

# RETHINKING AUTHORSHIP: WOODWORK AS COLLABORATION



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## INTRODUCTION:

In this study, we delve into the implications of the collaborative nature of working with wood within the context of artwork creation. By examining the history of woodworking through different cultural lenses, specifically Japanese traditions, and engaging with theorists such as Bruno Latour (b.1947), who explore the interconnectedness between human and non-human agencies we aim to broaden our perception of wood beyond the dominant Western-centric approach that shapes our understanding of its nature. Instead of seeking to master and control the material, we recognize the agency and inherent qualities of wood, allowing it to guide and inform our creative decisions as artists.

Moreover, working with salvaged wood holds particular significance in our exploration. By utilizing reclaimed or repurposed wood, we not only contribute to sustainability and waste reduction but also add an additional layer of collaboration with the material. Salvaged wood carries within it a history and a story of its own, which becomes interwoven with the artist's vision. In this section, we delve into Tim Ingold's (b. 1948) theories on the relational aspects of materials and their engagement with the environment. This convergence of past narratives and present intentions brings forth a connection with the material and amplifies the collaborative nature of our artistic process.

In summary, by adopting a multicultural perspective that challenges the dominant Eurocentric approach and embracing salvaged wood, artists can shift their approach to woodworking from one of dominance to one of collaboration. This approach acknowledges the agency of wood, allows for a richer artistic expression, and fosters a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness between the artist, the material, and the

broader cultural and environmental contexts in which we exist. Through this collaborative mindset, we discover new possibilities and a renewed sense of respect for the craft of woodworking.

#### CHALLENGE THE EUROCENTRIC APPROACH

In Western societies, narratives surrounding woodworking have often revolved around the artist's inclination to impose their vision onto the material, overshadowing alternative approaches that prioritize harmony, balance, spirituality, and collaboration. We find inspiration in the insights of Sylvia Wynter (b.1928), a prominent Jamaican-born writer and cultural theorist, who challenges Eurocentric perspectives across various disciplines, including the arts. While her work does not directly focus on woodworking, her critical insights encourage us to question the Eurocentric lens through which woodworking has traditionally been understood and practiced (Bogues, 2006).

By comparing Western and Japanese cultures of woodworking, we can discern the profound influence of a more holistic and respectful approach in Japanese practices. The Japanese tradition embodies a deeper engagement with wood that goes beyond dominance and control (Tsuji and Rousmaniere, 2020). It emphasizes a harmonious relationship, an appreciation for the material's inherent qualities, and a collaborative mindset between the artist and the wood itself. This alternative perspective offers valuable insights for reimagining woodworking as a collaborative endeavor, fostering a greater connection with the material and embracing a more nuanced understanding of its cultural and environmental significance.

#### COMPARISON OF JAPANESE AND WESTERN APPROACHES TO WOODWORK

Cultural differences play a significant role in shaping artistic traditions. Japanese art often reflects a deep connection with

nature, simplicity, and attention to detail. In contrast, Western art has been influenced by individualism, perspective, and a focus on realistic representation (Gombrich, 2007). Japanese art, by contrast, has often valued intuition, indirectness, allusion, and understatement (Tsuji and Rousmaniere, 2020).

Philosophically, Japanese art is rooted in concepts such as Zen Buddhism and the appreciation of impermanence and transience. This is evident in the art of wabi-sabi, which embraces the beauty of imperfection and the passage of time (Tsuji and Rousmaniere, 2020). Yukiko Saito writes in relation to the topic:

‘This principle for respecting a natural object also applies to producing objects of everyday life. From lacquerware to pottery, paper to textile, woodwork to metalwork, Japanese crafts are transmitted generation after generation, firmly rooted in respect for materials, methods, tools and traditions of each craft (Saito, 2007).’

On the other hand, Western art has been shaped by various philosophical movements, such as the Renaissance focus on humanism and the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and scientific inquiry (Gombrich, 2007).

Aesthetically, Japanese art emphasizes harmony, balance, and the effective use of negative space, creating a sense of tranquility and simplicity. In contrast, Western art has traversed a vast spectrum of styles, ranging from realistic representation to abstract expressionism, showcasing diverse approaches and artistic expressions. In Western art, individual creativity and the expression of the artist’s personality have been considered paramount (Gombrich, 2007).

A notable aspect of Japanese art, especially in the realm of

woodblock printing, is the collaborative process involved. Unlike many Western art forms where the artist works independently, Japanese woodblock printing embodies a collective effort. It encompasses the expertise of a designer who conceptualizes the composition, a carver who meticulously carves the design onto a wooden block, and a printer who skilfully applies ink and transfers the image onto paper. This collaborative approach highlights the communal nature of Japanese art and further exemplifies how it diverges from the individualistic tendencies often found in Western artistic practices (Salter, 2001).

In Japanese art, there is a deep appreciation for the intrinsic qualities of wood and a sensitivity to its organic nature. Wood is seen as a living material with its own spirit, and artists strive to work in harmony with its inherent characteristics. This understanding is evident in traditional Japanese woodworking techniques such as joinery, which aim to maximize the natural strength and beauty of the wood (Brown, 2014) (see Figure 1).



Fig. 2: Iwakuni 2018. [architectre model]



Fig. 1: Gibbons 1960. *no name* [carving]

In contrast, Western art has historically emphasised the transformation of materials through carving and shaping. The focus is often on the artist's ability to impose their vision onto the material. Western artists have explored techniques that showcase the artist's mastery over the material, such as intricate wood carvings and detailed sculptures (see Figure 2).

Through comparing and contrasting two iconic religious buildings, Itsukushima Shrine (see Figure 3) and Notre-Dame Cathedral (see Figure 4), we can explore how cultural differences between Japan and the West influenced the approach to woodworking in these spaces.

Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, views nature as sacred and holds a deep reverence for natural elements. This philosophy greatly influences the approach towards woodworking in Itsukushima Shrine. Wood is considered a sacred material in Shintoism, and its use in the shrine reflects a



Fig. 3: (unknown) 1100. *Itsukushima Shrine* [architectre]



Fig. 4: Lassus 1163 - 1345. *Notre-Dame* [architectre]

deep spiritual connection with the natural world. Woodworking techniques emphasize the integration of architecture with the surrounding natural environment, showcasing the beauty of natural materials. The creators of Itsukushima Shrine embrace the simplicity, incorporating natural textures and celebrating the material's inherent qualities (Hardacre, 2017) (Brown, 2014)

Christianity, in the context of Gothic architecture, emphasizes the pursuit of grandeur, the glorification of God, and the representation of religious narratives through visual arts, including woodworking. A passage from the bible:

'Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things (Nelson, 2017).'



Fig. 5: Louis-Philippe Hebert 1870. *Ezekiel and Jeremiah* [carving]



Woodworking in Notre-Dame Cathedral is characterized by intricate carvings, ornate tracery, and meticulous craftsmanship. The woodworking in the cathedral serves the purpose of illustrating biblical stories, depicting saints and religious figures, and enhancing the overall grandeur of the sacred space (see Figure 5) (Gombrich, 2007) (Follett, 2019).

Itsukushima Shrine, influenced by Shinto, focuses on simplicity, harmony with nature, and the celebration of natural materials. Woodworking embodies these principles and embraces the innate beauty of wood. The wooden structure is unpolished, the base still holds the image of a tree trunk. Notre-Dame Cathedral, influenced by Christianity and humanism, emphasizes grandeur, divine representation, and the glorification of God. Woodworking is intricate, ornate, and aims to create a sense of awe and transcendence (Follett, 2019).

In summary, the cultural differences between Shinto and Christianity have had a profound impact on Japanese woodworking in Itsukushima Shrine and Western woodworking in Notre-Dame Cathedral. Itsukushima Shrine embodies simplicity, harmony with nature, and the celebration of imperfections, while Notre-Dame Cathedral focuses on grandeur, divine representation, and intricate ornamentation. These cultural perspectives shape the final works and reflect the distinct artistic and spiritual values of their respective traditions.

Through this case study, we can observe how cultural differences shape the interaction with wood as a material. In the context of a holistic religion like Shinto, which values nature, balance, and harmony, woodworkers embrace the agency of wood and celebrate its inherent qualities. The emphasis is on working in harmony with the material, allowing it to guide the creative process. On the other hand, in the Western context influenced by a hierarchical, humanistic religion like Christianity, woodworkers



Fig. 6: Zoet 2023. *Test* [burnt birch]

showcases how contemporary artists incorporate the unique characteristics of wood into their practices.

transform wood into grand sculptures that exalt humanity and assert power. The cultural perspectives shape the approach to woodworking and result in distinct artistic and spiritual expressions within the final works.

#### MATERIALITY

In order to work with wood, one must consider how the material behaves and responds. It cannot be coerced into doing things it is not inclined to do. This paragraph highlights the significance of

understanding materiality and

Wood is a versatile and expressive medium that requires an appreciation of its nature to fully explore its creative potential. By understanding these aspects, artists can make informed choices, employ appropriate techniques.

One crucial aspect of understanding wood is its physical properties. Different wood species possess distinct grain patterns, densities, and textures, which influence how they can be worked with. For instance, hardwoods like oak and mahogany have tighter and more pronounced grain, making them suitable for intricate carving and detailed work. Softwoods like pine and cedar, on the other hand, are easier to cut and shape but may have more visible knots and variations in grain (Porter, 2006).

Furthermore, knowledge of the characteristics of wood allows artists to harness and utilize its inherent qualities in their creative process. Wood possesses unique aesthetic attributes, including warm and natural colors, as well as variations in grain that add depth and character to artwork. Artists have the opportunity to incorporate these features into their designs, using the patterns and textures of the wood to enhance the visual impact of their creations (Porter, 2006).

For instance, Figure 6 demonstrates the heightening of grain plywood using a pyrography tool. This tool features a small pointed heated nib for creating intricate designs. In these particular works, the grain has been elevated, therefore taking centre stage in the artwork. It is akin to someone using their



Fig. 7: Armstrong 2022. *unknown* [green turned oak, bleached and waxed]

thumbprint as a signature, emphasizing the individuality and beauty of the wood's natural characteristics. By recognizing and enhancing the materiality of the wood, we allow it to guide and inform our decisions (see Figure 6).

However, along with its expressive potential, wood also presents limitations that artists must consider or indeed embrace. Wood



Fig. 8: Armstrong 2022. *Fungal battles over territory* [wood sculpture]

is a natural material and can be susceptible to changes in humidity, temperature, and aging. It can warp, crack, or decay if not handled and maintained properly. Artists who embrace these characteristics can create unique and innovative works, taking advantage of the inherent qualities of wood (Porter, 2006).

For example, woodworker Jayne Armstrong carves fragile bowls from green wood. Green wood refers to freshly cut or recently harvested wood that retains a significant amount of moisture. It is called “green” due to its high moisture content, which makes it more prone to warping, shrinking, and other changes as it dries (see Figure 7). She writes:

“the reason I love working with green wood - particularly freshly cut oak - is the way in which it moves and changes shape as it dries (Stories, 2022).”

This example beautifully illustrates how artists can embrace the qualities of wood and work in harmony with its nature to create designs that are responsive to the inherent characteristics of the material. The material has a life of its own beyond the artist hand.

Another example where Jayne Armstrong explores the natural qualities of wood is through embracing decay and fungal forms. Spalted wood refers to wood that has undergone a natural process of decay and fungal growth, resulting in unique and visually appealing patterns and colors (Porter, 2006) (see Figure 8). By understanding the materiality of wood and embracing it, Jayne allows the organic nature of wood to collaborate with her artistic process, rather than attempting to overpower and control it entirely (Stories, 2022).

Through the exploration of Jane Armstrong’s work, we witness how contemporary artists embrace wood as a material, its unique



Fig. 9: Von Rydingsvard 2017-18. *Bowl with fingers* [cedar with graphite]

characteristics and challenges, while allowing it to express itself. When working with green wood, for instance, the artist relinquishes control over how the sculpture may naturally evolve beyond their initial touch. Similarly, with fungi, the artist cannot dictate its growth or movement. This concept revolves around the idea of letting the wood exist as it is, enabling it to tell its own narrative. When exhibited, the material assumes a distinct presence and voice, free from excessive manipulation that would relegate it to the background. This notion challenges the traditional view of the celebrated artist as the sole creative force, as artists allow the wood itself to take center stage, sharing the light and shaping the artistic dialogue.

#### BRUNO LATOUR'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE AGENCY OF MATERIALS IN ARTISTIC PRACTICE.

Bruno Latour is a prominent French philosopher, sociologist, and anthropologist known for his work on science, technology, and society, challenges the conventional understanding of the artist as the sole creative agent and emphasizes the active role played by materials themselves.

Latour argues that materials have their own agency and influence the creative process and outcomes. In his book "Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory," he proposes the concept of "non-human actors" or "actants," which includes materials, objects, and technologies. According to Latour, these actants have the capacity to shape and mediate human actions, blurring the boundary between human and non-human agency (Latour, 2007).

Wood, as a non-human actor, brings its own properties and histories that impact the artistic outcomes. Latour's perspective challenges the traditional notion of the artist as a masterful creator and positions materials as active participants in the

creative process. By acknowledging the agency of materials, Latour encourages a re-evaluation of artistic practice, emphasizing the complex entanglements between humans and non-human actors.

#### THE AGENCY OF MATERIALS IN TERMS OF AUTHORSHIP AND CREATIVE RESPONSIBILITY.

Wood possesses inherent qualities such as texture, grain, color, and durability that influence the artist's creative choices and techniques. Latour suggests that materials have a "vocabulary of action" and their own capacity to shape human actions. In the case of wood, its unique properties and histories, including the type of wood, its source, and cultural significance, contribute to the aesthetic, symbolic, and conceptual dimensions of artworks, making it an active participant in the artistic process (Latour, 2007).

Recognizing the agency of materials in terms of authorship and creative responsibility has significant implications, challenging traditional notions of the artist as the sole author and initiator of artistic works. Bruno Latour's perspective prompts a re-evaluation of the roles and responsibilities of artists in relation to materials.

This statement relates to Ursula von Rydingsvard's (b.1942) work by emphasizing the significance of recognizing the agency of materials and challenging traditional notions of authorship and creative responsibility. Von Rydingsvard's artistic practice aligns with this perspective as she allows the materiality of wood to guide her creative decisions and acknowledges the intrinsic qualities and characteristics of the material (see Figure 9). She writes:

"Often, as I build my work, the original image changes—it is



not unusual for the wood to [refuse to] yield to something I am asking of it,” “Every time I see a truckload of my cedar beams, I give myself a talking-to: ‘Okay Ursula, enough is enough, surely there must be some other material that you can work with (Gittlen, 2017).’

Von Rydingsvard’s recognition of the agency of wood and her collaborative approach with the material reflect a departure from the traditional artist-centric view and highlight a deeper engagement with the material’s inherent qualities. Her work demonstrates a willingness to listen and respond to the material, allowing it to inform the creative process and challenge established notions of authorship.

Recognizing the agency of materials also expands the notion of creative responsibility. Artists become accountable not only for their intentions and actions but also for how they engage with and respond to the agency of materials. Artists have a responsibility to understand, respect, and work with the properties, affordances, and constraints of materials, allowing them to shape the artistic process and outcomes.

This recognition of material agency challenges traditional hierarchies of authorship and opens up new possibilities for collaborative and co-creative relationships between artists and materials. It calls for a more nuanced understanding of artistic practice as a dynamic interplay between human and non-human actors, emphasizing the mutual influence and entanglement of both in the creative process.

## TOOLS

This next section will examine the relationship between the artist and material, emphasizing that this connection is made possible using tools. Tools act as a bridge between these two realms,

facilitating understanding and engagement with the material, while simultaneously transforming it.

It is important not to overlook the significance of tools in the artist-wood relationship. Tools play a crucial role in the creative process by facilitating the transformation and simultaneous alteration of wood into a work of art. They provide artists with the means to work with wood. Chisels, gouges, saws, rasps, and sanders, among others, offer a diverse range of techniques for carving, cutting, shaping, and refining the wood. Each tool serves a specific purpose and allows the artist to engage with the wood in distinct ways. The artist's skill and comprehension of how to effectively employ these tools ultimately determine the direction the final artwork will take.

#### HEIDEGGER'S PHILOSOPHY ON TOOLS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN CRAFTSMANSHIP.

Martin Heidegger (b.1889), a renowned philosopher of the 20th century, provided profound insights into the significance of tools in craftsmanship. Heidegger's views and theories are controversial and subject to widespread criticism due to his affiliation with the Nazi party. He argued that tools become extensions of ourselves, with our relationship to them being automatic and subconscious. This idea resonates with Heidegger's concept of 'ready-to-hand (Heidegger, 1977).' For instance, when someone unintentionally collides with your car from behind, your immediate response is to exclaim, 'Hey! You hit me!' rather than 'Hey, you hit my car!' This instinctual reaction stems from perceiving the car as an extension of our own being. It is deeply ingrained in our thought processes. Likewise, when working with wood, tools become extensions of the artist. Here, the notion of collaboration emerges once again. The artist not only collaborates with the wood but also with the tool—a tool laden with cultural significance, one that has been

employed since the dawn of humanity. It is not solely the artist; it is the artist, the wood, the tool, and all the makers who have come before them, forming a collective creative endeavor. Heidegger's philosophy highlights the intimate relationship between the craftsman and their tools. Craftsmanship, for Heidegger, is a form of activity where the tool becomes an extension of the craftsman's self-expression and reveals a deep understanding of materials and processes. Here, Heidegger emphasizes that tools are not mere instruments but integral components of the creative act itself (Heidegger, 1997).

Furthermore, tools also act as extensions of the artist's creativity and expression. Artists develop a deep familiarity and intimate relationship with their tools, learning their intricacies and adapting their techniques accordingly. The choice of tool and the way it is wielded can convey the artist's intent and artistic style. Tools become the medium through which the artist communicates with the wood.

An example that demonstrates the diverse ways in which tools help us understand wood is when we explore three different artistic approaches: working with pastels, using a chisel, and employing an axe. Each tool grants the artist a certain level of control over the wood. In the accompanying image, you can observe how pastels are used to enhance the grain pattern on pieces of birch (see Figure 10). When working with pastels, the pigment is applied to the wood's surface without the need to penetrate it. As a result, the wood does not influence the design process. On the other hand, when working with a chisel, the wood is penetrated, and one can immediately discern whether they are working with or against the grain, as the wood may begin to splinter (see Figure 11). Lastly, when using an axe, there is little the artist can do to govern the final cut of the wood; the tool follows the natural grain pattern, leaving the artist with limited agency (see Figure 12). Through these examples,



Fig. 10: Zoet 2023. *Untitled* [pastel on birch]

Fig. 11: Zoet 2023. *Untitled* [carving on oak]



Fig. 12: Zoet 2023. *Untitled* [Burnt birch]

it becomes apparent that tools provide distinct insights and avenues for understanding a material. Certain tools enable artists to impose their visions upon the wood, while others necessitate a deeper understanding of the material itself and require us to let go.

Tools become a means of understanding the nature of wood. Communication can then internally blossom into collaboration.

ORFEO TAGIURI: THE DUALITY OF THE TOOL - TO CREATE AND DESTROY

Using tools serves as a means for the wood to communicate. However, an ethical question arises as to whether working with wood can ever truly be a collaboration. While tools serve as a form of creativity, they also possess a dual nature of destruction.



Fig. 13: Tagiuri 2021. *Hammer Eating Nails* [wood engraving]

Born in Brookline, Massachusetts in 1991, Orfeo Tagiuri is a London-based artist who engages in a diverse range of artistic mediums and practices. Orfeo Tagiuri challenges the nature of the tool through his works by exploring the duality of its potential for creation and destruction. By incorporating the image of a hammer in his woodworks, he symbolizes the power and agency that tools possess (see Figure 13). The hammer represents humankind's ability to shape and manipulate the world around them, both positively and negatively. He writes:

“The hammer first appeared in my work when I was illustrating a story of a man setting sail, leaving home, beginning a new adventure. The hammer was used to build the boat. The hammer next appeared in my work when I was illustrating the ‘stations of the cross.’ Even from these two examples, the duality of the tool is evident. It can both create and destroy. I love that it is also the tool for reversing actions, withdrawing. The hammer is given the agency of a body. Simply put, the hammerhead figure is humankind, filled with potential and doubled with how best to use it (Tagiuri, 2021)”

Tagiuri's artistic exploration of the duality of tools, exemplified through the symbolic use of the hammer, challenges us to reconsider our relationship with woodworking and the broader ethical implications of creation and destruction.

This is when we must question whether “collaboration” accurately describes the artist's relationship with wood. I am sure if we had asked the tree if it had wanted to be cut down in the first place, it would have responded with a resounding no. The true nature of collaboration is one in which the two voices are presented as equal. Can this ever be realized in woodwork?

Perhaps the more fitting approach when working with wood is

to contemplate how we can truly celebrate, acknowledge, and respect the life that has been relinquished.

DAVID PYE: TO BE CONNECTED TO THE MAKERS OF THE PAST

David Pye (b.1914), a British furniture designer, craftsman, and writer, is a notable theorist who extensively explores how tools and the process of carving wood connect us to the makers of the past. In his influential book “The Nature and Art of Workmanship,” Pye delves into the philosophy and practice of craftsmanship. He emphasizes that when working with tools and engaging in carpentry, one brings all the makers of the past into the present moment. In the current cultural climate, which often celebrates individualism and rapid technological advancements, it is crucial to recognize that when working with wood, the collaboration extends beyond the wood and the tools. Rather, it encompasses a collaboration with all the masters of the past who have performed the same rituals. Woodworking, as a unique art form, involves tools and movements that span back to prehistoric times (Pye, 2007)

Pye’s concept of “the workmanship of risk” further underscores the connection between wood carving and the lineage of makers. He posits that the physical act of carving entails a certain level of uncertainty and risk, as craftsmen navigate the inherent qualities and idiosyncrasies of the material. Through this engagement, craftsmen establish a connection with the past and become part of a lineage of skilled artisans who have honed their craft across generations.

Artist Julian Watts (b.1989), who works with wood, shares a similar sentiment regarding the connection with the past. Watts became infatuated with wood due to its incorporation of organic and irregular forms that have always captivated him. Although his sculptures deviate from traditional norms, Watts embraces



the techniques of traditional folk wood carving. He appreciates the idea that his unique woodcarvings follow a process that has been part of human expression for centuries (Gittlen, 2017) (see Figure 14).

This notion challenges the Eurocentric approach that portrays the artist as the sole creator of the artwork. Instead, it emphasizes that when creating, makers are in the presence of all the artists who have come before them, collaborating with the legacy of past creatives.

#### WORKING WITH SALVAGED WOOD

Discuss the practice of working with salvaged wood and its environmental, historical, and aesthetic value.

Working with salvaged wood is an intriguing process as it involves working with wood that has a history preceding its encounter with the artist. Salvaged wood refers to wood that has been rescued or reclaimed from its original purpose or intended fate. Often, salvaged wood has served a function, been discarded, or faced destruction, and the artist rejuvenates it. As an artist considering working with such materials, it is important to contemplate whether you wish to interweave the narrative of the wood into your work. Recognizing the material's history, while not necessarily integrating it into the final outcome, acknowledges that the material may have a new life—a life that extends beyond the artist's involvement, where it may be reclaimed or even broken by someone else. This notion holds a cyclical quality, where the artist is not the sole collaborator but rather collaborates with the wood's history and future. The artist becomes a moment in the wood's life, and vice versa, where both undergo change and then move forward. Collaboration, in this sense, is infused with the understanding that the artist and the wood are entangled.



Fig. 14, Watts 2017, *Blob Vases* [sculpture]





Fig. 15: Gowda 2016, *Ambrosia* [carving on found wood, charred]

Working with salvaged wood holds significant environmental, historical, and aesthetic value, making it a meaningful and sustainable choice for artists and craftsmen. This practice involves repurposing wood from old structures, discarded furniture, or natural disasters, transforming it into new artworks or functional objects.

From an environmental standpoint, working with salvaged wood contributes to the reduction of waste and deforestation, aligning with principles of sustainability and responsible material sourcing. This practice, which minimizes the demand for new timber, helps conserve natural resources and protect forests. Bhuvanesh Gowda, influenced by his upbringing in the Western Ghats of southern India, has a deep connection to wood and its community. He recalls how wooden implements and structures were ubiquitous in his surroundings, highlighting the

cultural significance and aesthetic appeal of wooden tools and ploughs. In his recent work, Gowda explores the intersection of new developments in physics and Eastern philosophy, utilizing salvaged wood as his primary material. This choice reflects not just a conceptual decision but an ethical one driven by his responsibility toward the environment (see Figure 15). By repurposing salvaged wood, Gowda not only creates intricate and meaningful sculptures but also embraces sustainability and environmental consciousness in his artistic practice (Gittlen, 2017).

Salvaged wood also carries a rich historical value. Each piece of salvaged wood has a unique story embedded within it, connecting the artwork to a specific time, place, or cultural context. The traces of wear, patina, and weathering on salvaged wood add character and depth, reflecting its past life and imbuing the artwork with a sense of history.

Working with salvaged wood not only demonstrates an environmental consciousness but also allows artists to engage with the material's inherent history and aesthetic qualities. It serves as a reminder of the importance of sustainable practices and offers an opportunity to create art that resonates with both the past and the present. By giving new life to discarded wood, artists contribute to a more sustainable future while honoring the beauty and stories that lie within the material.

Tim Ingold's theory on the relational aspects of materials and their engagement with the environment.

Tim Ingold (b.1948), an anthropologist and scholar of anthropology, explores materiality from a holistic perspective, considering the entanglement of materials, humans, and the environment. Tim Ingold developed a theory that emphasizes the relational aspects of materials and their engagement with



Fig. 16: Weiwei 2005, *Fragments* [Iron wood (tieli wood) table, chairs, parts of beams and pillars from dismantled temples]

the environment. According to Ingold, materials are not passive entities but active participants in a dynamic process of becoming (Ingold, 2010).

Ingold's theory suggests that materials are constantly entangled in a web of relationships within their surroundings. He argues against viewing materials as isolated objects, instead proposing that they have agency and engage in reciprocal relationships with the world around them.

Central to Ingold's perspective is the idea that materials are not static, but rather in constant flux. He emphasizes the concept of "material agency," asserting that materials play an active role in shaping human actions and perceptions (Ingold, 2013).

Ingold's relational approach suggests that materials are deeply intertwined with their environment and the processes through which they are engaged. He highlights the interconnectedness between humans, materials, and the broader ecological context. In his book "Making," Ingold states, "The environment is not a setting for action, but a field of forces that act on and are acted upon by people and materials alike" (Ingold, 2013).

In a similar vein, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's (b.1957) use of salvaged wood in his furniture series (see Figure 16) reflects an appreciation for the material's history, cultural significance, and inherent agency. By repurposing discarded temple beams, he recognizes and embraces the material's intrinsic qualities and narratives. This approach aligns with Ingold's holistic perspective by acknowledging the active role of the material in shaping the artwork and its connection to broader cultural contexts (Baker, no date).

Both Ingold's theory and Ai Weiwei's practice invite a reconsideration of the relationship between humans and

materials, emphasizing a more dynamic and reciprocal engagement. They challenge the notion of materials as mere resources to be manipulated and instead encourage a deeper understanding and respect for the agency and interconnectedness of materials in the creative process.

By recognizing the agency of materials and their reciprocal relationships, Ingold's theory challenges anthropocentric perspectives and encourages a more holistic understanding of creativity, craftsmanship, and the entanglement of humans and materials in the world. His relational approach invites us to consider materials as active participants in the ongoing processes of making and meaning-making.

To conclude, it is not only humans who interact and influence one another, but also every material we come into contact with. Woodworkers require an understanding of wood in order to effectively work with it. By acknowledging the history of a piece of wood, artists can recognize that they are not the sole collaborators with the material; rather, it will continue to collaborate with others in the future, just as it has done in the past.

Returning to the notion of the celebrated artist in Western culture, adopting a humbler approach to wood and tools allows artists to refrain from striving for dominance over materials or seeking to be the center of their creative pursuits. Instead, it enables them to accept that they have simply encountered something—a material with its own unique history and past—and that they have mutually transformed each other. Once the transformation is complete, they can simply move on, respecting the ongoing cycles of collaboration and change in the artistic process.

I would like to end this paragraph on a quote by Bruno Lantor:



“You who are on the inside, this world terrifies you because, according to you, it’s ‘without a divine master’. But don’t you see that it’s also without a human master? You who are on the outside, this call for renewal of ‘God’ horrifies you because, according to you, it would bring back the old tyranny of the divine. Don’t you see that this world is forever without a creator?” (Latour, 2013)

Perhaps our desire to know if something is above us, controlling us, reflects our desire to control ‘things’. It is interesting to challenge those beliefs and recognize that you can collaborate with the things you encounter in life, that you are symbolically fueling one another, giving each other meaning.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has explored the collaborative nature of working with wood in art creation, investigating how wood becomes an active agent within the artistic process. By examining woodworking history through diverse cultural lenses and engaging with theorists like Bruno Latour, our perception of wood has expanded beyond the dominant Western-centric view. We have recognized the agency and inherent qualities of wood, allowing it to guide and inform our creative decisions rather than asserting control over it.

Additionally, the significance of working with salvaged wood has been explored. Utilizing reclaimed or repurposed wood not only promotes sustainability and reduces waste but also fosters an added layer of collaboration with the material. Salvaged wood carries its own history, intertwining with the artist’s vision. Through delving into Tim Ingold’s theories on the relational aspects of materials and their engagement with the environment, a profound connection between past narratives and present

intentions has emerged, further amplifying the collaborative nature of the artistic process.

By adopting a multicultural perspective and embracing salvaged wood, artists can shift their approach to woodworking from one of dominance to one of collaboration. This perspective acknowledges the agency of wood, allowing for a more profound and nuanced artistic expression. It fosters a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness between the artist, the material, and the broader cultural and environmental contexts in which they exist. Ultimately, this shift in approach invites a reimagining of the artist's role and cultivates a greater understanding of the dynamic relationship between humans, materials, and the creative process.



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