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Futuring the C Word

Abstract

In 2009 Craft Scotland mounted a successful campaign to cast craft in a new light. Called 'The C Word', the campaign undertook, I argue, the rescripting of the extant perceptions of craft as old, out-of-date and irrelevant to the 21st century. This paper will address craft's rescripting beginning with a brief introduction to its theoretical underpinning, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which proposes that objects have agency. Examples of mechanical devices to which ANT has been applied will be provided, followed by ANT's application to craft. The agency of craft with respect to public perceptions regarding technology, skill and materiality has not been fully exploited and this agency becomes especially relevant in a cultural climate attuned to issues of sustainability. Finally, using studio furniture as a case study for rescripting, the paper will offer ways in which this craft product can be rescripted to make it an ecologically appropriate and ethical choice compared to mass-produced furniture. The author's aim is to inaugurate discussion of rescripting/remaking as an element in re-building a sustainable world.

Keywords

Actor-Network Theory, rescripting, studio furniture, craft, sustainability, New Zealand

In 2009 Craft Scotland launched a campaign called 'The C Word'. The allusion to blasphemy and street slang was deliberate, naughty and inspired. The 'obscene' phrase raised the ire of some Scottish craft practitioners – obscenity can be defined as 'offensive to existing notions' – but the campaign, comprising print media and a video advertisement intended for television and cinemas throughout the United Kingdom, attracted attention. Not only were Scotland and Britain alerted to the contemporaneity of craft, the world took notice, too, and several international jurisdictions¹ requested permission to adopt the C Word campaign.

In essence, what Craft Scotland did was rescript craft, both literally and figuratively, in order to attract a new audience. Instead of accepting the status

quo, which characterises handcrafted products as well made yet traditional, old-fashioned, staid and devoid of design currency, Craft Scotland rewrote this perception for its cinema video and the field itself. It asserted that the goods under its purview are exciting, street-wise and sexy. The organisation made no distinction between Scotland's heritage crafts, such as knitting, weaving and metalwork, and those that incorporate new materials, methods and forms. All craft made now is contemporary, current, and clever, and worthy of encapsulation in the risqué designation 'C word'.

Craft Scotland's example shows that while the objects that are manually created and the makers who function under the rubric of craft have not changed, the language with which it is portrayed can. This revised language – the script – altered perceptions and brought attention to a commodity that had been perceived as passé. Although statistics are not available to gauge the efficacy of the campaign with respect to sales, Emma Walker, the Executive Director of Craft Scotland, stated: 'it has opened many doors for Craft Scotland, the Scottish sector and I believe the sector internationally' (2012). Craft Scotland's rescripting or remaking of craft serves as a model for the potentiality of bringing prominence to the handmade. Tony Fry, an Australian design critic and philosopher, explains remaking: 'While remaking can mean a literal disassembly and re-creation of some thing, it can equally leave an object-thing totally untouched, but rather transform how it is viewed and used by radically changing its meaning and status' (2009: 206). Applying the concept of rescripting, this paper examines the practice of studio furniture in New Zealand and recommends ways in which its current 'branding' can be rewritten to ensure furniture's, and society's, future.

Scripting technology

Madeleine Akrich delineates scripting: 'like a film script, technical objects define a framework of action together with the actors and the space in which they are supposed to act' (1992: 208). Latour provides a readily-visualised instance when he

climbs into his car and immediately encounters the safety, moral and legal scripts embedded in his seat belt. The belt's installation is to ensure Latour's well-being, but if he does not want to be strapped in the result is that he is harassed by beeping and flashing lights. These mechanisms 'enforce' the legal sanction to wear the belt; were he to seek measures to disengage the mechanisms, he faces his moral contravention of socially-accepted norms. The seat belt prescribes the actions of the vehicle driver and passengers. Yaneva's example of the keyless door lock embraces other social parameters. Access – and exclusion – are embodied in such locks. Not only has the lock been designed to mechanically differentiate those sanctioned to breach a barrier, it addresses human fallibility, whereby keys are not always at hand, and defines literal and figurative insider/outsider communities.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), of which scripting is a part, analyses the relationships among humans, non-humans and organisations. ANT is based in the sociology of science and technology where technology is defined as artefacts. Within the discipline of anthropology, Bryan Pfaffenberger disputes such a limited definition and proposes two definitions for technology: technique, which constitutes the materials, tools, skills, knowledge and process of making tangible artefacts; and a socio-technical system, 'the distinctive technological activity that stems from the linkage of techniques and material culture to the social coordination of labor' (1992: 497). Pfaffenberger's system places making and the made in a societal context including factors such as economics, geography and politics. Tim Ingold affirms a distinction between technique and the system in which it is embedded, but argues that while technique requires a human subject's shaping of material to produce things, technology is generalised, objective knowledge that is independent of human production or use. He states further that technique, which comprises both 'practical knowledge and knowledgeable practice' (2000: 316), has gradually been replaced by 'increasingly indispensable' technological systems that denigrate manual activity: 'Far from complementing technique by providing it with a foundation in knowledge, technology has forced a division between knowledge and practice, elevating the former from the practical to the discursive, and reducing the latter from creative doing or making to mere execution' (2000: 316).

As anthropologists, Pfaffenberger and Ingold are conscious of the human component of technology and their research embraces handmade objects. By

contrast, Latour and Yaneva centre their discussions on mass-produced objects and the built environment. To date, the majority of ANT-based writing about technology has concentrated on the impact of technical devices – electrical generators (Akrich), computers (Benoit-Barné) and appliances (Slob and Verbeek; Watkins) – on human actors. There are a few exceptions but little notice has been paid to non-mechanical objects such as craft. Neither has particular attention been drawn to the ecological aspects of the technical devices chosen. For instance, returning to Latour's seat belt, he does not address the additional scripts that the very choice of a personal vehicle entails: the sanctity of the automobile as a mode of transport, the prevailing concept of time/speed that justifies the use of private vehicles, the consumption of finite raw materials to create both the belt and its host, and the morality of donning a seat belt and turning a car's ignition switch when the consequence is carbon emission. Burgeoning environmental degradation necessitates consideration of these scripts as well.

The history of technical devices is replete with instances of an object's creation for one purpose and subsequent remaking for an alternative use. Polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), marketed by Dupont under the brand name Teflon, was originally employed as a coating in America's first atomic bomb, and molded into the nose cones of proximity bombs. When the fluoropolymer was successfully adhered to aluminum pots and pans in France in 1954, the product was remade for the domestic environment. Now PTFE is undergoing another remaking/rescripting as a carcinogen whose ingestion, as a consequence of proximity to food in non-stick cookware, should be avoided.

Another adaptation concerns gramophone recordings whose spiral grooves were the means of music and sound reproduction for most of the 20th century. In recent years, hip hop DJs have manipulated vinyl records on a turntable in a procedure called 'scratching' in order to create sound bricolage. Recollection of the care with which LPs were formerly handled shows how radical the rescripting can be. Both PTFE and scratching are indicative of rescripting's time factor – a product's longevity lends itself to revised uses – and its adaptation by an environment outside the technology's original context. A gramophone record user is unlikely to employ the vinyl record for anything other than what was intended; recontextualisation of the record leads to its rescripting.

A book – a bound volume of sheets of paper on which text has been written or printed – has an intended script, that of a narrative to be read. But users may devise other scripts: doorstep, missile, flower press, shelf decoration. In François Truffaut's 1966 science fiction film *Fahrenheit 451*, a literal script made books into subversive agents that were deemed anarchic: they had to be destroyed. *Fahrenheit 451* is a microcosm of the two-fold nature of technology: books as products of materials, tools, skills and knowledge, and an encompassing system that dictates how, where, when and by whom books will be used. This example demonstrates that like a film or theatrical script, a technology's script can be revised, edited, augmented and interpreted, to alter, enhance, or undermine the original scenario. It also shows that all artefacts are fluid in terms of use, and that ANT is applicable to a wider range of objects than previously recognised.

The possibility for the script for craft to be rewritten is what I now wish to address. My PhD thesis, which examined the practice of studio furniture within the contemporary craft movement in New Zealand, facilitates my proposal to remake handcrafted furniture. My discussion concentrates on furniture but its parameters can be extrapolated to craft generally. I begin with a brief history of craft in New Zealand and move on to the rescripting of furniture.

New Zealand craft and care

Crafts² – spinning, weaving, blacksmithing, furniture-making – were practised in New Zealand, of necessity, as soon as the first non-Māori settlers landed. As the nation progressed, the need to spin, weave or make chairs for self or family diminished. Nevertheless, craft activities persisted as modes of expression and were publicly displayed at exhibitions and agricultural fairs. By the 1960s, with the worldwide revival of crafts and the affordability of travel, European practitioners migrated to New Zealand, bringing not only transferable skills and standards but a reverence for craft that had not previously existed. Esteemed visitors – Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada, James Krenov and Alan Peters – also came, fostering connections and minimising New Zealand's isolation from the global craft community.

In 1964, two New Zealand delegates attended the inaugural meeting of the World Crafts Council (WCC) in New York. One of those attendees, Nan Berkeley, enthusiastically embraced the World Crafts Council and adapted it to New Zealand. She undertook the small yet significant deeds –

newsletters, exhibitions, regional and national advocacy – that brought craft out of the private sphere into the public one, and inspired other individuals to advance the visibility and standards of New Zealand craft. By 1978, New Zealand's WCC chapter had evolved into the Crafts Council of New Zealand (CCNZ). Both organisations assisted the burgeoning numbers of crafts practitioners during the 1970s and '80s by launching a number of initiatives: 1) education, by means of workshops and tertiary certificates/diplomas, that advanced skills and produced a cohort of practitioners who could perpetuate craft; 2) exhibitions, with both commercial and non-commercial aims, that brought the general public's attention to handcrafted goods; 3) publications, which served as communication, connection, recognition and education devices; and 4) a physically prominent craft centre in the national capital of Wellington that showcased, resourced and advocated for all craft media. Almost all of these initiatives came from the bottom up and were realised due to a handful of visionaries like Berkeley.

During the five-year period from 1987 to 1992, craft lost its foothold. Until 1984 craftspeople enjoyed government protection by means of high tariffs on imported goods, thereby making craft practice and craft products financially viable. With the election of a Labour government in that year, gradual liberalisation of policies and state-controlled enterprises changed the nature of New Zealand society. Locally-manufactured goods were exposed to worldwide competition which, coupled with the stock market crash of 1987, eroded the market for handmade products. As part of the removal of state involvement, the education system was restructured in 1989 so that programmes that were formerly under the purview of a national education department reverted to control by individual institutions. Certificate and diploma courses in craft, that the CCNZ battled to inaugurate, were more expensive to administer than visual art, and were placed under that umbrella in 1991. In addition, the elimination of government funding for the CCNZ in 1992 eroded the visibility and viability of the Crafts Council of New Zealand and its practitioners. Successive governments saw craft only for its potential export earning³ and were indifferent to any concomitant loss of traditional skills. At the same time, elevation of academic education over manual training overlooked the variation in abilities and interests of the populace, and the basic needs of the social structure. From the mid-1990s to the present, several initiatives – 'The Persuasive Object', 'Volume', 'Craft Now'⁴ – attempted to restore the visibility of craft. These

events were enthusiastically attended, yet without a national coordinating body, enthusiasm did not translate into actioned resolutions.

Currently, opinion on the maintenance of the practice of craft in New Zealand is divided. One side of the debate says that society is no longer obliged to make domestic items by hand; beautiful though they may be, handmade chairs, cabinets and tables represent a by-gone technology. The argument proceeds that, since New Zealand is a small country with limited resources, investment in supporting and teaching a craft practice, such as woodworking, is not forward thinking: this country must adopt progressive technologies. Others argue that the time-honoured techniques of artisanry are integral to the culture; because the techniques are still viable and their maintenance may be good insurance for an unknown future, the costs to preserve and disseminate them must be paid. The latter view was given credence after the major Christchurch and vicinity earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. The lack of a coordinating body for artisans meant that grassroots efforts⁵ had to be employed to find the few artisans capable of restoring damaged heritage buildings. Until advanced joinery and woodworking techniques – separate from carpentry for the building trade – are recognised as valuable and instituted in the New Zealand educational curriculum, there will continue to be a dearth of skilled practitioners to call upon when needs arise.

The rescripting of craft necessitates a paradigm shift. The distinction between technology and technique, identified by Ingold, represents the prevalence of a modernist ideology focused on innovation. In this respect, New Zealand whole-heartedly embraces technology and design as agents of economic advancement.⁶ The rescripting of craft would be a step in ameliorating this attitude. In the 1990s Tony Fry wrote several essays about the future of design in which craft played a significant role. He felt that re-creation of design is so important that he termed it ‘sacred’ (1995: 193),⁷ which is not a religious concept but an intangible collective sensibility at the core of being human. Being sacred could be described as having meaning. Fry added that sacredness does not happen by itself: sacred design evolves out of caring: ‘It is by the hand, with care as craft, that the sacred can be made’ (1995: 211).

Fry is saying that meaning can be derived from the handmade, where care is a component of the making. Care is a human quality that enables social functioning and demonstrates an awareness of

nature’s symbiosis with society. A continuum of care encompasses people, materials, the environment, and the future. Within the re-creation of design, Fry delineates a place for craft that is not marginal:

Craft knowledge should not be viewed in a developmental lineage in which it is placed behind new or high technologies, for it is essential in keeping and making the world human and in artificially sustaining the ecosystem. Craft knowledge is, therefore, behind, in front of, and in competition with noncraft technologies. It is not, in terms of importance, marginal. Craft knowledge is in fact of central importance to the future. (1995: 212)

Fry envisioned that craft has the potential to embody care of the planet, materials, tools, objects (from cradle to grave), the maker and the user. Such a vision is holistically human-centred. In concurrence with Fry’s argument that craft historically precedes, is an informative basis for, and vies with new technologies, I now proceed with the remaking or rescripting of furniture. This rescripting adds ecology to an object’s scripts.

A revised script for furniture

The current script for studio furniture in New Zealand is that it is achieved by traditional, ‘old-fashioned’ means, for a minuscule clientele. For the general public, bespoke or one-of-a-kind furniture tailored to a client’s needs: 1) does not exist; 2) is not affordable; 3) is accessible only through design professionals like interior designers and architects; or 4) is a luxury and financial possibility for the elite few. This script is based on hearsay, not facts. Unless craft generally, and studio furniture in particular, are ‘common knowledge’, the prospect of their purchase does not arise. In addition, there are limited resources in New Zealand to market craft at a local or national level so it’s not in the marketplace. Economic emphasis on export rather than domestic markets has contributed to studio furniture’s infrequent presence in the public realm. The medium did not disappear when imports flooded the market but was accessible solely via a localised network. I propose, therefore, the remaking of studio furniture.

The script for studio furniture in New Zealand could be rewritten both within the context of craft and outside it. Within craft, the rise of studio furniture cannot be divorced from the history of the World Crafts Council and the Crafts Council of New Zealand. The history and demise of the

CCNZ are important parts of the furniture script, in that furniture makers were influential in that organisation, pursuing mandates regarding professionalisation, education, design literacy, standards, and international connections; when the CCNZ disbanded, progress in informing the public about studio furniture went by the wayside too. Within craft, furniture aligns with other media whose essence is hand-making: pottery, weaving, leatherwork, glasswork, jewellery, blacksmithing, etc. As such, it should be seen in a general sacred craft script. A significant basis for craft's rescripting is its ability to provide meaning and generate community. Richard Sennett's latest book, *Together*, criticises the loss of community that pervades neo-capitalism.

Outside the context of craft, studio furniture warrants its own script. The professionalisation of woodworking removes it from the New Zealand realm of craft, where it sits uncomfortably alongside weaving and lacemaking, which eschew professional aspirations. Instead, a new script brings the public's attention to bespoke furniture as an alternative to local factory-made products and imported goods. The rewrite incorporates practical, ethical and environmental values alongside aesthetic ones. A script for New Zealand studio furniture would include the following elements:

- holistic, meaning that from inception to user it is the responsibility of a human being
- functional, including performing the functions of art
- a designed product with a personal aesthetic, instead of being anonymous
- unique – crafted products are one-of-a-kind
- incorporates quality construction
- affordable when looked at from a long-term cost-benefit perspective
- recyclable – can be passed down through generations; it can be renewed or repaired
- involves the ethical procurement and use of materials
- human-centred -- its intended users are individuals, not a 'mass'
- involves local transportation, resulting in a reduced carbon footprint
- provides support for local businesses and resources like timber merchants and materials suppliers
- engages the patronage of local artisans

Each aspect is part of a holistic narrative supporting a 'brand' for sustainable New Zealand studio furniture. Today and tomorrow, this narrative is necessarily directed to consumers conscious of sustain-ability – in the Sustainment (Fry 2009: 45–7), this narrative will resound universally. The Sustainment is an age when all decisions and actions are determined with a view to sustainability, including destruction of, or change to, the non-sustainable, such as: 'our relations of material and interpersonal exchange; what we make, how we make it and from what; the way we live and organize our ways of life; what we value; how we treat each other collectively at every level from the local to the international' (2009: 45).

Fry's *Design Futuring* identifies further scripting scenarios: 'Objects actually inhabit complex relational assemblages that constitute particular environments that themselves have designing agency that again evidence a causal determinacy that is contrary to a linear model' (2009: 35). Fry is arguing that objects influence their environments, echoing Joshua Pollard: 'objects have the capacity to re-channel human actions and perceptions of the world' (2004: 56). James Leach, in his research in Papua, New Guinea, came to a similar conclusion: 'the creation and use of an object elicits a particular form of social and political relations between persons' (2002: 731). These statements reiterate the arguments of ANT-inspired theorists.

The insertion of a piece of studio furniture into a room has more effect than simply function. A David Haig rocker (Figure 1) or Greg Bloomfield stereo cabinet (Figure 2), for instance, has considerable impact on its owners' environment. It changes the mood, interior decoration, and focus of a room; it alters sensibilities, in that viewers, both occasional and frequent, are exposed to an alternative realm of possibilities. The presence of the handmade invokes tradition, time and care-full manufacture; the evocation of senses – touch, sight, smell, sound – make the room a desirable destination. Handcraft conveys emotions: security, home, comfort,⁸ timelessness. Whereas knockdown furniture, like Ikea, is functional, designed and affordable, and may elicit pride in its successful assembly, its script differs radically from that of its bespoke rivals. Bloomfield's and Haig's furniture incorporates the characteristics of the sustainable studio furniture brand – functional, well-made, long-lasting, locally-designed and constructed – while satisfying a consumer's desire for self-expression and meaning in their surroundings. In addition, New Zealand benefits environmentally, culturally and economically.



Figure 1. David Haig. *Sycamore Signature Rocking-Chair*, 2006
Haig's rocker design, modified for thirty years, is about form and faultless construction.



Figure 2. Greg Bloomfield. *Symphony*, bird's eye maple, 1998
Bloomfield's cabinet is inspired by music; the forms are reminiscent of instruments – harp, cello, kettle drums.

Furthermore, studio furniture's script is about makers who enact and symbolise the human qualities of individuality, variation, and irregularity (Sennett 2008: 84). In other words, they are real and fallible mortals, like you and me. The makers have names and personalities that are embedded, both literally and figuratively, in the work. Purchasers, if they choose, can connect with the furniture maker personally and/or symbolically: the ownership of a piece of studio furniture signifies respect for an identifiable person, lifestyle and code of ethics. The makers are ever-present like-minded guests, and their work facilitates and represents human connections. In summary, the integrity of the object, process, and maker goes on designing – for the maker, the user, the maker/user's community, the maker/user's heirs, the nation and the environment – while allowing each participant to create their own relationship with the object.

A revised script for society

Whereas my proposal is for a revised script for studio furniture, the next step is a revised script for society. Such a view revisits John Ruskin and William Morris, who created utopian scripts that included craft practices. In this century, Fry espouses the incorporation of the traditional in his utopia:

This remaking requires intervention by cultural leaders to expose tradition as a product of incremental change, thus opening the

possibility of it being available for future innovation ... craft practices, furniture making ... – things that all initially arrived out of responses to particular environments – there is often the possibility of innovation and reinvention taking traditional forms as a starting point. What is being evoked here is ... the rematerialization of the culture by making new forms, knowledge and values from the old that, above all, recreate a sustaining social ecology as a foundation of change. (2009: 102)

Aspirations to remake and rematerialise culture are cross-disciplinary. T.M.S. Evens, an anthropologist, distinguishes 'dualism', which separates subject and object, and 'non-dualism', which posits a relationship between the two (2008: 1–2). Non-dualism, says Evens, 'serves to re-create human nature as a matter of responsibility for self and other. In other words, it re-creates it as a matter of ethics' (2008: 8). Ethics is a value that Evens believes is a given for all human beings; and the advance of ethics requires remaking of culture via 'the considered cultivation of a nondualist ontology' (2008: 13). Philosopher David Cooper suggests that we should not always be seeking something new, but revisiting the old, which is, simply, learning to live life. Acceptance of the holism of new and old would assist in eliminating the unsustainable modernist penchant for novelty.

Tony Fry designates craft as an environmental mediator because of its embodiment of care. Care has been identified as critical in a cross-disciplinary rescripting of culture as it exists (Sevenhuijsen 1998). Care, like craft, is old and re-newable. Rescripting of craft and furniture complements Fry's foresight for the Sustainment, a time when design will extend beyond a product's function and configuration to interactions, consequences and endurance. Within the critical discussion of craft, no-one has suggested craft's rescripting, and this proposal, while still needing development, is an approach towards enabling craft's and society's sustainability.

Notes

1. Craft Scotland had six offers, from countries such as Australia and Canada, to buy or lease the campaign (Walker 2012).
2. This paper considers Pākehā (non-Māori New Zealander) crafts. Māori crafts were not within the purview of my thesis. Furthermore, were rescripting of Māori crafts deemed necessary, it must be within the Māori tribal structure.
3. The announcement of a vocational Crafts Education Programme in June 1985 by the Minister of Education, Russell Marshall, was indicative of this perspective: 'The potential value of the craft industry for employment and as a major earner of local and overseas funds is recognized in an important feature of the Budget education package, with the funding of Certificate courses in craft education at 10 technical institutes or community colleges. ... There are few opportunities for people to pursue vocational education or training in crafts in this country, yet the overseas and local earning capacity is growing rapidly, with current earnings estimated by the Crafts Council at \$40 million each year' (Minister of Education).
4. 'The Persuasive Object' was a symposium that took place at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland in 1998; 'Volume' was an initiative of the Hawke's Bay Museum and Art Gallery in Napier in 2008; and 'Craft Now' was staged at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Christchurch in 2009.
5. The Centre for Fine Woodworking, a private furniture-making school, put out a call in its April 2011 newsletter: 'Many craftsmen will need to be assembled no doubt to restore some of Christchurch's heritage buildings and

this will form a national data-base for that and future projects. The NZ Historic Places Trust [Christchurch] would be interested to hear from any talented craftsmen and women with traditional skills to undertake restoration work on earthquake damaged heritage buildings. ... If you or anyone you know are able to offer any of these skills then please send your details to us'.

6. From an introduction to a CEO Summit in 2010 under the auspices of New Zealand Trade & Enterprise: 'Design integrated companies have evolved to be fundamentally different from other businesses. They create stronger and more appealing products and services, they inspire their people through fostering a dynamic organizational culture, they collaborate to turn their ideas into reality and they create loyal and passionate customers who are willing to pay a price premium. Companies that embed design create new opportunities, new markets and new value.'
7. Derives from George Bataille's 'sacred sociology' (quoted in Fry 1995: 194). Fry's source for Bataille is 'Attractions and Repulsion 1' in *The College of Sociology 1937-39*, ed. Dennis Hollier, p. 104 (1995: 215).
8. For instance, the closing scene in the 2011 Oscar-winning movie *The Descendants* shows George Clooney's character and his daughters, following the death of their wife and mother, eating ice cream and watching television, under a traditional Hawaiian quilt.

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