Crafts and gardening: the new frontiers of radicalism?

September 2011

Kate Day , Professor George McKay , Barbara Hastings-Asatourian and Rob Lyons discussed the impact crafts and gardening are having in society.

The current wave of interest in craft, and in particular in the process of *making* things for yourself, surely has its roots in recent social, political, and economic developments. It is often argued that the fashion for creative activity can be regarded as a backlash against an increasingly virtual and corporate world that promotes the passive consumer - albeit a Web 2.0 one. Alongside the
grow-your-own
allotment movement, the
make-your-own
approach enables craft participants to experience shaping their material world, creating objects that have an individual stamp and a narrative in their production. Is this just a repeat of the rural craft revival of the 1970s for a new generation, or perhaps a new twist to the fashion for eco doom-mongering?

Over the past 10 years, and emanating initially in the U.S., the DIY craft movement has played a critical role in promoting craft activity as a democratic and political tool. Online movements such as Craft Mafias, guerrilla knitters and ‘craftivism’ have encouraged a younger generation to regard craft as a platform for sharing ideas and protest. The activist approach shares common strands with the ‘guerrilla gardening’ movement, with activities such as seed-bombing and yarn-bombing linking to a new generation of political protest that prioritises community and direct action in the reclamation of social values, vs corporate or state ideologies. Alongside this, selling sites such as Etsy have developed a burgeoning market for user-led trading, often at a

low price point due to the predominantly amateur nature of the traders. Perhaps the ultimate outcome of the of self-styled ‘craftster’ movement, the website Regretsy celebrates some of the worst excesses of where ‘craft goes bad’.

An aspect of the craft and gardening revival is how connected and virtualised it is, rather than isolated or disconnected. Making groups, once regarded as the prevail of the Women’s Institute and over 60s, are now attracting hip young things keen to share techniques and learn new skills. Crafting events, from knitting groups, through local meet-ups to the V&As popular Craft Rocks evenings, are attracting cool urban (and predominantly female) audiences. A far cry from the cloth kits and macramé owls of the 1970s, these activities do nonetheless contain an element of nostalgia. The rediscovery of ‘grandma’s skills’ (possibly not passed on by grandma herself due to changes in inter-generational connections), hints to a lost generation in terms of craft skills development. Notions of a make do and mend approach prompted by recession, don't ring true as buying new if often cheaper, and with the erosion of craft teaching in schools and further education, there has to be a deliberate desire to learn crafting skills to then use them to 'make do'. From a fashion and style aspect, bunting, village fetes, and Cath Kidston’s ubiquitous patterned homewares hint at a longing for a more innocent age of pretty things and pride in the home-made.

Listen again (not miked so variable quality)...

Speakers on crafts and gardening - click on the Play button: {mp3}crafts-speakers-intros{/mp3}

Speakers on crafts and gardening - click on the Play button: {mp3}crafts-discussion{/mp3}

..sorry but the recording stopped at this pont so missing the last 25 minutes just when it was getting going.

Some background readings

Guerilla gardening , from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Thinking Aloud: Craftwork and Skill , BBC Radio 4 with Richard Sennett and Grayson Perry 06

February 2008

BBC crisis over 'fake' sweatshop scene in Primark documentary , by Ian Burrell and Martin Hickman, Independent 17 June 2011

Guerilla gardeners target housing estate in Somerset , BBC News 15 August 2011

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