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Exploring net political craft: From collective to connective

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Abstract

Craft and design has had a dialectical history since early modernism, where craft often sided with the romanticism of the 'arts and craft movement', while design became primarily market-led and allied with mass production, industrialism and consumerism. This conflict, which deepened through the twentieth century, is now exhibiting signs of reconciliation.

What happens at the borders between design and craft today, when a new generation of makers trespass and extend across this raft, to combine post-industrial design, open source shared engagement and net political craft?

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An exhibition and series of workshops at the Jönköping County Museum, Sweden, set out to examine the new household tactics of the global popular crafts and the transversal movements of critical engagement, re-examining household production, craftivism and critical design.

This article specifically examines the 'Counterfeit Crochet' project of artist Stephanie Syjuco whose works were exhibited at the show, to see how she uses networked craft as a critical tool for investigating contemporary modes of political power, globalized production, consumerism and DIY activism.

Introduction

Over the last decade we have seen a resurgence in craft especially from the young generation, who approach the household crafts with a DIY punk attitude. New magazines like *Make*, *Craft*, and *ReadyMade* have fed a growing interest with new ideas and techniques. The Internet has also spurred a wide exchange of ideas – a simple Internet search for 'Knitting blogs', for example, results in a 100,000 hits. Yoga magazines write about the meditative qualities of knitting and handcraft (Everman 2007) and celebrities knitting in special craft cafes around Beverly Hills have become a common sight (Parkins 2004), as has knitting as a form of political engagement (Greer 2008).

This resurgence in craft not only appears to be a new trend, but also answers to numerous causes and issues. As referenced in Richard Sennett's book *The Craftsman* (2008), we live in times that do not award workplace development or advancement in craftsmanship and thoroughness. According to Sennett, the workplace seems to have become less a place for self-realization than was common some decades ago. The crafts have also become a welcome hands-on anchoring in tangible reality; this is especially welcome in times of ubiquitous digital telecommunications and screen-based presence.

To better understand the forces and expressions of this powerful re-emergence of craft, we at the Jönköping County Museum approached these new tactics in an exhibition and set of workshops called 'Craftwerk 2.0' (19 September 2009–21 March 2010). The museum has a long history of documenting the folklore, naive and amateur arts in Sweden and has established itself as a driving force of folk design exhibitions and research since the 1970s. This made the Craftwerk 2.0 exhibition a welcome furthering of previous exhibition projects.

To frame the research in new household tactics we defined three new approaches among the artists and designers in the exhibition, organized under three main themes: new politics, new economics, and new technologies. None of these themes are radically *new*, but they are intensifications of forces that have previously been neglected in their respective fields and downplayed in connection to the crafts.



Figure 1: Craftwerk 2.0 Exhibition (2009). One of the exhibition spaces at the Jönköping County Museum, Sweden, Goran Sandstedt.

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New economics

'New economics' frames a new network and values that are spreading through the crafting communities. For Finnish researcher Ulla-Maria Muutonen the new crafter economics uses more channels of value exchange than purely monetary means. Instead, the motivations behind the craft economics are more based on learning, recognition, reciprocity, barter and conversations, not to mention links and recommendations through blogs (Muutonen 2006: 39).

One such exchange platform is the 'pledge handmade' initiative, an online crafter action spread through communities consisting of a short contract and banners. The pledge encourages crafters to support the handmade economy created by fellow hobbyists instead of buying sweatshop produced anonymous goods. Likewise crafters organize new craft bazaars, which seem to draw increasing crowds. Popular craft events like Bazaar Bizarre, Urban Craft Uprising, Radical Craft Fair and Maker Fair in North America have created great exposure for the handmade hype of today, and similar 'indie' craft markets can be seen in many western countries.

The online coordination of today's crafters can be seen as exhibiting something like the small-scale and collaborative endeavours developed in the open source movement, and which, in economic settings, Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams (2006) have labelled as 'wikinomics'. To Tapscott and Williams this form of economics differs greatly from the logics of industrialism. Wikinomics are characterized by globally distributed networks of participants and open models of collaboration, which seem to coexist or even replace the centralized and closed processes of innovation and production which have been commonplace throughout modernism.

In his early analysis of Etsy, a popular Internet bazaar for crafted goods, journalist Rob Walker (2007) asks if indie craft is 'an art movement, a craft phenomenon or a shopping trend' based on how these three aspects merge on this Internet platform.

According to Walker, what has made Etsy such a success story, with over 500 million visits monthly, is that the online platform could plug into a movement basing its values on participation, not consumption. Etsy has been fuelled by a scene 'that was *already* social, community-minded, supportive and aggressively using the Web' (Walker 2007, original emphasis).

What Etsy captures is surely an ideological movement, but perhaps even more accurately a *work movement*. It is all about making new connections: 'Buying something from an indie craft artist can result in a buyer-seller connection, but it can also make consumption itself feel like a creative act' (Walker 2007). This scene is not an outspoken anti-capitalist movement, but is about a 'form of economic independence *within* capitalism' (Walker 2007, original emphasis). Yet, for Walker a work movement like the community crafters organized through Etsy cannot be about changing the world, as he seems to believe that politics have to be centrally organized and radical movements placed *outside* the system. But even so, for Walker the economy on Etsy is still something utopian, because

crafters are 'making a living from what they love to do. It's a goal that reconciles ideology and self-branding, not so much to change the world as to stake out a place in it'.

New politics

Following Walker's argument one can wonder if there is any political intention or potential for today's online crafters. According to Betsy Greer, originator of the term 'craftivism' which represents the merger of 'craft' and 'activism', political activism means to change the world through passionate creation, even if in small scale (Greer 2008). What Greer puts forward is the cultivation and intensification of skills and engagement among fellow community members, which can manifest itself in anything from the utilitarian work of knitting sweaters for political prisoners or afghans for Afghan refugees, but also symbolic actions like making sweaters for penguin victims of Tasmanian oil spills. Yet for Greer the greatest potential exists in craft's ability to bring together people for reflective engagement; that craft creates time for discussion at a very personal level, instead of the anonymous masses of street demonstrations and slogan chanting. Craftivism can be aimed at creating social relationships or coordinated actions on special issues, but both paths of action have political potential.

For several years the artist Cat Mazza has been using craft to expose and debate the politics of consumerism and economic exploitation of South East Asia. Her projects combine hand knitting with knitting machines, and community-building efforts with digital social networks to investigate and initiate discussion about sweatshop labour, consumerism and war. In *Logoknits* (2004) she involved participants who could – using the simple online software, KnitPro – transform logos and other images into knitting patterns. Mazza is under no illusion that knitting is a politics that will change the world alone: 'Logoknits are not a solution to the sweatshop crisis, but a symbolic attack, and hopefully a meaningful, educational, resistance strategy' (Mazza 2004: 7). Her later project *Stitch for Senate* (2007) is more explicitly political as it is a networked effort for crafters to raise attention to and influence decision makers about the US war in Iraq.

Mazza frames her project as part of a series of 'micro revolts', loosely inspired by political philosopher Felix Guattari's concept of 'molecular revolutions' (Guattari 1984). She works towards the idea that social change can arise not only as a consequence of governing or economic policies but instead in how networked craft can bring about 'small, disconnected resistant acts overlapped to nudge along change' (Mazza quoted in Debatty 2008).

The 'micro-revolt' tactics of Mazza and her fellow 'craftivists' display a similar approach to the politics of imaginative and engaged creation as that discussed by design researcher John Wood in his design for 'micro-utopias' (Wood 2007). To Wood, such actions and design processes aim to break the status quo of consumerism and the dominant economic and political models to find loopholes and forums to make alternative futures discussable and conceptualized into paths of action. The largest

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Figure 2: Craftwerk 2.0 Exhibition (2009). The workshop area at the Jönköping County Museum, where crafting events were held weekly, Goran Sandstedt.

obstacle for change is our lack of imagination for alternatives and the deficiency of practical examples to guide our way through processes of change. To Wood, once such micro-utopias are thinkable 'they can be quickly developed into opportunities for beneficial change' (Wood 2007: 5).

What primarily distinguishes today's craftivists is their use of tactics similar to those of hackers in the world of software programming. As opposed to their counterparts from early industrialism they are not against the machines, like the Luddites. They do not wish to destroy the new devices or tear down the new technological infrastructure. Rather their hands-on tactics involve knowledge creation, building and appropriation. For them, new technologies are not a threat, but a tool to be used to update and intensify traditional craft.

New technologies

Throughout industrialism, craft has been positioned as the dialectic opposite of technology; within the craft communities practitioners have taken great pride in keeping their production incompatible with the intensive use of machinery. Technical ascetics, following the 'handicraft' decrees of John Ruskin and William Morris, have been favoured to distinguish craft from that of mass production. But today something else has happened, something which craft historian Ezra Shales identifies as a 'technophilic' movement in the crafts, where crafters combine century-old techniques with digital technology (Shales 2008).

Craft researcher Emily Howes recognizes a tendency among the indie craft subcultures, that of an 'idiosyncratic blend of old and new technologies' (Howes 2008: 1). Howes sees this triggered by the profanation of digital technologies and also a conscious embrace and hacking approach to everyday production technology where the Internet acts as the 'core mechanism for subcultural activity' (Howes 2008: 1). Interconnected with the ethics of the open source movement in software programming, Howes identifies how crafters put emphasis on 'egalitarianism and collective good' as they share their ideas, patterns and interests (Howes 2008: 2). As highlighted by Howes, at the core of this resurgence in craft lies a paradox: while the digital youth is ubiquitously connected to the global net, they lose their sense of community and place – and make efforts to rebuild community using the same technology that, for some, created the problem.

But the appropriation of technology goes further than the simple use of everyday telecommunications such as the Internet. The technophilic crafters 'hack' machines, reverse engineer them and apply craft thinking on them to make them into open tools that can do new crafty things.

One such example from the Craftwerk 2.0 exhibition is the project 'stitching together' by Swedish artists Åsa Ståhl and Kristina Lindström. The project set out by the two artists is a series of workshops about SMS embroidery; participants are encouraged to use their phone as an archive of digital memories and short statements, not too dissimilar from the mottos of traditional embroidery. However, participants do not only use hand stitching with classic needle and thread for their

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messages, the artists have also hacked a digital sewing machine and hooked it up with a mobile phone to which people can send their short messages. Users browse through their emotional archive of SMSs or write new messages and send to the machine. Users can take the results home or also work on collectively edited stories or remixed chronicles of 146-character poetry.

This approach to technology confronts the traditional Arts and Crafts Movement approach of rejecting all technologies in favour of embracing the direct use of tools. At the end of the day the new technologies in craft exhibit new connections and interfaces between the distributed tools of computer networks and a very hands-on romanticism of the tactile crafts. As contributor to *Craft* magazine, Jean Railla, has observed: 'We work at computers all day. Crafting allows us the experience of the tactile world, the non-virtual, the *real*' (Railla 2006: 10, original emphasis).

Counterfeit Crochet as applied net politics

Where network theoretician Andreas Broeckmann has seen the politics of the Internet as a move 'from collective to connective' (Broeckmann 1999), we can see similarities as the indie crafts expose net political tendencies, i.e., being distributed, molecular, appropriational and interconnected. These are network politics working along the same lines as those of the 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2004) or of 'swarms' (Parikka 2008), exhibiting viral properties of 'digital contagion' (Parikka 2007). One illuminating example is the practice of the crafter and artist Stephanie Syjuco.

Syjuco has been running her art project, the 'Counterfeit Crochet Project', since the beginning of 2006 when she started to make copies of exclusive fashion bags using crochet techniques. The project grew into a participatory, globally distributed, counterfeit factory as volunteers from all over the world now produce the bags.

The project is simple. Participants are encouraged to forage the Internet for 'it-bags' they desire but cannot afford to buy. Then they download the low-resolution images from the web and print these images in life-size. The heavily pixelated image then becomes a crochet pattern for the bags – from which the hobby crocheter can reproduce a life-size upmarket bag, crocheted in low resolution. From a distance it will look like the real thing. Makers are encouraged to send images of themselves and the finished bags to Syjuco, and these are exhibited on the project's website and have been on show in several art venues around the world (Counterfeit Crochet 2010).

Parallel to the counterfeit project, Syjuco runs an 'anti-factory' where she produces unique handmade garments at a cheap price. The anti-factory items are also used for trading with counterfeit bags between participants in her projects. Participants taking part in her counterfeiting projects receive an anti-factory piece as 'reward' for their work – a gift exchange of craft objects and time between fellow crafters. But this exchange is also a symbol of how the production economy works in the 'real' fashion industry, where work is globally outsourced, and her project thus

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Figure 3: Stephanie Syjuco (2007). Crocheted Gucci bag from Counterfeit Crochet project, Otto Von Busch.

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replicates the modes of production within global fashion. Syjuco has participants from all over the world creating bags for the project and engaging in her micro-economic exchange model, as part of a gift economic network.

As part of the project Syjuco runs workshops where she teaches crochet and simple methods to make some of the complicated patterns common in designer bags. Events such as these are opportunities for visitors to reclaim skill and move the modes of production back to the hands of what were previously passive consumers. Creating counterfeits in low resolution becomes a simple method of learning craft in a playful way. This type of crocheting is not a dropout position neglecting the desire of fashion: it is neither a radical construction of an entirely new fashion or an ideologically utopian position.

For Syjuco, every bag is made through 'freeforming' (where no formal pattern or technique is used) and the bag grows out of resemblance to the original pixelated image, leaving room for interpretation and improvisation. The project does not encourage those involved to follow a basic set of instructions; instead Syjuco tries to promote a 'healthy sense of experimentation on the maker's part' (Syjuco 2007: 58). Instead of using small needle and thin yarn she promotes the use of thick yarn to make the process fast and easier and give the bags a chunky expression. It is not a question of making a perfect copy with exclusive threads but instead to 'debase' the original, using common materials to interpret the couture (Syjuco 2007: 58). She says:

I have dreams of an army of crocheters putting busy hands toward crafting their hearts' desires, and both laughing at and paying homage to the 'high-end' fashion world!
(Syjuco 2007: 60)

Conclusion

Syjuco's take on the 'must-have' bags happens at the intersection of several forces in contemporary consumer society. On the one hand we have celebrity interest in knitting with exclusive Hollywood yarn stores and knitting cafés (Parkins 2004), on the other we can experience how contemporary fashionable luxury goods seem to lose some of their lustre (Thomas 2007). Indeed, many of the classic luxury brands, like Hermes and Louis Vuitton, now emphasize the slow handmade craft aspects of their production rather than the exclusivity of style. It is thus an irony that Chanel just released (spring/summer 2010) a small crocheted clutch bag expressing the very Etsyish style of the online amateurs as a seemingly re-appropriation of the style developed by Syjuco's distributed crocheters.

To find the attracting energies of these tendencies we should look neither at the hands that perform the craft, nor the final products, but we should trace the networks, protocols, techniques and attitudes among the makers. What net political crafts do is not only surf the Internet – as the platform of communication and coordination – they also use the recombinant tactics of what art critic Nicolas Bourriaud calls the 'semionaut' (2002). The semionaut, an agent of cultural re-appropriation,

embodies the cultural logic of today in the shape of semantic DJs who sample, remix and transpose signs across media. In the words of Bourriaud: 'We tinker with production, we surf on a network of signs, we insert our forms on existing lines' (2002: 19).

Today's net political crafters, many participating in the Craftwerk 2.0 exhibition, use such semi-onautic tactics, and do not primarily position themselves in classic dialectical oppositions. Rather, they transpose their energies by reinventing the crafter's approach to economy, technology and politics. They merge these topics into a new, net political, household practice of craft promotion and dialogue that is indeed an updated approach to the traditional handicrafts. They learn from new sports like surfing, rather than the classic Greek sports of shot put, and they tinker with critical forces outside of themselves, riding on urgent issues and technologies. They are neither introvert nor conventional. They are connective rather than collective.

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