

ACTIVISM AT WORK - CRAFTING AN ALTERNATIVE BUSINESS

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1. Introduction

Recent research firmly establishes the concept of craft as a set of distinctive technical and sensory skills; knowledge of materials and material affordances; and working methodologies centred on a reflective engagement with the material world. Our understanding of craft has broadened during recent years, as we have come to recognize the craft object as just one embodiment of this 'craft knowledge'.

Simultaneously, our appreciation of the value and contribution of craft has widened, as we have learned how makers' work is diversifying and becoming embedded across a range of industry, community and education settings.

Research undertaken on behalf of the Crafts Council (UK) in 2010 built on this research by exploring the contribution made by makers to other industry sectors and education and community settings. This research indicated that -

for many makers – contemporary environmental or social agendas provide a strong motivation and framework for professional practice (Schwarz and Yair 2010). In this paper, we investigate this finding in depth, combining our empirical analysis with additional desk research to explore how these motivations play out in makers' work, and how craft knowledge enables them to undertake a range of activism and social innovation roles.

2. Context

Within the 20th century studio craft tradition, makers have been understood primarily as creators of objects made for exhibition and sale, with critical discourse being focused on the object and its interpretation. There is also, however, an established literature around the nature and value of crafts knowledge and craft thinking. In this literature, crafts knowledge has

been described as an understanding or ‘feel’ for materials, their subjective qualities (Pye 1968), and their response when shaped or subjected to particularly processes (McCullough 1996). With reference to Polanyi (1968), craft thinking has been widely described as ‘tacit’ (Johnson 1997) and resistant to rationalization (Cooley 1998). Established, theoretical analyses of craft thinking draw on Schön’s theory of ‘reflection-in-action’ (Schon 1983) to propose craft as a way of working through engagement with the material world, rather than in reference to procedural knowledge (Dormer 1998, Butcher 1998).

The applicability of crafts knowledge and craft thinking – beyond studio craft practice – is first noted in a 1998 study, commissioned by the Crafts Council, which portrays crafts graduates as ‘intelligent makers’, drawing on the creativity, skills and knowledge developed during their education in pursuing a wide range of careers’ (Press and Cusworth 1998). It gains new prominence with Richard Sennett’s 2008 book, *The Craftsman*, which suggests that craftsmanship – as a way of addressing problems as well as a ‘material consciousness’ – deserves cultivation in professions ranging from orchestral conducting to engineering and medicine (Sennett 2008).

The Crafts Council research that is the basis of this paper recognizes portfolio working as ongoing trend amongst craft makers, and sets out to investigate what distinctive value crafts

knowledge and crafts thinking – defined in the ways set out above – contribute to makers’ work in a range of industry sectors and community and education settings.

From the in-depth interviews conducted with makers in the course of this research, we note that - for many - a social or environmental position provides motivation, impetus and a focus for navigating a complex, portfolio-based career path. This observation, combined with our focus on crafts knowledge and craft thinking, presents us with an opportunity: to explore the dynamic between making and activism, from a new perspective. Rather than analyzing the craft object as a site of activism, we would investigate the activist role of the craft knowledge and working methodologies behind it. Below we present our findings.

3. Innovation and Environmental Activism

3.1. Production

As materials specialists, many makers are drawn to working creatively to develop more sustainable modes of production and materials use. In this, they are part of a tradition: makers have always been quick to appropriate, transform and innovate with materials and processes. This work often produces intellectual property in the

form of new materials and technical processes, as well as creative content in the form of actual objects - historical examples include Harvey Littleton's pioneering of the early studio glass furnaces and in Diana Hobson's 1980s revival of ancient pate-de-verre techniques. What is new here is the valuing of this process, and the innovations it produces, as a form of activism in itself.

On one level, this focus on materials and making of a site of activism is concerned with materials innovation – the reappropriation of existing and recycled materials, and the creation of new materials entirely. Barley Massey's work provides one example here. Barley has applied the knowledge and skills developed through sewing and knitting, to work with a wide range of waste materials including recycled bicycle inner tubes, wool off-cuts and discarded clothing.

Laura Marsden, similarly, draws on techniques learned through sewing and lace making, but as a starting-point for practice-led research into the effects of heat bonding on polyethylene. Her research has transformed waste plastic bags into marketable fashion and interiors accessories that aim to challenge consumer perceptions around the undesirability of recycled products.

Barley's and Laura's work operates on a small scale: their aim is more to change attitudes

and demonstrate potential, than to challenge convention on an industrial scale. Other interviewed makers have shown, however, that prototyping new materials innovations on a micro level can produce scaleable innovations.

Resilica, a glass and resin composite material, uses 100% recycled glass chips, mixed cold with solvent free resins. The manufacturing process is designed to minimize environmental impact – raw materials are sourced from the UK, water used in the production process is recycled, and slabs of the material are custom made to order rather than being cut from large blocks.

The material was developed by glass makers Jim Roddis and Gary Nicholson, incubated at Sheffield Hallam University in a knowledge transfer project that fed industry knowledge into craft-based experimentation. 'Clean' production processes were a consideration to be worked with, with affordances and tolerances just like resin and crushed glass. The experimental, reflective approach to problem solving they adopted enabled innovation in a way familiar from Sennett's description of craft as a process of 'working with resistance rather than against it'.

Now made and sold by a spin-off company, Resilica has been employed by significant architectural projects including Thomas Heatherwick's Blue Carpet and Martha Swartz's redevelopment of Dublin docks, as well as to

furnish UK restaurant chains including the Pitcher & Piano and Costa Coffee. A PricewaterhouseCoopers evaluation projected Gross Value Added from companies selling Resilica of over £3m over 25 years, and income streams from Intellectual Property royalties of up to almost £1m (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2004).

Other makers are looking beyond the 'greening' of the processes they employ, to instead challenge the basis of production processes themselves. One example here are the low impact, portable manufacturing systems developed for desert environments by new RCA graduate Markus Kayser. The first, the Sun Cutter, focuses the sun's rays through a glass ball lens to 'laser' cut plywood sheet; whilst the second, the Solar Sinter, uses the ball to heat and fuse silica sand into 3D glass objects. Both machines create functional products, but here, the possibility of transforming abundant natural resources into objects – shared online through networks of interested craft, design and environmental enthusiasts - is the creative outcome.

This type of innovation, embodied in processes and systems as much as in objects or materials alone, has particular current relevance. In a culture where web technologies are enabling community and co-creation, there is a strong appetite for new and creative approaches to technology. New tools and systems are

demonstrated online, challenged and refined by peer communities, and spread virally across the internet; inspiring others whilst bringing endorsement and status for their originator (Gauntlett 2010). Designers and makers, it has been argued, have a responsibility to lead communities of interest in developing online tools and systems that enable creativity in others (Atkinson 2009).

In this context, craft knowledge and craft thinking – somewhat obscured by our previous focus the object – has a new currency. Makers are not only adopting new breadth of approaches to environmental activism, but are also redefining this territory to encompass complex, socio-ecological issues.

For example, the Metabolic Media project prototypes a modular approach to urban food production – it is designed to reduce food miles, whilst also promoting wellbeing by enabling people with limited space to garden and eat healthily. Textile makers Rachel Winfield and Mathias Gmachi of loop.pH developed the system using lace-making techniques to weave solar cells into a lightweight structure. The resulting collapsible structure supports climbing plants, whilst the cells charge the batteries of a fuelling pump that mists the plants' roots with nutrient rich solution.

Yuli Somme's handmade Leaf Shrouds are comparable in their holistic approach to addressing environmental and social issues – in this case, a more human-centred and environmentally sustainable approach to burial than those more commonly supplied by the funeral industry. By replacing the traditional hardwood coffin with a soft, felted cocoon, the shrouds are made to offer emotional comfort at times of loss. At the same time, the use of locally sourced wool provides a symbolic connection with the land and with cycles of natural renewal, as well as helping to sustain sheep farming on Dartmoor. Making a unique contribution to the Green Funeral movement, Yuli's work challenges both the anxiety and the environmental damage surrounding death rituals in Western societies.

3.2. Consumption:

Our research showed that many makers are interested in how consumers use the objects they create, as well as the making processes behind them and the sourcing of sustainable materials. In particular, they are concerned with promoting longevity of ownership and use, by creating enduring emotional bonds between person and object. For makers engaging with this field in their work, the activist object is one that influences consumers' values and behaviour as they relate to the whole product lifecycle.

The creation of objects made to last draws on makers' ability to understand people and their sensory, spatial and emotional responses to materials and objects. This aspect of craft knowledge is less well documented by craft theory – with its focus on creative production – but is emerges strongly both from our research and from makers' accounts of their own practice elsewhere. For the makers we interviewed, it enabled a recognition of how people develop a sense of connection with objects that endures and develops over time.

Katherine May's quilts operate in this way, being assembled from the client's previously worn garments – selected for personal association - and sewn into patchworks with an inherent, emotive value. Barley Massey also adopts this approach in some of her Remember Me range, designed to offer comfort as well as to evoke memories of a lost partner or friend.

The idea of consumer as participant goes beyond materials selection for some makers, to become part of the making process itself. Amy Twigger Holroyd, for example, believes that the more active a consumer is in the making process, the greater the emotional bond with the object and the longer its probable life. Amy makes her own knitwear range, but also aims to transform her customers into makers themselves, initially working to patterns and eventually creating their own designs. Running courses in 'pattern

blagging' and 'stitch hacking' as well as selling knitting kits, Amy encourages the active participation she sees as crucial to genuine ownership.

Again, these principles may appear to operate on a small scale, but the work of some makers demonstrates potential for scalability. Ceramicist Justin Marshall, working at University College Falmouth, is developing digital systems that allow consumers to steer product development by – for example – freezing and digitally manufacturing an ever-evolving, computer generated form. Justin's work may appear to be a departure from conventional craft practice; but the software hacking processes he employs involve a process of reflective experimentation that he describes as analogous with his work as a ceramicist (Marshall and Bunnell 2009).

Looking beyond consumption in terms of making for longevity of use, it is notable from our research that many makers are creating self-directed forms of selling that can be considered activist in their intent and execution.

Direct selling is, of course, a noted characteristic of craft; but in the context of an environmentally-engaged practice it becomes one that offers ethical retailing opportunities including local trading, barter and alternative currencies.

For some makers, this ethical approach to selling takes the form of a real-world retail outlet. Barley Massey's Fabrications shop in London – shown here – sells knitting and haberdashery supplies alongside locally made goods with a focus on recycling. For Barley, the shop also acts as a 'green' creative and community hub, hosting events and workshops, and attracting new opportunities for sustainable business practice.

A lighter-weight 'as and when' approach to retailing is adopted by other makers, including Amy Twigger Holroyd, whose company offers knitting workshops to summer music festivals, in return for retail space for selling clothes and knitting kits. For Amy, this is part of an activist philosophy focused on creating maximum value and minimum waste from everything produced – the knitting patterns found in Amy's kits can also be bought online and downloaded; and the waste wool from her machine knitting classes is bundled up and sold in the kits.

Just as some makers are challenging conventional systems of material production, others are creating new systems of distribution. Ceramicist Katie Bunnell, for example, is working at University College Falmouth to create distributed manufacture systems for ceramic tableware. Katie's Autochina system enables a high degree of customization against existing designs, and allows products to be made as

ordered, without waste. As Katie says, the system also has the potential to be remote, localized, made to order manufacturing on a bigger scale – through existing digital ceramic print bureaus (Marshall and Bunnell 2009). Distributed, digital manufacturing services are gaining users and dropping in price, and evolving these, adapting them and connecting them with consumers could become another key role for activist makers.

4. Craft learning and social activism

Makers are, of course, providers of services as well as products and systems; and many of the maker activists we interviewed were using their craft knowledge as the basis for socially engaged community and education practices.

Melanie Tomlinson, for example, is a metalworker, illustrator and workshop leader, who has a strong interest and engagement with engaged with people she describes as being ‘on the edge of communities... who are outsiders.’

Melanie’s studio work takes the form of metal tableaux, inspired by Eastern European folklore. It aims to confront society’s fears of marginalized people by creating whimsical, fairy tale like narratives around animals that are commonly misunderstood, such as wolves and pigeons.

In addition to this studio work, Melanie leads metalworking workshops for people newly arrived from areas of conflict. Her aims here are similar – to create self-respect amongst people who can be misunderstood in our society, through making. In the workshops, Melanie guides participants to make printed tin objects that say something about the places they originate from and their experiences gaining asylum, and in the process to start establishing themselves in their new communities.

Melanie identifies distinctive ways in which making supports participants in coming to terms with their experiences, and in adjusting to life in a new country. Specifically, she suggests that participants gain confidence from creating something beautiful that exceeds their own expectations, and from gaining control over a difficult material; that differing cultural associations with craft materials and domestic objects enable conversation between people from many countries; and that the permanence of metal enables it to represent and strongly ‘hold’ a particular moment or memory. Overall, she says:

‘Putting something out there and sharing it – making it real and permanent – has an almost spiritual element... It’s about saying that you don’t leave your culture behind, it’s who you are and you can make it current in your new culture.’

There is a dynamic of interdependence between Melanie's studio making and her workshop work – both are rooted in social values, and each reinforces the other. For example, whilst Melanie uses her studio work as a starting-point for conversation with workshop participants, the stories she hears back from them often become new sources of inspiration.

Our research revealed many other examples of socially and environmentally engaged makers developing their 'craft activism' through a wide range of community and education activities.

Susan Kinley, for example, works in the public realm, giving communities a role in the building of new hospitals and community health centres by running workshops to inform her flooring and wall hanging designs. Claire Harris works to promote recycling, both through the design of her environmentally friendly fashion accessories and through upcycling workshops run with young people excluded from formal education. In her workshops, Jo Davis gives young people with learning disabilities freedom to experiment and responsibility for working safely with dangerous processes. Cj O'Neill has run a community project enabling young people to reappropriate the ceramic traditions of their home town, Stoke-on-Trent, alongside her studio work exploring the hidden histories of domestic objects. Karen Whiterod believes in inspiring children to recycle, using hands on making in her

school workshops to introduce ideas that inspire positive choices. Jon Williams runs participant-centred workshops in clay, creating moments of satisfaction and confidence for young children with profound physical and sensory disabilities.

In these ways and others, makers are furthering environmental or social agendas in ways that draw creatively on their craft knowledge. Teaching and workshop leading, rather than simply being a way of earning money to support studio practice, can now be seen as an intrinsic part of a professional practice, guided by environmental and social values.

5. Motivation / Intent

It was clear from the interviews we conducted that makers identify strongly with a particular environmental or social position. For many, indeed, craft had become a way of making a living whilst remaining true to – and developing – particular values.

Individual makers told us that 'social issues are part of how I define myself', and that 'I would feel selfish just making for myself'. Some described environmental issues as having been part of their upbringing, whilst others had arrived at socially engaged work through involvement in particular music and festival scenes. Still more

had moved in this direction at a mid-career stage, inspired to make a shift in their practice by the experience of collaborating with a particular arts or community organization.

As we discussed earlier, each of the makers interviewed for our research has built a working life around values or beliefs that play out through a range of making-related activities. Often, this approach extends beyond making, providing focus for a 'portfolio' lifestyle incorporating caring responsibilities, ongoing learning, part time employment and / or volunteering, in addition to one or more strands of craft-related work.

We heard above about the dynamic between Melanie Tomlinson's studio work and her workshops with newly arrived people. This was a common finding: in fact, all those working in a 'portfolio' way described the socially-engaged community and education work they undertook as a creative impetus. This work not only satisfied their desire to 'make a difference', but also acted as a focus for the ongoing development of a reflective, creative practice: 'Everything I do, I get something out of it which applies to something else,' was a comment by one maker which applied to the work of many others. Looking back over their careers, many could see how their creative drive had been shaped by the socially-engaged community work they had undertaken. As Jon

Williams, the ceramicist and workshop leader mentioned above, explains:

Now I work like I see young children make, very directly in clay. I'm more innovative in my own work and making things with clay in its rawest sense... It's much more spontaneous, not at all about labour as it was in the past.

Of course, the idea of craft as alternative working lifestyle – as well as a creative practice – is nothing new. Tanya Harrod's history of the 20th century studio crafts movement connects the Arts and Crafts Movement's pursuit of 'honesty, goodness and morality' to craft's focus in the inter-war, Leach-led, years on vitality, simplicity and spontaneity (Harrod 1999). Noting the 'protean' nature of craft as a movement responsive to social, political and economic change, Harrod traces the emergence of the 1960s and 70s craft counter-culture, with its focus on personal integrity, autonomy and self-discovery framed by a community-oriented approach to ecological responsibility and economic self-sufficiency (Harrod 1999).

More recent histories suggest a continuity of intent between this counter-culture crafts lifestyle; and the 'gentle revolution,' informed by resistance to the mainstream economy, central to the Indie craft movement, prominent since the mid 1990s (Auther 2009). For Indie crafters, it is noted, the acts of making, buying, using, eating

and wearing handmade goods - made locally and traded within the community – are both satisfying for the individual, and capable of affecting political and economic change (Greer 2008).

Our research suggests that the ongoing evolution of the craft activism movement extends to makers who are not necessarily identifiable within the Indie craft aesthetic, yet whose work is nonetheless environmentally or socially engaged: overall, it supports the notion of craft's activism as an ongoing, evolving, phenomenon.

The research also offers some points for consideration, based on this wider maker community, in an analysis of the distinctive characteristics of craft activism today.

First, our research substantiates Gauntlett's assertion that web-based technologies are enabling collaborative creative and market development (Gauntlett 2010), in this case amongst environmentally-engaged makers. In contrast to earlier craft activists, these makers are using web-based technologies to challenge conventional systems of production and consumption, as well as to expand markets and audiences for their work. Perhaps more significantly, however, they are pooling knowledge and ideas online, creating a new culture of co-creation that brings with it new potential for activism through making.

Second, our research highlights the evolving place of the socially engaged maker within a market economy. Harrod notes that the anti-commoditization of many of the 20th century 'craft activists' was made possible only by patronage and private income (Harrod 1999). In contrast, whilst makers' businesses today do not typically produce high profits, they demonstrate a long and active engagement with the marketplace (McCauley and Finnis 2004). Our research shows that many are working across the craft value chain, applying their knowledge and skills with great entrepreneurialism, to a range of craft-related activity. It may be too neat to propose that today's craft activists have fused the ethical values of the 1960s / 70s counter-culture makers with the market-based entrepreneurialism of those working in the 1980s. However, focusing on social values, enacted through making and enabled by technology, they have – at least to some extent - established craft activism as a form of social innovation and enterprise.

Finally – and relatedly - our research raises questions around the business models adopted by makers engaged in craft activism. It is not clear whether the portfolio working we identify here – and which plays such a crucial role in both business sustainability and creative development for socially engaged makers – is a new phenomenon; or whether it simply reflects increased recognition of the value of work undertaken by makers beyond the studio. It is

similarly unclear whether makers have always worked within the mixed economy they describe to us – undertaking contract work for government agencies and voluntary sector organisations, raising grant funding themselves and generating income from sales of both objects and services – or whether this is a new phenomenon. Because both written and oral histories of the 20th century craft movement tend to focus on the studio crafts, new oral history work would be needed to investigate these issues more fully.

6. Conclusions:

The term ‘craft activist’ is possibly as ambiguous as that of ‘maker’ or even ‘craft’ itself. Arguably, it has to some extent become associated with an aesthetic and approach specific to Indie craft. However, our research shows clearly that makers are undertaking activist – or social innovation – work in a wealth of different ways.

Craft activists today, our research shows, are working across the craft sector value chain. Motivated by a strong ethical – or more often environmental – position, they are making products, systems, services and intellectual property, as well as sourcing materials and selling. Makers may work with people, with socio-ecological systems, or with used materials – in

each case applying their distinctive knowledge and skills to find ways of innovating for social change.

As a result, makers’ work is extending the range of available recycled materials and challenging consumers’ perceptions of them, promoting alternative trading, and creating new solutions to socio-environmental problems. In this work, makers’ distinctive knowledge and skills – in knowing materials and making processes, in understanding people’s responses to the material world, and in engaging creatively and reflectively with the material world – have become creative enablers for a more sustainable future.

Increasingly, environmentally-engaged makers are looking beyond the object, to reshape the systems supporting its production and consumption, and the social environment in which it operates. In this way, their immersion in materials and processes becomes a starting point for a fundamental definition of our engagement with the material world.

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