

## **Sub-theme 13: Co-workers, Hackers and Makers: Transforming and Making Visible Work Practices**

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### **The making of values: Exploring what motivates upcycling as sustainable work practice**

*What is the relation between thinking and making? [...] It is not that the former only thinks and the latter only makes, but that the one makes through thinking and the other thinks through making. (Ingold, 2013, p. 6)*

#### **Introduction**

In this project, we will be exploring the nature of and motivations behind upcycling practices of upcycling design makers. Based on an initial set of 25 interviews with practitioners of upcycling design processes (design makers, users, material suppliers and retailers) qualitative coding of the design maker interviews revealed a promising ground to conceptualise the role that emerging “valuation in the making” can play in realising sustainable human and environmental wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of those sustainability notions inherent in the work practices, we believe we need to move beyond traditional utilitarian motivations for sustainable (business) practices and embrace a more nuanced and often paradoxical understanding of what sustainability means (Hahn et al., 2015a; 2015b). To inform our understanding of sustainability motivations, we will explore the pragmatic valuation that takes place through what John Dewey (1934/1989) may have called ‘consummatory

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<sup>1</sup> As we have doubts whether the qualitative analysis (Nvivo) of the existing interviews and field visits alone will allow us to fully gauge the relationship between making and valuation, the current state of analysis should be seen as a sample foundation for a second round of in-depth interviews with the share of design makers on the processes of human material making towards sustaining wellbeing. The full paper version will include the respective analysis of such in-depth interviews.

experiences' amongst upcyclers. In doing so, we relocate related forms of ethical design making, and its role in the emergence of values, within the imaginative and skilled aesthetic practice of valuation as the process of material engagement (Ingold, 2013).

Upcycling, which is defined as material-making with discarded materials, involves collecting, sorting, assembling and crafting. As such, it can be framed as a local, spontaneous and collaborative process that holds immediate aesthetic, psychological, social, cultural and environmental value. From this perspective, we argue that upcycling motivations and commitments to sustainability can only be properly conceptualised if prevailing utilitarian economic reasoning take a back seat (as means and not ends in itself) to make room for meaning-making practices (see Walker, 2017). This may allow us to conceptualise alternative notions of valuation of a more inter- and intra-subjective nature in relation to the immediate environment. In fact, we explore whether these subjective sustainability 'values' are not in fact 'made' materially, and central to wellbeing. To make this case, we will map the emerging themes around the nature of and motivations for upcycling practice from our coded empirical data onto the dimensions of the pheno-practice of wellbeing developed by Painter-Morland et al. (2017) (see Figure), to articulate the relationship between sustainable wellbeing and materially 'made' values.<sup>2</sup>

### **A redefinition of 'values'**

According to the pragmatist John Dewey (1939) 'no theory of valuation is possible'. Valuations are simply empirically observable patterns of behaviour. What this perspective allows us to conceptualise, is that studying the practices of upcyclers is actually the clue to understanding their values and the emergence of ethical conduct. Dewey and Tufts (1947) describe ethical conduct as a reflective practice, comprised of past human experience that flows into situational assessing, deciding and acting (now) in anticipation of consequences for the future. For Dewey, the moral self is one that is always a work-in-progress, constituted through 'active habits'. When the routine takes over, the growth of the moral self is arrested (Pagan, 2008, p. 244). As such, the always surprising creative process of collection, disassembling and re-assembling is in fact the key to understanding the values that underpin sustainability.

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<sup>2</sup> This mapping will be done for the full paper on basis of the analysis including the second interview round. See developed framework *Integral Pheno-Practice of Wellbeing* in attachment.

Rather than seeing values as fixed ‘ends’, Dewey argues for the perspective of ‘ends-in-view’ in which values are continuously constructed through practice and are subconsciously ‘remade’ in acts of expression. Though Dewey (1989, p. 69) celebrates the way in which Aristotelian philosophy does not advocate a separation between the theory nature and the theory of culture, he does not believe in good and natural perfect ends that are fixed principles to pursue. Instead ends are experimentally or dynamically determined and are relative, not absolute. Seeing the relationship between values and practices like upcycling from this perspective, reveals it to be less of case of having a set of hierarchically organised principles which determine behaviour, and more an ongoing process of valuation that has to be sustained over time.

Dewey’s ethical theory involves not only ad hoc problem solving, but is in fact based on creative social action within specific conditions. He believes that human beings are more interested in consummations than in preparations (Dewey, 1994, p. 60). A consummatory experience is defined as experimental practices in which the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment or when some experiences have in itself its own consummation, beginning and end. The example he gives of ‘an experience’ that of the perfect meal in the perfect restaurant. In such *an* experience, successive parts flow, but do not give up self-identity. Consummations are stumbled upon spontaneously and accidentally. It is also important to acknowledge the relationship between labour and play, in fact, they lend each other pattern and plot.

These consummations can be seen at play in Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934/2005) in which he discusses ‘acts of expression’ in the creation of art. Here, we argue that the upcycling artefacts can be seen as one of these creative acts of expression in its undertaking. Dewey argues that every complete experience starts with impulses which are transformed into meaningful undertakings. These impulses can only be satisfied through interactions with the environment which become means to a conscious consequence, utilising tools, property, relationships and institutions. These expressions contain neither the past events which have influenced the expression, nor actual current events or acts. Instead, it is: “[...] an intimate union of the features of present existence with the values that past experience have incorporated in personality” (Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 74). Here an act of expression blends the conscious with the unconscious, bringing into play conscious intent

with the values, ideas and emotions shaped by past experiences which are also progressively reformed, as are the physical materials that constitute a work of art, here upcycled artefacts. This objectification of values and emotion is therefore translated into the esthetic, and whilst Dewey acknowledges the problems inherent in conferring esthetic quality into all acts of production or creation, he notes the benefit to communities of the remaking of the material of experience in the act of expression. Here we argue that acts of upcycling not only remake the materials of experience in an intangible sense, but also include the remaking of tangible elements of experience. Further Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 182) states that there can be: “[...] no perception of an object except in a process developing in time”, and that art, or the esthetic, is awakened by invoking experiences which have significance and value. Here, the effects of a creative act are greater when the multiplication of the effects of its single qualities lead to a consummatory, or unified experience.

The objection against this theory would of course be that ‘values come first’, and that sustainable practices are merely the ‘application’ of these principles. But if we were to believe Ingold, our traditional conceptions of ‘agency’ come up short in understanding most of human behaviour. Humans do not ‘possess’ agency, but instead, we are possessed by action (Ingold, 2013, p. 97). It is this ‘moral agency’ that emerges through action that emerges through action – as human-material movement, that we want to explore in this paper.

### **Human material making and its relationship to valuation**

It is important to acknowledge that although the conception of agency we defend is not that of the independent, calculative subject rationally choosing principles to enact, or mental images to render, ours is not a kind of random, directionless agent either. Dewey’s contention was that expression, containing both conscious intent and the sub-conscious reshaping of experiences, signifies both an action and its result. This is an ongoing process that unfolds over time. From our perspective, this relates to an important distinction Deleuze and Guattari make between an ‘iteration’ of steps, versus an ‘itineration’ (Ingold, 2013, p. 45). ‘Making’, according to Ingold, is about the journey, about activity that flows. This is reminiscent, at least to us, of the ‘consummatory’ experience that Dewey describes. It has an end-in-view, but this ‘end’ emerges in and through practice.

All humans dwell as practitioners situated in the context of an active engagement with the constituents of his or her social and natural/ecological surroundings (Ingold, 2011, p. 5). “Forms of life are neither given in advance nor imposed from above, but emerge within the context of their (social and natural) mutual involvement in a single and continuous field of relationships” (Ebd., p. 87). This refers to the making of artefacts that are generated in and through the practical movement of skilled agents in their active, sensuous engagement with the material.

In a meshwork of human and materials, “makers follow the flow, guided by intuition in unbroken contrapuntal coupling of gestural dance, bringing forth of potentials that are immanent in a world of becoming. [...] Things are continuously becoming in a form-taking activity” (Ingold, 2012, p. 436). In line with the phenomenological idea of Merleau-Ponty, Ingold (2012) describes how human dynamic bodies engage with and take-in materials from their surroundings. By opposing hylomorphism, aligning animate and inanimate processes of becoming, and placing the maker as a participant in amongst a world of active materials, Ingold frames ‘making things’, in our case making things of discarded material, not as a process of transcription but a process of growth (Ingold, 2011, p. 88) (as a morphogenetic process). The generativity of action is that of animate life itself and lies in the vitality of its materials. Instead of a theory of agency we need one of life – “that allows matter its due as an active participant of the world’s becoming.” (Barad, 2003, p. 802, in: Ingold, 2013, p. 97). Could it be that moral motivation emerges in response to the interactions of brains, bodies and things in the world, or in the correspondences between material flows and sensory awareness (Ingold, 2013, p. 98)?

### **Sustainable wellbeing**

Though much of the sustainability literature makes either principled or utilitarian arguments for living sustainably, such conceptions still rely on outdated understanding of the rational *homo economicus* calculating her/his own self-interest. However, multiple articulations of the ‘business case’ for sustainability reveal that a simple calculation of facts does not explain human motivation (Painter-Morland and ten Bos, 2016). It seems we still cannot measure, nor manage what matters most in ethics and sustainability. If sustainability is understood as an unending process defined neither by fixed goals nor the specific means of achieving them, but by dynamic and moving targets responding to interdependencies between social and ecological systems (Ceschin and Gaziulusoy,

2016), we need to acknowledge the ongoing task of understanding interrelationships and interdependencies in the ‘making’ of our commitments to sustainability.

Our contention is that we will understand the motivations behind sustainable living much better if we decentralise the human from her/his autonomy, propriety, and idealism. In fact, we share more with the animate and inanimate than we used to believe and it directly affects our wellbeing. In fact, from their analysis of both the economic and philosophical wellbeing literature, Painter-Morland et al. (2017) come to the conclusion that ‘wellbeing’ is a combination of intra-subjective variables, inter-subjective variables, objective individual variables, and inter-objective variables (see Figure). More importantly, wellbeing is not something that we arrive at once and for all – we are always involved in the pheno-practice of becoming-well. Understanding the relationship between wellbeing and sustainable living requires of us a new process-oriented, relational human-material conception of valuation.

That said, it cannot be denied that objective individual variables like finding employment and generating income are seen as means to sustain a living in relation to upcycling practices and emerging artefacts/goods. Yet to understand why upcycling design makers chose this specific avenue for sustaining themselves, we contend that ‘subjective’ variables are equally important. These ‘subjective’ dimensions relate to connectedness to other people, things, environments. We will also explore the role of inter-subjective wellbeing variables such as topophilia (love of place), solastalgia (longing for lost environments) and respect for nature. Inter-subjective variables such as freedom, autonomy, leisure and aesthetics are equally important within the wellbeing literature. In our conversations with upcycling design makers, we explore how these ‘subjective’ variables shape the forms of valuation operative in their practice. Their discussion of their engagement with their material surroundings and communities in and through the making of upcycled artefacts, seems to help them articulate, solidify, and sustain their values, providing them with a sense of freedom, autonomy, and self-realisation. All of these factors together, enables the ongoing processes of becoming-well, becoming-ethical and living sustainably. In fact, we want to explore the possibility that situated sustainability ‘values’ emerge in and through our connections with the material process of making.

## **An example case**

*C has huge passion and expertise for chickens. She holds one in her house, treating it lovingly and communicating with it emphatically. By creating images of chickens in her artworks, C gives the animals a voice and communicates animal rights. In order to create her artworks, all sorts of discarded fabric bits and found materials are collected and assembled. Based on self-promotion in her local community, materials are regularly given by neighbours and friends. Natural materials like stones, sticks and feathers as well as washed-up plastics are picked up on long shore walks. The amount of collected materials by far exceeds the used. Her desire is to build and nurture strong connections to her family and the living environment and thereby leave a positive imprint. It fills C with joy to create with given things around her, and the making has healing effects after a loss of a close friend in her life. She intends to develop her knowledge and skills to increase the efficacy of her activities and attain self-realisation.*

In C's case, the process of making is a process of self- and animate-life expression. If we are correct in contending that values are 'made' through material interactions, then in the case of interviewee C, her respect for and admiration of nature and animals is both result and consequence of her everyday interaction with her material environment and caring for chickens.

## **Tentative conclusion and work to be continued**

In the course of investigating designers' motivations for upcycling, processes of making and value-to-be-created through their practice, the initial interview coding led us not only to trace utilitarian interests, but promising notions of subjective desires attached to the upcycling practice. Utilitarian interests are overall connected to building a business around their creations, selling them as products to interested consumers/users; and to promoting their work respectively. References to subjective desires are connected to the actual practice of upcycling itself, to the meaning and engagement with the materials and the connected values that are interwoven in the making and expressed in the things that emerge from it. This is the 'sphere' of human-material making that in itself entails sustainability notions related to the immediate environment as well as personal well-being.

Upcyclers are most certainly people committed to living according to their values, that is indisputable. What is however interesting to explore, is how these values may be ‘made’ and ‘remade’ on an ongoing basis, and what this may teach us regarding motivations towards sustainable living going forward. Moral agency, from this perspective, becomes what Ingold (2013, p. 100) would call a ‘dance’.

What we hope to discuss in the full paper to be presented at EGOS, is the nature of the relation between material making and valuation towards sustaining human and environmental wellbeing, and how this relationship is articulated and more importantly, enacted.



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**Appendix: Figure**  
Integral Pheno-Practice of Wellbeing

