General

Craft as Lifestyle

Levien Nordeman

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Levien Nordeman takes a closer look at the notion of craft, as well as analog or "retro" media, and argues that the current fascination with craft, which is increasingly observable in both the cultural sector and the art academies, can be understood as a way of redefining our relationships with digital technologies.

Retro media

The appeal of craft-as-lifestyle can of course be found well beyond the Dutch cultural sector: for example, the global popularity of mobile phone apps such as Instagram and Hipstamatic, which simulate analog or "vintage" photography by adding film grain and scratches to digital photos, can also be understood in terms of craft-as-lifestyle. In his article "The IRL Fetish", Nathan Jurgenson (2012) connected such digitally facilitated flirtations with analog photography to a broader trend, which he calls the "fetishization of the offline" (Ibid): "The current obsession with the analog, the vintage, and the retro has everything to do with this fetishization of the offline. The rise of the MP3 has been coupled with a resurgence in vinyl. Vintage cameras and typewriters dot the apartments of Millennials. Digital photos are cast with the soft glow, paper borders, and scratches of Instagram's faux-vintage filters. The ease and speed of the digital photo resists itself, creating a new appreciation for slow film photography. 'Decay porn' has become a thing" (Ibid). This attraction of analog media can also be observed among students of professional art and design education. In a survey conducted by Aldje van Meer *[iwouldratherdesignaposterthanawebsite.nl - Survey conducted by Aldje van Meer (in Dutch)]* (2012), art and design students in the Netherlands were asked about their use of digital media, as well as their specific skills and attitudes. Students acknowledged the possibilities of digital media for enhancing or presenting their art or design work, but, at the same time, largely favoured conventional media such as fabrics and paper: They mostly agreed with the statement that they "would rather design a poster than a website" (Van Meer 2012).

In his book *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (2011) pop journalist Simon Reynolds characterised this renewed interest in the past as "retro", which according to him is actually more about the present than about the past: "It uses the past as an archive of materials from which to extract subcultural capital (hipness, in other words) through recycling and recombining: the bricolage of cultural bric-a-brac" (2011: xxxi). Reynolds notes that the theorist Svetlana Boym distinguishes two versions of nostalgia: reflective and restorative. The former is apolitical, "takes pleasure in the misty remoteness of the past" (2011: xxviii) and is well aware of the impossibility of going back in time. The latter is more political, attempting to restore certain cultural (folklore) or national (nationalism) values. Craft-as-lifestyle is in this sense "retro": it is not so much a re-enactment of the past, rather its references to the past can be best understood as "samples": [1] the retro camera, the handmade vase, the hand-woven t-shirt are all samples of bygone times. Craft-as-lifestyle could therefore be described as "flirting with ghosts", or what Mark Fisher calls "hauntology": "memory's power (to linger, pop up unbidden, prey on your mind) and memory's fragility (destined to become distorted, to fade, then finally

disappear)" (Fisher 2006: 335). Craft-as-lifestyle can thus be understood as a practical version of Fisher's "hauntology": It seems to "haunt" a past in which manual work prevailed over mechanised or computer work, in which photographs were not immediately available after pushing the camera's shutter button and needed to first be developed and printed.



Sweater on sale in H&M store Alkmaar, The Netherlands.

Media as black box

Although craft-as-lifestyle favours the "handmade" and the "authentic", it should not be understood solely in terms of an attempt to escape dominant digital technologies in favour of older analog ones. Craft-as-lifestyle can also be seen as an effort to open up the "black box" of older, analog technologies, such as LPs, analog cameras and cassettes, as well as their accompanying infrastructures (record stores, record companies), patterns of distribution, language and aesthetics. For example, the cassette is a relatively simple "black box" to open up and tinker with, compared to trying to understand Web or mobile platform programming. Digital media have become something which cannot be fully or even partially understood and controlled by individuals, in contrast to more local and tangible practices such as craft, "making" and DIY creativity, which at least offer the possibility of controlling the creative process and outcome. Here, the ideas of the philosopher Albert Borgmann regarding the "device paradigm" may be of renewed importance in understanding craft-as-lifestyle.

In order to understand the value of Borgmann's conception of technology for understanding craft-as-lifestyle, we first have to take a closer look at Borgmann's philosophy of technology. In *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984) Borgmann explained how, since the Enlightenment, technology has served as an agent of self-determination and control, playing a liberating and "disburdening" role by relieving countless human beings from the "toil and misery" (Ibid: 37) of manual labour. Borgmann connects this concept of "disburdening" with the notion of availability: "goods that are available to us enrich our lives and, if they are technologically available, they do so without imposing burdens on us" (Ibid: 41). Borgmann describes two paradigms as fundamental underlying patterns for technology (Ibid: 33): technology can function either as a "thing" or

as a “device”. A “thing” stresses social relationships and engagement, it is “inseparable from its context, namely, its world, and from our commerce with the thing and its world, namely engagement. The experience of a thing is always and also a bodily and social engagement with the thing’s world. In calling forth a manifold engagement, a thing necessarily provides more than one commodity” (Ibid: 41). Borgmann illustrates this point with the example of a stove, which provided more than just warmth: it also created focus by providing a physical centre to the house. Moreover, each family member had his or her own task, for example, the children “kept the firebox filled” (Ibid: 42). Thus, physical engagement is closely related to skill: “Physical engagement is not simply physical contact but the experience of the world through the manifold sensibility of the body. That sensibility is sharpened and strengthened in skill. Skill is intensive and refined world engagement. Skill, in turn, is bound up with social engagement” (Ibid: 42). Borgmann’s main argument is that the “device” paradigm of modern technology displaces “things” and skills, as well as the social connections and engagements, which are related to these “things”. According to Borgmann, this leads to unfamiliarity with the “devices” in question: “The machinery of a device does not of itself disclose the skill and character of the inventor and producer; it does not reveal a region and its particular orientation within nature and culture. In sum, the machinery of devices, unlike the context of things, is either entirely occluded or only cerebrally and anonymously present. It is in this sense necessarily unfamiliar” (Ibid: 48). Craft-as-lifestyle, consisting of DIY practices and the reappropriation of analog technologies such as LPs, analog cameras and cassettes, therefore, may be understood in terms of what Borgmann calls “focal practices”: a reaction to the disturbance of social and physical engagement with technology, and as an expression of certain values (connecting with people as well as with materials) in concrete action. For example, silkscreen printing, analog photography or 16mm film.

The “view source” option in many web browsers shows that the desire to open up the “black box” of technology and to foster a “thing” relationship is not restricted to analog media. For many web programmers and designers, the “view source” option was a first encounter with code and with the ability to edit or redesign a HTML website. However, the options for engaging with digital media in a simple and direct way have in fact decreased over the past decade, primarily due to the growing complexity of software as intermediary. In his article “Media After Software *[manovich.net - Media After Software]* ” (Manovich 2013), Lev Manovich stated that there is no such thing as digital media, only software: “for users who only interact with media content through application software, the ‘properties’ of digital media are defined by the particular software as opposed to solely being contained in the actual content (i.e., inside digital files)” (Ibid: 5). Thus media becomes software: “The shift to digital data and media software a hundred years later generalized this principle to all media. With all data types now encoded as sets of numbers, they can only be efficiently accessed by users via software applications which translates (sic) these numbers into sensory representations. The consequence of this is what we already discussed: all ‘properties of digital media’ are now defined by the particular software as opposed to solely being contained in the actual content, i.e., digital files. So, what was already true for audio recording, radio, television, and video now also applies to text, images, and 3D objects and scenes” (Ibid: 12). Perceiving media as a black box is not inherently tied to software: rather, it all depends on the skills, attitudes and perceptions of the users. For software developers and programmers, working with software applications and code languages instils a “thing” relationship in a Borgmannian sense, while for artists or designers, digital media increasingly tends to become a device, in Borgmann’s words “anonymously present” (Borgmann 1984: 48).

Rethinking craft and “retro media”

In this essay, my aim has been to link the contemporary debate on craft in the Dutch cultural sector with the broader trend of craft-as-lifestyle, visible in developments such as DIY practices and the reappropriation of analog or “retro” media. I referred to the writings

of Albert Borgmann in order to cast a new light on underlying patterns of engagement with digital technologies. If the cultural sector, including art and design education, wishes to remain relevant, it must avoid the trap of a "restorative" nostalgia which sees craft merely as a practice favouring analog media over digital technologies. Richard Sennett's contemporary exploration of craft and craftsmanship is first and foremost a sociology of labour, rooted in what Borgmann described as a "bodily and social engagement" (Borgmann 1984: 41) with the world, be it through a silkscreen printing workshop or in a web developer's office. However, in the contemporary debate the silkscreen workshop seems to generate a wider appeal and a greater deal of imagination than what can be found in the developer's office, or even the community of Linux programmers for that matter. Therefore, in rethinking the importance of craft, the debate should focus on what it means "to do a job well" (Sennett 2008: 9), regardless of whether the media of choice happens to be analog or digital. Consequently the popularity of "retro" media (at least among art and design students) should not be understood solely from the perspective of "retro" aesthetics or a false analog-digital dichotomy: Instead, the trend suggests a broader desire to define and discover new relationships with technology. In our media-entrenched world, "art and technology" cannot merely be categorised as a niche community within the broader sector of art and culture. This desire of art and design students to define and discover new relationships with technology can provide us with a compelling starting point for further discussion within the Dutch cultural sector, specifically professional art and design education, about the complex relationship between art and technology.

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Levien Nordeman is lecturer and researcher in the field of new media and culture. He currently teaches media theory at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam and is affiliated with knowledge centre Creating 010 in the research program Communication in the Digital Age.

Footnotes

1. Or, in Reynolds' words, "a segment of living time" (2011: 314).

Tags

Design, Labour, Media Society

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