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# Handwork

## Caspar Labarre

Woodworker, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

La conservació-  
restauració del moble  
i la fusta. L'experiència  
dels experts.

Associació per a l'Estudi  
del Moble i Museu del  
Disseny de Barcelona, 2020,  
p. 151-155

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### Abstract

In this short meditation I would like to invite you to join me in some thoughts about development and techniques or ways of working in the broadest sense. What motivates us to develop and how can we say that something is worthwhile.

**Keywords:** development, freedom, mentorship, autonomy

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### Resumen

En esta breve meditación, me gustaría invitarles a pensar conmigo sobre el desarrollo y las técnicas o formas de trabajar en el sentido más amplio. Lo que nos hace querer desarrollar y cómo podemos decir algo que vale la pena.

**Palabras clave:** desarrollo, libertad, tutoría, autonomía

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The idea of autonomy in our time is pre-eminently that of the free individual, free from generally accepted customs and conventions, a strong personality who takes the lead, always pursues his or her own course and thus enables the discovery of the new. As a model of progressive optimism, he or she can show the way and thus reap both admiration and envy.

But what do we actually call strong and in what sense is that personality free?

Is it at all possible to develop oneself in something without first having thoroughly investigated why traditions that one rejects should actually be abandoned?

For example, the American sociologist Richard Sennet states in *The Craftsman* that the thoughts of an unbridled talent are a romantic aberration:

We should be suspicious of claims for innate, untrained talent. "I could write a good novel if only I had the time" or "if only I could pull myself together" is usually a narcissist's fantasy. Going over an action again and again, by contrast, enables self-criticism. Modern education fears repetitive learning as mind-numbing. Afraid of boring children, avid to present ever-different stimulation, the enlightened teacher may avoid routine — but thus deprives children of the experience of studying their own ingrained practice and modulating it from within.

Skill development depends on how repetition is organized. This is why in music, as in sports, the length of a practice session must be carefully judged: the number of times one repeats a piece can be no more than the individual's attention span at a given stage.

Repetition of the same may be necessary for self-reflection, but in itself it is not a recipe for progress. Moreover, a strong objective can make real development impossible because the receptivity to the event and the independent weighing of possibilities then have no place. However, these first movements must be experienced in order to be used effectively enough, without running the risk that setbacks will discourage us too much. Development therefore takes place within a social interaction, but remains a quest of its own. Trust in the teacher is prerequisite, but the teacher must also show confidence in his or her pupil by giving the pupil the freedom to try things out without guidance.

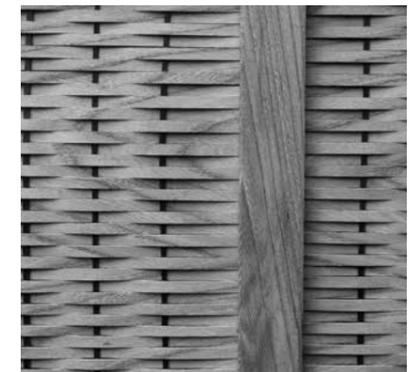
And isn't the space that is thus created suitable for the same kind of powerful optimism? The power of a personal experience and doing something yourself? Without having to leave the traditional structure, one can explore freely with the techniques and means at hand. If this is true, is it not the coercion with which to clear a direc-



Split with the grain.



Dressoir.



Woven panel.



Chair two views.



Spoonbit.



Profile.

tion was given that leads to a radical loosening? Are new paths taken for the "new" or do we first and foremost dissociate ourselves from the coercion with which too clear a direction was prescribed within tradition?

If the knowledge gained over the years enables the older person to know better, why is it so difficult to tell this to a young person? Does the idea in itself have enough power to be considered knowledge, or do we forget our body?

Doesn't a strong objective conflict with the complex relationship between body and mind because it is static? Moreover, an idea is an imagination that in it-

self can never be the cause of our feelings. Developing something by yourself in tranquility enables you to get to know yourself. It gives you the opportunity to experience multiple emotions during the same action, so that you can learn to experience the emotion on its own. It takes the nature of our body seriously and gives us the opportunity to be free.

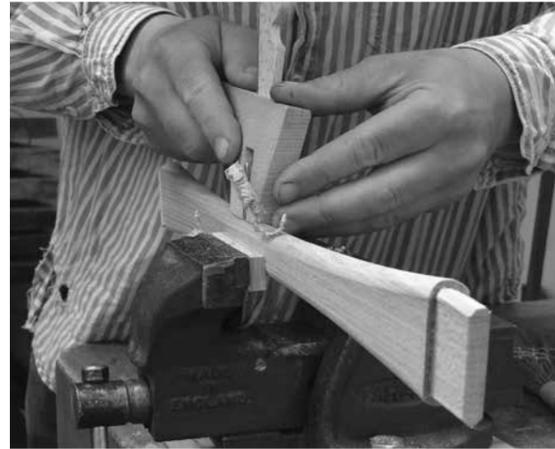
Techniques that have fallen into disuse can stimulate us to go exploring. An old hand tool will give you only a small indication of how to learn to control it and what possibilities it offers. Because of the self-evidence with which it was used, we can no longer know why it was used.



Custom made double radius plane.



Curved wood.



Adapted tool.

There is room to think with our own creative power. The aim is to discover the action itself and its objective disappears from sight. Many hours of refinement can be enjoyed, losing yourself in the motions. In the abstraction of the different actions, the tool acquires a uniqueness that encompasses several dimensions. It increases the will to experience the actions and the motivation to discover them. This tactile recognition results from the hours of differences in nuance that the body has experienced in this process, supported by the sounds and resistance of the material that gives measure and makes itself understood.

Manual work is slow and often requires a lot of strength and concentration. The will to dedicate oneself to it is more emotionally permeated. It makes us

susceptible to experience things more intensely. It offers us a humbling experience and the opportunity to appreciate things that we otherwise take for granted and gives us the fundamentals needed to make considerations in a broad sense; to choose work for the sake of the work, respecting each other's autonomy.

But the power of self-discovery also has a downside. The logical will for individuality was never independent of those who did or did not allow this development. Roads lead away from where people started to walk and developing as an individual makes it impossible to take friends with you. Moreover, these techniques usually disappear to the background for a reason, which does not make it any easier for them to be understood



Mute Air.

by others, and a mastery of these techniques does not necessarily guarantee a demand for them. Sharing knowledge and skills is an important motive for keeping one's own development healthy. One needs appreciation in order to be able to continue working. The influence of other people on our own motivation has probably never been absent and without that energy it is difficult to maintain the strength to keep working.

Since you've come this far, please take this leap with me.

Various objects in our architecture, old and new, have also been viewed differently for years. Not because they take the old or the tradition into account, but because they are seen by some people in a truly different way. The true Rollerskater doesn't use his skates just to ride in circles. The shoes with wheels in a line are an extension of the body. There are wide plates on both sides of the shoe and a large gap in the middle of the four wheels. These offer numerous possibilities to rest on and take up positions, while sliding over banisters, stone walls or marble edges, for example. This sliding is called "grinding" and, apart from the obvious jumping and spinning in the air, is the main category of movements that can be learned. The acrobatic and supple postures show control over the body without losing speed. The style of the skater, as in dance, is strongly determined by body and motor skills and therefore varies from person to person. There are no rules to participate in this cultural game. The possibilities of the skates provide the desired structure to follow, but there is no logical order. The autonomy of the skater is a combination of skill, choice and style, developed by following physical examples that can be readily observed during each skate session. Making friends is easy when there is a shared interest and the demands for friendship are not high when you can skate together. The skate culture is not a competition; there are no winners. The more highly skilled skaters are ex-

amples to follow but they require this social interaction to perform all the same. The mutual encouragement creates a wonderful feeling of joy and pride and they wish each other all the best. There are incredibly strong developments that people go through without having them imposed. They are free in the sense that these developments are not prescribed and yet there are clear movements that can be socially understood. There are theories about form and movement, endless trial and error. One learns to know the body and the limits but also to push them. The goal is not a beauty that can be achieved, although there is always a desire to learn new tricks and without a learning curve that is not possible. The beauty rests above all in a state of being that is sufficiently infused with joy that is social. The skating itself is the beauty and can be expressed infinitely. It is an open culture that still has a clear direction and we owe the existence of these movements to a different way of seeing what was already there.

Whether we work with a machine or by hand, there is always a broader humanity that subordinates expediency in order to qualify as a value in itself. To a large extent, methods and techniques are our means to shape our daily lives, but isn't there a fundamental core that we all share; that we all want to experience autonomy? But can this autonomy exist without keeping social structures open? And isn't this where the obvious responsibility lies to be considerate to one another and take into account the consequences of our actions, for the sake of keeping alive the openness that can make the basic principles of freedom possible?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNrgcP5HtPA>  
In this video by the Zeeuws Museum, chair maker Caspar La-barre explains his preference for traditional carpentry methods and tools to create new pieces in Amsterdam today