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BA Design Crafts

ADDA6006 Independent Project – Extended Essay

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Word Count – 5300.

“What is the relevance of Craft to the people of the UK at this present time?” This essay will discuss the importance of craft to the health and wellbeing of both society and the environment and look at how we have become so disconnected from Craft practices and how that disconnection has impacted our relationship with the Land over time, as well as how these entwined events are now manifesting in the society of the developed worlds as a growing feeling of hopelessness and despair. The essay will then look at the education opportunities available to enable us to make a connection to craft, how limiting those options can be, and how important it is that this should be improved to enable the readjustment and the healing of people’s minds through a renewed connection to the Land, through craft practices.



Fig. 1. Ochre Block incised with patterns (nd)
en.citaliarestauro.com), (accessed 30/08/23)

Referred to as '*Humanity's first art studio*' (Tenreiro, nd), the Blombos Cave in South Africa is an archeological site that has unearthed a plethora of objects associated with adornment, and Art. Amongst the finds were blocks of ochre with linear incised patterns (Fig.1), dating to 75,000 years of age. These were unearthed in 2002, with subsequent excavations in 2008 revealing two complete 'kits' for processing ochre, within a specific workshop space. These 'kits' comprise of abalone shells with ochre residue still in them, as well as quartzite cobbles and bone spatulas for grinding and mixing and were found neatly packed together all neatly packed as if the maker had just left the cave (Amos, 2011). The strata that these latest artefacts were found in has been dated to 100,000 years ago, making these discoveries some of the earliest examples of deliberate design and of artistic expression by humans. Bruno David, in his book '*Cave Art*' (2017), describes the evidence of the workshop and "*the manufacture and use of paints as signalling something much grander, the beginnings of an active, creative mind, and of what we have come to know as Art*" (p124).

How the ochres were used by the people in the Blombos cave is not known, and there has been no evidence of cave paintings found at the site to date. Some people suggest body decoration (Tenreiro, nd), which is still practiced by many indigenous people to this day, however this is all

speculation. Our interpretation of such sites will always be just an 'educated guess' based on our own lifetime experiences, which are vastly different from the lives lived in the past – *"our present day picture of their world will always be incomplete and only an approximation of the original"* (Hall, 1969, p81). The important point about Blombos cave is that it displays the manifestation of the urge to create by early humans, and the crafting of tools to facilitate the making of materials to aid this creative drive.

As time moved forward, this creativity was taken further by the people in their decoration of caves worldwide. Again, there is speculation of why the paintings were done, was it art, was it spiritual. However, as Arthur Versluis states, *"in tribal cultures 'art' or 'religion' are not seen as separate categories. Rather 'art' is manifested in ritual and in objects used in daily life"* (1993, p137). Therefore, were the cave paintings communication aids to show what animals were in the area, were the paintings 'offerings' as appeasement and thanks for a kill. They were more than likely an approximation of both, with some 'artistic freedom' for good measure. The paleoanthropologist Genevieve Von Petzinger has been studying the Caves of Europe and found 32 symbols that are commonly found in caves all over Europe, which can be seen as significant as ways *"to preserve information beyond the moment"* (as seen in Gibbs, 2023). During Petzinger's many travails into very tight spaces deep

underground, the scientist often found herself asking why anyone would come to these places to paint a symbol. The painter would, after all, have been using just a basic form of natural torch, venturing deep underground into caves often inhabited by predators, so why were they there. In a modern context the equivalent would be Graffiti art high up on a seemingly inaccessible building or a bridge, where you scratch your head and think “Why?”, and often, “How?” For both artists of their day, it could simply be the urge to create, and to leave a mark, to have a voice, and to be heard, or to honour another human or being. The Human race seems, essentially, to be driven to be creative in some form, be it painting or craft of some form, and under any guise, be it spiritual, social or out of necessity to survive.

By the end of the 1500’s rural communities in the United Kingdom had evolved into self-sufficient entities, where people made a living off the land and through crafting objects from produce gathered from the land. These communities were not wealthy, but most of their needs were met from within the immediate area, and they were self-sustaining and lived in tune with the land around them. Some of the villagers became specialised crafts people, making essential items for daily use (Jenkins, 2009 Edition). The poorer peasants were able to grow crops and raise livestock to supplement their incomes by using common land, and waste areas around the village area.



Fig. 2. Zarate, Oscar (nd), 'The Diggers',
(thelandmagazine.org.uk), (accessed 02/11/23)

However, from 1604 this all changed with the introduction of the 'Enclosures Act', which effectively allowed the wealthier landowners to fence in and claim 6.8 million acres of previously common land as their own and to bar access to the villagers who had relied on this land to exist. Villagers were driven from the land, often forcibly which obviously had a disruptive effect on the communities, leaving many displaced and destitute. Fig. 2 depicts an enforced clearing of people from the land and is entitled "The Diggers". The Diggers were a band of displaced villagers led by Gerard Winstanley who stated, *"England is not a free people, til the poor that have no land, have an*

allowance to dig and labour the commons..." (Fairlie, 2009). The Diggers fought back against the system and sought to reoccupy the common lands, but eventually the uprisings and protests were in vain, and the 'enclosure' of land carried on until 1914 (parliament.uk) and included the notorious Highland Clearances in Scotland.

A lot of these displaced villagers were forced to move to the cities to find work, or even forced to emigrate to the 'new worlds'. This movement of people to the city gave the emerging Industrial Revolution the workforce it required. Meanwhile the enclosure of land, which eradicated the previous 'open field system', enabled the Farming Revolution. You could say the 'Enclosure Act' has a lot to answer for. It is always the poor who suffer the most, the people just trying to get by, and make the most of what they have. Looking back now was the Industrial Revolution really to be applauded and was it a better way of life for those displaced poor who ended up down the mines or in the mills. There are so many grey areas it is hard to know. Likewise, the Farming revolution and the life of the rural poor was far from picturesque, with children and women working all hours in the fields, in all weathers and living in conditions sometimes worse than those of their industrial compatriots (Samuel, 1975).

Prior to the 'Enclosure Act' villagers lived a life in touch with nature, and in tune with the world around them. Customs, traditions, skills, rites and stories all *"helped to unite country people with nature and ancestors"* (Hawkes, 1991 Ed, p201). As such they would have felt a part of a place, and deeply connected to that place. The wrench of being displaced from their home would have caused distress and anguish. Writing in her book 'Losing Eden', Lucy Jones quotes the 19th century poet John Clare, who witnessed these acts on his own common land, and says *"he was writing about how eco destruction affected human mental health centuries ago"* (2020, p126).

The Industrial and Farming revolutions resulted in not just a displacement of people, but also in a change to many people's ways of life. In his book "Traditional Country Craftsmen", J Geraint Jenkins lists just a few of the crafts and industries that existed in the Welsh county of Ceredigion in 1831:

"28 Saddlers; 1 Whip-maker; 12 Printers; 15 Tin Smiths; 17 Clock Makers; 275 Blacksmiths; 6 Basket Makers; 33 Wheelwrights and Millwrights; 393 Tailors; 523 Carpenters; 8 Thatchers; 334 Stonemasons; 5 Sailmakers; 13 Rope Makers; and 43 Shipwrights." (p27)

The list above is, to the modern viewer, a little hard to comprehend, due to its scale and the breadth of crafts mentioned. These crafts are only the tip of what other small craft industries were in the area too, as it does not include things like weaving, spinning, etc. With the rise of cheap imports, mass production and better transport links, a lot of these traditional crafts are now

mostly to be found on the 'Red List' of Endangered Crafts published by the Heritage Craft Charity, which is looking to save the knowledge and practice of these now neglected craft practices. The disconnection of people from craft processes corresponded to a disconnection from nature and land. This disconnect occurred quite quickly, and really escalated after the Second World War (Jenkins, 2009 Ed), with the rise of mechanisation. Then within the factories the rising mechanisation and technological progresses slowly reduced the workers involvement in process. This *"intrusion of machines between hand and material completed the estrangement"* (Hawkes, 1991 Ed, p202), meaning the mechanised process had removed the worker from not only a connection to the land, but also from the very item they were making. This essentially made them a cog in a wheel, often not seeing the end product of their work, and not knowing that much about the products that went into the final product. Before mechanisation, most workers would have been involved in many processes of creating a product and would have known where items were sourced and gathered. This in turn 'connected' them to the item they produced, and to the location they worked in - a hand, heart, head connection.



Fig 3. Waldmüller, Ferdinand G (1860), 'The Expected One',
(vice.com) (accessed 04/11/23)

Moving forward to the 21st Century and the impact of the Industrial and Farming Revolutions, and their subsequent iterations, are finally being realised, if not directly addressed by those in power. The 21st Century has seen the decline and fall of many of the industries that led the Revolution. The resulting modern displacement of workers is compounded by the lack of anywhere for them to go, or roles for them to fill, and of course, there is no common land anymore for them to live off should they choose. All this is compounded further by the rapid introduction and rise of Technology, and it's resulting impact on society, mental health and on jobs. We are *"losing touch, becoming disembodied, more than in any historical period before us"* (McFarlane, 2016, p75), and *"we don't really know how to live in the 21st Century, it's not the sort*

of life we evolved for” (Barnes, 2007, p92). In Fig. 3 (above), we see a detail of the painting “The Expected One”, by Ferdinand G Waldmuller, which was painted in 1860. This painting set the internet ablaze with many convinced that the girl in the painting was holding an iPhone, and that this was evidence of time travel. Given the figure's posture and the light reflecting up to her face, you could perhaps see some logic in this. However, to anyone who remembers them, the figure is obviously holding a book, and the light is just an example of fine painting. Have we become so disconnected, via our modern way of life and the further intrusion of technology that we have forgotten what a book is. Is this an example of what is to come, as we become further estranged from reality will we lose more of our collective memory re objects and process (ie craft).

The collective rise in drug and alcohol abuse, the terrifying rise in suicide rates, and the increasing lack of hope amongst many people (Magsamen and Ross, 2023) are all signs of a culture and society struggling to adjust to the times. Indeed Mark Fisher, in 2014, describes society “*in stasis; time has stopped*” (p5), before pushing it further with “*not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible*” (p21). A bleak outlook, but ultimately a correct one. If anything, the world we live in, and society itself appears to be gearing up to go backwards. The recent criminalisation of abortion in America,

and that country's growing discrimination against the LGBTQ communities are not only the signs of a society in regression, but also of a society turning on itself as a way of distracting itself from the bigger picture of climate change and the problems of society in general. The governments of the world are only too aware that in dealing with a discontented populace, the *"resentment and anger of those people finally erupts, and they demand change. Think of the French Revolution"* (Goodall, 2022, p58), better for them to give these people a different target to vent their anger.

Joseph Campbell likens life to a game saying *"I will participate in the Game. It is a wonderful, wonderful opera – except that it hurts"* (1988, p66). In the scene below (Fig. 4), taken from the season six finale of



Fig. 4. Margaery Tyrell, Game of Thrones (Season 6 Finale), (whifflegif.com), (accessed 15/08/2023)

HBO's incredibly popular 'Game of Thrones' series, the character Queen Margaery has just realised that her husband, and her mother-in-law, are absent from an important public event. She knows that this absence is not 'part of the game', that she and all the other members of the court (especially her mother-in-law), would always adhere to. She alone realises that this absence from 'the game' indicates only that something is amiss, and that there are going to be consequences for all in that building, although even she could not have foreseen quite the drama about to unfold.

The Covid Pandemic, and its associated Lockdowns, gave many people worldwide the opportunity *"to understand what the world could – and should – be like"* (Goodall, 2022, p227). Or, as John Wood describes it – *"the world had a chance to reimagine itself"* (2021, p24). The world had a collective 'Margaery moment' you could say, as some glimpsed a world that was a balance of work and play, and a world connected to nature. By connecting the three life seemed to balance out, and you felt a part of your surroundings as well as a part of your immediate community, instead of just existing you were living. The Pandemic and the subsequent aftermath have also exposed the possibility that 'the social contract' has been broken, by those in power, who have not played by the rules of the game. The social contract is a concept developed by various philosophers including Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques

Rousseau and is an unwritten authority from the people that gives elected government/ruler power to make decisions on behalf of, and in the interest of, the people. In exchange the people agree to abide by a set of rules and laws and get protection and stability from their rulers. However, if these rules, etc are deemed too harsh, the people retain the right to protest or overthrow the ruler/government (Ranciere, Jacques, nd). It has become blatantly clear to all in the past few years that we are facing the challenge of climate change, and the resulting extreme weather conditions associated with it. We trusted our governments to act in the interest of the people, not in the interest of profits and big business, but it has become very clear that the latter is what seems to interest them more, as they appear unable to change or deliver on reforms to forestall a seemingly catastrophic climate crisis (Wood, 2021). Interestingly in these times of uncertainty, the governments of the UK, Australia, and Canada have also passed legislation which significantly impacts on how people can protest (libertyhumanrights.org.uk, 2023). Those in power appear to be playing a very different game than the rest of us.

Many individuals have seen firsthand the effects of our modern first world consumerism, and many want to change, but do not know where to start. The Lockdowns provided some with the opportunity to retrain, and to try to reconnect with a simpler, less complicated way of life. The answer to our

current problems lies in our past, society needs to reconnect to the land, to natural cycles and it needs to reconnect on a local level. This can happen through the act of making, be it art, craft, motor mechanics, cookery, anything that uses the trinity of the Head, Heart, and Hand, as illustrated below (Figure 5).

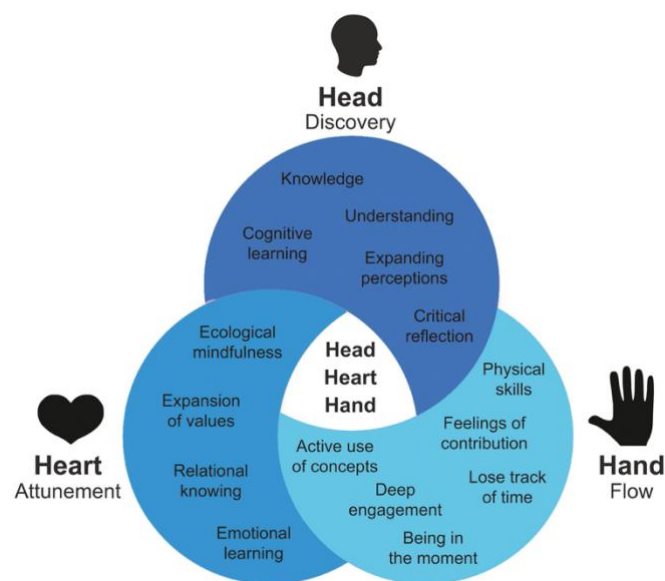


Fig. 5. Head, Heart and Hand Theoretical Framework, showing effects of Head, Heart, Hand connection. (Researchgate.net) (accessed 03/12/2023)

The main stumbling block to this reintegration of making into society is training, and the lack of, or difficulty in, accessing such training, particularly in the field of art and craft. The ceramicist and educator Tim Thornton, recently commented on a Crafts Council (UK) Factfile published in 1995, which was published for those interested in a career in pottery, in which he noted that in

the year of its publication there were 1.1 million students at higher or university level, with 55 courses available for ceramics, whereas now there are 1.9 million students, with just 14 courses that include ceramics, of which only 3 are just focused on ceramics (2023). So, whilst the number of students has increased, the number of courses has dropped dramatically. The provision of craft and art courses in general is compounded by another issue, particularly at university level – the fact that technical skills are no longer taught. Indeed, the glass Artist Elliott Walker has said of glass education that *“UK students can graduate after three years of study without even basic glass making skills. It’s a huge problem”* (2022). It appears that Universities have adopted the theories of Joseph Jacotet who espoused that if a teacher was to place a student in a stimulating environment with an object to be studied, the student would find a way to teach themselves through their own methods, and their own mind (Thomas, 2022). Today that is the use of YouTube and Google, with valuable help from Technicians to fill in any gaps in information from these often contradictory sources.

At the same time, by amalgamating the subject of art and craft into the research led university system, theory has been exalted above technique (Moran, 2009). This in turn has led to *“an exile of feeling”* (Robinson, 2017, p149). The theory being that we possess two minds – a rational, and an

emotional. The former is logical, whilst the latter is spontaneous and illogical.

“The folk distinction between “heart” and “head” (Goleman, 2020, p8). The current educational system has severed the link between head and heart, (and by default, hand) to favour the thinking processes, which are cheaper to provide, when compared to many hands-on craft processes.

Since the commercialisation of Universities, and the integration of art schools into them, the problem has been further exacerbated by funding, or lack of funding. When money is short it is usually the art programs that are cut first (Robinson, 2017). Commercialisation has also turned education into something akin to a manufacturing process, or as Tim Thornton describes it, a *“degree mill”* (2023).

Ken Robinson elaborates on this further in his book *“Creative Schools”*;

*“Education is not an industrial process, it is an organic one.
Education is about living people, not inanimate things.
If we think of students as products, products have no
opinions or feelings. People do. They are affected by what
happens to them, and they affect life right back”* (2016, p41)

Today's Universities are selling an education, for which a student now acquires a significant debt. As most Universities are currently charging £9,000 per year for their courses, with the addition of a maximum £10,000 ‘Maintenance Loan’ to cover rent, additional course costs (like art materials, photocopying and printing), food, etc – this would mean a student would acquire a debt of

£57,000. This makes the student a customer, but a customer generally of limited means and few options, and the universities know this. However, ultimately, if the product (ie the course) does not deliver a worthwhile outcome, then eventually the customer will find other options. Robinson further mentions that *“a degree is no longer the distinction it once was”* (2016, p15), which for a debt of up to £57,000 does not hold much promise or show a good return on the students (and in fact, the governments) investment, and is hardly the cause for the usual celebration upon graduation pictured below



(Fig.6).

Fig. 6. The Graduation ritual of tossing the graduation caps (nd)
(Marstonrobing.com), (accessed 18/11/2023)

Within the craft and art fields there are other options open to the student, outside the university system. There are a plethora of Private practitioners and artists running excellent short courses that can be fitted around a job, plus

there are part time night classes at local colleges. For those that want to truly immerse themselves in a practice, in an experience that is similar to that of a university, but that provides a grounded education based on the craft of making there are only a few options. For example, there is The Clay College in Stock on Trent (a class from which can be seen in Fig.7 below), whose 'Clay College Diploma Course' focuses on core making skills, and the use of materials as well as business, sales and marketing – all the things necessary to enable the student to set up as a practicing potter. This course runs over two years, and costs £9250 a year (claycollegestoke.co.uk, 2023).



Fig. 7. Ceramic Throwing Class in progress.

(claycollegestoke.co.uk), (accessed 04/11/2023)

For those wishing to pursue a more art orientated course there is Heatherleys in London, which provides a through grounding in Portraiture or

Sculpture techniques, with these Diploma courses again covering two years for a cost of £9350 per year (heatherleys.org, 2023). The downside of these courses is that they are not accredited like a University course, you get a Diploma but if you wanted to go on to teach, I do not know how this qualification would hold up. This is an example of the fixation of the academic over the practical or tacit knowledge.

For those who require a BA or MA accredited course the option could be 'West Dean College' in West Sussex. This College offers courses in Art, Design, Craft and Conservation Education. The courses are very specialised and appear to be structured slightly differently than a 'normal' University with regard to 'Levels' for entry. The cost of the courses also reflects their specialist nature with most starting at £13,000 a year (westdean.ac.uk, 2023). Though there are generous bursaries on offer, the costs would put these courses out of the reach of many people. Likewise, as the Clay College and Heatherley's courses are unaccredited, you could not get a student loan to attend, so would need the money to pay for the courses. To study a practice that used to be carried out by any rural person to get by day to day, or to supplement their income, you now need to be fairly wealthy to acquire these skills. This is ironic, as we are now seeing an increase in people being displaced by the march of technology and 'progress' from nearly all fields of work, be it Retail, Factory

work, or other industrial process – it's similar to what happened during the 'Enclosure Act', except in reverse. Peter Fleming writes of our current society and way of living as, *"a broken home, one which we cannot leave for we have nowhere else to go"* (2018, p21). Many people have turned to the Internet for an extra income stream, but this does not work for all, some prefer 'real' life, and learn better face to face. However, just like many rural and city areas of the UK, the crafts have become 'gentrified', and put out of reach of those that need it most, as they search for an alternative, better and more viable future.

The UK charitable bodies 'Heritage Crafts', and the 'Crafts Council', are promoting craft in the UK, with exhibitions and networking events online and in person. But they do appear to be 'office based', and almost academic in their approaches. They say all the right things, and have good intentions, but nothing seems to be actually changing, or getting done, other than the publishing of reports and surveys. The two bodies are also in separate camps – Traditional and Contemporary, respectively. This division of the Traditional from the Contemporary, in craft and art is also prevalent in Universities who have a definite bias towards the Contemporary.

The Heritage Craft Charity are currently hosting online networking events, to discuss and promote craft region by region across the UK. The first event focused on practitioners in Scotland and opened with information about

the 'Scottish Traditional Crafts Survey 2023'. This survey builds on an initial survey done in the 1980's and is due to be published in late November. The speaker, Helen Voce, pointed out the aims of the survey, and how "*traditional craft lacks support compared to contemporary craft*" (Zoom, 2023), plus the fact that initial findings are showing a significant decrease in Makers under 50 years of age. Amongst the further speakers Catherine Davies, of 'All About Willow' Basket Makers from The Isle of Eigg, was particularly passionate about how important craft is, and how vital educating the younger generation in these practices is. Many crafts people are desperate to pass on their skills, but finance and location often get in the way. Finding a way to allow those that are willing to teach and those that want to learn is vital for the future of craft, be it through apprenticeships or other avenues. If these can also show a real chance of a lifestyle, and of making a living, then this would help to increase the involvement of the younger generations in craft.

A European project called the Craft Hub is focusing on craft in its cultural heritage, addressing concerns on at risk and lost crafts, and looking at cultural differences to craft, whilst also creating an online repository of multimedia content, as well as an online materials library (crafthub.eu). The organisation recently held a Webinar as part of a conference on craft entitled "Transformation: Effect and Affect of Craft on Society", where a panel of

practitioners from across Europe talked about their experiences of craft. Lydia Chatzilakovou, of 'Crafted Istanbul', spoke of the divide between craft, industry and contemporary art and the need to redress this, of them all working together in *"a post-industrial era"* (2023). Chatzilakovou then spoke of how craft is embedded everywhere, how it creates social bonds and how it gives visibility to human labour (2023). Another speaker, Dr Fiona Byrne, echoed many of these sentiments, as well as saying that *"craft skills are undervalued by educational establishments, and the mind is placed above the body in the hierarchy of these establishments"* (2023). These comments illustrate the growing frustration at the inadequacy of educational establishments with regard to the teaching of crafts. The crafts are learnt by a combination of verbal tuition and practical tuition, and the latter is the most important- you learn from 'doing'. Chatzilakovou closed a Q&A session with a statement of *"if the crafts go away, we will experience a sort of dystopia. We need craft"* (2023). This dystopia is in many ways already occurring in the UK, with its rising suicide rates and drug taking, and as such we need to find a way back for crafts. We need a way of life that might allow us to achieve that state of timelessness, associated with being absorbed in an activity that we enjoy, what Mihaly Csikszentmihaly describes as *"Flow"* (2008, p6). What we also need is hope.

In “The Book of Hope”, Jane Goodall tells us that *“hope is a human survival trait and without it we perish”* (2022, p11). The work of art below (Fig. 8), is by the American Artist Beth Ames Swartz, whose work is all about hope.



Fig 8. Swartz, Beth Ames (1977), “Transformations – Mica #3”
(bethamesswartz.com), (accessed 14/08/2023)

The Artist works in series and looks to interpret all wisdom systems via the ritual of life, death and rebirth, or *“ordering, disordering and reordering”* (Swartz, interviewed by Chandler, 2009). The Artist burns and rips the paper, then layers it into new forms, before painting and incorporating earth from the location that she is working in. The fire indicates death, then the reassembling represents rebirth, and so from the ashes something beautiful emerges, a visual representation of Hope.

The wisdom systems of the world all work on cycles (Versluis, 1993, p126), and according to some we are now approaching a new cycle, or new era (Campbell, 2018). Our current era has just been defined as the Anthropocene and has, also been described by Peter Fleming as “*a supreme act of self-harm*” (2018, p94) on the planet. This appears to be backed up academically by the recent announcement of a sedimentary layer that defines the Anthropocene. The layer is made up of human made substances from within the last century, such as industrial waste, plutonium, plastic and other pollutants (ucl.co.uk, 2023). This layer shows how disconnected we have become from the natural world around us, and how damaging the Industrial age and its resulting practices have been on the planet as well as on ourselves.

But like a Swartz painting, from the ashes something beautiful could emerge. There is hope. The Covid Lockdowns, the resulting political fallout, and the now very visible climate change have given rise to a change of thinking in many people. Likewise, the new technological advances continue to make their mark in industry and other sectors, more people are being displaced, or becoming disenfranchised. People are looking for change. As the Enclosure Act created a displaced population that became the workforce for the Industrial and Agricultural Ages, now things are coming full circle with people displaced by the new technology. Our ways of life from the caves of Blombos up until the

1600's span thousands of years, with gradual evolution, but our current way of life has happened very rapidly in terms of time, and as such it is now very difficult for people to return to the old ways of life. What we need now is a new way of life, with crafts at its centre, but whilst utilising the best elements of progress, using technology as a tool and aid, not as a replacement for a person. The crafts engage the heart, head and hands which would aid in the healing of our mentally broken society, and by participating in craft you connect to nature and land. Through this process you witness first hand your impact on the land, so you use it in a more considered fashion, thus contributing to the reversal of our collective harm on the planet. But in order for this to happen we need to see a change to how crafts are taught, we need to see a return to hands on learning by 'doing', to in-depth technical teaching. Crafts can be the bridge to healing and rebuilding society and through seeing the impact of practicing crafts on a local level we can see our impact on the immediate environment, and so start to modify our behaviours and practices to lower our impact on the environment around us. The craft practices today in the UK can, by reestablishing the connection of head, heart and hand, bring hope to the people.

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