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Towards a post-consumer subjectivity

A future for the crafts in the twenty first century?

> "I never met with a question yet, of any importance, which did not need, for the right solution of it, at least one positive and one negative answer, like an equation of the second degree. Mostly, matters of any consequence are three sided, or four sided, or polygonal; and the trotting round the polygon is severe work for people in any way stiff in their opinion."
> John Ruskin, Collected Works, Vol 16, p. 187

Perhaps a little unfashionably, I would like to suggest that an idea as to a future for the Crafts could be found by looking to the past and, more specifically, to the intellectual legacy of the nineteenth century. Considering the birth of the contemporary studio crafts as a political and social movement rather than a merely artistic one, reveals a depth of what shall be referred to below as 'ecological understanding' that goes far beyond an awareness of environmental issues at the, often superficial, level of nature preservation. This paper will review, very briefly, the philosophies of three of the most significant and influential nineteenth century thinkers in the Crafts.

In recent years, the Crafts have been engaged in an increasingly desperate struggle to remain relevant in a hyper-industrialised world. The alternatives seem both to entail absorption into the fields of design and/or the 'fine arts'. The three areas of practice, craft, art and design, share many concerns and should be considered overlapping fields which nevertheless have distinct identities. The design profession separates the act of design from that of making, which is usually done in factories by people who have no, or minimal, input into the design of the objects they produce. Art has been increasingly conceptually driven for well over two centuries, during which it has been progressively divested of its associations with craft, with particular materials and their skilful manipulation. This shared valorisation of the intellectual over the material is perhaps the underlying reason for the twenty first century marriage of art and design recently described by Deyan Sudjic, Director of the Design Museum, London[i]. The key to craft, however, is the fusion of design and making and the ongoing dialogue this establishes between maker, object, materials and processes. By collapsing, to greater or lesser degrees, the distinction between the mind and the body, object and subject and, ultimately, the material and spiritual, craft represents a challenge to the dominant conceptual framework of our civilisation.

Craft with a capital 'C' is an epiphenomenon of modernity. Its catalyst was the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and its subsequent social upheavals. While the crafts movement that arose in the last half of the nineteenth century was in part dedicated to the preservation of skills and traditions that were considered endangered, it was also and above all else, concerned with both individual creative expression and the nature of work. In this it should not be considered a continuation of traditional production, nor simply a romantic dream of returning to a previous state of social organization such as that which prevailed

in the Middle Ages and had produced Gothic architecture, the idea of which was so important in the movement's genesis.

The Arts and Crafts Movement arose during an epochal change in the human condition brought about by the deployment of the steam engine powered by fossil fuels. This was the first advance in the technology of motive power since the domestication of animals and the exploitation of wind and water -power for that purpose. Understandably, the steam engine and the technologies that followed hard on its heels gave rise to dreams of unlimited human progress and power over nature. It also gave rise to an exponential increase in the exploitation of natural resources and of the production of an ever-expanding volume and variety of commodities. As is well known, the first phase of industrialisation caused widespread social upheaval, exacerbated by rapid, unplanned urbanisation and environmental deterioration. This maelstrom of destruction and potential was the ground for the emergence of the Arts and Crafts and it is no accident that the question of how we—collectively and individually—are to live was then a central preoccupation.

For three decades we have been experiencing a technological revolution on a scale commensurate with that of the nineteenth century. Digital technologies have not only changed the way we communicate with one another and provided a myriad of new toys, they also have a propensity to constitute a powerful metaphor of a parallel world—cyberspace—that can make us forgetful of the concrete material reality that is the grounds for our existence. Indeed, forgetful of the hydrocarbons we are still burning, the materials we are still mining and forgetful of the distant factories producing the objects we are consuming in ever-greater quantities.

As the industrial revolution rolls inexorably on, it has been shadowed by another revolution that represents a yet greater epochal change in the human condition; the long-term legacy of the hydrocarbon age and the immediate product of our own way of life. As we push harder against the limits of the Earth to supply materials and energy and to absorb the by-products of industrial activity a growing environmental crisis that is truly the flip-side of cyberspace casts a lengthening shadow over our technological cornucopia. Rooted firmly in physicality and the limits of concrete and contingent materiality, it must produce a revolution in human life, for better or worse, or destroy civilisation. This new epoch has been dubbed by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen the **Anthropocine**, with a suggested beginning date coinciding with James Watt's invention of the improved steam engine in the late eighteenth century. Crutzen argued that humanity now represents a force of nature with a significant, non-localised, impact on global natural systems and that this must be acknowledged if our civilisation is to survive.

To understand the potential role of the crafts in negotiating our way out of hyper-industrialism and turbo-capitalism, it is useful to look back to the intellectual foundations of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Rather than focus on the Movement's aesthetic contribution in the history of design or art, it can be more usefully reframed as a social and political movement that attempted to address the question of what constitutes the 'good life'. The 'good life' here refers to a philosophical tradition that, in the West, dates back to Ancient Greece. It is concerned with a life that is at once fulfilling and lived in a manner consistent with one's values, as distinct from a life of material abundance or one that is free from fear or effort. The Arts and Crafts Movement sought to address this question under the conditions imposed by industrialisation and, more importantly, sought to examine the potential opened up by new technologies and the challenge they

presented to the existing social and political order. Importantly, it put objects and their production at the very centre of these efforts.

Within the diversity of practices and beliefs that come under the rubric of 'Arts and Crafts' there is an implicit unifying theme that is far more relevant to our own time than mere aesthetics. This is an alternative form of individuation or 'selfhood' to the atomistic conception of the individual characteristic of modernism. As it emphasises relational identity and interdependency over a sharp distinction between subjects, or indeed between subjects and objects, it can be described as ecological in the broad philosophical sense. This alternative worldview operates on several levels and embraces both the production of objects, which is considered as the foundation of our relationship with nature and with one another, and natural and artificial context of this production. For the present purposes, this intellectual thread will be followed through ideas of three key individuals in the history of the Arts and Crafts: John Ruskin (1819-1900), William Morris (1834-1896) and CR Ashbee (1863-1942).

Ruskin's thought, though he provocatively described himself a 'Tory of the old school' offers a truly radical critique of some of central the values of Western civilisation. In his life time The Nature of Gothic—a chapter from the Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849)—became his best known work. It was considered so significant that William Morris described it as 'one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century'. His Kelmscott Press published it separately in 1892. If any one of Ruskin's works were to deserve a similar accolade today, I believe it would be a curious lecture he delivered at Tunbridge Wells in 1858, entitled The Work of Iron[ii].

In the midst of an industrial revolution built upon iron, Ruskin asked his audience to reconsider the true work of iron in the world. Here he set about overturning the contemporary understanding of this most common metal by arguing that its greatest value is to be found in its rusted form, where it has undergone a 'vital change', combining with oxygen to become '……sand, lime, clay, and all the rest of the earths' that sustain plant and animal life and, ultimately, human civilisation. Here in '…permanent unity with the purest air which he himself breathes…' iron is most truly useful to man. Ruskin presents a graphic and prescient vision of the inevitable outcome of a contemporary Victorian instrumentalism that could value iron only as a 'resource':

> ...but how would you like the world, if all your meadows, instead of grass, grew nothing but iron wire - if your arable ground, instead of being made of sand and clay, were suddenly turned into flat surfaces of steel - if the whole earth, instead of its green and glowing sphere, rich with forest and flower, showed nothing but the image of the vast furnace of a ghastly engine - a globe of black lifeless excoriated metal? [iii]

Ruskin extends his image of a world unified by the vital combination of elements rather than their separation, asking

> Is it not strange to find this stern and strong metal mingled so delicately in our human life that we cannot even blush without its help?[iv]

In addressing the role of iron in 'art' he uses the metaphorical image of that most typical of Victorian artefacts, the iron fence. Remembering that such fences were a relative novelty in the mid-nineteenth century, he contrasts a world divided by iron fences where the people are likely to be "sophisticated, unkind,

uncomfortable and unprincipled" with one free of them, in which the population will be found to be "for the most part, simple, happy benevolent and honest". Ruskin is making two points here. He uses iron as a metaphorical thread of to unify a discussion that spans issues customarily treated within discrete disciplines such as geology, human physiology, chemistry and political economy and demonstrate the interrelatedness of all phenomena. The iron fence is his metaphor for all human artifice, embedding it in its social context and emphasising its non-neutrality. Ruskin revisits the fence theme in a later publication, The Crown of Wild Olive (1866). Here he discusses observations made during a walk through then village of Croydon. He notes that the Carshalton pools near the village have been polluted by:

> heaps of dust and slime, and broken shreds of old metal, and rags of putrid clothes; which having neither the energy to cart away, nor decency enough to dig into the ground, they thus shed into the stream, to diffuse what venom of it will float and melt, far away, in all the places where God meant these waters to bring joy and health. These, he argues, could be easily repaired: '…half a dozen men, with one day's work could cleanse those pools and trim the flowers about their banks'.

In a parallel observation he notes that a new public house in the village has a fence consisting of "as much iron and iron work, indeed, as could well be put into the space" to enclose a narrow strip of land. This he describes as nothing other than a useless 'receptacle for rubbish' and asks "how did it come to pass that this work was done instead of the other; that the strength and life of the English operative were spent defiling the ground instead of redeeming it?" The fence represents a triple evil as '…work, partly cramped and perilous, in the mine'; work "partly grievous and horrible at the furnace" and, finally, as work "partly foolish and sedentary, of ill taught students making bad designs". His point is, of course, that all of this production is to make money without regard to the larger picture. Here Ruskin's inevitably unsuccessful coinage "illth", or what is now referred to almost equally uncomfortably as 'discommodity' is contrasted with the genuine life affirming wealth that would arise from a culture of care that nurtured both the land and its people.

William Morris as both a crafts practitioner and a social activist was deeply influenced by Ruskin's thought. In his essay How we Live and How we Might Live, he succinctly outlines his requirements for a decent life:

> 'First a healthy body; second, an active mind in sympathy with the past, the present and the future; thirdly, occupation fit for a healthy body and an active mind; and fourthly a beautiful world to live in.'[v]

In his emphasis on occupation that nurtures both the mind and the body combined with a beautiful environment, Morris's debt to Ruskin is clear. Morris put the production of objects at the centre of his political and aesthetic theory, arguing that this determines, to a great extent how we are to live. Considering the broader, global, impacts of capitalism on peoples outside Britain, he wrote:

> ' …the goods are forced on him by their cheapness, and with them a certain kind of life which that energetic, that aggressive cheapness determines for him: for so far reaching is this curse of commercial war that no country is safe from its ravages; the traditions of a thousand years fall before it in a month; it overruns a weak or semi-barbarous country, and what ever romance or pleasure or art existed there, is trodden down into a mire of sordidness and ugliness; the Indian or

> Javanese craftsman may no longer ply his craft, leisurely working a few hours a day, in producing a maze of strange beauty on a piece of cloth: a steam engine is set a going at Manchester and that victory over nature and a thousand stubborn difficulties is used is used for the base work of producing a sort of plaster and shoddy, and the Asiatic worker, if he is not starved to death outright, as plentifully happens, is driven himself into a factory to lower the wage of his Manchester brother worker. …the South Sea islander must leave his canoe carving, and his graceful dances, and become the slave of a slave.'[vi]

On the consumption side of the equation he critiques both the limits of capitalism and its homogenising effects:

> "… the market assumes certain wares are wanted; it produces such wares, indeed, but their kind and quality are only adapted to the needs of the public in a very rough fashion, because the public needs are subordinated to the interests of the capitalist masters of the market, and they can force the public to put up with the less desirable article if they choose, as they generally do. The result is that in this direction our boasted individuality is a sham; and persons who wish for anything that deviates ever so little from the beaten path have either to wear away their lives in a wearisome and mostly futile contest with a stupendous organization which disregards their wishes, or to allow those wishes to be crushed out for the sake of a quite life.'[vii]

Tellingly for us in this era of cyberspace and Second Life and in an era of British technological, economic and military supremacy, Morris criticised life in contemporary industrial civilisation enervating; arguing that "vicarious life is the watchword of our civilisation …"[viii]

CR Ashbee founded the Guild of Handicraft in 1888, it was originally located a poor working class area in East London. In 1902 it was relocated to the Cotswold village of Chipping Campden. The Guild was perhaps the boldest attempt to realise the theories of the Arts and Crafts Movement in practice, intimately uniting life and work in a utopian rural setting. Ashbee was deeply influenced by Ruskin's philosophy of art and Morris's socialism. Additionally, he was influenced by the writings of the social anthropologist Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) and his theory of homogenic love. This was based in Lamarckian evolutionary theory, which predated the mechanism of evolution through natural selection proposed by Charles Darwin. Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) argued that individual organisms physically changed in direct response to their environment to produce useful adaptations and that these we passed directly onto their offspring. Carpenter believed that human beings were motivated, above all, by love of the human form and that this love led to the progressive perfection of that form itself and would eventually lead to the elimination of the physical and mental flaws that lead to greed and hatred[ix].

For Carpenter and Ashbee, homogenic love, which was a comradely love between members of the same sex that might or might not involve sexual intimacy, was a higher form of relationship that was not confused by the property and reproduction agendas of the socially sanctioned heterosexual marriage relationship.[x] The Guild's move to the countryside was intended to remove its members from the degrading influences of the city to an environment in which the human will toward homogenic love would be freed to produce greater perfection through the process of Lamarckian evolution. Importantly, this move to the country did not entail a rejection of technology. For Ashbee technology was a sign of dynamism and progress; it was evidence of human progress through

evolution and adaptation. This did not, however, mean that human beings should adapt to market capitalism, rather he argued that the worker and the machine should adapt to one another. In practical terms this meant that while the Guild members used machines, there was no division of labour and all finishing and decorative work was done by hand[xi]. The work and the worker's freedom of expression were integral to Ashbee's belief that under the right conditions humanity would evolve toward harmonious perfection. Ashbee believed that the utopian conditions established at Chipping Campden would radiate from there, in a manner analogous to Lamarkian biological evolution, and to slowly transform British society.

Economic factors made the Chipping Campden experiment increasingly difficult to sustain and the Guild was wound up in 1921. Tellingly, Fiona MacCarthy attributes the Guild's decline partially to competition both from manufacturers such as Liberty and Co whose products imitated the handmade look of the Guildsmen's work, and partially to middle class amateurs and hobbyists undercutting the Guild's prices[xii]. The distance that the Guild had put between itself and its customers was also a major contributor to its demise. Although the theory of homogenic love has limited interest to contemporary thought, it has been included in the present thesis as an illustration of how deeply Ashbee was motivated by a concern for how we are to live. It is included also because Ashbee was able, more than any other theorist of the nineteenth century craft movement, to put his ideas into practice; he attempted to provide a meaningful life for the Guild's members that had work, the production of beautiful things and comradeship at its centre. While an admirably bold attempt to create a pocket of utopia in an ugly world, the Guild of Handicraft experiment, points directly to the futility of either confronting capitalism head-on and, also, of attempting to escape from its pervasive influence to another place.

Raymond Williams has argued that in history sensibilities change slowly, overlapping considerably as they do so: one slowly emerging into dominance as another slowly sinks. John Ruskin's thought was influenced by the comparatively new sciences of biology and geology: both of which stand in contrast to the mechanical sciences that rose to dominance during the Enlightenment in that they emphasise complex interactive processes within historically determined, particular and concrete contexts. It is possible that we are witnessing a slow change in sensibility that was, in some senses, prefigured by both Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts Movement. It is possible that contemporary manifestations of this epochal change in sensibility, stimulated by the accelerating environmental damage and social alienation, can be seen in developments such as the Slow Movement, bioregionalism, a rapidly growing concern for cultural and natural heritage preservation, the valuing of resources promoted by recycling and reuse and, most recently, the notion of 'emotionally durable design. This emergent sensibility can also be seen in more anarchic movements such as guerrilla gardening and indi-craft. These movements are decentred and non-utopian, crafting things and places—and thereby lives—from the what already is rather than a utopian what should be. All of these movements share a rejection of the abstract idealism characteristic of modernism, embracing instead the local and the concrete in historically determined particularity. The intimacy and the scale of Craft practice can render it both responsive to these ideas and able to the challenges the present. It is here in the work of imagining a humane, environmentally sustainable future for our civilisation that the Crafts should look to find a place in the twenty first century.

i Sudjic, D The Language of Things, Penguin Books, London, 2008 pp.167—216

ii Ruskin, J., "The Work of Iron", in The Complete Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition, E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (Editors), George Allen Publishers, London, 1904, Vol XVI, p. 337.

[iii] Ruskin, J., "The Work of Iron", in The Complete Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition, E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (Editors), George Allen Publishers, London, 1904, Vol XVI, p. 337

[iv] "The Work of Iron", C W Vol XVI, p. 38

[v] How We Live and How we might Live, 1885, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris. 24 vols. London: Longmans, Green, 1910-15 p. 25

[vi] Morris, W, How We Live and How we might Live, 1885, Collected Works p. 8-9

[vii] Morris, W, Art and the Beauty of the Earth, Collected Works p. 333.

[viii] Morris, W, Art and the Beauty of the Earth, Collected Works p. 338.

[ix] Eisenman, S. and Granof, C., Design in the Age of Darwin: from William Morris to Frank Lloyd Wright, Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 2008, pp. 52-54

[x] Eisenman, S. and Granof, C, 2008, p. 54

[xi] Eisenman, S. and Granof, C, 2008, p. 56

[xii] MacCarthy, F., The Simple Life, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1981, pp. 74, 173 & 180