Mētis and Somaesthetics in Polish Craft Practice: The NÓW Initiative

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Abstract: *This study examines, through a phenomenological interview, the ceramic practice of Olga Milczyńska, a member of NÓW—a Polish initiative dedicated to revitalizing traditional artisanal techniques through contemporary methods. NÓW's manifesto foregrounds embodied making processes that integrate sensory experience with cultural heritage, and Milczyńska's practice exemplifies this orientation through attentiveness to material behaviour and manual engagement.*

We argue that her ceramic practice offers a productive site for expanding somaesthetic theory by demonstrating how embodied making generates a situated, corporeal mode of knowledge. This form of bodily intelligence aligns with the notion of mētis (Klekot 2018), challenging the dominant framing of craft as primarily technical and rule-governed (technē). Accordingly, the interview investigates how reflective and unreflective bodily know-how are negotiated during the making process, how mētis is transmitted through practice and how aesthetic and somatic responses guide interaction with the material.

The analysis reveals a critical gap in how craftspeople articulate their own work: Milczyńska foregrounds technical efficacy in her self-narration while leaving unexpressed the somaesthetic dimension that substantively informs her practice. By tracing the dynamics of her working process, the study forges an explicit conceptual link between mētis and somaesthetic theory, offering a contribution to both somaesthetic discourse and contemporary craft studies.

Keywords: *Somaesthetics; embodied knowledge; mētis; embodied making; ceramic practice; material engagement; craft practice*

1. Introduction: Craftsmanship / New Craftsmanship in Poland

All bodily actions inevitably involve human interaction with the material world. They both shape it and are shaped by it. In this respect, the human body is one of the key factors that determine how individuals function within material culture.

Regardless of the meanings associated with the objects it consists of, contemporary material culture is largely created by design and industrial mass production. These two fields are typically viewed as hallmarks of modernity and are analyzed as such in philosophy, including aesthetics (Haug 1986; Adorno and Max Horkheimer 2002; Foster 2002; Baudrillard 2005). In light of

this reading, however, both design and industrial mass production are heavily influenced by the intellectual input required to generate the ideas behind the projects and plans and to create the necessary technologies. As a consequence, the production of material objects is increasingly being passed on to machines that are becoming more and more separated from humans and their bodily actions.

This historical novelty, characteristic of modernity, has determined not only the progressive scattering of traditional manual craftsmanship but, more fundamentally, a growing distance from embodied knowledge and material sensitivity that were once essential components of the relationship with material culture. However, traditional crafts have not disappeared, even in post-industrial societies in the Global North. They still exist, albeit more often than not in a specific context. On the one hand, craftsmanship is viewed nostalgically as a symbol of the 'good old times' and of a higher quality of life before mass production caused its decline. On the other hand, precisely because it functions as a symbol of a higher quality of life, it is seen as an economic luxury expressing one's worldview and social status.

In one way or another, the place of contemporary craft within material culture is defined by its contrast with design and industry. Its manual, i.e. bodily nature—once typical of all methods of production—determines its aesthetic qualities and economic value. This is why a somaesthetic approach seems to be very helpful when analyzing the 'identity' of craft within contemporary material culture, given that craft is often seen as the only field where manual work can still be highly praised, aside from the fine arts.

It is worth remembering that the term 'craftsmanship,' denoting a material activity consisting of transforming materials with one's own hands, derives from the English term 'craft,' which originally meant physical strength and power, and over time also physical activity requiring skill and ability to design and make an object. The Italian word 'artigianato,' like words denoting craftsmanship in other Romance languages, derives from the Latin 'ars,' meaning art, craftsmanship, understood as the ability to act or behave skillfully. The term 'ars' was equivalent to the Greek word 'technē,' meaning any activity based on knowledge of rules that could and should be mastered because they guaranteed effectiveness and, thus, the achievement of the intended result. This understanding of art therefore not only included the creation of paintings, sculptures, and buildings, but also the production of everyday objects, politics, and warfare. Much of the meaning of these terms remains in today's understanding of craftsmanship: it is still associated with manual labor requiring physical strength, skill, and knowledge of specific rules that allow an object to be designed and made in accordance with its intended shape and purpose. It is also these traditions that allow us to understand why, in the contemporary world, the adjective 'craftsmanship' is synonymous with the 'high quality' that industrial production is supposedly unable to guarantee, due to its mass character.

However, craftsmanship can be associated not only with good work, i.e., with the desirable products that are well made, in a thoughtful manner, and from good materials, but also with activities that merely replicate proven patterns, requiring reliability and knowledge but not necessarily imagination or creativity, which are associated with intellectual abilities. This association also has its historical justification. In the Middle Ages, there was a division of the arts into mechanical and liberal based on the kind of skill required. The former involved physical work, working with one's hands on a specific material, while the latter required only intellectual effort. Thus, the liberal arts were recognized as intellectual activities, which over time evolved into *studia humaniora*—the theoretical disciplines (e.g., mathematics, history, philosophy) believed to require the intellectual skills necessary for artists, but not for artisans, who remained solely practice-oriented (Tatarkiewicz 1970, 1980; Kristeller 1951, 1952; Shiner 2001).

The place of crafts within today's material culture is determined by the tensions outlined above regarding how craftsmanship is understood and valued. Additionally, craftsmanship sometimes borders on the realm of art, whether folk art, applied art, or fine art. It plays with tradition, originality, and innovation, while always engaging with the physical nature of the materials used and the bodily actions of the craftspeople (Braunstein-Kriegel and Petiot 2018; Risatti 2007).

This is also the case for Olga Milczyńska. She is a professionally trained ceramicist based in Warsaw who creates functional objects, such as vases of different sizes and purposes, as well as artistic pieces of various sizes (Milczyńska, 2025). She is also one of the founders of *NÓW. New Craft* in Poland, an association of craftspeople specializing in various crafts, whose aim is to promote new forms of craftsmanship. "We—they claim—get inspiration from traditional craft, but we do not rigidly stick to ready-made rules of craftsmanship. What we choose is the freedom of experimenting with the form, material and production process." (Nów 2025) The NÓW manifesto reads:

> *In the present world destroyed by thoughtless mass consumption and chase for more and more profit, craft is being reborn in its creative, new version – just like the moon coming back to its full shape. Nów. New Craft Poland is an association that gathers new craftspeople. Contemporary new craft—regardless of the craft specialization—stands, first and foremost, for taking direct control over the whole production process by a single person. The craft product is different from the industrial product in that it is not alienated from its maker. It is not because craftspeople do not use machines; in this case, the relationship between the maker and the product is based on the highly complex bodily knowledge.*
>
> *In our view, craft means co-operation with the material.* (Nów 2025)

Due to its open and "grassroots" character, the *NÓW* association essentially differs from the Polish Craft Association, which is the largest and oldest organization in Poland, uniting numerous cooperatives and local guilds and offering its own system of education and professional certificates (e.g., for butchers, clockmakers, farriers, hairdressers, locksmiths, masons, mechanics, and tire specialists).

Compared to this more institutional landscape of Polish craftsmanship, ceramics—especially as practiced by Olga—represents a form of making in which bodily contact between the craftsperson and the raw material, and then the finished object, is more explicit. Moreover, the hand serves not only as the main tool but also as the primary organ of tactile intelligence that guides the entire creative process. Thus, ceramics as a technology and technique (*technē*) is particularly distinctive because of the direct bodily engagement it demands from the craftsperson. Unlike many other crafts, ceramic work often implies constant physical contact with the raw material without—or with minimal—mediation of tools, making it perhaps the most immediately tactile of all craft practices. The hand's importance in this process indicates that the somatic dimension is central to both the technique and the practitioner's experience. Such bodily engagement, being a fundamentally sensory experience, lends itself to an aesthetic approach. This insight guided our research question: we—Monika Favara-Kurkowski and Mateusz Salwa—sought to understand how Olga, as a ceramist, experiences her craft and describes that experience in terms of bodily engagement. Specifically, we sought to understand how she expresses and values her practice through the lens of embodied knowledge, particularly attending to how tactile intelligence and material responsiveness shape both her making process

and her understanding of what craft means.

2. The interview with Olga Milczyńska: hands-on ceramics

The interview took place on 30 June 2025 in Olga Milczyńska's studio and was recorded with her permission. During the meeting, Olga worked on a vase and showed us around the studio, intending to accompany the dialogue with her manual work to help her feel more at ease, as well as to use this opportunity to continue working on the vase. The clay vessel had been started not long before our arrival, and given that the clay was still fresh, she could not leave it for much longer before adding a new layer. She used the coiling technique, which involves building the walls of vessels by adding long cylindrical pieces of clay on top of one another. This traditional technique is known all over the world and dates back to the Neolithic era.

The questions we asked Olga come from our philosophical background and shared interest in the aesthetic side of creative practices. Mateusz Salwa's work in contemporary aesthetics and philosophy of art—particularly around materiality, representation, and more recently everyday aesthetics—led us to explore how ceramic craft configures specific modalities of dialogue with matter. Monika Favara-Kurkowski's interdisciplinary background, combining design and philosophy, helped shape questions about the relationship between embodied aesthetic experience and practical knowledge. It should be noted that the original interview took place in Polish; what is presented here is necessarily a translation (approved by Olga), with all the limitations this entails.

Monika Favara-Kurkowski & Mateusz Salwa: Where did the idea for what you do come from? Would you call it "craft"?

Olga Milczyńska: Yes, I call it craft, and I really like that term. I think it's the most truthful of all the possible descriptions. It's working with materials and understanding them. It's a continuous process of learning and understanding what the material can do... it cracks here; why does it crack? *[Pointing to a drying piece in the studio]* Will it let me build something bigger or smaller? It's a constant attentiveness to the material. And it's always about improving my physical skills too... I can see I do things differently now than I did five years ago—better, faster, and more efficiently. And the idea? I'm the daughter of gardeners, who weren't gardeners at first but worked physically for many years. That's one part. Second, I started working with ceramics in high school. I took some ceramics classes here and there, and ceramics kept appearing in my life. But at that time in Poland, you couldn't really do it the way you can now. There were no shops with ceramic materials. No one threw on a wheel. It was quite limited. Only after I graduated, I went to Bornholm, to the Folk High School.[1] There, I met a wonderful teacher and had access to the studio 24/7. That's how it began. She really motivated me.

MFK&MS: From the perspective of our research, we're most interested in your relationship with the bodily and material dimension of your work. On one hand, we are interested in your physical and embodied engagement, and on the other hand, we are interested in the materiality of the objects and the medium you work with. Have you ever thought about how you experience it? Would you say something about the physicality or manual nature of your work? Do you even think about it, or is it fully automatic?

1 Bornholm Folk High School, https://bornholmshojskole.dk/english/

Fig. 1

OM: I believe it is somewhat automated. I once did a project with Ewa Klekot,[2] and we made an exhibition about craftspeople.[3] The exhibition was excellent, resembling an outdoor gym that showcased the gestures most commonly made by a craftsperson. You had to imitate them. At the time, I was casting, so you had to pour something like this [*she demonstrates the gesture*]. I don't think about it. I only think about it when I have interns. They don't usually make my pieces, but sometimes I have them make half or a simple, independent part. When I see how they do it, I sometimes think, "No, that's wrong." Then I start thinking about the gestures I make. Like here, now [Fig. 1], the coil is placed just so; the thumb is here, helping set the height—I like it when coils overlap, not just sit on top of one another. This allows the next movement to be efficient and create a smooth wall. Only when I explain it to someone do I become aware of it. The shape I'm making now is basic—a straight cylinder—but not so easy. Every shape requires a different hand posture and way of working. When I had to make those diffusers *[*Fig. 1, *in the background]*, I told the client, "You have to order at least ten." When I produce two, I learn the shape from the second one. But if I make ten or fifteen—some are still in the kiln—then they turn out similar. I get into an automatic rhythm.

MFK&MS: And then it stays in your body?

OM: I think so, but not always *[laughs]*. Not always, because with glazing, for example, I might glaze something—like those diffusers—and then do it again six months later. I don't do

2 Ewa Klekot is a Polish anthropologist of art, with a background in archaeology and ethnography. She works as an assistant professor at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw.

3 For more information and photographs of the exhibition *Robić Rzeczy [Do Things]*, see: https://kosmosproject.com/project/do-things/

it all the time. So the first one is like, "Hmm, how did I do this? No, not like that... oh, okay, this way!" If I did it all the time, I'd retain the knowledge. But because it's every six months, I have to recall it. Either by making a mistake or trying once and realizing, "Oh no, it wasn't like that." So it stays somewhere, but I have to dig it up. Whereas when I do it regularly, I know exactly how, and I don't make mistakes. For example, if I had to make those little elements now, by the third try I'd do it efficiently.

MFK&MS: Are there physical sensations that tell you everything is going well, that this is the process and result you want? Do you suddenly feel under your hands that something isn't going right, or it's not going as planned?

OM: Yes, for example, clay… I open a package, and it's wet. As I work it, it gets harder. So I work with it differently at the beginning of the bag and at the end. Now I'm attaching a coil and checking if it's done right.

MFK&MS: But you check with your hands?

OM: Yes. I check with my hands. From the outside, you can't really tell. At least, that's what I think.

MFK&MS: Were there any manual skills or forms that you found particularly difficult to master for any specific reason? For example, was there something you had imagined that turned out to be much more technically challenging than you expected—a real struggle?

OM: Yes, definitely—those large amphora forms that I create for hotels, which are one meter high… I can only show you a photo, as I don't have them here. Okay, this one is small *[shows a slightly different project on her phone]*. With those, the round body is fine, but the opening in the back… Making sure the clay doesn't collapse is really difficult. And I usually build those big pieces in the spring, because when it's cold and damp, it's very difficult to work. So you can only add about a centimeter at a time, and then the clay has to set. That is why I never work on just one piece at a time. I always have several. I add a bit here, and then it becomes too soft to control the wall. So I move on to another one. It needs to firm up a little before I can add more. Which means I always need to have multiple pieces in progress so I have something to work on. I have my production flow set up. It's not like I work on a single piece and just see what happens. That's also part of the craft—understanding efficiency. I always try to make my workflow efficient, so there's no downtime. It's always this, this, this, this. Again: this, this, this. Then: "Ah, now I can do that." That's how I think about my work process. I don't come to the studio wondering what I'll do today. I know. I have to do this so it doesn't dry out, then that, and that—every gap is filled. For instance, today I'm finishing a piece. I'll load another biscuit firing, do one more glaze firing, and then I have to clean everything up, prep the glazing area, and have one day just for glazing—then I can start building again.

MFK&MS: And you mentioned at the beginning of our conversation that your way of working has changed over the years. Is that about efficiency, or is it more about your hands changing, gaining experience, or approaching things differently?

OM: I've also changed the kinds of things I make. I always liked hand-building, but for a long time I worked with porcelain and casting. That's one thing. When I started building large pieces again, I had to relearn some things—I've been building for about five years, or possibly four—like understanding what type of clay works for what, and also mastering the craft. I used to be able to roll coils like this *[she shows us a short coil]*; now I can roll coils like this *[she shows us a long coil]*, and the speed is entirely different too.

MFK&MS: And that comes from repetition?

OM: I think it's purely from repetition. You just have to do a lot of it. The first time I made those tall pieces, it took me two months to make three. I had to redo a lot because I rushed it.

Now I don't have to adjust things—I just work at a slightly slower but actually faster pace because I don't have to go back and correct. But it all comes down to repetition.

MFK&MS: And in terms of your relationship with the material—would you describe working with clay as a kind of dialogue? In the sense that you have something in mind, but the material resists or suggests something else?

Fig. 2

OM: Yes, I think so. It's like a partner when you're building. I don't know how to put it... For example, I'm working with this clay now, and I know exactly how thin it can go. And how thin this other clay can go. I know that if a certain crack appears, it's fine, but if another kind appears—I need to act. When I'm building, I also know how far I can open up the form before it just stops working [Fig. 2]. It's not a dialogue like we're having now. It feels more akin to a companion. I can't do everything on my own. It's a conversation. Especially with more difficult pieces, like those arches [Fig. 3]. That was a real experiment. The idea of the arches came from my work with bricks—I collected around 4,000 bricks on Bornholm, and they had been sitting at a friend's place. I used those bricks to build different installations. But when I came back to Poland, I didn't have those bricks anymore. I couldn't build with them. I've always been fascinated by how bricks are used to build things and how they can last centuries—like Gothic cathedrals and vaults. So I thought, "Okay, I have this clay that I'm currently working with, so let's try to make vaults. How can I make vaults with clay?" Clay doesn't like those shapes—it bends and

warps. We couldn't even load the largest ones into the kiln. Four people tried, and they always cracked. I got to about 60 centimeters, and we still couldn't fire or move them. They'd start warping even while drying. So how do you make them stable enough to survive drying without toppling over? *[laughs]* Those arches on that little base [Fig. 3]—they were completely straight when they were placed in the kiln. This is because clay, especially porcelain, "remembers" how it has been touched and worked. A common issue with beginners: they make something, and—because clay is soft, especially in summer—they pick it up like this *[mimes rough handling]*, and I'm like, "Ahhh! No!!" You have to be gentle. When you move it, you do it slowly and carefully. You can play with it—it feels great—but if you treat it like a toy, then it needs to rest before you can make anything out of it. You can't build something and keep thinking, "Maybe like this? No, like that?" *[gesturing]*. That won't work. Once you decide "it'll be like this," then something warps here or there... When you start building, you need to know what you want. Sure, there can be small deviations—like here, you can see the cylinders are slightly irregular, like trees—they lean a bit here or there. That's fine; you can adjust that as you go. But not like I showed you before—because how would that even work?

Fig. 3

MFK&MS: So in short, you need to have an idea at the beginning and then negotiate from there?

Fig. 4

OM: Yes, yes, yes. Definitely. Without a concept, you can make small things. I do that sometimes; I make little sketches [Fig. 4]. That is a size with which one can play. So I sketch some shapes, and now I'm trying to make them bigger [Fig. 2]. But then I have to know exactly what I am going to make.

MFK&MS: Have there been moments when the material surprised you? For example, did you not anticipate a specific reaction or outcome?

OM: There are two separate things. Ceramics is difficult for two reasons. First, the clay has memory and behaves in its own way. Second, you have glaze. Glaze is chemistry—and I don't really know chemistry. I understand some basics: zinc with this makes that, iron does this, manganese that... but it's a whole other lab. I had chemistry classes, but they were in Danish, and I didn't understand everything then. So I'm operating at a basic level. I can identify feldspar, quartz… And at school they made us start from scratch. You had powders and a lab—you mixed your own glazes. You had the base, and you made them. In Poland, you couldn't even buy those powders then. Maybe some people did it, but... I started buying glazes, and the problem is that commercial glazes don't list the chemical composition. It's their "secret recipe," supposedly. When you start mixing them—you get all kinds of results… *[shows her glaze tests]* Sometimes I mix… This is my library, and here too. These are glaze tests—some very surprising results. I've been working with these glazes for two, maybe three years. I am still experimenting with some of these glazes, and the results are surprising. I try to do proper samples. But when I make a finished piece, I look at the tests… and then kind of ignore them. I mix stuff and end up with weird results. For instance, this one has four layers of glaze—fired four times to keep adding more *[*Fig. 5, *black vase on the fourth shelf]*. That's not how it was supposed to look. That one wasn't either. So yes, it definitely surprises.

Fig. 5

MFK&MS: Are there material properties that can't really be explained or described, for example, to apprentices? You have to somehow feel it, learn it on your own skin?

OM: I think so. When it comes to building, I can tell them, "Hold your hand like this or like that." But everyone has slightly different hands, and they might not feel comfortable "in my hands"—just as I tell them to put them—they have to work themselves through those materials and a certain amount of clay, because these are details that, if not handled properly, can lead to shrinkage or other issues. On the potter's wheel, you can see very clearly that every hand position matters a lot, because it's spinning and things happen fast. So if you hold your hand this way or that way, it's immediately visible on the clay. Probably the most important thing is to sit comfortably and feel the clay yourself. There is no single recipe for that. It's the same with building; there is no single recipe like "Hold it this way, not the other; you have to do it this way or that way."

MFK&MS: And how do you teach that? Do you give them some options, or do you say, "You should achieve this effect, and now try to achieve it"?

OM: At the beginning, whoever comes to me has to make these *[she shows us pieces of ceramic shaped like elongated domes, about 15 centimeters in size]*. Two hundred… Nobody has done that, but a hundred of those. It's very difficult to achieve a uniform wall thickness, not too thick or heavy. Since I build the ends with them later, I need them very light. *[She refers to her works, like Ukwiał 8 (Sea Anemone 8) or Journey—the latter visible in Fig. 5 on the lower shelf—made of elongated domes in various shades of blue.]* These have been corrected. If they make them too thin, they will crack. If they knead it for too long, it ends up crooked and can't be

straightened anymore. So that's the first thing. They have to make these little cylinders and keep making them until they're good. I mean, they aren't everywhere even. You can cut it and see.

MFK&MS: Do you cut them, or is it sufficient to simply hold them in your hand?

OM: I just hold it in my hand, and I know.

MFK&MS: Frustrating… Does this imply it is like musical hearing—you either have it or you don't? Is it that you develop a certain tactile sensitivity—something that can be trained to some extent—but if you lack it, well, you just can't get past it, and it might be best to focus on something else?

OM: I think many people have it, and they just have to practice; it's a matter of training. I don't have extraordinary hearing—at least that's what I think—but I started learning to sing at the age of 40, and now I can sing a song without going off-key. So here too, I think it's possible… The example I gave concerns a student who completely lacked those skills. I'm not sure what that depends on, but I believe that most people are capable of building simple things.

MFK&MS: One could argue that manual skills were once more widely valued and commonly practiced. In your view, has the contemporary approach to bodily intelligence changed? Do you see this kind of craft as particularly distinctive because of its manual nature?

OM: I believe it is. Your body has the ability to create an object that you can later use. This represents a unique form of agency—there's something special about making something entirely by yourself, from start to finish. And for the brain, it's like a dessert after dinner; it's pleasant, and you feel that agency. This is very, very important, especially in the context of how we approach many things—having a sense of agency, of actually creating something. Many people work nowadays without experiencing that sense of agency at all. Here, instead, you see it with your hands, and that's an aspect of craft that's also used in various therapeutic projects. I don't know what to call it...

MFK&MS: There is one more area that interests us, namely the question of the aesthetic experience, or simply aesthetics, in your work. Do you derive any sensual pleasure from it? Is it important to you in any way?

OM: Yes, definitely there is something like that. I don't know how to say it *[she says this while serving tea]*. When something nice comes out, it's super satisfying. There are a few pieces I don't want to sell, simply because I'm not ready to part with them yet.

MFK&MS: Is it an attachment to the object itself or to the process of creating it?

OM: To the object itself. Sometimes to the process too, but probably more to the final result, because in that final result there's a bit of the thought process… But in the end, it's about that particular work, which looks like this and not otherwise, because if it looked a little different, the satisfaction wouldn't be the same.

MFK&MS: Does the process itself give you pleasure? For example, maybe you enjoy working with a particular batch of clay more than others, or find creating a certain shape especially satisfying, or find fulfillment when you manage to accomplish something very difficult.

OM: I like it a lot. I like the process, how the piece grows upwards. I really like the building process, how it slowly takes shape. I also like those technical aspects… like with that one… Maybe I can show you these boxes here. *[She pulls out a plastic container filled with wet clay forms, carefully wrapped in wet sponges.]* When I have interns, I have many such boxes with elements from which I can keep building and constructing things. These are a little bit like toy boxes. Here I have this, and that, and this. I can see how they look together and… This I also find very pleasant. I'm glad I looked in here, because some were already dry. They can lie in this box for months, waiting for their right moment, if only properly protected. So I have these joyful toys here. I don't know if that's what you asked about…

MFK&MS: Yes, yes. I imagine you can also approach it simply as a process in which the most important thing is the result, which can only be achieved by handwork.

OM: I think the building itself is very pleasurable.

MFK&MS: How would you define craft if you had to put it in some form? What makes something genuinely craft rather than just small-scale production—like when people label things 'craft beer' or 'artisan ice cream'? How would you define craft?

OM: Oh my. That's super difficult. Because probably…

MFK&MS: I don't mean a strict definition, of course…

OM: I can only talk about the crafts I do—that is, artistic crafts, let's say. It is work with a specific material that bears marks of originality and is designed and produced by one person. That's what I think…

3. *Mētis*

The main challenge of this interview was the attempt to translate into words forms of knowledge that seem to resist verbal discourse. This difficulty may reflect the situated and tactile nature of ceramic practice; in fact, during our dialogue, numerous objects created by Olga spontaneously became visual examples—almost "incarnations" of the reflections we were developing together. When possible, we sought to capture these material references through images, attempting to convey not only the words but also part of the sensible context in which they were born.

According to Olga, craftsmanship requires that an individual creates an original design and executes it in a particular material. It is precisely this tension between planning in the most efficient way and carrying out the physical, manual work that gives rise to a form of embodied knowledge that, as evidenced in Olga's practice (and words), transcends the conventional technical understanding of craft skills.

Once acquired—she claims—this type of knowledge tends to remain stored in the body, even when not in use, making it possible to rediscover it as soon as needed. The "hand" must recollect the movements required to create the intended shape, and the craftsperson learns to come to terms with the plasticity suggested by the material. In other words, there is no complete identity between the form of the project one wants to impress upon matter (even if it is often the starting point) and the way the material "informs" itself. Moreover, there is a kind of automatization of hand movements, resulting from learning, that makes the objects resemble one another if they are produced not as single items but as serial ones. This shows that automatization occurs not only in industrial production but also in craftsmanship, albeit through embodied knowledge that requires direct tactile engagement and not thanks to pre-designed technological solutions.

The hand also allows the craftsperson to check whether the shape is correct—it is not possible to judge by looking alone. This is why the knowledge inherent in craftsmanship cannot be transmitted in any way other than through practice, not only by demonstrating how to move one's hands but also by encouraging repeated practice of the movements oneself. The required movements are determined by both the desired form and the material used. Knowing the desired shape from the outset is essential because there is no room for experimentation, as the material has its own memory and the intended form may not hold after firing due to structural weaknesses caused by whimsical trials made during the creative process. Additionally, one must take into account that the material may react in unpredictable ways at different stages of the creative process. Therefore, the material should be considered an active "partner" rather than as a passive medium for imposing designed forms.

Finally, contemporary awareness of the craftsmanship involved is the result of the experiences

of numerous past generations of craftspeople. This heritage is encapsulated in the movements of one's hands. In other words, craftsmanship is characterized not only by its manual nature and the fact that it is performed by an individual, but also by the craftsperson's awareness of the agency of the materials used and his/her mindfulness towards them.

As far as the aesthetic experience is concerned, Olga associates it mainly with the final object, although she acknowledges that the process itself is a source of pleasure. When asked about the relationship between these two experiences, she declared that the pleasure she gets from the object she creates ultimately includes the pleasure she felt while working on it.

What emerged from our conversation suggests that ceramic craftsmanship can illuminate somaesthetic theory in perhaps unexpected ways. The embodied practice of making—especially through manual and tactile engagement—seems to establish a distinctive mode of situated and corporeal knowledge. This bodily knowing can be read through the concept of *mētis* theorized by Ewa Klekot (2018) as a cunning, adaptive intelligence. This concept addresses a dimension of craft that has been left unthematized by established frameworks, such as Michael Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966, 1998) and Martin Heidegger's understanding of *technē as poiēsis* (Heidegger 1977). While tacit knowledge encompasses the implicit knowing underlying all skilled performance, *mētis* addresses something more specific: the tactical intelligence demanded by unpredictable, rapidly changing situations. Moreover, *mētis* provides an alternative perspective on craft compared to *technē*, which is a rule-based procedure.[4] Heidegger describes *technē* as bringing forth a form that has already been conceived through the craftsman's contemplative gathering of causes (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 10-12). *Mētis*, by contrast, operates through improvisation when materials, for example, behave unpredictably. It foregrounds the craftsperson's capacity for cunning negotiation with material agency and the contingencies inherent in making. Olga's peculiar position as both ceramist and Klekot's collaborator made her a particularly compelling subject for exploring the intersection between embodied knowledge and aesthetic practice.

Through our conversation, we explored how Olga embodies Richard Shusterman's concept of 'somatic awareness' through her material practice. Particular attention was given to the negotiation between reflective and unreflective bodily knowledge, somatic responses prompted by material properties, and the transmission of embodied knowledge within craft traditions. Central to our analysis has also been the materiality of crafted objects as the critical medium through which corporeal knowledge operates and manifests. What emerged from this exchange reveals the layered nature of aesthetic experience in craft. Somaesthetics, understood as a theoretical framework that integrates embodied experience with aesthetic perception, offers a valuable lens for understanding some of the dynamics between these layers, particularly those related to the practitioner's awareness of their own practice.

However, the main point of this research is to address a significant theoretical gap between analytic somaesthetics and craft studies. While existing somaesthetic literature has explored embodied knowledge in various aesthetic practices (e.g., visual arts, dance, architecture), and craft studies have examined corporeal knowledge (Detienne and Vernant 1991, Sennett 2008, Malafouris 2013), these domains have not been directly connected. This is evident from the absence of explicit connections between somatic awareness and *mētis*—a form of bodily intelligence—in existing literature. Our central thesis is that *mētis*, as described by Klekot, possesses an inherently aesthetic dimension that has hitherto remained unthematized in existing literature. The conversation with Olga represents a first attempt to map this largely unexplored

4 See Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book VI, and those who later translated and interpreted his work. For a more contemporary reading, see Tatarkiewicz (1980) and Sennett (2008).

theoretical territory. From Olga's words and reflection on artisanal making, it emerges that the concept of *mētis* refers to something central for understanding her conception of craft. Therefore, our analysis focused on how Olga—both as an individual practitioner and as a representative of the *NÓW* initiative—enacts *mētis* as a specific modality of embodied knowledge that integrates sensory perception and somaesthetic awareness.

Drawing from Klekot's analysis, craft practice does manifest *mētis*: "non-discursive knowledge of the body" (Klekot, 2018, p. 85)[5] that resists the Aristotelian-Cartesian dualistic framework, which segregates mind from body and theoretical from practical knowledge. *Mētis* is "largely non-linguistic in nature, grounded in experience and practice, which forces one to confront a series of situations that are similar but never identical and that require quick adaptation" (Klekot, 2018, p. 85) in the engagement with the material. Through her ethnographic examination of pottery practice, Klekot demonstrates how *mētis* manifests when the potter, attempting to center clay on the wheel, relies not on visual cues or abstract principles but on "feeling of weight, balance, center of gravity" (Klekot, 2018, p. 80).

This corporeal knowing is irreducible to verbal instruction, as evidenced when she notes that "nobody explained to me that centering involves placing the center of the clay mass on the axis of the wheel's rotation" (Klekot, 2018, p. 85). Instead, this knowledge exists in the dynamic relationship between practitioner and material—what Lambros Malafouris identifies as "material engagement" (Malafouris, 2013, p. 221, 210), where "the potter's being is interdependent with the becoming of the vessel and inextricably intertwined with it" (Klekot, 2018, p. 80), and Richard Sennett calls "material consciousness," where "the craftsman [or craftswoman] has learned to sustain labor in the smallest moves" (Sennett, 2008, p. 279). Olga herself assigns students 100 repetitions of the same form to help them internalize the movement, allowing their hands to learn the subtle adjustments needed to work with the material's changing conditions. *Mētis* thus represents a mode of bodily intelligence that operates through tactile sensitivity, proprioceptive awareness, and responsive adaptation to material contingencies—a form of knowing that cannot be abstracted from "the concreteness of experience" of embodied practice "in the relation between that body and the world in the here and now" (Klekot, 2018, p. 85). This responsive adaptation emerges from the interview when Olga explains that, depending on the season and changes in the natural environment, clay allows certain types of work but not others. Or when she notes that the pieces stored in the box, lacking luster, need to be rehydrated. As Klekot observes, what unites these cases is that "changes occur in connection with each other, often in a specific sequence, and their appearance signals to humans that matter is inclined to change in a certain direction." (Klekot, 2018, p. 86)

Another aspect of the definition of *mētis* that apparently links this conception to somaesthetics is that it "operates through attentiveness. *Mētis* is the result of careful observation, not a reaction to a sudden impulse" (Klekot, 2018, p. 86), yet it remains dynamic and in motion.

However, while this theoretical framework illuminates the embodied nature of craft knowledge, our research reveals a more complex picture. Despite the evident presence of *mētis* in craft practice, a rigid dichotomy between craft and design that attributes to the former an exclusively bodily stance risks overlooking how practitioners themselves understand and articulate their work. It emerged from our conversation with Olga that she tends to privilege in her self-narration the aspects of technical efficacy and functional achievement, while relegating aesthetic appreciation primarily to the evaluation of finished products rather than recognizing it as inherent to the embodied process itself.

5 All translations from Klekot (2018) are by the authors.

This tension between the actual presence of corporeal intelligence and its lack of explicit aesthetic recognition by Olga reveals a possibly significant gap in somatic awareness. While the body and materiality operate as media of situated knowledge—as Klekot's analysis clearly demonstrates—craftspeople articulate the aesthetics of their practice by privileging end results over process, leaving largely unexpressed that "somatic awareness"—that is, reflection upon the somatic feeling—which nonetheless fundamentally informs their making. In other words, practitioners might not consciously focus on their somatic experience of labor; they do not thematize the aesthetics of the "metistic" component character of their own work. *Mētis* requires a sort of "bodyfulness" that allows one to decide whether the product is good or bad, i.e. to aesthetically appreciate it. The criterion of this somatic act of appreciation is one's bodily feeling (the object feels right or wrong). "I just hold it in my hand, and I know," Olga said. This implies that *mētis* is aesthetic in two ways: it refers to sensory experience (mainly touch) and its qualities, and it refers thusly to the qualities of the object being made. In fact, when directly questioned about the former dimension, Olga acknowledged that the embodied experience of making itself is equally aesthetically significant, suggesting that the tactile, proprioceptive, and also affective dimensions of the practice carry their own aesthetic weight beyond conventional aesthetic categories. This became evident both when she spoke about the pleasure she experiences in the construction process and when she mentioned that, compared to when she started, her work now proceeds "at a slightly slower but actually faster pace" because she no longer needs to correct her pieces.

Here lies the potential contribution of somaesthetic theory to craft practice. The somaesthetic approach allows us to thematize the pre-reflective dimension of craft knowledge that manifests through *mētis* in aesthetic terms. While *mētis* (according to Klekot) constitutes a form of bodily intelligence that operates "below the threshold of discursive consciousness," Shustermanian somatic awareness represents the possibility of bringing this intelligence to the level of reflective consciousness by cultivating attention upon one's bodily sensations in the making process.[6]

The potential emerges from the fact that craftspeople practice *mētis* without recognizing it aesthetically: they privilege technical and efficacious aspects in their self-narration, leaving unexpressed that somaesthetic dimension that nonetheless informs their making. Therefore, these two concepts articulate according to a logic of potential complementarity: *mētis* operates as tacit embodied intelligence of making, while somatic awareness represents the theoretical tool for making it explicit and deliberately cultivable.

Craft does not automatically offer "mindful embodiment," but rather manifests a form of embodiment that requires somaesthetic mediation to become conscious.

4. Conclusion: the potter's wheel, hermeneutics and somaesthetics

Olga's view of craftsmanship, understood as an embodied practice as well as a theory, i.e., as a set of ideas accompanying handwork, both integrates and transcends the traditional views of crafts. It integrates them insofar as it refers to traditional techniques and materials as well as to a close bodily relationship between the maker and the object she/he makes. It transcends them given the fact that it deliberately opposes both industrial production and design—crafts' somaesthetics is a matter of choice and not a necessity—while having some affinities with art. In fact, the objects she creates (as other *NÓW* members do) are single pieces, even if they are serial insofar as they exist or may exist in multiple "copies." In this respect, she seems to endorse a perspective shared by numerous contemporary craftspeople as well as by people who buy their

6 Shusterman defines this specifically as "somatic cultivation of heightened body awareness and control." (Shusterman, 2008, p. 19).

products, inspired by this sort of practice and theory.

The interview allowed us, however, to notice two more things. First, Olga's words echo the manifesto of the *NÓW* that reads:

> *The essence of our work is incessant searching. Hence, our products are the outcome of experience inferred from countless trials, failures and successes.* (Nów 2025)

Craftsmanship is, thus, treated as a distinct manner of shaping material culture rooted in a particular organization of labor, one that is focused both on somatic experience and what we called *mētis*.

Second, the implications of Olga's approach go beyond craftsmanship itself and can be seen as shedding new light on somaesthetics. We, so to speak, mirrored Olga's work on the potter's wheel as our inquiry moved in hermeneutic circles: on one hand, adopting a somaesthetic standpoint on crafting ceramics allowed us to "discover" *mētis* as an important factor defining craftsmanship; on the other hand, this contributes to how somaesthetics may be studied, since *mētis* is a category that has not yet been fully recognized in this field. This circular process suggests that *mētis* may be seen as an important aspect of human "being-in-the-world," one that is present not only in craftsmanship but in all somatic interactions.

Indeed, *mētis* represents a fundamental form of somaesthetic experience that, over time, results in bodily routines capable of establishing felt (aesthetic) guidelines in craft practice, both for evaluating the work process—such as the instinctive recognition of the proper consistency of clay—and for evaluating the product—for instance, distinguishing a glaze that will vitrify correctly. The statement "I just hold it in my hand, and I know" points to craft-based aesthetic judgment that not only transcends traditional formal evaluation but also operates through tactile intelligence rather than discursive criteria; that is also why craft education can be mainly taught ostensively. The "metistic" evaluation of the product, which assesses the object and the quality of the embodied process within it, exemplifies the aesthetic dimension inherent in *mētis* that our research brings to light.

Furthermore, *mētis* transforms how the craftsperson perceives and conceives their body (somatic awareness), and in turn, somatic reflection on one's way of working with matter affects the development of *mētis* itself. However, this transformation occurs without necessary awareness. *Mētis* becomes an integral part of the craftsperson's bodily identity while operating beneath reflective aesthetic consciousness. Olga describes a transformation where body and matter co-constitute themselves through practice; this process often occurs below the threshold of reflective consciousness. Understanding the mechanisms through which somatic reflection on one's work influences the development of bodily intelligence could illuminate fundamental aspects of embodied cognition in creative practices.

Thus, making *mētis* conceptually visible through philosophical reflection and its integration into somaesthetic debate and craft pedagogy can address this absence of awareness, turning it into a concrete tool for improving craft practice. On a pedagogical level, integrating the concept of *mētis* with insights from somaesthetics offers promising possibilities for craft education. Such integration could help develop teaching strategies that, as Shusterman argues, make "the quality of our experience more satisfyingly rich" while making "our awareness of somatic experience more acute and perceptive" (Shusterman, 1999, p. 305). The exhibition *Robić Rzeczy* [Do Things] that Olga mentions seems to open precisely these pedagogical avenues of awareness.

In conclusion, our investigation has shown how the concept of *mētis* works alongside somaesthetics to create a productive theoretical framework for understanding embodied craft

experience. However, the intersection of these ideas seems to offer more than mere theoretical enrichment—it provides practical pathways for deepening our understanding of how craftspeople develop and deploy their embodied expertise, both practically and aesthetically. Finally, if we treat craftsmanship as a magnifying lens offering an insight into embodied practices requiring skills in general, *mētis* as a somaesthetic concept may be seen as a key to understanding ourselves—we are *homines fabri*, after all.

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