

How can Craft skills and Slow Design principles be used  
as approaches to create a more sustainable alternative  
to consumerism?

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## **Introduction**

"Anyone who thinks that you can have infinite growth on a planet with finite resources is either a madman or an economist." - Sir David Attenborough.<sup>1</sup>

Climate change is the biggest threat our generation will face. I am approaching this question from an ecological perspective. My practice rests on material sustainability and traditional making techniques. I often tackle throw away culture and educate people, through my work, on the environmental issues with this way of thinking.

It is important to look at design and making in relation to how we consume in a critical manner- as the creators of the world's objects - because of the unintentional consequences, especially when the objects are going to last for hundreds of thousands of years. I will explain how the design process of future objects must be thought through from beginning to end and the cyclical framework embedded within the design.

This question is complex, so I have set the boundaries of my answer to not include the social consequences of consumerism, but will explore the ramifications of how we value objects culturally. For this, I have looked at the views of Anthropologist, Daniel Miller. I will also explain the 'Slow Design' Principles and their relevance and applications in making, as well as the effect they have had on my own practice.

I will question the current model of consuming for economic benefit and how our attitude towards making can find alternatives to this - with less waste and a collective 'Make Do and Mend' attitude. My words on this concept are partially influenced by Design Historian, Glenn Adamson, Art Historian, Maria Elena Buszek. I also look at the timely start of the Environmental Social movement 'Extinction Rebellion'<sup>2</sup> in 2018, which will introduce the 'Craftivism' movement coined by Betsy Greer in 2003<sup>3</sup>. Finally, I will also introduce co-founder of the Craftivist collective Sarah Corbett.

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<sup>1</sup> Cardwell, M.R (2013) *Attenborough: poorer countries are just as concerned about the environment*. [Online] [Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/oct/16/attenborough-poorer-countries-concerned-environment>

<sup>2</sup> Extinction Rebellion (2019) *Home* [Online] [Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://rebellion.earth/>

<sup>3</sup> Greer, B (Unknown) *About* [Online] [Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <http://craftivism.com/about/>

## Value

I cannot start talking about consumerism until I explain our complicated relationship with value. This phenomenon can be affected by emotional factors, as well as perceived value of materials and societal trends portrayed by the media. The value of an object can be transformed with words, history, uniqueness, usefulness and emotional attachment. For example, a stool made by a deceased relative is likely to be perceived as more valuable than if it were a commercial, mass produced stool. This rationale can affect how much care we take of the objects we own. When the attributes of objects are seen as easily replaceable, we are less likely to treasure it.<sup>4</sup>

The most interesting aspect of value is the hierarchy of each object in people's lives and is totally different for every individual. How much you value objects can even be affected by how much you value each human relationship associated with it.

One disconcerting aspect of perceived value is how easy it makes it for the media to sell you *more* stuff than you need. When companies can increase the perceived value on an object, you are more likely to pay more money for it or buy more of it. This concept has confused our outlook on value and made it more likely for people to hoard these 'valued' objects, or alternatively, to consume a larger quantity of objects. Some objects are made intending to lose their original perceived value when the next version comes out. A good example of this is the iPhone. When the new and latest version of the iPhone is released there is a shift in the fiscal and social value of each phone that came out before it. Not because these phones no longer function as well, but because there is a new and 'improved' and therefore higher socially valued version.

The part of value I focus on in my work is perceived investment; when you spend more time, energy or money on an object it will have a higher perceived value. Because of this, handmade items carry a higher perceived value. This is especially true if the person intending to own the object makes it themselves. They will, therefore, know how much effort, skill and time goes into making something of that quality and uniqueness. At The Centre for Alternative Technology<sup>5</sup> in Wales there are workshops, for example: spoon carving<sup>6</sup>. Though you have only come away with a spoon, a small everyday item which can be easily taken for granted, you have invested physical time and energy as well as learning what skills go into making similar objects so gain an appreciation for other makers.

When you have that connection to an object you also know the materiality of that object including how to repair or improve it as you know each part of the object and its nature.

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<sup>4</sup> Quin, C. (2009). The Emotional Life of Object. *Journal of Design & Technology Education*. 8 (3).

<sup>5</sup> The Centre for Alternative Technology (Unknown) *Visit CAT* [Online] [Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.cat.org.uk/>

<sup>6</sup> The Centre for Alternative Technology (2019) *Spoon Carving* [Online] [Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019,] <https://www.cat.org.uk/events/spoon-carving/>

A notable example of the difference in value is when you buy from a maker like Sebastian Cox<sup>7</sup>. He will make a certain amount of the same product, by hand in his studio. There is a limited run of his stools and the quality will be very high. Compare this to mass-produced stools you can find in IKEA<sup>8</sup>. The fiscal, social and unique qualities which affect the value are completely different. Critically, a large quantity of the population could not afford something handmade by someone as notable as Sebastian Cox; however, there are local makers at artisan markets all across the country, as well as online. Etsy<sup>9</sup> and Folksy<sup>10</sup> have a huge collection of handmade items where the price can vary and be more accessible to those with lower incomes.

Daniel Miller, an anthropologist who focuses on *things* and our connection with object materiality and consumption, wrote that 'We are taught that the best way to appreciate the role of objects is to consider them as signs and symbols that represent us'<sup>11</sup> which explains the way we address and value certain objects, as if each thing we own is a physical manifestation of our personality. As if they are a *part* of us, allowing us respect them more.

It is important that if we want to live in a more ethical and sustainable world, our perception of value needs to change. We need a more ecologically critical view on which and how many objects we own, and a higher perceived value on fewer things, rather than more things with lower perceived values. If each object represents aspects of our personalities, we should have each object be of a higher quality and care for it and have a more mindful approach to each object we acquire.

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<sup>7</sup> Cox, S (Unknown) *Pedestal bedside table (pair)* [Online] [Accessed on 28th December 2019] <http://www.sebastiancox.co.uk/furniture/pedestal-table-abpbx>

<sup>8</sup> IKEA (Unknown) *Stools & Benches* [Online] [Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.ikea.com/gb/en/cat/stools-benches-10728/>

<sup>9</sup> Etsy (Unknown) *Home & Living* [Online] [Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.etsy.com/uk/c/home-and-living?ref=catnav-891>

<sup>10</sup> Folksy (Unknown) *Homeware* [Online] [Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] [https://folksy.com/home\\_garden](https://folksy.com/home_garden)

<sup>11</sup> Miller, D (2010) *Stuff*. Cambridge. Polity Press. p.12.

## Consumerism

Materialism is our desire for possessions. It is reinforced by consumer culture that a capitalist society, based on profit and constant economic growth, demands. It is, at the moment, the core of civil society.

At the same time our culture is based on a linear economic structure. This means a lot of energy and material is wasted and put into landfill. This is an unsustainable system which will end when materials to extract are exhausted, as we have a finite amount of resources.

A common criticism of creating a sustainable planet by means of minimalistic behaviours and a complete societal revamp is that, the way the world is organised, it is based on economic growth. If we do not have products to use and throw away, then people have nothing to buy. However, if we can create versions of commonly consumed objects that can compost and biodegrade, we can still function in a society. Consumers will still be able to consume, possibly even more than before since the objects will, without a doubt, become unusable, so a replacement must eventually be bought.

There has however been some research into alternatives. These include Circular Economics and Doughnut Economics<sup>12</sup> which focuses on balance when using the earth's resources, keeping within the planetary boundaries shown by scientists.

### From a linear to a circular economy

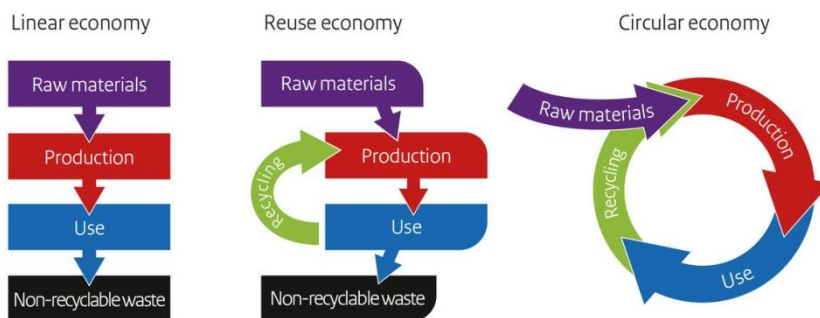


Figure: 1: Differences between linear and circular

The world naturally works in these cycles. When things die, the natural components get recycled by bacteria in the soil and turned back into raw materials and nutrients for something else to grow. We, as a race, have not paid attention to the importance of all the stages of that process and the existing scientific systems that allow life to have this continual loop. By creating materials like plastic that do not biodegrade for hundreds of

<sup>12</sup> Raworth, K. (2017) *What on Earth is the Doughnut?...* [Online] [Accessed on 9th December 2019] <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>

thousands of years, we are disrupting the natural cycles of elements. Through our consumerist behaviours we have created the Anthropogenic era, where the human activity on the planet has had the dominant influence on the climate and naturally occurring ecosystems.<sup>13</sup>

At the moment, a small percentage of our waste is recycled; however with certain materials it is 'better described as *downcycling* rather than *recycling*'<sup>14</sup> as materials, such as plastic bottles, are reconstituted into lower quality items, like thin plastic bags. Therefore, even the recycling we undertake now is not at its optimum level and the waste we produce is significant. When recycling, a large amount of energy is used to process the materials again, so in this respect we are very far from where we need to be. When you couple this with consumption you get a never-ending stream of waste product.

Scandinavian countries have different approaches to waste. Norway recycles 97% of plastic bottles<sup>15</sup> and the Swedish are creating Biofuel which is made by incinerating its non-recyclable waste to make energy<sup>16</sup>. Critically, this is not the most preferred way to transform the rubbish as it releases carbon dioxide. However it does mean that only 1% of rubbish goes to landfill.

Scandinavian design is more minimalistic and functional as opposed to aesthetically focussed and includes an appreciation for more natural materials and craftsmanship involved in making<sup>17</sup> and it is really the transience of an object allows you to have a respect and give it more mindful attention while it exists. In some ways the less time it exists, the higher the value the object has. Buddhist monks as part of their meditation create incredibly intricate sand mandalas by hand. 'Each sand mandala is ritualistically dismantled once it has been completed. [...] the transitory nature of material life.'<sup>18</sup> The fact that they are temporary makes them more beautiful.

Some of my projects have been influenced by the circularity concept, the importance of transience and biodegradable materials.

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<sup>13</sup> Carrington, D. (2016) *The Anthropocene epoch: scientists declare dawn of human-influenced age* [Online], [Accessed on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth>

<sup>14</sup> Greer, B (2014) *Craftivism*. Vancouver, Canada. Arsenal Pulp Press. p. 61

<sup>15</sup> Cassella, C. (2019) *Norway's Insanely Efficient Scheme Recycles 97% of All Plastic Bottles They Use* [Online] [Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.sciencealert.com/norway-s-recycling-scheme-is-so-effective-92-percent-of-plastic-bottles-can-be-reused>

<sup>16</sup> Yee, A. (2018) *In Sweden, Trash Heats Homes, Powers Buses and Fuels Taxi Fleets* [Online] [Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/climate/sweden-garbage-used-for-fuel.html>

<sup>17</sup> Lloyd, C. (2018) *What is Scandinavian Design?* [Online] [Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <https://www.homebuilding.co.uk/scandinavian-style/>

<sup>18</sup> Thorp, C,L (2017) *Tibetan Sand Mandalas* [Online] [Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1052/tibetan-sand-mandalas/>



Figure 2: GAIA boxes, Melissa Daniel (2019)



Figures 3: SCOBY Bowls,  
Melissa Daniel (2017)



Figures 4: SCOBY Bowls,  
Melissa Daniel (2017)

The Dutch Government has a programme and national agreement to implement switching to a circular economy by the year 2050<sup>19</sup>. They have businesses dedicated to finding the best ways to implement this including 'Blue City' in Rotterdam<sup>20</sup>.

Because of the changes in the global economy due to the demand for more, cheaper, and faster turnout of objects, a lot of companies shift their factories to places where the labour costs are cheaper. However, standards here are lower therefore workers are paid less and working environments can be more abusive, as well as using less ethical materials from other countries. It is hard for consumers of these products to be fully aware of the impact they are having by consuming products because of the globalisation of business. The lack of transparency and marketing make it difficult to know exactly how and where your product is made. It makes the consumer very detached from the process.

Minimalism is a freedom from consumerism<sup>21</sup>. It is a movement that is based on 'less is more'. It is about being intentional with our time, money and energy and living with no

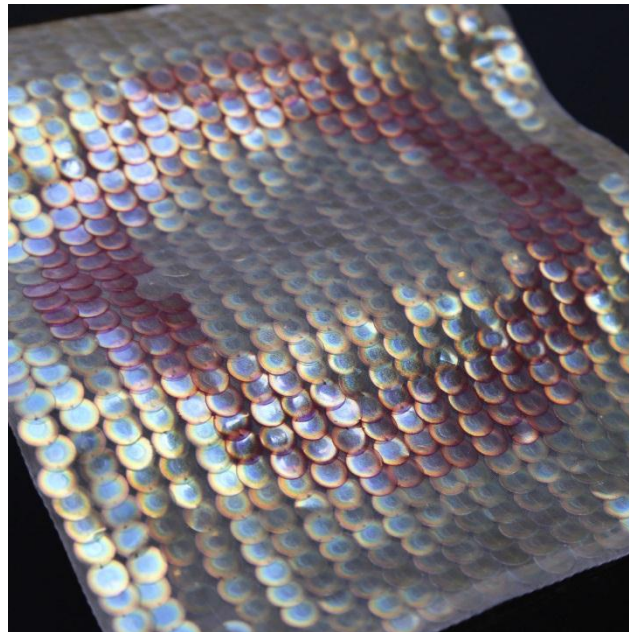
<sup>19</sup> Government of The Netherlands. (2017) *From a linear to a circular economy* [Online] [Accessed on 09<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <https://www.government.nl/topics/circular-economy/from-a-linear-to-a-circular-economy>

<sup>20</sup> BlueCity (Unknown) *About BlueCity* [Online] [Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <https://www.bluecity.nl/about-bluecity/>



more than what you need. When you live minimally you question before you buy anything new. In order for you to own it, it needs to have a purpose. William Morris, one of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement, said “Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful”<sup>22</sup>.

The only true thing that can be consumed to such an extent is food, as our bodies are composting machines, producing waste that should go back naturally into the various systems like Carbon and Nitrogen Cycles. Recently many designers have been experimenting with material alternatives to virgin plastic including: Cellulose, namely Elissa Brunato<sup>23</sup> and re-used plastic tents, for example Chloe Baines and Tuo Lei<sup>24</sup>.



*Figure 5: Cellulose Sequins  
by Elissa Brunato.*

<sup>21</sup> The Minimalists (Unknown) *What is Minimalism?* [Online] [Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <https://www.theminimalists.com/minimalism/>

<sup>22</sup> Doland, C. (2010) *Foundations of an uncluttered life: Useful, beautiful, and in its place* [Online], [Accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <https://unclutterer.com/2010/09/29/foundations-of-an-uncluttered-life-useful-beautiful-and-in-its-place/>

<sup>23</sup> Hitti, N. (2019) *Dezeen's Top 10 Innovative materials of 2019* [Online] [Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.dezeen.com/2019/12/29/innovative-materials-2019/>

<sup>24</sup> Hitti, N. (2019) *Dezeen's Top 10 Innovative materials of 2019* [Online] [Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.dezeen.com/2019/12/29/innovative-materials-2019/>

## Slow Design

Slow Design<sup>25</sup> has seven basic principles<sup>26</sup>:

- Reveal - creating awareness.
- Expand - a bigger picture.
- Reflect - allowing time post-use of objects.
- Engage - encouraging the user to become more active in the creation of the object.
- Participate - Opportunities to reconstruct and personalise.
- Evolve - allowing chances for adjustment.
- Ritual - the use of everyday ritual to create a better experience.

The intention of slow design is to make the users have a more conscious use of products, they are able to become more active and engaged in the making of the objects they own so are more mindful when it comes to using them. They are able to understand more how they work and how they are made. This more mindful approach to small everyday tasks allows people to appreciate these everyday actions and take their time doing them. It is action against the fast-paced lifestyle that tries to be as quick as possible without wanting to use any precious energy on small tasks, like having breakfast, becomes more of a race as it is not seen as an action worth thinking about. Slowing the process down to a relaxed, less stressful pace means that the experience is understood and actions are deliberate, aware and immersive.

The Slow design approach interests me because allowing the connection between user and product decreases the likeliness of passive consumption. The interaction means the object possesses more of the perceived value. This is important in decreasing the overall quantity of product consumption globally, especially in the west where short-term novelty is increasingly the reason for item purchase.

Unintentionally, some areas already display slow principles. In religious spaces, where each object present carries great significance, extra effort and thought is put into how objects are arranged and how each sensory input is experienced.<sup>27</sup> Such as smell through burning incense. This practice of care does not have to be only carried out in religious spaces but can improve quality of life in many other places. Using these principles in everyday life can take away from the fetishisation of instant gratification and be more conscious and appreciative of daily processes.

The Slow Design movement also takes into consideration the needs for the future, the transitional objects which can be adjusting to changes in the environment while also

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<sup>25</sup> Initially developed by Carolyn F. Strauss and Alastair Fuad-Luke in Amsterdam (2008)

<sup>26</sup> Grosse-Hering, B (Unknown) *Slow Design* [Online] [Accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2019] [https://diopd.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Book\\_of\\_Inspiration\\_SlowDesign.pdf](https://diopd.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Book_of_Inspiration_SlowDesign.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Adamson, G (2018) *Fewer, Better Things - The Hidden Wisdom of Objects*. New York, USA. Bloomsbury Publishing. P.149.

appreciating the process and origin of the materials used and the effect that has on the environment.<sup>28</sup>

The slow movement is not just important in the design stages. Slowing down how you make decisions and minimising unplanned impulse buys and one-click buying on Amazon is an important part of the slow, mindful lifestyle.<sup>29</sup> Responsibility comes with being a consumer. You are essentially voting for change with your money.

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<sup>28</sup> Holdefehr, K. (2017) *The 5 principles of the slow design movement* [Online] [Accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.apartmenttherapy.com/the-5-principles-of-the-slow-design-movement-240942>

<sup>29</sup> Holdefehr, K. (2017) *The 5 principles of the slow design movement* [Online] [Accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> December /2019] <https://www.apartmenttherapy.com/the-5-principles-of-the-slow-design-movement-240942>

## **Craft Skills**

Until about the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, everything was bespoke<sup>30</sup>. Clothing was tailored to the individual before the start of mass production and there were local artisans for every trade such as blacksmiths and woodworkers, as well as skilled food and beer crafters. The quality of the craftsmanship that went into making the items you owned was higher and there was a face-to-face interaction with the craftsperson who produced it. You would know exactly where your bread came from so there was more of a responsibility for the craftsperson to have those high quality goods, as well as recognition of craftsmanship from the other side of the counter.

Now many of these crafts have become endangered, for example: Swill basket making and tile making<sup>31</sup>, and the term 'bespoke' is now elitist, only available to people who are willing to pay in order to have something personalised and high quality. Craft has thus become more elusive and expensive as it has become less common. In some things, such as clothing, it has become over valued so that ordinary people have no way of accessing high quality items. 'Insisting on excellence as our best pathway to ecological balance is simply impractical'<sup>32</sup>.

Now our economy is based on globalisation and in industry it becomes harder to understand where the quality and ecological responsibility lies. Brands like Lush still hand make their cosmetics in the UK. They even have stickers on their pots with the name of the person who made that particular product<sup>33</sup>. The responsibility that comes with adding the maker's name to something means you feel more comfortable with the quality and care of the product and personalises it. Their small batches policy means the consumer knows that more care has gone into making it.

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<sup>30</sup> Adamson, G (2018) *Fewer, Better Things -The Hidden Wisdom of Objects*. New York, USA. Bloomsbury Publishing. P.65.

<sup>31</sup> HCA (2015) *The HCA Red List of Endangered Crafts* [Online] [Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <http://heritagecrafts.org.uk/redlist/categories-of-risk/>

<sup>32</sup> Adamson, G (2018) *Fewer, Better Things -The Hidden Wisdom of Objects*. New York, USA. Bloomsbury Publishing. P.137.

<sup>33</sup> Ahlquist, M. (Unknown) *Inside Lush Manufacturing* [Online] [Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://uk.lush.com/article/inside-lush-manufacturing>



Figure 6: Lush products stickers

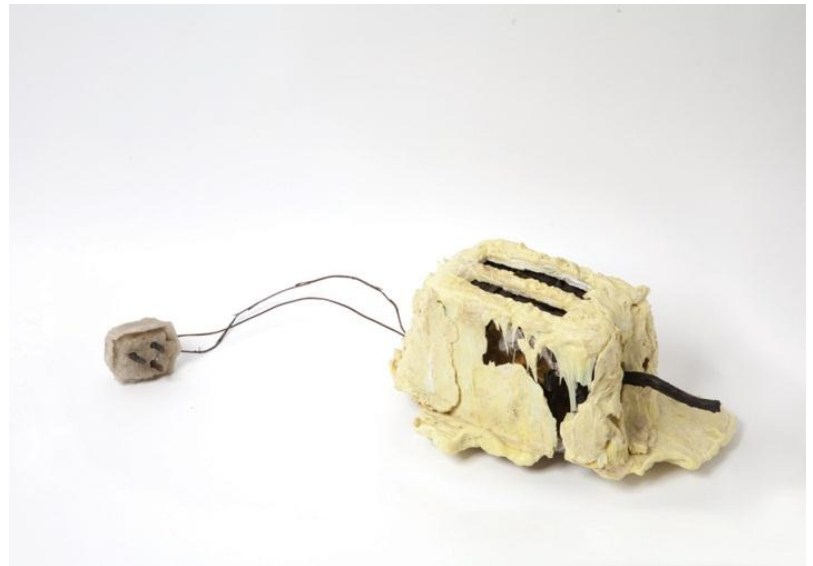


Figure 7: Thomas Thwaites' toaster project.

The objects we own today are almost impossible to be crafted by a single person. Designer Thomas Thwaites attempted to make a toaster himself from scratch<sup>34</sup>. The outcome was something that was not as refined as a toaster you would buy from a shop. It shows how detached we now are from what we surround ourselves with.

However this does not mean that craft skills are no longer useful. Problem solving and ingrained materiality are useful in all aspects of life. A good example of this can be shown using the logic puzzle: 'Candle Problem'<sup>35</sup>.

You are given a candle, some matches and a box of pins. Your task is to attach the candle to the wall in a way that when you light it, the wax won't drip onto the table below. Most people in this instance will try things like tacking the candle to the wall, however, when the objects are displayed differently you realise there is another object you were not even thinking about using; the pin box. This is called functional fixedness – since the box's primary function is to hold the pins in one place, your brain does not think to use it for anything else. The lesson is to literally think outside the box. This is how we can overcome problems by using our innate and learned materiality. Craft involves learning materiality. You also develop an intimate respect for the processes and the

<sup>34</sup> Thwaites, T (2009) *The Toaster Project* [Online] [Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <http://www.thetoasterproject.org/page2.htm>

<sup>35</sup> Duncker, K 'Candle Problem' (1945)



Figure 8: 'The Candle Problem' Karl Duncker

nuances in the processes. 'When [...] someone crafts an object, we mean that they put their whole self into it, body and mind alike, drawing on whatever skills they have acquired over the course of their lives.'<sup>36</sup>

The main issue with the Craft lifestyle is that it can require large or expensive equipment and tools. One of the ways people have got around this is through open source Maker spaces like Fab Labs<sup>37</sup>. These spaces act as libraries for specialist tools and equipment, like sewing machines and 3D printers, as well as having knowledgeable crafts and tech people to help with projects. They provide space and advice to those who could not do such things at home, especially if they are in rented accommodation. The social aspect is also important, allowing collaboration and skill sharing.

Some examples in Manchester:

- Stitched-Up Cooperative. They are a repair café promoting fixing clothes and skill sharing in that craft. Their manifesto includes how they want to inspire a more sustainable approach to clothing, a community sharing skills as well as up-cycling and reducing waste<sup>38</sup>.
- A similar project which is now called The Old Bank Residency<sup>39</sup> evolved from PLANT NOMA - an open studio which had space for woodwork and clay<sup>40</sup>. One of their first projects was making 100 chairs, in lots of different ways, inviting people from the local community to get involved and learn woodworking skills.

<sup>36</sup> Adamson, G (2018) *Fewer, Better Things - The Hidden Wisdom of Objects*. New York, USA. Bloomsbury Publishing. P.16.

<sup>37</sup> FabLabs.io (2016) *About* [Online] [Accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2019] <https://www.fablabs.io/about>

<sup>38</sup> Stitched Up (Unknown) *What is Stitched Up?* [Online] [Accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2019]

<http://stitchedup.coop/about/>

<sup>39</sup> The Old Bank Residency (2019) *What's On* [Online] [Accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2019]

<https://www.oldbanknoma.com/whats-on>

<sup>40</sup> Lovell, L (2017) *Look inside Plant - Manchester's new art gallery, workshop space and massive 'garden shed'* [Online] [Accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2019] <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/arts-culture-news/noma-plant-art-workshops-manchester-12946441>

The ability to use the equipment without huge investment makes craft more accessible to people with less disposable income, such as young people and the elderly. Especially for this demographic of people, it makes it easier to save money by fixing things as well as learning valuable skills for employment. The ability to become more self-reliant and become more independent of existing societal structures of consumption allows self-development.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Davies, S.R (2017) Hackerspaces - making the maker movement, USA, Polity Press p. 20

## **Make Do and Mend**

During past times of war and poor economic stability, people have become more resourceful and because of this had a 'make do and mend' mentality<sup>42</sup>. This was the result of hardship and the unavailability of consumer items, due to resources and transport being used primarily to make more important objects for the war effort. From this came a generation of menders. Darning, stitching and repairing in any way would ensure people had enough clothes to wear and their vehicles worked. With more constraint comes larger space for creativity. For example, they made 'underwear from scraps of parachute silk; dressing gowns from captured enemy flags [...] jewelry from corks'<sup>43</sup>. Making these items became a patriotic act in itself. The skills gained from living in such a time are even more valuable now.

When you take utterly disposable objects, for example broken plastic forks or non-recyclable waste like bike inner tubes, and create something beautiful whilst displaying and praising the original material, it shows that it is not a 'waste' material and does not need to be seen as disposable. This creates a conversation and I would argue it is a form of Craftivism - I will explain this term in detail in the next section. It subverts the use of the old/scrap materials, making an examination on how we live in a culture of waste. "Matter" only becomes a specific 'material' when someone sees its potential and puts it into action - thereby finding a way to put an intention into the world"<sup>44</sup>

There are makers whose work focuses on up-cycling materials. Disposable or unfixable items are transformed into beautiful art or different useful objects, which is a creative way of dealing with the waste driven world. For example: SystemDesignStudio up-cycle bicycle inner tubes into unique elastic shelving<sup>45</sup> and Micaella Pedros engineered a way to use old plastic bottles to connect things together by heating them so they shrink to hold<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Pitogo, H. (2014) *The 'Make Do and Mend' Ideology of the Great War* [Online] [Accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019] <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/war-articles/make-do-and-mend-ideology-great-war.html>

<sup>43</sup> Pat Kirkham, "keeping Up Home Front Morale: 'Beauty and Duty' in Wartime Britain" in Jacqueline M. Atkins, ed., *wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the home front in Japan, Britain and the United States* (New York: Bard Graduate Centre/ Yale University Press, 2005) pp.214-215.

<sup>44</sup> Adamson, G (2018) *Fewer, Better Things -The Hidden Wisdom of Objects*. New York, USA. Bloomsbury Publishing. P.155.

<sup>45</sup> Upcycle DZINE (Unknown) *Elastic Shelf by SystemDesignStudio* [Online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.upcycledzine.com/elastic-shelf-by-systemdesignstudio/>

<sup>46</sup> Tucker, E (2016) *Micaella Pedros uses heat-shrunk plastic bottles to join furniture* [Online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/06/30/micaella-pedros-royal-college-of-art-graduate-showrca-joining-bottles-wood-furniture-recycled-plastic/>





Figure 9: SystemDesignStudio's Elastic Shelf



Figure 10: Micaella Pedros heat-shrunk plastic bottle connections

Each item fixed and not thrown away is an act of protest. When you fix something, it gives it new life and you turn something generic into something unique, which can be seen as a political act<sup>47</sup>. To the owner of the object, the act of mending it has *increased* its perceived value. In Japan there is a practice of fixing pots with gold which emphasises and celebrates the repair process – Kintsugi<sup>48</sup>. Others have been touched by this concept, creating projects like the GOLDEN JOINERY project, which have used golden stitches to mend clothing<sup>49</sup>. The fact that these are everyday objects may prompt conversation from an observer and even begin a discussion about value and consumerism. It allows the questions to form organically in the observers' mind, instead of traditional activism which can be too loud for some people to participate in.



Figure 11: An example of Kintsugi

<sup>47</sup> Greer, B (2014) *Craftivism*. Vancouver, Canada. Arsenal Pulp Press. p.97.

<sup>48</sup> Richman-Abdou, K (2019) *Kintsugi: The Centuries-Old Art of Repairing Broken Pottery with Gold* [Online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://mymodernmet.com/kintsugi-kintsukuroi/>

<sup>49</sup> GOLDEN JOINERY (Unknown) *About* [Online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <http://goldenjoinery.com/#about>



*Figure 12:* Juliette de la Rue, Golden Joinery, Netherlands.

## Craftivism

Craftivism is a combination of Craft and activism. It is a helpful way to describe the creative actions that people do to make a statement about a social, environmental or political issue. It allows people to use humour, making skills and play to question why we do things as well as being a far more accessible and mindful way of engaging people in change. Sarah Corbett, the founder of the Craftivist Collective<sup>50</sup>, had a vision for engaging introverted people who wanted to engage in a more intimate and quieter version of activism. She wanted to show that there was an unconventional type of activism as the word can carry negative connotations, especially when people want to be involved in change but do not see themselves as loud or confident enough. It can put people off who associate activism with 'unpleasant images of tear gas and riot gear'<sup>51</sup>.

An example of the projects the Craftivist collective do is the 'Don't blow it' hanky<sup>52</sup>. The aim of hand-stitched hankies is to be sent to local Members of Parliament and to motivate and engage with the people with power rather than to criticise and condemn them.



Figure 13: Craftivist Collectives 'Don't Blow It' Hanky.

Craftivism is related to Ecofeminism<sup>53</sup>, which compares qualities of the female - caring and nurturing - compared to the male domination and control of the natural world and the effects on the natural environment. It sees environmental destruction as a correlation with having a deficiency of female qualities in positions of leadership. The term explains the

<sup>50</sup> Craftivist Collective (Unknown) *Our Story* [Online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://craftivist-collective.com/our-story/>

<sup>51</sup> Buszek, M, E. (2011). *Extra-Ordinary - Craft and Contemporary Art*. Durham and London. Duke University Press. p.178.

<sup>52</sup> Craftivist Collective (Unknown) *'Don't Blow It' Hanky* [Online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://craftivist-collective.com/dont-blow-it-hanky>

<sup>53</sup> Miles, K. (2013) *Ecofeminism* [Online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ecofeminism>

value in looking after and caring for what we already have, rather than being destructive. There is an almost innate vibe of affection radiating from objects that have been sewn, knitted or crafted with any other traditionally female handicrafts 'as though they had been created by a senior matriarch'<sup>54</sup>. So when those objects contain serious or environmental messages there is more impact. This is why the most successful craftivism projects are the ones that subvert the female narrative.

The handmade approach that Extinction Rebellion uses to convey its messages is a good way to engage more people in the movement. They hold local arts making days for people to sew and paint banners, reusing cloth and old bed sheets to convey personal, meaningful messages. Days like these also allow introverted or older generation activists to engage with like-minded people, without the limited accessibility of a march, blocking a road or other loaded acts of civil disobedience. These circles allow a space for teaching/ sharing skills and talking about politics.



*Figure 14: Block and screen printed flags at Extinction Rebellion Arts working day (21<sup>st</sup> September 2019)*



*Figure 15: Sewn Banner made at Extinction Rebellion Arts working day (15<sup>th</sup> August 2019)*

<sup>54</sup> Greer, B (2014) *Craftivism*. Vancouver, Canada. Arsenal Pulp Press. p. 38.





Figure 16: Extinction Rebellion Arts working day (4<sup>th</sup> October 2019)



Figure 17: The Centre for Alternative Technology during Clay Day (22<sup>nd</sup> June 2019)

To see what others thought about craftivism, I undertook a survey of 13 people at two making days during October and November 2019 and found that:

- When participants were asked 'When something you own breaks (example: coffee table) you are more likely to:' 85% said they would 'Attempt to fix it' rather than 'throw it away and buy a new higher quality one', 'make a new one' or 'throw it away and buy a cheap one'.
- When asked 'Do you believe everyday actions are a form of activism?' only 15% said 'No'.
- One anonymous participant when prompted with the question 'Can you describe any specific instances where making or fixing something yourself has made you feel proud/ useful/ accomplished?' explained that "Making cards for family members, feels more genuine than buying one"<sup>55</sup> which is a great craftivist micro protest as it doesn't give money to any large companies and the cards will have a higher perceived value to the receiver as they have been handmade using craft skills.

I completed another survey in November which focussed on the accessibility that craftivism allows for people to be more engaged in activism, so I asked 'Can you describe any specific instances where art has helped you engage with a movement?' and found:

<sup>55</sup> Respondant 3, (2019) [Questionnaire] 4<sup>th</sup> October

- One participant explained that “Being new to the UK, art has helped me to engage with XR in a ‘hands on’ way, hardly being impeded by any language barrier. For me, craftivism creates an inclusive movement”<sup>56</sup>
- A (male) participant said that he “learnt to sew”<sup>57</sup> in these maker days, which shows how these circles of makers are carrying on the make do and mend traditions via activism.

A criticism of my surveys is that my participants are not representative of the wider population because they were already attending a making event. However some of these people were first time attendees of such an event so could be seen as more closely representative of the wider general public.

The mindfulness aspect is an important feature of the craftivism movement as the process of painting, stitching and other crafts activities allow you to be present and self-reflecting while taking part in a process that keeps your hands and motor skills busy. The nature of craft is slow. It takes time to create things and is the opposite of instant gratification; this links back to the slow movement mentioned in the Slow Design section. Creating something that takes time demonstrates to others that you truly believe in the meaning behind what you are crafting, the amount of time you have spent, and the level of thought gives the message that much more integrity. The intimate nature of this type of small-scale, mindful activism is a step in the direction of sustainable consumerism.

A notable example of Craftivism principles in other parts of the world is Ghandi, who hand spun his own cloth - khadi - as a form of resistance against the British Empire's control over India and its monopoly of the textile trade. He said that “the villagers were drained of their varied occupations and their creative talent and what little wealth these brought them”<sup>58</sup>. Making his own was a small scale simple rebellious act, as the craft skill that goes into making the cloth demonstrates that you do not need the large scale commercial consumerism that comes with colonisation and globalisation of conglomerated industry which came with the British to India.

The People's History Museum<sup>59</sup> in Manchester has a ‘Protest Lab’ section where they have examples of placards and a selection of stencils and ‘how to’ guides on making for marches for those who want to get involved. They also have events such as ‘There is no Planet B Creative Disobedience Day’<sup>60</sup> (27/10/19) where, for example, representatives of Extinction Rebellion had a stall where members of the public could do woodblock stamping onto their clothes. This in itself is a good example of how the craft of woodblock printing can be used in activism: it allows you to repeat print messages quickly and easily onto pre-existing clothes and fabrics rather than buying a whole new piece with one message. It also allows the clothing to be totally unique, and customisable in terms of message and print

<sup>56</sup> Respondant 2, (2019) [Questionnaire] 30<sup>th</sup> November

<sup>57</sup> Respondant 10, (2019) [Questionnaire] 30<sup>th</sup> November

<sup>58</sup> Chakrabarty, B. (2006) *Social and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. India. Routledge. p. 140

<sup>59</sup> People's History Museum (2019) *Home page* [Online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://phm.org.uk>

<sup>60</sup> People's History Museum (2019) *‘There is no planet B’ Creative Disobedience Day at People's History Museum* [online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://phm.org.uk/there-is-no-planet-b-creative-disobedience-day-at-peoples-history-museum/>

colours, however, they do not show the craft that goes into making the woodblocks themselves.

“The new ‘activist’ is someone who recognises that their daily actions are changing the world, and they intentionally choose actions to create the world they want.”<sup>61</sup> Activists can make people more aware of the issues surrounding materialism and consumer culture through a form that is more gentle and approachable. Craftivism is a less aggressive way of asking the big questions about how function in modern society than conventional activism - it allows people who are not involved to be more open minded towards your ideas.

We all are activists, adjusting the world with our daily actions. This is why I have adapted my practice as a maker away from traditional ceramics, which uses a lot of energy from multiple kiln firings, to using cob. Cob is a traditional building material made from sand, clay, straw and water and air dries. I chose this pathway after I attended ‘Clay Day’<sup>62</sup> at The Centre for Alternative technology where I learnt how sustainable and versatile the material was, while maintaining many of the qualities of clay that I love. The connection with the environment that handling cob brings to me helps remind me that we are part of the natural world. My future practice will involve other people in craftivism projects based on making with cob, allowing people to craft and connect to the natural world by getting their hands dirty.

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<sup>61</sup> Mallett, L, A. (2017) The World Needs a New Definition of Activism [Video File] TEDxSantaBarbara [https://www.ted.com/talks/lea\\_ann\\_mallett\\_the\\_world\\_needs\\_a\\_new\\_definition\\_of\\_activism](https://www.ted.com/talks/lea_ann_mallett_the_world_needs_a_new_definition_of_activism) (9:15-9:29) [Accessed 9th November 2019]

<sup>62</sup> The Centre for Alternative Technology (Unknown) *Clay Day* [Online] [Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2019] <https://www.cat.org.uk/events/clay-day/>

## **Conclusion**

In my eyes, the problem with the world is not just consumption, but over-consumption. Our obsession with more and fast is what is driving us into environmental breakdown. The way our society is viewing economic growth over ecological balance means we need to shift our collective thinking, especially at times like Christmas when we are made to think that we need to buy, buy, buy, needs to radically be transformed.

Human Progress does not necessarily mean destruction. When we think for longer of the circularity of an object before producing it, we are more mindful of how we can exist *within* rather than *alongside* the world and its natural operating systems. Think about the life of the object after you no longer need it. We need to be aware that things do not disappear when they go into the bin, they just disappear from our conscious minds and this makes it easier to deflect/ normalise the guilt. Humans are such clever species and we could use that to create a model of ethical consumption that allows for transience.

It is also important not to place blame. However much we want to be able to say it is not our fault or tell someone else it's theirs, so they have to fix it; it is a problem we face as a race and we are all collectively responsible for our behaviour.



## **Self-Reflective Manifesto**

- 1) As a maker I will work with slow principles in mind.

Engage, Participate and Ritual will be especially relevant to my practice. I will make the user central to creating the objects and cause them to be more mindful of everyday rituals. DIY and craft are central to my own slow design inspired philosophy. Materials will be chosen with care. Local and reclaimed wood, as well as cob composite and waste will be my main materials. I will design the world I want to live in, not for the one that currently exists.

- 2) Build a skill-share community. This will be central to start creating a system for active and ecologically conscious individuals.

The creation of a radical alternative to consumerist lifestyle requires the creation of an accessible counter culture; the ability to opt-out of unethical practices by taking charge, making and fixing. This community of co-operative creative minds will be the root of a cultural revolution.

An open source, Fab Lab-esque maker space with a library of tools will reduce the design elitism and reduce the feeling of over-intellectualisation of design, making the processes more relaxed and accessible to passive consumers. I will open up the world of making. I want my practice to influence how others live.

- 3) Surround myself with my personal museum.

Overall, I will own fewer possessions. All objects will have a story, history or personal significance. I will be more mindful of my own consumptive behaviour and be more intentional with where I spend my money. Small businesses and good quality, eco-friendly factors take priority. Objects I will have will inspire creativity, stimulate thoughts. I will know who made it. I will not get taken in by novelty tat and consumerist impulses. My museum of objects will represent aspects of my personality and values.

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- Figure 16 - Extinction Rebellion Manchester Arts Working Group. @xrmcr\_arts . “There Is No Planet Bee”, *Instagram*, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4fJW5LgtJP/>
- Figure 17 – Daniel, M (2019) *Clay Day at CAT, Wales*.

## Appendices

### Questionnaire 1

- Respondant 3, (2019) [Questionnaire] 4<sup>th</sup> October

Respondant's  
Age:

## Consumption Survey

This survey is to help write my  
3rd year Dissertation

All answers will stay anonymous

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Do you believe everyday actions are a form of activism?

Why/why not?

When it is a close one's birthday, you are more likely to:

- a) Buy them an experience or meal
- b) Buy them a present from a large retail shop
- c) Buy them a present from a small/ local independent business
- d) Make them something yourself
- e) Give them money

When something you own breaks (example: coffee table) You are more likely to:

- a) Attempt to fix it
- b) Throw it away and buy a new higher quality one
- c) Make a new one
- d) Throw it away and buy a new cheap one

To what extent do you agree with this statement:  
'We as the consumer vote by what we choose to spend our money on'

Tick which of these which are 'Craftivism'

- ☐ Melissa block stamps her jacket with the Extinction Rebellion logo.
- ☐ Matthew patches up a hole in his jeans, so that he doesn't have to buy a new pair.
- ☐ Claudia writes 'Don't be a fossil fool!' on a piece of cardboard in bubble writing and holds it up at a protest
- ☐ Harrison and his family decide that they will only wrap their Christmas presents in old newspaper this year
- ☐ Harry sews up some flags at home, which later get printed and flown at a protest.
- ☐ Iona knits a scarf for her friends birthday present

Can you describe any specific instances where making or fixing something yourself has made you feel proud/ useful/ accomplished? Why do you think this is?

## Questionnaire 2

- Respondant 2, (2019) [Questionnaire] 30<sup>th</sup> November
- Respondant 10, (2019) [Questionnaire] 30<sup>th</sup> November

Your answers will remain anonymous.

### Consumption Questionnaire

**How old are you?**

Under 18	18-25	26-40	41-65	Over 65
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**Do you believe everyday actions are a form of activism?**

**Yes**

**No**

**Please circle the answer that fits you most**

When something you own breaks (example: coffee table) You are more likely to:	Throw it away and buy a new cheap one	Attempt to fix it	Throw it away and buy a new higher quality one		Make a new one
When it is a close one's birthday, you are more likely to:	Buy them a present from a large retail shop	Buy them a present from a small/ local independent business	Buy them an experience or meal	Make them something yourself	Give them money
'We as the consumer vote by what we choose to spend our money on'	Strongly agree	agree	Neither agree or disagree	disagree	Strongly disagree

**Which of these would be 'craftivism' to you?**

Yes No

Melissa block stamps her jacket with the Extinction Rebellion logo.

Matthew patches up a hole in his jeans, so that he doesn't have to buy a new pair.

Harry sews up some flags at home, which later get printed and flown at a protest.

Claudia writes 'Don't be a fossil fool!' on a piece of cardboard in bubble writing and holds it up at a protest

Harrison and his family decide that they will only wrap their Christmas presents in old newspaper this year

Iona knits a scarf for her friends birthday present

**Can you describe any specific instances where making or fixing something yourself has made you feel proud/ useful/ accomplished?**

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