In 1964, while looking at some of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes ,* Arthur Danto was struck by the fact that it was difficult to tell artworks apart from real things. Warhol's *Brillo Box* had no important visual distinction from the kind of Brillo box one might find in a grocery store, so it followed that one couldn't tell art from non-art simply by looking at it anymore. As a philosopher, Danto found this an intriguing problem that demanded a whole new way of defining art. In his 1981 book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, he offered his definition. To put it in a nutshell, Danto says that art is embodied meaning.

Danto's thesis is actually a great deal more complicated, but the phrase makes a nice slogan, and it's a useful way to look at the art of the 20th century. In this article, I propose an addendum to Danto's thesis, one that applies to craft. My proposal is this: there is a certain kind of craft that is embodied sympathy.

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I have been giving brooches and necklaces to my wife Patricia since 1994, and she now has a modest collection of works by Robert Ebendorf, Jan Yager, Donald Friedlich, and other well-known jewelers. A few years ago, I started looking for a good, well-designed piece of jewelry that would clearly express love.

Of course, any gift could conceivably do the job. In that sense, a Mixmaster or a new car - or a print or a painting - might stand as a love token. But the problem is that any old gift wouldn't speak in a public language, and a bystander wouldn't necessarily understand that Patricia was, indeed, the object of someone's affection. What I wanted was a public declaration, visible and easy to interpret. But it's as if serious artists - including jewelers - had unanimously decided that affection is not a proper subject for art. Almost all the studio jewelry I looked at was not "sentimental jewelry", in the sense of being specifically designed to proclaim love. The genre was once commonplace, and there was a symbolic vocabulary for all the nuances of love. Ivy meant fidelity, pansies meant "I think of you" (in a pun on the French pensée), bees and fire spoke about the agony of unrequited love. But no more. Nearly the whole language for communicating emotion in jewelry has been swept away. I guess that all those symbols were reclassified as decoration, which Modernists hated passionately. Now all that language is obsolete, almost lost. There's kitsch, of course, but I can't stand Hallmark® moments. The token of affection that I wanted was pretty damn hard to find.

Ultimately, I bought one of Pat Flynn's heart pins, the kind he produces by the dozens. And it was perfect. Patricia wears it often, and it says exactly what I wanted it to say. Now, nobody would claim that Flynn's heart pins are great works of art: they aren't. They are craft, made for the marketplace, without high ambitions. I had a fairly ordinary desire, but an urgent one, and it wasn't the flashy art jewelers that fulfilled it. Pat Flynn did the job. It made me wonder. What's up when an inconspicuous little pin does a better job at expressing feeling than art? Why did that happen?

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There's a certain kind of craftsperson who imagines what people need - especially in the psychological sense - and then, drawing from her own experience, make objects that fulfill those needs. If she's good, she will also consider design, color, and the rest of the formal components of art-making. She'll consider function, and no doubt she'll think about how well a given object might sell. But she'll keep one thing in mind at all times: how to make the experience of her work beneficial to others.

I think immediately of my friend Sharon Church. She sees jewelry as "the psychic armoring of the human form"[i]. By this, Sharon does not mean providing weapons for women in social combat, but completing and preparing a person for any kind of social intercourse. She particularly likes an essay by Ananda Coomaraswamy, in which he makes a case that ornamentation is far more than applying designs to the surface of an object. Coomaraswamy quotes ancient Vedic texts to show that ornament is a form of preparation that might solve practical requirements, but also answers to psychological (and even spiritual) needs. His example is a warrior who is "*alamkata* - fully equipped … in mail and turban, and with bows and arrows and sword"[ii]. Of course, the weaponry is metaphorical, and Coomaraswamy's purpose is to make the reader consider what kind of equipment is truly required in life.

Church would respond that psychic armoring is complicated business. She starts by assuming our universal longing to be better than we are. Church's "mail and turban" are designed to satisfy some of those longings, so to make women feel better about themselves. If a woman wearing jewelry feels more beautiful, she should also feel more confident. Church can equip women in other ways, too: she can make a woman appear seductive- *come hither* - or prickly - *keep away!* She can make portable icons, so a woman can project a suitable fiction (or truth) to those around her. She can make a shy woman into a center of attention. And thus, she hopes, she can give form to inchoate aspirations: to be more beautiful, more competent, more connected. These, to Church, are the vital functions of adornment, even

though none of them are even remotely physical. A woman wearing Sharon Church jewelry is intended to feel *alamkata*.

Church wears jewelry constantly. (She even dressed up for the interview I had with her!) She thinks about her experiences with jewelry she has seen and handled: what it was like to touch them, to wear them and heft them and hear their sound; what she felt like; how the people around her responded. And, I assume, she examines her own motives for wearing jewelry, and has felt all of those psychological needs herself. In a sense, she is her own case study, and her observations become her library and database.

But careful observation, by itself, means little. Church's experience must ultimately be transformed into objects. The crucial step is to imagine how another person feels, and to figure how those feelings can be altered through contact or use of an object. To do so, she must imaginatively reconstruct somebody's emotional state in great detail. She starts with her own experience - as a jeweler and particularly as a woman - but that knowledge must be extrapolated outward. This is the act of sympathy that I think is so important to craft.

There is a long history theories about sympathy in art. Most grew out of late 19th century German Idealism. Initially, the German term was *Einfühlung*, or "feeling [oneself] into", and it was used to describe a process of projection out onto nature. Here, the artist was regarded as a super-sensitive agent, projecting his feeling outwards in a pantheistic urge to fuse with nature. Robert Vischer, Theodor Lipps, and Heinrich Worringer are regarded as the most influential advocates of what is now called empathy theory.[iii] There were disputes and revisions, but the idea of *Einfühlung* was largely marginalized by 20th century formalist theories. Today, *Einfühlung* would be dismissed as a sad example of the pathetic fallacy, the tendency to ascribe human emotions to inanimate objects. Meanwhile, *Einfühlung* was translated into English as *empathy*, and co-opted by psychology. The sense of the word mutated to mean the ability of one person to correctly interpret the emotional condition of another, which is how most people understand empathy today. But this new definition is very close to the old meaning of sympathy, so I'll simply use the old word.

In contrast to German Idealists, I think of sympathy in art as emerging from a relation between the artist and other people, and I think of it as an imaginative re-creation, rather than a projection. My understanding of the word is derived largely from Robert Q. Wilson's book, *The Moral Sense*, in which he defines sympathy as the "human capacity for being affected by the feelings and experiences of others"[iv]. Wilson insists that sympathy acts not as a monistic principle that applies in each and every case, but a tendency that is manifested in

different ways in different cultures. As a moral sentiment, sympathy motivates altruistic acts like donating blood, putting one's own life in jeopardy to save a drowning person, or intervening to stop a crime in progress.

There is speculation about a genetic basis for sympathy. Evolutionary biologists propose that *Homo Sapiens'* ancestors evolved on the African savanna between 2,000,000 and 2,500,000 years ago. The fossil record, in combination with stone tools and animal bones found at ancient campsites, strongly suggest that these ancestors were highly social. Recent studies in brain function indicate that proto-humans' brains expanded dramatically to accommodate three distinct social capabilities: tool-making, language acquisition, and social intelligence. The latter ability is suggested by evidence of increasing behavioral flexibility, more food-sharing, and the social complexities brought about by pair bonding and prolonged infant dependency.[v] The upshot is that proto-humans probably worked together and communicated extensively - two characteristics of a true society - and the brain structure of early hominids evolved in parallel with their new social milieu. It's entirely possible that sympathy, like the instinct to learn language, is built into the human genome. We could all be inheriting a tendency for sympathy.

In societies, you must be able to anticipate other peoples' behavior, which is to say that you must guess accurately what people think and feel. A familiar example: child-rearing. Anybody who has spent time around infants knows that their powers of communication are primitive (if hard to ignore), and a parent must guess what their kid is making noise about. Is he hungry? Tired? In pain? A correct reading of the child's state of mind will help solve the problem. And the reading must be intuitive: you don't learn how to read babies in a classroom. In other words, the parent must have a working sense of sympathy.

Sympathy depends on an ability to imaginatively reconstruct another person's emotional condition, to understand what the other is feeling, and to predict reactions. Wilson stresses that using imagination is an essential part of sympathy.

> "We cannot, of course, know what others feel, so we must imagine it. Our powers of imagination are very strong; they can be aroused not only by the plight of a friend but by the flickering lights and shadows on a motion picture screen, so that we are reduced to tears by the sight of a fictitious boy looking in vain for an equally fictitious dog."[vi]

In this sense, sympathy is not a projection, as the German idealists would describe it, but the ability to reconstruct another's mental condition. The process is partly inward-looking: we

remember how we feel under certain circumstances; we recall those feeling with pleasure or distaste. We also look outward, observing all the non-verbal cues that humans recognize (facial expression, posture, body movements, even pheromones). Finally, our internal frame of reference is matched with direct observation, and we make intuitive calculations: this person must be thinking *this*, she must be feeling *that.* And since imagination is required to do so, there must be a component of creativity in sympathy.

It doesn't take too much reflection to see that a faculty for sympathy and imaginative reconstruction would prove useful in social life. How do you judge whether or not somebody is lying, or intends to cheat you? How do you work with a partner, the way glassblowers must, anticipating every move? How do you read the mood of your lover? In every social situation there remains a level of unspoken apprehension, in which we "interrogate our thoughts and feelings, asking how we would behave in some imagined situation."[vii] The interrogation gives us an answer, which we use to predict another's behavior, and to plan our own.

This, I believe, is how somebody like Sharon Church thinks. When she says, "I am a woman, I make jewelry for women - and a lot of women artists operate out of their own experience,"[viii], she is summarizing the sympathy that emerges from her own firsthand knowledge of what it's like to be a woman, and her imaginative reconstruction of what other women might need. But the intricate knowledge of other's emotional states is only half the story: that knowledge must be translated into an object. And in craft, this translation is almost universally a comforting, helping gesture.

This might seem obvious, but it is not.

In 1986, Canadian art critic John Bentley Mays wrote a controversial article for *American Craft* magazine in which he equated the spirit of 20th Century art with contentiousness and criticality. He went on to flog the crafts for never having "developed a self-critical attitude capable of pushing it into the total reversals and radical renewals which have heralded each new dawn in the history of Modern art".[ix] Mays is certainly not alone in locating the essence of art in confrontation and rupture. The artistic avant-garde was virtually invented by 19th century radicals. Ever since, the visual arts have been closely aligned with socialism, with its vast contempt for the middle class and its outrage against capitalism. For decades, the truly modern artist was assumed to stand outside of the mainstream - especially of commerce! - and behold the world at a critical distance, just as Mays prescribes.

But the sympathetic craftsperson cannot behold her audience so critically. From the beginning of the creative process, she assumes that her audience is essentially like herself: they feel the same pleasures, encounter the same obstacles, hold the same aspirations. She is not out to beat people over their heads for their sins, but to offer help and comfort. In this sense, some craft is diametrically opposed to the critical stance of modern art. Criticality always assumes somebody is wrong. Even when a radical takes up a victim's cause, there is always a third party who is to blame for the injustice at hand. (We're all familiar with the list of villains: capitalists, sexists, racists, the chief executive of Exxon, etc.) Sympathy, on the other hand, concentrates on a transaction between only two: I and Thou, essentially alike. And that sense of likeness precludes accusations of wrongdoing. (Blame the other, blame yourself!) Instead, the sympathetic attitude assumes that somebody could use a little help.

The primary act of the sympathetic craftsperson is to reach out to another. It's very difficult for me to find a vocabulary to elaborate this insight, but it calls to mind the process that psychologists call bonding. First, people must sense likeness, the feeling that both share something in common. Two individuals must metaphorically speak the same language. Then, relationships are built through mutual helping, where favors are given and returned. The deepest bonds develop when one feels that another is sensitive to their needs, and can be counted upon to express compassion or offer help. Sympathetic craft is closely analogous.

Based on her experience as a person in the world, and on her experience as a maker of objects, the craftsperson calculates how objects can cause benefit. The nature of these benefits is diverse, of course, and will be subject to the sensitivities and enthusiasms of the maker. A potter who takes great pleasure in beauty will try to make beautiful pots, thinking that they will cause an equal pleasure. A weaver who finds significance in the tactile properties of handwoven cloth will believe that her customers might get back in touch with their bodies, at least a little bit, by wearing her garments. A jeweler might see her necklaces as a useful psychological defense, like Sharon Church does. In each case, the maker designs an object to re-create an experience that she found beneficial for herself. This, precisely, is the helping gesture.

In turn, the object becomes a medium for this gesture of aid and comfort. The pot, the garment, the necklace: each becomes an extension of the maker, and a vehicle for the maker's sympathy. They are surrogates for the craftsperson herself. As I said: a certain kind of craft is embodied sympathy.

What does "embodied" mean? Regrettably, Danto does not provide a clear definition.[x] Obviously, he means something more than ordinary semiosis, as a sign stands for its signified. This is the way a stoplight indicates you should bring your car to a halt, or the word "c-a-t" stands for those fuzzy, four-legged critters. Symbolization will not suffice, either. I think Danto chose the word for its religious overtones. It's no accident that his major essay on the subject uses "transfiguration" in its title: the word is loaded with overtones of spiritual metamorphosis and glorification. When he speaks of embodied meaning, Danto suggests an idea made vividly present, practically given flesh and blood. Alternatively, he connects embodiment to a manifestation of the artist's mind: "It is as if a work of art were like an externalization of the artist's consciousness, as if we could see his way of seeing and not merely what he saw"[xi]

I would hold to all of Danto's implications save the religious one. A beautiful pot does not symbolize beauty. Nor does it represent its maker's intention to make somebody's life enjoyable and thus a little better. Instead, the pot *is* beautiful, and in the right circumstances, it does make life better. We are used to thinking of tools as an extension of the hand, but I see sympathetic craft as an extension of its makers. The pot, in being touched, extends the potter's touch to its user. The necklace, in being worn, actualizes the jeweler's wish to make her customer more beautiful and confident. As far as I can tell, this is embodiment.

I must stress that for this whole process to work, the object must be used. The fullness of its effects cannot be grasped until the object is placed into service, in either a personal or a social space. To merely look at the object, as if it were on a pedestal, is not sufficient.

The way pottery is used is a subject of frequent commentary, and since I collect and use pots, I can bear witness to the necessity of use. Once I buy a new bowl, I do not leave it on a shelf: the thing goes straight into my kitchen. It gets used, just like any other piece of kitchenware. But no two handmade pots are the same, and their unique characteristics form their unique pleasures. One of my bowls is chunky, broad, with a wide foot - good for a heavy load of stew. Another has a narrow foot, and demands special care so that I don't tip it over, which - surprisingly - makes it more interesting. Another bowl has a faceted surface, which feels quite different in my hand than all the others I have. And another has a wonderful "Shino crawl" glaze inside it, which is revealed slowly as I eat. One might think that experiencing of a bunch of straightforward, functional bowls should be dull, but it's not. Each bowl is an individual; each experience is pleasantly different.

My point is that those pleasures are only experienced through use, and sometimes only through repeated use. To truly understand those bowls, I had to eat out of them, clean them, nest them in one another. I had to get my hands on them to fully experience them. There's just no other way to do it.

To return to the case of Church's work: Sharon's sympathy is best experienced through the extended process of use. A women must wear the jewelry and become an actress in a drama. A woman must look at herself in a mirror, touch the jewelry, feel its weight on her body. But more than that, the jewelry must be worn in the presence of others. The wearer must be able to observe how people react, so as to better gauge her own emotional transformation. If Church did her job well, a woman will feel differently once the process is complete. She will feel prepared, confident, attractive, sensual.

You could say that some kinds of craft demand a performance to be fully realized. And this performance - if designed by an experienced maker - constitutes a re-enactment that was planned in all respects. Eating from a pot, putting on a scarf, wearing a necklace: each of these (at their best) constitutes a performance that has been anticipated in great detail. The maker's artfulness lies in how ingeniously the performance is fashioned, and how effectively it reconstructs the intended emotional state.

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Not all craft embodies sympathy. For more than a century, the central pursuit of ambitious craftsmen and women has been to get their work accepted as art. In the sixties and seventies, this ambition was manifested in the production of sculpture in craft mediums. More recently, it is manifested in attempts to produce of conceptual art in craft mediums.[xii] With few exceptions, both kinds of work abandon the traditional uses and formats of craft, in favor of quasi-artworks that are intended to be seen in exhibitions, or displayed at a proper aesthetic distance in the homes of discerning collectors[xiii]. Generally, craft-as-art is not pottery, not earrings, not scarves. Most artist-craftsmen avoid such quotidian forms. Craft-as-art is designed to be looked at, to be examined for aesthetic pleasure or intellectual gratification. There is little of the performance, interaction, and extended, layered experience that one encounters with functional craft. Craft-as-art is less capable of embodying sympathy because it shuns ordinary use and intimate human contact.

A philosophical problem also remains. My implicit claim for a theory of embodied sympathy is that effective work of this kind is not reflexive or stupid in any way, but requires

intelligence and an unusual degree of sensitivity. But the braininess of embodied sympathy would be in the form that Howard Gardner calls "personal intelligence"[xiv], and thus partly outside the realm of logic and reasoned discourse.

This would be important only insofar as craft-as-embodied-sympathy claims to be art. If, to follow Danto, an object is to be understood as art, certain conditions should apply.
Danto holds (correctly, I believe) that there is an art world, which he initially defined as "an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an art world."[xv] He later added that "to be a member of the art world is to participate in what we might term the discourse of reasons"[xvi], and suggests very strongly that personal experience is outside of said discourse. Allowable discourses should mean the same thing to every viewer, Danto says, and personal associations like family history - and presumably, any subjective, emotional experience - fall outside of the discourse of reasons. (Not surprisingly, at the end of his essay, Danto equates craft and mere things, and disqualifies craft from the status of art.)

This essay is an attempt to marry the sympathetic impulse in craft with a spirit of dispassionate inquiry. Yes, sympathy is not reasoned so much as it is felt. But it seems to me that craft, because it can be so comfortably implicated into ordinary life, is nicely suited to be a vehicle for sympathy. In fact, craft is uniquely competent to do so, much more than painting or sculpture or installations that stand at a distance from the lives that ordinary people lead. And so I think that sympathy can be a subject matter, a proper avenue of inquiry for craft. Should it follow that the human faculty for sympathy must fall outside of the art world's discourse of reasons?

[T]his essay completes a trilogy, which taken together are intended to describe the distinction between craft and art, and then point to craft's unique competence. The other two essays are "The Problem of the Fountain" in *Metalsmith* , Summer 2000, and "The Hand: At the Heart of Craft" in *American Craft*, August/September 2000.

[i]Simon, Marjorie, "The Articulation of Desire: The Jewelry of Sharon Church", *Metalsmith*, Winter 1999, page 15.

[ii]Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., "Ornament", *Art Bulletin*, Volume 21, 1939, pages 378-379.

[iii]For a brief summary of empathy theory, see Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, The Free Press, 1992, pages 140 - 147.

[iv]Wilson, James Q., *The Moral Sense*, The Free Press, 1993, pages 30.

[v]See Mithen, Steven, *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art and Science* Thames & Hudson, 1996 for one account of proto-human development and the genetic basis of the mind. The idea of social intelligence comes from Howard Gardner.

[vi]Wilson, 1993, p. 32.

[vii]Mithen, 1996, page 147.

[viii]Interview by the author with Sharon Church, January 14, 2002.

[ix]Mays, John Bentley, "Comment", *American Craft*, December 1985/January 1986, pages 39.

[x]The most complete essay that Danto offers on the meaning of embodiment that I could find is "Symbolic Expressions and the Self", in *Beyond the brillo box: the visual arts in post-historical perspective*, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1992

[xi]Danto, Arthur, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art,* Harvard University Press, 1981, page 164.

[xii]For some cheerleading on this trend, see Adamson, Glenn, "The Next Moment in Studio Furniture" in *Tradition in Contemporary Furniture,* Mastelli & Kelsey, editors, The Furniture Society, 2001

[xiii]The author is guilty of this, too.

[xiv]Gardner, Howard, *Frames of Mind: the Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books, 1983.

[xv]Danto, Arthur, "The Artworld", *Journal of Philosophy*, 61, 1964, p. 580

[xvi]Danto, 1992, "The Art World Revisted: Comedies of Similarity", p. 33