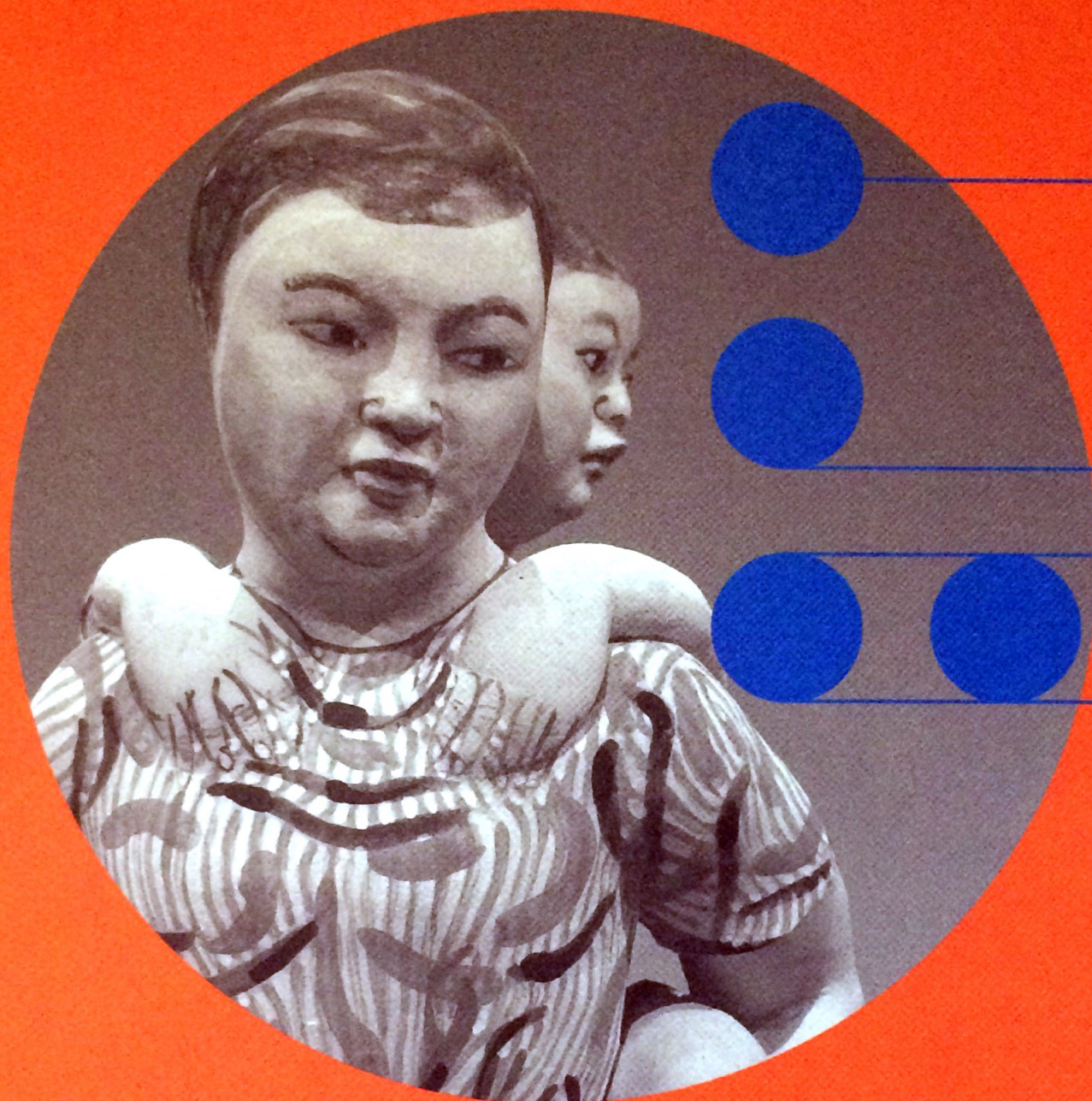


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PRESENT TENSE



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material ways of being in the world. Perhaps it's not just Mark Shapiro's model of unplugging and devoting oneself to studio craft that is the radical act, but the hybrid ways in which the communal, the traditional, the flexible, the ephemeral, and the modern all meld together in the material act of making as others before us have made, sitting down for a moment beside others engaged in similar acts.

As I sat at the embroidery table, the thread and needle became entry points into deep histories and communal stories, enabling imaginative connection with a vast array of other stitchers (physically present, past, and spread across the globe). I began to think of this as a space for provisional, momentary community building – a flexible and mobile site, perhaps ready to spring up on a park bench (as Otto von Busch suggested) to create a moment of connectedness. These acts are invocations, as Sonya Clark's talk helped me think through. We call upon histories and we remake the present, bound to one another, to the past, and to a possible vision of a shared future in the act of making craft.

Mariah Gruner is a PhD student in the American & New England Studies Program at Boston University. Her work focuses on gender and material culture.

### **A Rich Ecosystem**

Sarah Parrish

In a metaphor that is as perceptive as it is poetic, William Warmus compared successful museum displays to "rich ecosystems." A seascape, for example, would be

impoverished if only inhabited by sharks, which Warmus likened to the conventional paintings and sculptures that dominate far too many galleries. Rather, we need the coral, the fish, the shrimp; the textiles, the glassware, the pottery.

The same could be said about most conferences, which are often inhibited by their emphasis on a single material (clay, metal, fiber, for example) or approach (academic, creative, curatorial). In contrast, "Present Tense" offered a rich ecosystem of intellectual, aesthetic, and social exchange by bringing together students, teachers, trustees, entrepreneurs, and artists practicing in a range of media.

Of the many debates circulating in the ecosystem at KANEKO, the Omaha arts venue and conference site, those most relevant to my research and pedagogy concerned the interface between craft and ethics. Questions of cultural appropriation are central to my art history dissertation, which explores the ways in which American fiber artists of the 1960s and 1970s drew inspiration from textile traditions beyond the borders of Europe and the United States. Working from my own privileged position as a white American woman, I have recently been challenged to reconcile my subjects' oppressive acts of borrowing with their progressive urge to recognize alternative traditions. These difficult tensions are more effectively explored through conversation rather than in isolation, and prior to the conference I had experienced a period of writer's block as I tried to tackle them alone. It is a positive reflection on the state of the field that virtually every "Present Tense" panel made a point to address issues of diversity and access. Otto von Busch's energetic presentation was

filled with conceptual tools and vocabulary – such as Barbara Deming’s concept of “two hands of nonviolence,” Brian Eno’s “scenius,” and his own neologisms “compassionate fashion” and “strategic *slöjd*” – that offered new insight into the actions and intentions of the artists I study. Likewise, Sonya Clark, Nicholas Galanin, and Tanya Aguiñiga’s statements about racial tokenism underscored the urgency of my topic. I am so inspired by their practices that I would like to find an opportunity to write about their work in the future.

My research may focus on fiber, but my most helpful interactions at the conference were not with textile artists and historians, but rather with ceramists, woodworkers, and glass critics. Their perspectives began to broaden my craft knowledge to include clay, metal, wood, and glass, providing inter-media frameworks for understanding fiber in my own scholarship. Though one of the hallmarks of the conference was its interdisciplinarity, the “common interest” organization of the lunch tables made it easy for me to identify other higher education professionals for efficient, focused networking. In this regard, the “Education and Apprenticeship” panel was especially illuminating. I am currently on the academic job market, so it was invaluable to hear Rosanne Somerson speak frankly and eloquently about her goals for her student body as a college president. This entire panel will be formative in crafting my own teaching statement and job application documents.

Returning to Warmus’s oceanic analogy, the American Craft Council’s generous scholarship program provided me and other emerging professionals with an opportunity to “swim with the big fish,”

generating both practical experience and creative inspiration.

Sarah Parrish is a PhD Candidate in the History of Art & Architecture at Boston University.

## **Personal Reflection**

Dominique Ellis

During our time in Omaha, “Present Tense” seemed to transition into “Future Continuous.” The focus became the future of makers and making rather than a finite definition of craft now. We want to project ourselves into the future of what making is and will be, and how to engage with the next generation of creativity. The elephant in the room was how we can address diversity in the arts. For myself, I answer, “I will be making.” This is an important and active role that we all share, and in which I have a voice.

There are many more questions than answers that resulted from the conversations, panel discussions, and lectures I attended. I found myself understanding my voice among my peers, idols, and leaders in the artistic field. Collaboration is the core of what I see as a path that will help to bridge cultures, break down misconceptions, and open up avenues of expression.

When I looked around the rooms at “Present Tense,” I was curious about identity. What is the proportion of individuals who would describe themselves as artists, curators, writers? How many in the audience identify with multiple roles? In my notes, I observed that no panel exhibited any real conflict, as though the panels and panelists were speaking the same language. Which led me to conclude, it