

“DIY, Websites and Energy: The New Alternative Crafts,”
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About 18 months ago, I attended the American Craft Council’s big conference in Houston. The agenda was heavily skewed towards a view that the future of craft lies in installation art that employs bits of craft mediums here and there. I didn’t find this vision futuristic at all, but merely a description of a 20-year trend that is currently reaching its peak. (*Onscreen image: Renée Lotenero, “La Casa da Signora Fendi e I Giardini #5,” 2004.*)

Around the edges, however, there was modest talk about grass-roots craft that was altogether different in character. Populist, upbeat and almost completely foreign to the conventional institutions of craft like the ACC and the established craft fairs, this stuff interested me. I’ve spent the last year-and-a-half poking around that world—or more properly, those worlds—and this presentation is one of my reports.

For convenience, I have called it alternative craft, underlining its alternative status when compared to the craft mainstream of medium groups, craft galleries, craft museums and so on. There are several overlapping manifestations. One is DIY (do-it-yourself) the phenomenon of ordinary people (mostly young) taking up crafts to make useful and decorative objects. (*Onscreen image: two projects from Greg Der Ananian’s DIY book, Bazaar Bizarre.*) As I understand it, DIY craft is rooted in punk, indie music and street culture, but it has lately been appropriated as a hip thing to do.

DIY shades rather quickly into new marketplaces of websites and small craft fairs—fairs like the Renegade Craft Fair or Bazaar Bizarre and websites like Etsy.com. Exhibitors and sellers are mostly young and often untrained, and they’re mostly looking to make some money. They’re also looking for a sense of community. And then there’s activist craft (“craftivism”) which shares attributes with both DIY and the new marketplaces, but is primarily motivated by radical social and political critique. (*Onscreen image: “Peace Knits” demonstration by the Revolutionary Knitting Circle, March 2004.*) In general, craftivism is anti-globalist, anti-corporate, green, enthusiastic about any attempts to get off the grid, and deeply sympathetic to populations who feel marginalized from the mainstream. There’s even an active homocraft scene.

These diverse tendencies may or may not sit well with each other. Some craftivists criticize some of the market-based outfits for being insufficiently radical, for instance. But I’ll overlook the differences for the moment, and put them all under the umbrella of alternative craft.

In my conversations with academic types, students, and even some seasoned craft fair exhibitors, I find there is a considerable amount of resistance to alternative craft. This resistance seems to be pervasive in the established craft community: the worlds of academia and high-end craft fairs and galleries. My friends say they’re so tired of all that knitting (*Onscreen image: Cat Mazza’s knitting website.*) or they think most of the work is dreadful. Students object to the taint of hipsterism, of hyper-trendy urban cool.

My opinion is that there's tremendous energy and optimism in alternative craft. I think the established craft community—in which I include SNAG and myself—would do well to look at this phenomenon with an open mind. So I want to talk about alt-craft today in terms of its parallels to the history of modern craft—of which there are many—as well as its differences. I hope that these similarities and differences will help us all better understand what's going on here.

I'm going to speak about four basic attributes I see in alt-craft, each with a specific relation to craft history. They are: community; commerce; opposition and changing taste.

The idea of community pervades the history of studio craft. William Morris hoped to create a brotherhood of designers and makers who would all pursue the ideal of bringing beauty into ordinary life. His first communal project was the decoration of his new home in the countryside, Red House, built in 1860. (*Onscreen image: William Morris and collaborators, "St. George's Cabinet," made for Red House about 1861.*) He invited his friends up from London to paint furniture and to embroider hangings. It was a noble experiment but a short one: Morris moved back to London five years later. Even his interior decorating firm, Morris and Company, was initially conceived as a co-op.

This pattern of organizing communities around the production of craft objects has been repeated many times since. (*Onscreen image: Guild of Handicraft, silver and glass decanter, 1904.*) The dozens of Arts & Crafts societies in England and America, Utopian communities like Charles Robert Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft and Elbert Hubbard's Roycrofters; 1970s co-ops like the Baulines Craft Guild in California (*Onscreen image: group photo of the Baulines Craft Guild about 1972.*) and even medium groups like SNAG, NCECA and GAS— all of them followed the same impulse.

(*Onscreen image: Etsy.com's website community page.*) So, when Etsy's website supports forums, a chatroom, virtual and live classes, teams and a list of resources, the pattern is familiar even if the technology is new. The Etsy website is an online community based on communication, sharing and mutual support. Participation is quite active, and the range of topics is broad. It appears to be grassroots democracy in action.

(*Onscreen image: Etsy.com's website homepage.*) Despite the glow of participatory democracy, I should point out that there's also a bit of elitism at Etsy—just as there is in almost every craft organization. Etsy's homepage always features a few “hand-picked items” selected out of the thousands of Etsy listings by a staff member or sometimes an Etsy user. Either way, questions of choice and taste emerge, even causing a little friction in the community. As one said, “And why isn't it me?”

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(*Onscreen image: exhibitor at Bazaar Bizarre.*) One of the things that fascinates me about alt-craft is that it is so thoroughly involved in commerce. A few artists and craftivists shun the sales opportunities, but money-making seems to predominate

everywhere else. Alternative craft fairs a full of cheerful young entrepreneurs eager to make a buck, and the basic *raison d'être* for Etsy is selling. Again, this is a familiar pattern in the history of craft.

(Onscreen image: Roycrofters "Morris Chair" advertisement, about 1905.) Elbert Hubbard's Roycrofters existed only because a market developed for objects originally intended to furnish the inn Hubbard built to accommodate curious visitors. Rookwood Pottery was a business from the get-go, as were the vast majority of the Arts & Crafts potteries. Even the ACC was founded in part to develop an urban market for rural crafts. The studio craft movement and the marketplace have been conjoined from the beginning.

But if craft and capitalism have always been in bed together, I should note that Craft has always advocated capitalism on a very small scale, with modest investments and face-to-face marketplaces. This is small-money, small footprint, intimate capitalism, designed to solve one of the most urgent questions posed by industrial society: How does one find dignified labor? *(Onscreen image: workers at the Guild of Handicraft, about 1905.)* This was a question posed by Ruskin in 1853, and its still relevant today. At its best, craft is work with dignity, work that allows the worker to call the shots. In that sense, craft is inherently anti-corporate, as craftivists have recognized. Craft capitalism encourages self-determination and a degree of self-reliance. It also suggests a partial divorce from consumerism, at least the kind practiced by Wal-Mart and Target. I'm not sure about the claims that studio craft short-circuits the global system of sweated labor: many craftspeople still barely break the minimum wage, and I suspect that the majority of people on Etsy do not make a living wage at their craft. But at least the potential remains for persistent and talented young makers to quit their day jobs and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

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(Onscreen image: "Peace Knits" demonstration by the Revolutionary Knitting Circle, March 2004) I'm also fascinated by the reappearance of craft that is oppositional in nature: opposition to injustice, to global corporatism, to social prejudice, and even to war. Politicized craft was not unusual in the 60s—take Fred Woell's subtle commenatray on the connection between pop culture and violence. *(Onscreen image: J. Fred Woell, "Pepsi Generation," c. 1965.)* But political craft seemed to die down during the 80s and 90s, and at upscale craft events like SOFA on might conclude that the craft world has gone completely apolitical.

However, there's a good number of craftivists out there. They don't necessarily repeat the old Marxist slogans about the evils of capitalism, the inherent corruption of the bourgeoisie, or the superiority of socialism. The new generation seems too smart to replay those old tapes. Instead, they tend to focus on the problems of unchecked global capitalism: sweated labor and the loss of local jobs. They also critique militarism, often making jabs at the American war machine. *(Onscreen image: Marianne Jørgensen and collaborators, "Pink," 2005)* That strikes me as the agenda behind Marianne Jørgensen's

wonderful tank cozy, a collective project that transforms an old American tank into something warm, fuzzy, and exceptionally silly.

Craftivists, like local food advocates, think about shifting production back into the hands of ordinary people. They promote the same ideals of self-empowerment that motivated both Ruskin and Morris. (*Onscreen image: Revolutionary Knitting Circle storefront with sign promoting free knitting lessons.*) By getting people to make useful objects for themselves, they hope to decrease complicity in modern consumer culture. Handmade objects could last longer, or be used longer, than their mass-marketed equivalents. Handmade things could have a smaller carbon footprint. They could reduce the need for income, and if pursued in the community setting I mentioned before, they could become agents in social bonding and mutual help networks. The point, I think, is that if craft is practiced on a massive scale, the world would be better off for it.

Craftivist opposition to consumerism and corporatism can take many forms, but I'll just show two examples. (*Onscreen image: microRevolt, Nike swoosh blanket.*) One is a pieced-together crocheted image of the Nike swoosh by microRevolt. The intention is to deliver the swoosh blanket to the Chairman of the Board of Nike as a protest against labor exploitation. (*Onscreen image: Allyson Mitchell, "Lady Sasquatch" installation*) Another, by Canadian artist Allyson Mitchell, is an installation that features, among other things, two large fake-fur female sasquatches. Besides being a lot of fun, Mitchell's sasquatches are intended to protest consumerist ideals of feminine beauty, asserting that big, hairy and lesbian is every bit as valid as pretty, petite and smoothly shaven.

The oppositional impulses behind craftivism go way before the 1960s. William Morris was one of England's leading Socialists in the 1880s, and he was a very early opponent of industrial pollution. (*Onscreen image: William Morris tapestry, 1879.*) While his craft work was a tangible protest only against shoddy goods and tasteless design, he set the tone for much of the best Arts & Crafts production that was to follow. (*Onscreen image: Ernest Gimson, sideboard, c. 1915*) A particularly English form of craft-as-protest was a movement to make furniture without the aid of any machines in the studio. (Morris himself never avoided machine fabrication, but his followers did.) Another form of opposition was the way early Arts & Crafts jewelers avoided precious metals and gemstones. For instance, take Madelaine Yale Wynne, one of the first recorded American studio jewelers. (*Onscreen image: Madelaine Yale Wynne, silver belt buckle, c. 1900.*) She used mainly copper, silver and roughly-cut stones, as in this belt buckle from around 1900. Clearly, the relaxed craftsmanship is a visible protest against trade standards of both skill and design. In her own day, a critic called Wynne's jewelry "barbaric."

Which leads nicely to my last topic: changing tastes. It seems to me that mainstream craft has become institutionalized over the past 30 years, with the (perhaps) unintended consequence that a certain taste has become enshrined within the culture. (*Onscreen image: advertisements for ACC Baltimore exhibitors, Ornament magazine, 2007.*) When you go to a major craft show, for instance, there's a glossy professionalism about everything. Designs are consistent, craftsmanship is uniformly good, displays are neat. And how could it be otherwise, since jurying standards have become so uniform? There's

nothing messy, nothing contradictory, nothing off-the-cuff. There's no high-jinks, no rank amateurism, no cluttered card tables. And to my mind, all that slick professionalism has become dry, airless, and boring. The same with SOFA, the same with a lot of craft galleries. And frankly, the audience tends to agree. I have talked to a number of people who don't bother to go to the Philadelphia Craft Show anymore. Everything looks the same as it did last year, they say, and nothing excites them anymore. No wonder attendance at most craft fairs is flat or declining.

(Onscreen image: Bazaar Bizarre homepage.) Not at alt-craft fairs, though. I went to the Brooklyn Renegade Fair last summer and it was packed, even though it was held in an empty outdoor swimming pool and it was broiling in there. Why the difference? The alt-craft fairs represent a relatively new taste: ironic, kitschy, trendy and relatively free of both hierarchies and standards of professionalism. And this taste speaks to urban under-35 types. These are exactly the people who will be the next big audience for craft—and they definitely aren't going mainstream.

In the alt-craft fairs, the differences in both taste and standards are easy to spot. *(Onscreen image: exhibitor's booth from a Bazaar Bizarre fair.)* About two-thirds of the booths in Brooklyn had T-shirts for sale; a solid majority had some other kinds of silk-screened products. Most booths had work at a wide variety of price points, which gave any given booth a pretty inconsistent look. Furthermore, most crafters were wholly unconcerned about the preciousness of handwork. Low-end products were usually printed or silk-screened. Nobody cared, and the young hip audience seemed to eat it up. The average level of craftsmanship was low, but again, nobody seemed to care. I'll say this: the level of energy was high.

Some of my acquaintances can't stomach alt-craft, finding much of it crude and unsophisticated. But the Renegade Craft Fair reminded me of nothing so much as the 60s—and the people who were young back then are now the craft establishment. They should remember that 60s craft was often crude and irredeemably ugly. Remember all those hideous brown pots? *(Onscreen image: Rita Schumaker, macramé halter top, c. 1972.)* Remember macramé? Baby boomers who look askance at alt-craft should recall our roots before we pass any judgments.

(Onscreen image: cover of Readymade magazine, December 2006.) So here's a cover of Readymade magazine. While some crafters might disavow this publication as altogether too trendy and slick, I think the image summarizes many aspects of alt-craft taste that I find most interesting. I can see four interconnected concepts at work here, all of which divide the new taste from the old. They are semiotics, irony, kitsch and play.

Semiotics is the business of interpreting social systems. From clothing, cars or jewelry all the way to categories of kinship—semiotics sees them all as languages. You learn to read and speak and decode all these different signs. The under-35 generation is much more adept at reading visual languages than any prior generation. They're like fish swimming in a sea of signs. They're the children of channel-surfing and the internet, and they're comfortable with sensory overload. What this means is that under-35s often regard

meaning as endlessly mutable: an enormous kit of parts that can be recombined at will. Furthermore, many of these people are comfortable with the constant flood of signs that emerge from American consumerism—all that hype and advertising is actually a vast pile of raw material to them. My generation eyes consumerism with deep suspicion, but to the under-35s, it's just another language, another resource.

But they don't necessarily take it seriously, and that's where irony comes into play. Irony is distance. It clears a space for the individual to watch the chaos of modern life with some detachment. (*Onscreen image: Natalia Gianinazzi, "Mickey Grüsli, 2005*) The icons of consumerism can be treated with utter disrespect, as with Natalia Gianinazzi's "Mickey Grüsli" here. (This, by the way, is a one-of-a-kind handmade object.)

Irony also signals disbelief. An ironic stance tells like-minded observers that you don't necessarily buy into the matter at hand. You're just appropriating the language for your own purposes. Your reasons may point to politics or satire, respectful homage of pure fun. But the ironic distance always signifies that you don't necessarily believe.

One of the favorite semiotic fields for appropriation is kitsch. (*Onscreen image: paint-by-number clock project from Readymade magazine, December 2006.*) My sense is that under-35s respond much more favorably to kitsch than to refined good taste. I think they find it more energetic and a lot more fun. Kitsch, after all, is the underbelly of consumerism, the dregs and leftovers of all that was once shiny, hopeful and new. To embrace kitsch, then, is to be an archeologist of shopping—to dig into America's humongous junkyard of things once valued, and now thought to be in bad taste. Alt-crafters are mining the landfill of abandoned consumerism, and kitsch is their vein of pure gold. Put another way, kitsch is dead shopping brought back to life.

Which brings me to play. American craft used to be a lot of fun, with a cadre of craftsman/comedians who were always wisecracking and pulling pranks. (*Onscreen image: David Gilhooly, "Merfrog and Her Pet Fish," 1976.*) Does anybody remember David Gilhooly's world of frogs, or Clayton Bailey's skeletons and robots? Or the brick breast Ken Cory built in somebody's driveway while they were away on vacation? It seems that mainstream American craft, in its ambition to be respectable, has turned its back on the antic spirit of play.

But not the alt-crafters. Their manipulation of signs is, after all, a form of play. Ironic distance can be quite humorous, and kitsch is funny almost by definition. Because they are not all invested in being taken seriously, alt-crafters are free to goof on consumerism, politics, the war machine, homophobia, whatever. (*Onscreen image: Allyson Mitchell: "Sassquog."*) Some of my favorite pieces of alternative craft/art are the animal familiars Allyson Mitchell makes for her Lady Sasquatches—here's her "Sassquog" in pink fake fur. Funny on the surface, serious underneath—but not overly worried about respectability.

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Craft is a complicated thing, fluid and diverse. The alt-craft sensibility I'm talking about is only part of the picture, but it's an important part. I think the mainstream craft community must come to terms with it. Certainly, a big chunk of the craft marketplace is headed in that direction. And besides, I think there's much of value in alt-craft, and the establishment had better pay attention.

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I want to close with a singular thought that occurred to me only a few days ago. At first, I decided not to say this, because I find it rather disturbing. On reflection, though, I think it needs to be said.

Almost everything about alt-craft challenges the conventional wisdom of mainstream craft. That mainstream—largely populated and guided by baby-boomers—has become totally invested in building and maintaining a set of standards, particularly of quality and professionalism. And here's the sad truth: those standards are killing craft. Juries for craft shows, rules of what's allowed and what's not, principles by which teachers critique their students... all these standards make the new kind of craft look amateurish or sloppy or insufficiently aesthetic. But those old criteria are emphatically not the point. The only conclusion I can reach is that those standards must be changed or given up entirely.

Is my generation up to it? Having gained the wheel of control, are we prepared to say we represent the old guard, and we must step aside so all of craft can prosper and grow under a new regime?

I don't know.