

Hamid van Koten

The Role of Crafts in the Transition to a Sustainable Culture

Hamid van Koten Bio

Born in Rotterdam Hamid van Koten came to Britain to study Middle and Far Eastern philosophy. He also acquired practical skills as a furniture maker, and in 1993 he graduated from Glasgow School of Art in Product Design. Since then he has been the director of the VK&C design consultancy and has worked on a wide range of projects, including industrial, exhibition, interior, and architectural design as well as public arts commissions. He has exhibited in the UK and Internationally and has won a number of awards. His work has been much published. Hamid has always maintained links with education and has taught at Glasgow School of Art and Duncan of Jordanstone, where he now lectures in the History, Theory and Practice of Media and Design. He also was a specialist advisor for the Scottish Arts Council, involved with assessing start up and creative development grants. He currently sits on the curatorial panel for the Wych Elm Exhibition, to be held in 2009 at the royal botanical gardens in Edinburgh. For about two years Hamid has been an active committee member of the North Howe Transition Toun, a community action group involved with the mitigation and preparation for the implications of climate change and peak oil.

Abstract

There has been much debate about the role, function - even the justification of traditional and contemporary crafts in Western culture. We may argue that in the traditional crafts there survives a pre-Modern vision set against a culture primarily defined by serial production. Crafts and their practitioners may be conceptualised as vestiges of resistance against the increasing commoditisation of our lives. Yet even crafts are subject to the 'logic of late capitalism' (Jameson, 1992), the 'tyranny of the sign' (Baudrillard) and the 'conspicuous consumption of the leisure class' (Veblen, 1899).

It is hard to envisage a truly post-industrial age when the dominant industrial paradigm still operates as if we have an endless supply of resources that can fuel the global myth of progress, measured by the consumption of commodities. Thus we hear much talk of sustainability yet see very limited action. Living sustainably means dramatically changing our lifestyle – something only few of us are prepared to do. Indeed the post-industrial world is likely to be thrown upon us by nature itself – and when this happens it is the primordial nature of our craft skills that are central for our adaptation to the new conditions we will find ourselves in.

In the light of the global environmental crisis: the mass extinction of species, the depletion of resources and the devastating implications of climate change, the role of crafts and their practitioners will change and evolve into one more reminiscent of our pre-industrial past, but with a remit to create and sustain what we prioritise for our survival.

This paper will outline why we are in transition towards a de-industrialised future and why crafts skills are set to play an important role in the survival of the human species. The paper will make reference to the Transition Towns Initiative (Hopkins, 2009). It will draw upon a number of case studies from Transition

Initiatives and discuss the emphasis placed upon re-skilling and the role of crafts in realising the vision for a sustainable society.

Craft and Discourse

Lets start this paper by examining some of the discourses within which the notion of craft has become entangled. To follow Derrida's notion of 'différance', I preclude this discussion by stating that the meaning of a complex category such as craft can never be fixed, finalised or fully determined but that its meaning is derived at through the negotiation of an ever shifting set of human discourses.

When we consider our ancestors, the flint workers, basket weavers and potters who laid the basis for our current systems of agriculture and civic settlements, we engage with a historical discourse in which craft can be identified as a primordial ability to make tools with gradual (and at times accelerating) levels of refinement. Craft in this sense is our human ability to manipulate the external environment to the benefit of ourselves or of others. As humans we are able to intervene with our environment so dramatically, as exemplified by climate change, that as a consequence we might now face our own extinction. Not surprisingly than that the word craft at its root carries connotations of power (e.g. Wilson, 2007) and magic. Our extraordinary ability to make tools to aid our survival also allowed us to conceive of and develop tools that make yet other tools. Examples of these are potters wheels and weaving looms, both of which have a long history, going back at least 5000 years (Lucie-Smith, 1981).

Much of the discourse surrounding craft has engaged with the debates around this relationship between our tools and environment and ourselves. Most of us will be familiar with the writings Marx, Morris and Ruskin, and their emphasis on the dehumanising and alienating consequences of the technological systems we human live amongst. In many of these writings the craftsman is perceived as a Romantic hero who is fighting to regain a pre-industrial Eden of authentic, wholesome and hand-made production, against the throws of an industrial revolution with its dehumanising and alienating separation of labour and its machinated system of production. A battle - if ever there was one - which the craftsman inevitably would loose. However much of what we think of as revolution was in actuality a gradual evolution and many of the perceived hall marks of the industrial age are present in pre-industrial systems of organisation: arguably the pyramids were constructed on industrial principles using a highly formalised workforce with division of labour between carvers, movers and builders, all likely to have employed a range of machines as did many of the pre-Renaissance craftsmen. Early pre-industrial guilds dating back to 300 AD were another means for labour organisation that are perhaps now only associated with practices of industrial production. The utilisation of fossil fuels brought dramatic increases in productivity and provided a great confidence in the progress of industry, the fact is that many craftspeople of the past will have embraced the wonders of these new dawning technologies that promised to make their work lighter and would increase their output. In fact few craftspeople today could practice their craft were they to reject the machine culture within which we are so embedded.

Therefore viewing craft as standing in opposition to industrial development is not necessarily a useful thing to do. Craft skills today come into play at different stages of the industrial process e.g. as patternmaking, model making and hand finishing of the machine made. Craft activity, as we understand it in this light, is

an inherent dimension of any human creative endeavour, including industrial production and integrates both intellectual and sensual abilities.

Still the dominant discourse around craft today is a Romantic one, as Bruce Metcalfe proposed in his 1980 essay:

You can place almost everyone in one of two philosophical camps: the Classicists, who believe in the truth and power of analysis and categorization, and the Romantics, who believe in the truth and power of intuition and emotion. The Romantic attitude, I feel dominates the crafts.

This Romantic perception around craft has allowed it to be placed in a position of inferiority with regards to the Western category of fine art and has arguably undermined the confidence of craft people and their perceived intellectual status. This goes back to the rise of Neoclassicism - a reaction against the perceived extravagance of the preceding Baroque and Rococo styles and associations with aristocracy. Neoclassicism attempted to impose clear rules and standards to warrant consistency of quality and to universally 'resolve any problem of decoration or form' (Lucie-Smith, 1981, p 192). This imposition of style combined with newly developed technologies and the increasingly entrepreneurial activities demanded of the craftsman to comply with rigorous intellectual standards, imposed by the ruling and educated elite of the day (e.g. Thomas Wedgwood). In this rationalisation of the making process, and by separating out the skills base from the intellectual intent, craftsmen lost some of their independence and control. Equally their unique relationship with the materials was effected, as materials were now perceived a mere medium to achieve a predetermined commercial end. The craftsman's position became like that of a cog in the greater machine of industrial progress. But perhaps more importantly it drove further the wedge between those who worked with their hands and those who worked with their head, so relegating craft and craftsmen to a category well below that of artists. The separation between art and craft and the perceived hierarchy between them is an important, be it relatively recent phenomenon, and parallel's Enlightenment discourse of the 17th and 18th Centuries. This split is based on a conception that breaks down human creative endeavours into distinctive categories of mind and body - intellect and senses.

The body of critical writing associated with the Modern Movement in art and design further contributed to this relegation of craft to a place of inferiority. The written critical discourse that surrounded and defined Modern art of the previous century became so dominant that the practice of art itself has become an extension of it. And even though the High Modernist perception of the craftwork as the ugly stepsister to the perceived intellectual superior Modern artwork has done further damage in terms of the self esteem of practising crafts people and the place of craft in our culture. It seems many 'serious' craft practitioners as well as craft theorists aspire to the transcendent ideals of Modern art as well as its system of commercial galleries, prestigious awards and written means of critical appraisal. We currently witness attempts to develop an intellectual discourse around craft that aims to emulate the tenets of high Modernism. Constructing a new category of Fine Craft in order to differentiate it from traditional, folk and hobby craft is one such attempt. This position has been discussed by Harriman (2007), as she points out this upholds an artificial Euro-American position of superiority in validating cultural production, but it also further increases the gap between the intellectual perception and sensorial understanding of our environment that is at the crux of the forces that have led to our current environmental crisis. Craft discourse as such has become embroiled with the narrative of High Modernism and will maintain the aesthetic as something that can be dissociated from the everyday. It is this very dissociation between head

and hand, between what is beautiful and utilitarian, pleasurable and what is useful, that lies at the root of the environmental crises we now face. There is perhaps an irony in the fact that many contemporary artists are abandoning High Modernism as an authenticating framework for practice. And it is thus questionable if shifting Craft as a discipline towards the traditional modus operandi of fine art and its accompanying intellectual discourse actually do craft a service. Endorsement of craft activities might be better sought by uncovering the social values that the craftspeople manifest through their material production.

Craftivism and the end of Oil

All around the globe there is a growing interest in forming and joining community based craft groups. Many people are finding a great joy in craft activity in a collective setting. Community based craft groups, like Stitch & Bitch, Etsy, and others such as those within community action groups and the Transition Movement¹ are discovering how the sharing of skills and the doing and making of things collectively provides a medium for invigorating community, for regaining self confidence and for finding a way to fulfil deep inner needs:

As I'm sitting at the sewing machine, or holding a needle in my hand, I feel like I'm having fun. And when I can see that I'm learning, I feel my confidence grow, and once we have some confidence in ourselves, then that can only be a good thing, as we don't succumb to being unsure humans who must crave some outward satisfactions to reassure their self worth. Doing something yourself makes you appreciate what you are capable of, and that can go from sewing to leading a Transition group. (Transition Towns Forum, 2009)

Many Craftivists articulate a socio-political awareness around what they do and some will take an active stance against commodity culture. They believe that what they produce and how they produce is a means for political change as well as for profound inner transformation: 'Instead of relying on the mass-market commercial culture, we can be in charge of the literal creation of our own wants and needs.' (Finn, 2009)

For Craftivists the value of craft lies primarily in the process and endeavour of production and a shared sense of belonging to a community. Any consideration for commercial or for critical endorsement is secondary or even irrelevant. The very act of making is seen as means for resisting the cultural logic of late-capitalism (Jameson, 1992).



Figure 1. Practical Craftivism in action: a worldwide network of over 50 000 volunteer knitters produced more than 700 000 baby hats for the Save the Children campaign to keep young vulnerable babies warm during the winter in African and Asian countries. For each hat knitted in the UK a message was sent to Gordon Brown. (Image: Save the Children 2008. Copyright infringement not intended.)

Of course Craftivism itself is also the outward expression of another discourse around craft, and subsequently it will have to take its place in the history of reflective philosophical meanderings that our human condition is so prone to. Even though Craftivists would say they operate outside the traditional forms of validation and arbitration of good taste, and so implicitly critique our commodity culture, Craftivism still depends upon the latter for its very existence. Only affluent cultures can allow for people to spend large amounts of time pursuing what might be considered as primarily aesthetic activities. But before we relegate Craftivism to the past as another relativistic or neo-romantic discourse we might ponder upon the reflections perceived in its often-ironic mirrors. Craftivism engages with the structural narratives that underlie some of the illnesses of our consumer culture. Craftivists recognise that true inner satisfaction cannot be found in bought commodities, but in that in the action of making lies the fulfilment of deeper human needs, such as self-confidence and a sense of being part of a larger collective with shared social values that provides a place in a global community. Craftivists adopt practices like recycling of resources and support agendas for social justice and global equality. It is this socio-cultural dimension of Craftivism that runs parallel with the intentions and visions required for the transition towards sustainable lifestyles.

Re-skilling

For not much longer will we live in the age of fossil-fuelled comfort (global oil reserves are estimated to deplete in about 20 to 40 years). The conversion of highly concentrated energy sources, which the sun has deposited on our planet, have allowed us to build a highly sophisticated (but vulnerable) technological system providing us with leisure and convenience, that has allowed us to escape

much of the manual labour we were burdened with in the past. Due to the many conveniences offered to us by this system of provision, many of our rudimentary skills are being lost. Few of us know how to mend things, how to plough a field, grow or even prepare food. As we descend into a future without the cheap sources of energy that currently fuel our economy, these familiar comforts and conveniences, which our service based economy still offers today, will gradually disappear or at least will be out of reach for most of us. Thus in a few decennia we will be left again to attend to many things ourselves. If we survive the impacts of climate change and fossil fuel depletion than we will need to reacquire many of these lost skills.

As a species with the creativity, adaptability and opposable thumbs that enabled us to create an Oil Age in the first place, we can be pretty certain that there will be life beyond it. Similarly, we may be able to prevent the worst excesses of climate change, and indeed the measures needed would almost certainly make the world a far better place. However, the point is that the world and our lifestyles will look very different from the present. It is worth remembering that it takes a lot of cheap energy to maintain the levels of social inequality we see today, the levels of obesity, the record levels of indebtedness, the high levels of car use and alienating urban landscapes. Only a culture awash with cheap oil could become de-skilled on the monumental scale that we have, to the extent that some young people I have met are lucky to emerge from cutting a slice of bread with all their fingers intact. It is no exaggeration to say that we in the West are the single most useless generation (in term of practical skills) to which this planet has ever played host. (Hopkins, 2009)



Figure 2: Permaculture and re-skilling workshop at North Howe Transition Toun, Fife Scotland. Image copyright: Hamid van Koten, 2008.

In Transition Initiatives we witness people getting together and setting up to re-skill. Many Transition Towns organise training workshops e.g. in organic food production and food preservation techniques, the mending and maintaining of bicycles, straw bale house building, compost making and land management and so on, but also on how to facilitate groups and how to get on with your neighbours and rebuild a community. All of this will become vital in the face of the economic decline that we are all likely to experience as we reach the limits of our planets resources. In the Transition Movement there is an emphasis upon skills, and re-skilling, and not on crafts per se. And even though there are Craftivist-like groups that operate within Transition Initiatives, Transition thinking involves itself with the original roots of craft: to develop tools for survival.

Sustainability and craft

It is clear that the rational emphasis of Enlightenment thinking has not fully delivered its projected social outcomes. As a social project Modernism has done much to improve living conditions in the developed world but at an enormous cost to others and to our environment and to such an extent that we may now be facing extinction. The split brought about between an intellectual perception of the creative endeavours such as reflected in the discourses surrounding fine art as opposed to the more pragmatic ones of craft is symptomatic of the disconnect between the modern mind, the body and the physical environment we live in. This Cartesian dualist mode of awareness is still dominant in how we relate to this environment. Perceiving and treating our environment as fundamentally different from ourselves is the root cause of our unsustainable consumption based systems. Many people working in crafts make a strong commitment to working in sustainable ways and with sustainable materials. The nature and scale of the ecological / environmental issue we are faced with today though are of such immense proportion that many of these well intended measures are near irrelevant to the predicaments we face, and also to the way in which craft will be positioned in the future. This is not to sound demeaning of craftspeople who intentionally have chosen a particular medium or skills set for either ethical or aesthetic reasons, on the contrary it is not crafts that have to change - what will change is the context in which crafts are practiced.

So what then has craft to offer us in terms of moving towards a vision of sustainability? My initial response to this question used to be: rather little. The scale and nature of the changes here are so vast and near unimaginable that most of us do not even want to contemplate these. We tend to live pragmatically and focus on the day-to-day, pushing the implications of climate change, environmental degradation and resource depletion towards the edge of our awareness. In a media saturated culture these appear like things that happen to others in foreign countries and the primary message of our culture is still primarily to be concerned with economic growth and so to perpetuate the myth of endless progress. For the industrialised nations to live in a truly sustainable fashion will mean a dramatic change in lifestyle. This shift is so large - and stands in such complete contradiction to the current hegemonic paradigms - that it is almost beyond the imaginable. If we really took on board the implications of the current science with regards to climate change and resource depletion we would today start reducing our numbers on this planet, we would stop our building, flying and driving, we would no longer or sparingly eat meat, no longer drink bottled water, or consume appliances at the rate that we do, we would move out of our houses and rebuild them in order to make them energy lean. Many of us would have to return to agricultural practices or other forms of manual labour, for to live truly sustainable we need to take apart our industrial culture and rebuild it from the ground up. Craft – as a discourse of creative making – is not going to

bring about these changes and neither are art, design or science for that matter. This change is slowly, but surely, being forced upon us by nature itself. We can think about this in both apocalyptic terms, as the 'Revenge of Gaia' (Lovelock, 2006) or contemplate a more utopian vision such as that of the Transition Movement.

But in any case the implications for craft practice will come from the utilitarian rather than the aesthetic end of the spectrum and the aesthetic disengagement of High Modernist discourse is likely to fall by the way side. Moving towards a sustainable global culture will demand that our skills, both practical and intellectual are put to serve our survival as a species. As resource scarcity and energy efficiency will drive prices up it is likely that the craftspeople of the future will involve themselves with creative exploration of waste management, resource substitution and with technological innovation in the field of energy capture and efficiency. It is amongst the craftspeople that we will find those that have adopted and kept alive technologies, which we currently might consider obsolete. Aesthetic considerations in all of this are likely to be secondary, though will not become irrelevant. There is plenty of anthropological evidence that confirms that at our core we are aesthetically orientated (e.g. Dissanayake, 1990) and even conspicuous consumption lies at the heart of being human (e.g. Mauss, 1922, Veblen, 1899). But our discourses around aesthetics will change and rather than seeing nature as a source for inspiration and image making it is likely that nature itself will be the dominant aesthetic. What we consider beautiful will become more and more be dictated by design parameters of maximum efficiency, such as those advocated in the Permacultureⁱⁱ approach of Holmgren and Mollison (1996). But none of these external changes will happen with ease unless we allow ourselves to change internally. To end then on a metaphysical note: here we need to pay attention to the craftsman for the greatest lesson lies in the transformation of consciousness that happens tantamount to the act of material transformation we witness in the creative act. Craft people will tell us that during their creative journeys there are moments when they reach a point of natural stillness – a place of Flow (Csikszentmihályi, 1997) in which they experience a loss of self and a unity between body, mind and environment. It is from this inner awareness of our essential unity with all that is around us – an enlarged sense of self - that a truly sustainable human world can arrive.

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ⁱ The Transition Movement is a global network of community activist groups who are engaged with the preparations for and mitigations of climate change and resource depletion. For more information see: <http://transitiontowns.org/>

ⁱⁱ Permaculture was developed during the 1970's as a practical means for addressing an overpopulated planet. For more information see: <http://www.permaculture.org.uk/default.asp>