PLYMOUTH COLLEGE of ART

Making Futures

# Craft beyond craft

## The transformative potential of craft's resilience

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### Abstract

In the face of recent environmental, socio-economic and political crises, there is growing doubt in the capacity of the neoliberal economic system in delivering ways of living that are equitable and 'sustain-able' (Harvey 2010). During this time of increasing uncertainty, in many western countries, craft has enjoyed a period of renaissance. The ideological connections of craft with eco-living and other grassroots movements; accessibility of its processes; and its defiant history have made craft attractive to a diversity of amateur and professional practitioners, and its practices have become representative of the emerging counterculture to capitalist hegemony. Its current popularity should be celebrated but to ensure its longevity craft cannot rely on a possibly fleeting status as an alternative to mainstream practices. Given its continued presence throughout history, it is likely that craft will persist. But in what form? This paper argues for an expanded and more permanent role for craft that contributes to 'sustain-able' futures (Fry, 2011), and for focus to be returned to craft's strengths – namely its diversity and persistence – in order to develop this capacity. This paper proposes that in order to imagine these futures for craft practice it is necessary to explore the potential of plural economies in delivering 'sustain-able' ways of living. It explores the notion of 'resilience' and its relationship to possible transformative agency that can encourage and support 'sustain-able' practices.

## Introduction

In the face of developing environmental, socio-economic and political crises, there is growing doubt in the capacity of the neoliberal economic system in delivering ways of living that are equitable and 'sustain-able' (Harvey 2010). During this time of uncertainty craft, in many western countries, has enjoyed a period of renaissance: with its ideological connections to eco-living and other grassroots movements; accessibility of its processes; and its defiant history making craft more attractive to a diversity of amateur and professional practitioners. This new popularity should be celebrated but craft may be vulnerable if its identity is built as a fashionable and fleeting alternative to mainstream practices. In discussing craft's future, it is important to recognise that its practices have persisted throughout human history, surviving the last two centuries of industrialisation despite capitalism's continued efforts to marginalise its practices. It is likely that in this age of post-industrialism, despite new challenges, craft will persist. But in what form? How could craft be present in the future and what will be its potential role?

This paper argues for an expanded role for craft that can contribute to 'sustain-able' futures (in reference to Tony Fry's (2011) concept of 'sustainment') and for focus to be returned to craft's strengths – namely its diversity and persistence – in order to develop this agency. It presents craft practice as potentially contributing to plural economies and explores craft's resilience and its relationship to possible transformative agency through which to encourage and support 'sustain-able' practices across society. This paper is informed by an ongoing case study of the small regional craft community of Fiskars, in Finland, that focuses on the relationships between craft practice and the business environment. The study investigates the reciprocal roles of bio-physical, socio-economic and cultural ecologies on craft practice, and how these could potentially to contribute to 'sustain-ability'.

## Growing concern

Since Karl Marx took a critical view of the alienating forces of capitalism, arguments concerning reproduction and expansion of capital and the corresponding devaluing of human labour continue, and attention is increasingly being drawn to inequalities and our growing unsustainability. Capitalism works on the condition that there is a perpetual cycle of capital accumulation (where profit is generated from current investments) and absorption (where surplus is re-invested in new profitable activities). To maintain competitiveness and to contribute to economic growth, capitalists must discover ever-more profitable investment opportunities for their surplus otherwise they will suffer an over-accumulation of capital. This perpetual need for capital absorption disrupts the system from within and forces a re-negotiation of existing global barriers to free trade, with often destructive consequences for local communities. Not only is this exploitative but as David Harvey (2010) argues it is also becoming increasingly difficult, with the system's inherent contradictions constituting a looming limit to its own capacity for reproduction. This paper considers craft practice in the context of this socio-economic environment.

## The ability to sustain

'Sustainment' is both the project and the process by which humans can make a viable future for their world (Fry 2011). It challenges the current understanding of how humans exist in the world – as beings merely impacted by nature, culture, and technology – to beings designed by the world. All of that which sustains human life, namely the bio-physical environment, cultural traditions, social structures, economies and political systems, are considered in the development of 'sustainment'. It promotes 'sustain-ability' (the ability to sustain) in all practices, and stands in opposition to the instrumentality of structures, systems and material culture perpetuated in the name of sustainability but which, given their over-reliance on technology and an attachment to neoliberal economic goals, support unsustainable practices.

The most important aspect of 'sustainment' is that it is delivered through a commonality-in-difference – a process that recognises that a common goal of 'sustainment' will only 'stand a chance of realization if pursued in socio-culturally plural ways' (Fry 2009: 91). Here the distinction between plurality and pluralism is important. Plurality describes and accepts the reality of fundamental differences amongst the agents that will pursue 'sustainment' by multi-vectored means.

Pluralism, on the other hand, has been adopted to ensure compliance with the instrumental laws of a modern liberal democracy and describes a 'hyper-conformity that reduces differences to equivalence' (Fry 2011: 191). In order to create and support the political, economic and social futures that are needed, more power could be assigned to the plural, and often non-mainstream, ways that we make a living, develop social bonds and create sustain-able communities.

## Resilience

Resilience has its roots in the physical and natural sciences. In his 1973 influential paper on resilience, the ecologist C.S. Holling proposed that the behaviour of ecological systems is defined by two properties: resilience and stability. While stability refers to the 'ability of a system to return to an equilibrium state after a temporary disturbance' (Holling 1973: 17), resilience is defined as the 'persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist' (Holling 1973: 17). Holling further proposes that biological, ecological and social systems demonstrate similar behaviour and coined the term 'panarchy' to represent the hierarchical structure in which all bio-physical, human and social systems interlink in continuous 'adaptive cycles of growth, accumulation, restructuring and renewal' (Holling 2001: 392).

The theory and definitions of resilience have evolved considerably since Holling's early work. Now, largely in response to recent economic shocks, resilience has been adopted as a subject of enquiry in economics research (Simmie and Martin 2010) to further the notion that economies, including regional economies, must grow resilient against, or adapt to, exogenous forces. Recent studies on resilience of regions and other social and socio-ecological systems define resilience as 'the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks' (Walker et al. 2004). Built in to this are the notions of: adaptability, which relate to the capacity of the system itself to adapt in response to shocks; transformability, which is the capacity for it to transform its system so as to become more resilient; and resistance, which is the ability of the system to resist the shock in the first place (Simmie and Martin 2010).

Resilience is conceptualised on the premise that the system's growth path is interrupted by external shocks, and it is measured by how quickly the system returns, or bounces back, to its original state. The more resilient the subject the quicker it returns to its previous growth path, or possibly accelerating its former growth path.
It is outside the scope of this paper to analyse the full extent of their impact, but it is important to note that resilience theories, derived from Holling's work, are increasingly used in many fields. These include: engineering systems and the sciences; urban and infrastructure development; global security; psychology; biological and ecological systems; and socio-economic systems such as emergency response, tourism and viability of regional communities.

In the context of craft practice, there are two reasons why the notion of resilience is important. The first is intuitive – that resilient craft business are also viable craft businesses, which allows the practice of craft to continue. In regional craft communities, for example, it is reasonable to assume that being resilient in the face of external economic, political and ecological threats is important for the welfare and viability of that community. The second reason is the relationship of resilience to social transformation, the mechanism for which is not necessarily found in the neoliberal economic system. This is best illustrated through a critique of resilience that points to a paradox of resilience that may affect the transformative agency of craft practice.

## Critique of resilience

A growing body of research on regional economies is adopting the position that there is an automatic, or inherent, need for resilience (Martin and Sunley 2015; Simmie and Martin 2010). It is easy to understand why, conceptually, the notion of resilience has been so easy to adopt since it responds to the basic human instinct to protect against threats and vulnerabilities. However, this paper argues that resilience thinking has been programmed into neoliberalism discourse, and the adoption of economic resilience theory as an explanation of the success or otherwise of various sectors of society is dangerously uncritical.

This critique of resilience is based on three elements. The first point is that resilience is a neoliberal concept that relies on the community's and the individual's routine acceptance of external shocks. As Evans and Reid argues 'resilient subjects are subjects that have accepted the imperative not to resist or secure themselves from the difficulties they are faced with but instead adapt to their enabling conditions' (Evans and Reid 2013: 85). Vulnerability exists as a pre-condition to the resilient subject, and the global economic system is built on these accepting, conforming subjects.

There are parallels between the resilient subject and Fry's (2011: 150) 'globalized modern collective subject' who travels with the logic of the instrumental structures of mono-directional capitalist development. The freedoms granted (in the name of pluralism) are limited, based on inequalities and only available to those who contribute to the aims of that development, i.e. economic growth. This constitutes 'a condition that makes the possibility of imagining being otherwise than marginal an impossibility' (Fry 2011: 151).

Others, such as Bristow and Healy (2015: 242) have found that there is a system and structural emphasis on measuring resilience that tends to overlook the role of human agency in developing resilience. This macro approach to resilience discourse generates determinants only at a systems level and can easily ignore the local and individual context. It is crucial that the human that is present, yet absent from resilience discourse, is made visible so that an understanding of who has the capacity to adapt and has capacity for transformative agency can be achieved. The second point is that the foundations of resilience theory proposed by Holling rely heavily on Joseph Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction which he popularised in the 1940s. This concept derived from Marx and Engels' work in which they described the crisis tendencies of capitalism as 'the enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces' (Marx and Engels 1888, 1967: 86) led by an epidemic of overproduction and the famine that followed. For Schumpeter, creative destruction – an 'industrial mutation' which 'incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one' – is an 'essential fact about capitalism' (Schumpeter 1943, 2003: 83) and became central to his economic theory.

Today, creative destruction is widely accepted as a necessary macro-economic process, used to explain capitalism's destructive economic fluctuations, and defend the resulting corporate restructurings and workforce rationalisations. Opponents of capitalism have been critical of this acceptance. As David Harvey (2010: 46) argues: "Schumpeterians have all along gloried in capitalism's endless creativity while treating the destructiveness as mostly a matter of the normal costs of doing business". It is considered as value-free opportunity where the destruction, loss of livelihoods and stresses are mostly ignored.

The third point is that the resilience measures adopted in the study of communities are based largely, or exclusively, on economic prosperity and growth which aim to quantify economic viability. This is particularly relevant to craft discourse, as research relating to this paper suggests that practitioners are not driven by growing their business, rather there are other more important non-economic motivators and measures of success. These include: health and well-being; satisfaction in the work itself; and the quality of their social connections; each unquantifiable with respect to economic viability, yet significant to individuals. These individual factors could be attributes that contribute to a resilient community but these are not often considered. Ignoring both, non-economic measures of success and the role of the main actor in social transformation, one could argue, renders many resilience measures simplistic if not invalid. Furthermore, if the main measure of resilience is economic recovery, the tensions between the capitalist goals of economic growth and the need to reassess our social and cultural norms for long-term 'sustain-ability' will not be addressed, and a critical dialogue of alternatives to the hegemony of neoliberal ideology never occurs. While some alternatives do exist and are flourishing already, capitalism has assumed too much power (Gibson-Graham 2006) that has allowed a discourse that conceals, and silences the agency of, any possibility for alternatives.

Resilience theory is increasingly being used to measure the success of various sectors across society in order to inform government policy. This should be of concern because the restricted resilience measures nonetheless require energy and resources to be spent, and the resilient subject is contained in a permanent struggle to fit into the world.

The resilient subject is in essence paralysed in the face of prospective dangers, most of which are outside of their control, such that they are unable to 'conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility' (Evans and Reid 2013: 85). This effectively surrenders control to those with power, stripping the resilient subjects of their agency as transformative beings. The paradox of resilience theory is that while subjects are compelled to become resilient according to set measures, they have limited capacity to transform the very structures that define these restrictive measures.

## Craft's agency: from little things

This paper argues that as resilience theory stands, it is unlikely to be able to support social transformation that would be needed to develop 'sustain-able futures'. To imagine ways of providing support to an agenda for social transformation would require a diversity of agents, including craftspeople, to act in plural ways. This, in turn, would require recognition of the potential political power that is 'embedded in the directive structures of society and in the conduct of humans as 'political animals'' (Fry 2011: 6). Here, craft practitioners are called to 'engage with the political agency of craft as a way of fabricating new, and more sustainable modes of (human) being' (Kiem 2011). This could be achieved through a renewed resonance found in 'craft's founding critiques of modernity's fundamental polarities, those separating the body and mind, the spiritual and material and the manual and intellectual' (Hughes 2007).

This understanding of craft as a political function performed by political agents is combined with David Harvey's (2010) co-evolutionary theory of social transformation in which he refers to Marx's account of the transformation from feudalism to capitalism. He explains that social change arose out of the co-relations between seven activity spheres of socio-economic reproduction. These activity spheres are:

**a.** Technological and organizational forms of production, exchange and consumption;
**b.** Relations to nature;
**c.** Social relations between people;
**d.** Mental conceptions of the world, embracing knowledges and cultural understandings and beliefs;
**e.** Labour processes and production of specific goods, geographies, services or affects;
**f.** Institutional, legal and governmental arrangements; and
**g.** The conduct of daily life that underpins social reproduction.

The process, in which capitalism revolves through these inter-related activity spheres, can act as co-revolutionary in contemporary social transformation. Harvey, a staunch supporter of a post-capitalist political paradigm built on social values, argues that overturning of capitalism is not possible from change occurring in one of these spheres, rather, it requires the political movement to be constantly moving from one sphere to another in 'mutually reinforcing ways' (2010: 228). This framework, together with a specific redirection towards 'sustainment', could provide the mechanism through which a new political imaginary can be pursued through plural ways.

Craft practice, and therefore its potential agency, is present in most, if not all, of the dialectical spheres: namely, as a form of emancipated labour and sustainable mode of production; with its material relation to nature that may afford new socio-ecological relations; as a way to support community engagement and social relations; to sustain plural cultural traditions; and in the individual craftsperson's conduct of daily life, in pursuit of the good life. So as craft acts on the world through the modes of object and process, and on an individual and community level, one could argue that it has significant potential in social transformation.

Craft as an artform, as a mode of production, as a vehicle for activism and as DIY, already exists in the political realm with potential to engage with what it seeks to replace, namely unsustainable growth paths (Fry 1994). What is needed is further exploration of how characteristics of craft practice such as persistence and diversity can contribute to: renewed sustainable relations to nature; emancipated labour of craft practice; modes of design and production that bring care-relationships into visibility (Tonkinwise 2004); maintenance of the traditional skills and tacit knowledge that future humankind may need (Clammer 2015); and new economies embedded within society and social relations (Ferraro et al. 2011: 14).

The interventions already exercised by craft practices have transformative potential in much the same way that social economies run as alternatives alongside mainstream capitalism (Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen 2013).

Social economies which are those ‘wide ranging organizations that engage in economic activities with social and ethical goals’ (Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen 2013) which emphasise ‘life-needs’ giving them enormous social and political transformative potential (McMurtry 2004). How closely craft economies mirror social economies in practice is not investigated here, but it has been proposed that craft has the potential to contribute to redefining and shaping a new economic model based not only on economic growth but also on ‘notions of self actualisation, fulfilment and levels of happiness’ (Ferraro et al. 2011: 13).

While not discounting the potential for radical social transformation towards a post-capitalist future, the conscious political agents that are required to assemble for this to happen,may be some way away. In the meantime, recognising the plurality of ways that craft already contributes to a multi-vectored approach to ‘sustain-ability’, and continuing to cultivate its still-latent agency will contribute to the possibilities for change.

## Conclusion

This paper argues that craft has an agenda to be explored through a renewed focus on its characteristics of persistence and diversity. Despite repeated attempts by capitalist forces to marginalise craft practices, they continue to flourish in many forms. Craft practices run in parallel with, and are embedded within, industrial and post-industrial modes of manufacture; they form the basis of a significant DIY and activism cultures; and are ever-present in the arts. This paper proposes that an investigation of the notion of resilience and its relationship to craft’s transformative potential is important in the development of ‘sustain-able’ futures. As measures of resilience continue to be used to explain the nature and viability of other human, biological and natural systems, it is crucial to also build contextual knowledge in the unique field of craft practice. This would become a critical field of research, one that explores a political agenda for craft, investigates the values in our material culture, and opens the possibility for other ways of making and measuring viable futures. The imperative then becomes confronting the question: ‘Who should be resilient, against what, and how?’

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