



 Routledge

ISSN: 1749-6772 (Print) 1749-6780 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfmc20>

Art/Work: J.B. Blunk, Isamu Noguchi and the Intersection of Sculpture and Skilled Labor

Holly Gore

To cite this article: Holly Gore (2018) Art/Work: J.B. Blunk, Isamu Noguchi and the Intersection of Sculpture and Skilled Labor, The Journal of Modern Craft, 11:1, 17-25, DOI: [10.1080/17496772.2018.1440808](https://doi.org/10.1080/17496772.2018.1440808)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496772.2018.1440808>



Published online: 09 May 2018.



Submit your article to this journal 



Article views: 36



View Crossmark data 

**The Journal of
Modern Craft**

Volume 11—Issue 1

March 2018

pp. 17–25

DOI:

10.1080/17496772.2018.1440808

Reprints available directly
from the publishers

Photocopying permitted by
license only

© 2018 Informa UK Limited,
trading as Taylor & Francis
Group

Art/Work: J.B. Blunk, Isamu Noguchi and the Intersection of Sculpture and Skilled Labor

Holly Gore

Holly Gore is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is currently writing a dissertation on modernist woodworking in the United States.

Abstract

This paper investigates how modernist artists in the post-war United States navigated the intersection of sculpture and skilled labor. The sculpture of Northern California artist J. B. Blunk evinces a formal debt to Isamu Noguchi, his friend and mentor. Both artists made biomorphic sculptures in wood, many of which were interactive. From the late 1930s through the 1960s, Noguchi was a prolific set designer, creating a wide variety of stage sets for Martha Graham and other New York City choreographers. Blunk's signature format is the public seating sculpture. Sited primarily in and around the San Francisco Bay Area, these communal benches sculpted from reclaimed wood are among his most visible and acclaimed works. Though related in visual terms, the functional woodworks of Blunk and Noguchi have been read in very different ways and occupy disparate niches in American visual culture. The article examines these artworks within the framework of labor, and demonstrates that this gulf is due, in part, to their differing stances toward the skill sets of the building, manufacturing, and design professions on which their practices relied.

Keywords: Artistic labor, woodworking, sculpture, public art, United States, postwar

In a plaza at the University of Santa Cruz, a massive redwood carving by sculptor J. B. Blunk (1926–2002) is quietly turning back into a log. Completed and installed in 1969, it has endured over 18,000 days and nights in a coastal climate where cool morning fog routinely burns off in a baking heat. *Stevenson College Sculpture* is a communal bench with the proportions of a mid-sized boat (Figure 1). Fashioned with undulating curves evocative of a rolling ocean, it presents users myriad options for casual and social sitting arrangements. Black-and-white photographs from the 1960s show a work defined by crisp contours, freshly carved with a gas-powered chainsaw and an electric grinder. Now, these lines are disappearing as the wood grain swells, shrinks, and splits in response to its environment (Figure 2).

Northern California of the 1960s and 70s witnessed an unusual episode in the history of American modernist sculpture, where transitory wood had a powerful

presence as a medium for outdoor art. The region supported a robust counterculture that dovetailed with national movements to take back labor from an establishment some identified as “the military industrial complex,” or simply “the system.” Blunk’s hauling, sawing, and grinding of the wood he salvaged from the ocean beaches near his Marin County home resonated as a model for this reclamation of work. By putting the results of his labor on public display, Blunk brought new meanings to the abstract sculptural forms an earlier generation of artists had pioneered. This becomes evident when his functional sculptures are considered alongside those of Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), his longtime friend and mentor. By examining these artworks through the lens of labor, this paper will demonstrate that the ways in which mid-century sculptors oriented toward the skilled work they performed were crucial to how their works read and circulated.



Fig 1 J. B. Blunk, *Stevenson College Sculpture*, 1968. Redwood. University of California Santa Cruz. Courtesy Special Collections, University Library, University of California Santa Cruz. UCSC Photography Services.



Fig 2 J. B. Blunk, *Stevenson College Sculpture*, 1968. Redwood. University of California Santa Cruz.



Fig 3 Isamu Noguchi, *Jocasta's Bed*; Set Design for Martha Graham's Dance "Night Journey," 1947. Wood, plaster, paint. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ART. Photo by Kevin Noble.



Fig 4 Isamu Noguchi. Set Design for Martha Graham's Dance "Night Journey", 1947. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / ARS. Photo by Martha Swope.

Blunk and Noguchi were artists a generation apart who had a long and fruitful engagement with one another. When they first met in 1952, Blunk was an emerging ceramist, recently graduated from UCLA. Having just demobilized from the Korean War, he followed his interest in Mingei ceramics to Japan. There, a chance encounter with Noguchi in a folk art store sparked a lifelong friendship between the two men. Noguchi was by then a prominent artist and designer, based in New York City and Japan, who created sculpture, furniture, ceramics, public artworks, and stage sets. He became an informal guide to Blunk, introducing him to other artists who would help him develop his career. One such person was surrealist painter Gordon Onslow-Ford, who lived in the coastal hamlet of Inverness, where he allowed Blunk to use a portion of his land. There, Blunk built a kiln, house, and studio; made ceramics,

jewelry, and weavings; and beginning in the 1960s, became a woodworker.

Blunk's massive, textural woodworks have formal similarities with Noguchi's sculptures, and with those of Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, under whom Noguchi studied. Unlike these artists, however, Blunk primarily staked his career in the making of sculptural furniture, rather than placing special emphasis on free-standing sculpture. In a letter of 1969, Noguchi advised Blunk against such an approach, urging him to forgo his investment in carving benches:

Your work, if I may say so, is sculpture whether you can sit on it or not. Not that I have anything against the practical aspect of things. In fact, I think you ought to eschew sittability and seek success as a sculptor. I think your things look great. Now to make them useless other than as art.¹

With these words, Noguchi was making a utilitarian point: to build a bench is useful, but to be a sculptor is in fact the greater practicality. Seen in hindsight, this advice seems grossly misplaced, as the seating sculptures Blunk created in the decade that followed are among his most visible and acclaimed works. If Noguchi's career as a modernist sculptor is viewed through the lens of labor; however, we can better understand his conservatism and the extent to which Blunk was working against the grain of high modernism.

Friction characterizes the intersections of modernist sculpture and skilled labor. The tools and techniques of the building and manufacturing professions—carpentry, weaving, welding, electrical wiring—are the physical means by which most sculpture comes into being. Some mid-century sculptors also used the methodologies of architecture and design to plan and oversee their artworks' production. Professional labor, then and now, carries the marks of time and place, its practices shaped by popular tastes, commercial markets, and the working conditions of industrial capitalism. High modernist visual vocabularies, by contrast, gave form to notions of timelessness and universal humanity. When sculptors presented themselves explicitly as tradespersons or designers, they brought modernist abstraction into contact with twentieth-century social and political issues. Art historian Anne M. Wagner uses a case study of the American sculptor David Smith to demonstrate that these crossroads were ideal grounds for effecting powerful and timely critique.²

Wagner argues that for Smith, art and identity were inseparable. Famous for

his welded steel sculpture, Smith honed his metalworking skills building tanks and locomotives during World War II. After the war, he left the defense job but kept his union membership, bolstering the working class persona he cultivated through his dress, manner, posed photographs, and blunt use of industrial technique in fabricating his artworks. By making a public show of lifting the tradesman's skill set from its commercial context and imbuing it with timelessness, Wagner writes, Smith mounted a challenge to the anonymity of labor in a throwaway society.³ This interpretation opens the door to readings of modernist sculpture in terms of socio-political concerns that abstraction alone cannot express. This framework can be applied to a broader field of artistic practice, showing how the stances modernist sculptors took toward the skilled labor they performed were pivotal to their works' meanings.

A contemporary of Smith, Noguchi also contrived a public identity with regards to labor, though to a different effect. As a sculptor who was also a landscape architect and industrial designer, Noguchi brought the planning and supervisory skills of these vocations to his art practice. In a late-career interview of 1973, he reflected cynically on the hierarchical divisions between art and design that bisected his life's works: "So long as its useful, it's lacking in that quality of art. When it becomes useless, it becomes art." He went on to say that if he were to cut the electrical cord from one of his *Akari* lamps, a line of mass-produced paper and bamboo lighting he began designing during the 1950s, the piece would become a sculpture and its value would increase.⁴ Though Noguchi declared himself too "ornery" to "ride on the coattails of art" in such a way, his previous

activities reveal a stance toward modernist classifications that was less predicated on defiance than survival. In his role as a set designer, he effaced his participation in that established profession, an association that might have marked his stage props as innovative custom woodwork rather than art.

From the late 1930s through the 1960s, Noguchi created a wide array of interactive sets for Martha Graham and other choreographers. He insisted on calling his dance designs sculptures, though they were activated by music, storylines, and dancing bodies. *Jocasta's Bed* (1947), for instance, is a prop Noguchi created for Graham's *Night Journey* (Figures 3, 4). A psychological retelling of the Oedipus tale, the dance dramatizes the incestuous relationship between mother and son, the taboo at the heart of the story. Sculpted in balsa, the bed evokes glyphs, bones, a reclining couple, and male and female genitalia. When dancers interact with it, trauma results. As the character Jocasta (originally performed by Graham herself) lies down in the hollow of her side of the bed, her body must bend to its non-ergonomic contours. Oedipus balances along the narrow, downward-sloping beam that is his domain, one foot in front of the other, in a descent that portends his downfall. By calling props such as this sculptures, Noguchi downplayed their specificity to modern dance.⁵ The extent of his disassociation with stage design is apparent in the language Graham used to flatter him in a letter. Weighing his work against that of a prominent Broadway set designer she writes: "there is no comparison between what Isamu Noguchi does and what Boris Aronson does. One is a work of art in itself and the other is a 'set.'"⁶

By distancing himself from professional set design, Noguchi guarded his position in the upper tier of artistic labor; the benefits of which extended to the everyday trials of making a living. This much is evident in surviving Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance correspondence. On one occasion, when justifying Noguchi's fees to a patron, the general manager explained that the rate Noguchi was charging was actually the minimum allowed by his union, the United Scenic Artists', Local 829. She subsequently invoked a more emphatic line of argument:

As we are all perfectly well aware, Mr. Noguchi's work is in fact priceless and he quite properly considers his willingness to let any of us have his designs for [the union] minimum a contribution on his part.⁷

Was Noguchi a worker entitled to a fair wage or a sculptor creating art of unquantifiable value? In the context of dance, he chose the latter identity. It was in this spirit of navigating the hierarchical distinction between art and design that he urged Blunk to divest from making benches, advice that was of questionable relevance to the Northern California milieu in which Blunk worked.

Situated in a plaza on a hillside overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the *Stevenson College Sculpture* exemplifies Blunk's indifference to disciplinary boundaries. The piece was his first public project, commissioned by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin. Blunk carved the work from the lower portion of a colossal redwood trunk, incorporating the gnarled grain at its root end into his abstract forms (Figures 1, 2). As with many of his other sculptures, the material he used

was salvaged driftwood, a byproduct of the timber industry, dumped into waterways and later washed ashore. The *Stevenson College Sculpture* enacts a reclamation of scrap wood and public space. In beckoning passers-by to step off the pavement and into the cradle of an ancient stump resurrected as sculpture, it brings forth a sense of interconnectivity between art, nature, and human beings, thereby re-enchanting the everyday act of taking a seat. If the piece is considered in light of Blunk's identity as a woodworker, it becomes apparent that labor, too, is being reclaimed.

At the time of its installation, the *Stevenson College Sculpture* was patterned in its entirety with the semicircular marks of an angle grinder, a tool not normally used for finish work (Figure 5). The documentary

With These Hands: The Rebirth of the American Craftsman, broadcast on ABC-TV network in 1970, features a profile of Blunk that articulates ideological underpinnings for his unique manner of woodworking. In the program, Blunk appears outdoors, scouring beaches for material and sculpting his enormous finds using a chainsaw. In voice-over, he comments that many people dislike the chainsaw because it is the tool that has revolutionized the logging industry, allowing for many more acres of forest to be cut. He then says that the saw may also be used to create an infinite variety of textures.⁸ At first glance, Blunk seems to have taken a page from Smith's book with regards to the way in which he liberates a masculine skill set—in this case that of a logger—from the degradations of its commercial purpose. But as Blunk describes how he came into woodworking, another



Fig 5 J. B. Blunk, *Stevenson College Sculpture*, 1968. Redwood. University of California Santa Cruz. Courtesy J. B. Blunk Estate.

narrative emerges: while cutting firewood for others, he says, he noticed pieces of wood too beautiful to burn. Inspired, he gradually taught himself to use the tools he needed to make wood sculpture. His is the story of a self-taught generalist; a carpenter, handyman, homesteader, artist, and most of all a dedicated amateur.

Philosopher Theodore Roszak, who is credited with coining the term “counterculture,” theorized amateurism as having an important role to play in the social unrest of the 1960s. Roszak characterized counterculture as a youthful rebellion against technocracy, a professionalized, regimented mode of work belonging to the older generation, in which efficiency was the highest value.⁹ Amateur making represented a contrast to this framework. By taking of matters into one’s own hands, the amateur could fashion a meaningful way of life in defiance of so-called experts.¹⁰ Architect Sim Van der Ryn’s foreword to *Handmade Houses: A Guide to the Woodbutcher’s Art* (1973), reflects on the author’s experiences with self-taught carpentry in the building his own home, characterizing the independent builder’s lifestyle as one that is predicated on quality rather than commerce. Van der Ryn uses language reminiscent of Roszak:

For some years we have heard the extravagant technological promise of housing at low cost. It has never come to pass. The answer...it seems to me, is to make a break with a “standard of living” that makes us slaves to centralized decision-making and control....¹¹

In this instance, “technological promise” recalls Roszak’s assertion that technocracy lulls its subjects into complacency by promising that

science and technology will solve the world’s problems and provide a lifestyle of ease. For Van der Ryn, self-education and skill building in woodworking constitute a means to personal fulfillment and to reclaiming society at large from the hegemonic force Roszak called technocracy, popularly dubbed “the system.”

Handmade Houses is one of several publications of the 1970s that explicitly framed Blunk’s performance of woodworking as countercultural.¹² Written by designer-carpenter Art Boericke with photographs by Barry Shapiro, the book presents page after page of color photographs of hand-built homes in rural settings throughout Northern California. Most are made of wood and many exhibit an unpolished, funky aesthetic. Two images show the interior of Blunk’s Inverness dwelling with the caption: “a sculptor built this one with salvage.”¹³ Here, Blunk’s practice of carpentry reads as a technology for alternative living. Wood becomes a vehicle for change, gaining a symbolic significance strong enough to catapult this impermanent material into the arena of public outdoor sculpture, usually the domain of metal and stone.

Noguchi and Blunk were artists linked by their biographies; their similar handling of materials and form, and their involvement in making interactive woodworks that eluded clear-cut distinctions between modernist sculpture and the building and manufacturing professions. Through their furniture-like biomorphic carvings and constructions, both staged extraordinary interactions of bodies, objects, and space. Nevertheless, their works occupy disparate niches in American visual culture, owing in part to the unique way in which each navigated the intersection of sculpture and skilled labor. Even though the tool

marks have eroded from the surface of the *Stevenson College Sculpture*, the piece still reads as an artifact of uncommon manual work. *Jocasta's Bed* also shows evidence of a maker's hand in the form of its rough-hewn contours. Noguchi's rhetorical removal from the practical aspects of its production, however, contribute to a theatrical sense of the piece, in which it appears to be an object of primal making, thus qualifying as high modernist art. In the context of modernist sculpture, skilled labor is rarely a neutral tool. We should see it instead as a discourse that frames and informs the interpretation of inexplicit abstraction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

- 1 Isamu Noguchi to J.B. Blunk, August 29, 1966. Drawer 9/1, folder 010, Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.
- 2 Also see Robert Slifkin, "Mechanic Mythologist," exhibition review, *The Journal of Modern Craft* 1(1) (March 2008): 157–60.
- 3 Anne M. Wagner, "David Smith: Heavy Metal," in Carol S. Eliel (ed.) *David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011), pp. 81–82.
- 4 Isamu Noguchi, oral history interview with Paul Cummings, November 7–December 26, 1973. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art.
- 5 Late in his life, Noguchi called the Graham stage props "prosthetics." During the time he worked in dance, however, he never referred to them as anything less than complete artworks in and of themselves.
- 6 Martha Graham to Isamu Noguchi, May 3, 1958. Drawer 9/1, folder 045, Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.
- 7 Cynthia Parker to Bethsabée de Rothschild, September 19, 1974. Drawer 9/1, folder 046, Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, New York.
- 8 J. B. Blunk in *With These Hands: The Rebirth of the American Craftsman*, directed by Jack Ofield, ABC Broadcasting and Johnson Wax, 1970.
- 9 Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1969).
- 10 See Stephen Knott, *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
- 11 Sim Van der Ryn, "Foreword" in Art Boericke and Barry Shapiro, *Handmade Houses: A Guide to the Woodbutcher's Art* (San Francisco, The Scrimshaw Press, 1973).
- 12 See also Olivia H. Emery, *Craftsman Lifestyle: A Gentle Revolution* (Pasadena, Calif: California Design Publications, 1977).
- 13 Art Boericke, *Handmade Houses*.