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Quiet Activism and the New Amateur

The Power of Home and Hobby Crafts

Fiona Hackney

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ABSTRACT This article contributes to debates about the expanded, and expanding, nature of crafts by exploring the activist potential of amateur, domestic crafts and the quiet activism of everyday making. In contrast to much recent work on the resurgence of interest in DIY craft culture, it takes a historical perspective and argues for the emergence of a new, historically conscious, socially engaged amateur practice. The recently exhibited cross-stitch embroideries of Major Alexis Casdagli and my own memories of my grandmother provide a starting point for exploring the lived experience of home crafts in the first half of the twentieth century. Close analysis of home-craft features from 1930s women's magazines offer a framework for understanding how such marginalized spaces promote agency

through new feminine imaginaries. Michel De Certeau's notion of *la perruque* suggests how such devalued activities as crochet and knitting can be envisaged as strategies or tactics that afford agency and shape distinctive social relations, while interviews with two contemporary practitioners provide insight into historical continuities and current responses.

KEYWORDS: crafting, craftivism, design activism, women, gender, domestic culture, everyday life, new amateur, home crafts, hobby crafts, DIY, community, creativity

“I’ve always knitted”: Home Crafts as Activism

The crafts, what constitutes crafts practice and what we understand as craft, have changed beyond all recognition in recent years. Terms such as “crafting,” “craftivism” (craft activism), “manbroidery,” “counterfeit crochet,” “net craft,” “stitch ‘n’ bitch,” “guerrilla knitting,” “yarn bombing,” “Punk DIY,” “subcultural-,” and “indie craft” signal a new energy; a will to re-engage with crafts’ Morrisian/Ruskinian political heritage, and the counter-cultural radicalism and feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. Knitting, for instance, has become a valid and effective means to critique capitalism, protest against war, peak oil, and exploitative labor practices, and forge alternative identities, communities, and ways of living (Greer 2008; Buszek 2011). This re-emergence of craft is generally associated with a younger generation of activist, technology-savvy makers (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007; von Busch 2010). Craft as socially engaged practice, however, also provides a lens through which to view the largely overlooked, yet extensive, area of home and hobby crafts as practiced by millions of amateurs of all ages and to reconsider its radical potential in the context of everyday life (Dant 2005). The apparent invisibility of home and hobby crafts offers a starting point from which to explore the activism embedded in amateurism and the emergence of a new, super-connected (informed, skilled, reflexive) amateur for whom craft is power: “the ability or capacity to act” (Bratich and Brush 2011: 234).

The current craze for crafting covers a wide range of activities and issues, from after-school clubs where boys have enthusiastically embraced knitting to guerrilla gardening and stitch as therapy (Ritchie 2011: 37).¹ Home and hobby crafts, nevertheless, continue to be perceived as a middle-class activity, a distraction and leisure pursuit for “ladies” with time and means – a tendency that limits understanding of these activities. My paternal grandmother taught me to knit. She was a miner’s wife living in Staffordshire, whose sons trained to work in the potteries. Knitting and crochet – she preferred the latter because it was more of a challenge – were constant occupations;

they served as a means of making garments that could not be obtained elsewhere, a social activity and a way of connecting with family, neighbors, and friends, among other things. She rarely used a pattern, and her ability to read and knit simultaneously, engaging in the “flow” of creativity, was the subject of continued fascination for my sister and me.² An abiding memory is of her face transfixed, fingers busy knitting, as a neighbor locally known as the “news woman” relayed the latest gossip. She knitted jumpers for all her grandchildren. My mother bought the wool for ours and while they were beautifully knitted (one lovingly preserved example regularly drew admiring comments when my children wore it), the garments were invariably on the small side due to my grandmother’s habit of keeping wool back to knit something extra for a neighbor; a habit that never failed to irritate my mother.

The social and economic relevance of the “maker movement” is currently a hot topic of debate. *Guardian* journalist Libby Brooks has drawn attention to the wider implications of a craft renaissance “far more complex than the cliché of the middle-class mummy hooked on crochet” that “speaks to a more visceral and socially urgent need to reconfigure the nature of work” (Brooks 2009).³ Rob Fraser and Andrew Thomson, responding to Christopher Frayling’s RSA lecture, “Tools for Survival,” which called for a new language in the crafts, identify the “new artisan” whose “knowledge, skills and creative capacities” will sustain “a high quality of life, a low cost of living and a brighter future” (Frayling 2011b; Fraser and Thomson 2012). This article argues that, conversely, we need to recognize the existence of a new super-connected amateur who, informed by a wealth of on- and offline resources (citizen journalism, community broadband, online forums, social media), as well as their individual life experiences and expertise, are quietly active as they open up new channels of value and exchange by engaging in alternative craft economies and harnessing assets in often surprising, productive ways.⁴

The new amateur, moreover, is historically savvy. Awareness of an alternative history of domestic crafting promotes reflection and reflexivity, fostering tactics and helping to develop strategies. If the current enthusiasm for crafting is to be more than a short-lived fashion for the middle classes – a form of austerity chic – and its activist potential be realized, we need to understand more about the practices, networks, meanings, and values bound up with amateur making. Craft’s hobbyist history offers alternative models of practice and engagement at a time when history’s ability to help us manage change is being widely recognized (DeSilvey 2012). And while it reveals the inherently conservative nature of handicrafts that, as Steven Gelber argues, were developed as a way to “integrate the isolated home with the ideology of the workplace,” it also shows how hobbies “passively condemn the work environment by offering contrast to meaningless jobs” (Gelber 1999: 19–20). Gelber’s analysis of hobbycraft affect, however, only works when “remunerative

employment” remains elsewhere (1999: 3). Sociologist Manuel Castells (2012), in contrast, shows how, when the structures of capitalism are under severe strain, alternative and countercultural values and ways of living move into the mainstream. At such a time, hobbies and their associated competencies, networks, and skills might provide a rich source for reassessing not only what leisure, but also what work, might mean.

Comparing women’s memories of making, principally in the 1930s (an equivalent time of social extremes and economic crisis), with the experiences of two amateur practitioners today, and framing these within an analysis of home or handcraft (as it was generally termed) in popular magazines, provides a structure for thinking about the meanings and values attached to amateur crafts and exploring instances of continuity and change. Questions of agency, connectivity (social and familial) and community, creativity, economics, space, and health and wellbeing, alongside a concern with how women and men respond to and negotiate dominant craft discourses, are constant themes, albeit expressed differently in different historical periods. The conflicted nature of hobbies aligned with the culturally marginal status of women’s home crafts and domestic magazines shape a space and a praxis where sometimes surprising, collective identities, agencies, and capacities have developed. Drawing on theories of popular culture and everyday life, this article contributes to discussions about crafts practice outside official institutions, including net political craft, micro-businesses, and craft as social enterprise (Levine and Heimerl 2008; von Busch 2010). Michel De Certeau’s notion of *la perruque* (the wig) – the disguise, the ruse, the tricky strategy of, for instance, employees who use their employers’ time for their own purposes – additionally helps us think about how the supposedly powerless turn things to their advantage; my grandmother’s jumper strategies, for instance (De Certeau 1988: 30).

This introduction ends with an example of quiet activism that has recently been in the news. Major Alexis Casdagli, whose work featured in the Power of Making exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, made cross-stitch embroideries during his time as a prisoner of war in Germany (Charney 2011). Filling his days (and years) creatively, cross-stitching was also a subversive act as he sewed the Morse code messages “God Save the Queen” and “Fuck Hitler” into the decorative borders of pieces that were exhibited in the camps. In a perfect, if high-risk, example of De Certeau’s *perruque*, the Major’s crafting activities gave him secret satisfaction and a voice, albeit a quiet (secret) one; they also saved his sanity. His story recalls the women and men in earlier centuries who stitched sometimes devastating stories into samplers, quilts, and embroideries (Parker 1984; Llewellyn 1999). The quiet revolution is not an outspoken anti-capitalist movement but rather a means of thinking and acting independently, staking a place in the world and making one’s voice heard (Walker 2007). It involves qualities of patience, discipline, and

ingenuity; hard-won survival skills, whether at home or at war. Paying attention to it necessitates a fundamental reassessment of craft: its genres, institutions, practitioners, networks, protocols, practices, and the methodologies we use to explore, analyze, and understand it.

No Place for Amateurs? Approaches to Crafts Practice

The feminine and amateur status of home crafts as a hobby, which extends the idea of craft to essentially domestic skills, has resulted in such pursuits being undervalued, disregarded, or derided by craft professionals and historians. Paul Greenhalgh's damning assessment of Women's Institute handcrafts as "a rarefied form of household husbandry ... a vision of craft void of the original political commitment, a vernacular ruralism with pretensions to decorative art" is sadly typical (Greenhalgh 1997: 37). Arguing passionately for the need to move beyond established genres and to push the boundaries of what is considered craft, Greenhalgh, nevertheless, continues to regard amateur practitioners as second-class citizens who both lack the "intense search that is central to the professional sphere" and the ability to objectify their "subjective impulses" through research (Greenhalgh 2002: 7). The commoditized nature of consumer craft with its kits, transfers, and readymade designs has meant that it has been doubly damned by some for standardizing, "deskilling" and diminishing craft by removing it from its functional roots, and preventing women from exploring their own "ideas, values, experiences and fantasies" (Dalton 1987: 32).

Such hierarchies, and particularly the confusion of craft with art, continue to exclude women's amateur practice. More recently, academics adopting an interdisciplinary approach have highlighted the need for greater inclusivity. Design historians Penny Sparke (1995), Judy Attfield (2007), Cheryl Buckley (1999), and Joanne Turney (2009) examined the gendered social relations and complex emotions bound up with making "in the margins" and through "design in the lower-case." Barbara Burman's (1999) edited collection and Sarah A. Gordon's (2009) monograph investigate the culture of home sewing in Britain and America. A resurgence of interest in DIY culture reassesses the boundaries between professional and amateur, contributing nuanced arguments about the role of pleasure, leisure, personal agency, and creativity in the "flow of the making process" for men, as well as women (Atkinson 2006; Beegan and Atkinson 2008; Gauntlett 2011; Jackson 2011: 273). Social scientists and cultural geographers are increasingly interested in craft; Caitlin DeSilvey and Nicola Thomas, for instance, run research projects on repair and repurposing, craft communities, and the cultural industries. Practitioners, academics, and stakeholders work collaboratively to explore craft's experiential affect. "Local Wisdom," "The Unfinishable," and MEND*RS are innovative projects exploring the lived politics of dress, while the organization Craftspace commissioned Helen Carnac to curate *Taking Time: Craft and Slow*

Revolution, an exhibition about the slow ethics of making. The New Economics Forum supports research on “Craft Towns” as an antidote to “Clone Towns,” and a wide range of collaborative initiatives are examining crafts as an instrumental factor in wellbeing and health.⁵

While *Hand Made Tales*, Carol Tulloch’s exhibition on women and domestic crafts at the Women’s Library, London (2010–11), made a significant contribution, the history of home crafts in Britain has yet to be written.⁶ Histories of vernacular and industrial craft *work* provide a model for understanding craft as lived experience (Shales 2010; Frayling 2011a). Richard Sennett (2008) and Matthew Crawford (2009) recently examined these issues in relation to the failings of the workplace as a place for self-realization and a wider social and cultural malaise. Noting that the “home economics of our grandmothers is suddenly cutting-edge chic,” Crawford aligns current desires for, for instance, a direct relationship to the food we eat or taking up knitting with a yearning for individual agency, self-reliance, and the need to be part of a community. He believes that these dissatisfactions, though rooted in hard times, go beyond economics to a crisis in confidence in our institutions, professions, and work processes; they respond to the fake values and “uncanny modes of manipulation” that surround so-called “knowledge work.” The “new agrarians” keeping chickens in the city and growing vegetables on the roof are one manifestation of a widespread need to “feel that our world is intelligible, so we can be responsible for it” (Crawford 2009: 5–8). Crawford’s book focuses on the mainly male communities involved in motorcycle maintenance and its associated trades; his observations, nevertheless, are equally pertinent to the history and practice of home *work*.

DIY activism, home crafts, and gender politics came together recently when Jazz, daughter of Clash frontman Joe Strummer, founded the Women’s Institute (WI) branch in London’s Shoreditch area because she got “impassioned about women’s issues and women’s rights”; she has also published *Queen of Crafts*, a book on sewing and baking (Corner 2012). That a young woman passionate about women’s rights would see the WI as a natural home should not be surprising. Maggie Andrews’s history of the National Federation of Women’s Institutes shows how, from its inception, this was a significant feminist organization that, while accepting women’s primary domestic role, worked to challenge its construction, offering members “an alternative cultural space, a form of female-run counter-culture” (1997: ix). The WI worked to raise the status and skill levels of domestic work, created supportive female networks, validated labor (that was largely unpaid and unrecognized), argued for women’s right to leisure, and provided them with a sense of fulfillment and job satisfaction (Andrews 1997: 8, 11). Andrews’s activist argument hinges on the creative tensions arising from areas of conflict and contestation in a popular movement that embraced women of all ages, classes, and political affiliations throughout Britain. Nowhere

was this more evident than in the struggles around craftwork. While the mainly middle-class women involved in the Guild of Learners (an organization within the WI established to promote traditional crafts) viewed craft as a means of enhancing their status as skilled experts, working-class women saw it as a convivial leisure pursuit or a means of non-exploitative home work. Many knitted and chatted their way through supposedly “improving” sessions in a further example of De Certeau’s tactics of quiet disruption (Andrews 1997: 67–70).

Studying craft as process and a means of engendering alternative forms of value and social capital necessitates the adoption of a range of methodologies. Oral historian Lynn Abrams (2005) drew on anthropology in her analysis of Shetland women’s narratives of knitting in a rural society that depended largely on women’s work. Visual anthropologist Kathryn Harriman employed notions of “apropriative” and “distributive” creativity (an analytical framework derived from a Melanesian perspective) to locate makers’ agency when working with hobby-craft groups in northeastern Scotland.⁷ Harriman argues convincingly that we need to re-evaluate our assumptions about the range of makers and objects that we pay attention to and understand. The “intellectualisation of fine craft,” she believes, “goes hand-in-hand with denigration of hobby craft.” By continuing to impose a “vision of universal craft ontology” on makers who exist in “distinctly different socio-cultural and economic realities,” we blind ourselves to new modes of creativity and take away “the Other’s agency to express their own experiences and make their own reality” (Harriman 2007: 476, 483).

Any consideration of networks and agency must include communication technology and embracing social media is a significant aspect of crafting culture. Self-styled “DIY-demagogue” Otto von Busch (2010) proposed that online coordination, globally distributed networks of participants, and open models of collaboration enable a new economics of small-scale collaborative craft endeavors, and “micro revolt” tactics – small, disconnected resistant acts – that challenge the status quo. A “techie maker-culture,” however, all too often marginalizes women, something that the organization MzTEK’s workshops and training sets out to redress (Carpenter 2011: 49). Noting that the current resurgence of interest in DIY crafting culture “complicates conventional notions of activism, especially regarding gendered politics,” Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush (2011) argue that the very absence of value (economic and otherwise) generally attached to women’s domestic crafts (knitting, crochet, scrapbooking, etc.) is its strength. The “spaces of the amateur” represent “hidden ‘zones’” of interaction outside the masculine systems of capitalist culture and enable new sources of value production; precisely in the “diminution as ‘only’ affective and sentimental is where new figures and possibilities arise” (2011: 234–5, 240, 252).

Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch (2010) worry about “craftwashing” and the co-option of craftivism by museums, galleries, and big

business. They highlight the need to maintain “unruly spaces” in order to ensure crafts’ radicalism. A combination of open-source digital-analog hybridity through “Do It Together” networks and open-source operating systems offers a “third space” for unruly social making, preserving a “heady mix of amateur practices, reverse engineering tools and utopian gestures” (Bhabha 1994; Minahan and Cox 2007; Carpenter 2011: 50).⁸ Signaling the emergence of a new, community-driven fourth estate, the new amateur operates in a fourth space – a real and virtual space in which hybrid (old and new, virtual and material) technologies of making develop new forms of fourth-estate activity. Craft innovation can occur in unexpectedly ordinary places and what cultural geographer Tim Edensor (2010) terms “vernacular creativity” is just as likely to emerge in the heart of the suburbs or the imaged communities of women’s magazines as urban centers (Hackney 2006). As many knitters and sewers of all ages have told me, this kind of craft practice is not undergoing a revival because, in their experience, it never went away – a further reason for paying attention to the hybrid spaces of domestic activity.

Magazine as Room: A Room with a View

Magazines such as *Make*, *Craft*, and *Readymade* fuel the indie crafts movement, but there is a long history of knitting, sewing, and home crafts in women’s magazines, and these remain an important draw for readers of, for instance, *Woman’s Weekly* – a publication famed for its knitting patterns which first appeared in 1911 and remains in print today. The “service” magazine offering readers advice and entertainment appeared in the 1920s: monthlies such as *Good Housekeeping* (1922) and *Modern Woman* (1925) targeted middle-class households, while a new group of color weeklies, including *Woman* (1937) and *Woman’s Own* (1932) appealed to wider audiences in the 1930s. The women sewing, knitting, dress-making, or undertaking home renovations on their covers testify to the popularity of home crafts. Features included embroidery, rug-making, dressmaking, cookery, woodwork, and flower arranging and publications carried patterns and offers for stencils and transfers, sold tapestry and embroidery kits, and gave tips for “make-do-and-mend” (Hackney 1999, 2006) (Figure 1). The metaphor of the magazine-as-window, which emerged in oral history interviews with women about their memories of magazine reading in the period, conceptualizes the magazine as a liminal, hybrid space that bridged the gap between inside and outside: it involved collective and individual identities, public worlds, and private lives (Hackney 2008). Evoking a “room with a view,” rather than Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own,” the magazine-as-window conveys desires for the home comforts that the suburban semi-detached house symbolized, desires that were becoming a real possibility for the growing number of working and lower middle-class women who read *Woman’s Weekly*, *Woman*, and the cheaper service magazines.



Figure 1

"I Did it Myself!", Edith Blair's Home Page, *Woman* (December 11, 1937).
 Courtesy IPC Media 2013.

Handicrafts, moreover, were undergoing a revival, and magazine home craft circulated within a vibrant amateur culture of "making things" (Kirkham 1989). Domestic crafts were central to the ideal of the housewife-citizen whose skills and creativity – her "feminine touch" – materialized through sewing, embroidery, and cookery, transforming the house into a "civilized" home. New ideas about rational housekeeping meant that managerial strategies migrated from the workplace to the home. The "saving value" of hand crafts were perceived as a buffer against the dislocations of progress and the pace of modern life; a means of raising standards of physical health, maintaining psychological wellbeing, and safeguarding the moral standards of the home (Hackney 2006).⁹

The visual rhetoric of magazines, with their multiple codes of illustration, photography, text, and image, in color or black and white, employed in the differing registers of editorial features, fiction, and advertising, encouraged readers to become actively engaged in imagining, creating, reappropriating, negotiating, and performing different identities through different feminine types (Hackney 2008). Color, in particular, was associated with the feminine imagination and an expanded range of possibilities for women; an early *Woman* editorial aligned the "new, virile, colourful paper" with women's "widening ... horizons" and interest in "breaking down ... barriers"

(Anon. 1937). Along with ornament, texture, and display, color was also central to the popular discourse of personal decorating, which identified a woman's body with her home, and a feminine interior aesthetic that combined traditional comforts with modern convenience (Sparke 1995). Color photography, nevertheless, was not widely used until the postwar years, and hand-drawn illustrations delivered color's emotional impact and connective appeal.

The aesthetic possibilities of home crafts and dressmaking meant that they were regularly featured in *Woman's* eye-catching, full-color, double-page spreads. Whereas the visual register of photography tended to operate in the realm of documentation, underscoring a sense of reality, hand-drawn illustrations rendered the magazine "space" as a story that readers could imaginatively engage with and which was constantly being produced by and through associated practices of living, including home crafts. Cultural historian Francesca Berry, in her analysis of the 1920s French monthly *Femina*, argued that hand-drawn illustrations offered a means of materializing feminine subjectivity by providing a narrative context or multifaceted approach that encouraged readers to engage in creative fantasy, "projecting self imaginatively into the mis-en-page of the magazines" (Berry 2005: 66).

"Feminine Room," a full-color item on bedrooms by home editor Kathleen Pearcey, demonstrates how *Woman* encouraged readers to engage in processes of self-transformation through the production and performance of home craft (Figure 2). Whereas the living room was deemed a public place, albeit one that could be feminized, and the kitchen was the laboratory of the home, the bedroom was gendered feminine – a space in which a woman could express "a little of her personality and a great deal of her own handiwork"



Figure 2

"Feminine Room," *Woman* (August 21, 1937). Courtesy IPC Media 2013.

(Pearcey 1937; Sparke 1995). The idea of transformation and its means are communicated through the visual rhetoric of the page. The main player is an almost-to-scale (the size enhancing identification) picture of a flowered organdie dressing table mat to embroider that takes center stage, while inset images of bedrooms in various color schemes suggest the *mise en scène* in which the transformation will take place. The dressing table with its petticoat frilling – a metaphor for the feminine body – and mirror, which in beauty editorials and advertising served as a visual shorthand for the makeover, reinforce processes of identification and change. The transformation envisaged was within the bounds of accepted femininity. Pearcey's warning that on no account was the "feminine room" to mean "an orgy of ruffles and profuse ornament" suggests its potential to engender illicit, subversively sexual subjectivities as well as anxieties about maintaining "good taste."

Being "crafty" is synonymous with being cunning, clever, even deceitful (Greenhalgh 1997; Frayling 2011b). Magazines were always instructing their readers – in features and fiction – about how to develop strategies to get their own way, while reassuring men that they were in charge – the "power behind the throne," that is, but *the* power nonetheless. Overflowing with ideas for making, adapting, and transforming objects for the home and, by implication, transforming women's own identities, home-craft features fostered a sense of agency, expression, style, quality, and economy in the first decades of the twentieth century. Like the WI, they acknowledged women's decision-making power, and the revitalization of handicrafts underscored how feminine knowledge, values, and skills could shape a wider (civilized and modern) society beyond the home, something that continued to inform wartime "make-do-and-mend" and the DIY movement in the following decades (Attfield 1999; Burman 1999).

"Everyone did handwork": Making, Meaning, and Memory

The following section draws on oral history interviews conducted with women about their memories of reading domestic magazines in the 1930s and undertaking amateur crafts activities in the home from the 1930s to the 1950s.¹⁰ It extrapolates themes of connectivity, knowledge, identity formation, economy, value, the "tricksy ruse," and space, which provide a historical framework for contemporary amateur agency and quiet activism

One common characteristic among the women interviewed was that they undertook a diverse range of activities. Jennifer, for instance, did lace-making, tapestry, tatting, patchwork, calligraphy, and Chinese brush painting; she made banners for her church and pressed flower lampshades, greeting cards, silver jewelry, and children's educational games. Her father had been a keen amateur photographer in the 1930s and she learnt her craft skills in a variety of ways: tatting from an aunt, patchwork with a neighbor. Jennifer

was proud of her creativity and ingenuity, her ability to repurpose or “making things out of nothing,” which she attributed to an attitude of mind forged during childhood when “there was a need,” but little available, and “necessity [was] the mother of invention.” Skills were adapted for different craft activities, and she took pleasure in problem solving, making the most of the materials available. When her husband took early retirement due to ill health, craft was an activity that they could do companionably together. Jennifer’s home was full of objects, each invested with its own story and meaning: “Everything has got memories,” she reflected. Her words suggest Susan Stewart’s work on the symbolic meaning of personal mementos: souvenirs of individual experience that, although they often had little material worth, carried great “interior significance” because their connection with biography made them “emblematic of the work of that life and the self’s capacity to generate worthiness” (Stewart 1993: 139).

Jennifer’s crafting and collecting activities betrayed an element of compulsion that was evident in other accounts; “I can’t sit and do nothing,” she observed. “I have to have something to do.” Eileen Hunt described herself as a “hoarder,” while Lena Lowdell, Lillian Huff, and C.C. Russell, recalling their magazine reading in the 1930s, told me how they stored up snippets of information that, while not immediately needed, “might be useful in the future.” Recipes were particularly prized at a time when many went without (Oddy 1990). “I’ve got a stack of recipes, some from years ago,” Mrs Russell confided, and Lena admitted, “I could never get through all the recipes I’ve got.” The activity of saving and collecting, according to Anthony Giddens, represents a “crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties” (1984: 39). Women’s making and collecting activities had psychological significance, serving as talismans against unexpected eventualities and signaling the hope of better times ahead.

Sewing patterns, stencils, and transfers provided cost-effective and creative ways to decorate the home or acquire the latest look (Hackney 1999, 2006). Eunice Davies, as an eighteen-year-old shorthand typist in 1935, sent her own designs for “all-in-one pyjamas” to *Woman* and got a pattern back. Many used readymade kits acquired from magazines and craft shops. Far from limiting, they enabled creativity, allowing women to make objects of quality and value (Turney 2004). Lee Alexander, who went on to teach in the Textile Department at Middlesex University, enjoyed embroidery and used offers from *Woman* and *Woman’s Own* to buy linen cloth already printed with a design and embroidery silks. She made “afternoon cloths” for herself and her mother (Figure 3). Like so many of those interviewed, she described her mother as “more of a handicraft person” than herself, who knitted and made tapestries and fine crochet tablecloths for all her family. Mrs Alexander described the tablecloth given to her as “irreplaceable,” recalling Stewart’s observations about the personal memento that organizes experience and creates “a continual and

**Figure 3**

Lee Alexander, embroidered "afternoon cloth." Courtesy Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, Middlesex University.

personal narrative of the past" (Stewart 1993: 140). Mavis Lafosse also made items from kits when setting up home in the 1950s (Figure 4). She and her fiancé worked together on "rug projects"; "it was quite exciting seeing the design grow as you go along ... they lasted for absolutely years. I mean, it was pure wool and sort of indestructible," she observed. Mavis described the process as both cost-effective and therapeutic, part of the engagement ritual: "You saved for what you called your 'bottom drawer' ... and this is what it was for really, to eventually have your own home." Making objects for the home together was widely regarded as a suitable displacement

**Figure 4**

Mavis Lafosse, rug, c. 1950s. Courtesy Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture, Middlesex University.

activity for young couples to sublimate sexual excitement. The feminist and agony aunt Leonora Eyles – an important figure who wrote campaigning novels, polemical books, and popular advice manuals on sex – advised courting couples to “get busy,” “learn things,” and “make things of use and beauty” together. No prude herself – Eyles claimed that she would much prefer her son to “marry a girl who had had several lovers in a natural and sane way, to one who had been tortured to keep herself pure” – she was acutely aware of the dangers unmarried girls faced and considered crafting a healthy, pleasurable, and productive means of managing sexual urges until they could be enjoyed in married life (Eyles 1933: 22–4).

Not everyone appreciated the imperative to make, and many consciously rejected handwork in an effort to define identities that were different from their mothers’. Historians studying the lives of working-class girls in the 1930s have shown how aspirations were shaped by a wish to escape the hardship and domestic burden of their mothers’ lives (Alexander 2000; Todd 2005). For others, this was bound up with constructions of gender or social class. Mrs Alexander recalled:

I always saw my mother having a piece of work in her hands. And later on when I got older ... it became pretty evident that it was considered the right thing for young ladies to do, to keep them out of mischief.

Eileen Hunt, whose family were civil servants, had a strong antipathy to needlework, declaring, “I loathed it at school, and I loathe it now.” Her mother, in contrast, loved it: “She did it out of choice. All her sisters did it, as well,” something that Mrs Hunt associated with a shared sense of respectability and class identity – “sort of lower middle class stuff, really.” Sitting down to sew was also a leisure strategy for such women – De Certeau’s ruse and a means of finding time for oneself “on the job” (Langhamer 2000).

In his analysis of the online crafting platform Etsy, Rob Walker (2007) attributed its success to the fact that it tapped into an existing movement, basing its values on participation, not consumption, and social and communal values. Participating in imagined and actual communities of magazine readers and handworkers, these women demonstrate that the social, communal, reciprocal, and identity-forming aspects of amateur making were fully established long before the Internet and Web 2.0. Their memories suggest how home crafts were central to maintaining friendship and kinship networks, the creation of value through gifting, obligation, skill-sharing, and identity formation. Daughters always admired their mother’s abilities, and even if youthful rebellion was signaled through refusal to participate, these homemade items became highly valued in later life as carriers of personal history. Kits were no bar to creativity, and examples of problem solving and adapting skills abound. The satisfaction of

doing something pleasurable that was also practical – making an object of beauty out of recycled materials or being psychologically prepared for hard times – demonstrates resourcefulness and resilience that resonate with contemporary debates about craft therapy, slow craft, repurposing, and repair. The women who developed skills into paid work demonstrate the potentially porous boundaries between amateur and professional making in spaces “outside” the masculine mainstream. Above all, at a time when “elders” are so often regarded principally as repositories of memory, these women’s narratives were united by a sense of agency, pleasure, and pride in their skills and abilities. Alongside the spectacular forms of protest often associated with craftivism, craft as a means of keeping active signals an equally valid activism.

“Here I am and I’ve got an attitude”: The New Amateur

A willingness to reclaim the history of domestic crafts, engagement with notions of everyday activism, agency, and ingenuity, and a desire to act independently are all defining characteristics of the new super-connected amateur who, while not necessarily a trained craftsperson, draws on a wide range of knowledge and experience to contribute to an expanded notion of what craft might be. A brief consideration of two very different crafters – cake-maker Ruth Cicale and “manbroiderer” Jamie Chalmers, whose practices are historically informed and who are trained in other spheres (Cicale is a writer while Chalmers works in IT) – provides insight into how quiet activism operates in crafts today.

Chalmers, aka Mr X Stitch (his online persona), runs a website with a domestic/punk aesthetic that combines curation, stitch-news, and dialog, selling such “off the high street” items as Beefrank’s controversial cross-stitch pattern, “I Will Beat You into Bloody Submission.”¹¹ Online crafting, which in many ways is the contemporary equivalent of the ubiquitous, yet easily overlooked, spaces of historical domestic crafts, offers the new amateur the freedom to experiment with unusual juxtapositions, perform an imagined self, and take risks. As Chalmers observes, “I was tickled by the juxtaposition of a big man like me doing a tiny little craft like cross stitch ... It also reflected my childish desire to be a superhero” (Figures 5 and 6). The internet, moreover, has its own language and social mores, and Chalmers’s series of embroideries based on spam emails rework the sampler for the Internet age, simultaneously respecting and reinterpreting tradition by “encapsulating little bits of internet fluff and immortalizing them in stitch.”¹² This work is subversive not because it rejects domestic crafting, but because it respects and reworks its quietly anarchic practices and values, representing a historical continuum. “I really struggle with traditional gender stereotypes,” Chalmers concedes, “and although I didn’t intend to get involved in a discourse that’s been going on for a few hundred years, here I am, and I’ve got an attitude.”

**Figure 5**

Mr X Stitch, "Stitchin' in Public," 2012. Courtesy Jamie Chalmers.

The Women's Institute provides both a historical context and a physical space for Ruth Cicale's cake-making, craft fairs, and slow "food therapy" events at Falmouth WI in Cornwall (Figures 7 and 8). Cicale speaks about the total sensory experience involved in making – and eating – food, which she aligns with experiential learning, mindfulness, wellbeing, healing, and self-realization. WI qualities of resourcefulness and respect for the value of domestic skills emerge in a practice and attitude to food that was learnt from her Italian grandparents. Leaving home aged sixteen, Cicale's feminism emerged from her experience managing clubs and restaurants and forging a career in a male-dominated catering industry. Children and a move to Australia resulted in a very different life "back in the kitchen" where, from necessity and for love, everything that could be was homemade. On her return to Britain she determined to retain control over her life using her craft skills, knowledge, and abilities; she sews her family's clothes, for instance, refusing to buy new and recycling and adapting garments from charity shops. Reflecting on her own journey, Cicale draws attention to her need to assert a strong feminist identity through domestic skills, as well as the pleasures involved in acknowledging and fostering one's own creativity through making.

As new amateurs, Cicale and Chalmers draw on histories of domestic practice, but reinterpret them according to their own concerns and contexts, something that enables them to occupy spaces less immediately available to the craft professional. The uncanny discomfort and disruption that ensues when domestic activities



Figure 6

A Mr X Stitch embroidery, "Rock out with Your Cock out."
 Courtesy Jamie Chalmers.

such as knitting are conducted in public (during a business meeting for instance), when the familiar and homey becomes *unheimlich* and "out of place," is one example of this. Amateur practices that foreground resistance and resourcefulness through processes of connectivity, experiential learning, or sensory healing, moreover, take on new resonance for a cultural sector when public funding is being withdrawn. In a recent study commissioned by the UK Crafts Council, Karen Yair and Mary Schwarz used the term "portfolio working" to describe the diversification of the contemporary craftsperson who provides services and works collaboratively, employing "experiential learning and knowledge gained through collaboration," user-centered methods, open problem solving, and informal



Figure 7

Ruth Cicale outside Women's Institute, Webber Street, Falmouth, 2012.
Courtesy Ruth Cicale.



Figure 8

Ruth Cicale, "Daisy Cake," 2012. Courtesy Ruth Cicale.

networks – an approach that evokes the social capital and everyday creativity of the new amateur rather than the cultural capital of the individual artist-genius (2011: 313).

“Everyone is a maker as we make our way through life”

We’re at a point where market forces have created bland homogeneity of product, particularly in stitch, while simultaneously undermining the value of the handmade. It saddens me that we’ve largely lost the connection with craft and creativity, as it renders us beholden to the bigger commercial systems. Simple skills like growing our own food and making our own clothes have been lost to many people, and by losing those skills, they lose their independence.

I look forward to the modern form of agrarian culture, where we realise the power of technology to help people look after themselves and their communities. That’s what craft should be. (Chalmers 2012)

Chalmers’s vision and Cicale’s experience of an exploitative work culture and the restorative powers of craft return us to Crawford’s “new agrarians” and community initiatives such as transition towns or the slow movement, which are at the heart of new amateurism and quiet activism. Von Busch argues that net political crafters adopt a “new, net political, household practice of craft promotion and dialogue” that is an “updated approach to the traditional handicrafts”; “connective rather than collective,” it is the “networks, protocols, techniques and attitudes” we need to pay attention to rather than products and makers (2010: 122–3). The historically reflexive and community-minded new amateur is similarly involved in practices of connecting, dialog, new economies of making, swapping, gift giving, and micro-business. These involve small-scale and intimate experiences, as well as the possibility of large-scale change. They critique, or at least demonstrate, ways to negotiate competitive, consumerist capitalism and the specter of unhealthy, isolating, empty, and unrewarding lives. In her manifesto *Knitting for Good*, formative crafter Betsy Greer detailed what knitting could encompass, from a “relaxing and productive hobby” to a means of “lessening the environmental impact of mass-produced goods,” “protesting sweatshop labour,” making a living, or supplying needed household items (2008: 101). The great strength of amateur hobbyist practice is that it brings communities of interest together reflectively and reflexively through a shared love of “making” and in the context of everyday life. As such, it produces the means and conditions through which alternative values and ways of living can be imagined and shared, and practical examples for change defined and materialised.

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Notes

1. Including “Knit 1, Pass It On” and Craft Club Cinema Knit-along. Available online: <http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/crafts-magazine/blog/photo/2012/crafts-club-goes-to-the-flicks?from=/crafts-magazine/blog/>. Voluntary Arts England promotes the benefits of the arts and crafts for building resilience in their report *Restoring the Balance* (2011).
2. Flow is described by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi ([1975] 2000) as a form of play that results from a merging of action and experience which occurs when the participant is challenged but not overwhelmed by the activity. Flow takes place somewhere between anxiety and boredom and is the essence of experienced creativity.
3. She advocated taught trades, portable skills, and craft apprenticeships as one of the best ways to lift people out of poverty. See current initiatives being developed by the Heritage Crafts Association, the Prince’s Foundation, and the Craft Skills Advisory Board (Hayes 2012).
4. See current hyper-local platforms and community journalism; see <http://www.how-do.co.uk/north-west-media-news/north-west-digital-media/nesta-searches-for-pioneering-hyperlocal-services-20120402100956955> and <http://www.meldonline.org/>. Community-appropriated Research Model (CARM) is a project exploring community radio as a means to share and maximize community skills and initiatives; see <http://air.falmouth.ac.uk/research-groups/material-visual-culture#projects>. The Institute for Local Self-reliance in the US supports communities to build their own broadband networks; see <http://www.ilsr.org/>.
5. See www.smallisbeautifulproject.blogspot.com; <http://craftgeographies.wordpress.com/>; http://www.localwisdom.info; http://theunfinishable.com; <http://highwire-dtc.com/mendrs/>; <http://slowtextiles.blogspot.co.uk/>; <http://makingaslowrevolution.wordpress.com/>; <http://www.stitchlinks.com/>; http://artsinmind.org.uk; http://www.artsforhealthcornwall.org.uk; <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/clone-town-britain>. The current Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) “Connected Communities” program is initiating a raft of research projects including the Craft Network “Connecting Craft and Community” that initiated this research (see <http://>

- connectingcraftandcommunity) and also a doctoral project on craft and health; see <http://air.falmouth.ac.uk/about-projects>.
6. See http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/thewomenslibrary/whats-on/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/hand-made-tales/hand-made-tales_home.cfm. Carol Tulloch and the author are developing an edited book that builds on this exhibition and the related symposium.
 7. Harriman observed how objects could facilitate networks of exchange when, for instance, a button box became a source of inspiration and a hub of interaction at a quilting class, instigating a button exchange that encouraged creativity and mediated social obligations, something that craft practitioner Hazel White (<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/djcad/staff/hazelwhite/>) has employed in her work.
 8. See <http://www.drpop.org/democracy/dit-do-it-together> and <http://www.mztek.org>.
 9. Flora Klickmann, the editor of *The Girl's Own Paper and Woman's Magazine*, who herself may have suffered from a nervous breakdown, published *Mending Your Nerves* (1928) about the value of making for health. Thanks to Jayne Shacklady for directing me to this.
 10. Around fifty women were consulted in interviews and correspondence for a forthcoming monograph on interwar women's magazines, and a series of oral history interviews were conducted by curator Zoe Hendon for the exhibition *Stitch: The Art and Craft of Homemaking* (2003), held at the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA), Middlesex University.
 11. Jamie Chalmers, interview with the author, June 26, 2012 (see also <http://www.mrxstitch.com>); Ruth Cicale, interview with the author June 29, 2012.
 12. See *Stitching Together* (<http://www.misplay.se>) for other projects that reinterpret the mottos of traditional embroidery.

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