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What role for craft in the creation of a collaborative and positive future vision?

Despite overwhelming and generally accepted scientific evidence, the breadth and depth of existing societal response to global environmental challenges remains woefully inadequate. We are surrounded by apocalyptic and dystopian visions of the future and are failing to harnesses the power of human imagination and creativity to enable individuals and communities to shape a *positive* vision for a low carbon future. Such a process would enable them to face current global challenges in the eye in the belief that such a future could be preferable to the present: healthier, happier, more resilient and more collaborative.

Sustainable Ability (Jennings, H. and Neal, L., 2010) commissioned by Mission Models Money, used primary research to map the growing response to resource scarcity and climate change by individuals and organisations across the UK arts and cultural sector and assembled information to help deepen understanding of the practical and behavioural barriers to a greater breadth and depth of response. It highlighted research by WWF and others into the impact of human values on behaviour change, recently published in Common Cause - The Case for Working with Values and Frames (PIRC 2011).

The paper identified the potential of an holistic, values-driven, positive and visionary response, including space for understanding of loss and led by communities of activity. This potential will be drawn out through practice in three different contexts:

Community response - as co-chair of Transition Town Tooting (part of the global Transition Town movement) in the creation of the artist/maker led (and Tipping Point awarded) Trashcatchers' Carnival – a community wide celebration imagining a positive future.

Institutional response – as Associate on the Happy Museum Project - investigating how museums can create new civic spaces to help society transition to a high well-being, more sustainable world, inspired by principles set out in a paper, The Happy Museum - a Tale of How it Turned Out Alright, co-written by the New Economics Foundation's Centre for Wellbeing and leading museum commentators.

Individual creative response – as co-creator of Case for Optimism (supported by Clore and EFF) investigating how we encourage a much deeper conversation about the role of creativity, culture and art in a sustainable future.

Introduction

My name is Hilary Jennings and I work in a freelance capacity across the arts and cultural sector. I have a long standing passion for craft and have worked extensively with and for agencies supporting craft makers including the Crafts Council and Heritage Craft Association. I founder Director for Craft at Creative and Cultural Skills where I led the consultation and research and wrote the first iteration of the Creative Blueprint for Craft (2009). In recent years I have become engaged in exploring community and cultural approaches to the global challenges that we currently face and have undertaken research and projects in this area. In a voluntary community setting I am also founder Co-Chair of Transition Town Tooting.

In this paper I aim to share ideas emerging from work which spans the arts and cultural sector on the need for a collaborative and positive future vision – and to offer a

provocation to those working as and with craft makers to consider what place their work might find within this frame.

As introduction I would like to quote a colleague, Perry Walker (Fellow of the New Economics Foundation), in saying that this paper, 'like the name of Keats on his tombstone, is writ in water. I hope that it will attract enough comment and feedback that I shall need to completely to rewrite it. That would be success.' I would also take this opportunity to crediting my colleague and collaborator, Lucy Neal, with whom I have worked on a number of projects and with whom I have shared much of the ideas and learning encapsulated in this paper.

In 1968 an image 'The Blue Marble' was first published – now incredibly familiar it was the one of the first pictures taken of earth from the distant perspective of space. It represents the first time man was fully confronted with the Earth's frailty, vulnerability, and isolation amid the expanse of space. This moment is credited by Al Gore with the emergence of the modern environmental movement – with Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace setting up within three years and the first UN Summit on the Environment two years later.

However, despite approaching five decades of concern and campaigning - and with now overwhelming and generally accepted scientific evidence of climate change, environmental degradation and resource depletion – the breadth and depth of existing societal response to global environmental challenges remains woefully inadequate.

We know that we exist on a finite planet - yet governments', businesses and the general population still cling to the irrational and unsustainable concept of infinite growth. We are bombarded by messages encouraging our materialistic urges whilst ignoring the true sources of our happiness and wellbeing as identified by organisation like New Economics Foundation and Action for Happiness which lie in our capacity to 'keep learning, be active, give, be aware, and communicate' (Aked and Thompson - 2008).

Humans are a remarkable and ingenious species – we have the capacity to comprehend the structure of both an atom and the vastness of the universe, have expanded our habitation to all corners of the earth, created a globally networked civilization and even travelled to the moon (using the equivalent computer power of a modern mobile phone). There is much evidence of our capability to respond to these challenges.

There are technical models, such as Zero Carbon Britain (Centre for Alternative Technology CAT 1977, updated 2010) which sets out a positive, realistic policy framework for how Britain could eliminate emissions from fossil fuels within 20 years largely using wider application of solutions already in existence.

There are economic models such as the New Economics Foundation's Great Transition (2009) which provides a comprehensive blueprint for building an economy based on stability, sustainability and equality with success measured in terms of human and planetary wellbeing rather than monetary growth.

There are community solutions such as the Transition Town Movement. Transition Towns are a community-led response to climate change and shrinking supplies of cheap energy, building resilience and happiness which evolved in the UK and have spread virally worldwide with hundreds of initiatives from Totnes to Tooting, Tokyo to Toronto. Transition towns engage communities in a core process of visioning from which they plan a local transition to a sustainable future.

All these approaches are informed by the belief that a sustainable future has the potential to be preferable to the present: healthier, happier, more resilient, localised, more equal and more collaborative.

But despite this evidence we lack a positive vision of the future within popular culture. Where once our media painted pictures of futuristic technologies and intergalactic travel (remember Star Trek?), the overwhelming current response in art and popular culture seems dominated by apocalyptic or dystopian futures such as those portrayed in films and books like *The Day after Tomorrow* and *The Road*.

As a society we have not yet succeeded - on any real scale - to harnesses the power of human imagination and creativity to enable individuals and communities to shape a positive vision for a sustainable future.

Austrian Philosopher Ivan Illich was once asked 'What is the most powerful way to change society? Is it by revolution where those who are oppressors are removed through violence and those whom they oppressed placed in positions of power? Is it reformation where the key institutions in society gradually undergo change to a more sophisticated and democratic mode of operation?' Illich paused, and then replied, 'It's neither revolution nor reformation. If you wish to change society you must tell an alternative story.'

The most urgent question we must ask today is – 'What is our story? What story are we offering the next generation and the ones that follow it?'

SustainableAbility

In 2010 I was commissioned, with a colleague Lucy Neal, by Mission, Models, Money (MMM), to undertake primary research in two areas. The first was to begin to map the growing response to resource scarcity and climate change by individuals and organisations in the UK arts and cultural sector. The second was to begin to assemble information, which might help deepen our understanding of the practical and behavioural barriers preventing greater breadth and depth of response. The subsequent report (SustainableAbility 2010) and analysis and an interactive web map of initiatives can be found online at www.sustainableability.com.

Data gathered from umbrella bodies over a three-week period formed the basis of an Initiative List of 190 initiatives across the UK arts and cultural sector. Given a more extensive research period it without doubt would have been longer and a year on many more would now be added.

Identified initiatives spanned the sector including music, visual arts, craft, heritage, performing arts, literature, design, comedy and film. Initiatives ranged in scope and scale from the personal manifesto and environmental policy of a solo artist Ellie Harrison to data collected by the Scottish Arts Council on consumption of gas, electricity and water amongst Scottish RFO's.

It was in the area of artist and arts practice where the responses were often most inspiring, with examples from the craft sector reflecting a breadth of approaches. For some waste materials or recycled objects themselves provide inspiration such as work produced from fallen or forgotten timber by Wycliffe Stutchbury. Others such as Pottinger & Cole sought a holistically sustainable approach whilst some such as Craftivism were looking at the potential for Craft in terms of social engagement.

The second area of investigation in the study was into behavioural change. This is a complex area of study and intensive research is being conducted across many disciplines from social marketing, addictive psychology, positive psychology, neuroscience and anthropology to work out why it is when the problems we face are so evident - that so many people choose to turn away from them.

We conducted interviews and read a range of relevant publications. The repeated conclusion was that the pace of change is slow. Our dependence on fossil fuels has taken around 250 years to embed. Deep personal change is the most efficacious and demands engagement with the values that underlie the decisions we make – and our sense of whom we are. We did not draw a distinction between human beings in general and arts and cultural sector practitioners - although we did question the role of arts and culture – the sense gained was that this terrain is precisely one in which they are in their element.

As Clare Cooper Director of MMM says 'by helping to create an environment, and state of mind, directly conducive to the creation and development of new ideas, [the arts] challenge the status quo and provide spaces where anything is possible. They can help us build new capabilities and understand how to imagine a different way of being' (Cooper 2011, p2)

Of particular interest was emerging research into the importance of engaging with our cultural values in order to respond to these 'bigger than self' problems. A group of major NGO's (WWF-UK, Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN), Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Friends of the Earth (FOE) and Oxfam) under the banner of 'Common Cause' produced a groundbreaking report – 'The Case for Working with our Cultural Values' (WWF 2011)

The Common Cause Working Group expressed the view that 'Whatever the recent successes of civil society organisations in helping to address these challenges, current responses are incommensurate with their scale. It is increasingly evident that resistance to action on these challenges will only be overcome through engagement with the cultural values that underpin this resistance. In trying to meet these challenges, we must champion some long-held (but insufficiently esteemed) values, while seeking to diminish the primacy of many more "self enhancing" values which are now prominent – at least in Western industrialised society.

The values that must be strengthened – values that are commonly held and which can be brought to the fore – include: empathy towards those who are facing the effects of environmental crises, concern for future generations, and recognition that human prosperity resides in relationships – both with one another and with the natural world. Undoubtedly these are values that have been weakened – and often even derided – in modern culture'. (The Case for Working with our Cultural Values - Introduction)

In conclusion the SustainableAbility report (Neal, L & Jennings, 2010 p22) identified the key potential for the arts and cultural sector in leading 'holistic, values-driven, positive and visionary responses, including space for understanding of loss and led by communities of activity'

It is within this frame that I, along with friends, colleagues and collaborators, am in the process of interpreting and applying the potential of these findings. My work in this area is both in a voluntary and employed capacity and currently in three different settings.

Transition Town Tooting

The first of these is in a voluntary capacity in a community setting - as co-chair of Transition Town Tooting – a lively and diverse suburb of SW London. In 2010 Transition Town Tooting worked with two artist groups, Project Phakama and Emergency Exit Arts to create the artist/maker led and community wide celebration, the Trashcatchers' Carnival. The Carnival had making at its core bringing together artist makers and members of the community to imagine and create a shared and positive vision of Tooting's sustainable future. Making workshops were held across Tooting in schools,

leisure centres, youth groups and beyond where all ages and all parts of the community came together to make, talk, learn and imagine.

This picture shows the symbol of the carnival – the Sankofa Bird– a mythical bird flying forward while looking backward with an egg in its mouth, the egg symbolising the future, teaching us we must go back to our roots to go forward.



Trashcatchers' Carnival – picture by Simon Maggs

The Trashcatchers' Carnival was a Tipping Point awarded commission. Tipping Point brings together artists and scientists to explore the cultural, societal and behavioural shifts in a world impacted by climate change. Their 2011 commissions – focusing around performance based work – include work by Barnaby Stone, a theatre artist and Cabinet Maker. In his piece *The Beautiful Thing* (in development) an ancient oak beam, hand hewn four centuries ago during a famine, rests in the middle of the room. Its history is known and supposed. But what is its future? The audience witnesses the conception and birth of the Beautiful Thing out of this wooden relic, and see it physically changed. Forever.

The Happy Museum Project

The second setting is considering an Institutional response, the Happy Museum Project which investigates how museums can create new civic spaces to help society transition to a high well-being, more sustainable world, inspired by principles set out in a paper, The Happy Museum - a Tale of How it Turned Out Alright (2011), co-written by the New Economics Foundation's Centre for Wellbeing and leading museum commentators.

The Happy Museum Project looks at how the UK museum sector can respond to the challenges presented by the need for creating a more sustainable future. Its proposition is that museums are well placed to play an active part, but that grasping the opportunity will require reimagining some key aspects of their role, both in terms of the kinds of experience they provide to their visitors and the way they relate to their collections, to their communities and to the pressing issues of the day.

The paper argues that 'museums have innate qualities which can inspire a re-imagining of a society which values co-operation and stewardship as much as it does economic well-being. Museums are both popular and trusted. Apart from the ubiquitous gift shop museums have little to 'sell' visitors other than learning and enjoyment'. (Butler, T, 2011)

The programme, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Breakthrough Fund, tests these principles out through commissioned projects in museums across the country including Manchester, London Transport, Godalming, The Lightbox in Surry, the Oxford Story Museum and the Cinema Museum. Their ambitious programmes include exploring a connection to the natural world, mental 'wellness' (rather than illness); museums as a place of healing; museums as a place of story and play; working with the homeless and stewardship of local communities.

The project stems from work already undertaken by the Museum of East Anglian Life – where Tony Butler, the Happy Museum Project's originator – is Director.



Gypsy Arts Festival 2007, Picture by Luke Daniel

MEAL runs a range of programmes, using its historic buildings, landscape and collections to inspire and engage a range of vulnerable people within the community. A Fordson tractor was restored by a group of young people who have left school with no qualifications, a Shepherds Hut is being restored by the work based learning team. The

success of the museum's work is not measured by the queues out of the door but the strength of new social networks created by a shared interest in identity and locality.

'Through observations it was clear that being engaged in these activities made participants happy. They formed new friendships. They ran each other to the shops, supported each other in times of personal problems; people with previously isolated lives now had new found confidence to socialise. Far from being a refuge the museum was a springboard for participants.....To simplify, one can derive positive emotion from seeing a beautiful work of art or gain eudemonic flow from engaging in an absorbing activity (the volunteers who come in every weekend to maintain MEAL's steam traction engines). However in order to create powerful or meaningful experiences museums should create a landscape which not only enables participants to engage in the issues of the day but helps them contribute to society through acts of kindness and altruism.' (Butler, T, 2011)

In 2010 the museum commissioned research using the Social Return on Investment model, which showed that for every £1 invested in its programmes, £4 of social value was created. The museum showed that by working with individuals over the long term in a collaborative environment demonstrable progression was possible. (Barnet, M - 2010)

The Case for Optimism

The third setting in which I am working encompasses Individual creative response. As co-creator of Case for Optimism (development supported by Clore and Esmee Fairbairn Foundations) I am, with colleagues, investigating how we encourage much deeper conversations about the role of creativity, culture and art in a sustainable future.

The Case for Optimism evolved out of conversations sparked at the 2010 Clore Leadership Conference, where one or two delegates had a general sense that an elephant (in the form of the global challenges) had been left sitting in the lobby outside. So, we got thinking. How do we usher the elephant in and make safe space for a deeper conversation about around these issues?

The programme was designed as a response to those questions, and is intended to enable individual artists, thinkers, activists and policy makers to explore potential and share insights. It draws inspiration from the work of the eco-psychologist Joanna Macy and is loosely structured around the spiral of her 'Work that Reconnects' which offers group exercises and reflective practices to explore and evoke creative, compassionate and transformational responses.



The Case for Optimism – pictures by Simone Jaeger

The programme explicitly engages with visioning as a tool. 'We Imagined we were in 2030 and back cast, so we could begin to bridge the yawning chasm between where we are now and what we know is needed' (Paul Allen, Development Director, Centre for Alternative Technology and Project Director, Zero Carbon Britain – speaking at the inaugural event).

Conclusion

So where does this leave us individually and collectively? We cannot afford not to act - as Joana Macy puts it, 'of all the dangers we face none is as dangerous as the deadening of our response' (Macy 1998)

Our starting point must be a sense of where we are headed.

I would like to share a quote from Brian Eno on the power of the human imagination. 'Humans are capable of a unique trick, creating realities by first imagining them, by experiencing them in their minds. ...As soon as we sense the possibility of a more desirable world, we begin behaving differently, as though that world is starting to come into existence, as though, in our mind's eye, we are already there. The dream becomes an invisible force which pulls us forward. By this process it begins to come true. The act of imagining somehow makes it real.... And what is possible in art becomes thinkable in life.' (Eno 1985)

So what is the potentially critical place for craft practice in shaping such a response, harnessing the potential of a positive vision and the particular the potency of arts and creativity?

- Craft making can certainly contribute to individual wellbeing. As a recent piece by Karen Yair on Craft and Wellbeing (Yair 2011) investigates - a career in craft 'can provide opportunities for satisfying work and a balanced approach to life and work which promotes all-round wellbeing. It can create routes into employment for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, alleviate the symptoms of physical and mental disorders and stress, and help people to build strong relationships with the people around them.'
- Craft practice also lies at the core of the 'Great Re-Skilling' an essential element of the Transition Network approach to more sustainable and resilient local communities. Such events have been identified as bringing additional benefits such as building communication between young and old and embodying practical 'can do' attitudes through engagement with practical processes.
- Engagement with the history and traditions of craft making can help to engender a deeper personal sense of place and heritage. Such engagement also helps to widen our temporal frame – seen by the Long Now Foundation as an antidote to today's faster/cheaper mind set and helping foster responsibility for the longer future.
- Craft making – particularly in its use of natural materials – can help rebuild our connection to the natural world and challenge the loss of affinity to nature that our society once had. What the author Richard Louv has coined 'nature deficit disorder' (Louv, Richard – Last Child in the Woods 2008) sets off a cascade of disconnections which we need to re-connect.
- Wider acquisition and practice of haptic skills combined with a deeper understanding and appreciation of materials could play a key role in challenging our current over-consumption.

- And finally - an innately creative process, craft making can help us create and share both individual and collective narratives, narratives which emerge from and truly engage with head, heart and hands.

The multiplicity of roles that craft practice and practitioners can play in helping shape a more sustainable future present a challenge to us in identifying and quantifying its potential contribution. Its practical place is somehow both intangible and simultaneously ubiquitous - but what is its role in the creation of a positive and collaborative future vision?

Craft making holds at its core an imaginative leap of faith, not only in the manufacture of individual craft pieces, but in the very nature of craft practice itself. The apprentice maker imagines himself as a future master of his craft, and with that positive vision in mind takes the long slow journey of practice and application to reach his goal. But the price is worth paying, and the journey sustained, by the imagined future. Craft makers *embody* individually the kind of journey we need to make collectively to a life sustaining society - and the positive vision which must lie at its core.

I would like to close this paper for the Making Futures conference with a quote from the futurist John Scharr (Hempel, 1996). He said 'The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destinations.'

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Notes

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Tipping Point - <http://www.tippingpoint.org.uk/>

The Case for Optimism - <http://www.caseforoptimism.org.uk/>

Joanna Macy - www.Joanamacy.net

The Long Now Foundation - <http://longnow.org/>