

PARALLELS IN THE EVOLUTION OF CRAFT AND AUTHENTICITY

Abstract

Craft is often articulated as authentic, whether this occurs in the experience of the maker, or whether it is embodied in some way in the object produced. The notion of authenticity itself however, has not received critical attention within the field: therefore this paper presents a literature review which illustrates the ways in which craft's fundamental working philosophy seems to have shifted to mirror the evolution of authenticity itself. To start, an account is given of important recent developments in the philosophical concept of authenticity, drawing on the writings of Ferrara (1998), Golomb (1995) and Guignon (2004) to demonstrate a radical shift away from the dichotomies of romanticism and functionalism. The paper then goes on to illustrate the ways in which contemporary craft practice can be said to reflect this shift, attempting to overcome the broad clichés of authenticity commonly attached to it. It is proposed that while craft has had a history of exemplifying authenticity, from the medieval to concerns with workmanship and quality, and through Romanticism to modernist idealism, that it in its current emphasis on a critical engagement with an expanded understanding of material, it offers a radically authentic model of creativity applicable across diverse contemporary domains.

1. Introduction

The ideas presented in this paper have evolved through the author's recent doctoral research into Craft as a methodology for the development of wearable technology concepts (Kettley, 2008). This research responded to a need for an analysis of the potential benefits of Craft as a discipline to new and emerging creative practices, and identified authenticity as an important but ill-defined concept commonly associated with it. While the author cannot claim to be a philosopher, it is hoped that this introduction of the topic will stimulate further debate and an increased understanding of the ways in which Craft is written.

Authenticity has become something of a double edged sword for Craft: on the one hand it acts as a compelling promotional conceit used indiscriminately by the advertising industry to sell anything from music to beer and children's cereals (Cochrane 2004, Nestle UK Ltd 2007) (figure

1); on the other, it has infamously served to keep the discipline firmly below Art according to a Cartesian (and religious) hierarchy of mind over matter (Veiteberg 2004).



Figure 1

Nestle cereals advertisement, UK, “*Knitted by nanas*”; Carlton Draught advertisement hoarding, Australia
“*Handcrafted by big machines*”, reproduced with kind permission, Grace Cochrane

2. Emerging concepts of Authenticity

There is no need here to go over the familiar historical ground covered in depth by, for example, Lucie-Smith (1984), Pye (1968) and Greenhalgh (2003), other than to note that the literature on authenticity is similarly structured: the shift from communal pre-modern craft to the heroic individualism of modernity was predicated by a complex set of contingent intellectual, social and ethical developments between the sixteenth and eighteenth century (Williams 2002, Guignon 2004). Religious and ethical thinking were emerging from the upheaval of the Reformation¹; science increasingly emphasised the necessity of the objective observer and a view of the world with man at its centre²; and urbanisation created new social spheres that increasingly

¹ In the early 16th Century, Martin Luther protested against the sale of indulgences by the church and against elaborate rituals for spiritual salvation, instead preaching that man should look inwards to the intensity of personal faith and devotion – religious individualism focuses on the one to one relationship with God – “The distinction between true inner self and outward, bodily existence makes it possible to look on one’s body, feelings and needs as things... distinct from oneself” (Guignon p29-30) – to belong to the earthly world is then to be depraved.

² Science - Weber’s ‘disenchantment’: what is knowable is transformed from a murky world of mystery to a system of interrelated push-pull causal interactions – Galileo’s vision of the world as a universe of material objects acting and being acted upon. “The objectified and mechanized view of things can arise only for a knowing subject who has stripped off all prejudices ... and is able to adopt a detached, impartial, dispassionate view of things” (Guignon p31). Man becomes the measure of all things, and knowledge becomes power (Sophists and Francis Bacon in Guignon, p32-33), as the viewpoint of this universe becomes predicated on Cartesian space, seen from a single viewpoint at any one time, and transparent (and therefore truthful) in its illusionary perspective.

differentiated between public and private spaces³. These factors, completely changing “Western civilisation’s understanding of the world and the place of humans in it” combined to form what we know now as the modern worldview of Western Europe (Guignon 2004, p27). In this view, “the validity of norms, theoretical statements about nature, and institutional arrangements” came to rest on “their capacity for reflecting the objective order of the world”, and Reason itself was therefore “conceived of as objective” (Ferrara 1998, p2).

2.1 *Individualism: Romantic authenticity*

The dominant worldview described above was reversed by the individualism of Romantic thought, in which closing the gap between what was actually felt and what was avowed was understood to be the authentic goal. Truth was seen to reside in personal responsibility not so much to others in society, but to the emotional state of the inner self. Trilling (1972) and Guignon (2004) both begin their accounts of this shift with the writings of French writer and philosopher Rousseau in the Eighteenth Century. For Rousseau, it was the inner essence to which one must remain true. According to him, society and reflection represented the greatest threats to such individualism, which could only be fully free in the “state of nature” (Guignon 2004). As long as expression was spontaneous, the individual would be unable to hide falsity. However, new heterological models of authenticity are now emerging in an attempt to engage with the problems caused by this deep dichotomisation. These include Ferrara’s work on ‘reflective authenticity’, the configuration of authenticity as a ‘social virtue’ and Guignon’s subsequent efforts to “bring to light the social embodiment” of authenticity (2004).

2.2 *Tenacious dichotomies*

Having come (reluctantly in some cases) to the conclusion that universalism and individualism are but two sides of the same coin, that is, each dependant on an imposed separation of mind and

³ Society – Falling plague death tolls meant population shifts as villages failed to support growing numbers of inhabitants, feudal guild systems began to breakdown, while voyages of discovery and new trade set the scene for capitalism (Guignon p28), increased social and geographical mobility, and the emergence of New Monarchies and new wealth in the capitals of Europe (Wrigley 1985). Society became seen as a space of artificial existence separated from the truth of the inner self, which increasingly depended on the architectural arrangement of space to express itself at differing levels of intimacy; the social sphere came to be understood to demand a multiplicity of roles played out as on a stage.

body, of inner apprehension and outer reality, philosophy is currently seeking a new way forward. On the one hand, it is not feasible to return to a medieval or classical account of authenticity, on the other, we are not yet at the point when we know what awaits us ‘on the other side of the fjord’ (Ferrara 1998). A relatively recent sea change in philosophy which may well contribute to this problem is that shift in thinking termed the linguistic turn (Hacker 2005). Applied loosely by Richard Rorty in 1967 to a collection of post war philosophers, first in England and then increasingly in the US, this denoted a broad agreement on three points, namely that:

- there can be no philosophical understanding without the investigation of the language relevant to the problem at hand
- metaphysics, positing itself as language independent and objective, is an illusion
- the role of philosophy is not merely to clarify or improve the language of science

This important change has made possible new approaches to authenticity, one example of which is ‘reflective authenticity’ (Ferrara 1998). Accepting the implications of the linguistic turn such an approach can take account of narrative in its acknowledgement of the “heightened reflexivity” of today’s world, and casts the spontaneous creation of the self not as inherently authentic, but as “a performance option” in itself (Coupland 2003, p.426, Ferrara 1998). Rousseau’s “wound of reflection” is no longer seen as authenticity’s downfall in its destruction of spontaneity, but has become a constitutive part of it (Coupland 2003, p.424). Finally, recent accounts agree that authenticity can no longer be considered metaphysical, but is instead to be found in the humanistic processes of commitment and reciprocity (Brett 2005, p78, Golomb 1995). Authenticity is shown to be a cultural construct much like any other, without meaning if there is no-one else present to confer authentic status upon one’s actions.

There are then two important points to note about the state of authenticity today: its apparent inauthenticity, and its dissolution of dichotomous systems through its cyclical nature. Zizek sums up the first condition neatly: “Insisting on a false mask brings us nearer to a true, authentic subjective position than throwing off the mask and displaying ‘our true face’ ... the only authenticity at our disposal is that of impersonation, of ‘taking our act’ (posture) seriously (Druckrey, 1998). The second condition of authenticity is its cyclical nature: authentic experience may be defined as that process of engagement with authenticity in which new meaning is forged.

It is a model of oscillation between dualisms and a dissolving of dichotomies, an iterative system in which “authentic processes produce authentic situations” (Clothier 2005).

3. Craft

Having described how authenticity is currently being written as a worldview, it remains to be considered how authenticity is manifested in craft as experienced by makers, consumed by an audience and written in theory. This paper concentrates on the object and by extension the discipline of craft: the experience of making has received a great deal of attention in the literature already, some of it touching on authenticity (Wilson 2007, Penney Burton 2007), and we are all aware of the power of tacit knowledge as a defining characteristic of the field (Dormer 1997, Greenhalgh 2003). This is certainly a topic that should be developed further, but for the moment I focus on the reception of craft.

3.1 Beyond dichotomy

Craft objects have the capacity (and have always had the capacity) to segue between transparency and reflection; they have always occupied, even constituted a unique place between art and life, available for the authentic aesthetic experience, yet part of the ongoing flow of authentic pragmatic action. They are rhythmical in their cultural configuration as well as in their internal formal organisation. They retain elements of the traditional model and of the modern, combining somatic and narrative experience in a smeared simultaneity. Contemporary craft as it is engaged with the world around it, social, formal and political, can thus be dynamically configured as its traditional romantic self, in its modern guise as art, and as experimental intervention. More than this, these identities are not fixed – one work can be any of these things at any time, and will shift among them, combining them in different ratios according to audience, user and context of gaze and use. In particular instances, experiences with craft objects might be described as an oscillation between the near (the familiar and the domestic) and the far (the strange and the esoteric)⁴, between disappearance and contemplation, between sensual and critical appreciation, while at a macro level, craft as a discipline can be said to occupy a position of semi-autonomy,

⁴ This is reminiscent of Benjamin’s *aura* in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).

“essential in contemporary culture” (Mazanti 2006, p.3), echoing clearly the terminology and characteristics of authenticity and authentic experience⁵.

Craft objects allow a context for “moving in and out of the experience” and for a heightened awareness of somatic experience, found to be constituents of authentic experience (Rahilly 1993, p.62). Their undecidability encourages openness to experience and engenders processes of meaning making rather than presenting predetermined significations, two qualities Rogers found in authenticity (Rahilly 1993). And importantly, the processes of craft, craft objects and their modes of consumption, are unified by a dissolution of dichotomies (useful/aesthetic, reflective/transparent, flow/event), that is identified as being key to authenticity (Kettley 2008, Sandywell 2004)⁶. Bearing in mind this assertion, the following are proposed as criteria for this type of authenticity in craft before examples are given in contemporary practice:

- active engagement between actors resulting in new meaning
- processes of interrogation
- negotiation of hybridity
- the dissolution of dichotomies
 - object/subject, inside/outside, individual/social,
 - essence/appearance, form/content,
 - reflection/disappearance, theoria/praxis, abstract/concrete,
 - cognitive/pragmatic, universal/particular,
 - viewing/performing, active/passive, thinking/doing
- situated outcomes of interrogation

3.2 *Threads in an expanded field*

Explicit examples of hybridity and heterogeneity in contemporary craft can increasingly be found in an expanding field of practice. Action research based projects explicitly seek to remove the

⁵ The literature being looked at in Interaction and Experiential Design draws on Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934) for example, and emphasises holistic concepts such as *flow* to be found in psychology.

⁶ Discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper, but in short, a handmade textile object was evaluated as a product prototype with carers of young children for its materiality, and a small survey of jewellers was conducted to draw out perceived cultural values in the making processes used. These are covered in detail in Kettley (2008, p63-64).

apparent hierarchy at work between the perennially naive user and the artist as expert (Astfalck et al 2004, Craftspace 2007) (figure 2), while interdisciplinary approaches require a high level of openness and empathy between disparate working philosophies, motivations and cultures of expertise⁷ (Kettley 2007, 2008, Nobel Textiles 2008) (figure 2).



Figure 2

from the catalogue, *At Home II*; *Made in the Middle*, an action research project (left)
Suicidal Textiles: Carole Collet and Sir John Sulston, Nobel Textiles Project (right)

Critical engagement with ready-mades challenges cultural hierarchies constructed around art, craft and design and hybridises the experience of work so often predicated on a reading of the maker's relationship with his materials (Jönsson 2008). The dichotomisation of the everyday and the event is being addressed in the curation of shows such as *Out of the Ordinary* (Adamson 2007) (figure 3) in which scale, dexterity and the 'gift of time' (Kälviäinen 2000, Leigh 2002) confront normative expectations of the comfortable in craft. Ethnographic and reflexive studies of craft practices are a surprisingly recent development, conscious of the entrenched belief, no doubt, that to study a subject is to kill it (Baudrillard 1983). However, like Baudrillard these investigations challenge both the fallacy of that line of argument for 'purity', and the complacent notion that craft can survive without reflection (Gates 2007, Harper 2007, Penney Burton 2007). The emergence of significant academic discussion through such conferences as *Challenging Craft*

⁷ For the sake of brevity, this includes the growing interest in science and new technologies, and collaborations across sub genres of craft as well as collaborations between craft and other creative domains.

(2004), *New Craft - Future Voices* (2007), *Neo Craft* (2007) and *Crafticulation* itself (2008) is in itself a welcome symptom of this important shift in the explicit inscription of craft as an important cultural phenomenon, dispelling the myth of the honourable tradition of silence (Dormer 1997), and demonstrating that it is far from an anachronism to both talk about and practice craft (Harper 2007, Gates 2007).

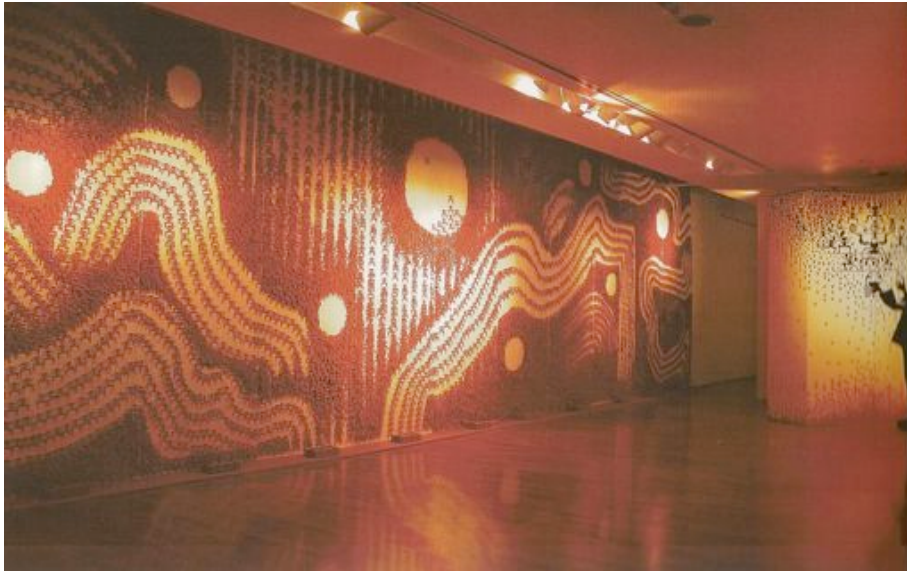


Figure 3

Spectacular craft: Lu Shengzhong

Out of the Ordinary, V & A and Crafts Council exhibition, 2007 - 2008

4. Conclusion

These examples illustrate a trend towards new forms of authenticity, but of course the craft process has historically been valorized for its immersive qualities. Indeed, it can be argued that craft has always been authentic on the basis of the flow experienced by the maker, that breaking down of compartmentalized time and space familiar to all makers. The ontologically level relationship between maker and material (both source material and material being worked) is relevant here, but increasingly important is the ontological relationship between the maker and the world beyond stylistic inspiration and formal resolution. That is, matters of concern are shifting and becoming more outward looking as ‘material expands to include the political and the social (Latour 2008). When craft takes its responsibility seriously in this way, it can truly be said to be authentic.

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