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5. REMIXED/UNSTITCHED DIGITAL COMMUNITIES OF CONTEMPORARY CRAFT¹

INTRODUCTION AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How will you use digital sites of craft to plan projects, document them, or aid your students' processes of making?
2. What resources and message boards are common choices among your students? Which might be referenced or included in your teaching and how? (Consider etsy, wikispaces, instructibles, deviantArt, and others)
3. Are there any sites you would discourage students from using? What alternates exist among instructibles, TeacherTube, TEDTalks, etc.?

“There is no doubt that the future belongs to the virtual spaces of craft.”(Sandra Alföldy, 2007 in *NeoCraft: modernity and the crafts*)

Craftspeople who teach may well ask how online networking sites for crafts define can complement and enhance physical communities of contemporary crafts. Communities of people working with studio craft media might seem unlikely digital natives, however, Internet forums for craftspeople are expanding. (A few examples include etsy.com, craftzine.com, and craftster.com.) In many ways, web forums such as message boards and tutorials offer alternative social and teaching spaces. Web dialogues, exchanges, and collaborations also provide participants with opportunities to reclaim and/ or revise artistic identities and conceptions of past and present craft communities. Craft (as I have seen it defined online) encompasses a range of traditionally-created works from embroideries, to quilting, to knitting, to hand-made cards, to crochet, to ceramics, and jewelry. While craft contextually extends to a variety of artistic projects and products, this essay will primarily address (1) my own experiences of digital community as a ceramicist and (2) social networking in digital craft sites my students have discussed.

CRAFT CONNECTIONS

My status as a potter and ceramic sculptor affords me an extended liminality not only within ceramics, but also in art and craft; for ceramics typically engages the real and imagined borderlines (borderlands) of the two areas. Although I have studied and

taught at six universities, I also have been a student at Haystack Mountain School of Craft and become engaged in learning about craft traditions and digital spaces of contemporary craft. My own role as a ceramic artist gives me the flexibility and indeterminacy of being a craftsperson (and/or an artist), while my dual roles as ceramicist and professor also engages some tensions and hierarchies of traditional forms of education (such as those ceramics techniques passed down through families and workshops) with more standardized and formalized ones of the universities (such as formalized studio and methods courses). For this reason and others, my writing on the area of craft speaks from within and without various communities. As a ceramic artist, I have come to believe that the earthy, physical processes in the ceramic studio can be oddly parallel to those undertaken in the virtual, digital realms of my computer. I might sculpt, burnish, and glaze ceramics during the same hour, engaging with different works of art at different stages of completion. Meanwhile, at my computer, I find myself using my word processor to plan out my ideas; dabbling in Photoshop to format images, and keeping several “tabs” open in my web browser to look at ceramic art history, pottery quotes, and/or other possibilities to inspire making processes. My studio-based and computer-based projects are often undertaken simultaneously, with many various parts evolving with different paces, places, and phases. This layered evolution coincides with what Sherry Turtle (Director of MIT’s Initiative on Technology and Self) called an enlargement of the “thinking space” through the “dynamic, layered display” of the computer (1996, p. 29). For many craftspeople, the social networking of the computer is fluidly linked with more physical artistic processes. Technologist and philosopher, David Weinberger, (2002) also commented on the relationship between the physical and the virtual in relationship to corporeality, “the bodiless Web reminds us of the bodily truths we have always lived.” (p. 142). While the Web does not connect us with tactile spaces of a ceramics studio, knitting circle, woodshop, or other physical craft places directly, it does reflect and reference materials and spaces of craft continually. Although the studio itself is often a quiet and tactile place with unspoken poetry, the web communicates itself with a wide array of words and images. In other words, it expresses visually and discursively. However, the language with which we express ourselves online may be casual, personal, lengthy or short, and the space is perhaps more democratically communal and communally expressive than a traditional studio craft workshop. For example: in lieu of the biographical sentences I included above, I might represent myself in a short blurb online: (potter, craftswoman, professor), or simply include an image and academic profile.

While there may be a different poetic for expressions of identity online and in the studio, some connections can be made to the tactile experiences of using a computer and engaging with crafts. Malcolm McCullough (1998), a researcher of craft and digital technology, noted how the repetitive movements typing and clicking with the computer can be comparable to craft. I have often found myself similarly soothed by the repeated motions of weaving reeds or wires into baskets as those of following threads of thought online to form questions and ideas. In this way, the relationships

between weaving a basket and meaningfully making one's way through craft sites and communities become more apparent.

CRAFTING SPACES

When weaving through the digital cultures of ceramics and other crafts with which I both observe and take part, I am always intrigued by the (re)conceptualizations of space and community that existed among groups. Space remains a key aspect of web communities as defined by their titles. I went from Craft Ark to Craft Church to New Orleans Craft Mafia. The look, feel, and function of a Craft Church in your web browser can be very different than that of a Craft Mafia—and this naming allows the digital forums important distinctions in the same way that university studios may differ from casual workshops. Words, fonts, backgrounds, colors, and images can give each communal space a very different feel. While some of these communities do not continually or solely exist socially in physical space (rather the connection is found online), groups may still perceive their socialization as taking place in a space and defend their rights to define and delineate their space. The Church of Craft website elucidates some of its many (and changing) roles as place, concept, and object:

The Church of Craft could be seen as a giant piece of art. Performance art of the very best kind, where the people involved don't always know that they are making art. The kind of art that is endless and endlessly meaningful, that generates discussion and prompts action. Art that is deeply personal and yet rooted in the world. And if you see the Church that way I wouldn't argue with you, and neither would many of its members or, indeed, its ministers. But the Church is also real—the kind of real that doesn't need quotes or capital letters. The Church of Craft is, without irony or disclaimer, a church. (www.churchofcraft.org, 2006)

It may be noted that this mission statement has since changed. Indeed, the mission of groups such as these are more frequently subject to change than real-time organizations such as schools and arts centers. This perhaps suggests the fluidity and freedom of an online space in comparison to a physical one. Other groups alter their name or mission to reflect the specific identities of the members, such as listings of crafts by men, or explorations of the connections of feminism and women's work in the craft.

There is sometimes a gendered aspect of engaging with webspace that persists from earlier times. Sherry Turkle (1995) has written that in the recent past, some folks “identified being a woman with all that a computer is not, and computers with all that a woman is not.” She goes on to argue that “the emerging culture of simulation becomes increasingly associated with negotiational and nonhierarchical ways of thinking” (p. 56). Meanwhile, Mary Hawkesworth (2010), has written of globalization and gender, noting the importance of making gender visible (p. 3). In digital craft communities, the choice to assert one's female identity is often prominent in declarations of space such as the “craft grrl community” or “knitter

girl community.” From my perspective, this sometimes reflects a certain revision of women’s historical membership in arts and crafts communities as well as an honoring of tradition, for it asserts women’s presence in the crafts in relationship and continuum with the past, but does so in a technology rich forum not always historically available to women. Helen Sterk and Annelies Knoppers (2010) have investigated the spaces between “hardware and software, those two reductive senses of how humans live out gender, in a space that honors both individual humans and communal living” (p. xiv). Their sense of space shows the complex and fluid relationship between physical identity, digital community, and gender. While individual artists and craftspeople may certainly benefit individually from crafting their identities through crafts learning environments online, there are a variety of unique social situations created around web communities of craft pertaining to the process of making itself that also redefine social hierarchies. From web theorists Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben’s (1997) perspective the Net offers both a “bottom up” redesign of social frameworks as well as inviting more “intellectual activity” than is typically encouraged offline. Certainly some digital forums may serve as counter-culture for art studio spaces, providing alternative types of time and space for personal reflection and inquiry than might be encouraged in a studio. I have observed some hierarchy of craft that exists between crafting sites that cater to those who create crafts as hobbies and sites that identify as relating to “professional” craft. Sites like the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design are more academically-focused and approach the sociological, art historical, and other research-related aspects of craft practice. Such university-affiliated sites can also seem comparatively ambiguous about their membership and goals, addressing both academic researchers and craftspeople working outside of university settings.

CONTEXTUALIZING CRAFTS

Some craft communities view themselves as antithetical to historical notions of craft and aim to redefine themselves artistically and socially. One site, Craftster.com, boasts that it is intended for visitors who “love to make things but who are not inspired by cross-stitched home sweet home plaques and wooden boxes with ducks in bonnets painted on.” Other articles, found on Almostgirl.coffeespoons.org, addressed “Renegade Crafters,” as web-savvy craftspeople who employ unexpected or unconventional craft techniques such as embroidering a skateboard, creating an illuminated (“light-up”) tank top, and/or weaving an iPod cozy. There is also an important linguistic concern in the terms we use to describe craft, from “studio craft,” to “fine craft,” to “craftsmanship in art,” to “artisan crafting,” and on to other overlapping derivatives. These definitions imply and engage hierarchical relationships and varying levels of status, digital crafts communities perhaps uniquely re-define, re-create, and even create new and alternative categories.

Craft objects have utilitarian meaning, as a potholder or quilt does, but the functionality is updated along with changing day-to-day needs. Additionally, these

craft items often have personally relevant, subversive, ironic, and/or political messages within their forms or shapes. For example, we find knitted dolls and Japanese amigurumi that are monsters instead of more neutral cuddly figures or embroideries that proclaim “I have my period.” These objects are not uniform alongside items of the same function and traditional stitch, but individually express the personality and opinions of the maker. Additionally, they often merge traditional objects with popular and consumer culture, suggesting a critical awareness of consumption. Given that the crafts do not occupy the space they once did in family homes and workplaces, the web also offers a revised and altered space for learning and display of this traditional work. Critic Charles Bernstein(2000) asserted,

I want to contrast the solitary conditions of viewing a work on a computer screen, my posture fixed, my eyes ten inches from the image, with the physicality of looking at a painting or sculpture in a large room, moving around it, checking it out from multiple views, taking in its tactile surface, its engagement with my thoughts. (p. 183)

There often is, on the other hand, a contextual enlargement of the craft object itself when a scarf or piece of pottery can be viewed alongside the biography of the maker, a tale of its creation, and the commentary of the artist’s peers. A computer can be a limiting screen or lens of vision, and some networking sites allows us to disclose our identities in limited, imaginative, or even false ways. (One might “try on” different titles and affiliations in these spaces that would not be believable in physical space.) But more importantly, craft communities are often spaces to engage us with the person who makes a craft item and a variety of supplementary information not typically included when purchasing or viewing a hand-made utilitarian item. This might include narratives about the use of a scarf or piece of furniture, images of the maker and their homes, and additional commentary that links the object and its design with the identity of the craftsperson. As Turkle (1984) has written, computers can “play an important role in human development . . . allow[ing] us to see ourselves from the outside, and to objectify aspects of ourselves we had only perceived from within” (p. 155). In this way, both the artist and the viewer can engage in ongoing dialogue with the work, with contextual information online, and with one another, from different spaces and times that would be difficult to accomplish within a particular physical space and time.

McCullough (1998) has argued «networks make artifacts more transmissible, and provide more settings for comparisons and discussions of practice, than do their grassroots traditional craft counterparts.” (p. 270). Echoing this notion, some of the folks I have met who work within online knitting groups mentioned that they feel as if they know crafting podcast personalities (those who produce internet radio shows about crafts such as NeoCraft) better than television celebrities. This is accomplished via crafting podcasters’ shared techniques, images, and other information published through the Web. This information engages viewers with an array of different contexts of the objects and emphasizes the maker perhaps as much as the art object.

In contrast, is rare for a gallery show or exhibit to invite and host such extensive information and discussion of artistic process as the web enables. I would venture to note that craft galleries are the only real/physical world spaces that might compare with digital sites in this regard. Craft researcher Bruce Metcalf (2007) noted “craft retains one crucial opposition stance [in that] the hand-made object is widely understood as the antithesis of mass-produced anonymity” (p. 21). I have found that there is indeed a notable outreach, or community-based element to many online craft communities. For example, craftzine.com features outreach projects for community service. Ceramic artists in particular may be familiar with the Craft Emergency Relief Fund, which has come to the aid of artists whose pottery studios have been destroyed by fire or natural disaster. Similarly, Craft Alliance Community features a website and states its program goal as bringing arts to “everyone, regardless of economic circumstance.” Internet theorist Judy Breck (2006) muses on the connection of virtuality and such visionary thinking, theorizing the word virtual as “something . . . that is imaginary or hypothetical” (p. 11). Similarly, Sandra Alfoldy (2007) asserted, “the idea of utopia remains central to our understanding of the crafts” (p. 157). There is an openness to these online sites that is imaginative, visionary, and full of possibility because these sites are always comfortably unfinished and evolving. Our hopes for students can also include opening up dialogues in a fluid way, through such exercises as this remixed and reconceptualized research.

CRAFTING COMMUNICATION; COMMUNICATING CRAFT

While ceramics communities and other craft communities are on the one hand simply social groups where artistic sharing, technical conversations, and critiques occur; the social interaction may be uniquely asynchronous and visitors may even “lurk” or visit a site without making one’s presence known as in the physical world. One might even question my role as researcher within these contexts, as “user,” “viewer,” and “maker.” These varying levels of participation provides an interesting individuality within the craft community. McCollough (1998) observed that “operating a computer may then seem less like sitting alone with a machine and more like entering a world of action in which you are the narrator” (p. 136). In this way, one’s journey as an online observer is not self-conscious in the same way physical journeys through art or craft environments may be, in the sense of observable presence. A protagonist in the realm of online crafting may experience greater autonomy, creating their own pathways and processes where the amount of feedback and input from others is self-selected (as opposed to some studios and galleries of the physical world in which critique can be difficult to avoid.) On the other hand, the anonymity that is easily obtained may not always be desirable. As a craftsman who exhibits artwork in web galleries, seeks professional development online, and teaches online art classes; reconstructing my persona and representing my work in each space can be at times more tiring and repetitive than appearing physically and speaking verbally. Balancing community and individuality seems

to be a skill that those learning crafts techniques online are apt to pursue. From my perspective, this may suggest that a new skill set of identity construction and re-construction is engaged within digital forums. The unified theory of the Web argued that such “web conversations . . . aren’t just multi-threaded; they’re hyper-threaded.” (p. 67). This interweaving of conversational time and space allows us to ask basic questions or go on craft tangents without breaking the etiquette and flow of real-time conversations. In this way, the web can offer both a unique space and a new approach to craft education. Broader definitions of teaching and learning may embrace the fluid nature of craftspeople’s work in interactions in which a diverse group of crafters can share all sorts of information through questions, answers, and comments difficult to maintain through real-world community gatherings. Additionally, As Malcolm McCullough (1998) has written “in the unusual event that a master takes time out to articulate a craft, the result seldom takes a well-established literary form” (p. xvi). Certainly, the image-heavy and conversational tone of shared patterns, themes, projects, and other creative expressions is unorthodox in format and yet may be approached with interest and usage extending possibilities of traditionally-published text with specific expectations such as those relating to language, length, and content.

While craft communities are transformed and re-created by web communities, craft forms themselves may reflect both computer technologies and the craft communities they enable. Sarah Kettley, a jewelry artist, has been interested in how jewelry wearing is experienced as a researcher and a maker. Her work engages the concept of a wearable computer, using LEDs and radio transmissions to alter the appearance of the jewelry. A sort of trace of meetings with other jewelry wearers is revealed in the light display, bringing about a visual representation of social interactions. Kettley’s recent work explores knitted garments equipped with sensors to be worn while playing the cello, which can manipulate and enhance the resulting sound in interesting ways.

CRAFT CONCLUSIONS

Within various sites of craft explored here, a merging of the cultures of traditional craft makers and those of new technology users are taking place. Personal may become public, and much can be adapted and exchanged within various threads of connection. For example, the World Wide Knit in Public Day is advertised online through groups such as New York’s Craftaholics, but culminates in a very physical, and arguably political act of public crafting. While the Web may often be a space that reflects and represents (re-presents) personal and communal visions of craft practice, it is also its own locale for creative forms of publication in craft as well as an enlarged view of the craft process and contexts in contemporary society. Given that the crafts do not occupy the roles and locations that they once did, the web also offers a distinctive and contemporary space for learning and display of this traditional work. For teaching artists and their students, it becomes important to

think about the fluidity in which craft's identity, along with the identity of the maker is both reclaimed and revised in exciting and problematic ways within digital spaces. Metaphorically, learning dialogues taking place between tradition and innovation are parallel to the interplay of craft and digital technology.

NOTE

- ¹ An earlier version of this research was published and presented as part of the National Art Education Association's <http://digitalcommunitiesofcontemporarycraft.blogspot.com/2010/05/re-mixed-and-unstitched-subversively.html>

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