



ASSEMBLE 2010: AUDIO TRANSCRIPTS

Session: Consumer Trends

Speaker: Martin Conreen, Senior Lecturer in Design, Goldsmiths University of London and Making Director, Institute of Making (formerly the Materials Library)

Chair: Emily Campbell, Director of Design, RSA

EMILY CAMPBELL: That was fun. Wise. I love the idea that scientists just simplify everything by vetoing 4x4's or something. And again we had this relationship between craft and social relations. There's a very nice bit at the end of Richard Sennett's book, *The Craftsman*, where he talks about a sociable craft, a sociable expert. I think his example is actually a lawyer or something, not ostensibly a craftsperson, but he spends a lot of time describing the expert who is able to mentor, who is sociable in their craft and able to pass on their knowledge. And that seems very fundamental to his argument about why craft is valuable. [Our next speaker is Martin Conreen]. Martin is a senior lecturer in design at Goldsmiths' and I believe he's going to take us a little further into the sustainability story with craft.

MARTIN CONREEN: Hello everybody. I'll just bring a few things out. I'm not going to be showing you any slides, but I've got a few objects and a few stories, and, I'm going to have a little bit of fun I hope. It's great listening to all the speakers talk about trends and consumerism, and Daniel Miller talking about objects in people's homes. And also we've looked at the future and technologies. And my background is as a maker who has gone through every kind of making that possibly you can make. And I've got rather confused by it all. But I think some time ago I kind of came to this position that I realised the thing that I love most of all is the stuff things are made of. Which led me to go on to be a visiting research fellow at King's [College London], where with Dr Zoe Laughlin, who you're going to see later with some materials downstairs, and Dr Mark Miodownik we set up a materials library. And I think working with

materials has kind of given me the fantastic satisfaction of trying to understand why people do things, what they do with things, and how they do them.

I was asked to talk a little bit about sustainability, and I thought, there's a really huge amount of research that's gone on about sustainability. And as Mike said earlier, we've had lots of debates about defining craft; we've equally had lots of debates about defining what sustainability is and what sustainability means. But I think craftspeople, makers, anybody who knows about stuff, they bring a deep knowledge of that stuff and I think that deep knowledge is both in their handling of it, their using of it, but equally in the way that that stuff interferes with people's lives. So the way that this stuff engages with people, even if it's artefacts that we might consider to be a bit mundane and just practical, utilitarian things, or whether they're objects that we've received as precious things. And there's a really great debate around sustainability which relates to things like durability and robustness. And I think that we have an emotional attachment to [certain goods], and because of that they can be delicate and fragile, and as delicate and fragile things, they need protection and respect. So, equally, there's a durability and robustness there that [requires us] to redefine what durability is.

So I was thinking about this last night, and I thought, I'll bring two objects and we'll look at them in relation to their sustainability. And this object - well you can see they're both shoes - but this was a shoe that I made some twenty years ago, not particularly interesting, never particularly comfortable. I did make it for myself, and I never wore them because they were horrible. And this is another shoe that I bought recently which is a handmade shoe, and is rather beautiful, and is incredibly comfortable. And I wanted to know more about it, so I found out who the designer was, and this designer started out to be a person who made handmade shoes, and interestingly studied at the same college where I did my shoe course, my evening class, to work out how to make a pair of shoes. But she started out making handmade shoes. She set up a business with a shop window that had one pair of shoes in it. And obviously because of the amount of time and effort that went into those shoes, she didn't sell very many. [She] carried on making shoes, because as a lover of making, that was her *raison d'être*, you know, she made things, she made shoes.

That got found out by somebody else, so her craft skill was brought into a more industrial context, and she worked for another shoe company. And in fact she's worked for all the shoe companies: Grenson's, Church's, Loake's. She has even been taken abroad and worked for people like Louis Vuitton. And then quite recently her knowledge and skills of her practice was identified by a major department store here, who said, 'Well hang on, why don't we make shoes like that person?' So the first thing they did was, they brought her into their store, and they said, 'What would you change about what we do?' And she said, 'Everything.' You know, she said, 'I've been watching people coming in to this shop wearing immaculate clothes, businessmen, lovely Italian suits, people wearing lovely, great fabrics, and they walk up to your shoes and they walk right past. And that's because they've become mundane, they've become boring, they've become plastic, they've become industrialised, they're made out of materials that probably wouldn't be very nice for the environment.' And she says, 'what you need to do is make things on an industrial scale but go back [to basics],' and people have talked about values of materials and values of skills. So, I think her immediate thing was to think about the companies that made their shoes - how are they going to survive if they don't make lovely shoes? So she did a kind of quick fix on that by getting them to improve the bad things that they already made. Then, in a more long-term situation, she went back to basics. She said, 'Look, we're going to redesign shoes. You sell English things; we're going to make some English shoes.' Interestingly, and this is where the debate about sustainability comes, she had the lasts made in Nottingham, the lasts were then taken to Italy, to Milan, where the Italians made the prototypes, and then the prototypes and the lasts were taken to India where the shoes were made by hand-makers, and the materials were also located. To make English shoes. So there's some Englishness there.

And interestingly, both of [these shoes] have got some kind of carbon footprint. But [for the shoe I made] I took the materials off the shelf and made a pair of shoes, and *these* [shoes] were a person's great knowledge, care and attention to the making of something that, I know that these shoes will last forever. And people can have a look at them; they're Goodyear welted, so they've got that kind of brand on the bottom, they're hand-stitched - OK, we use sewing machines and other things, but they've been finished by hand - and they are

quite a beautiful thing; as opposed to mine that are handmade and quite not beautiful.

So, again I think that raises questions around sustainability; what is sustainability? What does it mean to us, what does it mean to the people who make things? And my other thoughts, this thing about craftspeople making things out of locally-sourced materials; how many craftspeople today make things out of locally-sourced materials? [*Show of hands*] Great. I mean, I, I really appreciate that. I've dug clay out of the ground, I've slaked clay, and I've made things out of what's available. But I think that's another thing around education that we can discuss, about why we're not producing particular materials for particular types of craft and maker-users. But I think that tacit knowledge we have of materials means that also we're interested in the materials that are best for our craft, and sometimes they're not local.

On my journeys, I've travelled all over the Far East looking at craft communities, because crafts in some communities is all they do, and I was asked to go there and tell them what sustainable craft is. And I thought, hang on a minute, I'm a bit confused here. So I travelled to these places, and there are people there making things out of things that they grow, and some of the things they make, they use themselves - and they want to know how to be sustainable.

So, again that's a kind of contradiction in itself, because they have to send their crafts all over the world. While I was there I found this stuff which I thought was interesting, and in fact somebody was really keen to show me because they knew I collected materials. And this is a material that, well, it's a kind of thread or rope that's made by people in Indonesia from sweet wrappers that are thrown away. And in fact, in some places you just get given these sweets, and [the wrappers] kind of get melted and moulded and then bound into *this*, and then other people make things out of *this*. So it's that kind of chain. And they become baskets which then get sold all over the world, but I've seen them quite recently in T.K. Maxx. And they're kind of marketed as eco-crafts, or sustainable crafts, but they're actually made of a material that's collected by poor people and then made into another material that's sold on in a chain, and then made into this object, which luckily now does have a little badge on it saying it's recyclable. But before, as a craft, people weren't really interested in

whether a craft was recyclable, or repairable, or some of these other values within materials that might be considered sustainable. So that again raises interesting questions about sustainability and things that are made by hand.

Going back to craftspeople and the things that they make, I think a lot of craftspeople know the value of the materials that they use, and they understand it from quite a lot of different perspectives. They know first of all, [especially] if they've had to gather those materials, they know about the toil, the work, and what's gone into the production of them. If they have to buy them, they know the cost. They also know what they then get changed into in terms of the thing that they make, in terms of what its value is. But I think even more and more so, they've always understood the cost to the environment of those materials. And I think we need to hold on to that as a really special part of what makers do. They understand, they have a relationship with objects, they have relationships with users and owners and other makers, and they actually have an understanding of that complete cycle.

My last object, very quickly, is this piece of Whitby jet. I went up to Whitby when we were doing an exhibition for the Tate I had to get two things: I had to get a big piece of coal from Northumberland; and I also wanted to get a piece of Whitby jet, which you probably all know is one of the last mined precious materials in the UK. And when I went to visit the jeweller, the lady in the shop said, 'Oh you can't see him yet, he's out mining a seam.' Which I thought was lovely, that he was actually getting his materials from somewhere to make the jewellery. And, while I was researching this, I found a really interesting news story about when Whitby jet was popularised in the Victorian period, [telling how] people went out and they collected it on the beach, and people still collect it on the beach now. And then they were able to sell that on to this ever-increasing growth of jewellery makers that were making [objects with] Whitby jet to export all over the world. Then at the end of the Victorian period it suddenly became very unpopular, it was drab, demure; it was unfashionable. And still people were making a living out of collecting this. When they couldn't sell it any more, do you know what they used to do with it? Burn it on the fire! Because Jet is coal, and it has one of the highest calorific values of all forms of coal. So again I thought, wow, you know, this idea that you collect a precious

material, but it has a function, it's also carbon and its heat and its warmth and, you know, when you need that, that's what you can get from it.

So, I think there are complexities around sustainability that will haunt us forever, and ever-increasingly, like Daniel Miller says, although he likes to look at scientists, we do produce a lot of things that actually are not very good for us. But [in fact] there are quite a lot of makers that are able to cope with that and make things that I think generally are made out of things that are good for us. And there are lots of good things about that whole process and that relationship that are really connected to wellbeing. OK, thank you.

Further information about Martin Conreen's work, visit the website for the Institute of Making (formerly The Materials Library):
www.instituteofmaking.org.uk

