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Contemporary Art, Craft and the Politics of Silence

Both craft and contemporary art have experienced what might be called a 'social turn' over the last two decades. This phrase has been used by the art theorist Claire Bishop (2006) to describe the emergence in contemporary art since the 1990s of works that emphasise participation: where an audience is invited, in some sense, to contribute to the creation of a collaborative artwork. These works are now largely discussed as 'social practice' (Jackson 2011; Lind 2012), which is how I will refer to them here. On the face of it, the social turn has brought about a reconciliation between contemporary art and craft. The social turn in art has coincided with the emergence of expanded notions of craft, exemplified in the writings of Richard Sennett (2009). There has also been a resurgence of popular DIY craft, emphasising values of experience, process and collaboration, all of which have also been key terms within social practice. Many conceptual craft practices develop from a synergetic interaction between these developments.

However, this semblance of rapprochement conceals a complex and contradictory relationship. On the one hand, craft is visible within contemporary art and popular craft traditions are in rude health. On the other hand, there remains an element of 'craft shame' as Liz Collins (Bryan-Wilson et al. 2010: 621) has described it: evidenced, for example, in the discrete removal of this word from the American Craft Museum (which has become the American Museum of Arts and Design), or recent attempts to reclassify craft in the UK as no longer part of the creative industries.

In this paper, I will try to unravel some issues around the politics of making in the social turn. I hope to show that art of the social turn has moved, in a paradoxical way, towards a way of thinking about community as a kind of immaterial vernacular art. I will suggest that this shift highlights some interesting issues, especially with regard to what I want to call the politics of silence in craft. Here I hope to sketch some thoughts about the relationship between different senses of silence in or as a way of interrogating the idea of the social in art, and craft. Writing in the 1970s, Lucy Lippard was skeptical of attempts to reconcile art and craft. From the point of view of feminism, it seemed that women's work would always fall at the bottom end of the scale of respectability, as 'low' rather than 'high' craft. And yet, this for Lippard was part of the enduring power of craft to critique the exclusivity of art:

> The crafts need only one more step up the aesthetic and financial respectability ladder and they will be headed for the craft museums rather than for people's homes. … Perhaps until the character of the museum changes, anything ending up in one will remain a display in upper class taste in expensive and dubiously 'useful' objects. (2010: 484)

Clearly the cultural terrain has altered significantly since Lippard wrote these words. Collaborative art projects exploring handicrafts now do find themselves in, or sponsored by, museums. Nonetheless, it is necessary to ask, using Lippard's terms, whether a change in the museum, or in upper-class taste, means a real transformation in the politics of craft.

In reality, only certain kinds of craft are valorised by art. In a roundtable on the politics of craft, Cat Mazza notes that one of her submissions for the *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* (2007) show at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, was not included by the curators. It was a fourteen-foot-wide Nike Swoosh logo made up of squares produced by hobbyists who had visited the Microrevolt website, which was created to protest against Nike's exploitative production practices. Mazza concedes that some of the contributions did look 'amateurish' but that the intention of the work was to be participatory, not professional. The curators of *Radical Lace* told Mazza that alongside other works it looked just too 'funky', in their words, to work aesthetically with other pieces in the show. Mazza concedes this exclusion may have been due to political pressure relating to the negative exposure of the Nike brand, but emphasises that the aesthetic judgement communicated by the curators is in itself interesting (Bryan-Wilson et al. 2010). It points to the boundary where popular making practices find

themselves excluded from institutional valorisation. David Gauntlett, Professor of Media and Communications at the University of Westminster, has developed an argument that attempts to address this tension between high and low craft amid the transition to participatory forms of popular culture heralded by Web 2.0. His 2011 book *Making Is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity* synthesises a wide range of historical and theoretical sources and contemporary making practices into an accessible account of craft as everyday creativity. Gauntlett's central premise is that making of all kinds is socially significant because the connections made between 'materials' and 'ideas' also involves 'a social dimension that connects us with other people' (Gauntlett 2011: 2). Similarly, making and sharing what we have made increases 'our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments' (Gauntlett 2011: 2).

Gauntlett follows John Ruskin and William Morris in arguing that alienation remains the crucial problem of contemporary existence. He stresses the importance of the resurgence of handicraft and the emergence of Web 2.0 platforms like YouTube to combat our disconnection from a sense of community. His interest is in popular forms of making, rather than master-craftsmanship, invoking Ruskin's praise of the rough craftsmanship evident in Gothic cathedrals in order to validate the resurgence of popular creativity. Ruskin, for Gauntlett, is a champion of 'the collaborative mish-mash, the combined construction of individual quirks and talents, a celebration of perfection, imagination and "do what you can"' (Gauntlett 2011: 30). Whether this is an entirely accurate account of Ruskin's tastes is debatable. However, it is worked into an affirmative account of the importance of DIY practices as a means of community building.

There are tensions in Gauntlett's project. He defines creativity as an 'experience, a feeling, or a process' (2011: 74) that allows us to be more connected to others and our environments. One of his key examples is *Star Wars Uncut,* a Web 2.0 project in which the entirety of *Star Wars: A New Hope* (Dir: George Lucas, 1977). is recreated by fans who shared out and each reshot fifteen-second clips of the film. The resultant work is an upbeat mash-up of ingenious low-tech and hand-made recreations of the 1977 film's iconic scenes. It is resolutely fun, representing craft as a form of celebratory communicative interaction. But this optimistic representation of popular craft seems very one-sided. Can it really be the case that making and sharing YouTube videos and crafts will re-engage us with political processes?

Gauntlett's affirmative account of vernacular craft dispenses with the complex reflection on power that is part of the pioneering feminist work on craft. In work like Roszika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) and Joanne Turney's *The Culture of Knitting* (2009) the activist potential in craft is connected to craft's potential complicity in discourses of power. Parker in particular acknowledged that handicraft is a sign of femininity that can structure and limit subjectivity. And yet, as a practice, craft could be deployed to materialise identity in a way that might contest ideological formations.

Of course, the example that has become canonical is Elizabeth Parker's sampler, created in 1830 in an intensely powerful and private struggle with the silencing power of patriarchy. Parker's sampler, now held in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is an intricately harrowing object that begins with the compelling, counter-intuitive statement: 'As I cannot write I put this down freely and simply as I might speak to a person whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully entrust myself'. The tiny cross-stitch lettering, in red on the plain linen ground, literally makes a confession. Parker was tempted to suicide after ill-treatment from employers who treat her 'with cruelty too horrible to mention', a confession that breaks off mid-sentence: 'which way can I turn oh whither must I flee to find the Lord wretch wretch that I am … what will become of me ah me what will become of me'. There are many ways to interpret this strange artifact. Some have suggested that the confession was sewn because of the expense of writing materials at this time, though this prosaic explanation hardly accounts for the strange tension between writing, and the slow temporality of labour held in this document. Here, I dwell on Parker's sampler because it expresses two meanings of silence: the silencing of oppression, contested by the tacit skill, and the tacit community, of embroidery.

Whereas the feminist criticism of Lippard and Roszika Parker is nuanced in its account of power, Gauntlett, by contrast, emphasises a more straightforward critique of elitism, which is equated with art's claim to precedence over craft, as in this passage:

> Today, the category of 'artist' is even more sharply removed from everyday creative practices, and often seems to be based on having the 'right' kind of art education, the necessary fashionable artworld connections, and pretentious ways of talking about things. (Gauntlett 2011: 43)

Gauntlett's book works towards a middle-ground, towards an accessible knowledge against the elitist interests that theory sometimes serves. *Making Is Connecting* is sensitive to the linguistic codes that abound in academic work, and does an exemplary job of resisting them. But, in place of Lippard and Parker's subtle contestation of the structuring of experience by engrained and internalised forms of power, Gauntlett emphasises a generalised affirmation of popular creativity. The problem with such an affirmation is that it easily slides into an endorsement of the status quo, with vernacular craft in the role of public virtue.

Although there certainly is, and always has been, plenty that is self-serving and specious in the artworld, there are many specialised and celebrated activities that suffer from this problem. In fact, it is very important that the tense relation between art and craft should be explored in order to understand the changing terrain of the social turn. Grant Kester is an art theorist who is part of an American lineage of art activism that Lippard represents, and author of two important books on what he calls 'dialogic art': *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004) and *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (2011). For Kester, the role of the artist is to facilitate dialogue and to be able to listen and respond to co-creators. Kester, like Gauntlett, is sensitive to the fact that the interaction between artists and non-artists might involve an imbalance of power that is coded in the language used to make sense of artistic practices. In fact, Kester (2011) is scathing about much art practice in what he terms the 'avant-garde tradition' which he thinks deliberately refuses communication in order to maintain its elite status. On the other hand, he still believes that something can be gained by using art as a space that is removed from the usual determinants of social experience and their discourses of power.

Kester, in his most recent book *The One and the Many*, offers a perceptive commentary on social practice. He is critical of the tradition of artistic modernism where he traces an ideological identification with 'the emergence of the solitary genius out of the lumpen creativity of the medieval guild or lodge' (2011: 3). Of course, this is the same tradition that perpetuated the denigration and separation from craft. As Kester puts it:

> The figure of the singular, auratic artist, reinforced by notions of artistic genius first formulated by Kant, remains the bulwark of the long history of modernism, and the epistemological template for much contemporary criticism and curatorial practice. (2011: 3)

This means that, for Kester, the social turn is about the exploration of the tensions that exist in the relationship between individual and collective. Modernist individualism is renegotiated in these works, although this task is far from straightforward. Kester notes that the key terminology used to describe and evaluate social experience contains contradictory meanings, marked by an 'ethical undecideability' (2011: 2). Terms like collaboration, individuality and collectivity contain strongly positive and negative connotations that open onto politically-charged questions. As Kester puts it:

> Is the identity of the many based on coercive consensus, or radical plurality? Is the one defined by narcissistic projection or opening out to alterity? These are some of the most pressing political and ethical questions of our day. (2011: 2)

For Gauntlett, vernacular craft is about individual expression. This is stated more or less explicitly at the end of Chapter 2 when Gauntlett addresses William Morris's socialism. He updates William Morris's utopian communism when he states: 'we do not have to choose between the individual and the collective: rather a diverse *community* of *individual* voices offers a satisfying combined solution' (2011: 44). In a sense, Gauntlett wants vernacular craft to receive the valorisation of being recognised as individualised, whilst an art theorist like Kester wants to move away from the individualism that is often associated with the concept 'art'.

There are interesting arguments to be had about the relationship between individuality and collectivity in craft. Richard Sennett's famous example of the Linux programmers is an evocation of free, spontaneous collectivity: one where the emphasis is not upon personal psychology but on the objective need to solve a problem. This is what Sennett refers to as the 'impersonal character' of craftsmanship, where the fact 'that you might have a neurotic relation to your father won't excuse the fact that your mortise-and-tenon joint is loose' (2008: 27). The Linux programmers' practice is a form of making where individuality is subordinated to a collective task. Sennett directly contrasts the chatrooms of Linux programmers with his experience of visiting Russia towards the end of the Soviet regime. In this

visit he was shown the poor state of Soviet building work, which he reads as evidence of a demoralised workforce, born down upon by a moralising command and control economy. By contrast, the collectivity of the chatroom is anonymous but outspoken, where Sennett approvingly cites the very un-British, at least in his mind, words: 'this problem is fucked-up' (cited in Sennett, 2008: 27).

Social practice often negotiates the space between individual and collective in an interesting way. A useful example is the work entitled *Project Row Houses*, created since the mid-1990s by the African-American artist Rick Lowe, and still ongoing. As Lowe recounts the genesis of the project, he was inspired to create an art project that could genuinely act as a community intervention that might address some of the problems experienced in the 3rd Ward, a mainly African-American area in his home town of Houston. Prior to initiating this project Lowe was an artist creating more conventional work, including installations and paintings. He took over a row of shotgun shacks, that by the 1990s had become very run down, to act as the site for this project. The houses were slated for demolition. While the area had once been a thriving African-American neighbourhood, the community had gradually been eroded by the flight of middle-class residents to suburbia. In part, Rick Lowe's choice for this work was inspired by a senior African-American artist in the area, John Biggers, who had created many works picturing these houses. Once shacks were fixed up, some of these houses were given over to single mothers. Others have become the context for changing art projects and artist residencies. The work is a combination of community and artwork, both individually and collectively authored. Rick Lowe is credited for this work, but the development of the community is not strictly his doing. The work is not 'his' because it is powerfully woven from the vitality of community. It also recreates an image of community articulated in the paintings of John Biggers – works that are clearly crafted objects that speak to an ideal of African-American community, and indeed a form of community that once existed.

Tom Finkelpearl, the director of the Queens Museum, addresses *Project Row Houses* in his book *What We Made: Conversations on Social Practice*. He reads this work as what he calls the 'art of social-cooperation' (Finkelpearl, 2013. kindle edition). This idea is useful because it underlines some of the interesting relationships that can be found between craft and social practice. Finkelpearl builds his account around American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, who was always concerned to understand art and aesthetic experience as embedded in a social context. Dewey was opposed to the disembedding of art from social life in the context of the museum. Finkelpearl develops Dewey's position to read works like *Project Row Houses* as *made* from forms of community cooperation.

It is interesting to think about Finkelpearl's argument from the point of view of craft. Social practice art derives from a lineage of post-minimal and post-conceptual art. This kind of work is related to the art practices in the 1960s that rejected the production of crafted objects. In this tradition, related to conceptual art, painting and sculpture, the paradigmatic art objects are understood to demean art by their status as elite commodities. The rejection of this object was what Lucy Lippard called the 'dematerialization of the art object' (Lippard 1997 [1973]). In this sense it seems to be very far from discourses of craft, belonging to an extreme rejection of making as a practice of fashioning material. And yet, Finkelpearl sees social practice as a tacit collective making process that underpins all communal life. In order to clarify this point, he cites philosopher Axel Honneth's assessment of Dewey's work. Honneth writes: 'In his endeavor to justify principles of an expanded democracy … Dewey takes his orientation not from the model of community consultation but from the model of social cooperation' (Honneth cited in Finkelpearl 2013. Conclusion. Kindle edition).

Honneth contrasts Dewey with the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who sees democracy as based in communicative interaction: the public sphere. For Finkelpearl, this means 'Dewey's democracy is based not on intersubjective speech but on cooperative action for joint problem solving' (Finkelpearl 2013. Conclusion. Kindle edition). Here I would like to observe that this points towards an idea of collectivity which is analogous to Sennett's famous description of Linux programmers. Finkelpearl sees this making as a tacit rather than a communicative process: his opposition between 'intersubjective speech' and 'cooperative action' certainly suggests this reading.

Although the social turn is most commonly represented as a move towards greater communication or 'dialogue' – the implicit position of both Gauntlett and Kester –I think that it is more instructive to think in terms of the different ways that silence works in craft and social practice at this time. As in much social practice art, *Project Row Houses* is difficult to talk about: photographs

and artists' statements do not get to the core of the work. Social practice tends to construct art as an entirely immaterial yet real thing – viewing invisible and intangible entities such as 'social relations', 'participation' or 'dialogue' as though they were simultaneously stuff to be experienced and worked upon. In order to really have knowledge of the work you have to participate in it. And yet, this is practically impossible if the work is to be disseminated. Discussions of this kind of work always refer to something beyond what is said: a tacit and immaterial making process which is understood as the substance of the work.

Gauntlett refers to the 'vernacular' as 'the authentic, natural voice of a community, unselfconsciously communicated through everyday things that people have made' (2011: 47). It is interesting that this 'voice' is located in the process of making: the site of tacit forms of skill. In this short discussion, there are a number of different meanings of silence. Vernacular craft is silent because it is the making itself that stands in for a collectivity, a community. In a different sense, dominance has a silencing effect: those who are subordinated are refused a voice. Both Kester and Gauntlett acknowledge that art can be something that silences. And yet, the tacit knowledge that is crucial to making can be used to resist the silencing effect of power. The tacit skills involved in making invoke a community that is before any utterance, prior to language. In Elizabeth Parker's embroidery, the words powerfully evoke a struggle between silences: words that could not be spoken or acknowledged as 'written', but could be stitched. The tacit process of making resists the imposed silence of repression.

Different silences also exist in social practice. Kester's anxiety about the artist's power acknowledges the possibility that collaborative art is involved in a project of silencing its participants. And yet, as Finkelpearl (2013) suggests, social practice posits co-operative processes of making similar to the vernacular in craft: the notion that a community can be tacitly expressed in a process of making. Although it has only been possible to show this in outline, I feel that the struggle between different valuations of silence is the most interesting location for the politics of the social turn. It is here that social practice art seems to try to make its way back to craft, through its claims upon an immaterial vernacular process of making. And yet contemporary art cannot quite reach beyond an addiction to speech. It continues to speak of the making that remains unspoken.

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