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Homemade and Hell Raising Through Craft, Activism, and Do-It-Yourself Culture

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the literature on the intersections of craft activism as it stands within larger DIY craft culture and the professional-amateur divide. It uses a wider body of literature to highlight a contradiction between the ethos of "Do It Yourself," or DIY, which touts self-sufficiency and a romanticization of the handmade, and the very real connection between DIY gathering sites, whether virtual or in-person, and neoliberal consumerism. The piece discusses Do It Yourself culture as a whole, with special attention as to how physical and virtual DIY sites connect with consumerism, then overviews interrelatedness of the DIY lifestyle and professional-amateurism, paying specific attention to collaborative projects between professionals and amateurs. Using those prefaces, the paper focuses on an activist DIY subculture that attempts to resist the neoliberalism pervasive in wider DIY. It concludes by outlining real instances of craftivism and how the makers approached their projects, which serve to demonstrate how truly powerful craftivist resistance can be.

Keywords: *craftivism, professional-amateur, DIY, neoliberalism*

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1. Introduction

This essay outlines the emergence of a new form of craft, called craftivism, that exists within a larger lifestyle marketed as "Do It Yourself," or DIY. James Hay and Laurie Ouellette argue in Better Living Through Reality TV, that the Do It Yourself culture did not grow organically within the larger population, but rather has been explicitly marketed to the middle class by corporate interests.

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Furthermore, they argue that this culture ties in directly with consumerism, rather than existing outside of capitalism as it has been promoted (Hay and Ouellette, 2008). Relatedly, craft culture today is shaped largely by a highly skilled, but non-professional group that exists somewhere between the amateur and the professional, called the professional-amateur, or Pro-Am (Stebbins, 1992). The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the literature on the intersections of craft activism as it stands within larger DIY craft culture and the professional-amateur divide. It uses a wider body of literature to highlight a contradiction between the ethos of DIY, which touts self-sufficiency and a romanticization of the handmade, and the very real connection between DIY gathering sites, whether virtual or in-person, and neoliberal consumerism. The piece discusses Do It Yourself culture as a whole, with special attention as to how DIY real and virtual sites connect with consumerism, then overviews interrelatedness of the DIY lifestyle and professional-amateurism, paying specific attention to collaborative projects between professionals and amateurs. Using those prefaces, the paper focuses on an activist DIY subculture that attempts to resist the neoliberalism pervasive in wider DIY. It concludes by outlining real instances of craftivism and how the makers approached their projects, which serve to demonstrate how truly powerful craftivist resistance can be.

2. The Professional-Amateur

Craftivism, unlike other social movements, depends heavily upon a small, highly skilled base. It contains within it a steep barrier to entry – usually several months to several years of time spent learning a craft before crafters can take up such a project.

Advanced crafters spend a considerable amount of their leisure time learning the skills, techniques, and traditional culture that accompanies their craft. They are participatory in the modern phenomenon of "serious leisure." These crafters fit into a new category in the professional-amateur divide that researchers Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller call the "Pro-Ams" (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004, p. 112). The arrival of the 20th century introduced the concept of professionalism with the implementation of hierarchies of knowledge and institutions of knowledge/skill affirmation. The concept of professionalism immediately allowed for the idea of an amateur, since professionalism is largely defined against it (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004). Leisure expert Robert Stebbins contends that Pro-Ams

today often produce work of very similar quality to professionals and have access to cheaper tools of comparable quality to those available to professionals in order to do so. Advanced amateur work involves extensive time and capital investment, all in the search of cultural, also known as social, capital. Pro-Am activities also create communities in which skilled amateurs can connect with each other based on shared culture and to provide a place to share skills and display their work. Pro-Ams spend so much energy towards improving their skills, Stebbins has found, that “good amateurs are better than mediocre professionals” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 38). Leadbeater and Miller contend that many Pro-Ams connect online and become “avid consumers” of websites connected to their field. Since they spend so much time with their craft, Pro-Ams can also become “disruptive innovators” that change the craft on a mass-scale (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004, p. 45-52).

Rachel Perry and Elizabeth Carnegie discuss professional/amateur collaborations (or rather, professional/Pro-Am collaborations) in a study on a professional/amateur theater group initiative in the UK. One professional theater company decided to create a volunteer “People’s Theater Company,” which included professionals between jobs, amateurs aspiring to be professionals, and Pro-Ams who did not desire to become professionals (Carnegie and Perry, 2012, p. 6). The actors were even unionized, though the union made sure to distinguish between professionals and amateurs. Perry and Carnegie argue that because the PTC is volunteer, the professionals involve become amateurs – effectively blurring the line between them (Carnegie and Perry, 2012). While this flux is harder to apply to collaborative craft projects between professionals and Pro-Ams, it can definitely be said that professional-amateur collaborations create a new space, ripe with possibilities.

Leadbeater and Miller’s, Stebbin’s, and Perry and Carnegie’s research indicates, as does the plethora of DIY craft sites online, that modern craft creates a space for the professional-amateur to thrive. The largely internet-based collection of DIY skill-sharing and information demonstrates both the strong culture of the Pro-Am as well as high level of intrinsic motivation on the part of most of the crafters.

3. A New Approach: Do It Yourself, or DIY, Craft

Dennis Stevens, in his essay “Validity is in the Eye of the Beholder: Mapping Craft

Communities of Practice" for Maria Elena Busczek's compilation Extra/ Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art, describes the emergence of DIY craft. He claims that DIY is a political, sometimes accidental resistance to mass consumerism and the "homogenization of culture" which provided the social atmosphere surrounding activism and third wave feminism (Stevens, 2011, p. 50). DIY craft seeks relief from traditional modes of validation – museums, formal education institutions, etc. The Do-It-Yourself ethos embraces traditionally feminine crafts and reclaims them as empowering, resisting oppression through political and active use (Stevens, 2011). Nicole Dawkins, author of "Do It Yourself: The Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit," ascribes DIY ethos as firmly postfeminist, in opposition to Stevens' viewpoint. She defines a postfeminism as consisting of "pleasure, autonomy, [and] (consumer) choice." The latter definition exists antithetically to the politically left-leaning second or third wave feminist movements and Dawkins claims it is actually "central to neoliberalist rationalities" (Dawkins, 2011, p. 263).

Perusal of almost any DIY craft site reveals that the mainstream DIY movement exists ostensibly as a highly depoliticized space. Sites such as ExtremeCraft.com, Crafster.org, Supernaturale.com, WhipUp.net, Craftzine.com, and many others contain content rather unreflective of the political world. Day to day the nature of their content remains the same, regardless of changes in the global political atmosphere. Furthermore, Do-It-Yourself books on crafting, from Josephine Fairly's "The Ultimate Natural Beauty Book" (2008) to Kayte Terry's "Paper Made!" (2012) simply present glorified objects and seemingly timeless instructions on how to make them. Even Joan Tapper's book, titled Craft Activism: People, Ideas and Projects from the New Community of Handmade and How You Can Join In (2011), is constructed mainly of kitschy fashion items – mittens, scarves, blankets, sweaters, with only a few projects that extend beyond the domestic into the larger activist culture of social critique. That the content is so jarringly apolitical likely stems from the DIY movement's highly political ties with consumerism, and the apolitical masquerade reveals, upon closer analysis, neoliberal ties to a more conservative capitalist agenda (Dawkins, 2011). Kirsty Robertson argues that second wave feminists' rejection of the domestic arts indirectly fostered the later acceptance of the domestic arts into the mainstream (Robertson, 2011). Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush titles this phenomenon "retrograde postfeminism." The difference between retrograde postfeminism and reclaiming old domesticity and traditional crafts, they say, is that reclamation involves changing the old

associations into new ones within a modern context, whereas retrograde postfeminism "..*does not transform the old into new, it reweaves the old itself"* (Bratich and Brush, 2007, p. 7-8). That the DIY movement lacks political interest or context merely supports their theory.

Nicole Dawkins outlines modern DIY culture acutely in her sociological study of craft fairs and a 'reclamation' of supposedly 'abandoned' spaces in Detroit. Her piece, "Do-It-Yourself: The Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit," demonstrates the whiteness and unacknowledged association with the middle class prevalent within the DIY lifestyle ethos. Dawkins brings these factors to light when she highlights the way that mainstream media actively markets Detroit to white, middle class people by calling it a "blank canvas," a "dying city," "a no-man's land," and an "urban prairie" that needs to be "saved," while ignoring the highly racialized systems of power that locked people of color out of their homes and neighborhoods (Dawkins, 2011, p. 266-277). It is in this context, and against the backdrop of Detroit's ties to mechanized industrial factory production, that the DIY craft movement surfaces and claims ownership of Detroit city spaces. Dawkins writes of participants in an indie craft fair who express surprise and even distaste when people of color submit their pieces to these fairs, again highlighting the underlying political force that actively works to maintain a racialized and middle class market of consumerist individuals, most of whom yet understand their participation as a non-political act (Dawkins, 2011).

4. The Activist Side of Craft

Kirsty Robertson has compiled a short history of craftivism in her essay "Rebellious Doilies and Subversive Stitches" in Extra/ Ordinary. Robertson claims that craft's popularity within activist circles has swelled and receded, dating back to first wave feminism and possibly earlier. She argues that these fluxes relate directly to the state of the textile industry, citing the pattern repeated in many countries, including the United States, of a resurgence in craft interest once the textile industry has lost enough money and decided to outsource its factories to countries in the global south (Robertson, 2011). This distance from the reality of textile mass production tacitly informs the state of craft.

The connection of craft movement to the textile industry demonstrates the very strong connection between craft and capitalism, even though the utilization of craft often serves as a resistance to the latter within politically conscious circles.

Craftivism depends and builds on traditional feminine gender stereotypes in many scenarios, which, though redemptive, may inhibit the larger movement in the future given that this dependence still promotes essentialized roles. Craftivism generally presents itself in one of two ways: either posted or worn in public for general viewing, outside the specific context that the work comments on or as a tool within a protest. Crafting in public, no matter the nature of the piece being crafted, can be seen as a radical act simply because "knitting in public is *out of place"* (Bratich & Brush, 2007, p. 5). In their analysis of public crafting, Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush compare knitting in public to breastfeeding in public: "[b]oth acts are intensely productive" and make formerly invisible domestic tasks highly visible (Bratich & Brush, 2007, p. 6).

Incorporating craft, usually tactile work, into a political atmosphere can mean projects like the remembrance quilts popular in post-Apartheid South Africa or the patchwork *arpilleras* in Chile (Robertson, 2011). *Arpilleras* are "exquisitely detailed hand-sewn three dimensional textile pictures," made by women imprisoned during Pinochet's rule in which they hid messages under the blind eyes of the prison guards, who never placed high enough importance on women's sewing to check the pieces thoroughly (The FolkArt Gallery, 1997). In Quebec, a group of people knitted in protest in 2001 against the Free Trade agreement being created there and continued to do so while police sprayed them with tear gas. In Prague, activists knitted a wall across the street in order to non-violently block people attending a convention in 2000 for the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund from arriving at their destination (Robertson, 2011).

Barb Hunt, a professional artist, designed an exhibit of knitted and stuffed landmines she called antipersonnel. She also created a pamphlet to be passed around to viewers describing the context of mines, thus successfully working the political into the normally highly distanced and depoliticized space of the museum exhibit. Wednesday Lupypciw, creator of her Handicraft, Handy Cat travelling exhibit, uses hobby materials like pipe cleaners and other mass produced materials to engage critically with the modern definition of a craft object, notably one that is finished, perfect, and salable. She comments on the consumerism hidden within craft culture revealed through the "gorgeously photographed

object… [which] creates an underlying competitive and consumer mentality" (Black and Burisch, 2011, p. 212).

Calgary's Revolutionary Knitting Circle teaches craft as a non-violent method of resistance against corporations, capitalism, and mass production. The group teaches craft as a non-violent method of resistance against corporations, capitalism, and mass production. They knitted a "Peace Knit" banner, a collaborative piecework project that shows the potential for productive living based in community (Black and Burisch, 2011, p. 206). The Revolutionary Knitting Circle often participates in local protests and usually brings their banner with them (Black and Burisch, 2011). In 2002, the group gathered to knit, in public protest, against the capitalism that informs the governments in the Group of Eight. Of all the examples of craftivism at that time, only the knitting circle in Calgary received significant media attention. That the group did receive attention, Robertson argues, is the result of craft's recent rise in popularity. When the media cover examples of craft activism, it does not usually create productive conversation. Rather, given the novelty of knitting in public and the distance the general public usually puts itself from political protests, a news story about activist knitting will usually focus on the knitting itself, in contrast to the nature of the project the knitters attempt. Media outlets also tend to dismiss knitting outright as useless and ineffectual given the extreme non-confrontational nature of the craft, misunderstanding its place within the protest and activist movements at large (Robertson, 2011, p. 188). This dismissal informs the future of craftivism and threatens its utility within activism, reflecting a nostalgia towards knitting and the myth that "no one knits anymore" (Robertson, 2011, p. 193). With this knowledge, however, knitting activists can alter the way in which they relate to the media at future protests in order to diffuse the inevitable misinterpretation.

5. Conclusions

The authors reviewed here verified Hay and Ouillette's claim that Do It Yourself culture is not a grassroots movement, as it often appears to be, but instead reflects neoliberal consumerism. The market for this lifestyle is limited, however, in that it depends almost entirely on the professional-amateur. Pro-Ams spend nearly as much time invested in their

craft as professionals, and therefore enrich their field with new discoveries and methods of practice, but do not get paid for their work and are considered by most as having second-rate skill. This professional-amateur hierarchy can be reduced, though, in cooperative projects between both professionals and amateurs, oftentimes seen in craftivist circles.

The professional-amateur divide is a dichotomy created under capitalism, because it allows professionals to capitalize on amateur contributions to the field all while wholly depending on the existence of amateurs for a complete definition of professionalism. Rather than feeding into that dichotomy, it is more productive to see collaborative projects such as the People's Theater Company as one that enters a new space of collaboration between professionals and amateurs in the larger aim to resist consumerism. PTC is not the only group to enter this new space. Marianne Jørgenson, another professional artist with knowledge of textiles, collaborated with the Cast Off Knitters group and a few other individuals to create the Pink Tank project in 2006. The crafters worked together to crochet and knit over 4,000 squares in pink yarn to create a cozy to cover a World War II army tank located in a public place in protest of the war in Iraq (Black and Burisch, 2011). In both cases, the end production could not have existed without the number of people involved (and there are more amateurs than professionals), nor could it have been created without the unique skills and experience of both the professionals and the Pro-Ams.

Craftivists, whether Pro-Ams or professionals, create textile commentary in myriad styles and locales, as well as on a wide variety of topics. Kirsty Robertson offered tactile commentary on the deep, underlying connection between computer coding, made up of zeros and ones, and knitting, made up of knits (K) and purls (P). In a collaborative project entitled "The Viral Knitting Project," she and several others translated the Code Red Virus computer code into a useable scarf pattern, where the zeros became purls and the ones became knits. Robertson describes the end scarf as "comfortable, giftable, but intrinsically dangerous," as it could be easily carried unsuspectingly into places the virus is not otherwise allowed (Robertson, 2006, p. 326). The pattern for the scarf is available online, freely accessible to anyone, as a point of resistance against copyright laws and in the hope that the method will spread far and diversify itself, in the same fashion as computer viruses. The Viral Knitting Project speaks in a larger conversation with other craftivism, such as the *arpillera* quilts, in providing a real form of resistance that is further empowered by the institutional dismissal of craftwork as decorative and unimportant (Robertson, 2006).

As this piece has demonstrated, conventional models for DIY culture often represent a conservative and tacit support of patriarchal and consumerist institutional structures. The work of the Revolutionary Knitting Circle, Barb Hunt, Wednesday Lupypciw, Marianne Jørgenson and the Cast Off Knitters, and Kirsty Robertson and the Viral Knitting collaborators, among many other craftivists, present an alternative side of craft culture, and further research into their endeavors would provide acute insight into their methods of organizing. Many of these collaborative projects function largely online, some to such an extent that the collaborators never even meet each other. A deeper look into how these craftivists succeed in creating real projects out of virtual connections would pave the way for all craftivists, and activists, in the future.

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