

**Spoons in Exchange:
Carving Intimacies**

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Fig. 1. *Pointing the way to The Sixth Irregular Spoon Gathering in Arkport, New York.* Photo by author.

Introduction: Following Spoons

With the explosion of spoon carving in the last decade has come a proliferation of spoons. My first awareness of spoon carvers trading each other's spoons, or "spoon swapping," was at the meetings I attended of the NYC Spoon Club in 2019-2020.¹ These meetings were like knitting circles for people wielding axes and knives to carve spoons together in a group. Anyone who saw the announcement posted on the club's Instagram feed could come by, grab a piece of wood culled by members from the streets of the city, and try their hand at carving a spoon.² It was all new to me. Even after years of being a furniture maker, I had never owned a carving

¹ I attended four or five NYC Spoon Club meetings before March 2020 when the pandemic put the group on hold. The club meetings were held at Makeville Studio in Brooklyn where I was teaching furniture making classes. The NYC Spoon Club was started by the spoon carvers, Ben Gancsos and Brianna Harden, who I interviewed for this essay.

² Ben Bancsos, interview with author, March 8, 2021.

knife, and the closest I had come to anything ax-like was the ‘lesbian labrys’ which existed only on T-shirts and on the covers of old feminist journals in the library.³

It was at the NYC Spoon Club meetings that I first noticed spoon carvers putting out their spoons for other carvers to look at, touch, and potentially exchange. Here on a table was an array of spoons clustered in baskets, jars, and neat rows next to random snacks, the club’s collection jar, and the co-founder Ben’s vintage suitcase filled with tools he was selling. It had never occurred to me that craftspeople would be interested in buying or trading the kind of objects that they themselves make. Spoons are easy to come by—free in some places—and so I wondered what was the allure of these spoons? Why would I want one, especially since I could make one myself? On my breaks from whittling my own crooked spoons, I explored the wares on the table. No one seemed to notice as I touched their crisply cut surfaces, felt for their weight and balance in my hand, and scooped up air with them in front of me.

This five-part essay is about the movement of spoons, from carver to carver and in and around the body. I explore how social relations are tangled up in objects, and how people and things have social lives together.⁴ A wood spoon that never leaves the pocket of its maker is a different thing from a wood spoon that is received in a swap and is captured in an Instagram post or incorporated into the cooking of another carver. Rather than follow the exchange of handmade spoons in a craft micro economy where spoons are sold on Etsy, craft fairs, or small boutiques, I

³ The labrys, or double-sided ax, is a symbol appropriated from ancient Greek history by lesbians and feminists in the 1980s and 90s. It was used on lesbian pride t-shirts, earrings, stickers, and the mastheads of lesbian-run newspapers. The labrys symbol was associated with lesbian pride, fierceness in battle, female Goddess worship, and self-sufficiency. For more, see Diana Moon, “Lesbian Lore: The History of Our Language and Symbols,” in *Siren Magazine*, Vol. 3, Issue 1 (April-May 1998): 16.

⁴ The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai builds his theory of commodity exchange on “the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social lives.” Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

follow the movement of spoons from carver to carver, without the exchange of money, in a spoon carving-centered economy of gifts and trades.

At the time of writing this there are 1,231 posts on Instagram that use the hashtag #spoonswap.⁵ These posts show a profusion of spoons, posed next to handwritten letters, cards, and opened packages, that have travelled outwards from their maker's hands into what could be called a global spoon economy. More than half of these posts appeared in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic conditions.⁶ Spoon swapping seems to have taken off during the pandemic when there was more isolation, more loss, and more internet connectivity. The psychological and social benefits of craft-centered gatherings and crafting at home have been written about in popular news media.⁷ But little has been said about the objects that are made in these present-day amateur craft contexts. Spoon swapping is one answer to the question, where do all these objects go?

My focus on spoon swaps between carvers is a way for me to unravel the meanings and values that stick to wood spoons in the spoon carving craze. The way I follow spoons in social relations—in intimate exchange between carvers—builds on the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's method of following the trajectories of objects which as they shift in different contexts. In his introductory essay to the book, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Appadurai elaborates on a Marxist perspective that says objects in a capitalist mode of production have value in social exchange. He writes, "it is the things-in-

⁵ Instagram, "#spoonswap," accessed March 21, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/spoonswap/>.

⁶ Scrolling back in time, I see that the first posts were in 2013. From 2013-2017 there were less than one hundred uses of the hashtag. From 2018 to 2020 there were just under five hundred.

⁷ Julie Schneider, "Craft Through This: Why Getting together Online to Make Stuff Matters," *Hyperallergic*, October 30, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/598454/online-craft-nights-covid-19/>; Ainsley Hawthorn, "Is Craft Booming in COVID Because We're Starved for Touch?" *Psychology Today*, May 23, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-sensory-revolution/202005/is-craft-booming-in-covid-because-were-starved-touch>.

motion that illuminate their human and social context.”⁸ The spoons in my paper circulate in the context of late capitalism where everything has the potential to be sold on a market. I take Appadurai’s methodological approach of spoons-in-motion to follow spoons in a particular context, in a present-day spoon carving world where they are swapped from carver to carver.

My essay is divided into five sections— The Social Spoon, the Pedagogical Spoon, the Intimate Spoon, the Unboxed Spoon, and the Erotic Spoon—that give evidence to my argument that swapping spoons creates material and social intimacies in crafting social relations. By intimacy I mean both the social intimacies of a lively carving group of people and the intimacies of spoons that mix with bodies. When spoon carvers exchange their spoons in the social practice of a spoon swap, they are touching each other through spoons, bonding and deepening their commitment to their craft. And, I will argue, it is the spoon itself that makes the spoon swap a particular kind of intimacy.

The spoon carvers at the heart of this paper are all connected to a social world of spoon carving. “The spoon carving world” they inhabit is not a cohesive social world; it cannot claim anything like social solidarity;⁹ and it contains differences of identity, motives for being there, and opinions about how to carve a spoon and who to follow. They have attended NYC Spoon Club meetings, word-of-mouth spoon gatherings at peoples’ houses, and gone to organized events like Green Wood Fest in Plymouth, Massachusetts, or the 6th Irregular Spoon Gathering in Arkport, New York. Some participate in an online carving group called Rise Up and Carve.

⁸ Appadurai, “Introduction,” 5.

⁹ Mauss’ theory of gift exchange as a mode of enhancing social solidarity depends on “pre-market” situations where the individual is combined in a total social system. I see collaboration as part of spoon swapping, but do not claim this kind of cohesion and solidarity for spoon carvers who live and exchange in the deeply individualistic culture of capitalism. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990).

Many connect on Instagram, posting and sharing about spoons. Their participation varies, and they do not all know each other, but are connected through me.

The spoon carvers in this essay are not making a living from their spoon production, which places their practice in the category of amateur or hobbyist craft. I use the term “amateur” in agreement with the craft historian Stephen Knott who defines amateur craft as work done for love without remuneration.¹⁰ Many sell spoons on Etsy, Instagram, local craft fairs, farmer’s markets, or through word of mouth, but spoons are not their livelihood. They are freelance photographers, mothers, firefighters, medical school students, corporate help desk employees, fabricators, graphic designers and more. They carve spoon in the free time around paid work and home lives. If they sell spoons, this income is supplemental. In this essay there is a love, a sense of play, a slow long attunement to spoons, and a sociality around spoons that can be framed within the “differential” time and space that Knott attributes to amateur craft.¹¹

Spoon swaps in my research happen in places where spoon carvers meet—a gathering in the fields of western New York, on the hood of a car, at a picnic table over a shared meal, in an Instagram direct messaging thread, in a circle of stumps at a spoon meetup, or while carving on Zoom in a grid of rectangles. In these spaces, spoon carvers learn their craft, share tips, get access to wood and tools, and make connections with other carvers.¹²

¹⁰ Like Stephen Knott, I question the oppositional binary between amateur and professional based on the ways I know spoon carvers to craft in many places at once, making spoons for themselves, for swaps, and for sale. The tools they use and the how-to books they read are shared by professional woodworkers. The use of words like “amateur” and “hobbyist” ring differently for the interviewees in my research. Most just call themselves “spoon carvers.” Knott’s thesis that amateur craft is both dependent on and differential to capitalist modes of productivity and consumption, starting with the Industrial revolution in Britain, gives me something to frame the ways I see spoon carvers in their spatial-temporal zone making and using hand carved spoons. Amateur craft in Knott’s book offers a place of “constrained freedom” where capitalist structures can be “stretched, quietly subverted, and exaggerated.” Stephen Knott, *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), xiii-iv.

¹¹ Stephen Knott, “Introduction,” in *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹² Jody Nebesnik, *Interview by Kate Hawes*, Zoom, August 3, 2021; Chuck Trella, *Interview by Kate Hawes*, Zoom, March 1, 2021; Lauren Salinero, *Interview by Kate Hawes*, July 5, 2021.

Craft and engagement with materials categorically go hand in hand, as many before me have said,¹³ but here I offer a new context, spoon carving, which shows how collaboration and material exchanges happen across the supposed online-offline divide. In my research, online space *is* tactile; and bodies touch in tactile and intimate connection through the giving and receiving of spoons. In *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Black feminist scholar Legacy Russell describes time away from the keyboard, or “AFK,” and time spent online as a continual loop that refuses the dualism of a real life/online paradigm.¹⁴ Russell refutes the outdated view that more online connectivity leads to more isolation. I agree with her claim: “The Internet continues to be a place of immense intimacy, where an “opening up” of being can occur, and where one can dare to be vulnerable.”¹⁵ It is in this kind of digital intimacy that spoon swaps are made and where bodies meet.

At the heart of my writing is the desire to talk about crafted things as the fleshy connective things that craftspeople like myself know them to be. I combine first-hand perceptual and anecdotal observations with the recorded voices and transcripts from fourteen oral histories with spoon carvers conducted between March 2021 and February 2022. I draw from my own spoon carving experiences—carving and using spoons, swapping spoons, meeting carvers on Instagram, carving in an online group called Rise Up and Carve, and attending an in-person spoon gathering in Arkport, New York. My interviews took place on recorded Zoom video

¹³ See sociologist Richard Sennett’s writing on “material consciousness” in Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Anthropologist Tim Ingold’s writing on making as material correspondence in Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archeology, Art, and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013); and craft historian Glenn Adamson’s writing about material intelligence in *Fewer, Better Things: The Hidden Wisdom of Objects* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

¹⁴ Russell follows the theorist Nathan Jurgenson’s use of the term “AFK” rather than “IRL,” or in real life. The phrase “real life” implies two selves, one online and one offline. Russell sees a continual loop between AFK and digital life. Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, (London: Verso, 2020), 30.

¹⁵ Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 124-5.

conferencing where we were live together, face to face, but our bodies were cut off and our senses were limited. The possibilities and limitations of meeting here have expanded my thinking about what can happen over a screen.

In this paper, I too have become tangled up in spoons. I have been both a scholar and a spoon carver in the spaces of my research, gladly picking up my knife and a piece of wood to get the conversational juices flowing. I also come as a white woodworker who is used to working and socializing in spaces that are occupied by primarily white heteronormative cis male bodies. As a queer nonbinary woodworker, I am always aware of the ways in which the social norms of these woodworking spaces are defined by gestures that do not include a queer life. My ability to “get lost” in these spaces depends at times on my own self-censorship, my tolerance of oppressive gendering behaviors, and a willingness to accept the invisibility of queerness in these spaces.¹⁶ I see myself as a simultaneous insider and outsider to the spoon carving worlds I research; my acceptance and refusal of its codes of behavior are part of my viewpoint in this paper.

¹⁶ “We can understand queerness itself as being filled with the intention to be lost. Queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds’ mapping of space.” José Estaban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University, 2009), 72-3.

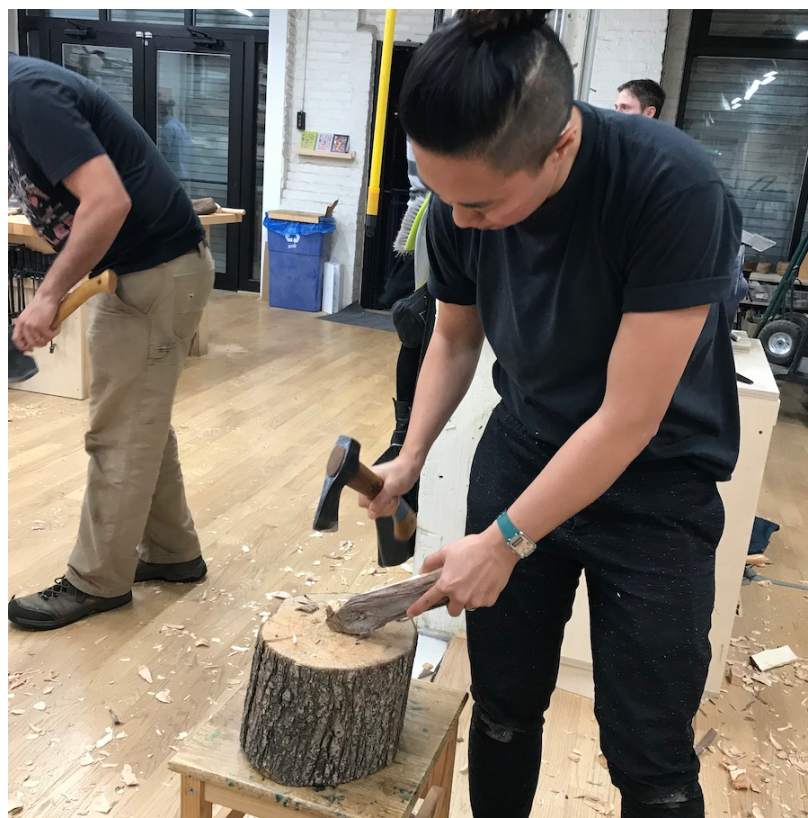


Fig. 2. A carver, Maia, axes out a spoon blank at a meeting of the NYC Spoon Club on November 2, 2021. Photo by author.

The Social Spoon

Rise Up and Carve is a twenty-four-hour open access Zoom Channel that spoon carver Chuck Trella formed in February of 2019.¹⁷ Chuck was inspired by the small in-person spoon carving gatherings he had attended at peoples' houses when he was first learning to carve spoons. There he hooked up with a small group of carvers. They started messaging on Instagram, but Chuck wanted a space with more interactivity, where carvers could talk and be together. The video conferencing capabilities of Zoom, introduced to him by his wife who was using it at

¹⁷ "Home," Rise Up and Carve (website), accessed March 16, 2022, <https://www.riseupandcarve.com>.

work, enabled Chuck to create an open access space where carvers from anywhere around the world could log on at any time of day and be with other carvers. He created a website and started to post about it on Instagram, where word got around. During Covid the forum “really kind of exploded.”¹⁸ A spoon carver in the Bay Area who had lost work because of the pandemic said, “doing it from eight to ten in the morning was basically the main reason I put pants on every day.”¹⁹ RUAC became a place where carvers learn from each other, share information about tools and techniques, make friends, and participate in monthly “spoon challenges,” demos, and swaps.²⁰

Hanging out on RUAC takes some getting used to. I can log on to the hollow quiet of two people absorbed in their work not saying anything; or I can enter a room where voices are jokey and loud. The quiet can stretch for long periods. Someone might leave their rectangle and I can see the kitchen where they carve, a glimpse of interiority where things like a huge jar of pickles on the counter give me a fractured sense of who they are. Or a man sits on a wooden bench in a halo of darkness with his leg up smoking a cigarette while looking at his spoon. The micro-sounds of knives on wood, the clunks of a tool being put down, and the toothy hollow sound of hands touching wood are surprisingly audible when no one is talking.

Most people I meet there are isolated geographically from other spoon carvers. One carver in Canada said he would have to drive ten hours to get to another spoon carver. Another has only carved with other people twice. Many just don’t know how to find another carver.²¹ A

¹⁸ Chuck Trella, interview with author, March 1, 2021.

¹⁹ Mike Bray, interview with author, June 30, 2021.

²⁰ Rise Up and Carve hosts monthly spoon challenges where a carver volunteers a spoon template for others to carve from. A PDF of the design is shared on the website for carvers to download. There is a show and tell meeting every month where carvers share their versions of the spoon challenge. “Spoon Challenge,” Rise Up and Carve (website), accessed March 16, 2022, <https://www.riseupandcarve.com/spoon-challenge/>.

²¹ Spoon carvers are a small group, though I have no data to tell me how small. On RUAC, I heard someone say, “We’re just a bunch of spoon carving nerds. There’s not a lot of us.” Author’s notes, July 21, 2021.

UK-based carver had a local spoon carving group of ten people before the pandemic, but since the shutdown has been on RUAC every day. A carver in Israel has tested positive for the COVID virus and is not allowed to leave his house.²² It's hard to get a sense of how many people are there, because 'there' is elusive. People in different time zones drop in and out with no trace. Screen names are often Instagram handles with pictures of spoons.

What is lacking in digital craft spaces like RUAC and Instagram is the ability to touch each other's spoons. In the middle of all this time together in a digital carving room, I will see a carver put down their knife (carvers cannot carve and look up at the same time) and ask *do I have a spoon from you?*²³ The way spoon swapping can be initiated in digital spaces like RUAC and Instagram tells me that there is a desire for tangible graspable intimacy through objects in a social craft community. This impulse was there at the in-person NYC Spoon Club meetings where I found myself handling the array of spoons put out for exchange on the table.

Affinities between carvers grow in social carving spaces and spoons get swapped. Suse is a spoon carver in Zurich who learned to carve on RUAC and has become a regular there. She describes how spoon swaps happen for her:

"It's also when you had a lot of interaction with the person, and there's always, at some point you get to that moment where you say, *okay, now it's time that we do a spoon swap*. It's like, yeah, it's a bonding moment somehow...One of those two people will bring it up somehow or even joke about it or say *it's high time we swapped* or something and then it's just happening naturally."²⁴

²² Author's notes, August 18, 2021.

²³ I have heard that some carvers on RUAC put their phone numbers in their screen names in case they cut themselves while carving. Author's notes, July 22, 2021.

²⁴ Sussane Karrer, interview with author, September 1, 2021.

Suse's description of how a spoon swap is initiated reminds me of asking someone out on a date. It just kind of happens. It is taking a relationship to a next level, forming a bond, getting to know someone through the give and take of spoons.

If spoon swaps connect carvers by way of touching and using each other's spoons, then thinking about what sensory experience might be like in digital spaces like RUAC helps me understand what is gained through the exchange of spoons. In a computer-mediated space tactility is more subdued than sound and vision. I see a spoon held up to the screen for show and tell in a RUAC carving session. I register its general shape, a color that might give away its species, and maybe its texture, crisp with the facets left behind by the carver's knife. But this image is often vague and pixelated. I crane my neck forward for more detail, but the carver takes it away. I cannot feel the tip of its bowl between my two fingers to see how thin the carver dared to take it. I can't feel its weighted-ness in my hand. I miss the smell of wood completely. The strange pungencies of wet wood when its particles become airborne is intoxicating. In a room with several people carving different species, the overlapping of smells from sweet to putrid is a curious thing. Sight combines with hearing in digital space when a carver is actively working on a spoon. Their movements are slow; their arm muscles are strained; their knife scoops out shavings from a bowl with dull scrapes that chatter around inside corners. A multisensorial experience of their movements tells me something of the density of the wood being carved, the sharpness of a tool, and the character of the person—the way they hold their tool, their gestures, and the way they gesticulate with a spoon in their fist while they talk.

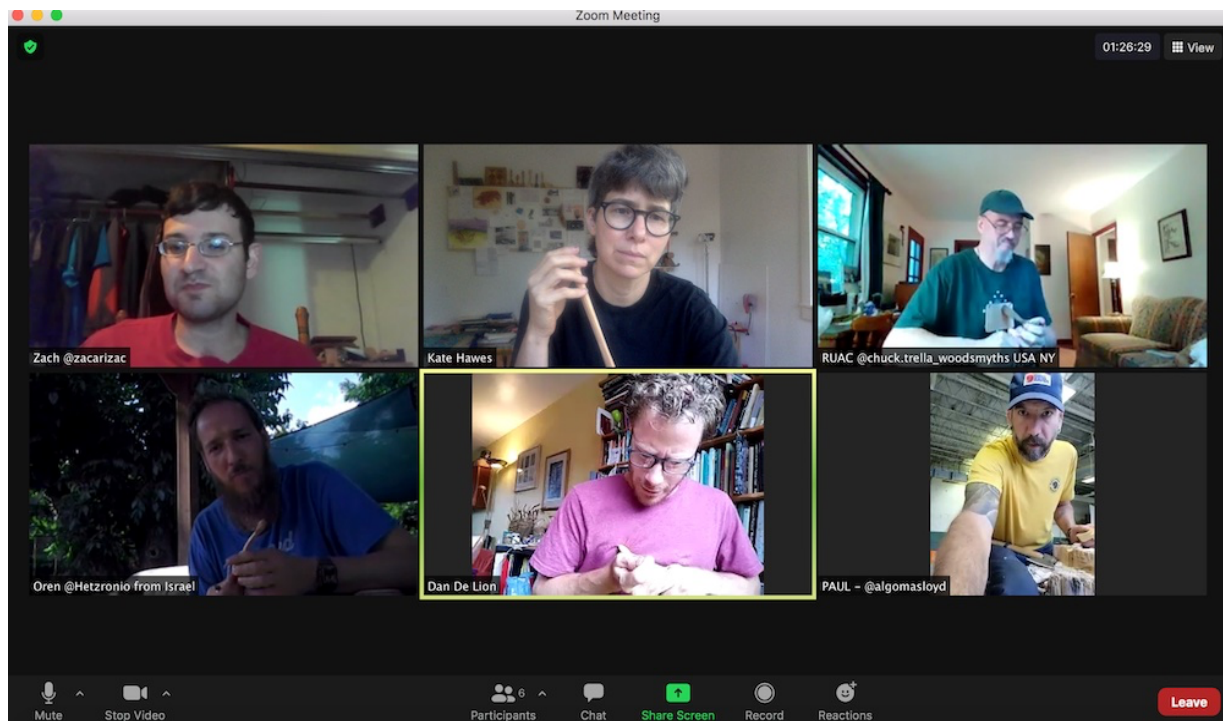


Fig. 3. A screenshot of a RUAC carving session, July 24, 2021. Photo by author.

The confluence of such decidedly handmade objects as carved wooden spoons with the social space of digital life on RUAC is cause for curiosity. The two technologies, making a spoon with hand tools and video conferencing, may at first seem anachronistic. I have logged into RUAC and instantly been in the company of a pensive carver examining his spoon against the backdrop of what could be an old wood barn in a previous century. But he is in front of his camera all the time in these two places, a kibbutz in Israel and my screen, at once and effortlessly. The rough vertical wood boards behind him unadorned with outlets and extension cords don't fool me. It is not a case of one or the other—of handmade or digitally made, of wood or pixels. Spoon carving as an amateur craft in this century has never been divorced from evolving technologies like chainsaws, mail delivery systems, industrial blade smithing. This tension between how the craft can sometimes look—preindustrial and backwards facing, and

how it is lived by carvers is visible in the digital carving space of RUAC, where carvers knife their spoons in the loop between digital and AFK life.

Spoon carvers were participating in online craft social networks before Instagram and Rise Up and Carve became popular. Several of my research participants remember their first awareness of spoon carvers meeting in a UK internet forum called “The Boggers Ask and Answer Forum” in the early 2000s. In 2012 they moved to Facebook group called “Spoon Carving, Green Woodworking, and Sloyd.”²⁵ In these social spaces spoon carvers post anything from a recent knife sharpening crisis to a query for how to buy tools with limited funds, to a picture of their first spoon.²⁶ Without the internet, carvers like Chuck would not have had the means or resources to jump into the craft. In 2013 Chuck saw a post on the Facebook group announcing a spoon carving gathering near Delhi, New York. He calls the post “an open call to the people who were sort of within this world.” Before he got the nerve up to go, he had been “dabbling,” watching videos online and researching tools during the lulls in his workday sitting at a computer working in IT.²⁷

Carvers occupy many spaces at once, fluidly.²⁸ They work in their kitchens where they have everything they need—cutting boards, water, a floor that’s easy to sweep up, and counter tops for sharpening.²⁹ They work in living rooms at old oak desks tricked out with tools storage

²⁵ Trella, interview; Peter Follansbee, interview with author, July 6, 2021.

²⁶ “Spoon Carving, Greenwoodworking, and Sloyd (public group),” Facebook, 2022, accessed March 22, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/groups/GreenWoodWork/posts/4884130038373777/?comment_id=4884677818318999&reply_comment_id=4884929784960469¬if_id=1646446398885255¬if_t=group_comment&ref=notif.

²⁷ Trella, Interview.

²⁸ The term “digital dualism” is used by the theorist Nathan Jurgenson to refer to the binary way of thinking about “virtual” versus “real” life. He argues that the critique of digital life as “not real” and therefor trivial is conceptually mistaken and that “our reality is both technological and organic, both digital and physical, all at once.” Nathan Jurgenson, “Digital dualism versus augmented reality,” *The Society Pages* 24 (2011), accessed March 22, 2022, <https://mxepstein.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Digital-Dualism-versus-Augmented-Reality.pdf>.

²⁹ Simon Pouly, host, “Episode 2: Finding Joy and Community with Loeffel Suse,” *Spoon Carving Conversations* (podcast), Feb. 15, 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/finding-joy-and-community-with-loeffel-suse/id1552384675?i=1000509122867>.

in drawers.³⁰ They carve a spoon on a subway platform on the way to a job, leaving behind a pile of shavings.³¹ They store their plastic bags of wet spoon blanks in bathtubs, freezers, or on fire escapes to keep them from drying out, sometimes cultivating lively ecosystems of colorful fungi and molds.³² They make noise and axe at stumps at boisterous in-person club meetings and then finish spoons in their tiny apartments.³³ And they make friends and learn their craft in the gridded space of RUAC where spoons are sometimes swapped very naturally.

Spoons are social in the way that they are caught up in the conviviality and bonding between carvers who live their carving lives in a continuous circuit of spoons, hands, wood, and pixels. Exchange is social; and spoons are made and valued in social relations that include a digital carving group, social media, clubs, and gatherings. These social arenas are missing in craft historian Stephen Knott's exploration of late nineteenth century fancy backyard chicken coops and amateur home workstations in his chapter, "Space" in *Amateur Craft*. Knott shows how these spaces are defined and expanded in relation to capitalist modes of consumerism, productivity, and efficiency. They individualistic spaces with not a lot of sociality amongst like-minded amateur makers.³⁴ Amateurs in this historical context typically looked at how-to book manuals and product advertisements—the print media precedents to Chuck's computer-mediated

³⁰ Trella, Interview.

³¹ Gary Francis, interview with author, March 16, 2021.

³² Stephen Heffernan, interview with author, March 3, 2021.

³³ The NYC Spoon Club offers city dwelling spoon carvers a place to share wood and ax spoon blanks with no charge for attending. Axing isn't always feasible in city apartments with neighbors. Club members are drawn to spoon carving because it is a small-scale way to do woodworking. Member Lauren says, "I'm in like university housing, kind of so like the tiniest apartment that I've ever lived in, like right here in Manhattan. Like no space for anything. And I thought, how can I do woodworking? But then I saw spoon carving classes, right. I'm like, oh, that's apartment sized woodworking. You just need like, you know, a couple of knives." Brianna Harden, interview by author, March 10, 2021; Lauren Salinero, interview with author, July 5, 2021.

³⁴ "This chapter's hypothesis is that amateur space was and is 'differential' within capitalism." He borrows from Lefebvre's concept of differential space which he exemplifies through the example of leisure which he endows with a "quasi-revolutionary potential." Knott, *Amateur*, 56; 36.

entry into spoon carving, browsing the internet for videos and spoon carving tools.³⁵ Spoon carvers in 2022 do more interacting, more sharing, and more swapping of spoons.

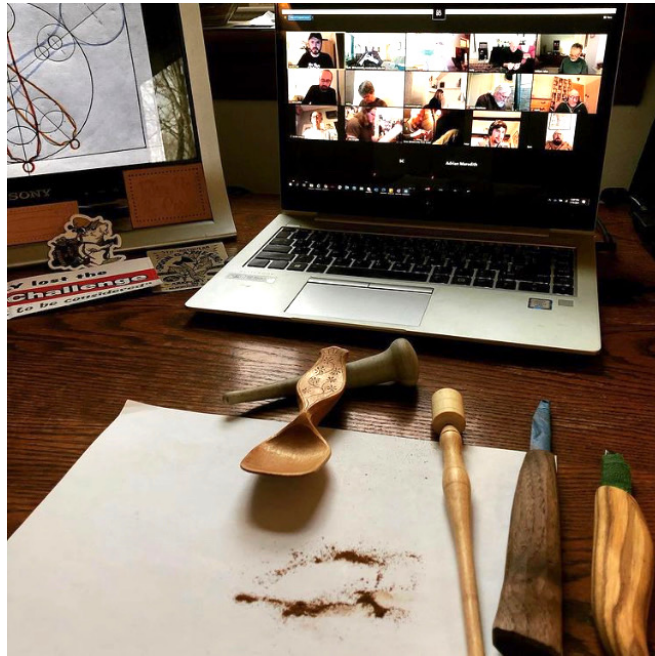


Fig. 4. A screenshot of Chuck's carving desk set up with a spoon in progress and the Rise Up and Carve Zoom window open. Photo taken with permission of Chuck Trella. Instagram, Jan. 10, 2021.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CJ32-hDjWOd/>

³⁵ Knott, 45-87.

The Pedagogical Spoon

“I want to encourage you to consider learning to work with a knife in a group, such as a study circle or workshop. The main advantage is that people can learn from each other.”³⁶ In the introduction to his popular 1990 how-to book, *Swedish Carving Techniques*, the Swedish woodworker and author Wille Sundqvist wrote these words about the merits of collective learning. The pictures in Sundqvist’s book are focused on his own hands as they go through complicated knife grips. Alongside close images of Sundqvist’s hand, knife, and spoon-in-progress is text like this: “Moving the blank from the tip of the thumb to a spot just below the first finger joint will increase your power immensely.”³⁷ The book’s pages give a reader a sense of how to go through the motions of various grips and maneuvers. But the instructions are mechanical, treating all bodies as Sundqvist’s, and they do little to capture the troubles that might come up in carving a spoon. His mention of *learning from each other* is significant because he recognizes what is missing in learning a craft from a book, which is the social interactions in a group. I add to his directive the learning from spoons themselves, passed around, collected, and copied.

In-person spoon gatherings, local spoon carving clubs, paid-for classes, and the online carving space of Rise Up and Carve are the present-day versions of Sundqvist’s study circles. These are common trajectories for people learning a hobby or craft that exists outside of paid on the job training.³⁸ In these social spaces, techniques, tips about tools, and spoon designs circulate among makers. Diving into the subtractive process of finding a spoon inside a billet of wood can

³⁶“Working together also stimulates creativity. The variety of designs your group will produce will make you all the more conscious of how good design interacts with function, and increase the satisfaction of making small and simple everyday things.” Wille Sundqvist. *Swedish Carving Techniques* (Newtown, CT: Taunton Press, 1990), 2.

³⁷ Sundqvist, *Swedish Carving*, 74.

³⁸ Knott, *Amateur Craft*, 123.

be intimidating for beginners. The NYC Spoon Club's founders, Ben and Brianna, tell me they were teaching people every night at meetings.³⁹ A new carver sat next to a "grumpy and quiet" guy at her first spoon club meeting who lent her his knife and demonstrated how to "ride the bevel in a cut."⁴⁰ This generosity is not uncommon in groups of enthusiastic spoon carvers. Coming together for the purpose of a shared craft done for love and not money has a slackness of time that allows for impromptu teachings, a beginner's curiosity, and the sharing of tools.⁴¹

The pedagogical spoon exemplifies the spoon objects that are often at the center of these social groups. Chuck, a frequent carver in the digital carving space of RUAC, talks about the inadequacy of photographs to capture a spoon's complex form. He tries to "get pretty close" in his versions of other carver's spoons from pictures he sees on Instagram. But he's been "way off" in his attempts to copy from photographs.⁴² Having each other's spoons in the flesh is one way to get around the limitations of learning through screens and print media. Knowledge about how to get a likeness or learn from another's spoon comes through the body; it is tacit knowledge that cannot be learned from pictures and words, but only through practice.⁴³ Spoon carvers hold spoons side by side, study them, feel for thinness and thickness, sense curves, analyze facets, copy a spoon's "crank" or bend, trace outlines, and riff off each other's styles.⁴⁴

³⁹ Gancsos, interview; Harden, interview.

⁴⁰ Salinero, interview.

⁴¹ Stephen Knott posits what he calls amateur time as an "alternate temporal reality." In line with his writing about amateur space, amateur time is both dependent on and differential to capitalism, offering a certain freedom that includes play, autonomy, and a beginner's attitude towards learning. He writes, "Amateur time has an elusive quality and does not fully satiate the dream of non-alienated labor but instead offers the possibility for temporary control of one's labor alienation." Knott, *Amateur Craft*, 98.

⁴² Trella, interview.

⁴³ In her auto-ethnography of glassblowing, Erin O'Connor gives an overview of theories of tacit knowledge, drawing primarily from Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge which is knowing *from the body* rather than knowing from books or sources outside one's own bodily experiences. Her focus is on "hands-in-practice" or the kinds of knowledge that comes from handwork. She calls handwork "a carnal and sensory method." Erin O'Connor, "Touching Tacit Knowledge: Handwork as Ethnographic Method in a Glassblowing Studio," *Qualitative Research* 17, no 2, (2017), 217-230.

⁴⁴ Peter Follansbee, interview with author, July 6, 2021; Karrer, interview; Nebesnik, interview; Trella, interview.

In our Zoom conversations, many spoon carvers hold up to the camera examples from their collections of other people's spoons for commentary and critique. A handle, Jody tells me while holding it, is ridiculously long, too long for her body. She wishes it was shorter and considers changing it.⁴⁵ In another instance, I watch as Jody knifes away a snag of torn-out fibers on another carver's spoon, making it smooth with her own touch. Spoons are collaborative and part of conversation. They are works in progress—something to be adapted, modified, tinkered with, and felt for inconsistencies.



Fig. 5. Jody holding up a large-handled cooking spoon on Zoom with author. Photo by author.

In the profusion of glossy images of spoons on Instagram—spoons posed on stumps, fanning out in artful arrays, and held up for admiration—the pedagogical spoon is an three dimensional example that a maker can *carved from*. Suse, who swaps a lot of spoons with other

⁴⁵ Nebesnik, interview.

makers, tells me that she is interested in discerning how someone made a spoon in her collection of received spoons. She tells me there is a difference between just looking at it and sitting down to re-carve it.

“Sometimes you try to carve the same thing, you try to copy it very closely. And you think, ‘how did this person do this? This is so complex. How do these lines connect? How do these facets even work?’ And then you do it and something clicks. And that is always like a magical moment because you understand something that this person has already figured out and helped you become a better carver.”⁴⁶

What Suse describes as “a magical moment,” is hard to capture with words. But it expresses the way a carver incorporates another’s work into their own. For Jo, the magic moment happens when he puts the spoon away:

“More often than not, what I’ll do is I’ll look at a spoon. And I’ll put it away. I’ll let it do what it does to me. I’ll move toward that and then I’ll make what I make. I might look at it later and say, ‘Wow, I wonder...oh, now I understand what happened here.’”⁴⁷

This is craft knowledge that is gained through the felt experience of spoons. Jo and Suse both have the desire to *understand* the making process more deeply, and to make another’s understanding their own.

When I ask Chuck where he gets the designs from for his spoons, he tells me “I shamelessly steal where you steal from.” He assumes that everybody copies each other’s spoons because we look at them on Instagram.⁴⁸ I have never consciously copied another spoon though. But as a scroller of spoon carving on Instagram I am aware of the plural aesthetic universe of

⁴⁶ Karrer, interview.

⁴⁷ Jo Johnpoll, interview with author, March 1, 2022.

⁴⁸ Trella, interview. As a formal method, the act of *copying what is in front of you*, is still common to arts and crafts academies. In my own experience at North Bennet Street School, I was judged on my ability to copy a dovetailed Shaker candle box that was placed in front of me. This communal learning object was passed from student to student around the bench room as a timed and judged exercise.

hand carved wood spoons—the cute spoons with snail and fox finials,⁴⁹ the pastel painted spoons,⁵⁰ the etched drawing spoons,⁵¹ geometric chip carved spoons,⁵² the wordy spoons (“vulnerable,” “strong,” “I voted early”),⁵³ the rebel spoons, the aggressively faceted spoons, the camp spoon, the pocket spoon, the ombre spoon, the serious skills spoon, and so forth. What is behind Chuck’s assumption that *everybody steals* is the assumption that we are all on Instagram. We *can* steal; it’s easy now; and maybe I do it unconsciously.

Chuck, who calls himself “a mimic” because he likes to copy spoons, started collecting spoons from other carvers early on. At the first in-person gathering he attended in 2013, he became acquainted with a group of carvers he had been following on social media. He rattles off names of the carvers he describes as “the crème of the crop of northeast US spoon carvers.”

“What I did early on was get some of their spoons. And I just immediately started trying to copy. I would take what they had. So, I had it side by side. They had spoon collections that they had acquired. Don had spoons from Barn. You know, they had spoons from all these people. Spoons that they bought and swapped, you know, traded whatever with people. So, you go to one of these events, you’d see all these spoons from all these people that you hear about or see on Instagram.”⁵⁴

Chuck fell in with a crowd of spoon carvers where spoons are a bit like trophies. Their avid circulation—he talks about one carver showing up with three five-gallon buckets filled with other peoples’ spoons all tagged and sorted—means spoons get copied, but also names get

⁴⁹ Philippa Brooks, (@Brooksphilippa), “My snail mail meets Neil’s brush tail critter,” Instagram (post), March 31, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNFAGfXj3Qd/>.

⁵⁰ Dan Lawrence (@dan.lawrence.uk), “{Pretty in spring},” Instagram (post), May 27, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPYC1NODX4Q/>.

⁵¹ Liesel (@rivchicawarrior), “Rose’s spoon,” Instagram (post), March 20, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbT9tk9AOWv/>.

⁵² Kaylyn Messer (@kaylynmesser), “Spring Apple Blossom spoon for the RUAC,” Instagram (post), April 17, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNxGA7XA3nC/>.

⁵³ Liesel (@rivchicawarrior), “I am trying to work out a neck-bowl transition,” Instagram (post), March 2, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CL715Sri2I4/>.

⁵⁴ Trella, interview.

known and followed.⁵⁵ When Chuck talks about carving his spoons “side by side” with these others, he is positioning himself next to them, saying “yes” to an invitation to be part of a group.

Peter Follansbee, a green woodworker and sometimes spoon carver, rifles through a stash of spoons from other carvers while we talk on Zoom. He says, “So here’s a big one of Jögge’s.” I see through my pixilated screen that it is indeed a big one. Its bowl is massive, like an open hand. Jögge Sunqvist, the son of Wille Sundqvist, taught Peter how to carve a spoon at Country Workshops in 1988.⁵⁶ He traded one of his own spoons for this one in 2017.⁵⁷ The handle is painted blue and green and is decoratively carved with tiny, incised lines and chipped-out triangles. He points to two stick figures, making sure I notice the “male and female figure.”⁵⁸ He pinches the hefty bowl’s outside walls between his thumb and forefinger, and says, “Jögge makes them count!” I feel like his student as he makes a comparison between the Jögge spoon and the last spoon he showed me, a gift from a friend who purchased it on eBay. This other spoon has “quick but skillful” knife marks, he says. It is a lesser spoon because carved too delicately from straight grain: “it got very thin, fell off the wall and chipped.” The point of his comparison is about affiliation. The Jögge’s spoon is a spoon made in his own lineage—a Swedish one and a personal one; and one in which the best spoons are carved from crooked branches rather than straight grained stock.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Trella, interview.

⁵⁶ Follansbee, Interview.

⁵⁷ Peter Follansbee, email message to author, September 25, 2021.

⁵⁸ Peter Follansbee, email. Peter acquired this spoon in a swap he did with Jögge around 2017. He had two choices from photos to pick from. He does not remember the spoon of his own that Jögge picked. He says “it’s a treasure—right up there with his father’s, but different.” Jögge is part of his “woodworking legacy/heritage,” a subject he is writing a book about.

⁵⁹ Follansbee, interview. Peter is known for his decorative carvings. He tells me in our interview that when he first saw a hand carved wood spoon in 1980 at the lunch table at Country Workshops, it was the decoration on the handle that made an impression on him. These were the spoons of Wille Sundqvist and Drew Langsner. He wasn’t there to learn spoon carving that summer but came back in 1988 to take a class with Jögge Sundqvist and then took a class with Wille Sundqvist.



Fig. 6. Peter holds up a spoon made by Jögge Sundqvist he acquired in a trade on Zoom with author. Photo by author.

understanding how all the flowing lines of a spoon connect, but also how people may or may not hitch themselves, and their spoons, to others. A swapped spoon that is mimicked, assessed for inconsistencies, and held up to a screen for noticing is a learning example and a sign of craft affiliation. Amy Umbel, the co-creator of *Cut the Craft Podcast*, calls herself a “social critic” of spoon swapping. She says swapped spoons are “like woodworking trading cards” where carvers are eager to get a piece of spoon carving stardom.⁶⁰ Ben says that many spoon carvers are buying the spoons of these big-name carvers simply because they are “the gods of my chosen hobby.”⁶¹ I was not charmed by the stick figures on the big Jögge spoon. To me they evoke heteronormative values of that I would rather not stick to. If spoons become symbols of being in with an in-crowd, then following them and copying them is aspirational.

⁶⁰ Amy Umbel, interview with author, July 6, 2021. Amy has gotten off the Facebook group which became for her a place of “cowboy attitudes” and pointless debates that, for her, took the fun out of spoon carving.

⁶¹ Gancsos, interview.

The Intimate Spoon

Spoon swaps deepen craft alliances, up naturally between friends in shared space, and influencing a carver's learning. The spoon swap also captures the stickiness of intimacy as objects are traded sometimes freely and sometimes with reservation, across boundaries. Jody, who learned to carve during the pandemic in a community of carvers on Rise Up and Carve, says this about swapped spoons:

“...it's that you have something that somebody made with their own hands. It's so personal and they probably tried it out and used it before they sent it to me or...you know, you're like...it's almost like an intimate experience because you're handling something that somebody made from nothing and now it belongs to you.”⁶²

Jody's words convey the intimacy of taking in a spoon made by a person she knows. Jody alludes to the fact that the spoon's carver probably put the wood spoon in their mouth as they were making it. It comes already *used*, already tried out, because she knows that spoon carvers like herself are intimately involved in perfecting the ways their spoons feel—in hands and mouths.

Spoon swaps have an intimacy for Jody because they are passed around in a community she feels part of and indebted to. She lives in a rural area of northwestern New York where she has never carved with another carver. Initially, she started logging onto RUAC for help carving, not for the community. She happened to join RUAC on the tails of an organized spoon swap where people were pulling names out of a hat to be matched with a swapping mate. The first spoon she received was from Chuck, the organizer, who generously sent her two spoons, an eater

⁶² Nebesnik, interview.

and a cooker, as a welcoming gesture. She did not return the gift because she was a beginner who had no spoons to give. She was intimidated logging on and seeing “all these carvers making beautiful things.” She was shy at first, waiting to be asked to swap rather than initiating them herself.⁶³ After a year of carving nearly every day on RUAC, she now has spoons from nearly everyone she carves with.

What Jody calls “an intimate experience” of *handling something* someone else made reminds me that a spoon’s handle invites touching. Because the spoon is an object that is meant to be used in eating and not just appreciated from a distance on a plinth or shelf, it comes close to the body.⁶⁴ A spoon’s handle is a stick that fits a hand. Spoon carvers talk about handles feeling good—about it being “too round,” not round enough, too flexy or too chunky; and about the merits of having a little bump where the thumb can rest.⁶⁵ They take into consideration whether the recipient is right-handed or left-handed, which could determine the shaping of a spoon, cocked to one side or the other.⁶⁶ The spoon’s handle communicates to its user that it is there to be grasped and steered towards something. The intimacy of a spoon swap comes partly from the intimacy carvers have with the objects they make—knowing how they feel and how they work, and how handling them makes a difference.

Jody has a highlighted collection of stories called “spoon swaps” on Instagram that archives incoming spoons. I can watch these multiple spoons as they enter her life photographed next to handmade cards, tins of homemade salve, and notes from their senders interspersed with

⁶³ Nebesnik, interview.

⁶⁴ Francis, interview; Salinero, interview.

⁶⁵ “It’s nicer when you have a wide spot to put your thumb on the top like this. And a round handle actually doesn’t really feel great, but I like the shape of it.” Nebesnik, interview; see Georg (@schorsch55), “#ruacspoonchallenge20...my goal,” Instagram (post), April 21, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CN7NgiQDIJO/>.

⁶⁶ Nebesnik, interview.

posts of her own spoons reposted from other carvers. One post shows a lineup of spoons hanging from pegs in racks with the caption, “Recognize any friends?”⁶⁷ She has so many spoons that she must select which one she’ll use on a which day. They are like friends that she makes sure are cycled through their use—stirring, pushing, and carrying food. She tells me she often picks the one that “maybe hasn’t seen some love in a while.”⁶⁸

The intimacy that comes with spoons can be a reason why some spoon carvers do *not* freely let their spoons go out into the world. Gary, a member of the NYC Spoon Club, who works in the construction trade and carves spoons as “anxiety management” does not formally swap spoons but does give them away. He differentiates between eating and cooking spoons in his gift giving.

“If I’m making somebody an eating spoon, then I test it, you know. So I feel like there has to be that level of connection before I even start doing that, because I just can’t do that. That’s a little too close. Yeah. You’re shared. Unless I’m comfortable sharing that much...like I got to know you that well enough in order to share that well. That’s a real thing.”⁶⁹

Gary’s feelings about the intimacy in spoon exchange is why he withholds from swapping.

Giving away an eating spoon, he says, is “too intimate for me. I get embarrassed about it.” To share his spoon is to also share himself, *that well*. Gary only makes eating spoons for the “closer knit people” in his life which includes his daughter and an inner circle of friends. Cooking spoons are different; he gives away cookers, ladles, and flippers to people not that close.⁷⁰ Like Jody, he points to the testing, or trying out, of eating spoons that happens in the making, of putting it in his mouth. Passing his objects around freely feels too casual.

⁶⁷ Jody/Wood and Bee (@jody.neb), “Spoonswaps,” Instagram (story), <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17870596004497345/>.

⁶⁸ Nebesnik, interview.

⁶⁹ Francis, interview.

⁷⁰ Francis, interview.

Gary is deeply attuned to “the energy” materials which get passed on in the release of spoons. He uses the New York City Street Tree Map website to geo-locate the wood he finds on the streets of his city—limbs that have come down in storms or cuttings pruned by a city worker.⁷¹ He zooms in on the map to “find out what happened” to the tree—its species, girth, and recent pruning. He processes his found wood in vacuum-sealed bags making notes of the tree’s address and species—serviceberry, Callery pear, hornbeam, Kentucky coffee tree. When making a spoon, Gary listens for what the material tells him, in conversation with its life as a tree.⁷²

“I guess I can only talk about myself, but how you touch and can be connected to a piece of a living...what was a living organism. You know, what *did* spend time on earth—growing, being, existing, taking up space. And that kind of...the energy that can be contained in a piece of wood, and especially in a beautiful, gnarled piece.”⁷³

The close communication Gary has with his material in the long process of making his spoons, that includes getting to know trees, is an intimacy that makes giving away spoons feel like “a real thing.”

I swapped my first spoon at the Sixth Irregular Spoon Gathering in Arkport, New York. I heard about the gathering on Rise Up and Carve where several carvers said they were going.⁷⁴ There was no sign up or RSVP, you just showed up in the Pat the host’s yard and pitched a tent. I had many reasons to feel nervous about the event—the post-pandemic fear of being around people, the prospect of camping in a sodden field, and the untethering possibility of being shoulder to shoulder with a very un-queer group of cis white men swinging axes. I am a white

⁷¹ “NYC’s Street Trees,” *NYC: The Official Website of the City of New York* (website), City of New York, 2021, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://tree-map.nycgovparks.org/tree-map>.

⁷² “What would this piece of wood be comfortable being? What does this piece of wood trying to tell me? I’m trying to listen to this language that I feel is inherent in the material, in the wood. It’s a lot of time. It’s a lot of seasons and weather and wind and harsh winters and dry summers.” Francis, interview.

⁷³ Francis, interview.

⁷⁴ Attendees estimated that about fifty carvers showed up to the event which lasted four days.

gender nonconforming queer person used to “the testosterone cloud”⁷⁵ in wood shops in Brooklyn, New York, but I was not sure how my butch appearance and more city-like style of dressing and talking would fly in this spoon carving crowd. To calm my worries and give me some company on the long drive, I brought Steve, a member of the NYC Spoon Club, who is also known as “Big Steve.”

In the Pat’s garage at the Sixth Irregular gathering, I gazed upon a sprawling table of spoons. There were neat rows patchworked against each other, ceramic jugs overflowing with spoons, and shallow cardboard boxes full of spoons. It was hard to tell where one maker’s work ended, and another’s began. A row of spoons with spindly octagonal handles lay next to a series of spoons with identical spade-shaped bowls which abutted a jumble of spoons with carved feathers as handles. Some spoons had handwritten notes with “willing to trade” or a price. Occasionally there was a name on a box written with a Sharpie. Being new to the scene at the Sixth Irregular, I did not recognize names or spoons. I felt self-conscious checking out the impressive spread of spoons, like I was standing in a store, and someone might pop out and try to push me into buying something.

⁷⁵ Salinero, interview.



Fig.7. *Spoons for trade and sale at the Sixth Irregular Spoon Gathering in July 2022.*
Photo by author.

The confusion and profusion of things on the table reminded me that the exchange of spoons is also an exchange of commodities. The display at the Sixth Irregular and the ambiguity about whether spoons were for sale or trade, was dizzying but instructive. Following Appadurai's thinking about things moving in and out of commodity phases during their busy social lives rather than existing in permanent states of commodification, I could be sure that this gathering was about more than having fun around stumps making spoons together. This market-like table where spoons were being offered for other people at a price—whether a spoon-for-a-spoon in a swap or a spoon-for-money—was a place where spoons were encouraged

to circulate.⁷⁶

In her 1997 essay, “Craft Within a Consuming Society,” the Canadian craft writer Gloria Hickey writes about craft objects as gifts, arguing that craft consumption has always been personal. Before people could buy hand crafted things on Etsy, websites, and Instagram, they were found mostly at craft galleries, “craft shops,” and the old school ‘studio visit’ where craft was bought directly from makers. Hickey writes, “the studio visit affords the ultimate shopping experience, providing an intimate knowledge of a distinctive object and a degree of personal attention normally associated with the most elite of retail environments.”⁷⁷ What she misses is that buying craft goods directly from makers *is* an elite environment because a handmade spoon is a luxury good only available to a select audience of insider-craftspeople. When someone buys a spoon from this table, they are buying a Roy or Emily spoon, not just any spoon. Luxury goods are defined in part by a “a high degree of linkage of their consumption to body, person, and personality.”⁷⁸ This linkage is partly what’s at stake when a spoon carver feels the presence of a person in a spoon.

Arjun Appadurai, in his essay “The Thing Itself,” seems to mourn the fact that everything at some time is a commodity in capitalist contexts. He wants to find the magic or what he calls, “the thing itself,” which is a resistance of things to be abstractions, to lose their singularity.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Appadurai points to how an object’s context, its temporal, cultural, and social factors, affect an object’s candidacy, from one *phase* to another, commodity to gift for example, during its career. He writes, “Bazaar settings are likely to encourage commodity flows as domestic settings may not.” Appadurai, “Introduction,” 15.

⁷⁷ Gloria Hickey, “Craft Within a Consuming Society,” in *The Culture of Craft*, ed Peter Dormer, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 97.

⁷⁸ Appadurai attributes signs of an object’s “luxury register” to “(1) restriction, either by price or by law, to elites; (2) complexity of acquisition, which may or may not be a function of real “scarcity”; (3) semiotic virtuosity, that is the capacity to signal fairly complex social messages (as do pepper in cuisine, silk in dress, jewels in adornment, and relics in worship); (4) specialized knowledge as a prerequisite for their “appropriate” consumption, that is, regulation by fashion; and (5) a high degree of linkage of their consumption to body, person, and personality.” Appadurai, “Introduction,” 38.

⁷⁹ Appadurai, “The Thing Itself,” 20.

Gifts and spoon swaps can feel special and feel magic in the way feelings get wrapped up with things. Stirring a pot with a spoon given in mutual exchange brings a flood of memories that money can't buy.⁸⁰ This handmade singular spoon is imbued with qualities, and maybe even particles, of both its giver and receiver. There is a quality in the exchange of spoons as they are handled and tested in mouths and then used in the cooking and eating arenas of other makers—given a little love—that feels a little unruly in its intimate ways, beyond what is typical in the consumption of other objects. This magical quality has to do with the comingling of people and objects that the form of the spoon, its graspable handle, and its cradling bowl, seems to exemplify. Spoons draw food in near the body inviting strange minglings.

My first spoon swap at the Sixth Irregular happened very naturally. Big Steve wanted to make me dinner and held out his pot of freeze-dried vegetarian chili to me to share. I didn't have a spoon handy and so he offered me one of his, a small eater with tiny, engraved designs on its handle. It was pocket sized, like a child's spoon, not even the length of my hand. We had been through a lot, both of us outliers at the gathering, not interested in making perfect spoons or being the best in the crowd. We had pitched our tents close together on the edge of the field. We had told each other more about our lives than perhaps I had expected. He had said things that surprised me like "I want to make spoons like my mother used to hit me with." The spoon he gave me would never be that spoon and I was glad. In return he picked out a cherry spoon from my meager stash of finished spoons I had come with. Letting one go to Big Steve felt right.

⁸⁰ Trella, interview.



Fig. 8. *A spoon-for-a-spoon. The author's cherry rice spoon on left and Steve's decorative birch eater on right.* Photo (left) by Stephen Heffernan; photo (right) by author.

The Unboxed Spoon

Suse has been called “the Queen of Swapping” because she has “tons and tons” of spoons from other carvers.⁸¹ She captures them in her “unboxing videos” on Instagram, where her profile description is “Happy little spoonmaker from Zürich, Switzerland.”⁸² It started in January of 2021 when she posted on Instagram that she had the goal to swap spoons with someone abroad and was flooded with offers; people she had barely spoken to or met were eager to send her their spoons. Suse has over seventy spoons from seventeen countries. She has spoons from Canada, the United States, Scotland, England, Wales, Germany, Israel, Italy, Poland, Russia, Australia, the Netherlands, Mexico, Norway, Spain, France, and Belgium. Opening her first international swap, Suse was overwhelmed with emotion. She told me: “It’s like when you give somebody a gift for their birthday, you want to see the reaction. You want to see the joy of the person.”⁸³ From this sentiment, Suse began her series.⁸⁴

Her posts often show just her torso or a closeup of her hands working to get inside a package on her kitchen counter. I hear a hollow tear of paper as she opens it with a pocketknife, and a quick succession of in-breaths. Her body dances, runs in place, jumps up and down, claps and then squeals. She pulls a bubble wrapped shape from the mailer which is flung into the kitchen sink. I feel as if I am in her kitchen: there is dish soap and a tea towel near the sink, a backsplash of white tile, a couple leaves of a plant, a cloth curtain languidly entering and exiting the frame, and some spoon carving tools on the counter. Suse holds a robust spoon up to the

⁸¹ Nebesnik, interview.

⁸² Susanne “Löffel-suse” (@loeffel.suse), Instagram (profile), accessed March 31, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/loeffel.suse/>.

⁸³ Karrer, Interview.

⁸⁴ As of October 2021, I counted sixty-three spoon unboxing videos on @loeffel.suse’s Instagram profile.

camera and turns it over slowly. It is ladle-like, with bold, faceted cuts. On the back of its bowl is an eye-catching spot of color—a knot maybe—hot pink, clustering with some darker flecks.

“Look at that. Wow. Holy moly!” she says. Suse’s smiling face pops down into the frame:

“Thank you Dustin.”⁸⁵



Fig. 9. *Suse unboxing a spoon that arrived with a butter spreader, three scoops, sweets, and stickers.* Photo with permission from Susanne Löffel.suse.⁸⁶

Her videos share some of the same sensory devices as the popular genres of ASMR and unboxing videos on YouTube. Suse’s use of slow deliberate movements, the cropping of her face so that just her hand movements are visible, her soft voice, her oohs and ahhs, the crinkling of paper, and her caressing finger movements around the contours of a spoon create an intimacy to

⁸⁵ Susanne “Löffel-suse” (@loeffel.suse), “Woohoo! Mail from the USA,” Instagram (post), February 2, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKyS9pYDP8V/>.

⁸⁶ Susanne “Löffel-Suse” (@loeffel.suse), “My winnings from,” Instagram (post), June 8, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CP2hC_HjfHb/.

our encounter, even if through my screen.⁸⁷ Watching her trace the contours of a tiny paddle-like spoon or putting a “spoon pendant” around her neck, I get a sense of spoons interacting with a body.

The stars of conventional unboxings might feature an Apple Magic Keyboard,⁸⁸ or a bottle of Airbrush Flawless Foundation,⁸⁹ but usually not a warm woody spoon sent from maker to maker. Suse sees her videos as existing on the “other side of the spectrum” from the consumer-oriented culture of YouTube unboxings which are used for product promotion and consumer feedback.⁹⁰ Spoon carvers are greener, she says, and not interested in “status symbols.” She adds, “We’re on the other end, this is just silly to us.” An unboxed spoon is personal; the best unboxed spoons are total surprises, the weirder the better.⁹¹

Suse’s own spoons are playful and often very funny. I enjoy her “mosaic spoon” with tiny pinhead sized square tiles epoxied all over its handle. It’s a meticulous bejeweled thing, wrapped in an ombre of sparkling blues to greens, accompanied by the hashtag #donttakemysparkleaway.⁹² The “Folding Spoon a la Suse” is carved into the shape of a human

⁸⁷ Naomi Smith and Anne-Marie Snider, “ASMR, Affect, and Digital-Mediated Intimacy,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* 30 (2019): 42. Suse’s videos share qualities with ASMR or “autonomous sensory meridian response” videos. These often feature a closely cropped body, whispering voices, or enameled nails tapping on a hard surface to trigger a physiological response—hard to put into words—but commonly described as a tingling feeling starting on the head. These videos create digitally mediated affective experiences that can range from relaxed euphoria to the impulse to buy something.

⁸⁸ Judner Aura, “NEW Mac Studio + Studio Display & First Impressions!” UrAvgConsumer, streamed live on March 31, 2022, YouTube video, 13:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQxbDVOdBnc>.

⁸⁹ Kathleen Lights, “FEBRUARY BOXYCHARM UNBOXING/2022,” streamed live on March 31, 2022, YouTube video, 12:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzytbLUZ7Dc>.

⁹⁰ Laura Zielinski, “Out of Box Experience,” *BrandPackaging* 20, no. 5 (06, 2016): 22-4.

<https://login.proxy191.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/out-box-experience/docview/1797567117/se-2?accountid=14890>.

⁹¹ Karrer, interview

⁹² Susanne “Löffel-Suse” (@loeffel.suse), “The mosaic spoon,” Instagram (post), February 4, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CK3lGRNjT9P/>

leg and hinged at the knee with a foot wearing bright red nail polish.⁹³ Others I have enjoyed are the “freaky armadillo swap spoon”⁹⁴ and “the kickstand spoon.”⁹⁵



Fig. 10. Two of Suse’s funny spoons: the *Folding Spoon à la Suse* (left) and “*Spring has sprung!*” spoon. Photos courtesy of Susanne “Löffel-Suse.”

With its emojis and caption bubbles, its connective channels and clustering tendencies, Instagram generates a kind of “sociable happiness,” to use Sara Ahmed’s term. Happiness, Ahmed argues, is not just an affect, or a feeling that is brought about in us, but an end-in-itself.⁹⁶

⁹³ Susanne “Löffel-Suse” (@loeffel.suse), “Folding spoon à la Suse,” Instagram (post), February 23, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLofQWDDQ7B/>.

⁹⁴ Susanne “Löffel-Suse” (@loeffel.suse), “The freaky armadillo swap spoon,” Instagram (post), March 9, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMMGUqwjYaL/>.

⁹⁵ Susanne “Löffel-Suse” (@loeffel.suse), “Sloyd Brain: “Make a spoon with a kickstand!” Instagram (post), May 9, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/COpZ75_Dk7i/.

⁹⁶ “I would suggest that happiness involves a specific kind of intentionality, what I would call ‘end oriented’. Happiness is often described as ‘what’ we aim for, as an end-point, or even an end-in-itself.” Ahmed, “Sociable Happiness” *Emotion, Space and Society* 1, no.1 (October 2008): 11.

Happiness draws us in, makes us want more, and bonds us to each other. Ahmed brings up the craft group as an example:

“The fan club or hobby group make explicit what is implicit about social life: that we tend to like those who like the things we like. The social bond is thus rather sensational. If the same objects make us happy—which means investing in the same objects ‘as if’ they make us happy—then we would be directed or oriented in the same way. Happy objects accumulate positive affective value as social goods through being passed around.”⁹⁷

The practice of spoon swapping in amateur craft social groups amplifies this tendency to stoke good feelings by passing around liked objects.

Suse’s spoons go against the grain of what I would call a dominant Instagram aesthetic for spoons. In the spoon posts of carvers with large followings, I have noticed showiness around facets, the flats left behind on wood from a knife. Spoon carvers get a lot of likes and a lot of praise for these tool marks that show off skill and an ability to circumnavigate the curves of a spoon with a sharp knife. In comments, I read spoon carvers’ praise of each other’s long, uninterrupted facets, which strikes me as being a masculinist tendency.⁹⁸ There is a snobbery amongst spoon carvers around the use of sandpaper, which Suse uses.⁹⁹ Her often-sanded forms are pillowed smooth as if made from dough, rather than hewed ruggedly from wood. She queers the single-material purism of most spoon carvers, adding epoxy, spray paint, shimmering violet, gold leafing, and beads to her spoons.

⁹⁷ Sara Ahmed, “Sociable,” 11.

⁹⁸ @rockewood, “I’ve been trying a bit less hard with the faceting,” Instagram (post), November 25, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CICBzrRinHr/>.

⁹⁹ The green wood furniture maker and sometimes spoon carver, Peter, says that this debate over to sand or not to sand a spoon, was not present in the eighties and nineties. He says, “It’s new and it’s not quite snobbery, but it almost is. And I’m a snob. I don’t sand them now.” In contrast another carver, Mike, feels that purist attitudes about “knife finishes” in spoon carving groups can feel like “chastising.” He defends sanding as a valid choice; it highlights form, feels better for users, and helps new carvers in tricky transitions. Follansbee, interview; Bray interview.

Themed spoon swaps are collaborations where carvers agree to carve for each other around a theme. The non-spoon spoon, the folding spoon, or the tarot-inspired spoon are custom-made for each other in a jokey spirit. Suse prefers these to swaps with strangers whose likes and wants are unknown to her.¹⁰⁰ In one post, Suse shares a picture of the “Anti Nose Bumper Spoon” she made *at a person* she was carving with in digital carving space. It’s shaped with no hard edges with a triangular hole right above the bowl, made to fit a nose. It is a strange mask of organic shapes fitting into each other; flesh and wood, convexity and concavity. Her caption reads: “My swap spoon for @pogibua after a conversation on RUAC about spoon humps, big noses, and the problems when the two collide. So, I made an Anti-Nose Bumper Spoon! I hope it fits, Dominik, I only had my own big nose to test it...”¹⁰¹

Suse keeps her seventy-plus swapped spoons hanging up in spoon racks—neatly strapped onto sticks of wood that hang on her living room walls. She uses some of her spoons, “if they fit my mouth for eating or if they fit my pot for cooking.” Most she leaves up on the wall, “treasures,” she calls them, not actively doing what spoons usually do. Sometimes they are pedagogical spoons. She takes them down and wonders, “What was the thought process or even what were they doing, what was going on in their lives?” With their celebrated arrival and placement together as a series, hers is a kind of collection rather than a random accumulation. But unlike collections of unused objects, like pig-shaped cutting boards that hang untouched, or

¹⁰⁰ Karrer, interview.

¹⁰¹ Susanne “Löffel-Suse” (@loeffel.suse), “My swap spoon for @pogibua,” Instagram (post), September 13, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CTwg_e1ozaE/.

souvenir spoons from worldly travels in cabinets for display,¹⁰² Suse's spoons are still active in her eating and carving life.¹⁰³



Fig. 11. *Suse's spoon racks*. Photo courtesy of Susanne "Löffel-Suse."

Suse's videos remind me that swapped spoons travel distances, cloaked in mailers and bubble wrap, in an international spoon carving economy. She unpacks not just spoons, but the "extras" sent along like souvenirs from a place. Nabisco Easy Cheese,¹⁰⁴ crackers, Doritos, coffee, a card from a local artist, a fan bird, tea, a watercolor, a coffee scoop, a leather knife sheath, Canadian maple syrup, and a honey dipper are all surprises that have accompanied

¹⁰² "Decorative teaspoons hang neatly in rows, collected over many years of traveling the world. They wait patiently for a grandchild or other visitor to ask about them so adventures can be retold and memories shared." Kacey C. Neely, "The Spoon," *Phenomenology and Practice* 11, no. 2, (2017): 30.

¹⁰³ The question *what a collection is* is somewhat elusive as the museum studies scholar Susan M. Pearce explores in her pithy essay, "The Urge to Collect." She floats several definitions from other scholars, including one that says a collection contains things that forego their original use. Becoming subsumed in a collection, their purpose morphs into the idea behind a collective whole. In the end she says a collection is a collection if the person calls it that. Susan M. Pearce, "The Urge to Collect," in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 157-159.

¹⁰⁴ Susanne "Löffel-Suse" (@loeffel.suse), "Swap Mail from @lionvalleycreations!!" Instagram (post), February 16, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaCR1AylGRm/>.

spoons in the mail.¹⁰⁵ She sends Swiss chocolate with her spoons because it is a regional thing she is proud of, that she can get in the store right next to her home. She tells me that carving spoons in the digital room of RUAC has made the world feel “a bit smaller in a good sense.” She has “friends all over the globe,” who send her hard-to-find national delicacies via spoon swaps.¹⁰⁶

I had a feeling of disorientation in a recent organized spoon swap where I received a spoon from a carver in Belgium whom I had never met, even virtually.¹⁰⁷ What struck me was the wood, which I couldn’t quite place. I have never been to Belgium and have no idea what wood is like there. I messaged the carver, Gert, to ask what species his spoon was made from. He replied, “it’s from a fruit-cherry, the only ones we have are for orchards. American Cherry is actually a pest here.”¹⁰⁸ The practice of spoon swapping with its analog snail mail exchange of handmade local objects, handwritten letters, and local favorites exists in the context of a globalized transport system. Holding the Belgian’s spoon in my hand I realized that I was participating in a global exchange of wood.

Just as the social practice of mail art has had to reinvent itself over time, becoming adaptive or reactive to changes in technologies like the photocopier, the practice of spoon swapping will also continue to hinge on changes in communication technologies.¹⁰⁹ Both spoon swaps and mail art insist on the analog. Just as mail artists, in the ilk of Ray Johnson and the

¹⁰⁵ Nebesnik, interview; Karrer, interview.

¹⁰⁶ Karrer, interview

¹⁰⁷ Rachel Bainton (@rachel_bainton), “Last reminder...” Instagram (post), September 28, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CUW4MGbDtMw/>.

¹⁰⁸ G. Onsia (@spoonsia.woodworking), direct message to author, Instagram (messages), October 28, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ “As future generations of mail artists encounter an ever-changing world that is continually being shaped by technology, craft remains an important bellwether of how mail artists are working through the complex issues of their time, such as building relationships, creating and participating in a larger network.” Dunkin-Hubby, Laura Dunkin-Hubby, “A Brief History of Mail Art’s Engagement with Craft (c. 1950-2014),” *The Journal of Modern Craft* 9, no 1. (March 2016):52.

Fluxus artists, deploy nostalgia in the visual language of their collages with magazine cut-outs and artist-made stamps sent through the postal system, spoon carvers send wooden spoons which connect them to a preindustrial mode of spoon manufacture.¹¹⁰ Both are organized through word-of-mouth networks, sending objects, and creating social bonds around a shared craft practice.¹¹¹ Spoon swapping, like mail art, is a communicative social practice that is defined by interactions between people. Suse's unboxing videos point to the spoon as both a touchable object and something more spread out and networked. If mapped, a short list of what a spoon swap involves might include a fruit-cherry tree in Belgium, learning to carve in a digital carving space full of ardent spoon carvers, the labor of postal workers, the procuring of sweets from a local shop, and a video with an international following.

Social media exposure can be a gain for the sender whose spoon is featured in Suse's unboxings. A gift is never free but comes wrapped in social relations, always asking for something in return.¹¹² Amongst spoon carvers, Instagram is how people find each other, see work, sell, and drop each other notes. Happiness is something we turn towards, pile up around us, and hang on spoon racks in our kitchen. Ahmed's concept of happiness has an end goal which could be called 'the good life.'¹¹³ In craft there might be something like a 'good craft life' on Instagram. I see images of craftspeople building designated spoon carving sheds in their

¹¹⁰ "By using both nostalgic imagery and the outmoded postal system, contemporary mail artists exploit nostalgia on two fronts: both in their aesthetics and via the communication system itself." Dunkin-Hubby, "A Brief History," 45.

¹¹¹ There is a democratic politics identified in mail art that sees itself as a nonhierarchical means of distribution, outside the gallery system and commercial markets. Though craft has different modes of distribution than art, spoon swapping is a self-selecting exchange of objects by makers. Dunkin-Hubby, 36.

¹¹² In her foreword to Marcel Mauss' book, *The Gift*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas writes, "There should not be any free gifts. What is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor's intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient." Mary Douglas, "Foreward: No Free Gifts," in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Marcel Mauss (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), vii.

¹¹³ Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 29-51.

backyards;¹¹⁴ carvers axing stumps together in meet ups; jolly circles of fellow carvers around a campfire; a fan of perfect finished spoons ready to take to market; the curl of a spiraled wood shaving coming off a spoon's neck, a crisp facet running up its length. We aim for happiness in our lives where what we do, and how we expose ourselves on social media, is instrumental to that happy end.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Jody/Wood and Bee (@jody.neb) "Remember Summertime??" Instagram (post), February 26, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CacXsC5LSaW/>.

¹¹⁵ Ahmed follows Aristotle's definition of "happiness as the Chief Good," from his book *Nicomachean Ethics*. We choose things that are *instrumental* to happiness in aiming for a good and virtuous life. Ahmed, "Happy Objects," 33-34.

The Erotic Spoon

I have noticed that spoon carvers when sitting around carving together will stop and put the spoon they are working on in their mouth. This should not have surprised me, but it did the first time I saw it. The person goes through the motions of eating, bringing the bowl of the spoon which is in some yet-done state of being carved into their open mouth. They may move the fleshy insides of their mouth around the wood, feeling it from all sides with whatever sensory equipment is there at the ready. It is not savoring, but discerning. The bowl is still being formed and so there is a lot to think through as it sits there, a mute wood shape surrounded by sensing flesh. The spoon carver may be thinking *a little off here, too thick there, smooth out that bump*. And then, getting the answer, the spoon carver pops it out of their mouth and gets on with the subtractive process of carving.

In spoon carving, failure is felt more than seen. How a spoon feels in hand and mouth is something that is tested, mulled over, and improved upon. Failure takes many shapes and forms, the worst being that a spoon I carve makes me gag when I put it in my mouth. It's too thick in the middle of the bowl and rests heavy on my tongue. In spoon carving feeling is *turned on* and *turned towards* in specific ways.

To be attuned to the way spoons feel—in their making and in their exchange—is a kind of erotic connection. I use the word erotic to wake up something about feelings and craft that is relevant to spoon swapping. The erotic I am talking about is not sex, but more like what Black lesbian poet feminist Audre Lorde means when she uses “the erotic” to mean a “wellspring,” a “fullness of feeling,” and a source of “inner power” that, if said yes to, can spread throughout a life.¹¹⁶ I am not talking about erotic art objects or spoons as erotic fixations, but about an erotic

¹¹⁶ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, ed. Roxanne Gay (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2020), 29-37.

connection in the experience of carving, using, and swapping spoons. In her manifesto-like essay “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” written in 1978, Lorde points to an erotic of everyday life that is rooted in the body.¹¹⁷

“In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.”¹¹⁸

The erotic spoon refers to the experience of spoon carvers being alive in the ongoing making of spoons. For Lorde the erotic is a “self-connection” which can become “self-connection shared.” Swapping spoons with others is a way of sharing a deep attunement to one’s craft. She writes, “For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.”¹¹⁹ I agree with Lorde that this satisfaction depends not on the *what* of doing but the *how*. The erotic spoon highlights experiential knowledge learned from the body.

From its first inklings of growth when I see “a spoon shape” in a branch or stump, the spoon is brought into being for and around the body. It begins as a ragged piece of wood that I axe to the overall size of the type of spoon it will be. This could be a small “pocket spoon” that fits within the grasp of a hand and made to fit a pocket; it could be an eater that is slightly longer,

¹¹⁷ Audre Lorde wrote the essay “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power” amidst second wave feminist debates around pornography. She argues against pornography because it is “sensation without feeling.” Lesbian feminist poet Adrienne Rich writes that in the late 1960s and early 1970s the slogan, “the personal is political,” was used by second wave feminists—women, black women, and lesbians—to break down “the mental barrier that separated private from public life.” Lesbians could lose their children, their jobs, and their housing because of their so-called private lives. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 30; and Adrienne Rich, “Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet,” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986): 183.

¹¹⁸ Lorde, 33.

¹¹⁹ Lorde, 31.

maybe the length of a hand; or it could be a cooking spoon that extends into a forearm and gives more leverage and distance from the pot. It could be a ladle if there is a deep bend built into the growth of the branch, giving it the feeling of a cupped hand at the end of an arm dropping down. If there is not enough thickness to the piece of wood, I might not make a spoon at all, but a flat pusher or butter spreader.

The work a spoon does is determined by its shape. A spoon carver might start out with the thought of making a cooking spoon and end up whittling it away so that it becomes an eater. There may be snags and knots along the way where the wood dictates; detours are taken, and design is a flexible and impetuous thing. But there is a moment in the spoon's shaping when food comes into mind. *What kind of work will the spoon do?* A spoon is a stick with a bowl on the end that extends the range of my body, allowing me to feel further.¹²⁰ A spoon might stir, scrape, shovel, carry, mash, pound, fold in, ladle, heap, or slice. I have a spoon gifted to me by a carver that has the thinnest tapering rats tail handle. It flexes when I stir heavy oats or potatoes, but in a bowl of corn flakes it does just fine. I have seen carvers make eating spoons with bowls that are flat across their width which will make a thin hot broth roll off its sides. These are not failures, just spoons that fit a purpose that is food specific.

This task of making an object that feels good in the mouth is a peculiar one. What does it mean to make an object to fit the mouth? The mouth is a negative space, an orifice that is not easily pictured. It is a strange space flanked with orderly white blocks made of a shiny rock-hard material. Out of its center comes a shape-shifting red form. I make the rounded underneath of a

¹²⁰ I am thinking here of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's blind man's walking stick that extends what he feels through his body. A spoon can extend my bodily space, its volume, in a similar way as Merleau-Ponty's blind man's walking stick. "...Its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2002), 165.

spoon bowl thin enough, so it enters and exits the mouth without too much ado. Upside down, a wooden eater in my mouth is just a wafer that fits between the dome of my palette and the cushion of my tongue.



Fig. 12. *Chuck's mulberry eating spoon in a mouth.* Photo by author.

Wood and mouths are porous, so tastes are intermingled in the act of eating. Wood is a material that is always equalizing itself with its environment, which served it well when it was a tree and inhaling and exhaling the wetness of the world. I taste chemical compounds in wood, the species of wood, and the oil soaked into its fibers. Cherry has a tartness, some more than others; birch is a bit like hay; a certain apple spoon has a stink like decadent cheese and tastes of something fermenting in my mouth. I am eating tree particles, but I am also eating oil if there is any on the spoon. Certain oils turn rancid, never dry, and leave a bitterness on a spoon that seeps

out across my tongue. It all becomes mixed into the experience of eating which complicates the thought that I am eating something distinct from the utensil that brings food to mouth.¹²¹

It is useful to think about the way that spoons mix with our bodies when thinking about the intimacy of a spoon swap. Jody makes sure her swapped spoons get used; she rotates them into her family's eating life. She says, "And if something happened to one of them, I would be like *oh no, Kaylin got put in the dishwasher!*"¹²² A spoon may be a sign of its maker in use, as Jody folds it into her home life, thinking of Kaylin when she stirs the pot or rinses it at the sink before hanging it on a spoon rack. But it also may carry trace particles of its maker in its pores. The anthropologist Tim Ingold, who argues for a less divided sense of objects as distinct entities, has a way of seeing materials not as things with fixed boundaries, but in a flow and exchange with other things. The surfaces of things are more permeable than we think. Eating and breathing exemplify this point because matter moves in an obvious way in and out of us. He writes, "Things can exist and persist only because they *leak*: that is, because of the interchange of materials across the ever-emergent surfaces by which they differentiate themselves from the surrounding medium. The bodies of organisms and other things leak continually; indeed, their lives depend on it."¹²³ Ingold's 'leaky things' are conversant with the world, and like Jody's spoons they pick up and discard particles as they move about.

¹²¹ The political theorist Jane Bennett argues that in the experience of eating nonhuman things have "agentic capacity." She writes, "On this model of eating, human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and both offer themselves as matter to be acted on. Eating appears as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry: my meal both is and is not mine; you both are and are not what you eat." In this paper I am not elaborating on the ways that spoons and food have agentic capacity, but only wish to assert the blurriness of objects like spoons as they interact with human bodies, especially during eating. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 49.

¹²² Nebsnik, interview.

¹²³ Tim Ingold, "Toward an Ecology of Materials," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol 14, (2012): 438.

The erotic spoon has no stake in permanence.¹²⁴ Unlike a sculpture that is captured under glass in a museum, a spoon is free to move about, to be in the weather of daily lives. Spoon carvers want the spoons they make to be used. A carver is thrilled when they see someone using their spoon to swipe the place where the pot's bottom meets its side, to scrape hardened bits of food from the bottom of a pan, to bring a steaming pile of oatmeal up to a mouth.¹²⁵ I notice the wood spoons in my kitchen grow fuzzy with use. Grain that was once burnished with the cut of a sharp knife becomes raised like fabric. Spoons erode quickly with washings, much quicker than rocks in a stream. A convex back of a bowl that was once a series of minute planes, becomes a shape that feels sanded smooth. With air, sun, and water, a spoon's edges become thirsty for oil. In the dishwasher a wood spoon is shocked by the heat, and splits.

Being alive to the exchange between bodies—wood, flesh, environment—is part of the craft of spoon carving. An erotics of spoon carving includes the hunger to dive deeply into a sodden log and find something within it. It describes the ability of craft to sharpen our imaginations and connect us to materials that breathe, sweat, age, soften, and leak. The erotic spoon expresses how spoons feel, how they meld with bodies, and how they are folded into intensely personal spaces. A spoon is not a fork; and I have never seen a wood fork traded so promiscuously as the spoons I see swapped with abandon. This might be because spoons' unending curves and roundness has more to say about love and sharing than does the sharpness of things with tines. A spoon's bowl is round like the moon, an open orb that asks to be filled. In

¹²⁴ Arjun Appadurai theorizes from a place of things in flux and things-on-their-way. What he calls objecthood is “a momentary respite” from never ending motion. Objecthood is “ever volatile” and fragile. Appadurai, “The Thing Itself,” 15.

¹²⁵ Johnpoll, interview.

her poem, “On a Night of the Full Moon,” Audre Lorde begins: “Out of my flesh that hungers/ and out of my mouth that knows/ comes the shape I am seeking for reason.”¹²⁶

Conclusion

My kitchen drawer holds both factory-made stainless-steel spoons and a gaggle of spoons made by carvers I know. I often reach for a small mulberry eater that Chuck gave me as I was leaving the Sixth Irregular gathering. He held out a shallow box of spoons like tarot cards and let me choose one. When I use it, I hear his booming voice, I recognize the deep sweep he likes to build into his spoons, and I remember that I owe him a spoon in return. This mulberry spoon is part of an unrequited swap because I had no finished spoons to give him that day. His spoon is fading already, eroding with wear, and it will not last like the anti-corroding stainless steel spoon will, but it reminds me of my involvement in this nutty community of people and its bartering tendencies. Its value is not in the one-to-one of dollars, and nor is it in the one-to-one of spoons, but is in its connection to the person who made it, which makes me choose it over the metal one. I equate the warm woody spoon in my hand with Chuck, the warm-hearted person.

Arjun Appadurai wrote the essay “The Thing Itself” twenty years after his influential 1986 essay introducing the book *The Social Life of Things*. He begins with this: “Since then, I have continued to be engaged with the idea that persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transactions that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations.” Appadurai points to a certain segment of life in India, where capitalism has not yet had a total reach, and the world of things has not yet fully shifted to “the empire of the exhibit,

¹²⁶ Audre Lorde, “On a Night of the Full Moon,” in *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, ed. Roxanne Gay (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2020), 211.

the collection, or the commodity.” There is a fluidity and unruliness about objects which he describes as “the world of *the thing itself*.”

“The idea of the thing itself is a way to capture the stubbornness of the materiality of things, which is also connected to their profusion, their resistance to strict measures of equivalence, and to strict distinctions between the maker and the made, the gift and the commodity, the work of art and the objects of everyday life.”

The world of the thing itself is a place where profusion reigns over minimalism; where things meld into bodies; and where there are no sharp distinctions between people and things.

I cannot imagine a place where capitalism does not touch all things. In my essay about spoon swapping, spoons shape shift between the categories of gift, collection, barter, and commodity. Like Appadurai, I am attracted to the in-between. Spoons in this essay live in this tension between “the rule of the commodity and the unruliness of the thing itself.” Spoons in exchange mingle with bodies and people. They are folded into meals, put in mouths to be fit and tested, and smoothed with a knife long after being ‘done.’ Spoons in the economy I describe exist in neither freedom from capitalist abstraction—a full-bodied pure state of materiality—or its opposite, a calculated measure of things as exchange values. The spoon is enlivened in the spoon swap, where it shows its face as both.

My writing on the intimacies of spoon exchange is embedded in the perspectives of craftspeople who make wood spoons. As a craftsperson I am preoccupied with questions about where those things go, where they end up, and how will they be valued. I know that the things I make deaden when they sit too long in my shop. Objects come alive as they move in a social world. The fleshy intimacy of a spoon swap is a craftsperson’s story—questions arise from conversations with carvers, spoons, and wood.

To think and write about the exchange of spoons, I have immersed myself in the craft of carving spoons and in a spoon carving world. My spoon scholarship is a chatty discourse that

arises from three places—my own making, the words of fourteen spoon carvers, and my experience in spoon carving worlds. I have theorized spoons from a place of making spoons—how I feel a curve with my knife, shape a bowl to hold liquids, or handle my spoons to direct the hand that holds them. And I have theorized spoons from the stories, anecdotes, and spoon sharings of fourteen carvers. These have been lively collaborations that have always pointed me to places I would have never gone. My spoon scholarship comes from my experiences of carvers in the places they meet, in groups like the online carving room of RUAC, the Sixth Irregular Spoon Gathering, Instagram, and the NYC Spoon Club. In these spaces, I felt the weather and the gestures of spoon carvers in shared space.

In my five sections, *The Social Spoon*, *Pedagogical Spoon*, *The Intimate Spoon*, *The Unboxed Spoon*, and *The Erotic Spoon*, I have given evidence to my argument that spoon swapping is a lively form of giving and receiving that creates intimacies amongst the spoon carvers who make them. I have formed a picture of spoons in the touching and feeling economy of carvers. I have shown how the materiality of spoons—what they are made of, how their forms get made and remade, how they fit hands, mouths, and even noses—gets shared in spoon swaps. I believe craft should be talked about as this, as an unruliness of things that move in and around our bodies. This messiness includes the social world of craft where affinities and orientations stick to spoons. People are oriented to spoons differently—one might reach for a handle with the male and female stick figures because it makes them happy; one might accept freely all invitations to swap, while another holds back; one might copy spoons to understand what other people do, while another might put them away, letting learning come as it may.

Craft scholarship that asks questions about the social relations in which crafted objects are made will increasingly have a lot to learn from online craft life. Platforms like RUAC and

Instagram are spaces for craft kinship, learning, and becoming. Like Legacy Russell, I see them not as utopias, but as opportunities. The same hierarchies of gender, race, and heteronormativity exist here as they do in other social spaces. Digital crafting can be a lifeline for people who do not feel comfortable at in person gathering or club because they are differently oriented in terms of race, class, gender, or queerness. I would not go to another three-day spoon gathering like the one I went to in Arkport, New York where I was the only queer person in a field of cis gender white men. The digital carving space of RUAC is also predominantly occupied by cisgender white men. Its founder, Chuck, admits it's also mostly white. As I write this a "womxn" group is forming on Rise Up and Carve that will meet in its own time and space.

Every now and then when I come to the end of a thought or a sentence, I leap up from my computer and carve a spoon. It is a fidgety habit I have, and it keeps me grounded in my body and in the objects that are my subject. Like many spoon carvers I have plastic bags of half-finished spoons waiting to be carved in my freezer. They are frozen blocks of wood that I axed into blocky shapes that aspire to be spoons. Opening one up, I remember the tree it came from, the cherry that wouldn't split, or the birch that was too quickly inhabited by a mysterious green fungus. As a queer person, living the life I want to live has always meant imagining. It has been about creating what is lacking in the here and now. Spoons for me are like this. I can take a frozen block of wood from the freezer and see a shape that is not yet a spoon but has possibility within its margins. There is a bowl that will be like a hole dug down into the cool interior. Its handle will follow the grain and so be slightly cocked to one side. It's the shape of my collaboration with wood and with the carvers I carve with. And soon, the shape of a hand that holds it.

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