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# Sell (It) Yourself: Marketing Pleasure in Digital DIY

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# Sell (It) Yourself: Marketing Pleasure in Digital DIY

## **Abstract**

DIY (do-it-yourself) craft is in the midst of a North American renaissance, and the reasons attributed to the phenomenon's meteoric rise are manifold. Thrift, conspicuous consumption, politics, environmental activism, nostalgia, individuality, community: each in turn has been cited as the driving force behind handicraft's recent blossoming. In this dissertation I examine the work of professional and semi-professional crafters through an alternative explanatory lens, one that is noticeably absent from academic investigations of DIY and underutilized in the scholarship on creative work at large: the rhetoric of pleasure. Through an examination of in-depth interviews with Etsy sellers and DIY bloggers, textual analysis of promotional materials from individual crafters and from Etsy.com, and participant observation at indie craft fairs and local knitting groups, I trace pleasure's effect on the chronology of commercial handicraft. First, drawing on Roland Barthes's distinction between *jouissance* and *plaisir*, as well as Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," I argue that the pleasure crafters derive from the act of making DIY is itself bifurcated, at once concretizing and destabilizing their sense of self. I then direct my attention to the handcrafted object's sale, maintaining that both *jouissance* and *plaisir* are folded into the professional crafters' marketing narratives to build their personal brands and signal their creative authenticity. Finally I consider interactions between individuals in the craft community and the nature of the Etsy exchange, suggesting that commercial handicraft functions simultaneously as gift and commodity. However the primacy of pleasure throughout the sale of DIY obscures the challenges that creative entrepreneurship engenders. But in considering these oft unrecognized hardships--the loneliness and isolation; the endless administrative burdens; the pressures of a saturated marketplace--it becomes clear that there is a deep-seated irony at work: the more successful a maker becomes and the bigger her business grows, the farther away she moves from personally experiencing *jouissance*. I conclude by arguing that this paradox is emblematic of neoliberal creative work at large and points to the limits of the creative class thesis. I suggest that the surest path to the pleasures of creative production might in fact lie outside its professionalization.

## **Degree Type**

Dissertation

## **Degree Name**

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

## **Graduate Group**

Communication

## **First Advisor**

Sharona Pearl

## **Keywords**

craft, DIY, do-it-yourself, Etsy, neoliberal creative work, pleasure

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**Subject Categories**  
Communication

SELL (IT) YOURSELF: MARKETING PLEASURE IN DIGITAL DIY

Tara Liss-Mariño

A DISSERTATION

in

Communication

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2014

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SELL (IT) YOURSELF: MARKETING PLEASURE IN DIGITAL DIY

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Tara Liss-Mariño

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to my advisor, Sharrona Pearl, whose prodigious intellect is matched only by her unending kindness. Her keenly insightful (and, at times, dauntingly quick!) feedback constantly pushed me to think about my work in new ways, helping me to write a dissertation I would have not been able to write otherwise. She has been a challenging critic, a generous teacher, a supportive mentor, and a wonderful friend. It has been a tremendous honor to call myself her first Annenberg graduate, and I am profoundly grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her.

I am also indebted to the other members of my dissertation committee. Katherine Sender was my advisor for the first half of my graduate career, and it is thanks to her steadfast support that I dared venture into research topics outside the traditional bounds of communication studies. She advocated tirelessly on my behalf and introduced me to the joys of academic collaboration. Joseph Turow's passion for his research has been an inspiration. He always asked the hard questions and encouraged me to draw connections between my work and the discipline of communication at large. This dissertation is all the better for both of their contributions.

Although at times my project takes a critical view of professional DIY, I have a deep respect for the crafters who have boldly pursued their creative dreams and a great appreciation for those who took time out of their (all too) busy lives to tell me their stories. I am especially thankful to the women of Penn Knitters and Stitch 'n Sip-NoLibs for warmly welcoming such an abysmal knitter into their communities.

I am very fortunate to have had the opportunity to develop as a scholar at the Annenberg School for Communication, an exceptional institution that is made so in large part by its committed faculty and staff. Amy Jordan, David Eisenhower, Litty Paxton, and Peter Decherney are some of the most compassionate teachers with whom I have had the privilege of working and models of the kind of mentor to which I aspire. Joanne Murray, Bev Henry, Rose Halligan, Deb Porter, Donna Edwards, Sharon Black, Min Zhong, Lizz Cooper, and Cory Falk have all been enormously helpful as I have navigated the logistical and technical challenges of researching and writing this project.

My mentors outside the program have been equally instrumental in helping me see this dissertation to completion. Emma Kafalenos, my undergraduate thesis advisor, first introduced me to Barthes and what it means to be a scholar. It is thanks to her encouragement that I embarked on my doctoral adventure, and many years later, I still find myself returning to what I learned from her. I also grateful for the support and friendship of other Washington University in St. Louis faculty, including Sharon Stahl, Mary Laurita, Angela Miller, Elizabeth Childs, and Georgia Binnington. Nights hanging

out with Ryan Keytack and Tonya Jung were a life saver during some of my dissertation's roughest patches and their professional support helped me imagine a life beyond it. Bob Griffin's wisdom was invaluable; his sound judgment and continual reassurance helped me stay a (sometimes very rocky) course.

I was also incredibly fortunate to have experienced graduate school in the company of friends both brilliant and kind. Thanks especially to Laura Gibson, Ali Perelman, Lauren Kogen, Chloe Lee, Susanna Dilliplane, Andrew Crocco, Pitor Szpunar, Jeff Gottfried, Aymar Jean Christian, Heidi Khaled, Brooke Duffy, Matt Lapierre, Nora Draper, Lyndsey Beutin, Chelsea Schafer, and Kevin Gotkin for all of the support and laughs. Emily Thorson and Sarah Vaala were my officemates throughout most of my time at Annenberg and have become lifelong friends. They have inspired me in ways large and small and made my time in Philadelphia a joy. I am forever grateful to have had a seat in Office 141.

Of course I owe my deepest gratitude to my family: to my oldest and closet friend, Kimberly Linton, for the innumerable cards, care packages, cross-country visits and phone calls when they were most needed—and for reminding me that if graduate school didn't work out, I could always try business school. Maureen and Carlos Mariño provided support both emotional and comestible, keeping my kitchen regularly stocked with wine and empanadas. My sister Jennifer Launchi and my brother-in-law John are the best siblings I could ever hope for. I owe an extra thank you to my sister for coming to every single one of my (many) graduations and for cheerfully keeping me company at some very humid craft fairs. My parents, Abby and Steven Liss, have always been my biggest fans and sacrificed so much to make sure that I had every educational opportunity possible. My love of learning is entirely thanks to them; words cannot express my boundless appreciation and love.

Finally, this dissertation would not have been possible without the endless love, support, motivation, and daily sacrifices of John-Carlos, my husband and partner in all things silly and serious. He is my rock and my home, and it is to him that this dissertation is dedicated.

**ABSTRACT****SELL (IT) YOURSELF: MARKETING PLEASURE IN DIGITAL DIY**

Tara Liss-Mariño

Sharrona Pearl

DIY (do-it-yourself) craft is in the midst of a North American renaissance, and the reasons attributed to the phenomenon's meteoric rise are manifold. Thrift, conspicuous consumption, politics, environmental activism, nostalgia, individuality, community: each in turn has been cited as *the* driving force behind handicraft's recent blossoming. In this dissertation I examine the work of professional and semi-professional crafters through an alternative explanatory lens, one that is noticeably absent from academic investigations of DIY and underutilized in the scholarship on creative work at large: the rhetoric of pleasure. Through an examination of in-depth interviews with Etsy sellers and DIY bloggers, textual analysis of promotional materials from individual crafters and from Etsy.com, and participant observation at indie craft fairs and local knitting groups, I trace pleasure's effect on the chronology of commercial handicraft. First, drawing on Roland Barthes's distinction between *jouissance* and *plaisir*, as well as Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," I argue that the pleasure crafters derive from the act of making DIY is itself bifurcated, at once concretizing and destabilizing their sense of self. I then direct my attention to the handcrafted object's sale, maintaining that both *jouissance* and *plaisir* are folded into the professional crafters' marketing narratives to



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## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction: DIY in the Digital Age**

As a journalist recently remarked, DIY “is having its moment” (Storey, 2012), and national statistics seem to support this claim: there are avid crafters in approximately three out of every four US households, and 62.5 million people participated in one or more crafting activities in 2012 alone (Craft & Hobby Association, 2013; J. Morris, 2007; Richardson, 2011). Decidedly au courant celebrities from the likes of Kate Middleton, Jessica Alba, and Katherine Heigl have been photographed engaging in crafty pursuits, and a host of craft-centric television networks (the DIYNetwork, HGTV, CreateTV) has emerged in recent years, broadcasting shows (e.g., “Knitty Gritty,” “Stylelicious,” “Craft Wars,” and “Craft Lab”) obviously pitched towards younger, hipper audiences (Flores, 2012). The profusion of DIY resources available on the internet, including sites like ehow.com, instructables.com, and diyhappy.com, has also provided would-be crafters with an almost boundless trove of information and made it that much easier to teach oneself how to do-it-yourself. Indeed a 2005 national survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that 55% of all adult internet users have looked up “how-to” or “do-it-yourself” information online (Madden, 2005).

But while DIY is clearly in the midst of a North American renaissance, the reasons attributed to the culture’s meteoric rise are as a manifold as the craft practices it encompasses.<sup>1</sup> They are also deeply intertwined and at times quite incongruous, testifying to the fact that craft is remarkably elastic, accommodating a range of distinct

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that DIY culture has not been flourishing on other continents. However North America—and the United States in particular—is the focus of this dissertation.

yet overlapping tensions. Thrift, conspicuous consumption, politics, environmental activism, nostalgia, individuality, community: each has been cited in turn as *the* driving force behind handicraft's recent blossoming.

This dissertation, however, proposes an alternative explanatory lens, one that is noticeably absent from scholarly investigations of DIY and underutilized in research on creative work at large: the rhetoric of pleasure. I maintain that the concept of pleasure is the linchpin uniting the seemingly incongruous desires that motivate contemporary craft practice. Drawing on Roland Barthes's writing about textual pleasure and his distinction between *jouissance* and *plaisir*, as well as Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," I suggest that the experience of creative pleasure that comes with handicraft is itself bifurcated, and this division, in turn, underlies many of the dichotomies that characterize DIY.

In this mixed-methods qualitative analysis, I focus primarily on professional and semi-professional crafters, a population that is considerable and continuously growing. According to a report recently issued by the Craft Organization Development Association (2011), approximately 10% of American crafters, or roughly five million individuals, supplement their income from selling their work. Moreover 30,000-50,000 craft full time, at an increase of about 4000% from CODA's 1999 survey (Jakob, 2013). In considering these individuals who most conspicuously straddle the divide between work and leisure, I investigate how the pleasurable experience of creating becomes strategically transmuted during the sale and circulation of the craft object. In so doing, I analyze the affordances and challenges this marketing narrative engenders and what it reveals about neoliberal landscape that has given it rise.

On a more macro scale this dissertation positions professional crafters as simultaneously emblematic of and antagonistic to larger cultural shifts that have proliferated with along with the rise social media, namely the increasingly ubiquitous practices of self-branding, celebritization, and prosumption. But it also problematizes the strict liberation/exploitation binary that has typically characterized discussion of these digital-age phenomena, illuminating a vast terrain in which pleasure emerges as a complicating factor. Creative producers might be in control of their own media environment and/or the industrial system might be manipulating users for its own financial gain, but both of these schema pale in comparison to what I argue is a far more pressing question: what is producers' affective experience? Does it matter if they are being exploited if they are deriving pleasure in the process? Likewise what is the value of agency without gratification? And how does the *kind* of pleasure experienced change the terms of this debate?

The following chapter first examines in greater detail the myriad reasons scholars and journalists have attributed to DIY's digital-age resurgence. It then situates this multifaceted phenomenon in the context of four intersecting bodies of scholarship that have guided this inquiry: neoliberalism and the rise of the creative industries; the professionalization of leisure; the advent and import of user-generated content; and the underlying mechanism of capital convertibility. This literature review is succeeded by an explication of the terms "craft" and "DIY" as well as a brief cultural history of the practices. The chapter concludes with an overview of methods and a review of the dissertation as a whole.



## Why DIY?

One of the most salient explanations for craft's popularity has been the flagging economy—in the face of the recent financial downturn, individuals are seen as actively seeking out cost-cutting alternatives. Concomitant is the argument that craft provides a way to circumvent mass consumerism and its rampant commercialization. As Greenhalgh (1997) has observed, “whenever the industrial society appears to tip into an especially consumerist phase, real or imagined, and particularly when respected thinkers identify the age as decadent and greedy, craft and design are wont to reveal themselves as the forces of anti-Mammon” (p. 9). Thus the argument is that by participating in a digital culture of DIY, either via the dense web of interconnected craft blogs or through e-magazines and forums, makers build a semi-autonomous world, one that is internally directed and relatively free from the dictates of the marketplace.

This back-to-basics rejection of mass consumerism, in turn, is often framed as a political act: to create something yourself is to simultaneously shun globalization, questionable labor practices, built-in obsolescence, and needless environmental destruction. The primacy of political engagement is visible in the spate of neologisms that has developed in recent years to describe these activities. “Craftivism” (a portmanteau of “craft” and “activism”), “guerilla knitting,” “yarn bombing” and “Punk DIY” all signal a willingness to engage with a lineage that extends from the 1980s punk movement and through the counter-cultural radicalism of the 1960s to the ideological legacy of the Arts and Crafts Movement (Hackney, 2013; Stevens, 2009).

Political awareness is also a pronounced component of Indie craft—perhaps the most visible manifestation of the new wave of craft and the focus of this dissertation.

Characterized by irony, nostalgia, kitsch, and wit, “Craft 2.0” or “Alt Craft” is often positioned by enthusiasts as a means of resisting the homogenization of culture and dehumanizing global supply chain. Faythe Levine, the documentarian behind the film *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design* and crafter the *New York Times* dubbed “the Ambassador of Handmade,” best encapsulates this view: “I believe the simple act of making something, anything, with your hands is a quiet political ripple in a world dominated by mass production, consumerism and commercialism, and that people choosing to make something themselves will turn those small ripples into giant waves. The power of doing something yourself is contagious” (quoted in Groeneveld, 2010). Yet this rejection is generally a cheeky one. The tagline of ExtremeCraft.com, for instance, advertises the site as a “compendium of craft masquerading as art, art masquerading as craft and craft extending its middle finger”; Craftster.com declares “no tea cozies without irony” (Stevens, 2011).

But if craft is championed as radical, it is also paradoxically embraced for its conservative potential. Yoked to the idea of craft-as-thrift is the belief that in turbulent times crafting represents stability, a “solace in the tacit” (Stevens, 2011, p. 45). As Fiona Hackney (2006) posits, the popularity of craft “may be read as a means of addressing the problems and anxieties surrounding the acceleration of modern life (unemployment, the strain of new work processes and their effects on physical and mental life)” (p. 23). This is especially the case in traditional manifestations of craft—the country fair and long storied domestic practices like knitting and needlecraft—in which conformity is typically prized over innovation. These predictable forms of expression

and the repetitive nature of the creative process itself serve as a soothing balm in a world of continual change and challenge.

Similarly, though craft can be a means to flout the mass marketplace, it is also fundamentally commercial. Most DIY sites are sponsored by advertisers, and the majority of DIY projects require the purchase of goods and materials from outside retailers. Just as interesting is the fact that the very process of posting and publicizing one's creations—a critical mechanism by which DIY culture reproduces itself—seems to cement trends and often drives conspicuous consumption, presenting something of a conundrum for those who initially sought out craft activities as a way to bypass the commercial. Moreover many retailers like Urban Outfitters and West Elm consciously limn the handmade aesthetic and sell DIY kits for jewelry, T-shirts, and home décor, reappropriating the fruits of a movement ostensibly opposed to mass consumption (Wellington, 2012).

Equally paradoxical is the fact that craft is portrayed as generative of both autonomy and disempowerment. Many in the academic and popular press have hypothesized that DIY enables its practitioners to derive a sense of accomplishment that in better economic climes would have come from stable employment. Noreen Malone, in a *New York Magazine* features piece, muses about the millennial generation of which she is a part:

Making stuff is what got us smiles from our parents and top billing in refrigerator art galleries. And since we are, as a generation, more addicted to positive reinforcement than any before us, and because we have learned firsthand the futility of finding that affirmation through our employers, we have returned to our stuff-making ways, via pursuits easily mocked: the modern-day pickling, the obsessive Etsying, the flower-arranging classes, the knitting resurgence, the Kickstarter funds for art projects of no potential commercial value. . . this is a

golden age for creativity and knowledge for their own sakes. Our pastimes have become our expressions of mastery, a substitute for the all-consuming career (2011).

Time again, observers and crafters alike stress achievement and empowerment as key motivations behind DIY's cultural contagion; the products of such activity serve as points of pride for the underemployed and tangible reminders of their ability. Yet at the same time, critics have argued that the commoditized nature of consumer craft, with its prefab kits and readymade designs, has resulted in a general deskilling and standardization (Hackney, 2006; Melchionne, 1999).

Likewise DIY practice is simultaneously a product of and reaction to new media. On one hand, practitioners seek out handicraft as an embodied alternative to the anonymized, abstract world of networks and interactive technologies. Yet on the other, contemporary DIY culture is inseparable from its online environment. Not only has the ever-increasing number of DIY websites made it possible for geographically dispersed crafters to communicate and learn from one another with incredible ease, but a number of makers are also reversing the traditional chronology, connecting first online and then moving to offline, in-person gatherings. As crafter Garth Johnson avers, "For the time being, it's the internet that holds the craft world together. . . The handmade nation wields the internet just as effectively as it does a knitting needle or a roll of duct tape" (2008, p. 35). Thus, today's DIY culture is doubly "digital," reliant on the work accomplished by digits of code as much as the digits of the hand.

The entangled relationship between craft, commerce, and new media also underscores another dimension of contemporary DIY, one at the very heart of this dissertation—the conflation of work and leisure. A recent trend piece in *The New York*

*Times* (Williams, 2009) chronicled a number of crafters who have managed to convert their leisure pursuits into their primary source of revenue. Some of the most successful were collecting salaries well into the six figures, and while these high-earning crafters are certainly outliers, they nonetheless point to an increasingly noticeable trend-- individuals who, though one online venue or another, have blurred the lines between leisure and labor. If handcraft is work turned hobby, these makers have once again transformed it into work.

Taken together, the causal factors cited for DIY's recent popularity are so numerous and contradictory that the phenomenon itself is difficult to delimit. Nonetheless it is worth noting that many of the motivations advanced are in fact diametric binaries: frugality *or* consumer excess; the embrace of technology *or* its rejection; radical politics *or* conservative nostalgia, and so on. As I suggest in the ensuing chapters, this peculiar feature of DIY is a consequence of pleasure's very nature, which is itself dichotomous and culturally complex. However to fully appreciate the relationship between craft's affective experience and its social application, one must examine the practice in relation to the greater neoliberal landscape from which it emerges.

### **Neoliberal Creative Work and the Pleasure Mandate**

A set of economic policies as well as a political philosophy, neoliberalism is borne out of the move from Fordism—with its precise standardization, division and commodification of labor—to post-Fordism, a system in which open markets, privatization, and deregulation are prized. Service and knowledge industries have

displaced traditional manufacturing, and in so doing, generated new modes of working. Concomitant has been the privileging of symbolic over material production—what Du Gay and Pryke (2002) call the “culturalization” of the economy—and significant advancements in communication and information technologies have only hastened this transition (Bowring, 2002; Gill & Pratt, 2008). David Harvey (2005) describes the ensuing changes in labor practices as processes of “flexible accumulation,” which include constant innovation, mobility, subcontracting, and as-needed, decentralized production.

In this continually shifting economic and social context, communicators, aestheticians, designers, and marketers have supplanted hierarchical management in driving large portions of the economy. However not only are these cultural intermediaries expected to be well-versed in ever-fluctuating trends, they also need to be adaptable and autonomous, juggling the “lifelong learning” and the “multiple career trajectories” that are the new norm. Gee (1999) has deemed this figure the “shape-shifting portfolio person” and for du Gay (1996), she’s the “entrepreneur of oneself.” But regardless of moniker, it’s clear that neoliberal workers are required to be self-reliant and adept at self-invention.

Complementing this emphasis on autonomy and individualization is the transition from state to private enterprise. Neoliberalism is committed to promoting free market capitalism and competition, and as a result, neoliberal policies shrink public services while they support business interests and private profit. Government provision of services is seen as inefficient, costly, and undermining personal liberty. Consequently they are offloaded to private enterprise whenever possible, and individuals are duty bound to take care of themselves (Luxton, 2010; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). This

commitment to privatization, when combined with the rise in casual labor, means that workers are often untethered free agents and completely responsible for their own occupational fates.

Many cultural critics, industry insiders, and political leaders have welcomed these transformations, extolling the new media workers and other cultural laborers at the heart of the economic shift as “model entrepreneurs” (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004; Reich, 2000). Richard Florida, whose influential book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2004) has been eagerly adopted by policy makers in struggling cities the world over, argues that creativity is now the key factor in shaping thriving postindustrial economies. For him, “new technologies, new industries, new wealth and all other good economic things flow from it” (21). A recent influx of similarly titled books—Ray and Ruth’s *The cultural creatives: how 50 million people are changing the world* (2000); Henry and De Bruin’s *Entrepreneurship and the creative economy: process, practice and policy* (2011); Howkin’s *The Creative Economy: How People Make Money from Ideas* (2002); and Currid’s *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art and Music Drive New York City* (2007)—issue comparable arguments. These authors suggest that there is an emergent demographic segment composed of diverse and autonomous workers who privilege tolerance, experience, and innovation, and that this new group will revitalize flagging cities and stimulate economic growth.

Discourse surrounding the “protean career” (Hall, 1996), the “boundaryless career” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), and the “spiral career” (Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth, & Larsson, 1996) celebrates the autonomy and flexibility this kind of work provides. Not only are creative laborers seen to be the beneficiaries of higher pay, more varied work

opportunities, and robust professional networks, they are also understood to be engaging in work that is intrinsically self-actualizing, meritocratic, and generative of a rich sense of personal identity (Arvidsson, Malossi, & Naro, 2010). Indeed management theorists often use explicitly Marxist rhetoric to describe the personal benefits of creative work. Don Tapscott, for instance, has argued that while in traditional industrial economies, “the worker tried to achieve fulfillment through leisure [and] . . . was alienated from the means of production,” in the contemporary neoliberal digital economy the same worker achieves fulfillment through the “unalienated,” intellectual demands of knowledge work (1996, pp. 48, quoted in Terranova 2000).

However recent empirical studies of creative professionals contest this utopian point of view. Investigation into the on-the-ground labor conditions of fashion entrepreneurs (Arvidsson et al., 2010; McRobbie, 1998), television industry employees (Christopherson, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008; Ursell, 2000) and computer programmers (Gill, 2002; Ross, 2003) reveal that the creative industries are populated by small group of well-paid, relatively autonomous creative elite and what Arvidsson et al (2010) call the “creative precariat”—a growing mass of workers whose skills are in over-supply and who are forced to accept low pay and uninspiring jobs as a result. Among this group, work is generally repetitive and requires no special skill set other than the construction of social networks; in other words, it often resembles non-creative sectors of the service industry more than the “cool” work Florida exalts. Moreover it is often highly unstable, and workers are left in a constant state of anxiety about the source of their next project. Indeed McRobbie (2002) goes so far as to suggest that in these highly competitive, deregulated industries, workers participate in their own “self-exploitation.”



She argues that possibility of self-actualization is especially attractive to those groups most likely to have been previously denied fulfillment through work, namely women and minorities. Moreover as Tokumitsu (2014) points out, the industries that rely most on the rhetoric of pleasure and the underpaid labor it attracts are the feminized ones: fashion, media, and the arts. Ironically, however, women and minorities are the very same demographics most likely to be marginalized and disempowered by the new modes of work.

Given these serious disadvantages of neoliberal creative work, then, why does this segment of knowledge and new media workers continually pursue jobs that leave them underpaid and often unengaged? In short, the “unofficial work mantra of our time” (Tokumitsu, 2014): “do what you love; love what you do.” This dictum commands workers to find labor that feels like anything but, implying that the truest kind of employment is that which feeds our soul. Tokumitsu (2014) traces the aphorism to such varied sources as Martina Navratilova, Francois Rabelais, Oprah and Confucius, but regardless of origin, it has encapsulated the motivation behind many creative workers’ embrace of otherwise problematic and potentially exploitative labor conditions. It also makes explicit the link between vocation and identity that underpins the vast majority of neoliberal employment; creative workers’ satisfaction “is derived from the ability to belong, or imagine themselves as belonging in the future, to a particular scene and lifestyle (even if vicariously lived, which their job gives them” (Arvidsson et al., 2010). Brouillette (2009) describes the prototypical creative worker as an individualist who “sees career success as essential to self-worth. . . she experiences all successes and failures as

manifestations of her own personality, as interior struggles and triumphs she processes through introspection and self-awareness.”

Indeed the rhetoric of pleasure that suffuses accounts of the creative industries has displaced discussion of adequate remuneration. Consider, for instance, “Your Creative Future”, a policy document issued by England’s Department of Media, Culture and Sport. It asks its readers to:

Just imagine how good it feels to wake up every morning and really look forward to work. Imagine how good it feels to use your creativity, your skills, and your talent to produce a film . . . or to edit a magazine . . . Are you there yet? Does it feel good? (Department of Culture, 2001; quoted in Nixon & Crewe, 2004, p. 129).

This account is fairly typical of those portrayed by governmental and industrial organizations with a vested interest in fostering the growth of the creative industries. Yet the idea that work is an arena in which to experience pleasure is also one that has been adsorbed by laborers themselves, even those whose work tends to be monotonous and unimaginative. To quote from Gill and Pratt’s introduction to a recent special edition of *Theory, Culture and Society* on creative labor, “one of the most consistent findings on research on work in the creative industries is . . . a vocabulary of love . . . with work imbued with the features of the Romantic tradition of the artists, suffused with positive emotional qualities” (2008, p. 15).

This equation between creative work and pleasure is so ubiquitous as to seem natural, but as Arvidsson et al. point out, “the separation of the identity value of work from its monetary value is quite astonishing: it would be difficult to conceive of a sample of Fordist workers responding in the same way. It suggests that . . . the ‘labor theory of value’ has been effectively suspended!” (2010, p. 306). Ross (2000) describes a

“sacrificial ethos” endemic to the creative industries in which the commitment to art as a calling obscures conditions that in any other professional field would be considered unabashedly exploitative. McRobbie argues that this constraint acts as an effective form of new disciplinarity—that new media workers are increasingly required to “be creative” (and, in turn be happy). As she asserts, not doing so often results in penalty and reprimand.

This pleasure mandate, in turn, reveals the inherent underlying tension of neoliberal creative work—that is, the contrast between the autotelic gratification this kind of work is supposed to provide and the considerable self-discipline and emotional labor it takes to project and maintain that image. However, as Gill writes of the restraint required by the new media workplace, “this is not the kind of self-discipline as it is traditionally understood (early mornings, cold showers and highly polished shoes are not required!), but a much more thoroughgoing, wholesale management of the self, which requires the radical remaking of subjectivity” (2010, n.p.). Creative workers are now required to self-brand, relentlessly curating and packaging their affect, their appearance, and the narratives that they weave around their working lives in order to project the right “meta-image of self” that will attract business (Hearn, 2008, p. 198).

This radical fusion of pleasure and labor is, as I will suggest in the chapters that follow, especially acute in professional craft. If the new call of capitalism is to love with you do, then professional DIYers embody this philosophy far more visibly and consciously than other kinds of neoliberal creative workers. As Dawkins (2011) argues, the autonomy and self-improvement inherent in the very term “Do-It-Yourself” are also the pivotal values of neoliberalism. And it is here that the work of Barthes—specifically

his distinction between the radical potential of *jouissance* and the ego-reinforcing function of *plaisir*—becomes useful in illuminating how this synthesis of identity, joy, and work takes place. After all, craft, by definition, is an activity embarked upon by choice, outside the confines of the office; it is self-directed; and it is often a reflection of practitioners' deepest held beliefs. It is also, of course, fundamentally a kind of work. In other words, it is simultaneously labor and leisure, a fusion that is an equally prominent characteristic of neoliberalism.

### **The Professionalization of Leisure**

Leisure is generally defined and understood as time free from obligations or responsibilities, when an individual is at liberty to pursue interests of his or her own choosing. In fact Blackshaw and Crawford (2009) argue that the debate around the association between work and leisure has become so important that the two are now readily understood as a conceptual couplet. But while leisure might be commonly thought of as not-work, it is not the activity per se, but the impetus behind that activity that determines its categorization. As Gelber (1999) reasons, “one person’s livelihood can be another person’s pastime—and vice versa. Amateur car mechanics on the one hand and professional ‘sex workers’ on the other invert the usual meaning of those activities” (p. 7). Thus motivation becomes leisure’s defining characteristic—not what people are doing but how freely they have chosen to do it.

Blackshaw (2010) proposes a pragmatic rather than definitive interpretation, asserting that “leisure” is nothing more than one of Wittgenstein’s “language games.” He contends that “we shouldn’t be arguing after the *meaning* and the *purposes* of leisure, but

should instead be asking after its *use*. Our task should be to clarify its contingencies and the ways in which the idea is used in different leisure situations rather than trying to pin it down to some absolute meaning” (p. xiii, emphasis in the original). Only when we consider leisure in its socio-political context can we begin to appreciate how, like consumption and work, it operates as a key site of identity construction. According to Best (2010), through leisure we can construct the identities with which we are most comfortable; similarly Roberts (2011) avers that leisure is a site where “people can most freely *express* who they really are, and receive confirmation of their authentic selves from beyond their immediate families and work associates” (p. 13, emphasis in the original).

Given the importance of lifestyle in a “post-traditional society” (Giddens, 1991), it follows that leisure has emerged as critical field in which individuals construct and broadcast their senses of self. If lifestyles are reflexive routines of behavior and “each of the small decisions a person makes every day . . . contributes to such routines,” then leisure, which ostensibly provides individuals with ample room to make these kinds of small decisions, offers tremendous opportunity to communicate constantly evolving self-identities (p. 81). This capacity becomes especially transparent when leisure is juxtaposed with the relatively more confining strictures of conventional (i.e., traditional, hierarchical) work and family life.

However, the use of leisure becomes a thornier problem in the context of post-industrial society, where flexible employment patterns and radical advances in information technology have destabilized the traditional work/leisure binary. Without a clearly defined inverse, the role that leisure plays in the lives of many professionals is difficult to ascertain. In the move from Fordist to post-Fordist economies, a rapidly

growing portion of the labor market has dedicated itself to the servicing of leisure or non-work time, via the media, entertainment, and information technology. In this way, leisure “becomes more important not only to our non-work identities but also the identity of work itself” (Slater, 1998, p. 403).

Moreover, as Rojek (2010) reasons, leisure has emerged as the primary site in which individuals practice emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) and develop their emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), the credible “people skills” that drive leadership performance and self-management. If leisure is dedicated to honing these employment-related abilities, then the line between work and play becomes fuzzier still. At the same time, work is becoming less fixed in terms of time and space. With the expansion of the global 24 hour market and the communication technologies that allow continuous access to that market, employment patterns have become more mobile and flexible (S. Lewis, 2003). Whereas work was traditionally confined to the office and leisure relegated to the home, the two are now eminently portable and often inextricably intertwined. Much of today’s neoliberal work has taken on characteristics previously relegated to leisure, leading to a hybrid form of “playbour” (Kücklich, 2005). Rojek (2010) comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that capitalism has adopted features of leisure—immediacy, playfulness, subjectivity and performativity—as key to successful self-management and creative entrepreneurship.

In fact, many now view leisure as they once did work, as Hochschild (1997) famously argued, with the home becoming a source of alienation, drudgery, and despair, and work emerging as a source of creativity and autonomy. Lewis (2003) similarly contends that work has in fact become the new leisure, engendering satisfaction and

personal fulfillment. Vingerhoets, van Hijgevoort and van Heck (2002) have even identified a phenomenon they call “leisure sickness,” whereby those who highly identify with their work experience guilt and stress when away from their offices.

This, however, is only the experience of a certain class of workers. The blurring of the work-life divide is not a process that is uniformly experienced; employees in low-wage manufacturing and service jobs still look towards their free time for personal fulfillment. But for those in Florida’s (2004) “creative class”—that is, a loosely defined group whose “economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and/or creative content” and add “economic value through their creativity”—work is inherently fun, pleasurable, and self-directed (pp. 8, 68). Thus the creative class sees leisure as means to develop creative ability for future work opportunities and pursue “experiential” leisure—sports, games, travel opportunities and relationships that reaffirm work-oriented identities—as a result.

In this way, creative class leisure is consonant with Stebbins’s (1992, 2007) concept of “serious leisure.” In contrast to casual leisure, which is mainly consumptive and involves non-productive leisure activities, serious leisure is associated with depth and structure. It involves the pursuit of an activity “that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience” (1992, p. 3). Stebbins identifies three types of serious leisure—voluntarism, hobbies, and amateurism—but stresses that each can support a longstanding leisure career, punctuated by stages of advancement, and that all three types build self-confidence through achievement.

These potential benefits notwithstanding, many have critiqued both the idea of serious leisure and the unqualified celebration of creative class leisure, suggesting that it's indicative of the “social factory.” Autonomist Marxists employed this phrase to describe the fact that “work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine” (Negri, 1989, p. 92). They argue that the factory walls have dissolved, leaching the capitalist imperative into society as a whole and subsuming human creative capacity in the process (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lazzarto, 1996). Capitalism is able to accomplish this wholesale takedown via the ascendance of immaterial labor, or “labor that produces a material good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 290). Because it draws on workers’ subjectivity—that is, their creativity, intellect, and emotional intelligence—as well as those skills previously relegated to personal life—socializing, reputation building, and taste-making—it erases boundaries between the economic, the social, the political and the cultural.

Applying a similar line of thought to leisure studies, Rojek (2000) concludes that Stebbins frames serious leisure as nothing more than a “rational-purposive” activity (p. 19). Likewise, Blackshaw (2010) writes that:

Stebbins is simply setting up a polarity—careful creativity against carefree consumerism—and making his own allegiance clear in the process: those who pursue only casual leisure activities are unable to weigh immediate gratification against the pleasures of achievement through prolonged engagement with a leisure activity (p. 43).

These complaints echo those that Banks (2009) has levied against Florida’s endorsement of the creative class. Banks finds creative workers’ willingness to embrace instrumental, work-oriented leisure concerning, and sees it as belying a neoliberal adoration for



constant self-governance. Moreover he points out that while both creative work and leisure seem to offer a world of free choice, “workers’ specific leisure choices and the way those choices are discursively framed (as an expression of a ‘self-determining’ and ‘active’ individual) have become standardized and predictable and so actually close down the creative possibilities of selfhood” (p. 677).

In sum, for many cultural creatives leisure has been colonized by professional concerns—as Parker writes, the “more and more we work at our play. . . [the more] we begin to evaluate our leisure in terms of the potential it has for work” (1975, p. 68). However I maintain that this fusion is radically intensified for professional crafters, whose hobbies have very literally become their work; this amalgam, in turn, becomes folded into the marketing narrative around the DIY object. But because this story is one primarily about pleasure and identity, it also evokes questions about agency, autonomy and makers’ place on production/consumption spectrum. And in this way the phenomenon fits into the greater debate about user-generated content and the role of pleasure therein.

### **DIY as UGC**

While traditional approaches to the communication have tended to reinforce the boundary between production and consumption—with political economists studying the former and cultural studies scholars focusing on the latter—recent theorizations of mass communication have instead forged this divide by highlighting user-generated content (UGC) and the new participatory culture of consumers. Henry Jenkins (2006) defines

convergence culture as “a cultural shift [in which] consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (p. 3) and as:

Both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottomup consumer-driven process. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broad markets and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other users (p. 37).

Thus Jenkins describes a landscape in which individuals not only have unprecedented levels of control over what they consume but also increasing room in which to engage in collaborative media production. Moreover convergence culture, as Jenkins understands it, simultaneously reinforces industrial power and revenue while providing media users with some degree of agency in terms of the messages they receive.

A number of scholars have expounded on Jenkins’s claims, extolling the democratic potential of UGC (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Leadbeater, 2008; Shirky, 2008, 2010). For instance, Benkler (2006) has argued that peer production has proven effective and inclusive in ways that mass media simply cannot emulate, taking advantage of intrinsic (rather than extrinsic—e.g. monetary) rewards and dispersed, tacit knowledge. Not only does the process of generating this collaborative culture endow users with a profound sense of agency, Benkler maintains that it also produces more worthwhile content. He writes that from “the perspective of liberal political theory, the kind of open-participatory, transparent folk culture that is emerging in the networked environment is normatively more attractive than was the industrial cultural production system typified by Hollywood and the recording industry” (p. 277). But perhaps no one is more optimistic about the liberatory potential of UGC than Charles Leadbeater, who has argued that the

web has the capacity to “spread democracy, promote freedom, alleviate inequality and allow us to be creative together” and claims that “community and conversation are the roots of creativity” (2008, p. 6).

Other scholars, however, remain skeptical of convergence culture’s ability to radically refashion the media landscape and the power structures behind it (e.g., Deuze, 2007; Duffy, 2010; Keen, 2007; Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008). Deuze (2007) encapsulates this stance when he writes, “on the one hand, convergence culture makes room for new forms of creative organization, product, development, and consumer relationships that have the potential to be more diverse and compelling than ever before. On the other hand, the same trends allow for increasing exploitation of media workers and consumers. . .” (p. 258). He suggests that while there are ever increasing opportunities for consumers to engage in creative co-production, those opportunities are still generated—and to some degree, policed—by institutional forces. Zwick et. al. offer an even more trenchant critique, arguing companies’ embrace of UGC ultimately serves to “reconfigure marketing as a technology of consumer exploitation and control suitable for the complex machinations of global information capitalism” (2008, p. 167).

Of course where these scholars fall on the spectrum of responses to UGC and convergence culture depends in great part on how they are conceiving of the users generating the content. In the last ten years, the explosion in digital technologies and the increasing popularity of reality television has prompted many academics to reconsider the labor that audiences perform when they consume media (Andrejevic, 2002, 2008; Shimpach, 2005; van Dijck, 2009). Many of these scholars have been critical in their

assessment of the ease with which corporations can and do exploit viewers-cum-laborers, taking advantage of and profiting from their online participation.

Yet other academics have been far more positive in their description of the individuals straddling the line between production and consumption and have developed a host of neologisms to describe what they believe to be a position of great agency. Foremost has been the phenomenon of digital “prosumption.” The term “prosumer” is generally attributed to futurist Alvin Toffler (1980) who argued that this combination of production and consumption was predominant in pre-industrial societies, which he called the “first wave.” This was followed by a “second wave” of marketization and industrialization that divided these two processes, but that society is moving away from this bifurcation and towards a “third wave that signals their reintegration in the rise of the ‘prosumer’” (275). Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) have built on Toffler’s work, contending that while prosumption has always been a feature of the economic landscape, the social changes brought about by Web 2.0 have only amplified its cultural importance. For them, in fact, prosumption is so significant that it might signal the emergence of an entirely new form of capitalism. They argue that not only have capitalists been unable to monetize the majority of Web 2.0 activity, but that corporations also have far less control over contemporary prosumers as compared to traditional producers and consumers.

Ritzer and Jurgenson’s conception of prosumption, in turn, dovetails with Axel Bruns (2008) conception of “produsage,” and what Leadbeater and Miller (2004) have called the “pro-am revolution.” They argue that as professionalism has grown over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so too did hierarchical organizations and formal systems for accrediting knowledge. As a result, amateurs came to be seen as substandard and

“amateurism” a term of derision. However Leadbeater and Miller suggest that in the last two decades a new breed of amateur has emerged—the Pro-Ams, or amateurs who work to professional standards—and that these individuals can achieve things that until relatively recently remained the sole province of large professional organizations.

The debate surrounding the prosumer and his or her degree of agency in regards to UGC still rages. But I contend that an examination of contemporary craft culture can offer nuance to the argument that has heretofore largely been lacking. In between the poles of exploitation and empowerment lies the question of pleasure: how does the degree and kinds of pleasure producers derive change the terms of this debate?

Professional DIYers are, of course, compensated for their work (or at least that is their hope). But DIY is also the *ne plus ultra* of prosumption: not only do DIY practitioners engage in a kind of *digital produsage* through the process of documenting and marketing their work on blogs, Etsy, and the like, but they engage in *manual produsage* by making and using their handcrafted creations. Additionally their relative power to set the terms and conditions of their labor still pales in comparison to that of Etsy, the corporate behemoth on which they depend—or even, to a lesser extent, the independent craft fairs in which they participate. The nature of this tension is explored at length in Chapter 4, but I suggest that looking at how sellers’ affective experiences intersect with their economic reality serves to complicate and problematize the agency/abuse binary typically used to frame UGC.

## **Capital Convertibility and Cultural Production**

Underpinning all of these social transformations—the development of neoliberal creative labor, the rise of UGC and transformations in work, and leisure practices—is the causal mechanism of capital conversion. Not only do Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) notion of capital and Sarah Thornton's (1966) addendum of subcultural capital offer useful analytics with which to consider how DIY objects are generated and exchanged, but they also help account for the richness and complexity of contemporary craft culture. Moreover it seems that the increasing frequency with which capital is transmuted from one form to the next is made possible by the affordances of new media.

In *Distinction* (1984), a book based on the extensive ethnographic and empirical research he conducted in 1960s France, Bourdieu argues that tastes are not natural, but rather constructs through which individuals and groups position themselves in social hierarchies. Such acquisition of status (or symbolic capital) is largely dependent on access to forms of economic, social and/or cultural capital. As one might expect, economic capital refers to money or assets that can be transformed into money, and social capital describes the strength of one's relationships, affiliations, and personal networks. Cultural capital, however, is a much more complex and slippery concept, encompassing a wide swathe of seemingly innate dispositions, from general competence to verbal abilities to artistic sensibilities.

Bourdieu, working with Jean-Claude Passeron (1977 [1970]), first used the concept of cultural capital to account for differences in children's educational attainment. He and his colleagues recognized that economic obstacles were not sufficient to explain the students' disparities in performance. So Bourdieu developed the idea of cultural

capital to describe the family-inherited cultural habits and dispositions that he believed contributed to these differences. In doing so, he broke sharply with traditional sociological conceptions of culture, which tended to view it as a source of shared norms and values. Instead Bourdieu argues that cultural capital echoes many of the same characteristics of economic capital—it can be monopolized and transmitted from one generation to the next (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Accordingly, for Bourdieu (1984, 1986), cultural capital is the status-conferring knowledge that is accumulated through one's familial upbringing and education. This capital can be embodied (as a competence of skill, marking a significant investment of time devoted to learning); objectified (tied to certain articles that presuppose cultural capital, e.g., a philosophy textbook that requires extensive training to understand); or institutionalized (certified by an educational institution, e.g., an advanced degree from a university). Regardless of form, however, most cultural capital is perceived as innate, despite the fact that it is accrued through early socialization, and is used to legitimate social difference. In *Distinction* (1984), for instance, Bourdieu demonstrates how artistic taste is not instinctually acquired but instead deeply tied to one's education and class status. The middle-class respondents in his study were far more confident than their working class counterparts in evaluating fine art and visiting museums and other cultural institutions. But this self-assuredness was borne out of skills acquired from their families and schooling, rather than any kind of "natural" love of art, and, as a result, these middle class art enthusiasts were able to transform their cultural capital into symbolic capital.

This process in turn points to another key part in Bourdieu's formulation: capital convertibility. In fact it has been argued that what ultimately defines cultural capital *qua*

capital is its convertibility into economic capital (Garnham & Williams, 1980). Calhoun (1993) goes so far as to argue that Bourdieu's "key original insights are that there are immaterial forms of capital—cultural, symbolic, and social—as well as material or economic form and that with varying levels of difficulty it is possible to convert one of these forms into the other" (p. 69).

That said, different kinds of capital are unevenly distributed across fields, or "contexts—discourses, institutions, values, rules and regulations—which produce and transform attitudes and practices" (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002, p. 21). Bourdieu (1993) characterizes the field of cultural production as constituted by low levels of economic capital and high levels of cultural capital (as opposed to the field of power, which is typified by its inverse—high economic capital and low cultural capital), thereby associating the field of cultural production with the dominated fraction of the dominant class. But within the field of cultural production are smaller sub-fields, distinguished by the degree to which they are "autonomous" of the field of power. Mass cultural production is "heteronomous," and thus subject to outside commercial rule, and involves relatively greater amounts of economic capital. Small-scale cultural production, on the other hand, is generally oriented towards "pure" artistic goods, involves very high levels of symbolic capital, and is characterized as having significant (but not total) autonomy from market interests. Moreover, as Hesmondhalgh (2006) points out, Bourdieu is fond of describing the field of small-scale cultural production as "production for producers," and "in rejecting the market, [Bourdieu] implies with this phrase, cultural producers in the restricted sub-field are left pretty much to talk to each other" (p. 214).



Given this divide between mass and small-scale cultural production, where might contemporary DIY culture fall? As a form of anti-consumerist consumption, crafters are at once far removed and deeply imbricated in commercial culture and hence share characteristics with both small-scale and mass cultural production. But due to its reliance on digital and participatory media, DIY also privileges the exchange between social and cultural forms of capital. It seems as if those with a good eye and skilled hand—those embodied competencies that underlie all forms of cultural capital—are able to attract viewers, be it to their storefronts or blogs or craft fair booths—and in so doing build their social networks. This is especially salient in the blogosphere, where most DIY blogs prominently feature a “blog roll,” a list of curated links to other blogs and websites, and in so doing, build dense, interconnected web of likeminded practitioners. Similarly, those who are deeply embedded within this world of DIY culture are surrounded by arbiters of indie cool and as such have more opportunity to hone their own taste. They also are able to leverage their interpersonal connections to learn handicraft, thereby clearly converting social capital to cultural capital.

The feel for hipness that crafters build through these social networks also evokes Sarah Thornton’s (1996) concept of subcultural capital. She writes that much of the “mainstream” is in fact composed of a diverse mix of subcultures, and offers a critical extension to Bourdieu’s work by uniting it with subcultural theory to develop the idea of “subcultural capital.” Though the focus of Thornton’s work is the youth club cultures of the late 1990s, many of her findings hold true for the subcultural modes of DIY practice. Centered on expressions of authenticity and “being in the know,” subcultural capital, like cultural capital, is primarily a marker of distinction. Subcultural members are often as

much opposed to mass culture as Bourdieu's cultural elites. But whereas those with high cultural capital try to avert the "trickling down" of their taste cultures, those with high subcultural capital guard against the "gushing up" of their taste cultures into the mainstream (1996, p. 5).

Yet while those with subcultural capital are wary of the dangers of too much media exposure, they rely on some media exposure for the circulation of subcultural knowledge. As Thornton explains, "With in the economy of subcultural capital, the media are not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction (which is the way Bourdieu describes films and newspapers vis-à-vis cultural capital) but a network crucial to definition and distribution of cultural knowledge" (1996, pp. 13-14). While cultural capital is inculcated in the home and in elite institutions, subcultural capital is acquired through the media, the very same mechanism that can also be its undoing. This is certainly the case in the circulation of DIY culture, which relies on media structures—and new media in particular—to attract practitioners and refine its purpose.

Another critical difference between cultural capital and subcultural capital is, rather puzzlingly, the obviousness of class. This is not to say that class is irrelevant to subcultural capital—in fact nothing could be further from the case—but its presence is deliberately obfuscated as a way to connote distance from the mainstream. This too is true of DIY; participants either erase or ignore domestic labor's stigma. Instead makers frame their craft as a way for everyone, regardless of class status, to engage in creative self-expression.

The transformation of these myriad forms of capital—subcultural, cultural, economic, and social—also underscores the importance of "cultural intermediaries," of

which professional crafters are a particular kind. Bourdieu (1984) used the term “new cultural intermediaries,” to describe an emerging kind of worker who, by educating the masses in the art of consumption and taste, mediates between producers’ needs and consumers’ desires. As professionals involved in marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, home décor, among similar occupations, members of this group are engaged in “occupations involving presentation and representation . . . providing symbolic goods and services” (1984, p. 359). Moreover Bourdieu’s notion of the cultural intermediary—particularly as its been developed by Featherstone (1991)—connotes a class fraction that tends to blur a number of conventional distinctions, most notably those between high and low culture and personal taste and professional judgment. These professionals develop the cultural forms located between the “legitimate culture” of small-scale art-for-art’s-sake production and the mass marketplace, thereby supporting middlebrow forms of petite bourgeois taste (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 324-328). As a result, cultural intermediaries occupy a point of connection between the detached bohemianism of the educated elite and the earnest striving of the upwardly mobile working classes (Negus, 2002).

Though cultural intermediaries only play a minor role in Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984), in subsequent literature on the creative and cultural industries these workers assume a much more developed role as the exemplar of postmodernity (Cronin, 2004; Doane, 2009; Featherstone, 1991; Moor, 2008). Negus (2002) writes that the notion of the cultural intermediary “suggests a shift away from unidirectional or transmission models of cultural production . . . and it challenges us to think about the reciprocal inter-relationship of what are often thought of as discrete ‘cultural’ and ‘economic’ practices” (pp. 503-504). Accordingly the idea of the cultural intermediary is one that is consonant

with UGC in that it bridges the longstanding divide between political economic and cultural approaches to social life—and, as a result, hinges on the convertibility of cultural into economic capital. In a post-Fordist knowledge economy, these professionals become key players in determining both use and exchange value, explaining why consumers need particular commodities and their relative market worth (Negus, 2002).

Yet this concept has also drawn criticism on a number of counts. Many scholars contend that it is too myopic, and that by focusing on a handful of professions or class positions, it neglects key personnel who mediate between production and consumption and help train consumers in hierarchies of taste. Negus (2002), for instance, maintains that the conventional notion of cultural intermediaries mistakenly privileges “creatives” over the “suits.” In his study of the music industry, he maintains senior account executives exert considerable influence over the industry’s symbolic output through their ability to determine budgets and draw contracts. Recent articles have also argued that occupations as differentially positioned as chain bookstore salespeople (Wright, 2005), public relations practitioners (Hodges, 2006), fashion buyers (Entwistle, 2006), advertising account managers (Cronin, 2004), and cut flower retailers (A. Hughes, 2000) should be included under the heading of cultural intermediary.

However none of the critiques of Bourdieu’s formulation of the cultural intermediary moves beyond the near exclusive linkage between cultural intermediaries and formal professions to consider *amateur* cultural intermediaries. Negus (2002) complains that the concept of cultural intermediaries has been introduced in a way that favors a particular cluster of occupations, and he suggests that there are many other occupational groupings that are crucial to the processes of cultural mediation. He also

conjectures that “a consideration of [the professions who] might bridge this space, or who might be involved in ‘articulating’ production with consumption, raises some significant questions about the enduring *distance* between production and consumption” (pp. 504-505).

But how do the stakes change when that distance between production and consumption collapses? What does it mean to reinforce hierarchies of taste when the cultural intermediaries in question are not located within conventionally defined professions? Professional crafters exemplify these changing social and commercial contours, and thus, as I argue throughout this dissertation, provide an interesting argument for why traditional understanding of capital must be augmented and reworked in the digital age, where “ordinary” producers have come to the fore. But to come to grips with this phenomenon it is necessary to first delimit its boundaries.

### **Defining DIY & Craft**

The divide between craft and DIY is blurry and has been subject to contentious debate. Furthermore the sheer magnitude of practices each term includes makes developing a comprehensive definition a near impossible task. For instance CODA’s (2011) definition of craft includes 17 techniques and 13 end product categories. As Wagner submits, “craft is a big, unwieldy beast of a phenomenon not so easily wrestled into its Sunday best. Encompassing not just a singular activity (in a very broad sense, the act of “making”), craft also often carries with it an ideology suggesting a particular outlook on the world” (2008, p. 8).

Atkinson (2006) has suggested that this lack of definitional clarity is one of the primary reasons there is so little scholarship devoted to these practices, as researchers have a hard time placing them in relation to the literature on art, design, craft. Attfield concurs, writing that “DIY is an aspect often mentioned in passing, but still not accorded much attention by design historians” (2000, p. 73). From a survey of the small pool of literature that does exist, it becomes clear that scholars have tended to bifurcate the handmade on a number of axes, the most prominent being the division between handicraft and home maintenance (c.f. Atkinson, 2006; Edwards, 2006; A. Jackson, 2006; Powell, 2009), which in turn maps onto craft and DIY, respectively. The former category includes knitting, sewing, and furniture construction; the latter includes gardening, plumbing, electrical work, and home construction. Accordingly this division also falls along gendered lines—decorative craft being the province of women and structural DIY the domain of men.

Craft and DIY have also been cleaved on ideological grounds, reflecting 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptions of the term craft. For thinkers like Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen, craftsmen engaged in labor that was authentic, creative and dignified, in contrast to the alienating factory work of the industrial revolution. As a result, craft activity became a symbol of the virtues of pre-modern production, and this view persists today. According to Campbell (2005), “Present-day advocates of craftwork have tended to be labeled romantics, uneasy with the modern world and either yearning for a return to an earlier preindustrial age or nurturing unrealistic dreams of future postindustrial utopias” (p. 25).

This idealistic view of craft has found its way into some of the DIY literature, most notably in Melchionne’s (1999) distinction between craft and DIY. While his

notion of craft echoes that of Marx, as an activity that relies heavily on authentic engagement with one's environment and material surroundings, Melchionne defines DIY as "practices in which consumers buy semi-finished materials that they then use in the creation of something of their own design, *though usually modeled on commercially available, professionally made products*" (p. 247, emphasis mine). For him, DIY is largely a middle- and working class-phenomenon in which practitioners aim for results that are completely indistinguishable from the professional or mass-produced. Moreover he points out that DIY (as he defines it) is a fundamentally consumerist enterprise. DIYers, lacking the skills necessary for most projects, must rely upon "how-to" books and products designed with an inexperienced end-user in mind.

While there is some logic to distinguishing DIY from craft on the basis of the phenomena's gendered or ideological underpinnings, on the whole this binary oversimplifies the rich—and overlapping—traditions of each. Women have long participated in home improvement and other technical endeavors, complicating the view that DIY is men's work, and men have engaged in craft, especially furniture construction. In terms of ideology, DIY has often espoused the anti-establishment ethos typically attributed to craft; after all Stevens (2011) writes that the "do-it-yourself ethos . . . confront[s] mass market consumerism and the perceived homogenization of culture as a result of the aggressive expansion of big-box retailers and multinational corporations" (2011, p. 50). And craft can be just as conventional as the most mainstream DIY. Paulsen and Staggs, who studied traditional craft fairs, remark that with the institutional domain of the fair, "familiarity and predictability are desirable traits in craft production, as

these trains suggest a degree of cultural continuity in an otherwise unstable social landscape” (2005).

Instead, following Atkinson (2006), I argue that concentrating on *why* people in engage in craft/DIY practice in addition to what it is that they are making opens up our understanding of these cultural phenomena, allowing us to appreciate their overlapping sociopolitical foundations. This seems to be an especially apt approach to take when studying contemporary DIY, which has been framed in both how-to texts and the mainstream media as lifestyle. For instance, Billee Sharp’s *Fix It, Make It, Grow It, Bake It: The DIY Guide to the Good Life* (2010) includes chapters devoted to raising organic vegetables, “eco-cleaning” one’s home with lemons and lavender, basic plumbing and traditional crafts like decoupage and tie dye. Similarly, in *ReadyMade: How to Make [Almost] Everything: A Do-It-Yourself Primer* (2005), authors Shoshana Berger and Grace Hawthorne provide directions for making a chopstick clock and a colander light sconce as well as how-to advice irreverent (how to write a love note) and practical (how to self-publish and “how to break through your own class ceiling”).

In these texts and similar iterations of maker culture, structural projects are intermixed with decorative ones under the broad rubric of DIY. In fact many authors treat craft and DIY as each other’s equivalent. For example, Jean Nayar’s (2010) *Real life decor: 100 Easy DIY Projects to Brighten Your Home on a Budget* and Lola Gavarry’s (2010) *DIY art at home: 28 simple art projects for chic décor on the cheap* both use DIY in their books’ titles to describe the ornamental craft projects contained therein. Likewise Faythe Levine’s (2008) *Handmade nation: the rise of DIY, art, craft, and design*, a textual offshoot of an eponymous documentary about the burgeoning indie craft



movement, groups DIY and craft under the banner of the handmade, and scholar Dennis Stevens simply combines the two, calling the movement “DIY craft” (2011). Following these writers, I will hereafter frame craft as a particular kind of DIY, for I consider craft (“soft DIY”) and home maintenance (“structural DIY”) to be subgenres of the overarching DIY lifestyle advocated by its adherents. As a result, I use the terms interchangeably.

But these arguments are best understood by first tracing the two parallel histories of DIY/craft practice—the traditional and political. When we open up our understanding of DIY to account for the contradictory objectives for which it has been employed, we can begin to appreciate how flexible handicraft is as a cultural practice—and how that flexibility might underlie the various tensions at the heart of its contemporary iteration. However we can also begin to recognize that though seemingly contrary, both radical and conventional DIY have at their heart issues of the maker’s identity, and as a result are perhaps far more similar than they first appear.

### **Making as a Normative Enterprise**

Handicraft, particularly as it has been represented in mainstream media, has a long history of connoting the conservative and the nostalgic. Working with one’s hands harkens back to an imagined golden era, in which men and women observed traditional gender roles, and the hearth, symbol of the home and family, maintained a position of primary cultural importance. In fact, the use of handicraft to signal social stature and moral rectitude dates back to the Industrial Revolution. As the middle class grew exponentially, scores of Victorian women found themselves with empty days to fill.

While they were still charged with caring for their families, those in this growing social stratum had the luxury of domestic help, commercial laundries and an efficient school system to help them meet many of their household responsibilities. Historian Stephen Gelber writes, “Farm women, poorer women without servants, and those with very large families had no problem keeping busy, but for substantial numbers of middle-class women the temptation to do nothing was an everyday reality” (1999, p. 158). To guard against the dangerous allure of idleness, women were encouraged to develop hobbies, especially those that reinforced traits considered exemplary of the feminine ideal. Handicrafts, as pseudo-occupations practiced squarely within the domestic sphere, adorned the home and were considered a morally upright pursuit to occupy these listless homemakers (Edwards, 2006; Gelber, 1999).

Crafts consequently became an important status marker, particularly when it came to “fancywork.” Before the rapid expansion of the middle class, practical needlework—that is, the functional sewing that kept household members clothed—was uniformly praised, whereas ornamental embroidery (“fancywork”) was generally deemed frivolous. Yet with the widespread distribution of the sewing machine in 1850, middle class women were no longer obligated to engage in plain sewing, and fancywork began to shed some of its negative connotations. Not only did ornamental embroidery allow women to produce furnishings that were in accordance with the aesthetic of time—which tended towards the embellished and elaborate—but its aristocratic heritage made it appealing to bourgeois wives. Decorative needlecraft became a sign that they had the time and skill to master non-functional hobbies (Gelber, 1999; R. Parker, 1984).

Of course it wasn't just needlework that demanded the attention of middle class women. Throughout the nineteenth century, women's magazines were filled with instructions for homemade bibelots made from shells, dried plants, colored paper, paint, wax, and human hair, among other materials; these handcrafted knickknacks were meant to convey sentimental, rather than financial value, reaffirming the personal relationship between creator and recipient (Gelber, 1997). Moreover, in keeping with the cultural esteem bestowed upon domestic thriftiness and sound household management, the projects were often created via salvage. The ideal handicraft was made of fabric scraps, fragments of wire, and old candle-ends, and used these remnants to stand-in for costlier materials. For example, wax dripped on wool was meant to replicate coral and ink lines on stone-colored paper were intended to suggest marble (Schaffer, 2005).

However while these Victorian crafts acted as an antidote to the depersonalized masculine sphere of the factory, they nevertheless emulated many of the qualities of the mass-produced. Fashionable, ephemeral, and standardized, these crafts were advertised in magazines and their materials were often sold in premade kits. Thus 19<sup>th</sup> century domestic crafts allowed women to showcase their distinct social position all the while reproducing mainstream understandings of appropriate home décor (Schaffer, 2005).

Though they remained squarely within the feminine, domestic sphere, handicrafts would again become subject to the same rigors of the workplace in the context of the home economics movement. Managerial strategies were applied to various household tasks and led to the "Fordification" of domestic work: domestic work patterns became measured by their efficiency and the "citizen-housewife" was encouraged draw upon technological advances to streamline her daily tasks (Bose, 1982; Vincent, 2003). Much

like the Victorians that preceded them, the home economists of the 1920s and 1930s perceived handicraft's inherent thriftiness as "a buffer against the dislocations of progress and the pace of modern life; as a means of raising standards of physical health, maintain psychological wellbeing, and safeguarding the moral standards of the home" (Hackney, 2013, p. 177).

Middle class men also started to become engaged in manual leisure in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1910s and '20s, *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics* (first issued in 1872 and 1902 respectively) began to feature articles that guided fledgling woodworkers through small craft and construction projects (Goldstein, 1998). At the same time, the fussy, overstuffed ideal of Victorian taste was replaced by both mission and colonial styles of furniture, two aesthetics that privileged simplicity (Gelber, 1997). In fact, Gelber (1999) dates the earliest usage of the term "do-it-yourself" to this time period, when a short magazine article in 1912 encouraged homeowners to do their own interior painting rather than hire professionals.

The first British usage of the term, however, happened some years later. A 1920 newspaper article in the in the London-based *Times* urged those with limited means to "do it yourself and save money" (Atkinson, 2006, p. 4). Coming on the heels of World War I, this appeal reflected a very real problem, not only for the working class but also for all classes who suddenly found themselves with limited means. Labor was scarce and often prohibitively expensive. Homeowners on both sides of the Atlantic conquered projects previously relegated to professionals, and the social stigma attached to DIY began to further dissolve (Atkinson, 2006).

World War II and the period of reconstruction following it brought comparable labor shortages. Citizens were once again encouraged to DIY, but this time “making do” was also seen as a patriotic act, one that preserved precious national resources. In the UK, a government-approved campaign featured images of “Mrs. Sew and Sew” and “Dig for Victory,” urging people to refashion old clothes into new garments and to augment food rations by planting their own vegetables. In the US, similar campaigns featured “Rosie the Riveter” and her compatriots learning manual skills in factories, and urged Americans to embrace efficiency and prudence (Atkinson, 2006; Goldstein, 1998).

In the bloom of post-war prosperity, however, for many DIY became less a matter of necessity and more a means by which to achieve their version of the American dream. Writes Carolyn Goldstein, “World War II and its social and economic legacy accelerated the growth the of the emerging home-improvement infrastructure and launched a widespread do-it-yourself craze in the United States. The war provided men and women with technical skills, confidence and a predisposition toward using their resourcefulness to realize their dreams of domestic living” (1998, p. 31). The GI Bill of Rights dramatically expanded the federal loan program, which in turn made home ownership increasingly accessible. Rapid suburbanization followed, as did the proliferation of simple “starter homes,” providing young married couples with an opportunity to customize and upgrade these simple abodes with the technical skills they developed during the war (Goldstein, 1998).

These budding handymen and women were aided by rapid advances in technology. The demands of the war had forced manufacturers to develop new synthetic materials; after the war they marketed these novel materials to homeowners (Goldstein,

1998). Increased access to mass media—including television—also played a critical role in the growing popularity of DIY. In the UK, W.P. Matthew, who had previously written books and hosted radio shows about household improvement and home repair, appeared in the BBC program *Household Hints*. He was succeeded by DIY expert Barry Bucknell in *About the Home*, a popular DIY magazine show aimed primarily at women (Powell, 2009). In the U.S., numerous wide-circulation magazines regularly featured trend pieces about the growing hobby, including *Business Week*, *Harper's*, and *American Magazine* (Gelber, 1999).

While DIY product manufacturers and media began to more purposively target female viewers, gender roles remained firmly entrenched. Gelber (1997) describes what he calls a “half-pound rule”: women avoided any tool weighing more than a half-pound while men by and large shunned most tools weighing less, and this binary persisted well into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though women’s involvement in home planning was evident in the 1950s and 1960s, when humorists and cartoonists commonly portrayed female homemakers as the brains behind DIY projects, when it came to actual labor, they were rarely shown doing anything other than assisting their husbands or adding the finishing decorative touches. And when they were portrayed, it was generally in the context of advertising, in order to suggest just how easy a particular home-improvement task was (Goldstein, 1998).

Eventually the boundaries circumscribing appropriately gendered DIY began to ease, and the precipitating factor behind this growing equality was consumerism. The newly emerging home centers of the 1970s welcomed women into the realm of DIY home improvement with their carefully designed layout, liberal use of lighting, and

deliberate employment of saleswomen. New kinds of instruction manuals appeared on the market, specifically targeting female do-it-yourselfers. With titles like *I took the Hammer in My Hand: The Woman's Build-It and Fix-It Handbook* (1973) and *The You-Don't-Need-A-Man-To-Fix-It Book: The Woman's Guide to Confident Home Repair* (1973), these how-to guides challenged gender norms and sought to empower women to tackle structural DIY projects on their own (Goldstein, 1998).

Not only did the DIY industry, prompted by profit motives, efface deep-rooted gender boundaries, it also both capitalized upon and helped foster the historic preservation movement. Though the desire to restore and preserve historic homes dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the preservation movement gained significant traction in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1946 (Barthel, 1996). DIY manufacturers followed suit, issuing an array of products for tasks like stripping paint, reproducing molding, and replacing tin ceilings. Originally developed for the restoration of national landmarks, these products enabled homeowners to incorporate old (or at least old-looking) elements into their remodeling projects (Goldstein, 1998). This interest in rehabilitating original structures was also echoed in the media, with the production of the long running public broadcast home improvement series *This Old House* in 1979 (Vila & Henry, 1981).

Today, the products available to consumers seeking to recreate the suggestion of historic legitimacy are wide-ranging. Period wallpapers, precut wooden moldings, and ornamental “plasterwork” made of polyurethane offer consumers an easy way to achieve the aesthetic of tradition. Similarly, many upscale retailers, including Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware, offer a selection of historically-inspired reproductions. These

stores' interior design and display systems often feature anecdotal labels, making shopping itself a nostalgic experience (Brown, 1997) (Marsh, 1998).

This sentimental longing goes some way towards accounting for the rise in retro handicraft or what Jean Railla (2004) calls "new domesticity." Knitting, crochet, cross stitch and embroidery have all become widely popular in recent years. As aforementioned, a number of mainstream press articles have been devoted to the growing trend, especially when well-known celebrities like Sarah Jessica Parker, George Clooney, Julia Roberts and Cameron Diaz picked up knitting in the mid-2000s (e.g., Breen, 2005; Cantrell, 2005; Selway, 2004). Though the knitting fad seems to have since ebbed to some extent, more recent press coverage has focused on the widespread appeal of general handicraft (e.g., Burt, 2011; Millard, 2011; Sung, 2010). Binkley, writing of the repetitive nature of kitsch, suggests that its fundamental monotony "shore[s] up a sense of cosmic coherence in an unstable world of challenge, innovation, and creativity" (2000, p. 135). Paulsen and Staggs (2005) have applied that logic to the country craft fair, though it seems equally germane to the practice of handicraft at large.

Ultimately this conservative craft tradition serves to shore up participants' understanding of themselves and their place in the world. It is also often aspirational, particularly when it comes to class. By knitting or building furniture, makers have sought to either move up the socio-economic ladder, as in post-War couples looking to carve out a place in the swelling middle-class, or reaffirm their vaunted position, as did Victorian women who relied on needlecraft to signal their distance from the world of work. As I suggest in Chapter 2, identity affirmation is one of the principle pleasures that results from the craft endeavor. And in fact, so fundamental is to the experience of craft-making



that it also underlies this lineage's apparent opposite: subversive, politically-motivated DIY.

### **Making as Rebellion**

Craft has had a political bent since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However makers themselves did not self-consciously adopt the idealistic connotations Marx attributed to handicraft until the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Organized by the Pre-Raphaelite artist William Morris and inspired in part by the writings of John Ruskin, the Arts and Crafts movement was a reaction to the ascendancy of mechanical production; followers championed holistic craft fabrication as a means to engender positive social change (Mickle, 2005). Reflective of this shift in emphasis was the periodical published by Gustav Stickley, the Arts and Crafts movement's most prominent American member. In the *Craftsman*, Stickley addressed questions of manufacturing and social reform; he also dedicated part of his publication to the growing amateur interest in Arts and Crafts (Kaplan, Boris, & Museum of Fine Arts Boston., 1987). In fact, David Gauntlett (2011) has suggested that Stickley invented—or at least reinvigorated—the concept of “open source,” the system by which access to an end product's source materials is granted. By providing working plans for his own furniture and metalwork designs, Stickley risked potential financial loss in order to make the Arts and Crafts aesthetic available to average Americans. In so doing, he helped democratize a movement that, rather ironically, was

otherwise inaccessible to the very workers it championed.<sup>2</sup> Most could not afford to purchase Arts and Crafts objets d'art, but they could fashion their own.

This anti-establishment ethos reasserted itself fifty years later, with the in the subcultural philosophy of the hippies. In fact, Gauntlett (2011) puts the emergence of expressly political DIY in the 1960s, arguing that it was deeply entwined with the alternative spirit of the time. He traces the call for practical, skill-based education back to the heroes of the counterculture, including Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. Gauntlett also identifies Stewart Brand as another key figure in the “every-day life DIY movement” (p. 51). Brand, working with friends and family, launched his homemade *The Whole Earth Catalogue* in late 1968. Subtitled “Access to Tools,” the compendium offered tools and information available via mail order. *Whole Earth* not only advertised books, maps, garden tools, specialized clothing, forestry gear and tents, welding equipment, etc., but also featured and reviewed other instructional and how-to publications (F. Turner, 2006).

Though Brand’s publication was meant for readers living communally or “off the grid,” craft books aimed at those less radical began to frame DIY as a complete lifestyle, a model that persists today. Yet the lifestyle these primers advocated was decidedly anti-conformist and all-inclusive, dictating attitudes towards exercise, sex, spirituality, and hobbies. Alicia Bay Laurel’s tremendously popular *Living on the New Earth* (1971) for instance, provided information on pickling, hatha yoga, salting fish, growing marijuana,

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<sup>2</sup> However it is worth noting that while Stickley espoused a progressive agenda vis-à-vis labor conditions, he also advocated very traditional gender roles and harbored a deep suspicion of the threat of the feminine to the home and society. For him, the essentially Old World, feminine characteristics in the “degenerate” curvilinear aesthetic of the Art Nouveau posed a serious danger to a robust American democracy (Hegstrom, 2007). Thus Stickley demonstrates the fuzzy lines between craft as a simultaneously conformist and radical enterprise.

and giving birth at home, as well as more traditional handicrafts like woodcarving, weaving and sewing. As Smith observes, “the ‘D’ in DIY in the 1960s and 1970s tended toward the holistic and expansive” (2010, p. 209).

However, in the punk movement of the late 1970s, DIY became associated with fanzines, known for their cut-and-paste aesthetic and the angry screeds they contained. According to cultural historian Roger Sabin, “Although punk had no set agenda like its hippie counter-cultural predecessor it did stand for certain identifiable attitudes. Among them an emphasis on working class ‘credibility.’ A belief in various hues of class politics and an enthusiasm for spontaneity and doing it yourself” (quoted in Triggs, 2006, p. 70). As “non-commercial, small circulation publications [generally] produced and distributed by their creators,” punk zines adopted the anarchist ethos that punk rock bands espoused, and this manifested itself in a particular visual style—handwritten scrawls, cut out letters, and low budget graphic quality thanks to the use of photocopiers (Spencer, 2008, p. 17).

This gritty undercurrent still guides a considerable segment of contemporary DIY practice and is especially noticeable in feminist DIY, an outgrowth of the ‘90s riot grrrl movement. Directly inspired by 1970s punk, the riot grrrl movement was driven by women who wanted a share in the production of their subculture. The term “riot grrrl” was first used by American musicians and activists, specifically Kathleen Hanna of the band *Bikini Kill* and Alison Wolfe of *Bratmobile*—and the label soon gained currency as women formed their own bands and wrote their own zines, which were similar in aesthetic to their punk predecessors (Abrahams, 2008). Spencer (2008) traces the lineage of many contemporary female DIYers directly back to these zines—to the countercultural community they formed, to their antagonistic relationship to mainstream media, and to

their sardonic rants about the strictures of traditional femininity—and the philosophy they espoused can be seen in a number of otherwise conventional handicrafts. Julie Jackson, for instance, has built her website and corresponding book, *Subversive Cross Stitch* (2006), by selling snarky cross stitch patterns (her top-selling design features the charge “go fuck yourself” surrounded by folksy flourishes). Similarly Jenny Hart runs *Sublime Stitching*, a company whose motto reads “this ain’t your grandmother’s embroidery” and whose online store features patterns of skulls, tattoos, and roller derby girls.

Punk DIY’s progressive ethos also undergirds much of today’s maker culture; many crafters consciously strive to circumvent the “big box” stores and instead practice ethical consumerism. Callie Janoff of The Church of Craft, a bicoastal art collective that holds monthly “craft-ons,” epitomizes this view when she writes that “Growth and progress are also mirages of accomplishment; being present here and now are the things we really need to worry about. Consumption eats self-esteem; creation makes it grow . . . making things makes us happier, more whole people” (Janoff, 2008, p. 57). The same sentiment is echoed by self-titled “craftivist” Besty Greer who explains that when she began to knit she “started thinking about ways to knit for the greater good, and I realized that right now, right here at this very moment in time, the act of craft is political. In a time of over-ease and overuse and overspending, I can take back the control over where my money goes, over what my outfit is and over how my life is lived” (Greer, 2008, p. 90).

Though this anti-establishment spirit would seem to incompatible with more normative craft practices, in fact the two lineages are deeply entwined and at times overlap. In fact, as Smith (2010) has argued, in today’s cultural landscape

embracing traditional craft is itself a radical move: “in the 1960s, tie dye and batik were exotic and represented an extreme turn away from middle class culture and homogeneity; today, traditional homemaking skills, like sewing and knitting, have become for many just as exotic.” Even the most subversive of crafters conjure the aforesaid traditional connotations of DIY—the primacy of domesticity and stereotypical gender roles—as they deliberately push back against them. Furthermore these twin histories are also functionally similar, offering practitioners a way to solidify and broadcast their personal sensibilities and politics, whether conservative or liberal. This signaling ability also underpins the most recent manifestation of craft culture and the focus of this dissertation: indie craft.

### **Third-Wave Craft: Hipsters and Anti-Consumerist Consumers**

Levine and Heimerl (2008) trace the roots of this “new wave of craft”—elsewhere called IndieCraft, Craft 2.0 or Alt Craft—to a handful of third-wave feminist magazines that appeared in the mid-‘90s: *Bust*, *Venus Zine*, and *She’s Crafty* (Loosli Pritchett, 2010). Several years later these were followed by the first websites devoted explicitly to indie craft: [getcrafty.com](http://getcrafty.com), [buyolympia.com](http://buyolympia.com), and [craftychica.com](http://craftychica.com). It was around the same time that alternative craft fairs also began to crop up, with Boston’s Bazaar Bizarre and Portland’s Handmade Bazaar, both in 2000, succeeded by the Chicago’s Renegade Craft Fair and Washington D.C.’s Crafty Bastards, both in 2003. Thus what started as a slow and ambivalently received trickle—a *New York Times* reporter, writing about *Bust* and its penchant for domesticity, asked dubiously “Is this feminism or Cosmo?”—exploded in a matter of a few short years (Kuczynski, 2001). Magazines like

*ReadyMade* and *CRAFT*—both explicitly focused on DIY projects—appeared in 2002 and 2006 respectively, and there are now indie craft fairs in most major and mid-sized cities across the country (Garofoli, 2009; Matchar, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

This “third wave” of craft (Cummins quoted in Hampton, 2010) draws upon both the conventional and progressive traditions of craft practice, a “symbiosis of aesthetics and activism, traditional technique and modern technology, personal empowerment, and entrepreneurialism, ‘grrl’ feminism and ‘new domesticity’” (Jakob, 2013, p. 130). But indie craft is also about purposeful displays of cultural capital. Crafters frequently employ tongue-in-cheek humor, using this ironic distance to signal their knowing hipness and aesthetic savvy. As Stevens argues, “If there is anything cohesive about the DIY movement, it’s that its practitioners choose to reinvent tradition as a remix, engaging with it through parody, satire and nostalgic irony” (2009, p. 51). Likewise, as one journalist described the Brooklyn outpost of the Renegade Craft Show, “Expect indie artists with an edge - not frumpy, mothball-tinged women in cat sweatshirts peddling macramé plant holders. This craft fair has got cred” (Fleming, 2007).

In this way, indie crafters stake their place in the hipster subcultural pantheon. Greif writes that for this figure, “the skills of hanging on—trend-spotting, cool-hunting, plus handicraft skills—become the heroic practice. The most active participants sell something—customized brand name jeans, airbrushed skateboards, the most special whiskey, the most retro sunglasses—and the more passive justify it” (2010, p. 4). One of the most damning accusations levied against hipsters is that they have adopted the

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<sup>3</sup> Though these publications were both relatively popular, they, like many shelter magazines, fell victim to the recession and dwindling advertising revenues. In 2009 *CRAFT* was folded into O’Reilly Publishing’s more popular magazine, *MAKE*, and in 2011 *ReadyMade* issued its last edition.

rhetoric but not the politics of the counterculture, using consumption to signal their imagined subversiveness (Greif, 2010; Haddow, 2008). It is not hard to see how one could charge DIY crafters with a similar allegation, as they embrace long-storied craft practices while disassociating them from their historical contexts.

Critics of hipsters—and everyone is a critic, as to embrace the title of hipster is a very un-hipster-like thing to do—disdain their cooptation and repetition, arguing that they strip cultural expression from its autochthonous roots and repackage it as cool. Of course this kind of symbolic appropriation is nothing new. Carducci (2006) tracks this debate from Rousseau and the Romantics through the work of Habermas, Debord and Baudrillard, though perhaps nowhere is it more forcefully expressed than in the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer (1998). For them, the social landscape of the 1940s was marked by a bourgeois capitalist system, one that slowly effaced individuals' capacity for autonomous self-expression and instead produced culture that was hopelessly commercial, artificial, and manipulative.

But what is new—in degree, if not kind—is the extent to which leisure and consumption practices have become identity projects. Featherstone (1991) writes that rather than unselfconsciously adopt a lifestyle “the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together” (p. 86). For him the concept of lifestyle is the pivot point around which contemporary identities hinge and is a product of increasing aestheticization of everyday life. And while Featherstone might refer to this postmodern consumer as a hero, he and other likeminded scholars (cf. Appadurai, 1997; Giddens,

1991; Holt, 1998; Lash, 1990) suggest that while consumer culture appears to present us with endless choice, this profusion of commodity-signs does not necessarily mean an end to class identities, but rather the increasing importance of consumption, via lifestyle, to the construction of class identities.

This seeming contradiction—that free choice only compounds social hierarchies rather than dissolves them—goes some way towards explaining the commercialization of many resistant subcultural movements, of which contemporary DIY is a sound example. According to Holt (2002), “Postmodern consumer culture was born, paradoxically, in the 1960s counterculture that opposed corporatism of all stripes” (p. 82). Consumers began to seek out items they perceived as more authentic, and many companies started consciously framing their products as parts of a lifestyle of rebellious self-reliance (Heath & Potter, 2005). Frank (1997) points out that the ideals of the cultural revolution anchored a commercial goldmine for corporations savvy enough to make radical adjustments to their sales strategy. Those firms that created ironic, reflexive brand personas or positioned themselves as disinterested in profit were seen as more genuine, and as a result, were eagerly taken up by “liberated” consumers. As Walker (2009) has recently argued, much the same phenomenon is happening today with a host of brands, from Papst Blue Ribbon to Timberland.

In many ways, the ascendancy of contemporary DIY falls in line with these deeply commercial anti-consumerist movements. The handmade has become symbol of distinction, evidence of the fact that consumers have enough cultural capital to avoid the banal offerings of the mass marketplace. David Brooks (2000) evokes this



commercialization of craft trenchantly when describing his “bobos in paradise,” the new petite bourgeoisie, and the businesses they establish and frequent:

Today’s [bobo] mogul remembers that business is not about making money; it’s about doing something you love. Life should be an extended hobby. Moreover, business, which was once considered soul destroying, can actually be quite enriching if you turn your profession into a craft, using natural products, like apples, and transforming them via old-fashioned artisanship into wholesome products like cider. . . In this way business nourishes the whole person (p. 108-109).

Similarly, Walker (2009), though cautiously optimistic about the DIY movement’s potential to prompt conversation about the ill effects of consumer culture, is also certain that it is very much tied to the consumption it tries to revolutionize. He writes, “DIYism . . . entails selling what you do. . . Grounded in commerce, the DIY movement not only accommodates consumption and marketing, it depends on them. It’s not opposed to the meaning of objects, it’s *about* the meaning of objects” (241).

In the “post-postmodern” consumer environment Holt (2002) theorizes, consumers become *bricoleurs*, using their own idiosyncratic mixture of commodity signs as forms of self-expression. How, though, do DIY practitioners differ from other “liberated” consumers? Campbell (2005) describes the “craft consumer” as one who “consume[s] principally out of a desire to engage in creative acts of self-expression . . . [and] already [has] a clear and stable sense of identity” (p. 24). He uses “craft” metaphorically, to depict the same *bricolage* process that Holt chronicles, but his definition presents a fruitful way to contextualize craft in the history of anti-consumerist movements. Because makers are producers, this hybrid position ostensibly offers them far more control and distance from the marketplace. Nevertheless the objects crafters

produce are arguably deeply interwoven with their sense of self, and so it seems likely that their identities become far more tethered to material commodities.

It is no surprise, then, given the way that the maker's persona is made manifest in and communicated by consumer goods that the handmade object is fetishized in DIY culture. But of course DIY, as aforementioned, is fundamentally opposed to the homogeneity and politics of mass consumerism, and this seeming contradiction also places contemporary DIY within a tradition of ambivalent anti-consumerist movements. From the eighteenth century colonists (Witkowski, 1989) to the '60s cultural revolution (Holt, 2002) to more contemporary instantiations like Burning Man (Kozinets, 2002), individuals have embraced alternative consumption practices as a form of protest, but as many (cf. Binkley, 2008; Binkley & Littler, 2008; Cherrier, 2009; Duncombe, 2012) have pointed out, this form of activism often unintentionally entrenches the symbolic and communicative powers of the commodities it seeks to repudiate. After all, this kind of protest—performed not through an out-and-out rejection of the marketplace but rather the embrace of alternative forms of consumerism—offer radically aestheticized forms of cultural capital and, in turn, deeper expressions of self-identity.

Binkley (2008), reflecting on those practices that are especially likely to enact this paradox, asks:

What domains of everyday life are implicated in such heavily mediated forms of consumption and lifestyle practice, which serve to valorize the critique of the commodity form apparent in anti-consumption practices? Examples are found in any of several specialized anti-consumerist vanguards, particularly those which, while still linked with specific goods and services, have developed relatively autonomous lifestyle discourses which float between various sectors of consumption, whose rhetorics appear, commingle and recombine in different venues, and whose net influence on the consumer is to satiate a given practice of consumption with a critical valence, valorizing the autonomy of the individual

consumer while enveloping it in an affirming sense of social belonging, even one supported by no real social contact (pp. 612-613).

Though Binkley isn't describing DIY explicitly, many of these same characteristics appear throughout craft culture: the emphasis on personal remix and the offer of fetishized goods seemingly endowed with political significance that in fact stoke the drive for still more things.

If this ambivalence is characteristic of DIY consumers, it is even more acute for DIY sellers, as their identities are wrapped up in both their work and the objects they produce. Their work is attractive precisely because it is conceived as alternative to the mass. Yet to sustain themselves, they must engage in all of the same commercial practices that characterize more traditional retailers, namely branding and marketing. And exactly how they manage this tricky balance—selling themselves while seeming to shun the marketplace and the artifice it requires—is often a matter of making their experience of pleasure the focal point of their sales pitch. This equilibrium between self-commodification and authenticity, as well as its consequences, is the subject of the ensuing chapters.

### **Project Overview**

This study articulates how pleasure both motivates and constrains professional craft practice and queries what this relationship might mean for creative labor at large. To untangle the complicated relationship among pleasure, leisure, labor and contemporary DIY, the following dissertation centers on a series of research questions:

- Process: how is pleasure experienced by crafters in the creative act?  
What effect does this experience of pleasure have on crafters' sense of self?
- Product: how is the rhetoric of this creative pleasure folded into the marketing narrative, and to what effect?
- Context: what is the nature of the exchange between crafter and consumer? What values does this relationship reveal and what challenges does it obscure? What does an examination of DIY suggest about neoliberal creative work at large?

In order to probe the meaning of pleasure as it relates to professional craft, I employed a multi-sourced and mixed methods research design which enabled me to generate the kind of grounded theory advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). As Flick (2009) maintains, qualitative research is inherently multi-method in focus. Researchers cannot ever fix “objective reality,” if such a thing exists. Instead Flick argues that triangulation, or the combination of multiple methodological practices, circumvents this challenge by adding rigor, breath, and complexity to any line of inquiry. I thus employ a qualitative combination of in-depth interviews, textual analysis, and limited participant observation to begin to parse the complex network of relations among crafters, the objects they produce, their customers, and the greater DIY community. Moreover just as there are conceptual parallels to be drawn between the digital produsage of new media users and the manual produsage of crafters, so too does this multi-modal system of data collection mirror my object of study. Alasuutari (1995) has characterized cultural studies

methodology as a kind of bricolage, writing that “that real gist of cultural studies is to *make use* of all useful theories and methods in order to gain insights about the phenomenon one studies” (p. 2). Thus my methodological bricolage reflects both the material and metaphorical bricolage in which crafters continuously engage.

As I noted earlier, the practices subsumed under the label of DIY are expansive, slippery, and often times incongruous. In order to avoid the pitfall of a broad yet theoretically superficial investigation of contemporary craft culture, I employed Bratich and Brush’s (2007, 2011) concept of “fabriculture” as a loose guide when delimiting my field of study. They describe the term as:

A whole range of practices usually defined as the “domestic arts”: knitting, crocheting, scrapbooking, quilting, embroidery, sewing, doll-making. More than the actual handicraft, we are referring to the recent popularization and resurgence of interest in these crafts . . . taking into account the mainstream forms found in Martha Stewart Living as well as the more explicitly activist (or *craftivist*) versions . . . (2011, p. 234).

Hence Bratich and Brush’s definition of fabriculture is expansive enough to account for the individual/communal, consumerist/anti-consumerist, and embodied/digital spectra on which contemporary craft falls. A study of fabriculture offers an especially productive site in which to probe the dissolving boundaries between work and leisure, as the practices it describes typically have a long history as domestic labor. As a result, those who willingly choose these kinds of craft already engage with the work/leisure divide. But, as I also suggest in the introduction, if handcraft is work turned hobby, many of these crafters have once again transformed it into work, monetizing their leisure by way of blogs, online stores, and craft fairs.

Secondly by focusing on fabriculture, I am tapping into activities with a rich and complicated relationship to gender. Traditionally conceived as sentimental hobbies or rote domestic drudgery, craft has been dismissed by cultural historians and rejected by second-wave feminists (Chansky; Hackney, 2013). But as third wave feminists grapple with the influence afforded to them by the women's movement, many have been reclaiming these domestic arts as powerful expressions of their femininity. Moreover building a career around these pursuits is perceived as especially appealing to women. This path is assumed to allow them greater freedom and flexibility, giving them the ability to work from home and earn income while caring for their families. However, as I suggest, this fantasy is often at odds with makers' realities, and by focusing on such loaded craft practices, it becomes easier to tease out these complexities.

Finally, fabriculture taps into longstanding communal structures. As a result, it offers an established framework in which to consider the way that community is physically and discursively inscribed in digital DIY culture. Knitting circles and craft fairs have a storied tradition as social institutions in which likeminded practitioners came together, and so by expanding the focus of my research to include them, I am able to compare the motivations and rewards derived by pure amateurs to those divided between work and leisure.

While Bratich and Brush's concept was my guide in seeking out research participants, I ultimately expanded my research focus to include complimentary practices, notably jewelry design, paper crafts, and ceramics. Like fabriculture, these activities are decorative and traditionally relegated to the province of the feminine. By opening up my area of focus, I was able to sidestep some of the logistical challenges I discuss in

subsequent sections and interview makers who were widely dispersed across the spectrum of professionalization. As I argue in Chapter 4, knitting and needlecraft have certain inherent characteristics that typically limit the size of the crafter's operation. However by taking a broader view of craft and interviewing makers who have businesses relatively more scalable, I was able to draw from greater diversity of experience.

Though I acknowledge the existence of the consumer and her demands—particularly as they relate to displays of capital—I focus explicitly on craft producers, thereby casting my project firmly in the realm of cultural production research. But it is my hope that by examining the practices and perceptions of DIY professionals as well as the industrial forces that constrain them, this dissertation draws on the traditions of both political economy and cultural studies to honor the fact that, Keith Negus (1998) has so aptly puts it, “industry produces culture AND culture produces an industry” (p. 359). In fact it is my contention that precisely because craft professionals exemplify seeming incompatible identities—laborer and hobbyist; shrewd entrepreneur and guileless artist; and of course that ultimate incongruity, producer—an analysis of their motivations and practices highlights the fact the “specific complexity of cultural production, ‘mass’ or otherwise, [is] a complexity no less significant than that of consumption for our understanding of how culture works” (Frosh, 2001, p. 554).

Ultimately I conceptualize DIY not as a commercial industry per se, but a commercial field (Bourdieu, 1984): a system of producers, consumers, and text that together dictate what it means to DIY. Though this field is rich and complex, with ever more participants and institutions as the culture only continues to expand, most professional DIYers are (or at some point were) sellers on internet craft behemoth

Etsy.com. Moreover due to its sheer magnitude--Alexa ranks Etsy as the 40<sup>th</sup> most popular website in the United States and the 136<sup>th</sup> most popular website in the world-- the thriving online marketplace is *the* driving force in the world of digital professional craft (Alexa, 2013). As a result Etsy—both the corporate website as well as individual storefronts—is the primary focus of dissertation and provided the bulk of the data that I analyze. But because embodied DIY provides an opportunity to probe the connections and discontinuities of professional craft culture as it moves offline, I supplemented my study of Etsy with ethnographic investigations of both the Renegade Craft Fair and Stitch ‘n Bitch meet-up groups.

### *Etsy.com*

Launched in 2005, the company’s business model is fairly simple: the site charges sellers 20 cents for each item listed and 3.5 percent of each sale. But the sheer volume of transactions (in November 2013, there were listings for 20 million products and over one million sellers worldwide) has resulted in extraordinary sums; in 2012 alone these storefront owners garnered \$895 million in sales (Etsy, 2013i) . It is also growing at an extraordinary rate: In November 2013 alone, 1,381,666 new members joined the Etsy community, increasing October new memberships by 22.5% (Traub, 2013).

Etsy was conceived in 2005 when Jean Railla, of the *Get Crafty* book and eponymous website, hired New York University classics student Rob Kalin and his friends Chris Maguire and Haim Schoppik (Bruder, 2009). Though the company has had a succession of leaders at its helm—the ramifications of which are explicated in Chapter 4—Etsy has always stressed entrepreneurship, framing its customers and clients as skilled



professionals. It provides several blogs, including “the art of pricing” “from etsy’s merchandising desk,” and “quit your day job,” each with lengthy and frequently updated entries that cover all aspects of running a craft-centered business. A company-issued report declares that Etsy is comprised of “a unique population of Internet enabled entrepreneurs who are building businesses on their own terms—prioritizing flexibility and independence over rapid growth, using Etsy income to build resilience in the face of declining job security . . . transforming the U.S. economy in the process” (Etsy, 2013i). With “middle-skill jobs disappearing at a rapid clip, the report champions the fact that for the 26% of U.S. Etsy sellers who craft full-time, the company offers new opportunities to bolster the middle class through micro-business and the peer economy. This is especially noteworthy given the fact that 88% of its sellers are female, with a median age of 39—demographics that don’t necessarily correspond with what many imagine to be the prototypical entrepreneur.

However in contextualizing the data, the picture of Esty entrepreneurialism that emerges isn’t quite as uniformly rosy. The same report finds that sales contribute an average of 7.6% to a seller’s household income, which at an average of \$44,900 (10.2% lower than the national average), turns out to be a little over \$3,400 (White, 2013). Moreover not everyone is benefitting equally, and thus the typical take-home is likely considerably less. Jakob’s (2013) research reveals that sales are dominated by craft suppliers as well as overseas manufacturers; Etsy doesn’t distinguish goods in its “handmade” category from those in “supplies.” She thus concludes, “Etsy.com’s rising sales figures are a sign that more and more people buy their craft supplies from Etsy.com sellers but it does not imply that the people actually making the handmade goods are

running successful and thriving businesses” (2013, p. 132). Indeed some have gone as far as criticizing Etsy for capitalizing on the user-generated anti-corporate image projected by these crafters while confining them to a “female ghetto” (Mosley, 2009). Etsy.com thus provided a rich site in which to investigate the professionalization of leisure, the convergence of work and hobby, and how economic capital can be wrung from social and cultural capital in the context of the handmade.

### *Renegade Craft Fair*

A large-scale and free-to-attend annual juried marketplace event, the Renegade Craft Fair (RCF) is considered by many to be the most exclusive and visible of the handful of DIY craft fairs that have emerged in recent years.<sup>4</sup> RCF co-founders Sue Daly and Kathleen Habbley were inspired to organize the inaugural bazaar after looking for an art and crafts show that was consonant with their own aesthetic. After investigating several events, it became clear to them that was no event explicitly devoted to the burgeoning DIY community of which they were a part (Renegade Craft Fair, 2011). So they, with several of their friends, created an event that catered to an alternative audience interested in more contemporary designs, by featuring moderately priced goods of all kinds. Since RFC got its start in Chicago’s Wicker Park in the fall of 2003, it has spread to Brooklyn (in 2005); San Francisco (in 2008); Los Angeles (in 2009); Austin (in 2010) and London (in 2011), garnering national media attention along the way (Ryzik, 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of similar indie craft fairs include Art vs. Craft in Milwaukee; Bazaar Bizarre, held in Los Angeles, Cleveland and San Francisco, Urban Craft Uprising in Seattle; and Art Star Craft Bizarre in Philadelphia.

On average, the fairs are attended by over 250,000 people annually, and each features the handmade, original offerings of hundreds of crafters from across the country (Renegade Craft Fair, 2011). Prospective sellers are subject to fierce competition—many would-be vendors apply and as a result, the fairs are heavily curated—and booth space typically ranges from \$400 to \$600 (not including display items or equipment), making participation a costly venture. The sellers that are selected are joined by purveyors of “artisanal” food and drink and local musicians. Most fairs also include bespoke art installations, interactive workshops and locally sponsored seating areas. Thus each RCF proudly celebrates both national and local DIY culture.

But while thoroughly embodied events, these fairs are also clearly the products of digital culture, both functionally and ideologically. Vendors are heavily reliant on mobile credit card processors like Square or Intuit, and Stevens, writing of the new crop of indie craft fairs, describes their vendors as “palpably confident” because they are “insiders [who] have not only built up social capital through communal work sessions in crafts production but have also embraced their inner geek and built an identity for themselves via the social community of craft that exists on the Internet” (2011, pp. 52-53). After all Hubble and Daly were motivated to start their first fair because there already existed such a lively online community of indie crafters (Fleming, 2007). Likewise Leah Kramer, founder of online craft community Craftster, attributes the success of site like hers with spawning many physical-world craft fairs, including RCF, whose popularity has in turn led to the founding of brick-and-mortars devoted to DIY (Walker, 2006).

### *Stitch ‘n Bitch Groups*

The term stitch ‘n bitch can be traced back to as early as WWII, it was greatly revitalized by *Bust* editor-in-chief Debbie Stoller in 1999, when she started her own group in NYC’s East Village. Open to anyone who wanted an opportunity to both knit and socialize, the club met in public spaces such as bars and cafes and proved incredibly popular. After Stoller wrote about Stitch n’ Bitch in her magazine, numerous readers were inspired to start their own knitting groups, and clubs have popped up in Chicago, Los Angeles and Austin (Stoller, 2003). Though wildly varied in terms of demographics and purpose—some groups are strictly social while others knit for charity and other kinds of social welfare projects—collectively Stitch ‘n Bitch groups are characterized by the fact that they are distinctly “third place,” convening in spaces that are neither domestic nor work-related; social; and predominantly female (Minahan & Cox, 2007).

Moreover like RCF, most stitch ‘n bitch groups are reliant upon information technologies like emails, blogs, and, crucially, sites like MeetUp.com and Ravelry.com in order to organize events and attract new members. In this sense, stitch ‘n bitch members who first meet online and then move offline to pubs, coffee shops and yarn stores make public the personal and private nature of their leisure and transform knitting into a communal activity (Orton-Johnson). In this way they engage with many of the same aforementioned tensions—public/private, individual/communal, technological/embodied—that confront professional crafters, and yet they also serve as a useful counterexample. As feminine and anti-commercial, in many ways represent conventional understanding of handicraft. In so doing, in this dissertation they serve as a

control group, highlighting the way that pleasure is differentially inflected across the amateur/professional spectrum.

## **Method**

The bulk of my data comes from 46 one-on-one interviews with informants from one or more of four overlapping constituencies: Etsy storefront owners; craft fair vendors; members of two Philadelphia-based stitch ‘n bitch groups; and the individuals behind a handful of independent DIY style blogs. All but one these interviewees are female, and they range in age from early 20s to late 40s.<sup>5</sup> Dividing informants by category is difficult, as the vast majority who sell on Etsy also participate in craft fairs and/or blog, though notably most of the stitch ‘n bitch members were not engaged in any kind of regular commerce related to their craft.<sup>6</sup> Likewise the three full-time bloggers I spoke to did not produce crafts to be sold but rather derived revenue from sponsored posts, corporate partnerships, and advertising (see Appendix A for the full list of subjects and their various roles).

Thirty-six interviews were conducted by phone, and of those that took place in person, all but one were with local stitch ‘n bitch group members. Discussions were recorded with informants’ permission and transcribed verbatim. The length of time for each interview varied considerably, from fifteen minutes to over an hour and a half; most lasted between twenty-five and forty-five minutes. Though interview questions varied

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<sup>5</sup> As a result when I hereafter refer to my participants generically, I employ the feminine pronoun.

<sup>6</sup> However it should be noted that two of my informants were in the process of developing “how to machine knit” classes with a third stitch ‘n bitch member. They intend to grow these classes into a thriving second business, but at the time of our interview the location in which these classes are to be held was still undergoing renovations.

depending on the particular individual's background, chosen medium, and degree to which her craft was professionalized, collectively the prompts were designed to elicit practitioners' motivations, personal histories, perceptions of their work, and understanding of their place within the larger DIY community (see Appendix B for sample interview schedules).

While anonymizing research participants is often standard practice in ethnographically-oriented research projects, the question of anonymity was not a critical one in this case, as most of my subjects were initially contacted because of their visible online presence. When I asked participants if they would like to remain anonymous, only three answered in the affirmative; as requested I provided them with an alias and changed any identifying information (see Appendix A). I did, however, provide all of the Stitch 'n Bitch members with pseudonyms. Because I was only interested in their experience participating in local knitting groups and did not need to contextualize their responses in light of Etsy storefronts, blogs or any other social media artifacts, it was not necessary to identify them by their real names.

Accessing informants, however, proved trickier than anticipated. I began data collection by soliciting Etsy sellers, as the company is the common denominator for most craft professionals. My intention was to use Etsy's within-site "contact shop owner" feature to cold email the first 10 storefront owners who appeared under the categories of "bags and purses," "crochet," "jewelry," and "knitting," and continue to contact potential subjects until my conceptual categories reached a saturation point. However because I was sending the same recruitment email (see Appendix C) to a number of Etsians, I was almost immediately flagged as a spammer and my ability to use their contact system was

suspended. I emailed Etsy Admin and explained my research project; they reinstated my privileges but asked that I refrain from contacting subjects through their site. As a result, I was forced to look for sellers in each category who included additional contact information—whether an email address, a blog, a personal website, a Facebook account, or some combination of all four—in their shop profile or masthead. Because of this adjustment in strategy, my sample is not random, and as such does not conform to strict definitions of representability. In fact, it is likely quite biased, as the most casual or amateur of Etsy sellers typically have neither the interest nor ability to set up a full complement of social media accounts.

The response rate to my email solicitation was also lower than expected. Of the more than hundred people I contacted, fifty expressed initial interest and thirty-five were available at the scheduled interview time. Though some of my informants are successful enough to derive their entire income from their Etsy stores, I did not interview any subjects with kinds of triple digit earnings that Williams (2009) profiled in his *New York Times* trend piece. My guess is that sellers with an exceptionally heavy volume of sales did not have the time to participate and so didn't respond to my request. Again, as a result of this selection bias, the data gleaned from my interviews comes from a narrower swathe of Etsy sellers than I had originally intended—neither completely amateur nor uber-professional--and thus I make no claim that the conclusions I draw necessarily hold true for all Etsians.

I also interviewed a handful of DIY style bloggers—women who don't produce items for sale but rather publish DIY tutorials. In addition to generating ad revenue, these blogs have often led to new business ventures for their creators. Geri Hirsch, for

instance, has collaborated with a number of high profile clothing brands, including Topshop and L.A. based Lovers + Friends; created editorials for magazines like *Foam* and *Lucky*; and most recently launched her own YouTube channel LEAFtv. Alicia DiRago has translated her blog's success into Whimseybox, a DIY/craft kit subscription and ecommerce business, securing startup funding and business guidance from Chicago's Accelerate Labs incubator. But though the response rate for this group was modest, so was the sample size: at the time of my data collection, there were only a handful of personal DIY blogs that continually appeared on top 10 lists. Of the 9 bloggers I contacted, three expressed interest. However several of those who demurred did so on account of the fact that they were in the middle of national book tours.

I also drew upon relevant textual sources to augment my analysis, approaching the data intertextually by placing the materials in dialogue with one another and with the interview transcripts (Fairclough, 2003). In addition to the texts that related directly to my interview subjects—e.g., the content of the informants' Etsy shops and blogs—I completed a thorough analysis of Etsy.com, including its corporate literature and overall site structure. Three especially fruitful sources of information were the monthly “Quit Your Day Job” series, semi-weekly Featured Shop posts, and the Etsy Seller Handbook, all of which are also folded in the Etsy blog.

Though they differ in format, the QYDJ and Featured Shop posts accomplish a similar objective: to draw attention to a seller and her work. In both series, the highlighted storefront owner fashions a narrative about her personal history with craft, her motivation behind launching her storefront, her typical schedule, and how her life has changed since joining Etsy. Peppering these articles are photographs of the crafter



herself, her workspace, and her handicraft. Unsurprisingly profiled sellers typically see a dramatic uptick in sales, and there are a number of forum posts devoted to deciphering the reasoning behind Etsy's selection process. And they have a regular opportunity to be chosen: as of February 2014 there have been close to 11,000 published Featured Shop profiles and 250 QYDJ entries, providing a superabundance of data about the kinds of careers and products Etsy deems worthy of emulation.

In order to draw from these archives a more reasonable selection of texts, I conducted purposive sampling of each until reaching theoretical saturation, ultimately analyzing 100 featured shop profiles and 50 QYDJ posts. In all likelihood this was more than necessary, as each kind of entry is quite homogenous. QYDJ publishes the questions that are asked of each seller. They are often identical, and if not, generally only deviate slightly from the standard set of prompts. The "Featured Shop" posts are typically straight first-person narrative. However given the overwhelming similarity of these accounts, it seems very likely that the profiled sellers are responding to the same questions, which are then excised from the text.

While QYDJ and Featured Seller posts are clearly aimed at the general public, entries in the "Etsy Seller Handbook" are, as the name suggests, written for Etsy storefront owners and meant to educate them on an array of topics, from setting up shop to determining sales tax. There are close to 450 archived entries in the handbook, and cumulatively they paint a clear portrait of what Etsy deems best practices, and hence how the company understands professional DIY. I didn't sample the Etsy Seller Handbook systematically but rather consulted numerous relevant entries as themes emerged in the interviews and in the QYDJ and Featured Seller posts.

In order to contextualize my findings and secure a firmer grasp of how DIY is imagined more broadly, I also conducted an expansive search of popular press articles devoted to contemporary craft culture. Using both Ebsco and Lexis Nexis, I searched for articles containing both “craft” and “DIY” and using the sites’ filtering mechanisms, analyzed the top 300 most “relevant” articles. Throughout the research and writing process, I also continued to conduct searches on developing themes and research sites.

Finally, in addition to the interview and textual data, I engaged in limited participation at both the Brooklyn (June 2012) and Los Angeles (July 2012) Renegade Craft Fairs, as well as the Art Star Craft Bazaar in Philadelphia (May 2012). Though I attended the events largely to recruit subjects, I also spent the better part of two days at each walking through the fairgrounds, observing how sellers interacted with customers and one another. I attended some of the hands-on workshops and conducted informal interviews with fair attendees. I also photographed many of the booths, and this data was invaluable as I started to make sense of how professional crafters conceive of community and competition (see Chapter 4).

I also participated in two Philadelphia-based Stitch ‘n Bitch groups. The first is a meet-up group that organizes monthly at bars and restaurants throughout Northern Liberties and Fishtown, parts of the city known for their thriving hipster culture. Of the five events I attended, all of the participants save one was a woman, and most were in their 20s and 30s. The second is a weekly group of knitters and crocheters that convenes at the University of Pennsylvania. Almost all of the attendees are affiliated with the University in some way, and the average age is considerably higher than the former

group. Most women are in their 40s and 50s. In both cases I made my position as a researcher clear from the outset of my attendance.

Most qualitative research projects demand a certain kind of reflexivity, requiring the researcher to acknowledge her own socio-historical location and the values it engenders, as well the inescapability of her own bias (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Likewise, as Chiseri-Strater writes, “Turning in upon ourselves as researchers makes us look subjectively and reflexively at how we are positioned. Turning in upon ourselves prevents us from removing our self(es) from our research process, from our connections with our informants, or from our written translation of data to text” (1996, p. 117). This is something to which I given close thought as I conducted the research for this study, as my position clearly affected the kinds of data I was able to glean. I, like the majority of the women I interviewed, am white, educated, urban, and over the course of my research, left my late 20s for early 30s. I also consider myself to be creative, and in the free time that I do have, enjoy making things. And like many of my informants, I went to art school, graduating college with a B.F.A. in painting.

My status as a native ethnographer was especially salient in the interviews and enabled me to deconstruct informants’ spin to a certain extent. Sender (2004) writes of the pitch, whereby marketers and media professionals’ remarks are always positively cast, with the ultimate goal of selling their client or organization. Likewise Garnham (1990) argues that media producers frequently produce accounts of their careers in which they overstate the creative and celebratory features of their work. Much the same process occurred in my interviews with crafters, though in this case these women were selling themselves. This self-branding is a central topic of Chapter 3, but here it behooves me to

note that my own background encouraged interviewees to come out from behind their celebratory façade. Once I disclosed the fact that I had fine arts training and understand to a certain extent what is demanded of creative professionals, informants were far more apt to share their personal struggles and frustrations in turn. Similarly, one more than one occasion, as I started to wrap up an interview a subject would ask me about other interviews I had previously conducted and the trends that were starting to emerge in my research. Once I gave voice to the fact that others found facets of professional craft challenging, the informant would chime in to agree and elaborate. I examine the reasons that underlie this hesitancy in Chapter 4.

### **Dissertation Outline**

In this dissertation, I argue that the concept of pleasure is an especially useful theoretical mechanism by which to understand DIY's digital-age resurgence as personal hobby, professional practice, and consumer product. I focus explicitly on the work of professional and semi-professional craftspeople, considering why they choose this kind of work, how they sell their craft, and the implications of DIY's popularity in the digital age. In so doing, I suggest that DIY is both an antidote to and exemplification of the challenges of neoliberal creative work, and as such, is a rich site in which to probe the limitations of the creative class thesis.

My analysis is structured in terms of chronology, tracing a handcrafted object's creation through its marketing to its sale, as well as scope, moving from the creative experience of an individual artisan to her place with the broader DIY community. In Chapter 2 I consider Roland Barthes's writings about textual pleasure, suggesting that his

notions of *jouissance* and *plaisir* illuminate just what makes craft so alluring: the fact that it both dismantles and reifies understandings of the self, offering the practitioner an experience of seamless immersion with the material world and a more stable sense of personal identity. Moreover I argue that Barthes's *jouissance* shares much in common with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow." Though former is a product of post-structuralist literary theory and the latter, positive psychology, I contend that not only is there significant overlap between the two theories, but that taken together, they become useful prisms through which to examine the politics of pleasure as they are enacted in professional DIY. I then use repetition as a case study to further illustrate the simultaneity of these conservative and radical functions in DIY practice. I argue that on a macro level, trends (that is, aesthetic repetition)—and, somewhat ironically, practitioners' resistance to these trends—deliver *plaisir*'s characteristic ego-reinforcement. On a micro level, however, the somatic repetition of the hand—so essential to the craft fabrication process—not only involves the loss of self that typifies *jouissance*, but in so doing, also challenges traditional understandings of women's domestic craft as mindless drudgery.

After establishing the pleasure that comes in producing the DIY object, in Chapter 3 I direct my attention to its sale, arguing that both *jouissance* and *plaisir* become part of marketing narrative generated by professional crafters. If in traditional consumer goods, lifestyle signifiers are connected to the signifier of the product, then in DIY this relationship is filtered through the figure of the maker herself; she becomes her own brand. Yet, at the same time, authenticity is a crucial part of this marketing narrative; in order for this fantasy to compel consumers it must above all else appear genuine. And herein exists the central paradox confronting makers: how to market themselves and

their lifestyle without seeming to do so, as crass salesmanship runs counter to the very idea of autotelic creative pleasure they are tendering. In this chapter, I suggest that this fundamental contradiction drives much of the way that professional DIY is framed on both Etsy and sellers' personal blogs. Makers often counterbalance self-promotional references to *plaisir* with portrayals of *jouissance*, which serve to underscore sellers' "real" commitment to their art. They also take leverage the affordances of digital media to minimize references to conscious self-promotion, thereby conveying an aura of authenticity through the very process of selling their work.

In Chapter 4 I examine the nature of the relationship between crafter and customer that occurs on Etsy, suggesting that the objects exchanged on the site are *simultaneously* gifts and commodities. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's (1986) assertion that gifts and commodities are two ends of a continuum rather than mutually exclusive states, I maintain that the handmade goods on offer are fundamentally part of both the moral and economic market. However I also maintain that the primacy of pleasure, so critical to this exchange, obscures many of the challenges that come with creative entrepreneurship, as to acknowledge these pressures would puncture the fantasy that makes crafters' work so appealing. But in considering these oft unrecognized hardships it becomes clear that there is a deep-seated irony at work: the more successful a maker becomes and the bigger her business grows, the farther away she moves from personally experiencing *jouissance*. Thus the principle that drives the business of DIY—the pleasure crafters derive through the act of creative production—becomes impaired by its commercialization.

I conclude by arguing that this paradox is emblematic of neoliberal creative work at large and points to the limits of the creative class thesis. I contextualize professional craft within the widespread cultural embrace of “celebritization”—the democratization of celebrity and the processes whereby public figures are framed as “ordinary” and ordinary citizens frame themselves as extraordinary—suggesting that both phenomena hinge on produsage and underscore the centrality of self-commodification in the face of economic uncertainty. However I contend that not only is professional craft emblematic of these pervasive cultural shifts, it is also counterposed to them. Turning to the interviews I conducted with the stitch ‘n bitch members, I consider the possibility that craft-as-hobby offers the surest path to the pleasures of creative production, as it sidesteps the challenges of self-commodification while engendering the full range of both *jouissance* and *plaisir*.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Process: Do What You Love, Love What You Do**

In many ways, Kristen of Quernus Crafts is a typical example of the crafters profiled in Etsy's "Quit Your Day Job." Featured on July 17, 2012, Kristen was a practicing attorney when she found herself in the midst of a mid-life crisis. She realized she could no longer pursue a career that left her passionless and after building a small nest egg, took a six month leave of absence to begin crafting her "wee creatures"—thimble-sized animals made out of polymer clay. These bibelots began garnering modest attention on her own blog, and she subsequently opened her Etsy storefront. Three years later, her business had become lucrative enough to warrant Etsy's public stamp of approval, and as she exclaims in the profile, "I have absolutely no regrets about leaving behind a career in law—I have never worked harder, and I've never been happier". Though she admits there are certain challenges that come with working as a self-employed professional craftsperson, she urges would-be Etsy sellers to "go for it! It's not an easy way to make a living, but if you are doing what you love, there is no better way to earn a crust" (QuernusCrafts, 2012).

Kristen's success story is like so many of those featured in Etsy's series. Numerous sellers have jettisoned the white-collar world, either by choice or by circumstance, to focus on their growing home businesses. Sandra of snapcrafty left her position as a postdoctoral fellow in genetic research; Christine of BloomStudios, her job in dentistry; Vana of lepapierstudio, her tenure at a small architecture firm; and Alaina, her career in grocery store advertising (marymary, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011c). Still



others have found themselves as full-time caregivers of children or sick relatives and started crafting as a way to earn additional income while at home. Regardless of motivation, however, almost all of the profiled sellers express unqualified satisfaction with their career changes. Writes Anna of Anna Joyce Designs, “I am so glad I decided to take the chance to follow my dreams” (marymary, 2011b). Sandra enthuses, “I no longer dread going to work every day and am healthier and happier than I’ve ever been. Goodbye doctor and hello entrepreneur!” (marymary, 2011c). Jeweler Molly of Uniqueartpendants tells would-be Etsy sellers, “One of my favorite quotes comes from George Eliot: ‘It’s never too late to be what you might have been.’ I wish I would have become self-employed sooner!” (marymary, 2011d). Again and again, the same themes emerge across these strikingly similar profiles: self-sufficiency, creative autonomy, tenacity, and pleasure.

While neither journalists nor scholars have explicitly suggested that pleasure is the driving force behind DIY, references to this ethos of creative joy abound in both the popular press and scholarly literature. In a 2009 *Washington Times* article, for instance, the DIY movement is characterized as the “start of a personal and social revolution,” and the reporter includes a quote from DIY maker, author, and filmmaker Faythe Levine, who stresses that “there are endless examples of people who are not satisfied with their lives and who followed their creative path” (Goldberg Goff, 2009). In a *Washington Post* column from the same year, a reporter writes, “there’s a sense of accomplishment and a satisfying smirk that can’t be diminished by stinging paper cuts, Super Glued fingers, or the sweat invested in massive cleanups” (Hom, 2009). A *Philadelphia Inquirer* feature about the growing DIY movement cites Les Gordon, A.C. Moore’s chief financial

officer, who stresses that the craft superstore “[doesn’t] sell anything that anybody needs. What we sell is self-expression and self-gratification” (Lotozo, 2003).

Just as notable is the recent spate of popular lifestyle guides (e.g., Berger et al., 2005; Gavarry, 2010; Henzel & Stoller, 2011; Levine & Heimerl, 2008; Nayar, 2010; Sharp, 2010) extolling the joys of a DIY lifestyle. For instance *Fix it, make it, grow it, bake it: the DIY guide to the good life*’s (2010) Billee Sharp writes, “I’m not suggesting that everybody needs to ditch the SUV and begin a macramé plant-holder business, but I do think that simply doing what makes you happy will reap the best rewards” (p. xvii). Likewise *Bust* magazine editor and noted feminist Debbie Stoller explains in her introduction to *The Bust DIY guide to life: making your way through every day* (2011), “DIY is not just about making things—it’s also about making a life. Aside from learning how to knit a scarf we wanted our readers to learn how to create a life on their own terms . . .” (p. 10). For these DIY adherents, handcraft provides opportunities for autonomy, and autonomy, in turn, results in pleasure.

A flurry of para-academic (and often autobiographical) books (e.g., Crawford, 2009; Gauntlett, 2011; Sennett, 2008) celebrating DIY culture or manual labor in general has also recently appeared, and these too praise DIY activities for the happiness they bring. Gauntlett, citing economist Richard Layard, argues that not only does work need to be meaningful if we are to be satisfied, but that “creative projects, especially when either online, or offline but linked via online platforms are invaluable for human happiness” (2011, p. 223). Crawford, recounting his own experience as a motorcycle mechanic, writes that when he finishes a job he “suddenly [doesn’t] feel tired, even after [he’s] been standing on a concrete floor all day” and that listening to a satisfied satisfied

owner drive off on his newly repaired bike, “that sound pleases me . . . the gist of it is ‘yeah!’” (2009, p. 4). These writers frame manual labor as the source of deep satisfaction, the kind that cannot be found in the disembodied abstractions of the digital workplace but rather only in the concrete realities of the workshop.

But perhaps nowhere is this underlying philosophy more efficiently expressed than in some of the aphorisms circulating on Pinterest, a popular image-sharing site, and other similarly DIY-focused corners of the internet. The palindromic “Do what you love, love what you do” has become a *visible* rallying cry for many crafters, having been emblazoned on sumptuously designed prints, posters, charm necklaces, bracelets, and pillows (see Figure 1). Just as popular are its variants: “do what you love and do it often”; “do more of what makes you happy”; and “do it with passion or not at all.” In fact, according to estimates from Repinly.com, an independent online directory that compiles such data, one of the top 100 most popular quotes in Pinterest’s history begins, “This is your life. Do what you love and do it often. If you don’t like something change it. If you don’t like your job, quit” (Repinly!, 2012).

Drawing on these disparate cultural references, I suggest that not only is pleasure craft’s primary allure but it is also an especially productive mechanism by which to understand DIY’s digital-age resurgence. In this chapter, I focus on crafters’ creative process, arguing that the act of making craft simultaneously concretizes and effaces practitioners’ sense of themselves. Employing Roland Barthes’ writings about textual pleasure as well as Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow,” I contend that this concurrent strengthening and weakening offers crafters both a more stable sense of personal identity and seamless immersion with the material world. This binary, in turn,

underpins all of the other dichotomies that characterize contemporary DIY: its materiality and digitalization; its status as work and leisure; its fundamental individualism and communality.

To illustrate these myriad simultaneities, I use the phenomenon of repetition as a case study. I argue that on a macro level, trends (that is, aesthetic repetition)—and, somewhat ironically, practitioners' resistance to these trends—engender DIY's characteristic ego-reinforcement. On a micro level, however, the somatic repetition of the hand—so essential to the craft fabrication process—not only involves the loss of self that typifies the creative experience



Figure 2.1. A sampling of handmade “DWYL”-themed items available on Etsy. Clockwise from upper right: aluminum bracelet from Etsy seller LindaMunequita; embroidery hoop wall art from PAGEFIFTYFIVE; women’s t-shirt from meganleedesigns; mug from TwiceAlive; cushion cover from CaboPickles; print from 55his; earrings from thatsreallyclassic; and printed notebook from TheLittleRice.

but in so doing, also challenges traditional understandings of women's domestic craft as mindless drudgery. However by comparing the features of contemporary craft to the characteristics lauded by Richard Sennett in *The Craftsman* (2008) and Matthew B. Crawford in *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (2009), two of the more widely known treatises extolling the virtues of physical work, as well as the Marxist conceptions of labor from which these books draw, I suggest that DIY—at least in the abstract and free from the strictures of commerce—offers a radical vision of unalienated work and a useful point of comparison when considering the complicated effect of the marketplace.

### **Pleasure as a Theoretical Frame**

Like DIY, pleasure is a problematic and amorphous term. Geoffrey Hartman contends that “The word pleasure is problematic . . . First, for its onomatopoeic pallor, then for its inability to carry with it the nimbus of its historical associations . . . Though literary elaboration has augmented the vocabulary of feeling and affect, pleasure as a critical term remains descriptively poor” (Kermode & Alter, 2004, quoted in Frost, 2013). Moreover, like DIY, it has been long characterized by strict bifurcation. Connor (1992) frames this divide in relation to pleasure and value: hedonists and utilitarians believe that an object's value is determined by its ability to bestow pleasure; moralists measure pleasure's value by its ability to be transmuted into some other good, such as “truth” or “justice.” In other words, “the moralist aims to convert pleasure into value, the hedonist to convert all value back into pleasure” (p. 204).

This binary, however, is not an even one. Extreme hedonists notwithstanding, most ancient Greek philosophers considered pleasure to be only one of happiness's

constituent parts. For them, pleasure is a bodily and sensual force, and must always be held in check if one is to cultivate the reason, wisdom, and harmony that are preconditions for the good life. Plato, moreover, distinguished between “true” and “false” pleasures, characterizing the former as the result of mental pursuits and the latter an outcome of corporeal experience. A life of physical pleasure without intellect is “not the life of a human being, but of a jelly-fish or some sea creature which is merely a body endowed with life, a companion of oysters” (1983, p. 16, quoted in Frost, 2013).

Not only is pleasure denigrated as vapid, but it, once again like DIY, has been framed as inherently feminine. Plato describes poetry as “merely pleasurable,” portraying it as an enchantress who seduces the wayward from philosophical truth, thus establishing a precedent in which pleasure is both morally suspect and wantonly feminine (Rutsky & Wyatt, 1990). Descartes argues that the Man of Reason must transcend the realm of the senses, for which women have sole responsibility (Lloyd, 1993). Ott (2007), drawing on Schott (1988), points out that the Kantian theory of “pure reason,” which prioritizes the mastery and control of bodily experience, excludes women because of their historical association with sensuousness.

This assault on pleasure has also not only motivated much of philosophy but critical cultural studies as well. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write that, “Pleasure always means not to think about anything. . . Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality but from the last remaining thought or resistance” (2002, p. 144). Elsewhere they recount Odysseus’s experience with the island of the Lotus eaters, in which the lotus serves as a symbol for pleasure itself. Like the intoxicated and oblivious Lotus eaters, then, those who derive

pleasure from mass media products are unaware of their dependence on them, and the seeming gratification they experience is in fact “only an illusion of bliss, a dull aimless vegetating, as impoverished as the life of animals” (p. 49). However, like Plato, Horkheimer and Adorno also distinguish “true pleasure”—that which must be struggled for and won—from mere gratification. The former is demanding, flexible, and innovative; the latter, ossified, comfortable, and both the inverse of and enemy to high art.

During the critical turn of the 1960s, Marxists and other members of the Left reinvigorated the Frankfurt School’s attack. In fact Frost (2013) argues that the fundamental goal of modernism was to redefine pleasure, by revealing accessible, sensual pleasures as specious while encouraging those that were difficult and abstruse. American literary critic Lionel Trilling, speaking for his intellectual brethren in an essay entitled “The Fate of Pleasure,” applauded Modernist authors who took on difficult, arduous tasks—“ ‘unnatural’ modes of life. . . [seeking] out distressing emotions in order to know psychic energies which are not to be summoned up in felicity.” He went on to declare that “we are repelled by the idea of art that is consumer-oriented and comfortable” and called for a whole-sale “repudiation” of bourgeois pleasure (1963, p. 439).

In the 1970s, feminists also actively dismantled notions of pleasure all the while critiquing its feminization. Most famously, Laura Mulvey, in her oft-cited and anthologized “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1995), sets her sights on the eradication of pleasure, making it the express goal of her radical enterprise. She argues that classical narrative films privilege the male viewer, allowing him to take pleasure by



both identifying with the male hero and by objectifying the passive female body.

Drawing upon psychoanalytic theory, she maintains that the two modes of film spectatorship—voyeuristic and fetishistic viewing—are responses to male castration anxiety. Mulvey concludes by arguing that only an avant-garde practice can free the audience and “destroy” the “satisfaction, pleasure and privilege” of traditional narrative film. Like her Modernist predecessors, Mulvey calls for art that is challenging and inaccessible in place of that which is comfortable and easy.

This monolithic conception of pleasure, in turn, has also long been wrapped up in questions of social position. Bourdieu (1984) points out that aesthetic taste and artistic consumption are reflections of one’s class; the bourgeoisie learn to value form over substance, appreciating that which is demanding and abstract. The working class, on the other hand, favors content over style, judging works of art by their ability to provide immediate sensual gratification rather than their formal attributes. Moreover Bourdieu argues that each position is elevated by its constituent group. In other words, films favored by cultural elites are considered pretentious and gratuitously convoluted by those with lower cultural capital. However, this antagonism, far from changing the status quo, actually entrenches it while upholding the ideology that tastes are naturally heterogeneous and culturally insignificant (Holt, 1997).

These class connotations are evident in scholarly attempts to recuperate popular forms of pleasure, particularly those that are highly gendered. Throughout the 1980s, scholars pondered whether popular media is as deleterious and vapid as its critics have always claimed and, if so, why such forms were perennially beloved by women (O’Connor & Klaus, 2000). As result, a large number of empirical, audience-focused

studies were conducted, investigating such myriad cultural forms as soap operas, women's magazines, horoscopes (e.g., Brunsdon, 1981; Coward, 1984; Hobson, 1980; Livingstone, 1988; Modleski, 1983; Winship, 1987) and the pleasures they engender. But while this thoughtful consideration of mass culture was a novel shift in focus, much of the discourse that resulted from these studies was fundamentally apologist. For instance, in her influential study of romance readers, Radway (1984) argues that the women she interviewed are voracious consumers of these formulaic novels precisely because the texts provide a pleasurable release of tension. They enable their readers to take a break from the constant demands on them made by their families; they also offer vicarious nurturance and care—needs that aren't being met in these women's "real" lives. However Radway also argues that mass market romantic fiction, by virtue of its hybrid realist/mythical status, maintains the status quo and further indoctrinates women into an oppressive patriarchal system. The pleasures that romance novels engender are ultimately compensatory.

Thus while wildly varied in their aims and approach, cumulatively these scholarly investigations belie a monolithic conception of pleasure, as fundamentally passive, homogenous, and hegemonic. Joy comes in submitting to the cultural status quo, in allowing oneself be lulled into a false complacency. Moreover this conception of pleasure is always couched, either implicitly or overtly, in terms of consumption. Ready-made and ego-reinforcing mass cultural texts are the bearers of this effortless satisfaction. And while this particular kind of pleasure certainly underlies a great deal of DIY's appeal, to fully come to grips with its import in the digital sphere it is necessary to problematize this totalizing view of pleasure. It needs to be both contextualized and

considered as only one point on a spectrum of experience. And it is here that the work of Roland Barthes becomes especially helpful for parsing the nuance and cultural implication of contemporary craft.

### **The *Plaisir* of Craft**

Though Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) was writing about the interaction between a text and its reader, rather than an embodied cultural phenomenon, his model proves helpful for thinking through what's at stake as DIY becomes textualized and professionalized. He describes two kinds of textual pleasure: *plaisir* (often translated as "pleasure") and *jouissance* (often translated as "bliss"). Though both, as I argue, are at play in contemporary craft, *plaisir* is a much more familiar concept, connoting the aforementioned conservative pleasures so condemned by cultural critics.

For Barthes, *plaisir* "comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading" (p. 14). It also is a result of a particular kind of text, what Barthes calls a "*texte lisible*," or a readerly text: a closed, unified, and often linear narrative that privileges a singular interpretation. Because this kind of text is conventionally structured and confirms a reader's understanding of what a particular genre should be, "it institutes the general, becomes normative, generic, not to be transgressed (or only at the cost of incurring the wrath and displeasure of the conventional reader)" (Miklitsch, 1983, p. 103). Thus readerly "works" always "respect the sovereignty of the Author-God," and while they can allow for the possibility of a plural signified, "it is always a kind of limited plural" (Ott, 2004).

Of course, as Ott (2004) asserts, one can experience *plaisir* while producing radical readings. For him, context is the critical—and often neglected—consideration, and he critiques media studies scholars for conflating radical points of view with resistive readings. To illustrate this point, Ott references a study by Linda Steiner (1988) in which she argued that readers of *Ms.* who submitted patriarchal ads for republication in the magazine were engaging in oppositional reading. But as Ott points out, the context of *Ms.* essentially recodes the ads, thereby making a feminist interpretation the dominant one. Fiske makes a similar point when he suggests that “as insofar as people are positioned complexly in society, in simultaneous relationships of conformity and opposition to the dominant ideology, so the form of *plaisir* that is experienced will range from the reactionary to the subversive” (Fiske, 1989, p. 44).

As I will argue, this point is an important one when it comes to parsing DIY phenomenon. Though politics of *Ms.* readers might have been understood as going against the contemporary cultural grain, their engagement with the magazine text is actually quite conventional as it substantiates their previously held-social values. In much the same way, a great deal of DIY culture is conservative—in the sense that it is ego-reinforcing—while simultaneously professing to break with mainstream consumerism. Fiske (1987) calls *plaisir* “a mundane pleasure that is essentially confirming, particularly of one’s sense of identity” (p. 230), and domesticity (including the domestic craft that I examine) is nothing if not extraordinarily mundane.

However, digging further it becomes clear that *plaisir* actually works to describe two distinct, yet interrelated, attributes of contemporary DIY: the historical and the individual. On one hand, craft practice is deeply normative. Underneath the patina of

irony are the legacies of preindustrial domesticity and longstanding models of femininity I describe in the literature review. Even those highlighting DIY's subversive potential do so in relation to this tradition. For instance, Jean Railla, in her introduction to *Get Crafty: Hip Home Ec* (2004), writes of housework and the scorn it's received from second-wave feminists: "It's not stupid and it's not easy; it's damn hard work that we need to respect. Moreover, it is our history, and dismissing it only doubles the injustice already done to women who didn't have any choice but to be domestic in the first place" (2004, p. 4). She explicitly labels this cultural turn "new domesticity," and while she seeks to radicalize notions of craft, she does so by linking her argument with traditional women's culture.

Not only is craft embedded in diffuse social constructions femininity, but for the vast majority of the women I interviewed, it also had deep roots in their own family histories. Many of crafters I spoke to—both professional and novice—were first taught to craft by their grandmothers or mothers. Ryan-Ashley Anderson, a jeweler and knitter in Asheville, North Carolina, describes her great-grandmother as "an amazing knitter and crocheter" who "who made all of her own clothes until the day she died practically." Jordan Perme, a Cleveland designer who crafts faux-taxidermy mounts of imaginary felted creatures, grew up with a mother who enjoyed art of all kinds and often joined her children in craft-related activities. As a result, both Etsy sellers credit their own natural affinities for craft to this familial influence. Likewise, Chicago-based jeweler Laura Franek told me she was a "DIY voyeur," having learned to make soap, strip quilts, crochet, and cook from her grandmother. Reflecting on her family's heritage, she mused "I feel like that DIY, that sensibility, it came from someone. It didn't just appear in my

life out of the blue. It came from my mother, it came from my grandmother, and it came from my father, who is also very resourceful.” For these women and many more in my sample, DIY is a way to continue familial legacies; it also provides them with a regular opportunity to reflect upon those relationships.

In fact, several of the women I interviewed had mothers who were themselves professional crafters, thus providing their daughters with clear models of ways to derive income from DIY endeavors. Karie Reinertson, a handbag designer and co-founder of a broadly-focused design collective, told me that she was first exposed to the idea of professional craft through her mother, who was also craft fair seller. For Reinertson there was “was always this idea rattling around in my mind that that was a way you could support yourself.” Similarly, Lauren Kemp, a Portland-based maker who focuses on original garment design and vintage reconstruction, hails her mother as a role model:

My mother wanted to be a fashion designer. And just because she married my dad who wanted to live in a small town in Arkansas . . . she became a Home Ec teacher. She taught me how to sew and I would look at all of the things that she made and all her old sketches and get inspired and think, ‘oh fashion is a profession. I can do that.’

For both Reinertson and Kemp, their mothers opened up the possibility of crafting professionally, but their careers also provided models for emulation, thereby further cementing the deep-seated familial identity that runs through much of traditionally feminine craft practice.

Gestures towards craft’s interconnection with family history are also evident in several of my subjects’ work. For instance, Miniature Rhino’s Jessica Marquez told me that she “grew up making stuff. My mother’s side of the family is super crafty. They always made their own Christmas cards when we’d get to together, and instead of going

shopping or whatever else families do, we'd have craft days." For Jessica, craft was the ritual that brought her extended family together, and as a result, became an emblem of familial identity. Thus it is unsurprising that she consciously invokes this tradition in her Etsy storefront, where she sells hand-embroidered loops and embroidery kits, branding them as "modern hand-crafted heirlooms, tokens of affection and makers of memory" (Marquez, 2012). Similarly, Liz Stiglets, who sells on Etsy under the handle "cozyblue," grew up crafting with her mother, and as a result she's "just always made things." References to this tradition are also evident in her storefront, where some of her most popular items are family tree screen prints (Stiglets, 2012).

DIY's ego-enhancing affects can also be detected in the way that makers talk about their clientele; almost all of the women I interviewed described their average customer as remarkably similar to themselves. Eco-friendly jewelry designer Erica Bradbury, for example, described her client base as "mostly women in their late 20s to mid-30s, sort of college-educated and fashion-forward but also intelligent." Similarly, jeweler Zoe Einbinder portrayed her typical customers as "in their 20s and 30s. They are natural people who tend to wear funky things . . . [and] be a bit more artistic." Some sellers were even more explicit about the parallels between themselves and their followers. Perme, told me she sells to those "in their 20s or 30s but a little bit funky or offbeat . . . I don't know, my crowd." Stiglets characterized her market as "people like me—the young families, the moms, a lot people [who] are probably crafters themselves," and clothing fabricator Valerie Soles admitted that she is "reaching towards my own personal demographic." Kemp was the most self-aware of the inherent conceit in this homology, portraying her average customer as:

Probably a twenty something girl... I don't know. I guess someone who wants something eye-catching and unique. And you know, hopefully she's into literature and films and music. Probably a creative type because I do a lot of bright colors. And probably has a love of vintage. I don't know, I guess that's kind of narcissistic of me to say she's kind of like me.

Thus these women, by designing objects for people who are very much like themselves, are engaging in what Bourdieu (1984) calls “restricted production,” or small-scale cultural production, which he often characterizes as “production for producers.” Aside from this practice’s strategic benefits (e.g., it’s far easier to predict what will sell if your customers’ tastes are similar to your own), it is also profoundly ego-reinforcing. Successfully marketing goods to customers that mirror themselves only reconfirms that these crafters’ aesthetic vision is appealing and on trend. And while it’s hard to determine exactly how many of these women’s clients are makers themselves, it’s clear that many of them are.

But even more importantly, in keeping with Bourdieu’s model, these customers—whether crafters or not—function as metaphorical producers by way of the value systems and cultural capital they share with vendors. In this respect, small-scale cultural production exemplifies *plaisir*, which Corner (1999) describes as a “confirmatory pleasure, engaging with textual elements which support social identity” (p. 100). Not only can the sale of craft objects confirm self-identity, but so too can the actual process of making them. Atkinson (2006) has argued that DIY helps individuals create and maintain a sense of self-identity, enhancing people’s notion of themselves as innovative and as having agency; this was certainly reflected in my interviews with professional crafters. For instance, DIY blogger Kristen Nunez argued that DIY fashion is the ultimate vehicle for self-expression because each step of the process provides crafters with myriad options



from which to choose: “it’s all up to you. . . . five people can make the same project but it’s just always going to be different, and I think that’s where, for me, there’s a lot of meaning in that.” Though Nunez has a vested interest in portraying DIY as creative and user-centered—craft tutorials are the centerpiece of her blog and the eyeballs they attract have a direct bearing on the sponsorships she is able to cultivate—she nonetheless reflects the widely-held belief that craft is self-expressive. And in a Barthesian framework, this reification of self is also deeply normative.

Craft’s ego-reinforcing function is only intensified when the objects created are taken directly out of sellers’ personal lives, as was the case with many of my subjects. Perme’s “Horrible Adorables” and Marquez’s embroidery are variants of projects they both completed while in art school. Reinertson’s backpack design is based on one she made for her berry-collecting expeditions with her husband. She couldn’t find a bag that suited her needs and so she began prototyping her own, selling them on Etsy as a lark at the urging of a friend. Stiglets only began selling children’s hats when she realized her own children had “oodles of hats—way too many hats to wear.” Shayna Norwood presses greeting cards ornamented with phrases that she notices herself saying often. Other artists craft to satisfy their own desire for consumer goods. Franek makes jewelry that she often wears herself, and Theresa Waterman, a Brooklyn-based illustrator, started printing her whimsical drawings because they were the kind of image to which she gravitated when building her personal artwork collection. And Kemp used her own taste as a guide to shape the direction of her first collection. As she told me, “Finally I decided I would make stuff that I wanted to wear, not just, ‘hey I could make this to make it.’ But

more, “what would I want to wear?” And I think that really helped me hone in on what look I wanted.”

Oftentimes if these Etsy sellers didn’t begin crafting for their own needs, they oftentimes did so to make gifts for friends. Marquez started making her custom hearts when she had to scramble for a last-minute present for her grandparents’ 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Likewise, Stiglets first produced her screen-printed family tree-prints for a friend’s wedding, after a design she had made for her own husband. As she explained:

Most of my ideas come from things that I want, you know, for myself or that I want to give to someone else. They come from a pretty personal place. It's not just me sitting here, racking my brains, trying to think of what's going to sell or what people are going to buy. It's more like, I have an idea for someone in my life that I feel like other people can relate to also and it becomes more of a product for the shop rather than just that one gift.

For these sellers, then, the handcrafted objects they produce are intimately intertwined with their own histories and as a result, a reflection of their own deeply held values, be it family, as in the case of Marquez and Stiglets, or environmental conservation and functionality, as it is for Reinertson. Again, the fact that they are able to then sell these objects reaffirms that their beliefs are appropriate and shared by a greater community.

However ego-reinforcing function of *plaisir* is matched by a radically destabilizing kind of pleasure: Barthes’ *jouissance*, which has much in common with Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow. Both denote an enervation of the self that is as appealing as it is contrary to the ease and reassurance of *plaisir*. And in tandem they illuminate why DIY holds such attraction in the digital age, offering an immersive, engaging, and ultimately visceral experience in a world in which most interactions could be described as superficial, abstract, and disjointed.

### ***Jouissance, Flow and the DIY Experience***

As Stephen Heath points out in his translator's note of *Image, Music, Text* (1977), English lacks a satisfactory equivalent for "*jouissance*," which brings with it connotations of both social possession, and crucially, the pleasure of sexual climax. The French term suggests an orgasmic, and at times, violent, form of pleasure (the verb *jouir* means "to come") (Moriarty, 1991). However, unlike *plaisir*, which is merely a state of being, *jouissance* is also an act of production; readers are actively engaged in the process of meaning making. Barthes uses the term "*texte scriptable*," or writerly text, to distinguish the kind of writing that generates this participatory interaction from its counterpoint, "*texte lisible*."

This kind of writing is intertextual, fragmented, and eclectic, and the kind of active engagement it generates is truer in spirit to Stuart Hall's concept of oppositional reading. As Ott (2004) submits, oppositional reading has been traditionally described via the metaphor of "work" in communications scholarship; the effort of producing meaning while struggling against ideological grain is generally placed in opposition to conceptions of pleasure. But reconfiguring this analogy through the prism of *jouissance*, it becomes clear that the pleasure comes *from* the work itself. As Barthes (1988) argues, "*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*" (p. 157).

As with *plaisir*, *jouissance* is interrelated with the reader's subjectivity, but here it is the breakdown rather than the buttressing of the ego that is at play. According to Barthes, *jouissance* "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language; [it] is the system of reading, or utterance, through which the subject,

instead of establishing itself, is lost” (1975, p. 14). As Fiske further explains, *jouissance* is “the pleasure of the body that occurs at the moment of the breakdown of culture into nature. It is a loss of self and of the subjectivity that controls and governs the self” (1989, p. 47). Readers’ understanding of themselves as unified subjects is shattered. Moriarity adds that “We have no secure identity as receivers of a message for there is no message” (1991, p. 149). This is because there is no message until readers produce it. Just as *jouissance* breaks down barriers between self and other, it also defies verbalization. Writes Barthes, “With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text. This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, unless it is reached through another text of bliss: you cannot speak ‘on’ such a text, you can only speak ‘in’ it, in a fashion” (1975, p. 21).

Barthes was concerned with interactions between readers and texts, but by taking a large disciplinary leap and putting his notions of pleasure in conversation with leisure theory, it becomes clear that *jouissance* bears many striking similarities to Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow” (1990). Much lauded by positivist psychologists and leisure theorists, flow describes the state of becoming completely immersed in the task at hand. Those experiencing flow are no longer self-conscious; instead they have become totally focused on the activity in which they are engaged and respond automatically. A transcendent experience, flow produces spontaneous joy and has been used by leisure studies scholars to describe the appeal of “autotelic” (self-directed) leisure activities.

Thus both flow and *jouissance* pivot on the dissolution of the subject, and this meditative suspension of self was mentioned by many of the professional crafters I

interviewed. In particular, the metaphor of loss and “losing” oneself was repeatedly invoked when interviewees talked about what they most enjoyed about crafting. Franek depicted her process of making upcycled jewelry as:

A lot of fine mechanical things, you know, like eye hand coordination that is really intense and you can kind get lost in it. I mean, I literally, when I'm like stringing a bead or I'm making an earring, that activity totally consumes my brain waves for that amount of time, when I'm not thinking about anything else. I'm just kind of focused on that.

Soles, another Etsy storefront owner, described her process in similar terms, telling me that she “always just enjoyed making things and getting into the rhythm, you know when you really get into a project and you lose track of everything else that's going on. You're just in the moment of making.” Jennifer Wright, a jewelry designer in Portland, talked about letting herself “drift along,” and Kate Wilson echoed this sentiment, tell me that she “just like[s] to walk around and look at street art and plants and building and trees and stuff . . . just sort of thinking up things and letting myself drift off into daydreams and then designing from there.” Erica Williams, who carves linoleum blocks and stamps them on notebooks, told me “people ask, ‘How long did it take you to carve [the stamps]?’ And I don’t know. This is the cheesy thing but I get lost in it. I have to use a timer now to figure that out.” And ceramicist Kim Gilmour described her experience sitting at her potter’s wheel:

It relaxes me. It just takes me away . . . living in New York City, it’s just fast-paced, all the time go-go-go-go-go. But in my pottery studio . . . I just sit there and I can zone out. I just sit there pulling and pinching and working . . . and it’s completely relaxing for me. It gets me away from a lot of stuff.

This ebbing of self-consciousness makes sense in the context of the flow experience; the individual is so totally focused in the present exchange that nothing beyond the

immediate interaction enters one's awareness (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Not only does the self-awareness dissolve, however, but the very experience of complete engagement defies verbalization. Bill Martin, a Philadelphia-based jeweler, gestures towards this ineffability when he told me of his creative practice that “a lot of it is not really a conscious decision. It's just in there somewhere. . . It's hard to explain. I just let it go, you know. It just happens.” Likewise Kate Wilson told me that there was something “intrinsically satisfying” about handcraft but was unable to figure out just what that “something” was. Kemp called the drive to make things “an itch” she has to scratch, a kind of “addiction after a while,” but when asked why, she told me, “I don't know. It's just fun. I don't know how else to say it. It's just fun to do.” This indescribability of this compulsion to create is in keeping with both *jouissance* and the flow experience. After all, to verbalize it would be in some sense to pin it down, which runs contrary to the feeling of total seamless immersion. As Barthes writes of texts of bliss, they're “bound to *jouissance*, that is to a pleasure without separation” (1988, p. 164); the action of DIY production seems to be much the same way.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, the flow experience is result of reaching the perfect equilibrium between skill and challenge, boredom and anxiety. And in fact, Csikszentmihalyi and Judith LeFevre (1989) found that “flow-like” situations are three times as common in work as in leisure. This finding seems to correspond with Barthes's notion of *jouissance*—the pain/pleasure synthesis that comes in producing meaning. And informants discussed this experience, albeit somewhat more obliquely and generally in reference to the supplies with which they work. Jessica Franzen of Sparrow Collective, for instance, talked about the being responsive to the physicality of her materials, telling

me, “I can browse around for supplies online and see what I really like and look at it all on there. And sometimes it’ll just hit me and I’ll [. . .] know exactly what I’m going to use it for . . . and all this inspiration, it just all comes flowing out.” Martin also stressed that his designs were generated by the stones themselves: “I’ll just sit there and stare at [the stone] for half an hour sometimes and it will just click. Like a light. And then I’m like, ‘that’s it!’ I’m going to get started.” Again, though it seemed that many informants had a hard time verbalizing this experience, for them their materials’ physical properties imposed certain creative bounds, which became pleasurable challenges around which to work.

Though flow and *jouissance* clearly share a number of attributes, flow generally sidesteps questions of ideology, a tendency which has generated significant critique. As Blackshaw (2010) suggests, what is distinctive—and most problematic—about flow is that it stresses an individual’s autonomy—not his or her interconnection. In other words, flow doesn’t account for the social structure in which leisure occurs. Similarly Rojek (1995, 2000, 2010) and Gelber (1999) have critiqued flow and leisure studies scholars’ preoccupation with it as too psychologistic. For them, theories that position flow as the primary motivator for leisure activity not only remove these questions from their social context but also elide the effect of power, inequality, and representation. For Rojek, in Csikszentmihalyi’s social psychological approach “it is taken for granted that fulfilling leisure is the project of modernization, democracy, and what might be referred to as the emergence of the ‘good society’” (2010, p. 29).

*Jouissance*, on the other hand, is by definition bound up in questions of social norms and conventions. It is the power to “unsettle foundations and classifications, to

shake up ideology” (Gallop, 1984, p. 112); the pleasure comes from transgressing hegemonic boundaries. However a point which Barthes stresses—and which is often overlooked—is the fact that there can never be a text completely free from ideology. As he writes of those who yearn for such an experience, “this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text. . . The text needs its shadow . . . subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro” (1975, p. 32). Barthes does not privilege either the “subversive” or “conformist” edge of language, since to do so would be to create the rigid either-or classifications that ironically characterize *plaisir*. Instead not only does every text have two extremes (the conformist and the radical), but also that “what pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the dissolve which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss. Culture thus recurs as an edge” (1975, p. 7). Ultimate pleasure—what Barthes calls the “erotic” happens between the subversive and the conventional. Moreover, as Gallop (1988) suggests, as this experience of ultimate pleasure “vacillates” between *jouissance* and *plaisir*, then the binary itself is a site of *jouissance*.

Moving from the “either/or” of the flow experience to Barthes’s “both/and” proposition opens up room for us to uncover the reasons behind the recent DIY resurgence: the pleasurable edge that occurs between the reinforcement and erasure of the ego. I argue that the balance between these two poles is what makes DIY so alluring—and that this equilibrium is often destabilized as craft is professionalized and disembodied. But before turning to the nature of the sold DIY object, it’s useful to consider exactly how this “both/and” dynamic plays out in closer detail, via repetition.



## **Repetition**

In many ways, craft is defined by its leisurely repetitiveness. Knitting a sweater, sewing the seams of a dress, stringing beads, embroidering a dish towel stitch by stitch—these are all activities characterized by a slowly unfolding rhythm and ceaseless repetition, the final product testifying to innumerable hours invested in it. And patterns—at the heart of many craft endeavors, and fabriculture in particular—are nothing more than a technology for repetition. As Plant (1997) suggests, in patterning, “nothing stops when a particular piece of work has been finished off ... the finished cloth ... is almost incidental in relation to the processes of its production. The only incentive to cast off seems to be the chance completion provides to start again” (PG#). Centered on extreme attention to detail and monotonous handwork, pattern-based craft has been consequently linked with concepts of “obsession” or derided as aimless as a result (Araujo, 2010; Katz-Freiman, 2003).

But not only does repetition constitute most crafts, it also provides a rich example of the way that DIY simultaneously reinforces and erases the self—and is intensely pleasurable as a result. Barthes himself distinguishes worthy repetition—“the repetition that comes from the body is good, is right”—from “dead repetition,” that which is omnipresent, cliché, and “comes from no one’s body” (1977, p. 71). He thus contrasts the replication of stereotypes with creative reproduction, a process that can be “erotic” and excessive to the point of destruction (Mazur, 2005). I argue both variants are at work in DIY, which relies on both the circulation of trends (resulting in *plaisir*) and repetitive movements of the hand (resulting in *jouissance*). Reconsidering repetition in light of its

radical ego-diminishing potential, moreover, challenges traditional understandings of women's domestic craft as mindless drudgery.

### **The *Plaisir* of Trends**

It's clear from the attention devoted to them in news coverage of indie DIY that trends are a major identifying (and oft-parodied) characteristic of the cultural phenomenon. For instance, a 2007 *New York Times* article about that year's Renegade Craft Fair highlighted the themes then (and to some extent still) *au courant*: mustaches, forest animals, psychedelic imagery, sea creatures, and "adorability" (Ryzik, 2007). In fact, the trendiness of a movement that prides itself on its individuality has become a something of cultural joke, most notably expressed in *Portlandia*'s "But a Bird on It" sketch (Armisen, Brownstein, Krisel, & Silverman, 2011). IFC's comedy show portrays the outlandishly-named Bryce Shivers and Lisa Eversman, two artists who visit a downtown Portland boutique and affix generic bird silhouettes to suitcases, cards, and teapots while gleefully exclaiming, "Put a bird on it!" The sketch thus humorously underscores just how omnipresent the avian design meme has become, ending with the unexpected entrée of a live bird, who proceeds to wreak havoc on Shivers and Eversman's twee creations. A clip of the sketch quickly went viral, and its influence has continued to resound across the DIY blogosphere, with some makers shunning the overused icon and others deliberately using it in an attempt to self-consciously parody the parody (Keane, 2011).

The ubiquity of trends was something many of my interviewees quite candidly discussed. Bradbury described her work as very "trend-based" with its references to

Southwest and Native American imagery, and Destiny Morris, of Destiny Ray Jewelry, told me, “right now triangles and chevron shapes are popular, and I have [started incorporating] triangles and using these snake beans to make chevrons. . . .It’s like that’s what’s in right now, and so you make what’s popular.” Anderson too is inspired by the “whole native, tribal trend,” consciously using earthen colors and beads in her knitwear and jewelery. Norwood consciously incorporates the visual leitmotifs circulating on popular wedding blogs—now chevrons, baby’s breath, and gold—into designs of her letterpress invitations.

Of course a number of artists expressed a great deal of frustration with the limitations these pervasive motifs pose. Jenny Topolski, a New York jeweler and ceramicist, confessed:

I think it’s a joke when you talk to other people who are like, you know, ‘oh, I’ll just put a mustache on something’ or whatever the current stupid trend is. You know, put a bird on it, all of that. It’s frustrating, but it’s so true.

Similarly Waterman explained the growing popularity of narwhals, and told me:

I have that urge to just throw a narwhal on everything, because why not? But I’m like, Teresa, you don’t want to make that many freaking narwhals. I mean, I like narwhals as much as the next person, but I don’t want all narwhals, all the time.

While the issue of trends brings up a number of complicated questions about economics and popular conceptions of the DIY community and distinctions within it (which I later discuss in chapter 4), as it relates to the process of craft production, it too underscores the practice’s ego-reinforcing function. Miklitsch (1983), drawing on Edward Said’s reading of Foucault, argues that Barthes’s readerly text represents:

a kind of "advance-guard" (where "kind" is a matter of degree) since, in some sense, it exceeds and displaces "what had been there previously." However, although it can transgress its conventions in some sense, to some degree, it also

always glosses over this violation. The conventional aspects of a text of pleasure, for example, exceed and displace, in turn, those elements which distinguish it from its predecessors; it relegates to the background, for the pleasure of the reader and at the expense of a more radical expose, that which it seems to foreground (p. 103).

Thus even those texts that seem to push back against convention nonetheless only solidify the overarching sweep of the trend. Though Miklitsch is referring to literary genres, the same process occurs here in regards to handcrafted objects. Some of the artisans I interviewed clearly saw themselves as standing apart from the tide of the mainstream—a sentiment they expressed in their disdain for crafters who mindlessly mimic the reigning visual trope—but they also clearly evoke some of those very same trends: Topolski’s shop currently features brass whale, sea horse, and hummingbird pendants, and Waterman’s Esty storefront includes a number of narwhal prints. As a result, craft, like a readerly text, “glosses over any violation.”

Moreover, this very disregard for trends is itself a kind of trend and means for reaffirming identity and social positioning, a phenomenon Douglas Holt (1997, 1998) highlights in his reworking of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital. Holt makes the case that objectified form of cultural capital can only serve as a status marker in stable cultural hierarchies, and today’s cultural landscape is anything but static. Citing Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Jameson, he contends that late capitalist societies are characterized by a profusion of commodity signs, and as a result, consumer goods are no longer adopted en masse by particular social groups. This welter of signs, combined with the fact that there has been a clear breakdown between what has traditionally been conceived of as high and low culture, has severely weakened the classificatory function of objectified cultural capital.

Holt argues that consumption *practices* have now replaced consumption objects as the primary indicators of status; likewise objectified cultural capital has been supplanted by embodied cultural capital. Now that those with high and low cultural capital are often consuming the very same commodities, elites can only distinguish themselves by emphasizing the rarity of their consumption practice. Holt isolates a number of practices that distinguish those with considerable cultural capital from those without, though one is of particular relevance here: communal versus individualist forms of consumer subjectivity. Conceding that all consumption acts express to some degree one's individuality *and* communal identity, Holt nonetheless demonstrates that those with high degrees of cultural capital—like the professional crafters and DIY bloggers I interviewed—are far more concerned with using consumption to fashion a distinctive sense of self than their low cultural capital counterparts. Because it is so difficult to use mass-produced consumer goods to construct a unique identity, the cultured class relies upon a strategy of de commodified authenticity, exhibiting a clear preference for artisanal goods and downplaying their use of mass-produced goods when such choices are unavoidable.

How this orientation and penchant for individuality factors into the marketing and sale of the handcrafted object is the focus of the next chapter. But Holt's findings shed light on the DIY pros themselves. In a rarefied group that is defined by its ability to stand apart from mass consumption, crafters signal their merit as artists by disavowing the trends that so clearly influence the DIY sphere in which they operate as well as their very own work. By positioning themselves in opposition to these visual leitmotifs, they communicate their own high cultural capital, and in so doing, reaffirm their social

identity and group affiliation. Thus even outright rejection of trends accomplishes the same ego-reinforcement that is characteristic of *plaisir*.

Yet if we move from the cultural to the individual and from the aesthetic to the physical, it becomes clear that repetition can also accomplish the diametrically opposed effect of ego-diminishment. Ironically, this counter-hegemonic experience is a direct result of the same bodily experiences that the aforementioned philosophers and cultural critics condemned. But not only do somatic rhythms induce *jouissance*, they also evoke larger questions about the relationship between the mind and body, and the value of repetitive work, customarily overlooked as mindless pursuit by women.

### **Repetition as Embodied Problem Solving**

Just as many philosophers have distinguished “true,” i.e., cerebral, from “false” or sensual pleasures, so too have they long divided mind from body. From Plato’s argument that the mind activates the dead vessel of the body through Descartes’ contention that the mind is immaterial and hence separable from the body, rational cognition is privileged over the unreliable input of the senses, and the body is conceived “as, at best, [the mind’s] mute servant, at worst, a wild, lustful animal whose impulses were meant to be tamed” (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). And though the mind-body split was controversial even in Descartes’ day, its reverberations continue to affect contemporary mechanistic understandings of and approaches to the body. However appreciating somatic repetition’s ability to induce *jouissance* requires a reconceptualization of the body and its effects. After all, for a crafter to experience the

flow state I argue is so akin to *jouissance*, the creative challenge that she confronts and her ability to meet that challenge need to be in dynamic equilibrium.

As aforementioned, the hallmark of flow is engagement, not vacuity (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), and the work of phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty is useful for rethinking the repetitive, physical nature of handicraft. Rejecting ontological separation of mind and body, Merleau-Ponty (1962) instead favors an integrated view that emphasizes embodiment and reframes the senses as a bridge to worldly experience. Indeed for Merleau-Ponty and the thinkers he inspired, the body and that which it perceives are inextricably intertwined; the body becomes the very basis for human subjectivity (Crossley, 1995). Accordingly, in the work of the phenomenologists, there is an understanding of “persons as creators involved with the meaning making of their world, a thrust different from Descartes’ thinker who is physically in the world but not of it” (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 8).

But not only do individuals perceive the world somatically, they also solve problems via physical engagement, and this is a critical fact for appreciating the importance of repetition. Richard Sennett stresses as much in *The Craftsman* (2008). He quotes Kant—“the hand is the window on to the mind,” before going to elaborate that craftsmanship “focuses on the intimate connection between hand and head. Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem-solving and problem finding” (p. 9). Sennett provides example after example of the ways in which artisans engage in this reciprocity between handwork and headwork, learning, for instance, how to use “corporeal anticipation” (as a glassblower does when working

with molten glass) or work with, rather than against, resistant force (as did the engineers responsible for the tunnels under the Thames). Keller and Keller's research (1996) illustrates a similar point. Conducting an in-depth analysis of the work of a blacksmith, they found that he draws both on personal experience, the knowledge of his colleagues, and crucially, the forging process itself. As they point out, the blacksmith never knows the exact nature of his product before striking his anvil; it is only in the process of working with and responding to the conditions of the iron that he comes to form the final design.

Repetition, it seems, is one of the fundamental causal mechanisms underlying this embodied problem solving, via the accretion of tacit knowledge. Michael Polanyi, in his classic book *The Tacit Dimension* (1967) argues that the portion of our knowledge readily available is but a small fraction of its totality; beneath the surface of conscious thought lies a vast depth of knowledge, built through a lifetime of sensory experience, practice, and perception. As he famously wrote, "we can know more than we can tell," thereby alluding to the ineffability that unites *jouissance*, flow, and tacit knowledge acquisition (1967, p. 4). But while the process of tacit knowledge might be incommunicable, it clearly results from repeated experiences and the ability to recognize patterns. Crawford describes this process in his paean to the manual trades when he writes that makers' ability to make good judgments arises "from repeated confrontations with real things: comprehensive entities that are grasped all at once, in a manner that may be incapable of explicit articulation" (2009, p. 169). Sennett too distinguishes this creative repetition—in which crafters learn to explore "sameness and difference" and



practice becomes “a narrative rather than mere digital repetition”—from rote duplication (2008, p. 160).

Here we circle back to the flow experience. The crafter, engaged in problem solving via somatic repetition, ceases to be aware of separation between herself and other; everything becomes about solving the challenge presented by the design process. Genevieve Williamson, a jeweler who works primarily with polymer clay, evoked this collapse when describing her studio time:

I do enjoy the making as much as the finished piece. Working with my hands... I would prefer to be doing something physical, even over, you know, reading or writing or something like that. I think it helps me think through ideas sometimes. I think my finished pieces look abstract but they may have started with [inspiration that came from] something I read. So [the process of playing with the clay] helps me think through an idea.

She later characterized this thinking-by-doing as the most rewarding and enjoyable facet of her creative process:

I think my favorite part is solving problems, visualizing something in my head and then working out how I'm going to make that work. It's just kind of strange because . . . if you saw me doing it you would think I was miserable because it is a problem. But I think that's what keeps me doing it. I like the solving of the problem. I like the designing of a new piece.

Bradbury similarly credits this satisfaction as the fundamental motivation behind her jewelry line: “I think the whole process that kept me doing Species [her jewelry line] for so long was not really knowing what I was doing. It was an ongoing project where I want to make something and I have to figure out how to do it. It always comes that point.” Likewise Michigan-based clothing designer Yana Dee revels in the repetitive nature of her work: “I’ve always liked to figure out how to make [my clothing designs] most efficiently and then see how it is to make 50 or 100 or 1,000 of them.” She credits

this interest in process to her training in product design and takes great satisfaction in perfecting her assembly while producing in mass. Similarly Stiglets confessed, “I really just like the process of figuring it out. I don’t just want to have a giant planter box in my yard. I want the experience of trying to figure out how to make it and then actually making it.”

This revised view of physicality also goes some way towards countering feminists’ traditional condemnation of repetition. For Modernists, repetition had become “a sign of dull compulsion, grey routine, the oppressive regimen of natural or man-made cycles. It threatens the existential dream of authentic self-creation by yoking the self to a preordained pattern” (Felski, 2002, p. 25). Because the quotidian, like the sensual and the emotive, is deemed the natural province of women, repetition became femininity’s defining temporal mode—a fact which numerous feminists, including Simone DeBeauvoir and Julia Kristeva have lamented (Nathanson, 2009). According to these scholars, women are trapped in a Sisyphean loop of domestic responsibilities. And though neither DeBeauvoir nor Kristeva invoke Cartesian dualism, they do insinuate that these embodied repetitions—both in terms of cycles of reproduction and manual domestic labor—are problematic because they are devoid of creative thought.

But reconsidered in the light of its potential to induce *jouissance*, repetition can become something else entirely. Felksi has worked to recuperate repetition, arguing that it is in fact the modality of change. She suggests that “the task for feminist theory is surely to connect repetition and change rather than to sever them. Cyclical time and linear time are not opposed but intertwined; the innovations of modernity are made real in the routines of everyday life” (2002, p. 26). Parkins (2010), applying Felksi’s formulation to

a feminist analysis of fashion, stresses that repetition does not mean sameness but instead can denote a politics of small-scale change that itself can be seen in everyday life. As Metcalfe and Game (2010) have argued that “repetition is not always serial” but that instead it allows those engaged in it “to be in non-linear time, where life unfolds” (p. 167). And as crafters’ experience of DIY repetition make clear, it can also, somewhat ironically, engender a sense of timelessness by way of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow experience; the monotony of repetition can lead to a feeling of ultimate creative and temporal freedom. Moreover repetition, as the crafters I interview attest, actually fosters creative reflection and problem-solving. Thus the same activities that have elicited feminist scorn also have the potential to stimulate radical kinds of affective engagement and pleasure. In recasting DIY and the repetition it relies upon in relation to the transformative nature of *jouissance*, some of the stigma around domestic craft dissolves, evoking larger questions about the nature of meaning and work in the process.

### **DIY, Labor, and Marxist Conceptions of the Good Life**

When considered purely as a form of leisure, craft is a rich and multifaceted phenomenon, capable of simultaneously concretizing and effacing practitioners’ sense of themselves. But when practiced as a kind of leisure-cum-labor, it is more complicated still and becomes another instantiation of a swelling cultural trend: the valorization of manual labor. Kershaw (2009) tries to delimit this movement by describing some of its myriad forms, linking maker culture to the lionization of artisanal food production to the rise of reality shows devoted to blue collar work (e.g., the commercial fisherman portrayed in “Deadliest Catch” and long haul truck drivers in “Ice Road Truckers”). She

suggests that this turn to physical labor is in response to the recent financial implosion, writing that “not since the back-to-the-land days of the 1960s and ‘70s has there been such a rose-colored view of working with your hands” (p. E1). And yet nowhere is this point of view more cogently expressed than the recent flood of semi-academic and wildly popular books linking broad conceptions of craftsmanship to questions of economic worth. The most widely known of these are Richard Sennett’s *The Craftsman* (2008) and Matthew B. Crawford’s *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (2009), both of which critique the more oppressive features of neoliberal knowledge industries and position handicraft as an oft-overlooked but deeply ennobling alternative. But both Sennett and Crawford are primarily focused on historically masculine pursuits—motorcycle repair, automobile maintenance, brick making, and computer programming—and in overlooking (traditionally feminine) professional craft, they are missing out the *ne plus ultra* of unalienated labor.<sup>7</sup> Because it catalyzes both *jouissance* and *plaisir*, experiences which are then filtered through the lens of the maker herself, craft presents a radical version of self-fulfilling work.

Before considering how craft might compare to the skilled trades, it is first imperative to come to grips with the Marxist conception of labor from which most of these recent panegyrics to handicraft implicitly or explicitly draw. For Marx, work is the essential human activity, and a potential means towards liberation; he describes it variously as man’s “vital activity,” his “species activity” and his “spiritual essence” (2005/1844). It is only when individuals relate to their labor or its resulting product as

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<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that they ignore more traditionally feminine pursuits altogether. Sennett does consider the culinary arts, for instance. However Crawford states upfront that he focuses primarily on men, and indeed, many have critiqued his work for its not-so-implicit sexism and strident machismo.

something hostile and outside their control that labor becomes alienated. This kind of labor reduces human productive activity to the base level of adaptation to, rather than mastery of, the natural world; it also estranges workers from their fundamental human nature (*Gattungswesen*, “species-essence”) (Giddens, 1973; Marx, 2005/1844).

Alienated labor is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Moreover Marx argues that it is not an unwavering truth of the human condition but instead a product of the historical moment of capitalism. Crucially, implicit in this contention is a belief that work could and should be otherwise; after all, the inverse of alienated labor is that which is creative, fulfilling and self-directed (Sayers, 2005).

I argue that Marx’s portrayal of un-alienated labor is analogous to the painful pleasure of *jouissance*. In *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (2005), Marx writes:

Overcoming obstacles is itself a liberating activity . . . labor becomes attractive work, the individual’s self-realization, which in no way means that it becomes mere fun, mere amusement, as Fourier, with *grisette*-like naïveté, conceives it. Really free working, e.g. composing, is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion. (p. 61)

Elster (1986) summarizes this passage nicely, writing, “work, according to Marx, is rewarding and painful; moreover it could not be rewarding without being painful” (p. 110). Thus though Marx doesn’t explicitly identify it as such, for him, like Barthes and Csikszentmihalyi, the worthwhile effort necessary for self-actualization is neither vapid nor easy but rather brings with it a sense of discomfort.

These Marxist conceptions of work suffuse both Sennett and Crawford’s paens to manual labor. Crawford suggests that the return to manual work has been fueled by a perceived dearth of agency in the workplace, and that despite the myriad metrics and

benchmarks set for white collar knowledge workers, “their job lacks objective standards of the sort provided by, for example, a carpenter's level, and that as a result there's something arbitrary in the dispensing of credit and blame” (2009, p. 8). He rails against the rise of “teamwork,” vilifying it for obscuring individual responsibility, and maintains that only the workshop offers a form of labor that is self-directed and satisfying—to wit, un-alienated. Likewise, Sennett defines the craftsman, the titular subject of his book, primarily in terms of his or her autotelism. He writes that the carpenter, the lab technician, and the conductor all exemplify craftsmanship because they focus their energies in service of their work, rather than its remuneration, and that ultimately, a craftsman “represents in each of us the desire to something well, concretely, for its own sake” (2008, pp. 144-145).

This desire for agency and a sense of self-sufficiency was certainly expressed by many of the crafters with whom I spoke. Amy Palanjian, a quilter, blogger, and author of two craft books, explained the satisfaction she gets from working with her hands:

After being on the computer all day. . . the act of making something by hand and seeing how much is left, that does something for my mental state that nothing else does. It just makes me feel better. It's something I can control. . . and it somehow makes me feel better about the rest of life . . . I feel a sense of accomplishment.

Likewise Reinertson described the primary appeal of craft as “creating the world around you just because sometimes life can feel so out of control.” Gilmour defined DIY as “doing it how you want to do it without anybody telling you what to do.” For Williamson, finishing a piece of jewelry is profoundly gratifying, because when she looks at it she knows “[there] was this problem that I was trying to solve and now I solved it. And now I'm done. I did the thing that I wanted to do.”

But according to Marx, not only is un-alienated labor autotelic, the self-realization it brings is both a byproduct of the making process (rather than its express goal) and built in relation to external realities, be them other people or physical objects. According to Marx, self-realization is constituted communally:

Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have *in two ways affirmed* himself and the other person. (1) in my *production* I would have objectified my *individuality*, its *specific character* and there enjoyed not only an individual *manifestation of my life* during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be *objective, visible to the senses*, and hence a power *beyond all doubt*. (2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have the *direct* enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a *human* need by my work, that is, of having objectified *man's* essential nature, and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another *man's* essential nature” (1986, p. 34, emphasis in the original)

Thus for Marx the existence a product reifies the worth of its producer—its very physicality serves as an index of the laborer’s individuality—as does the product’s utility. And this process occurs transitively; the laborer derives personal joy and self-respect from the pleasure of another, via the object he or she produced. Marx terms this phenomenon “objectification” (*Vergegenständlichung*); by giving shape to the world through labor, workers manifest their abilities in outward things, thereby recognizing these abilities and, in turn, developing self-consciousness. Moreover, in so doing, individuals are able to overcome their alienation from the natural world and instead find their rightful place within it (Sayers, 2005).

Though neither Sennett nor Crawford reference *Vergegenständlichung* explicitly, it figures prominently in both of their work. For Crawford, it is one of the principle functions of the workshop:

The satisfactions of manifesting oneself concretely in the world through manual competence have been known to make a man quiet and easy. They seem to relieve him of the felt need to offer chattering *interpretations* of himself to vindicate his worth. He can simply point: the building stands, the car now runs, the lights are on (2009, p. 15, emphasis in the original).

Thus Crawford's heroic manual laborer—embodied most vividly in the form of the motorcycle mechanic—relies upon the sign of the now-operational bike and the “bwaaAAAAP! blum-blum” of the satisfied customer's “exuberant salute” to both provide pleasure and self-worth (2009, p. 4). In fact Crawford goes on to make the somewhat dubious claim that the thinly-veiled political incorrectness for which the construction site is traditionally known is mitigated by the work its laborers produce. In a context in which ability is the bottom line (e.g., “the building stands”), these workers' obvious skill reveals their “true” value and offsets any offensive remarks. Sennett makes a similar, if less problematic, point regarding objectification when describing the phenomenon of the maker's mark. Tracing masons' use of personal stamps in Ancient Rome and Greece, Sennett writes that these imprints “carried no political message. . . merely the statement anonymous laborers have imposed on inert materials, *fecit*, ‘I made this,’ ‘I am here, in this work,’ which is to say, ‘I exist’” (2008, p. 130). The object points back to the existence—and by implication, the merit—of its maker.

Like their trade counterparts, crafters also evoked *Vergegenständlichkeit* as one of the primary benefits of professional DIY. For Franek, ultimate gratification comes in seeing someone wear her work: “If someone buys [my jewelry]? That's like, wow! That's really cool. Somebody really loves the piece that I made and is wearing it . . . that feels really good at the end of the day. It just feels really good.” Similarly Waterman described how memorable it was when she first saw a customer wearing her work:



“Someone wheeled their stroller in and their [sic] baby was in an ‘I fight crime’ shirt. It was adorable. It was weird but adorable.” Stiglets mused, “I can't imagine any other thing I would want to do as a job. I would be making things any way, even if it wasn't my job. But knowing that I can just spend my days making things, and people like them and people want to buy them, that's a really good feeling. I really like the personal connection of making something and send it out there.” Thus crafters derive the same sense of transitive satisfaction from observing the use of the objects they produce.

Ultimately, then, in the Marxist framework, as in the literature on *jouissance* and the flow experience, turning outwards—towards the realm of the physical and the other—leads inwards, and the hard work of self-realization mandates the enervation of the self. However I suggest that this process of *Vergegenständlichung* is not present in craft but it is also profoundly intensified when it comes to the handmade craft object. A working motorcycle is certainly a testament to its mechanic's skill, but he (in Crawford's universe it's always a “he”) is generally working with prefabricated parts. In contrast, every facet of the craft object—every stitch sewn, every bead strung, every slab of clay pinched—is a physical trace of its maker's time, hand, and creative vision. Terranova (2000) has written about the immaterial labor undergirding much of the digital economy, arguing that:

the disappearance of the commodity is not a material disappearance but its visible subordination to the quality of labor behind it . . . It as is if the acceleration of production has pushed to the point where commodities, literally, turn into translucent objects . . . [becoming] more transparent, showing through their reliance on the labor that produces and sustains them (pp. 47-48).

Adopting a Peircean (1991) terminology, the crafted good becomes both a symbol (i.e., an abstract communication) and index (i.e., a physical trace of the artisan's individuality).

As a result, it acts as a material counterpoint to Barthes's *texte lisible*, generating the "cultural enjoyment and identity, [the] cultural enjoyment of identity, [and] a homogenizing movement of the ego" (Heath, 1998, p. 9) that characterizes *plaisir*.

Yet, as I argue in the next chapter, in the professional craft sold throughout the digital sphere and Indie craft fairs this relationship is, to some extent, transposed: the indexicality of the handcrafted object exemplifies the *story* of its creation, and is *the persona of the maker* that bolsters the worth of her product, rather than the inverse. This, of course, is not a new development. In 1899 Thorstein Veblen complained that the "marks of hand labor"—irregular edges and other visible imperfections of execution—were becoming symbols of bourgeois distinction. For Veblen such "marks" relegated the meaning of skilled labor to the realm of conspicuous consumption because they represented the artisan's significant time investment—and the increased price his or her customer paid as a result (pp. 159-162). However thanks to radical technological advances and the development of robust social media platforms, crafters are now able offer their own personal biographies for consumption in a way that was never before possible. Through the immaterial work of self-branding (Hearn, 2008), professional DIYers self-consciously craft a meta-narrative of the self with the same care that they craft their own material goods.

As I will show in the following chapter, at the heart of these biographical narratives is the experience of creative pleasure. When patrons purchase a handmade object, they are also buying the fantasy of the artisan's *jouissance* and flow. Here the indexicality of the handcrafted good serves an evidentiary function, testifying to the crafter's imagined joy, which in turn is further supported by crafters' robust self-

documentation. Running parallel to this narrative is an equally compelling fiction that creative liberation is also possible for consumers—they that they too can do “it” (that is, professional DIY and its concomitant pleasures) themselves. As I will demonstrate, this rhetoric of pleasure has profound implications on way that professional DIYers market their work and their lifestyles—as well as the as the realities that are left unsaid.

## CHAPTER 3

**Product: Selling (Do-It-Your) Selves**

In October 2012, West Elm, a member of the Williams-Sonoma, Inc. family of brands, opened up its very first West Elm Market in Brooklyn, conjuring the small town general stores of eras past with the tagline “tools to make work wonderful” (“West Elm to Launch West Elm Market: Tools to Make Work Wonderful,” 2012). While perfectly functional, its stock of garden tools, laundry supplies, and grooming aids is also carefully curated and designed. Among its shelves customers can find apothecary jars-cum-garden misters, rosemary beard oil, ostrich feather dusters, and “heirloom” scissors—all products that self-consciously connote an aura of rustic nostalgia (Williams-Sonoma, 2012). But more than mere store, West Elm Market also aims to serve as a neighborhood destination. The retailer has partnered with the Brooklyn-based company Skillshare to organize an array of classes in its community kitchen; current offerings include “A Beginner’s Guide to Clothing Quick-Fixes” and “Bitters and Beyond: Be Your Own Favorite Bartender” (Skillshare, 2013). As a *New York Times* review put it, the new outpost denies “the droning existence of cubicle life, imagining instead a can-do customer with endless unsupervised hours to devote to backyard chickens and victory gardens, pie crusts and piles of laundry” (Jacobs, 2013).

At the heart of this commercial enterprise is a longing for a more purposeful temporal engagement with the surrounding world, one that is free from the strictures of responsibility and is instead centered on individual pleasure. This same impulse is evident in many of the newly popular lifestyle trends that have garnered press coverage

of late: home brewing, book binding, canning, and urban bee keeping, for example. It is also one of the most oft-cited motivating factors behind DIY's contemporary resurgence. Knitting, for instance, has been repeatedly characterized as "the new yoga" (cf., Curran, 2005; Dube, 2004; Fulsang, 2002; Morra, 2004; Pepper, 2004) for its stress-relieving potential and its ability to foster a slower, more contemplative kind of temporal experience. Writes one *Washington Post* reporter:

You settle into a Metro seat, open up that newspaper or maybe fire up the BlackBerry, when you see her. Or, sometimes, him. The rider clacks serenely on a pair of knitting needles, a pile of yarn on her lap or discreetly bulging out of her briefcase -- exotic-bird colors sparkling against drab office wear. The soft click, the rhythmic hand motion, the peaceful expression tell you one thing: This is a person who is not thinking about work. And you want to be that person (Carlisle, 2004).

Another reporter similarly describes the then-latest home-sewing revival: "I'm all for this slow movement . . . the slow craft folk who'd rather pour hours into a garment they've made themselves than buy off the rack. I'm all for the concept of slowing down in our busy world - I just wish I had the time" ("A slow concept that's sew easy," 2011).

Though the popular fervor for knitting has ebbed since its mid-decade zenith, the notion that craft is a meditative pleasure continues to hold true for the domestic pursuits that have taken its place.

The desire for ever more pleasurable aesthetic experience is in keeping with what Bourdieu (1984) presciently recognized as a one of the defining features of the new middle class: "the morality of pleasure as a duty" (p. 367). Unlike the "old" petite bourgeoisie (ironically, then the declining social strata of craftsmen and small business owners), which sought to distinguish itself from the working class by virtue of its commitment to restraint and self-sacrifice, the new middle class defines itself by an ethics

of fun, in which it is a “a failure, a threat to self-esteem, is not to ‘have fun’” (p. 367). As David Brooks cogently argues, Bourgeois Bohemians (or “Bobos”) seek a particular kind of gratification, one that marries the bourgeois imperative to succeed with the bohemian impulse for new sensations—in other words, productive pleasure (2000). This particular ambition accounts for the appeal of consumer goods, like those sold by West Elm, that suggest satisfaction both sensual and practical.

However I maintain that this allure is significantly more complicated when it comes to the *handmade* object. In purchasing West Elm Market’s aestheticized tools, consumers signal the fact that they have the disposable income and time required to engage in blissful domestic labor—at least in theory. But when consumers purchase commercial DIY, they access this fantasy through the “real” blissful labor of another—that is, of the maker—indexically encoded in the material form of the craft object itself. Rather than symbolizing the *possibility* for pleasure, then, professional craft is testament to its lived *actuality*; hence via craft’s very physicality the dream of meaningful and gratifying engagement with the world is rendered far more concrete.

In this chapter I focus primarily on crafters’ Etsy marketing materials to argue that sellers evoke *plaisir* and *jouissance* to strategically amplify this narrative. Yet they do so for seemingly incompatible ends. On one hand, by referencing their biographies—their families, their homes, and their studios—as well as their subjectivity—their likes and dislikes—Etsians use the ego-reinforcing function of *plaisir* to augment their own personal brands. Moreover, by portraying themselves as idiosyncratic and unaffected, professional DIYers stand in counter distinction to the disenchanting effects of rationalization and mass production. As a result they also come across as relatable and

are hence more likely to establish the kinds of affective relationships with customers that have define successful brands (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

On the other hand, professional DIYers must, above all else, appear genuine, as unvarnished commercialism is antithetical to the very fantasy they are selling. *Plaisir* helps in this regard; references to the self enhance and authenticate the persona behind the craft object. But crafters also rely on allusions to *jouissance* to suggest experiential authenticity. Though this ego-diminishing pleasure is, by definition, ineffable, crafters nonetheless continually gesture towards *jouissance* in both image and text. As a result they not only underscore their own artistic purity (implying they are invested in their business for the experience of creativity, rather than the financial rewards) but also allow consumers to enjoy DIY's flow state both voyeuristically and vicariously.

This fundamental tension between (self) production and authenticity and that way that it plays out online is the focus of this chapter. However I suggest that rather than contradict each other, these ends are mutually supportive, working together to suggest that the DIY object is an artifact of an entire lifestyle centered on sensory pleasures. I contend that the craft object serves as a metonym for a particular nexus of interests, dispositions, occupations and hobbies, all centered on leisurely and creative engagement with the surrounding world. And by leveraging the affordances of digital media to obscure references to conscious self-promotion, Etisans, and to a certain extent, bloggers, are able to seamlessly incorporate their products into seemingly ingenuous depictions of their "real" lives. Thus the day-to-day existence of the professional DIYer is rendered as pleasure-laden and eminently accessible, possible not just for the maker but for the consumer as well.

### **Lifestyles of the Flexible and Anxious**

The value of this particular kind of marketing narrative becomes most evident when placed within the context of neoliberal landscape, where lifestyles have emerged as useful heuristics for sorting through endless consumer choice. As suggested in the literature review, neoliberal subjectivity is anything but secure; rapidly changing political, economic, and social contexts mandate an autonomous subject who is malleable, endlessly evolving, and ultimately reflexive. Though reflexivity has always played a constitutive role in understandings of social identity, traditionally it has been embedded within the context of stable, geographically specific communities. As Lash and Friedman write, “premodern identity can be very generally understood as externally (or in Kant's sense 'heteronomously') determined. In ‘tribal’ societies it is a kinship-ordered cosmologies that define identity in terms of deciding who someone is” (1992, p. 4). Now, however, in the “runaway world” of late modernity, reflexivity has taken a radical turn (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Individuals are compelled to write their own narratives, and “the self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible. We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). “Solid” markers of identity like race and class are much more permeable than they were in the recent past, and “our lives today have a much more in-between, DIY ready-made feel about them, and to this extent that they are better understood as *individualized* existences” (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 88). In other words, individuals, unmoored from traditional social structures and stable communities, must chart their own professional and personal courses; those who succeed are the most capable of endless self-invention.



Flexibility, however, brings with it profound anxiety, and many have argued that the project of the self is inherently perilous—a situation that Beck (1992) has called in a eponymous book “the risk society.” Individuals now face greater accountability for meeting their own needs; with the freedom of choice comes the social danger of making the “wrong” choice. Consumer culture only amplifies this risk by offer an ever dizzying array of options for an ever growing number of products. And in the free-flowing semiotic stew of post-traditional social systems, these choices matter; they are “decisions not only about how to act but who to be” (Giddens, 1991, p. 81). Moreover, though the amount of information circulating only continues to increase, “the *relative* status of that knowledge is underscored leading to reflection upon and uncertainty about its ontological status” (Brocklehurst, 2001, p. 6). Making matters more fraught, many of society’s most pressing problems are structural in nature and therefore outside of personal control. As a result individuals are forced to find ways of creatively coping as best they can without the support of the state or stable institutions. The anxiety that in high or “solid” modernity was directed outwards towards “the other” has in post- or liquid modernity been trained inwards (Bauman, 2000).

It is out of this profound and far-reaching instability that the rhetoric of lifestyles has emerged, for it describes a way for individuals to manage the changeable nature of contemporary identity:

Lifestyles are routinised practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting, and favored milieus for encountering others; but the routines followed are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity . . . The more post-traditional the settings in which the individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking (Giddens, 1991, p. 81).

But not only do lifestyles reduce risk, to both self and commerce (making market demand more predictable)—they are also, importantly given the malleability of post-traditional identity, easily exchangeable. After all lifestyle groups do not reflect stable social groupings with well-guarded points of entry or require long-term commitments; rather they are elective communities and can be joined or discarded at will (Slater, 1997). If in today's social landscape the “umbilical link” that once connected culture to communication has been severed, then lifestyles become tools for coping and mechanisms for filtering mass culture's immense and ever-changing “symbolic repertoire” (Chaney, 2001, pp. 77-78). In this way lifestyles are reactive modes of behavior or “functional responses to modernity” and offer “a set of expectations which act as a form of ordered control” to help individuals navigate social change (Chaney, 1996, p. 11).

Crucially lifestyles are both constituted and communicated via consumption practices. Featherstone (1991), summarizing the work of Benjamin and Lash, posits that the aestheticization of everyday life has its origins in the figure of the *flâneur*, that urban man of leisure who, strolling through the intoxicating and overwhelming sensorium of the metropolis, used fashion as a means to signal his individuality. Since then, the differentiating function of consumption has only intensified as the bulwarks of class have begun to disintegrate—or in the least become more porous—and individuals rely on consumer goods to broadcast lifestyle affiliation:

The new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle. The modern individual is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but with his home, furnishings, decoration, ca and other

activities which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste (Featherstone, 1987, p. 59).

So powerful is the signaling potential of consumer goods that, as a result of social media, it now surpasses the materiality of the products themselves. Pinterest co-founder Ben Silbermann was quoted in a recent *New York Times* article as suggesting that the virtual collection encouraged by the site is a form of self-expression for people who don't themselves create. In contrast to the artists, musicians, and filmmakers who populate Brooklyn, "most of us aren't that interesting. Most of us are just consumers of that. And when we collect things and when we share those collections with people, that's how we show who we are in the world" (Chocano, 2012).

Consequently there is quite a bit a stake when it comes to the innumerable consumer choices facing the average individual, and this glut of options, in turn, has helped cement the importance of a particular kind of cultural intermediary: the lifestyle expert. Tastemakers who offer guidance on the relationship between the expanding domain of consumer goods and the production and maintenance of the self—all while coming across as eminently likeable—these figures often become celebrities in their own right through vast media empires built on reality television shows and how-to books. Yet despite the potential for considerable fame, many of the most successful lifestyle experts nonetheless maintain an aura of approachability, built through strategies of "ordinary-ization" (L. Taylor, 2002). These domestic cynosures adopt a particular tone of voice—what Bonner (2003) calls "conversationalization"—that is chattier and allows for a seemingly more egalitarian exchange. They also de-emphasize their skills and share parts of their personal lives so as to close the distance between themselves and their

audience. Essentially these new lifestyle experts function more like friendly personal stylists, interpreting the latest lifestyle trends, rather than adjudicating from on high, and thus reinforce the notion that the “right” lifestyle can be easily achieved through the right consumer choices (Bell & Hollows, 2005; L. Taylor, 2002).

If mainstream lifestyle experts adopt this posture, then professional crafters have all the more reason to fervently embrace this “demotic turn” (Turner, 2009) and its attendant process of “self mediation” (Chouliaraki, 2010). Makers have to cast themselves as even more ordinary, even more relatable, if they are to distinguish themselves from industrially sanctioned cultural guides and instead signal their place outside of the mass marketplace. This strategy, I argue, is especially apparent in crafters’ tactical evocation of *plaisir*. And while some of the DIY bloggers with whom I spoke are clearer examples of the traditional lifestyle expert—deriving their primary financial worth from sharing their expertise and considerable cultural capital—even those Etsians focused explicitly on selling their crafts (rather than their knowledge) serve as tacit lifestyle guides. The difference is that these professional craftspeople lead by example (through documentation on their blogs and in their marketing materials) and evidence (through the signifying function of their work) rather than direct injunction. But, crucially, not only does the craft itself become a record of the maker’s creative pleasure, the very act of purchasing that craft offers a form of pleasure in itself: enchantment.

### **Branded and Enchanted**

Retailers like West Elm Market and its competitors have long since capitalized on the commercialization of leisure time, turning domestic tasks into a purchasable visual

aesthetic. Nathanson (2008) has written about the way in which cooking is represented as a retro consumerist fantasy in Crate and Barrel and Williams Sonoma, arguing that the stores appeal to working women's need for culinary efficiency all the while suggesting that "the sensual contentment to be found in manual labor, of the invocation of memory, and the joy of the mind's relates from daily toil come together in the act of cooking" (p. 90). Similar logic has guided representation of home improvement, interior decorating, and gardening projects, both in stores and on lifestyle media (cf., Hollows, 2003; Ketchum, 2005; Nathanson, 2009; Rosenberg, 2011; L. Taylor, 2002).

These practices—along with DIY undertaken as a hobby—are emblematic of what Lupton (1996) has called "aestheticized leisure practices"—endeavors that are centered around "the care of self" rather than the care of the family and undertaken as much for their entertainment value as for their utility. Their growing cultural visibility is in turn evidence a cultural demand for re-enchantment. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) describe enchantment as a "shibboleth," characterizing it as "an invocative and provocative incantation whose underlying meanings tend to be tacitly assumed rather than explicitly stated" (p. 280). Most commonly associated with experiences of magic, wonderment, spontaneity, transformative awe, enchantment is also socially constructed and as theoretically linked to an imagined halcyon past. Thus consumers' drive to access the relics of this mythologized golden era: neo-traditional neighborhoods that connote the familiarity of small town life; "authentic" travel destinations in which long-held traditions stand firm; and old-world bazaars that offer the excitement of the unknown (Thompson, 2000).

Scholars maintain that this impulse for enchantment is a direct result of

modernity's rationalizing effects. Geroge Ritzer (1996, 2005) has made an especially compelling case for the importance of affective experience. Drawing upon Weber, he uses the metaphor of "McDonaldisation" to describe contemporary social life, arguing that the rationalizing principles of the fast food industry now pervade most institutions, leaching any sense of wonder along the way. Instead consumers are left with efficiency-driven consumption: the generic, the impersonal and the mass produced. As a result they turn to "cathedrals of consumption" such as shopping malls, casinos, theme parks and cruise ships in hope of transcendent experience. However these spectacular consumer spaces can really only offer a kind of postmodern "disenchanted enchantment" (2005). Rationalized and instrumentally driven, they remain predictable and controlled retail environments; as a result they preclude genuine enchantment.

Kozinets (2002) has persuasively argued that expressive, rather than productive, consumption discursively incapacitates the rational rules of the marketplace, enabling opportunities for re-enchantment. This viewpoint, in turn, helps explain the motivation behind Campbell's (2005) "craft consumer," a figure who "consume[s] principally out of a desire to engage in creative acts of self-expression" and who bring "skill, knowledge, judgment, love and passion to their consuming in much the same way that it has always been assumed that traditional craftsmen and craftswomen approach their work" (p. 24, 27). Yet the craft consumer's activity is inextricably entwined with mass consumption; his or her primary creative act is making connections and combining commodities so that their totality is greater than the sum of their parts. Campbell cites cooking, fashion, gardening and home modification as prime of examples of this new way to exert control over the consumer goods and cultivate a sense of the "unique, singular or even sacred"

(p. 37).

There is also pleasure to be had in consuming in ways that are outside of industrialized commercial systems, or what Binkley (2008) calls “a fetish for de-fetishization.” Soper (2008), for instance, champions “alternative hedonism,” or a “new erotics of consumption” (p. 571). She contends that consumers are growing increasingly aware of mass consumerism’s displeasures—pollution, stress, financial instability, and ill health—while at the same time recognizing that there are sensual pleasures to be had in consuming differently. She argues, for instance, that in eschewing automobiles, consumers are exposed to the intrinsic joys of walking and cycling. Likewise Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) suggest that those participating in Community Sponsored Agriculture (CSAs) can experience enchantment; Kozinets (2002) describes the transcend rituals of Burning Man; and Arnould, Price and Otnes (1999) argue that white-water rafting can engender magical transformations.

The consumption of handmade goods brings with it these myriad and overlapping kinds of pleasure. Indeed Hartmann and Ostberg (2013) assert that craft production is a particularly noteworthy, as it stands in contradistinction to rationalization’s disenchanting effects. Though the authors’ focus exclusively on the discursive representation of craft production in the re-launch of Hagström guitars (i.e., mass produced goods), their argument that an emphasis on a product’s genesis can stimulate enchantment certainly holds true for professional craft. This possibility, in turn, underlies crafters’ emphasis on the idiosyncrasies of their own creative process, which further distances themselves from the generic and superficial offerings of a “McDonaldized” mass marketplace. But professional craft is also unique in that it accomplishes this aim through the figure of

the maker herself, who serves both as producer, and to a great extent, product. As a result crafters become their own brands, thereby engaging in the widespread commercial practices to which DIY is ostensibly opposed.

### **“I’m just me”: *Plaisir* and the DIY Self-Brand**

Though brands have existed since the onset of industrialization and the mass production of consumer goods (Klein, 2009), they are now ubiquitous. They also contribute to the signaling capacity of lifestyles, providing pre-fab, socially-understood narratives for consumers to try on and adopt as they wrestle with the “reflexive project of the self” (Giddens, 1991). Moreover brand logics capitalize on consumers’ imaginative yearning by stressing the context of consumption (Arvidsson, 2005). As Banet-Weiser writes, “building a brand is about building an affective *relationship* with a consumer, one based—just like a relationship between two people—one the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations” (2012, p. 8). As she and other scholars stress, we cannot productively think about brands without considering the cultural effects of these affective relationships.

Wernick (1991), who has also written extensively about promotional culture, insists that commodity forms can no longer be separated from their promotional forms, and that this kind of branding entails a rearrangement of the relation between sign and referent. Echoing Baudrillard, Wernick argues that in contemporary brands the sign displaces the object to which it refers and acquires its own agency as a result: “In this integrated system of production/promotion, the commodity and its double—the commodity sign and the promotional sign—are deployed together in a mutually referring



and self-confirming way” (p. 16). When it comes to DIY, it would seem that much the same process is taking place, only in this case it is the crafter who becomes the sign, displacing the referent of her work; in other words, the brand is the maker herself.

Of course self-commercialization is not unique to professional craft; indeed many have suggested that it is a defining characteristic of the neoliberal economy. Hearn (2008), who defines self-branding as “the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings,” points to reality television and social networking sites as examples of the practice’s ubiquity (p. 198). Writing elsewhere about the reality television show *The Hills*, she describes the “person-characters” of the show’s stars; these socialites personify interchange between performance and labor in which “their work/lives are, apparently one seamless flow of value generation. Here ‘being’ is labour and produces financial value. . .” (2010, p. 61).

Yet it seems that the branded self reaches radical new heights in DIY, in which the concept of self is inscribed in the phenomenon’s very name. Etsy is well aware of the appeal of auto-commodification, plainly urging storefront owners in a series of “Seller Handbook” posts to brand themselves. Karin Chapin, in a post entitled “How to Be Your Own Best Marketing Tool” (2013) tells vendors, “Be you. Be yourself and make sure the *you* shines through in your marketing.” She stresses that this step is vitally important to running a successful Etsy storefront: “It bears repeating, so I’ll type it one more time: you. You are what sells your products. The essence of you is what people are buying.”

The company justifies this zeal for self-branding by suggesting that it forges a personal interaction between maker and customer, and the crafters I interviewed were very much aware of the commercial appeal of their own persona, even if they didn’t use

the term “brand” per se. Erica Williams explained that “people shop on Etsy and buy handmade because they feel like they want to have some sort of personal connection with whoever it is they’re buying from.” She told me that, as a result, in her marketing materials, “I wanted to sound like I’m your friend.” Kristin Turner, of DIY blog Glitter ‘N Glue, described her blog as “very personal” and conjectured that her candor was what set her site apart from similar sites. Similarly, Alicia DiRago mused:

You know, blogging is a business. You know it is about . . . . you know you’re trying to probably make revenue or maybe you’re selling something or you’re trying to get more readers, advertising or whatever, but people buy from people and people trust people. So you have to become a person to them. I mean of course you already are a person but you have to make that part of your story visible and then people can connect with it. That’s what I’ve noticed when I’ve been reading the blogs I really like. I mean, what is it about this blog that makes me run back here? Or text my mom when someone who was pregnant and has a baby? Like ‘did you see that Rebecca had her baby?’ Like ‘go look at the blog! The pictures are up!’ I mean, that’s crazy. My husband and my dad are always like, ‘do you guys even know these people?’ And we are always like ‘no’ . . . But yes, yes we do.”

All three women are well aware of the fact that their personalities are large part of their commercial allure; for them to build the kind of intimate relationship with readers that generates growing numbers of unique visitors and return visitors, they knew they had to make themselves seem real and congenial. Despite the fact that their blogs are ostensibly centered on DIY craft projects, DiRago and Turner recognize that in fact their success is a reflection of their ability to self-promote.

Perhaps most telling of the importance of self-branding was the fact that so many of the professional bloggers and craftspeople with whom I spoke see the economic utility of building an online persona and thus consciously market themselves, despite the fact that they are generally private and would otherwise not be inclined to live their online

lives so publically. DiRago, who spoke at length about the importance of establishing authentic connections with the would-be crafters who frequent her site, also described the process of blogging as “vulnerable and kind of scary” and confessed that her natural inclination is “to not be Google-able.” Teresa Waterman expressed a similar sentiment when she told she was in the process of investigating how she could make better use of social media, but everything she was reading “is that you have to be a real person and you have to share all of these aspects of your life with people” but that she was just “so naturally introverted and shy” that the whole process made her very uncomfortable. For her, self-disclosure is a “hurdle . . . to just get over.” Likewise, Lauren Kemp told me, “sometimes I really like being off the grid, but if you’re going to have an online business, you need to be out there.”

Keight Dukes, a Georgia-based, Christian DIY and lifestyle blogger, also struggles with the notion of self-promotion, as it runs counter to the religious values that, in a very real sense, comprise her online persona. The wife of youth minister and worship leader, Dukes writes about “mushy Jesus stuff” alongside sewing her projects, and told me that the most gratifying feedback she’s received has been from readers thanking her for broadening their conceptions of what it means to be Christian. However these values conflict with the blatant self-commodification necessary to attract readers, and with them advertisers: “[it’s] hard for me, that line between here’s what I do and here’s what I am and check me out and the bragging associated with that.” And yet when I asked what united the often disparate posts on her blog, she told me, “The only brand that I would say I carry through [the blog] is the unique voice that’s mine.” Later in the interview she added, “People who are going to read me are going to read me because they

like me. I'm not a how-to blog. I'm just me.”

Though self-promotion might be a requisite part of all neoliberal creative labor, what is unique about DIY is the fact that this branding occurs vis-à-vis the depiction of *plaisir*. Fiske (1989), writing about Barthes, describes *plaisir* as “an everyday pleasure,” one that involves “recognition, confirmation, and negotiation of social identity” (p. 44). And most sellers use same *plaisir* they discovered in the act of creative production to also marker their wares, calling forth these ego-reinforcing aspects of their craft practice in their promotional materials.

For instance, not only do makers craft objects that are inspired by their families, but they explicitly reference their personal lives in the stories they tell *about* these objects. In the profile of HiButterfly's Hanna Gritton, for instance, the Colorado-based crafter informs prospective clientele “When I was young my mom taught me how to add rick rack to Princess Leia's dress. The idea of turning something plain into something beautiful sparked my imagination.” She later adds, “My son pointed out that each piece I make use to be something different, ‘sort of like transforming caterpillars to butterflies.’ Hence the shop name HiButterfly” (Etsy, 2013d). In her store profile, Gritton makes explicit reference to both preceding and succeeding generations as the inspiration behind her repurposed vintage books, and in so doing, clearly positions her product within her own family network.

Amy Berreth, of Etsy storefront Teagan and Bailey, takes the familial references one step further, by connecting her own relatives with those of her clients. In an interview on Etsy's “Featured Store” blog series, Berreth (2013) describes the process of sewing the children's clothing and accessories she produces as “so satisfying and

peaceful” and muses that when sewing for her own loved ones, she uses “visualize[s] them enjoying my creation, whether it’s a skirt that my niece can twirl around in, or a towel for my nephew to snuggle in after his bath. When I am creating an order for a customer, I engage in a similar process. It makes me happy to create something original just for them.” This excerpt is accompanied by photographs of her freckled children enveloped in a handcrafted hooded towel and modeling silk-screened t-shirts (see figure 3.1), thereby suggesting a link between the affection she so obviously feels for her own family and intended recipients of her goods.

In this way craft bloggers superficially resemble another emergent group of prosumers equally rich and complex: “mommy bloggers.” Morrison (2010) defines “mommy blogs,” alternately called “baby blogs” and “parent blogs,” as a particular genre consisting of “everyday



*Figure 3.1.* Excerpt from Esty's store profile of Teagan and Bailey, featuring images of Amy Berreth's own children modelling some of her handcrafted children's wear.

experiences written up by people . . . for whom parenthood is a key identity component.” Numerous (a 2008 *Wall Street Journal* estimated 20,000+ bloggers devoted to parenting family—one can only imagine they number has grown exponentially since then) and often wildly successful, mommy bloggers, like their craft brethren, position their personal lives and intimate relations at the center of their sites in an effort to generate revenue (Shellenbarger, 2008).<sup>8</sup> Both groups thus walk the fine line between public and private, recontextualizing prototypically feminine (and thus private) concerns—parenting and domestic labor, respectively—into a very public blogosphere. Moreover just as many craft bloggers features images of their children, mommy bloggers of a particular type often feature DIY and craft projects.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the two groups differ dramatically when it comes to priorities. For mommy bloggers, any DIY content is in service of their persona as a mother. Susan Douglass and Meredith Michaels have written extensively about contemporary views of parenthood and what they call “the new momism,” or the practice of intensive mothering in which “everyone watches us, we watch ourselves, and other mothers and we watch ourselves watching ourselves” (2004, p. 6). According to the ideology of new momism, motherhood is a competitive sport; the best mothers are main caregivers who provide their children with “boundless, unflagging and total love” (2004, p. 15). Thus mommy bloggers use representations of craft to reinforce their image as a doting, domestic parent,

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that not all mommy bloggers do so for profit. That said, many earn handsome incomes from their sites. For instance, it is estimated that Heather Armstrong, the blogger behind top-ranked mommy blog Dooce.com, earns between \$30,000-\$50,000 a month, not including revenue from her books, speaking fees, or role as Verizon corporate spokesperson (Belkin, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> A random sampling of widely-read mommy bloggers who explicitly focus on craft include DIY Home Sweet Home (DIYhshp.blogspot.com), probablycrafting.com, The MaMade Diaries (mamadecreations.com), and. The Stitchin’ Mommy (thestitchinmommy.com).

fully invested in their children's happiness, even as they also cultivate the snarky, tell-it-like-it-is narrative voice for which many baby blogs are beloved.

For crafters, on the other hand, the priorities are inverted: images of domestic bliss are in the service of their craft and their brand. These clear references to family not only underscore the unique persona of the maker behind the DIY object, but they also concretize the lifestyle with which that object is associating, suggesting a familial idyll for which so many consumers yearn. Morgan (1996) contends that "family" is a social construct, a "quality rather than a thing" (p. 186). Here the emphasis on unfixed practices—rather than enduring structure—reflects the fluidity, instability, and diversity that characterize contemporary family units as well as neoliberal society at large. Finch (2007), building on Morgan, has suggested that as a result, twenty-first century families are defined more by "displaying family"—through the exchange of keepsakes and deployment of shared narratives—than by "being" a family. The emphasis on appearance over experience is only compounded by relentless domestic taylorization, work-life imbalance, and time-bind, all of which hit women hardest (Hochschild, 1997).

Against the backdrop of such cultural shifts, the stories conjured by these DIY sellers become especially powerful. In the previous chapter, crafters stressed that the creative act reaffirmed their own identity by allowing them to forge linkages with their own family histories, remembering their mothers and grandmothers as they practiced the crafts these women taught them. But once these stories are interjected in Etsians' promotional materials, the aura of familial connection is disembedded from the crafters' personal lives and instead made public, a fantasy that now circulates with the object itself.



In fact so powerful is the signifier of domestic contentment that even those crafters for whom family is not obviously connected to their work evoke their loved ones. On Jessica Marquez's Etsy homepage, for instance, she tells prospective clients that her career began with the last-minute embroidered heart she made for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her grandparents, Helen and Lito (the same story she shared with me in our interview; see chapter 2) (Etsy, 2013b). Yet she elaborates here, adding details that hint at her own heritage: "My grandmother always preferred a handmade gift" and that "my lopsided birdhouses hung in the backyard and my heart nestled among her saint figures and reliquaries." She continues to refer to her family in the brief biography on the page's sidebar: "I'm named after my grandfather Jessie. I love my family so much—they helped grow my love of craft and making." Under own photo she includes pictures of her two "studio cats" (Marquez, 2012).

Not only do makers' familial biographies become part of their craft's allure, but so too does their very subjectivity, evoked by way of reference to their own personal likes and dislikes. This strategy is explicitly endorsed by Etsy. An entry in the Etsy Seller Handbook reminds storefront owners that their "about" page is one of the most important elements of their website and that "Your Etsy Profile needs your personality. You don't have to go open kimono and share your entire life story or every detail imaginable, but you do want a few details that are uniquely you — hobbies, guilty pleasures, and idiosyncrasies" (thirstyfish, 2012). It is also a surprisingly common feature of Etsy profiles, with storefront owners often referencing seemingly random preferences that are in no way related to the kinds of goods they purvey. For instance, Shannon Schnittker of Random SacksofKindnes, an Etsy storefront featuring reusable sandwich and snack bags,

divulges, “I can’t cook, but I can bake. I make breakfast for dinner. I have a life-sized Red Ranger in my living room and love watching old movies with my husband. My favorite thing to do is make Halloween costumes!” (Etsy, 2013j). Meg Madden, a Vermont-based jeweler, introduces herself to readers in the first paragraph of her profile, through a combination of her interests and personal life: “I am Meg Madden, artist, bead junkie, gardener, cyclist, chef, wife and mother. Friend to a big, goofy German Shepherd, a Holstein tabby, 15 eclectic laying hens and an amorous rooster named General Tso” (Etsy, 2013g). Loreleigh, of saffronandsage jewelry, builds her entire profile around this trope:

I was a...

Bird watcher.  
 Patron of loud rock concerts.  
 World traveler.  
 Proud Canadian.  
 Stage Manager/Lighting & Sound Designer.  
 Not-very-talented drummer.  
 Student of Anthropology

I traded in my former life for two little boys with sparkling eyes and mischievous smiles.

I am a...

Mommy.  
 Wife of a wonderful man who sure knows how to cook.  
 Backyard bird watcher.  
 Proud Canadian thinking about dual citizenship.  
 Gardener.  
 Listener of quiet playlists while I make jewelry [sic] and my boys sleep. :)...(Etsy, 2013f).

This hodgepodge list of interests, while specific and deeply personal, has little to do with the brass jewelry and trinkets Loreleigh sells, and yet it is evocative of the kind of

lifestyle with which she surrounds her craft. Not only do the personal details she provides suggest a contented home life (“mommy” and “wife of a wonderful man”) and a more authentic and leisurely engagement with her environs (“backyard bird watcher” and “gardener”) but the temporally bifurcated description (“I was” and “I am”) connotes a fairytale existence of pleasurable work. As she tells her prospective clientele, “I traded in my former life” to now spend halcyon evenings working and listening to “quiet playlists” while her sons sleep.

Indeed the notion that this lifestyle is both pleasurable and possible is a key factor in both the way that DIY is marketed and, I suggest, the phenomenon’s success. For Giddens, a lifestyle “involves a cluster of habits and orientations, and hence has a certain unity—important to a continuing sense of ontological security—that connects options in a more or less ordered pattern” (1991, p. 82). And it would seem that many professional DIY practitioners take great pains to portray elaborately detailed lifestyles centered on quotidian sensory pleasures. Consider, for instance, a November 29<sup>th</sup> blog post from ozetta, an Oklahoma-based knitter who runs an active Etsy shop in addition to her blog. Entitled “Solitude” the entry reads:

i love mornings like this.  
 foggy, cold, grey skies.  
 a quiet home.  
 working hands.  
 the deer that walk the earth in front of our home.  
 solitude.

The entry is capped by a moody photograph of a shadowy forest (see Figure 3.2). At first blush, the poetic meditation has little to do with the knitted gloves and scarves ozetta sells. But within the context of lifestyle, the connection between the hand knits and the

entry's representation of contemplative immersion within the natural world becomes clearer: both suggest a "cluster of habits" devoted to leisure and pleasure.

A similar logic is at work on Karie Reinertson's blog, *SHELTER*. There, in addition to posts devoted to forthcoming collections and store sales, she also chronicles adventures with her husband, including numerous cross-country and camping trips (see Figure 3.3). There is also a series of blog posts dedicated to fantastically ornate log cabins and tree houses, reflecting Reinertson's prior experience in sustainable design and home builds. But the thread uniting these disparate posts is a palpable appreciation for the natural world. For instance in "A little bit of home," a post from November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the first paragraph reads:

Winter in the mountains is now starting to set in – frost in our field every morning, sleeping in long underwear, dreaming of a wood stove. That isn't to say that tomorrow it won't be 70 degrees and sunny (that happens in the south, even in the mountains), but the sun's angle has changed and our lush rain forest has turned to sticks. Winter!

Again, the clear references to the sensory and seasonal charms do not have any overt connection to Reinertson's handmade purses and backpacks. However when considered through the framework of *plaisir*, these allusions to long underwear and wood-burning stoves intimate a life centered on small pleasures, far removed from the context of mass consumption. Moreover associations with the outdoors are only compounded through the design of Reinertson's bags themselves, which are made of hand-tooled leather, waxed canvas, and Pendleton wool, and are often photographed against the backdrop of a weathered wooden floor.

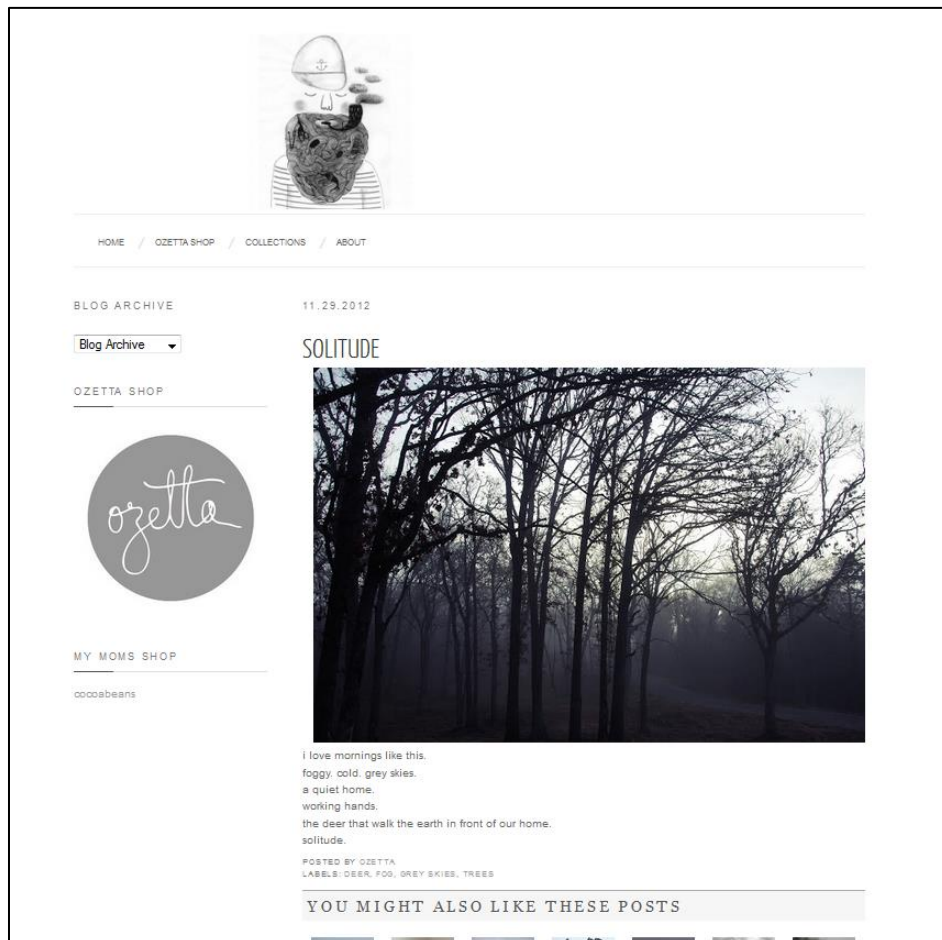
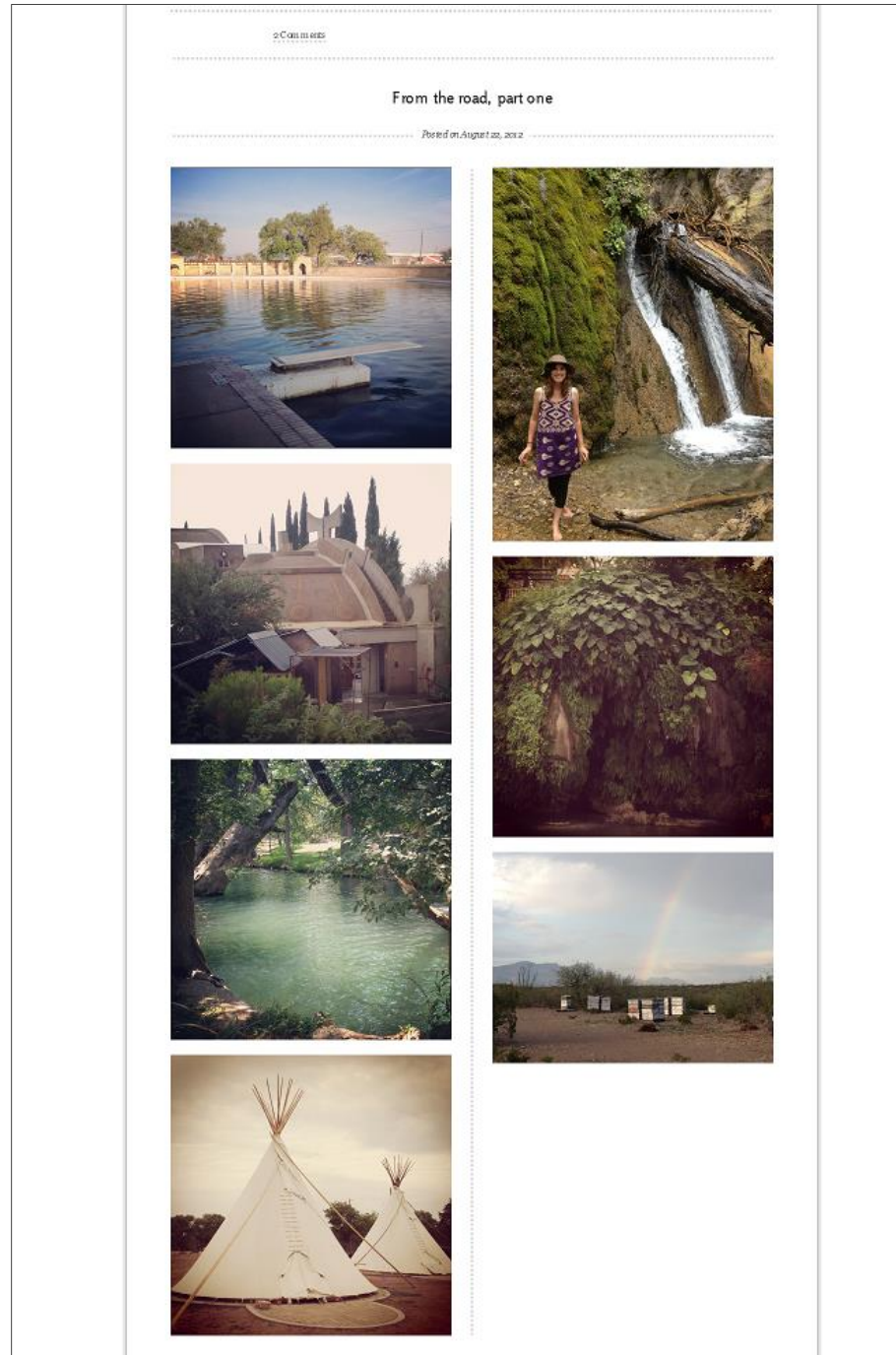


Figure 3.2. Blog entry entitled “Solitude” from Ozetta Handmade.

Journalist Emily Matchar has critiqued this trend, calling the women’s tendency to focus on small pleasures in place of institutional inequalities “a little bit of an insidious cultural thing right now.” She explains:

I see a lot of people on blogs say you can’t reach for too much. One of the ways people always introduce themselves on blogs is you know, my name is Anne, and I like pink cardigans and kittens and copper teapots. And there’s something very childish about it. And I’m not criticizing the people individually, but just the idea that you’re the sum of your whimsical interests (Gentry, 2012).



*Figure 3.3.* Excerpt one of Reinertson’s blog posts entitled “From the Road, Part one,” a collection of images taken from a recent road trip with her husband, further underscoring the connection between her work and a lifestyle firmly grounded in the natural world.

Yet I would argue that in fact this method of self-identification is an effective commercial strategy for both professional Etsy sellers and craft fair vendors. If the development of coherent identity is the central problem of modern existence and is something itself to be chosen and achieved—“We have no choice but to choose” (Giddens, 1991, p. 81)—then this constellation of identifying characteristics becomes an incredibly useful heuristic. It provides consumers with a network of interests with which to associate, and as a result, a lifestyle ripe for adoption. After all, lifestyles suggest a coordinated routine, diminishing the overload of consumer choice and offering “a continuing sense of ‘ontological security’ that connects options in a more or less ordered pattern” (Giddens, 1991, p. 81). Therefore by positioning their products in relation to their personal interests, Etsians and craft fair organizers create a kind of marketing feedback loop: these leisurely and pleasurable associations amplify the symbolism of the DIY handicraft and add legitimacy to the lifestyle portrayed.

### **Real beyond Words: Authenticity and *Jouissance***

Though the Etsy sellers and DIY bloggers with whom I spoke clearly embraced strategies of self-promotion, when asked about these practices, they were far more ambivalent. Geri Hirsch, a DIY lifestyle blogger based in Los Angeles, was fairly representative of this inconsistency. Hirsch, who has gained considerable industry and press attention in recent years, told me, “Sometimes I get a little overwhelmed. I’m a little shy by nature. .. When I go to fashion week and everybody wants to take pictures, I get a little like, oh, this isn’t really my thing.” She was also critical of blogging newcomers who, to her mind, are clearly driven by the external motivators of fame and

profit. She told me while she began her own blogging career without any kind of trajectory, “today if you start a blog there’s a formula” and that “anyone who’s going to spend their life taking photos and going out shopping to be praised for their personal style has the motivation of people seeing that and trying to monetize that.” In so doing, she implies a not-so-subtle distinction between her own intrinsic (and thus authentic) motivation to document her world and her predecessors’ primary interest in revenue.

And yet her self-confessed bashfulness and critique of profit-minded bloggers is a bit incongruous given the fact that Hirsch’s primary means of employment is co-creating and starring on LEAF (Living, Eating, Fashion) tv, a YouTube channel featuring DIY and culinary how-to videos. In dialogue-free and beautifully shot clips, Hirsch demonstrates how to apply the perfect self-tan, models various ways to style a sequin skirt, and walks viewers through numerous recipes. Though the videos are didactic, their appeal relies heavily on Hirsch’s persona; indeed its allure is evident in the numerous user comments proclaiming viewers’ love of Hirsch herself. Moreover Hirsch, in partnership with LA clothing brand Lovers + Friends, recently designed a small capsule collection, and she models her own creations in some of the look book’s images. Despite Hirsch’s protests to the contrary, self-branding is clearly very much “her thing.”

Upon further reflection, though, this incongruity between obvious self-branding and avowed distaste for the limelight makes sense when viewed through the framework of authenticity. David Grazian, in his study of Chicago blues bars, defines authenticity as a comparative phenomenon—it’s always constructed “in relative terms; that is, in contradistinction to someplace else” (2003, p. 13). Or as Trilling (1972) puts it, “authenticity is implicitly a polemical concept” (1972, p. 94), emerging as a focal point



when put in doubt. Traditionally this binary has played out between notions of a “true” inner self and outer façade. Scholars from Rousseau to Thoreau to Marx have conceived of the authentic as a state closer to nature, eminently immaterial, and genuine. By contrast the inauthentic has been associated with social display, calculated performance, and the commercial. However as Banet-Weiser (2012) posits, instead of questioning or lamenting the effects of this binary, it is often more fruitful to attend to the ways in which this divide has collapsed and authenticity itself has become a brand.

This radical fusion certainly emerges in most creative forms, in which an artist’s authentic creative vision is branded and positioned against the crass material needs of the industry, whether it be country music (M. Hughes, 2000; Peterson, 1997), hip-hop (Judy, 2004; McLeod, 1999), or punk (Moore, 2004; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1990). Indeed this conflict seems most fraught when the artist’s worth is determined from his or her stance *outside* of the industrial system. Fine (2003) has written about “outsider” or self-taught artists, suggesting that the value of the works these artists produce depends not on quality but on the perceived authenticity of their creator: “not only are these artists outside the art market, but also the value of their works is directly linked to the biographies of the artists and the stories of *authentic creation* that the objects call forth. Life stories infuse the meaning of the work” (p. 156). Fine uses the term “identity art” to describe the fact that it is the “social location” and biography of the artist rather than the intrinsic aesthetic qualities of his or her work that confers its merit.

I maintain that much the same process of evaluation takes place in DIY craft and is just as critical, given the phenomenon’s self-conscious location outside of mass consumption and the fact that authenticity in the form of the rejection of commodity

homogeneity is *sine qua non* for the lifestyle signified by the handcrafted good. Indeed much of the ego-affirming references to *plaisir* function to signify the authenticity of the maker herself and her position outside the slick and sophisticated world of mass production, through discourses of “ordinary-ization” (L. Taylor, 2002). Just as the ordinary domestic experts who host most lifestyle television shows often deemphasize their ability in an attempt to seem relatable, so too do professional crafters. This tactic is particularly apparent on crafters’ blogs, where they call attention to their failures both professional and personal. Dukes most consistently deploys this approach, documenting parenting mishaps (one entry from May 7, 2013, for instance, details Dukes’ failure to move her daughter’s bedside step-stool and the toddler’s subsequent middle-of-the-night fall, which resulted in a severely swollen lip), marital difficulties, and sewing blunders (Dukes, 2013). She explained:

I’m not good with a filter, and I’m not at good narrowing myself, so both of these end up full blast. I’ll hear people say oh . . . I never thought I could sew and you did whatever. I’m like, here's the good, the bad, and the ugly. Here's what it was really like for me. Here's why parenting makes you crazy or here's why I want to quit sewing after a while or here's why I don't even want to blog right now. . . . That's a very unifying theme, I think, on the Internet. Like okay, I'm not alone in that. Like okay, somebody else is googling web M.D. for this crazy symptom or I am not alone in in this parenting struggle or not understanding how to thread a sewing machine, all of that. And so I think there's a lot of that, just transparency and authenticity, like this is who I am . . .

Though Dukes is perhaps the most candid of my interviewees, many of the bloggers with whom I spoke were comfortable discussing personal frustrations and perceived shortcomings. Turner told me that hers is not “a TMI blog,” but she does take pride in the fact that the content on Glitter ‘n Glue is quite personal. To illustrate this sentiment, she told

me about a post devoted to a sequin pocket tutorial, modeled after those on the hips of a gown Gwyneth Paltrow wore to the 2012 Met Gala:

[In the post] I talked about where I was when I got the inspiration. I was literally sitting at my desk in my sweatpants, eating popcorn and looking online at all of these fabulous people and being like, ‘where the hell is my invitation?’ Not because I’m cool like that, but because that’s my personality. And then like, yeah, that kind of information, like the inspiration and you know, I talk about my weight obviously. Like I’m not a skinny girl, so of course in the post I’m like, I don’t need oversized pockets on my hips. No, please. Don’t make that happen.

As both Turner and Dukes suggest, this level of personal disclosure creates an aura of relatability and likability, building the virtual bond between blogger and reader that has long characterized the kind of everyday engagement encouraged by blogs (Ryan, 2013). But I maintain personal admissions such as these also indicate that these women, though obviously quite skilled and rich in cultural capital, are nonetheless fallible “real” people—and, by implication, if they can lead fulfilling creative lives abounding with experiences of *jouissance*, so too can their readers and patrons.

This persona of the friendly girl-next-door is not only demonstrated via the content of crafters’ marketing material but also by the form these narratives take. In addition to the interviewees who, like Turner and Duke, derive the lion share of their craft income from blogging, many of the makers with whom I spoke supplemented their Etsy storefronts with personal blogs. And as Hilgenberg (2012) posits, the appeal of lifestyle blogs is based on the fact that, unlike traditional print media, blogs are supposed to be real, existing outside the economic demands of parent companies and advertising contacts: “they are, at the most basic level, online records born from a desire to share with others, rather than satisfy a bottom line.” The serialized nature of a blog resembles a diary, and as such connotes a sense of intimacy irrespective of content. And even though

the blog is highly performative (Boyd, 2006), it also, by virtue of the space it allows for reader comments, presumes ongoing communication with the audience (Robinson, 2007), connoting a kind of parity between blogger and reader. It thus quite plainly fosters the emotional relationship that characterizes successful brands.

Yet, at the same time, it seems that professional crafters also evoke another dimension of authenticity when marketing their work—the ego-dissolving flow experience *jouissance*. In the context of creative production, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has (1998) described authenticity in terms of a lack of cognitive experience. Citing instances of avant-garde performance art, she frames the authentic as resulting from an experience that is completely genuine and unmediated, distinct from pragmatic self-presentation. Likewise, Bendix (1997) contends that defining characteristics of authentic expression is that it is connected to the artist’s moral authority and, simultaneously, to the fact that the resultant object is created by hand. It is to this direct, embodied experience of creative pleasure that Etsy sellers make frequent reference when marketing their work. Though *jouissance* is by definition incommunicable—as Barthes describes it, “[The text of *jouissance* is] outside criticism, unless it is reached through another text of bliss [*jouissance*]: you cannot speak ‘on’ such a text, you can only speak ‘in’ it, in its fashion . . .” (1975, p. 22)—and as such can only be really known through personal experience, professional DIYers nonetheless continually gesture towards it and its meditative pleasures in their promotional materials. In so doing, they not only underscore their own authenticity (implying they are invested in their business for the experience of creativity, rather than the financial rewards) but also allow consumers to enjoy the freedom of artistic endeavor both voyeuristically and vicariously through the sale of their craft.

This purposeful elicitation is perhaps most apparent in Estians' photographic documentation of their studio spaces. Once again, Etsy itself is well aware of the allure of creativity, advising would-be sellers drafting their promotional materials to "Show your process. This is a great place to really show the buyer and press how 'handmade' your business is. Etsy buyers are truly interested in supporting the small business owner, and the more you can let them in on your process, the more they will cherish the work you make" (danielleexo, 2012). In this blog post, published in Etsy's "Seller's Handbook," documentation of artistry is clearly equated with degree of "handmade"-ness, thus affording those storefront owners who capture their workspaces creative legitimacy. And many successful sellers heed this advice, often including beautifully photographed and intimate views of their studios on their storefront's "about" page. Marquez, for example, has populated her photo carousel (the scrolling marquee at the top of her store's homepage) with a series of images featuring her work table and carefully-curated inspiration board; piles of brilliantly colored embroidery floss; a peg board filled with wooden needlework supplies and notions; and an image of herself stitching on a sun-dappled picnic blanket (see Figure 3.4). Likewise Jessalin Buetler's "about" page is emblazoned with an image of fabric clothes pinned across a sunny window in her studio, flanked by a dress form and jars of paint (see Figure 3.5). Indeed every entry in both the "Featured Shop" and "Quit Your Day Job" series on the Etsy blog highlights lavishly photographed scenes of the showcased crafter's workspace and carefully curated tableaux of her art supplies (see Figures 3.6, 3.7, and 3.8 for typical examples).

Cumulatively these images serve to set the context of consumption, in much the same way that window design operates in a traditional brick and mortar retailer. Here,

however, the fiction on offer is the life of artistic freedom, and these evocative montages only reinforce the connection between the experience of *jouissance* and the product for sale via the suggestions of indexical authenticity. For Peirce, an “index” refers to cues that connote a spatio-temporal link to a particular object; in order for a consumer to perceive an object as an index, he or she must believe that this link is factually true (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). The dense web of documentation that crafters weave around their work—the stories of their creation, the photographs portraying the family members that inspire them, as well as the images of their studio space—all serve as evidence, underscoring the link between the maker’s pleasure and the material form of the object for sale.

Even more indicative of the appeal of the creative expression is crafters’ willingness to publish project tutorials. These step-by-step lessons on handicraft production are omnipresent on both Etsy and individual sellers’ blogs. Etsy publishes a series of tutorials under the tag “How- Tuesday,” in which they invite craft bloggers and Etsy sellers alike to take readers through the process of completing a project, whether it is a pair of bleached jean shorts or a handmade picnic set (Schneider, 2011; yomissnicole, 2013). While the featured projects run the gamut from “anti-bouquets” to seasonal food items and often highlight the kinds of work that are not available for sale on the website, some of the “How Tuesday” contributors in fact pen tutorials for objects very similar to those in their Etsy storefronts. For example Rebecca Rignquist authored a tutorial on basic embroidery, thereby potentially undercutting sales of the DIY embroidery samplers in her Etsy shop “dropcloth” (dropcloth, 2012). Likewise Jocelyn Harns walked Etsy readers through the process of creating a floor cushion made from upcycled jeans, a craft

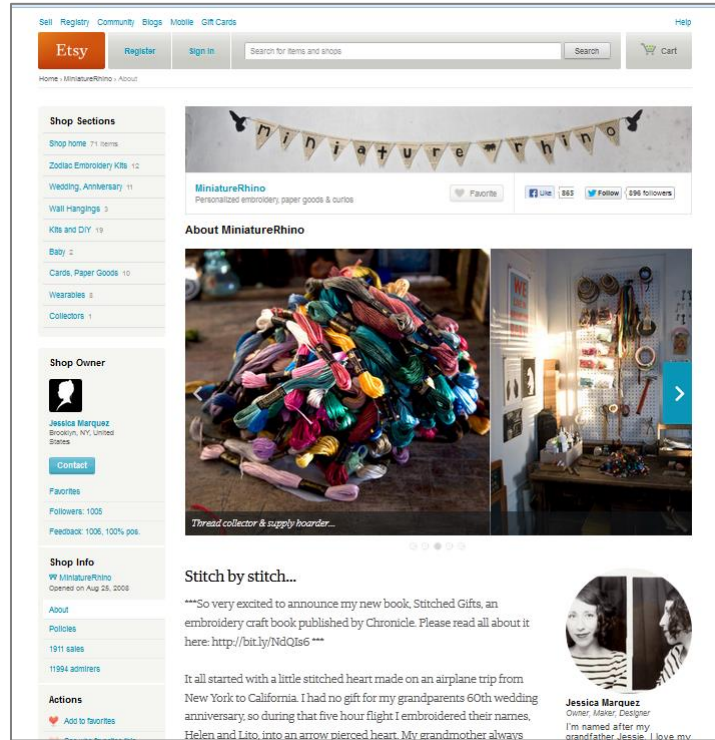


Figure 3.4. Miniature Rhino’s “About Page,” showcasing her craft supplies and interiors of her studio space.

very similar to those she offers in her storefront “Good Denim” (gooddenim, 2013). Etsy rationalizes this connection by arguing that evidence of a seller’s studio work helps customers understand the labor behind the cost of handmade craft (HeyMichelle, 2012a). This might be the case, but I would add that richly photographed studios and workshops also document the fantasy of creative production, allowing customers to imagine themselves as going through the artistic process themselves. The fact that most of the images accompanying these tutorials are free of human subjects—in direct opposition to Etsy’s dictum to “be you” and include as much self-portraiture as possible in marketing materials—only heightens this imaginary. So too does Etsy’s “Hands-On Etsy,” a series of monthly creative programming held at the company’s Brooklyn headquarters. Local

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- Shop home 65 items
- Mens sizes 10
- Womens sizes 21
- unisex 11
- Housewares 6
- Scarves 12
- Bags 3
- SALE 2

**Shop Owner**



**Jessalin**  
Seattle, WA, United States


Contact

Favorites

Followers: 790

Feedback: 563, 100% pos.

**Shop Info**

 JessalinBeutler  
Opened on Nov 30, 2006


About


Policies

1016 sales

6701 admirers

**Actions**




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# JESSALIN BEUTLER

**JessalinBeutler**  
clothing, textiles, original art

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**About JessalinBeutler**




◀ ▶

**Clothing, Textiles, Original Art**

Inspired by a lull in her day job, and an internship at a local shop & gallery Jessalin opened up her Etsy shop in 2006. In the first couple years it was full of experimental paintings, prints and hand made cards, and in 2008 started to include clothing.

Today, Jessalin is focusing on textile design and is partnering more frequently with her boyfriend Jonas to bring unique clothing and bag pieces to the shop.




**Jessalin Beutler**  
Owner, Maker, Designer  
Surface artist and designer.  
Lover of line, texture, and

Figure 3.5. JessalinBeutler's "About Page," featuring interiors of her studio.



• Prompt and attentive customer service has been very rewarding. Approximately 40% of my customers have come back to buy more jewelry.



**What tool or technique has been the most effective in getting buyers to your shop?**

I create a newsletter every few months to update my customers on new items and sales. I have dabbled in some craft fairs, but I learned very quickly that you have to really do some research to make sure an event will attract your target buyers. The first handmade craft show I attended ended up being a flea market, and everyone wanted to get secondhand items for very cheap, not quality handmade jewelry. I have also attended a few small business workshops to learn more about reaching out to customers through SEO optimization and social media outlets. The Etsy Success newsletters are also very helpful. I always look forward to receiving them in my email and I make sure to make the applicable changes in my shop to make it easier for customers to find my jewelry.

**What's the hardest part about running your own business?**

I find myself working all of the time and sometimes, it does get in the way of family time. It can be hard to turn it all off. It is also a bit daunting to not know how you are going to do financially every month. All I can do is work hard and hope it pays off. Some months are better than others.



**What's the most exciting thing that's come of selling your designs on Etsy?**

I love making pieces for brides to give to their bridesmaids — it's so exciting to be part of their big day. I also love getting feedback from customers. It amazes me that people from all over the world find my shop and wear my jewelry.

**What advice would you give to someone considering a similar path?**

Make sure you can keep up with the work. Even though you are at home, it is very challenging and time consuming to run everything smoothly. Make sure to keep up with your orders and respond to customers in a timely manner.

**Anything else you would like to share?**

Figure 3.6. Excerpt from Etsy's "Quit Your Day Job" profile of Wrenn Jewelry, highlighting a corner of Alissa Wrenn Smith's studio and some of her tools.



Figure 3.7. Excerpt from Etsy's Featured Shop profile of Poppy and Fern, documenting Rachel Pruett's production methods.

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## The Etsy Blog

### Quit Your Day Job: Gilded Notes






Photo by GildedNotes

Story by ScrapHappyKeywords  
Published on July 24, 2012 in [Seller Handbook](#)

**Tell us about your shop and the idea behind it.**  
I run a musical shop called [Gilded Notes](#). Music has always been an integral part of my life. I played my first notes on the violin at age eight and still enjoy playing with my husband and mom (an amazing banjo player) in our little "band." Whatever I'm doing, I love to be surrounded with music all the time, and it's important to me that my work be imbued with my love of music.

When I first started selling on Etsy, I began as a decoupage artist, using images from old sheet music covers to create collages and decorate keepsake boxes. I had scraps and pieces left over that I didn't want to waste. I began creating jewelry with them, and [Gilded Notes](#) was born! I love what I do because it's a way for me to share my passion for music, romance, and the past with the world. Basically, I get to play with old sheet music all day and indulge in my hopelessly romantic tendencies. As an autoharp and violin playing co-archaeologist, I'm pretty sure I've found my calling!

**Tell us about your previous working situation and how you discovered Etsy.**  
After graduating in 2008 with my MA in Historical Archaeology, I struggled with finding employment. When I got engaged a year later, a friend sent me a link to a [vintage wedding dress](#) on Etsy. I was instantly hooked! Even though I didn't plan to sell anything on Etsy, it made me pick up some old hobbies and start creating again. (I also snagged a mega gorgeous vintage gown for my wedding.)

After I started selling on Etsy, I continued to work a series of part-time jobs to help make ends meet. I knew none of them were for me, but I didn't think I could seriously make a go of my Etsy business either — thankfully, I was so wrong.

**What steps did you take to prepare for transitioning into full time Etsy**


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What You're Saying

@Hatchute425 says on "Miscare on the Runway"

"Civona's story is an inspiration and his work is amazing. I think we would all like to know that our work is 'runway worthy' but have the freedom to choose that path or not." [Read more](#)

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Figure 3.8. Excerpt from Etsy's "Quit Your Day Job" profile of sheet music jewelry shop Gilded Notes, portraying Tess's studio space, creative practice, and final product.

DIY enthusiasts and Etsy patrons are invited into the “Etsy Labs” where they are given access to crafts supplies and the expertise of special guest artists (Schneider, 2012).

Though the events are only accessible to those in the New York City region, their very existence reaffirms the notion that customers too can engage in creative *jouissance* should they so choose.

Some of the sellers and bloggers I interviewed also publish tutorials on their personal blogs. Lauren Kemp, the Portland-based upcycled clothing designer, has dedicated several posts on her blog to the process of hand painting and stamping vintage clothing. When I asked her about her rationale for including these guides, she told me “I plan on posting more tutorials because I love the democratic feel of ‘oh, anyone can do this.’ I mean, you can buy this from me, but here’s how you do this. Maybe that’s to my detriment [laughs].” Keight Dukes was more pragmatic in the way that she rationalized how-tos. In 2011 she posted a braided scarf tutorial on her blog “Put Up Your Dukes” that nearly quintupled her readership, but she also sells the very same scarf in her eponymous Etsy shop. When I asked her about the logic of this decision, she responded

[Am I] undercutting myself? Right, you don't need to come to my bakery because here's the recipe for my pie. The logic behind that is that as someone who knows how to sew I would never buy one of those scarves anyways. So the logic becomes, are you going to provide the tutorial and give you my click? Like the people who sew are going to sew. They're not going to shop for me on Etsy anyways. They'll figure out a way to figure it out. So I can provide something for them and get their click . . . But I'd been on blogs where I felt that line. Like they were holding something back in order to make profit and it didn't really sit well with me. It wasn't what I wanted to be like. “I figured this out and I made it but I'm not going to tell you how to figure it out.” I didn't feel too comfortable with that so that was a big decision to come to because it did feel weird at first. I was like, I won't hold it back and not give away all my secrets. But there are really two different markets. There's a market reading to learn how to do something and if you take that away, it's not [going to] make them buy scarves.

Dukes, like Kemp, justified her decision by suggesting that her target Etsy market is not comprised of clients who were themselves makers, and therefore her tutorials are not leeching potential sales. This is likely the case, but I also maintain that the inclusion of tutorials also lends a gloss of accessibility—the fiction being that any customer could make this scarf given the motivation to do so.

This is also a strategy eagerly adopted by the indie craft fairs I attended; there were numerous workshops throughout all three events. Brooklyn’s Renegade Craft Fair included a Pébéo sponsored Creat(ive) Lab and tables devoted to tote dying and friendship bracelet weaving (see figures 3.9 and 3.10). Workshops at the Los Angeles RCF included zine-making, sponsored by LA Zine Fest, as well as woodworking demos from mobile artist-run organization Side Street Projects. In both cases the workshops were at the event’s periphery and did not seem to be especially well-attended.



*Figures 3.9 and 3.10.* Workshops at the 2012 Brooklyn Renegade Craft fair: a Pébéo sponsored Creat(ive) Lab and a Make Your Own Friendship Bracelet table (note the sign: “Let’s be BFFs!”). Photos by author.

Yet, in addition to garnering sponsorship revenue, their very presence lent to the fairs a semblance of experiential authenticity, allowing patrons to undergo the creative process themselves. It also symbolically closes the distance between consumer and producer, thereby reinforcing the event's trademark atmosphere of communal goodwill.

### **Craft's Not-So-Secret History**

Ultimately this overt linkage between product and process at the sites of consumption—whether they be Etsy storefronts, personal blogs or craft fairs—flies in the face of Marx's suggestion that commodities obscure their fundamental "secret"—that is, the people who made them and the materials from which they were made. As Marx writes "the commodity form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this." He continues, maintaining that the commodity, "is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx, 1867/1976, p. 165). Thus for Marx the phantasmagoric nature of a commodity works precisely because it shrouds the conditions of its production.

Yet DIYers in fact strive to uncover this "secret" history, tactically folding into their marketing materials to suggest authenticity. Of course many constituencies benefit from revealing the conditions of a product's creation; Duncombe (2012), for instance, argues that "revelatory" strategies, whereby the "real" socio-political history behind a commodity is made plain, is a traditional form of consumer activism. He also identifies

“restoring” practices, which seek to rebuild the non-alienated connections between nature, people and products, citing CSAs and the Fair Trade movement as prominent examples. He concludes, however, that these practices have significant limitations, as they often commoditize anti-consumerism. And it seems that the marketing efforts behind DIY combine both of these impulses, to the same commercial effect that Duncombe laments: crafters, by way of abundant visual and textual evidence, meticulously document the materials and labor that went into a particular product and through deliberate construction of their personal brands build affective “restoring” relationships with their clientele. But while professional DIY might fall in line with both the restorative and revelatory Duncombe identifies, it is a unique phenomenon in that its marketing logic rests on evoking labor conditions only to then suggest a fantasy that is far afield from the realm of work. By strategically utilizing references to both *plaisir* and *jouissance*, makers embed their products not only in fully developed lifestyles, but, crucially, lifestyles centered on quotidian sensory pleasure.

Here we circle back to Barthes. He characterizes the subject of a text reliant on both *jouissance* and *plaisir* as a kind of reader-rewriter, grabbling with the dispersal of normative codes:

Then perhaps the subject returns, not as illusion, but as *fiction*. A certain pleasure is derived from a way of imagining oneself as *individual*, of inventing a final rarest fiction: the fictive identity. This fiction is no longer the illusion of a unity; on the contrary, it is the theatre of society in which we stage our plural: our pleasure is *individual*—but not personal (p. 62).

Analyzing this passage, Stafford and McManus (2005) explain that subjectivity itself becomes a kind of “text” for Barthes and that “the reader as rewriter of the text is not the origin of meaning, but merely a privileged site where meanings interweave” (p. 78). And

yet it seems that Barthes is also suggesting that there is a certain pleasure in casting off one set of codes—how one sees oneself—for another—the fictive identity. And I suggest that this describes the allure of the DIY object: bound up in the physicality of a beaded earring or a woven scarf is a fictive identity of the artisan who made it and the imaginary of pleasure and leisureliness that her lifestyle evokes.

This in turn begs the questions: why is this narrative so appealing? Numerous critics have suggested in the contemporary landscape of ever more rapid fashion cycles it is not familiarity with the cultural cannon that bestows status but rather cultural omnivorousness (Peterson, 1992) and trendiness (T. D. Taylor, 2009), being “in the know” rather than knowing. But trends are socially constructed in relation to the notion of one’s own “true” personal style (Michael, 2013), and as Crewe et al. (2003) maintain, in the subcultural imagination being innovative is defined as the inverse of an imagined mainstream.

It is also steeped in the rhetoric of authenticity. As Appadurai (1986) observes, regarding luxury goods and the closing distance between consumers and producers:

In pre-modern conditions long distance movement of precious commodities entailed costs that made the acquisition of them in itself a marker of exclusivity, but now as more people have access, the only way to preserve the function of these commodities in prestige economies in the modern West is to complicate the criteria of authenticity (p. 45).

It would seem then that this rhetoric of pleasure—with its attendant suggestion that crafters are engaged in their work for sheer joy, rather than remuneration—carves out a symbolic place for consumers to signal their opposition to the mass produced and mainstream. Moreover a number of researchers have proposed that when consumers believe an object is authentic, they can feel transported to the context to which that object



is authentically linked, and thus feel more connected to the fantasy it evokes (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Hence consumers, in purchasing an item that has been authentically tied to creative freedom and pleasure, are more likely to vicariously access the sense of enchantment that drives so much of postmodern consumption. Thus the DIY object reinforces the pleasure mandate while opening up the possibility that this life of creative experience—of *jouissance*—is possible.

But this script has certain consequences, as it dictates the way that DIY circulates in both the community of makers and between crafters and their clientele. It also means that certain facets of professional crafters' lives are suppressed. The very real challenges that come with creative entrepreneurship, whether in the form of full-time freelance work or secondary employment, are often unacknowledged, as to do so would puncture the fantasy that makes their work so appealing and thus undermine the point of their endeavor. In considering these hidden stories, as I do in the following chapter, it becomes clear that there is in fact a deep-seated irony at work: the more successful a maker becomes and the bigger her business grows, the farther away she moves from personally experiencing *jouissance*.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Context: Etsy's Virtual Commercial Community**

Located deep in the heart of Dumbo, Brooklyn's newly thriving warehouse district, Etsy corporate headquarters has captured public imagination. Journalists from the likes of *New York Times* to producers from CNN and *The Martha Stewart Show* have publicized the workspace's granny-chic aesthetic, replete with colorful gingham curtains, faded oriental carpets, and charmingly mismatched worktables (Jiminez, 2013; Martha Stewart Inc.; Wortham, 2010). Frequently photographed are the company's more whimsical decorative touches: "Mr. Grit," a human-sized owl-like cardboard sculpture that has become the Etsy's unofficial mascot; the yarn-covered overhead air ducts and artist-designed phone booths; and sundry upcycled art installations that dot the open-plan space. And if the company's decor is meant to suggest a creative mecca—what *BusinessWeek* calls "a nursery school for adults" (Spiegelman, 2012)—then the numerous crafts nights and workshops it holds only reinforce this image.

Though the physical space is only accessible to local New Yorkers, images of it and the events Etsy organizes circulate widely online and are folded into the company's own marketing and promotional materials. Crafts workshop attendees are encouraged to tag and upload any images they take to Etsy Flickr groups, and easily accessible livestream feeds of company craft nights are digitally archived (EtsyStore, 2009). Additionally photographs of the workshops populate Etsy's "community" page and blog (see figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4). These well-publicized tutorials—with images of "regular" women taking part and successfully creating their own craft objects—serve to



*Figures 4.1 and 4.2.* Images of a “Hands On” event at the Etsy Labs, displayed in an auto-rotating slideshow on Etsy’s Community Page.

further support the fantasy that the DIY lifestyle promulgated by the site is easily accessible to those who seek it. Hence the very physical reality of the Etsy Labs offers a brand “touch-point” for stakeholders, while reinforcing the connection between the communal, the pleasurable, and the handmade (Kozinets et al., 2002; Parsons, 2006).

Both a place and not-place, Etsy leverages its liminal status to associate itself with a location-specific aesthetic—the indie culture for which Brooklyn is celebrated while simultaneously portraying itself as a democratic community open to patrons the world over. Kozinets and his colleagues at the Kellogg School forecasted a decade ago the ascendance of the “brick-and-click” hybrid, arguing that despite the recent surge in ecommerce, brick-and-mortars would remain a critical component of any brand’s retail strategy (Kozinets et al., 2002). They suggested this appeal was realized through flagships’ ability to communicate indigenous meaning to a particular audience while simultaneously expressing universal emotional states. And while Etsy HQ doesn’t fall under the rubric of traditional retailer per se—you can’t purchase any items at the

Brooklyn complex—it accomplishes the same multivalent communication that Kozinets et al (2002) attribute to the flagship: the spectacularization and distillation of the brand narrative for both local crafters and global Etsy members.



Figures 4.3 and 4.4. Images of a “Hands On” event at the Etsy Labs, displayed in an auto-rotating slideshow on Etsy’s Community Page.

Yet this ontological indeterminacy is not just confined to Etsy’s material status; it also describes the way that DIY objects are circulated both online and off. In this chapter I focus on interactions between individual actors and agents—Etsy corporate, storefront owners, craft fair vendors, and consumers—to argue that the same tensions that characterize the marketing of professional craft—the alternatively conflicting and complimentary need to be both authentic and commercially viable—also typify its circulation. First, drawing on Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), I suggest that the objects exchanged on the site as well as at local fairs behave *simultaneously* as gifts and commodities. Sellers strategically invoke practices characteristic of traditional gift exchange, and in doing so, foster a sense of intimacy with their customers. Relatedly I maintain that, as its fanciful décor and impressive lineup of events suggest, Etsy

consciously frames itself as a warm and welcoming creative community, comprised of likeminded makers. This egalitarian spirit, in turn, positions both the company and its sellers outside of the mainstream marketplace and endows it with subcultural capital.

However these vacillations between morals and economics obscure (even as they generate) some of the less-than-idyllic features of a commercial community: competition, both subtle and overt; plagiarism; and deep professional divisions, among others. They also eclipse the considerable challenges that come with creative entrepreneurship, as to acknowledge these pressures would puncture the fantasy that makes crafters' work so appealing and destabilize the gift/commodity balance. However in considering these oft unrecognized hardships—the loneliness and isolation many crafters experience; the administrative burdens that often overwhelm creative expression; the pressures of a saturated and trend-driven marketplace—it becomes clear that there is a deep-seated irony at work: the more successful a maker becomes and the bigger her business grows, the farther away she moves from personally experiencing *jouissance*. Thus the principle that drives the business of DIY—the pleasure crafters derive through the act of creative production—becomes impaired by its commercialization and ultimately calls into question the limits of the professional handmade.

### **Commodities in Gift Wrap**

For the last century, gifts and commodities have largely been conceived as diametrically opposed (Komter, 2001). From Malinowski's (1922) famous description of the *Kula* exchange rituals through Mauss's *The Gift* (1954), traditional anthropological accounts have tended to distinguish societies in which gift exchange is predominant from

those in which “economy is relatively unfettered by the social consequences of exchange” (Miller, 1995, p. 272). In the case of the former, kinship relations and groups define individuals, and objects are inextricably associated with the giver and the relationship she or he has with the recipient. Gifts, then, are more than non-utilitarian objects bestowed as presents; they are objects exchanged in order to facilitate mutual interdependence and social cohesion. And just as they are inalienable, so too are they unique. Baudrillard (1981) describes this characteristic aptly when he writes, “once it has been given—and because of this—it is this object and not another. The gift is unique, specified by the people exchanging it and the unique moment of the exchange” (p. 64).

In societies characterized by commodity exchange, on the other hand, class divisions structure social interactions. Individuals are seen as self-interested and autonomous and engage in exchange with those to whom they have no enduring ties. Moreover in commodity transactions, the value of an object is determined via its use value and exchange value rather than the identity of the individuals to whom it once belonged (Carrier, 1991). Although anthropologists differ in the degree to which they see gift and commodity exchange as mutually exclusive, “the idea of some fundamental opposition between the two is at the root of their theories” (Komter, 2001, p. 61).

Arjun Appadurai, editor of *The Social Life of Things* (1986), and Igor Kopytoff, the collection’s first contributor, counter both these points of view when they stress the utility of studying “things-in-motion”—that is, objects’ cultural and social biographies as they move through complex networks of use. The authors suggest that “commodityhood” is neither restricted to capitalism nor an object’s enduring state. Rather Appadurai defines a commodity in terms of a situation in which “its

exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (p. 13). An object’s value has no absolute basis but instead originates in the exchange between transactors, when desire is matched with demand. Hence any object is a potential commodity, and depending on the context in which it is exchanged, can move in and out of the commodity state.

Kopytoff (1986) goes on to describe the inverse of commoditization, what he calls singularization. This is the process by which an object is appropriated into an individual’s life and given a specific set of personal meanings. Though commoditization is governed by “technologies of exchange” (e.g., money), singularization is driven by culture: “commoditization homogenizes value, while the essence of culture is discrimination” (p. 73). According to this argument, these two forces are eternally at odds, alternatively drawing objects in and out of the economic and moral markets. Appadurai, summarizing Kopytoff, explains that there is a “perennial and universal tug-of-war between the tendency of all economies to expand the jurisdiction of commoditization and of all cultures to restrict it” (p.17).

However subsequent scholars have suggested that relationship between singularization and commoditization is far more complex than Kopytoff’s strict division. Frow (1997), for instance, points that there is frequently a paradox at work, whereby an object’s exchange value is actually enhanced by its decommoditization; it is often an object’s singularity that determines its aesthetic value, and thus, its monetary worth. Appadurai too noted this tendency, particularly in the arenas of fashion, domestic décor and fine art. Recounting the aestheticization of African artifacts in bourgeois Western homes, he maintains:

In these objects we see not only the equation of the authentic with the exotic everyday object, but also the aesthetics of diversion. Such diversion is not only an instrument of decommunitization of the object, but also of the (potential) intensification of commoditization by the enhancement of value attendant upon its diversion (1986, p. 28).

This observation is in keeping with some of the more recent scholarly attempts to update and reformulate Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. Holt (1997, 1998) has argued that in the contemporary United States, authenticity and singularity are potent signals of high cultural capital, as has Zukin (2008) in her examination of urban gentrification.

Scholars have made a similar case when it comes to homemade food, suggesting that its defects mark its singular quality in relation to "serialized difference" (Baudrillard, 1996[1968]) of market-made food. When it comes to home cooked meals:

Homemade is never realized unless direct connections between the producer and consumer are forged through singularizing practices. In the absence of agape, homemade loses much of its worth. Hence, the experience of homemade is not only a matter of person-role fit but also the delivery of a devotional performance (Moisio, Arnould, & Price, 2004, p. 372).

In other words, the defining feature of the handmade—and thus the source of its value—is its imperfect singularity, which is a turn a reflection of the unalienated social relationship between producer and recipient. As Luckman (2013) writes, "Today, when direct connections to the hands that produced the goods we own are rare, an abundance of mass-produced goods reinstates a Benjaminian aura to the analogue and the handmade" (p. 264).

Yet I would argue that this friction between commoditization and singularization is rendered in high relief when it comes to professional DIY and on Etsy in particular, where the objects on offer are strategically presented as both commodities and gifts. Mauss describes gifts as fundamentally inalienable and stresses that they "are to some



extent parts of persons” (1954, p. 11). But he could just as well be describing the indexicality of the handcrafted object and its evocation of its maker herself. Sellers’ aforementioned emphasis on *plaisir* creates a one-to-one connection between consumer and producer that is far more characteristic of a gift economy’s kinship ties than the anonymous relationships typical of a commodity economy. Etsy spokesman Adam Brown articulated as much when he declared: “It’s not like you’re buying stuff. It’s like you’re connecting with this person” (quoted in Tracy, 2010) This view is also one espoused by the sellers themselves. Erica Williams echoes Brown almost verbatim when she told me “I feel like people shop on Etsy and buy handmade because they want to they want to have some sort of personal connection with whomever it is they’re buying from.”

Many Etsy sellers self-consciously evoke gift exchange through their careful packaging, and there are Etsy Flickr pools, threads, and blog posts dedicated to showcasing innovative wrapping and decorative embellishments. Hey Michelle’s article on the Seller Handbook, for instance, profiles storefront owners’ meticulous use of craft paper, ribbon, glassine packages, and custom stamps (see fig. 5) Many Etsians also go so far as to include a handwritten thank you note with each order, including details about the particular item and its production; others include a gift tag emblazoned with the customer’s name as a way of personalizing the exchange (bethela, 2012). Of course the Handbook promotes thoughtful packaging as an effective way to reinforce brand recognition, but for many sellers the practice is about far more than marketing. Jennifer from livejewelry represents the philosophy of many storefront owners when she writes, “When my customer buys something for herself, I want her to feel as though she is



Figure 4.5. Photo montage from HeyMichelle's Etsy Seller's Handbook blog post devoted to innovative packaging.

unwrapping a special gift just for her" ("Packaging That Packs a Punch Article: Call for Responses," 2012). Jillian Carmine of JillianReneDecor echoes the sentiment: "A handwritten note and thoughtful packaging definitely goes a long way - I think it's so

important for customers to feel special when they receive their order! Those personal touches are what handmade is all about” (HeyMichelle, 2012b).

These bespoke features, in turn, gesture towards another feature of the Etsy exchange that is characteristic of gift economies: implied reciprocity. The relationship between storefront owner and customer is patently uneven, with customers on the clear receiving end, and yet it is not unidirectional. The clear foregrounding of makers’ *plaisir* and *jouissance* as well as their explicit evocation of gratitude (via thank you notes and stressed in store owner biographies) all suggest they are recipients as well as givers. The implication is that in exchange for the purchase of a handmade object, buyers become patrons, providing Etsy sellers with the financial support necessary to continue their lifestyles of pleasure. Moreover buyers have the opportunity to leave sellers comments about their purchases. As Schwarz (2010) notes in his study of self-portraiture on social networking sites, public comments help form and ratify social bonds, ultimately functioning as gifts because “most comments are compliments, that is, public recognition of the receiver’s worth, and because (independent of its content) every comment raises the receiver’s comment-count” (p. 169). The vast majority of comments left on Etsy sellers’ storefronts are glowing, buttressing sellers’ reputation which in turn increases the likelihood of future sales.

Cumulatively these practices cohere to endow the exchange between seller and consumer with a sense of intimacy and connection, connoting an aura of authenticity by virtue of the fact that it is positioned in contradistinction to the impersonal mass marketplace. Given that the signaling of authenticity is a key factor in Thornton’s (1996) formulation of subcultural capital as well as Holt’s (1997, 1998) modernization of high

cultural capital, this kind of interchange also enables consumers to communicate their own status. Appadurai describes tourist art as constituting “a special commodity traffic, in which the group of identities of producers are tokens for the status of politics of consumers” (1986, p. 47). This observation is easily applicable to the professional craft marketplace, in which consumers become tourists of creative pleasure and the nature of their relationship with makers signals their own social standing.

The commercial logic of this sentiment is also one strategically cultivated by Etsy corporate, which has taken great pains to come across as an authentic, community-oriented business. This is a reasonable approach given the fact that homemade is fundamentally tied to the conditions of social relationships and the gift economy is inherently communal (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). Thus by fostering a sense of community, Etsy scales the unalienable, gift-like features of the seller-consumer exchange to the company as a whole.

### **Crafting a Community**

A 2007 *New York Times* piece noted, “If all Etsy did was channel D.I.Y.-ism into a profit machine, it could easily be seen as monetizing—exploiting—the creativity and hustle of 70,000 indiepreneurs” (Walker, 2007). This is a perception the company clearly seeks to discount; as it proclaims in its mission statement, “We keep it real, always” (Etsy, 2013a). To that end it has developed a suite of features that seems to back up this claim to authenticity and community.

Perhaps most obvious are the extensive social networking opportunities embedded within the site itself. The wish lists of “community tastemakers”—select Etsy

users—are prominently displayed on the site’s home page. Moreover sellers and buyers alike can create “circles” to friend and follow other Etsy members, keeping track of their recent purchases and wish list additions. In fact this social networking feature is so robust that it generated a flurry of criticism when it was first introduced. Because of the way that Etsy mined buyer feedback, individual patrons’ profiles and purchase histories were appearing in both Etsy and Google search results when users ran a search for their full names (Cheng, 2011). Etsy has since adjusted its feedback system, so that buyers’ shopping activity is now private, but preferences and connections to other Etsy members are still very much tied to the identities of particular users. Again this one-to-one connection between buyer and seller only reinforces the unalienable nature of the Etsy exchange.

Etsy Teams are another obvious part of the company’s campaign to build virtual community. Much like meet-up groups, teams are created around a common interest, be it artistic medium, geographic location, or thematic inspiration, and though self-organized, are clearly encouraged by Etsy corporate. After all, the alliances serve as effective mechanisms for storefront owners to exchange practical information with likeminded sellers via daily digest emails and discussion boards. This operational tutelage ensures savvier and more successful sellers, which ultimately benefits Etsy’s bottom line. But the teams also operate as effective sales tools in their own right. Browsing shoppers faced with a glut of options can use teams to search by subject or location, and the press often seeks out team members to serve as regional experts. Moreover teams can apply for Etsy fellowships in order to subsidize local showcase or craft fairs (Etsy, 2013k).

These online endeavors are complemented by offline events and unsurprisingly, the fruits of these efforts are ultimately folded back into the digital brand. There are Etsy Labs, permanent (in Brooklyn, New York and Berlin, Germany), rotating (frequently held in creative urban hubs across the United States like San Francisco, Austin and Chicago), and virtual community spaces that feature tech talks, business development seminars, and an ever-changing panoply of craft workshops, including the aforementioned “Hands On” nights. Etsy also encourages offline meet-ups, including a series called “Home for the Holidays.” The events are organized by Etsy admin who are visiting their hometowns during the holiday season; these hosts invite local Etsy members to nearby restaurants to socialize and talk about all things Etsy (Etsy, 2013e) . Etsy has also initiated an annual Craft Party, in which people across the globe come together on the same day in locally organized art-making events. Of course the instrumental nature of this endeavor is not lost, as the company reminds would-be party organizers, “craft parties are a great way to boost your team’s visibility and showcase the talent of your sellers” (Noonan, 2014).

The company has also adopted a number of internal and external policies meant to further bolster this commitment to community. For instance, the company does not require exclusivity from its sellers; instead storefront owners are actively encouraged to market themselves on their own websites, in stores, and at local craft fairs. Moreover Etsy co-founder and former CEO Rob Kalin hired a number of especially successful Etsy sellers to work directly for the company, in positions meant to disseminate their skills to as many storefront owners as possible (Walker, 2007). In a similar spirit, the company gives each new employee a \$100 Etsy gift card in order to outfit their workspace with

Etsy finds, further reinforcing the company's commitment to supporting its members (Doherty, 2013).

Etsy's investment in community clearly offers an economic advantage, as many business observers have noted. Rachel Botsman, coauthor of *What's Mine is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*, has argued that Etsy's unique selling point is the intimate relationship it fosters between buyers and sellers (quoted in Wortham, 2010); Bennett and O'Reilly (2010) make a similar point when they argue that Etsy's phenomenal growth is a direct result of consumers' desire for connectedness. Moreover a disproportionately high number of Etsy sellers are also Etsy buyers, thereby recirculating their revenue back into the larger community (Gansky, 2010).

This same logic is also at work at craft fairs. Many sellers buy from one another and develop relationships through the local fair circuit. Jen Nathan Orris confessed that while she established many relationships through Etsy, she does tend to meet people at fairs who happen to have Etsy storefronts: "where you want to share booths at the next show or like, 'I really like your work; here's my card.'" Similarly Jenny Topolski has met some of her closest friends at the myriad markets and craft fairs that are organized across New York City. She recounted her experience at the last Renegade Craft Fair, which she attended with a friend who is primarily a wholesaler: "She's not a market person. But she cracks up when we do [Renegade] each year because as soon as we get there, it's like we're saying hi to everybody and running around and catching up . . . as people get there, they're like, 'Hey Emily, Hey Jenny; what's up?' It's fun." This sociability, coupled with the fact that many vendors engage in regular trades in which they exchange handcrafted items with one another, creates a patent sense of conviviality.

Renegade's additional features—the DJs and local bands; the artisanal food trucks and crafts tables—only reinforce this party-like vibe.

These tactical allusions to community and its concomitant decommodification are counterbalanced by the clear elements of commodity exchange on both Etsy and at craft fairs such as Renegade. After all both the economic and philosophical imperatives underlying DIY mandate craft's democratization. Most obvious is the fact that the more handmade objects sold, the better the financial return for both the company and its individual storefront owners or vendors. Less so is the fact that making craft accessible to as many consumers as possible is in line with DIY's political mission, which seeks to create an alternative to the exclusionary strategies of high market retailers.

In this way, both Etsy and craft fairs represent instances of what Appadurai (1986) refers to as a “tournament of value” or a ritual practice of exchange. For Appadurai, these are “complex, periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life” (p. 21). Appadurai derived the term from descriptions of *Kula* gift rituals and applied it to contemporary Western phenomena in which participation is a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status. Scholars have since used the concept to examine cultural phenomena as wide ranging as competitive marketing strategies (Lien, 1997), garden art (Conan, 2002), Japanese advertising agencies (Moeran, 1993), fashion shows (Entwistle & Rocamora, 2005), the Olympic Games (Glynn, 2008), film festivals (O. Evans, 2007), and the Grammy awards (Anand & Watson, 2004). Craft fairs too seem to meet Appadurai's criteria. They are periodic and certainly competitive institutions. Curated and juried, Renegade, for instance, only takes a small proportion of vendor applicants. And while Etsy might not



be a tournament in the truest sense—it's not strictly episodic nor is it overtly competitive—it is a clear place of economic activity, one that takes advantage of the performative features of the commodity exchange.

Appadurai described tournaments as exhibiting a “agonistic, romantic, individualistic and gamelike ethos that stands in contrast to the ethos of everyday economic behavior” (1986, p. 50). Accordingly they share much in common with Ritzer's (2005) and Thompson's (2000) characterization of enchanted consumerism, summoning the halcyon images of small town marketplaces and communities from yesteryear. And just like the bazaars of which both Appadurai and Thompson write, Etsy and Renegade serve as “theaters” in which buyers and sellers alike determine the value of the handmade.

Ultimately these tensions—between gift and commodity; community and commerce—elucidate Etsy's operational approach. In order to both attract new customers, retain current buyers and support its storefront owners, it behooves Etsy to visibly foster community both online and off. And yet this resolute emphasis on cooperative engagement also brings with it a myriad of challenges, many of which ultimately detract from the very success that the focus on community is meant to cultivate.

### **The Downsides of a Marketplace Democracy**

If part of Etsy's goal is to democratize craft, then in many ways, it is clearly succeeding. According to the company's press page, Etsy currently includes over one million active shops and 18 million listed items (Etsy, 2013h). However while this sheer

magnitude benefits the company, it poses considerable challenges for storefront owners, as the likelihood of being selected by browsing shoppers from this superfluity of activity is a considerable challenge. Consider, for instance, that on November 15, 2013, the search term “pink scarf” returned 43,922 items; “pearl drop earrings” netted 24,561 possibilities; and even the far more specific “broken china necklace” (pendants made from pottery shards) yielded 1,788 options. Without considerable marketing efforts, paying for advertising, or the adoption of sophisticated search engine optimization strategies, Etsy storefront owners are left to play some very unfavorable odds.

Not only must sellers compete with the seemingly innumerable offerings of other makers, but increasingly they face competition from resellers and copyright infringers. Resellers—Etsy storefront owners who buy factory goods in bulk and then sell them as if they were their own handmade creations, often for a dramatic markup—have long been a contentious issue for Etsians. There was a wave of indignation following Etsy’s April 2012 featured seller profile of California-based Mariana Schecter and her storefront, Ecologica Malibu, where she, allegedly with the help of four local carpenters, sold furniture made from reclaimed wood. Etsy sellers soon collected evidence in the post’s comments and site forums to suggest to the contrary: Ecologica Malibu shared a mailing address with a furniture wholesale retailer, Bali Ha’i Imports. Moreover some Etsians uncovered a paper trail indicating that the furniture was imported from Malaysia, not handmade in the United States as Schecter claimed (Orsini, 2012). Etsy launched a brief investigation, after which it concluded that, as a “collective shop,” Ecologica Malibu was within the site’s rules (Gorman, 2012). In May of that year, 3,500 storefronts—or, at the time, approximately 1 percent of the site’s total marketplace—closed for a day to protest

what sellers believed to be Etsy's lily-livered response to an issue of growing concern (K. Morris, 2013).

Etsy has continued deal with allegations of poor oversight when it comes to resellers, and many critics have suggested that Etsy consciously overlooks resellers because the company makes the same 3.5 percent commission from each sale, regardless of whether the item is handmade or mass produced. In fact some Etsians have become so incensed that they've created watchdog blogs and forum groups on the site itself with the sole mission of documenting cases of questionable sourcing (K. Morris, 2013). Angry members have also voiced their displeasure by leaving scathing comments on profile pieces of Etsy CEO Chad Dickerson and corporate blog posts. In a recent *Forbes* piece, for example, one reader commented that "I'm surprised Etsy hasn't been investigated for fraud. People should be contacting their State Attorney General AND New York's State Attorney General w/ bullet points of all the BS they peddle" (Ludwig, 2013). Another echoed the same sentiment, writing that "Etsy has turned a blind eye at the resellers because they generate good profit. And, that leaves the buyer with a mass manufactured item sold as artisan handcrafted. Not a good business practice unless you really don't care about your customers." Many find Etsy's corporate response and implicit support of wholesalers especially hypocritical given the fact that it frames itself as a company invested in community and the nurturance of small business owners.

Rampant copyright infringement is just as problematic, if not quite as easy to identify and curtail. For instance, in 2011 Urban Outfitters was accused of copying the jewelry designs of Etsy seller Stevie Koerner. Tipped off by a customer, Koerner discovered that near replicas of her \$55 "I Heart New York" pendants—metal cutouts of

US states, with a small heart removed—were being sold by the national retailer for \$19.00 as “I Heart Destination Necklaces” (Linkins, 2011). A social media firestorm ensued, and Urban Outfitters vigorously denied the claim (Urban Outfitters, 2011). The situation soon became even more fraught as bloggers at Regretsy and elsewhere soon pointed out that there were dozens of iterations of the design on Etsy that predated Koerner’s creation, asking: “are all of these independent designers on Etsy stealing from each other? Or this is such a simple and generic idea that many people can come up with it at once?” (Gray, 2011)

Undoubtedly disentangling a design’s chronology is nearly impossible given the fact that so much of DIY is trend-driven (see chapter 2, pg. 90), and yet this continues to be a topic of much debate in Etsy’s forums, where sellers regularly complain of other storefront owners plagiarizing their intellectual property (FunnyPeopleCo, 2012; greenyogini, 2012; Luo, 2012; Visser, 2012). Etsy has published a detailed FAQ about the topic, and while the company encourages sellers to report issues of infringement, it also reminds sellers that:

Ideas are generally free to copy. And the line between an idea (unprotectable via copyright) and expression (protectable via copyright) may be difficult to draw. Artists may be inspired by other artists, previous art, and the world around them. For example, Cezanne is thought to have inspired Picasso’s cubism period and Boucher, Fragonard and Watteau inspired Renoir (Etsy, 2013l).

As Etsy’s reference to some of the world’s most famous fine artists suggests, tensions around copyright have long characterized most trend-driven artistic enterprises, from painting to music, with innumerable instances of copyright infringement and questionable sampling, to fashion, which has recently been plagued by allegations that mass retailers are copying the work of high-end designers. Creative industries across the

board are furiously grappling with where to set the nearly imperceptible line between inspiration and plagiarization. But this problem has taken on a new valence in DIY, where the item in question is, by definition, entwined with the personal identity of its maker and its worth derived solely from its status as a handmade, one-of-kind item. After all, as Kalin told the *New York Times*, about the purpose of his site: “You will find things on Etsy that you won’t find anywhere else, things that are entirely unique” (Wortham, 2010). When near replicas circulate on an already saturated marketplace, sellers are under even more pressure to distinguish their storefronts by virtue of their personal brands, and consciously or not, disparage the offerings of their competitors by comparison

Moreover I suggest that not only are Etsians concerned about resellers poaching their business, but they are also, in turn, concerned about their own storefronts being perceived as ersatz. And this concern only further cements their investment in marketing themselves and their work as authentic. This strategy of authenticity-by-offense was perhaps most apparent in Put Up Your Dukes, Keight Dukes’ blog. Dukes’ site traffic exploded after she posted a tutorial for a braid-scarf inspired by the work of a German designer she found via Pinterest (Dukes, 2011). Dukes not only provided a detailed how-to for readers looking to make their own version but also started offering them for sale on her Etsy store. Though she garnered a great deal of support from the blogosphere, with other bloggers reposting the tutorial and many commenters expressing their appreciation, she also elicited a fair amount of criticism from those accusing her of copying the German maker’s intellectual property. Readers seemed especially incensed by the fact that the German original was modestly priced at 32 €, suggesting that had it been an

expensive offering by a recognized designer, Dukes replication would have been less problematic.

Once again, this was a situation in which the exact lineage of design is murky. In her first braided-scarf tutorial, Dukes tells her readers that she first came across the design via another DIY blogger's Pinterest board, and this blogger had already published a braided scarf tutorial of her own. But regardless of questions of attribution, this is obviously a topic about which Dukes still feels quite uncomfortable. In our interview, she expressed clear relief when she realized the focus of my questions was about her general DIY practice and Etsy storefront, rather than her "controversial one hit wonder." And yet it's interesting to note that Dukes take great pains throughout her blog to communicate her likeability, her gentle self-deprecating humor, and her deep religious values. These attributes were part of her blog well before she published her divisive tutorial, yet they are be strategically invoked in Dukes' response to critical comments posted by an "anonymous internet troll." On August 12, 2012, Dukes wrote that:

if someone can make one of my designs for cheaper, i would say GO FOR IT!100%! thats the point, silly head. i use cheaper materials and possibly have streamlined the process so that i can make these more efficiently and therefore cheaper than the original seller. perhaps they just pay themselves a higher wage than poor humble me. maybe the original seller is marketing to a more wealthy clientele who appreciates really expensive fabric. not me. i think everyone should be able to rock this look and i figured out a way to make that happen and to make money on it (one way being by people clicking and visiting here, so THANK YOU!)

By referring to herself as "humble," her detractor as a "silly head," and implying that her buyers are both frugal and fashion-forward, Dukes skillfully deflects questions regarding her integrity or motivation while employing a vernacular that connotes intimacy with her readership.

Dukes' subtle parry is characteristic of sellers' responses to what Hracs, Jackob and Hauge (2013) have dubbed the "dilemma of democratization." They argue that the contemporary digital marketplace is a double-edged sword for independent producers. One on hand, as new technologies—from digital cameras to software for developing websites and editing photographs—have become "democratized" (Anderson, 2011), that is, readily available and increasingly inexpensive, the barrier for entering the marketplace becomes ever more porous. But at the same time, as Postrel (2009) has proposed, "competition has pushed quality so high and prices so low that many manufacturers can no longer distinguish themselves with price and performance . . . in a crowded marketplace, aesthetics is often the only way to make a product stand out" (p. 2). This is the case for mass retailers and independent producers alike, but the aim for exceptionality is arguably far more difficult for latter. For how does one "stand out" amongst a sea of similarly gendered, aged, classed, and raced crafters who not only share the same goal of distinguishing themselves but are selling goods valued precisely because of their originality? Thus, somewhat ironically, the very factors that contributed to Etsy's success—the community and singularity of its offerings—have contributed to the considerable challenges its sellers face.

Moreover the idiom of sociability that cloaks the Etsy commercial transaction makes it very difficult for sellers to publically complain, not only because doing so would shatter the fantasy they're peddling but also because Etsy corporate ostensibly prohibits this kind of criticism. There have been numerous allegations that Etsy penalizes sellers who critique the company, often going so far as to suspend or completely deactivate storefronts (see, for instance, the comments on Malik, 2013). In fact the active blog

“Etsy Bitch” was founded with the express purpose of providing wronged Etsians with a forum on which to air their grievances. The founding self-proclaimed “bitches” go so far as to encourage aggrieved Etsy sellers to use the blog’s badge of honor—the “Mute Salute” on their respective homages (see figure 4.6).



*Figure 4.6.* Etsy Bitch’s badge of honor, the “Mute Salute.” The blog tells readers, “If you are one of the silenced - say it loud, say it proud! Use this humble badge of honor on your blog, or Etsy Avatar. (If you ever got unmuted that is.)” (Etsy Bitch, 2014).

While sellers might feel unable advocating on their own behalf or critiquing some of Etsy’s more problematic practices, their commercial success nonetheless depends on the singularization of their craft. Thus Etsians need to find socially acceptable means to differentiate themselves from the competition, and often times they do so by referencing their own identities. If signaling membership of a particular group is as much “about becoming an insider, about becoming enculturated in the norms and distinctions of the group as it is about acquiring particular sets of skills or core competencies” (Crewe et al., 2003, p. 66), then Etsians and crafters use their own professional practices to distinguish



themselves from the glut of competitors. The implicit hierarchy these distinctions create in turn reveals certain fundamental values that circumscribe the DIY enterprise.

### **Art vs. Craft vs. Mommy Craft**

As Olesen (2001) points out, in “classical” professionalization, individual subjectivity “is entirely integrated in a professional identity, based on unquestioned expertise and often connected with a great but well-defined power” (p. 290). Yet in the slippery and inchoate world of professional and semi-professional DIY there is not a solid foundation of socially legitimate knowledge or widely recognized professional associations upon which to draw.<sup>10</sup> As a result those who make craft for income often grapple with how to define themselves. Many crafters humbly disassociate themselves from what they see as idealized creative archetypes, but they also eschew comparison to competitors with lower cultural and educational capital. In so doing they reveal widening rifts in a culture that, through the likes of Etsy and popular media outlets, otherwise depicts itself as a happy and collegial community.

Many professional DIYers are reluctant to call themselves artists, perceiving a disparity between the term’s high cultural connotations and the indie venues in which they operate. As Kate Wilson explained:

. . . most people refer to me as an artist, but I have a really strong reaction to that and it's mostly because of some weird cultural conditioning. I have an idea of an artist as someone who makes paintings that hang in the gallery and I absolutely

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<sup>10</sup> There are entities like the Craft Council of America, established in the 1940s (Fariello, 2011), but as Denis Stevens (2011) persuasively argues, this association and other traditional craft associations cater to and are composed of baby boomer practitioners, who differ philosophically, strategically, and aesthetically from their Gen X and Y counterparts.

know that . . . the concept [of an] artist is much broader than that, but for whatever reason that's how I definitionally [sic] understand it.

Liz Stiglets shared a similar point of view, telling me “I guess for some reason when I think of an artist, I think of fine art or painting or drawing or something like that.” For Stiglets the unassuming materials with which she works—burlap, embroidery floss, printer’s ink—disqualify her from the rarefied world of conventional fine art.

Relatedly, many of the sellers associate the term “artist” with a kind of engagement far more rigorous than their own creative practices. When asked if she uses the label to describe herself, Morris demurred on the grounds that such a categorization seems “way more intense” than what she does. “I don’t say that I am a crafter or an artist. Or that I’m a designer or even a jewelry designer. When I think of a jeweler, I think of really nice wedding rings. So when people ask me what I do, I just say I make jewelry.” Jessica Franzen expressed similar qualms, telling me that she always feels self-conscious about the designation: “I feel like clothing designers call themselves a ‘designer’ and I just always felt like I don’t make the beads that I’m using or the supplies so I’ve always felt a little bit weird calling myself a ‘designer.’”

This widespread perception belies a kind of insecurity about the cultural status of interviewees’ professional practice, and interestingly, this disinclination was especially notable among practitioners who had in fact attended art school. Though these sellers have the training and credentials that would logically entitle them to the identifier, their former intimacy with fine art actually deters them from its use. This reluctance is likely borne out of a longstanding rift in the visual arts, in which craft is often seen as fine art’s decorative—and thus, vacuous—counterpart. Greenhalgh (1997) traces this division

back to the consolidation of a hierarchical classification system within the European visual arts, which, depending on the scholar one consults, occurred somewhere between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This divide only continued to widen throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Modernists embraced the elite in favor of the commonplace. Of course not only is the polarization of art and craft a gross generalization, but it is also a process that has reversed in recent decades, as postmodern artists have self-consciously abjured hierarchies and embraced vernacular materials. Yet the perception of craft as art's lesser complement endures and clearly continues to hold sway on many DIYers' self-perception, underscoring their own continued investment in cultural and educational capital.

But if many Etsy sellers are reluctant to call themselves artists, they are oftentimes equally hesitant to employ the label "crafter." For one, many shied away from the designation "crafter" for the same reason that they avoided the term "artist," which is ironic given the fraught history between the two: DIY artisans see "real" craft as something far more demanding than their own work. But if art is deemed too rigorous on account of the time and attention to detail it requires, craft is considered out of bounds because of its status as a holistic lifestyle. Laura Franek described the "extreme" crafters that she so admired and against which she measured her own practice: "You see people in the middle of Texas, where there is nothing else around and they're living on a farm and they have their own sheep and they're shearing their own sheep and they're making their own clothes. And it's like, who are these people?" Kristin St. Clair expressed a similar notion when she reminisced about the Hermès master crafters featured on the *Martha Stewart Show* during her tenure in the program's crafts department. Despite the

fact that the bags they create are “crazy expensive,” she deeply respects the leather makers’ skill, telling me, “*That’s* when you appreciate craft.” Ryan-Ashley Anderson also talked about “true craftspeople,” explaining that while she doesn’t necessarily see herself in this category, that “basket weavers, rug hookers, and people who weave fabrics and spin their own yarn--they are the real craftspeople.”

In characterizing what they see as the exemplar of craft this way, interviewees are also tapping into a long historical lineage—what Glenn Adamson (2007) calls the “pastoral” perspective of craft traditions. As aforementioned (see pg. 39) from the writings of Arts and Crafts luminaries like John Ruskin and William Morris through the Studio Craft movement that followed them, craft has been steeped in a romanticism that ties the practice to an idyllic existence far from the deleterious sway of technology. This association also continues to influence DIYers understanding of their own profession.

Yet while the sellers with whom I spoke were often hesitant to associate with the identity of “artist” or “real” crafter, they were also quick to distinguish themselves from “mommy crafters”—the untrained, amateur sellers who have neither their considerable cultural nor educational capital. Topolski communicated the tension aptly when she described Etsy’s Quit Your Day Job series, telling me that the posts were grating “because [they’re] pretty invariably [about] someone who is a stay-at-home mom or maybe she’s a working mom and she quit and she does this ‘full-time’ but somewhere in the article there’s a little sentence about how her husband’s a lawyer . . . there’s an insincerity there.” These “mommy crafters” have the economic capital to underwrite their entrepreneurial ventures, and as such don’t face many of the same challenges that self-supported Etsy sellers do.

Yet I maintain that my subjects' derision is not merely a result of unequal access to financial resources. As I suggested in Chapter 3, mommy bloggers use craft in service of their families, whereas professional crafters use references to family in much the same way they deploy other references to *plaisir*—to suggest a lifestyle centered on pleasure. Here mommy crafters' priorities are perceived as less artistically legitimate: for them, their labor is foremost about child-rearing and other non-material practices. The implication, then, is that for makers, by contrast, the labor is in artistic production. Consequently mommy bloggers become the symbolic “other” against which crafters' underscore their serious, sustained commitment, accumulated cultural capital, and hence the worthiness of their craft; in this way crafters to separate themselves out from the welter of competitors.

This division reveals deep rifts in the craft community and is subtly, but regularly, evoked. Though she doesn't expressly use the term “mommy,” Erica Bradbury nonetheless references differences in cultural capital when she described her recent jewelry as “more expensive and more fashion-y and less crafty.” She went on to explain that “some people just make stuff, you know, people who are retired and make weird things to make their life easier. They just rig something up and are like, ‘yeah. I'm a maker. I made this thing.’” Topolski was even more explicit in her view of craft world divisions. When asked if she defines herself in terms of DIY, she responded that:

I'm sure most people would put me in that category but I don't actually really put myself in it . . . [craft] makes me think of housewives who feel like they should be doing something. To me it's a little bit different because this isn't something I got sucked up in. I mean, this is what I went to school to do, which is to make work and be creative and be paid for it . . . it's not a particularly novel or brand-new idea--I went to art school. I mean, I'm not following craft and I don't think of myself as a craftster particularly. I don't really like being lumped in with that. I

prefer to be an up-and-coming designer, you know? As opposed to being lumped in with the craft world. I go to gallery openings in Chelsea; I'm not going to the knitting circle.

Jessica Marquez likewise alluded to craft's association with low cultural capital when she admitted that if she were to tell her friends from her MFA program that she sells embroidery online, "there's kind of a little embarrassment with that . . . you know that whole art versus craft thing."

St. Clair also sees her fine arts training as distinguishing factor, differentiating her work from that of the typical crafts person. She recalled her first encounter with a Martha Stewart representative, who had recruited St. Clair at a job fair for art school graduates:

So the woman saw my portfolio and she was like, "oh, we think you would do really well in the craft department," and even hearing the word "craft," I was like, I'm an artist you know. The word "craft" sounds so cheesy and you know, not well-made. I always hated the word. I always hated crafts. Because it's usually people who don't know how to make things, trying to make things and they don't look good and it's a different aesthetic.

St. Clair went on to work with Stewart for many years and, contrary to her initial aversion, developed a deep appreciation for the craft doyenne's artistry and discrimination. And yet St. Clair still sees a large part of the craft world as "other." She compared the Hermès crafters for whom she had so much respect to:

a mom making stuff for her kid's nursery or, you know, Halloween costumes . . . or kitchen tables [made] out of milk crates. . . I'm just like, oh God, it's all kind of bad. I mean, I guess it's good for some people. I mean, I would have liked that when I was 13.

Again motherhood is implicitly associated with poor taste and with a kind of amateurish frivolity. Thus running throughout St. Clair's remarks as well as those of many other interviewees is the notion that, contrary to Etsy's depiction of an egalitarian

cooperative—what Topolski calls the “happy little community filled with [people] wanting to put doilies on bikes in the street”—there are deep divides in the level of skill and aesthetic refinement sellers perceive themselves and others to possess.

Interestingly, the Etsy sellers I spoke to endeavor to set themselves apart from lower cultural capital competitors not only to highlight why their work is more worthy of purchase, but also, relatedly, to justify its price. Amber Kane, for instance, welcomes the chance to explain her production process to prospective clients because:

They are normally kind of like, “Whoa! You made all of this?” . . . But their whole attitude changes when they realize I made everything from start to finish and it’s all hand done and it’s all my own designs, as opposed to when they think a bunch of different people made it and they think I bought the fabric somewhere and added a button to it.

Gretchen Diehl, who sells the majority of her wares at local craft shows, likewise stressed the importance of educating patrons about how her status as a professional affects her pricing structure:

Everyone’s perception of what handmade things are worth is just completely different. Because some people will think that because [the objects for sale] are craft, then they’re probably somebody’s hobby and that they should be cheap. And because they’re being sold outside at a fair and not in a brand-name store, they should be really affordable.

For Diehl, Kane, and many other professional crafters with whom I spoke, distinguishing themselves and the seriousness with which they approach their craft production is critical if they are to attract patrons, given the sea of similarly-designed and often far less expensive alternatives. And because DIY is fundamentally incompatible with commercialism—craftsmanship is distinguished by its quality and singularization, and as such is highly inefficient—rationalizing its considerable cost is all the more important.

But while these oft contentious intracommunal divides are a direct result of the economic pressures on professional crafters, for-profit DIYers have more in common than not. Regardless of variances in economic, cultural and social capital, all crafters face the myriad problems that come with creative self-employment. A thorough examination of these difficulties casts the lifestyle of professional craft in a much more ambiguous light.

### **A Labor of Love or Labor Pains?**

As part of its strategic commitment to authenticity, Etsy does acknowledge some of the hardships that come with professional craft, particularly in its “Quit Your Day Job” and “Featured Shop” series. As aforementioned, the most salient refrain throughout these posts is the love and gratitude sellers feel for their Etsy-fueled life of creative joy (see also Chapter 2). Tempering these enthusiastic portrayals, however, is the fact that storefront owners are also asked to reflect on the challenges that come with being self-employed. Just as DIY bloggers tactically convey genuineness through fallibility, Etsy likewise frames itself as a company “keeping it real” by acknowledging the pitfalls as well as the pleasures of creative entrepreneurship. Yet not only are the obstacles disclosed by the featured sellers variants of the same theme—working too much—but this hindrance is almost always cast as the necessary price one pays for the ultimate good: a livelihood that is so much fun you can’t help but do it all the time. Consider, for instance, Lena Hanzel’s description of her hectic schedule:

Running my own creative business has taught me that I’m not a 9-5 kind of person. I enjoy the freedom and flexibility that self-employment offers. I love working two jobs and switching back and forth between the professional



challenges they present. Despite the stress that occurs due to irregular earnings, I truly love my work, each and every day (Ielenaberl, 2013).

Hanzel concedes that the life of an Etsy seller is far from stable, but recasts that volatility as a kind of liberty. Corrina Buchholz's reflection on her first year as a full-time Etsy seller reveals a similar logic:

Now I finally understand why [loving what you do] matters. I eat, sleep, dream, play and travel piddix [the name of her Etsy storefront]. I spend my "free" time in bookstores and antique stores looking for items for my work. We even schedule vacation around what archives are nearby. If I didn't absolutely love scanning, researching, graphic design and all the other aspects of running piddix there's no way I could stay motivated (daniellexo, 2010).

Thus Buchholz too attests to the fact that the demands of her business have encroached upon her personal time, but she stresses that because she "absolutely loves" her work, these tasks are reframed as a welcome intrusion. The challenges of neoliberal creative work are thus cast as the inevitable byproducts of living a life dedicated to pleasurable work.

Many of the sellers with whom I spoke were also quite emphatic in the pleasure they derived from professional craft. For example, St. Clair told me of her days freelancing in Martha Stewart's craft department, "I got paid to glitter stuff and it was amazing," and Geri Hirsch enthused of her work on LEAf, "I love every moment of it." For others, it was a comparison between their current creative employment and previous career paths that underscored the joy they took in their work. Jordan Perme told me of her recent move to fulltime craft, "last month I was working on a real job, like 9-to-5, just as a temporary freelance in-house thing, and I realized it's not really for me. That kind of put a whole new view on what I'm doing. It was like oh, I'm really glad I'm working for myself." Lauren Kemp recounted her move from a stable administrative position to

being a self-employed clothing designer, “It took me 2 years to finally say you know what? I can't. I know this sounds like some sort of hippie, New Age thing, but what's the point of doing something if it makes you miserable? It actually inspired me. I have to do my own thing at all costs.”

But while the pleasure that the crafters I interviewed derive from their work seems both genuine and deep, it also co-exists with challenges and frustrations that generally go unacknowledged in both Etsy corporate communication and on these women's own blogs. Their depictions of day-to-day experience are often far less idealized and are often stripped of the patina of romance that infuse the QYDJ entries. As jeweler Denise Weiss told me of her work, “I call it labor of love and my husband calls it labor pains.” It is in this gap between the officially sanctioned marketing and their own candid responses to my questions that a richer, more nuanced, and ultimately, more challenging account of entrepreneurship emerges

Many described themselves as harried and overworked, struggling to carve out time for their personal lives. Perme told me that she works from the moment she wakes up until her head hits the pillow and that her freelance practice becomes especially difficult when she's under deadline. As she explained, “it's not like I go to work from 9 to 5 and then I come home and relax and do whatever. I work on that [project] every day until finish; I might not have a social life for an entire month because I'm working.” Stiglets, who had recently transitioned from her role as a full-time nurse to work from home with her husband on their thriving Etsy storefront, admitted that the newfound flexibility has been helpful and allowed for greater quality time with her children. But despite this freedom, “I'm definitely working harder now than I was before as a nurse.

[Before] was kind of easy to just go in and do my thing and then come home. Now it's nonstop. I can never really turn off my work mode."

For these stay-at-home artisans, boundaries between work and non-work space become especially important when it comes to maintaining a reasonable schedule, and yet they are often very difficult to preserve. Karie Reinertson was able to negotiate with her landlord to turn an empty apartment in her building into a workshop, making her commute just a few steps. For her, though, this spatial division between home and work is critical; otherwise, she stressed, "I'd work 24 hours a day." Similarly, Bradbury recently teamed up with another designer to open a Williamsburg boutique/workshop called A Thousand Picnics and now has a dedicated external studio as a result. Yet she continues to find herself bringing her work home. When we spoke, her kitchen was doubling as a candle-making workshop. As she recounted, "We literally just moved into the store and I told my boyfriend 'we finally have our apartment back.' And the next day I bring in all this wax and tell him it's a candle shop now." Marquez also finds her work bleeding into her personal space. Though she has cordoned off a separate room in her apartment in which to develop her embroidery projects, she nevertheless tends to work elsewhere. Her studio becomes so messy she feels like she "can't think in there."

Sustaining balance is also exceedingly difficult for individuals who hold full-time jobs in addition to their craft practices. Amber Kane, a high-school art teacher who works nights and weekends on the woven scarves she sells in her Etsy storefront, finds the craft show circuit and its requisite travel particularly demanding. We spoke after she had just returned from Philadelphia's Art Star Craft Bazaar, and she recounted, "Last week I taught 5 days, came home, packed my car for Philly, spent two days at the craft

show, got home at 10 o'clock Sunday night, turned around, and am back at school teaching this week. My car is still packed." For her, interacting with her customers and seeing them wear her creations is a "joyful process" but one that "gets kind of exhausting." Kristen Nunez who, in addition to managing her popular DIY blog as works two jobs and is completing a graduate degree in nutrition, also finds time management to be a challenge. She told me that during the periods in which her schedule becomes acutely demanding, she has to take pains to just "keep communicating with [my] readers saying that I'm still alive and around." Kemp concurred, explaining that for those crafters with full-time employment outside of the studio, "there's just no way you can devote enough time if you have a day job. I mean, you can try, but when you get home the last thing you want to do is make stuff. You're tired."

Ironically Etsy and the growing popularity of online shopping—the very phenomenon that sustains crafters' professional practice and thus makes the fantasy of this life of pleasure possible—contributes to their sense of urgency and thus undercuts the leisureliness that makes the lifestyle so appealing. As Reinertson told me:

It's tricky too because now that Etsy is so huge and buying handmade online is such a huge thing, somebody may just Google our Shelter Bag or somebody googles buying a handbag and maybe Etsy shows up and they may not be coming to Etsy because it's a handmade site. They may just be coming up Etsy because it's there and it has bags. So they have different expectations as to when these things may arrive because maybe there are people who always buy from Amazon and Amazon always shipped the same day so why can't your bag ship the same day? So maybe they aren't totally on the same page in terms of understanding that someone makes it all, every single piece of it is handmade. So that's definitely a push. People expect a lot really fast.

Reinertson confessed that, as a result, she's "always crunched" and "really good at overextending myself and then freaking out and working too hard."

If the virtual nature of Etsy and most professional DIY has accelerated the pace of production for my subjects, it also keeps many of them profoundly isolated. Some of the crafters took great pains to stress that their solitude was a small price to pay when it came to autonomy and creative freedom their positions offered. Reinerston explained that her social life dwindled at first because “I replaced hanging out with my friends for working because it was just so exhilarating to be able to do it all the time and start to even get paid for it.” Julie Dye, who was equally positive in her portrayal of her life as a professional craftsperson specializing in paper, nonetheless confessed that she too spends most of her time working, and as a result, her “social life is not as vibrant as it was at one point.”

Other artisans, however, were less tempered in their depictions of the loneliness inherent to their jobs. Bill Martin, a Philadelphia-based silversmith, admitted that he’s “not getting out. It’s just work, work, work and you start to get pretty isolated.” Zoe Einbinder echoed him almost verbatim, telling me that “I’m a workaholic. Right now my life is work, work, work.” Ryan-Ashley also expressed a similar sentiment when she explained that keeping up with her knitwear business meant “suddenly [stopping] doing school work and not sleeping enough. And [not] thinking about the people I care about.” For her, the costs of maintaining an active Etsy storefront were primarily interpersonal. As she told me, “I can do it, I can do it all, but it means sacrificing any possible social event I want to be a part of.”

For those sellers who turn to craft after leaving a traditional 9-to5 position and the office culture that comes with it, the sense of isolation can be particularly acute. When asked what was the most difficult about the transition from industrial engineering to craft entrepreneurship, Alicia DiRago told me it was the absence of water cooler gossip.

Though she didn't socialize outside of the office with her former colleagues, she did miss casually interacting with them. She admitted that she wished she “was the kind of person that could go work at a coffee shop that has this cast of characters—regulars in my life” but that she doesn't drink coffee and prefers to work in her pajama pants. Though she longs for the *Friends* fantasy of regular friendships and a work life outside of her home, the demands of her growing business preclude these kinds of interactions.

Crafters' loneliness tends to peak seasonally, as they scramble to take advantage of the uptick in holiday work. Often the detachment is only intensified by contrast with the season's merriment and flurry of social engagements. A self-proclaimed extravert, Bradbury found the most recent holiday rush especially taxing:

I just became obsessed and always working. Literally, I feel like I don't have friends anymore. I feel like I gave up my social life. It's really sad. Like even my family, I felt like I couldn't even go away for Christmas because I felt like I needed to just recover from that season. I think I've had my best year in sales . . . [but] I just got really burned out. Like a little bit too crazy. I stopped buying clothes, like I felt like I just got a little sloppy and also a little bit of a hermit, sitting here making stuff. I'm trying to change that now.

This recurring image of the pajama-clad hermit stands in sharp contrast to the image of the contented and healthy seller that Etsy often paints, and it is especially stark when compared to the seasonal merriment and conviviality fostered in Etsy's “Home for the Holidays” events.

Another reality seldom mentioned in Etsy-sanctioned press is the fact that much of these artisans' work time is devoted to tasks that could not be further removed from the joy of creative spontaneity; as is the case for any entrepreneur, Etsians and professional craftspeople spent significant portions of their day on rote administration. DiRago described this part of her professional responsibilities as the “hard-worky parts

like doing the accounting and figuring out your taxes and filling forms.” She acknowledged that this kind of clerical work is part and parcel of most jobs, but that it was critical to “make sure you’re also getting to do the things that are the reason you started.”

This balance between finding time for the administrative tasks that keep their businesses running and the kind of creative exploration that is the ultimate point of their work can be difficult for crafters to achieve. Marquez found the steep learning curve that came with being her own boss especially taxing. She told me:

It’s still a lot of trial and error and there’s a lot of figuring out on the spot, so that’s what I mean by being overwhelmed. It’s also only me. I have to be the one making everything and the accountant and, you know, the trash man and the marketer . . . I was unaware how much work it would be outside of making.

Orris painted a similar picture when she described the months she spent as a full-time Etsy seller:

Yeah, I think it was work when I didn’t have a full-time job. I would wake up and do my normal morning stuff and then spend 5 or 6 hours either making things or putting stuff up on Etsy. [And] photography took a huge amount of time. Oh my gosh. I would spend an entire morning photographing 5 things. And then you have to edit the photographs and upload them and then fit all the size requirements. I spent more time on photography than making because it’s so essential on Etsy to have a beautiful picture. And so at that point, I think it was more of a job.

Orris points out the ironies of successful Etsy salesmanship. Though the size and renown of the website is undoubtedly what makes it possible for so many Etsians to derive all or part of their income from craftwork, these same characteristics are also what ultimately detract from studio time and thus creative production. Etsy sellers like Orris are obligated spend a significant part of their days on photography, image uploading and tagging, and search engine optimization if they hope to distinguish their work from that

of their competitors. If these sellers have any hope of attracting prospective buyers, they have no choice but to devote significant time to perfecting their descriptive keywords and photographic skills, processes that are a far cry from the creative work of the studio or crafter's table.

In fact many Etsy sellers find their storefront's administrative demands so wearisome that they have consciously restructured their business model so as to reduce them. Bill Martin, who estimates that he spends 50% of his time on clerical tasks on a good day, has deliberately sought out made-to-order work because it requires far less correspondence with his customers. He simply contacts the client with his turnaround time and then ships the finished jewelry when complete. Similarly, at the time of our interview, Teresa Waterman was actively investigating partnerships with companies like Society 6, which will print, manufacture, and mail items on her behalf. She admitted that it "at this point it gets hard to follow up on all of the emails and print all of the orders and pack all of the orders and mail all of the orders and make sure everyone knows they're coming." And yet, as a self-confessed "OCD psycho about everything being perfect," she worries about quality control and the lack of control that comes with outsourcing production.

Though long hours, isolation, and administrative burdens are challenges that most Etsians confront, these problems are especially acute for full-time craftspeople and those who sell wholesale, and as many of my informants stressed, wholesale is the key for career longevity and a secure livelihood. For some sellers, these challenges are so insurmountable that scaling to wholesale is simply not possible. Orris had originally hoped to court brick-and-mortar wholesale accounts at national craft shows, but realized



that she “could not say I’m going to make 100 of these pillows for you because every pillow is different and I have to find fabrics all around town and on the internet. So to just go to a show and say, yes, I can make this uniform product for you is just not possible for me.” Einbinder was in the midst of preparing for her first wholesale show when we spoke, and while excited about the new business possibility, she also had doubts about her ability to keep up with the demand. “Right now I’m the one who makes every single piece,” she said. “And I anticipate I might not be able to keep doing that if things grow.” Moreover for many sellers who focus on custom orders the fact that each of their pieces is tailored for a particular client precludes their participation in national shows.

For those sellers who are able to make the leap to wholesaling their craft, many soon find that handmade work is inherently incompatible with large-scale production. Regardless of how efficient the assembly process, there is a limit to how much work one can do manually, particularly when it comes to individually-run operations. Marquez described this frustration when asked about her wholesale accounts:

There’s a difference between making one and 200 at a time. It’s a lot of physical labor . . . for example I have an embroidery kit which is mainly what I sell wholesale. So to package a hoop, thread, needle, and a little card and the fabric—I put 2 pieces of fabric in there—and an instruction card, like it seems so simple, but somehow it takes me a week to do 100, 150. So it's just labor. And honestly I don't pursue it as hard as I probably could just because part of it is also, like, “oh damn, I got an order.”

Jessica Franzen had a similar experience when she agreed to produce a wholesale jewelry order for a buyer in California. It was the biggest order she had ever received, but it took her nearly two months to fill. During that time, she felt as if she couldn’t “work on anything else because I’ve got to finish this order . . . I couldn’t stock the store, I couldn’t do anything. I just had to finish this one huge order. . . You know, you’re getting all of

this money but it's also like, Good Lord, it's so stressful." Both of these women's experiences are fairly typical for those crafters who decide to sell to retailers, as the move requires a sizeable cache of inventory. One article for aspiring wholesalers recommends that would-be vendors choose 20-50 products to supply in bulk, and then make 4-6 units of each piece (J. Smith, 2009). Depending on the nature of the crafts these women are producing, the time needed to amass that kind of stock can be staggering and significantly detract from the hours spent on the demands of day-to-day business.

Not only are the more successful Etsy sellers required to produce in bulk, but they often have to recreate replicas or variants of the same few items for which they become known. And, ironically, this mandate runs counter to the creative spontaneity and exploration that attracted most professional crafters to their businesses in the first place. Stiglets, who was sure to emphasize that she is very grateful to have a perennial seller in the form of her family tree pillows, nonetheless confessed that "there have definitely been times where we've had a big rush of orders for pillows and I have other ideas that I'm just dying to work on and I felt really frustrated . . . [but] you know, people have paid for these orders and I've got to get them done and get them ready."

In fact for many full-time sellers, there has emerged a clear tension around the desire to make craft they find beautiful and the need to produce items they know will sell. Martin was fairly candid about this conflict:

I go back and forth between what I want to do and what I should be doing and it's a constant battle. What I want to is just make what I want to make and put it in my shop and sell it and make a ton of money and be happy. But that's not totally going to happen. . . . Because I need to make money. I'm doing this full-time and it's not a joke and it's scary.

Likewise Bradbury told me of her first few months crafting full-time, when she used to make whatever items pleased her. However once she started attending craft fairs, she soon realized that following her creative whims not did not make for a successful business strategy; instead she thought her collection “look[ed] like I’m having a garage sale; it look[ed] like weird jewelry.” Topolski also found she had to move away from the ceramic pieces she found most gratifying to produce. For her working with porcelain was more of “an artisanal craftsman-type thing rather than just being a jewelry designer” because “everybody and their mom is a jewelry designer.” But though she loves her ceramic work, it is incredibly expensive to produce, and at a certain point, she “had to look at the cost effectiveness and whether or not they were going to be able to help my business. And they aren't.” But though Topolski has scaled back her ceramic production considerably, at the time of this writing, she still sells a ceramic vase and fragrance burner in her Etsy store, J. Topolski. As she told me rather wistfully, “You always have the one [item] that everything else pays for.”

These creative limitations, combined with the relentless demands of bulk production and the concomitant social isolation, have for some Etsy sellers cast their businesses in a new, less-rosy glow. Kristin Turner, of DIY blog Glitter ‘N Glue, described her rocky transition to full-time blogging:

It started out being fun and just something I did, and now there are all these deadlines and it becomes a pain. I definitely struggled a lot with that last year. Just trying, it felt as if at some points, this is work and sometimes I would do a project and do it just because I knew I had to have something in, and it wasn't even that fun anymore. You know, I wasn't excited to do it, which is not how I started off. So it became kind of weird but I think now I am doing better about finding a way to balance that.

Turner's strategy for keeping her work pleasurable is not to publish every DIY project she makes but rather to retain some projects for her personal enjoyment. Most full-time DIY crafters, however, don't have the luxury of that choice as they rely on the sale of their work for income. Ryan-Ashley Anderson told me that she would love to be able to craft for fun with friends but that she simply didn't have the time for non-productive creative exploration. "If I'm going to take the time to craft, it has to be intentional," she said. "It can't just be sitting around and getting drunk and collaging, because I'm working on building my business as well as going to work, paying the bills, and so I was finishing my schoolwork." Similarly Orris, who had recently transitioned from full-time Etsy seller back to a career in journalism, described her current forays into craft as "less as work and more . . . I'm going to work on that even, though I won't make any money on it, it will be a nice thing to do and fun." She contrasted this attitude with the way she approached her craft when it was her sole source of income: "I'm going to make this product in the next 2 hours and then I'm going to photograph it for another 45 minutes and then put it on Etsy which is going to take another 20 minutes. It was less fun when it was a job."

Perhaps most telling of crafters' disenchantment is their surprisingly frequent use of factory work as a metaphor for their time in the studio. Explained jeweler Kate Wilson, "I was just becoming disenthralled with my designs. . . . I felt like I was just becoming a little factory." Though Wilson's hand-printed clothing line was successful enough that she could have pursued it full-time, she instead sought out a part-time position in an entirely disparate field to counter her dissatisfaction with uninspiring rote

production. Martin was even more explicit: “To me it’s just factory work. It’s just redoing the same thing over and over again.” Later in the interview he mused:

You're trying to be professional, and you're trying to be a real large ... You want to go big. . . So at what point does this become bullshit, basically? You can only be so big sitting in your house by yourself. You can only produce so much of the same thing before you are your own factory worker. If you want to keep doing it, it’s probably cheaper and better for your sanity to just have it made somewhere else and let them do it.

This metaphor is striking, as it underscores the serious limitations and concomitant frustrations that come with a business centered on individual manual labor. It also represents a complete inversion of the way that Sennett and Crawford, following Marx, conceive of craftwork (see Chapter2). Instead of as a means towards liberation and personal fulfillment, for Martin and Wilson, when undertaken full-time and produced in bulk, it becomes more akin to the alienated labor that that, for Marx, estranges workers from their fundamental human nature. And perhaps most importantly this approach to work radically destabilizes the gift/commodity balance that distinguishes the professional handmade.

### **Changing Meanings of the Handmade**

Even if Martin and Wilson only represent a disgruntled minority, their displeasure points to a certain irony at work for the most successful Etsians: the bigger their businesses grow, the farther away they move from personally experiencing *jouissance*. If sellers hope to generate significant income from their Etsy shops, they have to scale up their production. In so doing, they cannot help but abandon the innovation,

experimentation and joy that makes DIY personally fulfilling and commercially appealing in the first place.

Etsy itself has acknowledged this paradox. Until this October, company rules disqualified sellers who did not personally make what they sell from participating on the website. There were of course loopholes—most notably regarding the admissibility of collectives and the flurry of criticism that policy often generated—and the guidelines swelled from 4,000 to 14,000 words as the company has wrestled with ever changing circumstances (Dickerson, 2013). But for the most part storefront owners faced an impossible task: scale their production methods up to the point at which they could hope to be most successful without relying on the contributions of others. For many, this meant a further intensification of the challenges noted above: punishing schedules, assembly line production methods, and hours devoted to the ever-increasing administrative demands of a thriving home business. As a *New York Times* reporter noted in a story covering the most successful Etsy sellers' typical workdays, "You need to maintain the morale of the labor force, which can be particularly challenging when *you* are the labor force, and the workday runs from 'Good Morning America' to 'Late Night with Jimmy Fallon'" (Williams, 2009).

However Etsy recently changed its guidelines drastically: sellers are now permitted to hire employees, outsource shipping and fulfillment, and use manufacturers to produce their designs. In exchange, storefront owners who are interested in participating under these new rules must apply and get prior approval from Etsy, in an effort to encourage transparency and prohibit the participation of resellers or manufacturers of mass-produced goods. But while the company outlines ethical

guidelines for factory conditions and fair labor standards, it will not vet third-parties and manufacturers. Instead it expects that sellers demonstrate “authorship, responsibility, and transparency,” thereby putting the onus to ensure fair production practices on the storefront owners themselves (Dickerson, 2013; Etsy, 2013m).

The changes have sent shockwaves through the Etsy community, with many worried that manufacturing companies will now overtake the site, pushing out the one-man shops that had heretofore comprised the core mission of the company. Sellers with outside help will have a competitive advantage over those unable or unwilling to afford supplemental assistance. And of course there will likely be drastic inequalities when it comes to competitive pricing structures. Sellers making everything by hand could never match the prices of those who outsource production to large-scale manufacturers.

Notably these changes were ushered in under the aegis of CEO Chad Dickerson. A former Yahoo executive, Dickerson joined Etsy as its chief technology officer in 2008, replacing co-founder Rob Kalin (Malik, 2013). Kalin, who reportedly outlined his business plan for Etsy in masking tape on the floor of his Brooklyn walk-up, launched the website with the express goal of creating an alternative to Ebay, which he deemed soulless and impersonal, and instead focused on the intangibles of community and purpose as much as he did profits (Bruder, 2009; Chafkin, 2011; Neves, 2011). Often portrayed as eccentric (e.g., Ante, 2011 ; Chafkin, 2011) Kalin remained deeply committed to sustaining an alternative, handmade marketplace and vigorously defended Etsy’s utopian vision throughout his tenure at the helm. As he told *The New York Times* in a 2007 interview, “I see Etsy as an art project”; later he confessed to *Inc.* magazine, “I speak to people in the business world and the technology world, but I don’t admire them”

(Chafkin, 2011; Walker, 2007). However Kalin's ideology soon began to conflict with that of Etsy's investors, and in 2012 its board voted to replace Kalin with Dickerson, who quickly revamped the company's structure and priorities.

Clearly the decision was a good move in terms of the company's financial health: since then gross merchandise sales have roughly tripled, and the number of monthly unique visitors has soared from 35 million to 60 million (Foster, 2013/2014). However Dickerson's tenure has also brought about a radical reconceptualizing of the meaning of handmade. In the company's FAQ about the new guidelines, Etsy clearly stresses the symbolic over the material: "When shoppers buy handmade, they prize the story behind an item's creation, and for many sellers, those stories are what make their businesses unique" (Etsy, 2013c). This approach is in keeping with sellers' marketing strategies detailed in Chapter 3 and privileging of their own personal biographies, but it also negates the indexical properties of the handmade object that so powerfully link maker to product. In so doing, the new emphasis imperils the overtones of gift exchange that have distinguished Etsy from other online behemoths like Ebay and Amazon. Elsewhere Dickerson has suggested an even more drastic redefinition of purpose, suggesting that the future of Etsy rests not in the handmade but what he calls "person-to-person commerce." He envisions Etsy sellers training and mentoring skilled workers in erstwhile industrial centers like Detroit. Though perhaps no less idyllic than Kalin's dream of independent artisanship, people centered manufacturing is still just that—manufacturing (Foster, 2013/2014).

Protests about the new regulations have been tempered by their numerous vocal proponents, who suggest that rules are keeping with the long history of artisanship. In



one recent widely-circulated *New York Times* editorial, archaeology and linguistics professor Elizabeth Wayland Barber reminds readers that few items we consider handmade are truly made by hand (2013). Looms, hand spindles, spinning wheels: these are machines that have helped create objects we consider to be unambiguous examples of handicraft. Though these devices might seem outmoded and quaint enough to be unproblematic, Barber maintains that by that logic everything produced via obsolete technology would be considered handmade.

In fact all of this handwringing about Etsy's new rules brings to bear a larger question, one that considers the very meaning of craft. If a product was brought into being without the imprint of its maker, is it still handmade? The very name "handmade" would suggest not, but many of the outfits that Etsy now welcomes follow production processes that completely divide the design of an object from its construction. Similarly, if an item is produced via an assembly line—no matter how small, artisanal, and creative—is it still handicraft? And if craft's production process is not suffused with creative joy, how different is it from the offerings of the mass marketplace? Underlying all of these questions is fundamentally an issue of value. Which matters more—creation or intent? Crafter or craft? My research suggests that one cannot be separated from the other. This indivisibility not only challenges the applicability of Etsy's new guidelines; it also calls into question the very meaning of the professional handmade in the digital age.

## CHAPTER 5

**Conclusion: The Limits (and Limitations) of Professional Handicraft**

As interest in contemporary DIY culture has grown in recent years, so too has attention to its perceived disadvantages, particularly as they relate to women. In 2009 *Slate* contributor Sara Mosle penned an article entitled “Etsy.com Peddles a False Feminist Fantasy.” In it she calls Etsy a “female ghetto” and alleges that the site promulgates the impossible dream of having it all: a rich and rewarding family life; a fulfilling and well-paying career; and reasonable, flexible working hours, all while making hip handicrafts from home. However she goes on to argue that:

Like those flyers you sometimes see tacked up on lampposts, or late-night television ads, Etsy actively fosters the delusion that any woman with pluck and ingenuity can earn a viable living without leaving her home. Etsy has a business model that’s akin to the lottery’s. It preys on the hopes and dreams of working moms and other women, while delivering genuine financial success to only the very, very few.

Mosle points out the innate problems in the site’s economic logic: with very slim profit margins, sellers are forced to reduce their prices even further as the marketplace becomes saturated with competitors. And as I have suggested in the preceding chapter, for many Etsyans this business model quickly becomes untenable.

Mosle’s piece generated a firestorm of censure, from Etsy corporate as well as loyal storefront owners and customers. However it is a refrain that has been picked up elsewhere. In Emily Matchar’s recently published *Homeward Bound* (2013), the journalist chronicles the broader cultural turn to the domestic, from attachment parenting to urban chicken farming. But Matchar also directs much of her attention to the rise of professional handicraft. She posits that while leaving the traditional workplace is often

advantageous for individual crafters, this alternative working model means that they are then less inclined to advocate for systemic labor reforms. Thus the new domesticity, itself the result of the increasingly poor economy and widespread professional dissatisfaction, only exacerbates these trends for laborers without the capital to opt out in the first place. Luckman (2013) makes a similar point when she maintains that home-based work can lead to “presence bleed”—the same blurring of the personal and professional of which my informants spoke in Chapter 4—adding that “it is important to note that research suggests [pro-am home-based work] does little to shift traditional gender divisions within the household” (p. 265).

I agree in part with the critiques levied against Etsy. An emphasis on individual consumer choice, at least when practiced in isolation, can be inherently limiting and preclude critical widespread social activism. However these arguments lack careful analysis of the actual fantasy on offer: a lifestyle of personal and communal creative pleasure. As I have argued in the preceding chapters, in the act of making crafters experience both *plaisir* and *jouissance*. The former is ego-affirming and concretizes their personal identity, acting as a social salve in the flexible, endlessly changeable “runaway world” of late modernity. The latter, along with Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow,” offers practitioners an opportunity to spontaneously and unselfconsciously engage with the material world. However when the intimate creative experience is professionalized and commercialized, much of this pleasure is transmogrified. It becomes a marketing narrative meant to position the handcrafted object as an index and symbol of a particular lifestyle. To do so, Etsy sellers strategically cite *plaisir* and *jouissance* to augment their personal brands, via references to their life stories, their idiosyncratic proclivities, and

numerous allusions to happy domesticity and the beauty of the natural world. Yet they use the same indicators to signal their authenticity, their position outside of the mainstream marketplace, and the fact that their merchandise is the outcome of genuinely joyful creative production.

In this way there is a great deal of overlap between professional craft and a more widespread cultural embrace of “celebritization” (J. Evans & Hesmondhalgh, 2005). As numerous scholars (e.g., Driessens, 2013; Holmes & Redmond, 2012; T. Lewis; Rojek, 2001; Sternheimer, 2011; Turner, 2004) have observed, growing numbers of public figures use social media to frame themselves as more ordinary, and “ordinary” people use it to market themselves as somehow extraordinary. Celebritization, like craft, is built on the backs of producers, underscoring the centrality of self-commodification in the face of widespread economic uncertainty. Both processes are also characterized by the mounting salience of the “real”—what Graeme Turner (2009) productively deems the “demotic turn.” And both ultimately hinge on participants’ ability to maintain a near impossible balance between authenticity and strategic self-branding.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that crafters adopt many of the same tactics as “celetoids” and “microcelebrities.” Rojek (2001) coined the term “celetoid” to describe the fleeting media life cycle of individuals who have risen to fame with no apparent qualifications or goals (other than fame itself): “lottery winners, one-hit wonders, stalkers, whistle-blowers, sports’ arena streakers, have-a-go-heroes, mistresses of public figures, and the various other social types who command media attention one day and are forgotten the next” (2001, pp. 20-21). In some ways a natural extension of the celetoid, microcelebrity, as Senft defines it, is “the commitment to deploying and maintaining

one's online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same" (2013, p. 346). She maintains that within the last few years the custom has moved from the Internet's margins to the mainstream, where the famous and non-famous alike engage in a complex process of impression management to build communities of friends/fans. In fact, because of the ubiquity of these strategies, Marwick and boyd (2011) posit that rather than inborn attribute or elite position, celebrity is a *continuum* of practice in which all contemporary subjects engage, from the renowned to the "regular." In order to achieve the twin goals of likability and popularity, microcelebrities, like DIY pros, must come across as genuine all while scrupulously preserving an appealing front stage identity. To do so they deploy the very same strategies upon which professional crafters rely: affiliation, or "the public performance of connection between practitioners and fans using language, words, cultural symbols, and conventions" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 147), and performed intimacy via personal pictures and seemingly off-the-cuff remarks.

In keeping with mainstream coverage of user generated content, these self-promotional tactics are almost always cast in the language of empowerment and self-care. For instance, Catherine Kaputa describes self-branding as a means towards "self-actualization," writing that it is about "becoming who you were meant to be, which means that success includes who you truly are. The trick to effective self-branding . . . brings more of you into the equation" (2005, p. 2). Portrayed in this way, self-promotion—as a way to garner recognition on social media or on Etsy—is seemingly available to anyone with enough pluck and get-up-and-go to pursue it. Turner (2006), for instance, concludes from the dramatization of enormously popular auditions for contest-

based reality television (e.g., *American Idol*), “Clearly, the spectacle of the audition tells us, anyone has a chance in such a competition” (p. 158). Of course this perception is in the best interest of the institutions subsidizing these cultural forms because it dramatically increases the number of individuals each can attract. After all, reality television’s ability to sustain itself is predicated on the continuous fabrication of dispensable “D-level” celebrities (Collins, 2008); casting directors rely on a constant stream of willing participants in order to generate new content. YouTube, Twitter, and other social media platforms similarly derive their worth from the number of users they attract, and the same holds true for Etsy. Because the site only charges sellers 20 cents for each listing and 3.5 percent of each sale, the company requires a large volume of transactions (and thus sellers) in order to remain profitable.

But in peeling back the veneer of democracy, it becomes clear that the inclusivity typically used to describe communities of producers—whether they are comprised of crafters, social media users, or YouTube stars—is in large part a myth. As Rojek’s notion of “celetoid” intimates, the vast majority of reality shows contestants soon fade into obscurity (though the fact that a very small number remain in public view—even if only on newer iterations of the same reality television franchise—is enough to keep the pool of aspirants growing). The same holds for Etsy. Very few are employed full-time, earning viable income, and experiencing the full range of *jouissance*. As I posit in Chapter 4, professional crafters are caught between two realities: their operations cannot be too big or they run the risk of becoming a factory of one, giving up the spontaneity and creative freedom that makes the prospect of professional craft so appealing in the

first place. However if crafters' ventures stay too modest, they cannot hope to eke out a livable income.

The logical outcome of this claim, of course, is the fact that professional craft's full spectrum of creative pleasure is generally available only to those of a particular social class. Makers must have access to sufficient financial capital to avoid being held captive by the *jouissance*-effacing demands of the marketplace—that is, rote replication of trends and uninspiring piecework construction. But if makers are too obviously resourced, then they run the risk of inciting disdain or resentment. As my informants' comments about mommy bloggers indicate, women for whom craft is a part-time and discretionary activity are often deemed as less serious and therefore less worthy of artistic respect.

But even the privileged few who do succeed in maintaining some degree of acclaim, on Etsy or in reality-based entertainment, are forever in thrall of the institutions that made them. As Turner persuasively argues:

It is important to remember that celebrity still remains a systematically hierarchical and exclusive category, no matter how much it proliferates. No amount of public participation in game shows, reality TV or DIY celebrity websites will alter the fact that, overall, the media industries still remain in control of the symbolic economy, and that they still attempt to operate this economy in the service of their own interests. (2006, p. 157)

Reality television stars typically sell their life rights, sign stringent confidentiality agreements, and are prohibited from appearing in public or accepting paid work without express network approval (Collins, 2008; Halbert, 2003). Marwick and boyd (2011) make the same case regarding Twitter users, suggesting that if anything, microcelebrity practice reveals sharp power divides between established stars and mainstream users.

Christian (2012) observes a similar imbalance in web series. Though the “off the line” space of YouTube and its more alternative ilk seems to present a liberatory market, in fact the most successful independent producers have been folded back into Hollywood’s institutional machine. And as I have argued throughout this dissertation, professional crafters are likewise bound to Etsy and, to a much lesser extent, craft fairs. It is true that some sellers are able to transition off of Etsy and build their own e-commerce sites. Nonetheless few can successfully launch their careers without the company’s considerable promotional and structural support. Moreover, as the vociferousness of some of Etsy Bitch’s bloggers makes plain, Etsy holds great sway over the craft world. Its denunciation—or, worse yet, outright rejection—of sellers can be career-destroying.

Not only are producers often subordinate to the media platforms they utilize, they are also confronted with a series of what seem to be mutually incompatible demands. Marwick and boyd (2011) have written convincingly of the particular challenges of “context collapse” on social media in general and on Twitter in particular, where multiple audiences are flattened into one. As a result, users are unable to engage in the dynamic impression management typical of in-person interaction, wherein subjects make adjustments to their self-presentation based on the characteristics of their particular interlocutor(s). Instead social media users are compelled to broadcast a singular, credible identity—one that is anodyne enough to satisfy the most judgmental viewers (such as family members or prospective employers) and interesting enough to attract followers. As I have suggested, Etsy sellers are in the very same position. They must divulge enough personal information to render their personal brands compelling. Yet if crafters



reveal too much about the trials of creative entrepreneurship then the fantasy of *jouissance* and *plaisir* is destroyed.

The same balancing act also plays out in relation to community. On Twitter, Facebook, and other kinds of social media, mutual ties are the platforms' fundamental purpose and currency; "likes" beget "likes," which in turn garner attention of all kinds. However with communities so massive, it is often a near impossible task to get found. So too with professional craft culture. Some social connections are advantageous. On Etsy they can facilitate professional development, further herald makers' authenticity, and conjure the enchantment of Appadurai's "tournaments of value." At craft fairs they can make the event more enjoyable for venders and participants alike and often confer logistical advantages (friends will often watch each other's tents, for example). However crafters are also forced to deal with an overwhelming glut of competitors and all of the associated problems—plagiarism, copyright infringement, and resale—this surfeit brings.

Indeed both craft and the greater celebrity culture of which it is a part are, fundamentally, oxymora. Mark Andrejevic (2004) writes that "reality programming has, paradoxically, undermined the uniqueness of the celebrity . . . [and] rendered [it] fungible" (p. 11). A comparable incongruity is at work in contemporary craft, where the singularity of the handcrafted object—its indexical relationship to its maker, its decommodification, its inimitability—is the very thing that renders it unexceptional in a sea of similarly singularized goods. But while professional craft is, in many ways, emblematic of celebritization and self-commodification, it also acts as its inverse. Though social media users and reality television producers strategically evoke signals of authenticity, the format of new media platforms and reality television is understood to be

inherently digital, and thus artificial. On the other hand DIY, while reliant on social media for its circulation, is fundamentally material and thus seemingly more real. In its physicality, it harkens back to a simpler time, offering its practitioners a way to return to the joys of the material and natural world.

In fact the very meaning of craft is incompatible with commercialism. As Stevens (2011) puts it, “There is a disconnect between the ideology of craft work and that of the economic system that supports it; namely, that capitalism seeks efficiency in all matters, while craft, though it possesses many positive attributes, will always be a highly inefficient way of getting the job done” (p.44). Thus if the success of the microcelebrity rests on relentless self-promotion and strategic angling, DIY presents itself as a way out of this grueling existence; as the marketing around the handmade object and the nature of its exchange suggests, professional makers are allegedly pursuing their craft for the simple joy of it.

Given the fact that DIY thus acts as the apotheosis of neoliberalism and, simultaneously, its antithesis—and that both functions are mediated through the rhetoric of pleasure—I maintain that a thorough investigation of contemporary professional craft culture adds nuance to convergence culture’s liberation/exploitation debate. Producers might be in control of their media environment or the industrial system might be manipulating users for its own financial advantage. Or, more likely, shifts in power are flowing top-down and bottom-up concurrently. But scholars have not explicitly considered whether these producers are experiencing pleasure, and if so, how that experience problematizes questions of agency. In the case of DIY, as this dissertation demonstrates, professionals certainly do gain a great deal of *plaisir* and *jouissance* from

their work and the lifestyle it engenders. They are afforded creative flexibility, identity affirmation, artistic community, means of experiencing enchantment and flow, and, of course, remuneration. But given the market forces that circumscribe these workers, the question remains: when craft is for sale, how much does it cost?

## CHAPTER 6

### **Coda: Crafting for Pleasure**

Before closing this project, I would like to propose a route around some of the challenges of professional craft, an option so retrograde it just might be progressive: crafting for pleasure instead of for profit. Though the focus of this project has been on professional craft, the very modifier “professional” suggests the existence of an amateur alternative, one that is as rich in cultural and historical import as its commercial complement. While the full scope of this multi-faceted phenomenon and the considerable literature devoted to it is outside the bounds of my own project, I would be remiss if I didn’t at least acknowledge it as a counterpoint to the professional endeavors at this dissertation’s heart. For not only does an examination of hobbyist craft highlight by contrast the problems endemic to self-commodification, but an analysis of my time in two stitch ‘n bitch circles also reveals a surprising irony: despite the fact that professional craft is rhetorically framed as a lifestyle of round-like-clock creative fulfillment, if pleasure is operationalized in terms of *jouissance* and *plaisir*, then craft amateurs just might have it best. They access the same ego-reinforcing and ego-effacing rewards that professional crafters do, and the very materiality of their practice engenders a kind of pleasure that is arguably far more intense offline than on.

Of course some of these benefits have long been noted when it comes to stitch ‘n bitches. The social knitting clubs were labeled as such as early as World War II, when wartime wives would get together to craft, share stories, and commiserate while their husbands were overseas (Macdonald, 1988). Thus the very term and its early

instantiation underscore the fact that these assemblies were as much about collective craft as they were female sociality and identity construction. The label was revived decades later when *Bust* editor-in-chief Debbie Stroller started her own stitch ‘n bitch in 1999. The group met at public spaces and thus provided ample opportunity for women to bond, develop networks, and build social capital amidst the hubbub of New York bars and restaurants. It proved wildly successful, spawning a lucrative book series, and in the years since stitch ‘n bitches have been organized across the U.S. and around the world. Though wildly varied in terms of purpose and kinds of participants, all of the clubs are characterized by the same features of their WWII forebears: they are “social, third place, based on craft production and predominantly female” (Minahan & Cox, 2007, p. 7).

These attributes were certainly evident in both Penn Knitters and Stitch & Sip-No Libs, two very different knitting groups that I joined for the better part of a year. The former is a meet-up that convenes weekly at the University of Pennsylvania’s Women’s Center. Though Penn Knitters has a page on Ravelry, a popular knit and crochet social networking site, for the most part participants discover it by word of mouth. Almost all members are affiliated with the University, and in keeping with the average age of college faculty, most are in their 40s and 50s (though there are certainly outliers). Stitch & Sip-No Libs, on the other hand, is a group organized entirely via the social networking portal meet-up. It assembles a few times a month at restaurants and bars across the city and, occasionally, outside of it. However as the group’s name suggests, most gatherings are clustered around Northern Liberties, an area *Forbes* included in its list of hippest hipster neighborhoods (Brennan, 2012). Thus, it is unsurprising that the group attracts

women who are relatively young (most are in their 20s and 30s), urban, and replete with subcultural capital.

Yet, despite demographic variance, the groups are more functionally similar than not. At their core are serious, committed crafters, many of whom have active knitting practices outside of the circles. In relating the role that the hobby played in their lives, members of both groups described almost verbatim the same kind of immersive, meditative *jouissance* that professional crafters detailed. Rachel, a longtime Penn Knitter told me of her practice, “It’s very calming for me. I call it my anti-dumb ass . . . with all of the silence I can kind of disconnect from what’s going on in my life and in the world and I can just be all about this stitch and what I’m doing and the repetition of it.” Lilly, one of the Stitch & Sip organizers, related a similar sentiment, explaining that she knits because “it’s very internal . . . and it’s sort of relaxing too because depending on the skill of what you’re working on, you can do it . . . and not really think about it.” Members of both groups also discussed the appeal of problem-solving and repetition, another critical dimension of *jouissance*. Penn Knitter Ronnie loves the “mathematical challenge” of intricate knitting patterns, the sense of “okay, I can do this” she gets when working her way through a difficult project. Likewise Patricia, another Penn Knitter, knits because “it’s just mentally stimulating” and “mathematically interesting.” She also enjoys the repetitive nature of knitting, the chance to continually “do things over and better.”

But while amateur knitters seem to be on par with professional crafters in terms of the *jouissance* they derive from their creative practices, when it comes to *plaisir* the enduring relationships these women form serve as especially powerful mechanisms of ego-reinforcement. And it seems as if the very physicality of their gatherings is what

facilitates this intensity. As Prigoda and McKenzie observed in their ethnographic investigation of way that information is exchanged in knitting groups, “[participants’] hands are busy but their minds can easily stray to other matters. In this way knitting is conducive to chatting, and chatting is justified because participants are still being productive” (2007, p. 103). This social function was evident in the two groups, where knitting was both a topic of conversation (attendees regularly discussed favorite materials, patterns, and yarn shops) and a driver of participant interaction. For example, meetings in both groups generally began with an informal show-and-tell. Members asked one another about new projects, commended knitters who had made visible progress between meetings, and offered advice to those who were clearly stymied (I frequently fell into this category, unfortunately). Finished items were circulated so that participants could more carefully examine the stitching or feel the texture of a particular yarn. Moreover the knitter who produced the article in question was loudly praised for her handwork, regardless of her skill level, and this vocal affirmation only intensified the ego-reinforcing function of the group.

While the atmosphere of both communities was a supportive one, the Penn Knitters went out of their way to assist new and veteran members alike. During several sessions I observed accomplished knitters setting aside their own projects to patiently teach a new member—and thus relative stranger—the fundamentals of casting on. I was also the frequent beneficiary of Penn Knitter expertise. During one memorable session, a woman who is clearly one of the most capable knitters in the group spent the majority of the hour-long session cheerfully unknitting a project of mine that had begun life as a lace scarf but quickly devolved into a series of impenetrable knots. Harriet, another

consummate knitter, eagerly adopted me of her own accord, regularly sending me project patterns that she deemed easy enough for a novice to tackle and emailing in between sessions to inquire as to my progress. And when the group decided to throw a baby shower for another member, not only did Harriet send me the “world’s easiest” baby bootie pattern so that I too could contribute something handmade, but she also invited me to lunch to walk me through the seemingly impossible process of turning the socks’ heel. As she later told me in our interview: “you just need to try a pattern that’s a little harder and do it at Penn Knitters because there’s so much knowledge. Or start a pair of socks. And don’t worry about having dumb questions because we’ve all asked them.” Indeed, even the more experienced knitters relied on one another for assistance and commonly solicited members’ advice both inside and outside of the weekly meetings.

But despite the fact that knitting was the common denominator amongst the women in both stitch ‘n bitches and the ostensible reason for their gatherings, it typically played a secondary role to oft-lively conversation that was as wide-ranging as it was identity-affirming. In other words, the “bitch” superseded the “stitch.” Penn Knitter Patricia described the banter at the weekly sessions as:

All over the place. Sometimes we get gossipy every once in a while but for the most part we talk about our families because of our connection and what we know about one another. Who’s had a grandchild, who’s doing this, who’s doing that. And we talk about movies and books and it ends up sometimes being a little bit more of a book club or a [a way] to catch up on the TV shows [we all enjoy].

Grace, one of Stitch & Sip’s earliest members, expressed a comparable sentiment, characterizing the chatter at the semi-regular meet-ups as “weird, kind of random.” She went on to add: “It’s weird because Cindy [another Stitch & Sip knitter] and I listen to the same music. And no one listens to this type of music. We bumped into each other at



a concert and it was like, ‘you like the same music?’ Yeah!’ If, as I suggest earlier, commercial handicraft serves a metonym for a particular nexus of interests and dispositions, here those interests are evoked directly, in real-time, and collectively endorsed. What’s more, this process is repeated over an extended period of time as the participants come to know one another and the interests they share. Thus the seemingly idle talk at both groups is in fact a potent source of *plaisir*.

This communal norm-setting was even more explicitly displayed when it came to politics, a common topic of discussion in both groups. Penn Knitter Harriet mused, “Sometimes we talk politics, but I’m extremely liberal and everyone else is a Dem. So maybe only Democrats knit.” Stich & Sipper Grace offered a similar observation, “We’ve got like-minded individuals there for the most part. . . I mean we’re a pretty liberal group, which is to to my liking.” The fact that both university staff and young East Coast urbanites skew Left in their affiliation is relatively unsurprising, but the frequency with which the topic was raised was unexpected. Moreover the manner in which it was broached seems to be reflective of each group’s values. The Penn Knitters were explicit in their conversation; they frequently talked local politics and discussed articles of note in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Stich ‘n Sippers, on the other hand, were far more oblique and tended to signal their liberal affiliation through reference to personal issues rather than focused political exchange. Either way, group talk served to affirm participants’ political leanings, and this normative function is in keeping with the scholarship on women’s informal interactions. Tardy (2000), for instance, notes in her research on mother and toddler groups that the women’s interactions “provided [them]

with a sense that their experiences were normal. Sharing their experiences with women of similar values and lifestyles provided them with assurance that they were usual” (p. 455).

The conversation was just as likely to turn intimate, though, with members regularly divulging personal problems and providing one another with emotional support. Though Penn Knitters’ attendance ebbed and flowed, on the whole the group was quite stable. Some knitters had been participating for years and formed close friendships with one another as a result. For instance, both Ronnie and Sarah told me of the collective grieving that occurred in the group when one of its regular members passed away unexpectedly. The knitters contacted the deceased’s mother, whom many of them already knew, and presented her with a blanket composed of granny squares that each member had knit in remembrance of her daughter. Though this particularly fraught period occurred before I joined the Knitters, during my time in the stitch ‘n bitch I heard participants habitually share familial challenges and joys as well as job- and health-related concerns. They discussed their children and grandchildren, vacations, and retirement plans. Indeed I could easily see why Ronnie called the group a “little mini family” and that it was “cohesive [despite the fact that] a lot of stuff is going on at once.”

Although Stitch & Sip-NoLibs was established just a few years ago and met less regularly than Penn Knitters, the meet-up was likewise characterized by personal disclosure. As Grace explained:

Well, as one of the more open members of the group . . . about my personal problems, it's been interesting to find out how similar your problems are with other [people's problems], even though you don't work in the same industry and you don't have the same life at all, but you're experiencing similar issues just based on the fact that you, you know, you're female and you live in this economy and you're in basically the same age bracket . . . so we talk about relationships-- boys, girls, whoever you like--and problems that you might be having at work . . .

Thus though the topics of conversation shifted from retirement and grandchildren to dating and job exploration, the nature of their exchange was no less intimate than that of their Penn Knitter counterparts.

These kinds of personal conversations are also in keeping with research about women's casual sociality. Tardy (2000) and Coates (2013) draw on Goffman (1959) to suggest that informal talk amongst women functions as a "backstage" to their "front stage" presentation of femininity. They suggest that most women are bound by a performance of "niceness" and that backstage environments created with female friends allow women to "subvert and challenge norms and explore alternate selves" (Coates, 2013, p. 122). While the discussion at the knitting groups was not exactly no-holds-barred—particularly for the Penn Knitters, as the group met at the participants' place of employment—it was also characterized by fleeting glimpses of these women's backstage lives. Some knitters swore and told bawdy jokes; others griped about their children, bosses, or their weight. Though these transgressions were relatively anodyne, they nonetheless enabled the participants to express a wider range of feelings than polite exchange might otherwise allow and, moreover, do so with the affirmation of their peers.

Not only was handicraft an ancillary topic of discussion, it was also regularly used as pretext for other kinds of social activities—or, indeed, off of the schedule altogether. Penn Knitters frequently had lunch with one another outside of the group. Though presumably they discussed knitting at some point, clearly these meals were much more overtly social than craft-related. *Stitch 'n Sippers*, however, were far more extreme in this regard. As Grace joked, "[*Stitch & Sip*] is not like a normal kind of knitting circle. We are drunk half the time, you know?" Events were strategically organized at trendy

bars, up-and-coming restaurants, and other alternative venues (the Roller Derby was a favorite). Clearly these loud, dark locales were not exactly conducive to complex needlework; rather they served as social signifiers, literally embedding craft within environments steeped in subcultural capital. But even more indicative of NoLibs' ability to communicate lifestyle affiliation is the fact that many events took place with nary a needle in sight. During our interview, Lilly recounted some of the group's latest "extracurricular" outings; the knitters had recently attended the annual town-wide garage sale in Media, PA (a Philadelphia suburb) and, on another occasion, gone berry-picking. And as was the case with the Penn Knitters, smaller breakaway cliques of Stitch 'n Sippers regularly met outside of formally organized events to grab coffee or drinks.

But what is especially interesting is how amateur knitting in particular—and by extension, leisure craft in general—is a signifier malleable enough to communicate vastly different values, and thus evoke the lifestyle-affirming dimension of *plaisir*. For NoLibs participants, knitting, by virtue of the physical environments in which it occurs, connotes hipness, urbanity, and creativity—values that these attendees clearly prize. Thus knitting for these young cosmopolitans becomes a way to exchange and build subcultural capital. For Penn Knitters, on the other hand, knitting seems to suggest a privileging of the down-to-earth and, given the frequency with which these women help one another, a spirit of good will. Of course these are principles generally embraced by the wider University community, and as a result the weekly meetings at the Women's Center enable practitioners to build critical social capital with fellow Penn employees. Either way, knitting's offline characteristics and the enduring, reciprocal personal relationships the practice engenders endow it with this semiotic flexibility.

Ultimately, then, amateur knitting seems to confer many of craft's advantages—the immersive experience of *jouissance* and the ego-affirmation of *plaisir*—without challenges posed by creative entrepreneurship. Of course amateur craft does come with its own set of drawbacks. After all, most of these women earn their income through noncreative employment, and many turn to knitting precisely because it offers the expressive and empowering opportunities their day jobs do not. But if the joy and communal support that I observed in both Penn Knitters and Stitch & Sip-NoLibs is generalizable to leisure craft at large, there does seem to be considerable advantage in separating *jouissance* from *plaisir*. The former is experienced individually, the latter collectively, and both are arguably intensified as a result. In the end, then, the surest path to the gratification of creative production might just lie outside of its professionalization. Perhaps the greatest pleasure comes in turning off the computer and picking up a pair of knitting needles instead.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: List of Informants

Anderson, Ryan-Ashley

- Craft: Knitted Cozies, Knitting Patterns, Beaded Jewelry and Accessories
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/FrayKnot](http://www.etsy.com/shop/FrayKnot)
- Personal website: [www.frayknot.com](http://www.frayknot.com)

Beutler, Jessalin

- Craft: Clothing, Textiles, Original Art
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/JessalinBeutler](http://www.etsy.com/shop/JessalinBeutler)
- Personal website: [www.jessalinbeutler.com](http://www.jessalinbeutler.com)
- Blog: [www.jessalinbeutler.com/blog/](http://www.jessalinbeutler.com/blog/)

Bradbury, Erica

- Craft: Jewelry
- Personal website: [speciesbythethousands.com](http://speciesbythethousands.com)
- Blog: [speciesbythethousands.com/blogs/news](http://speciesbythethousands.com/blogs/news)

Collins, Laura

- Craft: Vegan, cruelty-free bags
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/PansyMaiden](http://www.etsy.com/shop/PansyMaiden)
- Personal website: [www.pansymaiden.com](http://www.pansymaiden.com)
- Blog: [www.pansymaiden.com/blog/](http://www.pansymaiden.com/blog/)

Crickets, Celeste

- Craft: Fashion scarves and photography props
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/CricketsCreations](http://www.etsy.com/shop/CricketsCreations)
- Blog: [cricketscreations.blogspot.com](http://cricketscreations.blogspot.com)

Dee, Yana

- Craft: Handmade clothing and accessories
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/yanadee](http://www.etsy.com/shop/yanadee)
- Personal website: [www.yanadee.com](http://www.yanadee.com)

\* *Pseudonym*

Diehl, Gretchen

- Craft: Handmade plastic jewelry
- Personal website: [birdqueendesigns.com/home](http://birdqueendesigns.com/home)

DiRago, Alicia

- DIY blogger, founder of WhimseyBox (DIY craft subscription box service)
- Business: [whimseybox.com](http://whimseybox.com)
- Personal website: [www.dismountcreative.com](http://www.dismountcreative.com)
- Blog: [blog.whimseybox.com](http://blog.whimseybox.com)

Dukes, Keight

- Craft: Handmade scarves, bags, and home accessories
- Etsy storefront: [etsy.com/shop/putapuredukes](http://etsy.com/shop/putapuredukes)
- Blog: [putapuredukes.com](http://putapuredukes.com)

Dye, Julie

- Craft: Handmade jewelry, accessories, home décor, and papercraft
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/juliedyecraft](http://www.etsy.com/shop/juliedyecraft)
- Personal website: [www.juliedyecraft.com](http://www.juliedyecraft.com)

Einbinder, Zoe

- Craft: Real Fruit Jewelry
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/realfruitjewelry](http://www.etsy.com/shop/realfruitjewelry)
- Personal website: [realfruitjewelry.com/](http://realfruitjewelry.com/)

Elise, Jordan

- Craft: Faux taxidermy
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/horribleadorables](http://www.etsy.com/shop/horribleadorables)
- Personal website: [www.jordan-elise.com/](http://www.jordan-elise.com/)
- Blog: [www.horribleadorables.blogspot.com/](http://www.horribleadorables.blogspot.com/)

Franek, Laura

- Craft: Modern & vintage upcycled inspired jewelry
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/laurafrank](http://www.etsy.com/shop/laurafrank)

Franzen, Jessica

- Craft: Jewelry
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/SparrowCollective](http://www.etsy.com/shop/SparrowCollective)
- Personal website: [sparrowcollective.com/](http://sparrowcollective.com/)

\* *Pseudonym*

Gilmour, Kim

- Craft: Unique and functional handmade pottery
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/FisheyeBrooklyn](http://www.etsy.com/shop/FisheyeBrooklyn)
- Blog: [fisheyebrooklyn.tumblr.com](http://fisheyebrooklyn.tumblr.com)

Hirsch, Geri

- DIY blogger, founder of Leaf.tv
- Personal website: <http://becauseimaddicted.net/>

Kane, Amber

- Craft: Hand-woven scarves
- Etsy storefront: [etsy.com/shop/amberkane](http://etsy.com/shop/amberkane)
- Personal website: [www.fabricatedends.com](http://www.fabricatedends.com); [amberkane.com/](http://amberkane.com/)
- Blog: [fabricatedends.blogspot.com](http://fabricatedends.blogspot.com)

Kemp, Laura

- Craft: Clothing designer
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/laurendkemp](http://www.etsy.com/shop/laurendkemp)
- Personal website: [laurskemp.com](http://laurskemp.com)
- Blog: [laurenkemp.blogspot.com](http://laurenkemp.blogspot.com); [laurskemp.com/blog](http://laurskemp.com/blog)

Marquez, Jessica

- Craft: Personalized embroidery and vintage inspired hand made goods
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/MiniatureRhino](http://www.etsy.com/shop/MiniatureRhino)
- Personal website: [www.jessica-marquez.com/](http://www.jessica-marquez.com/)

Martin, Bill

- Craft: jeweler
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/purifiedart](http://www.etsy.com/shop/purifiedart)
- Personal website: [www.purifiedart.com/](http://www.purifiedart.com/)
- Blog: [purifiedart.blogspot.com/](http://purifiedart.blogspot.com/)

Moisan, Ariane

- DIY blogger; boutique owner
- Blog: <http://blog.boatpeopleboutique.com>

\* *Pseudonym*



Morris, Destiny

- Craft: Silver-hammered jewelry
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/destinyray](http://www.etsy.com/shop/destinyray)
- Personal website: [www.destinyray.com/](http://www.destinyray.com/)

Norwood, Shayna

- Craft: Letterpress wedding invitations and greeting cards
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/SteelPetalPress](http://www.etsy.com/shop/SteelPetalPress)
- Personal website: [steelpetalpress.com](http://steelpetalpress.com)

Nunez, Kirsten

- DIY blogger, author
- Blog: [www.studs-and-pearls.com/](http://www.studs-and-pearls.com/)

Orris, Jennifer Nathan

- Craft: Handmade pillows, earrings, pin cushions
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/people/BerthaRose](http://www.etsy.com/people/BerthaRose)

Palanjian, Amy

- DIY Blogger, author
- Blog: [amypalanjian.com/](http://amypalanjian.com/)

Partain, Jessica

- Craft: Miniature food jewelry
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/inediblejewelry](http://www.etsy.com/shop/inediblejewelry)

Reinertson, Karie

- Craft: Handmade leather and textile bags
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/people/shelterprotectsyou](http://www.etsy.com/people/shelterprotectsyou)
- Personal website: [shelterprotectsyou.bigcartel.com/](http://shelterprotectsyou.bigcartel.com/)
- Blog: [www.shelterprotectsyou.com/blog/](http://www.shelterprotectsyou.com/blog/)

Schiwal, Aimée

- Craft: handmade jewelry, accessories and novelties
- Etsy storefront: [hookandmatter.etsy.com](http://hookandmatter.etsy.com)
- Personal website: [hookandmatter.com/](http://hookandmatter.com/)
- Blog: [hookandmatter.com/category/blog](http://hookandmatter.com/category/blog)

\* *Pseudonym*

Soles, Valerie

- Craft: Handmade clothing
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/lovelierseas](http://www.etsy.com/shop/lovelierseas)
- Personal website: [www.dearbirthday.com/](http://www.dearbirthday.com/)
- Blog: [dearbirthday.wordpress.com/](http://dearbirthday.wordpress.com/)

St. Clair, Kristin

- DIY blogger, author, app-creator, craft developer
- Personal website: [www.lemmemakeit.com](http://www.lemmemakeit.com)
- Blog: [lemmemakeit.blogspot.com](http://lemmemakeit.blogspot.com)

Stiglets, Liz

- Craft: Handmade home accessories
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/people/cozyblue](http://www.etsy.com/people/cozyblue)

Topolski, Jenny

- Craft: Jewelry and ceramics
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/jtopolski](http://www.etsy.com/shop/jtopolski)
- Personal website: [jtopolski.com/](http://jtopolski.com/)

Turner, Kristen

- DIY blogger
- Blog: [misskristturner.com/](http://misskristturner.com/) (formerly glitter 'n glue)

Waterman, Theresa\*

- Craft: Illustrations, drawing, custom vinyl and t-shirts

Weatherman, Rachel\*

- Craft: Jewelry

Weiss, Denise

- Craft: Jewelry
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/people/voXevangeline](http://www.etsy.com/people/voXevangeline)

Williams, Erica

- Craft: Notebooks, carts, and illustrations
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/subtleacts](http://www.etsy.com/shop/subtleacts)
- Blog: [subtleacts.blogspot.com/](http://subtleacts.blogspot.com/)

\* *Pseudonym*

Williamson, Genevieve

- Craft: Art jewelry
- Etsy storefront: [www.etsy.com/shop/jibbyandjuna](http://www.etsy.com/shop/jibbyandjuna)
- Blog: [genevievewilliamson.blogspot.com/](http://genevievewilliamson.blogspot.com/)

Wilson, Kate\*

- Craft: Hand adorned clothing

Stitch & Sip—NoLibs

- Lilly\*
- Grace\*

Penn Knitters

- Harriet\*
- Patricia\*
- Rachel\*
- Ronnie\*
- Sarah\*

\* *Pseudonym*

**Appendix B: Sample Interview Schedule for Etsy Sellers and/or Craft Fair Vendors**

- Can you please walk me through your creative history? Where and when did you learn how to make *X*? How long have you been selling *X* on Etsy [and/or at craft fairs]? Did you make or sell *X* before joining Etsy? Has the type of objects you sell or your approach to selling changed over the months/years?
- What do you like most about making *X*? What do like most about Etsy [and/or craft fairs]? Least?
- Can you walk me through your creative process? What does an average day look like for you? Where do you get ideas for your projects?
- Do you have a sense of who your clientele is? How would you describe it?
- Is this your primary occupation? If not, what is? Does it relate to your DIY activity?
- Have you had to make any significant changes to your lifestyle in order to accommodate your DIY activities (e.g. e.g. to other hobbies/leisure activity, familial or domestic responsibilities, time devoted to other kinds of employment)? Do you regret any of these changes? Has there ever been a time when you felt under pressure to finish a project?
- Do you read other DIY blogs, websites or magazines? Do you have any relationships with other Etsy sellers [and/or craft fair vendors]? Have you ever met them in person? Do you see yourself as belonging to some larger creative community? If so, how would you characterize it? Does it ever feel competitive? If so, how?

- How would you define DIY? Is this a term you identify with? Do you think DIY has become more popular in recent years? If so, why?

### **Sample Interview Schedule for DIY Bloggers**

- Please take me through your blogging history: when and why did you decide to create your blog? How has it changed over the past/years months?
- What do you like most about blogging? Least?
- Is this your primary occupation? If not, what is and does it relate to your DIY activity? Do you derive any income from your blogging? From ads? Product placement? How do you get exposure on your blog?
- Can you tell me about X [if applicable, a professional project that has come out the blog, e.g., book, magazine column, etc.]? How did it come about?
- Where do you get ideas for your projects? How do you decide what to feature on your blog? How do you decide how much personal information to include on your blog?
- How would you describe your readership? Have you ever met readers in person?
- What is your relationship with other DIY bloggers like? Have you ever met them in person?
- How do you position your work in relation to more mainstream craft culture, e.g., Martha Stewart?
- 
- How would you define DIY? Is this a term you identify with? Do you think DIY has become more popular in recent years? If so, why?

### **Sample Interview Schedule for Knitting Group Members**

- When/why did you learn to knit? When/why did you start coming to [name of knitting group]? How did you find out about it? Do you participate in any other craft groups, either online or in person?
- What do you like best about knitting? What do you like best about meeting other people to craft?
- How well do you know the other group members? What do you talk about? How do they compare to your friends [and/or colleagues] outside of the knitting group?
- Do you read any DIY/craft blogs, websites or magazines? Where do you get ideas for your projects?
- What are your other hobbies?
- How would you define DIY? Is it something you identify with?

### Appendix C: Sample Recruitment Email

Subject: Interview Request from a PhD Student

Dear [Name],

My name is Tara Liss-Mariño, and I am a doctoral student in the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. I am currently working on my dissertation, which explores the intersection of DIY culture, craft, pleasure, and new media. I am especially interested in talking to professional and semi-professional crafters about their artistic practices and work/life balance. I was hoping you'd be willing to speak me, as I believe your insight would greatly benefit my project.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at [tlissmarino@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:tlissmarino@asc.upenn.edu) to set up a phone interview. Conversations are typically around 15-20 minutes, though this flexible; you can also participate anonymously if you like. If you have any additional questions about this project, please do not hesitate to email me at the same address.

I greatly appreciate your consideration and look forward to speaking with you.

Best,  
Tara

Tara Liss-Mariño  
Doctoral Candidate  
Annenberg School for Communication  
University of Pennsylvania  
[tlissmarino@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:tlissmarino@asc.upenn.edu)



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