

Making Futures

The crafts in the context of emerging global sustainability agendas

The last few years have witnessed something of a resurgence of interest in ideas about craft in post-industrial societies. This revival has moved beyond the specialist fields of arts and crafts practitioners and writers, i.e., the domain of Craft with a capital "C". Popular texts such as de Botton's *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (2009) or, more particularly, Sennett's *The Craftsmen* (2008) and Crawford's *The Case for Working with your Hands* (2010), have sought to retrieve the prosaic and somewhat neglected notion of 'craft' and to position it at the centre of debate about the place and value of productive work in a post-industrial globalised context.¹ It is ironic, but of course symptomatic, that this wider interest in the idea of craft is occurring at exactly the same moment in which many of the studio-based arts and crafts are acquiring the status of 'Endangered Subjects' (at least in the UK) and the contemporary art school - or its typical heir, the University Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries [sic] - has all but eradicated reference to the middle-term from the traditional Trinitarian 'art, craft and design' conception of its pedagogic mission.²

Needless to say, these recent popular recoveries of the idea of craft do not especially concern themselves directly with the fate of the studio arts and crafts. Indeed, if anything, their strategic purpose is to enlarge our understanding of craft beyond constrained references to the applied arts and crafts. Nonetheless, Sennett and Crawford in many senses echo and even continue early Arts and Crafts Movement philosophy through their project to endow agency (individual and collective) with a purposeful and strong ethical dimension through the prism of craft ideals and applications, albeit updated and adjusted to contemporary social conditions.³ These broader social conditions are familiar to the extent that they reference a predominately Western experience in which material production increasingly occurs 'offstage' in manufacturing centres located across the world and in which so-called 'immaterial labour' characterises the nature of work within a political economy mediated by information and media and presided over by the unreal, larger-than-life, manias of the global financial markets.⁴

What is more than a little unexpected, however, is that these sociologically inflected

¹ It is also worth noting that there have been a number of more specialist titles appearing recently in which craft, de facto, reoccurs as a central issue. For example, in the contiguous field of art history, see: John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, (2008); and, Andrew Hemingway, Editor, *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, (2006).

² For papers dealing with the issue of crafts education in this volume, see the thematic section entitled: *Endangered Subjects – Ethical Minds...*

³ The notion that Sennett and Crawford echo and/or continue early Arts and Crafts Movement philosophy is, of course, a simplification. Their work, for example, incorporates a characteristically American pragmatic vein that distances it from the romantic spiritualised elements of Arts and Crafts ideas. Indeed, Crawford appears critical of Arts and Crafts thought in that he refers to Jackson Lears study of turn of early 20th century American culture to suggest that Arts and Crafts thinking served as an aspect of bourgeois ideology justifying the socialisation of the early industrial working-class into a factory work ethic, as well as cultivating certain "unattractive" aspects of modern consumer culture based in "therapeutic self-absorption". (What Colin Campbell saw more positively as 'autonomous imaginative hedonism' in his classic work: *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, (1987)). Nevertheless, there is an ethical dimension to Sennett and Crawford's work that aligns it with aspects of Arts and Crafts thought.

⁴ For views on craft and sustainability in the context of non-western cultures and their late-Modern experiences, see the papers included in the thematic section in this volume: *Local-global translations and dialogues...*

readings pay little attention to the one key area that might operatively (re)-frame craft as a domain deserving of urgent attention beyond the well-rehearsed realm of labour theories that pit crafts' perceived qualities (i.e., of small-scale non-alienated immersive labour) against the divided thinking, doing and general abstraction of large-scale industrial systems. I refer, of course, to the rapidly emerging environmental sustainability agendas that are, more than any other set of factors, radically challenging the terms of late-modern political economy.⁵ Global climate change, coupled with the ongoing turmoil in global financial markets, a looming post peak-oil scenario and related shortages in energy and key mineral resources, posit the emergence of long-term austerity conditions. Given the critical import of these agendas this lapse, or absence, is notable because in the view of a growing number of people, this expected state of scarcity suggests a situation in which craft, broadly understood, might re-engage more closely with socio-economic and cultural needs.⁶

The impacts of this argument are not, however, simply located in some 'other' future tense. Indeed, under the influence of these scenarios craft skills and practices are already being redefined and reconstituted as less marginalised and more vitally productive forces in society. This re-evaluation and re-engagement is following different (sometimes contradictory) paths, and at different velocities, levels of complexity and integration. For example, from small-localised crafts-based supply chains, to enterprises that seek to collapse production into consumption, through "up-cycling" and "make-do and mend" schemes, to craft-informed industrial modes of production. Many of these incorporate hybridised practices operating on the borders of materials disciplines and/or integrating digital technologies into making and audience communication.⁷ It is therefore perhaps even more surprising that this omission has also been performed by many leading commentators on the applied arts and crafts, whose focus continues to revolve around issues of positioning and identity in relation to the Fine Arts on the one hand, and design for industrial production on the other.⁸

Needless to say, it seems clear that some of these emerging ventures do not, and most likely increasingly will not, correspond with typical formulations of craft with a capital "C", i.e., the studio arts and crafts as they are currently understood and practiced. Rather, the scenarios outlined above are likely to engender new formulations and/or re-articulations of craft practices, identities, positions and markets. Perhaps this is why some leading arts and crafts commentators have been disinclined to address these factors, although no doubt one must also acknowledge that the future tense in which many aspects of the debate are necessarily rendered also imparts a degree of uncertainty and speculation that trouble some. We can understand this hesitancy but suggest it is misplaced. On the one hand the evidence that global industrial production linked to aggressive consumerism is pushing many natural systems to breaking point (if indeed, some of these limits have not already been breached) has become incontrovertible. On the crafts front, because the papers in this volume demonstrate that a lively and significant sustainability and ethical practice debate is taking place within craft practitioner circles. Moreover, that concrete practice-based initiatives are emerging as the fundamental

⁵ In fact Sennett does acknowledge the significance of these agendas for the crafts. In his introduction to the *The Craftsmen* he states that the work is the first of three intended volumes on the subject, one of which will deal with sustainability.

⁶ Many of the papers in this volume refer to these circumstances, but see especially the four published under the thematic section: *Critical perspectives on post-industrial futures...*

⁷ Particularly relevant in this respect are the papers published in this volume under the thematic sections: *Socio-technological and material discourses... and Responses, redefinitions & repositionings...*

⁸ See, for example, two recent and influential publications by Glenn Adamson: *The Craft Reader (2010)* and *Thinking Through Craft (2007)*.

reference points of these discussions.

Furthermore, many of the practitioners engaged in these agendas emerge from, or are connected to, the studio arts and crafts "...as they are currently understood and practiced..." However, these practitioners are now deploying their makers' sensibility to strive for those re-articulations and new formulations of practice, identity and audiences, which intersect with ideas and initiatives emerging from within the sustainability 'movement'. Examples of this interaction are, for example, to be found in craft-based projects and activism emerging in and through the various Transition Town initiatives, referred to in some of the papers in this collection,⁹ and in the discussions developing around *Slow Craft* and *Slow Making* initiatives.¹⁰ By definition many of these practical efforts tend to be modest in scale and typically inclined to localised forms of collaboration and networking that do not have the resources, and/or are not disposed, to elaborate themselves into comprehensive structures, theoretical or otherwise, (yet another reason, perhaps, why they fall under the radar of some commentators). Nevertheless, they de-facto represent a revived micro-political level of engagement that quietly performs Sennett and Crawford's redefinitions of the import of craft by quite literally *making the future*, and in terms that are potentially charged with global significance.

This volume represents a modest attempt to present, amplify, and contextualise these 'actors' and the projects they are developing, whilst also deepening consideration and understanding of the grounds they engage with - the crafts in the context of emerging global sustainability agendas. Under the banner of the first *Making Futures* international conference organised by Plymouth College of Art, the authors of the papers in this volume gathered with approximately one hundred and twenty other practitioners, academics, curators, campaigners, activists, and representatives from associated organisations and agencies, to share and explore their research in September 2009 at Mount Edgumbe House, the magnificent country estate that lies across the River Tamar opposite the City of Plymouth, UK. The conference was held across two days as a component within the broader *Making Futures* research initiative at Plymouth College of Art. This is an ongoing programme that aims to contribute to a more comprehensive and sector-wide understanding of the contemporary crafts in relation to environmental and social equity issues, and especially in the way that these factors impart new ideological purpose to the idea of craft. The programme supports a number of parallel and interrelated sustainability research initiatives, from practice-led projects and interventions to theoretical modes of exploration.

Reflecting this the *Making Futures* conference sought to incorporate a range of practice-based case studies alongside approaches rooted in historical and theoretical modeling and encompassing Western and non-Western critical-cultural, technological, economic and political perspectives. Thirty-nine presentations were selected for the final programme following a process of double-blind abstract reviewing by a distinguished peer review panel.¹¹ 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. The conference itself was curated around five distinct themes, and to ensure

⁹ See for example, the Sustainable Makers group associated with the Transition Town Totnes on the TTT website at: <http://totnes.transitionnetwork.org/thearts/sustainablemakers> Also, in this volume, for example, Hamid van Koten, *The Role of Crafts in the Transition to a Sustainable Culture*, and Yuli Somme, *Bellacouche*.

¹⁰ See for example, Helen Carnac's *Making a Slow Revolution* blog which "...explores the identity of craft within the Slow Movement" at: <http://makingaslowrevolution.wordpress.com/> Similarly, the more broadly based *Slow Making* blog at: <http://slowmaking.blogspot.com/>

¹¹ The original *Making Futures* conference site details the peer review panel along with the selected abstracts, the final programme, running order, location, etc., and can be accessed at: <http://makingfutures.plymouthart.ac.uk/>

that this post-conference publication maps back onto the structure of the original event, we have published each paper under the theme its abstract was originally selected for, even though some of the full papers might justifiably be incorporated into other thematic areas, or indeed, the themes themselves further tuned to take account of the full papers. The five themes are as follows:

Critical perspectives on post-industrial futures... Five papers were presented in this session and four of them are included here. The session largely revolved around a series of historically informed critical-cultural perspectives that sought to define the position of the contemporary crafts in relation to the political economies of industrialisation, and to a post-industrial future in which environmental sustainability becomes a key (if not singularly the key) paradigm. The papers explored whether this post-industrial future necessarily implies a return to some pre-industrial form of craft-based past; and whether Modern subjectivity, presently structured around a technocratic utopianism performed through the media of advanced market consumption, can be reconfigured around a 'post-consumer' desire for a more socially equitable and environmentally sustainable mode of being.

Local-global translations and dialogues... This was a large session split across two days and all eleven full papers are included here. The session largely examined the tensions and flows expressed in craft making and craft consumption in the supposedly 'post-colonial' contexts of contemporary global capitalism and its possible futures. Ethical and sustainable craft issues were explored in relation to the new sensibilities emerging through the movements and stresses between traditional cultures and modernity; between rural and urban cultures; between local, regional, national and global levels of interaction and translation; between notions of authenticity, cultural heritage and identity derived under the influence of Western and non-Western markets, aesthetics and agencies.

Socio-technological and material discourses... This was the largest session of the conference and eleven of the twelve original papers presented are published in this volume. The session was divided across two days and largely examined the relationship of craft practices to 'post-industrial' modes of design, making, marketing and consumption. Also, emerging reactions to mass production, de-skilling and contemporary consumerism, (i.e., in 'slow design', the cult of the 'imperfect' and 'amateurism'). As such the presentations explored the discourse between traditional craft making and advanced scientific and technological models which, emerging in the context of global capital, are characterised by their mobility, adaptability, customability, and speed of operation. The opportunities presented by the new were also explored in relation to the (contested) assumption that traditional craft approaches necessarily provide the frameworks for more ecologically sustainable practices.

Responses, redefinitions & repositionings... Three of the five original papers presented at the conference are included in this publication. The session largely explored some of the ways in which craft practitioners are imaginatively responding to public dialogues around sustainability issues, especially through the 'Reduce, Reuse and Recycle' rubric. They explored some of the ways in which makers (as individual craftspeople, members of collectives, and designer-makers) are redefining the contemporary

crafts as a means to empower self and others to gain critical awareness of the habitat, and to engage in grassroots activism and community participation. The papers included projects that seek to extend product life, to employ found objects, to reclaim and recycle refuse, to adopt second-hand 'upcycling' strategies, and to incorporate concepts of collaborative authorship.

Endangered subjects - ethical minds... All six papers from the original presentations in this session are included here. The session largely explored social equity and environmental sustainability in the context of crafts education and curriculum design. As stated earlier, despite the frequently asserted transformative value of purposive, embodied engagement with material processes as a basis for ethical and sustainable living, crafts education is undergoing something of a crisis, and craft-based disciplines in the UK art school system (for example) are now considered 'Endangered Subjects'. The papers explored why this might be so, and whether a crafts-based education designed with ethical and environmental stewardship at its core might help address this condition.

Through these five themes the multiple struggles around craft and sustainability come into focus to give a sense of the interlaced relationships between the two and the broad range of perspectives they embody - perspectives that differ in tone and commitment (philosophical and practical) to the idea of craft and, indeed, to notions of sustainability. Certainly, the old issue of crafts identity and its ambivalent positioning with respect to fine art, design and technology, alluded to earlier, comes through as authors sometimes vacillate between explaining the crafts as studio-orientated applied art and design, and/or as something tied up in more general conceptions of production. But generally speaking where all agree is that environmental sustainability interrupts and at the same time restages the possibility of craft in fundamental ways that are important to makers, their audiences, and society more generally.

Overall then, the articles making up this volume offer a picture of the kinds of practice-based research and writing on the crafts and sustainability that are currently being produced. Through this, one begins to understand that although many narratives of craft in the 21st century are being 'written', perhaps the key one is environmental sustainability viewed as a new condition of possibility for crafts re-emergence. Thus if the category of craft with a capital "C" is a historically contingent one, an epiphenomenon of Modern industrial production, it seems that a broader reinvestment in craft with a small "c" represents the future of a sustainably aware post-industrial late Modernity. This suggests a broad investigative project that not only explores from an applied arts perspective crafts' shifting practices and meanings in the context of environmental sustainability, but one in which - to come full circle back to Sennett and Crawford - craft itself becomes a methodological frame through which to think through a wider set of socio-economic and cultural factors. Exploring these thoughts and the varied perspectives related to them will present a range of opportunities and methodological challenges for crafts-people and researchers working in this field long into the foreseeable future. With this in mind I trust readers will forgive me for taking the opportunity to announce that, at the time of writing, preparations are well under way for the second *Making Futures* international research conference. *Making Futures II* will be held on Thursday 15th and Friday 16th September 2011. Readers are asked to watch for forthcoming sector announcements and calls. Or, to ensure they are included on our mailing list, email: conference@plymouthart.ac.uk

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