

Malcolm Ferris

Making Futures - the crafts as change-maker in sustainably aware cultures¹

Making Futures explores our relationship with the making of *things*. As its title suggests, it triangulates past, present and future in all their vertiginous relations, its beguilingly simple reasoning implying that if we are to have any hope of making a better future for ourselves, we must also fundamentally shape the future of our material culture – a culture configured around the mass commodification of materials, people and non-human life forms, in globalised circuits of production whose logics of disproportionate accumulation and consumption now threaten the very foundations of life on the planet.

This means we must develop a renewed sense of the possibilities surrounding *making* now, and particularly, of reappraising and resituating craft in the contemporary moment, for unquestionably, we are witnessing a rehabilitation of the value of craft in society - as a set of potentially progressive *material practices*, and therefore, as a critical lens through which to understand, and comment upon, current societal norms and criteria. Indeed, *Making Futures* is itself an instance of this recuperation of the value of craft. Yet while it is gratifying to find craft brought so powerfully into contemporary debate, it inevitably prompts three important questions, *why craft? Why now? And, 'how is craft positioned in relation to the future through these discursive trends and structures?*

These then, are some of the fundamental issues *Making Futures* has set itself to examine over its two editions to date. The project is on-going and its findings multifaceted, but in this introduction to the second edition of *Making Futures - the crafts as change-maker in sustainably aware cultures*, we will explore some partial responses to these questions; first through an abbreviated look at the craft as embodied practice, then briefly through some of the "*discursive trends and structures*" that are perhaps particularly relevant to *Making Futures*; for example, the academy, the wider arenas of art and design, and the more generalized field of contemporary (UK) politics. In doing so we will note how these trends and structures often return to the paradigmatic ground of craft as embodied action. We will also try to remain attentive to the use of 'craft' as a noun, helpful in so far as it identifies a set of making activities that share a similar ground and associated meanings (to be discussed shortly), but also alert to the ways in which it tends also to suggest a singular static entity in place of the actuality of a multiplicity of practices based in different materials, operations and technologies.

Craft's Theatre of Becoming:

It is to this plurality of materials, gestures and technologies, to craft as *practice*, that we first turn; and foremost, to craft as an immersive encounter with material that is fundamentally embodied, performative and time based - a liminal space that has the potential to generate processes of alterity, identity formation and becoming. These processes (of subjectivity formation) emerge in moments of intense automatic concentration, the "*being in the zone*", often characterized by rhythmically repetitive procedures that orchestrate movement forwards and backwards between self and matter, between subject and object, the two occasionally blurring to the point where momentarily, polarities fuse and material becomes maker and maker becomes material, where object determines subject.

¹ Minor elements of this essay were first published as the introduction to the print booklet of the abstracts to the *Making Futures* conference at Dartington Hall, September 2011; and as a catalogue essay for the Craftspace exhibition, "*Made in the Middle*", February, 2012.

¹ The views expressed in this paper are representative only of the opinions of the author.

If this description of the body-material encounter would seem to present too idealized an account of craft's experiential grounds - as if a return or resetting of the body to some ordinary moment or 'real' outside of all social signification might be possible through craft - it is important to note that it does, indeed, function as an trope. This is not to deny its truth *per se*, but to recognize that it is relative and circumstantial, contingent upon situations and settings and unique to each practitioner and practice. Nonetheless, charged with the energy of the idea (as much as the actual experience) of this transformative encounter and its potential as a "*freedom to*", craft reverberates through a semantic field that binds it to concepts of affirmative agency and intentionality, integrity and autonomy, identity of self and identification with 'the community' of makers, to particular configurations of space and place, and to notions of localism and the wider communal good. In doing so, these significations bring the non-instrumental "*freedom to*" into social discourse and towards a "*freedom from*".² And it is at this point that subjective experience (imagined or real) crosses into the 'objective' world of systemic social experience and onto the contested grounds of crafts political, social and ethical claims. We might note too, how this notion of an essential craft experience, in its absence, also feeds through into wider narratives of loss and nostalgia.

Materialist Pedagogies:

In the academy crafts potential to foster modes of subjectification finds correspondence with the so-called '*new materialism*' currently running through the humanities and social sciences.³ In many respects a revisiting of older concerns in the light of new technological advances, the '*new materialism*' highlights and problematizes matter as a field through which embodiment and agency are enacted in the world – issues that clearly find counterparts within the meanings ascribed to craft discussed above. Indeed, this interest sometimes manifests as a direct concern for artisanal practices, with their paradigmatic close personal investment in making seen as generative of forms of identity construction and socialization that often stand outside the societal mainstream.⁴

There is perhaps an acute paradox here in that, just as one part of the academy has been discovering craft, so another has been divesting itself of craft-based courses – at least in the UK. These are the Faculties of Creative Arts concerned with crafts practice, where there has been a steadily accelerating trend in craft course closures over the last two decades - the UK Design Commission quotes a Crafts Council figure of *at least* twelve significant closures since 1993.⁵

The Craft 'Turn' in Art and Design:

A further incongruity attaches itself to the decline in craft courses in the light of the recent recovery of craft seen in the fields of fine art on the one hand, and design on the other. In contemporary fine art this 'turn' is evidenced as a shift from neo-conceptual detachment towards the conspicuous display of matter and process, albeit tinged often with (and here perhaps lies the rub) an ironic and self-deprecating nod towards the romantic *lingua franca* of past expressive trends in Modernism. This disposition seemed evident, for example, in some of the works by artists in the recent 7th edition of the British Art Show, which (despite protestations to the contrary by its curators) inevitably functioned as something of a contemporary 'survey' of practice. To select just one

² For a useful description of the difference between "*freedom to*" and "*freedom from*", and further discussion of "*freedom to*", see: Elizabeth Grosz, '*Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom*' in D. Coole and S. Frost (eds): '*New Materialisms: ontology, Agency, and Politics*', Duke University Press, 2010.

³ Again, see, Coole and Frost's influential, '*New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*' mentioned above.

⁴ A case in point here would be the Association of American Geographers 2012 conference strand, '*Geographies of Craft*'.

⁵ The news is not uniformly negative; my own institution, Plymouth College of Art is making a major £4 million plus investment in new Applied Arts studios and workshops, incorporating 'Fab-lab' 3-D design and print facilities, opening September 2013.

interesting example from many possible instances, Spartacus Chetwynd's *Folding House* with its botched together DIY aesthetic and echoes of domestic make and mend.⁶

In the design world, the renewed interest in craft is expressed in, for example, the products of a range of (often well known) practices, such as Tom Dixon's handmade stoneware 'Lustre' and brass 'Beat' light ranges⁷, through to art/design activist initiatives such as the multidisciplinary 'Futurefarmers' studio whose recent projects have been based around various forms of artisanal production.⁸ The turn to craft is perhaps also evident in sector events such as the European Academy of Design's '*Crafting the Future*' conference.⁹ This effort to move towards the seemingly marginal terrain of craft, with its symptomatic foregrounding of material and process and associated interest in ethical and activist practices, comes after a period of feverish global capitalism in which contemporary art and design both came to be seen as characteristic of conspicuous consumer excess. It also reflects a wider public concern with how our worlds are made, and the role of human agency within these processes, indexed, for example, in the popularity of recent exhibitions such as the hugely successful UK Crafts Council / V&A show, '*Power of Making*', or the Renwick's '*40 under 40: Craft Futures*'.¹⁰

Craft as (Consumer) Insurgency:

These large public exhibitions point to the gathering resurgence in craft activity over the past ten years or so, and how this phenomenon laid the foundations for the widespread interest seen in craft today. Significantly, this began as a populist revival that (initially) sidestepped the 'traditional' studio crafts, beginning more as a story of non-specialist grass roots DIY, feminist 'craftivism' and slow movement makers, buoyed by broader alternative developments like the transition movement, urban farming, local markets and craft fairs. Reaching out to new audiences through Internet websites, Blogs, Facebook interest groups, and YouTube, craft *practice* became a means to *re-think* ideas of value production in confronting the high-water mark of post-war mass consumerism. This resurgence drew upon the trope of crafts "*theatre of becoming*" and its field of significations, of personal agency and independence and senses of embeddedness in place and community. In short, craft spoke of an honest-everyday philosophical-cum-practical simplicity, expressed as a unity of mind and body, unity of material and nature, and unity of self with group or community. These meanings constituted a shared utopian narrative that mobilised what became, in effect, a molecular ethical-communitarian revolt against the febrile pre-crash epoch of futures-financed consumption.

Over its two editions, *Making Futures* has been tuned to this quiet insurgency, documenting the ways in which it has continued to develop and influence. Indeed, *Making Futures* might in many respects be considered a product of it: conceived back in 2006-7 as a necessary long-standing project in the face of a system that clearly seemed to be heading towards some form of breakdown, even before the financial crisis had erupted from its obscure origins in the US subprime market to become the toxic infection of global inter-bank debt exposure. That this should have happened so abruptly and through a failure of high-risk banking perhaps should not have surprised anyone - but inevitably it did. The first *Making Futures* conference in September 2009 took place

⁶ The installation also sometimes serves as the site of associated live events in which the artist engages public groups in discussions and activities, including making functioning solar energy devices.

⁷ Each 'Lustre' pendant shade carries a "...unique and unrepeatabe finish..." being handmade in a Dutch family-run factory "...established over 5-generations". The 'Beat' pendant light series are "...spun and hand-beaten by renowned skilled craftsmen of Moradabad in Northern India" having been inspired by cooking pots and traditional water vessels on the subcontinent.

⁸ See, for example, the '*Flatbed*' installation series (2012), or '*Shoemakers Dialogues*' (2011), at: <http://www.futurefarmers.com>

⁹ Projected for April, 2013; the conference text reads "*Design is a central field for practice and research in visioning and crafting the future...*" and, "*Designing is about crafting, making, visualizing, and imagining the future, regardless of whether we are involved with products, services, fashion, interactions, or other areas of practice.*" See: <http://www.craftingthefuture.se/>

¹⁰ '*Power of Making*', the V&A and Crafts Council, Sept 2011 to Jan 2012. The exhibition featured over 100 crafted objects; '*40 under 40: Craft Futures*', The Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, July 2012 to February 2013.

against the background of the global financial crisis at a time when most of us were still trying to comprehend the reality and significance of its reverberating shockwaves.¹¹

Craft in an Age of Austerity:

By the time of the second conference, at Dartington Hall in September 2011 (whose papers comprise the proceedings of this volume) the financial sector appeared to be relatively stabilised but at the cost of the emergency evolving into a deeper socio-economic crisis, euphemistically termed “rebalancing” - between those nations that had followed an export-led model of growth based on the fundamentals of making and/or commodity trading (for example, the BRIC economies), and those that had followed a debt-led model based on a hugely powerful shadow economy of futures finance (largely the West). Battle-lines were drawn within discrete nations, between nation states, and, perhaps most notably, between Far Eastern and Northern Hemisphere blocs. Indeed, the conference itself occurred against a backdrop in which entire sovereign states ran the risk of being bankrupted in a domino effect that threatened the possible break-up of the Eurozone and to tip all into a deep global recession. The UK also experienced its worse urban riots of a generation, as if that extraordinary remark from Margaret Thatcher, (one of the key promoters of ‘big bang’ banking deregulation), “...*there is no such thing as society...*” had come back to haunt UK society with a vengeance.

In retrospect the Dartington Hall conference marked a threshold moment, not only of austerity, retrenchment in public services, unemployment, and generalized precarity, but when interest in the quotidian ways of craft were shifting to a new register, driven by a wholly different assessment of value production. For if the molecular grass roots craft revolt discussed above can be associated with a contemporary progressive politics, one that in some respects echoed its “Morrisian” heritage, craft was now being reclaimed and repurposed as part of the radical right’s political project, as indexed in calls by the then Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning for a new Arts and Crafts movement,¹² the moves to develop apprenticeships, and in the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s stirring demand for a “...*march of the makers...*”¹³

Despite this impressive rhetoric, implementation appeared to lag behind intentions; for example, the focus of the Government division promoting economic growth, the Department for Business Innovation & Skills, was, and remains, directed largely towards high-end advanced manufacturing. And so it felt at times that craft was being presented to us as little more than a prop in a fable of some ideal England, an approximation of which surfaced as the (now quietly set aside) ‘*big society*’ concept. It was as if the movement earlier noted, from the subjective “*freedom to*” into the social sphere as a “*freedom from*”, now became tinged with nationalist strains of a “*freedom lost*” which craft, unleashed by Government, would do its bit to help recoup.¹⁴

Significantly, this talking-up of craft sought to invoke an almost identical semantic field to that shared by progressives: of self-direction and independence, hard work, honesty,

¹¹ The papers of the first conference, ‘*Making Futures: The Crafts in the Context of Emerging Global Sustainability Agendas*’ are available at: <http://makingfutures.plymouthart.ac.uk/journalvol1/about-this-publication.php> The original conference website can be consulted at: <http://online.plymouthart.ac.uk/micro-sites/conference/>

¹² “*I look back to the Englishmen who first raised the standard of craft skill as a force in the modern world - to Morris and Ruskin, Rossetti and Burne-Jones - and I think it's high time to create a new aesthetics of craft, indeed, a new Arts and Crafts movement, for Britain in the 21st century.*” The full text of John Hayes speech, ‘*The craft so long to lerne: Skills and their Place in Modern Britain*’, October 2010, is available at the GOV.UK., site: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-craft-so-long-to-lerne-skills-and-their-place-in-modern-britain>

¹³ In his 2011 budget speech, George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, famously hailed “*march of the makers*” stating: “*We want the words: ‘Made in Britain’ ‘Created in Britain’ ‘Designed in Britain’ ‘Invented in Britain’ To drive our nation forward. A Britain carried aloft by the march of the makers.*” The full text is available on the Telegraph website at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/budget/8401022/Budget-2011-Chancellor-George-Osbornes-speech-in-full.html>

¹⁴ See, for example, Tanya Harrod’s article ‘*A Merrie England masquerad*’ discussing the speech of John Hayes, the then Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, regarding his vision for a new Arts and Crafts Movement, Crafts, Mar/Apr2011, Issue 229, p92.

philosophical and practical simplicity and localism. Except that these meanings were now rerouted through a neo-liberal lens that involuntarily shaded them with darker senses: of crafts subordinate standing within an economic order which equated manual skills with low-wage labour; of craft as an economic necessity rather than lifestyle choice, as individuals and communities turned to localised resourcing, increased domestic provisioning, more make and mend, recycling, and similar practices; in short, of an actual English political economy based on vastly unequal relations of accumulation and deprivation, rather than some nostalgic folk 'vision' of a common future.

In terms of *Making Futures*, matters were not helped in so far as achievement also appeared to lag behind aspiration in the field of sustainability change. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, had declared in 2010 that he wanted his coalition Government to be, *the "greenest Government ever"*, but by the time of the conference it was beginning to appear that the environment and the imperatives of global climate change were being accorded somewhat secondary status in the face of economic crisis.¹⁵

The 2011 Conference:

Reflecting these concerns, *Making Futures - the crafts as change-maker in sustainably aware cultures*¹⁶ was convened at Dartington Hall in the heart of Devon, drawing approximately one hundred and twenty practitioners, academics, curators, campaigners, activists, and representatives from associated organisations and agencies, to share and explore their research. The choice of site was pertinent, not least because it was at Dartington that the Elmhirsts' instituted in 1925 their unique and visionary project to create a centre for progressive education that placed the arts and crafts at the forefront of rural regeneration and positive social change. Dartington Hall was also significant for its close connection to Totnes, the ancient market town just three kilometres away that today is the home of the modern 'transition' movement, a grass roots community initiative dedicated to promoting sustainable forms of living and which has inspired similar developments across the globe.¹⁷ The placement of *Making Futures* at Dartington became, in measure, a call to connect transition thinking and initiatives with the need for a modern day craft renaissance analogous to that initiated by the Elmhirsts'.

The *Making Futures* programme sought to explore crafts critical value as a "change-maker" through six thematic strands and one research workshop. Thirty-eight presentations were curated into these seven conference sessions following a process of double-blind abstract reviewing by a distinguished peer review panel. By far the overwhelming majority of presenters, thirty-five, responded positively to the post-conference call to publish and all are included in this volume. In keeping with the original agenda they appear in this volume under the sessions they appeared within:

Craft As Social Process:

This session centered on the idea that, if the crafts are to enact more ethically and environmentally sustainable practices, we also need to examine and develop their potential to generate social capital. The papers in this session sought to celebrate and to investigate the relationships inherent in many craft related activities. Papers explored craftivism and history (Burcikova); a craft social enterprise by refugee women (Daker); designer-makers and the regeneration of social capital (Fuad-Luke); craft-based co-design for fashion (Hur and Beverley); a design-activist model of a fashion 'commons' based on

¹⁵ David Cameron made the claim that the coalition would aim to be the "greenest government ever" in May 2010. The Guardian later established a 'Green-o-meter' on its Environment Blog to track the coalitions progress. It makes sobering reading. See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/interactive/2011/oct/05/greenometer-interactive-greenest-government>

¹⁶ The website for the 2nd *Making Futures* conference in September 2011 can be found at: <http://makingfutures.plymouthart.ac.uk/mf2> The third *Making Futures* conference will return to Mount Edgcumbe, on the 26th and 27th September, 2013.

¹⁷ See the Transition Network website at: <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/>

amateur knitting (Twigger Holroyd); and a value chain analysis of makers contributing to sustainability agendas (Yair). All suggested craft should not simply be seen as a relationship between an individual maker and material - but as an *active space* within which narratives of relationship, group identity, place-making and belonging are woven.

Craft in an Expanded Field:

This session explored the view that a broad view of making, beyond that represented by the studio crafts movement, constituted an important dimension of our understanding of contemporary craft and its potential to contribute to a sustainably aware future. The papers in this session explored: a cultural ecological framing as a basis for understanding tradition and change (Dillon); a practitioner perspective on craftivism as eco-philosophy (Harper); the significance of 'craft' within a project bringing together textile design and materials science creating sustainable sheet materials (Kane, Vardy, Shakoov, Thomas); the DIY values of 'imperfect', punk influenced, cinema (Paolantonio, Gall); and an examination of the skills, aptitudes and values common to traditional, industrial, so-called 'world' and studio crafts (Woolley).

Critical Perspectives on Post-Industrial Futures:

This session examined the position of the contemporary crafts in relation to the historical conditions of industrialization, and to current social circumstances in which 'post-Fordist' modes of design, making, marketing and consumption are emerging as reactions to mass production and environmental issues. The papers in this session investigated: the value of a craft 'outlook' as distinct from that of a 'scientific' worldview (Ferraro); the multiple roles of craft, including in the Great Re-Skilling' envisaged in Transition Networks (Jennings); the mobilization of nostalgia as a narrative of craft (Loveday-Edwards); the pleasure of making expressed as 'thinking hands' (Martin); and the repositioning of craft in relation to contemporary consumer values (Na).

Endangered Subjects - Ethical Minds:

Crafts education is undergoing something of a crisis, with craft-based disciplines in the UK art school system, for example, now considered 'endangered subjects'. The papers in this session debated the place of craft in the context of these rapidly changing academic structures and evolving pedagogic practices. They examined: a student-teacher project involving recycled sleeping bags and tents (Barber, Swindells); an historical overview of craft education as a basis for understanding its possible futures (Houghton); technical manuals as communication media from professional to amateur potters in the immediate post-war period (McLaren); understanding and overcoming resistance to sustainability agendas through a phenomenological approach to teaching (Smith).

Local Global Translations & Dialogues:

This session examined the tensions and flows expressed through craft in the 'post-colonial' contexts of contemporary Globalisation. The papers debated: a Finnish perspective on the motivations underpinning craft entrepreneurs (Luutonen); the promotion of Scottish national identity through craft (Peach); two papers from different authors (Rhodes) and (Stevens), both examining the position of craft within the rapidly urbanizing contexts of South Africa; an analysis of design and craft contributions to sustainable development in relation to Welsh textiles (Thomas); and the changing dynamics of felt production within the Kyrgyzstan (Bunn). Together they explored sustainable and ethical craft issues in relation to the movements and stresses between traditional cultures and modernity, between rural and urban cultures, and between local, national and global levels of interaction and translation.

Practice-based (Re) Definitions & Positions:

This session explored the many ways in which craft practitioners are imaginatively responding to public dialogues around sustainability and ethical production/consumption issues. The papers in this session explored: the combination of craft and digital technology to point to a more environmentally sustainable form of textile printing (Carden); the craft of moving image production and the sustainability of the digital medium as a vehicle for communicating family histories (Leake); a study on the subjective and objective (interior/exterior) facets of craft in moving towards a sustainable future (Nasseri, Baxter, Wilson); an evaluation of the role of the craft of knitting in emerging trans-disciplinary design issues (Steed); the implications of crafts practice as a change-agent for the individual and a way to develop the 'self' (Wood). Together these papers revealed how individual craftspeople are redefining the contemporary crafts as a means to empower self and others.

In addition, the programme incorporated a special research workshop:

Regeneration in Glass - A Sustainable and Financially Viable Future:

The workshop explored the difficulties faced by the Studio Glass Movement, and the idea that, if there is to be a future for the Studio Glass Movement, part of the answer must be to address the ever-increasing energy costs and local and global environmental sustainability concerns. Introduced by Catherine Hough through a historical review of the studio glass movement by reference to her own outstanding career and experiences, the papers in this workshop explored: the development of an economically feasible model located in a synthesis between tradition and innovation and based on arts tourism (Bohm-Parr); an enquiry into technical and reflective rationality and the implementation of a sustainable business model utilising 17th century kiln technology (Hankey); current glass recycling activities and its usage as an artistic medium (Xin).

The workshop was accompanied by live demonstrations of a low-cost, low energy prototype glass furnace, developed through research led by Hankey at Plymouth College of Art.

To conclude, in this introduction we have tracked swiftly through some of the recent history of craft in order to sketch possible responses to the three critical questions we began with: *why craft? Why now? And, 'how is craft positioned in relation to the future through current discursive trends and structures?* Needless to say, the papers included in this volume themselves collectively go some considerable way to also addressing these issues, but with a richer descriptive complexity - of specific materials, techniques, technologies and traditions - that reveals the detailed reality of 'craft' as an aggregate, or formation, of actions. Frequently the papers return us to those meaning associations narrated through academia, art and design, and all sides of the political spectrum - of craft as a "*freedom from*" and, sometimes, as a "*freedom lost*", and finally, not least, to that sense of "*freedom to*" disclosed in and through craft's *theatre of becoming*. In doing so they return us to the point we began, to the fact that craft is, first and foremost, a *practice* – a creative situation in which something is done; where people enter into transformative relationships with media and materials, developing and engaging selves through the passionate deployment of making skills. Together, they position craft as an ideal space of positive potentiality in which integrity and autonomy emerge through the capacity to express agency and shape identity. In doing so these papers point to the inherent 'civility' in making, to the sense of craft as a process of deep reflective communication, and thus to craft as a profoundly social activity that empowers us to *imagine*, and to *enact*, a better world.

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