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Craft, Responsibility and the Search for Sustainability

Introduction

This study is a preliminary exploration of the role of craft in actualizing the idea of a sustainable future. This, we believe, should align with the pursuit of a better quality of life on Earth.

What we suggest in this paper is that the quality in life can be crafted and so too is the realization of a sustainable future.

As quality is an outgrowth of desirability and goodness, crafting in quality is tightly entwined with the care and responsibility for good. Thus, responsibility is an inseparable property of crafting a life in quality, as well as crafting a sustainable future.

To fulfil this aim one should be able to craft both the internal and external worlds, where quality is perceived and acknowledged and the responsibility is formed and executed. To do so, we consider the example of craftspeople and try to understand their way of crafting objects as well as crafting their own selves.

In this paper, the three concepts of sustainability, responsibility and craft are overviewed and the state in which they are currently seen is discussed. This is followed by a preliminary subjective practice-based inquiry into craftsmanship.

The paper concludes by briefly exploring the outcome of the subjective inquiry, which exemplifies a way of connecting to the external world as well as the internal world of the craftsman. This can then be considered as a way to facilitate achieving a sustainable future and boosting the quality of living for those who make decision to craft their lives.

Sustainability- Past and Present:

The concept of sustainability has been addressed over many years in numerous ways by a plethora of individuals, groups, institutions and governments. However, there are still many people who believe that the term has not been well defined or indeed that it is indefinable in its current use. (Kossoff 2011)

The continuous change of conditions and concerns of each generation only add to the fluid nature of the concept and thereby delay a precise definition. The debate about sustainability according to the environmentalist, Simon Dresner, originated from concerns about social inequity in 1974 (Dresner 2008). In 1987, the Brundtland Commission added concerns about environmental limits and the need to extend the social concerns to future generations with particular regard to their access to finite natural resources. (Brundtland et al. 1987) However, the Commission's almost uni-dimensional approach, suggesting that the only effective way to achieve greater social equity was through development 'failed to identify the current political and economic obsession with continuous growth as one of the main driving forces behind environmental degradation and global inequity.' (Wahl 2006, p.150)

A further milestone in the unfolding of the concept of sustainability was made at the Earth Summit in 1992, where instead of just focusing on the efficiencies of managerial strategies, the participatory approach to development was added to the agenda of sustainable development. The subject then re-entered the debates in academia, policy institutions and government ministries with a new dimension and direction. (Kossoff 2011)

Over the years, in the search for greater precision, many studies have concentrated on quantitative and technological contributions and whilst these are helpful, they have also exposed the need for more holistic, humane, qualitative approaches. David Orr(1992), Peter Singer (1994) and John Foster(2008) for example, are all sceptical of purely technological or mechanistic solutions to sustainability and warn that such an approach may merely exacerbate the problems they were, at least partly responsible for in the first place.

Ecological organic approaches, in the broader sense of the term, now seem central to the debate on sustainability.

However, framing the issue of sustainability without embracing *quality of life* matters is mistaken and probably well-nigh impossible. Sustainability is not just about preserving the environmental quality or sustaining materialistic life styles as 'business as usual,' as these matters have already failed to enhance the quality of life for the majority of human beings on the planet. Enhancing and facilitating a culture of sustainability should embrace and contribute to our trajectory of seeking greater happiness for all. This will require a fundamental change in our approach to our relationship with each other and with the natural environment.

Thus, people's psychological and spiritual needs, the meaning and quality of life they pursue, their sense of belonging, respect, and responsibility to their community and environment and their willingness to sustain these commitments are all aspects which should be embraced by sustainability and the way we address it. Only in this way can a higher level of an eco-socio- culture result in a plausible outcome for future society.

Responsibility

'To be a person rather than just a living body or animal entails more than just consciousness and ability to communicate and to formulate aims and beliefs. The individual must also be the bearer of responsibilities.' (Doyal & Gough 1991)

While global problems threaten the very survival of the species on Earth, social and individual responsibilities play a significant role in achieving sustainable societies.

Responsibility involves social lives, moral duties, values, perceptions of right and wrong and boundaries within which socially acceptable attitudes towards others are determined.

Social responsibilities are duties that society expects the individual to undertake and execute. Rousseau(1712-78) and Durkheim(1858-1917) and more recently Doyal and Gough (1991) all argue that ' The very existence of a social life depends upon the recognition of duties towards others - that in one's interaction with others there are some things that one should and should not do.' Norms and moral values of every culture determine the domain of social responsibilities. They are the means to validate and sustain the reciprocal expectations between members of a society who have a common vision of what is good or bad. They create a language by which members of a community connect to one another.

Responsibilities are generally embedded in moral rules and consensual norms of societies. However being associated with rules does not dissociate morals or responsibilities from human nature. As David Wiggins points out, 'consensuses is not so much a primary source of moral information as a check upon the correctness of beliefs arrived at without consultation of the opinion of others.' (Wiggins 1998, p.60)

Despite the importance of the role of responsibility in sustaining the quality of relationships among individuals in societies and natural environments, irresponsible behaviours have appeared to reach epidemic proportions in modern societies.

The rise of new social identities

The gradually languishing role of responsibility appears to be associated with the alienation of individuals from their intrinsic values and the rise of new social identities

based on extrinsic, materialistic values. George Monbiot (2011) suggests that, based on psychological experiments by others, 'we mould our thinking around our social identity, protecting it from serious challenge.' He continues: "our social identity is shaped by values that psychologists classify as either extrinsic or intrinsic." While extrinsic values engage people with how they are seen and evaluated by others, intrinsic values are concerned with how a person sees themselves in relation to others. These values are grounded on beliefs which transcend a person's self-interest. Although social identity contains both kinds of value, experiments show that 'these values suppress each other: the stronger someone's extrinsic aspirations, the weaker his or her intrinsic goals'. (Monbiot 2011, p.10) As the social environment shapes our values, so Monbiot argues that the current social situation boosts the influence of our extrinsic values. As a result, intrinsic values, among them the sense of responsibility for others are diminished in social interactions.

A world with no boundaries

The growing number of scientific achievements and technological developments along with economic growth create a vision of a world with no limits. This boundless vision questions the necessity for responsible behaviours, where limits are put on actions, 'not because they cannot be done, but because they should not be done.' (Orr 1992, p.18)

'There seems to be an ideology of freedom at the heart of consumerist material culture a promise to disburden us of mental and bodily involvement with our own stuff so we can pursue ends we have freely chosen. Yet, this disburdening gives us fewer occasion for the experience of direct responsibility.' (Crawford 2010, p.56)

The more principles of modernity that are integrated into our lives, the more the case for responsibility is overshadowed, and renounced by modern men and women whose minds are captivated by the idea of progress and greater materialistic standards. The sanctity of the truth and principles of right and wrong are dissociated from social and individual identities and become abstract religious concepts.

Religion on the other hand, is either misused as a means of manipulation and domination or associated with superstitions, and attributed to another era where, unable to control their own lives, humans would wonderously take refuge in the word of God. A consequence of this, as Vacla Havel has pointed out is:

'We are ... living in the first atheist civilisation-in other words, a civilisation that has lost connection with the infinite and eternity. ... The most dangerous aspect of this global atheistic civilisation is its pride. The pride of someone who is driven by the very logic of its wealth to stop respecting the contribution of Nature and our forebears...' (Havel 2011, p.12)

The pride Havel refers to is constructed from the illusive image of humans as the ultimate source of power who are able to think the unthinkable and make it happen using their science, technology and wealth.

Nature, which was once sacred, mysterious and integrated with the humanity of humans, becomes a target of these ceaseless conquests. The miraculousness of the living system is broken down to be decoded and recoded again in scientific figures. The reductionist approaches to nature reduces the human - nature relationship from integration to dissociation and then to the domination of nature, thereby leading to the disappearance of our ecosystem. This is happening simultaneously with unprecedented developments in technology giving birth to new methods of communication and entertainment. The absence of nature in people's lives, especially in the younger generation, is hardly noticed and quickly filled by virtual worlds. The chance of experiencing nature is being taken away from this generation, and so is the possibility of their care and responsibility for it.

In this situation, while the intrinsic values are devalued and the illusion of infinite freedom is rooted in the human mind, expecting responsibility to be a provocative

agency, which draws people towards the culture of sustainability, is naïve and over-simplified. It is also naïve to try to revive those moral values inherent in the rules of responsibility and expect societies, which are accustomed to self-interest values, to adopt them immediately.

On the other hand, the obvious signs of global warming and climate change, higher levels of violence around the world, an increasing gap between poor and rich, declining levels of happiness and an increase in the number of those suffering from psychological problems, requires urgent action not only politically, but by individuals too.

Rationalism, one achievement of modernity, is now recognizing the loss of balance in our world and warning against its consequences. Also, as a significant contribution to humanity, it is now promoting the wisdom, which *'lies in knowing when the time has come to leave reason behind.'* (Schoch 2006, p.143)

As testified by many scholars, it is now almost certain that rationality is not the only way to understand reality. To reclaim the balance, we need to adopt a holistic approach, which will enable us to understand the reality of our own selves, each other, and our ecosystem by reinforcing our connection with them.

What we suggest in this paper is that there is great value in a craft practice, in relation to sustainability, which transcends whilst also includes rationalism. We believe that the craftsman's way of connecting to materials, tools and all other properties of the workshop is a microcosm of how individuals could adopt a macrocosmic approach to a sustainability aware culture.

Craft in a Sustainability Aware Culture

Craft now

It has been thousands of years since Homo sapiens began to create things (tools) to increase their chances of survival. They used their hands and manipulated the materials that the surrounding environment offered them. Latterly, making turned to crafting, when humans learned the skills of conversing with materials to *lure* them into being the manifestation of their imaginations and to fulfil needs beyond just those of survival.

Since then, making as an influential feature in the course of human evolution, has itself been changing and evolving, and objects have gone from being entirely hand-made and localized to fully mechanized productions and made of materials traceable to the opposite side of the planet.

Somewhere within this journey, crafting separated from the main stream of making and followed a different path. While the main stream took the road to a fast, mass production of consumer goods, some craft practitioners retained a direction, which allowed the maker to be in charge of the slow creation of unique objects from beginning to end using essentially the hands.

Crafted and mass produced objects, one the product of predominately handwork, the other the work of predominately machines are both the result of technology whether it is as simple as hand tools or as complicated as a rapid prototyping machine. The significance of each, in the current situation, does not lie so much in the kind and sophistication of the technology producing them, as it does in their relationships with both the maker and the users lives.

The rising population around the world and the pervasive culture of consumerism demands speed in production and a lowering of costs. The technology of mass-production has been developed in response to these demands. However, the consequence of this has resulted in the disappearance of craft objects from homes where they were once held, worn and simply touched, and transferred them to the "don't touch" artworks in galleries. This is neither a criticism nor an approval, but it is an implication of the gradual absence of craft objects from everyday life. Although unpleasant, however, this does not seem to be an irreplaceable loss in the lives of many

consumers. This is not a pessimistic anticipation of the disappearance of crafts in the future, but a declaration that the significance of craft is not to be found merely in the craft objects or their consumption, but in the craft knowledge within the process of making and how it affects the maker. As Glenn Adamson points out: ' Craft only exists in motion. It is a way of doing things, not a classification of objects, institution, or people.'(Adamson 2007, p.4) This is the approach we adopt in this study, as we believe it contains values that a world in search of sustainability cannot afford to lose.

Craft beyond crafts

Craft has been given various meanings and definitions across disciplines, and the term communicates different concepts in different fields. As Dormer(1997) (quoting Greenhalgh) says: 'they (we) make the word mean whatever is convenient for the moment'.

Within this study, while acknowledging the craft definitions by authors such as Peter Dormer, David Pye, Richard Sennett, and Howard Risatti we aim to understand (and not define) craft as a means of connecting to the world (Gauntlett 2011), where we believe it can contribute immensely to the formation and the establishment of a culture of sustainability.

Understanding is a key concept in this research. Understanding a phenomenon inevitably redirects the questions of understanding to the way of understanding and to the way of being of the self who understands. In other words: 'understanding can come about only through self -knowledge. After all the world is the projection of myself'(Krishnamurti 1992, p.5)

Understanding craft and its patterns of action and reaction lead us to the domain of self-knowledge and human consciousness.

We apply Allan Combe's idea of consciousness as; 'the essence of experience'. Consciousness in his words 'is the perfect transparent subjectivity through which the phenomenal world shines.'(Combs 2002, p.7)

A subjective enquiry

Craft is a mode of practice. Understanding craft (and not merely being informed about it) happens only through practice. On the other hand, understanding this phenomenon in the context of consciousness is necessarily a first person approach, and requires the direct engagement of the inquirer within the experience. Therefore, the body of this study is mainly formed around the personal experiences of one of us (Mona Nasser) herself a jeweller and a PhD student, and is the outcome of her reflection in and on her actions. This is accompanied and strengthened by the responses of other practitioners and scholars.

As we mentioned earlier, understanding lies in self-knowledge. 'Locating oneself as a researcher immediately disturbs a taken-for-granted security of knowing *who I am* in relation to *others*. Suddenly *I* as well as *others* are in question.'(Schostak 2002, p.50) Thus, entwined in this study, are the aspirations for self-knowledge. This, we believe, not only emerges from the study of craft in the context of consciousness, but craft practice is essentially followed by self-knowledge and self-recreation, which also emerges and evolves throughout the craft journey. Carla Needleman's comment confirms this belief as she suggests: ' the principles in craftsmanship that call us to work with a material may be the same principles which in a large sense calls us to work with ourselves. It may be that in this large sense, the realized craftsman is a new man.'(Needleman 1979, p.106)

The researcher's (MN) personal perception of her practice has been the initial framework in which this research was developed. In a separate study, this was refined and structured as a narrative integrating her perception of her own practice as well as her interpretations of the perception of other practitioners expressed through their conversations with her.

This general narrative, which includes a variety of human activities, regards craft as a change making rather than object making process; the change that affects not only the external conditions, but also the internal world of the maker. Craft practice in this sense is perhaps the closest experience to the experience of living in the world. As the psychologist Clare Graves points out, human's psychology is an emergent system that changes according to living conditions. 'These systems alternate between focus upon the external world, and attempts to change it, and focus upon the inner world, and attempts to come to peace with it.' (Graves 1974, p.72)

The researcher's (MN) inquiry thereby mainly concentrates on these changes and their impacts on the internal and external worlds. The outcome of this inquiry is summarized in the following subjective narrative.

A subjective Narrative:

As a jeweller, I see craft as a relationship between the self (the conscious being) and the non-self (the others). The non-self refers to all the elements of time and place in which the experience is happening. They are recognized as 1) natural beings (such as materials or other humans), 2) outcomes of other practices and experiences (tools and devices or any other component of the place at the time), 3) and the environmental conditions (sound, head, smell, etc.)

Although this is a two-way relationship, it is always enacted by the self, who is capable of understanding the requirement of the situation, entrusted to make changes and skilled in transforming the non-self to meet those requirements. As a consequence of the early part of this research, the understanding, the trust and the skills which gradually emerge, appears to be the result of the following interim postulates:

These postulates are framed in a language which I hope will allow me to explore conjointly the notion of crafting at both micro and macro levels.

- (1) A holistic (physically and mentally) and lasting presence of the self, (These are the essential requirements of a strong relationship, as the absence of each leads to insufficient knowledge and understanding, and results in the fragility of the relationship.)
- (2) An intention to make changes in the non-self, in order to serve a particular purpose, which extends beyond the self and its interests. (This is brought into the relationship through the functionality of the craftwork. The creativity of the maker integrates with the familiarity of the utility for the consumer. This demands imagination and empathy and takes the relationship and the responsibility for it to the world beyond the boundaries of the workshop.) This is then pursued by-
- (3) Conversations, interactions and exchanges between the self and the non-self that constantly influence their ways of being. This then leads to-
- (4) The understanding of the non-self by the self through embodying the experience of being wholly engaged with it, as opposed to merely knowing it by receiving information about it. This is followed by-
- (5) Increasing awareness of the self and its power and possibilities as well as its limitations through
- (6) A never ending aspiration towards perfection hoping to reach it, and simultaneously
- (7) Connecting to the essence of the non-self and gradually becoming emotionally attached to it. This process, then brings forth-
- (8) The making (of change or product), which embodies and integrates features of the self and the non-self together in a new situation, as well as
- (9) Making changes to the self, which transcend it to a new level of understanding.

Future Approaches

Craft, as a dynamic process of making (change) and becoming (changed), can provide a small-scale framework to study and understand the self in relation to others (humans and non-humans), to contemplate aspects which are missing in our relationships in large-scale life practice, and to inspire solutions to overcome our crisis such as social irresponsibility.

The above approach provides me (MN) with a lens to closely observe myself as a craftsperson, my mode of interaction with the environment and my system of approaching problem solving.

It allows me to identify my self in the process; what I regard as a purpose, where I believe my intrinsic and extrinsic values lie, and how I intentionally or unintentionally adjust with the condition to allow my values to guide me through it.

This study does not aim to generalize these observations to all craftspeople and regard it as an objective discovery. It does however, provide a practical example of deep self-reflection in the process of making change and becoming changed. It also suggests that this sort of deep reflections in craft practices are as important as the integration of a craftsperson's way of being into the life practice, if, we, as individuals, are to increase responsibility towards the environment within ourselves.

This study aims to develop further in the direction of crafting a life in quality using the framework described. By maintaining the deep, reflective approach, this study continues to follow the process of self-development, where this quality is believed to lie.

This, however, requires reflection and reevaluation of the notion of development and whether it is, or its purpose is, directed at intrinsic or extrinsic values.

And finally, this research is not conclusive, nor does it lead to any new discovery. The main objective of this research is to shed light on the importance of the phenomenon of subjectivity in creating a culture of sustainability. It is a kind of subjectivity which, unlike the individualistic fashions of modernism, is rooted in respect, care and responsibility for the whole. It is subjectivity, which arises from the integration of humanness with the great web of being.

As Ferraro et al (2011) point out: 'It is this kind of consciousness, the awareness of one's own human-ness that is essential to achieving the transformation that sustainability requires.'

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