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Toward a Post-Consumer Subjectivity: a Future for the Crafts in the Twenty-First Century?

In the last two decades it has become clear that a number of anthropogenic environmental problems are presenting an increasing threat to the future of human civilisation. These problems include pollution, resource depletion and global warming, amongst others. While science can guide responses to them, it cannot provide the solutions. This is particularly true of consumerism—broadly acknowledged as the principal source of environmental degradation—and the set of idealised, transient relationships between individuals and objects necessary for its continual growth. These are ethical problems relating to what constitutes the 'good life' and how it might be achieved. The 'good life' here is seen as one lived in a manner consistent with one's values and moral standards, as distinct from a life of material abundance or one that is merely free from fear or effort.

The crafts movement has a long history of engagement with both environmental and ethical issues. However occasionally misguided, this engagement has been neither superficial nor redundant. In the early history of the crafts, environmental degradation and its attendant ethical dilemmas were central to the thought of John Ruskin and William Morris. For both of these thinkers environment, aesthetics, social relations and politics were considered an integral whole. This legacy continued to exert an influence in the studio crafts movement through to the 1970s. Throughout the twentieth century, this aspect of the heritage of the crafts movement has steadily waned; since the 1970s, in particular, the crafts have tended to bifurcate into the domains of 'Art' and 'Design', becoming respectively isolated or co-opted.

In recent years, several movements have emerged—in response to environmental issues and in opposition to the dominance of the monoculture produced by globalising capitalism— that have powerful resonances with some of the crafts movement's early political and ethical heritage. These movements are characterised by a rejection of the idealism and technocratic utopianism of Modernism, embracing instead the contingent, the concrete and the particular. The most important of these in this context are the 'slow' movement, natural and cultural heritage preservation, recycling and reuse, bioregionalism and emotionally durable design. All of these movements suggest the possibility of alternative human subjectivities and are best understood as a movement away from selves defined primarily as a consumers of goods supplied mysteriously by industrial capital, to selves understood as active producers of the material culture that significantly constitutes their lives. Such projects, entailing the acceptance of modernity as a regime of continual change but positing alternatives to the manner in which the subject has been determined within industrial culture, were also fundamental to the crafts movement from its beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and is evident in the writings of Ruskin, Morris, Ashbee and others.

Environmental issues are moving into the mainstream, entering politics, economics and the popular imagination. This rising tide of concern presents an opportunity for the crafts movement to renew its engagement with broader issues and to contribute both to the debate and to the formation of the sustainable material and creative culture of the future.