In the middle of the twentieth century, many artists sought to expand ideas about abstract art, questioning not only which materials should be used but also how they were applied and to what ends. Anni Albers, for example, made tapestries, jewelry, and prints, and in working directly with natural materials, celebrated what she called “the adventure of being close to the stuff the world is made of.” She taught at Black Mountain College, a nontraditional institution in North Carolina that emphasized radical interdisciplinary learning. Ruth Asawa, Robert Rauschenberg, and Peter Voulkos all studied or worked at Black Mountain during the late 1940s and early 1950s and benefited from this experimental, collaborative environment—one Albers herself helped to foster—where they could weave with wire, include found fabric in paintings, or incorporate painterly gesture into large-scale, nonfunctional ceramics.

Artists who lived and worked in Coenties Slip, an industrial neighborhood in Lower Manhattan, similarly engaged in creative dialogue. Agnes Martin, Lenore Tawney, and Ann Wilson shared approaches across mediums: the gridded structure of Tawney’s weavings informed Martin’s small, repetitive drawn lines and Wilson’s paintings on found quilts.

In the early 1960s, artists such as Richard Artschwager, Yayoi Kusama, and Claes Oldenburg handcrafted sculptures resembling furniture or food, upending the cold materialism of the era and complicating traditional definitions of Pop art, which often borrowed its aesthetics and fabrication methods from mass-produced consumer goods. Their versions of ordinary objects reflect the artists' idiosyncratic interpretations of daily life.

Later in the decade, other artists experimented with malleable materials as alternatives to the rigid geometries commonly associated with Minimalism, then a dominant mode of artmaking. Eva Hesse and Robert Morris began working with a wider variety of mediums, including fiber, which was commonly associated with weaving or textiles. As Hesse explained with regard to her knotted-rope piece No title (1970), fiber's tactile qualities permit an artwork, rather than the artist, to "determine more of the way it completes itself." For the series Morris informally called "the tangles," he cut diagonal slits into sheets of industrial felt before hanging them from the wall. How the works pool onto the floor can change each time they are installed, undermining expectations of when an artwork is "done." Still other artists used fiber to challenge the conventions of traditional painting on stretched canvas: Howardena Pindell left the edges of *Untitled* (1974–75) raw and frayed, while Alan Shields removed the center of his painting entirely, replacing it with strands of beaded thread.

In the early 1970s, some artists battling gender-based exclusion from the art world began to take up sewing, embroidery, quilting, and pottery—modes of making associated with "women's work" that had been similarly marginalized. As Faith Ringgold explained, "I was trying to find out: What would you do as a woman in your art, if you could do anything you wanted to do, and you weren't looking at the male, white mainstream?" Her answer was to overtly critique sexism and racism in the arts by painting on sewn fabric. Others artists worked along parallel lines. Barbara Chase-Riboud's combinations of braided silk or wool cords with sculpted metal forms disturbed binaries such as hard and soft, male and female. For Elaine Reichek, using thread was a political act, one that connected her embroidery to an undervalued technique. These artists made explicit the ties between specific materials and feminist themes, and paved the way for craft techniques to be readily embraced by future generations.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many artists addressed ideas of devotion, whether religious or personal. Mike Kelley, Pepón Osorio, and Lucas Samaras, for example, invoked their Catholic upbringings in secular works akin to altars or reliquaries. Kiki Smith's wool blanket is adorned with imagery that subtly alludes to the history of witchcraft; it can also be understood as a covering that gives warmth and protection, poetically suggesting the politics of care. Working at the height of the AIDS crisis, several artists' considered attention to handcrafting objects attempted to provide an emotionally reparative experience in the absence of assistance from the government or religious authorities. The intense concentration and abundant effort required to make Arch Connelly and Robert Gober's works took on an additional poignancy due to their awareness of how many of their peers, including Connelly himself, were literally running out of time.

Over the past three decades, artists have used craft as a means of exploring the relationships between people and the sites they inhabit. Liza Lou's *Kitchen* (1991–96) is a life-size replica of a household kitchen, completely encrusted in glass beads. Although no one occupies the space, there are numerous references to human presence, including a sink full of dirty dishes and cereal left on the table, making apparent the often-unacknowledged nature of domestic work largely performed by women.

Throughout the 1990s, many of Lou's contemporaries were also making works that questioned societal power structures based on race, gender, and class. In 1991, Nick Cave began making wearable Soundsuits in response to the beating of Rodney King by police in Los Angeles. More recently, Kahlil Robert Irving, Jordan Nassar, and Erin Jane Nelson chose materials such as ceramics or embroidery thread for their connections to specific geographies and legacies. Their objects amplify the individual experiences of those who live in and shape a given place while critiquing the ways such people are frequently left out of dominant histories.

While ceramic works are on view throughout the exhibition, this gallery brings together objects made over the past four decades in order to consider the inherent possibilities of one of the materials most closely associated with craft. Ceramics as a category of making is full of contradictions. It has long been the subject of a debate about functionality, since the same methods are called upon whether an object is intended for use or for display. Additionally, the medium of clay is widely accessible: many people have touched or worked with it, whether or not they intended to make art. Ceramics is also labor intensive, technically specific, and requires a time-consuming process that can involve the use of pottery wheels, the building of shapes by hand, and several rounds of firing and glazing. The breadth of the works gathered here—from vessels to representational sculptures to abstract forms—attests to both the impossibility of tethering any material to a single function or means of expression and the difficulty of drawing distinctions between “craft” and “art.”