CLOSER APPROXIMATIONS

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The system: development of a single element. An L-shape piece of scored steel that lends itself to adjustable positioning that when combined with another L-shape piece creates a rectangle. Infinite possibilities are borne out of this single shape in respect to scale and proportion. The element: a rectangle. Parameters: method of attachment, jewelry, wearability. The hinge. Building a structure that grows through the repetitive act of attachment—opportunities for restricting growth or expanding through rules or the breaking of rules. Allowing for decisive acts of formal arrangement during assembly. In tandem to and throughout this process, rules and structured limits are placed on my approach to making—dictating results and also creating opportunities for chance operations and undetermined outcomes. Spare parts and leftovers, the byproduct of processes, become opportunities for provisional offshoots. The approach is play. Play, not playful. Play that is not freeform and unstructured—“play predominantly involves instinctive movements and patterns of movement” (Dissanayake 212). Cerebral play, an approach guided by curiosity. Play as a mind state—experimentation in order to achieve new. Tangent: a straight line or plane that touches a curve or curved surface at a point, but if extended does not cross it at that point. Tangent: hand making and the digital. Exploring where these two meet without crossing.

The body of work represented by this exhibition, *Closer Approximations*, serves as evidence of an iterative process that is situated in a framework of practice and play. I am motivated in my making by an interest in the phenomena surrounding pedagogy and the creative process—methods of instruction and ways of learning through play. As a product
of American primary, secondary, and higher education, I now attempt to shift my learned methods and approaches towards creative thinking outside of discipline-based learning, where imposed guidelines dictate outcomes. I seek to incorporate strategies into my process in order to be less ridged and result-driven. When I approach my work as play—as a chance to problem solve and to learn something—it provides the opportunity to explore the process and materials in ways that are otherwise restricted to producing a product. My interest in pedagogy and the creative process drives my work: it propels my creative process and also allows for analysis of how I think and learn—and in turn; reevaluate my thinking—as I consider the objects that I make. My interest in certain forms has turned into an opportunity for an analysis of their means of production and the development of systems by which to make them. What I make simultaneously relates to and disrupts systems of production—I often make multiple elements in a production-like way, but not with the goal of mass-producing an identical product. The act of repetitively producing forms serves two purposes: one, to generate elements for building the work, and two, to create metal space that allows the work to be made. The rote act of scoring sheets of steel over and over again in order to make bends in the sheet could be seen as mindless labor, but it’s about the labor that allows for the resulting object. “Like play, artistic behavior, even though it may be private, takes the artist outside of himself, puts him into relationship with an 'other'. This 'other' is first of all the work of art that gradually separates itself from its maker and takes on a life of its own” (Dissanayake 214). Approaching my work this way allows for the elements to become ‘other’, opposed to needing to be previously defined
and boxed into an outcome. The making is limited to the hand, efficiency in making is sought, and the tools and technology are limited to the space of the bench. The goal is to make singular yet iterative objects, not to replicate and produce product. Considering the works’ iterative nature, “repetition of procedure applied to the result of a previous application, typically as a means of obtaining successively closer approximations to the solution of a problem”, I question the problem I am trying to solve—what I am trying to get closer to (“Iteration”). Through this I echo Roy Ascott’s claim that “process replaces product in importance, just as system supersedes structure” (Ascott 123).

Metal is a discipline governed by rules and my attraction to the medium is partly because of this—I have a need and desire to understand the material as I attempt to hone my skill. The material demands an investment of time and the algorithmic constraints I place on my approaches serve as a marker of this—the making is slow, methodical, and meditative. I specifically work in steel because of its relationship to industry and accessibility. As an industrial product, steel historically has a low value within the context of jewelry, which serves to critique the preciousness of traditional jewelry materials, and jewelry in general: steel is a material of the people. Steel’s inherently low thermal conductivity allows me to construct complicated objects that would otherwise be too careful in another material such as sterling silver. I choose to blacken my finished pieces with heat in order to create uniform surfaces while also highlighting the means of construction through illuminating the solder seams. The work is about the making, and this serves as evidence of the process. Additionally, steel also reinforces my approach to
making as a studio practice based in play, in the sense that it is inexpensive and readily available. I am able to purchase my materials locally, and am not beholden to the financial burden precious metals carry. When using steel, I am able to make through a generative approach without agonizing over the success of the piece due to the invested cost of the material.

I also explore a serial means of production through the integration of expanding technologies. By creating drawing programs in software, I am able to generate a volume of images that would otherwise be impossible. Contrary to the metalwork, this approach produces human dictated results without the persuasion of emotion, thought, or opinion instantaneously. I attempt to make in the same manner with my metal work, but identify that the software drawings are truer representations of working purely from a system, or as Sol Lewitt would say, a plan.

“To work with a plan that is preset is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn. The plan would design the work. Some plans would require millions of variations, and some a limited number, but both are finite. Other plans imply infinity. In each case, however, the artist would select the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem. After that the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better. This eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible” (Lewitt).

I create simple tasks for the program to accomplish: draw six lines, one after the other, that alternate in horizontal and vertical direction and start and end at the same place in order to create a closed shape. These tasks would be simple for a human, too, but daunting. I am interested in the ways this act can create a dialogue between the digital and the handmade in the space of contemporary craft. Why have a computer complete these tasks
when they could be done with a straight edge and a pen? Why fabricate an interpretation of the system that creates these drawings out of metal when a machine could print them? I seek to find efficiency in my making, but I also find humor in subverting the efficiency of technology.

This approach serves two different methods that engage the body and mind separately, resulting in contrasting output as high/low, one/many, and fast/slow. These acts happen serially—sequentially and bit by bit. Like serial communication, one procedure runs until it is exhausted and then the next procedure begins. In the handmade, this happens through the making of one object at a time. In the digital, one program is developed at a time. This allows for true iteration to happen—the successive work is not started until the previous is finished in order to allow for thoughtful reflection on the aspects of the making or systems that are decidedly elaborated on. This approach is provisional and experimental in conception, but not in execution. The challenge, then, becomes curating these outcomes in a way that illustrates these points without being overly didactic.

My work engages the viewer by being participatory—the pieces are activated by being handled and worn which allows for discovery of the kinetic potential and movement. Even when stationary, the viewer can engage with the work by imagining the curious ways the work is assembled, the sign of mechanisms, and elements that allow movement. Jewelry, as an intimate object, isn’t fully experienced in the gallery setting. Nuanced instances of visual interest can be discovered through close looking, and I ask the viewer to
consider why the arrangement I’ve decided to construct is the arrangement the finished piece has taken. To me, the finished pieces are just instances of assembly and illustrations of systems that become completed by being jewelry. The individual pieces they come from illustrate the possibilities of the form they could have become. I enjoy constructing objects that don’t make complete sense—objects that look straightforward at first glance, but upon closer inspection reveal complicated arrangements and subtle details.

The result of my work and investigations terminate in the finished jewelry object. I work in metal, and my means of production are rooted in the traditional metalsmithing processes of construction and fabrication. The incorporation of digital technologies, software and 3D printing, have recently served as tools of assistance in the design and development of my work, but are not employed as a means to a final product. I question the conditions of contemporary craft in consideration of incorporating these newer technologies and recognize them as becoming necessary tools.

The completion of this work cumulated in a thesis exhibition at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at the State University of New York at New Paltz. The display was meant to be provisional, referencing the studio nature of the making, by creating a horizontal surface resting on sawhorses. The horizontal surface the work rested on was also intended to be provisional, yet in execution of its construction it became an illustration of its own system. Like the work, the surface was constructed of a single element—rectangles of varying proportion. This unified element allowed the assembly to avoid subjectivity as the boards were stacked upon each other, overlapping, and intersecting at right angles. The stacking
of the boards created varying surface heights, casting shadows, and resembled a low level horizon. I took opportunity in making the display to exercise one of the software drawing programs I had created through the use of paint and tape. This was the most direct and straightforward approach I had used to adopt the parameters of a software drawing in an act of making by hand: a true completion of the system. Like the software drawing, I used tape to mask off six lines—the first in either left or right orientation, the second either up or down, and so on until the last line which then returned to the starting place. Similarly to the making of the jewelry objects, this act required patience and became methodical and meditative. Unlike the software drawings, which are generated almost instantaneously, the masking of lines created an awareness of the passing of time.

Reflecting on the objects exhibited in the show, I feel satisfaction in the accomplishment of their making—each feels complete. The string that is pulling me forward into my next work is a desire to exploit and expand upon the systems that determine my approach to making. “We are now in transition from an object-oriented to a systems-oriented culture. Here change emanates not from things but from the way things are done” (Burnham 114). Through my making, I will continue to challenge the way things are done in an attempt to disrupt traditional narratives in the craft and contemporary jewelry fields.
Bibliography


Machine Art, New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1934


CLOSER APPROXIMATIONS
Installation
2018
CLOSER APPROXIMATIONS
Monel 400, steel, sterling silver
2018
Clasp necklace
CLOSER APPROXIMATIONS
Stainless steel, steel, sterling silver
2018
Awkward Hinge Brooch
CLOSER APPROXIMATIONS
Stainless steel, steel
2018
Necklace