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The Concept of Permanence in the Crafts and its contribution to a sustainable future.

Abstract

Craft, like the making of all works, (as Hannah Arendt observed in **The Human Condition**) has 'the capacity for producing durability' (Arendt, 1998: 172)
In our commodified world there are issues of duration that impinge on the clutter and congestion of our planet, through its overpopulation with things. Through an interrogation of the 'craft object' I indicate a way to understanding the basis for a more sustainable future, through the concept of the persistence of the object, and the processes that lead to its inception.
I use a framework derived from a theory of making based on the writing of Hannah Arendt to examine an understanding of the handmade and the readymade. This position is mediated by a reading of Merleau-Ponty and Raymond Tallis, and his thinking about 'the hand'. I conclude with an analysis of fire informed by Gaston Bachelard.
By returning to the hand(made) and hand(making) I propose an emancipatory position that is based around a re-thinking of the hand-made object and its permanent, sustained place within our lives.

> if labour leaves no permanent trace, thinking leaves nothing tangible at all. By itself thinking never materialises into any objects. (Arendt 1998:90)

In this paper I propose that it is necessary to examine the different rhythms and durations of craft and the 'thinking hand', before we can discuss the nature of a sustainable future. We need to seek the philosophical underpinnings of our relationship to materials, methodologies, processes and the resulting objects before we can ask how craft can contribute to a more holistic appraisal of being and making in the twenty-first century.

> history is a pattern
> Of timeless moments
> (T.S. Eliot, The Four Quartets, Little Gidding, section v)

Craft has been central to the lives of humans for millennia, and in many areas of the world hand -making is still the predominant mode of production. We might even wish to identify the manufacture of hand-made objects, along with the development of language and thought, as the defining characteristic of humanness. Making transports that distant trace of our species-being into the present, carrying the qualities of the haptic. Although the production methods of the last century have made many craft-based methods of mass production redundant, there are still arenas where manual making is still the best or the cheapest process, and therefore the manufacturing mode of choice. In addition there exists a very different scenario for us in the West where mechanisation has replaced much hand production. I maintain the position that the 'fossil record' of the hand and our species' past embedded in the craft object, and the tools, processes and methodologies passed down to us, are now essential to complement, and even to pit against, the alienating forces of modernity with a view to establishing a sustainable future. The production of craft objects forces us, the audience, to confront 'embodied knowledge' and the 'embedded hand'. These objects represent the storehouse of physical experience. Their fragments lie in our museums. Instead of believing that the world of ideas is the only viable future for humankind, I wish to propose that embracing the handmade is also a way to the future. It is a model that has been effective for millennia. These shards are amongst the earliest traces of humanity and some might even prefigure spoken language and have lead to its development; as Charles Woolfson says: 'In saving the tools they were, in effect, also storing up objectified experience of previous labour activity.' (Woolfson 1982:42) To communicate this requires the development of a spoken language, in addition to the 'language of showing how to' perform specific actions. Craft, today, can also offer a model of sustainable production that opposes the alienating qualities of many mass-production processes and their objects, through the re-iterations and innovation of traditional practices. It is a means of carrying the past into the future.

> These fragments I have shored against my ruins. (Eliot, The Wasteland 1969: I.430)

There is, additionally, the special quality of the duration of craft objects; they represent a quite different relationship to rhythm and time than many of the objects that comprise the most part of our commodified world. I insist that we need to re-address the embedded knowledge represented, for instance, by the traces of the potter's hands on a ceramic object, for they connect us through the past and, via that contact with tradition and skill, to the future. I expand the concept of the 'embedded hand' to include, not just the impressions left by direct physical human

contact , but also to the employment of tools - and by extension to the traces left by fire, on clay objects exposed to flame.

In a world of accelerating commodification, where the latest mobile phone is made redundant by the next model every few months, then the different durations of the crafts offer an alternative to the constant demand for renewal and novelty.

> The present still holds on to the immediate past without positing it as an object, and since the immediate past similarly holds its immediate predecessor, past time is wholly collected up and grasped in the present…. It [the human gaze] can never come up against previous appearances or those presented to other people otherwise than through the intermediary of time and language…my present draws into itself time past and time to come. (Merleau-Ponty 1970: 69)

One of the consequences of our existence, what Heidegger calls our 'thrownness', is that we search for significance in that existence; as Merleau-Ponty says: 'Because we are in the world, we are *condemned to meaning*, and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history'. (Ibid., p. xix) This search for meaning is a significant part of my project in this paper. Ceramic remains have nearly the longest duration of any man-made products. Time is an essential part of the ceramic object; time makes us aware of our own death and realise our own authenticity. Our time encompasses our lives.

The ceramic object can persist for generations, handed down in a family perhaps as an object of use - a jug – the accumulation of chips and cracks finally leading to its eventual demise as its 'use value' is exhausted and it eventually breaks. Or it leads a new life as an heirloom, carrying memory traces of former existences into the present that inherits it merely as a symbol of the touch of ancestors. Some of the most persistent objects are grave goods that often come to us in a near perfect state having lain undisturbed in a tomb for thousands of years. Within the register of fired ceramics some of the most remarkable and persistent objects, that bring us an almost immaculate 'memory' of their making, are the sunken cargoes of the East India Company, trading from China, where the porcelain was carried essentially as ballast for the more precious loads of silk, spices and tea to Europe; now, cleaned of barnacles the ceramics are exposed as traces of that manufacture 500 years ago. They are objects of contemplation that arrived into the twentieth century without intermediary.

> Only by the form, the pattern,
> Can words or music reach
> The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
> Moves perpetually in its stillness.
> (T.S. Eliot 1969: Four Quartets. Burnt Norton. section v)

The relationship between art, craft and history is significant. For Walter Benjamin art is historically determined and embedded within its time; history informs our experiences. For Heidegger, on the other hand, art is outside of a particular time – it is trans-historical, and, as such, we enter into a special relationship with a given work. For Hannah Arendt making has 'the capacity for producing durability' (Arendt 1998: 172), and it is this special quality of persistence (that Henri Bergson also draws our attention to as **durée**) that marks out such objects in the world as separate.

Raymond Tallis writes on somatic experience; he combines the point of view of a doctor with concerns of a philosophical nature. He identifies humans as quite different to the rest of the material universe, and the difference 'is to a very great extent the result of the special virtues of our hand.'(Ibid.:21) He speaks of the way hands explore our own bodies and other bodies, providing an explanation of the dialogue between hand and material that occurs when clay is moulded by a potter: '…the caress. Its strokes induce tactile sensation in the stroked and, at the same time, gives knowledge of the body to the stroked.' (Tallis 2003: 141) He develops his thesis in order to separate touch from the other senses - it is a sense that penetrates the world and changes it in ways that we can observe, creating haptic knowledge. But 'to touch' also has a sensory dimension that goes beyond contiguous surfaces lying in contact – it involves an active seeking out - and, if the touched is another human being, then 'to touch is to awaken to awareness'. (Ibid.: 31) The concept of 'embedded knowledge' suggests that touch can also 'awaken' our materials and animate them, and that this is recorded as an integral aspect of the craft object. The clay (body) responds to the hand of the potter – either in its firmness or gentleness and it reflexively returns information to the body of the maker and likewise the metalworker and glass practitioner using tools as an intermediary between hand and material. This can be seen as an 'erotic' seeking quality in the hand that can start to account for the intimacy and power of the handmade through its own mode of discovery. 'The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks.' (Levinas, quoted in Derrida 2005: 71)

The handmade object is an entity that precedes modernity; it has been to some significant extent superseded by mechanised production or by making by proxy. I maintain that the lack of association with the handmade, after the extreme rupture forced by the industrial revolution, has lead to an extreme level of alienation within post-modernity. The haptic was central to human existence; it is the basis from which our being has differentiated itself from animal insensibility. Woolfson asserts that: 'tools are the 'objectivisations' of the accumulated labour experience of humanity.' (Woolfson 1982: 74). The basis of craft is the learnt; a repeated action that has become naturalised – it is 'second nature'. The actions become analogous to our physiological being – the actions of the glass blower, weaver, or pot thrower become as natural as walking (which, itself, was initially learnt) or digestion and heart beat which are part of our autonomic system. The repetition of actions and their embedding in our being, such that we can recall them spontaneously is the basis of the world of **homo faber**, (Arendt's name for the creative human), who makes permanent 'monuments' to his, or her, own(ed) labour. For Tallis the hand is central to an understanding in a greater scheme (indeed the great enterprise of thinkers – that of understanding 'what it is to be a human being.' (Tallis 2003: 3). Central to the project is the fundamental phenomenological 'given' of our embodiment - we cannot escape our physicality; Tallis wishes to go further and to suggest that it is through a particular aspect of the body - the hand and its relationship to tools - that the defining characteristic of humanness (consciousness and self-consciousness) developed.

The hand is an extension of our bodies that needs to be understood, then, in two ways: it both senses nature and the man-made environment and, most importantly, also acts upon it. Touch is the original sense organ and tool - the chief way in which we interrupt natural processes and supply our own needs. The hand has always been of utmost significance in making and manufacture; before the mechanisation of many work activities, it was the chief means through which we effected change on

the environment. Yet, in our post-industrial world the hand and many of its associated processes have been made commercially redundant and replaced by vastly more efficient machines and working practices. In these the hand has not merely been displaced as an agent of making and integral to 'philosophical' decision making, but it has become instead just an adjunct to the machine and its inexorable drives.

It is now those extensions of the hand - the machineries of industrialisation that are leading to the destruction of the environment on which we are dependent. Even if 'labour' and 'work' have been denigrated as concepts in our post-industrial world, nonetheless, seen from the perspective of the embodied craftsman, I wish to emphasise that making, as **work**, remains a central way to an understanding of the human condition and still engenders a critique of alienated labour. Here Arendt's distinction between work and labour is useful. In **The Human Condition**, Arendt sees a tripartite division between labour (and its manifestation as the activity of **animal laborans**), work (the product of **homo faber**) and the creation of appearances in action; for her it is in the making of things and appearances, where, echoing Heidegger, she says that there is a real 'disclosing'. Her distinction between **animal laborans** (who can be considered the repository of alienated labour) and **homo faber** can be utilised in an analysis of work and making beyond the dehumanization of the worker, allowing an interrogation of 'the life of the object'.

In order to understand the crises of craft, (its different duration and the significant place of the hand in our lives) and the problems thrown up by the twenty-first century, concerning sustainability and the commodification of our lives, I suggest that we need to adopt a phenomenological perspective, which describes our own place and experience of the world:

> Phenomenology is a transcendental philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins – as an 'inalienable presence'; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with philosophical status. (Merleau-Ponty 1970: vii)

This position places an emphasis on our being a part of the world, which precedes us, and will endure after our deaths. It enables us to focus on our ecological being as part of organic, natural, culture as well as human culture. This 'Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being'; (Ibid.: xx) it is an intimate linking of life, art and truth that creates the most practicable 'horizon', or basis for my own critical evaluations. Most significantly for a maker, that is someone who uses his body and particularly his hands, phenomenology is a philosophical position that does not reject the physical; it is profoundly enmeshed in an understanding of the body: 'The body is our medium for having a world.' (Ibid.: 146)
In this reading, the marks left permanent in the clay and the orchestrated marks left by fire persist as an embedding of skills and ideas; they are a physical record of our embodiment.

In trying to establish a sustainable future we need to recognise the importance of subjectivity. This is a major contribution made by the establishment of a horizon established within craft. Indeed one of the great impediments to a sustainable future is the presupposition that science is an objective discipline that determines our rationales for dealing with the worlds of nature and culture, whereas:

> All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view….[science] is a rationale or explanation of that world…..I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself…the tradition which I elect to carry on…To return to things themselves. (Ibid.: viii / ix)

A phenomenology of making reflects the necessity to deal with the human as a unity and not as a mind and a separable body - nor indeed the tripartite construct suggested by Freud.

In **Civilisations and its Discontents**, Freud identifies the separation of body and mind that has been forcefully in place from the time of Descartes and probably from the ancient Greece of Plato and Socrates, and is inherent in much religious belief. 'Civilisation is built up on a renunciation of instinct'. (Freud, 1955: 44) Much established culture gives a privileged place to the mind over the body. It proposes that mind is separate from the body and is a 'higher function'. For Freud, civilisation views corporeally determined forces and pleasures as potentially subversive; the forces of order and society require their suppression in order to impose themselves. The body and its activities are subsumed to a notion of the greater good, imposed through a prioritising of the will and mental activity over bodily function. My repositioning of craft through an emphasis on the embodied maker can posit an innate rebellion against that repressing, civilising tendency, by favouring an embodied response to ideas and stimuli. Indeed, in order to evaluate ideas about the world or objects in the world first there has to be the: 'transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things.' (Arendt 1998: 95)

In **Beyond the Pleasure Principle** (Freud 1955: 14-17) Freud recounts the *fort-da game* played by his contented grandson. The child, in his earliest attempts to control his environment, throws the cotton reel out of the cot - 'fort ' (gone) and 'da' (there) as it returned, pulled on the thread. There is an ongoing struggle for the grown up potter once the pleasures of the world have been experienced to make them recur; in firing we have the need to repeat a surface and an 'accidental' quality imposed on the clay through exposure to flame. This parallels those earliest experiences as the ego is developing in the way that we set up situations to get that flashing to repeat in successive firings.

The nature of play, whether it is the very simple activity described by Freud or the activities of a chess grand master is predicated on repetition. Catherine Bates in her book on play states: 'Play orders experience. It re-creates it, which is why play is recreative. It divides experience into completed tellable narratives, making it repeatable and masterable'. (Bates 1999: 173) This is why craft, and its methodologies, which are dependent on play and repetition, is so very important in building a sustainable world.

That rhythm of statement and repetition until an action and its physical consequences become habituated is 'tradition'. Traditions are the repository of haptic knowledge and can endure to confront the new challenges of this century, or ossify and drag practice back to a position of Romanticism and nostalgia. The rejuvenation of traditions takes place through appropriation and nomination. These are acts that have, in fact, occurred significantly throughout history. Sometimes they appear as revolution, but can also be seen as the cusp of evolutionary developments.

In order to create a sustainable world we need to understand our place within it and the ways in which human culture impinges on the natural environment. The methodologies of craft have dealt for aeons with the problems of renewables. For instance, firing, using wood as a fuel, needs to replenish stocks. (It is believed that the creation of the Terracotta army in China destroyed forests and changed the landscape irrevocably – but today most firing takes place against an awareness of the problems of damaging the world).

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable.
> (T.S. Eliot. Four Quartets. Burnt Norton: 1-5)

> Rhythm is the pulse of making. It is also the dynamic of our bodies, of nature; it is the beat of the universe.
> Rhythm reunites quantitative aspects and elements, which mark time and distinguish moments in it – and qualitative aspects and elements, which link them together, found the unities and result from them. Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human being: the lived, the carnal, the body. (Lefebvre 2004: 9)

Rhythm is embedded in the making of craft objects; their making and their possession connect to this centrality of what makes us human. By contrast **Homo laborans** (the labourer) unthinkingly repeats an action, as an adjunct to a machine, in order to make a commodity. **Homo faber**, the maker, either owns the work of his, or her, hands or controls a machine to make 'workmanship of risk', as David Pye calls it. Repeated actions are at the heart of the creativity of the crafts – an action that can be consciously re-iterated and becomes a signifier of skill and of the creation of the new, rather than the alienated act of the labourer. Through that practiced repetition it ceases to be a restriction but becomes creative play.

The creative employment of repetitive actions takes an element of human learning – play - and enables it to transcend just being a simple recurring motif and become something other. Huizinga recognises that the repeated action becomes part of the actor and indeed something that can be drawn on in the future - 'it becomes tradition' (Huizinga 1970: 28). This use of 'tradition' is very important – it describes a 'doing', that has been learnt from, which has been done before. It is learnt because the rhythm of that life has been internalised and incorporated into the being of the maker. In this way I read the concept of tradition as a modernising force that propels us forward rather than as a retrospective anchor that fixes us to the past. By inhering our works in a relationship to tradition we connect pasts to the future; we establish a continuity with our ancestors – both physical and adopted (in so far as none of my forbears were potters I need to appropriate traditions). Tradition relates us to the body, to the carnality of a sensuous relationship with material.

Tradition is re-invigorated by the new. Sometimes that looks like a complete break but I maintain that the acts of appropriation and of nomination are the engines that keep traditions vital and alive. In 1917 Marcel Duchamp first showed **Fountain**. This was an historical moment that was hardly noticed when it happened but has come to be acknowledged as one of the defining motifs of modern 'art'. The different 'duration' of the readymade is essential to the understanding of the handmade craft

object, with regard to 'art', and the alienating conditions of current post-capitalist production. As an act of nomination, I maintain that it was not unique or the first: the most significant act of appropriation for me and my thesis concerning performative firings is the 'act of appropriation', conducted in medieval Japan, by Sen-no-Rikyu for the Tea Ceremony. Tea Ceremony (Chanoyu) is a highly ritualised practice, informed by Zen philosophy, to make tea in a special vessel that was 'nominated' from discards selected by the Tea Master, Rikyu. It involves a focus on the actions of preparing and presenting an infusion of leaves, not as formerly in the most refined of Chinese porcelain vessels, but in rough pots exhibition the marks of process from making and firing. The thinking behind the ceremony and the making of vessels for the ceremony are progenitors of my own practice, 'raku'. I would like to suggest that this appropriation of objects can be seen as analogous to the unique nomination of the (ceramic) urinal by Duchamp, and the establishment of new sites of temporality and what I call sociability for ceramics. Raku has lead to the development of self-firing kiln sculptures that are built by teams of workers can act cathartically like theatre, or dance, for the large audiences who gather for these special events.

Fountain is read as an allegory for the alienation erupting from the denial of skill and the 'embedded hand' as a result of industrialisation, in addtion to other readings such as that of Thierry de Duve, who sees it as a rupture with modernist aura and the myth of the artist. I wish to maintain that the making and firing of contemporary ceramics can be posited as a site for the restoration of the 'the hand' from its abject position in artisanal labour and work within our culture. The selections of kiln wasters by Sen-no-Rikyu, and their reception in contemporary ceramics as the apogee of free, expressive making, can now be re-conceived as returning 'the hand' from this abject position in our culture, through an act of nomination. Bernard Leach experienced a raku firing as an amateur painter/potter in Japan before he met and apprenticed himself to Kenzan. He is instrumental in introducing the practice and associated philosophies to the West, but his remains a retroactive attempt to regain a lost past of the medieval as encouraged by the Arts and Crafts movement. His position acts as a complement to Duchamp (with whom he shares his year of birth).

Firing can also be seen as a form of meditation, both in the religious sense of a devotee observing a practice and also (as in Husserl's **Cartesian Meditations**) as a critical inquiry into the phenomenal. Both reveal a quest for understanding, meaning and enlightenment; one through an intuitive, and the other through a rational enquiry. Not merely is there the product of the craft making, but also the process itself; this 'mystery' is frequently now demonstrated and explored and as it is revealed then it is possible to re-establish a continuity with craft objects and their durations. In the **Psychoanalysis of Fire** Gaston Bachelard talks of the importance of contemplating the nature of fire, particularly in its intimate social manifestation; just sitting quietly with fire: 'Fire and heat provide modes of explanation in the most varied domains, because they have been for us the occasion of unforgettable memories, for simple and decisive personal experiences'. (Bachelard 1987: 7)
The objects created by ceramic firing carry these meditative qualities with them. This quietness and contemplative attitude, I maintain, are essential to an understanding of our place in the world and to avoid our destruction of it . If this is to be the case then the lessons of **homo faber**, the craft maker, need to be heeded.
Arendt writes poignantly of the vita contemplativa. (Arendt 1998: 14-17) and it is well to recall her reflections on our essential temporality, which must form the basis of a new thinking about sustainability in craft: 'We are surrounded by things more

permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially more permanent than the lives of their authors'. (Arendt 1998: 96)

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