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Creators	Burcikova, Mila

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Milada Burcikova

Craftivism 2000: Utopia of Socially Engaged Craft?

Throughout history, if perhaps somewhat surprisingly, craft has played a significant role in radically re-imagining existing societies. The reasons why it keeps reappearing in critical political and social debates are manifold and are as different as the worldviews that inspired them. Thus, craft has been a vehicle to think about self-sufficiency, self-empowerment, communal experience and happiness in work, as well as a tool for fighting poverty and oppression. Finally, it has been a crucial element in envisioning more aesthetically pleasant and sustainable futures for all. In one way or another, from monasteries through literary utopias, intentional communities, through the nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, craft and design reforms, the 1960s rise of DIY movement up to the quite recent phenomenon of Craftivism, craft has repeatedly been one medium through which political, social, economic and cultural crises have been critiqued. Despite the variety of approaches employed, one of the common features linking all these quests together have always been their vulnerability to the charges of 'idealism' and 'utopianism'.

There is undoubtedly a good deal of truth in a recent remark by the craft theorist and historian Glenn Adamson, who in an article glossing the craft revival in the current recession wrote: 'when things go spectacularly, complicatedly wrong, there is a temptation to get back to basics', and craft, in this respect, 'seems to provide a simple solution' (Adamson 2011). But, as Adamson points out, craft is not a simple matter. It indeed is not. And human dreams and quests for a better world are not any simpler either.

The aim of this paper is therefore to look at the complexities of the relationship between craft, social transformation and utopianism. We will look at the connections between the legacy of the English poet, designer and socialist William Morris (1834 -1896) and the ideas of the currently flourishing Craftivism movement. Differences, as well as similarities between these two approaches are in many respects instructive and, we believe, aptly illustrate several topical questions in contemporary craft discourse.

The link between the ideas of William Morris and the contemporary craftivists has been recently addressed also by sociologist David Gauntlett in his book [Making Is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0](#) (Gauntlett 2011). As already the book title suggests, Gauntlett's interest lies primarily in social aspects of creativity, such as personal and social empowerment that shared activity of making brings about. In this way, Gauntlett believes, making and sharing are political acts in themselves. Therefore, his book does not explicitly address the phenomenon of Craftivism, which combines craft and making with direct political activism.

In contrast to Gauntlett's approach then, the focus of the current paper is particularly on the role of craft in political activism. The paper thus traces the connections between William Morris's public activities and political involvement of different contemporary craftivist groups, in order to explore the potential of craft to negotiate (and sustain) social change.

Let us hence start with a brief reminder of the ideas and work of one of Britain's most influential designers ever, William Morris. In 1855, twenty-one years old Morris, who was hugely influenced by John Ruskin's view of art as an expression of man's pleasure in labour, decided to abandon his studies of theology at Exeter College, Oxford and become an artist. Six years after that, in 1861, with somewhat idealized view of working conditions of medieval craftsmen, and his passionate hatred of industrialization which he blamed for decline of taste in design and architecture as well as for appalling working conditions it imposed on workmen, Morris, with his friends, founded an interior design

company known in its beginnings as Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company. Quite interestingly, Morris's position in these early days wasn't very far from that taken by Gauntlett in his new book. Morris, fascinated with the idea of fellow workmanship, hoped that the company, proudly employing handwork and traditional skills, would present a challenge to the greedy, profit-based, industrial frame of mind and that he could thus 'reform the society through his craft'. After several years of company's great commercial success, however, when he fully realized that this 'act of resistance' did not inspire a change, but was, instead, adopted by industrialist elites as a 'new cool' (and he himself spending his life 'ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich' (Morris 1876, cited in Harvey, Press 1991: 86)), Morris decided for major public involvement. Thus, apart from restructuring the company, Morris gradually got involved in numerous public activities, initiated the foundation of The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and lectured widely on the role of art and craft in society. Finally, he became an active socialist agitator advocating revolutionary change and is still remembered as one of the pioneers of British socialism. Two selections of his talks and articles for socialist periodicals from the years of his active public involvement were published during his lifetime, first one titled Hopes and Fears for Art in 1882, followed by Signs of Change in 1888 (Morris 1882, Morris 1888). Later in his life, slowly losing his hope for seeing the more just society become reality in foreseeable future, Morris summed up his vision of a community providing decent working conditions and beauty for all, in his utopian novel titled News from Nowhere (Morris 1890).

In 2000, almost one and a half century after Morris started his quest to challenge the profit-motivated society through craft, a US based community of 'crafters' calling itself The Church of Craft and aiming 'to create an environment when any and all acts of making have value to our humanness', (The Church of Craft n.d.) first introduced the term 'Craftivism'. 'Craftivism', created by the connection of 'craft' and 'activism', was simultaneously used and later hugely popularised by the writer Betsy Greer, who is now considered the 'godmother' of the term. Greer, interested in communal and therapeutical aspects of knitting, explored the connections between knitting, DIY culture and community development in her Master thesis in Sociology at Goldsmith's College, London and in 2008 published now famous craftivist guide Knitting for Good (Greer 2008).

Thanks to Web 2.0, craftivism has, in the meantime, grown into a worldwide movement, and, as is often the case, became a rather heterogeneous phenomenon. The examples would include Greer's anti-war graffiti cross stitch and the well-known pink tank cover project by Danish artist Marianne Jørgensen, as well as the ethical fashion label Anti-factory or the charity Hats for Hunger founded by nine years old Andrew Castle.

Craftivist agenda involves variety of issues, from environmentalism, anti-capitalism, anti-sweatshops, anti-war to charity or third-wave feminism. Although opinions on these topics and forms of involvement of individual craftivists or craftivist groups may vary, craftivists worldwide believe in transformative power of creativity that enables community development, self-empowerment and anti-consumerist activism. Craftivists engage their creativity in 'making', they network on-line to build virtual as well as face-to-face communities, and use their handmade products in various forms of anti-consumerist resistance. Despite the gap of more than a century, their core concerns (sustainability, social responsibility, creative work) quite strikingly resemble the topics eagerly addressed by William Morris throughout the period of his public involvement. So, quite naturally, there's a temptation to ask the cheeky question: Isn't this all just doomed to end up, as many of Morris's hopes did, in 'Nowhere'? We don't know...

History has never encountered a social movement without a tension between its ends and means. And craftivists are, of course, no exception. Thus, one of the major controversies going on among various craftivist groups is about the connection of craftivism to direct political activism.

The stance taken by Betsy Greer, one of the major inspirers of craftivist culture is clear. Greer, in a definition of craftivism in her website writes: 'Craftivism is the practice of engaged creativity, especially regarding political or social causes. By using their creative energy to help make the world a better place, craftivists help bring about positive change via personalized activism' (Craftivism n.d.).

However, not all the makers, crafters or artists, who consider themselves craftivists, do share this view. In this sense, a discussion that took place within the Craftivism Team of the on-line craft shop Etsy in 2009 is quite illustrative. As the discussion showed, many of the members of the Etsy Craftivism Team believed, not unlikely to Gauntlett (2011), that making and buying handmade objects is a way of self-empowerment and as such is already an act of resistance against the consumerist culture. Further controversy then arose about the suggestion that craftivism was tied to a specific (American liberal) political agenda. As a result of the debate, number of members decided to leave the team and those who chose to stay were left in confusion about the group's mission and prospects (Finn 2009, Mok 2009).

The whole craftivist matter is, nevertheless, even more complex than that. Two (mostly) London active groups - Craftivist Collective and Knit the City - serve as an eloquent example. Craftivist Collective was founded in 2008 by Sarah Corbet, who started working on craftivist projects a year before as 'A Lonely Craftivist'. In its website, the Collective makes clear its disagreement with the use of the term craftivism to 'label something such as upcycling, recycling or making crafts to raise money for charity' (Craftivist Collective n.d.) and explicitly declares that it shares Betsy Greer's idea of craftivism as a tool for direct political engagement. Craftivist Collective manifesto thus sets the objective 'To expose the scandal of global poverty, and human rights injustices through the power of craft and public art', and specifies that 'this will be done through provocative, non-violent creative actions' (Craftivist Collective n.d.). Among the typical examples of Craftivist Collective projects are 'mini protest banners' placed on various occasions around the city. In a recent event of this kind (in July 2011), hand stitched banners with messages for bankers to support the Robin Hood Tax were put around the Bank Station. An example banner read 'There is a gap in the clouds of unbridled capitalism, now's the time to act for justice' (Craftivist Collective 2011). The whole event was filmed by the Chanel+ TV for a documentary programme to be released in October/November 2011. Another popular kind of craftivist protest - a stitch-in - was held at railway stations across the UK in April 2011 to protest against the rail fare increases. During the stitch-in, craftivists stitching and picnicking in railway station halls made small fabric train coaches covered with facts and customer views on UK railways. These were later on stitched together and with the support of campaigners from the initiatives Fair Fares Now and Climate Rush presented to the Transport Secretary Philip Hammond as a giant 50 metres long petition for fair fares. Craftivists from Craftivist Collective also get regularly involved in projects of the charity Fine Cell Work that teaches needlework to prison inmates and sells their products to help them save money for their new beginnings after the release from prison.

The activities of the second London based community mentioned above - Knit the City - are a rather different phenomenon. Knit the City, probably best known for creating a cosy for a phone box at Parliament Square, proudly introduces itself as 'Your friendly neighbourhood graffiti knitters' (Knit the City n.d.). In contrast to the Craftivist Collective, the objective of Knit the City is not to 'change the world one stitch at a time', as the politically active craftivists tend to sum up their endeavours, but to 'enliven the dull city streets with a riot of colour - one stitch at a time' (Knit the City n.d.). The main activity of Knit the City is therefore 'yarnstorming' which they characterize as 'the art of enhancing a public space or object with graffiti knitting', and add in brackets 'or putting knitting on something unexpected in public and running always giggling wildly' (Knit the City n.d.). Apart from the 'enlivened' phone box, another typical project of Knit the City was a 2009 happy Christmas present to

Londoners – a yarnstormed ballerina in Covent Garden. More recently, knitters from Knit the City echoed the atmosphere of the Royal wedding by creating knitted figures of Prince William and his wife to be, and, on the day of the wedding managed to hang a string of knitted hearts on the bow of the Eros statue at Piccadilly Circus. Knit the City projects seem to fit rather well into Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of 'relational aesthetics', approaching art as a social practice that encourages people to get involved in a shared activity (Bourriaud 2002). The adventures and challenges accompanying Knit the City's guerilla knitting are now also documented in a recently released book mapping the most memorable of their yarnstorms (Knitshade 2011).

Now, despite the very similar points of departure and the mediatory role that both Morris and craftivists ascribe to craft, the examples of the projects cited above point to a number of differences that not only draw Morris and craftivists apart but also raise valid questions about the role of craft in social transformation. We suggest that the main differences between the two approaches are threefold and lie in their treatment of creativity, materials and skill. These three elements thus serve as a framework for the following discussion which re-evaluates the links between Morris and Craftivism and addresses the question of the relationship between socially engaged craft and utopianism.

Above all, it is worth noting that a principal difference exists between Morris's and Craftivist notion of craft. As has been said above, both Morris and craftivists equally value the creative potential of individuals and emphasize communal aspects of creativity as well as the personal empowerment it helps facilitate. The difference comes, however, with the understanding of the relationship between creativity and skill. In Morris's idea of craftsmanship, creativity has always been closely related to skill. Yet, this does not mean that Morris wouldn't agree with craftivist belief that anyone can learn a craft. After all, his and his friends' first decorative attempts in Oxford Union and Morris's Red House in Bexleyheath serve as excellent examples of enthusiastic but amateurish beginnings. Nonetheless, at the same time, the true pleasure of craftsmanship was for Morris, much in the way described by Richard Sennett (2008), in maturing of skills that enables to take pride in one's work. As Morris summarized in one of his articles for the socialist newspaper Commonweal, 'indeed the main pleasure of life is the exercise of energy in the development of our special capacities' (Morris 1886: Dawn of New Epoch).

For craftivists, on the contrary, creativity seems to be practically identical with handwork. Therapeutical and communal aspects of shared creativity are at the centre of their interest, with the product itself often not being of primary concern. For these reasons craftivist projects usually involve relatively undemanding craftwork (both in terms of skill and also with regards to portability of tools), such as knitting, stitching, crochet or quilting (patchwork). In other words, craftivism is an extension of DIY tradition and thus, as the artist and critic Dennis Stevens comments, 'emerges from a culture that does not seek professional validation within traditional art methodology but rather is motivated by joining with others in shared, creative activity' (Stevens 2009).

Related to the question of final products, there then arises the issue of the materials used. William Morris, (un)famously, insisted on using only the best quality natural materials in his craft. This fact, as is widely known, resulted in high quality and long lasting products on one hand, but, at the same time, due to the resulting high prices, proved to be one of the major obstacles to fulfilment of Morris's dream to produce beautiful objects available to all. As suggested above, craftivist priorities are slightly different, and only secondarily tied to the actual products of their craft activities. Similarly to Morris though, environmental concerns are generally very high up on their agenda and therefore many of them (especially those making objects to sell) tend to use recycled, upcycled or also organic materials for their projects. That's all very well - one would be inclined to think. Yet, question marks still remain on the consistence of craftivist engagement. Let's try to imagine, for instance, how many useful blankets, jumpers or hats would the material used for Marianne Jørgensen's famous pink tank

cover make? Or, what happened with the Knit the City's phonebox cosy after it had been photographed and enough people had 'giggled' on it? And, most importantly, aren't the 'handmade enthusiasm' and creativity unrelated to skill threats of alternative overproduction?

In short, shouldn't creativity, skill and materials use be closely intertwined elements of any environmentally conscious and socially responsible craft practice? Moreover, and Morris would be very likely to ask this question himself: can we demand a better society if we don't aim for the very best in that what we do? Hence, can craft change the world without a consistent political statement and 'quality-driven work' (Sennett 2008)?

Morris, indeed, was a holistic thinker and always searched for complex solutions addressing the roots of problems. Therefore, he never was satisfied with achieving partial improvements. When he, after his attempt to reform the decorative arts understood that the beauty for all is impossible to achieve unless the whole industrial frame of mind changes, he decided for a revolutionary solution – a universal 'utopia' - that would bring happiness for all. Craftivists, on the other hand, perhaps with the advantage of the twentieth-century experience with the drawbacks of 'one size fits all' utopias, tend to aim at smaller changes - 'one stitch at a time'. Some of their projects can thus be seen as series of 'micro-utopias', such as those by the artist Cat Mazza whose 'micro-revolts' are inspired by Felix Guattari's concept of 'molecular revolutions' (Guattari 1984). Others may be better characterized by Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002: 45-46) claim that:

Nobody nowadays has ideas about ushering in the golden age on Earth, and we are readily prepared just to create various forms of modus vivendi permitting fairer social relations, more compact ways of living, and many different combinations of fertile existence. Art, likewise, is no longer seeking to represent utopias; rather, it is attempting to construct concrete spaces.

In this sense, Craftivism might not 'TRANSFORM' the society, but the fact is, that it did 'transform' lives of thousands of people already. Moreover, it has to be noted, that it is also very likely to transform the ways we are looking at craft in the twenty-first century.

Many craftivist projects, still, appear to be more demonstrative than transformative. But, does this mean that craftivism is doomed to end up in disillusion such as that felt by Morris at writing the News from Nowhere (Morris 1890)?

We don't know. The economist Tim Harford in his new book Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure (Harford 2011) points out that we don't know what will work, unless we're willing to try (and fail). William Morris, in his life-long quest, did not achieve his dream of beauty available to all. But, his belief in the close connection between craft and ethics stayed alive throughout the twentieth century thanks to the Arts & Crafts Movement which he, (to his great surprise), inspired. In other words, we often don't know what will work. But perhaps the most important legacy of William Morris is that we should be willing to try.

And this is where another important connection between the nineteenth-century Morris and the third millennium craftivists lies. Craftivists, as Morris, are willing to try. Their aim of reforming society through craft may for some appear to be utopian. It might be. Yet, when it comes to utopianism, it is worth remembering the words of historian Gregory Clayes, who reminds that utopian thinking is about 'perfectibility, not perfection'(Clayes 2010).

Morris said in one of his lectures that Ruskin 'could not have written what he has done unless people were in some sort ready for it' (Morris 1882: The Beauty of Life). Similarly,

the number of Google search results for Craftivism, with uncountable websites, blogs or Facebook entries and growing networks of active craftivist groups around the world all seem to signalize that people are now ready for Craftivism. The attention that Craftivism and social aspects of making have been given by major galleries and research institutions in the United States, Canada and Europe, with the London Victoria & Albert Museum 'Power of Making' exhibition as one of the most recent examples, is only another proof. The great task before Craftivism then, is to make sure that it isn't, in this wave of popularity, repackaged into a cool lifestyle trend with its activist agenda (whatever it is) well forgotten - just as it happened with Morris's designs.

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