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Make Your Own Ark: Indie craft's sustainable imperative

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The prospect of a sustainable future is intimately bound with our cultural materiality. Industrialisation crystallised a conception of materiality that has precipitated many of the environmental challenges we face today. This includes such aspects as the notion of disposability of material goods, centralised, streamlined production and reliance on non-renewable materials and energy. But, as Michael Braungart and William McDonough (2009) have notably pointed out, while environmental catastrophe is a bleak prospect, so is forsaking materiality altogether. We find pleasure from the objects in our lives, on our bodies, in our homes. They help us to be comfortable, provide aesthetic stimulation, define our identities and speak to that part of us that craves beauty. This paper considers how the advent of a subcultural amateur handcraft revival, indie craft, challenges the mainstream industrialised modes of manufacturing, production and consumption of material goods while at the same time celebrating an enjoyment of materiality. It examines this with particular reference to matters of environmentalism and sustainability, which can be considered an aspect of indie craft's wider social mandate.

Indie craft's sustainable potential lies in the complex implications surrounding its reclamation of the handmade. Rather than the music or spectacular dress of 'classic' subcultures, indie craft has as its central motif the deployment of domestic crafts to make clothes, accessories and household items. It is distinguished from conventional domestic crafts through the particular way it twists the tradition to fit a contemporary popular culture context and the motivations of the crafters as they do so. Typically indie craft objects are richly ironic and include self-referential motifs from popular culture and the history of domestic crafts. Examples include edgy body and household adornment, salvaged objects reconfigured into new uses, rewired retro gadgets, and X-rated embroidery. They are as much about the process of making as the object itself: choosing to craft becomes a source of productive and enjoyable leisure. It is also considered to be intrinsically worthwhile, with a handmade object being more meaningful and emotionally endowed than its machine-made counterpart. Indie craft forms a category distinct from conventional domestic or studio crafts, representing a new aesthetic and conceptual direction for the handmade. It thrives on the internet with an abundance of blogs, web-forums, specialised communities and e-commerce websites alongside more traditional media, such as magazines and books.ⁱ Numerous indie craft fairs operate internationally, though mainly concentrated in the US, where crafters sell their wares to one another and to like-minded customers.ⁱⁱ

Indie craft's assumption of the word 'indie' aligns the practice with the larger indie subculture, which also includes such modes as publishing, film and music.ⁱⁱⁱ Generally speaking, the indie ethos posits itself in opposition to corporatised mass culture, instead seeking an unmediated connection to creativity and authenticity. Hence, indie is short for 'independent', and it values the raw, the under-produced, the home-grown and the analogue as nobler alternatives. A strong ethical and political undercurrent in indie craft responds to a sense of hopelessness in the face of global

inequality, the mediocrity of standardised mass culture, concerns about exploitative labour, and the perceived stranglehold of multinational corporations on consumers. It should be noted, however, that while indie craft has this anti-corporate, anti-mass and anti-consumerist undercurrent, it has a qualified pro-materialist stance that celebrates materiality. By contrast, crafting is seen as a legitimate, meaningful and ethical alternative to mass production, and becomes an opportunity to disengage from a morally dubious mainstream, to opt-out of the consumer cycle. In theory, this deprives the corporate power-brokers of their market and their basis to dictate the terms of the exchange. When making something oneself, the goods are made for pleasure in a comfortable environment, the maker has the capacity to determine the type of object made, its materials, methods of fabrication, and fate of the waste products.

Moreover, within the indie craft media are numerous cries of concern regarding the environmental ramifications of mass production, such as the excess of manufactured goods, waste and climate change.^{iv} An un-named blogger on the Buy Handmade website coupled environmental concerns and anti-corporatism in the same breath:

The accumulating environmental effects of mass production are a major cause of global warming and the poisoning of our air, water and soil. Every item you make or purchase from a small-scale independent artist or crafter strikes a small blow to the forces of mass production.

Autumn Wiggins queried in The Storque, blog of indie craft online store Etsy, 'There is increasing unrest amongst crafters who feel their creations only add to the clutter on this Earth, but what if we could actually save the world by making things?' (Wiggins 2008). The 'mini manifesto' of indie craft publication Readymade states: 'I will attempt to keep all consumer goods in circulation and out of the big Wal-mart in the sky, by reusing them ... thus I make my VOW OF VIRTUE' (Berger and Hawthorne 2006: 8). Indeed, at times indie craft harks to a certain utopianism with aspirations nothing short of changing the world permanently, thus catch-calls in indie craft media such as 'make the world a better place one stitch at a time' (Christiansen 2006) and 'saving the world from mass production' (Beal et al 2005).

Perhaps the most apparent way indie craft supports sustainability in particular is through the use of ephemera and salvaged waste materials, which are creatively re-configured into new roles. This addresses the excess of waste as well as embracing the design challenge of utilising found objects. Thus a suitcase becomes a coffee table, old shopping bags become a rug, a group of bottles becomes a chair and some cocktail glasses become a bird-feeder. Such is the popularity for environmental concerns that a recent wave of craft publications has hit the market with a specifically sustainable angle, for example books such as Betz White's Sewing Green^v and Susan Wasinger's EcoCraft,^{vi} and GreenCraft magazine, which was launched in August 2009.^{vii}

While there is no denying that novelty is at play in many of these examples, all have been published and promoted as examples of sustainability. The notion of 'upcycling' has become popular in the indie craft culture, the term having entered the subcultural lexicon courtesy of the close-knit network of blogs. It was coined by Braungart and McDonough in their book Cradle to Cradle (2009), which challenges the common, linear 'cradle to grave' model, whereby materials are extracted, fabricated, consumed and discarded in landfill. It has become apparent that such a system is not without serious ecological consequences surrounding the exploitation

of non-renewable resources and staggering quantities of waste.^{viii} In practice, then, the cradle and the grave are misleading notions: materials are neither conjured out of nothing, nor do they just disappear when we're finished with them. Braungart and McDonough build on Ian McHarg's identification of the field of design as key to ensuring a sustainable future, and his determination that nature should be adopted as the standard model for our patterns and processes.^{ix} Accordingly, they propose an alternative material ecology that reflects the cycles of nature, where one organism's waste equals another's food. Similarly, Cradle to Cradle provides a conception of the fabricated world where materials can be maintained in perpetual closed-loop cycles, and where waste, previously abject, is reconceived as nutrient, either biological or technological. What we commonly refer to as 'recycling' is often insufficient to achieve this, as it has its own wasteful by-products and the recycled material can be reduced in quality. As such, recycling is more often 'downcycling'. Upcycling, however, maintains or ideally increases a material's value. Indie craft would seem to have a natural fit with the notion, with its intrinsic creativity and wider agenda for social rehabilitation. Upcycling also resonates with traditional domestic values such as thrift and virtuous housekeeping. Indeed, longstanding craft traditions such as patchwork and rag rugs can be read as demonstrating a certain cradle to cradle mentality, as they deny the concept of waste through the creative repurposing of scraps into objects of value.

The Upcycle Exchange is a notable initiative, conceived by indie crafter Autumn Wiggins and influenced by Braungart and McDonough.^x The principle is simple: crafters request materials through an internet interface or other publication, which local businesses and members of the public are invited to donate in exchange for coupon books or other incentives. The coupons can then be used to purchase the crafters' products which are themselves upcycled. Such a system has been implemented with success at several indie craft fairs and has the potential for broader application. In addition to providing an alternative means of acquiring and disposing of materials, upcycle exchanges upset the conventional roles of suppliers, consumers and producers, and entirely bypass any middle-men. This cultivation of direct relationships, as Stuart Hall has pointed out, engenders a sense of personal accountability and trust (Hall 1992: 319). The format additionally presents an alternative, non-monetary system for exchange and demonstrates the 'relativity and non-fixity of value' (Willis 1996: 79).

Indie craft's repositioning of salvaged materials further problematises notions of value, as this process not only changes their use but also changes their meaning. In her thoughts on how waste can be transformed through being re-homed or re-deployed via thrift shop or other means, Anne-Marie Willis (1996: 80) points to Jean Baudrillard's conception of sign value, where an object's meanings, rather than its functionality, underpin its value.^{xi} Indie craft's use of recycled materials carries the implication of recycling the stories and emotions with which they are imbued, thus enhancing their emotional value as well as their monetary. Their reconfigured context transforms them from commonplace, low-value, waste objects into unusual, valuable and cherished treasures endowed with readymade histories. To return to the martini glass bird-feeder, it may function like any other bird-feeder, but unlike any other bird-feeder it evokes unique ideas and feelings, and is likely to be more prized because it was wrought by its owner's own two hands.

Additionally, indie craft toys with context in ways that parallel Marcel Duchamp's innovation of the readymade, which represented a significant breakthrough for the

fine arts in the inter-war period. The name of indie craft publication *Readymade* adds credence to the link. As Helen Molesworth explains:

Arguably, the readymade has done more to reorganize aesthetic categories than any other twentieth-century art practice ... It was a lever that pried open art (and art history) to debates about meaning and context, particularly the question of how art's meaning is derived in large measure from its institutional and linguistic contexts. (1998: 50-2)

Indie craft's comparable re-contextualising of objects may have similar potential to disrupt the mainstream material sensibilities.

Given these complex implications, the ecological intentions within indie craft vary from genuine, considered maintenance of the material ecology to tokenistic, fad-driven, even kitsch re-use that will see materials ultimately returned to landfill. Merely making something by hand doesn't answer all of indie craft ecological obligations and the environmental credentials of some so-called 'upcycled' projects are questionable. How serious, after all, is the risk of being overwhelmed with vintage knitting needles, such that they are more valuable when bent into bracelets? And is there virtue in redeploing something that has 'life left in it' in its original form, just for the sake of recycling it? The craze for refashioning woollen sweaters treads a thin line when some patterns urge crafters to find second-hand wool, angora and cashmere sweaters to then shred as the basis for rag rugs. Not only does this undermine any future use of the material, but it also ignores the potential to utilise more serious sources of waste materials such as industry textile offcuts. One also wonders whether a rag rug is the best application for such prized material as animal fleece.

Upcycling aside, Indie craft's adoption of the internet as a primary platform of exchange provides scope to promote local capacities of production and consumption. As Braungart and McDonagh have stated, 'all sustainability is local' (2009: 123). The online sharing of patterns provides an efficient means to transfer the essential information about a project so that it can be manufactured close to the point of consumption. Localising production eliminates moral problems regarding outsourcing it to poorer countries, which includes outsourcing the resultant waste and exploiting any inferior workplace standards. Additionally, it minimises shipping costs both monetary and environmental, and cultivates skills among local communities. This seems to resonate with the emerging debate surrounding the sustainable potential of the 'distributed systems' model, derived from computing but with diverse applications. As summarised by the Victorian Eco-Initiative Lab:

Infrastructure and critical services (for water, food and energy) are positioned close to points of demand and resource availability and linked within networks of exchange. Services traditionally provided by a single, linear system are instead delivered via a diverse set of smaller systems – tailored to location but able to transfer resources across wider areas. (VEIL 2009: 1)

Through its own distributed network of crafters, united by the intangible space of the blogosphere, indie craft demonstrates the potential for the circulation of a design that is essentially standard, yet tweaked according to the particular local conditions, skills and inclinations of the makers.

An example is the wonderful Amidogs patterns by June Gilbank which are downloadable as PDFs from her Planet June website. The patterns are based on the popular Japanese phenomenon of amigurumi, which are essentially small, ultra-cute crocheted toys, which Gilbank interprets into various breeds of dog. Via her blog, she invites others to upload onto Flickr photographs of their own completed Amidogs. So, while a design may have been conceived in Waterloo-Wellington, Ontario, the internet has allowed access to its pattern across the globe, enabling its manufacture local to its point of consumption. Moreover such a system allows for tailoring to local needs, conditions and creative inspiration, demonstrated in the Amidogs by such features as a little harness, or, in the case of the Cerberus beagle, a couple of extra heads.^{xii}

Essential to such self-agency is a certain focus on skill, which the internet also helps to cultivate with an abundance of online tutorials. As ecodesign advocate Kate Fletcher reminds us, skill provides the potential to revise the passivity implicit in the notion of the consumer, with reference to her field of fashion: 'People are re-cast in roles other than simply that of consumers; they are also competent individuals who are potential producers of their clothes, or suppliers of skills and resources enabling them to create as well as consume.' (Fletcher 2008: 188). Skill in indie craft is not always about high standards, but rather the ability just to do, make and understand things. Skill therefore equates to a potential for economic, material and aesthetic self-sufficiency and personal agency as opposed to passive reliance on the dominant material paradigm.

Indie craft's mandate for wider social change is exhibited more overtly in examples of 'craftivism', indie craft's activist strain. Betsy Greer, who coined the term defines it thus: 'activism + craft = craftivism ... each time you participate in crafting you are making a difference, whether it's fighting against useless materialism or making items for charity or something betwixt and between.'^{xiii} This can extend to messages of sustainability, such as the Knit a River project for the international NGO Water Aid, which sought donations of blue knitted squares from the public in order to create a giant blue knitted river, conceived as a 'knitted petition'. Each of the 6,000 squares represented one of the 6,000 children globally who die daily from water-borne diseases.^{xiv} Such campaigns harness craft's accessibility, inclusiveness and collaborative potential to generate a higher degree of participation and awareness than a more standard petition might. The 'signatories' donate their time and workmanship, the campaign invites their active involvement and engages their attention. Moreover, the novelty value of the project ensures interest from media channels, thus securing further promotional potential.

The Radical Cross-stitch Posse in Melbourne, Australia, and Wellington, New Zealand, also harnesses the novelty value of craft in order to promote political messages. In their installation I Wanna Live Here, they stitch the words into cyclone fencing around vacant lots in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray. The work points to land use and misuse and the shadowy power dynamics behind ownership and development.^{xv} They make other crafted objects that convey messages of sustainability, among other political themes, such as a 'stop climate change' cushion, and 'bikes not bombs' embroidered handkerchief. Though one-offs and not generally for sale as either object or pattern, they are promoted via their popular blog, thus reaching audiences and inspiring similar projects.

Anti-consumerism is manifested in Cat Mazza's microRevolt campaign, which utilises the knitpro freeware to translate corporate logos into knitting patterns. While knitters

not only evade sweatshop labour through making garments themselves, they also undermine the corporate brand and identity through hijacking its image.^{xvi} Stephanie Syjuco's Counterfeit Crochet project works along similar lines, where she invites crocheters to counterfeit designer handbags, which become, as she says 'both homages and lumpy mutations'.^{xvii} The participants are encouraged to keep and wear the handbags, which quietly disrupt the material landscape and challenge the dynamic of production and consumption of designer products.

Craftivism can be read as part of a substantial tradition of craft as a tool of resistance and social rehabilitation. Indie craft's calls-to-arms resonate with the words of William Morris, who stated in 1888:

Though the movement towards the revival of handicraft is contemptible on the surface in face of the gigantic fabric of commercialism; yet, taken in conjunction with the general movement towards freedom of life for all, on which we are now surely embarked, as a protest against intellectual tyranny, and a token of the change which is transforming civilization into socialism, it is both noteworthy and encouraging. (Morris in Frank 2000: 176)

Under the auspices of Morris's philosophy, which was inspired by the anti-industrial romanticism of John Ruskin, the Arts and Crafts Movement sought to re-invigorate the idea of the artisan. It posited handicrafts as a more meaningful and worthwhile alternative to mechanised production and its associated social and aesthetic damage. Also known to be influenced by Ruskin, Mohandas Gandhi adopted homespun as a symbol for the campaign for Indian independence, harnessing it as a motif for civil disobedience, social healing and spiritual enrichment. Aside from providing a virtuous alternative to the exploitative colonial textile industry, spinning was undertaken in public as a display of passive resistance. Later in the twentieth century, in the 1970s and 1980s, craft was used as part of the campaign for nuclear disarmament, not only with hand-made banners but also knitting in the picket. As Kirsty Robertson (2009) reminds us, while the feminist movement did have calls to renounce craft, other feminists used the connotations of knitting to their advantage, positing its quietude as a counterpoint to accentuate the violence (and thus masculinity) of the police oppression and wider political forces behind war.

While examples of craftivism may be overt in their political intent, sometimes an object's potential for fostering ongoing change is more subtle. After all, the impact of even the most sustainable wares is dependent on how they are used in the everyday material environment; how they influence the way people think and act. Similarly, genuine and ongoing change won't come from a handful of individuals but rather must have a collective basis and be embedded in culture. In the words of David Orr, 'The problem is not how to produce ecologically benign products for the consumer economy, but how to make decent communities in which people grow to be responsible citizens and whole people.' (2002: 12) As such, while indie craft may not realistically have the capacity to single-handedly solve the world's problems, it may play an important role in transforming our culture. Its popularity helps create a platform to make a sustainable agenda not just essential but also desirable, fashionable and fun. Its inclusiveness and accessibility ensures a broad reach, and its emphasis on the local cultivates community and connection. This process heightens an object's sensoriality, which has a qualified link with sustainability: the more meaningful and emotionally endowed the object is, the better understood, the more prized, and accordingly, the happier it makes us. As Hazel Clark summarises Giulio Ceppi's concept of 'sustainable sensoriality', it is 'the way of understanding a product

from the knowledge of how it is made, through its raw material to the end product, rather than just through (the exaltation of the experience of) consumption' (Clark 2009: 440). It is a sensibility learned 'in the making', whereby the craft processes cultivate a sense of kinship and value for the material ecology and how to manage it with sensitivity. The simple, accessible processes of the handcrafts encourage the maker/consumer to understand and gain pleasure from material; the time spent crafting an object enhances emotional input and endows it with the spirit of the maker.

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ⁱ For example, see websites such as whipup.net, churchofcraft.org, www.craftster.org, www.getcrafty.com; e-commerce sites such as www.etsy.com and www.georgielove.com; magazines such as Readymade and CRAFT; and books such as Levine, Faythe and Heimerl, Cortney (2008) Handmade Nation, New York: Princeton Architectural; Hanaor, Ziggy and Woodcock, Victoria (eds) (2006), Making Stuff: London: Black Dog Publishing; Carson, Tsia (2006) Craftivity New York: Collins; among others.

ⁱⁱ Examples include regular events such as the Renegade Craft Fair (Chicago, Brooklyn, Los Angeles and San Francisco), Crafty Bastards (Washington), Art vs. Craft (Milwaukee) and Strange Folk (St Louis).

ⁱⁱⁱ A clarification: while it is useful to consider indie craft through a subcultural lens, it equally challenges this classification. Aside from exhibiting the un-subculture-like traits of inclusiveness, femininity and affluence, indie craft embraces and has been embraced by aspects of mainstream that a more typical subculture might be expected to eschew, such as television shows and books commissioned by the corporatised media.

^{iv} As a starting place, see websites such as futurecraftcollective.com, craftingagreenworld.com, www.etsy.com/storque/search/tags/earth-tones, www.betzwhite.com, sewgreen.blogspot.com, www.recyclethis.co.uk, whipup.net/category/eco-craft, as well as other indie craft sources cited in this paper.

^v Betz White (2009) Sewing Green, New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang.

^{vi} Susan Wasinger (2009) Eco Craft, New York and London: Lark Books.

^{vii} See http://www.stampington.com/html/greencraft_volume1.html

^{viii} David Orr has cited that for every 100 pounds of product we create 3,200 pounds of waste (2002: 44).

^{ix} See particularly McHarg, Ian (1969) Design With Nature, Garden City NY: Doubleday/National History Press.

^x See: www.upxchange.com and etsytrashion.blogspot.com/2009/04/upcycle-exchange-swapping-green.

^{xi} See Baudrillard, Jean (1975) The Mirror of Production, St Louis MO: Telos Press; (1981) For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, St Louis MO: Telos Press; (1993) Symbolic Exchange and Death, London: Sage; (1996) The System of Objects, London and New York: Verso.

^{xii} There are, of course, risks associated with unrestricted distribution of a pattern's valuable information, where a certain implicit trust is open to abuse. As such, on occasion some patterns are only available to 'insiders' certified by virtue of their membership of a recognised craft-based social networking website such as Ravelry, or otherwise via direct email contact with the designer.

^{xiii} See www.craftivism.org

^{xiv} See http://www.wateraid.org/uk/get_involved/events/events_news_archive/4983.asp

^{xv} See radicalcrossstitch.com

^{xvi} See www.microrevolt.org

^{xvii} See www.counterfeitcrochet.org