

Name: Bethany Coram

Student Number: 1908242

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Lecturer: Julia Lockhart

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Construction, Clay, and Conviviality

In this essay I will be exploring the words consumption, clay, and conviviality. I will be researching these different words and then synthesising the knowledge I have learned into a research question I may research further next year. I shall be researching their definitions, related artists and thinkers, and concepts that are related to these words. I will be researching the artists Irena Korina and Romero Britto, and the thinker Ivan Illich.

Consumption

The first word that I am going to be researching is consumption because being aware of how I consume resources is important to me. I will be researching consumption in relation to throw away culture, and how design is important to what is consumed. The definitions of consumption are “of or relating to the using up of resources”, “the action or act of being destroyed”, and “decaying or wasting away” (OED, 2005, p. 187), the word consumption is derived from the word consume. In *New Keywords* consumption is described as “early usage of consume had an unfavourable connotation – to destroy, to exhaust, to waste, to completely use up” (Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris, 2005, p. 57). Consumption is not inherently a dreadful thing though; we need to consume resources to be able to live. Humans need water and food, materials to make clothes, and shelter; these are things we need in order to survive. But overconsumption, particularly for the sake of money, is bad; using excess resources when there are options for consuming less is not sustainable or good.



(Fig 1)

This is Irena Korina's piece titled *Capital* (Núñez-Fernández, 2021). The main structure is made from metal and the top of the sculpture is made from plastic carrier bags and donated clothing that was going to be thrown away. The sculpture is an ironic tribute to the throw away culture of modern culture. Its title addresses capitalism and that it is a contributor to the development of throw away culture. Throw away culture is very closely linked with consumer culture, because they are both about not caring about what you consume, and also about carelessly throwing stuff away. Consumer culture is defined as “a culture where social status, values, and activities are centered on the consumption of goods and services” (Grimsley, 2021).

When wanting to make something more eco-friendly, instead of trying to make what already exists fit into an eco-friendly frame, it can be more effective to completely re-imagine the whole object. In the chapter *Eco effectiveness*, the example of a book is given, where when we think of what an eco-friendly book is we might think of a paper book with thin pages that has been printed with one ink colour. But paper books are difficult to recycle because reused pulp just is not as good as virgin pulp, and the cover of the book is coated for durability but that means that the cover cannot be recycled. You could try to mitigate all of this, or you can redesign the concept of a book from scratch (McDonough and Braungart, 2002, p. 68).

One approach on how to reduce consumption is to develop a circular economy. A circular economy aims to look “beyond the current take-make-waste extractive industrial model, a circular economy aims to redefine growth, focusing on positive society-wide benefit” (Ellen McArthur Foundation, 2017). So, a circular economy is about changing the way we make and use products from the end goal of a product going to landfill, to products that last longer and have the ability to be recycled when their life cycle is over. A circular economy approach to industry is becoming more commonplace because the current “take-make-waste” model that is currently being used by industry is not sustainable in the long run. Like what is explained in *Cradle to Cradle* to make production less wasteful it is important to look beyond what our current industrial model is and change it to have less of a negative impact on our world.

The final chapter in *Cradle to Cradle* is about putting what you know about eco-effectiveness into practice (McDonough and Braungart, 2002, p. 157). The quote “be ready to innovate further” (p. 184, *cradle to cradle*), means to be ready to continue the development of ideas even if you think you have come up with your best idea. There is always room for improvement, so it is necessary to evaluate and see if you are being as environmentally friendly as possible. Being eco-friendly does not always mean consuming the minimum amount of resources possible. It means you need to evaluate the harm that can come from what you are making.

The word Jugaad which is a Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi word, is an untranslatable word for ‘winging it’. It is a design principle where you use what is already available to make what you need. “Jugaad is a way for people to deal with whatever life throws at them, in ways you’d never expect” (*Untranslatable Words*, 2017). In this show where they talk about the word jugaad, one of the people being interviewed says that jugaad reflects the mindset of the people of India. That is because they do not always have access to what they need, be it skills or resources, they come up with ingenious solutions to problems.

The jugaad principle relates well with the concept of a circular economy. Six guiding principles of jugaad were defined in the book *Jugaad Innovation Think Frugal, Be Flexible, Generate Breakthrough Growth*. The six principles are “Seek opportunity in adversity, do more with less, think and act flexibly, keep it simple, include the margin, and follow your heart” (Ahuja, Radjou, and Prabhu, p.19).

Clay

The second word I am going to be researching is clay. “The term clay is used for a natural, earthy, fine-grained material that develops plasticity when mixed with a limited amount of water.” (NGMDB, 1989). Clay can be turned into ceramic when fired in a kiln. Ceramic is “inorganic, non-metallic, and predominantly polycrystalline materials that may be shaped from room temperature from a variety of raw materials” (Heimann, 2010, p. 15). One of the materials that can be turned into ceramic is clay. Before being fired clay is often darker and a different colour to what it will look like once it has been fired. Stoneware clay is a muted brown-green colour before it has been fired because of the water content and all of the organic matter that is in it. Once fired though, stoneware clay becomes pure white. Clay has been used to make ceramics for a long time and it has been used to make cooking, food storage, and for art.

Clay that has not been fired at high temperatures in a kiln and turned into ceramic can be recycled back into usable clay with a small amount of effort. It does not matter at what dryness stage clay is at, once recycled it ends up as good as new. Like the expanding foam dinosaurs that you may have had when you were a kid, “just add water!”. The clay will not expand like those foam dinosaurs, but if you have saturated the waste clay with enough water, it will turn into clay sludge. Once it has turned into a consistent sludge you can leave it to dry on a block of plaster and then reuse it when it gets to a workable consistency (Schwartz, 2012).

This means that you get to have a choice as a maker, fire the clay in a kiln to turn it into ceramics or recycle the clay. When you are learning a new craft, it can feel very wasteful because you are consuming materials but what you are making is not of the best standard yet. This is discouraging for consumption cautious makers but having the ability to practice without consuming materials makes clay a great material to work with.



(Fig 2)

Granby Workshop recycles old and broken ceramics, clay that has been in a kiln, into new dishes (Hagen, 2020). This is a new process, so it is a great step for ceramics to become a more sustainable craft.

There is a small disposable clay pot called a kulhad that is predominantly used in India and Pakistan. It was first used in 5000 years ago and the kulhad has been used there ever since. A kulhad is made from clay and fired in a kiln, but it is not fired to a temperature where it completely turns into ceramic. Because it is fired at a lower temperature, it breaks down eventually. Because it is fired in a kiln, they are sterile when they are fired. As long as they are handled properly after that, then they can be cleaner than plastic (Rana, 2018). Its popularity started waning with the introduction of single use plastics, because plastics became more widely available and were cheaper to use. Other than the actual cost of the cups, the kulhad was more expensive because the cups are porous, so they absorb liquid, meaning you need more liquid to fill them up in comparison to a plastic cup.

In 2004, the Indian government started supporting the use of the kulhad, especially on India's railway system where they are replacing all plastic cups with the use of the kulhad. This is part of India's scheme to make India single-use plastic free, since the kulhad is bio-degradable and more eco-friendly than plastic cups (Dhillon, 2020). There is controversy regarding the use of the kulhad though. Since biodegradability is not the only factor in to how environmentally friendly something is.

Conviviality

The third word I have chosen to research is conviviality. Conviviality means to be friendly and lively. The OED describes convivial as “friendly and lively” and “cheerfully sociable” (OED, 2005, p.191). I am researching this word in connection to the creation of art and of its connection with Ivan Illich's theories. I am researching this because it is important to approach creation with openness and conviviality to get an outcome you love as the creator.

Illich chooses to use the word conviviality as a description of the responsively limited tools that he thinks are necessary for a modern society (). In his book, Illich describes conviviality as a tool necessary to move forward from the frustration of an industrialised society. “Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision” (Illich, 1973). This can be interpreted as approaching problems in a cheerful way gives you a better chance of having positive outcomes in your future. In an industrialised society it can be difficult to find ways to reach your dream goals if the goals are not compatible with industrialised society. So, using conviviality as a tool to reach goals makes them achievable because you are no longer worrying about what is acceptable. Pursuing the arts or anything that is not STEM is not considered productive anymore, so it is necessary to use conviviality to pursue art.



(Fig 3)

In the 1992 Romero Britto founded the Happy Art Movement. The aim of this movement was to “inspire happiness, fun, love and optimism” all over the world (Cision, 2020). The movement encouraged artists to share their happiest works to share happiness with other people. Britto brought back the movement at the start of the global pandemic in an attempt to bring more happiness to those affected by the pandemic (Britto, 2020). It is important to Britto that art makes both the creator and the audience happy and that both enjoy the work.

Researching The Happy Art Movement made me want to research more about what else we can approach with conviviality in relation to the art world. So, the next thing I am going to research is art therapy. The British Association of Art Therapists describes art therapy as “a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of expression and communication” (BAAT, 2021), therefore, art is used as a tool for people to express themselves. Anyone can engage in art therapy, there is no age limit, and it can be helpful to anyone no matter their age. Art therapy is not only to express negative emotions which is a common misconception, “engaging in art therapy allows the client the opportunity to communicate thoughts, feelings, concerns, problems, wishes, hopes, dreams, and desires in a relatively non-threatening manner” (Buchalter, 2015, p. 15). Making art can help express your thoughts and feelings if you cannot find the words, or do not have the right vocabulary. In *Raising Self-Esteem in Adults*, many the real examples given had people realising goals that they had, and that they had more optimism than they thought after looking back at what they had made and reflecting on it.

Looking at what I have researched, one common theme I am noticing is being respectful of the planet and its resources. It is important as artists and makers that we analyse our resource consumption and employ ways of reducing waste. We should be looking at our relationship with consumer culture and how it is affecting our relationship with what we make. There is an important theme of creating ethically in my researching. It is also apparent to me that I have a personal interest in being ethical with creating and that there is joy in being resourceful. Reducing waste is important but it should not completely stop anyone from making and being creative. It is about ethical consumption, not about consuming nothing at all.

The question I might research next year is "How can ceramicists create more ethically while still creating with joy?" There are several sub-questions that could be explored relating to this question as well, these are “What are the benefits of creating with clay?”, “How to reduce clay waste in pottery?”, “How does making pottery contribute to consumer culture?” The themes and concepts of consumer culture, pottery, recycling, reduce, ethicality, and joy.

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Fig 1.

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Fig 2.

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Fig 3.

Cision (2020) *The Happy Art Movement*. Available at:
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