

Craftivism:
reconnecting art and design education through the social act of making

Kevin Henry
Columbia College Chicago

11th ELIA Biennial Conference
Nantes, 2010

FULL DISCLOSURE

I am an industrial designer with a background in fine arts and craft (furniture making) interested in exploring the intersections of all those disciplines. Two factors in particular shape the ideas of this essay: Richard Sennett's recent book *The Craftsman* and my own experience as a 'maker' and now an industrial designer. During my own apprenticeship I came to the realization that the best craftspeople are open to sharing information because they are secure in the knowledge that mastery comes through doing - a process amplified by personal reflection and social engagement. Openness and social sharing has sustained craft culture over millennia and now represent, in my opinion, a good model for art and design education in the 21st century where open source, open access, peer production, crowdsourcing, etc. are reshaping the broader culture. Given the space restrictions of the essays, I will concentrate on design rather than studio art looking specifically at the social aspects of knowledge creation as opposed to the technical implications of craft. I begin with a brief overview of some of the historical dynamics that drove art and craft apart; describe the economic model that helped launch passive consumption; and finally explore how a re-definition of craft and activism could help reshape education and in the process assist in the re-generation of our cities.

THE HISTORIC SPLIT

The issue of craft may seem like a very distant one in discussions of art and design curriculum but as recently as 1919 Walter Gropius in the first Bauhaus manifesto placed it central to the discussion: 'Architects, painters, sculptors, we must all return to crafts! For there is no such thing as "professional art". There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman.....a base in handicrafts is essential to every artist. It is there that the original source of creativity lies.' While it's easy to argue about the context and intended meaning of Gropius' words, it's clear that the debate over craft and art was still a central concern less than a century ago. The power and politics of design reformers in the late 19th century made craft a highly contested issue. This was, however, not enough to keep Gropius on point. Within four years he changed his rhetoric under political and economic pressures: "We aim to create a clear, organic architecture whose inner logic will be radiant and naked, unencumbered by lying facings and trickery; we want an architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios and fast cars...." The original manifesto embracing craft however informed the Bauhaus *Vorkurs* or foundation which in turn shaped the development of most art and design curriculums throughout the 20th century. Many institutions are only now re-thinking their foundation program in light of the changing nature of art, design, and digital technology (which some believe represents a new type of craft knowledge). To really understand craft it is important to go further back.

The original split between craft and art can be traced back to the fifteenth century and Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Painters*. His cohesive narrative elevated art above craft despite the fact that many of the artists described in the text had apprenticed as artisans. Brunelleschi for example trained as a goldsmith and applied similar empirical methods to problem solve everything from cathedral domes to the re-invention of perspective. As Oxford professor and Leonardo scholar Martin Kemp puts it: "When we look into the implicit 'boxes' of space behind the screens of our televisions or computers, we are distant legatees of Brunelleschi's vision." Craft knowledge in this context is perhaps more comparable to patented or trademarked technology today. It was an asset guarded and controlled by guilds interested in shaping and protecting it like a cartel, trade union, or corporation today. As author Malcolm McCullough writes: "Towns created guilds- and guilds made towns- in order to instigate commerce."

It was the artisan's skill and innovation that propelled commerce forward creating a rich class of merchants. Vasari, according to historian Richard Goldthwaite, was amongst the first to use the word competition (*concorrenza*) in the economic sense to describe the intense struggle amongst individual artists for commissions. It was in this context that the artist emerged as the dominant creative force respected for innovative and novel works that appealed to patrons who viewed their own risk-taking as central to their success. As commissions increased artists often hired and trained talented assistants to help realize their ambitions. History however often recorded only the individual artist's name and their stylistic innovations - a phenomenon that persists today in the studios of some artists, star designers, and 'starchitects'.

ART/CRAFT/INDUSTRY

This historic split eventually created three distinct trajectories: art, craft, and industry (which emerged fully in the 18th and 19th centuries). For any student of design history the 60-year period beginning with the establishment of the Victoria and Albert museum (1851) and ending with the founding of the Deutsche Werkbund (1907) is an especially contentious time. The V&A, which was established with funds from the Great Exhibition, was meant to serve as a repository for the best examples of applied art from which Victorian manufacturers were encouraged to model their production. This however did not happen, instead within five years, manufacturers in Germany realizing that their production capacities far outweighed consumer demand embraced the fashion model with its seasonal changes intended to stoke desire in a consumer interested in change for change's sake. Writing in his book *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture Before the First World War*, Frederic Schwartz quotes Walter Troeltsch an economist of the time: "Fashion undermines the habit of moderate consumption based on individual need; it stimulates the passion for constant change even when this is not objectively necessary; it directs demand toward objects whose often dubious merit consists in being modern; it seduces and trains people

to apply an entirely new standard to commodities.” Here lies the origin of our own passive consumption only greatly accelerated in the 21st century by the exploitation of cheap foreign labor; containerization made economically feasible by cheap foreign oil; and the global capital that controls it. It’s easy to see the work of artists like Duchamp, Warhol, and Koons in light of these rapidly changing dynamics.

While the model of passive consumption might begin here where craft and industrialization tumultuously split apart, the seeds of industrialization were sown much earlier by craftsmen-entrepreneurs like Thomas Chippendale’s whose *Director* served as a pattern book for disseminating and advertising his work (thus propogating a recognizable style that could be reproduced anywhere) or Josiah Wedgwood (trained as a potter) whose embrace of serial production using slipcast molds replaced what had previously been made entirely by hand. The small workshop came under competitive pressure from larger ‘manufactories’ (from the Latin ‘manu factum’ or ‘made by hand’) where serial production became the norm. All of this is intended to dispel any romanticism associated with craft production: competition and innovation were as much a part of the small shop as it was the larger factory, yet craft is far more than the knowledge required to produce objects by hand.

RECALIBRATING “CRAFT”

One of the central problems in defining craft today is the lack of a reliable definition: hand production, non-industrialized production, traditional skills passed from generation to generation, expensive and precious artifacts, cheap products from developing countries, and so on. Richard Sennett in his 2008 book *The Craftsman* provides a simple and direct definition: ‘the desire to do a job well for its own sake’. However the desire to do something well and the reality of doing it especially in the contemporary workplace of the ‘new economy’ can be two very different things. The author spends the majority of the book exploring the subtle dynamics that have shaped craft and continue to inform it whether in a context of open source software development or raising children. He returns us to the ancient Greek’s use of the word in mythology: demioergos - a compound of demios and ergon or ‘public’ and ‘productive’ reminding us of its social and technical importance. Craft, in Sennett’s definition, is far more than working with one’s hands. It’s about acquiring the ‘tacit knowledge’ necessary for good decision making: “Craftsmanship cuts a far wider swath than skilled manual labor; it serves the computer programmer, the doctor, and the artist; parenting improves when it is practiced as a skilled craft, as does citizenship.”

Craft however relies on the transformational power of time. The acquisition of any ‘skilled’ activity needs repeated and meaningful exchanges between a person (the craftsperson) and the task/material they learning. Provided there is enough time (Sennett cites 10,000 hours as a good

benchmark) a person can achieve mastery over a material, process, or activity. For a doctor or a nurse practitioner, the daily interactions with patient and colleagues, and the repetition of procedures over a concentrated period of time can lead to a more holistic understanding of the healing craft allowing one the ability to make truly informed decisions as well as share that knowledge with others. Such interactions are difficult to codify in book form acquired as they are through practice, social interaction, and the free exchange of knowledge.

APPLYING THE LESSONS OF CRAFT TO CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

The world we now inhabit, shaped as it has been over the past half millennium by profound technical advances and innovation, is facing major problems including climate change, global terrorism, labor exploitation, and unsustainable growth and lifestyles (at least in the industrialized nations). The same technical advances and innovation have also brought us the open architecture of the internet, socially motivated peer production, open source software and open architecture and design initiatives, access to greater amounts of information, and the power and wisdom of crowds to do everything from solve technical problems (innoventive.com for example) to collaboratively create films (the animated short “Live Music” for example). The ‘self-generating’ dynamics of these newly emergent networked communities might be better thought of as the craftspeople of the 21st century intent on leveraging the knowledge of the community to solve large and small problems alike. Developing art and design curriculum around this new paradigm requires understanding how these networks form and thrive.

Social craft (craftivism) requires as a first step to process of framing some of the major trends that will impact our lives. For example: how might local production/manufacturing be rethought as the price of oil rises to such a level that it makes exports infeasible? How might technology assist in the process of localized production? How might lifestyle trends and expectations be adjusted or adapted to new realities? Questions like these would require cross-disciplinary approaches to generate ideas/solutions and in the process expose students to a range of disciplines and possible areas of interest. Students would need to explore a topic like localized production from the standpoint of the economics, the technology, the change in consumer habits, and so on. Working in non-hierarchical structures to ensure the free flow and exchange of information the students could begin organizing groups interested and able to tackle any of the various topics. In the beginning, problems would need to be scaled appropriately to help facilitate cross-disciplinary activity and research amongst appropriate teams which might include design students, science students, engineering or economics students, etc. The lengths of projects would be determined based on the desired outcomes as opposed to existing time slots. The team would be taught to establish workable parameters for approaching the problem as well as appropriate methods for sharing and disseminating information amongst each other as well as the other teams. During

projects students would undertake the technical training or instruction to assist in understanding and framing the problem. Such a craft-like approach could help re-focus education around large scale issues and the real possibility of building flexible teams that come together as needed to solve a particular problem and learn from each other.