

move aside, mr. ford, to make
room for the new, more agile
micro-factories.

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the preface

looking in to look out

klein agency

looking in to look out

We are the couple behind *Klein Agency*. We have often felt at odds with standard business models. Always pushing the realm of what a normal design firm should look like, what projects it should do, and how it should conduct its commerce, we often find ourselves lacking the words to fully describe our own operations. There is no all-encompassing formal noun. Bouncing between designing and fabricating furniture, hosting private dinners in our workshop, developing brand identities, and envisioning architectural spaces, the path forward is often circuitous.

We set up shop in a small two-story building, a former carriage house in the old harbor district of northern Antwerp. We live above and work below. The house has become our *klein* compound: small in size, but enormous in its potential. What began as an intimate wood workshop quickly expanded, with the help of local craftspeople and partners, into a multi-disciplinary design studio. We strive to delve deep into every design problem we encounter, but always maintain a breadth of vision, allowing all ventures to fall neatly under our blanket manifesto: to find simple solutions to living well.

This simple directive has led us down a path in pursuit of conceptual and material simplicity. Launching our debut furniture collection this past year put many previously untested ideals into practice. Working with a reduced palette of oak, steel, and natural leather, a simple geometric frame is

laser cut, and inlaid with a warm, haptic palette. The furniture is conceived with a simple, functional routed joint detail, allowing the pieces to come together without the use of mechanical fixtures. This simplistic expression of form weaves together fundamental principles of our design ethos into a playful collection of household elements. The design should be comfortable, easy to understand and use, and beautiful in an ancient way – familiar in typology, yet strikingly new.

This study underpins a much larger desire to integrate pure, simple, intentional design into every project, even when not designing solely for oneself, but for clients with their own set of values and aspirations. To achieve this is to achieve intuitive beauty. We believe that when a solution so specifically pure, logically sound, and previously untested is found, evolution is achieved in that particular industry. This principle is something we search for in ourselves and in others. This process led us to the original thesis behind this book.

We question often. The infinitely lingering dinner, sipping wine at midnight, breakfast-on-the-road, conversations about our next projects shift to evocative probes into understanding better how our own business works. And in our relentless attempt to get better at our own ‘know-how’, we poked our heads into the *micro-factories* of other inspiring creative friends from around the globe to see how they do it. What challenges do they face? How do they organize their life and work? By reaching out to this new breed

of creative business owners, or what we like to call the *contemporary-ists*, this book is an attempt to gain a better understanding of their businesses and what effects they have on the people behind them.

jon and maša kleinhample





the micro-factory

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new rules for operating creative
businesses in a contemporary
setting

the micro-factory

A micro-factory is an atelier, a container studio, a re-purposed factory hall, where digital technology drives a new understanding of customization and adaptability, all in the hands of creative entrepreneurs. This is not your grandfather's bakery, or your grandmother's steel shop, but a place where creative businesses combine traditional techniques with new technologies, resulting in the emergence of adaptable factories, places where the endless repetition of the assembly line has been eliminated.

A new breed of creative entrepreneur operates these micro-factories in a global, interconnected economy driven by digital technology. These businesses operate upon an elevated plateau, where technology and tradition weave together to form a remarkably romantic but inimitably commercial enterprise.

slow it down! let's add a little humanity

Micro-factories value internal production over outsourcing. Globalization saw the rise of specialized factories around the world competing to provide low-cost parts to businesses worldwide through a repetitive, assembly-line production. Authenticity has been lost in the process, and an ever-growing chatter of dissension is forcing a shift away from this type of consumerism.

Craving humanity in the products and objects around us, a new generation of

consumer has emerged, both intuitive and educated in design. These consumers drive an economy that no longer values speed and quantity over quality. The now-now-now moment is gone, in favor of a slow movement. We see this emerge in fashion, food, design, and many other areas of expertise, where an appreciation for passion and craftsmanship trumps global branding and speed. An awareness of who is producing the products, under what conditions, and at what environmental expense, are issues closely examined by an informed, conscious consumer. This phenomenon can be found broadly across many different fields, and we will examine several below.

questioning the status quo

A surge in kitchen culture through the emergence of the rock-star chef and the rebirth of locality in our cuisine clearly signals a contemporary shift in how we perceive the products we consume. We want to know where our chicken is raised and what the cows eat before being slaughtered to produce the beef on our plates. We want to know where and when the fennel blossoms garnishing our dish have been foraged. We see a new awareness that man can, once again, walk through the woods hunting and picking edible flowers, mushrooms, bark, ants, and the many other natural resources found in nature's bounty. He can serve these ingredients raw, cooked, or even pickled, and eaten after years of preservation. An appreciation for what we have around us, as opposed to what we can ship from distant ends of the world, drives

this new economy. An economy of careful consumption, educated and informed, has by design made a platform upon which a special breed of craftsman can stand tall, championing these concepts and values.

The kitchen led by Nick Balla and Cortney Burns, stands as a perfect example of such a movement fashioned in flesh. When dining in their restaurant, one becomes immersed in a creative collage of flavors, both familiar and completely foreign. The introduction to such locally grown ingredients, in uniquely imaginative compositions, pushes the diner to reimagine what the act of eating means. Must we always default to globally accepted ingredients, such as ground pepper and its widespread use, when, as Nick and Cortney have found, a locally grown dried nasturtium seed can achieve a similar, yet subtly different taste? This slight shift in a familiar flavor drives creative playfulness in their kitchen, and inevitably an intimate probing into the inner feelings of their diners. This initiates an intimacy between chef and consumer that drives the new slow movement in food, directly responsible for the emergence of such micro-factories in the culinary industry.¹¹

We see a similar approach to the questioning and sourcing of raw ingredients at the Mission District based bakery, Tartine, run by Chad Robertson. Chad continuously re-imagines the definition of sourdough bread in his hometown of San Francisco. Perplexed as to why chefs around the nation never questioned what types of grains they used in their kitchens, defaulting to standard paper

bags of white flour, Chad began introducing various heirloom grains into his bakery. In his search for these grains, he found that producers were ill-equipped to grow and provide large-scale quantities to the market. In response, he now works directly with producers throughout the country to help build the appropriate infrastructure to grow and provide these rich, nutritious grains to a larger public. The simple act of questioning the source of a raw ingredient was enough to change an entire industry, propelling his business to the forefront of innovation.

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technology driving internal feedback loops

As technology continues to creep its way into creative studios and fabrication shops across the globe, we see an ever evolving synergy between information and design. As the machines we use to create the products we design become smarter, the less we are confined by the tools at our disposal. As this process decreases the divide between our design intention and the physical output, the ability to achieve our most ambitious projects becomes reality.

What began as a simple bakery has now become what Chad calls his "Manufactory". Work began nearly a year ago to design and build a brand-new production space for Chad and his team of bakers. The new space allows them to upscale their production using custom equipment manufactured and shipped from Germany. The equipment is digitally synced, making it possible to capture and record important

weight measurements and ratios in order to document all bread produced here. This allows a constant feedback loop of information, to make better, more consistent bread at their current location, and to inform repeatability for future locations. Chad's desire to learn from history and tradition, while embedding simple technological checkpoints, allows his "Manufactory" to operate at the fringe of the grain and bread industry.

narrative as a tool for intimacy

The ever-evolving relationship between business and consumer drives the communication of design intent and integrity behind micro-factories such as Stephen Kenn, Sean Woolsey, and Helen Levi to name a few. The driving force in this movement is a public educated in the authenticity of design. The new, informed consumer craves real wood over plywood; material dimension over surface application; honesty in production over deceit fueled by economics. How a business communicates these values to its customers becomes an integral function of its operation, and a key value behind each micro-factory.

As we systematically define the values of the new micro-factory, we shift our focus from the food to the furniture industry to examine the uniquely innovative Stephen Kenn studio. Stephen and Beks Opperman have successfully transitioned a business, which could have been limited to local acclaim as a small furniture company, into a highly efficient, culturally aware entity, ballooning

its reputation far beyond its local roots. Through internal development of its social media accounts, digital content creation, and fluency in its network creation and maintenance, the company has positioned itself as a poignant entity in a field of much larger, global players. Stephen Kenn now stands among the likes of Herman Miller, Knoll, Vitra, not through a desire to scale its production, but through a fascination with and devotion to an intimacy of craft, and how to effectively market that intimacy.

Watching a short film produced by Stephen Kenn, one immediately becomes absorbed by an ancient romanticism, an awareness that each product is actually a memento of a larger narration. The story behind the product becomes as important as the product itself. Evolving beyond pure function, a Stephen Kenn sofa becomes a vessel, carrying the consumer into a world woven from the fibers of both history and fantasy.

Not only is the consumer engaged by the stories crafted around each product, but also by the idea that the person conceiving and building each sofa intuitively cares for its process, completion, and eventual placement in the customer's home. This connection between the maker and the consumer is elevated beyond a pure commercial relationship. A true bond is created, forged to last through generations.

the in-between

Micro-factories are often difficult to

describe. They are not easily defined by a single mode of operation, like a makers movement or a tech movement. Micro-factories, defined by their polarity, exist in a liminal space we define as an in-between, operating with qualities found in both, emerging more robust in their ability to keep their distance from any singular definition. Marc Fornes' TheVeryMany demonstrates this beautifully and succinctly. His business operates as a tech-driven firm, while still harnessing a crafts-based, "maker" mentality. Intricate, digitally conceived constructions are designed in the computer and fabricated by hand every day in his Brooklyn studio. The two processes work hand in hand, constantly informing one another. The two modes of operation seem at odds with each other, though they pair elegantly, imbuing Marc's aesthetic with a completely original character. His sculptures hang serendipitously from the ceiling of his studio, made of thousands of small, laser-cut pieces, painstakingly assembled by hand. Color-coded, the giant, gravity-defying constellations conjure some sort of high-tech children's playground. The power of his work derives from the unexpected, a fusion of different worlds, architectural and artistic, with a healthy dose of computer-calculated engineering.

harnessing anachronistic discomfort to drive innovation

Driven by our own desire to define a unique approach to design – not too traditional, not too futuristic – Klein Agency has developed a strategy of straddling the line

between the two. We hover in the space where two ideas rub together, creating uncomfortable associations, reactions, and often beautifully unexpected results. This place is where lumberjacks stride through the forest wearing Nike flyknit racers; or where laser-cutting technology is used to create new typologies of traditional woven forms. This place thrives off of anachronistic couplings of technology, where traditional tech meets contemporary tech and fuels the innovation in our business. We guide our work by these principles, utilizing computer-controlled cutting techniques to shape our desired geometry from steel. The integration of imperfect materials such as torched wood or natural leather contaminates the perfection achieved through the computer-driven processes. This combination strikes a discordant tone in perception, creating the kind of uncomfortable rub we desire. The moment when something feels right, but may not initially look right. True artistic and technological innovation occurs in these moments.

Piety Surfboards harnesses these anachronistic technologies in its approach to best shape a surfboard. Beau loves technology, and how it can be used to inform the shaping of his boards, just as much as he loves getting his paws dirty with a hand planer. The foam does not discriminate. Situated between a traditional hand-shaping approach and a completely digitized, CNC-driven approach, Beau allows them to equally inform his process, taking the best values from each. His approach shows a fundamental desire to make the best

possible product, regardless of adherence to any particular era of technology.

These were only a few select examples of how micro-factories operate in a post-Ford era, a time defined by a new surge of technology that empowers us with adaptability and precision within our own small-scale operations. Technology continues to shrink, blurring the boundary between a traditional industrial facility, large in scale and sluggish in its ability to react, retool, and adapt, and its new contemporary counterparts, the micro-factories.

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Our survey revealed many similarities between creative micro-factories, allowing our initial assumptions to be empowered through the research enclosed in these pages. By visiting with the people behind them and capturing their processes with the highest regard to honesty and integrity, we hope to prove our assumptions about what it means to be a micro-factory.

the contemporary -ists

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about a new breed of entrepreneur

a new breed of entrepreneur

This book defines a new generation of entrepreneurs. Driven by constant curiosity and a thirst for innovation, these new archetypes of a contemporary creative production transcend traditional definition. This study carefully selects a group of entrepreneurs whom we define as the *-ists* of a new generation of visionary businesses.

Informed by both tradition and digital techniques, the *-ists* operate within contemporary culture, forging what we define as a new form of creative production: *the micro-factory*.

To quantify someone as an *-ist* means to elevate their status. To recognize that person's ability to shift the rules defining operational norms within creative businesses. They are, by definition, the embodiment of a ground-trembling creative renaissance, ushered in by the integration of both tradition and technology into our daily lives, whether business or personal. Operating within a small footprint, these extremely agile companies communicate directly with their customers. Ushered in by the utilization of new modes of social technology, the *-ists* exhibit the real-time ability to create feedback loops of critical information, lessening the divide between their customers and their product development.

They do not rely on large production facilities, but on their own, hyper-reactive micro-factories. Living in both the physical

city and within a new, expansive, digitally networked community, the *-ists* define a new breed of commerce. Commerce unbound by location embodies the emergence of a new global landscape benefitting from the intimacy of local actors. Differing from previous definitions, this globalism is shaped by the transparency of social networks.

This is not a book about the makers movement. This is not a book about the tech movement. This is a book about a new breed of entrepreneur, tangled up in tradition and technology. This book is about the *contemporary-ists*.

the shapist

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Piety Surfboards / surfboard designer / shaper



Piety Surfboards

name:
Beau Irvine

age:
36

business activity:
surfboard design / fabrication

position:
owner and shaper

location:
Costa Mesa, California, USA

start year:
1995

employees:
1

days shaping per month:
6-8

days surfing per month:
+/- 20

unique strategy

Beau is in the surfing industry because it's where he loves to be. He knows the business not only through riding waves but also from the commercial side, working for Quiksilver. His main intention has never been to "sell a whole lot of boards". As he puts it, "I earn my primary income as a strategist for a branding agency, but I love the surfing industry and I love having a business that preserves this custom, interpersonal building process." Beau custom-makes each board to achieve the best fit for each customer's specific skill set, the type of waves being surfed, and their intentions and aspirations. This hyper-tailored model is hardly supported by an economic reality, but for Beau it is about building a business on a foundation of real, tangible value.

From the outset, Beau did not want the end price of his boards to dictate how much quality and attention each board would receive. Even today, you can find a hand-painted silk scarf embedded in the top surface of many of his boards. "It's a moving piece of art, even though many people think of it as fairly disposable. I still want each board to feel like it has a personality, a character of its own."

The surf world, an awfully territorial sector, is currently dominated by a few globally distributed brands and a couple of proud regional brands. "Underneath, there is a glut of garage shapers that are really tethered to their micro regions," Beau explains. "I do not personally identify with that. I love to surf everywhere and I want Piety to behave as a proud global brand that has a micro-regional humanity and grit to it."

He is in the business of making custom pieces, but still manages to maintain tight control of how his brand presence is established and expressed. It is this control together with a strict oversight of the distribution that make a board, a Piety board. "I value this sort of interaction with the customer. Feedback from the boys and girls out there riding all sorts of different waves improves the quality of my boards too." The hyper-customization that he offers his clients makes his company very attractive to surfers who want to grow with his brand. As their skill level develops, they know Beau can set them up with a board that will perfectly balance their strengths and weaknesses, achieving "custom adjustments that really make a big difference for each surfer".



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