

All that is solid melts into craft: crafting a sustainable future from today's rubbish

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In March 1996 an exhibition of contemporary craft by makers who use recycled and reused materials The Recycling Show opened at the Crafts Council gallery in London at the start of its national tour. Curated by Louise Taylor at Craftspace Touring, the exhibition brought together some of the country's best known makers alongside newly emerging talents. This is an extended version of an essay in the exhibition catalogue which attempts to place this work in a critical context.

“Good material’ is a myth. English walnut is not a good material. Most of the tree is leaf-mould and firewood. It is only because of workmanlike felling and converting and drying and selection and machining and setting out and cutting and fitting and assembly and finishing - particularly finishing - that a very small proportion of the tree comes to be thought of as good material; not because a designer has specified English walnut. Many people seeing a hundred pounds worth of it in a London timber yard would mistake it for rubbish...”

David Pye

The Nature and Art of Worksmanship, 1968¹

The work in this exhibition is rubbish. Its makers saw creative potential and new value in this rubbish, finding new uses and contexts for the waste of industrialised consumption. There is little new about turning cans into jewellery, bottles into tables and rags into rugs. We have a well documented history of domestic thrift craft in this country in which women recycled worn out coats into rugs, underwear into cleaning rags while woollens were unpicked and reknitted.² Today, necessity has turned old tyres into water carriers in West Africa, and tins into lamps and other items sold on Indian markets.³ Driven by scarcity, people throughout history and across all cultures have displayed dazzling inventiveness in clothing their children and making homes for their families with their own and other people's rubbish.

But the makers in this show are not driven by scarcity. The historical and cultural echoes of thrift craft, interesting and valuable though they are, offer at best a highly partial contextual understanding of the work we see here. This is work made at a particular moment in history, reflecting the sense of crisis, contradiction and questioning in our broader culture. Our society is not just post-scarcity, it offers us more wealth, adventure and pleasure than could be dreamed of even a generation ago. At the same time it offers a wide menu of self-destructive possibilities from nuclear annihilation to ecological suffocation. Through its spiralling complexities, the old certainties of the past which helped us understand and control that world are evaporating. As Marx described it, through the contradictions and fragmentations of the modern world “all that is solid melts into air”.

Melting into craft today are new influences and creative connections. The post-punk skip culture which was fashionable in the craft and design of the 1980s, has been refined into a more focused exploration of how we reuse and recontextualise materials and objects, providing them with a new perceived value. Our makers are part of a broader creative culture in which the reuse, recontextualisation and manipulation of existing components have transformed graphics, music, fine art and design. While this context is more significant than craft traditions, and perhaps even environmentalism, in understanding new developments in contemporary craft, the craft method itself has found a new relevance. As a means of obtaining knowledge about materials and processes, discovering how to find the quality within any matter, craft finds us the diamonds in the landfill. A final melting is the divide between craft and manufacture. Makers appear to be working with industry to a greater extent, and exploring the industrial application of their craft knowledge. The sustainable economy that must be developed if our civilisation is to have a future is already drawing upon ideas and methods of craft practice. The 'new culture' of craft, the 'new relevance' of craft knowledge and the 'new relationship' with industry are the three key issues explored here.



Birgitta Turba

Craft's 'connected plurality'

Despite the best efforts of some commentators to coral craft into a territory tightly defined by familiar forms and materials and a premium on traditional skills, as in Dormer's notion of 'the conservative crafts', many makers continue to explore in new directions.⁴ These confront the established definitions, traditions and critical contexts of 'craft'. Making sense of this diversity is the challenge today, rather than seeking to deny its legitimacy.

In his review of a recent New Designers show, David Walker characterised some of the work exhibited as displaying a 'connected plurality': divergent creative approaches underpinned by the common objective of ethically based simplicity.⁵ According to Walker, creative scavenging is part of the emerging ethic beneath pluralism, for which he provides a three-fold taxonomy in the use of found forms (animism), the use of found materials (brutalism) and the use of found objects (cannibalism).

This framework provides one means of defining the diversity of approaches in this exhibition. Jessica Briggs and Dail Behennah, for example, as makers using found materials are 'brutalists', while Michael Marriot with his sardine can drawers, a maker using found objects, is among our fine young 'cannibals'.

Definitions based on creative strategies rather than materials will doubtless continue to help understand the ever shifting nature of that activity broadly covered by 'contemporary craft'. In the context of this exhibition it helps to underline the point that while some makers are concerned with 'recycling' (Jane Atfield) others are 'reusing' (Sophie Chandler). While Walker's observations are very useful, it is possible to take issue with his assumption of an underlying ethic.

Brutalism and cannibalism can be creative responses to a 'green' ethic, but they have been in evidence in the crafts since the mid 1980s, characterising in particular the 1987 'New Spirit' Crafts Council show and Thackara's 1986 volume 'New British Design'.⁶ This was long before Thatcher discovered the votes in the ozone layer, Sainsbury's discovered the profits in recycled toilet rolls and we discovered that David Icke was a bottle bank short of a recycling centre.

It is a mistake to view all such work as 'green' or as part of a 'new ethical movement' for it manifestly is not. The plurality of creative approaches is connected to a broad range of cultural influences of which, I would argue, the politics of the environment plays a minor but possibly growing role. Let me briefly map out some parts of the web of connections around creative scavenging.

Virtually all post-punk youth sub-cultures have scavenged and recycled styles and engaged in a piracy of the symbol. The grunge aesthetic found an echo in the deconstruction fashion that swept the catwalks only recently. Indeed the rawness of Issey Miyake's 1992 'Twist' show also reflects this approach. So fashion, whether street or couture, has encouraged a raw aesthetic and a spirit of reuse. Some of the jewellery in this exhibition reflects this trend. Popular music and graphic design, both highly synthesised and produced, have used technology to reuse and recycle. Sampling in music and scanning in graphics turns one person's creative outputs into another's raw material. This does not necessarily make the latter's creative challenge any easier than the former's, but it does make the creative processes and challenges very different.

Then we have 'post-modern' industrial and decorative design. This has encouraged novelty and humour in consumer products through the use of surprising form. An Alessi kettle or Philippe Starck chair is appealing through a surprising use of form or material. The appeal of many items in this exhibition derives from a similar 'surprise', such as the teabag bags, milk bottle lights and plastic bag bracelets.

Moving away from popular culture and consumption, is the influence of adhocism, a philosophy of reuse and recontextualisation first developed in architecture by Charles Jencks.⁷ A utopian view, directed towards a 'consumer democracy', adhocism provides a rationale and exemplar-led view of creative scavenging.

However, possibly the greatest influence on this creative scavenging are the expenditure cuts in art and design education. As materials budgets have shrunk, inventive tutors have come up with all manner of projects which involve raiding skips, dustbins and garbage dumps. I doubt whether more than a handful of the exhibitors in this show will have read Jencks, but probably all, at some time, will have foraged through skips in the rain having been given two weeks to create 'an environment'.

Whatever the personal context, influence or inspiration, one issue that connects all of this work is the use of craft practice to explore creative possibilities in waste. This is creating knowledge that can be applied in a new aesthetic for design.



Sophie Chandler

Exploring the aesthetic of sustainability

“There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them”, argued Victor Papanek at the start of his ecological critique of design.⁸ In creating products that are often unnecessary, highly packaged, disposable and energy intensive in their production and use, industrial designers have better served the interests of corporate profitability than they have the planet. This is, of course, understandable: the profits pay their salaries. Defined by an economic system that requires unconstrained growth and continually regenerated desire, ‘consumer-led design’ is no longer about meeting needs, rather “it seeks to create and constantly to stimulate human *desires*”⁹.

A combination of the greening of public opinion, the ecological reality that such a system is simply unsustainable and the navel gazing brought on by the so-called ‘death of modernism’ has led the design community to question its ethics and future direction. In his latest book, Victor Papanek makes an impassioned plea for a new aesthetic in design: “a new direction - transcending fad, trend or fashionable styling - is long overdue. New directions in design and architecture don’t occur accidentally, but always arise out of real changes in society, cultures and concepts”.¹⁰

While Papanek appeals to spiritual values, Ezio Manzini of Milan’s Domus Academy has made the case for a new aesthetic to be seen as “a fundamental factor of change”.¹¹ Design, according to Manzini, cannot change the world, but is capable of giving form to a sustainable society. By *give form* he means to visibly amplify new types of demand and behaviour, together with proposing sustainable criteria for quality.

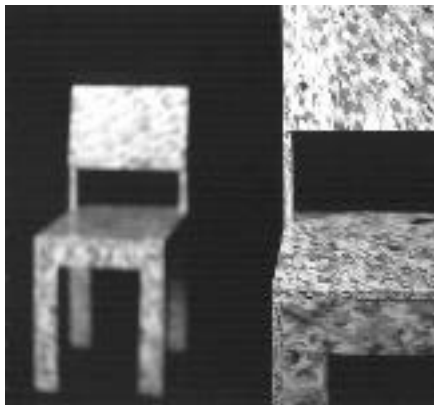
David Pye reminds us that “there is in the man-made world a whole domain of quality which is not the result of design and owes little to the designer”.¹² It is through craft and workmanship that designers have understood the possibilities of materials. As the quote from Pye at the beginning of this essay argues, there is no such thing as ‘good’ or ‘quality’ materials. It is only through the craft of manipulating materials that quality has been revealed in a piece of wood, clay, glass or metal. It is through craft that we can explore and define the new aesthetic called for by Papanek, Manzini and others.

As I have argued elsewhere, the practice of craft is a form of research that provides us with knowledge of materials, processes and techniques.¹³ Through manipulating a material, a maker will understand its decorative and functional potential and refine methods of working it. Much of this knowledge cannot be reduced to words, for it relies upon movement, touch, sometimes even smell and sound to acquire; craft knowledge makes use of all the senses. But it remains a knowledge that can be communicated, applied and developed further. Craft knowledge is not ‘old’ knowledge, for it is

constantly evolving and adapting to new materials, new tools, new demands and new skill. Our educational and cultural elitism has sought to devalue the knowledge discovered by craftmakers, reducing it to mere manual skill. If manufacturers and designers are to employ a 'new aesthetic of sustainability' they will have to apply the knowledge of craft, including the new knowledge that is contained in this exhibition.

Sustainable consumers need to develop an aesthetic taste for the raw, the partially cooked and the reheated; they need to appreciate the inherent quality in something that once looked like rubbish. The craftmakers here have through their practice researched ways of isolating and refining this quality - they have seen what has not been seen before. Brigitte Turba saw jewellery in plastic milk cartons, JAM Furniture discovered furniture in white goods, while Clare Goddard gazed into a teapot and saw a pair of boots.

Such observations may prove small yet vital steps in making use of what has become regrettably one of our most plentiful raw materials - garbage. Since each of us, on current patterns, is set to produce 52 tons of this material in our lifetime, knowledge of how we can use it, value it and thus produce far less of it is essential. The materials and product research rooted in craft practice is beginning to contribute to a new aesthetic and in turn may create possibilities for a new ethically responsible culture of consumption and production.



Jane Atfield

Craft's changing industrial relations

In the current context, it is valid to view craft as providing laboratories of aesthetic and technical experimentation developing ideas for consumption, which can influence and challenge consumer tastes, as well as ideas for production which can be taken up by manufacturers. In his review of the work of British designer makers ten years ago, John Thackara complained that "the fact that most of these individuals are alienated from mainstream manufacturing is a tragedy... If even a few of their innovations in form, or surface finish, or materials handling, could be taken up by manufacturers, dramatic improvements to mass production standards could be made".¹⁴ The prospect of flexible manufacturing systems pulling craft-based innovation onto the factory floor to meet the needs of customised production proved illusory. Furthermore, the decade that created the yuppie and made Wapping fashionable sustained a buoyant gallery market which sustained many makers.

Today, a combination of makers with more acute business sense and a willingness to work with industry, together with more openness to new ideas from a rising number of enlightened industrialists, has led to closer working between makers and manufacturers. Jane Atfield not only makes furniture from her recycled confetti plastic, but also produces and markets the plastic in sheet form through her Made of Waste company. There is a growing demand for such plastic, especially in North America

where Fender has produced a range of its Stratocaster guitars featuring a confetti plastic body instead of wood. Other makers in this exhibition have also linked up with manufacturers. Tejo Remy's milk bottle lights have gone into production, while both Jeremy Dent with his can slabs and Tom Dixon with recycled plastic furniture are currently working with companies to develop ideas for industrial production.

Industry would appear increasingly willing to back makers with hard cash to develop new materials and products. Andrew Hewitt started experimenting with glass and cement composite materials as a sculptural medium during his MA studies in glass at the Royal College of Art. After graduating he was appointed research assistant at Sheffield Hallam University where, with Professor Jim Roddis, he secured two year funding from British Glass and the DTI to refine this materials innovation.

The British glass industry faces the problem of how to recycle large quantities of green, mixed and contaminated waste glass. Its ambitious recycling targets demand that new uses and applications are found for this material. Andrew Hewitt has developed the composite into a versatile material that can be used in furniture, lighting and decorative design. A considerable environmental advantage is that the composite is fabricated using low energy, low technology methods, which also makes the material attractive as a commercial proposition. The University's Art and Design Research Centre is now working with a manufacturer which plans to employ an additional fifteen staff to produce the composite under licence.

In the United States similar initiatives are demonstrating how 'eco-design' can play a key part in new models of sustainable economic development. Economists are suggesting that the so-called 'third sector' - located between the state and private sectors, often community based - is the fastest growing source of employment in industrialised economies.¹⁵ One firm in the Bronx of New York exemplifies third sector enterprise. The not-for-profit Big City Forest recycling and manufacturing facility makes furniture out of wooden pallets. Now four years old, the company employs 37 people in an area of high unemployment making use of a material that accounts for 40% of the country's waste wood.¹⁶ The United States now has dedicated business magazines, trade fairs, retail and other networks to support its growing sustainable sector. Perhaps it is insignificant in comparison with the mainstream economy, but such enterprise, like the exhibits in this craft show, represent exemplars. They demonstrate how things could be made, how business could be conducted if ethical practice were allowed greater presence in our material and commercial cultures.



Michael Marriot

Towards a new relevance for craft

Too often craft refers to the past. In a generally frightening age, providing a security blanket of familiarity and tradition helps take our minds of other concerns. Too often

craft refers only to its maker. Acts of therapeutic self-indulgence takes the maker's mind off other concerns and can provide objects of beauty and studies in skill, worthy of contemplation. But, valid through they are, such approaches are only a part of what craft is capable of contributing to our culture.

Craft is about humanity's creative relationship with materials - how we think, feel, look at and use all the diverse natural and synthetic materials available to us. That relationship has long been out of balance, and needs urgently to be reconsidered. Craft, as a professional practice, provides us with the knowledge we need to address some key problems. Craft, as part of our leisure and learning, helps us appreciate the quality in materials and objects. Craft, as a social process, links together makers, users and manufacturers. Craft, as part of our industry, provides innovation driven more by a balanced materialism and less by unfettered desire. Craft, as this exhibition demonstrates, has far more value for the world of tomorrow than the world of yesterday.

"The design of garbage should become the great public design of our age."

Mierle Ukeles

Artist in Residence, New York City Department of Sanitation, 1995

¹ Pye, D (1969) "The nature and art of workmanship", Cambridge University Press

² See, for example, Elinor, G et al (eds) (1987) "Women and craft", Virago Press

³ Various examples of such Third World 'thrift craft' are featured in Victor Papanek's latest book: "The green imperative: ecology and ethics in design and architecture", 1995, Thames & Hudson. This develops the themes of his earlier and highly influential "Design for the real world: human ecology and social change", 1984, Thames & Hudson.

⁴ Dormer, P (1990) "The meanings of modern design", Thames & Hudson.

⁵ Walker, D (1994) "The ABC of design", co-design journal, vol.1 no.1

⁶ Crafts Council (1987) "The new spirit in craft & design: a Crafts Council touring exhibition"; Thackara, J (ed) "New British design", Thames & Hudson.

⁷ Jencks, C and Silver, N (1973) "Adhocism: the case for improvisation", Anchor Books

⁸ Papanek, V (1984) op cit, p. ix.

⁹ Whiteley, N (1993) "Design for society", p.3. This book provides a clear elaboration and powerful critique of consumer-led demand, detailing a range of initiatives characterised as 'green design'.

¹⁰ Papanek, V (1995) op cit, p.236

¹¹ Manzini, E (1994) "Design, environment and social quality" p.40, in Myerson, J (ed) (1994) "Design Renaissance: selected papers from the International Design Congress, Glasgow, Scotland 1993", Open Eye.

¹² Pye, D, op cit

¹³ Press, M (1995) "It's research, Jim...", co-design journal, vol. 1, no. 2

¹⁴ Thackara, J, op cit, p.12.

¹⁵ This needs a reference. I'm buggered if I can find the source - I think it's a Demos report - the hunt continues.

¹⁶ "Eco alert: pallet-able design", I.D., May/June 1994, p.16