Malcolm Martin

Take a look at these hands...

I
I make things because making makes me happy. Not always, and not in all ways. But essentially because it makes me happy, because I like it. I like it especially because my work is what could be called 'intimate making': these hands, a few simple tools and the material.

I know a leather worker, an Italian working in Nice, who has a booth workshop in the old town there. He makes bags, sandals, purses, all hand stitched. When I ask him why he works seven days a week, from eight in the morning until seven-thirty in the evening he always says: 'pour m'amuser, je m'amuse': I'm playing, fooling around, having fun. His workshop is open to the street. Customers and browsers wander in, friends drop by. They watch, and I watch, his hands working slowly but very efficiently, no gesture excessive or rushed, no effort wasted.

Culturally it's not so long, a few generations, since it was all intimate making. But though much of the production that happens across the globe is still like this, the centre has shifted, and this way of working now appears economically irrational and marginal, either relying on Third World wages for the makers, or users who recognise a special value in this way of working. So we are here today to talk about Craft, as a special kind of making.

As I said, I make because this kind of intimate making makes me happy. Or actually, because it makes my hands happy to make in this way.

Anecdotally, a recent survey suggested that in England the occupation with the highest degree of job satisfaction was in fact hairdressing, clearly an example of intimate making, if not normally included in the 'Crafts'.

What makes your hands happy? If your hands could speak, what would they say?

If you don't mind, could you please shut your eyes for a few seconds while you take a slow breath in and out. Now, slowly opening your eyes, take a good long look at your own hands. Look at the palms, the fingers and their tips. Are they warm or cool, moist or dry? Look and feel how the thumb opposes to the fingers and how the fingers grip. Turn your hand over see how the tendons control the fingers, how you can feel and see the movement of tendons and muscles in your wrist and arm.

What is my relationship to these hands? In what sense are they 'mine'? I tend to treat them as some kind of tool, a physical interface between my mind and the external world. And it's easy to think of my body as a machine, like a car that my mind drives around in. But another image, another metaphor, seems much closer to my real experience. I'm like a working elephant and its rider. The part of me that thinks and plans is like the rider. But so much of me is not this little part that thinks, that is aware of it's own awareness. And the part that gets things done, for all the rider's planning and exhortation, is the elephant, and if the elephant wants to go one way, then that's the way it goes. The rider relies absolutely on the skills of the elephant, skills which the rider doesn't even consciously understand. The point of the metaphor, is that to be effective, rider and elephant have to collaborate, they have to get on. To work well they both have to be happy, even enjoy themselves. Within this working relationship the happiness of both is strictly interdependent.

The beauty of this metaphor is it's imprecision. Who is the rider and who the elephant? Mind and body? Too simple. Conscious and unconscious? Absolutely not.
Both are 'me', but in different senses, not different, but nor the same either.

II
When I make sculpture, taking timber and carving it, I make with my whole body. But the real focus of this activity is my hands. However grand the ideas I may have for a piece, whatever 'issues' it may or may not address, it is the hands that actually do the work. I see them thinking as I carve. I have to admit that in the past I have been rather carried away by whatever grand schemes I have in my mind, and have pretty much just let the hands get on. But of late I have been trying to listen more to my hands, and let them have their say in the way the work develops.

There is an intelligence in hands, manifest in what they do and make. Here are some of the things they have told me:

These hands remind me that it has taken millions of years of evolution to produce the modern hand, and still our hands have explored only a fraction of their potential.

According to these hands, the modern human brain actually evolved primarily to help them in their work.

And that it is their ability to make and to use tools that is one definition of being human. So I'm not so much a human being who has hands, as a human being who in one sense is these hands.

My hands tell me they have spent the last fifty years or so trying to show my mind what to do, but my mind just keeps arguing with them. Though they say that of late there are signs it might be starting to pay attention.

These hands remind me that the basic tools they use—chisel and gouge and mallet, axe and saw—have evolved with them over several thousands of years. That they use tools to extend their capabilities in specific ways.

A carving gouge, for example, allows the hand to cut grooves of different sizes and shapes. Let's get technical: if the bevel-the slope behind the cutting edge of the blade- is flat, it keeps the angle between wood and blade constant, so every cut should be the same depth and width. The hand-plane takes this idea a step further: you mount the blade in a frame, to guarantee the angle stays exactly the same for every single cut.

But put a curved bevel behind the cutting edge and the blade follows every twitch of the guiding hand, and every irregularity in the wood's hardness and grain. The hand feels the response of the gouge the way a tennis player feels the vibration of the impact of the ball through the racket handle, and adjusts the next shot, the next blow, accordingly. Feedback is cumulative, from moment to moment, and over a lifetime. The more specific the function a tool has, the more restricted are it's possibilities—like the plane—and the more general it is—like the carving gouge—the greater the potential freedom.

Just for a minute, I'd like you to shut your eyes again, it's easier to concentrate that way, but if you prefer, eyes open is ok too. Try to feel, really feel the actual tactile sensation, of holding a paintbrush, any kind. Form the grip you would use. Imagine it loaded with paint, and now make a mark. Feel the brush yield to the paper or canvas as you make a mark, and how the hairs of the brush follow your hand's trajectory, but in a way that is very complex, to do with pressure, and speed, the viscosity of the paint, the texture of the support. Hold that feeling for a moment or two.

Now do exactly the same for writing with a piece of chalk on a blackboard, or failing that, a marker on a whiteboard. Feel the differences from the brush. Again, hold that feeling.

And finally, imagine yourself at your laptop, and the range of movements required, as you touch-type, or two finger type. Again, how is this different from the brush or chalk?

Now open your eyes and look at your hands again. Typing is just as much a skill as painting or carving. But its freedom is strictly limited, it is a highly constrained and pre-determined activity, with a strictly defined range of possible outcomes that place the hands squarely at the service of the meaning of what is written.

When I'm not carving I tend to be using a very different tool: it's a Chinese brush. This tool can make any mark, thin or thick, controlled or impulsive. And it's used equally happily for writing, drawing and painting. It is super-responsive to the hand and its intelligence. Practice with one of these for months or years, a lifetime, and you will experience how much your hands dislike making two identical marks. Chinese calligraphy recognises this: no line is absolutely straight, no character symmetrical, and the 'same' character will never be written exactly the same way twice. Freedom is the nature of your hands.

The point of training is to focus this freedom. To get rider and elephant working together, to trust each other. Trying to repeat is a good test, because it's easy to see what's happening. But the nature of hands is to never repeat exactly, which is exactly why it's an interesting exercise to try... It's not really a case of getting the hand to follow the mind, but of getting the hand/eye/touch system responsive in it's feedback.

A traditional way of teaching Chinese calligraphy is for the teacher to stand behind the student and hold their hand while they makes the stroke, the student letting the teacher's hand guide their own. This is a direct transmission, hand to hand. Of course there is conscious learning as well, but this is simply one hand showing another the correct way. What is transmitted is not the appearance to be aimed at, but the activity, the how to.

III

Discipline and freedom are not opposite poles, but mutually necessary. As my hands point out to me, I didn't invent these tools, and neither did God simply hand them to me. They have evolved over generations as hands learned to master their possibilities, and to modify the tools to create further possibilities. And I think it is possible to suggest that this is an interesting way of looking at the whole idea of a tradition in making: a set of creative possibilities manifested through the evolving use of a set of tools. This applies whether or not I consciously choose to be a part of it: tradition is carried not so much through the conscious intentions of individuals, or even in the material objects they make, as in the continuity of activity of hands.

So looked at in this way, the co-evolution of hand and tool could be said to be the beating heart of tradition. In this sense tradition is absolutely not a set of patterns to be copied. Rather, it's the creative possibility, here and now, that opens onto an unknown future. I wrote down once that 'carving is risk, failure is copying the template perfectly'.

Ask a computer to carry out the same operation again and again, and the result will be exactly the same as long as it's working. But this is not how hands are in the world. Change and difference are the nature of handwork, and if this may often appear as random variation, or even sloppiness, it is equally potentially innovation and creativity, channelled through the particular tools and practices through which these hands work.

Creativity is allowing this possibility to become fact. If we allow them to, our hands will find these creative possibilities, as long as we don't artificially restrict them or try to make them merely the mind's tools.

These hands actually are the living embodiment of traditions of making, of this field of stored experience and possibility. Genetically, even. My father trained as a tool-maker, making the tools that made the machines that made our society. My mother has been a lifelong knitter, at least until failing eyesight forced her to stop. These are their hands in this sense as much as in this curiously shaped little finger I have inherited.

It's not 'me' that has made these hands. They have been shaped far more by this tradition of making and tool-using. So just as much as these are 'my' hands, they are rather more the hands of the first users of tools, of the megalithic builders and the axe-head makers, of the carvers of the cathedrals, of the carvers of the gods and demons in the British Museum. And through them of, say, Brancusi and Matisse. These are just a few of those who spring to mind, of course, there are so very many more, not least the potters of Song China, the sewers of quilts, and the knitters of fisherman's jumpers. These hands simply are the matrix of creative possibility extending into the unknown future.

But these hands do not work alone. So many other hands play their part before and after them in the process of carving wood into a finished sculpture. These hands of mine would like to thank David's and Andy's hands, at work in the timber yard. To thank the hands of the farmers and foresters who planted and raised the trees. The Swedish hands that forged most of the gouges and tools we use, and the English hands from 140 years or more ago that made the others. And so many other hands, but most of all to thank the hands of my life and work partner Gaynor, that my own hands work with every day in the workshop and at home, carving and finishing and cooking and cleaning, looking after themselves and each other. For all of these hands, there is creativity and constraint in varying measure. All of these hands rely on each other for anything at all actually to be made. Tradition flows through all these hands, exists through and in their activity.

So I think it is helpful to see tradition as a dynamic of making, not so much to do with 'styles' or 'feature', 'ideas' or 'individuals', nor simply the manifestation of blind forces of history or economics. A dynamic rooted in the concrete activity, and pleasure, of hands.

IV

I think that through developing a greater awareness of my hands, a stronger experience of them, I have come to see and use differently the things I and others make, perhaps less abstractly and more concretely, and that this has affected the process of making as well. I can see that much of what I do is beyond my conscious control, but is still very much a part of me, and also a part of those who have gone before, those with whom I work now, and those who will come after.

It has also made me deeply aware of how much my hands enjoy themselves working, and how central this is to why I am a maker at all. But how often do we as makers talk about it? Why hasn't the sheer pleasure of making been better celebrated? It has to be, after all, the reason why amateur craft exists at all. With very limited exceptions, there is no need to make anything at all in an intimate way. What motivates the maker is the pleasure of the hand, of the hand in action.

The pleasure of our hands is both mental and physical, inextricably so. Pleasure in action links the maker's hands to all those other hands, and so to the tradition as a whole. And also to the last term in the equation: the hand of the user. Pleasure joins maker and user quite directly in a way that bypasses and flows underneath conscious understanding and even the socio-economic context of production and consumption. The users takes their place as the end-term of tradition. This pleasure is inextricably tied to the hand and

its concrete physical activity, this is no abstract feeling. There is a quite specific pleasure to handling any object of intimate making—or even to looking at it and imagining handling, so close is the relation between eye and hand—that develops as the experience of the using hand itself develops.

Perhaps the word 'pleasure' is actually too restrictive, suggesting something too tied to simple sensation. This is a pleasure deriving from an indirect contact of hand with hand within the great flow of making. I'm trying to think of a better phrase than 'embodied meaning' for this. Meaning because it locates and situates and gives significance to, and embodied because it is immediately experienced and concrete. Perhaps 'significant pleasure' might do as well? There's no need for the mind to explain or rationalise this, although it inevitably will try.

Craft is perhaps a flagship for intimate making, though for me there is always the danger that it gets muddled with small scale industrial design, which is something else. It is a conscious attempt to make and use within a context which gives value to intimate making. High end craft can give wonderful examples of what is possible to make and to experience. But in it's need to establish its difference from both industrial production and the bulk of the intimately made, it easily becomes merely quirky or solipsistic. I can say this because this is my own world as a professional maker. There is a very real danger of it becoming a ghetto, safely set aside from the 'real' world, unable to contaminate it, but nevertheless interesting to go and stare at.

There is though, an awful lot of intimate making going on every day, even in our industrialised society. When my hands are chopping vegetables, or cutting cheese or bread, it's not so different from what I do in the workshop. We are all makers. Some of us develop some aspect of this as a professional practice, some become committed amateurs. It seems to me important to acknowledge this interconnectedness and to foster intimate making at all levels. Which makes me very worried when the general drift of our culture, both practically and intellectually, seems to be ignore and dismiss its importance.

It was until recently proverbial that 'the Devil makes work for idle hands'. And yet it does seem that the mission of our contemporary culture to make hands as idle as possible, where 'hands free' is really the aspiration for not only mobile phones, but all aspects of life. Rather than going 'hands free' we could perhaps work for a society of 'free hands'. Hands free to engage in meaningful activity which might or might not be called 'work'. Hands allowed to have an active role in shaping their world. Surely our hands need meaningful activity, not something to keep them occupied. Take a look at your hands. Do they want to sit in your lap all day, or do they want something real to do?

We can and do communicate hand to hand through making. But our predominantly verbal and rational way of understanding in this culture have not given us the language with which to appreciate the importance of this. There has been a crucial failure within the history of Western thought to engage with what it is to be an embodied being, that manifests, for example, in the old distinction between the Liberal and Mechanical Arts, or in Descartes' philosophical separation of mind and body. The body is rationalised simply as a machine, made to dance to the mind's tune. In this world-view the human body becomes on the one hand an object of knowledge, and on the other a site for intervention, whether by drugs, cosmetic surgery, exercise, or any other of the potentially alienating devices that consumer capitalism can provide. It is within this frame of reference that the West has developed its massively powerful technologies, which have in turn reinforced the power of the metaphor of the body as machine.

But even in trying to understand, to frame an argument, to challenge or agree with other people's views, we take our attention away from the body. And when we think about and

write about how we make things, or how things are made, it's just the same. We can even write books about the body, about perception and sensation, we can try to understand the body, but even this is taking us away from the reality of being embodied beings, sat together here and now.

So just for a moment experience how it feels actually to be here sitting in your chair. You might like to shut your eyes, but in any case, try to feel if and how your feet connect to the floor, how your sitting bones are taking the weight of your torso, and the way your head rests on and is supported by your neck. Try to be aware of any pain or discomfort, and just feel it, and feel free to shift position to ease your posture. You have all been paying a lot of attention for two whole days. Paying attention to the words, to the images, and to the arguments. All very abstract. So now try to come back to your body, to the physical sensations of sitting here together in this hall.

Without this body, your body and my body, I'm not here, and you are not here. And absolutely nothing gets made.

So in this sense, to really return to the body is to recover a vital dimension of what it is to be human. Return, not in the sense of some vague 'wisdom of the body', but by developing mental tools that will let us think the body, think through the body. Phenomenology and existentialism as philosophical approaches appear to offer scope, and although I'm not really competent to judge, there is a lot in the late work of Heidegger that points in this direction. But what is really needed is something more direct and immediate. It's here that all those Eastern techniques—meditation, yoga, tai chi—which have found space in the West have a really important role: to help us truly return to the body, and not simply to understand or do work on it.

But in intimate making we have an equally powerful tool, one that links hand to hand, body to body, past to present to future.

Simply picking up and using a ball of knitting wool is a deeply human act that has been radically misunderstood and under-rated. It's economic irrationality. It's to take one step away from the hooks of the mass market and mass-media drivers of fashion. But it's good for these hands, and it makes them happy. It generates pleasure, embodying meaning. It unpicks the separation of mind and body. It's human.

V

So I think that the crafts, at whatever level, are still radical, and becoming increasingly so, as technological development and global enterprise reinforce our illusions of ourselves as isolated and individualised passive consumers, distanced from our bodies and made infantile in the same movement that we are in other ways empowered.

It's beyond the scope of this paper to do more than suggest the vital importance of broad based educational initiatives, or do any more than note the vacuum that is opening up within those educational institutions that seemed, in the already distant last century, to have made such promising beginnings. Our culture clearly needs to value much more the intimate making that happens across the globe, and so help to sustain and develop economically viable alternatives to the industrial model of 'development', and it is heartening to see how much of this conference has shown examples of this. I have an example close to me: a friend and maker who is now working with a range of very local groups across Africa and the Indian subcontinent, to use specific and often innovative local products to create jewellery for sale in the UK.

Equally obvious is the need to find ways of supporting and sustaining all the intimate making that goes on outside the economic sphere, whether as culturally meaningful making, or simple subsistence (like me making my dinner).

Perhaps making is only really comprehensible hand to hand, so the more making that happens, and the more awareness of making at every level, the more articulate our culture becomes, and the greater the pleasure and happiness that can be found through making.

What about when making isn't 'pleasure'? Even for a very privileged maker such as I am, there are long hours, missed deadlines, recalcitrant materials, cantankerous tools and demanding customers. And for many, especially in other cultures, these demands may make the pleasure of working much, much harder to find. So I think this too could be a priority in developing thought about craft: how to create the best conditions for experiencing making as the meaningful pleasure it always potentially is.

As a culture we simply don't have the words to describe what I have been stumbling to point to in this paper. When I am talking of 'hands thinking', 'communicating hand to hand', of 'tradition as the interdependent activity of hand and tool', of 'intimate making', of 'embodied meaning', I'm just using words to point to a complex reality, and just maybe avoid some of the more common pitfalls of the way making is normally talked about.

Practically, perhaps the best thing we can do is really to get to know our hands, really to be our hands. In doing this I realise that through these hands I am part of the past, present and future of making. I remember how truly important the pleasure of making is, and its significance. Look to your hands when thinking about making. Literally 'look'. Our heads don't have all the answers. We need to have trust in these hands.

Malcolm Martin

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Handnotes

No footnotes here, for queries and further thinking, just take a look at your hands.