Making leaders/curating maker cultures
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Both the difficulties and the possibilities of making things well apply to making human relationships. Material challenges like working with resistance or managing ambiguity are instructive in understanding the resistances people harbour to one another or the uncertain boundaries between people. I’ve stressed the positive open role routine and practicing play in the work of crafting physical things; so too do people need to practice their relations with one another, learn the skills of anticipation and revision in order to improve these relations. (Sennett, 2008, p.289)

This submission reflects a work in progress. It sets out our key argument and rationale. The final paper will expand our discussion and elaborate on examples.

This paper asserts an underexploited potential for craftspeople as leaders, and the value of creative practices in developing qualities that contribute to good leadership, not just within the institutional art/craft world, but in wider work and social contexts. Our thesis is that makers might be uniquely adept creators of communities, organizations, cultures and institutions.

In introducing our argument it might be useful to say something about our backgrounds and how they have shaped our thinking in relation to art and craft.

We have both experienced leadership roles in the arts and crafts: as makers, curators and as art professionals in management positions, as well as teachers, mentors and researchers. In all of these capacities we also have developed perspectives on creative work, which we understand as both intrinsically rewarding for the individual practitioner and as socially useful.

We have both been members of Craftnet, which is an independent network that promotes leadership and strategic development for contemporary craft. Core group members are individuals who represent a variety of viewpoints from the contemporary craft world. The idea of leadership - what it is; how it works and how it might serve the development of craft is naturally at the heart of what we want to do. The group had been considering developing a research proposal relating to leadership, and we felt that an area that was ripe for further exploration was that of ‘makers as leaders’. When we first discussed the idea of makers as leaders we were focused primarily on the role of artists and craftspeople as leaders within the art/craft world – whether as curators, critics or teachers shaping the discourse around making, or as institutional leaders, creating opportunities, influencing policy etc. Artist-led initiatives and contemporary developments in maker ecologies – networks, clusters and communities of makers and the evolving phenomena of ‘maker
spaces’ have become a central part of the arts infrastructure and it is perhaps here that makers as good, creative leaders have been most obviously cultivated and made evident. Artists and makers from this sector have often segued into leadership roles in more formally structured arts organizations. As we began to clarify our thinking, and with reference to some of the recent literature on Craft, we began to feel that if we recognize that the skills, values and qualities that are carefully learned and nurtured through creative practice have gained credence within the art world, might we not also assert their usefulness in other leadership situations?

Further to these thoughts, research has shown that, whilst there is no single, defining, model for artist’s and craftspeople’s careers, for the vast majority, income derived directly from creative practice will typically be well below the national average and will not reflect relative levels of education (Harper, 2014). Consequently, careers are typically sustained by a portfolio of other, income generating, activities. Sometimes these activities will be art related, but often they will not be, and again they may not reflect their level of education or employment potential. Craftspeople, through their higher education and professional networks, are encouraged to consider studio activity predominant and to frame economic or non-arts activity as irrelevant or distracting to the model of a ‘professional’ artistic practice. The research suggests that there can be a richer, more complex, symbiotic relationship between craftspeople’s practices and parallel, income generating, careers. Whilst practice based degrees tend to be regarded as vocational we believe that there is a case for understanding them as a training in a critical way of thinking and being in the world, which is sustained and deepened by practice, but which might have wider applications.

The assertions that underpin our thesis may be contrary to a popular notion of the craftsperson. Makers are perhaps not usually considered the kinds of people who typically occupy spheres of leadership. Craft was (maybe still is) commonly associated with the romantic idea of the maker - as a singular, narrowly focused, specialist, perhaps somewhat taciturn in nature, deploying her or his on-going skill through (what are imagined to be) relatively stable practices of production and consumption.

But we are asserting that, while craft making can afford an introspective absorption in, and unselfconscious enjoyment of, work, it is also outwardly directed - an unfolding engagement that forms an organic link between the self and the surrounding material and social environment. Craft knowledge is internalized by the individual, but it involves shared techniques and standards, and learning. It doesn’t take place in isolation, but within a network of relationships involving teachers, students, suppliers, clients, fellow practitioners, other employment, family, friends and the wider society. Craft practice simultaneously promotes more subtle understandings of relational interdependence, empathy, equanimity, humility, and a certain generosity of spirit.

Although writers such as Sennett have drawn attention to this kind of expanded notion of craft, there has been (to our knowledge) limited research
on the subject and we are doubtful that it has much currency outside of the immediate field at present.

Most of the leadership programs in the cultural sector (such as Clore Leadership Program and courses offered by universities such as Goldsmiths) are directed at the leadership of cultural organizations and emphasize the importance of good management skills – leadership is regarded as a function of organizational management. Similarly, there can be seen a transference of management skills from business to areas of social leadership. This may have led to a tendency to treat arts and cultural organizations as businesses, with much of the literature drawing on standard Business/Business School material.

There are some underlying assumptions. Business leaders such as Bill Gates, Elon Musk, Sheryl Sandberg are cited as exemplars - all heads of major or multinational corporations. In this context, success is ultimately understood in economic terms, and often more specifically in terms of driving change in order for corporations to generate higher earnings (for the benefit of senior managers and shareholders).

The transposition of this discourse into the public sector is well developed – as seen for instance in the National Health Service and in Education – we can bear witness to its ascendancy in our universities. We’ve also seen the extension of this agenda to the cultural sector, and even here it seems to take limited account of practices of creativity and leadership framed by a range of drivers, not just economic competitiveness. These other drivers might include, for example, knowledge sharing, well being, concern for the environment, sense of place or community building.

Alongside the dominant discourses on leadership we seem to have seen the rise of a regressive model of leadership in political, business and institutional systems alike; one that seems to favor the cult of the autocratic and didactic ‘strongman’ – Trump, Putin, Erdogan, Modi et al.

This then is the context in which we are suggesting that by recognizing craft, not as a kind of thing, but as a methodology or way of being, we could make a useful contribution to fostering more nuanced understandings of leadership and different strategies for developing leaders.

We believe that makers might (and indeed frequently do) turn out to be uniquely adept creators of communities, organizations, cultures and institutions. In order to test this thesis we ran a conference strand at the bi-annual Making Futures conference in September 2017. We wanted to explore how the skills and sensibilities involved in creative making are perhaps particularly aligned to positive and constructive forms of innovative leadership that can be nurtured within maker-cultures, and which might benefit many spheres of human organization. We invited submissions that would describe relevant case studies, sharing knowledge and experience and suggesting reproducible models, as well as exploring the critical context in which they take place. The aim was to encourage discussion, to test our thesis, to develop a better understanding of how maker cultures operate in the world.
and how creative work might cultivate positive and constructive forms of innovative leadership.

The kind of leadership we have in mind can be seen to play a vital role in facilitating creative clusters, or ‘communities’ of makers – so we were particularly interested in the networks, both physical and digital, that help bring individual makers into constellations of maker groups that together can become mutually supportive maker culture sub-systems, establishing maker ecologies. These cultural clusters not only allow for rich social and learning exchanges between participants, but can also signal a vital role for makers in building thriving neighborhoods as well as helping to develop audiences and consumers, thus supporting maker economies.

Abstracts were peer-reviewed and the presentations that were included represented a wide range of experience and perspectives, rooted in distinctive situations. It is striking that, whilst they demonstrated awareness of theoretical contexts, they were all based in or refer to real world experiences.

For all their diversity, in reviewing and reflecting on our notes, they seem to resolve themselves around common themes and concepts. They share, for instance, a sense of craft production as relational, social and concerned with community making, not simply about making an object. Craft emerges as a methodology for forming and shaping social structures as well as things.

In these papers craft is presented as a means to make good. It is a construct for imaginatively and practically making and remaking place and patterns of living. Our contributors described the actions of making, the mythologies, the conventions and dexterity of applied knowledge, which offer experienced and mobile ways to build cooperative and fluid physical and social relationships. The skills of craft were seen as the practical, problem solving, familiar and familial, readily distributed resources that are instrumental in the creation of relationships. Alongside objectives of making things that function or look good, the needs of communities were resolved through craft. Presenters described co-fixing, mending and making groups as well as things; discussed the role of shared material language in connecting with the environment, and the way that Craft Guilds, based on mutuality and collective enterprise, became empathetic networks of support and critique.

The case studies acknowledged ambitious multiple desires where the making of objects could ‘lead’ to environmental and social change. Mostly this was expressed through similar sets of aspirations; seeking openness, encouraging playfulness, transparency, conviviality, generosity, responsibility, integrity, and happiness. Beyond Junk in Birmingham, for example, collected castaway jewelry, inviting expert makers to use it as raw material in a live stream making event of skill sharing, money making and entertainment - ‘a hermeneutic circle with designer interpreting their making as social production.’ They described the importance of the beautiful and sublime and of material and imaginative change. Amy Twigger Holroyd showed how enabling people to design, make and repair for themselves doesn’t only open up a discussion about production and consumption, but it generates
speculation about alternative futures. Similarly Fabrizio Cocchiarella and Judith van den Boom addressed making practices as tool for rethinking the social and urban landscape.

Openness can require a relinquishing of established methods and recognizing craft as an adaptive process, it fixes and transforms and moves on. The agency of material and maker encourages a reciprocity and dialogue between place and people, between observation and action, between the singular and synergistic/pluralistic experience of craft. What was suggested was a way of listening to material as instrumental in propagating ways of listening to the world and operating as sentient, responsible citizens. This craft utopianism is tempered by the specific, practical realities of making and the context of making. So craft is realistic and futuristic, utilizing analogue, digital and virtual technologies that engage and create dynamic, fluid, communicative spaces between the local and the global. Leading through craft was described as engaging in multiple ways, whilst being present effectively, responsive and open to change. This ecology of making, which encourages material to adopt new characteristics, is adaptive. It follows that the proximal spaces can be equally shaped and reformed,

... the craft of making physical things provides insight into the techniques of experience that can shape our dealings with others... I argue no more and no less than the capacities our bodies have to shape physical things are the same capacities we draw on in social relations.

(Sennett, 2008, pp.289-290)

The slow acquisition of craft knowledge affords a sense of agency, in which we feel enabled to shape our world, but it also acknowledges that real, embodied, agency for the self is achieved not solely through the autonomous imagination or through self-directed activity but through the necessary submission of the self to an external reality. The acquisition of craft knowledge cannot be done by an individual in isolation. Craft knowledge is embodied knowledge - once acquired, it becomes ‘my’ knowledge, but it is also part of a common wealth, a body of knowledge that is passed on from one person to another across generations and cultures. Makers often express their gratitude to those who taught them and beyond, to those who evolved the techniques and tools that shape their practices. These values set it apart from notions of creativity that emphasize the individuality of self-expression and the singular genius.

Craft’ has been described as a ‘salon de refuse’ (Dormer, 1997, p.2), a potential space for work that defies categorization. The benefits of occupying the edges and borderlands opens a space beyond established possibilities, one that is not fixed, one that can be constantly reinvented. Craft is never at the center stage, it does not lead from the front, but allows unconventional, mutable and decentralized ways of operating. The marginalization of craft within our visual culture turns out to offer an enabling space for problematic and contested narratives. It was suggested in our lively discussion that issues of gender, race, and politics could be absorbed and played out through craft in
maker spaces and activities. This was persuasively evident in Frau Fibre’s sharing of sewing knowledge through her Sewing Rebellion; Susan Melsop’s teaching methods that create intense, immersive real world learning experiences for her architecture students and in the empowerment of women artisan’s in Pakistan through the entrepreneurship of Amneh Shaikh-Farooqui. The distribution of knowledge amounts to the distribution of agency.

In the projects reported on at Making futures, thinking inside out opens a discourse on diversity, one which acknowledges being physically, emotionally, imaginatively varied, being female, being young or old and individualistic, definitions which in themselves can and must be constantly negotiated and challenged. Our discussion animatedly circumnavigated the presumptions of craft as submissive, gendered, domesticated, and yet it simultaneously owned this rich lexicon, applying these terms of positive, important aspects of making culture.

Sennett suggests a defining attribute of good leadership is looking outward, beyond instrumental ends, to understand and teach others the value of community. Material knowledge is not about being fixed or solid, but about movement, attentiveness, responsiveness and transformation, which encourages the development of civic skills that invest in patience, care and trust. At Making Future, in our concluding session, we asked: what constitutes leadership in craft? Clearly there is no single answer, but it implies generosity – sharing knowledge and experience, learning and growing, responding to context and opportunity, engaging with politics and the responsibilities/ramifications that are part of a chain of ethical considerations. Opening up spaces for the imagination – envisioning alternative futures – imbued with optimism. And who is the leader? The leader is the person who recognizes and opens a space for others to enter and make.

We have stated that we have both experienced leadership roles. Nevertheless, we have had limited formal education in leadership as a field. We were led initially by a felt sense and our observations in the course of conducting our individual research practices, which have been more broadly focused on the meaning and value of creative work rather than ‘leadership’ as such. We have tested our initial thinking within our own field at the Making Futures conference, which lent evidence to our initial experiential sense of things. We now hope that by presenting in this context you may be able to help us in forming a critical, theoretical foundation that will support ongoing research.

Bibliography


