Instead of treating craftsmanship as an activity that is the sole preserve of a specialist, the artisan or craftsman, gifted with skills and answering to a profession, we will extend the question to cover all activities that require skills. In this vein, there are also so-called domestic practices of clothes manufacturing or culinary preparation that exist parallel to the artisanal trades of tailor or chef. We should note that industrialisation hit the domestic sphere just as hard as the artisanal trades of tailor or chef. Since the end of the 19th century, the industrial sphere has replaced many trades in the production and transformation of raw materials.

By cultivating, transforming and selling seeds, vegetable or animal raw materials, industry shifted skills into its corner. It designs, makes and sells on a huge scale that which was once and still remains today to a very small extent, the traditional activity of farmers, artisans, chefs, restaurant owners and housewives. Industrial productions designate merchandise or services. They integrate scientific knowledge and techniques, notably culinary, linked to traditions that are more or less original. A pre-cooked dish contains natural and transformed materials, and the knowledge and practices involved in its preservation, manufacturing, preparation and taste.

The industrial transfer of skills and consumption

This shift indicates progress on a utilitarian level and a freeing up of the access to food and the effort involved in culinary preparation. Industrialisation has never stopped pushing back the limits of culinary activity—an artisanal activity for the professional chef and the housewife who use their skills—by re-founding its prerogatives, through the demoted artisans and by ricochet the recipients themselves. By leaving them a few incidental tasks like re-heating or putting together pre-cooked foods, they have been transformed into passive consumers. Thus, most needs are fulfilled by consuming products and services rather than making things oneself. “Basic needs, writes Ivan Illich, are satisfied by shop-bought products and services: accommodation as much as teaching, transport as much as giving birth. It is the “work ethic” that leads to the legitimisation of the consumption of products and which degrades autonomous activity”.

However, this process only frees us up from certain constraints in order to create new ones. Each person needs to transform the merchandise bought into a useable item. “I call this, adds Illich, “shadow work”, the time, labour and effort needed to add this additional value to bought merchandise without which it cannot be used. This term designates an activity that people are obliged to carry out if they wish to satisfy their needs through merchandise. By introducing the expression “shadow work”, I distinguish for example between making an omelette today and in the past. When the modern housewife goes to the market, chooses her eggs, drives home, takes the lift up to the seventh floor, turns on her cooker, takes the butter out of the fridge
and cooks the eggs, each move adds value to the merchandise. This was not the case in her grandmother’s time. She went to get the eggs from the henhouse, melted some home-made lard, made a fire from wood the children had collected from the forest and added salt she had bought to the eggs. This example, while it may appear romantic, clearly shows the difference. The two women both make an omelette, but only one uses merchandise and goods whose production depends on a high level of capital investment: car, lift, electric cooker with all mod cons. One accomplishes tasks specific to her gender by creating subsistence; the other must resign herself to the household burden of shadow work”2.

However, this “shadow work” happens, first and foremost, in the kitchen, in front of the computer, behind the wheel. It is, in a way, “the non-paid labour that each person must carry out in order to procure merchandise and transform it in order to be able to use it without which the merchandise would not be “consumable”. The organisation of consumption demands constraining and uninteresting activities. One no longer cooks a dish, one reheats it. A full subsistence activity has been replaced by a “taylorised” operation in the home. The more insignificant the activities are the more they push toward supplementary mercantile services: home delivery, product selection, almost full preparation of products, fast food, etc. But this solution accentuates even more the disaffection activities that hit subsistence activities. We are seeing the disappearance of the subsistence activities and a radical change in modes of existence. The products are consumables but they demand actions that, unlike craftsmanship, have in some way lost all of their attraction.

So what characterises artisanal activities? Their definition demands that we go back to the Manuscrits de 1844 and the Idéologie allemande that cover the issue and the “self-dispossession” by a certain type of work. First of all, in industrial capitalism, alienation comes from the specific organisation of work that separates intellectual work from manual work; from the legal confiscation by a work contract of the value produced by the worker that is a source of added value; from the division of work, the way it is broken into small tasks that prevent the development of the mental and physical faculties of the artisan, from the impossibility for the worker to recognise himself in the merchandise of which he has produced only a tiny part. Atrophy of the cognitive and affective potentialities is characteristic of the proletariat. In addition, the division of work leads to the production of subjects that are like separate entities isolated and cut off from one another. With the industrial division of work, design and production, consumption and production, job and satisfaction are necessarily dissociated. An alternative to this dissociation, typical of the Fordian model, does exist in artistic and artisanal production where the person who produces, designs and makes the object in its entirety. In an artisanal, pre-industrial regime, “each person made an art of their own trade”3.

The impossibility of industry is that it abolished activities because they were laborious. In addition, the appearance of an autonomous activity is sometimes kept up when the reality is something else entirely: “Cooking for grandmother (…) is considered to be an undesirable vestige of the past that future development will eliminate. In both perspectives, giving grandmother her due has been devalued, as soon as this activity – in this case, making a late breakfast – is considered as a value produced to satisfy the needs of the elder. The economic value rises up and eclipses the blessings where the cultural context has been destroyed”4. The act of purchase has replaced the act of making, consumption has replaced social production, and values of exchange have replaced values of use. With regard to the norms of civilisation
that have been taken up by industry, its products are advantageous in that they relieve people of tasks, turning them into consumers who then only have to absorb, removing the daily worry of attending to their needs. Once the economic transaction has taken place, you only need to enjoy. Industry now has access to private and domestic spaces. Its products inhabit homes, they are the source of transmission of taste and provide serious competition for local, familial or religious habits.

The crisis of subjectivity

In fact, the industrial machine is suspected of having broken the dream of the “handmade” or “homemade” of the housewife and cook, in particular the one where the housewife slaves over a hot stove, lovingly handling foodstuffs and utensils, surrounded by her brigade. Industrialisation has sidelined the hand, it has been demoted in terms of efficiency by the machine. The “handmade” and the “touch” have been pushed aside and replaced by mechanised and precisely configured processes. The approximation of the cook has been replaced by the exactitude of the plans and equipment. In fact, the erasing of dexterity has forced workers to resort exclusively to their strength, which is itself coordinated by engineering programmes and management’s business plans. The division between manual work and intellectual work between the tasks of execution and design, testify to the absence of the cook. As an artisan, the cook uses all of his or her mental faculties – imagination, representation, calculation, and anticipation – and gestures that are constantly modulated by his or her experience.

Industrialisation implies re-working to change, if not abolish the very definition of cuisine as a human activity, into a factory transformation. The factory has become a place where a prototyped recipe that can be reproduced identically is applied and mass produced. Industry only works fully when it splits both with the act of cooking and the cook. Mechanical production means that there is no longer anyone slaving over a hot stove: the operator who replaces the cook, sets out the rules of manufacturing with engineers and technicians. All that remains is the process, a parametered organisation of the work to be done that is divided and split up into agents, managers, workshops, logistics, vats, the same gestures repeated over and over, health regulations, measuring instruments and machines transforming gigantic quantities of vegetable and animal raw materials. Then comes the organisation of consumption which is essential to the sale of the merchandise, under the economic control of marketing and advertising.

The main pillars of the industrialisation of flavour are the calculability linked to economic rationalisation, the identical reproduction of products of a constant quality, the exclusion of subjectivity with the disappearance of the artisan (farmer, cook or even grocer) and the focus on consumption. It is essentially the inhuman character of industrial manufacturing that seems to be the most problematical. While an œuvre supposes originality and emotion, the product that comes from industry forces its designers and executors to impassibly carry out actions that are shorn of all feeling. This leads to an opposition between processes that develop in a space of freedom, in a relatively free and erratic fashion where the risk of losing orientation is fought with an intention, a design, an aim, let us call it an emotional dynamic, and processes that develop from start to finish in a pre-determined universe following a causal chain of events and for which the intrusion of feelings and intelligence are a nuisance. The precedence of the product over the œuvre corroborates the advantage of science over empiricism, of rational organisation over personal action, of determinism over creativity, of the algorithm over the heuristic, of
machine-like activities over reflexive activities, of process over savoir-faire. This determinism finds its equivalent in consumption with the market preference for passions that defy reason, to compulsion over reflection, to devouring over tasting.

Experience reveals itself to be essential. Located half-way between feeling and science, it is already knowledge and disappears with pure, formal discipline. While always referring to the particular, it nevertheless provides an overall view. It is knowledge that has been lived rather than learned, profound because non-deduced, recognised in those about whom we say “they have experience”. The incommunicability of experience is but the flip side of an irreplaceable skill that each individual must earn back by himself, in time and through application. If science today appeals to that which is the least personal, the intellect, and if transmission happens through discourse, experience happens on the more vital level where the intellectual faculties are also responsible for man's behaviour, on the level that plays to passion and pain. On the other hand, pure productivity does not only consist of optimising production, it also takes care to remove all feelings and emotions that threaten its smooth working. By disassociating the execution of operations from the emotional life of the subjects, it aims to improve efficiency. It sacrifices the sensitive existence for work power. There is no activity left, the subjects have been de-sensitised.

In part, the criticisms directed at the industrialisation of cooking and on a broader scale cooking itself present similarities with the disqualification that concerned any machine before the industrial era. A machine excludes all events in the radical meaning that can surge out without any room for expectation or anticipation, outside the realm of programming and forecasting. These events are of an incalculable singularity, and as a result non-plannable, and mass repetition leaves them no space. Machines are not alive and however sophisticated they might be, they are out of touch with life’s arbitrary movements. Thus, there is no event without experience, no cooking without human subjects, no wine without a wine grower, no taste experience without an aesthetic effect and without a minimum of living organicity. Machines have no organs or feelings, they are doomed to repetition and reproduction, and they are impassable and insensitive. They act on orders, have no capacity for emotion, and no way of creating emotion in others. Industry has become the source of barely organic (in the original sense of the term) victuals, meaty, protein-filled foodstuffs without flesh, with the metallic aftertaste of the machine that made them. What's worse, because neither machine not farmed animal have any willpower or word, they are condemned to the purely technical and utilitarian. This has meant that the way in which the artisanal has been pushed aside is affecting our relationship with food.

Industrial artisans?

Going beyond the oppositions between the machine and the living, industry and cooking, can we envisage any form of reconciliation? We should warn against two trends that produce simulacra of activity.

1/ Should we envisage the generalisation of easy-to-use machines – like bread makers – on an individual basis? On the contrary, these machines could prepare the ground for a new type of standard. In fact, the schematisation of a technical procedure and the simplification of the instructions determine the nature of the object manufactured according to the standard model. Yes, it no longer comes from a factory and it is bought and used within the domestic space. The bread maker requires the use of raw materials – like flour and “special bread maker yeast” – the priority and unique qualities of which are to guarantee
a spectacularly average result. Paradoxically, blindly taking on the cause of individual re-appropriation has standardised things even more and deactivated taste while convincing people of the contrary.

2/ There are practices which are only artisanal in appearance and are supported by a powerful commercial discourse. Industrialisation is still at work behind the scenes, all the more efficiently as it can remain brilliantly discreet, within an entity that looks artisanal from the outside. This is the how for the most part, so-called artisan bakers use industrial cereals and flours, supplied by the miller. In addition to the flour, the miller provides machines and even invests cash to open a business, on condition of repayment of course and the baker agreeing to use only his flour and adopt his production model. Enriched with improvers and additives (yeast, flavours, preservatives, texture agents, etc.), the flour is ready-to-use and conditioned as mixes and doughs. The artisan then only has to finish off the work and the result is already industrially guaranteed. You only need to follow the instructions which, for the most part, require no skill. Inversely, industry can be artisanal in a certain way as long as it leaves room for a certain level of inventiveness. Industrial production is not about size, it can be so on a very small scale if man is divested of his activity in favour of routine thought-free operations that do not involve his personal contribution. Industry depends on the organisation of work and its specialisation, on a systematic mass production mode and commercialisation on a huge scale. By excluding sensitivity and emotion, industrial mechanisation tends to result in the human disincarnation of the foodstuffs produced.

At the same time, by manufacturing a product from which it removes all signatures, industry implies strongly that subjectivity is no longer required to harness taste successfully. With the use of the non-culinary food model, where the artisan and his skills have been ridiculed, industry supplies proof that its products, even though anonymous and mechanised, are capable of attracting and harnessing entire swathes of the population.

Everything prepared by industry that is not actually cooked, if that can even be considered to be a fault, is made up for by the enjoyment produced. At the same time, a sign of its deficiency, industry has to endlessly hark back to aesthetic symbols — brands and advertising campaigns that depict their so-called producers or farmers and their artisanal methods — to mask the absence of the “auteur”. And when this subterfuge starts to lose its effectiveness, credit and trust collapse, like a currency with no funds. So society, feeling distrustful, has started to look for the messianic presence of men and cooks, the urgent return of subjectivity and a living presence — artisan, wine-grower, cook, farmer, organic crops, etc. But the question remains as to whether only foods that come from a real human, incarnated activity are desirable? The more we sacrificialise the hand of the cook and his or her flesh and blood presence, we forget that the kitchen, like any workshop, is a closed-off space, away from prying eyes and was kept secret for a long time, a place given to dissembling and falsification. In the 19th century, placed under the control of the State, faith in industry relied on this higher level of transparency that corroborated the norms of safety and quality. As such, the cult of the handmade is above all symptomatic of the serious feelings of mistrust that the food industry and industry in general provoke.

Thus, instead of excluding all production technologies, like basic refrigeration and all machines on principle, they should be used on condition that the need is evaluated and they are the subject of an appropriation. These criteria mean that economic calculations are not the sole reason for their use and protect from systematic industrialisation whether
producing freely or artisanally, as claiming the use of the hand is no indication of the artisanal nature of a product. Proof of this is that historically the manual labour claimed by factory work was required for extra operations or tasks that could not be mechanised. So manual activity corresponds to work strength, a characteristic of industrial capitalism and proletarisation, meaning the quantity of measurable and disciplinable muscular strength that can be exchanged and compared to any other piece of merchandise. Such use of the manual is essentially mechanical, purely energetic and excludes the use of specific skills or any kind of talent or knack. To decide on the nature of an activity, it is important to take into account the fact of doing things in a thoughtful manner. This supposes taking on a job fully from start to finish, contrary to work that is broken down into small repetitive tasks with no initiative. This is where the artisanal manner of manual work comes into its own. Only when the precision of the gesture is essential and irreplaceable. Above all when the dexterity and the aptitude involved are essential to the level of perfection of the product. On another level, there is an artisanal way of manufacturing industrial products using specific and irreplaceable skills. There is also an artisanal way of using them when they do not impose a specific usage but can be freely used. This means being committed to constantly evaluating one’s gestures, the situation and possibly the corrections to be made in unique circumstances. That brings us to open objects, those that involve evaluation, a critical sense and the emotions. In Du mode d’existence des objets techniques, Gilbert Simondon shows that a closed object tends to decline, losing “contact with contemporary reality”: “On the contrary, if the object is open, that is to say if the gesture of the user is an intelligent, well adapted gesture, in the knowledge of the internal workings. If the repair person, who could be the user, can perpetually maintain the spare parts that wear down, then there is no attack, there is no ageing process on a base that is long-lasting or at least very solid; one can install pieces that need to be replaced but that leave the basic schema intact and that even helps to improve the object as we could envisage a better blade for a cutting machine, this blade could be installed, on condition that the necessary norms exist on the base, and as such the machine progresses with the development of techniques. That is what I mean by open object”5.

It is true that the open object does include an extra risk of failure and uncertainty. This experience is of an adventurous nature. In “open” production, for the same effect, functional forms can vary considerably from one to the other. But, when one starts to produce industrially using technologies that cannot be modified by the users, the variations tend to fade. There is only one right and rational solution to a problem. On the consumer end of things, it is in the best interests of mass production that excessive variations between tastes fade away as much as possible. The simplification of taste is a condition sine qua non in order to satisfy the most people. Above all, the food production system is more capable of answering clearly defined desires rather than vague expectations. As such, the systematic configuration of production as well as consumption occurs to the detriment of the individual. To act one needs to measure manufacturing instructions, to evaluate the materials and gestures required, the quantities, the blends, to know how to react given all circumstances and contingencies. If the gesture is artisanal, it exists everywhere there is real activity, in domestic spaces and for communities of amateurs (lovers). This is what closed technology neutralises by planning the totality of operations to the nth degree. An open production mode associates a changeable, perfectible, transmissible, idiosyncratic savoir-faire with more unpredictable elements.
Acting means being in a position to judge. It also means avoiding too much calculation and not judging unplanned events according to unchangeable and absolute rules. Instead of excluding technologies, they are used according to their need and relevance. In this perspective, one can produce artisanal in an industrial setting, as the essence is decided on the basis of the activity and the use of intelligence. The presence and use of the hand are far from being the only deciding factors in the artisanal nature of a production. As proof, the strength of work demands the use of the hand for operations that cannot be mechanised. Manual activity this corresponds to a quantity of muscular strength comparable to that of the machine. This “mechanical” use of the hand excludes any skill or talent. The simple indication of industrial or artisanal activity is not sufficient, neither is the indication of the place of manufacturing. To decide on the nature of an activity, it is preferable to consider the relationship between the producer and the activity, the tools and surroundings. An “open” activity consists of controlling one’s object from design through manufacturing, rejecting the idea of small repetitive tasks. Indeed, the proletarian carries out but one detail in an operation. A critical reflection on one’s activity, dexterity and inventive capacities will renew this activity and make it artisanal. From then on, there is a way of using technology in an artisanal manner that is to work in collaboration with one’s peers or with machines. Every time, the producer is compelled to constantly evaluate his or her gestures, situation and corrections to be made in unique circumstances. Instead of resisting by trying to get back to traditional methods that have been set up as dogmas, the issue should be to continually invent new agricultural and industrial systems. The most singular achievements are not those which restore gestures from the past – not that this is forbidden if we judge it necessary to turn to tradition for inspiration. Production modes should be experimental. They need to be prospective, meaning they can be changed and improved, through testing, inventions and experiments. While the producer is not totally autonomous, it is because his work demands the active and complicit presence of a recipient, essential to appreciate if necessary, the originality of the approach, even share in the risks and thus contribute to the final product.

Olivier Assouly
IFM