

# ART+DESIGN IN THE INCARNATIONAL FIELD <sup>1</sup>

Incarnation is about spirit becoming body; the Word made flesh.

Similarly, Art and Design are about idea becoming physical substance; Vision made to occupy space.

When artists do their thinking *through* materials, there is something delightful and incarnational happening. This is of course true for engineers and chemists, but as the sculptor Diana Al-Hadid has described, the process of pushing against gravity and materials to bring form in to space is particularly challenging as artistic vision is pulled in to tension with charcoal that smears, aluminum that melts faster than you thought it would, big printers that jam, and wood that warps overnight.

## TENSIONS AND UNITY

Why are these challenges meaningful? They lead artists and designers to learn about tensions with their mind, intuition, and body. Tensions activate the world - growth is in tension with entropy; the Kingdom of God is in tension with chaos; form is in tension with disorder. Sculptors, for example, learn about tensions physically and intuitively by spending hours struggling against gravity and entropy in the studio. Steel, plaster, plexiglass, and wax are not just means to an end-as-sculpture-in-a-gallery. They are teachers.

Andy Crouch and Mark Potter have elegantly argued that Christians can be strangely *in to* disembodiment, given that we believe in the Incarnation. Art and Design in the Kingdom is anti-gnostic; it is about merging spiritual realities and ideas with physical form. This is relevant to a church weary of materialism grown hollow. It is also relevant to a culture whose daily life is disembodied by technological interfaces.<sup>2</sup>

The Apostle Paul's illustration of the church as a body with many parts influences the way that we approach studio materials and traditions. Art and Design studios at IWU seek to energetically embody a range of traditions through the exploration of diverse media. Our creative practice is pulled tense between conceptual freedom and investment in craft traditions. Curator Joanna Burton has written about Art's capacity to create "a kind of triadic skin between itself, its viewers, and the space or place in which it - however superficially, ephemerally, or tangentially - situates itself."<sup>3</sup> While we embrace the potential of an increasingly expanded field for artists, we simultaneously value a rigorous exploration of materials that encompasses technical excellence, historical context, and stewardship of creation. We are thrilled to host a range of perspectives in our faculty and in our studio spaces because doing so makes our creative practice richer in dialogue and productive tension.

Glenn Adamson, Senior Scholar at the Yale Center for British Art, has articulated ways that ideas can be embedded in materials and processes. All materials have histories that feed meaning. Stained glass, for example, carries European liturgical stories like state-enforced tithing and iconoclasm. Corrugated cardboard is coded with goods-transportation empires and impromptu dance floors in rainy Woodstock NY. Materials also have tactile qualities with rich associations. Stoneware, for example, has an immutable connection to the soil and to agriculture. Our studios at IWU strive to teach concepts, historical precedent, and problem solving methods *through* materials, rather than fracturing technique from concept. This is one way that Art and Design can be approached as an Incarnational field, where thought and physicality are treated as a single tectonic mass called Form.

The energetic process of wrestling against materials, space, and gravity lends productive tension to a studio. Just as importantly, polishing craft processes until they become a lens that clarifies meaning is an embodied process of working for hours with those materials until you love them enough to internalize the codes they carry. All of this could be called *Thinking Through Craft*, to borrow Glenn Adamson's book title. This is what we do in the studio, with exuberance and stewardship to the glory of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Krauss' 1978 essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* has been the subject of much idea-wrestling. Her simultaneously binary and expansive thinking has influenced much of this writing.

<sup>2</sup> For precedent in 'contemporary' sculpture, see Evan Holloway's exhibition titled *Analog Counterrevolution* at Approach Gallery in London

<sup>3</sup> Johanna Burton, SCULPTURE: NOT-NOT-NOT (OR, PRETTY AIR) in the book [The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas](#)