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## Craft As A Socially Aware Nostalgic Practice: Re-Envisioning A Positive Future

Nostalgia is part of the narrative of craft; like all narratives it is ideological. The nostalgic narrative of craft is a utopian one, one that not only cannot exist but that has never existed. The romanticised nostalgic Crafts ideal is seen as proposing a way of life with a particular value, one which places value on the everyday rather than the sublime, one which overcomes the alienation of the contemporary world, one which values the human-sized approach. This narrative is not negative in itself; but seen in the sentimental light into which nostalgia can drift, it can place craft in a position of privilege or of withdrawal from the world, as William Morris found to his despair.

But if we critically examine what our nostalgic responses to craft tell us about what we want from life, we can use this information as a catalyst for actions, practices that transform our present and start the process of preparing for a climate changed and post peak oil future. Svetlana Boym divides nostalgia by its intended effects into reconstructive, allied to the longing for an invented, unified past and reflective nostalgia, which is inconclusive; it acts as a question. She says nostalgia is the idiom of exile; cultural and biological biophilia seem to propose that we as humans feel exiled from the natural world. We are also exiled from each other. This paper examines the role of craft in bridging gaps between ourselves and nature and between ourselves and each other, and in using nostalgia as a focus for these explorations. In looking towards the past, could craft engage with wider contemporary critical debates? In showing what we feel we are missing from the past in our present society, might we use nostalgia as a tool for envisioning how we would prefer a new society to be, post peak oil and in a time of climate change?

John Michael Greer proposes that a post peak oil future may well look very similar to the Middle Ages. How we might we embrace the potential scenario of loss of our 21st century comforts and ease, and move towards the future with enthusiasm and excitement? The idea of nostalgia as a constructive tool is related to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-minority; when "a people is missing" you create a space for that people to exist. A people is missing that can make a considered, positive transition to a future altered by peak oil and climate change.

But there are some craftspeople who are taking a knowing approach to the use of nostalgia. Those who practice crafts in this way are not un-knowingly nostalgic; they are using it as an envisioning tool. This paper will use currrent examples of craft work to explore whether reconstructive nostalgia can be converted or diverted to reflective nostalgia, and how this repositioning of craft to a more socially aware and productive force in society might already be occurring.

The word nostalgia is Greek etymologically but not historically. It is, in fact, a medical term coined by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688 to describe a sadness originating from a desire, becoming an obsession, to return to one's native land. Patients confused past and present, the real and the imaginary. The act of diagnosing it as a condition both ratified it as a disease and started an epidemic. Domestic servants in foreign countries and soldiers on the losing army were particularly afflicted; but it was seen as the cause of a host of physical symptoms – nausea, brain inflammation, pathological changes in the lungs (it was confused with or showed a comorbidity with tuberculosis), cardiac arrests, high fever, and others. Tastes and sounds particularly set it off. Initially it was seen as curable, but it became less and less so, and by the end of the eighteenth century it began to be seen as an untreatable, psychological ailment. It started to become particularly associated with diasporas. By the mid nineteenth century nostalgia had become part of the rhetoric of nationalism: as museums and memorials began to take their place in societies, the past became allied with ideas of "heritage" – and, as Rafael Samuel says, "In any given period, conservation, and with it ideas of 'heritage', will reflect the ruling aesthetics of the day." (211) So by the end of the century, negative connotations had begun to imbue the term.

In modern usage, the term nostalgia is problematic almost because of its ubiquity, and because of the seemingly cynical or ideological uses to which it is put. Nostalgia can be seen as a kind of "temporal primitivism", where all that is good but lacking in our own time can be found in another. Politicians use rhetorics of nostalgia as a shorthand or emotional argument for policies to do with anything from immigration to education. It has given rise to what is seen as a "heritage industry" that is criticised for being an ersatz experience of an uncritically examined history – broad sweeps of social and cultural development telescoped into an individual's day out at a theme park. Samuel says, "Heritage, according to the critics, is the mark of a sick society, one which, despairing of the future, had been 'besotted' or 'obsessed' with an idealised version of its past…It…was a symbol of national decadence; a malignant growth which testified at once to the strength of this country's ancient regime and to the weakness of radical alternatives to it." (261)

For some, the lure of the past becomes so strong that they spend their spare time recreating it, as with historical re-enactors. Living in the past allows us to indulge in a romance of otherness, "not so much kindling memories as creating an allegorical space and allowing us to people it with our imaginings. For some it may be a time when people enjoyed more 'natural' ways of living; when pleasures, though few, were those which people made themselves, when children were childlike; work, if laborious, dignified." (Samuel, 357) This romance (and temporal primitivism) gives rise to examples such as the Society for Creative Anachronism's slogan: "the Middle Ages – not as they were, but as they should have been", that is, without religious persecution, bubonic plague, and open-pit sewers.

Of course, not everybody wants to return to the same place. But no worries! You can choose your nostalgia, just as you have endless choice over what you buy in any other way, in our capitalist society. Capitalism and commodification breed conditions for nostalgia, according to Goldman and Papson, perhaps inspiring the recycling of mass cultural texts as primary resources 'for narrating our collective past as memory' (1996, 127). Who isn't nostalgic for the old, much larger Wagon Wheel? Actually the comparative sizes of old versus new Wagon Wheels is hotly contested, with the makers' claims of no change being roundly rejected by those whose memory is their arbiter of facts. But is objective truth important here? Can there be an objective truth? In history, as with memory, the search for 'reality', the reaching for authenticity, is always permeated by fiction. Fentress and Wickham, in Social Memory (1992), contend that the purpose of memory is not to be objectively real, but to *feel* real. They are less concerned with the accuracy of historical narrative than its functionality. This is what I am interested in with nostalgia.

Svetlana Boym distinguishes between two types or tendencies of nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia is a desire to rebuild the past in its entirety, as it was. This is the kind of nostalgia often involved in those rhetorics of nationalism. In contrast, with reflective nostalgia the concern is with a meditation on historical and individual time and the spaces and differences between them. "Restorative nostalgics don't acknowledge the uncanny and terrifying aspects of what was once homey. Reflective nostalgics see everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home, and try to cohabit with doubles and ghosts" (251). This way of looking at nostalgia critically, but without the distancing tools of irony and cynicism, is called by Boym "off-modern". "In this version of modernity, affection and reflection are not mutually exclusive but reciprocally illuminating, even when the tension remains unsolved and longing incurable"(30). Off-modern is a way of engaging emotionally, while staying wary of meta-narratives; because a faith in the power and validity of beliefs based around grand narratives, however well intentioned, is nonetheless still a story employed to legitimate mechanisms of social control. For example, as reflective nostalgics we could enjoy the countryside and its vision of a bucolic communing with nature, while at the same time appreciating that both the countryside and our ideas about nature are socially constructed, and are used in the process of constructing society.

Nostalgia for nature is nothing new. The age of consumerism has been variously ascribed to the 1590s, the 1730s and the 1880s, each age of consumption being followed by a nostalgic longing for an Arcadian vision of the rural, the unspoilt, the simple. Nostalgia is the idiom of exile, and at times we can feel ourselves exiled from the garden. Kate Soper writes, "Nature…is both a present space and an absent – already lost – time/space: a retreat or place of return, to which we 'go' or 'get' back, in a quest not only for a more originary, untouched space, but also for a *temps perdu*, or perhaps, more accurately, for a time that never was, a time prior to history and culture. Getting back to "nature" is, in this sense, as much about getting out of time, or away from "progress", as it is about getting into wilderness." (187) Simon Schama talks about the forest as a kind of embodied residue in our culture's collective memory. "The forest as the opposite of court, town and village – the sylvan remnant of arcady, or what Shakespeare called the 'golden world' – was an idea that would lodge tenaciously in the poetic...imagination." (Schama 142)

This looking for a lost utopia, or specifically Arcadia, is a longing often found deeply rooted in the ecology movement. It may very well be a communal archetypal memory of the sylvan or the pastoral that provides the rhetoric of ecology with its emotional power. Soper observes that just because Nature is socially constructed it does not mean that there is no such thing as the natural world, one that is certainly affected by us. The progress of this alteration is both the source of concern and attention, and part of the rhetoric used by, environmentalists. In these circumstances, to seduce rather than convince may well seem an appropriate strategy. We are aware of a desire to slow down, to simplify, to save, against the catalogue of all that we know is being despoiled, used up, made extinct, altered beyond recall; and one response is simply to want things to remain as they are, as we have known them, to just not want things to get any worse, since that is clearly the trend. Walter Benjamin said, "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was'…it means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."(255)

I think Benjamin's notion of danger can refer to ecological concerns, but also to danger to the sense of self in the world-that-should-be. George Carling once said ecologists don't really care about the earth per se; they just want a nice place to live. A nice home. But, home, like nostalgia, is not necessarily spatially or temporally defined: the home for which we are nostalgic is to be at home in the world. We are nostalgic for a world that never was, and for a place we never held in it. There is a kind of cultural nostalgia that is for something that we understand from a thousand different inspirations and shared references from even before our own childhood. This is "legislated nostalgia"

– even if we have no direct experience of a thing, we have to participate in nostalgia for it. It is part of our cultural make up.

Craft is subject to legislated nostalgia. Even people who have never made a thing in their lives know things about craft – that it is hand-made, human-sized, that involves a slowing down and a communing with natural materials. The romanticised nostalgic Crafts ideal is seen as proposing a way of life that places value on the everyday rather than the sublime, one that overcomes the alienation of the contemporary world. It can place craft in a position of privilege or of withdrawal from the world. In this way it is aligned with the constructed idea of nature – that this "Way of the Craftsperson" is something that, like the countryside, once existed and can be got back to in a kind of sideways step out of time and progress. This "Craft" is not about making stuff; it is about having a relatedness with the world in both material and spiritual ways. The nostalgic narrative of craft is an essentialisation, and one of the problems with essentialisations is that they operate at the mythic level even when they appear to be speaking the language of criticality. But, paradoxically, I would submit that it is at this level of engagement with an idea that art is at its most powerful as a critical tool.

There is a growing body of research that clearly shows that what our hearts yearn for is not more 'stuff' but the 'stuff' of connection. Nicholas Bourriaud spoke of the theory of relational aesthetics in art: "What really good artists do is to create a model for a possible world, and possible bits of worlds…utopias…To transform the world from scratch a rebuild a society that would be totally different…I think that is totally impossible and what artists are trying to do now is create micro-utopias, neighbourhood utopias…this is all super-political when you think about it." Can craft fit into this idea? It would involve some reflection. Craft, in the modernist artisan view of it, is an individual pursuit: "…The ultimate scene is at the bench, where the lone artist faces their own demons and angels in the task of bearing testament to the millennia of…traditions." (CraftUnbound, 5 Sept, 2011) There is another paradigm, away from that of the solitary artist, towards that of co-learner, facilitator, social transformer, working through the medium of craft. The Gestures of Resistance panel at the 2008 College Art Association conference in Chicago advanced a vision of handicraft as performative: active, public, and affective rather than passive, private, and obsessive. How would that manifest?

Knowle West Media Centre, in partnership with the Arnolfini in Bristol, and as part of the Bristol Craftivism exhibition in November 2009, initiated and presented The Knitting Salon, a participatory project led by artist-curator Trevor Pitt and developed with a group of local residents. Informal knitting sessions held during late 2009 produced a soft public sculpture involving yarn sourced from a flock of sheep near Bristol. Each knitter produced a section in moss stitch to cover a seat slat and a second piece of their own design for the corresponding back slat. These sections were then knitted together to encase the whole bench in wool. From early December the 'Salon Bench' relocated to Arnolfini as part of its Craftivism exhibition and functioned as a platform for sharing knitting skills and dialogue facilitated in part by Knowle West residents.

I think the take-off of knitting in recent years is at least in part because of a nostalgic vision of it, related to a number of different eras, perhaps, and part of its rise also relates to the altered perception of it – from a solitary to a social activity. In this particular initiative the wool was local as well. There are initiatives similar to this one all around the country and they are, I think, active, public and affective. But this kind of work can face questions that are in essence about the nature of craft itself. Charles Darwent, in his review in the Independent, on January 3rd 2010, wrote, "I thought how well Trevor Pitt's communally knitted slip cover, Salon Bench: Knowle West – its knits and purls credited to Eunice, Beryl and Adele – would sell in the Conran Shop. But I left with the sense of having been to a revivalist meeting rather than an art exhibition; or, come to that, to a craft show. Taking the name of art in vain is fair enough, given artists

have spent much of the past century doing just that. But hijacking craft – a word that has, surely, to encompass skill and experience and tradition – is another thing again."

I think it is interesting that, in harnessing a nostalgic vision of community, the work leaves some nostalgic for this idea of craft skill and tradition. But in Darwent's view of craft (as an art critic), "can you sell it" is the limiting paradigm of making, and experience and skill is the criteria for judgement. Added to that, as Kevin Murray has said, "craft's institutionalisation in the twentieth century has tied it to the tiger of modernism, and for a work to succeed as contemporary craft it must demonstrate its originality"(ibid). Perhaps relational craft would, as Murray suggests, value originality in the quality of the final production and in terms of how it engages, and value craftedness in terms of the quality of the experience for, and creative agency of, participants.

I would say that the nostalgia that most relational craft initiatives play on is the nostalgia for connection. But some play on the Arcadian nostalgia too. Littoral is a Trust that owns and manages two small land holdings with fields, orchards and woodland, in East Lancashire and in Cumbria. These are currently being developed as skills training centres for artists, craftworkers, and young people interested in sustainable woodland crafts and design, landscape restoration, and creative management of land in marginal urban, or remote upland areas. This particular initiative is called Handmade, in which the Littoral Trust is keen to promote new (and some of the new is a return to the old) contexts and creative challenges for the crafts to enhance their 'unspoken pastoral significance', recognize and re-valorise the agricultural and rural heritage of the crafts, support the introduction of more carbon neutral practices, contribute to the development of a sustainable Creative Rural Economy, and embrace a 'radical DIY/ecological lifecycle' approach.

Littoral think that the crafts community is uniquely well placed to inform future policy initiatives for environmental sustainability, by virtue of their rural origins and past agricultural heritage. The crafts have other origins and advantages too, such as an innate capacity for imaginative re-engagement. Tactical engagement with policy initiatives for rural development and sustainable food and agriculture, and demonstrating how this might be achieved, will form the basis of their crafts and sustainability research and project work over the next few years. Ideas include inventing new urban and rural applications for basket making, willow-coppicing, charcoal-making, barn construction, scything and hay-making, straw bale construction, and hedge-laying, and new agriculture, sustainable land management and creative rural economy programmes, thereby creating a new role for the crafts in support of social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and economic regeneration.

Littoral places itself in an exclusively rural context. What I find interesting about this is that it is making, to my mind, full use of the nostalgic power of both Nature and Crafts, but the trajectory is outwards. In other words, some may say that it is limiting to contextualise craft in this romance of the rural, but the practice of the craftsperson is expanded to include actions such as lobbying and engaging with government policy. They also mention the decentring of the craftsperson's solo, expert privilege. The thing about which many people are equally nostalgic, as we saw before, is the craftsperson's skill. Is the new crafts-based ecological aesthetic going to include the master crafter's exquisite skill? Can it be done?

I think one example where the two are not mutually exclusive is that of The Potting Shed. Richenda Macgregor is an artist working in the field of Art and Ecology. She originally trained as a production potter and glassmaker and spent ten years working professionally as a maker, teacher and trainer, facilitating the transformative process of making pots and glassware, and the parallel process of supporting people to empower and transform themselves. She now works to facilitate a transformative way of being in

the world, one in which each individual finds a stronger connection to the natural world and to their community. In other words, the transformative focus is not turned inwards, but outwards, towards society.

The work is not only seen as self-expression but also as an expression of care for the group, for the environment and for living processes. Lessons in claywinning- a traditional term used to describe the process of 'harvesting' local clay - allow participants to recognise, process and use found clay. Participants have the experience of 'reading' the landscape for possible deposits, digging, cleaning and then using the clay to make garden labels, which will be fired. The product – labels that one will then use to perhaps grow some food – is not accidental. The aim is to create a more holistic approach towards the processes and the use of craft. Some days are open studio where people can come and work with the artist. The days are generally self-directed and the artist is around to help with technical problems, suggestions and ideas, and beginners are welcome as the classes are small. In fact the model is of co-learner rather than the hierarchical one of pupil-teacher. Touching material and interaction with the elements, earth, air, water, fire, teaches you fundamental rules and natural laws that are ultimately sustainable, building a relationship with material instead of controlling it, moving it, abusing it. Richenda remembers reading sentences like 'as the potter moulds the clay...' Her response now is, "NO! The potter is in relationship with the clay, as I touch the clay, so the clay touches me and I have to abide by its rules and understand the material. It is conversation, not domination."

The Potting Shed was set up as a response to the understanding that oil is finite and that in the future we are going to have to find new ways of working with energy, resources – and with each other. If you are concerned with the idea of sustainability it is possible to become so conflicted that you give up making altogether. Richenda says, "I am so tired with students telling me that they have stopped making, I know I did, but stopping is taking yourself out of the conversation altogether. There is so much of value to be explored; out of all the things produced these days, hand made ware should be the last thing that people give up on." She is not completely rejecting the idea or practice of the ceramic artist as we currently know it. She still sells work in galleries. The two practices work alongside each other, but the studio changes from being a personal retreat, a place of sanctuary from the outside world, to a public space, one of engagement with it. The role of the artist changes concomitantly. Richenda embodies this idea of the artist who has looked carefully at her emotional responses to the changing terrain of how the environment is changing, and fashioned a response not just in what she produces but in her whole way of being a craftsperson in that changing world. And this change is needed.

"As a species with the creativity, adaptability and opposable thumbs that enabled us to create an Oil Age in the first place, we can be pretty certain that there will be life beyond it. Similarly, we may be able to prevent the worst excesses of climate change, and indeed the measures needed would almost certainly make the world a far better place. However, the point is that the world and our lifestyles will look very different from the present." (Hopkins, 2009) John Michael Greer has said that a post-peak oil future may very well look similar to the Middle Ages. One argument for keeping craft traditions alive, and in fact one with which I completely agree, is that in a post peak oil and climate changed world, we will need crafts, both those that survive, and new ones that involve craftedness. We will not just be saving craft for the heritage industries, but for a more resilient future. But this different future will, whatever we do, be a radical change, and change can be unsettling, can make us feel endangered. When we feel in danger it is hard to move forwards to meet change. But if a change can be made to feel exciting and full of opportunity for improvement, the dynamic changes, and change is something we embrace.

Walter Benjamin said that every epoch, in dreaming of its future, revises its past to create any number of new futures. Those potentialities of the present were his greatest source of nostalgia. In other words, the futures that we could create, but are not now creating, are sources of a lost sense of belonging. Nostalgia for me is like Wagon Wheels. It is not the enjoyment of either that is problematic but their uncritical consumption. It seems we blame nostalgia when what we lack is imagination or critical awareness. Algia – longing – is universal. Nostos – home – is individually constructed for each of us, even when we think we're speaking of a collective home. If this vision of home is subject to nostalgia, that longing must be telling us something about what we feel is lacking in our current lives. But a critical response to a utopian vision encourages us to see nostalgia not just as an escape or as sentimentality, but to pay critical attention to the real needs that are often obscured by the commercialism affecting our lives. I am interested in looking at a way of using nostalgia, and the nostalgic vision of craft in particular, to envision or revision a world which takes the best of our nostalgic fantasies and looks to take what is emotionally important in those fantasies to create a new paradigm, a new way of living in a world which is likely to change beyond recognition in our lifetimes. As David Williams says: "(There is) an uneasy tension between yearning for what's 'lost'… and a desire for what 'could be' (an imperfect otherwise still to come, to be invented)…an acceptance of (this) paradox…is allied with a critical perception that what we lack is that which demands our present and future energies. In other words…(there could be) another kind of utopianism – something perhaps closer to a measured, creative, play-ful collectivism that one might characterise as a practice of hope." Perhaps we are entering a new phase in which craft, by being intentionally, constructively nostalgic, can point the way forwards by looking back. Our nostalgic response can be a critical tool with which we can examine the differences between the way we live, the way we might like to live, and the role of imagination in forming a practical response. If we identify what is lacking, we can work to construct a place for it to develop or appear or be created, using the fusion of imagination, engagement, and agency that is craft.

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