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Design in the South: Social object in teaching and research

Education challenge

Craft and design education equips students to produce objects of artistic and utilitarian value. This model is challenged in recent times by several trends. The democratisation of tertiary education has seen a reduction in the number of teaching hours available for tuition. While computer-based skills such as PhotoShop can be automated, the traditional craft skills involved in a field such as ceramics require sustained face-to-face contact.

Coinciding with this has been a decline in student interest in single focus craft education. Preference is instead for skill on demand which allows for flexibility in selection of options to suit creative interests during the course of an art degree. We see this for instance with the teaching of jewellery at Monash University, which is available for all students yet lacks a path of specialisation.

Reinforcing this is the decline of manufacturing in Australia; since the 1960s, its share of national employment has dropped from 25 to 8% (Gittins 2014). And as Nicholas Carr argues in the *Shallows* (2011), the multi-tasking afforded by technology platforms leads to shorter attention spans and lack of focus.

A common source of distraction is Facebook, which provides an abstract and remote platform on which to conduct social relations that were previous mediated by things. As a teacher, I am surprised to find now that in an average classroom all the students have Facebook accounts. During a recent poll of students, I found that a generation is coming through that have never sent a physical birthday card.¹

¹ One student from UNSW, Halla Hannesdottir, made a gift to give someone not on Facebook. From her description: 'A bracelet that displays the fact that the wearer has spent time in natural surroundings during the day. The beads collect sunlight and glow in the dark so that at the end of the day the wearer will be reminded that he's put effort into not

While we may bemoan the loss of depth in Facebook friendships, there is a positive dimension to the dematerialisation of consumption. Geoff Mulgan argues in *The Bee and Locust* (2013) that there is the growth in the 'relational economy', where value is increasingly found in relations between people, such as care and education.

So the challenge is to think of a way of providing craft and design education that includes relational value among the artistic and utilitarian dimensions of the object. This challenge is aided by the considerable literature that is growing around the field of Actor Network Theory, in which objects have a value as embodied forms of social relations. As Bruno Latour writes in *Reassembling the Social* (2005), 'technology is society made durable'. For instance, while feelings of love may fluctuate during the course of a marriage, the wedding ring affords particular activities such as the wedding ceremony and daily care that adds an enduring framework to a relationship.

How can craft and design education respond to the relational turn? For craft education, this entails changing the focus from individual creative expression to ways in which individuals connect together. And for design, it means thinking of objects not as instruments for a predictable purpose, but as agents of social action.

Design in the South

I believe there is a special opportunity here to nurture a craft and design practice that responds to the settler colonial condition. In recent years, the field of southern theory has emerged to question the universal presumptions that have underlain disciplines such as sociology (Connell 2007) and art history (Elkins 2007). This has opened up new perspectives, particularly from Indigenous thought, such as the Buen Vivir movement in Ecuador and Bolivia (Fatheuer 2012).

A recent conference at Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano in Bogotá turned the focus of southern thinking to design —is there a design specific to the south? Cameron Tonkinwise travelled from Carnegie Mellon University to argue that the northern paradigm for design had collapsed. It was unable to deal with the environmental limits that are confronted through commodification in consumer capitalism. The more

wasting time inside on the computer but has rather chosen to spend time outside. The bracelet therefore acts as encouragement to spend more time in natural surroundings.'

collective sensibility of cultures of the South have potential to offer alternative paradigms for the north.

While this argument has validity, there is an alternative approach that has particular relevance to the Australian condition. As a colonised country, Australia experienced a process of re-evaluation whereby the Aboriginal cultures already inhabiting this land were devalued as primitive and transitory. One example of this was in ornament (Skinner & Murray 2014), where early exchanges involved an uneven match between the European trinkets, involving processed materials such as nails, mirrors and beads, and the native sacred objects usually made from organic matter such as grasses and seeds. This scene formed part of a general colonial sensibility typical of the British Empire that reduced all objects to their commercial exchange value. This was particularly evident in the demonization of the fetish (Pietz 1985) as an object of infantile mentality.

A major post-colonial challenge is to recover the status of the object as an agent of social value. Louis Hamby's work (Hamby & Young 2001) has been instrumental in legitimating fibre as ornament in a museum context.

More generally, Actor Network Theory provides a theoretical framework for re-considering the value of the object as more than a utilitarian thing but as a mediator that is key to sustaining social relations.

Social Object

To address this challenge, a course has been developed in the subject of Social Object. Social object is defined as an entity whose purpose is to regulate social relations. This can be to connect people together, as in a friendship bracelet, to introduce new members of a group through a welcome garland, to elevate an individual above others through the use of a crown, or to expel someone from the group through the use of a stigma.

Amulet

The methodology emerged during the development of an exhibition whose purpose was to foster a contemporary jewellery network across the Pacific, between Latin

America and Australasia. The Joyaviva idea involved a design challenge to develop a modern amulet. Workshops were held in different countries to develop proposals based on particular local needs for luck. These included the voyages of asylum seekers in Australia, the transfer of traditional responsibility between generations in New Zealand, the recovery from earthquake in Chile and the drug violence in Mexico. A number of workshops at the Universidad de Valparaiso in Chile helped develop a methodology for creating and testing social object prototypes.

The project was not premised on any 'new age' understanding of luck as the result of mystical forces such as astrology or divine will. The concept of luck was presented relationally as a space where action can be interpreted beyond individual accountability. A friend who wishes you 'good luck' is implying that your possible failure will not be something they judge you against. The amulet is a guarantee of this unconditional support.

Examples include:

- Alice Whish, Smart Charms/Encantos Inteligente, 2011, mild steel, vitreous enamel, enamel pencil, pacific sand, silk string, pearl shell, 250mm long, each object 33 x 20mm
- Areta Wilkinson, Arohanui (much love) for the whanau of Rapaki / Mucho amor por la comunidad de Rapaki, 2011, satin, varied supermarket packaging, plastic bucket, many, 60 x 60 mm each, photograph by Mark Adams
- Jacqui Chan, Brooch from 'Host A Brooch' / Broche de 'Ofrece un broche', 2011, cable, silver, 90 x 70 x 30mm
- Angela Cura Mendes, Project Ekeko / Proyecto Ekeko, 2011, copper, 45 x 40 x 20 mm each
- Cristina Celis, SANA / Limpia con Huevo, 2013, Cerámica, cáscaras de huevo
- San Título collective, 2014, photograph by Alberto Davila

The modern amulet has been the subject of two iterations of Social Object at University of New South Wales. The theoretical background comes from a number of sources. These include:

- The concept of the gift in anthropology, particularly through the work of Marcel Mauss (1966)
- The sociology emerging from Durkheim including Hannah Arendt (Arendt 1998) and Richard Sennett (Sennett 2010) that identifies respect for objects as indicative of the social strength
- Phenomenological perspectives that involve an understanding of the world through the perspective of things, from Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 2004) to Tim Morton
- Psychoanalytic understandings of the desire for objects, from Freud's theory of the fetish to Winnicott's concept of the transitional object, particularly as articulated by Bonnie Honig (2012)
- The role of objects in story-telling within the context of narrative psychology (Murray 1995)
- The field of ethical design (Fry 2011) that highlights the labour relations that are embodied in the manufactured object

While much is learnt from this theoretical literature, a great deal of information comes from traditional practices.

More recently versions of the Social Object at RMIT University have explored other designs such as the love token and welcome garland. Planning is underway with the Universidad Tadeo in Colombia to hold a shared studio that will consider the design of objects to help in the expression of regret. Colombia has been wracked by a conflict between left and right-wing guerrillas that has left 92,000 people dead. There is currently discussions in Cuba about a peace deal that promises to bring this to an end. But this will leave the challenge of dealing with the anger and blame that remains from the damage caused. The function of the 'sorry object' is to allow for the safe and genuine expression of apology and sympathy from someone linked to the problem. If accepted, this object can then be used by the victim to express forgiveness. The object is designed to afford this transaction.

In Australia, there are everyday situations where an object would be useful, such as forgetting a lunch date or saying something insensitive to a friend. But there is also the historical dimension in the unfinished process of reconciliation between

Aboriginal and settler populations. Workshops are planned in Australia and Latin America next year, resulting in a website, publication and local exhibitions.

Conclusion

Social object offers one way of re-focusing the material sensibilities of craft and design so that they can become more relevant to the relational values that characterise our historical moment.

There are two issues that challenge this current situation.

First, the social object does not warrant craft skills. A simple thread wound around a wrist can provide a compelling demonstration of friendship. There is minimal manual skill or effort involved. In this context, the main use of craft skills is in the time that is invested in the object, which gives it a unique value that can symbolise the importance of a relationship.

Second, the pathways for students seeking to apply what they have learnt are not fully developed. Unlike the established system of art galleries, there are relatively few outlets for social objects. There are new stores in Latin America such as Ocho Fortuna that sell objects for their social meaning. For Australians, it is a matter of fitting these into existing outlets, such as jeweller who might seek to specialise in lucky charms for specific purposes like success in an exam. The hope is that a cohort of graduates will create their own platform for this, as a generation previously of jewellery graduates in Melbourne started businesses like e.g.etal, Funaki Gallery, Studio Ingot and Pieces of Eight to display and sell jewellery as art.

Fortunately, we find already the development of a jewellery festival in Melbourne that promises to make spaces for projects involving the public object. A collaboration is planned between collectives in Australia and Mexico towards this.

Within art, social object is closely aligned with the creative activity known as social practice. This draws not on the buying and selling of works, but partnerships with the social sector, including health and education.

Given these challenges, the social object offers a path to increase the relevance of craft and design in an art education environment that increasingly emphasises the relational value of creative work.

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