

Thoughts on Crafting the Social

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Last year, I came to HighGround with a kind of map, or, weave, of what I framed as four essential ambitions of design. Namely, to **reform**, to **perform**, to **co-form** and to **deform** — with roots, respectively, in classical order, baroque persuasion, everyday vernaculars, and visionary propositions.

This year I find myself thinking more about the third of these ambitions — those aspects of everyday design that are materially and socially ‘crafted.’ (Full disclosure, what follows is research for a studio I plan on co-teaching next winter on Crafting the Social.)

That said, I am personally attracted to the crafted for several reasons. Among others, it is often conducted on an intimate scale. It involves an engagement with the behaviors of supposedly inert materials. (And now, with biodesign, living materials like bacteria and microorganisms.) It involves ‘caring for’ as in mending. It has a politics both general and specific as with the Palestinian design and craft school called Disarming Design. Most significantly, it encourages an informal and generous sociability, something I just experienced with a very friendly group of strangers at Knit@Nite in Alan Cumming’s club on the Lower East Side. I’ve noticed that when I knit with others (and not just at night clubs), the knitting acts like a bass-line in music. It operates quietly and rhythmically in the background of our conversation. It’s productive but unburdened by the demands of conventional productivity. And just so you don’t think this is a Luddite’s rant, I should point out that digital technologies have for years been shrinking in scale and for both better *and* worse, increasing in bodily engagement.

To wit, the crafted is also susceptible to being trite, materially toxic, guilty of virtuosity, overly conservative, as well as being solitary. That said, doing things alone is not a problem *per se*. Writing and editing are crafts that in my experience are best done in silence, if not completely alone.

Nonetheless, I’m increasingly drawn to the crafted – particularly for its potential to materially shape or design social relations through relatively modest means. Most immediately, if I’m honest, I’m drawn to the aesthetics of the crafted. By aesthetics I don’t just mean beauty, but the full range of sensory qualities evoked in the making and perception of objects.

On another but no less critical level, I’m attracted to the questioning prompted by more intimate engagements with materiality – a questioning that is granular or even molecular in scale, but no less ambitious for it. In this, I concur with Georges Perec when he writes: “What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. ... It matters little to me that these questions should be fragmentary...and a lot to me that they should seem trivial and futile: that’s exactly what makes them just as essential; if not more so, as all the other questions by which we’ve tried in vain to lay hold on our truth.”² And what is design but questioning through

making?

My questions are: Can we strive for modesty? Or must design achieve scale to be effective? Or is design more about approaches to making and sharing, no matter what the scale? In these difficult times, when the granular seems no match for our adversaries, I am full of doubts. Nonetheless, I continue to be disturbed by growth as a measure of success. I take comfort in small spaces and what the art historian Ara Merjian calls a willful finitude, in which the visible – not the abstract and infinite – can be a source of revelation.³

I am especially interested how tangible, incremental gestures of the crafted can overpower immensity. A friend of mine recently introduced me to a work by the Sardinian artist Maria Lai. The project is called *Legarsi alla Montagna* (or, “Tying to the Mountain”). It was made in 1981 in a tiny Sardinian village, where the artist and the villagers tore strips of cloth into bands, which they then tied together to bind their houses to each other and the adjacent mountain. (Picture a giant cat’s cradle.⁴) The result was a confirmation of a shared space, made manifest through individual acts of knotting.

Another Italian, Italo Calvino, also explores the idea of literalizing social ties. In *Invisible Cities*, he describes Ersilia, where citizens stretch strings from the corners of their houses to establish the relationships that sustain their city’s life. When the strings become so numerous that no one can pass among them, the inhabitants abandon Ersilia leaving only the strings and their supports. They are “spider webs of intricate relationships seeking a form.”⁵ (In my fantasies, such spider webs would be made and over-laid on towns and neighborhoods here in the US, with the idea of showing where our fractious tribes traverse common ground. Think of it as a different kind of gerrymandering.)

Calvino’s other point – that Ersilia’s webs are ultimately abandoned – suggests different concern. They point to a lack of care. If we translate Calvino and Lai’s scenarios into models of social design or social innovation via the crafted, we might want to also add a commitment to ‘care for and with.’ As political scientist and feminist scholar Joan Tronto writes: “without maintenance work, affectivity does not make it up to care and keeps it closer to a moral intention [...] without putting in the work to “care for.”⁶

Here, a more manageable example than Lai’s mountain or Calvino’s city comes to mind. This past winter a friend from Parsons asked me and several other people to each give her a textile that we had a deep enough connection to not to have discarded it – a textile we would allow her to mend as she saw fit. I found her request deeply moving, and I think that just maybe there is a model here, not only for an approach to *craft*, but also a way to think and practice design a bit differently: What if we thought of the work of design as materializing things (and affects) that we would like to have for a very long time?

Now, admittedly, we can rarely return to those things we’ve crafted, designed, and put out into the world, but maybe we can see mending as a shared responsibility. Maybe the work of design is ultimately not to innovate or even iterate (which tends toward value-neutral ‘improvement’) but to mend with all the care that is possible. If approached as future-oriented, and *not* nostalgic, such mending could yield distinctly different nuances and pleasures. Mending thought as generative.

It might also address the question of the proper agency of the designer—much critiqued in recent years as too Western and individualistic. The response – in social design, especially – has resulted in what I see as the near withdrawal of the designer. It reminds me of the early modernists’ attempts to erase signs of personal sensibility. But mistaking sensibility for authoritarianism, then and now, seems to me wrong-headed, a case of misplaced modesty. Just possibly crafting and co-crafting (as an approach to materials, to products of any kind, and those who will be affected by them) might be another way to repair that schism, and enrich, not squelch, the aesthetics of design and designers.

Notes:

1. <https://www.dezeen.com/2019/07/12/disarming-design-school-palestine-education/>
2. Georges Perec, “Approaches to What?” in *Georges Perec: Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, London: Penguin Classics, 2008, 210-11.
3. Ara H. Merjian, “Giorgio de Chirico’s Willful Claustrophobia: The Ferrara Interiors, 1915-18,” *Art Bulletin*, June 2019, 64.
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rVoN64Fz-o>
5. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, [1972] New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1974, 76.
6. Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. New York: Routledge, 1993 in Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, London Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 5.