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Does Contemporary Craft Carry a Social Deficit?

An analysis through comparison with related creative practices

Introduction

Today in the West the use of the term 'craft' is restricted to describing professional practitioners who work to aesthetic ideals derived from, and subordinate to, contemporary art theory. Despite claims to universality and cultural relevance, craft as conceived and promoted by the craft establishment is becoming increasingly marginalised in the West. There have been recent high profile 'defections' by previously stalwart promoters, both individuals and educational institutions. Applications to study some craft subjects are currently so low these are now considered 'at risk'. To provide a foundation for a critique of this situation, this paper will examine two practices that display superficial similarities to contemporary craft but which operate within alternative conceptual frameworks. The consequences these have for their level of social engagement and contribution to sustainability will also be considered. The results will be compared with contemporary craft, with the aim of explaining the extent to which contemporary craft carries a 'social deficit' in its theory and practice which has led to its marginalisation. The paper will conclude by considering means by which contemporary craft in the UK could attempt to readdress such a 'social deficit'.

Considering Craft

Contemporary craft (hereafter termed Craft) presents itself as the practice of making objects, and situates itself in opposition to 'impersonal' industrial manufacturing, associated with Design, though the definitions of and boundaries between the two modes have been contentious. Craft has an equally fraught relationship with 'fine art', primarily due to the latter's claims to superiority (Dormer 1997; Greenhalgh 1997, 2002; Pye 1968; Racz 2009; see also Ranson 1989). Discussions on Craft frequently assume a universalism that selectively disregards historical and contemporary spatial boundaries, indiscriminately appropriating objects from other places and times that appear to be produced through similar means. This is most obvious in Craft technique manuals, which use images of a range of arrogated artefacts to illustrate particular processes or approaches.

The underlying thesis of this paper is that Craft is a conceptualisation rather than an activity. What it creates is people rather than artefacts, though the construction of physical objects is the most easily identifiable physical side effect of this process. This is not to mean the aim of Craft is to physically create humans, though making activities may induce particular types of development in a practitioner's senses (Oakley 2008). Instead people are primarily being produced in a social sense; Craft creates a specific outlook, an identifiable self-perception and a particular social identity.

As Craft is a social construction it is inherently linked to other social concepts, practices and institutions. The Craft practitioner can only thrive in societies with a complimentary framework of perceptions: modernist (in the historical rather than visual aesthetic sense), capitalist and neo-liberal. Craft is therefore an expression of Western culture. Despite Craft's

universalist aspirations it cannot encompass the rationale behind entirely non-Western activities such as the carving of Malanggan in New Ireland or the making of hunting weapons by Inuit in Alaska (Küchler 2002; Fienup-Riordan 2007).

Craft is not the only possible theoretical framework for practice. The same physical activities can be associated with alternative conceptualisations. This paper presents two such situations: Navajo silversmithing and earth building. They align with Craft in being concerned with the production of artefacts using a specific material, with a strong emphasis on visual aesthetics, hands-on creation and exploiting a chosen material's inherent properties, but both differ in regard to their underlying concepts. The following descriptions will identify these and will identify where they support economic, environmental and cultural sustainability.

Navajo Silver Jewellery

The first records that mention the Navajo making silver jewellery come from the mid nineteenth century when the tribe was interned by the US army. Following a truce with the US government the tribe were allowed to return to their homeland, where the Navajo adopted a more pastorialist lifestyle. This resulted in an unprecedented accumulation of wealth and the adoption of silver jewellery as the material means of storing and displaying this wealth.

The first silver jewellery made by Navajo used American dollars or Mexican Pesos. This link to the Western economic system made Navajo jewellery acceptable pawn in the local trading posts. Many Navajo pawned their jewellery at the trading posts in the spring to buy seed, retrieving it to wear during major ceremonies in the autumn after selling their crops and fleeces.

These social functions had a direct influence on the material qualities of the objects. Extant Navajo silver from the period is large and heavy. The bold and simple forms employed both emphasised the mass of silver and resulted in robust objects able to withstand the demands of ceremonials. As Trading post managers reckoned the value of Navajo silver jewellery in terms of weight rather than appearance, Navajo silver from the period is an unmediated reflection of Navajo material culture and includes items such as bowguards and concha belts (Tisdale 2006).

Navajo patrons expected their silverwork, like any other thoughtfully created object, to express hozho, a concept which crudely translates into English as balance, but in Navajo thinking also carries a moral and cosmological dimension. A piece of quality silverwork would evidence hozho both through its overall form and its surface qualities, with textured and smoothly polished surfaces balancing dark and light (Torres-Nez 2004).

Navajo silverwork was affected by social changes occurring at the beginning of the twentieth century: the move from precious metal coinage to fiat currency by the US government, the decline of the trading post pawn system and the increasing acceptance of US currency amongst the Navajo. Despite repeated attempts by Western backed institutions to retain or revive early formal and production conventions they became increasingly marginal. The nineteenth century style was replaced by a new one that responded to the needs of an influx of Western tourists.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the Southwest had changed in the American imagination from a truly hazardous wilderness to a tourist destination, but one that retained

a frisson of exoticism and danger. Viewing Indians was considered part of the tourist experience, but most visitors preferred to do so in mediated situations: guided tours, shows and demonstrations. The Fred Harvey Company, the main service provider for rail passengers crossing the region, capitalised on this interest by building Southwestern themed Fred Harvey stores and hotels that staged displays of Indian culture and sold Indian made souvenirs.
There was already a developed market in local Indian-made souvenirs: blankets and rugs woven by Navajo women and pottery made by Pueblo Indians. But the blankets and rugs were large and heavy and the pottery was large and fragile. Occasionally wealthy visitors with a taste for the exotic or unusual would purchase Navajo jewellery from one of the trading posts. But Navajo silverwork did not meet mainstream tourist expectations of jewellery and their weight placed the objects beyond many tourist budgets.

In 1899 Fred Harvey buyers started commissioning 'tourist-friendly' silverwork through the trading posts. The Company needed jewellery that would look Indian to tourists but meet western conventions and tourists' budgets. The resulting 'Harvey House' jewellery was smaller and lighter and made using quick and simple techniques that kept down material and production costs. To ensure the jewellery displayed a superficial 'Indianness' Fred Harvey buyers provided stamps that bore stereotypical Indian images: arrows, arrowheads, teepees, thunderbirds, owls, and swastikas. These images were enthusiastically adopted by Navajo silversmiths to decorate work (Baxter 1994; Tisdale 2006).

Over the next thirty years the expanding tourist market for jewellery led to an explosion in the number of practicing jewellers among the Navajo and the adoption of silverworking across the Peublos. Whole families now worked together to produce tourist jewellery. Indians were increasingly employed in commercial jewellery workshops in local cities. The resulting work ranged from simple twisted wire bangles to complex and expensive necklaces and concha belts. It included exclusively Western objects such as table spoons, watchstraps and lipstick cases decorated with Indian motifs (Torrez-Nez 2004).

Indian silversmithing was encouraged by the US government through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and protectionist legislation, particularly after social integration policies were abandoned in the 1930s. This support was not driven primarily by altruism towards culturally significant activities. Intensive sheep farming was damaging the fragile ecosystem; the open range on the Navajo reservation had become severely overgrazed. In 1931 and 1932 harsh winters in the region combined with a lack of food killed over 300,000 livestock. The federal government was also concerned that silt washed from the degraded land would, within a few years, choke the planned Colorado Dam. In response to these real and predicted events the Federal Government instituted an involuntary stock reduction programme. Between 1933 and 1945 the Navajo's livestock holdings were reduced from over one million animals to less than 500,000 (Wilkins 1999).

A positive attitude towards silversmithing was shared by the US Government and the Navajo, but for different reasons. The US Government saw and promoted silversmiths as self-reliant and displaying a positive work ethic, attributes that could be sold as American values. For Navajo, its social prestige and associations with masculinity in Navajo culture provided a clear social identity and a measure of self respect. Silversmithing could be practiced on the reservation and integrated with managing the reduced herds. The economic and social relevance of silversmithing during this period is indicated by Adair's estimate that in 1940 the Navajo reservation was home to 600 silversmiths. At the time the reservation was home to 50,000 Navajo. Adair's data excludes assistants, often wives and children, who contributed to production and those Navajo working in the commercial workshops in local cities (Adair 1989).

By mid century the decline of the railroad and improvements in the road system had changed the pattern of tourism across the region. Tourist hot-spots such as the Grand Canyon, Four Corners and Santa Fe witnessed ever increasing numbers of tourists and opportunistic vendors. In Santa Fe, the souvenir market held under the Portal of the Palace of the Governors, a building owned by the Museum of New Mexico, became one of the region's busiest attractions. In 1976 the Museum, in response to the chaotic overcrowding, enforced an Indian-only vendor policy. In response an Anglo-American who had a regular stall at the Portal market sued for loss of livelihood. Evidence collected during the litigation showed that tourists were travelling to the market in large numbers specifically to purchase work made by Indian silversmiths; buyers even attempted to return items to vendors after learning the work was made by Anglo-Americans. (Evans-Pritchard 1987; Hoerig 2003). The court upheld the museum's position that it could and should restrict the use of the Portal to Indian vendors. In addition, the court's verdict statement declared an Indian-only market was part of 'a valuable state interest, that of acquiring, preserving and exhibiting historical, archaeological and ethnological interests in fine arts'.(Livingston v. Ewing 1979 quoted in Hoerig 2003: p70)

Early tourist promoters described Navajo silversmithing as one of the 'Indian Arts and Crafts', capitalising on perceptions of Indians as anti-industrial. The obsolescence of 'arts and crafts' values in American society coincided with the cubists and surrealists' promotion of indigenous artefacts as worthy of admiration as art. From mid-century the terms 'Indian Art' and 'Indian Arts' became dominant. Indian jewellery, pottery, baskets and rugs were by now being appreciated by tourists as vehicles for an abstract or symbolic visual language, analogous to contemporary Western abstract paintings or sculpture. The US court's 1979 verdict statement for the Palace Portal described Indian silverwork as fine art. But this was an art made not by individuals but by cultural representatives. The consistency of the use of either Indian or Navajo as prefixes through both the nineteenth and twentieth century indicates the importance placed on the objects' culture of origin and a belief that the objects were indicative of that culture.

Earth Building

Earth building encompasses the construction techniques which make use of unfired earth as the building material. The techniques are: adobe (mud bricks), moulded (mud piled and beaten into place), rammed (soil forced between shuttering) and compressed earth blocks. As earth can vary significantly from site to site in some localities fibrous materials are added to improve stability. In the UK the traditional material is cob, earth mixed with straw and dung, used in a moulding process.

New earth building is advocated for one or more of three reasons: it is low-cost in terms of materials, less ecologically damaging than other building materials and relates to local heritage. For poor communities with surplus manpower but no means of buying building materials, earth building is often the most viable and sustainable means of constructing new dwellings. An example of earth-building advocacy for economic reasons is the Adobe Alliance cooperative in Ojinaga, Mexico. The cooperative, set up specifically to teach local people how to build with adobe, has provided education programmes for local communities, new employment opportunities and homes in the region (Rael 2009).

In other recent projects the low ecological impact of earth building has been the primary driver. Most building materials have a large carbon footprint created through their

preparation, transportation and later disposal. Growing concerns regarding environmental impact have enhanced the reputation of a material that does not need to be moved or disposed of and does not contaminate the environment. Earth building has been the technique of choice in recent ecologically sensitive projects such as the Kakadu National Park WHS visitor centre in Australia and the Nk'Mip Desert Interpretive Centre in British Colombia (Rael 2009).

Whereas the previous two rationales do not necessarily connect with historical or contemporary local practices, projects may also relate to local cultural heritage. Where extant earth buildings are valued this can lead to a radical departure from modernist conventions and moral economies of material. The historic Pueblo architecture of New Mexico and the fortified monasteries of Bhutan have both inspired new earth build projects in their localities (Rael 2009). This interest in emulating heritage construction techniques has stimulated research on surviving historic built earth structures and development of appropriate conservation methods.

In the UK earth building is promoted primarily on the basis of its green credentials and relation to heritage. English Heritage, the non-departmental public body that advises the UK government on historic built environment conservation policy takes a leading role in earth building issues. English Heritage's building conservation and research team have published on repair and conservation practice, contributed to the setting of technical standards, curated travelling exhibitions and coordinated international conferences on earth building. The body charged with supporting training in cob building, along with other 'heritage construction skills', is the National Heritage Training Group, funded by English Heritage and ConstructionSkills, the sector skills council.

There are also innovative projects in the UK which have adopted earth building due to its ecological and environmental sustainability. The Eden Project, an ecological tourist attraction in Cornwall, has a visitor centre built round a 90m spinal wall of rammed earth and cob built bus shelters (Rael 2009). Eden can be seen as a local manifestation of the international trend of earth-built ecological visitor centres.

Other UK projects illustrate the interplay of heritage and sustainability. Purbeck District Council chose cob for a park and ride reception building in the town of Corfe Castle in Dorset. The technique was chosen both for its environmental sustainability (in line with the park and ride ethos) and because the site is located in the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) where cob is a traditional method of construction. The decision to use cob therefore demonstrated the Council's commitment to the AONB management plan. It was envisaged that as well as being a functional structure the park and ride building would serve as an educational aide for owners of local cob buildings seeking advice on maintenance and repair (Nother, 2000).

Submissions for earth-build projects in the UK have to meet planning regulations and prove the proposed building adheres to building regulations. While cob structures have good load bearing and insulating properties, the absence of documentation to this effect proved problematic in early planning applications. Over the past decade one of the tasks undertaken by organisations and individuals advocating or supporting earth building has been to collect and make this information available. (Nother, 2000). Earth building practitioners have to understand the relevant legal regulations as well as construction techniques in order to make a contribution to new build projects. An understanding of the local historical context of earth building, its technological relationship to other building materials and technologies are necessary prerequisites to successful practice.

Conceptualisations and their Implications

Within the two examples are three differing conceptualisations of practice. Initially the manufacture of Navajo jewellery was fully integrated into Navajo culture, with objects being produced primarily in response to Navajo needs but also being relevant to liminal western contacts. Subsequently it became fundamentally inter-cultural, with the production skills and practice based in Navajo culture but the objects modelled and consumed according to Western conventions.
Nineteenth century Navajo silversmiths gained their status and livelihood through being the creators of socially complex objects; each silver object was a store and overt display of wealth and a material expression of the Navajo concept of hozho. This role situated silversmithing at the heart of the Navajo pastoral economy, but also dictated limits to practice. Silversmiths were artisans, making jewellery only when patrons had the silver for them to do so. In order to fulfil its social role, the form of each artefact created was restricted by social conventions. There was little opportunity for speculative production on the part of practitioners either in terms of the number of artefacts or their physical form.

Silver jewellery enabled the Navajo to embrace Western precious metal currency but mediated this acculturation by reconfiguring the material objects at the heart of the Western system, subordinating them to Navajo conventions. Their activities made practitioners agents of social sustainability, and through their role in the development of a culturally integrated means of retaining earnt wealth, economic sustainability.

Navajo silversmithing evolved into a type of tourist art. The term tourist art identifies individually made objects created by indigenous or naturalised communities, primarily to sell to Western tourists (Graburn 1976). Tourist art is perceived by consumers as manifesting the culture of their producers, though the objects can also symbolise the circumstances of their acquisition. Tourist art differs from art and craft in that it privileges the ethnicity and culture of the maker and their alterity to the consumer.

The production of tourist art is often portrayed as decadent, with an economic rationale that has destroyed more worthy cultural motives for production. Such notions assume the lack of a financial dimension to previous creative activities and impose a hierarchy of authenticity dominated by extant pre-contact relics.

As tourist art Indian jewellery became a significant force that facilitated social sustainability by offering a continuity of social identities built around practice and economic sustainability through that practice. One of the few viable alternatives to increasingly unsustainable subsistence agriculture, by 1940 silversmithing helped provide an income to more than one in eighty of the total Navajo population. By reducing dependency on local natural resources it also had a direct positive impact on the environment

Earth building is subject to different constrictions. The size and potential utilisation of the artefacts results in their classification as buildings. In a nation-state such as the UK, creators of buildings are expected to conduct their practice in relation to legal frameworks (planning and building regulations) and project a particular social identity, which includes possessing specific qualifications. As a consequence earth building is drawn into the orbit of architecture and building technology rather than of Craft. But this classification is reinforced by earth-building's positive relationship to environmental sustainability. It is the possibility of the creation of structures at minimal environmental and ecological cost through the exploitation of a particular material, rather than a delight in the material in and of itself, which makes the practice material-specific.

In contrast craft is conceptualised around the activities of production and the practitioner. Peter Dormer has presented Craft as relational to other genres of production, situated in opposition to art, design and technology and existing as a *salon de refuse* inhabited by low-status practitioners working in studios in a largely indifferent world (Dormer 1997). With a measure of irony Paul Greenhalgh calls Craft 'victim of an unloving world' (Greenhalgh 2002: p1). This perspective can be traced back to Bernard Leach and his 'spiritualisation' of pottery as a craft process.
When theorists consider the social role of Craft it is solely through the provision of aesthetically pleasing objects. In his analysis of workmanship, which specifically included craft, David Pye recognised that visual diversity, whilst desirable, was not essential. He anticipated that individuals economically reliant on bespoke manufacturing within an industrialised society such as the UK would find themselves in an increasingly precarious financial position (Pye 1968). He predicted it would 'survive as a means of livelihood only where there is sufficient demand for the very best quality at any price' (Pye 1968: p77). But instead Craft followed a different route that enabled its established practitioners to survive without economically competing with industrial production.

The Craft Establishment

Craft practitioners are a subset of bespoke production and one that currently has a relatively high status in terms of income and reputation, though this does not flow directly from Craft practitioners' manufacturing activities. In the UK, Craft practitioners are educated professionals who adhere to aesthetic ideals derived from, and subordinate to, art theory. They have a symbiotic relationship with governmental organisations, agencies and institutions with a remit that covers or interfaces with Craft and the educational institutions which offer training in Craft. For the majority of professional Craft practitioners social engagement consists of presenting the results of their individual explorations of material and formal qualities in exhibitions, generally linked to an expectation of the eventual sale of individual objects. Their financial security, however, is not directly dependant on such sales, as once their status is confirmed by the Craft establishment they are able to acquire extramural remunerated posts as lecturers, exhibition and collection curators, trustees, writers and consultants. Such posts reinforce their professional status and enable the development and maintenance of professional networks which further cement their position.

But whilst established craft practitioners do not need to create large bodies of work, candidates aspiring to achieve such status do. This leads to a paradox. Exhibitions showcasing the work of established makers present Craft artefacts as scarce, valuable and worthy of reverence. But the system is underpinned by the production of large volumes of relatively disregarded and undervalued work which is made by contenders (students and 'early-career' practitioners) in the process of developing their professional profile as part of their attempt to gain admission to the secure elite. The level of gearing the current system creates (the ratio of established to aspiring practitioners), the percentage of contenders who never achieve any measure of success, and where the large number of artefacts being created end up, are difficult questions to answer.

The Craft establishment has gone through different phases of growth and decline in the UK. During the 1960s and 70s, governmental financial support to higher education (HE) institutions and students provided initial impetus to its expansion. Further stimulation was provided by the inauguration of the Craft Council in 1971, which financially supported newly established practitioners who exemplified Craft ideals, and the creation of additional Craft-related courses and expansion of existing ones which provided economic security and status

for established practitioners through lecturing posts. During the 1980s and early 90s a decline in the funding awarded per student to educational institutions led to an expansion of cohort numbers (creating far more aspirants). Since the 1980s Craft has increasingly struggled to retain a presence in school and adult education due to changes in government policy and funding restrictions. The more recent decline in HE Craft course applications and spate of course closures have led to some Craft disciplines now being identified as 'at risk' (Fearn 2008).

Concerning Consumption

Both Navajo jewellery and earth building had consumption built into their conceptual structure. Early Navajo silversmithing was dominated by patrons' requirements. Their control over the provision of the raw material ensured the levels of production and consumption remained in sync. The scarcity of the raw material dictated this restriction and the unused capacity in this system was an intangible element: silversmithing production capability.

When Navajo jewellery became a tourist art the desires and financial limits of tourist consumers became the defining factor. Initially the Fred Harvey Company acted as patron, underwriting production and dictating the qualities of the work being created. Though subsequent direct selling situations were more speculative, silversmiths could not afford to make work that did not quickly sell. Indian jewellers at the Portal used their vendor status to continually gauge tourist responses to the artefacts being offered, creating a positive production-consumption interaction. During the 1970s in such situations it was the amount of access to the finite number of vending sites which in reality restricted production.

Earth building is subject to different controls. All projects of any import have to be approved by government officers working to strict guidelines on behalf of the wider community (who, in effect, also consume the artefact though they do not directly purchase it). Prior to the production of any artefacts, projects have to be justified in a public area not only in terms of aesthetics and social continuity, but also environmental sustainability through a demonstration that they adhere to legally binding building codes.

In contrast to these situations, craft is conceived only in terms of production. Practitioners are expected to respond to materials not consumers. As market research is part of Design's modus operandi, Craft's alterity precludes this activity; instead the Craft practitioner is expected to look inside themselves for the rationale behind their production. In Craft publications far more space is devoted to production techniques, materials, practitioner motivations, interests and inspirations than to the social trajectories of the artefacts being produced (exhibitions excepted). It could be proposed that the most important consumer of Craft is the Craft establishment, which, through an attenuated and undeclared system of selective patronage, dictates the relative status of practitioners and therefore the qualities of the majority of current Craft work being produced. But Craft institutions are only interested in directly purchasing iconic examples of established practitioners' work. The social trajectories of pieces created by aspirants and unsuccessful contenders (which are possibility the majority) are unclear.

A Future for Craft?

It is reasonable to assume that the Craft establishment is going to suffer some level of attrition in the near future. All its major current sources of funding are now under increasing constraint as a result of macro-economic pressures. In a sense this is only an acceleration of the long term decline in the level of institutional support for Craft in the UK that has been occurring since the 1980s. The core issue has always been relevance. While apologists choose to declare Craft's value in its own terms, those managing educational and cultural budgets have to determine relative value. Craft will always have competition; whether this is literacy and numeracy, STEM subjects or sport is just a matter of circumstances. The Craft establishment's inability to conceive of craft beyond visual aesthetics and production, or consider the consumer as anything more than a passive audience, does not help its appeals. Seriously addressing Craft beyond the comfort zones of the workshop and the exhibition is an essential step to building a more dynamic and mutually supportive relationship with wider society.

The continual emergence of new practitioners who conceive of their activities in a more socially engaged way is cause for optimism. That they feel the need to give their activities new labels such as 'indie craft', 'craftivism' or 'stitch 'n bitch' indicates the extent to which they see their practice as distinct from Craft. Identifying how Craft can learn from their achievements and possibly incorporate some of their social dimension is important, but it can only be successfully done through a dialogue on equal terms. The Craft establishment needs to recognise that Craft as currently conceived lacks widespread social engagement and needs to become more proactive rather than assume a position of superiority.

Craft may also be declining as a result of long-term shifts in social perceptions in regard to its core elements: materials and production processes. In much the same way that a shift in the way Westerners viewed elephants resulted in ivory carving becoming a socially reprehensible practice, many other Craft production processes previously considered benign are today potentially ethically dubious. The environmental and social costs of material extraction, preparation and transportation are now recognised as significant, as is the pollution that Craft manufacturing processes themselves almost inevitably entail. The recent 'blood diamond' and 'no dirty gold' campaigns in the UK are examples of a new ethical perspective encroaching on Craft practices.

Practitioners will increasingly have to make and declare ethical decisions regarding their own activities. Organisations that claim to speak for the sector have to answer for Craft as a totality. A conceptualisation of practice that excludes consumption fatally compromises this. How can any practitioner begin define an acceptable level of environmental and social disruption regarding the creation of an object when they have no means of identifying where the object will go or what it will do? The ecological cost of creating artefacts not only needs to be minimised, the remaining price still needs to be justified.

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