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BA Design Crafts

Research In Context

(ADAD5003)

Question1. What is the role of the Designer/Maker in the 21st Century and how might this role change in the next 10 years? Discuss your ideas with reference to two of the practitioners or thinkers discussed in your lecture strand.

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Lecturer : Julia Lockheart

Craft is experiencing a renaissance in our current economic and personal climate, and as such this essay will look at how craft education can possibly be changed in the future to encourage more participation and engagement in these popular subjects. The essay will look at craft and its benefits to individuals and how engaging in these subjects could enhance society, help 'endangered crafts' and bring a greater awareness of environmental issues. To help in articulating these ideas, thinkers looked at will include Christopher Frayling, William McDonough, Peter Korn, as well as other writers and practitioners that are deemed to have an important contribution to make in supporting my ideas.

In "The Storyteller", Walter Benjamin deplores how the art of storytelling "is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to" (p91), alluding to how the repetitive nature of the craft impresses the story onto the listener. Benjamin is therefore linking the loss of a craft process to the disappearance of the storyteller, and its subsequent impact on the community and society in general. There has been an erosion of craft process since the rise of the mechanical age, and with it a growing disconnect of society, person and our connection to the Earth itself. In his 2013 book "Why We Make Things & Why It Matters", Peter Korn gives a quote from John Ruskin book "The Stones of Venice", where Ruskin warned of the "degradation of the operative into a machine" (p35). Today society is at a cusp, perhaps

fuelled by the 'break' afforded to many by the Lockdowns of the Covid epidemic. As a result many people were able to see just how 'degraded' their working lives had become and how, ultimately unsustainable that is. The majority of people are unfulfilled, and are now seeing firsthand the effects of our modern life on mental health, and on the planet itself. As such there is currently a growing resurgence of interest in traditional Crafts, fuelled by the desire to seek a better mental state and by the interest in alternative and greener making processes. "Things made by hand seem to be of such high quality, and to be so 'human', whereas so much of modern life does not" (Jones, p xxxii & xxxiii), and in "Craft and Contemporary Theory" Sue Rowley states "Craft reminds us that we are mortal creatures and that our bodies as well as our minds and spirits give substance to our legacies" (p xxiii), reminding us of how healing the creative process can be.

At the same time as this interest in the traditional craft processes, there are actually crafts at risk of 'extinction'. The Heritage Craft Association (Uk) has a Red List of Endangered Craft, which comprises of 56 crafts currently 'Critically Endangered', as well as 74 crafts currently 'Endangered' . So, is there a way of saving these Crafts and also creating a better environment for people (and the planet) to go forward. I believe that the time is ripe for an overhaul of the education system to enable people to access these crafts thus enabling them to change their lives for the better, and then possibly this could have a positive knock on effect for society as a whole.

What form should this new system take? A new Bauhaus, or an iteration of the Black Mountain College? Even a reimagination of the Arts and Crafts Movement? None of these is viable I feel in today's climate, due to economics mainly. Christopher Frayling certainly saw the benefits of looking at a new Bauhaus and made some interesting points in his book "On Craftsmanship – towards a new Bauhaus". The author reminds us that "the crafts were first introduced into the school curriculum in the 1880's, to teach the hand and eye in unison, and to familiarise pupils with the properties of materials" (p12) and then draws our attention to the fact that "Today, with the decline of laboratory work in school science, and the transformation of design into a briefing process, 'Making' is at its lowest ebb since before the Arts and Craft Movement" (p12). This was back in 2011, which means an entire generation of children have possibly not had access to a 'Making' process, by hand. For now we are seeing the rise of the Technological teaching methods – on computers and computer software (the 'new' mechanical age). The danger of this new education is that "the disappearance of tools from our common education is the first step toward a wider ignorance of the world of artifacts we inhabit" (Crawford, p1). On Radio 4's "The Sympathy of Things pt1", Richard Wentworth illustrates what could be a possible outcome of this ignorance, he says "the more the world is illegible, the harder we find it to relate to each other". Is this not the case in current society? Mental illness is at alarming levels and people are struggling

increasingly in dehumanised careers and day to day life, and most interactions nowadays are done via a screen. We need to claim back the ability to work with our hands, engage with each other and engage with the world around us, and Crafts can help us to do that. We just need to open up access to education in these processes.

In his book Frayling defends the place of Crafts in the School and Further Education system. It does have a rightful place in these systems, but now it is struggling under economical pressures, and seems unable to deliver a through grounding in the actual craft processes. In ‘Theorising the crafts: new tricks of the trade’, NCM Brown says the following: “ Craftpersons are mindful of the threat to the crafts which is posed by the hegemony of theoretical representation within universities” (p5). This concern about the education system is also voiced by Elliot Walker (a renowned British blown glass artist who recently won the “Blown Away” TV competition in America), who stated the following in a recent Craft Magazine article:

“Even though there are many promising new talents coming through the university system, UK students can graduate after 3 years of study without even basic glass making skills, like blowing a good bubble or making a proper putty. It’s a huge problem”.

On a recent UWTSD online talk given by the contemporary jeweller Jo Haywood, the speaker inferred that they had learnt more about Silversmithing on an Adult Education course, than they had at University. It does appear then that Universities are struggling to provide proper hands on tuition of the craft process. This is most probably the result of funding issues, which lead to limits on numbers of staff and technicians, and on materials required to carry out what can be expensive and time consuming processes. But how to solve this dilemma? Craft belongs at University, it is just as important as any other subject. The academic side of the subject can be taught there, and of course marked there – a student needs a base, and an anchor. However, for the practical learning there are the Crafts people on the ‘Red List of Endangered Craft’ (compiled by The Heritage Crafts Association Uk), who are looking for people to train, looking to pass the baton so to speak, to keep their craft alive. Students could use the ‘Student loan’ to access education in these crafts. Even half the loan would buy a lot of courses, in specialist subjects that would be impossible for a University to provide. There are also lots of other smaller craft practitioners who could also provide courses (The Leach Pottery, for instance), that are not on the ‘Endangered’ list. Or perhaps a better way would be to do a broad first year, covering basic craft process available at the University and academic or historic study, then in the second year go off and try these other crafts (by then the student will have a broader idea of what is out there, and what might interest them), or stay at the University to concentrate on more

technological innovations in Craft (such as anything involving computers, CAD, etc). Then the student could choose to remain with a specialist practitioner (and finish studying remotely), or return to University to complete the course. I am not advocating in any way, the end of University Craft courses, nor am I advocating a ‘work experience’ approach, what I am looking for is a balance between hands on learning and academic study. Everybody has the ability to craft, and should not be held back or barred from the system for not being academically gifted, or because they are resistant to technological advances (many of these older crafts do not require these practices). The new structure would also open people to more opportunity, and possible career options, as well as helping small craft studios to flourish and by extension help the community around them.

This is just a basic outline, and nothing in life is ever black and white. There are always grey areas, and economics will always get in the way. Ultimately though this about giving people more access to learning craft, because “the emotional rewards craftsmanship holds out for attaining skill are twofold, people are anchored in tangible reality, and they can take pride in their work” (Sennett, p21) This is something that many workers no longer have, they are a cog in a wheel, a number, nothing more – as Ruskin foretold. Another founder of the Arts and Craft Movement, William Morris, is quoted by Christopher Frayling as being asked “ What is the point of Arts and Crafts?”, to which Morris replied

“The point of Arts and Crafts, is to give us hope” (p134). Current Society is in need of hope more than ever at the moment.

Another bonus of people reconnecting with crafts is that they will appreciate materials and resources more. They will understand how things are made, and what processes are involved in them, and see first hand any detrimental effects on the environment or on them selves. This can only be of benefit to our planet, and to society as a whole.

In 2021, the Trend Forecaster Laura Perryman gave an online talk to students at UWTSW Swansea, entitled “The Colour of Saying”. During this talk Perryman was asked to recommend resources for the students to look at, and one of the resources mentioned was Permaculture Magazine. As things on the fringe eventually move into the mainstream. Permaculture is very difficult to define, but it’s concept originated in Australia in the 1970’s, and it can loosely be described as a practice of producing food, energy and living systems in a sustainable and holistic fashion with no negative impact on the environment. So, whereby Crafts people have a better understanding of materials and the impact these have on the environment, through hands on use, Designers have been slower to ‘come to the table’. However that is changing and nowadays Designers are indeed picking up this message. For instance, Tim Brown, in “Change by Design” (2009) says the following:

“If we take time to examine the whole cycle of creation and use of a product – from extraction of raw materials used in manufacturing to disposal at the end of its useful life – we may be able to find new opportunities for innovation that reduce environmental impact while enhancing rather than diminishing the quality of life we have come to expect” (p199)

However the Designer whose ethos is closet to that of Permaculture, and who was an early adopter of their principles, is William McDonough whose “Cradle to Cradle Design” is described by himself as;

“Our goal is a delightfully diverse, safe, healthy and just world with clean air, water, soil, power – economically, equitably, ecologically and elegantly enjoyed” (TEDTalk)

How wonderful does that sound! Imagine a world where all designers carried the above principles as well as those of Permaculture. Imagine a world where these principles had been applied worldwide 50 years ago, would we be on the precipice of irreversible climate change and it’s associated impact on the world as a whole – I propose we would not. Sadly economics has a large part to play in this story. As always it boils down to money. If only the economists had taken on the advice of fringe thinkers earlier.

By making Craft courses more accessible, and broader and more practical I would propose that the mindset of those participants could go on to enhance communities, and their surroundings. Peter Korn says “we engage in the creative process to become more of whom we’d like to be and, just as important, to discover more of whom we might become” (p104). If by engaging in these creative processes, we can find a ‘happier’ more balanced mindset that can then lead into life surely that has to be a positive step for people and planet. If we can see a return to smaller self sustaining community groups, with more craft people out there, surely that is better for society than large faceless corporations, with their profits first, employee last mentality.

“To begin we have the wonder of crafting an object, and wonder retains the potential to beget even greater wonder” (Lueckenhausen, p30). You can’t say that about many of today’s jobs, or society as a whole. In reality you may still need a ‘faceless’ job (Money, again), but if you know it is not all there is, then you feel potentially better about it, and this attitude knocks on into the society around you, creating a more positive, and forward thinking outlook on life and the world around us.

“Creative persons differ from one another in a variety of ways, but in one respect they are unanimous. They all love what they do. It is not hope of achieving fame or making money that drives them: rather, it is the opportunity to do the work that they enjoy doing” (Csikszentmihalyi, p107)

If more people could experience a lifestyle like this, the world could be a calmer more content place, and day to day life could be made a lot easier for many.

In concluding, a lot of what has been proposed above is most probably going to be viewed as impossible or even demented in the larger context of society. But in certain places these approaches could work, the smaller universities and colleges in particular. There is an element of 'rose tinted glasses', but something has to change for people and then society in order to improve conditions for many people, and from there we can start to improve society and the environment in incremental stages. Education is so important, and needs to be accessible to all, plus there are crafts out there that need saving, as well as people and the planet. Let education and makers drive the crusade, and let's make the world a kinder, healthier place to be, for us and future generations. I know I will be investigating the endangered crafts and looking at opportunities for the future, as well as re engaging with my interest in the Permaculture movement, and following the likes of William McDonough to see where Crafts and Design will take us in the next few years.

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