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A Craft State of Mind

Abstract

Within contemporary craft, designer/maker practice generates much debate in terms of its viability within twenty-first century technological culture. Much of this debate focuses on economics, as makers conceive new design ideas and produce physical/material results in the form of innovative design objects to meet a 'standard' within the craft sector. However, there remains a philosophical and practical gap in our knowledge with regards to the relationship between the individual acts of managing creativity, and creatively managing craft within the craft sector. In craft writings on research (be it academic or public sector), these two perspectives are most often separated into an analysis of the craft sector that contributes in an economic sense (within the creative industries) to the gross domestic product (GDP), and the activities of craft practitioners in terms of their contribution to culture. This separation arguably presents an unbalanced and misleading view of the business of being a craft practitioner. This paper addresses this and looks at craft practice from the practitioner perspective, focusing on why we practice

Drawing on the author's PhD research, 'Making Changes: Applying Heuristics to a Practice Led Investigation of Creative Wellbeing in the Context of Contemporary Craft' (2012), this paper will explore the role of values within the creative process and discuss their importance to maintaining creative wellbeing and the impact of this to both economic and cultural sectors.

The paper discusses how a research process is used to reflect on fundamental challenges encountered during ten years of the author's business as a designer/maker – in particular the difficulty of meeting the sector's economic expectations and one's own personal creative expectations. Through the research process creative wellbeing is highlighted as an essential part of practice and a necessary 'state of mind' that is underpinned by values. The paper argues that creative wellbeing drives innovation and design development in the production of objects, and that facilitates personal growth and creative development. The question leading the discussion is:

What is creative wellbeing in a craft context and what is its significance to practice and the craft sector?

Introduction

Designing and making 'stuff' continues to generate much debate, whether from an historical, traditional, sociological, economic, political or contemporary perspective. But for people who are designer/makers the process of making contemporary products that have the potential to enhance people's lives is a way of life, where they seek to improve, expand or innovate within their area of practice. Richard Sennett points out that craftsmanship is the constant endeavour to do the best that you can possibly do, and it is this which drives all forms of creative work. This is of course a historical debate, but one that is at the heart of all craft and arguably all forms of work where people are being creative. However, there are many factors that come into play in the process of making, and it is this which will be discussed in this paper. They include the maker's own aspirations and expectations and the external factors that impact and influence them.

The report *Makers in Focus* by Heather Rigg (carried out for West Midlands local authority and the University of Wolverhampton in 2005) highlights a point of tension, namely how to maintain creativity, innovation and the internal motivation for one's practice at a level that can meet the expectations of external economic drivers. In the contemporary craft sector in the UK, hefty demands are placed on the production of 'new' products to sell. Rigg questions the support for makers in terms of professional development, asserting that makers themselves require specific development in how to access new markets from the ones that they currently operate within. She points out that current thinking by providers is not *'making [the] connection between makers' motivation for their practices'* (Rigg 2005: 28) and the activities in which they are involved, pointing out that the term 'market' should be rethought as 'processes by which craft … [is] bought and sold … but also to non-commercial opportunities that expose makers to new experiences, new audiences, new

work and new exhibition opportunities. All of these activities collectively comprise “the economy” of the applied arts sector’ (2005: 1.1.5). Rigg’s point in raising questions concerning the acts of ‘maintaining creativity’, ‘innovation’ and ‘internal motivation’ remains pertinent today. I argue that these three things are a fundamental part of the working lives of makers and thus need to be considered more fully in terms of how they can be maintained, as they underpin why makers do what they do.

The paper also discusses the importance of identifying and communicating values within the craft sector as a whole, and I present observed values and beliefs put forward by others as being significant within this sector. I discuss the relevance of Verhoeven (2007) and Woolley (2007, 2010) as they explore designer/maker practice as a sector now, arguing craft practice needs to be reflected upon and potentially rethought as a viable form of craft in the context of the modern material world; in their view it is not currently sustainable.

I also present my own perspective as a practitioner, arguing creative wellbeing is underpinned by the activity of creating new and innovative ideas in the form of products but that creative wellbeing is unsustainable in the attempt to constantly produce innovative ‘objects’ for an economic market. The argument advocates that markets needs to be identified in a whole sense and include the financial and symbolic worth of both the process (the skills of the maker and the objects that they make) and the cultural significance of their skills within society.

Within designer/maker practice there is a tension point between the expectations of practitioners, the craft sector and the audience, and this tension needs to be discussed through looking at what our values are as this is the first step in helping designer/maker practice evolve to a new place that practitioners can realistically maintain. The key point is that maintaining a healthy craft state of mind is as important for the sector and society as it is for each individual as it goes to the heart of good mental health through creative and productive work.

Maintaining creativity: A personal story

In 1996, at the start of my professional career as a printed textile designer/maker, I was full of ideas and expectations. I took time to research and prototype textile products, knowing I was extending my own knowledge regarding the materials I use and the aesthetic development associated with colour and motifs for printed textiles. I believed in making textile products that people could understand and ultimately buy as critically important to the sustainability of my design studio. Experience gained through working for the UK Crafts Council (1994–5) along with my university design education (1988–94) helped me to understand the primary market for my products (ties, scarves, throws and cushions) were people who frequented galleries, in particular those with retail outlets as well as exhibition space.

Figure 1. The author taking part in the New York Gift Fair Trade Show Stand (1999).

As the business developed I witnessed a rapid rise in demand, and by 1999 I needed to manage the business as effectively as my design process. I had new and additional components to learn, understand and consider in the process of making craft. For example, managing accounts, stock creation and distribution to retail outlets, which in my case were galleries in various geographical locations throughout the UK and USA. I quickly realised the greatest challenge of being a professional craft practitioner is mastering or managing the tension between running a business and sustaining (what I perceived to be) the high levels of creativity in my practice. Indeed, I soon discovered the crux of this dilemma arises, or is at its most apparent, when you become known for a particular style and the demand for your creative signature intensifies at a time when your own creative process needs investment for progression.

Figure 2. Example of signature piece. Hand painted velvet scarf (1998)

By year four in business, my levels of creative development had significantly dropped. My creative signature piece (a velvet scarf) was at its peak in terms of vendor and market recognition. But in fulfilling this demand I hadn't managed to invest quality time into future design collections. In other words, I needed to give time to advancing my visual signature and to think through how I could continually incorporate this as part of my own creative development. However, I had to face a reality that if I take time out to invest in the development of new ideas, I remove the capacity for making money and securing the necessary financial income needed for living. With the business framework for studio design I had adopted, I could not see how I could do both at the same time.

After five years in business I intuitively understood the approach to being a craft practitioner that I had nurtured had to fundamentally change if I were to meet both creative and market demands and sustain my position as a professional practitioner. But for some reason I found it overwhelming and was uncertain how to make this necessary shift, as I had not thought through how I would cope with growth in business. I did not know where to go, how to make the change or where to start making the change.

The turning point arrived as a consequence of new work for a solo exhibition in 2001, which was an attempt to progress my practice through the creation of a new body of textile products.

Figure 3. Silk hangings for C2+ Solo Exhibition (2001)

However, due to a lack of time spent developing the visual imagery, materials and products, the work did not sell and, more importantly, it did not meet my own printed textile quality thresholds in terms of colour, balance and composition. The impact of the failure of the work to sell was serious: it resulted in a large drop in confidence, taking with it my usually high levels of motivation and accompanying aspirations. The 'weight' of this change caused critical damage. I found I was prepared to abandon my vision of being a professional textile designer, as I could not see how to make a living from designer/maker practice. Indeed, having lost the sense of fulfilment I deemed critical to being a successful sole trader, I decided to 'give up' my business. Within one year of this decision I had stopped making textiles.

Understanding the problem

In 2006, I was ready to accept the challenge of understanding what went wrong in the business years, exploring how to rebuild confidence in my visual signature and find a strategy for growing my craft capacity and capabilities. It involved looking back and reflecting on the situation in its entirety through the framework of doctoral studies, employing a practice-led methodology. Reflection as a method is used extensively in research, particularly practice-led research where reflecting-in-action through being aware of thoughts through practice

itself or being conscious of the moment (mindful) allows the practitioner to think about what they are thinking about. Reflecting-on-action involves looking back at what has taken place to recount the situation, and reflecting-through-action allows awareness to develop about practice through practice itself (Schön 1991; Mason 2002).

As part of the PhD process I used a personal narrative to reflect on past action, allowing me to bring personal endeavour to the fore, starting with the past to reflect on the meaning of everything I had done, everything I had aspired to do, and contextualising this within contemporary craft culture. I considered the early stages of my designer/maker business and realised at that point in my career I had a sense of 'creative wellbeing' that kept me creatively buoyant. This seemed to be a balance between having a sense of fulfilment and a sense of worthwhileness in my creative life, something which I believe I lost in later years. I realised the 'sale' is not the most important part of the process. It is the expectation that someone wants the object as his or her own and the creative process (embedded in the object) is as important (to me) as the object itself. I expect to be able to continue to make products that represent my own creative process at its best. I observed a need to explore what 'creative wellbeing' meant in the context of my practice, as this is arguably what had diminished. I focused on nourishing this and defining to what degree it would help to nurture and enable me to direct my own creative future.

Nurturing creative wellbeing

Wellbeing is a familiar term used extensively to gauge the positive or negative condition of people in terms of how they consider an aspect of their life. It can refer to their financial, health, spiritual, social or cultural state, and it is used primarily in life coaching, therapy, health and spiritual practices. Creative wellbeing is acknowledged as relating to wellbeing in that it refers to specific activities associated with the arts which, it is argued from a psychological perspective, can generate a 'positive' outlook on other areas of life (Taylor and Brown 1988). The recent Arts Council of England 'Be Creative Be Well' project carried out in London from 2010 looked to use the arts as methods of engendering a sense of creative wellbeing in local communities through participatory art activities. The positive evaluation published at the end of the project (Be Creative Be Well 2012) 'measured' how successful it was and cites evidence from the case studies to show how the 'activities' deepened community relations and generated a sense of pride among the local communities. This concurs with Taylor and Brown's (1988) research into positive psychology which identifies wellbeing as a fundamental part of good mental health. When in this state, a person can engage in creative and productive work (Taylor and Brown 1988), meaning that they are in a state of creative wellbeing.

The relevance of values in maintaining creative wellbeing

In his book *Start with Why* (2009), Simon Sinek has systemised what makes great communicators great, be they companies or individuals (e.g. Apple and Martin Luther King), and he has called this model 'The Golden Circle', suggesting that it 'codifies the three distinct and interdependent elements (Why, How, What) that make any person or organization function at its highest ability' (Sinek 2011)

The relevance of Sinek's model to practice is its focus on values or beliefs and the implications of ordering information when communicating to people. It is the specific ordering of three questions – What do you do? How do you do it? Why do you do it? – and the significant implications of the order, be it: (1) Why, (2) How, (3) What, or (1) What, (2) How, (3) Why.

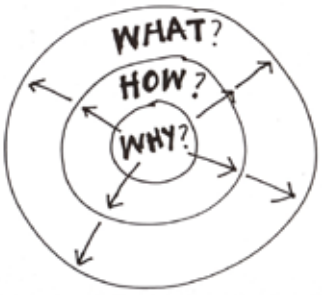

Figure 4

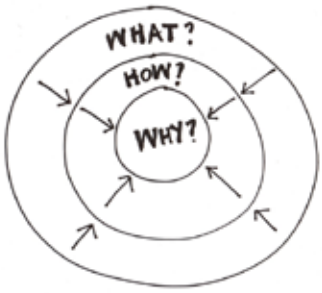

Figure 5

Figure 4: Sinek's Golden Circle. Top: 'Inside-Out'. The arrows pointing outwards indicate the direction of travel when communicating to audience(s), beginning with why, then how before what.

Figure 5: 'Outside-In'. The arrows pointing inwards indicate the direction of travel for communication, beginning with what, and then how before why. (Drawings by Frances Stevenson from Sinek's diagrams)

Sinek notes an order of difficulty in terms of communicating: 'why-how-what' is the approach less commonly employed because it is more difficult, while 'what-how-why' is most often used because it is habitually how we communicate. He explains that most people communicate from the outside-in, i.e. 'what-how-why', but 'inspired leaders', irrespective of their size or industry, communicate from the inside-out, i.e. they begin by explaining *why* they do what they do, then *how*, and end by describing *what* they do (Sinek 2011). Taking Apple Inc. as an example of outside-in (using the Golden Circle framework for communication), he says their marketing message *could* be:

> We make great computers. They are beautifully designed, simple to use and user friendly. Want to buy one? (Sinek 2011)

However, using Apple's *actual* approach, i.e. inside out, Sinek tells us their communication is:

> In everything we do, we believe in challenging the status quo. We believe in thinking differently. The way we challenge the status quo is by making our products beautifully designed, simple to use and user friendly. We just happen to make great computers. Want to buy one? (Sinek 2011)

This example shows how reversing the order of the information makes the product (type or form) become less important (e.g. computer, MP3 player), because the values have remained constant. This is Sinek's argument: by emphasising values, a person and individual can differentiate themselves. He argues it is the values that differentiate Apple from competitors who are equally qualified and competent in making the same product type. People buy into why Apple do what they do – they relate to their values and trust them to deliver those values. In essence, *what* you do is the proof of *why* you do something.

Sinek's way of looking at values and beliefs can be used as a tool to reflect on and understand what drives people as his model encourages stronger, deeper understanding and awareness of values when making products or providing a service for people.

Using Sinek's theory to reflect

Returning to my earlier experience of commercial failure, one of the questions that re-surfaces is: why did I not delegate production of my designs to others? It is normal for design studios to work in this way, with the creative work (the design) being undertaken by one person, and the actual making the responsibility of another. Similarly, the business side of things – marketing, dealing with clients, invoicing – could have been done by somebody else. Doing this would have allowed me time to focus on new concepts and collections. Sinek's model offers an explanation, and it begins with 'why'. For me, the physical and intellectual process of making, and the sense of worth that this engenders, is as important as the development of ideas and designs. In fact it is integral, because it is through the process of working with materials that ideas develop; the two processes cannot be separated in my own practice. And working with other people, the stockists and ultimately the clients, is a key part of this too. Why I am a designer/maker is because of the intellectual and physical stimulation that comes from it. Without those there is no 'why', only 'what' and the evidence of that early experience is that my 'what' without my 'why' is not particularly appealing either to me or to others.

Sinek's main point is that values provide the rationale for why we do things; therefore understanding them is essential in order to communicate them in a relevant and meaningful way. It is their relevance and meaning to society, or to a particular market at least, that is needed in order to sustain the practice/business. Sinek explains that values underpin why companies and individuals are driven and motivated and, importantly, the audience understands and believes in a company or individual's values through the way that they are communicated, by placing 'why' first. This was laterally not a feature of my business as I had become disconnected from my values and found myself in a conflict situation making the same signature product for economic success to the detriment of creative wellbeing and a healthy craft state of mind.

Craft practice: Values

This then raises a further question, which is how do practitioners support the development of having a healthy craft state of mind? One could also say it is via an open mind, and that open mindedness is integral to progress. Sinek's message is in essence about change and has to be 'synthesised' through craft practice in order to appreciate its significance as a valuable concept. This means identifying which habits hinder progress and development and identifying important or key components that lie at the heart of practice itself. To do this I reflected on my practice through personal narrative, and I also looked to understand what is going on in craft writing past and present, to help me think through how I approached my own practice and the 'habits' I had as well as identifying the small things that drive it, which are normally taken for granted.

Similar to Sinek's model, Donald Schön (1991), Peter Dormer (1994, 1997), Bruce Metcalf (2007), Martin Woolley (2007), Sōetsu Yanagi (1978) and Arno Verhoeven (2007) advocate for craft to improve its communication and make clear its cultural meaning and social relevance by defining its value and beliefs through a coherent structure. Metcalf (2007) argues that cultural meaning and social relevance form crafts values, and these include community and tradition. Dormer talks about the value of excellence and discusses craft as a discipline concerned with quality. In this work he posits the need for craft to communicate differently (1997: 229), subtly suggesting this is achieved by emphasising the creative process where he notes the values of 1) making (through physical engagement), 2) self-discovery, 3) honesty, 4) failure, 5) tacit knowledge (or learning through experience) and, 6) demonstration.

In Sōetsu Yanagi's (1978) seminal piece – *The Unknown Craftsman* – craft values are discussed in the context of creative product(s), making reference to the Industrial Revolution, noting the significant cultural shift in values which occurred through this, from the handmade to the industrially produced (1978: 217). The values he cites include: beauty, culture and cultural understanding (where culture is a context for products) and usefulness (in that there is connection(s) with society as well as culture). Martin Woolley (2007: 175, 2010: 136) explains there is a need to communicate contemporary craft values in order to nurture understanding about craft beyond the boundaries of the established or traditionally perceived audience(s) of the sector; to do this he suggests targeting the gallery retail sector (which largely defines the contemporary craft sector). His main objective is that the sector's value structure should be communicated beyond existing 'people in the know' in order to allow subjective interpretation by audience(s) and the various contexts craft can occupy, including the creative development of practitioners themselves, the market(s) that practitioners operate within and the business models within which they choose to sustain themselves, for example, lifestyler, entrepreneur, idealist and/or late developer (Fillis 2010: 132).

Building on this need to identify and communicate contemporary craft values, the writer, maker and designer G. Arno Verhoeven (2007) calls for the craft sector to debate its values in an open manner, implying there is a need to be more transparent. He argues craft as practice is almost dead as there is very little understanding regarding what it is that craftspeople do and why they do it. But, craft as process is still very much alive as it is part of the human condition covering every area in which human beings 'make'.

Verhoeven's point relating to how designer/makers' practice in a business context is not an effective model reflects my own experience as a designer/maker. Within my own creative development an internal communication needed to take place and the heuristic process within the PhD provided the structure that allowed this to happen. In a sense I needed to critically examine my values and beliefs through the research process to nurture a new perspective on my creative life and its wellbeing.

Looking at debates about the sector has helped me understand my own experiences, and I present these from a personal perspective, arguing that understanding values is an essential part of creative practice as being mindful of one's values helps to maintain creative wellbeing and a healthy craft state of mind. The reflective process that I adopt through narrative helps me understand why and how I work and allows me to understand the profound relationship and connection between the process of making, the product, the audience and the social implications that this has.

Immersing myself in past and present experiences of printed textile design practice as a method to reflect, think through and relive the experiences, has enabled me to see that creative wellbeing is an essential part of my practice, and a necessary 'state of mind' that is underpinned by my values. Creative and productive work for me means the balance between having a sense of purpose in why I do what I do and also

having a sense of fulfilment through having a healthy flow of new ideas within my practice which drives it and keeps it fresh.

Writing the reflective narrative and drawing on Sinek's theory has allowed me to reflect on why I do what I do. Essentially I value design and I value the way design is created. It is the process of making printed textiles and the experience of creating printed textile products for people to use that are of value to me. Creative wellbeing is the balance between a 'sense of purpose' and a 'sense of fulfilment' in the work being undertaken. They both relate to creative and productive work: the former includes the relevance of making products for society, or doing some good in enhancing the discipline of printed textiles, and the latter relates to the endless flow of ideas that fuel my own continuous learning and build knowledge within my discipline area, allowing me to produce work to the best of my ability. It is this that constitutes a healthy craft state of mind.

Moreover, it is the embedded emotional engagements that underpin these values. The acts of imagining, observing, touching and constructing textiles, for example, have a definitive purpose, which is to offer textiles to people for them to enjoy, in the same way music and/or food is enjoyed. The process of making printed textiles combined with the vision of delivering a personal experience through design capable of affecting an individual's sense of joy and wonder is my *raison d'etre*. The deep passion for creating beautiful, sensual, useful textiles is what drives my motivation and provides a sense of design purpose. This is what ultimately underpins my own creative wellbeing.

Idea generation is a critical stage in the process of printed textile design. In my experience it is an aspect of designing that occurs throughout the creative act rather than being confined to the beginning of a process. This process or cycle keeps me connected with reality – it involves spending time looking and engaging with the world. For example, seeking a source of inspiration through drawing and direct engagement with nature, observing people in their everyday lives – noticing how they interact with cloth and understanding this across different cultures. Incorporating ways to deepen personal knowledge and understanding how to use the knowledge I have within culture through looking at society and the role of textiles in people's lives is of value to me. It supports my decision-making as to why I am designing, how I design and for whom.

Summary

The significance of the perspectives of Dormer, Yanagi, Metcalf, Woolley and Verhoeven in this paper is that they focus on craft from a values perspective, emphasising that craft is a symbol that reflects values. Woolley and Verhoeven focus their discussion specifically on designer/maker, sole trader type practice/professions that produce objects or material products. This profession is often the focus of economic studies. The argument here is that it can be explored more fully in terms of why makers practise as this is at the heart of its social relevance and arguably forms the internal motivation for practitioners themselves.

Drawing on historical and contemporary ethical issues concerning craft practice which include engendering community spirit and moral code (Parry 2010; Gauntlett 2011), engaging in purposeful work (Crawford 2010) and being an ordinary citizen who serves society by working to the best of their ability for society (Sennett 2008) helps to articulate why craft practice is important for practitioners. Gauntlett's use of the term 'Making is connecting' sums up the integral part that making activity has within society as through these physical activities we learn, socialise and innovate for our collective good. I have argued this human instinct to work together and for each other in a creative way is fundamental to why practitioners practise. Rigg's point regarding maintaining creativity highlights the need to understand what this means in order to explore how it can be supported.

Ultimately, the reflective process raised the following questions for me as a practitioner. What is craft a symbol of now? What is its cultural meaning? And what is its social relevance? Exploring these questions allowed a new confidence and enhanced maturity to develop and emerge through practice and allowed me to identify some of the assumptions underpinning my practice. I was able to dissolve some of these assumptions and understand craft practice in the bigger landscape of life rather than the narrow landscape of market.

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