

# **Emily Howes**

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## **Make Your Own Ark: The Sustainable Imperative of Indie Craft**

Blogger Autumn Wiggins last year put forward to readers of The Storque, blog of indie craft online store Etsy: 'There is increasing unrest amongst crafters who feel their creations only add to the clutter on this Earth, but what if we could actually save the world by making things?'<sup>1</sup> It is a question with complex implications. With input from ethnographic data and reference to examples of objects, this paper discusses indie craft's sustainable imperative and its potential to bring a sustainable agenda to popular culture.

Indie craft is essentially a sub-cultural amateur craft revival, which, rather than the music or spectacular dress of 'classic' subcultures, has as its central motif the deployment of hand skills such as knitting, embroidery and sewing – the domestic arts – to make clothes, accessories and household items. Unlike amateur crafts of the past, indie craft distinguishes itself from conventional domestic crafts or studio crafts through the particular way it twists the tradition to fit a contemporary popular culture context and the motivations of the crafters as they do so, representing a new aesthetic and conceptual direction for the handmade.

Embedded in indie craft are altruistic and socially-motivated undercurrents, whereby craft is read as a more meaningful and ethical alternative to mass production, including an emphasis on sustainability. Crafting becomes an opportunity to disengage from a morally dubious mainstream and to opt-out of the consumer cycle. In theory, this deprives the corporate power-brokers of their market and their basis to dictate the terms of the exchange. This extends to examples of 'craftivism', indie craft's activist strain, which utilises crafted objects to convey messages of protest. As such, indie craft can be seen as part of a tradition of craft as a tool of resistance and social rehabilitation that crystallised at the time of the industrial revolution, as inspired by Arts and Crafts Movement instigators John Ruskin and William Morris.

Indie craft specifically addresses sustainability through its espousal of the concept of 'upcycling', derived from William McDonough and Michael Braungart's 2002 book *Cradle to Cradle*.<sup>2</sup> Crafters remake salvaged waste materials as new objects, addressing the excess of waste as well as embracing the design challenge of utilising found objects. Repositioning salvaged materials enhances their emotional value as well as their monetary: their reconfigured context transforms them from commonplace, low-value, waste objects into unusual, valuable and cherished treasures endowed with readymade histories. These two aspects can alternately complement and compete with one another, however, as the fine line between ecologically-motivated salvage and fettered vintage styling wavers and blurs. Popular culture's propensity for short-term faddishness has the potential to undercut the long-term change required for a sustainable future. This may be ameliorated, however, by the not-insignificant value of symbolic acts, and indie craft's potential to make a sustainable ethic appealing and accessible in the face of such a daunting challenge as the future of the planet.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.etsy.com/storque/craftivism/earth-tones-make-like-a-tree-part-2-1631/> (accessed 26 March 2009)

<sup>2</sup> McDonough, William and Michael Braungart, 2002, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the way we make things*, North Point Press, New York.