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You Are Not a Lemming: The Imagined Resistance of Craft Citizenship

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Abstract

This thought piece examines the ways in which pre-Industrial craft ideals are taken up in a late-capitalist context, where craft is framed as an act of resistance, couched in the language of rebellion. Mobilized by big business and the culture industry alike, this pre-modern archetype draws upon an intractable yet mythical narrative in which craft is synonymous with altruism, morality, resistance, and self-determination. While subverting a contemporary theoretical understanding of craft as a mode of investigating both the material and the immaterial, this model focuses on the attributes of the maker within society. The imagined craftworker personifies a fully realized notion of citizenship that extends beyond neoliberal boundaries, and speaks to a contemporary audience wishing to identify as more than consumers within a capitalist state. As a mode of cultural capitalism, craft is mined for its connotations of citizenship and social responsibility, advocating rebellion yet ensuring its impotence. The symbolic power of the manifesto is often harnessed, and draws upon an imagined populist history of grassroots uprising, becoming a persuasive—albeit illusory—counterpoint to neoliberal capitalism. Ultimately, this theoretical framework serves to perpetuate the conditions of the late capitalist state rather than destabilize them,

underscoring power inequity, cultural hegemony, and rebellion as commodity.

Keywords: craft ideology, craft in Canada, craft and rebellion, neoliberalism, cultural capitalism

In 2015, Craft Ontario, a savvy and long-standing not-for-profit organization, introduced its *Citizens of Craft* campaign. A ten-point manifesto served as its rallying cry. Practitioners and consumers were warned, "cookie cutter doesn't cut it," alongside other truisms, such as "one size should not fit all," and the more dubious "vases are people too." Provincial crafts councils from British Columbia to Newfoundland adopted the campaign. "Declare yourself," they challenged their members (Citizens of Craft, 2015; Figure 1).

A year earlier, the Maker Movement Manifesto written by Mark Hatch, CEO of the American franchise TechShop, issued his own call to arms: "I am inviting you to become a revolutionary," Hatch declares in his 256-page manifesto, daring the reader to attack global problems with tools and a little ingenuity (Hatch, 2014: 202). The goal? To "liberate the oppressed" and fulfil one's own latent potential (Hatch, 2014: 36). Oh yes, and to change the world too.

Pairing craft with rebellion is a curious phenomenon, yet a shockingly enduring one. Craft—or rather, a distancing from it—has consistently incited a passionate populist outcry. Its role as a foe to mass marketing and commercial enterprise charts a straight line from early Industrial dissent to twenty-first century post-industrial disillusionment. As Western countries have inched further away from pre-modern modes of

Fig 1 *Citizens of Craft*, 2015. Maker: Joe Han Lee, *Courage*, 2012. Photo: Joe Han Lee.

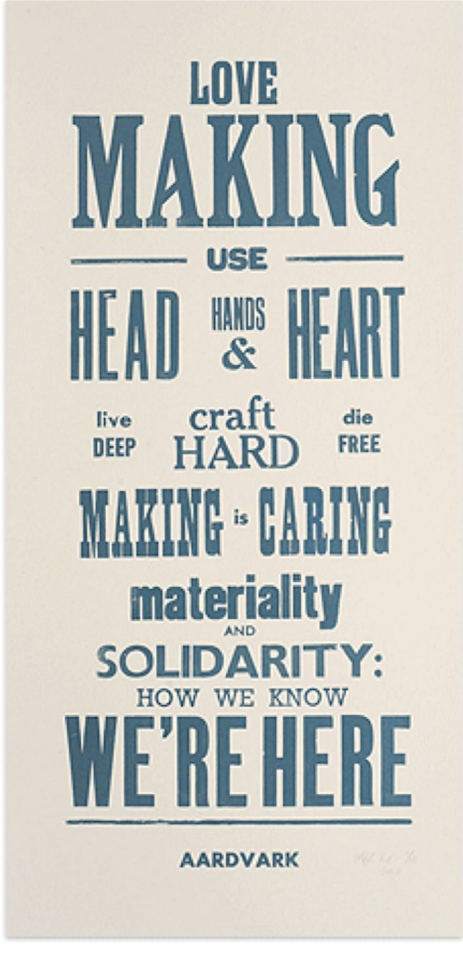

Fig 2 Pea Crabtree & Lesley Greening Lassoff, *Craft Manifesto*, 2012.

production, craft has been cemented in the public imagination as a beloved symbol of the void left behind, commonly viewed through rose-colored glasses, and shrouded in nostalgia.[1] Craft theorist Glenn Adamson explains the binary that pits craft against industry as a compelling yet fictional parable in *The Invention of Craft* (2013). Positioning the two as antithetical offered those in the throes of the Industrial Revolution a persuasive means of coping with the trauma of modernity, one that proved enduring. Veracity has no place in this construct. Rather, craft's dynamic and persistent cultural role is overlooked in favor of it being a "static backdrop" to industrialization and the ills of modernity (Adamson, 2013: xiii). It remains frozen in history, alongside a wealth of imagined human virtues.

An ethos of "making and caring; materiality and solidarity" as advocated in Lesley and Pea's Craft Manifesto (2015; Figure 2) channels the same sentiment as that of architect Augustus Pugin, who championed the aesthetic, altruistic, and moral zeal of Gothic craftsmen almost two centuries earlier (Pugin, 1969). William Morris (1885) espoused defending "the common cause—the cause of Humanity" by resisting "beauty-destroying, man-enslaving" machines. Over a century later, the Craft Guerrilla Army is poised to "take on the world for a better hand made existence!" with its sister armies. "We've had enough of soulless, mass produced tat" they declare (Craft Guerrilla Manifesto, 2015). In this discourse, craft objects, and the makers behind them, are assigned a range of attributes including resistance (Adamson, 2010; Bratich & Brush, 2011; Charny, 2011; Morris, 1885), skill (Marx, 1887; Morris, 1885; Pye, 1995; Risatti, 2008), authenticity (Benjamin, 1968; Morris, 1885), benevolence (Bratich & Brush, 2011; Helland, 2014; Upchurch & McLaughlin, 2013) morality (Gaskell, 1836; Ruskin, 1905; Woodward, 1884), and self-determination (Braverman, 1974; Metcalf, 2002; Ruskin, 1905).

While these are curiously heady days for the craft manifesto, it is not the only

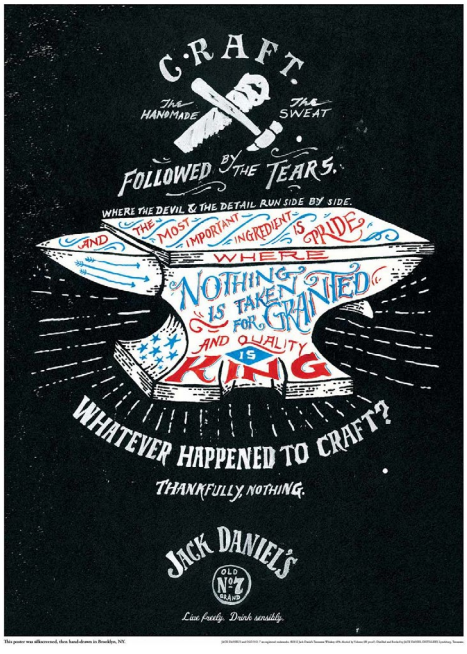

Fig 3 Jack Daniel's, *Craft*, 2012. Advertising Agency: AmWorldwide.

form in which craft is mobilized as a pre-capitalist insurgent—just the most overt. In fact, we see a conception of craft as an anachronistic ideal infiltrate a particular but widespread understanding of the term. It seeps into popular advertising: "Craft, the handmade, the sweat, followed by the tears" encircles a stylized handsaw and mallet for the Jack Daniel's craft whiskey campaign (Figure 3). Possibly the same sweat and tears went into the Craft Beer Revolution—certainly the same font (Hindy, 2014, cover). Chrysler asks, "What's a born maker made from?" in its 2015 ad campaign. "From calloused hands, strong backs... from steely resolve; from blood sweat, and gears" (Chrysler Group, 2014). And while the Craft Coffee Revolution is based on "craftsmanship, equipment, and passion," DMC Commonthread (2015) is mounting its own insurrection, seeking "renegades" and "soldiers" committed to building a "life handmade." "Whatever happened to craft?" asks the Jack Daniel's Distillery in vintage font, "Thankfully nothing."

However, something did happen to craft. Makers and theorists looked in the mirror and refuted an ideology that was both obsolete and flawed from the get-go. Craft ceased to be confined by the pre-Industrial since it took charge of its own theorizing, assuming a more expansive role as an attitude or methodology. Making, in turn, has been posited as an exploration of embodied relations, materiality, affective knowledge, place, sensory intelligence, and self. As such, craft's continued role as *resister* or *rebel* does inspire some curiosity. How does this pre-Industrial trope retain its relevance, when fresh theoretical frameworks have deemed it redundant? Who, in fact, is being served by the endurance of a discursive construction that perpetuates a mythical pre-capitalist model? And what is revealed about the social and economic conditions of present-day cultural production that perpetuates this view and gives it continued relevance?

As revolutions go, the one being advocated is more symbolic than a boots on the ground variety—the equivalent of wearing an image of Che Guevara on a t-shirt rather than participating in the Arab Spring, for example.[2] A craft *movement* may have the trappings of an uprising, but it will leave political and economic systems intact. Theorists from Marx (1887) to Baudrillard (1998) have warned us that dominant

ideologies will always prevail in the modern state, where everything from cultural activity to rebellion serves to legitimize a social order. By this logic, any promise for something resembling a pre-modern grassroots insurrection is inherently hollow. While Etsy pledges to empower citizens to change the global economy by "bringing heart to commerce," this aspiration changes nothing about the capitalist institutions that safeguard Etsy's corporate status as a craft marketing powerhouse (Etsy, 2015). Rather, it falls under the category of "neoliberalism lite," in which public responsibility is determined by the free market.[3] Its "reimagining of commerce" may refer to the altruistic narrative it crafts for its shareholders, while working decidedly within a capitalist system. As with theorist Herbert Marcuse's "one-dimensional reality" (1964), this backstory of reimagining a global economy offers a convincing illusion of free choice and self-determination, while masking a larger system based on oppression, inequity, and state dereliction of duty.

So where does this leave the craft rebellion? Well, there's little chance that Marcuse would be renting tools at Mark Hatch's TechShop seeking self-realization. More likely, he would out it as a cog in the culture industry, intent on maintaining and perpetuating conformity, while fostering a sense of "pseudoindividuality" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). However, the power of myth is persuasive and the pre-Industrial trope has commanding cultural sway.

Consider the attributes of our pre-Industrial craftworker: as a representative of authenticity and skill in the workplace, (s)he is informed by tradition, morality, and categorical self-determination. These attributes all confront capitalist ideals head-on, and create a persuasive ideology of what it means to be human. Whether mythical or otherwise, they articulate distinct claims to knowledge, political positions, social responsibilities, personal beliefs, and moral codes. Our craftworker asserts a multidimensional conception of the individual in society, and personifies specific discourses of this citizenship.

This personification of ideology is key, creating a means of reaching an audience ready to receive its message. As a counterpoint to disillusionment and insidious corporate malfeasance, our symbolic craftworker is understandably appealing. (S) he conjures a narrative of rising above "the mass-produced promise that if I buy widget number 2865702, I will matter" (Citizens of Craft, 2015), and a reductive approach to neoliberal citizenry in which an individual is reduced to consumer. Importantly, though, its message does not advocate "sticking it to the man," but rather, nostalgically recalls a time when we felt there was a man to stick it to (Figure 4).

And, as the story goes, that which is enticing can be readily vacuumed up by market forces and assigned a pricetag. Economic theorist Jeremy Rifkin (2001) describes an emergent cultural capitalism in which commodified human experiences—particularly the ones that communicate a sense of "rightness"—are served back to an increasingly eager audience. Instead of a blister-packed artefact, we can purchase an anticonsumerist experience in the form of a Rebellion craft beer or a "You are not a lemming" t-shirt in small, medium, large, or extra-large. By buying "good things from real people" (Gittleson, 2015), consumption itself

Fig 4 *Citizens of Craft*, 2015.

can feel creative and empowering (Walker, 2007). We can allow the material (object) to declare our allegiance to the immaterial (dissent), and metaphorically take up arms through our purchasing power. It is a beautiful example of the counter-hegemonic reaching to envision new possibilities for hegemony (Figure 5).

The limitless reach of free-market capitalism is nothing new, but provides important insight into the cultural role of our mythical craftworker. If we look at who is being served by the perpetuation of this archetype, we find both corporations and organizations whose target audiences respond through their purchasing power. The fact that arts service organizations mobilize an outmoded narrative for craft may speak more to the economic position of the arts sector within a neoliberal system than it does to a committed philosophical stance. The dictates of the Craft Ontario manifesto stand in sharp contrast to the organization's role as a leading advocate for makers in the province, championing a conception of making that is broad and inclusive, freed from "silos and boundaries" (Craft Ontario, 2014). Perhaps, like Morris, they recognize that a mixture of altruism and sedition will reach the largest audience. The much-hyped creative economy that has sprouted in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and the like has gone hand in hand with reduced public funding to the arts.[4] Not-for-profit arts organizations, faced with an increasingly hostile climate in which to operate, must be doggedly resourceful to remain viable.

This by no means advocates complacency, nor does it absolve makers and the organizations charged with representing them from the responsibility of shifting a stubborn discourse for craft. But it does remind us of two things: first, the crafts community—makers and their

Fig 5 Banksy, *Festival*, 2006.

organizations alike—must relentlessly uphold and defend their own conception of craft in all its contexts, from all of its vantage points, and with all of its shifting discourses. As a persistent and sustained voice, this community alone has the power to build a full and honest definition. There is an emergent but solid foundation of making, theorizing, collaborating, and critiquing, on which we can continue to build.

Second, those speaking for the crafts community are not unaffected by the economic and political contexts in which they operate. Provincial crafts councils need not rely on revenue earned from Citizens of Craft t-shirt and button sales if given the means for financial stability. Instead, attention could be entirely shifted to the extensive and relevant programming they currently undertake. Likewise, makers need not join the monthly tool rental revolution at TechShop in which craft is packaged as a mutinous means to self-realization, by instead opting for volunteer- or artist-run models. Hackforge in Windsor, Ontario is one such example, in which membership comes in the form of monthly volunteer hours and a lending of skills. The mobile Repair Café is another, in which volunteer mentors teach others the skills of repair, and extend the life of otherwise disposable objects. Now that's revolutionary!

Recognizing who controls the message of craft and who controls the messenger

are key. The examples in which craft is co-opted for commercial purposes show that rather than changing the game, such enterprises are, in fact, joining it. Yet for many, the game they are joining may be a race to the bottom, as arts organizations are increasingly left to fend for themselves in the ironically titled "creative economy" of neoliberalism. We find ourselves at the same juncture faced by the Arts and Crafts movement in the late nineteenth century in which a reclaimation of craft was asserted as a means of counteracting industrial alienation, when the real intractable issues were those of corporate control and economic inequality. This is when our pre-Industrial craftworker was stripped—not of skill, virtue, or the like, but of a notion of citizenship that transcended the economic, and of a status that transcended the symbolic.

So, how about a few revisions to the ubiquitous manifesto that can replace the current "two-handed" version—one that makes a fist in the air while the other reaches for your wallet? A starting point would be swapping value-laden rhetoric with realistic demands from the community represented. Few contemporary makers are preoccupied with insurrection; rather, they and the organizations charged with representing them, depend on political and economic conditions that will safeguard their health. If a manifesto has any place for nostalgia, it is not for Arts and Crafts moralizing, but for a recent time in Western history when legislators, not corporations, were charged with defending public interest, and ensuring culture precedes commerce rather than the other way around (Rifkin, 2001). While deep structural changes to capitalism may seem idealistic, continued public divestment in all aspects of cultural life will leave makers, and the organizations charged with representing them, saddled with persistent economic vulnerability. The message of craft, in turn, will be communicated via the TechShop franchise or a suitably powerful alternative. Perhaps we can recognize neoliberal capitalism as an idea whose time has come, and we can usher in a new chapter. A new manifesto waits to be written.

Notes

1 Glenn Adamson describes a romanticized discourse of craft as "fraudulent and false," yet "also doing real cultural work" by providing a means of psychologically coping with the disruption of change. The discourse acts as a bandage "that simultaneously heals a wound and also draws attention to the wound, whether or not there's a wound there at all." See Glenn Adamson, *Visiting Artist and Scholar Lecture Series* film (Athens, University of Georgia, 2012).

2 Che Guevara has come to denote a vague symbol of sedition, according to writer, Chris Berg. Stripped of all historic specificity, his popularity is due "to the very economic system he sought to destroy." See Chris Berg, "Che Chic: You've Ignored the Horrors, Now Buy the T-shirt," *The Age* (October 14, 2007).

3 Cultural theorist Toby Miller (2007) uses "neoliberalism lite" to describe public services managed by private initiatives. George W. Bush's "ownership society" is a key example in which federal tax cuts were introduced as a means of spurring expanded private ownership in 2004. The ensuing subprime mortgage crisis exposed the dangers of unbridled privatization combined with rampant divestment on the part of the state. See Toby Miller, *Cultural Citizenship Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism, and Television in a Neoliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007).

4 Funding to artists and arts organizations provided by the Canada Council for the Arts has faced a consistent decline since 2007. In 2013–14, fund-

ing to arts and artist organizations ($153.6 MM) dropped below that of 1986–87 levels ($157.4 MM). See Canada Council for the Arts, *Funding to Artists and Arts Organizations 2013–14* (2014).

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