

There is something about the International Turning Exchange that is almost breathtakingly idealistic. This modest program, located for most of its history in a pastoral corner of Pennsylvania, annually enacts a rather Quixotic undertaking in which five or so strong-willed artists, who invariably possess contrasting aesthetic sensibilities and sometimes lack even a common language, come together in close proximity. The goals of the residency are amazingly few and inspecific. An exhibition, consisting of anything at all made by the artists (it need not be made of wood, or turned, necessarily), must be mounted at summer's end. A few trips must be made to collectors and museums. Materials and tools are provided upon request. And artists are encouraged, but not required, to collaborate. That's it: no other rules, guidelines, or expectations. ITE is premised on an open-mindedness so capacious that, for many participants, it can be intimidating at first.

What has been the result of this experiment in unbridled creativity? The answer lays far beyond the tabulation of objects made by the residents over the years, which form the heart of this catalogue and the exhibition it documents. It is also beyond the sum total of personal transformations that have resulted, as wide-ranging as these have been (few artists' oeuvres fail to be profoundly affected, and the list of lasting friendships and even marriages that have emerged from the residencies is equally impressive). No, the most important effect of the ITE is even less tangible than that. It is rather the feeling of a single, shared field of enterprise that transcends national boundaries, even though it is held together by nothing more than a sense of mutual relevance.

The very idea of a wood turning "field," rather than a bunch of dissimilar artists who all happen to know something about lathes, is a strange and distinctive one. The artistic relationship between (say) Richard Hooper and Jack Slentz is marked by much more in the way of contrast than similarity. These two artists, one a master of geometry and the other a modern-day expressionist, do not seem to be part of a single movement any more than Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky. But if we look past issues of style, technique, material selection, and other concrete variables, we can see a deeper root. Just as Mondrian and Kandinsky, despite their antithetical art theories, were both pioneers in abstraction, Hooper, Slentz, and their fellow turning artists are united in a shared project of reimagining craftsmanship for the twenty-first century. In this new, post-disciplinary environment, the material-based categories that used to serve as studio craft's stable frame of reference (the litany of clay, fiber, metal, wood, glass) have come to seem increasingly dissatisfying. What seems more determinant in today's craft world is the discourse about craft itself, rather than the specifics of its practice. Turning, in that it is a process rather than a material, imparts a sense of exploration rather than closure; it acts as both the metaphor and the means for an ongoing course of re-definition.

In this sense, ITE can be seen as vital for the present moment because it takes for granted a notion that would have seemed unlikely even twenty years ago: that craft is more about conversation than product. Albert LeCoff, the executive director of the Wood Turning Center and the man who sets the tone for the residency, often says to the artists that if they only produce a pile of wood shavings by September he will still be well satisfied. While this sentiment may be difficult for any working artist to take seriously (especially

one facing the prospect of a museum exhibition), it does highlight the fact that ITE is mainly structured as a laboratory for intense personal interaction: translations, disagreements and dislikes, and unexpected common ground. This makes it a microcosm of the craft movement itself, which brings together people of disparate background, interests, and intentions into a relatively non-competitive, mutually supportive community.

Not all of the objects made at ITE are successful. Unlike a traditional museum catalogue, in which art works are selected exclusively for their aesthetic quality and lasting importance, this book serves more as a reminder. It is an index of a rich and complicated series of events. It would therefore be a mistake to claim masterpiece status for every work shown in these pages. Many of the pieces included are indeed beautifully made, masterfully designed, or conceptually rich. Others are energetically unresolved collaborations, immature works of artists who have since gone on to greater things, or simply false starts. Readers will have to make their own private determinations about this.

Yet a project like this one, in its messy diversity, its up-and-down range, preserves the essential humanity of the ITE experience. Any community is, to borrow a phrase from conceptual artist Robert Morris, a “continuous project altered daily.” This book offers an occasion to look back at what this residency has been in its first decade. But it’s important, even while looking at and thinking about this short history, that ITE has always been, and will continue to be, about the future.