

News Flash: The future is a giant meteorite... and the craft world has already been hit.

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The ACC's national craft conference, called "Shaping the Future of Craft," turned out to be to be a mixed bag, not so much a sustained meditation on the future but more a series of reports on the present. [JK1](#) The most prevalent theme was hybridization. A steady drumbeat of hybrid objects played in multiple PowerPoint presentations. Most were sculpture installations that used one craft material or another. An equally steady drumbeat of subtexts emerged: Young artists choose craft mediums along with the other things they find, buy or make. The hottest art schools encourage students to freely mix mediums. The rigorous instruction of craft disciplines is obsolete, and the crafts as we know them are dead. The future of craft, according to these prognosticators, looks a lot like Art-with-a-capital-A, the Art you see in art magazines and in mongo Art exhibitions.

Some teachers in the audience were disturbed by this scenario. Having devoted their lives to transmitting craft skills to younger generations, it was a tad distressing to hear that their work will soon be [JK2](#) irrelevant, and that craft studios will be reduced to service components in schools of one-size-fits-all post-conceptual art.

However, a modest set of counter-proposals were presented at a much lower volume. Some came from craft teachers (Rosanne Somerson, professor of furniture at Rhode Island School of Design, and Lisa Gralnick, professor of metals and jewelry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, being the most notable), some from young working ceramists, and one from a store owner in the audience. I was far more interested in what these people had to say. [JK3](#) While the picture they presented was fragmented, the possibilities they offered were richer and more complex than the main storyline about hybridization. Each of them, in a different way, questioned the received truths of the (largely academic) view that craft must inevitably dissolve into Art practice. Somerson talked at length about her students' interest in small manufacturing ventures; Gralnick insisted that craft is a repository for the sensual experience. And Amy Shaw, the shop owner, observed that there is a tremendous interest in craft as a consumer item among her clientele in Brooklyn. Taken along with some trends I have observed out in the real world, a different picture of the future of craft emerges.

### **Embracing design and industry**

The current generation of students have no use for categories. The pigeonholes of craft, design and art are nearly meaningless to them. The most interesting project is to blur boundaries, to make objects that operate in gray areas. While many are interested in blurring the craft/art boundary, I'm not. Craftspeople have wanted to cross that particular boundary for four decades now. Been there, done that. I am far more intrigued in those that want to mess with the border between craft and design. [JK4](#) Of the two boundaries, this one has been explored much less.

Those who know the story of Modernism in the United States know that there was once a major push to have craftspeople design for industry. The move was based on the Bauhaus notion that a designer who has an intimate working knowledge is better qualified to design objects made in that material. The ideal role models for the craftsman-designer were Charles and Ray Eames. But sometime in the 70s, the ideal faded. Not only did students lose interest

in working for industry, but industry lost interest in hiring craftspeople. They had young industrial designers with college degrees to choose from, after all. Until about 10 years ago, the two camps had little further contact in this country.

Meanwhile, European designers found they could collaborate with small shops, producing limited editions of inventive designs. Or, large companies like Alessi provided the money and connections to get designers to work with craft shops. Some of the objects that emerged from these cooperative ventures received a lot of good press. Examples: all that Memphis furniture, or Marc Newson's 1986 "Lockheed Lounge."[\[JK5\]](#)

The under-30 crowd pays attention. The American segregation of design and craft looks increasingly foolish to them. Confident of their abilities, they believe the two disciplines are closely related, and any reasonably skilled individual can cross from one to the other. Furthermore, they think that they can find a way to put their own designs into production even if the big manufacturers ignore them. Who needs Herman Miller? Poke around on the web, and maybe you can find a company interested in working with you.

Some young craftspeople regard themselves as designers. Their training in their medium gives them skills they need to generate good designs, along with sensitivity to cultural issues. The isolation of craft from design looks foolish: they can design, they can think, so why not? Furthermore, they are fearless about technology. Anything that does the job well is good, whether it is digital or hand-based. The precious politics of handwork, the heavy breathing about quality and integrity that once motivated thousands to take up woodworking, has become *passé*. If anything, craft is understood in Bauhaus terms, as a sound training-ground for designing in a particular material. It's a practical orientation, not an idealist one.

Any interest in design leads directly to production for the marketplace. For decades, most craft students mirrored their teacher's attitudes: engaging the market as an "artist" was OK because it was principled, idealistic. But some teachers implied by instruction and by example that design for production was not OK. The purity of art would be stained by commerce. While this was not universally true of woodworking programs, the attitude was pervasive elsewhere. Not only was the argument flawed—galleries are merely high-toned stores, after all—but it crippled several generations of talented students. Torn by internal conflict about the desirability of getting into production, they conceived of themselves as artists instead. And when that strategy failed, they dropped out of the crafts altogether.[\[JK6\]](#) Luckily, many in the current generation reject that argument, and embrace the marketplace enthusiastically. A lot of the most interesting new work is being done with the marketplace in mind. Hundreds of young craftspeople see sales as a path to empowerment in this culture, and they would be gratified to make a nice profit.

## **Commodification**

At the ACC conference, furniture historians Edward Cooke Jr. and Glenn Adamson gave a very polished talk about the history of American craft, and some of the social conditions that formed it. It was one of the high points of the conference, but for me it had a sour note. Cooke and Adamson brought up the issue of commodification, which they defined as the process of an object exceeding its use value by becoming a fetish of sorts. Using studio glass as a convenient whipping-boy, they talked about the marketplace leading glass "down the wrong path" "to a certain frenzy" of careless accumulation. Since the topic of the conference was the future, one might conclude that the marketplace is a corrupting influence on the crafts, and should henceforth be treated something like a snarling wolf in your kitchen.

Well. The concept of commodification leads back to Marxism, and the presumption that the marketplace is inherently evil. (It leads further to socialist revolution, and condemnation of the middle class for standing in revolution's way.) [\[JK7\]](#) Perhaps Cooke and Adamson believe that commodification is dangerous only at high price points, and small-money capitalism is OK. But an object sold for \$10 is no less implicated in the marketplace than another sold for \$100,000. Which is the greater distortion: that a craftsman designs a chair to be sold for \$50, as Walker Weed once did, or that some real estate developer buys a glitzy piece of glass for \$250,000? The marketplace is more than happy to sell expensive quasi-sculptures to self-satisfied *nouveaux riches*. It's a feedback loop, reinforcing certain kinds of taste, that's all. Nobody is compelled to participate. A disdainful attitude towards commodification confounds many theorists of Cooke's generation, rendering them partially blind. It's a preconception that tempts people to dismiss market-oriented work out-of-hand. Best, I think, to let it go.

I suspect that talk about commodification is actually a way to avoid the issue of bad taste among collectors. Art has acquired importance beyond its use-value for millenniums, and slick marketing has been with us for centuries. No big deal. What's disturbing to elitists like me is that dreadful work sells so well. But we can't attack taste, so we shift our disgust into complaining about commodification.

### Urban hipster taste

[\[JK8\]](#) A radical shift in taste is taking place. I don't know how much this shift is acknowledged at art schools and exhibitions. Some college teachers and craft professionals don't get it, and they tend to suppress every manifestation of this taste whenever it appears. [\[JK9\]](#) Thinking it's bad, they tend to squash it unthinkingly. However, taste is a companion to both aesthetic sensibility and philosophical outlook, and if a whole bunch of young people buy into a new kind of taste, oldsters had better pay attention.

For lack of a better label, I'll call it urban hipster taste. It has been around for more than two decades, and has been gathering energy of late. For a primer in urban hipster taste, check out a catalog from Archie McPhee. It's all there, in fascinating detail. Urban hipster taste is a confluence of semiotics, shopping, and kitsch. It is often wrapped in irony and humor. It's also quite serious, and has profound implications for the future of craft.

Everybody younger than 30 has grown up in an ocean of signs. They swim in it like fish, hardly noticing it. Think high-speed channel surfing: one context follows another in rapid succession, each one demanding interpretation. Old fogeys like me linger on every channel, puzzled. Why is there a channel devoted to bass fishing? What are all these jump-cut images? Is Christian broadcasting serious, funny or sad? It all seems to border on incoherence.

Younger people know how to read these signs rapidly, without breaking a sweat. They are all trained semioticians. (Semiotics regards objects and behaviors as all having the properties of language. For instance, we all know the language of cars. Everybody knows what a Rolls Royce means in comparison to a rusty 1989 Dodge.) All under-30s know that no object or image is inert, but is full of meaning and any packed with hidden agendas. My generation wondered if the world was meaningless. This generation, in contrast, has to deal with a glut of meaning. They regard meaning as an endless variety of assembly kits. You can do whatever you want with meaning: buy into it, reject it, modify it at will. It's the third option -- to treat meaning as a plastic material to be customized at will -- that is most commonly accepted.

The semiotic viewpoint tends to flatten meaning, to treat all meanings as roughly equivalent. And interchangeable. People like me, who think of meaning as something one must struggle to find, and who base their lives on one or two central beliefs, find this *laissez-faire* attitude towards meaning almost shocking. Don't laugh. If you're reading this article, you are probably a true believer in the inherent meaning of craft. Or that wood should be treated with reverence. Or that art has transcendent value. To a believer, the proposition that meaning can be taken up and abandoned freely is pretty damn weird.

## **Shopping**

The activity that most closely matches the sense that meaning is exchangeable is shopping. To many young people, shopping and constructing a personal identity are almost the same thing. One shops for clothes that signify a certain attitude, or one mixes different clothes to invent new hybrid identities. Similarly, one shops for furnishings, music, cosmetics or whatever with the same attitude. At the same time, it's clear that these objects are replaceable -- they can be exchanged for another set of consumer goods that signify a whole new identity. And given the deluge of consumer goods, there are now so many choices that the permutations are infinite. Shopping is fun, entertaining, ironic. To shop is to play with signs. And shopping is the primal metaphor for life in America today.

Hipster shoppers don't believe the hype, though. They understand that consumers are being manipulated, and they know every advertising trick. They tend to regard it all with ironic detachment. Their attitude can easily be mistaken for insincerity, the glib gallows humor of a willing victim. Maybe. But urban hipsters negotiate through media saturation and 24-7 commerce, looking for the energy. Where's the heat? What's interesting in all this chaos?

## **Kitsch and the new authenticity**

Somebody who plays with signs has a flexible attitude towards authenticity. My generation thought authenticity was basic, fixed, and above all honest. The tiller of the soil had an authentic relationship to the earth and its seasons. The tribal shaman had an authentic relationship to the spiritual realm. And the craftsman has an authentic relationship to his materials -- and presumably to the larger culture. Authenticity exudes an aura of uncompromising purity, a beacon of honesty for all the world to see. Think of James Krenov planing his wood, carrying on about the integrity of ultra-fine handwork, and insisting his work stands as a repository of virtue.

To the urban hipster, such earnest sermons are laughable. Authenticity is not located in anything fixed. Instead, it is located in consumer goods. Is the real America found in some grumpy refusenik, sharpening his tools amidst the redwoods? Or is it found in the stores and shopping malls? Hipsters vote for the stores every time.

If authenticity can be constructed out of the debris of shopping, the attitude towards the patina of age changes. Since the 1980s, large numbers of people have been fascinated with the signs of antiquity. Wear, weathering, and the residues of ritual were all taken to stand for authentic experience. Think of Stephen Whittlesey's furniture constructed of recycled boats and buildings: the crusty, worn surfaces were interpreted as representing a simpler, more honest time. Whittlesey's furniture is, in effect, the record of an archeological expedition into a lost world. But now, the patina of age no longer makes sense. It's the patina of kitsch that resonates.

Think about it: what is the archeology of shopping? Kitsch. The prodigious energy of bad taste, of American philistine commercialism at its worst. 1950s cars. Chrome-plated appliances. Barbie dolls. What old fogeys recoil from, hipsters embrace. They tend to find the most energy in the decade immediately before they were born, which now means the 60s and 70s. They correctly understand this stuff as an authentic manifestation of consumer culture, and they delight in it. Because outdated consumer goods are not part of their direct experience, it's exotic and amusing. Because it's semiotic in nature, it's available for playful rearrangement. Kitsch is the clay of hipsters. They rub it on everything. There's nothing precious, nothing that can't be mixed or matched. Have a cocktail! Wear a plaid sports coat! Knit a few robots out of cheesy pink yarn!

## **Hipster DIY**

One might think all this irony and irreverence spells the death of craft. Not so. There's a groundswell of urban hipster do-it-yourself activity that has attracted the attention of marketers and publishers. Already, at least two magazines are devoted to the subject: *Readymade* and *Craft*. From the point of view of a trained craftsman, they appear primitive. But to measure them by the standards that studio crafts have labored so hard to develop is to miss the point. These magazines (presumably) appeal to a population of young men and women who are dissatisfied with pure consumerism. They want to use their hands for something more than whipping credit cards out of a wallet. They want to make things, maybe for the first time in their lives. Sound familiar?

What's fascinating about Hipster DIY is that the stuff in the magazines looks nothing like the stuff in craft publications and fairs. Some of it's silly (a dumbbell made of D cell batteries, a clock made of an old paint-by-number painting), but some of it is fairly sophisticated. DIY magazines trade in the familiar lifestyle features: record reviews, new products, features on young artists. Their design sensibility is kitschy: the icon of *Readymade* magazine should be the George Nelson "Atomic Wall Clock" from 1949. At the same time, they suggest a resurgence of interest in handcraft that has very close parallels to the 1960s, when all those hairy hippies churned out yards of macramé and tie-die. The imagery is different, but the impulse is the same.

While most elitists ignore rank amateurs, this resurgence of interest in making is very promising. It has energy. It's sorta cool. The DIY phenomenon can serve as an entry-point to a more disciplined study of making. Hipsters (or hipster wannabees) could very well constitute the core of a new generation of students -- if only somebody can figure out how to reach out to them, and get them into classrooms.

## **The possibilities**

Even among urban hipster artists, craft has potential. Shopping pales after a while, and one realizes that even in the vast flood of consumer goods, some things can't be bought. The obvious alternative is to invent your own signs -- which means you have to make them. (Or have them made, but only established professionals are rich enough to afford that.) While lots of young artists are content with flat images that can be generated on a computer, plenty of others long for the vividness of objects, of real things that can be held in the hand, worn, or tripped over. Still, nobody should expect purity. Chances are good that handmade stuff will be used in combination with found or bought stuff. The possibilities for energetic combinations are endless, even if they are jarring.

The other piece of good news is that a lot of kids are interested in useful things. After several generations of kids who REALLY wanted to be artists, this is a refreshing change. As high-end craft is increasingly devoted to making useless objects, only good for looking at, the utilitarian roots of craft go ignored. If a new generation of students insists on making things they and their friends can actually use, it will be all to the good.

As far as I can tell, neither craft teachers nor practicing craftspeople are prepared for the shift in taste I have described. It looks corny and unsophisticated. In fact, it's engaged and celebratory, a cheerful embrace of the jumble of signs that constitute visual America. The old way of struggling to find one's true voice is simply not part of their equation, and making value judgments is not particularly important. Hipsters-and, in fact, almost all young people today -- make their identities out of a patchwork of images and styles. If teachers and craftspeople can't adapt to this new sensibility, they risk becoming irrelevant.

At the ACC conference, there was a lot of muttering that craft is dead going on, and a lot of fear. Maybe a giant meteorite has hit the craft world, and most crafts are fated to become extinct. Maybe craft will become a collection of hobbies, nothing more. Or maybe the field will adapt. So I ask you: is craft a dinosaur, or a mammal?

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[JK1] I conflated your 2 sentences to speed up the opening a tad.

[JK2] "will soon be irrelevant" or "has become irrelevant?"

[JK3] I'm intrigued, what did they have to say? Can you pls include some brief quotes or descriptions here or in a subsequent section on this aspect of it? Doing so would take a lot of the abrasion out of the blanket comments you make later on about craft teachers and craft professionals – clearly it is "some" and not "all" because you found a couple of counter-views right here. So if you can give us a little more about what these folks said, it'll balance what you say next, and make you more credible too.

[JK4] Bruce can you explain more about why you are interested in the boundary between craft and design, and not between craft and art? Seems to me that either way, you are engaging in pigeon-hole discussion, but more explanation here could help me understand why one is interesting and the other is not.

[JK5] I am not sure but I recall the Memphis furniture as being really badly made, not only for economic reasons but also because Sotsass et al disdained the fussiness of one-off craftsmanship. The Lockheed Lounge on the other hand (or so I have read) was well made and not an industrial product. Is this a distinction worth making here? I dunno I offer it up to you to consider.

[JK6] Bruce I am having trouble with this part of the argument. My experience as a furniture student in the 70s and as a journalist reporting on furniture throughout the 80s and 90s wasn't this way – we had teachers, from Frid on down, who were totally OK with designing for production, and who encouraged students to consider engaging the market on any or all of four dimensions: craft producer of multiples for sale through craft stores, craft designer/maker of installations such as offices and kitchens, craft artist chasing a high-brow (high price) gallery audience, and craft-trained designer for industry. Parenthetically I later observed a push toward a fifth dimension, to have the best students define themselves as teachers, and to snuggle up to the trough in new college programs, without ever having made a living on any of those four other axes. That bothered me a lot. But I didn't and don't see in furniture programs the kind of hierarchical mirroring of one-dimensional teachers that you describe here.

[JK7] Did Adamson and Cooke really go here? Or are you extending their argument to a place they would not go? I am fine with you advancing your own viewpoint here, it is what we asked for, but this feels like an unwarranted slam

at Cooke and Adamson. I'd rather you slam what they actually said, rather than where their argument could be taken by somebody else.

[\[JK8\]](#) You wouldn't see "urban hipster taste" as another way of describing "the main storyline about hybridization?" I'd guess not, but could you clarify why not?

[\[JK9\]](#) Your remarks in this section are astute, trenchant, on target. However I haven't observed teachers repressing these young people, though I do agree that a lot of teachers and craft professionals don't fully appreciate urban hipster taste. Again, my sample is confined to the furniture programs, but I see this kind of work being encouraged and also questioned and challenged in order to make it sharper, not to make it go away – anything but quashed. Maybe you could say "some college teachers" rather than "most?"