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Making, social identity, and sustainable society

Making Futures 2

Biography

BA(Hons) Fine Art , PGCE , seven years self employed Blacksmith, nine years Lecturer in Applied Arts. Current research for Masters in Entrepreneurship in Creative Practices researching Making, Pedagogy, and Social Identity.

Abstract

In the 21st century things are easily obtained, often without much knowledge of what brought them into existence. It has been my experience that acquiring the knowledge and skills to fabricate in metal has been grounding and empowering, as well as giving me a greater understanding of my environment. My hypothesis is that when 'making', craftspeople are doing something that is ancient: using their hands to create something that was not there before. They are adding value, not only to the materials, but also to the sense of 'self'.

Evidence shows that working with your hands is good for you (Crawford, 2010) and that making has been a key part of human development (Sennet, 2008). Working with hands is fundamentally empowering but at present our culture teaches a relatively limited experience in making, and this therefore allows macro-economic systems to take advantage of a restricted functionality of the masses (Mckibben, 2007). The acquisition of skills and knowledge in material manipulation contributes to a fuller sense of self. This empowers us by increasing our abilities, and therefore the choices we have. It also creates the basis of a sustainable way of thinking. In using craft making to break the addiction to 'materialism', we show how we can empower the individual to disrupt the cycle that constantly feeds the 'new' into the system. We also improve our relational existence in society by a stronger belief in ourselves. We can gain a greater respect for each other, and become more environmentally aware.

When we think of a craft pedagogy, we do not normally describe the secondary effects that derive from learning to use our cognitive and technical skills to resolve our need. This project thinks in terms of wider ethical implications of learning craft skills. Craft, making, and skills acquisition empowers, creates self-belief, and improves the individual in terms of social identity, self-efficacy and attribution.

My paper will explore craft as a change agent for the individual, and as cornerstone of healthy and sustainable society,

Linking to my research for the Masters in Entrepreneurship for Creative Practices, I hope to explore making by:

- Transformation of found objects to extend their lifecycle (Functional, Aesthetic, Conceptual)
- Pedagogy Framework for group work and teaching
- Involvement in a community where the maker is still central.

Introduction

For this paper I am talking from the position of making, but within the context of working with metal, (steel and iron for the most part). This does not preclude the acts of making across the materials and skills spectrum, in fact it is intended to encourage those actions. I want to speak from my personal making experience of the ability to make and engineer tools, equipment, and of course, items of utility and beauty. I believe that the practice of transforming materials is also a transformative process for the maker. The ability to learn a skill, to materially affect the world and to make something good is grounding and enhancing to the sense of self. To say "I made that!" is an amazing experience, and one that grows with every achievement. I will begin by exploring relevant understandings of the terms 'making' and 'craft'. I will then go on to explain how I see the relationship between making and wider economic processes, as well as with human psychology. I will conclude by discussing the way that these insights have been derived from my work with a research project entitled 'Urban Jetsam'.

Making

The Maker

This research is the ongoing exploration of what making does for the maker. In my experience, making can enhance the individual, giving a sense of proactive ability, and ultimately a connection to self and therefore contributing to a healthier society. My hypothesis is that as members of society, we are less able to make do or mend, and have less agency in the immediacy of our material world, because we have become dependent on consumption. First, this is because our education, and therefore our learning, is more risk adverse (or driven by Risk Assessment outcomes). It is controlled by costs (expensive workshops). Secondly, the peer pressures that affect students seem to have become more about making money than developing a fulfilling experience of the world. Therefore, you could say our learnt ambition is more about spending and ownership than individual, independent agency.¹ Thirdly, the economics of the industrial revolution have been about economies of scale, and the alienation of skills, material, and manufacturing. As stated by Koplos and Metcalf (2010):

De-skilling then was a more likely cause of alienation than division of labor. In the most mechanized, least humane situations, factory owners exploited workers ruthlessly. That led to the poverty of the urban workforce and stimulated the Marxist rejection of private ownership.

Gunter Pauli, in his book *The Blue Economy* (2009) discusses the need for 'the economies of scope'. This concept adds more layers to the economic system by making better use of local resources, giving more agency to the community, and encouraging creativity. In Pauli's model the economy is not driven by the idea of financial growth, but long-term sustainable community. This understanding of economy informs my understanding of making: I see 'making' as an important way of enacting an economy of scope from the ground up. The alternative to this seems to be less and less power for ourselves, and the more reliance on the consumerist, capitalist and materialist structures all around us. The dominant economies of scale provide fewer and fewer experiences that show us how we can empower our own selves, use the resources we have to positive effect. Surely, a model that thinks in terms of economies of scope must be more efficient in the long run.

¹ Radio 2 5thAug, saying how difficult it is to get apprentices for woven textile manufacture in Debora Meadon on Somerset, attributed to lack of manual making in schools, and how it is not perceived as 'cool'.

As a blacksmith, I discovered a world where the rules of 'demand and supply' do not work so well, because I gained the knowledge to change material to fulfill a need. I learnt the skills to make, and to make the things I needed, and this empowered me to not only generate income through my endeavors, but gave me access to structurally change the material around me to my benefit. It was transformative for my sense of self as well as transformative of materials.

I think some of the problems in the current way we have learnt to exist are based on addictions to easy solutions. The oxford dictionary gives a definition of addiction as 'enthusiastically devoted to a particular thing or activity'.

<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/addicted?q=addicted>

The potential consequences of these addictions are found in discussions about peak oil (Hopkins 2009), and in the effects of recession, for example the lack of wealth (Office of National Statistics shows that net wealth per head fell by 15% between 2007-2008). These addictions and focused concerns could de-rail the productivity of our society, as well as the personal quest just to be happy.

How do you contribute positively and sustainably when all the factors seem so enormous there is so little control you can have over them ? With the best will in the world, you cannot, and in some parts of society, there's no will at all in the first place. It is my experience, and increasing view, that making can be a powerful and empowering way forward to activate the will, almost as a catalyst. This in a society that has this addiction to external resources, increasingly concerned at the availability of supply. Gaining some insight to one's own efficacy can change this paradigm.

Craft

There are many discussions around Craft which often relate to particular skills in relation to specific material: the craft of the potter, the hot glass worker, the jeweler (Sennet 2009). More recently there has been a discourse around craft's ability to bring together people, ideas, actions, events that add more complexity. Craft is clearly a multi-layered subject that encompasses the process, the maker, industry, art, society and material. As Koplos and Metcalf (2010: ix) put it: "craft is no more difficult to pin down than art is – which is to say , nearly impossible".

There is also the sense that Craftsmanship is primarily about the overriding will to make something the best that you can. There is often a sense of almost holy virtue in applying the right tools, the right material, the correct actions and the striving for perfection. In my experience as a Blacksmith, proud in my status, nearly everything I made was faulty in some way. As a 'practitioner', I had to make sure the items I made were very good, I did not want them coming back, but at the same time, it is impractical to knowingly spend too much time on crafting a hinge you know will net you thirty pounds . So, when defining "crafts" the range of definition for me here has to include the practicalities of the practitioner, the ad hoc cunning that we innovate in times of need, the bricolage (Turkle, 2007) of the workshop, which all contributes to the sense of pride you achieve over time. In short, it is important not to idealize the notion of craft if we are to access its potential to shape our sense of our own efficacy.

When considering the effect that making has on the maker, removing the high virtues of 'craft' seems to be important. This holy virtue is possibly off-putting to the maker engaged in transformative activity, especially if there is a lot of learning or gaining of experience through trial and error. The ability to play, to feel the way, to make mistakes, and rectify them is such a powerful learning tool, and will ultimately end up with an outcome that is not only 'good enough', but leads the way to making better next time with a positive approach.

Making

" The roots of studio craft... began as a concerted effort to put pleasure back into work and to wrest making from the grip of the machine and reinvest it with humanity"
(Koplos and Metcalf 2010 p9)

I have decided to base my discussion on 'making', as opposed to craft, as this has a more generic and less multilayered sense of action. It can be applied to a range of material specialisms easily, and is about a physical and cognitive skill, that does not overly stress master craftsmanship. This makes it accessible to all of us, whatever our previous experience or ability. With this in mind I advance the following definition: making is the context of using knowledge, skills, process, materials and ideas with craftsmanship(knowing when to use the appropriate actions). This is in order to change stock into a more appropriate or desirable state.

For this research, the discussion of making is primarily situated in the area of metalworking. Blacksmithing is a strong part of my efficacy and to me underpins the sense of liberation in making. In metals we have the ability to make the things we need, to make the things we want. From there, we can structurally affect the world around us. It is for this reason the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths uses the motto ' By hammer and hand, all arts do stand'.

With the fire, the hammer and the anvil, we have the choice to make tools, or artifacts of decoration, utility devices, or follow a creative material expression. It also gives us personal expression, a sense that we can make a difference, we can change iron bar into decorative flowers, we become centered in the knowledge that we have agency in our lives.

The Social and Psychological Context

Necessity and Choice

When we face the daily challenge of say a broken washing machine, the need for a sharpened edge, or limited funds to buy something new, we are in Western economies presented with a limited set of choices. We have the money to pay for replacement, repair and depend on somebody else's skill. We are not educated, or expected to take the issues into our own hands and resolve our own problems. Currently, it would be the social norm to buy, beg borrow or even steal (add on riot to that) what we need to function. If we cannot easily fix, we buy new, throwing away the broken. If we cannot afford the new, we buy second hand, discarding the even more used. If the economics hold up, we may pay someone to repair. In the case a car mechanics, that's going to cost sixty pounds an hour, - This process makes us prey to a system that is exploitative. As McDonough and Braugart (2002: 28) put it:

In fact, many products are designed with built in obsolescence, they last only for a certain period of time, to allow—to encourage—the customer to get rid of the thing and by a new model. Also, what most people see in their garbage cans is just the tip of the material iceberg; the product itself contains on average only 5% of the raw materials involved in the process of making and delivering it.

This system is also destructive of the environment:

Think about it: you may be referred to as a consumer, but there is very little that you actually consume— some food some liquids. Everything else is designed for you to throw away when you are finished with it But where is" away"? Of course, "away" does not really exist. "Away" has gone away.

(McDonough and Braugart 2002: 27)

It seems that for us to move to a sustainable society we absolutely require a reconnection with the resources we have around us. A more connected knowledge of material resource is to my mind a way forward. It makes us think about what skills we need, what processes we can achieve, how to solve problems, and often all these with creative imaginative solutions. This process gives us back a sense of self and makes efficient use of our resources.

Attribution, self efficacy, and Sustainable society

The importance of making that is described here can also be translated into psychological terms. According to Bernard Weiner (1935-) 'attribution' is the effect of the psychological placing of cause and effect to explain the reasons why and how we achieve or fail in relation to personal lives, our community or in our society. This process can be explained in relation to 'locus of control' (internal and external drivers), 'stability' (do causes change) and 'controllability' (skills, luck, environmental effects.) Clearly to see the direct results of our actions create significant changes in our environment will have an important effect on the psychological processes. Similarly, Albert Bandura (1925-) published research on Social Cognitive theory and proposed how we achieve 'self-efficacy' from the results of our actions or beliefs, how we see and understand our own capabilities affecting our progress. I think that 'making' centers our beliefs in our abilities, shows us what we are capable of by taking personal responsibility and therefore makes us more or less reliant on the society at large. This counters the dangers inherent in a society that distances us from process of making: " Society has offered us a safety net, which has become a hammock, and is now a noose"²

The Transformative process

The experience and increasing knowledge of working with your hands, with metals, supported by workmanship, is empowering to the individual. It increases the individual's standing within society, , increasing their choice of actions and increasingly frees them from the lock of consumerist society. This is because it gives confidence, a sense of resolve over necessity, and makes us aware the availability of resources in a finite system. For example, there is the classic situation when marking out on a sheet of stock, you set out the most efficient use of material so as not to waste any. The cost (in monetary terms) of materials always made it necessary to make best use of them. This way of working also then becomes a way of being in the wider world outside of the workshop thereby making good use of available resources.

The effect of being able to make your own objects by hand to sell frees us from the need to earn money to buy that object, and gives a practical interest in the work of making. The redemption found in making by hand is liberating. It taps into our primordial experience of surviving through the acquisition of manual and cognitive skills. It gives us a sense of 'can do' in a world of 'no you can't'. It means that we step forward with more certainty. Transformation comes from the change in material stock, using the uncontrolled fire and heat, the transformation of self relating to the knowledge that we can bend 'unbendable' things, and become transformed. The magic of this process can be seen in societies where the maker is still central to the community, where the importance of hand skills, material knowledge can help sustain a community in economies not buoyed up by oil or monetary wealth: 'the ability to locally make, mend, reuse resources gives a material economy that is resilient and sustainable' (Hopkins 2008 p. 21)

²Contributor on Radio 4 , 9.30am 6th August. Excerpt from the discussion in Birmingham on the 5th August un-raveling the causal origins of the recent riots in England.

'Urban Jetsam' – Research Project

My research project to date has consisted of interviews and questionnaires with makers, teachers, students, and making sessions to transform found stock into new objects, which have been called 'Urban Jetsam' workshops. 'Urban Jetsam' is a live project designed to develop a teaching framework and forms the basis for ongoing research into the way that pedagogy can support the 'making' of the 'maker'. The project takes people into the urban environment and looks at how we can use what is available. We look for stock useful in making items for our needs, by hand, and with simple technology. This mirrors many other communities in the developing world who reclaim materials from the urban environment. Here though we can use heat to change the stock, and so see it very much as raw material. I also think it captures the spirit of the outward bound adventures that have been ongoing for years, and more recently the new Forest schools that are teaching awareness and skills in the rural environment. I think making could be used very effectively as both leisure and lifestyle training.

'Urban Jetsam' is a project designed to raise the knowledge, skills and efficacy around the resources available to us simply on the street. To 'see' that resource is all around us. In principle, it can be extended to be Rural Jetsam, Shore-line Jetsam, dug up, scrap yard or local recycling yard projects. This is an ongoing exploration of ideas to develop making by hand. The 'Urban Jetsam' idea is to present a pedagogic framework to a group and collect, gather metal objects from the urban environment that could serve to resolve needs in our daily lives. It is situated within the community and gives the maker a sense of possibility where there was just detritus and 'rubbish'.

The project poses the scenario that If there was an object needed for daily function, then go out and find the suitable materials to make it. Conversely, a section of high-grade steel casually left down an ally because the product it came from stopped performing, could lend itself to manufacturing other high quality products, then that is suddenly an item to sell and a new entrepreneurial prospect.

For example, a small roller bearing from a car found in a car park became a useful small edge blade that works in a similar way to the Swedish textile knife. It also became an excellent drawing tool when used to score paper.

The tool itself was a function to the material the bearing was made from, i.e. a carbon-steel, and the knowledge and skills tacitly available from previous experience helped make that conversion.

The group could therefore recover some of the materials freely available, discuss the material properties and suitability of stock, and take inspiration from a needs or necessity basis to make, fashion, or even repair an object. However, the addition of inspiration from the material recovered would also add a fascinating angle to the outcomes. It could create quite unexpected, innovative new solutions.

The research so far has delivered some interesting insights. The sessions with in - experienced makers have showed the revelation that working with hot metal has for people. Participants have been amazed at the ability to get very high temperatures with very basic equipment, and have been really proud of making small items for themselves. The experience has led to a wider thinking in terms of how they perceive metal in the world around them as a resource, leading to further reflection on what it is possible to do with found material, new insight into the wealth of applications or ways to resolve simple issues.

Interviewing makers and teachers has revealed perspectives on sustainability that agrees with the premise that it is social sustainability, practitioner sustainability as well as environmental sustainability that we are exploring. 'Urban jetsam' links the respect held by the customers with the integrity of the maker, and the need for the maker to identify with the market by understanding the customers aesthetics. It also identifies

that the maker has a wider range of conscious actions within the aspects of running a successful business, and that translates to a practical approach to cause and effect knowledge in the wider society. To illustrate this, speaking with *PL21*, the Ivybridge Transition Town movement, illustrated the possibility to make downhill racing carts as a way of including the younger inhabitants with sustainability as a fun thing, in parallel with their interest with going fast and gathering with their peers at night. That project would encourage simple making and engineering to have a fun connection with their community.

Risk

Reflecting on the realization of our actions then, I think, the resources in our environment become more visible to us, and our relationship to them is clearer as we experience the material and processes of making. Taking risks is part of that. If we can make a new, desirable artifact from old defunct objects, we are energized by both the artifact assisting our daily lives, and also the actual act of making shows us how to challenge our environment, work with dangerous processes, and harness difficulty to our benefit. Also then, how we use that relationship becomes a set of choices, many of which can improve our sense of self, efficacy and community. In this process risk becomes productive and exhilarating: the safety net becomes less of a hammock than a network to enhance our understanding.

"Consumption is founded on a lack, a desire always for something not there"
(Chapman 2005, p38)

Many effects of government policy on our daily lives can be out of our control, people may ask what is the availability of a job for us? Is it that our sense of well-being and happiness must be predicated on the presence of the things the media tells us we need to be full and functioning people? Well, no, not entirely, and the process of making, transforming and realizing objects (and ourselves) helps us see the set of connections between what is, and what could be.

We need less external gratification, and will use less resource achieving it. Understanding the nature of material as resource, we consume and purchase less. We can add positive energy to our community and build a more sustainable society.

It seems to me, from my experiences as a maker, and as lecturer, a key factor is the personal ability to get it 'right', not necessarily right away, but by using that inner determination. If we use the tools correctly, if we manipulate the material stock well enough, if we have planned and prepared sufficiently well, then we know we can have a good outcome. If that outcome is not good, we will have a clear picture as to why that is, and what we need to do to resolve it. (On the forge, the lesson to learn quickly is make sure the metal is hot enough).

This philosophy I think translates well in the wider community, giving us understanding of where we can have a positive effect, what our actions can do to enhance or detract, and what we are capable of achieving for ourselves.

Given enough necessity, and I think that there is, then making has a lot to offer.

Making gives us a sense of self-identity, promoting a social identity, and educates a material awareness that literally 'makes' our society more sustainable and more resilient.

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