CRAFTIVISM

The Art of Craft and Activism

edited by
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CRAFTING RESISTANCE
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"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." —Martin Luther King Jr.

Since the turn of the century, we have seen a resurgence of both the craft and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) cultures. Many who experienced the waves of activism in the 1970s and '80s make comparisons between the crocheted fashions and dropout cultures of the hippies or punks and their community actions, such as the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the United Kingdom in 1981, and today's craft and activism resurgence, which has much in common with earlier forms of resistance cultures. It can be traced as far back as the nineteenth-century American author Henry David Thoreau's self-built cabin at Walden Pond.

Today, we see a tendency to primarily judge the outcomes of such actions for their aesthetic signature, for their forms and the quality of their craftsmanship. But just as it would be wrong to gauge Thoreau's endeavors based on his skills as a carpenter, it would be wrong to evaluate today's craft only by its merits as objects. Through acts of craft, we still shape forms of resistance. They are examinations of the seams in our social fabric and acts of disobedience.

Thoreau and resistance
In his essay Resistance to Civil Government (1849), Thoreau suggests that it is our fear of punishment that makes us reproduce injustices. Our fear of punishment is our prison, not the prison structure itself. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison." Thoreau believed that we must govern ourselves by our conscience and not seek to be ruled, even democratically. "Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail." To Thoreau, democracy was only a convenient delegation of power and responsibility to a parliament so that we could acquit ourselves from taking necessary action for justice. In other words, by not participating more actively in the fight against injustices, we become complicit in them.

In his epic work Walden (1854), Thoreau documents his experiments in what it means to be autonomous. Early in the book, he discusses the role of fashion, pointing out how we are dependent and controlled in this area by the opinions of others. As Thoreau points out, clothes and fashion play an important role in our society, producing a lot of anxiety; they may even act as a cover for conscience: "No man ever stood the tower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience."

Clothes are not seen as unimportant; they are instead remarkable instruments from which to build independence, and they can reveal our relationship to power if we take them seriously. Thoreau sees our dependence on fashion as reluctance to see that we have power, even though we uncritically adhere to the authority of trends. Not only are our clothes "assimilated to ourselves," but wearing simple clothing and adopting a critical relation to trends can allow us to have a more independent life.
For Thoreau, our relationship to fashion lies at the core of our independence, as it mirrors our relationship to both government and power. Obeying fashion without conscience is the same as obeying laws we have not set ourselves. By putting our conscience back into the equation, we can remind ourselves of our autonomy. Taking on fashion through craft is more than an issue of expressing identity; it is a way to tackle our relationship to our compliance to being governed. It is a way to be free.

**Turning resistance into craft**

What Thoreau highlights is the struggle for independence inherent in clothing. Fashion may be an identity struggle between belonging and independence, but it is a struggle manifested as part of our social skin, and it is often made from materials open to our intervention. Craft, in the realm of fashion, is a tool that operates directly at the contested frontline of identity.

When one sees craft as resistance, it is far too easy to examine it from a perspective of anti-consumerism or an individualistic attempt toward self-sufficiency or homesteading. In such cases, it may seem that craft is yet another counterculture in the spotlight, another subcultural trend that is easily commodified. If we look at craft objects, they are indeed often treated as mere commodities. Even a great arena for craft resurgence such as Etsy is still primarily a venue for the exchange of goods for money, even if other values are also involved.

However, some of the crafts we see at Etsy can also establish other relationships to the world of objects by forming new connections between crafter and buyer. In these, it is possible to disarm some of the fear and social anxiety common throughout consumer culture. As Thoreau saw, the mechanisms of control are internalized in all of us through everyday fear. Peace researcher David Cortright notices that, “We fear the loss of job security or position; we worry how family, friends, and employers will view us. We are so entangled in the comforts of society that we find it difficult to take risks, even for causes we hold dear.” The passivity and obedience of the subjects forms the basis of how power is executed, as power is founded on obedience. Nobody “holds” power; it is reproduced by the subjects. The prison exists to hold as prisoners people on the outside, through their own fear. In this way, our own latent fear of isolation or even autonomy can be used against us. Therefore, resistance is aimed inward as well as outward—to withdraw fear and build inner courage, but also to inspire others, show what is possible, and engage in discussions on what to build together, to form new modes of togetherness beyond fear.

Resistance is thus a struggle against ourselves as much as against external power. Within the current regime of power in consumer society, we may consume sustainably just in order to keep on consuming. Sustainability is, in this sense, a promise to leave things as they were before—so that consumers have no real power except to “vote with our dollars.” Consumers are left powerless and in a state of social anxiety if they don’t “keep up with the Joneses.” In other words, they are not engaged at all, but leave the decisions up to the prison guards. By giving us freedom, craft is training in **not being the prison guard of oneself**. Once we are free, we are then truly able to forment change.

How is resistance and activism enacted through craft? Gandhi’s life gives us two well-known examples of craft as resistance against the British Empire. The first is his spinning of khadi (homespun cloth) to support the independence movement, thus bypassing the British monopoly on textiles in India. This example takes a frugal position in building autonomy, not unlike Thoreau’s self-sufficiency. The other powerful example
from Gandhi’s life is the Salt March, where justice was manifested through the hands-on craft of independent salt production. Gandhi proposed that, instead of buying British salt, which was taxed, Indians march to the sea to make their own salt. Every grain was a manifestation of Indian freedom, made from the abundance of salt in the Indian Ocean. The act itself was very simple, much simpler than spinning cloth, and easily reproduced; it was an action based on accessing abundance rather than signifying thrift. It thus resonates well with our time, a time of abundance, and may inspire us in how to “detoxify” consumerism.

Gandhi’s strategy used several components to make it strong:

- The act mobilized participants through simple and palpable means.
- The act accessed a colonized source of abundance and made it public through craft.
- The act bypassed or was a non-reproduction of domination.
- The act exposed oppression by making useful but illegal things.
- The act showed how a tangible result, however small, can emerge from protest.
- The act showed how resistance leads to self-rule (which Gandhi called swaraj).

Even though the resistance was violently repressed by the British, the salt campaign was effective in many ways: it was creative and original, easily replicable without the need for extensive training, gave an experience of coherence to everyone involved, and enabled the movement to seize initiative and build momentum toward larger, strategic objectives. It was a craft of being free.
Resistance as the craft of two hands

The resistance proposed by Gandhi can be seen as a form of craft, as it was materialized into action in a constructive manner. It was done by constructing disobedience. Feminist Barbara Deming used a metaphor of the “two hands” to describe this form of resistance, which aims to control and reform the relationship between activist and opponent: “The more the real issues are dramatized, and the struggle raised above the personal, the more control those in nonviolent rebellion begin to gain over the adversary. For they are able at one and the same time to disrupt everything for him, making it impossible for him to operate within the system as usual, and to temper his response to this [...] They have as it were two hands upon him—the one calming him, making him ask questions, as the other makes him move.”

This double-handed craft is a refusal to respond violently to the repression of the action and to constrain the escalation of violence or desire for revenge, and to instead focus the action on its moral implications and
inform possible dialogue. The action builds the ground for change by incarnating change. One hand stops while the other constructs the alternative; one hand displaces injustice while the other enacts justice. A similar strategy was carried out in mixed-race sit-ins against segregated diners in the American south during the Civil Rights era. At a lunch counter reserved for whites, racism was temporarily displaced when a person of color sat there. In order to oppose the sit-ins, opponents had to stop the constructive act of desegregation, and by doing so, display their racism and reveal the violence of segregation.

Craft resistance in the world of fashion would mean withdrawal of fear from fashion, while not withdrawing from fashion. Instead, resistance is simultaneously crafting alternative forms of togetherness through fashion. This may take the shape of cleverly distributed counterfeit schemes, such as Stephanie Syjuco’s Counterfeit Crochet project or the Milan-based open-source fashion network Openwear, which runs education, production, and pattern-sharing services for independent designers and users. It is through action that we test our democracy and government, as we touch the seams of society. Craft may, in this sense, act as resistance to obedience. It is a training camp for empowered autonomy. It is fearlessness toward the decrees of consumerism and peer pressure and, in its most expressive form, the violence of fashion. Craft can be a tool for overcoming fear. It is a way to be free.

Notes:
3. Thoreau, p. 231.
5. Ibid.

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