

Reflections on a Craft Design Protocol

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ABSTRACT

For some years I have been working on a design protocol of craft, which aims to unearth the working principles of one cultural area (contemporary craft) of production for the benefit of another (interaction design). The methodology that led to its formulation comprised my research as a doctoral student in Interaction Design, and made up the bulk of my thesis [22]. The protocol has recently been more fully explored for the craft community, with each tenet explored in more depth [24]; however, several important publications and conferences in the field have emerged since its initial formulation and if it is to have any relevance, the protocol needs to be revisited in light of them. These include Sennett's *The Craftsman* [36], Risatti's *Theory of Craft* [34], and Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft* [1]. In addition conferences such as Neocraft [3], and collections of writings such as Extra/Ordinary [5], which includes Mazanti's SuperObjects model of craft [28], have developed the field immensely. This paper critically reflects on the protocol in this new expanded context.

Keywords

Craft, design methodology

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STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

The paper begins with a short summary of the seven tenets that make up the protocol, an explanation of how it came about through a period of research, and its position within a larger methodological framework. Subsequent sections use each tenet to examine its place in the expanding field of discourse around craft; some space is then given over to a description of how a recent interdisciplinary research project has been informed by the broader craft research methodology; the concluding discussion reflects on the major issues of concern shared by this protocol and current craft theory, and delineates where there are still important differences to be explored.

THE PROTOCOL IN BRIEF – WHY AND WHERE IT CAME FROM

Hallnas and Redstrom have pointed out that if the fundamentals of design are changed then very soon it can no longer be considered design. However, both design and art have been conducting a love affair with craft for some time now, borrowing tropes and signifiers of timescale and commitment in an effort to get closer to 'real' life, to work with concepts of authenticity [23, 28]. This protocol formed part of a larger enquiry into what craft might bring to Interaction Design; in addressing this core aim of the research it was necessary to be able to explain what craft was to other disciplines, and to move if possible beyond the temptation in technologically oriented practices to use craft merely as a prop supporting romantic tales of tradition, or in creating spectacular futures [26]. Instead the goal was to reinstate the object as a thing open to human systems of meaning making in the here and now as in Ingold's conception of a 'world without objects' [19, 20]. The specific domain I was working in was wearable computing, where the dominance of the 'borg' was at the time being newly challenged by practices and aesthetics more usually found in domestic crafts. Researchers in such as Maggie Orth [32] would include in their reflections on design process accounts of being instructed in the (feminine) traditional skills of embroidery and crochet by grandmothers, for example, a narrative visibly

at odds with the post-humanism of the instrumental engineering approach. My experience as a jeweler and contemporary craft gallery manager suggested there was more to craft than this, that there was something more fundamental at work, which might benefit the evolving fields of wearables, interaction design and physical computing. Was it possible to define what that was, and how could it be made available to these other disciplines?

The protocol was one part of a longer four-year program of reflexive research into practice. It was initially informed by an exploratory piece of product design, which aimed to use craft explicitly to engender feelings of familiarity [25], and by interviews with post-graduate level jewellery students and transcripts of talks by internationally recognised jewellers. This primary research, coupled with an ongoing literature review, began to reveal issues of authenticity as design attempts to borrow from craft, and this was subsequently explored fully through a literature review of the evolution of authenticity as a cultural phenomenon [22]. The argument for craft as a site of authenticity followed, citing the ambiguous conceptualizations of the field as proposed by White [39] and Mazanti [26] in relation to calls in the interaction design literature for new approaches to design metaphorical presence beyond use-value [14] and availability of the technological object for critical reflection [4].

At the time, to talk explicitly about craft process was still contentious, and theorists were being careful to defend their work against those who believed such enquiry only serves to destroy the ‘magic’ and romance of craft. To present a protocol suggesting craft might be available to other creative worlds felt something like an act of betrayal. However, over the past few years, the domain of craft theory has expanded dramatically and is gaining credibility with those who make as opposed to write. The conditions presented in the protocol may not all be necessary for craft to exist, nor might they be sufficient, and this paper begins to examine how developments in craft theory challenge, extend or reaffirm them.

THE PROTOCOL: CONDITIONS FOR CRAFT

The conditions are listed here in their original form to give the reader an overview of the protocol. For fuller descriptions the reader is directed to [24, 22].

One :: risk and visual language

the risky non-predetermined process results in original visual language, seen to embody particular political and metaphorical values

Two :: extending material

‘material’ may include traditional materials, technologies, processes and methods, each having their own affordances and constraints

Three :: internalisation and visual language

internalization of material – both source material and the material being worked – is essential for the development of original visual language

Four :: processes of internalisation

this internalization is achieved through action – techniques include drawing, direct manipulation of material, and repeated exposure to the material

Five :: embodied process

control over formal expressive elements at diverse effective ranges is dependent on an embodied understanding of the process of production

Six :: signifiers and authenticity

signifiers of craft are not to be confused with the original visual language which emerges only from the internalization of material

Seven :: undecidability

craft practice, objects and consumption are characterised by an undecidability of purpose and cultural placement. As such, they are unfixed and occupy a unique space between art and life.

The following section brings together some of the broad themes that characterize current craft theory, and discusses these conditions in relation to them.

THEMES IN THE CRAFT LITERATURE

The broad themes discussed here are: networks of production; the sociological dimensions of craft; material consciousness; and material culture. These are arranged in pairs, corresponding first to process, and second to outcome.

Networks of production

Accounts of shared production featuring craftsmanship have focused on the apparent sleight of hand being performed (taking credit for a piece made by someone else) or the reinforcement of the hierarchical cultural struggle between art, craft and design: as artist Jorge Prado says, “I don’t think that art gets made with your hands” [33:15]. We may find that some working relationships are easier to accept than others – Marc Newson trained as a jeweler, and operates as a designer – and even for a jeweler, it is normal practice to employ a specialist to set thousands of sapphires and diamonds as in the case of Newson’s *Julia Necklace* [33]. I have used the word craftsmanship deliberately here, as it is generally skills that are being described in the service of some higher vision. However, it is true also to say that much craft is practiced as a shared endeavour, with many specialists completing different aspects of a larger job. Oppi Untracht’s introduction to his seminal teaching text, *Jewelry, Concepts and Technology*, includes a diagram of related outlooks, specialisms and materials in the field of jewellery and silversmithing [38]. In naming this diagram a *convocation* rather than a map, Untracht was seeking to draw attention to the fact that everyone was welcome and had much to learn from each other. When art or design

approaches craft in this way, we do find cases of practice that make more sense to us: Fred Wilson values the connection that a craftsperson can bring to the fabrication of an artwork, and the “wonderful relationship” that can develop with the artist [33:29].

Sociologists such as Bruno Latour have sought to show that in fact all production is social, and Hutchins goes so far as to claim that cognition itself is distributed, based on studies of navigation on board US navy ships and scientists discussing chemical reactions [17, 18]. Now David Gauntlett is bringing together theories of social capital with creativity to argue that shared creative production can only be a positive force for all of us [12].

Craft has provided the case studies and served as a model for growth and learning in the development of influential pedagogical (and management) theories of communities-of-practice [27], a model which in turn becomes embedded in the pedagogy of craft and design disciplines [11]. Of disciplines themselves, it is becoming harder to draw boundaries as the range of materials available to the maker increases through the efforts of materials science, and indeed, as we extend what we mean by ‘material’ itself. The democratic, convivial character of open source and hacker communities is becoming a part of craft not only as it develops its own overtly political practices in craftivism, but as it engages with new technologies and draws on the expertise of others to serve it in turn. Programming and hardware become material just as much as wood or silver or cloth, and may require that the craftsperson collaborate or outsource to achieve something more than a record of their struggle with the constraints and opportunities of a new process – just as we might not be able to set our own sapphires, so might we not be able to program our own interactive jewellery [40]. Recent research workshops in the domain of design examine the range of such collaborations in a way that craft and even art literature often do not, reflecting on inter, multi and trans- disciplinaryity as social models of knowledge underpinning the new design consultancies [35]. These are mature reflections on authorship and ownership without the anxiety that can still pervade craft discourse. Grace Cochrane’s discussion of Australian and New Zealander makers working across craft and design is an excellent exception [7], and challenges one of the outcomes of the protocol presented here – that is, that the visible authorship of the maker is still important. Instead Cochrane cites makers who find that craft (the control of a process of production from start to finish) and craftsmanship (skill with a particular material) are bound up in many different ways with scalable, sustainable production. It is this first dimension that the protocol misses, and my assumptions about ‘fine craft’ as the focus of the research at the time are clearly revealed.

The sociological dimension

Adamson cites Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics and the shift from studio to site as recent functions of the move away from an individualistic modernism in craft [1:165], and points out how site at least conflates the spaces of

production and consumption. Such leveling can also be found in current thinking in sociology and in philosophy – objects and people, ideas and institutions, tools and media, are seen as potentially having equal importance.

In Interaction Design, the dominant model of engagement with technology as inherited from HCI was initially a one-to-one (person to machine) relationship. This has quickly been replaced as technologies become increasingly, explicitly distributed. My own attempts to bring craft and technology together began with a hardware/software hybrid whose creators saw it as the generic platform for Ubiquitous Computing – computing embedded in everything (a paradigm which grows apace, and which includes the concept of the Internet of Things for example). This networked technology, and a research question focused on how people make sense of novel things, led to my concentrating on the ways jewellery acts as a shared form of social expression rather than on aspects of intimacy or memory. In developing the craft design protocol and examining authenticity, there was a clear relationship between how authenticity has been understood at any given time in history, and how the individual has been seen as a part of society. That is, craft’s authenticity today includes a social dimension whereas the modernist form of authenticity has depended on the heroic individual, the lone genius who does not have to work through those tedious 10,000 hours to achieve mastery, but is instead inspired, or enlightened. Again, the protocol has not addressed the social reception of craft; rather, the jewellery made as part of the larger research methodology was wirelessly (and aesthetically) networked to reflect the social and cultural world of a particular female friendship group [22].

Material consciousness

If the protocol ignored the social aspects of craft, it emphasized the maker’s engagement with material as an end in itself. Responses in the interviews describing how some makers ‘operate within the matter itself’ [6:130] are echoed by Cochrane’s findings demonstrating the importance of drawing and scribbling, of face to face communication and of developing responses to material: material experiences lie behind creative processes [7:71]. The makers working with industrial methods she cites in NeoCraft echo Pye’s analysis of scales of engagement (diverse effective ranges) with objects and surfaces, and the corresponding need to be in contact with the different processes of production: Cochrane quotes flatware designer Oliver Smith as saying he learns, checks results and better understands each process with each visit to the ceramic casters he works with [7].

Sociologist and anthropologist Tim Ingold says that “the intentionality of skilled practice inheres in the action itself in its qualities of attentiveness and response whether or not any prior intentions are affixed to it” [20]. It is this processual design that craft celebrates and seeks to make evident through its objects. The extension of material to include new technologies, computation or the social world, does not change this conversational model, nor

does the wide range of tools at our disposal. Recent observational research shows that the craftsperson is fully cognizant when the whole environment (workshop) can be brought into play in conversation with a material through a kind of choreography [15, 21], a complex “prosthetic outgrowth” [20] in a performance of distributed cognition.

Art and design have pursued Ingold’s hylomorphic model of separation of matter (nature) and form (culture) in their own ways, attributing higher cultural value to the concept and the geometric plan. Craft in the meantime has sought to articulate what Ingold is suggesting here – that deliberate and highly skilled activity is not dependant on prior intention, but on an engagement with material that is more akin to language [20].

Material culture

Sennett’s writing on changes in pottery production suggests how material consciousness in the form of embodied practice becomes material culture, pointing out that changes in decoration as a result of new slip techniques could have economic value. He too holds that the “craftsman, engaged in a continual dialogue with materials, does not suffer” the divide between understanding and action [36:125]. This bridge between the experience of the maker and the cultural narratives of the object is interesting not only for material culture but also for our discussions of creative disciplines, as the aesthetic results of such engagement with matter very often come to signify identifiable communities of expertise. New materials such as precious metal clay (PMC) can reveal this anew as makers work through the techniques to work with and against the properties of the material, and new criteria for successful work emerge in the process. PMC has for example made very visible the debate around amateurism in metal working and jewellery in particular, with a large amount of work taking advantage of the clay’s impressionability – for a ‘fine craft’ audience, these works typically do not demonstrate the skills in finishing which have grown out of an engagement with metals in a different type form. Work that balances an engagement with PMC’s inherent malleability with traditional control of finishes in metalsmithing is more readily accepted.

Adamson’s introduction to the Craft In Action section of his 2010 edited volume contains a shock – he suggests that anthropologists often look to artisanal products to understand the everyday life of a culture [2:457]. He is right, but think for moment of the craft objects in your own home – not many of them, and not many of those are for use alone, but may play a role as ‘fine craft’ displayed for status and contemplation. Tanya Harrod writes of “house trained art objects” [16], reminding us of the alternative history in which real life has a tendency to muddle the neat divisions of art object and craft. In a review of NeoCraft, a lack of research “considering the role and significance of craft activity to consumers or to patterns of consumption” is noted [29], and I agree that there is a wider paucity of this kind of work. However,

theoretical advances are being made in particular by Louise Mazanti, whose recent writing (or original theories recently available to English readers) shows craft sitting astride the rarefied world of art and everyday life with reference to aesthetic theory and material culture [28]. Accounts of ownership and attachment can be found in the ethnographically informed research of the likes of Daniel Miller [31], and before him, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton [10], and Alison Clarke brings together writing on design and anthropology, looking both at how design employs observational techniques in user research, and at how designed objects fare once in the domestic sphere [8].

The seventh condition of the craft design protocol stated that craft practice, objects and consumption are characterized by an undecideability of purpose and cultural placement. This referenced Mazanti’s theory of the super-object, and attempted to extend it beyond the frame of material culture to include practices and experiences of use and consumption. In studying how the friendship group constructed meanings around my networked jewellery, I found that crafted technological objects were configured by the women variously as proximity devices, a system for personal expression on the body, and autonomous craft objects. More importantly, these configurations were dynamic and shifted according to the tenor of the ‘conversational floor’ (a democratic style of conversation apparent in female communication according to Coates [9]). This may have been due to the objects being unfamiliar (although the women had been party to designs and concepts over two years), to the group being all female, if we are to accept Coates’ ideas on communication, or may be to do with these objects being craft. Certainly the women had no problems merging usefulness and aesthetic expression, or in separating them when appropriate [22].

Risatti’s argument for the craft object chimes with Ingold’s account of the coming together of nature and culture in the very act of making. He argues that craft has both a ‘natural’ and a ‘social’ life, saying that “more properly the purely functional in craft is never pure but is always latent with meaning” [34]. I would add that the reverse is also true, that craft is never entirely autonomous even at its most modern.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER WORK

Sandra Alfody states in the introduction to Neocraft [7:xxi] that: “We have a long way to go before we can discuss the differences between individual and collective craft production, authored and anonymous craft objects, and how to level the playing field for crafts in our globalized economies” – and in addition, she suggests we need to reflect on how feminism is being dealt with. These are areas which the protocol has not dealt with, and which largely are missing from today’s craft literature. Further, one of the most obvious aspects missing in the protocol is an explicit consideration for the role of touch, although conditions four and five – processes of internalization, and embodied process - allude to it. This

omission is being addressed through current and proposed work with a group of textile designers working with new technologies [11]. Metcalf talks of Wagner's synaesthesia in opera production, saying that we "do not consider how sight, touch and hearing can be organized in a unified composition" [30:28] – but we find in language and neuroscience [37], and in the research of, for example, the Glasgow multi-modal interface group [13], some indications of what this kind of research might look like.

In the end such a protocol is a product of our own education and experience – this protocol is a product of my journey from a (fairly conservative) training in jewellery through encounters with interaction design to the facilitation of interdisciplinary textile projects, all within a Western historical framework and employing a pragmatic research methodology. Where other models differ or have similarities, we find corresponding differences and commonalities in outlook formed by practices of making research. The most satisfying models are of course those that speak directly to our own experience, but the most rigorous are those that reveal their own processes of evolution. In the end, the stated aim of this protocol was to improve the awareness of design when employing craft to approach authenticity. It sought to show that a craft approach to production would provide a context for a craft approach to consumption. That is, that the creative engagement of the process (creating meaning through action) might be continued through the craft object as undecidable thing, as the "the commitment of the maker to the work is an invitation to the viewer to reciprocate with a similar level of commitment" [22:31].

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