

Can craft be used to empower individuals and emancipate from capitalist values?

Introduction

Making with our hands is intrinsic to human nature, and the ability to make and craft enables us to become agents in creating change, a concept I will explore throughout this essay. I will begin by examining the role that craft plays in our lives, and how we are deeply connected to the act of making. Defining capitalism and the effect it has on our consumption of goods will provide a basis for my argument that it is necessary for us to move away from these values. Prefiguration and prefigurative activism hold a core role in defining my own practice, and the principles of craftivism will also be explored as an application of a craft-based practice and as medium for change. With my investigation of the crafts, and the inherent associated community, I will begin to build an argument for how engaging with the crafts can enable agency and act as a pathway towards becoming empowered. This essay includes primary research conducted within the UWE Bower Ashton campus in the form of an interactive interview setup in the form of a craft 'stall'. This style of participatory research has come to define my work as designer of 'happenings', which alongside my secondary research has allowed me to define a context within which to place my design practice. By exploring the work of other artists and researchers in Bristol by attending a seminar at Bricks Bristol, I was able to justify my work and identify similarities in other contemporary practices. Through synthesising my research I will identify three key strands within crafting that enable empowerment and identify how they can be used to subvert the status quo.

Why Crafts?

First and foremost, it is important define what I mean by crafts in the context of this essay, due to it being a broad term covering a range of meanings. Artisanal crafts, made by skilled professionals occupy a central position within cultural histories as these skills are often transferred through generations, and form an important part of place-based local histories. Hobby crafts cover a much more general range of making practices, and often constitute techniques that require fewer technical or specialist skills, though it does not exclude the possibility to achieve an artisanal level of craftsmanship. Whilst there are many barriers which can prevent individuals from the hobby crafts, it is generally a much more accessible and open form of making. It is this type of craft that I will be referring to

throughout this essay, though it is important to note that this definition is not constrained to only 'traditional' crafts such as knitting or embroidery but encompasses all types of creative outlets that involve some form of physical engagement leading to a made outcome.

Craft and Wellbeing

There is emerging research into the psychological benefits of crafting, though it is well known for its role within wellbeing as a way to combat stress, anxiety and even depression—as early as the late 1800's basket weaving was prescribed to veterans as way to relieve anxiety (4 reasons craft is good for your mental health., n.d.). Studies have shown that meaningful engagement with craft activities such as knitting can improve wellbeing, enhance social cohesion and increase perceived happiness (Riley, Corkhill and Morris, 2013). There have also been enquiries into how the creative arts and cultural engagement can be used as a public health resource to improve the livelihoods of patients suffering with illnesses such as COPD (Clift, 2012). Textile based activities give crafters, particularly women, a way to engage both with their own personal histories surrounding textile art, a topic that will be returned to, and with other women in their communities. This engagement has been shown to alleviate the stresses of daily life and even provide a grounding source of comfort throughout times of hardship, such as the death of a loved one (Kenning, 2015).

Innate Connection

The biophilia hypothesis states that we have an innate connection to the natural world because we evolved into modern humans alongside, and within, nature (Kellert, 1993). Findings such as the Venus of Dolni Vestonice, a 25,000 year old clay statuette of a woman, suggest that hand crafting has always been intrinsic to our development as a species, similar to our relationship with nature (Králík, Novotný and Oliva, 2002). To craft, in my opinion, is one of the most deeply human traits we have. All throughout history we have told stories through sculpture, pottery, manuscripts, paintings, and glass. It is embedded into the walls of our buildings and woven into the threads of our clothes.

Activism

Capitalism is defined as an economic system in which properties and businesses are owned privately and have the purpose of accruing profit (capitalism., 2023). Characteristics of capitalism include wage labour, where workers sell their labour through a contract with an employer (Steinfeld, 2009) and free-market economics, where supply and demand determine the prices of goods, and are

controlled by these private companies, as opposed to being regulated by the government (Babb, 2013). Of course, capitalist society is familiar to us, as British citizens it's been our adopted economic system for centuries (McMenemy, 2020). However a lack of regulation within the markets has led to an extreme of business owners amassing huge amounts of wealth, whilst the average person has seen almost no real wage growth (King, n.d.). Many sectors, such as the currently striking university staff have even seen their real wages decrease by 20% since 2009 (UCU, n.d.).

Consumerism, defined as the economic encouragement of acquiring goods and services (Czarnecka and Schivinski, 2019), goes hand in hand with capitalism and the idea of accruing wealth. This consumer culture is reinforced by the constant onslaught of advertising through our media outlets, making us question our social status and feel like we need to buy more to sate this dissatisfaction with our lives (Torres, 2020). Combined with the epidemic of 'hustle culture' where pushing ourselves for material success is idolised, capitalism and consumerism have left us in a position where we are being overworked, overcharged for our basic goods, and underpaid for our labour. This is even without mentioning the almost catastrophic effects our overconsumption has had on the exploitation of workers (Mattei, 2022) and the environmental impacts of producing and disposing of our goods (Hickel, 2022).

Prefiguration

It is of no surprise then that many people are opposed to the status quo of the capitalist lifestyle, and there are a number of organisations and collectives working to raise awareness of the corruption within our governmental and institutional systems. Many of these groups use traditional Non-Violent Direct-Action tactics to gain visibility, which can involve street marches, to public performances, to putting pressure on the government through petitions. There are however other activism tactics that can be employed which involve more community-based action. An example of this is prefiguration, which is carried out by activists who aim to build alternative futures that are more equitable and inclusive. Through community building and local action, a prefigurative activist can work to bypass social structures that no longer serve the community and begin to rebuild society in an open-ended and experimental way (Fians, 2022).

A lot of this style of activism carried out isn't done intentionally as 'prefiguration', it can often be a collective simply working together to fight for a cause. In 2015 a group of Brazilian high school students in the state of Sao Paulo occupied over 200 schools to regain control of their teaching and learning after the state governor attempted to restructure the educational system without debate or collaboration with teaching staff, parents, or students. Students organised their own classes which were open to all members of the community, and curated their own curriculum around their own hopes and desires for the future (Sales et al., 2020). Through my research and examining my practice, I have

identified that my work is in line with prefigurative activism, and I am determined to use my practice as a designer and activist to be part of prefiguring a better future.

How are people empowered?

Empowerment is a broad term and can have different definitions in different contexts, making it difficult to underpin exactly what we mean when we talk about 'empowering' people. Most definitions take the role of agency into account—the individual's ability to act freely and achieve personal goals (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). In the context of this essay, I will be looking at empowerment as an individual's gain of agency through the dismantling of the barriers that can withhold it. These barriers can manifest themselves as institutional, social, or even personal.

Community

The role of community as a tool for empowerment is vital. As humans we are defined by our communities and the people around us. We are never truly independent, from being carried by our mothers and delivered by a midwife, to when we are carried to our graves by the pallbearers. Our actions are constantly affecting others in ways we often unaware, evidenced in TV series *The Good Place* (2016) which observes that the complexity of modern life makes it impossible to act without consequence, good or bad. Despite this, there has been very little research on the psychological benefits of community participation, even though there is a consensus that it is inherently positive. Feeling a sense of community is to feel a comfortable and reciprocated interdependence within a group of similar people, and to be a member of a community is to feel a sense of contribution to the group and emotional safety around the other members. The 2015 study (Cicognani et al., 2015) showed that, specifically in young adults, engagement in community activities is beneficial to a sense of wellbeing and supports empowerment. In 2016, McAra identified how a group of teenagers involved in experimental filmmaking research could explore their craft skills without being excluded by not being 'good at art'. This opportunity to work in a group setting improved social cohesion, as well as enabling each participant to become more independent and gain a greater sense of agency (McAra, 2016).

Austerity and Agency

Our brief look at capitalism and consumerism has shown us that the average person is often denied agency within our current economic system. The austerity that we have been subjected to as British citizens has taken many forms in the last few years, including budget cuts, rising inflation, and repressed wages. In Capital Order, Mattei's exploration into austerity shows us that British capitalism could only prevail through the coercion of workers by the redistribution of capital from the 'low-saving working class' to the savers and investors (Mattei, 2022). We have seen through studies that when a group is afforded external support in the form of infrastructure, they have more freedom to explore their own internal capabilities and skills. This in turn allows the individuals to become more empowered within their group setting and can work to dismantle institutional barriers (von Busch and Pazarbasi, 2018). However, as Mattei highlights, austerity is key to the continuation of capitalism, and oppression of agency is part of the system that has been designed to deny the population its financial freedom.

Craftivism

This essay is of course focused on how we can use contemporary crafts as tool for change, but it would be a great injustice to not address the feminine history of the handmade, most significantly within the realm of textiles. Whilst it is impossible to address the full scope of womens roles within the development of the crafts in such a short text, I would like to briefly return to the Venus of Dolni Vestonice. This is the oldest known ceramic object and one of the oldest hand-crafted objects we know of. We do not know who made this statuette and why, though historians suggest its large breasts and hips are a symbol of fertility. As a woman, it simply calls to me as a celebration of womanhood. I truly believe that this clay was given life by the hands of a woman, a mother perhaps, providing no other domestic purpose than to represent herself and the women around her. The rest of the story, I hope, tells itself.

The Suffragettes

A part of history I would like to highlight however is the Suffragettes and Suffragists, who used embroidery and banner making in a way to display their femininity as a symbol of strength. In the great marches of June 1908, thousands of women from a variety of trades all marched together under their own handmade banners, though still expressing a uniformity throughout the parade. Their carefully curated aesthetic was an integral part of their campaign, opposing the connotations of embroidery and femininity being 'soft' and a sign of weakness. This removal of textile art from the household onto the

street showcased the immense talent of the working woman and exhibited their demand to be treated alongside men as strong and intelligent women (Parker, 2010).

The Banner

Banners are quite possibly one of the most effective ways to spread a message, their carefully curated slogans and mottos communicate demands and express solidarity. The People's History Museum in Manchester showcases the largest collection of Trade Union banners in the world, including the oldest known union banner from the 1821 Tin Plate Workers Society. There is a plethora of symbolism used by these union banners to represent their different values, though they are all unified by the solidarity between workers. History has not forgotten the banner, and this symbol of both the power in the handmade and unique, and the strength of a community is still a ubiquitous motif in modern activism.

Craftivism

Craftivism has become widespread since being coined by Betsy Greer in 2002, though the sentiment of Craft as Activism has been around much longer, as we have seen, not least with the work of the suffragettes. Greer's work has given the vocabulary and the platform to those who were already engaging in craft activism. It has also helped to highlight the importance of making, and the power it has to enable critical thinking and expression through questioning (Greer, 2014). Sarah Corbett, an activist suffering from burnout from confrontational classic activism discovered craftivism as a tool for 'gentle activism' and started the craftivist collective as a way to bring people together to be involved in beautiful and changemaking craft projects ('Our Story', n.d.). Craftivist Sayraphim Lothian has created work in ways similar to a prefigurative activist, making small (inedible) cupcakes from foam and leaving them around their city. These acts of kindness, addressed to 'a stranger' invited members of the public to become involved in this exhibition of sorts, transcending the four walls of a gallery. Returning to the idea that our actions have unseen consequences can help us to understand how this 'Guerrilla Kindness' can create a butterfly effect of positive influence through the medium of the hand crafted (Lothian, 2018).

Yarn Bombing

Other more drastic examples of Craftivism include yarn bombing, a fairly well-known style of graffiti where crocheters or knitters will adorn areas of the public realm with their fibre creations, covering anywhere from the arm of a park bench to whole tree trunks or fences. This style of graffiti is

often purely a whimsical pastime, but true to the ‘subversive stitcher’, it has frequently been used as a tool for political activism (Mann, 2015). An unintentionally controversial example of this is the city yarn installation of 2018 in Rochester, New York. Hinda Mandell, a self-proclaimed yarn activist, organised for 12 handstitched tapestries to be made as a way to revitalise a civic park in the city suburbs. With the support and funding from a local business developer, work went underway as over 40 different local women brought themselves together to create the tapestries and other yarn-based embellishments, expressing their connections to the local area and to one-another. The controversy occurred when the local council demanded for the tapestries to be removed, sparking a conversation about the spaces that craft can occupy and who owns these creations (Mandell, 2021).

Research Findings

Before evaluating my research, it is important to note that the participants involved in the study included specifically students and staff from the UWE Bower Ashton Campus, due to the resources available to me at the time of conducting my event. This demographic represents a very specific type of person, which is most generally white, and left-wing ‘progressive’ young people. To carry out this research, I erected a craft ‘stall’ with a number of different materials available for participants to craft with. These included yarn with knitting needles and a crochet hook, paper and glue, plasticine and modelling tools, and needles and embroidery thread and hoop. I invited participants to join me in crafting as I asked them a series of questions about their own relationships to the crafts.

Engagement

Many of my participants had at least some sort of interest or engagement with crafts or making. There were many who were not specifically ‘crafters’ as such, but had other creative practices, such as music, poetry, graffiti and even makeup and styling. Whilst these activities wouldn’t classically be labelled as ‘crafts’, their role in the participants lives as creative outlets holds just as much significance in this research as a more traditional craft such as sewing. Again, being based on an arts campus whilst conducting this research will have created a huge bias, and the relationships to creativity evidenced here are not necessarily reflected in the wider population. Despite this, it was interesting to note how even people studying creative degrees, such as media production or filmmaking still had limited relationships with crafting, with their studies often being the only creative outlet they had within their lives.

Upbringing

There are of course many factors that affect someone's interest in making and the skills they have acquired, but most notably it was the participant's upbringing that had the most influence. Those who were more engaged with the crafts and tended to have more hands-on practices within their studies often had the influence of creative parents whilst growing up. A lot of these participants were encouraged to explore their creativity from a young age and picked up skills such as crocheting from their families and peers. One participant talked about how craft has been their natural way to react to the world around them, since childhood they had been naturally inquisitive about the way objects are made, and how to make them. Others came to their creativity later in life, often citing the way that crafting and making helped ease the symptoms of mental health issues.

Emotional Connection

This mental reaction to crafting is of course well documented, and we know the effects craft can have on one's wellbeing, as has been discussed. However, I am interested in the emotional connection that people have with crafting. I have personally been exploring my creativity since childhood, and I have a deeply emotional connection with the act of making. Baking and cooking have been the crafts most integral to my life, and the act of baking not only provides the obvious benefits of a delicious treat but also the sense of achievement of having made something. It honours my own personal history and provides me with an emotional comfort blanket. Having the opportunity to ask my participants about their emotional state as they craft has given me a much more personal insight into their relationships with creativity. A lot of individuals quoted feeling soothed and more relaxed after their chosen activity. Others said they felt empowered or liberated by their creativity and the objects they had made. Most interestingly to me, individuals that had a specific practice explained to me that, once an idea of a project had occurred to them, there existed an intense yearning to bring it to fruition. Often these individuals would struggle to focus on other projects and wouldn't feel satisfied until they had finally made their desired outcome. As someone that can empathise with this feeling, which I often call having 'itchy fingers', I can only assume that this feeling is shared amongst many creatives and makers. I'm not yet sure how this psychological phenomenon fits specifically into my work, but to me it makes a good case for how intrinsically linked our minds and our feelings are with the act of making and crafting.

Art, Craft, Sustainability and the Local

Looking at the work of existing organisations is an important part in establishing my own research in the context of the wider world and how my practice exists within it. The organisation Bricks Bristol, based in St Anne's House, Brislington held the seminar 'Art, Craft, Sustainability and the Local' to explore this issue from a sociological perspective. Attending the event gave me the opportunity to meet other creatives from all backgrounds, as well as local councillors, sociology professors and members of the Bricks staff. After the talks, we had group conversations to highlight the opportunities and challenges of using craft as a lever for sustainability. Together, we highlighted the value that comes with the slowness of craft, and how it can be used to push against the need for constant productivity whilst encouraging more care and appreciation for what we already own. It was also recognised that art and craft can be used to enable both individual and collective expression and create platforms for members of the community to share stories and experiences. As someone trying to establish a practice based on these principles, it was really inspiring to hear others talk about these aspects of craft and sustainability, and helped me to validate myself and my work (Art, Craft, Sustainability and the Local - Bricks - St Annes House & Public Art in Bristol., n.d.).

Summary

So far, I have explored how the crafts have been used as activism and the effects crafting has on us, both through my own conversations with others and through the research of other practitioners. I have also highlighted how capitalism and austerity oppress our agency and looked briefly at the role that community plays in breaking down these barriers and aiding the empowerment of individuals. But how do these different facets become a whole? I have identified three strands:

- Craft is Activism
- Craft is Community
- Craft is Slow

In an economic system where our labour defines our worth, using our time to craft is within itself an act of resistance. Not only can the outcomes of craft be used as a form of activism, but exploring identity through the means of making can actively subvert the status quo. Craft also offers the opportunity to build communities around a central activity or strengthen the sense of community between existing members. These communities can foster the empowerment of individuals by providing

a safe environment to express identity. The purposeful deliberation of the handmade lends crafters the space to step back from the demands of a fast-paced consumer environment by allowing the time to connect with the materiality of the craft and the work needed to produce an outcome. This engagement with the 'manufacturing' process can help an individual to gain a better understanding of the manufacture of products in a broader sense, and begin to critically evaluate the mass production of everyday goods.

Crafting and critically engaging with the processes and outcomes discussed throughout this essay can allow an individual to emancipate their own values from that of a consumerist and pro-capitalist mindset. Despite remaining in the clutches of our current economic system, a crafter can still enjoy the benefits of learned skills, found community and creative expression. Improved social cohesion, wellbeing and critical reflection could all become avenues to equip an individual with a greater internal sense of agency. When they have become empowered in this way, they are provided with the capability to effect change within their own circles through prefigurative activism.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the use of hobby crafts and other creative practices as a form of activism both throughout history and today. By evaluating the capitalist economic system of Britain and the limitations and barriers that austerity pose, I have identified ways in which we can use the crafts to afford individuals more agency within this oppressive framework and subvert the status quo at an individual and local level. Through my own research practice, I have begun to gain an insight into the personal connections that individuals have with the crafts, opening me up to a more psychological line of enquiry that I hope to explore further with future iterations of my 'craft stall' interview setup. Both my empirical and anecdotal evidence provide a strong foundation to the argument that participating in craft-based activities can indeed play a role in empowering individuals. However, when working in fields that are so complex and nuanced, it is impossible to quantify such data and without conducting extensive and in-depth research it cannot be claimed as fact. This research also has not addressed other systemic barriers that withhold agency, such as institutional racism and the discrimination of those with disabilities.

I do believe that this research has provided a solid foundation of principles on which to base my practice, and my work will continue to explore our intrinsic connection to making. I will also be continuing to use my practice as a form of prefigurative activism by using my own creativity, and fostering the creativity of others, in order to build a vision of a more equitable, just and sustainable future.

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