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Eleven Propositions in Response to the Question: “What Is Contemporary about Craft?”

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Abstract

This text was written for a panel at the 2012 College Art Association conference entitled “What Is Contemporary about Craft?,” co-chaired by Namita Wiggers and Elizabeth Agro. It puts forth eleven polemical propositions that attempt to answer the panel’s question from a variety of perspectives, highlighting the shifting and vexed place that craft occupies within contemporary art.

Keywords: contemporary craft, craft identity, feminism and craft, queer theory and craft, thing theory, craftivism

Proposition One

Craft is contemporary because, at a fundamental level, the world of contemporary art is brimming with what could be characterized as craft. Take the stuffed animals and grandma throws of US artist Mike Kelley, whose suicide last year unleashed an outpouring of remembrances in the pages of *Artforum*, or the intricate tapestries of the Italian artist Alighiero Boetti that were recently featured in an exhibit at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Boetti’s maps, in which

flags of countries fill each nation's contours, were handmade by commissioned Afghan embroiderers. In these tapestries, the entire chart of global political boundaries was remade by female skilled laborers who were working in a country where such boundaries were under increased pressure. Boetti's maps raise, for some, ethical questions about outsourcing, exploitation, and the blurred boundaries between handicraft and low-paid piecework. This example demonstrates how craft saturates the landscape of recent current art; it has threaded itself into and onto any map of the international art world. Within the discourse of contemporary art, craft is an unstable but potentially useful rubric under which to corral a host of strange bedfellows, from Louise Bourgeois' fabric works to Ghanaian El Anatsui's sculptures of aluminum and copper wire to German-born Rosemarie Trockel's visceral ceramics. All are high-priced, high-minded objects made by hands—but whose hands? Does it matter who makes these contemporary crafts?

Proposition Two

Craft is not contemporary. It is outmoded; it is old-fashioned; it is kitsch; it is domestic. It is the residue of the homespun, the folksy, or the functional. Craft belongs not to Boetti or Bourgeois, but is instead the purview of figures like Erica Wilson, whose widely selling books on embroidery and quilts in the 1970s paved the way for the resurgence of amateur popularity in needlework in the US, and spawned a new publishing category of trade craft books. Craft, which was formerly based on survival and necessary making, has morphed into a hobby, a leisure-time activity. It is provincial, regional, middlebrow,

decorative. In the 1970s, it turned a blind eye to what has really mattered in contemporary art, namely, the linguistic turn, the growth of conceptualism, and the drive towards deskilling. Hence it is largely irrelevant. Its retrograde reliance on the touch of the maker's hand is nothing but a regressive, romantic leftover.

Proposition Three

Craft draws its very strength from its anachronistic quality and its ties to traditions, both its adherence to conventional artisanal labor and also its more messy reinventions. Handmaking maintains its integrity in response to and in opposition to industrialization. Why should we insist upon craft as contemporary when its important and distinctive ontology is its very connection to the past, to the entire rich terrain of thrift and ingenuity, to knowledge production passed down through the hand, and skilled legacies? Craft embodies its histories in its materials. It should not be seen as yet another trend within current art but rather is assertively and proudly *uncontemporary*.

Proposition Four

Craft is contemporary because it has been widely institutionalized, because it maintains a strong connection to the world of galleries, museums, auction houses, and, even more, the academy. It has spawned a new wave of criticism and curation, and has become a bigger part of the art historical discourse, with influential and ever-proliferating monographs, anthologies, journals, and scholarly sessions dedicated to craft theory. Craft is the under-recognized or effaced alternative to modernism, a small but influential mode of practice that savvy

scholars are finally cued into. Craft's influence on virtually every aspect of contemporary art is the worst kept secret in art history, as art historians are beginning to realize the profound debt current practices owe to handmaking. This includes not only the important feminist reclamations of several decades ago such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* or Faith Ringgold's story quilts, but also the growing centrality of object-based new materialist "thing theory." Craft paved the way for investigations about obsolescence, transparency of labor, methods of production, and what Jane Bennett refers to as the "vibrancy" of matter. Feminist craft in the 1970s involved collective projects, distributed authorship, social practice, and what Nicolas Bourriaud calls relational aesthetics, well before those terms were invented. Because of the widespread absorption of feminist methods of working into the larger terrain of art since the late 1970s—including participation, process-based pieces that highlight unfinished or leftover remains of visible effort, and the performance of domestic work in the space of the institution to question the public/private divide—one could say that craft has driven contemporary art, has motored some of its most groundbreaking tendencies. Given the close marriage of craft procedures and the critical concerns of recent art, there is no difference between craft and art in the contemporary moment.

Proposition Five

Craft is contemporary because it is progressive, because creating things by hand yourself proposes an alternative microeconomy of local making, a system of exchange more akin to bartering with its

emphasis on trade and tactile connections to supply-and-demand. It is environmentally conscious and respectful of the earth's diminishing resources. Craft is the slow, the intentional, the ecologically sound counterpoint to the acceleration of post-Fordist life. Craft is edgy, craft is radical, even revolutionary, and craft has the potential to remake regimes of distribution. Craft can be a galvanizing visualization of political intent, like the 2009 Mother's Day anti-war rally in Washington, DC, sponsored by Code Pink, which featured a collectively knit banner spelling out Julia Ward Howe's proclamation: "We will not raise our children to kill another mother's child." Craftivism's marriage of craft and activism is a tool to dismantle or contest the global tyranny of mass manufacturing. It is a potentially wide-scale rebellion that encourages us to buy handmade or to "stop shopping and start sewing," as craft activist Frau Fiber exhorts. Craft can throw a wrench (or crocheted bomb) into the machinery of late capitalism.

Proposition Six

Craft is contemporary because craft is obsessed with the market, with entrepreneurship, with neoliberal self-branding and promotion. Craft is contemporary because it is thoroughly, decidedly, capitalist. Craft is dominated by niche advertisement and publicity on marketplace websites like Etsy, as well as at local craft fairs laden with both amazing finds and frivolous objects. Craft is about selling stuff, turning a profit, remaking yourself into a business. Craft has turned hobbies into jobs, has blurred the line between fulfillment and employment, has become a smart career move. Whatever subversive potential it

might have had has been leached out of it by the emphasis on commodification, on the relentless demand to buy, to sell, to make something cute that will catch the shopper's eye.

Proposition Seven

Craft is contemporary because it importantly maintains its tactile, bodily component in the face of computer technology. It connects people in the flesh and provides a much-needed alternative to the incessant push of digital interfaces, mediatization, and screen culture. Current stitch-and-bitch circles or knitting groups provide a respite from online lives, and craft facilitates face-to-face encounters that are not transacted via the internet.

Proposition Eight

Craft is contemporary because it has embraced the digital, because it has gone online, because of the explosion of craft blogs, social media sites, and intimate interfaces with the internet. This resonance stretches back to early computer software innovator Ada Lovelace with her analogy between the analytic engine and the mechanical loom. Echoing this historical legacy, Cat Mazza's KnitPro project is a free software app that translates digital images into knit or needlepoint patterns. Conversely, Mazza's Knitoscope software renders moving images into knitted animation. In her *Knitoscope Testimonies*, she interviewed activists who organize against sweatshop labor; connecting new media technology, fabric production, and social justice in one flickering image.

Proposition Nine

Craft is contemporary because it has been embraced by straight men, because it has lost its stigma and is no longer ghettoized as feminized work, because it can be heterosexual, even deliriously, if abjectly, masculine. Craft is now big, machinic, spectacular, macho, heroic.

Proposition Ten

Craft is contemporary because it is queer, with its nelly yarn bombers and wild cross-stich faggotry and dykes who throw pots. Craft's queerness keys into interlocking discourses of pleasure, shame, disappointment, difficulty, exuberance, and community-building. Craft's unruly libidinal energy is a bridge across the high/low divide.

Proposition Eleven

Craft is a wedge that reveals stark distinctions within ideologies of taste and value. Craft polarizes and collapses theoretical positions about what making means today. Craft is contemporary because it is the pivot between art and commerce, between work and leisure, between the past and the future. There is no such thing as "the contemporary," and there is no such thing as craft. With all its complexities, with all its different registers of meaning across history, across class, across gender, across institutions, craft is all of these things, some of these things, none of these things.

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