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Showing Making: On Visual Documentation and Creative Practice

Ann-Sophie Lehmann

Ann-Sophie Lehmann is Associate Professor at the Department for Media and Culture Studies at Utrecht University. Her research develops historical and theoretical perspectives on materials, tools, and practices used in artifact production in old and new media cultures. She is an editorial board member of the *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* and co-founder of the Iconology Research Group.

Abstract

This article discusses visual representations of creative practice as source material to study the complex procedures involved in the making of artifacts. After a brief discussion of theoretical approaches to production processes, the genre of *showing making* is introduced as a new line of enquiry. The still and moving images belonging to the genre contain at least four main elements which are extremely useful to the analysis of making. They have an archival function, as they store tacit knowledge about making; an instructional function, in that they enable the acquisition of skills and material knowledge; a participatory function, in the sense that demonstration incites pleasure in the viewer through kinaesthetic identification with the depicted process; and finally a display function, which showcases some but hides other elements of the creative process. These functions can be made instrumental to the study of creative practice, it is finally argued, if the mediated nature of images (which is the result of material processes) is taken into account.

Keywords: creative process, image making, materials, mediation.

Recent theoretical approaches to artifacts in the adjacent fields of anthropology, sociology, archaeology, and material

culture studies all agree in one respect: if we want to understand what artifacts mean—in the broadest sense of the word—we have to investigate the complex, dynamic networks in which they are created, used, modified, collected, and destroyed.¹ Artifacts circulating within networks are often described using anthropomorphic metaphors, as in the well-known phrases “the social life of things” (Appadurai 1986), “the everyday life of objects” (Clark 2007), “the material life of things” (Lucchini 2010), and the “life cycle of artifacts” (Bijker 2010; Boradkar 2010). These metaphors have been useful in overcoming subject-object dualisms by emphasizing the idea that things, too, possess agency (e.g. Gell 1998; Latour 2005). Yet this biological analogy, in which things are likened to living organisms, is also misleading because it suggests that things only really exist from the moment that they are “born.” And indeed many studies devoted to particular artifacts consider them primarily as finished objects, paying little attention to their becoming or, in keeping with the metaphor, their “prenatal” life.² In mammals, the prenatal phase of growth is homeostatic, in principle hidden from view and inaccessible except in particular medical or experimental settings. Therefore, it is usually excluded from the conception of life proper; thus a biography typically starts from birth.

The case is completely different with artifacts. As the very term (with its etymological root of *factum*) denotes, they are not the result of growing but of making, and while growing is a self-regulated, internal process, making is embedded in and accessible to human experience. Of course, everybody knows that things are not alive and it may seem naive to take the

metaphor so seriously. Yet the contrast between growing and making makes clear that if the analysis of things ignores processes of production, it fails to acknowledge how the complex interaction between humans, materials, tools, and technologies shapes the possible meanings and usages of the resulting artifact.³ Understanding making therefore is vital to understanding artifacts.

Making Is Motion

The complexity of making poses a challenge to academic research. Theoretical approaches to what actually happens when a thing is made are only just being developed. A contemporary definition may describe the act of making as a temporary creative unit, fixed in time and place, in which materials, tools, and maker interact. In his book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett has described the knowledge resulting from this creative unit as “material consciousness,” leaving open whether it resides in the human agent alone or also in the materials involved (2008: 119–46). The archaeologist Lambros Malafouris, in line with Actor-Network Theory, argues that an analysis of making cannot focus on the individual agents involved, but must study what happens *between* makers, materials, and tools. He describes this in-between as material engagement, or the “grey zone where brain, body and culture conflate” (2010: 22), a zone essentially defined by a constant flow of activities, from neurons firing, to hands moving, to materials resisting, and back. Howard Risatti in his *Theory of Craft* gives a similar though more technical definition, when he writes: “Both material and process are essential to craft and must be understood together as the basis of craft technique, a unity of operations centered

in functional purpose" (2007: 99). And Glenn Adamson has pinpointed motion as the prime catalyst of this unity, stating that craft really "only exists in motion" (2007). The connection of creative actions through purposeful motion is also paramount in Timothy Ingold's interpretation of making. The anthropologist compares artists and artisans to "itinerant wayfarers" who "make their way through the taskscape as do walkers through the landscape." To follow the paths that they have waded through materials is to understand creativity (2010: 97).

A brief historical perspective on this line of thinking suggests that motion is indeed inherent to theorizing creativity. John Dewey had already stated in *Art as Experience* that every work of art always denotes "a process of doing or making" (1934: 47) and that art theory should therefore expand static and distanced aesthetic contemplation towards including dynamic and performative aspects of artistic production. Dewey envisioned this production as an exchange between two different material spheres. During making, he wrote, "inner material" (everything commonly ascribed to the embodied mind: thought, observation, memories, imagination, emotion) and "outer material" (the physical stuff the artist employs) interact. As "the physical process develops imagination, while imagination is conceived in terms of concrete material" (74–5), this exchange creates a purposeful back and forth movement, which results in an art object.

While the different yet related theoretical approaches briefly assembled here all agree that a theory of making needs to address the unit of agents (makers, materials, tools) and their dynamic interaction, the different

ways of expressing this idea also hint at the greatest obstacle such approaches may meet: how exactly can the interchange between inner and outer materials be grasped? How do we trace the paths that artisans have trodden as they have waded through their "taskscape"? In other words, how can theoretical descriptions like these, which beautifully capture the complexity of making without necessarily clarifying it, be particularized in detailed studies of creative practice?

How to Study Making

One problem certainly lies in the fact that the complexity of making challenges our most important analytical tool: written language and its essentially linear structure. Richard Sennett has argued that language "is not an adequate 'mirror tool' for the physical movements of the human body," and that only visual experience can take in making fully, and hence "enable our eyes to do the thinking about material things" (2008: 95). Back in the fifteenth century, the authors of instructional manuals warned the reader about the insufficiency of their own medium: in order to learn making one has to see it—ideally by looking over a master's shoulder—and not only read about it (Cennini 1960: 65). For theoretical studies of making, which of course need language, too, the deficiency of textual description is easier to balance when there is a direct access to the act of making and thus a lot of information, as in anthropological fieldwork or other encounters with contemporary process. Past making is exponentially more difficult to study. Sources may be lacking entirely, or else deemed unreliable—such as artists' biographies, which are often unfairly

neglected because they are considered merely anecdotal. Manuals and recipe books have only recently been discovered by researchers outside the field of restoration. A close reading of many recipes for the same thing, or a detailed account by a single artisan, may give an impression of the complexity of historic ways of making (see also Lehmann 2008; Smith and Beentjes 2010). Archaeologists have neither direct observation nor textual sources at their disposal and have to extract all information about making from the object itself (see also Bleed 2008). This is not to say that a theoretical analysis of making and its materials is unattainable. It does, however, mean that methods need to be developed, and language carefully employed, so as to match the complexity of making (Elkins 2008; Herzfeld 2007).

Generally speaking, studies of artifact-making can develop along four lines. Two of these are the province of particular academic fields: first, direct observation of process (anthropology, sociology); second, scrutinizing objects for traces of making (archaeology, art history, history of science). In addition, scholars working in any field may analyze textual descriptions of making and—the fourth line of development—engage in reconstruction and re-enactment. These methods have all been explored to a greater or lesser extent by other writers. I would like to add a fifth line of enquiry here, which is to study the visual documentation of making in still or moving images. If direct observation enables “thinking about material things,” as Sennett puts it, so too does mediated observation through visual documentation available in drawings, paintings, photographs, films,

animation, computer simulation, etc. Images can capture the complexity and simultaneity of making where words fail to do so. This is well known, of course, and popularizing as well as academic studies of practice are more often than not accompanied by visual material. But here images are typically used as illustrations, as transparent windows that seem to grant direct access to whichever process is discussed, substituting for the direct visual experience. What is new about the approach proposed here is that it aims to turn images into an analytical tool to investigate making by addressing not only what is shown, but how it is shown, how the image acquires the agency to show making and how its own materiality relates to the material process depicted.

Showing Making

The search for visual information about the making of artifacts reveals a distinctive iconography, surprisingly consistent throughout history and across cultures, geographies, and media. Taken together, images of people making something crystallize into an independent genre, the genre of “showing making.” People engaged in crafting objects were depicted on Egyptian murals as early as 1400 BC, and Roman and early medieval artists created representations of miniature painters, glassblowers, weavers, and woodworkers. But images of making first became common in the early modern period with the institutionalization of craft within the guild system, which helped to encourage the production of illustrated craft manuals and portraits of artists and artisans. In the eighteenth century, crafting procedures were visually recorded for encyclopedic projects; the nineteenth century saw countless

allegorical and topological representations of craftspeople at work, and photography permitted extensive documentation of craft procedures, often their consecutive steps. In the twentieth century, film emerged as an ideal means to record the movements of production, and making became a favorite subject in documentary and educative film as well as television. In the age of new media, the visual representation of practice has multiplied in online tutorials, photo-sharing platforms, and YouTube videos that demonstrate “how to” make every artifact imaginable, from throwing bowls, weaving cloth, or folding origami to making digital artifacts with advanced software (Lehmann 2012).

The persistency and robustness of the genre through the ages—traveling with ease across different visual media and between art and popular culture—suggests that showing making has a basic anthropological function in helping to understand the complex nature of the human capacity to make things. Pictures which show making contain thickly layered information about the social, material, technical, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of the production of artifacts. While specific groups of images have been studied from some of these perspectives, there has never been an integral approach to the genre as a whole.⁴ A critical analysis, with the goal of unpacking the wealth of information these images contain, may be useful to visual studies and art history as it helps to reconcile these fields with the realm of “making and doing,” as Dewey called for. The visual analysis of making can also contribute to theories of creative practice as they currently develop in anthropology, sociology, material culture studies, and craft and design studies.

Knowledge, Skill, Pleasure, and Display: The Elements of Showing Making

Showing making has a number of key functions, which are more or less explicitly present in all examples of the genre, and which traverse the media used to depict or record the process at hand. First and foremost, representations of making are visual archives in which information and therefore knowledge *about* making is stored. How is glass shaped and blown (see also O’Connor 2007); how is clay kneaded and thrown on the wheel (see also Lehmann 2009; Malafouris 2010); how is a laptop assembled or a chocolate meringue cake baked? Archiving knowledge can be considered the passive function of the genre.

Second, showing making has an instructional value and can enhance the acquisition of skills for making things, such as in manuals, tutorials, and how-to videos. Even staged representations of making, such as a self-portrait in which a painter shows herself at the easel, or a “making-of” feature about a Hollywood movie, contain elements of instructional value in so far as they are generally truthful to procedures of material production (Lehmann 2006). As conveyor of skill, the image mediates between the domains of implicit and explicit knowledge and can be considered the active function of the genre.

A third purpose of showing making is to evoke pleasure through embodied identification. It is this aspect that makes both the passive, archiving function and the active, instructional function available to the viewer: looking at a film of someone drawing, for instance, generates knowledge about the process we see and it might

enhance our own drawing skills. It also creates pleasure because we vicariously experience making the drawing ourselves, activating our capacity for kinaesthetic empathy. In the seventeenth century, René Descartes observed that a blind man extends his sense of touch through his cane, just like our hand seems to feel the tip of the pen on the paper—and not the pen in our fingers—when we write. Descartes concluded that we are able to extend our sense of touch beyond our physical being.⁵ But the sense of touch can be extended even further because we can also “feel” the pen in the hand of someone else when we observe writing. Recent neurological research confirms that the physical experience of an action we merely perceive visually is a hard-wired neuronal part of perception. The existence of so-called mirror neurons shows that observing a familiar act triggers the same neurons that would fire if we were to perform the act ourselves. The more experience and knowledge we have of the action we observe, the more neurons fire (Calvo-Merino *et al.* 2006). This effect can also be observed outside the context of simultaneous observation: when looking at a handwritten letter of the alphabet, our brains replays (as it were) the movement that initially formed it, because our hand and our brain know how the letter was written (Freedberg and Gallese 2007).

This “hand in the brain” not only explains why the observation of the skilled action of others is such an essential element of learning a craft (Marchand 2007). It also elucidates why we enjoy watching artists and artisans even when we do not intend to learn their skills. While it takes talent and years to learn drawing or throwing clay

or stone knapping well, we can vicariously share in the immediate experience of skilled actions because we all know a bit about making marks on a surface, shaping soft material, or wielding a tool against a resistant material. Showing making extends this knowledge and allows the onlooker to participate, even if only and literally *second-hand*, in the skilled action of another person.

Finally, showing making can serve to put skillful practice on display in order to claim ownership over a certain technique, to create awe in the viewer, or simply to show off. This is often achieved by showing only certain elements of making. Like watching a magic trick, the viewer witnesses a process but cannot discern how the making actually happens. The display function is paradoxical because representation is employed to mystify rather than to clarify creation.

Showing Making Is Mediated

For the elements outlined here to become effective tools in the study of creative practice, the relation between *making*—the process—and *showing*—the image—needs to be taken into account. This relation is far from a simple one. First of all, drawings, paintings, prints, photographs, films, etc. are mediated objects that answer to specific pictorial conventions. These conventions and styles are shaped by the historical, cultural, and geographical settings in which an image is produced. Furthermore, images of making are only rarely direct transcriptions of process. When capturing these procedures, innumerable decisions are made that depart from strict objectivity, from the technologies used to editorial choices. Images fragment and compress; in showing one thing, they leave out another, and can easily be made

to idealize, mystify, or obscure creative processes.⁶ Showing making can only be employed for the study of creative practice if the double nature of the image which shows, but also hides, is acknowledged.

This, however, is not achieved by treating images only as representations, as immaterial signs, symbols, or carriers of information in need of interpretation—a dominant tradition in visual and media studies. Such primarily semiotic approaches tend to focus on the surface of images, leaving their material depth out of sight.⁷ But images, too, are materially constructed artifacts. Making them involves tools, materials, and practices, which in turn shape style and meaning. Thinking about mediation as a material and not only a representational process introduces another layer to showing making. As well as the material practices represented *in* the image, we must direct our attention to the materiality *of* the image. It follows that in order to understand making through visual representation, processes of artifact making have to be studied in conjunction with processes of image making.

Coloring Lanterns, Umbrellas, and Photographs

I would like to demonstrate the approach outlined here by examining some photographs by the Japanese photographer Enami Nobukuni, also known as T. Enami (1859–1929). Enami had a large studio in Yokohama and produced a vast number of albumen photographs, lantern slides, and stereo views during the Meiji and Taisho periods.⁸ Among the most prominent genres in early Japanese photography, next to landscape scenes and portraits, are what David Odo has called “occupational scenes”

(2008). These show typical “Japanese” views like geisha drinking tea or Sumo wrestlers, but also include people at work, often engaged in crafting everyday objects. These images were attractive to tourists as well as to Japanese collectors (Odo 2008: 10–12). Enami’s oeuvre includes a large number of such images.⁹ Within this group a certain subset can be distinguished, showing both male and female artisans engaged in coloring common traditional artifacts such as screens, prints, fans, umbrellas, and lanterns. The photograph of the lantern painters illustrated here (Figure 1) was taken around the early 1890s. Of the four elements of showing making, it addresses the archival function of documentation as well as the display function most clearly. The frontal composition and the arrangement of the props point to a studio photograph. The fact that this is a staged image is confirmed by another photograph showing an umbrella painter, who is sitting under the same line of hanging lanterns and taking refreshments from the same teapot. In fact, he appears to be the very same



Fig 1 T. Enami, *The Lantern Painters*, hand-tinted lantern slide, c.1892–5. Reproduced with kind permission from Rob Oechsle, t-enami.org.



Fig 2 T. Enami, *The Umbrella Painter*, hand-tinted lantern slide, c. 1892–5. Reproduced with kind permission from Rob Oechsle, t-enami.org.

man (Figure 2). A later Enami photograph, showing two boys painting lanterns, gives a more immediate impression of the process (Figure 3). The deep perspective, the wooden floor; lanterns, bamboo and brushes piled in the background, the paint bucket, and the fact that the boys have dirty hands and have spread a newspaper on the ground to protect the paint from spilling, suggest that



Fig 3 T. Enami, *Boys Painting Lanterns*, hand-tinted lantern slide, c. 1905–20. Reproduced with kind permission from Rob Oechsle, t-enami.org.

this might be a view of a real workshop. Not yet instructional, the picture nevertheless conveys more accurate information about the process and the skills involved (the second function of showing making), and also appeals to the “hand in the brain,” which can relate to the large brush and imagine the movements that brought about the colorful patterns on the lanterns. In fact, in Japanese calligraphy, the process is as much valued as the result, and the ability to recreate brush movements from written signs and decorative patterns in the mind was probably high, adding a further kinaesthetic layer to the image (Nakamura 2007). The immediacy is also due to technical developments in photography that enabled a higher sensitivity to light and shorter shutter times, allowing the camera to move into new spaces.¹⁰

The most fascinating kinship between the processes on display and the material process of image making itself, however, lies in the coloring. Most of Enami’s photographs were hand-colored and famous for being so. Techniques of hand-coloring, though invented in Europe, were brought to perfection in Japan, where traditional skills were applied to these new pictorial objects (Henisch and Henisch 1996; Lacoste 2010). In one of the first large photographic projects to issue a carefully staged image of Japan to the Western world, *Captain Frank Brinkley’s Japan: Described and Illustrated by the Japanese* (published between 1897 and 1898; see also Hockley 2011), the ten folio-sized volumes of essays were accompanied by 260 hand-tinted albumen photographs. In Japan, 350 colorists worked on the project, including Enami’s studio (Oechsle 2007–11). A black and white photograph shows employees in the workshop in Yokohama engaged in this

work, an image that is certainly staged (given the careful display of different formats and phases of the coloring process), yet probably directed at insiders to the trade (Figure 4).¹¹ But scenes of coloring photographs also became a subject within collectable albums, extending the iconography of decorating lanterns, umbrellas, fans, or screens. These photographs were colored themselves, depicting the process they had undergone, and they also emphasized the pleasure of looking at these new and vividly colored artifacts, as is clear in an Enami photograph that shows boys engaged in coloring and looking at pictures (Figure 5).¹² Looking at photographs became an occupational motif

in its own right, showing, for instance, geisha contemplating pictures, either directly or through a stereoscope. In these scenes, the coloring process is not represented but is cleverly emphasized by coloring everything in the image but the depicted photographs.¹³

All of the pictures briefly described here reflect on the production and materiality of both the emerging medium of photography and the familiar medium of painting, as well as the new liaison they entered. The ensuing multilayered relation between showing and making not only reveals the appreciation of traditional crafts alongside a related, new craft technique. It also shows how coloring played an important role in linking



Fig 4 Unknown, *Hand-tinting of Photographs in the Studio of T. Enami*, half-tone image published in England in 1904, reproduced from albumen print, c. 1895–7. Reproduced with kind permission from Rob Oechsle, t-enami.org.



Fig 5 After T. Enami, *Japanese Boys Coloring Pictures and Using Stereoscope*, lithograph from a photograph by T. Enami, 1906–10. Reproduced with kind permission from Rob Oechsle, t-enami.org.

photography to familiar expressions of visual culture and helped to appropriate the new medium as Japanese. Finally, it stresses the cultural value attached to the art of coloring in general: an art that adorns manufactured objects, bringing images made with a mechanical device to life with a manual technique.

Conclusion

The display of hand-coloring photographs *in* hand-colored photographs allows for a particularly distinct demonstration of the relation between the material practices represented in the image and the materiality of the image. This material bond, however, is also relevant in less obviously related media, such as video and clay, for instance.

Extremely corporeal craft techniques like throwing and kneading clay can only be

captured fully in moving images. In the many YouTube video tutorials that Simon Leach, grandson of Bernard Leach, has embedded on his website (www.simonleachpottery.com), the dexterity of handling clay stands in stark contrast to the amateur use of the recording medium. In a video that demonstrates the Japanese *kikuneri* wedging technique, Leach walks up to the running camera and adjusts it to the table he is kneading on (Lehmann 2009). The resulting close-up cuts off his head and shows only his hands and arms engaged with the clay while he is talking outside the frame (Figures 6a and 6b). Yet it is exactly this casual mode of recording, done by Leach himself, that helps the viewer identify with the material engagement documented here. By creating an almost too close visual contact with Leach's body and the clay, the video

SIMON LEACH . tips on kneading clay739 videos **(a)****SIMON LEACH . tips on kneading clay**739 videos **(b)**

Fig 6 (a) and (b) Stills from Simon Leach, *Tips on Kneading Clay*, YouTube Video, uploaded June 20, 2007 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xboIDEdngwY>). Reproduced with kind permission from Simon Leach.

images—a bit shaky and not quite in focus—create a distinct impression of the force and smoothness of the kneading motion. As a consequence, the “hand in the brain” is triggered and the demonstration of Leach’s wedging becomes very effective.¹⁴

Like the hand-colored Japanese photographs, the video images of kneading clay can better be understood if their own materiality is considered alongside the material processes they show. Such a combined study of the imaging of craft and the crafting of images opens up new perspectives for media and craft studies—not only because it can tell us about the cultural, social, and material conditions of making, but because it reminds us that images are an integral part of making in their own right.

Notes

- 1 For an overview of recent theoretical concepts in these and related fields, see Boradkar 2010: 17–43; Knappett and Malafouris 2010.
- 2 In Science and Technology Studies and Design Studies there is a strong focus on the political, social, and economic aspects involved in the production of things in industrial settings, yet little attention is paid to the actual procedures of making themselves (Boradkar 2010, esp. 75–101).
- 3 Igor Kopytoff’s article “The Cultural Biography of Things” paved the way for a biographical approach to objects. It mentions the initial phase of making as relevant but does not include it in the analysis (Kopytoff 1986).
- 4 The majority of studies is devoted to pictures of the painter at work; an overview is given in Kleinert 2006. The artist’s documentary also has a number of studies devoted to it; see Hayward 1998 and Walker 1993. There are a couple of articles on “making-of” features in film (Hediger 2005; Hight 2005) and on instructional pictures (Gombrich 1999; Lopes 2004).
- 5 See the Sixth Discourse of René Descartes, *Diotrique* (1637). For a modern interpretation of the phenomenon using the example of chalk as an extension of our hand, see Ihde 1986.
- 6 This mechanism was the subject of the follow-up conference to “Showing Making”: “Hiding Making—Showing Creation. Strategies in Artistic Practice from the 19th to the 21st Centuries,” Teylers Museum, Haarlem/Rijksakademie Amsterdam, January 7–8, 2011.
- 7 For an extended critique of the dominance of immateriality in visual culture, see Ann-Sophie Lehmann, “Das Medium als Mediator: Eine Materialtheorie für Öl(bilder),” *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 57 (2012).
- 8 The oeuvre of Enami has only recently been fully rediscovered, documented, and made available by Rob Oechsle on <http://www.t-enami.org/>. Under the pseudonym Okinawa Soba, Oechsle maintains a photostream on Flickr with high-quality digitized photographs by T. Enami (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/24443965@N08/>). See also Bennett 2006.
- 9 Oechsle has assembled a set of occupational images by Enami on Flickr: “At Work in Old Japan” (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/24443965@N08/sets/72157605714378115/with/2456262266/>).
- 10 Before, craft scenes would also be staged outside, where improvised outdoor studios would allow for enough light and the display of messier crafts. These photographs are called *shajo*, referring to improvised outdoor theater stages. See Clark Worswick, *Japan: Photographs, 1854–1905* (New York: Random, 1973).
- 11 On photographic studio practice in Japan, see Fraser 2009.
- 12 For a view of women coloring photographs see the Metadate Database of Japanese Old Photographs in Bakumatsu-Meiji Period, Nagasaki University Library (<http://hikoma.lib.nagasaki-u.ac.jp/en/target.php?id=2366>).

- 13** "Geisha Looking at Photographs," assembled by Rob Oechsle, alias Okinawa Soba, on Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/24443965@N08/sets/72157604139392795/with/2339168371/>).
- 14** Vivian Sobchak and Laura Marks describe the phenomenon of bodily identification with moving images as "haptic visuality"; see Vivian Sobchak, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), Laura Marks, "Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes," *Frameworks*, 02 (2004): 79–82.

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