

# — THE — WORK IS THE THING: the *STATE* of the *ILSSA UNION*

by ILSSA Co-Operator  
Local 917 Shop RC  
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slide 1 please Five years ago, Bridget Elmer and I decided to create a generative framework for addressing issues related to art, craft, and labor. We wanted to build community with other artists, while creating a platform for independent publishing and social practice. We established Impractical Labor in Service of the Speculative Arts (ILSSA), a membership organization for makers who use obsolete technology in conceptual or experimental ways. ILSSA is structured as a Union that fosters solidarity and creates opportunities for members, and as a Research Institute that publishes new ideas, communications, and resources. Today I'll give an overview of ILSSA, and discuss our most recent project, the *State of the ILSSA Union*.

Bridget and I both have a background in self-publishing zines and artist's books, and years ago each of us adopted letterpress slide 2 please as a way of more thoroughly making our work. Self-publishing through hand type-setting and letterpress printing seemed to us a way of thinking through our ideas from beginning to end.

But Bridget and I share a deeper philosophical commitment to letterpress. We believe in the slow, meditative qualities of hand typesetting; the surprising solutions produced by extreme limitations; the self-education involved in learning skills uncom-



monly taught; the reuse of old equipment that might otherwise be junked; slide 3 please the scavenging of such equipment over a lifetime of practice; the embedded skepticism of consumer-based novelty inherent in using what has already been discarded. We believe these qualities are intrinsic to creative engagement with obsolete technology.

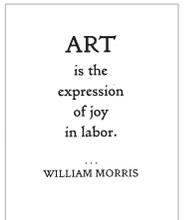
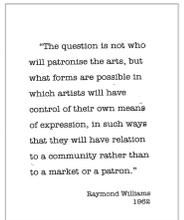
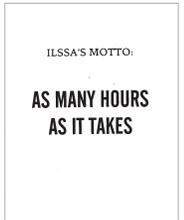
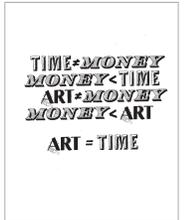
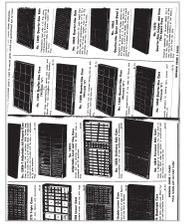
slide 4 please We find the old adage "time is money" insulting. We believe time is vastly more valuable than money. The fact that the many hours we pour into letterpress will never be financially compensated — a fact mystifying to many non-craft-practitioners — is to us not a problem because financial compensation isn't the aim of the work, the quality of the time spent is. While self-publishing could certainly be achieved more efficiently via digital publishing, it is the nature of spending time immersed in the letterpress process that is of value to us. We formed ILSSA as a way to explore ideas and build community with other artists who share our attitude toward what we call "impractical labor:" a category of work that does not prioritize efficiency, but rather emphasizes quality of process. "Impractical labor" prizes the experience of labor in-and-of-itself.

slide 5 please We chose the Union as a model because it is an organization formed around labor interests — an organization created for workers, by workers, in order to improve their lives. While historically the Guild enforced a rigid hierarchy and preserved the status quo, we identify the Union as a progressive labor organization that achieves positive change for its members.

Unions improve material conditions for workers through collective bargaining with employers. The ILSSA Union is inherently different: since most impractical laborers are self-employed and work alone, we seek to improve their immaterial conditions.

slide 6 please ILSSA, unlike other artist-worker organizations such as the Art Workers' Coalition or W.A.G.E., is not agitating for greater financial remuneration for our members. We don't think more money is the answer to our members' work ailments because we believe the over-valuation of money — above autonomy, above belongingness, above challenge — is part of the problem. We were interested in how we, as ILSSA, could address non-economic needs, and build an alternate value system for art-work.

As self-publishing letterpress printers preoccupied with labor, we have an obvious predecessor: slide 7 please William Morris, the famed 19th century father of the Arts & Crafts movement, self-publishing socialist, textile designer, and fine printer. While we admire Morris and share many values, our differences are important. Through his publishing, Morris revived and re-interpreted 15th century typography,



paper-making, and printing; the resulting Kelmscott Press books were very expensive. Unlike Morris, we are not interested in the historic processes and forms of a specific time period. Our publications have a contemporary aesthetic and sell for a few dollars; accessibility is important to us.

We don't believe the use of obsolete technology or our interest in meaningful work is inherently nostalgic to a time of pre-industrial labor. While our commitment to obsolete technology can be viewed as romantic, it is pragmatic: when I purchased my letterpress for \$1200 in 2002, it was \$390 cheaper than a new Mac laptop. Since then, I am now on my third laptop, while my press — now 50 years old — is as operational as the day I received it. And while Bridget and I may prefer the process of letterpress to that of digital design, we are not Luddites: ILSSA maintains a listserv and a website, and we are both fond of hand-coding in html, as this too is an immersive, engaging process, not unlike hand typesetting. Sometimes I design in AppleWorks, the discontinued Mac software, as I enjoy the challenge of working within its limitations. Just as with Morris, and with all who love the doing of their work: our emphasis on process is about valuing the experience of working in the present moment.

While Morris was an advocate of pre-industrial handicraft, membership in ILSSA is open to anyone who identifies as “using obsolete technology in experimental or conceptual ways.” *slide 8 please* Our members are a very diverse group, working in calligraphy, fibers, historic photographic processes, comic books, typewriters, analogue video, vacuum tubes, bookbinding, pirate radio, ceramics, heirloom farming, to name just a few: the range of technologies spans centuries. Many of our members identify as artists, many as craftspeople, some as designer-fabricators. (As our members' work is so diverse, I'm going to use the term “art-craft” to refer to it). To date we've had 200 members from 28 states and 5 countries, 100 of which are currently active. *slide 9 please*

ILSSA produces and distributes original publications. Other projects include an exhibition that involved a year of saving and documenting daily process; an Obsolete Technology Lab; and an annual holiday, the Festival to Plead for Skills: every July 7th, all members, wherever they might be, are encouraged to practice a technique of their choosing and to document that practice to share with the rest of ILSSA.

By ILSSA's fourth year, Bridget and I decided that we'd like to collect member feedback. From our earliest conception of ILSSA, we embraced the idea of art-craft as meaningful work. We had collected letters from members in which they described their work. But what made it meaningful, and how did they think and feel about it?

I happened upon an older textbook, Hodson & Sullivan's *The Sociological Organization of Work*, and within it discovered Hertzberg's theory of conditions that produce satisfied and alienated workers:

*slide 10 please* SATISFIED WORKERS are self-actualized, meaning they experience:

**Autonomy:** ability to set own schedule, to determine the order of tasks to be done, to have control over relations with others

**Challenge:** through complexity and diversity of tasks

**Belongingness:** meaningful interactions with others

**Recognition:** acknowledgment for doing good work, future advancement

**Opportunity:** development of new skills

**Commitment:** personal needs, goals, and values are compatible with the goals and values of the work

ALIENATED WORKERS experience:

Lack of freedom in choosing tasks and activities

Mindless, repetitive tasks

Limited, controlled, or restricted social interaction

Lack of recognition or advancement

Centralized control, with few opportunities to make decisions or choices about work

Pressure toward economic growth

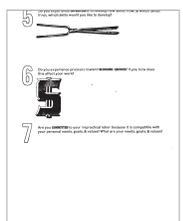
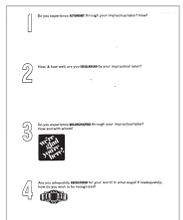
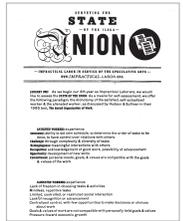
Goals and values of work are not compatible with personally held goals and values

Both Bridget and I found this model helpful in thinking about our own working lives as artists and teachers, so we decided to offer it to our members via a letterpress printed survey. *slide 11 please* We asked each member to reflect upon her working conditions as an art-craft worker. Through their answers, we hoped to chart a new course for ILSSA, one specifically shaped to address member concerns. Upon reading and tabulating the returned surveys, we encountered new ways of thinking about art-craft practice, as well as questions we hadn't previously considered.

In answer to our question “Do you experience AUTONOMY?” our members replied with great enthusiasm “Yes!” “Of course!” “Being in control of my own ideas and techniques, choices of materials and in general working on whatever I feel like, gives me independence.” “In relation to my work, my only restraints and commitments are self-imposed. I just do the work I want to do, when I want to do it.”

Here, we see how art-craft practice offers control over the means of production: unanimously our members reported they enjoy making decisions about all aspects of their work. However, for some this freedom is an anomaly: “This feeling of autonomy is in direct contrast to how I feel in other parts of my life.”

*slide 12 please* Survey responses indicate that most members do not rely upon their art-craft practice for their livelihoods: “My joy is that my creative making is



not tied to money.” “If I looked to make a living off my work I would have to compromise what I like making and HOW I make. My decision to make the way I do means it’s impractical to make a living off it.”

Some members, however, do run a craft business or a monetized art practice; most struggle. And a few more members are strategizing how they might do so, but are frustrated by its seeming impossibility: “It is a goal to have a self-sustaining endeavor eventually. I’m not really sure what this means yet.” “Sometimes I like to think about making money at this. Often I toss that idea away in exasperation. I don’t want to run a business. The only aspects of the “business” that I’m interested in are the aspects that connect me to the community — sales and communications that can derive from them. In many ways my desire for more sales is a desire for more reach, more community, more recognition, etc., but not necessarily more money.”

Craft processes are steadily grounding in materials, technique, and handwork, in contrast to contemporary service-industry and knowledge-industry employment that is often abstract, dematerialized, and precarious. Is art-craft practice valuable as it provides engagement in satisfying work, when members’ other forms of labor may provide means for subsistence but not sustenance? Yet many of our members report they find satisfaction in their day jobs, especially in teaching:<sup>1</sup> in what ways is the balance of a day job and an art-craft practice positive, and not detrimental? And in our enthusiasm to emphasize the things we valued more than money, did we error in dismissing its indisputable importance? By ignoring the basic economic realities of our members, were we advocating for an impossible Maslow pyramid, slide 13 please consisting of nothing but a floating tip?

Yet, a majority of our members report that they do not experience economic pressure; what most experience is a shortage of time. “I never depended on income from my personal work. That would have meant disaster. I do experience TIME pressure.” “My impractical labor challenges me to find time. Time to focus and time to slow down.” “Time and I are not very good friends. I would love to manage my time and tasks better.”

For some members, the paradox of how to monetize inefficient but satisfying labor is the challenge; for others it is the challenge to find enough time in a day. But a large part of the satisfaction of art-craft practice lies in the challenge of a very different type, which one member explains as:

“A friend of mine once described challenge this way — you have certain skills and you have ideas. Sometimes your ideas require you to learn new skills and then you can create more of you ideas. I have ideas — and sometimes the challenge becomes learning a new skill or refining an old one to reach a goal. I never tire of this kind of challenge.”

One of the rewards of 21st century art-craft practice is the continual opportunity for ad-hoc reskilling. Our members report that they continually learn new techniques through heuristic trial-and-error and from studying handmade objects, as well as from online tutorials, library books, community college courses, workshops, and each other. This process provides challenge to existing skills, opportunity to develop new ones, and belongingness with other practitioners: “Learning new techniques from mentors and friends reinforces my own connection and dedication to the craft.”

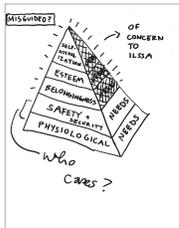
Fostering community was a primary motivation in our formation of ILSSA, and our members report that they too experience belongingness “Through collaborators and audience,” “Through various friends & communities of artists,” and “through ILSSA, awww!” But many of our members cite feelings of isolation: “I wish I had more outlets for building community.” “I still feel isolated in what I do.” Going forward, one of our goals is to increase interaction among our members, possibly through long-distance critique groups, interviews, and virtual studio visits.

slide 14 please Just as Bridget and I did with ILSSA, several of our members build their need for belongingness directly into their art-craft practice. ILSSA members Action Weaver and Lyman Edwards combine craft process with social engagement by practicing publicly. Action Weaver (Travis Meinolf) builds looms and teaches weaving in public spaces, while slide 15 please Edwards, a craftsman Rirkrit Tiravanija, hand-builds outdoor adobe ovens and bakes pizza onsite for participants. This impulse — to make a public service out of what could be a solitary craft process — belies the original role of the craftsman, that of craft as a social good. As Richard Sennett reminds us in his recent book *The Craftsman*, the ancient Greek for craftsman, *demoiergi*, combines “public” and “productive.” Art-craft practice as social engagement offers these members a rewarding context to make their work. Despite the deskilling in “post-studio” academic programs, this way of working can easily support a handmade practice.

The idea that art-craft practice is not isolating but rather an activity that provides value and assistance to others is shared by many of our members: “I am committed to my practice because it feeds me completely. It provides my work, my social circle, a larger community, an industry in which I can define myself. My own practice pushes my intellectual capacity, betters my abilities as an instructor, and allows me to be helpful to others. I become a positive and constructive force in my greater community.”

Craft’s long history also reframes belongingness in another way: Several members report “I feel linked to generations of makers of objects by hand.” “The fact that my

<sup>1</sup> “I experience belongingness most often with my students.” “With customers, but more regularly with students.”



tools and techniques are not so different gives me a sense of belonging to a vast number of unknown craftsmen whose skills and practices are maintained and saluted by our impractical labor.” Our members’ close identification to the history of craft raises a question about its current resurgence in an art context. Much of contemporary art takes art history as its subject matter. Is a 21st-century return to craft taking art history to an inevitability: its point of origin?

If so, is craft practiced within the context of contemporary art a form of “exploit” rather than “industry”? To define Veblen’s terms, “industry” is labor that provides the necessities of life; also known as “drudgery,” it is traditionally performed by women. “Exploit” is labor that is deemed “worthy, honorable, noble,” and is the domain of men. Surely this suggests the tired dichotomy between “craft” and “fine art.” Does the embrace of craft “drudgery” as an end in itself, not as a means, change the category of such work? Is this a repackaging of McLuhan’s idea that when technology becomes obsolete, it becomes an art form?

Combined with Veblen’s theory of exploit’s focus on workmanship, this predicts a dismal future for DIY art-craft practice. Currently, many art-craft practitioners find that when craft itself is taken as subject matter or when their work is sufficiently conceptual, their own level of skill does not matter. In the early 21st century, when ideas still reign over objects, it is widely permissible for skills to be crude. But as astonishingly handmade objects become fetishized, how much longer might this be the case?

I doubt this is a concern for most of our members, as some bristle at our term “impractical labor”<sup>2</sup> due to their commitment to a practice that they perceive as “industry” and not “exploit”: “I appreciate the output and camaraderie of [ILSSA]. The one thing that rankles is the word IMPRACTICAL. It’s the FIRSTWORD! I would argue that our work is anything but impractical and it is the dominant labor practices, information, and service work that actually produce NOTHING, done by those who care NOTHING for the acts they commit on the ‘job’ but only work towards credits they can exchange for their needs, while all the actual STUFF OF LIFE is produced by slaves living thousands of miles away and shipped at great expense to be bought and disposed of... that is crazier than weaving your own clothes and printing your own books.” Another member writes: “I’ve been thinking about how to define impractical labor a lot lately. Is it simply the disassociation of labor with payment? Does gardening count? That actually seems quite practical to me. The things that a lot of people get paid to do seems very impractical to me. Do we have to define what is practical in the context of our society?” To these members, the close tie of their art-craft practice to the necessities of life, to industry, brings them deep satisfaction.

<sup>2</sup>our definition of impractical labor: work that does not prioritize efficiency, but rather emphasizes process

Or maybe what they love is being able to do both. The flexibility of art-craft practice offers a range of opportunities: practitioners have the freedom to perform feats of “exploit” as art or to provide craft services as “industry,” depending upon changing necessities, contexts, or desires.

slide 16 please If there’s validity to the hypothesis of craft-as-exploit, it would seem that recognition would be very important to our members, as external validation for their “honorable” work. Yet our members had a very mixed response to the question, “Are you adequately RECOGNIZED?”

While some report they are recognized, and many echo the sentiment “I suppose that I have received fair recognition but I would like more,” others reject recognition outright: “Recognition is not a goal or a desire.” “Eh, recognition is over-valued.” “I’m a big fan of anonymity.”

Other members entirely reframe recognition, away from themselves and onto the work: “Recognition in some way means that somebody is trying to understand what went into the work. It is important.”

“Sometimes it is frustrating that (without being told) most people will neither recognize nor appreciate the time and effort that went into the object. But most of the time I consider this feeling part of the work itself; the labor is a selfless gift to the world.”

“Generally I think folks understand that I do something special, and maybe more importantly they know and acknowledge that I do it for a reason, and actually that is what separates our kind of labor from the rest in my mind.”

It is certainly the valuation of the experience of working itself, the commitment to the art-craft processes, which binds ILSSA members together:

“What I make and create is only impractical through the eyes of outsiders. The labor itself is painfully practical. To create things — it helps you to understand reality, it grounds you, unites body and mind, gives depth and shape to the world, avoids consumerism, gives meaning to objects, aids in expression and understanding.”

“I believe “true” labor (and this will seem really impractical in this world) is not that which we produce but that which produces us. Most of what passes for work any more is merely a distraction from learning and developing who we are. Part of my own labor is to turn it around and participate in the struggle to realize who I am becoming by what I create.”

“In the end, the work is the thing — in the end, working is all that — working is my goal, my values, and what I need.”

slide 17 please While we continue to unpack their meanings and potential, we are invigorated by the range and depth of responses. Conducting the survey has clarified some specific needs of our members — the desire to connect more directly with other members, for one, the want of effective time management strategies, for another. It has provided a surplus of potential topics to tackle, and offered other frame-



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works for thinking about art-craft practice.

For Bridget and myself, the survey also validated our initial impulse to embark on this project: we received many spurious comments such as “Thank you for organizing and spearheading ILSSA.” “Have I told you today just how much I love ILSSA?” And “Can’t wait to see what happens with all these.” “Would like to read other responses.”

slide 18 please We’re very happy to comply. We’ve published a compilation of responses as the State of the ILSSA Union, which we’re sending to all members. Along with this publication we are asking members to identify questions, issues, and topics that they would like to see addressed at our first-ever ILSSA convergence this July in Asheville, North Carolina, whether or not they will attend. One of our goals through this meeting is to generate content for a new series of publications that will provide pragmatic advice addressing specific topics of primary concern to our members. Another goal is to welcome how ILSSA changes when we finally meet face-to-face, and have the opportunity to work together.



Delivered on February 15, 2013 in New York City  
at the College Art Association 101st Conference  
on the panel “Craft After Deskilling?,” chaired by T’ai Smith.

Slides were presented as black & white transparencies via an  
overhead projector.

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