

*Handmade Online:
The Crafting of Commerce, Aesthetics and Community on Etsy.com*

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ABSTRACT

HANDMADE ONLINE: The Crafting of Commerce, Aesthetics and Community on Etsy.com (Under the direction of Dr. Katherine Roberts)

Etsy.com is an online marketplace for the buying and selling of handcrafted objects. As a part of the independent/DIY craft subculture, Etsy.com offers a unique glimpse into the world of contemporary, independent craftspeople. Though only three years old, Etsy has been exceptionally successful in creating a unique space for craftspeople to interact with peers, as well as sell their objects to an ever-growing customer base. Beginning with an analysis of the website's technological and socio-cultural precursors, I interrogate Etsy's self-presentation as a company interested in both commerce and community. In turn, sellers maintain high expectations for what the website can and will help them to achieve. I explore the aesthetics of the objects promoted on Etsy with particular attention to the traditionally gendered nature of craftwork, reconfigured notions of labor and leisure, and the perceived benefits and drawbacks of individual artists working inside a private, for-profit company.

DEDICATION

To my sister Marsha for her tireless support.

Thank you also to my parents and Chris for their patience
and generosity throughout this project.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the last three years, craftspeople across the United States (and the globe) have been communicating, sharing and selling their work through a new e-commerce venue. As a digital marketplace, Etsy.com offers buyers and sellers a user-friendly platform with which to make transactions. Etsy has built its company on a reputation as a voice box for the ‘handmade revolution,’ privileging handcrafts over mass-production objects. Through its site design, Etsy has built not only a system for the sale of crafts but has also encouraged a sense of community among crafting entrepreneurs and hobbyists. As part of the independent craft scene that has emerged in the last decade, Etsy offers opportunities for expressing individuality, rebellion, pleasure, and economic freedom within the context of a global industrial marketplace. Etsy can be seen as a long overdue chance for craftspeople to empower themselves in a economic system built upon the industrial revolution, however, this is not to say that Etsy does not have its theoretical or practical problems. In its current form, Etsy seems to desire to be both centralized and decentralized, mission-driven and neutral, and visible and invisible as intermediary between buyers and sellers. The stated intentions of the owners and employees of Etsy, the interests of craftspeople using Etsy to see their work and consumers using Etsy to purchase handmade items are not always directly aligned. In my thesis, I address this discord, as well as position Etsy within the cultural history of do-it-yourself/independent craft culture, third wave feminism and aesthetic trends of crafted objects.

Given Etsy’s relatively young age² (the site is only in its third year of existence), my goal is to shed light on the ways that Etsy is (and may in the future be) understood by craftspeople and consumers of handcrafts. This undertaking is from a position of situated

²The site is in its third year of existence.

knowledge. If folklorists, academia and the broader public — particularly those with an interest in handcrafts — can become savvy to Etsy as an alternative venue for the sale of crafters’ goods, we can help craftspeople find new markets and generate greater income from the sale of their crafts. My hope is that ultimately, makers will be able to utilize Etsy as a means of finding financial success in a field where too few see the monetary rewards of their skills, while understanding the ideological underpinnings that inform the structure and success of the Etsy website.

Etsy Rhymes with Betsy

My interest in the independent craft community began in 2005, but my relationship with crafting, like so many people interested in handmade objects, started much earlier. Like many crafters, I learned how to draw, paint, sculpt, sew, and knit from my mother with an occasional bit of help from a few particularly inspiring art teachers at school. My mother had learned these skills as a young person because of financial necessity—crafting was a way to make what she didn’t have the money to buy. For me, crafting was a creative and artistic outlet. It is a pleasurable activity done during leisure time rather than out of necessity. Like many, I find deep satisfaction in the process of making things with my own two hands.

In my early teen years, crafting took on a different connotation. My history with crafting is not without moments of adolescent rebellion. As a younger person, I scoffed at the possibility of handcrafts as an alternative to consumerism. After all, brand name items were *de rigueur* to middle school fashion. “Why buy it when we could make it?” my mother would say as we perused the storefronts of the local mall. She said it so often, in fact, that it became a sort of running joke in my family. Though I argued against it at the time, this message was not lost. In later years, I would find myself saying the same thing, and even telling myself, “I could make this, and I could make it better, and it would be one-of-a-kind.” But as I grew into adulthood, my feminist anti-domestic sentiments and the lack of shared aesthetic among crafters kept me at bay from crafting, even as an art student in my undergraduate college years.

I had no interest in the patterns and designs being sold at the big-box craft stores.

It seemed that my taste and lifestyle did not fit with the crafting style to which I had been exposed. Despite this, I kept searching, hoping to discover people like me, seeking the solace and the feelings of connectedness to a community that I could embrace. A decade later, I began to encounter people who shared my specific craft aesthetic and a particular do-it-yourself (DIY) sensibility. Around the year 2000, a new breed of crafters, rooted in do-it-yourself punk subculture and riot grrrl ethics of the 1990s came to my attention. Like the riot grrrl movement, DIY/indie crafters could be seen as operating from a position of third-wave feminism. In fact, the term ‘new domesticity’ is now sometimes used to refer to indie crafters who operate from a decidedly feminist position. These groups seek to empower individuals (predominantly women) through the creative act. By taking up the activities that have traditionally been associated with women’s work as voluntary pursuits, the act of crafting is re-envisioned as empowering rather than confining. Removed from its burdensome history, activities such as sewing and knitting have taken on new life for some contemporary feminists, particularly where so many women (and men) spend their working hours away from tasks that involve their hands. Alongside the growing popularity of crafting among young, often urban, women, websites like craftster.org, which began in 2003, opened:

as a repository for hip, off-beat, crafty DIY projects. People who have crafty urges, but who are not excited by cross-stitched bunnies and crocheted toilet paper cozies, can show off their current craft projects, ask advice on future projects and get inspiration for new endeavors.³

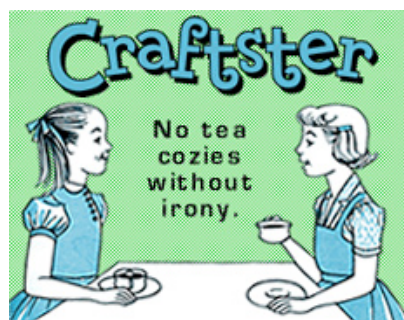


fig 1. homepage, craftster.org

Shortly after it opened its virtual doors in July of 2005, I discovered Etsy.com, a website designed as a venue to buy and sell handmade goods. I had been a long-time

³“Craftster.org – About Craftster,” available at <http://www.craftster.org/about.html>; Internet; accessed 30 September 2008.

computer user at that point, having educated myself by way of chat rooms and websites. I was familiar with the way that people were using new media to interact, communicate across sometimes vast geographic distances. I had certainly encountered many craft sites before it, but Etsy seemed to be doing something unique. Though Etsy buyers and sellers (also known as Etsians) covered a wide range of aesthetics and styles, I encountered a thriving community of people like me whose objects were the product of the DIY/indie craft and new domestic movements, informed by a mix of pop culture, traditional craft methods, new tools and media. I became enchanted by cross-stitch sampler kits that featured phrases like “Bite Me,” “Irony is Not Dead” and “Is That All There Is?,” clothes made from refashioned Goodwill finds, and many other projects that challenge stereotypical domestic or women’s crafts.

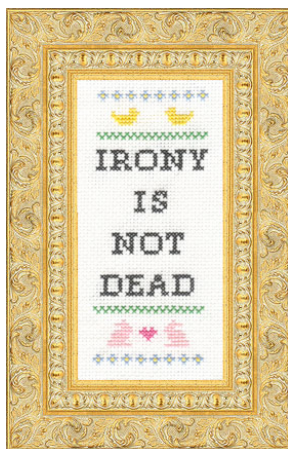


fig 2. cross-stitch kit available for purchase at subversivecrossstitch.com

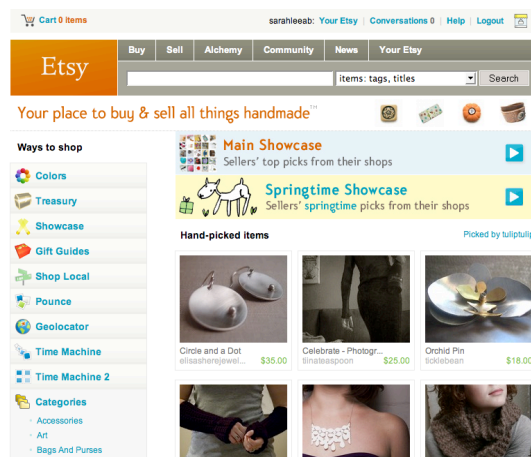


fig 3. Screen capture of the Etsy.com homepage

The user generated wikipedia.com includes an entry for Etsy that defines it as a “site [that] follows in the tradition of open craft fairs, giving sellers personal storefronts where they list their goods for a fee. It has been compared to ‘a crafty cross between Amazon and eBay’ and ‘your grandma's basement.’”⁴ The site functions as an extension of a series of Internet platforms for individual artisans and craftspeople to sell their goods. The successor of galleries, fairs, consignment shops, trunk shows and catalogs, Etsy describes itself as “an online marketplace for buying & selling all things handmade” and yet, the structural design of Etsy implies a certain ideological agenda. Etsy promotes itself both as a venue and a place/space. The Etsy platform is not value neutral, it is a space that aligns itself with particular aesthetics and ideologies. Through the presence of online forums for communication and conversation, local street teams and seller groups, collaborative projects, contests, and educational sessions in specific craft skills as well as business guidance in planning, pricing and tax preparation, Etsy has purported to create a virtual and physical community of participants who share a core belief in the symbolic and commercial value of the handmade. Many users champion Etsy for offering craftspeople a simple, easy-to-establish virtual storefront:

I love Etsy! It's style, ease of use, creative searches, the people, the way it pushes me to be better at my craft, and just for making it all possible!⁵

I think etsy has been an amazing vehicle for crafters. It's the best online venue for selling your work. I love how cheap it is. You can tell that the people who started it are trying to make money but are also concerned about the crafters and making it affordable for them. I love that you get your own shop, and I think it's very easy to navigate.⁶

Etsy is so incredibly good about supporting its vendors, it's ridiculous. They are constantly coming up with ways to streamline the use of their site, all the while providing us with invaluable tools to make each of us a success. It's a give-and-take environment. If we are successful, so are they; so they do all they can to keep that cycle in motion. And the sellers love them for it. I know I do. I wouldn't be even considering making a go of all this if it weren't for an avenue like Etsy, and thousands of others would likely be in the same boat as well. It's made having a home-based

⁴“Etsy – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia,” available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Etsy>, 1 October 2008; Internet; accessed 3 October 2008.

⁵Camille Marie Weitzel. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, April 13, 2008.

⁶Lindsay Keating. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, March 17, 2008.

business and lifestyle completely possible for those like me who otherwise wouldn't know what to do.⁷

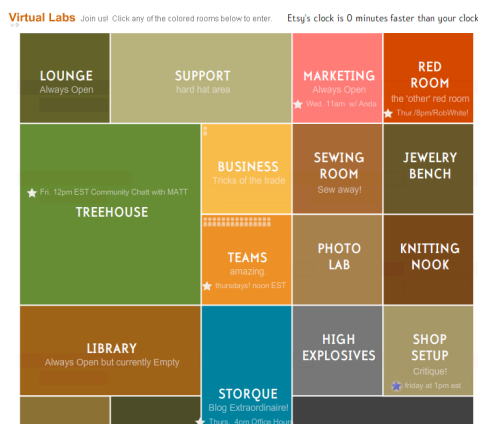


fig 4. A screen capture of the Etsy.com virtual labs spaces. Each area contains its own workshops and tutorials are offered.⁸

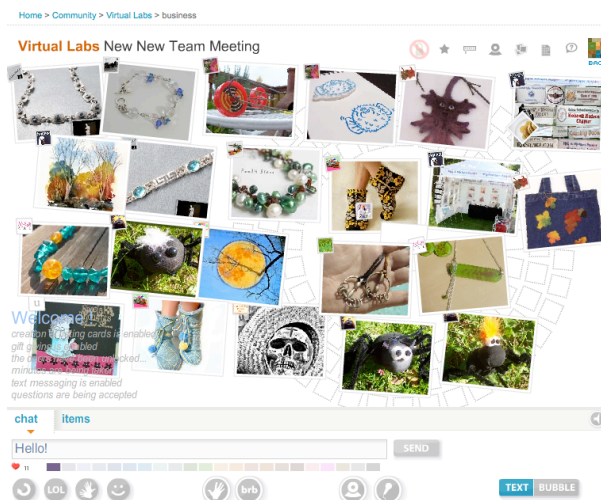


fig 5. A screen capture of a virtual labs room called 'New New Team Meeting.' The virtual labs and the chat area of Etsy is where users may create and participate in electronic conversations with peers.

In the last three years, Etsy has grown significantly. In February 2008, Etsy reported a total of 612,641 individual items listed, a seven percent increase from the previous month and a 312% increase from January of the previous year. In addition, they noted 75,458 new users, an 11% increase from January 2008 and a 236% increase from

⁷Tina Jett. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, March 12, 2008.

⁸"Etsy :: Virtual Labs," available at http://www.etsy.com/virtual_labs.php; Internet; accessed 3 October 2008.

January 2007. As the Etsy community has seen record growth, Etsy Incorporated and its sellers have also seen significant monetary success. Overall, 349,092 items were sold in the month of February 2008 alone, an 11% increase from January 2008 and 273,043 more than in January 2007 and \$4.8 million dollars worth of goods compared to January 2007 sales of approximately \$1 million.⁹

As the visibility of Etsy grows, fueled by press coverage in *The New York Times* and segments on television shows such as *The Martha Stewart Show*, it remains to be seen what ultimate impact Etsy will have as a model of sales for craftspeople around the world. It is clear, though, that Etsy has hit a nerve with a growing cottage industry (defined as home-based rather than factory-based production) composed of individuals who are interested in pursuing their ‘home-made’ handcrafts as a means to economic freedom. This is aligned with Etsy’s mission statement of “[enabling] people to make a living making things, and to reconnect makers with buyers... to build a new economy and present a better choice: buy, sell and live handmade.”¹⁰ Despite Etsy’s earnest goal to provide an alternative to the trappings of big-box shopping and consumerism, Etsy buyers and sellers maintain a very wide range of reasons for using it as their platform. Not all Etsians are interested in the concerns of ‘buying local’ or even ‘buying handmade’ but rather see Etsy as a space where they can pursue their desire to establish themselves as wholesalers and/or retail chain store suppliers. For these individuals, their goal is in direct opposition to Etsy’s core mission of conscious consumerism. In addition, Etsy Incorporated’s business interests, namely, generating a profit from listing and sales fees, complicates their proposed ethical mission. And yet, Etsy has provided many with an opportunity for greater exposure than almost any individual craft fair or brick and mortar shop can offer. Etsian Laura McConnell writes, “I owe a lot to Etsy for allowing me to gain the exposure to so many people that my web site and doing art shows alone

⁹“Etsy.com. February 2008.” *January 2008 Survey Results*, available at http://www.etsy.com/storque/media/article_images/Survey_-_For_Storque1.pdf; Internet; accessed 12 March 2008.

¹⁰“Etsy :: About,” available at <http://www.etsy.com/about.php>; Internet; accessed 3 October 2008.

could not do.”¹¹ Supported by the resources that Etsy provides, craftspeople using the system express feelings of empowerment. The strength of this sentiment is perhaps best expressed in the response I received when I asked what Etsian Blake Lindey liked about Etsy:

The entrepreneurial spirit on etsy is like a raging bonfire. A vast fire raging bright, lighting the sky and burning a new way of life! We are burning down the contemporary way of living as we know (the 9-5, rat-race, working for the bank)... and when we're finished all that will be left oh how we once lived are embers. And with those umbers will be rich soil to grow anew. And that rich soil combined with our capacity for vision and creativity as our guide will aid us in building a way of living in accordance with the natural laws of life! And instead of building buildings and bridges, we'll be cultivating hearts and souls!¹²

For folklorists and students of material culture, this work proposes a new chapter to conversations about contemporary artistic production and circulation. As a venue for craftspeople, Etsy offers makers a relatively simple way to sell their objects and increase their profile/visibility on the Internet to buyers around the world. Etsy is a young business, particularly by academic terms, but Etsy has developed a devoted following and continues to rapidly increase its visibility and presence as a resource for craftspeople and artisans.

In the larger context, Etsy is indicative of the increasing speed of which new technologies have affected every aspect of life, even among craftspeople who characterize themselves as practicing distinctly traditional and non-technological artistic skills. As a discipline, Folklore must stay abreast these changes and make every effort to understand how websites like Etsy.com effect contemporary craft practices. It appears that the presence of the Internet has been more readily acknowledged in studies of music cultures, but less so among studies of material culture. It is necessary, for folklorists in particular, to take up the subject of material culture and new media, with particular regard to how it affects community formation and maintenance, the promotion of particular aesthetic values and the process of gift exchange. Etsy's affiliation with the independent/DIY craft movement makes it ripe subject matter for scholars interested in contemporary forms of craft culture. In addition to this analysis of Etsy providing fodder for discussions of folklore and new media, it also may serve as an entry point for conceptual discussions about the independent/DIY craft movement. This movement represents a new phase in the

¹¹Laura McConnell, Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, March 24, 2008.

¹²Blake Lindy, Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, March 12, 2008.

popularity of craft and deserves to be both acknowledged and analyzed as it is connected to the Arts and Crafts movement of the turn of the century United States and Europe, the DIY/Punk and Riot Grrrl scenes of the 1980s and 90s and the third-wave feminist movement.

Methodology and Format

My research for this project led me down various paths. First, I interviewed (in person and via email) a number of Etsy sellers. Second, I observed and participated in forum dialogues, chat sessions, and unofficial (off-site) Etsy discussions. Third, I established my own Etsy account as both a buyer and a seller. Fourth, I became a faithful visitor to the Etsy website, one might even characterize it as compulsive, keeping up to date on site changes, official Etsy blog posts, aesthetic trends and listing types over the last year and a half.

Online systems or websites have always made for difficult research methodology. On the one hand, Etsy has been available to me at any time of the day, from any location with Internet access. On the other hand, from a researcher's perspective, I worried that I was spending too much time online compared to the face-to-face work that I had done for this particular endeavor. Ultimately, in the process of this project, I realized that the lack of face-to-face contact was a major component of the experience for the vast majority of Etsy users. To over-emphasize the in-person connections would be a misinterpretation of the way that so many Etsians use the website. In scheduling interviews, I found that the Etsy sellers I contacted were typically far more willing to respond to questions via email than to speak in person or by the phone. This reaction was not unfamiliar to me. In fact, one of the initially appealing features of Etsy to me personally was the idea that I could engage with the indie/DIY craft community without leaving the confines of my home, without having to brush my hair, and without having to participate in many of the etiquette rules of face-to-face social interaction. For those of us who find social interactions stressful, the Internet offers a way to interact without having to 'face our fears' of forgetting someone's name, misspeaking or the discomfort of awkward silent pauses in conversation.

These personal anecdotes aside, the Etsy website has become a familiar part of my everyday life. The daily process of signing on, checking my shop statistics, reading mail, forum messages and blog posts for the purposes of this project has given me intimate knowledge of the experience of the Etsy user. This regular use, though seemingly mundane, has been most beneficial in offering a deeper understanding of Etsy, the company, its users and the objects bought and sold. While Etsy.com lacks a physical place where users convene en masse, its format allowed me access that would have otherwise been unfeasible.

The content of this project includes three chapters, each of which addresses key aspects that differentiate Etsy.com from its peers and predecessors. The broad topics of these chapters are: origins and context, community, and aesthetics. Taken together, these analyses shed light on the changing forms of marketplace, which simultaneously utilize and claim to undermine capitalism. As Internet technologies become increasingly relevant in the day-to-day lives of Americans, we must consider the impact that this will have on craft in future generations.

The first chapter gives a brief overview and history of the Etsy company, and positions the creation of the website in socio-cultural context. As one of the newest markets for craft professionals and those interested in pursuing crafting as a means of primary or supplemental income, the structure of Etsy is modeled on both virtual auction sites like eBay and shopping websites, like Amazon.com as well as social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Flickr. I also explore how Etsy Incorporated and its founder Robert Kalin have reconciled the use of venture capital funding with the ethical underpinnings of its mission. Kalin's self-fashioning as figurehead of the Etsy organization, as scrappy, young entrepreneur, philosopher and craftsman is central to this image.

Etsy's roots are located in two distinct socio-cultural movements: the turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts Movement and the riot grrrl/DIY punk scene of the 1980s and 1990s. By aligning itself in increases in telecommunications (including the Internet) and home working, as well as the contemporary ecological movement, Etsy broadens its user base. Most significantly, Etsy has aesthetically and ideologically aligned itself with the DIY/indie craft and new domestic movements (linked to particular threads of

contemporary feminism) of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Etsy benefits from the emotional and psychological depth of resistance to corporate hegemony.

In chapter two, I attend to the concept of community in relation to Etsy. I examine the origins of the term community and its broad romantic associations in modern parlance. Using the writing of sociologist Suzanne Keller and folklorist Dorothy Noyes, I consider the ways in which Etsy does and does not appear to function as a community. Through this exploration, Etsy is conceived as a network, with its members engaged in performance of both their individual identities and their understanding of the Etsy platform. Feelings of community are evoked through the emergent practice of actors on Etsy and are re-iterated in the language of Etsy marketing. For Etsy Inc., the notion of community becomes a powerful selling point and strategy to attract users and sales.

Chapter three, on the aesthetics of Etsy, investigates the designs, styles and motifs of popularity on the website. The two-dimensional format of the computer screen informs Etsy's tendency to favor visual features of their objects. By examining a range of specific aesthetic features evident on Etsy, one can see that the creations bought and sold on Etsy must be understood contextually, often playing with notions popular and traditional culture. Objects tend toward a tactile softness, smallness in size and whimsy in subject matter. The concept of 'rejuvenile,' or, the adult consumption of childish things is also discussed in the context as objects that challenge traditional conceptions of safety/comfort and danger. In theorizing the aesthetics of Etsy more generally, it is possible to see the website is once again indebted to the DIY/indie craft movement. Among its largely female population, this aesthetic is affectively powerful in challenging traditional gender stereotypes of feminine domestic culture. Ultimately, though, the objects lose much of the affective power when they are reduced to commodities of novelty in the (privatized) Etsy exchange system.

As we will see, the ideological premise of Etsy is a compelling one for users. Etsians are often the company's best salespeople, touting the virtues of Etsy to family, friends and peers. Part of the Etsy marketing strategy has been to align itself with the indie/DIY craft movement. Though the company's affiliation to the indie/DIY craft movement may be seen as a superficial one, some makers on Etsy have a connection with the movement that is much deeper. These individuals draw meaning into their creations by

injecting them with sentiments and the styles that favor political action, ecology and irony. A close analysis of the aesthetics favored on the website reveals that objects indicate the tension between consumer fashion and coding which challenges dominant power structures and stereotypes.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT: SOCIOLOGICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL ORIGINS

In this chapter, I will explore the major technological precursors, as well as the socio-cultural movements that informed the creation of Etsy.com. By reviewing the contributing innovations in Internet technology, I will place the Etsy website in a timeline of systems for electronic commerce and distinguish the ways that Etsy differs from other e-commerce sites including eBay and Amazon. I also explore the importance of PayPal and social networking to the Etsy system. In addition to these technological players, Etsy is also tied to a number of historical and contemporary socio-cultural movements, which are each, in their own way, tied to crafting. Etsy is indebted to both the Arts and Crafts movement of Britain and the United States at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries and the DIY movement that grew from the 1980s punk subculture are both particularly relevant to analysis of the ideological foundation of Etsy.

For the purposes of this project, the Arts and Crafts can be described as a campaign by artists and designers that extolled the virtues of handicraft in response to the growing mechanization of production processes. The DIY movement can be characterized by a rejection of the consumption of objects produced by dominant culture in favor of creating the items one needs and desires on one's own. In both cases the objects of mass production are viewed as 'soulless,' without quality and devoid of uniqueness. The process and product of the handcrafted is seen as a way to recover power from the tethers of machines and corporations. While the Arts and Crafts movement focused its attention on objects categorized as 'decorative arts' (ie. architecture, furniture, printmaking, ceramics, interior design, jewelry-making, textiles, etc), the DIY movement of the 1980's and early-to-mid 90's focused on music and creative writing with a particular visual aesthetic that favors collage and kitsch. Both movements, and their respective styles, have informed independent contemporary craft and Etsy.

These movements brought forth a desire to challenge what participants considered rampant industrialism, commercialization and consumerism. Third wave feminism has also played a part in challenging traditional notions of domesticity and feminism, resulting in a changed understanding on how crafts and the domestic arts in general might fit into the life of the 21st century woman. The third wave feminist movement's re-appropriation of the traditional domestic skills of sewing (knitting and embroidery), cooking for personal pleasure and political statement functions as a noteworthy conceptual underpinning of Etsy and the independent (or indie) craft movement as well. In total, all of these movements: the Arts and Crafts movement, the DIY movement and the third wave feminist movement have served as sources from which Etsy draws its social relevance.

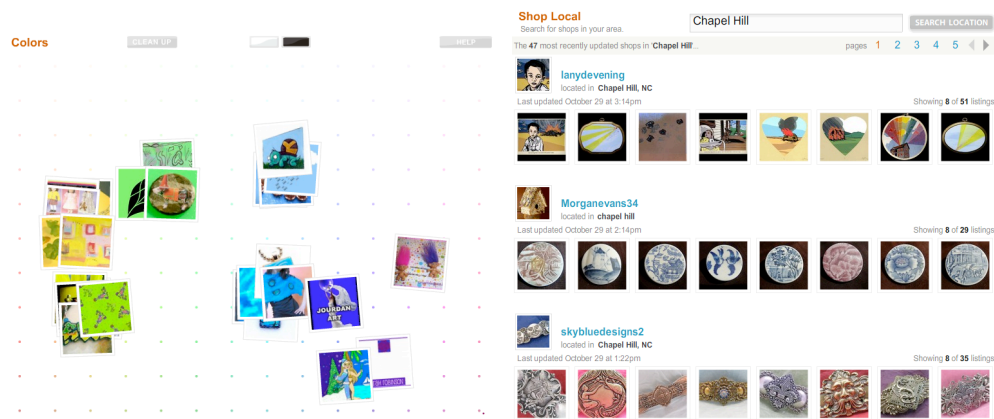
In the growing craft industry, fueled in no small part by the re-emerged popularity of crafting among young people, Etsy has given craftspeople a new type of venue for exposure and the sale of their goods. Because Etsy is an inexpensive and easy way for users to sell their crafts, both professional and hobby crafters are afforded an opportunity to enter their handmade items into the market. Etsy has also benefited from the growing popularity of home working and specifically, a segment of home workers known as 'mompreneurs,' Etsy has become a popular platform. When browsing Etsy.com, it becomes evident that these movements are not only present but essential to how Etsy works.

Technological Precursors

In order to fully understand Etsy and how it functions, one must consider its major technological predecessors as well as the socio-cultural landscape of the early 21st century into which it was born. As a website which deals in the sales of handcrafts, Etsy is an extension of larger trends in Internet use. The popularization of the Internet radically affected the way many people communicate and consume. The brainchild of three New York University students (who also happen to be computer programmers), Etsy is indebted to four major trends in interactive media on the Internet: e-commerce, social networking, blogging and the newest form, an amalgam of the three, web 2.0. With the advent of shopping on the net, users are no longer restricted to goods they can find locally.

The web functions as a global marketplace, reconfiguring consumers' relationships to the items they buy and people they buy them from. Internet shopping allows the consumer to avoid navigating traffic-filled parking lots and long lines at the local suburban shopping mall. Nowadays, if a consumer wants something, it is likely that they will seek it out online. Unlike a local shop, the Internet is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Users can shop from anywhere if they have a computer, Internet access and the time to use it. In addition, Web shopping has made bargain hunting and price/product comparison faster and easier. Recent advents in security and payment methods have made e-commerce even more appealing to consumers.

Shopping in a virtual space affords the consumer new and different means of sorting, viewing and evaluating products.



figs 6 and 7. Etsy offers a number of innovative search mechanisms for buyers, including searches by item color and location of the seller, allowing users the option to 'shop local.'

Through the search tool, the experience becomes user-driven— a consumer can seek out a specific item or range of items based on their own criteria, instead of physically roaming the aisles of a store. Thus, the consumer has much greater control over what he or she looks at (and what he or she bypasses) while shopping. One of the groundbreakers in the area of e-commerce, and arguably the best known, is Amazon.com. As part of the dot-com boom of the 1990's, Amazon.com was founded by Jeff Bezos and launched online in 1995.¹³ Initially, Amazon.com sold only books, but soon expanded to movies, music and other electronics. Amazon.com now functions as a veritable general store, selling

¹³Jason Er. "E-commerce – Amazon – History and Development," 9 September 2004; available at http://wiki.media-culture.org.au/index.php/Amazon_-_History_And_Development; Internet; accessed 8 June 2008.

everything from groceries and clothing to musical instruments. As mentioned previously, Amazon has a robust search engine that allows users to shop easily for specific items. Amazon's digital architecture uses a model where a standard but personalized homepage opens to the search mechanism and offers the option to browse by pre-defined categories. Eventually, shoppers are required to register an account by providing an email, password, address, and credit card information in order to make a purchase. Each item for sale has its own page that includes images of the product, a product overview, its price, technical information, consumer reviews and production information. For example, a search for 'Bugaboo Cameleon stroller' yields 44 different strollers of this type in different fabric colors, packages and prices. A user review posted by Erika Toker of Brooklyn for the Bugaboo Cameleon complete stroller in denim 007 for \$959.00 offers thorough and useful information for potential buyers from a fellow consumer, rather than a salesperson:

When I first saw the price of the Bugaboo, I was a little skeptical. What does this stroller have to offer that a stroller 1/3 of the price does not offer? The Bugaboo Cameleon is a marvelous stroller, as it will take your baby from a newborn all the way through his/her early walking years...Although, I'm not going to lie and say that I don't have a second smaller umbrella stroller for vacations that involve taking a plane. The Bugaboo is hard to carry on a plane in two pieces, and a one-piece foldable umbrella stroller is a better option for this particular situation.¹⁴

In this example, one can see that Amazon allows users to be entirely candid in their reviews of products. With this feature, Amazon shoppers are given additional comfort with the knowledge that they can review the experiences of other buyers before deciding to make a purchase.

Amazon simplifies their large inventory by categorizing each item, which can then be toggle-searched for similar items. A search for 'toothbrush' reveals over 130 results for electric and manual brushes.¹⁵ Through a system of keywords, called 'tags,' Amazon also reveals that as a buyer I might be interested in similar

¹⁴Erica Toker. "Amazon.com: Bugaboo Cameleon Complete Stroller – Denim 007: Baby," 5 March 2008, available at http://www.amazon.com/Bugaboo-Cameleon-Complete-Stroller-Denim/dp/B0010WAW1Y/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=baby-products&qid=1213757036&sr=1-1; Internet, accessed 1 June 2008.

¹⁵"Amazon.com: Toothbrush," available at http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_gw?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=toothbrush&x=18&y=22; Internet, accessed 10 June 2008.

items such as replacement brush heads for electric toothbrushes systems, water picks, and razors. Like Amazon, Etsy has a centralized homepage, a required login user profile to make purchases and sell goods, the ability to save or mark items as ‘favorites’ and a similar list of item categories. Both Amazon and Etsy also foreground the importance of item images. But unlike Amazon, Etsy offers additional search mechanisms to find and browse items, including a search by item color and another tool to search by the geographic location of the seller.¹⁶ Though Amazon and Etsy share quite a bit in common, Etsy is much more often compared to another website born in the late 1990s—eBay.

As a monolith in the world of e-commerce and important precursor to Etsy, eBay. was launched in 1995 as another player in the dot-com boom, and is the largest online auction shopping website on the Internet, reaching 32 countries outside the United States.¹⁷ eBay offers different types of auction listings, which allow the seller to specify how bidding for an item or group of items will occur. Given the choice of a traditional or ‘buy now’ auction, sellers can dictate how they would like their items to be available for purchase.¹⁸ Though Etsy does not function as an auction service, there are similarities between the ways items are listed and sold on Etsy and eBay. Both Websites rely on user-provided goods for transactions – the quality of these items is wholly dependent on users. While eBay scales its insertion fee based on the starting/reserve price of the item being listed, Etsy currently offers a twenty-cent rate per item as a flat fee for all listings, for the duration of four months each, regardless of the listing price. Like eBay, Etsy sellers list items for a set period of time. This time period is designated by the seller. A seller may choose to pay an additional twenty cents to have an item in their shop listed for additional four-month increments. Like eBay, Etsy also charges a final value fee for sold items. But,

¹⁶The geographic search tool is particularly interesting because it allows shoppers to more easily ‘shop local.’

¹⁷Ben Gomes-Casseres. “eBay’s History,” available at <http://www.cs.brandeis.edu/~magnus/ief248a/eBay/history.html>; Internet; accessed 17 June 2008.

¹⁸In essence, the ‘buy now’ auction is not an auction but rather an item posted and available for immediate sale at a fixed price.

while eBay scales the rate of their fee based on the price of the item sold (ranging from 8.5% to 13.75%), Etsy charges 3.5% on all sales, regardless of price.¹⁹ In addition to offering standard auctions, eBay also offers other types of listings, namely: fixed price and dutch auctions. The fixed price format allows sellers and buyers to eschew the auction process and purchase an item immediately for a set price without placing a bid. In essence, the fixed price auction is not an auction at all, but rather an e-commerce shop hosted by the eBay service. Etsy's service most resembles this type of sale, where a seller is charged an insertion/listing fee and a final value fee based on the sale, but no auction is conducted. Instead a buyer simply selects the product and makes the purchase for the listed price.

eBay also offers seller 'stores' which allow for greater flexibility in format and content. According to eBay's online help section, eBay stores:

...allow individual sellers to show you all of their items and tell you more about their business on their own customized pages. When you shop eBay Stores, you'll enjoy a unique shopping experience. While part of the eBay marketplace, each eBay Store has its own personality, with customized displays and content. You can learn more about sellers, their policies, and the items they sell in order to find great deals and make informed purchases. [You'll also] keep track of your favorite sellers. Many of your favorite sellers (including big-name retailers) have eBay Stores, making it easy for you to see all the items they're selling on eBay in one convenient place.²⁰

For eBay users, shops are a way to personalize their virtual storefront, available to those who have received a certain amount of positive feedback from previous transactions and who have a PayPal account (checkout software) in good standing. For Etsy, stores are the basis for all transactions. In addition to the account information required for buyers (name, mailing address, email, username and password), Etsy sellers are required to enter credit card information, which stays on file for fee processing. Once the credit card has been verified, Etsy sellers can personalize their shops' appearance by adding a title, banner image and messages to buyers. They may also elect to 'feature' three items currently for sale to appear more prominent on the store's page and create sections in order to group items that are similar. Like eBay, Etsy sellers are also required to set their shipping

¹⁹"eBay.com Fees," available at <http://pages.ebay.com/help/sell/fees.html>; Internet; accessed 10 June 2008 and "Etsy :: FAQ," available at http://www.etsy.com/faq_selling.php#how_fees_work; Internet; accessed 10 June 2008.

²⁰"eBay Stores Overview," available at <http://pages.ebay.com/help/specialtiesites/stores-ov.html>; Internet; accessed 5 June 2008.

options, including a primary shipping cost (the price for an item to be shipped by itself) and a secondary shipping cost (the price for shipping multiple items together, usually discounted from the primary shipping cost). Etsy users may add a third shipping fee option, if they elect to permit international shipment destinations. For Etsy buyers, payment can be made through check, money order or PayPal.

The use of PayPal is significant, since it allows for sellers to accept credit cards as payment and thus speeds up the transaction process. eBay also makes use of the PayPal system; in fact, eBay purchased the 10-year-old company in 2002 for \$1.5 billion underscoring its dependence on the transaction software.²¹ Beyond eBay and Etsy, PayPal has been a major force in e-commerce across all sectors of the web. PayPal currently has more than 164 million accounts worldwide and is available in 190 markets and seventeen currencies around the world.²² As a system, PayPal offers a secure, low-cost option for processing credit cards. Traditionally, in order for a shop to accept credit cards, they were required to apply for an account with a bank subsidiary, purchase a credit card terminal machine and pay membership, service and transaction fees. PayPal streamlined this process by giving businesses, in particular, entrepreneurs and young companies, the ability to accept credit card payments without the investment required for brick and mortar stores. Not only does PayPal speed up the transaction process by avoiding the wait for receipt of payment through mail, it also provides the benefit of additional security.

According to their Website:

PayPal is the safer, easier way to pay and get paid online. The service allows anyone to pay in any way they prefer, including through credit cards, bank accounts, buyer credit or account balances, without sharing financial information.²³

²¹Margaret Kane. "eBay picks up PayPal for \$1.5 billion – CNET News.com," 8 July 2002, available at <http://news.cnet.com/2100-1017-941964.html>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

²²"PayPal Case Study," available at <http://digitalenterprise.org/cases/paypal.html>; Internet; 1 June 2008.

²³"Online Payment, Merchant Account – PayPal," available at <http://www.paypal.com>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

When a transaction is made, PayPal functions as an intermediary. Buyers only expose sensitive credit card information to the PayPal system, not to the individual sellers, making transactions among a network of individual sellers a more viable low-risk option for sites like eBay and Etsy.

Etsy’s system for feedback also borrows heavily from eBay. On eBay, a specific user’s feedback rating reflects a buyer or seller’s reputation. Participants in a transaction comment on and rate their experience as positive, neutral or negative. A recipient of a positive feedback message receive +1 point, 0 points for a neutral transaction and -1 point for a negative transaction. Over time, the feedback scoring system is designed to summarize a seller or buyer’s history. The more successful transactions a user participates in, the greater her or his rating. The feedback system, like PayPal, is a way to add a sense of security to the transaction system, acknowledging that in a digital environment where the buyer and seller typically will never meet face-to-face, suspicions over character and trustworthiness are ever present. When considering whether or not to make a purchase from a particular Etsy seller, the buyer has the option to view the seller’s full history of feedback, including all comments.

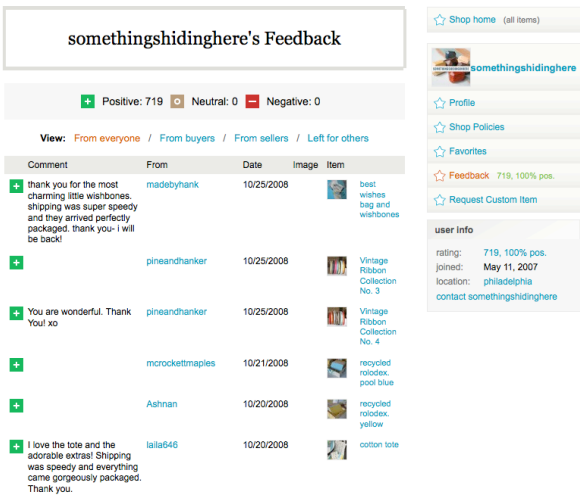


fig 8. screen capture of the feedback for Etsy seller, somethingshidinginhere

eBay has the added feature of rewarding users for achieving milestones in their feedback points, ranging from 10 to 100,000.²⁴ Although generally the feedback system has

²⁴“Feedback Stars,” available at <http://pages.ebay.com/help/feedback/reputation-stars.html>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

functioned well for both eBay and Etsy, message boards on both systems include questions about its usefulness and fairness. There are always those who choose to abuse the system. Some sellers have cited feedback padding, retaliatory feedback and feedback extortion. Over the past 10 years, eBay has enacted changes to reduce the opportunity for fraudulent feedback, limiting the amount one member may affect another's profile score by only one point per week.

But what happens when a transaction does go awry? When a buyer purchases but never pays for an item or a seller receives payment but never sends to the paid-for item. Etsy's policy for transaction cancellation (in the case of non-receipt of payment) or for the non-delivery of goods is for the interested party to complete an online form detailing what has happened. In the case of a seller needing to cancel a transaction for non-payment, Etsy will issue the seller a refund. In the case of a buyer who has not received purchases goods, Etsy's Website recommends contacting PayPal for information regarding claims. PayPal offers a sophisticated system for handling the buyer complaint process, involving a dispute phase and claims phase, ultimately culminating in the refund of the expenditure. But, on February 26, 2008, consumer affairs blog, *The Consumerist*, posted a piece in their 'backlash' section entitled "Sellers Grow Increasingly Unhappy with Lack of Professionalism at Etsy," author Meg Marco describes how some Etsy sellers have had severely negative experiences regarding problem transactions. According to a number of users, seller shops were closed by Etsy without notice due to "simple, easily-resolved complaints from buyers."

One seller with over 15,000 positive feedback comments was banned after a single complaint... These sellers are eventually able to get their accounts reinstated, but not without possibly being reported to the FBI's cybercrime division. A seller DID complain about me - a week & a half after the purchase date for not receiving their parcel, and I'm in Australia and he's in the US! Instead of referring the buyer to me, giving me the benefit of the doubt or explaining on my behalf that assuming non-delivery was premature, Etsy banned me & issued the buyer with an FBI cyber-crime form to complain about me!²⁵

²⁵Meg Marco. "Backlash: Sellers Grow Increasingly Unhappy with Lack of Professionalism at Etsy," 26 February 2008, available at <http://consumerist.com/tag/backlash/?i=360889&t=sellers-growing-increasingly-unhappy-with-lack-of-professionalism-at-etsy>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

Here, we see the frustration over Etsy's seeming 'guilty until proven innocent' strategy by administrators. The overzealous measure taken by Etsy administrators in instances like this one make many users anxious. Observers liken the issues discussed in this article to problems reported by eBay users. Although some feel that Etsy is "corrupt" and "fascist," user fat_chic may be most insightful in her assessment:

I'm very familiar with the issues of Etsy, being a seller there myself. Etsy really is one of those "what you make it" places, and is unfairly held up against the eBay standard and mindset - people basically want it to replace eBay when it does no such thing. That said, the staff is very young, and are reinventing the wheel and coming to every situation as though they are the first people ever to experience it. I had the pleasure of meeting some of the staff in person earlier this year - they're overeager to buck what they see as "traditionalism" and are making a lot of mistakes right now. One of their big mistakes is the inability to recognize that it is entirely possible to be transparent as a company while protecting your clients' privacy, and they lack a single clear voice for communication. Etsy administrators have responded to these claims by explaining that their decisions have always been in the interest of their users. Since February, Etsy has made strides in clarifying their policies and by providing more information, such as a thorough list of do's and don'ts for Etsy buyers and sellers. If anything, these issues remind us that Etsy is a young business making it's way through previously uncharted waters in the world of e-commerce.²⁶

Fat_chic's comments frame Etsy as a young company navigating its own maturation by working through difficult business issues in the public eye. Etsy has made their path a challenging one by expressing an interest in a high level of business transparency and, as the previous commenter remarks, and by building a company that bucks traditionalism. eBay makes no such claims, offering their services from a position of more traditional business practices. Though Etsy and eBay share some basic similarities, they are more like cousins than twins—alike in some of the mechanisms used to manage complex systems of individual transactions between strangers.

Another feature that differentiates Etsy is the use of social networking for inspiration, collaboration and marketing. In web-savvy terms, Etsy users tend to be quite "plugged-in" utilizing a myriad of social networking and web 2.0 platforms to communicate, share, learn and be inspired. Tim O'Reilly, founder of O'Reilly Media and champion of the open source software movement, defines web 2.0 as:

the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the

²⁶Ibid.

more people use them. (This is what I've elsewhere called 'harnessing collective intelligence.')

²⁷

Websites like MySpace and Facebook offer Etsy users the opportunity to expand their identities (and Etsy brand) and promote events and items. A 2008 Etsy survey of 30,000 members revealed that 72% of buyers and 78% of sellers have a profile on one or more social networking sites.²⁸ Blogs and websites such as Flickr, an image sharing online community, offer similar appeal.²⁹ Bloggings, which connect similar blogs by a button placed on the static content of the blogger's site, allow visitors to jump from site to site within a previously established network. The 'Etsy Sellers Who Blog' ring was recorded as in September 2007 as having over 1,000 members.³⁰

²⁷Tim O'Reilly. "Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Trying Again," 10 December 2006, available at <http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2006/12/web-20-compact-definition-tryi.html>; Internet, accessed 1 June 2008.

²⁸"Etsy.com. February 2008." *January 2008 Survey Results*, 9.

²⁹Incidentally, one of the founders of Flickr currently sits on the Etsy board of investors. An article about the origin of the Etsy company explains, "Kalin first came to the attention of Flickr founders Caterina Fake and Stewart Butterfield when he sent them an e-mail he describes as a "love letter" praising the design and functionality of the photo site and inviting them to look at Etsy, elements of which he had modeled after Flickr." Stacey Higginbotham, "The Handmade CEO: Etsy founder Rob Kalin," *The Deal.com*, Tech Confidential: Startup Stories, 9 November 2007, available at <http://www.thedeal.com/techconfidential/features/startup-stories/the-homemade-ceo-etsy-founder-1.php>; Internet; 1 June 2008.

³⁰Lis Kidder, "1000 Blogs!," 8 September 2007, available at <http://etsysellerswhoblogv2.blogspot.com/2007/09/1000-blogs.html>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

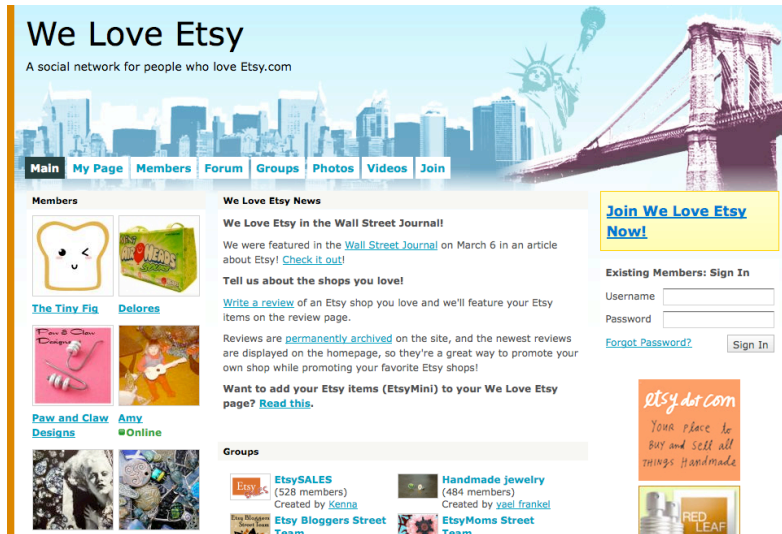


fig 9. screen capture of the *We Love Etsy* homepage



fig 10. screen capture of the *Etsy Bitch* blog

In fact, an entire social networking site now exists just to serve the Etsy community—*We Love Etsy* gives members of the site a forum outside of the Etsy web space to discuss buying and selling as well as a chance to showcase their items, shops, post photographs and join a wide range of sub-groups of Etsians, such as the ‘Interior Design Etsy Team,’ ‘FarmGirl Flair Etsy Team’ and ‘Pagans of Etsy.’³¹

Each of these technological features is relevant to an analysis of Etsy. Despite varied interests among Etsians, they are all bound by the basic structure and format of the Etsy website, as it was (and continues to be) envisioned by its creators. Ancillary

³¹“We Love Etsy,” available at <http://etsylove.ning.com/>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

technological forums, such as the *We Love Etsy* website and the *Etsy Bitch* blog, shift the focus from the structural form of the Etsy site to the Etsian community. It is in the perspectives of its users that we can begin to explore the cultural knowledge that informs their understanding of Etsy.

Socio-Cultural and Ideological Contributors

But technological advances and the relevance of the Internet in our daily lives make up only part of the socio-cultural environment that has allowed the emergence and growth of Etsy. A number of relevant cultural movements leading up to and present in 21st century America have converged to transform the cultural landscape. These political, social and economic factors have affected the way Americans understand cultural production. Specifically, the popularity of the craft industry, and particularly the increase in young crafters, as well as the growing appeal of homeworking (including a special segment of this group known as ‘mompreneurs’) have been major forces in the growing success of Etsy. Ideologically, the DIY (do it yourself) movement and Riot Grrrl, by way of the Punk subculture, have been influential as well, alongside third wave feminism and new domesticity. Historically, similarities are visible in the greater relationship between industrialization and consumer culture as the desires of movements such as DIY mirror many of the concerns of the Arts & Crafts movement of Britain and the United States at the turn of the century. In order to understand how Etsy functions one must consider the way these social movements have contributed to the contemporary western craftsperson and consumer.

The craft industry as a whole has seen considerable growth over the last half-decade. According to the *IBISWorld Industry Report*, published November 5, 2007, revenue for the sewing, needlework and piece good stores industry will have increased by 1.4% per annum over the period of five years to the end of 2007.³² This report also notes two particularly salient factors as industry determinants: 1) Trends over the current period

³²IBISWorld. (2007). “45113 – Fabric, Craft and Sewing Supplies Stores in the US.” (New York: IBISWorld, 2007). Retrieved June 10, 2008 from the IBISWorld database., 12.

indicate a rise in popularity of sewing and needlework, and 2) The level of popularity is also rising in non-traditional market segments, in particular the younger consumer market segment.³³ The findings of these studies dovetail with a January 2008 survey conducted by Etsy concluded that of the 30,000 participants, 96% of the responders (both buyers and sellers) were female with an average age of 32 for buyers and 35 for sellers.³⁴ This is significantly younger than the average age cited by the *IBISWorld Industry Report*, which lists women aged 55 years and older as the largest percentage of the craft market segment for major chain stores, accounting for a 60% share.³⁵

While the largest craft retailers: Jo-Ann Fabrics, Hancock Fabrics, Michaels and Hobby, Lobby account for an estimated 45.5% - 52.5% of total industry revenue, it appears that Etsy has found a growing niche market of young crafters to whom it appeals.³⁶ Though these retail chains differ from Etsy in that they focus on selling materials and supplies in order to make craft items, rather than selling or offering a platform for craftspeople to sell their own completed projects, it is relevant that these retail environments aspire to attract all viable craft markets. Etsy has made headlines for anticipating this growing trend and its ability to generate enthusiasm among participants in an already booming independent craft scene, composed of young, hip, urbanites who do not identify with the craftsperson who is interested in the (what I would argue) demographically-elderly aesthetic sold by the major craft retailers. Here we begin to see why it is problematic to categorize the users of Etsy as monolithic. While some Etsians gladly buy supplies at major craft retailers, others adamantly protest the use of goods where there is questionable production origin—opting instead for materials that are made by peers (not sweat shops in third world countries) who are mindful of the ecological footprint of their processes. Despite these differences, what these groups share is an interest and desire in crafting at home.

³³Ibid.

³⁴“Etsy.com. February 2008.” *January 2008 Survey Results*, 3 and 9.

³⁵Ibid., 9.

³⁶Ibid., 10.

Much of the appeal of this type of business is tied to the growing attractiveness of homeworking. Articles in major papers and magazines cite this trend, attributing it to a number of factors including flexible work hours and the desire to avoid long commutes. But before entering into an examination of this type of work, it is crucial to first define and distinguish the type of homeworking discussed in this project. In Alan Felstead's *In Work At Home: Towards Understanding of Homeworking*, the author writes, "It is vital to distinguish between people who: work *at home*,...work *from home*,...and work *in the same grounds and buildings as home*."³⁷ While seemingly subtle, the difference between these distinctions is pronounced when one analyzes the forces of home life for women. "Those who work *at home* are far more likely to experience the cross-cutting pressures of two worlds of meaning, organization and value. They typically have to negotiate some kind of reconciliation or settlement between the public and private spheres within the home itself."³⁸ In fact, there is an approximate 50/50 split in the gender profile of homeworkers in the United States, but homeworking women are more likely than men to be parents.³⁹ Though Feldstead notes that the probability that a person will participate in homeworking increases with age, he notes that there is a significant group of women in their 20s and 30s who also fit into this category, presumably because they have children to care for.⁴⁰

This group is visible among a significant population of Etsy sellers, and on the Internet in general. 'Mompreneurs,' a term coined by authors Patricia Cobe and Ellen H. Parlapiano, was created to identify a category of homeworkers who also consider themselves full-time mothers with children under the age of eighteen. This title is defined as "a female business owner who is actively balancing the role of mom and the role of

³⁷ Alan Felstead, *In Work At Home: Towards an Understanding of Homeworking* (London: Routledge, 2000), 20.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 73, 83.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 84.

entrepreneur”⁴¹ According to The Center for Women’s Business Research, there are an estimated 10.4 million privately held women-owned businesses in the United States, accounting for two in five (40.2%) of all US businesses and generating 1.9 trillion dollars in revenue each year.⁴² In 2002, 4.5 million mothers with children under eighteen reported working from home in some capacity.⁴³ Clearly, women-owned and women-run businesses play a considerable role in the American economy. Of women-owned firms, the industry sector of ‘arts, entertainment and recreational services’ has seen a 116.8% growth between 1997 and 2006.⁴⁴ More than ever before, moms are seeking greater control and flexibility with their time by using their domestic and entrepreneurial skills to create successful home-based businesses.⁴⁵ Technology has made this easier. In *Mompreneurs Online: Using the Internet for Work*, authors Cobe and Parlapiano write:

The Web is a natural fit for smart, cyber-savvy moms like you. ‘I read the morning paper on the Internet; I buy my children’s clothing on the Internet; I even met my husband on the Internet!’ says Rhonda Dykes, mother of three from St. Joseph, Missouri.⁴⁶

Etsy survey results report that ‘mompreneurs’ make up a significant portion of their user population. A quarter (23%) of sellers on Etsy categorize themselves as self-employed.⁴⁷ Though mompreneur craft businesses are not limited to parenting or children/babies,

⁴¹“Term Definition: Mompreneur,” available at <http://www.entrepreneur.com/encyclopedia/term/159096.html>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

⁴²“Center for Women’s Business Research: Key Facts about Women-Owned Businesses,” available at <http://www.nfwbo.org/facts/index.php>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

⁴³Patricia Cobe and Ellen H. Parlapiano, *Mompreneurs: A Mother’s Practical Step-By-Step Guide to Work-At-Home Success*, revised ed. (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002), 1.

⁴⁴“Center for Women’s Business Research: Key Facts about Women-Owned Businesses”

⁴⁵One of the central “domestic” skills applied here is the ability for complex multitasking. Parlapiano and Cobe, *Mompreneurs*, 4-5.

⁴⁶Patricia Cobe and Ellen H. Parlapiano, *Mompreneurs Online: Using the Internet to Build Work at Home Success*, 1st ed. (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001), 3.

⁴⁷“Etsy: January 2008 Survey Results,” 9.

many find that their intimate knowledge of a mother's needs makes them particularly well suited to create functional craft items that cater to the particular interests of other mothers and there is clearly a market for them on Etsy-- nearly a quarter (23%) of buyers consider themselves full-time moms.⁴⁸ In addition, many mompreneurs begin their entrepreneurial ventures with the experience of their pre-motherhood careers.

Mompreneurs, as a group, tend to embrace the flexible schedule of the crafter, though the hours are no less demanding than any other job. Many find time by working late in the evening or during off hours before or after their children's bedtime and when their children are busy at school or napping, in essence working as a full-time mother and a full-time businessperson/artisan.⁴⁹ The difficult management of the mompreneur lifestyle is indicative of gender biases regarding childcare that endure despite other advances in gender equality, including the presence of women in the workplace. The positions of mompreneurs and homeworking mothers, from this vantage point, are reflective of conflicted social expectations. Though not overt, Etsy seems to have made a concerted effort to include stay-at-home-dads into the mix of their online conversations. This appears to be not so much an attempt at offering equity among parents, (though they statistically acknowledge the presence of homeworking mothers, they have done relatively little to support them as a particular group) but more a general desire to broaden their appeal to both men and women. From an economic standpoint, this makes good business sense. The more Etsy users, the more successful the site and the company.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹Cobe and Parlapiano, *Mompreneurs Online*, 106.

⁵⁰I would also argue that what is also at work here are the personally progressive beliefs of the Etsy founders and staff who are interested in challenging traditional gender stereotypes that dictate what is appropriately female and what is appropriately male. From a distance, the visual and graphic identity of Etsy, colorful and dotted with 'cute' ink illustrations certainly seems to target a more "girlish" aesthetic, and yet Etsy's content asks all buyers (both male and female) to participate and enjoy this aesthetic—attributing its style to a certain kind of counter-cultural resistance than gendered taste. This is a topic that will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three.

Certainly technology has played a crucial part in the recent popularity of homeworking, particularly among groups such as mompreneurs, but the concept of working from home is anything but new. Not until the industrial revolution, which shifted large populations away from agrarian and craftsman lifestyles, did working away from home take on the status of normalcy. As working away from one's residence became common and a more distinct separation between work and home emerged, the home came to represent the opposite of the workplace. Where the office represents work, the home represents leisure. The way that Etsy sellers use their home spaces as homeworkers complicates this understanding. The Etsy seller working from home, in fact, needs two spaces or a single, convertible space to function as studio and as business office. For many Etsy sellers and young craftspeople, the concept of renting or locating a separate space as art studio is not feasible, instead much of the work is done on kitchen tables, living room couches and floors in front of the television. As Etsy seller Angela Pontoriero describes:

My space is inadequate to say the least. My computer desk doubles as my sewing space, kitchen table where I cut and lay things out. My bedroom is generally where I do everything. Everything is stored in a few drawers hidden in my closet. There is never enough space.⁵¹

It is worth noting here the mixed use of the space where crafting and computing occur. While this may seem purely a product of space constraints, it is appropriate that a computer desk also function as a sewing space where items are made and then sold on Etsy. While it might be more cumbersome to do both activities on the same desk, it could also be interpreted as more efficient. In some cases, even when a studio space is available, a crafter may feel more comfortable working in her living space. Jordan Jennings, another Etsy seller explains:

I am shacking up with a total type A personality, and I think it probably annoys the crap out of him that my favorite place to craft is in the middle of the living room surrounded in scraps of paper and yarn. This is especially annoying because I have a crafting room, solely devoted to craft, but I only go in there to drag messes out into the living room or sew. It's a really nice room, with nice light, but I'd rather sit on the hard floor in the dim living room with dark wood paneling to craft, probably because that's what I've always done.⁵²

⁵¹Angela Pontoriero. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, April 13, 2008.

⁵²Jordan Jennings. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, April 18, 2008.

Jennings justifies the decision to bring her crafts out into the living room as a move based on comfort, despite moving from literal lightness to dark. But, one could interpret a symbolic move from darkness to light in her words as well. Rather than allowing her craftwork to be relegated into its ‘appropriate’ domestic space, Jennings feels compelled to bring her work out into the open, other spaces of her home. This move makes the crafting experience more physically comfortable and also more visible in the domestic environment. It would be hard for her partner to ignore her craft projects with the materials on the living room floor. As Marybeth C. Stalph writes, in her piece “Negotiating Time and Space for Serious Leisure: Quilting in the Modern U.S. Home,” women simultaneously challenge and comply with traditional gender conceptions that require women to privilege family interests over personal ones.⁵³ They do so by blending their craftwork with their other responsibilities, which often manifests in the use of ‘non-traditional’ domestic spaces as craft studio. By crafting in the ‘center’ of the home, rather than in a specialized and isolated space, as is traditional with a ‘man’s workshop,’ women use a limitation to their benefit. By crafting out in the open, rather than in hidden, secret spaces of the home, these women make a statement of confidence about the value of their work.

Working in domestic spaces is not exclusive to crafters, a survey by the authors of *Mompreneurs* revealed that the top locations for homeworking mothers are: spare bedroom (25%), basement (18%), den/family room (9%), my own bedroom (7%), dining room (4%), living room (3%) and kitchen (3%).⁵⁴ A distinction of note, here, is the way that the mompreneur group tends to be more likely to choose spaces within the home that will not interfere with their families’ day-to-day functioning. This may be reflective of a tendency of women to place their personal needs and interests in lower rank of priority than their family and children. Alternately, some crafters choose a space where they are most comfortable, without particular regard to traditional uses of domestic space. This is

⁵³Marybeth Stalph, “Negotiating Time and Space for Serious Leisure: Quilting in the Modern U.S. Home,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 38, no. 1 (2006): 105.

⁵⁴Cobe and Parlapiano, *Mompreneurs*, 117.

not to say that working at home is always easy, particularly for crafters' spouses or domestic partners. Explains Sarah Massagee:

It happens mostly in the kitchen, given the nature of making glycerin soap. The space looks really messy when I'm working on things, because I like to pull out lots of supplies to get ideas of new things to make. Actually the soap making is sort of taking over my house. Thankfully my husband is a really patient guy. I also crochet a lot still, which mostly happens on the couch when we're watching TV or a movie, or in bed before I go to sleep.⁵⁵

Here we see the portability of some types of crafts over others. Sarah's crochet projects move with her throughout the house, while her soap making stays in the kitchen. Beyond the practical justifications for working at home, Brabec argues that:

Thanks to technology and the growing range of personal and business services available to us, we have less need to go out and do things—from shopping to getting an education to earning a living—thus finding ourselves 'cacooning' within the comfort and safety of our homes, our fortress against the world.⁵⁶

As Brabec reflects personally on her experience as a craftsperson working from home, "[I feel] ...enjoyment, satisfaction and sense of pride... each morning as I get up to go to work... in the comfort and privacy of my home."⁵⁷ Homeworking can be interpreted as not only personally significant but also socially significant. As Felstead writes:

Home-located production is at the interface of a series of broad social processes and institutional spheres that characterize capitalist societies. These include, *inter alia*, divisions between the public and the private, production and consumption, the global and the local, work and leisure, and the formal and informal economies. In recent years the articulation of these divisions has been characterized by processes such as time-space compression, transformations in relation of intimacy and challenges to establish sources of ontological security. Home-located production thus exemplifies or incorporates many general aspects of what has been designated as 'late' or 'high' modernity.⁵⁸

It is indicative of our times that homeworking has returned as a force in the market economy, assisted by the compression of time and space that came with the widespread use of the Internet. On another level, it is also reflects a return to a past conception of

⁵⁵Sarah Massagee. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, April 22, 2008.

⁵⁶Barbara Brabec. *The Craft Business Answer Book & Resource Guide: Answers to Hundreds of Troublesome Questions about Starting, Marketing & Managing a Home-based Business Efficiently, Legally & Profitably* (New York: M. Evans and Company, Inc., 1998), 7.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁸Felstead, *In Work At Home*, 162.

labor, where mass production and the assembly line give way to the production processes of handcrafts. Because the production process of making handcrafts is on the maker, it has become common practice to focus on innovation rather than imitation.⁵⁹ Though artisans traditionally learned their skills by apprenticeship, contemporary crafts learn from a range of resources. And, rather than working to make single components of a larger item, contemporary crafters build objects to completion, without dividing tasks among disparate laborers or locations.

The American economic landscape, in particular the growing popularity of what is sometimes described as the American cottage industry, informs the way Etsy works and is understood by its users. By definition, a cottage industry is “an industry whose labor force consists of family units or individuals working at home with their own equipment.”⁶⁰ Traditionally, the concept of cottage industry was seen as relevant only in geographic sectors where agriculture functioned as a major form of industry. But as the industrial revolution manifested itself first in turn of the century Britain. It was during this period of transition that the Arts and Crafts movement and Pre-Raphaelites, led, most prominently, by artists-authors, John Ruskin and William Morris called for social changed through the production and consumption of handcrafted goods. In *Design in the USA*, Jeffrey L. Meikle writes:

...Ruskin and Morris believed in the morally redemptive power of craft production. As a Gothic revivalist, Ruskin celebrated the picturesque imperfections of the great cathedrals, handcrafted over generations by independent artisans. Romanticizing the medieval guilds, he envisioned brotherhoods of craft workers rising to replace the alienating labourers of Manchester and Birmingham.⁶¹

Morris applied Ruskin’s philosophies and championed a sentiment that values both functional and attractive. “They must, according to a statement that became the main aphorism of a self-conscious Arts & Crafts movement, ‘have nothing in your houses that

⁵⁹Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 102.

⁶⁰“Cottage Industry – Definition from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary,” available at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cottage%20industry>; Internet; accessed 22 October 2008.

⁶¹Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA* (Oxford History of Art) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 67.

you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.’’⁶² The Arts and Crafts movement emerged as both political and social, concerned with the dangers of dirty, dehumanizing machinery and the obliteration of the artisan, in their minds, the essence of the human spirit. The romanticized image of the craftsperson, the humane and free-spirited producer of beauty, combined with a deep anxiety over the potentially devastating effects of machinery proved a powerful motivator, even as it traveled across the ocean. In the United States, the Arts & Crafts movement originated by way of the Centennial Exhibition of 1876. Ironically, the Exhibition showcased both technologically progressive innovations and handmade goods. But, in the minds of the attendees, the focus was on a romantic novelty (both the production and the consumption) of these crafts:

Inspired by handmade objects on display, whether needlework or pottery or wood carving, people wanted to try it themselves, learn the techniques, master and extend them, and thus create unique objects of beauty. From that personal involvement came the Arts & Crafts emphasis on authenticity, which eventually changed from active to passive, from making to having. People came to believe that virtue emanated from possessions that evoked national traditions of organic nature and colonial simplicity, regardless of whether or not their owners had anything to do with making them, or even whether or not they were actually made by hand.⁶³

By the time the Arts & Crafts movement had gained widespread popularity as a style, at the turn of the century, its philosophical underpinnings had faded to the background.⁶⁴

There are many ideological similarities to be argued between the original tenets of the Arts & Crafts movement and the core values of Etsy. Much like in the Arts and Crafts movement, Etsy idealizes and romanticizes the craftsperson or maker. Contemporary America has become increasingly aware of the environmental and social ramifications of consumerism and mass production. Both William Morris and Etsy founder Rob Kalin reference Renaissance Europe as a model for which to strive. But where Kalin’s reverence for the Renaissance is theoretical, William Morris took a much more literal position by integrating many of the motifs, designs and techniques of Medieval Europe into his (and his compatriots) art.

⁶²Ibid., 67.

⁶³Ibid., 77.

⁶⁴Ibid., 82.

Both the supporters of the Arts and Crafts movement and Etsians believe in the essential nature of art and the value of everyday objects that eschew the cheapness of mass production. Morris argues that handicrafts have the power to do nothing less than restore the happiness and dignity lost in the vulgarity of mechanization. For champions of the Arts and Crafts movement, such as Morris, this concept was one that necessitated social revolution. In the November 1888 *Fortnightly Review*, William Morris wrote:

In short, it may be said that though the movement towards the revival of handicraft is contemptible on the surface in face of the gigantic fabric of commercialism; yet, taken in conjunction with the general movement toward freedom of life for all, on which we are now surely embarked, as a protest against intellectual tyranny, and a token of the change which is transforming civilization into socialism, it is both noteworthy and encouraging.”⁶⁵

On September 28, 2007, Kalin posted a podcast on the Etsy’s *The Storque* (News Blog) in which he addresses a number of user questions about the company, the marketplace and the community:

Averly asks, ‘Did you know/plan that Etsy would turn into such a community and not just a place to buy and sell all things handmade?’ And the answer to this is actually yes and it was something that I had hoped for and had always seen it as an integral part because I had been reading all these stories about how marketplaces back in the Renaissance times used to function and they were these vibrant grounds at the crossroads of the world where you’d have these trade routes coming in where they intersected with these large marketplaces and you would go there to see people that you’d never seen before, you’d go there to find a husband or a wife, you’d go there as a kid to play around and as a community they contained all walks of life and I’m sure that they were everything from criminals to tailors who were occupying the space and it’s something that we’ve really tried to figure out the best way to create as open an environment on Etsy but in the same time recognizing that we want to establish a kind of code of conduct for what we expect from the community and I see everyone at the company as active participants in this community and it does put us all in a very equal footing.”⁶⁶

Kalin sees the Renaissance fair as fertile ground for creativity and diversity. Though Etsy (and Kalin) are less explicit and take a distinctly light-hearted tone, this is not to say that their desire is any less ambitious. In Etsy’s storque section, one can find an entire section of articles devoted to ‘craftivism.’ In the winter of 2007, Etsy created a web-based

⁶⁵William Morris, *Politics, Art and Society* (London, GBR: ElecBook, 2001) <http://site.ebrary.com/libproxy.lib.unc.edu/lib/uncch/Doc?id=2001756>, 310.

⁶⁶Rob Kalin. “Rokali’s Ironing-board Chat (Podcast 1),” 28 September 2007, available at <http://www.etsy.com/storque/section/etsyNews/article/rokalis-ironing-board-chat-podcast-1/307/>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

consumer boycott pledge site called ‘Buy Handmade.’⁶⁷ These topics will be discussed in greater detail in chapter two.

Another distinct similarity of both Etsy and the Arts and Crafts movement is the refusal to distinguish between art and craft. Art history, in particular has historically divided work into the categories of ‘fine/high art’ and ‘craft,’ where the former takes on greater cultural prestige and value than the latter. But as aesthetic theorists have explored these concepts, they have discovered that the distinctions between the categories of ‘art’ and ‘craft’ are highly subjective and also highly suspect. On the most basic level, craft is interpreted to represent objects that have a functional and aesthetic qualities. But this definition is made more complex when one attempts to define the limits of ‘function.’ Whether an object is labeled art or craft is partially dependent upon the taste and the contextual understanding of who/when/how the object was produced in the perspective of the categorizer. If craft is signified by skill, and art is the product of, in part, a similar understanding of skills, how does one distinguish the two? For champions of the Arts and Crafts movement the view that craft is art, was based in the desire to ascribe additional value to handmade objects (or at least, objects made outside the realm of total mechanical production). The Etsy website uses the category of ‘art’ to include collage, drawing, fiber art, illustration, mixed media, painting, photography, sculpture, printmaking and other media, but this terms ‘art’ and ‘artist’ are used widely on the website’s blog to refer to any category of expression, not limited to these categories. For Etsy too, the lack of distinction between art and craft is not an attempt to sidestep the question, but rather to apply the value traditionally recognized in fine art to a new category of items, and to rework definitional understandings of how art may function in our daily lives.

Despite Etsy’s tendency to think of craft as an art, Etsy users are less concerned with these distinctions as they are with defining what is ‘handmade’ and where and how the line is drawn between mass and hand-production. In fact, as part of the independent craft and design movement, Etsians seem almost to have matured beyond the longstanding art/craft question. Though one does find threads on the Etsy forum that ponder whether Etsy sellers do or should call themselves artists, this may in fact be more symptomatic of

⁶⁷“Buy Handmade – Make Your Pledge to Buy Handmade Goods,” available at <http://www.buyhandmade.org>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

the fact that so many Etsy sellers maintain other full or part-time jobs. For the time being, the definition of the term ‘handmade,’ used so regularly by Etsy administrators, appears to be still up for debate. Etsy seller MinuOriginals pontificates:

The actual definition of ‘Handmade’ is something that is made without the use of machines. Today the term has become so diluted that if a hand has touched it some consider it handmade. Things that are truly handmade do, in most cases, command a higher price. That is also subject to quality and originality. Hand knitted items higher value than machine knitted items. A quilt made totally by hand higher value than the quilt made by machine. A true Haute Couture garment made totally by hand higher value than a garment made by machine. Shoes totally made by hand a higher value than a shoe made by machine. Now there are many quality, creative items that are made with machines that also command a high value but many times that value is based on branding, style, quality and originality... It would be nice if there were a term that would describe items made with the use of machine that did not make it sound like it is mass produced but still honored the real tradition of handmade and hand wrought.⁶⁸

MinuOriginals comments speak to the desire to break out of the question of ‘art versus craft’ by creating a new, separate category and highlights the problematic nature of traditional definitions. By designation, is a letterpress card, printed with the use of a hand-operated press, an example of something handmade? Does the presence of machinery, on any level, deny the possibility for an object to be considered ‘truly’ handmade? Followers of the Arts and Crafts movement asked similar questions and found answers in the acknowledgment that the mere presence of a machine does not affect the possibility of an object as craft, but rather it is the mastery of the artist/craftsman in controlling the creation of an object from inception to completion that categorically defines it as a handcraft. Thus, the emphasis lies in the maker her or himself, in their ability to design and create a range of useful and artful objects.

The DIY movement tied to the punk subculture of the 1980s and the subsequent culture of Riot Grrrl in the 1990s also figures into the socio-cultural environment into which Etsy was born. At the core of Etsy’s structure is the interest to provide a space, a medium for craftspeople to become conscious producers/consumers. DIY culture operates on the assumption that consumption and production need not be mutually exclusive. There is an aesthetic tendency, among DIY and Riot Grrrl items to use collage, or as one might see it, bricolage, to reformulate mass media images in the context of intensely personal experiences. Presumably because of limited modes of reproduction available to the

⁶⁸MinuOriginals. “So What is ‘Handmade’ Anyway?,” 30 March 2008, available at http://www.etsy.com/forums_thread.php?thread_id=5542884&page=2; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

majority of DIY makers in the 80's and 90's, zines and printed material accompanying musical recordings is mostly black and white, or single color ink photocopied onto colored or white paper.

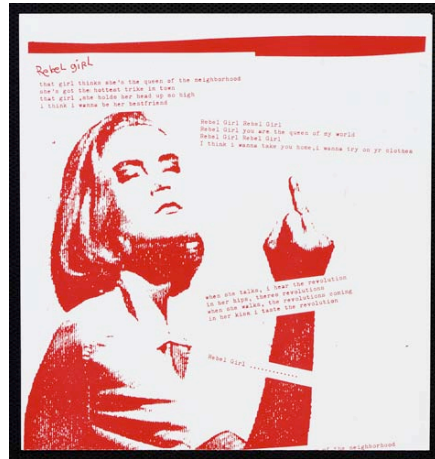


fig 11. An image from an exhibition at the Experience Music Project in Seattle, Washington, entitled “Riot Grrrl Retrospective”⁶⁹ with lyrics from the Riot Grrrl band, Bikini Kill, song “Rebel Girl.”

In her dissertation, Piano explores DIY as a delivery system and a category of production in which, “practices encourage individuals to produce their own texts, and in doing so, form a community that adheres to certain values that often contradict free market tendencies.”⁷⁰ Rather than requiring the support of outside publishers or vendors, makers were able to design, produce, share and sell their music, zines and other forms of media without participating in or cowing to what they considered mainstream media. As a space, one could argue that Etsy was built upon the notion of creating a platform where individuals could explore the possibility of using the Internet as an ever-growing, geographically unbounded locale to re-imagine the market economy. It is ironic that Etsy intends to proliferate subcultural or alternative markets for handmade goods by utilizing the DIY concept, given that the movement has always worked so diligently not to be

⁶⁹“Empsfm.org – EXHIBITIONS – Online Features: Riot Grrrl Retrospective,” available at <http://www.empsfm.org/exhibitions/index.asp?articleID=666>; Internet; accessed 4 September 2008.

⁷⁰Doreen Marie Piano, “Congregating Women: Reading Third Wave Feminist Practices in Subcultural Production” (Ph.D. diss., *Bowling Green State University*, 2003), 22.

solely dependent on high-end technology. While Etsy appears to strive for continued sensitivity to the needs and desires of their users, experimentation and innovation are always restricted by a platform designed by few for many.

Another ironic component of Etsy's use of a DIY ethic is the way that the term "DIY" is simultaneously used to incorporate and exclude new technology. While Etsy defines itself as a place to sell "all things handmade," the mechanism for participation is decidedly not handmade. In order to participate as a buyer on Etsy, you must have access to a computer and the Internet. In order to participate as a seller, in addition to your craft, you must also have access to a computer and the Internet, an email account, and for most, a digital camera or scanner. Both buyers and sellers must also have the technological knowledge to operate these systems. Etsy is clearly designed for people of a certain socio-economic situation, equipped with the skills, technology and time to use it. As an economic practice, DIY has been part of how "subcultural producers use market practices to generate an economy that produces, sells, and distributes goods that most mainstream markets will not touch."⁷¹ Certainly there are Etsy sellers dealing in crafts that operate outside the mainstream, but this is not unilaterally the case. In actuality, Etsy sellers have a wide range of intentions. While some Etsy sellers revel in their activities as hobbies, others use Etsy as a means to commercial success, hoping that their Etsy store will lead to contracts with department stores. Regardless of a user's intentions, they must all have the requisite technology, time and knowledge to engage as members of the Etsy community. Here, Etsy is simultaneously an alternative marketplace and a tool used to build a business, with the ultimate goal of being co-opted into the mainstream. This status certainly complicates Etsy's relationship with DIY. While Etsy follows the notion proposed by Stephen Duncombe, that "producing and distributing one's own text... is a way of resisting market forces that alienate consumers from their ties to the production of goods," it does not as clearly value relationships over profit.⁷²

⁷¹Ibid., 81.

⁷²Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), 106. quoted in Piano, "Congregating Women," 82-83.

Etsy seller Ruth Zelanski (ContagiousJewelry) also has roots in the punk subculture, and reflects on the way punk changed as it was appropriated by mass consumer culture and whether this might foreshadow a similar future for the indie craft community:

There are plusses and minuses to the attention the DIY movement is getting. In the late 60s, my mother began her ongoing foray into the homesteading movement. Along with the Back to the Land movement with small farms was an explosion in crafts. Many of the books in my personal library are from the 70s. The popularity in crafting is cyclical, and while I am enjoying the current state of it, I don't think this is the first time that it seems like everyone is making something with their hands. When I was in high school in the early 90s I became very involved in the punk rock scene in Connecticut. I happened to be at the right place at the right time—the indie music scene was vibrant, and there were punk rock shows constantly, due mostly to the fact that there were people willing to organize and promote. As a life-long outsider, it was the community I had always longed for—it was the smart kids, the awkward kids, the creative kids. It was amazing... but the essence of punk rock had changed with commercialism. All the things that I stood for and had been harassed about in high school were now “cool”. But commercialism only embraced the surface of the punk rock community, and the clothing and haircuts was never what it was really about. In regards to the craft movement, like when I became part of the punk scene, it's exciting to have a community of like-minded peers. It feels good to have people with the same interests. It's also nice to be able to have access to more and more materials and inspiration. It's also a relief to have people in other walks of life understand what I do without as much explanation. On the other hand, when everything is so mainstream and easily accessible, there are more people flooding the market. There are an overwhelming number of people selling jewelry alone on Etsy. Sometimes it seems everyone you meet on the street makes jewelry. Even though I am skeptical of the mainstream after what happened to punk rock, I think the crafting movement is going to be okay. We're making products, and when the masses are interested in those products, it only benefits us.⁷³

Although Zelanski is wary of the growing commercial popularity of the independent craft community, ultimately, Zelanski's take on the Etsy and independent craft community is a hopeful one. While she recognizes that punk had been co-opted on a superficial level, she retains the belief that the spirit and beliefs of the community were not equally commercialized. With her experience of the punk community behind her, Zelanski sees the independent craft movement and Etsy as a way to re-engage in a community of peers. She notes accessibility as a major benefit of being involved with the indie craft scene. Unlike punk, Zelanski feels that on the surface, craft doesn't require as much explanation. The subcultural entrepreneurs of Etsy are using it as a mechanism to find career and monetary success and are often more consciously aware of the practical (rather than political) implications of their actions.⁷⁴ From a position of ideology, it is ironic that

⁷³Ruth Zelanski. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, April 13, 2008.

⁷⁴The term 'subcultural entrepreneur' is one I borrow from Piano.

some Etsians would seek the goal of being co-opted into mainstream culture speaks to the power of dominant socio-cultural models. The Etsy sellers who hope to sign deals with department stores understand their success within a very particular framework, much like trends emerge on the periphery of popular culture and are drawn in with centrifugal force toward the center. Perhaps Tom Frank may have written it best when he explored alternative culture in “Alternative to What?” “Thus, with the “alternative” face-lift, “rebellion” continues to perform its traditional function of justifying the economy’s ever-accelerating cycles of obsolescence with admirable efficiency.”⁷⁵ Despite any and all intentions of Etsy to represent a subcultural position, the users are necessarily drawn back into the realities of the market system.

In *Handmade Weddings: Dispelling DIY Myths*, one of a recent series of articles in the “Handmade Weddings on Etsy” series, Khris Cochran aka. diybride explores four myths of DIY/Handmade: 1) Handmade is poor quality, 2) DIY equals disaster, 3) Handmade is for low budget brides or tacky, tacky, tacky, and 4) DIY/Handmade is always less expensive. Here, by dispelling myths she believes to be obstacles for the larger public to embrace DIY/handmade weddings, Cochran writes to the not yet converted:

Handmade goods are (often) far superior to mass-produced, machine milled items in both quality and style. Not only is the handmade item getting personal attention and care, it’s the direct result of someone’s skill and craftsmanship. That’s not something a machine can ever give you.⁷⁶

Here, Cochran speaks about DIY/handmade to the unconverted, herself reiterating one of the tenets of DIY culture, where members act not only as both consumers and producers but also as educators and learners.⁷⁷ What Cochran does not say, in an overt way, is that DIY cultural practices take away the gate-keeping power of the mainstream. When

⁷⁵Tom Frank. “Alternative to What?” in C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby, eds. *Popular Culture: Production and Consumption* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 98.

⁷⁶Khris Cochran. “Handmade Weddings: Dispelling the DIY Myths,” 17 March 2008, available at <http://www.etsy.com/storque/section/thisHandmadeLife/article/handmade-weddings-dispelling-the-diy-myths/1409/>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

⁷⁷Piano, “Congregating Women,” 1.

someone elects to make their wedding a DIY/Handmade event, they are actively participating in a way that posits them in a more active role than mere consumer. In the “Handmade Weddings” series, projects include everything from cake, gown, and jewelry to venue decorations, photography, and invitations.



fig 12. Hand-printed wedding invitations drying in the basement of the maker.⁷⁸

Cochran’s article is also of note because she is writing about weddings—a cultural event historically steeped in the domestic realm and with identities of womanhood. It does not appear to be accidental that Cochran offers her readers the opportunity to use a do-it-yourself mentality when planning and organizing the wedding event. ‘Doing’ a DIY wedding is a chance for women, in particular, to re-conceptualize the ceremony and the act of marriage in a way that feels right to them, safely within the confines of a ritual steeped in traditional gender tropes. Etsian Beyondthepale writes, “I want our wedding to be special, unique to us and one that reflects our personalities, rather than a mass-produced tedious and instantly forgettable occasion!”⁷⁹ For these women, the DIY sensibility is likened to a kind of empowerment, but should not be conflated with the tenets of the new domestic and Riot Grrrl movements.

⁷⁸Image posted to “Hanging invites on Flickr – Photo Sharing!,” available at http://www.flickr.com/photos/alt_redmeg8/235066970/in/pool-thediybride; Internet; accessed 4 September 2008.

⁷⁹Beyondthepale. Comment posted to “Handmade Weddings: Dispelling the DIY Myths,” 23 March 2008, available at <http://www.Etsy.com/storque/section/thisHandmadeLife/article/handmade-weddings-dispelling-the-diy-myths/1409/comments/#comment-12496>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

As an outgrowth of the punk movement of the mid-1970's, Riot Grrrl came into existence in the early part of the 1990's as a female-centered movement for women seeking a voice and a community within punk music. In addition to producing their own brand of punk music, the Riot Grrrl scene also fostered the growth of other skills. Zine production by members of this community furthered education about gender bias and used the tools of DIY to serve a particularly feminist vantage. In her article, "Charting the Currents of the Third Wave," author Catherine M. Orr writes that Riot Grrrl is:

a movement of sorts that emerged in the early 1990s from the punk music scene when the testosterone level reached unbearable highs for some young female devotees. (The spelling of Grrrl is meant to subvert the image of girlhood innocence and evoke an angry grrrowl.)⁸⁰

Riot Grrrls use(d) DIY to empower themselves as producers and consumers, challenging media stereotypes of females and creating networks of support for likeminded women.

The DIY ethic had long been an essential element of the alternative music scene, but it took on a special significance with Riot Grrrl. Young women were not only encouraged to play rock instruments (it was not unusual for a band to play their first show the same week — or even the same day — that they first picked up their instruments), they also were encouraged to produce shows, become DJs, start record labels, publish fanzines, design posters, organize protests. Seizing the means of production gave women the opportunity to maintain control over their work, while learning valuable skills they could then pass on to other young women.⁸¹

The Riot Grrrl movement embraced DIY for their particular interests—to fight against male dominance in alternative culture. They produced music and zines (self-published works of original material) that argued for female empowerment and the rejection of gender stereotypes. In fact, they paved the way for a women-centered DIY movement. These 'grrrl' forms of cultural production most definitely infuse the structure of the indie craft movement and Etsy. As Piano explains, Riot Grrrl was networked in a non-organizational, non-hierarchical way, similar to the way that the Internet operates. In fact, the Internet has become a viable form of media for Riot Grrrl and DIY practice.⁸² One can find traces of Riot Grrrl on Etsy. A search run on June 5, 2008 for 'zines' for sale on Etsy revealed 11,582 items. A

⁸⁰Catherine M. Orr, "Charting the Currents of the Third Wave," *Hypatia* 12:3 (Summer 1997), 38.

⁸¹"Empsfm.org – EXHIBITIONS – Online Features: Riot Grrrl Retrospective"

⁸²Piano, "Congregating Women," 75.

number of Etsy seller profiles reveal their connections to Riot Grrrl. Other crafters, following in the path of DIY and Riot Grrrl, use Etsy to sell work that is a direct reflection of their feminist beliefs. In response to a question about whether she considered her crafting and her participation as a form of activism, seller Jordan Jennings replied:

Yes, I'm a punker. My business model is based on the business model that my musical heroes have created, I look at Kill Rock Stars and Fugazi and Beat Happening. I am a feminist, I am an activist. Most of my art has a political undercurrent, or at the very least some sort of smart-ass sociological commentary. I don't know to what extent the average Etsy shop owner takes this into consideration, but it seems that everyone that I know who has an Etsy shop takes these economics into some consideration and, certainly, there are feminist undertones in the iconic craftsters of our day, it's a liberating scene for women, which is why it's so heartening that Etsy has all ages of men and women involved. And simply being a part of Etsy has made me more open to new ideas that are better for the planet. A couple of weeks ago I linked to a shop off of one of the forums and wound up buying reusable menstrual pads. And that's something I'd never thought of before, I'm on a crash course with thirty, I have a Bikini Kill tattoo, and I've read most of Andrea Dworkin's work, but I'd never even considered reusable menstrual pads until I happened to stumble across it while shopping on Etsy. If I can be exposed to new ideas through the indie craft scene then certainly a fifty-year-old housewife out of North Dakota can absorb something from the indie craft scene. People are lured in by the cool handmade stuff and then they wind up learning something about the planet, it's a total trap.⁸³

Jennings reflects on her business model as a direct result of DIY punk culture. In addition she sees Etsy as a part of a larger socio-political movement, as a new form of DIY communication. But unlike much of the free or traded zines and record albums of the earlier DIY community, Etsy users engage on a direct economic level, buying and selling goods, all the while exposing people to their political and social beliefs.

Outside of the particular interests of Riot Grrrl, third wave feminism has also been a major player in the ideological preparation for Etsy. Third-wave feminist movement can be difficult to characterize, especially when placed next to other waves of the feminist movement, but one might say that a major feature of third-wave feminism is a deeper engagement with gender issues as they intersect with race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation. Some have argued that the term third-wave feminism is a misnomer, since it implies a clear break with the second-wave feminist movement. In fact, third-wave feminism occupies a much more complicated position in the trajectory of feminism. Though, the incorporation of feminist beliefs into the indie craft movement and into Etsy

⁸³Jordan Jennings. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, April 18, 2008.

is not always obvious, one can find strong underlying currents about women's work and girl culture that dovetail with feminist beliefs. In *New Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism*, editor Anita Harris writes that:

young women have new ways of taking on politics and culture that may not be recognizable under more traditional paradigms, but deserve to be identified as socially engaged and potentially transformative nonetheless. These engagements reflect the changing times within which they live by highlighting both the limitations and opportunities afforded by the globalization of youth consumer culture, the co-option of styles of youth resistance by the market, the emergence of new technologies and media, and the decentralization and dispersal of power and resistance from the national to the global.⁸⁴

This optimistic perspective is not shared by all, some feminists of previous generations feel that young women today do themselves a disservice by not self-identifying as feminist, and choosing instead to follow their own internal compass regarding personal decision making. Other young women feel that feminism is so much a part of their being that they argue it feels redundant to identifying oneself and one's actions as feminist—likening feminism to fluoride, “For our generation... we scarcely notice we have it—it's simply in the water.”⁸⁵ Regardless of a young feminist's particular stance on this point, it is clear that this kind of personal decision-making and identity is at the core of their concerns. Folded into these issues is a complex relationship with popular culture. As an outgrowth of the Riot Grrrl zine production, many young women have now shifted their attention to cyberspace as an open forum for a panoply of voices and positionalities.⁸⁶ As third wave feminists shift away from traditional forms of feminist activism, they find new ways to be political and reflective of the particular times in which they live.⁸⁷ Harris argues that young women are, more than ever, performing resistance within a capitalist

⁸⁴Harris, *New Wave Cultures*, 1-2.

⁸⁵Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards. *ManifestA: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

⁸⁶Orr acknowledges the problematic nature of accepting cyberspace as the great equalizer, given that, “it requires access to computers, software, and a specific set of language skills, along with the inclination and leisure to sit in front of a monitor for hours at a time.” Orr, “Charting the Currents of the Third Wave,” 40.

⁸⁷Harris, *New Wave Cultures*, 1.

economy by challenging dominant models of consumption and leisure.⁸⁸ New forms of creative resistance are a visible part of Etsy. By producing and consuming within a micro-economy such as Etsy, one is able to enact greater control over how much they are buying into the larger system.

The term ‘new domesticity’ was coined by Jean Railla, founder of the website *getcrafty.com*, which is, not accidentally, one of the inspirations for Etsy. New domesticity is often used to refer to independent (indie) crafters who engage in craft production (and consumption) from a decidedly feminist position. These groups seek to empower individuals (predominantly women) through the creative act—re-embracing the domestic as a symbol of empowerment, not subversion. Railla is quoted at length here, as she writes eloquently about her own experience in embracing crafting as one of the domestic arts by framing it within her own feminist education:

I stopped fretting and embraced my inner craftiness. Yet, even with all this joyous creativity—and for me, domesticity is a very artistic process--there are times when I wonder: am I too domestic, too girly? After all, our culture continues to thumb its nose at domesticity... More troubling for me is that it isn’t just mainstream culture, which dismisses domesticity, but some feminists as well. When Betty Friedan searched for the cause of ‘the problem that has no name’ affecting middle class white suburban housewives in 1963, she found it in housecleaning and caring for the family. According to Friedan, all things domestic were actually the root of women’s malaise and depression. As I read through *The Feminine Mystique* now, forty years later, I have a lot of sympathy and admiration for Friedan as someone who was trying to make sense of her world. But I think her analysis is too narrow. It isn’t the activity of housework that is so stifling, but rather women had so few other options and, more importantly, women’s work has always been devalued.

From cooking to cleaning to caring for children, our culture views ‘women’s work’ as stupid, simple, suffocating—things that can easily be replaced by mechanization, crappy fast food, hiring poor women and neglect—precisely because women have always done them. Even feminists aren’t free from this type of thinking; we have internalized patriarchal thinking to such an extent that we also dismiss our own history of domesticity. And although we may not be aware of it, we have bought into the lie that women are inferior so we set out to be more like men: important, big, self-centered and good at getting ours.

Debbie Stoller, the founder and editor of the third wave feminist magazine *Bust*, believes that if the feminist movement wants to achieve real equality, we have to embrace domesticity. ‘We already know what’s respectable and fulfilling about the workplace--basically going out and making money—and there is a certain amount of pride and independence in doing that,’ Debbie continues, ‘But I think we, as a culture, need to relearn what’s valuable and fulfilling in the private sector. The home, children, crafts and making things.’

What if, instead of dismissing it, we thought of domesticity as an important part of women’s culture? Don’t get me wrong, I am not suggesting that every woman should enjoy knitting and cooking and embroidery. But I am suggesting that we give women’s work its props as something valuable, interesting and important, like knowing how to build a house, keep accounting records or

⁸⁸Ibid., 3.

play basketball. Skill, love and creativity go into creating a nice home, making things by hand and raising children. It's not stupid and it's not easy; it's damn hard work that we need to respect. Moreover, it is our history, and dismissing it only doubles the injustice already done to women who didn't have any choice but to be domestic in the first place. And it is as relevant as ever. Taking care of our homes and children is important for our happiness and the health of our entire society.

Paradoxically, when I learned to respect and embrace domesticity, I became reacquainted with my teenage anger that led me to feminism so many years ago. I found myself frustrated by the dismissive looks I received for knitting on the subway or the way people related to me for being so concerned with buying the right cheese or arranging a lovely vase of flowers. With this anger and frustration, I started a Web zine called *getcrafty.com* which is devoted to radical craftiness—a feminist home economics site, if you will. The site covers arts and crafts, cooking, relationships, home décor and finances, but only from the vantage point of living a more meaningful, egalitarian life. Our motto is 'making art out of everyday life.'⁸⁹

Railla begins by recounting her struggle to reconcile with domesticity and feminism, particularly in the wake of some feminist sentiments that asked women to cast off their domestic responsibilities and unburden themselves from the tethers of patriarchal dominance. But, as Railla notes, figures such as Betty Friedan were speaking to women of a certain time and socio-economic status. As a woman in the 21st century, Railla finds that the rejection of domestic life was an oversimplified response to a period when women were given little room to do anything other than housewifery. As a "web zine," *getcrafty.com* is tied to DIY culture. Reiterating the sentiments of contemporary feminist pop culture magazine *Bust* editor, Debbie Stoller, Railla suggests that feminists might embrace domestic life as a part (but not the whole) of what she calls "women's culture." Allowing women to form communities that nurture their feminist beliefs and their interest in crafting, Abby Elise Lehman (Etsy seller GaGaVida) believes that Etsy has been important in bringing together women in the new domestic movement:

I actually graduated with a Women's Studies major for my undergrad... I think that if anything, things like Etsy, *Bust*, etc. have brought together other women that are like-minded in many ways to myself – the feminist ideals, the grassroots thinking, etc. In fact, I would guess that it's why I feel so strongly about continuing to support Etsy as a community, and not just as a way to sell my things.⁹⁰

⁸⁹Jean Railla. "Feminism and the New Domesticity," 2 November 2004, available at <http://www.getcrafty.com/blogs.php?user=jean&entry=598>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

⁹⁰Abby Elise Lehman. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, May 2, 2008.

By advocating egalitarianism in the domestic realm, Railla and others help to push crafting beyond stifling gender stereotypes. Crafting is more than just a simple response to a basic need, it is a way to create beauty in one's every day existence, engage in community, and express socio-cultural and political positions and beliefs. The perspective that crafting is a means to "making art out of everyday life" is an insightful one. Yet, the notion of a feminist re-embrace is not a new concept. Historically, women across a wide range of cultures have creatively utilized the activities of their domestic life as a way to express individuality, emotional and socio-political positions.

Given that getcrafty.com was one of the inspirations for the Etsy website, it is not surprising that similar sentiments are present among Etsians. When asked whether she considered the crafting that she did as a form of activism, Etsy seller Angela Pontoriero (TheDomesticFeminist) explained:

Yes and no. I just like doing what I do. I'm someone who likes to feel empowered and knowing how to do things that people don't usually do (because it's easier to buy something made already) is quite empowering. There's nothing better than baking your own bread or getting a compliment on a dress you envisioned and spent hours configuring. Then on the Yes side... I feel empowered as a woman who chooses to learn and embrace traditionally domestic skills, so there is something in terms of feminism (as my company name suggests 'The Domestic Feminist') I hate that some women feel that they must reject certain roles because they are traditionally assigned to women. I think that you should reject them if you don't like them and accept them if you do...and that is part of feminism: Knowing who you are as a woman and actively pursuing those things that interest you. Yes I am a woman who knits and sews and cooks and cleans, but I do those things because I enjoy them and am good at them. I recognize that not all women do, so they definitely shouldn't. On a feminist note as well, I feel that in some ways, rejecting consumerism is rejecting certain aspects of patriarchy--no I am not going to wear the dress you tell me I will look good in; I will wear the dress I want to feel good in because it is a fruit of my labor.⁹¹

Like Railla, Pontoriero sees the possibility of empowerment through a re-embrace of domesticity as a choice not a requisite responsibility of her gender. As a form of activism, crafting allows the maker to resist mass consumption and marketing practices while enjoying the satisfaction of artistic creation.

In reviewing the main factors that have played roles in the technical and ideological foundation of Etsy, it becomes clear that there are complex and multi-layered concepts at work. The creators of Etsy have appropriated technological and socio-cultural precursors for the benefit of the company and website. This co-opting is neither wholly nefarious nor altruistic, but in fact an extraordinarily savvy (and possible naïve) business

⁹¹Angela Pontoriero. Interview by author. Conducted via E-mail, April 13, 2008.

plan which aspires to achieve both commercial success and generate social change. At the same time, the users of Etsy are attempting to fulfill their own wide range of desires and needs—employing their own personal politics into their powers as producers and consumers. But when this kind of commercial venture with political underpinnings emerges and blossoms within a capitalist economy, does it necessarily get subsumed and converted from a mechanism of resistance to a reiteration of hegemonic power systems? In the case of Etsy, it remains to be seen. But for the time being, the people participating in Etsy are empowered, if only in their belief that their participation is allowing them to regain some control over the way they live their lives within the framework of western industrialized, rampant consumerism and the ever-growing relevance of the Internet.

CHAPTER 3

EVIDENCE FOR THE ASPIRATION OF COMMUNITY

Conceptualizing Community

One of Etsy Incorporated's most interesting strategies has been their effort to create an Etsy community. In order to do so, Etsy relies on popular, romantic conceptions of what a community is. By associating themselves with the benefits of community, Etsy has used the concept as a key component of their successful marketing strategy. As we will see, though, the term is fraught with a complicated history. In analyzing what Etsy purports to be its community from a folkloristic and sociological perspective, we will see how romanticism remains a powerful and compelling force for contemporary consumers.

The term "community" is a deeply contested one. Scholars' definitions range from interpreting the term as synonymous with the public at large, to an understanding of the term to mean a small, tribal and geographically bound social group. Early German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) is often cited as one of the first theorists to attempt to define the concept of community. Tönnies defined social life as composed of two binary categories: *Gemeinschaft* ("community"), distinguished as an environment where members interpret their associations to be of greater importance than their individual goals, and *Gesellschaft* ("society"), where members are primarily concerned with individual self-interest without a sense of collective loyalty. The two concepts identified an evolutionary movement from community to society, where the interests of capitalism, in particular, replaced the common will of humanity. This took on a spatial conception where informally structured rural villages, which emphasized kinship, family and religion, are replaced by urban environments distinguished by the rational interests of the individual, unburdened by the obligations of sentimental bonds. Tönnies laid the groundwork for future theorists who employed his binarism, romantically (and

problematically) envisioning *Gemeinschaft* as the site of “traditional community” in opposition to *Gessellschaft*, which represented the tenets of reason and individualism and simultaneously bemoaned the loss of community in their respective time periods.

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), a French sociologist and early figure in the field of Anthropology, also attempted to define the concept of “community” by furthering the conceptual duality in terms of “mechanical” and “organic” solidarity as components of Structural Functionalism. For Durkheim, “mechanical solidarity” is indicated by collective consciousness. Aligned with *Gemeinschaft*, this form of solidarity emphasizes a sense of shared beliefs and values. “Organic solidarity,” on the other hand, is related to *Gessellschaft* in understanding the ambitions of the individual, within the context of heightened divisions of labor, as overtaking any sense of monolithic unity. Organizations and groups are present in situations of “organic solidarity,” but function in establishing identities and affiliations that are less universal than the previously stated collective consciousness. Unlike Tönnies though, Durkheim envisioned “community” and “society” as coexisting.⁹² Despite the differences between Tönnies and Durkheim’s characterizations of these ideas, the binary conception of community and society remained. The following list characterizes the dualities perpetuated by these theorists:

<u>Community</u>	<u>Society</u>
natural	contrived
village or hamlet	city
group tradition	individualism and self-interest
faith	skepticism
custom or habit	rational calculation
stable	constantly changing
slow-paced	fast-paced
feeling	reason
simplicity	complexity
direct	formal

This list exemplifies the way that stereotype informs this dualistic conception. As time passes, and we ostensibly move further and further away from “community” and “toward

⁹²Suzanne Keller, *Community: Pursuing the Dream, Living the Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 43.

society,” it is possible to see how the features in the left column take on a romantic quality.

The idealization of a romantic past, based on an imagined sense of “community” remains a conceptual force in contemporary society. Political scientist and author Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, published in 2000, argues for the need to re-establish what he terms “social capital” or “...features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”⁹³ This perspective, that social networks in the United States are in a state of disintegration, is the central thrust of communitarianism, a philosophical and political movement that gained visibility in the 1992 American presidential campaigns with Bill Clinton who indirectly cited the values of responsibility each American has toward the nation. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed a similar sentiment at the 1997 British Labor Party conference, “A decent society is not based on rights. It is based on duty. Our duty to each other.”⁹⁴ In addition to the political position which advocates renewed accountability toward humanity, the communitarian position includes a harsh criticism of the guiding principles of contemporary society. In their approximation, communities (and thus community memory) are being replaced by lifestyle enclaves that do not have the same ability to foster morality among citizens for they are based upon mutual interests rather than in a sense of shared existence within a society or nation-state.

Many years prior to the 20th century, figures in academia had already begun to question the romantic underpinnings of such notions of “community.” Even before to the work of Tönnies, community as a “primordial force” was imbued with romantic and idealistic associations.⁹⁵ In 1976, theorist Raymond Williams (1921-1988) noted that “the

⁹³Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 66.

⁹⁴Jack Mahoney, *The Challenge of Human Rights: Origin, Development, and Significance* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2006) 93-4.

⁹⁵Gerald W. Creed, *The Seduction of Community: Emancipations, Oppressions, Quandries*, School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), 24.

notion of community began to acquire romantic qualifications, or as he puts it, ‘a sense of immediacy and locality... based on narrow direct relations,’ from the seventeenth century.”⁹⁶ Romanticization of what become known as “traditional” communities involves not only a sentimentalization of the past but also a denigration of the present.⁹⁷ Following the revelation that these conceptions of “community” were deeply biased with sentimental connotations, theorists began to explore the possibility of “community” free of the binaries listed previously, finding that the term “community” was in fact being used to serve a complex host of functions. The definitional ambiguity of “community” plays a part in its significance in modern parlance. In fact, an analysis of the term may shed insight into its popularity. Many take for granted that the term is not only descriptive, but carries with it a highly positive connotation. As a noun, the word is used to mean three things at once: a unit of social organization, a condition of meaningful relationships with one another and/or as a generic term of social territorial organizations. Some theorists also began to realize that the idealized and ambiguously defined concept was vulnerable to the misuses and abuses of those wishing to promote their own agendas. Often individuals, groups and corporations use the term community with the intention of incorporating more than one of these definitions. This most certainly adds ambiguity to its reading. John F. Freie coined the term “counterfeit community” to define groupings, or locales, such as shopping malls, that appear to be communities, but are in actuality private spaces masquerading as such for monetary gain. Such spaces are deeply problematic in Freie’s conception since they distract people from building more genuine formations of community, such as the “ethnically diverse St. Nick’s parish on the southwest side of Chicago in the 1950s” and leave members feeling, “alone, empty, and bewildered as to what has gone wrong.”⁹⁸

⁹⁶Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 75-6 quoted in Creed, *The Seduction of Community*, 24.

⁹⁷Peter Day and Douglas Schuler, eds., *Community Practice in the Network Society: Local Action/Global Interaction* (London: Routledge, 2004), 32.

⁹⁸John F. Freie, *Counterfeit Community: The Exploitation of our Longing for Connectedness* (Landham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 24, 35.

The Possibility of Digital Community

Despite these theoretical advances, romanticism re-emerged as a significant force in the discussion of community within academia with the advent of the Internet. In *Maintaining Community in the Information Age: The Importance of Trust, Place and Situated Knowledge* author Karen F. Evans explains that over the past forty years, two key themes have been present in discourse regarding community: First, that Western societies are collectively in crisis, and second, the amazing progress of and profound impact that technology has had on the nature of social relationships in the West.⁹⁹ The digital utopianism promoted by media presupposed the facts that community was something desirable, that community was disintegrating and that through technology, humans would have a chance to fix what they had broken. The popularity of these claims no doubt stems in part from feelings that as life has “advanced,” people have lost a certain sense of connectedness to one another. According to this viewpoint, Post Modern life brought with it: the dissolution of place, vastly increased mobility and the destabilization of identities.¹⁰⁰ Technological communication tools have become a regular, everyday part of Post Modern life, and one could argue, one of the instigators of the changes previously named. The Internet, in particular, has dislodged previously accepted divisions between work and leisure, public and private.

Ironically, some have looked to the Internet to solve the problems raised by technology in what Peter Day and Douglas Schuler in *Community Practice in the Network Society: Local Action/Global Interaction* (2004) call a “positive feedback loop.”¹⁰¹ From their perspective (as well as other critics of digital community), the individual seeking escape from their isolation through the Internet is only perpetuating the problem. In this instance, community is conflated with communication. Just because a person has a greater range of ways to communicate does not mean that they will have greater engagement with others. Despite media portrayals of the contrary, communication does not directly result in

⁹⁹Karen F. Evans, *Maintaining Community in the Information Age: The Importance of Trust, Place and Situated Knowledge* (Houndmills, N.Y.: 2004), 1.

¹⁰⁰Day and Schuler, eds., *Community Practice in the Network Society*, 182.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 44.

community. Others validate the use of technology to “solve” the problem of disintegrating community by defining the concept of community as solely an emotional connection rather than a physical reality. In the 1970’s, journalist and energy activist Greg Pahl conceptualized the possibility of community existing as a purely mental construct regardless of the physical features of geography, etc. This creates an ideology for digital communities to exist beyond the realm of bounded-ness of any kind, including physical space and the promise for digital communities to solve the problem of mobility, all the while perpetuating withdrawal from the physical world and communities.¹⁰² But as Gerald W. Creed writes in *The Seduction of Community: Emancipations, Oppressions, Quandries* (2006), online/digital communities are shallow ones that use selective uniformity and harmony to conform to an ideal model and thereby justify romantic notions of community.¹⁰³ Etsy indicates just such an example of Creed’s concept, flattening difference in favor of harmony among users to an almost imperceptible level. Within the field of sociology, Suzanne Keller, author of *Community: Pursuing the Dream, Living the Reality* (2003), concurs that “digital communities” “lack ninety percent of the defining criteria” necessary to appropriately term them as communities.¹⁰⁴ From this perspective, the digital community is a mirage.

Re-defining Community as Aspiration

How then should the notion of community in Etsy be explored? In her seminal piece, “Group” (1995), folklorist Dorothy Noyes argues that we conceptualize community as a potential aspiration of network. Unlike “community,” the term network does not carry with it the same overtones of positivity. As an open-ended system, the term network highlights the emergent quality of social relationships and group formations. Network also allows us to focus on the two categories of community outside those defined by territory/place/residence, namely: territorial/place communities, communities of interest

¹⁰²Ibid., 227.

¹⁰³Creed, *The Seduction of Community*, 46.

¹⁰⁴Keller, *Community*, 293.

where people share a common interest in a particular topic, and communities of attachment, where a feeling of connectedness (outside geography or particular characteristic similarities) promotes a sentiment of community.¹⁰⁵ In a digital environment, the notions of shared characteristics and shared agreements or contracts become primary organizers. This is very different from the “traditional” conceptions of community explored earlier, which are deeply rooted in a sense of place, whether it is rural or urban. With this in mind, as a digital environment, Etsy functions without a distinct concept of physical place. The Internet is both everywhere and nowhere, without the qualities necessary to identify it as a particular place or space. The sense of place in the digital real is more implicit than explicit, where engagement occurs inside the context of a literal place of space. One always uses the Internet from somewhere. The Etsy headquarters in Brooklyn, New York serve as a flagship but do not provide any sense of regional character. While this relative universality has helped the Etsy company promote the website as a co-operative space that does not discriminate on the basis of national borders, it is also an idealized vision of the Internet network that denies the complexity of network systems as they function within power structures that reinforce inequalities of access. One of the overarching assumptions of the Etsy system is that everyone has equal opportunity to the skills, technology and equipment necessary to participate as a member. Nowhere on Etsy does one find reference to these broader issues. Despite Etsy Incorporated’s strategic positioning, the notion of Etsy as a network is beneficial because it better describes the quality of membership among Etsians. Given Etsy’s affiliation of communities of interest and attachment, “network” is also conceptually useful because it is characterized by a high level of voluntarism. Members of Etsy electively choose to participate by being involved with the website. Unlike communities, which often emerge as the result of circumstance, for example, people living in a particular neighborhood in a city, ‘network’ places emphasis on the interdependent affiliations between parties that relies less on geography and more on the dynamic of relationships. While Internet use in

¹⁰⁵P. Wilmott, *Social Networks, Informal Care and Public Policy* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1986) quoted in Evans, *Maintaining Community in the Information Age*, 55.

certain social areas of Post Modern life has become more compulsory than ever, Etsy serves a relatively small number of people.

Following in the perspective of Noyes, I employ the use of the term ‘network’ to describe the structure of human interactions “in which culture is created and moves.”¹⁰⁶ Community, alternately, will be used to describe the aspirational goal of “the social imaginary that occasionally emerges in performance.”¹⁰⁷ Network emphasizes the ever-changing dynamic that occurs between people, the visible exchange that occurs when members negotiate their positions, their interests and their goals. In short, a network is made up of people interconnected through a shared system. For example, people living with HIV/AIDS may be considered a network, as might members of particular political party consider themselves part of a network. Community, in turn, is the flexible and dynamic result of these performative interactions. Community is emotional and does not require any particular shared system. Creed writes that “community is an aspiration entwined as an identity” and as such, it has the power to both empower and burden people.¹⁰⁸

Without examining the more physical elements of “community,” as defined by Keller, it would be difficult to ground any discussion of the interpersonal experiences that inform Etsy users. In turn, examining only the dimensions acknowledged in Keller’s distinctly sociological account would deny the relevance of human relationships that compose such an important part in the aspiration for community. In order to most fully examine the possibility of Etsy achieving community, I utilize the physical qualities of network delineated by Keller and the dynamics of relationships as defined by Noyes. By employing a cross-disciplinary methodology that takes into account contemporary folkloristic and sociological perspectives on “network” and “community,” my goal is to

¹⁰⁶Dorothy Noyes, “Group,” *Journal of American Folklore* 108, no. 430 (Autumn 1995): 452.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Creed, *The Seduction of Community*, 22.

uncover the intricacies of Etsy's claim to be, as one Etsian put it, "truly a community of artists that spans the globe."¹⁰⁹

Structural Qualities of the Etsy Network

According to Keller, there are ten elements of "community." But rather than explore Etsy as a community, as Keller might do, it seems more apt to think about Etsy as a network striving for community. This is a concept based on Noyes' understanding that community of affiliation is enacted in instances of performance. With Etsy, this performative aspect takes on special character in the digital environment. Keller's definition of community includes a list of structural qualities that compose it. Although she notes that community is enacted through the presence of these qualities, which often involve elements of interaction among members, she does not attribute them to instances of performances. Unlike Noyes, Keller is more interested in identifying the range of building blocks that compose community rather than exploring performance as a mechanism that highlights the fleeting emotional quality of community that emerges as a result. Both Keller and Noyes, though, see community as an imagined result. Their stance differs in that Keller sees community as attainable if all the necessary building blocks are in place while Noyes sees community as an ever-changing aspiration enacted by the performative occurrences of people. For Noyes, the term network better represents the group that strives (whether consciously or unconsciously) for community. For Keller, the term community is unilaterally used to refer to the actual situation of group and the ideal formation or psychological destination of their activities. For the purposes of this project, I use Noyes' concept of network to describe the occurrences at work on Etsy and the concept of community to refer to the aspirational spirit that Etsy incorporated claims to have achieved with the website.

In reviewing each of the qualities Keller distinguishes as necessary for the presence of community, I mean to represent the ways in which Etsy, as a network, aspires toward community. In the following paragraphs I will consider each of Keller's "bedrocks" or essential attributes, questioning how Etsy does or does not conform. Included in this list are the following ten components: turf/territory, criteria of

¹⁰⁹Amara Holstein, "Meet Your Maker," *Dwell*, February 2007, 100-101.

membership, institutional framework, cultural values, a belief system, myth and image of community, rituals and celebrations, a leadership structure, social relationships, and transcendent purposes and goals. Though Keller argues that these ten dimensions are all essential, she recognizes that their individual impact depends on where in the stages of formation the community exists.¹¹⁰ This is not to imply that networks operate on a linear path in stages toward community, but rather to emphasize that community is more fluid, relying on the “multivocality and complexity of actors... as agents.”¹¹¹

Turf/territory

Keller lists a defined site of territory and turf as the first essential feature of community. In her words, this helps to “generate a collective identity, a sense of closure, and safety.” In addition, she notes the importance of “a name and certain landmarks [to] offer a spatial signature.”¹¹² Etsy, of course, is not a bounded site in terms of land but rather a domain on the web. By definition, any web space that is part of the etsy.com system is owned property of Etsy Incorporated. Language on the official Etsy site strives to promote itself as a particular destination, calling itself, “*your place* to buy and sell all things handmade” (emphasis mine). In terms of landmarks, the Etsy website differentiates itself by its logo and graphic identity as a company. The orange Etsy box appears on every page of the website, along with a similar ‘E’ favicon. The favicon is particularly important here because it indicates to the user that a particular webpage is part of the official Etsy site. Though favicons are not always used by websites, they have become a popular mechanism to foster a conceptual frame for a particular website’s virtual space.



¹¹⁰Keller, *Community*, 269.

¹¹¹Noyes, “Group,” 466.

¹¹²Keller, *Community*, 267.

But even as these features very clearly establish what is and is not part of the official Etsy site, the spatial boundaries of the Etsy community are much more nebulous. Etsians do not always limit their interactions or presentations of self to the official Etsy site. Etsians are also bloggers and social networkers, using other areas of the web to self-promote and to pontificate on the relative merits and shortcomings of Etsy Inc. The spaces beyond the official Etsy domain often are much more revealing in terms of how users create a sense of history and memory with regard to certain “wrongdoings” made by the Etsy staff. The *Etsy Bitch* blog and the *Unofficial Etsy News* website are two examples of web spaces outside of Etsy.com where users candidly discuss company news, personal experiences and frustrations.

Criteria of membership

In terms of criteria of membership, any person who has an Etsy account, has made a purchase or listed an item for sale is a member of the Etsy community as stated by Etsy Incorporated, “If you are a member of Etsy, you are part of our community.”¹¹³ According to Keller, this is crucial to establish “who belongs and who does not, providing access and privilege for insiders, exclusion for outsiders and nonmembers.”¹¹⁴ By this description, Etsy does not meet the standard dimension for criteria of membership. In Keller’s definition, membership in a community defines who does and does not belong. Membership in Etsy is voluntary and involves a simple online form. A person need only be 18 years of age or older, have access to the Internet, an understanding of the Web and a few minutes of time to become a member of the Etsy community-- as the company defines it, “the heart of Etsy.”¹¹⁵ If you are a member of Etsy, you are part of our community. The ease with which one can join the Etsy community defines membership as extremely broad, to the point that the ‘sense of belonging’ associated with Etsy members ceases to be unique. From an economic standpoint, it makes sense for Etsy Inc. to define

¹¹³“Etsy :: Dos and Don’ts,” available at <http://www.etsy.com/dosdents.php#community>; Internet; accessed 3 July 2008.

¹¹⁴Keller, *Community*, 267.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*

membership in as broad of terms as possible. The greater the number of users, the greater the potential for transactions that ultimately translate into company assets.

Following their broad conception of membership, Etsy also does not distinguish between new and senior members of the “community,” affording the same access to all users. The ease with which membership is achieved is beneficial to the Etsy company but counterproductive in establishing what Keller identifies as a “real” community.¹¹⁶ Easy membership involves little risk, which many sociologists believe is the “glue” which helps to keep individuals committed and participatory in a community. With Etsy, it stands to reason that one may opt out as easily as they opt in, if and when they feel challenged, disappointed or simply bored. And yet, despite this, there is a clear “us” and “them” sentiment among some users, which characterize their identity as Etsians as part of a larger subculture of artists and ecology-minded citizens.

Institutional framework

As a business, law requires Etsy’s institutional framework or governance to be clearly delineated. Etsy Incorporated has a terms of use agreement, a privacy policy and a list of user “do’s and don’ts” all of which are available to view in full on the website. The terms of use agreement specifies the binding contractual agreement made when a person becomes a member of Etsy and indicates the respective legal responsibilities of the company versus the individual user. Etsy is comprised of users and admins (employees of Etsy Inc.). Part of the responsibility of the admin is to govern Etsy and ensure that users comply with all rules and regulations. As stated in their terms of use agreement, Etsy Inc. retains the right to suspend members at their discretion and to refuse service to anyone, for any reason. As a private, incorporated organization, this is entirely acceptable. But as a potential community, it is problematic. Etsy admins are paid employees, not elected officials.

By marketing itself so vigorously as a community, Etsy has led some users to believe the site to operate as a form of democracy, despite the fact that it is a privately owned business. As a result, some Etsy users express anger over feelings of

¹¹⁶Keller, *Community*, 298.

disenfranchisement as they discover that a democratic system of government is not present. This has become particularly evident on the Etsy forums, where users are sometimes ‘muted’ (blocked from being able to post public messages on a specific conversation thread) or banned (blocked from being able to participate in the forums altogether) for engaging in anything that Etsy admins deem inappropriate or non-productive. As the Etsy Do’s and Don’ts page explains:

The staff’s role in the community is to maintain the health, helpfulness and success of community. We have policies and expectations for members’ participation in the community spaces. Etsy’s role is to facilitate open discussion and support our community through constructive communication.¹¹⁷

Posts and comments on un-affiliated Etsy sites *Etsy Bitch* and the *Unofficial Etsy News* often reference the fact that Etsy users are subject to censorship. But technically, the term censorship is only applicable to restraints placed on freedom of expression in the public domain. Regardless of how individual instances of control are exerted by administrators over users, it is clear that the admin are the ones with the power—the ones who always get the last word. In terms of Etsy’s status as a community, this authority negates the possibility for the users to grow and develop their bonds in situations of routine governance and times of crises.¹¹⁸ By making users essentially powerless in the basic structure and regulation of Etsy, they limit the possibility for community to emerge.

Cultural values

In order to establish community, Keller also highlights the importance of shared values. These values emphasize a number of the key qualities of community as aspiration and ideal—cooperation, mutual responsibility and sharing.¹¹⁹ These shared values shape priorities and goals, as well as provide clarity to members about normative behaviors. Explicitly defined, Etsy’s mission statement exclaims the following, “Our vision is to

¹¹⁷“Etsy :: Does and Don’ts.”

¹¹⁸Keller, *Community*, 267.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*

build a new economy and present a better choice: Buy, Sell, and Live Handmade.”¹²⁰ This is ambitious, to say the least. Given Etsy’s presentation of itself, it is not a coincidence that Etsy promotes itself as the place to engage in the buying and selling of this new economy. But, as a site for e-commerce, it is unclear what exactly this “new economy” entails. In fact, the site seems to promote a kind of pre-Industrialized capitalist society where individuals buy and sell handmade objects. In an article in *Dwell* magazine, Kalin was quoted as stating:

If you look back 150 years, everything was made by artisans. Then along came the Industrial Revolution, and there was a huge swing toward mass production. What I really want to do is swing the pendulum back the other way.¹²¹

But what Etsy offers isn’t a new economy but rather a type of venue for participating in the already established modes of capitalist exchange.

A recurring theme on the official Etsy blog is the concept of “success” defined as an Etsy seller’s ability to support themselves financially entirely through their Etsy sales. This is best described in a series of articles that Etsy named “Quit Your Day Job.” These pieces, most of which are actually interviews by Etsy admin of full-time Etsy sellers, highlight those that have been able to “succeed” in the transition. Key themes in these articles are “turning dreams into reality” and “making a living doing what you love.” While these articles acknowledge some of the challenges faced by full-time sellers on a day-to-day basis, the articles note that in many of the cases, the sellers did not have any defining moment and criteria where they knew they were ready to “quit their day job.” Though some successful sellers advocate preparation prior to “taking the plunge,” there is a general sense that making the decision was a “no-brainer,” as Etsy admin MaryMary writes, to risk leaving an unsatisfying day-job in order to follow your passion. As inspirational stories, these articles successfully present a rosy picture of life as a full-time Etsy seller. Not coincidentally, all of the success stories in the “Quit Your Day Job” series are of women or husband and wife couples. The successes of these sellers lie in their passion for their respective crafts, their patience and their faith in their ability to succeed.

¹²⁰“Etsy :: About,” available at <http://www.etsy.com/about.php>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

¹²¹Holstein, “Meet Your Maker,” 100-101.

The core cultural value of Etsy is financial achievement couched within language that emphasizes a sense of conscientiousness and care for others in the process of making one's Etsy shop a "success." Etsy teams, a component of the community section of Etsy, are slightly more altruistic in their design. By working together in small groups, Etsy teams help promote individual Etsy sellers and beliefs, with a strong tendency toward groups that favor recycling, up-cycling and ecological-mindedness. This is reiterated in the section of the Storque called Craftivism, borrowing a recently coined term that has been defined by open-source encyclopedia, Wikipedia as, a "form of activism, typically for social justice, environmentalism or feminism, that is centered around practices of craft – especially handicrafts."¹²² In Etsy's case, craftivism is used to represent a more benign form of activism—ecological awareness through the consumption of earth-friendly objects. The large female presence on the website has been fertile ground for the Etsy company to advocate the consideration of the environment as parents, for the sake of our children and our pets. Although craftivism has manifested itself as more aggressive in terms of political stance, in particular a Post-Colonial feminist resistance, craftivism on Etsy is often reduced to a distinctly apolitical altruism and kindness that Etsy Incorporated uses to promote the justification for the buying and selling of handmade items.

A Belief System

The belief system at work on Etsy calls for "community" members to engage in conscious consumerism in order to support their ideological position. If we understand belief system to mean an ideology, or way of seeing the world, Etsy's goal to build a new economy is in large part a response to three emergent ideologies: the following critiques gain immediate relevance: 1) we as a culture have become detached from the production of the things we own and use, 2) rampant industrialization and mechanization have led to the deterioration of quality and the uniqueness of our things, and 3) our consumption habits are hurting the environment. These three components appear to comprise the overarching ideology and are commonly expressed sentiments on Etsy's "community" spaces, on the Etsy blog and elsewhere on the web (in unofficial Etsy spaces). Some Etsy

¹²²"Craftivism – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia," 28 January 2008, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craftivism>; Internet; accessed 4 September 2008.

users unequivocally accept these to be the tenets of the Etsy community, while others are more selective, weighing their favor to the ‘causes’ that strike them as most personally relevant. For Etsy, the response to these ideologies comes in the form of buying handmade.

In terms of marketing strategy, the Etsy company positions its business to dovetail nicely with the trend in conscious consumption already visible in the U.S. In the last decade, the conscious or ethical consumerism movement has grown exponentially. This is due, in no small part, to the presence of the Internet as a DIY media outlet and site for e-commerce. Proponents of the ethical consumerism movement reject ‘retail therapy’ (shopping for the primary purpose of improving a buyer’s mood), a concept they feel has been perpetuated by big-box companies who stand to benefit from this kind of conspicuous consumption. As William McDonough and Michael Braungart argue in *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, an unnecessary feeling of guilt characterizes much of the contemporary environmental movement. The key is not to buy less but to buy differently.¹²³ Etsy stands to benefit greatly from a movement that believes large corporations have been apathetic to consumers’ wants and needs. Etsy’s marketing, through the strategic connection to the conscious consumer movement, effectively promotes guilt-free consumerism by buying and selling on Etsy.

In November 2008, the beginning of the holiday shopping season, Etsy began a web campaign called “Pledge Handmade.”¹²⁴ The affiliated website, buyhandmade.org, offers economic and environmental justifications for buying non-mass produced objects. First, they argue that handmade items are better gifts. The buyer/gift giver feels the

¹²³William McDonough and Michael Braungart. *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 46. In January 2007, Rob Kalin started an Etsy book club that included *Cradle to Cradle*, *The Perfect Store: Inside eBay* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002) and a number of other titles related to topics including micro-lending and the importance of localized economics.

¹²⁴It is worth noting the Buy Hadmade campaign’s use of a .org TLD, or top level domain, web address is one typically reserved for non-commercial or non-profit organizations.

“satisfaction of supporting an artist or crafter directly.”¹²⁵ The recipient of the handmade gift benefits, according to the website, because they are receiving a one-of-a-kind item, “made with care and attention that can be seen and touched.”¹²⁶ This type of craftsmanship, according to the site, is “absent in the world of large-scale manufacturing.”¹²⁷ In this statement, the *Buy Handmade* organizers assume that handmade items are always better made than their manufactured counterparts.¹²⁸

Second, the website argues that, “buying handmade is better for the people” because it offers an alternative to the bland uniformity of “chain store culture and global manufacturing” – a process that encourages people to be “consumers not producers of our own culture.”¹²⁹ As a result, we have lost our connection to the “local and human sources of our goods.”¹³⁰ Here we see the activity of buying handmade championed for its ability to simultaneously reject hegemony and support unique goods and thus the individuality of the consumers. The empowerment associated with this type of consumption is perceived to reunite the material, the process and the product—essentially, to help humanity recover their daily connections to the origin of their possessions.

Third, Etsy proposes that, “buying handmade is better for the environment.” Mass production is a major cause of “global warming and the poisoning of our air, water and soil.” The website argues that buying handmade (“from a small-scale independent artist or crafter”) “strikes a small blow to the forces of mass production.” The benefits as listed on

¹²⁵“Why Buy Handmade?,” available at <http://www.buyhandmade.org/why-buy-handmade>; Internet; accessed 1 July 2008.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

¹²⁸Although this is certainly sometimes the case, it is naïve to argue that individual artists or craftspeople always produce better work than their mechanized counterpart. In particular, this attitude limits the range of items—for example, one would expect this sort of production when producing a potholder but not a dishwasher.

¹²⁹“Buy Handmade – Make Your Pledge to Buy Handmade Goods.”

¹³⁰“Why Buy Handmade?”

the buy handmade website are ambitious to say the least. As of July 10, 2008, the site had gathered 21,681 digital signatures pledging to “buy handmade this holiday season and request that others do the same,” a product of the appeal of the project’s romantic and idealistic conception of consumer powers.¹³¹ Problematic to the *Buy Handmade* campaign, is that the project was conceived by Etsy, a company that stands to benefit directly and personally from the buying and selling of handcrafting items. While the impulse behind the call for consumers to be more aware of the gifts they give and receive may be grounded in altruism, it is suspicious that the answer offered by Etsy is the singular call for consumers to buy handmade “whenever possible.” Rob Walker explains the contradictory nature of Etsy’s affiliation with the handmade pledge in his *New York Times Magazine* article “Handmade 2.0”:

The pledge echoed the idealistic language of a tree-hugger activist group, but actually the consortium’s most prominent member was the online shopping bazaar Etsy, a very much for-profit entity that bills itself as “your place to buy & sell all things handmade.”¹³²

Buyhandmade.org certainly works hard to promote and justify the importance of buying handmade, but the political sentiment falls flat in the context of Etsy selling itself to potential users/shoppers/makers. Ultimately, then, we find that like many of the other components of the Etsy “community” explored thus far, Etsy presents its belief system as optional, not compulsory for users. As an elective component of Etsy, it renders the efforts of those attempting to make good of their promises as lone rangers rather than part of a group, incapable of bolstering the feeling and spirit of community.

Myth and image of community

Keller notes that a community must also perpetuate a myth and image of community, or “a guiding image, often mythic... these may be natural disasters, historic triumphs, or notable trials. Myths are visions of the desired life or fictions of common origin and past events. They may bear little relation to reality.”¹³³ As “symbolic models

¹³¹“Buy Handmade – Make Your Pledge to Buy Handmade Goods.”

¹³²Rob Walker, “Handmade 2.0.” *The New York Times Magazine*, 16 December 2007, 76.

¹³³Keller, *Community*, 267.

solidifying community,” images, often manifesting as myth, play a crucial role. On Etsy it is the company’s mission to “enable people to make a living making things” that serves as the central myth for its notion of community.¹³⁴ This is a drastic oversimplification. As a venue for e-commerce, Etsy is, at its core, a place for people to buy and sell things. The fact that their mission conspicuously omits the “selling” required for a person to “make a living making things” denies much of the work involved with being a craftsperson and vendor and reiterates the image of the artist being able to survive on creativity and artistic skill alone. There is an entire second category of skills necessary for an Etsy seller to be successful, including: writing, pricing, photography, customer service, organizational skills and an understanding on copyright, shipping and tax laws.

Central to Etsy’s marketing is the perpetuation of the financial success and freedom available to Etsy sellers. The concept of financial success being sold by Etsy, Incorporated to Etsians may be considered a central myth in the concept of the Etsy “community.” One way to examine the intricacies of this myth is to look closely at those Etsy sellers that have been touted by Etsy as having achieved this goal. Seller, Emily Martin aka TheBlackApple, is arguably the most well known of Etsy’s success stories. This is largely due to her appearance along with Rob Kalin on *The Martha Stewart Show* television program on February 29, 2008. On the segment that featured Martin showing how to make her signature “black apple doll,” Martha Stewart stated that Martin was making “six figures” from her Etsy sales.¹³⁵

¹³⁴“Etsy :: About.”

¹³⁵The Martha Stewart website, which hosts the video clip of the show, describes Martin as “the No. 1 seller on online crafts website Etsy.” “Black Apple Doll and More Creative Craft Projects, Templates, Tips, Clip-Art, Patterns, and Ideas on Marthastewart.com,” available at http://www.marthastewart.com/article/black-apple-doll?autonomy_kw=emily%20martin&rsc=header_1; Internet; accessed 3 September 2008.



fig 15. Screen capture of Emily Martin showing Martha Stewart how to make her signature Black Apple doll on *The Martha Stewart Show*.

This statement has made Martin a celebrity among many Etsians, while others resent her monetary success. What Martin has been purported to have achieved through Etsy serves as both aspiration and inspiration to users/sellers. Etsian Below14th wrote an Etsy forum post entitled, “From suspicion to therapy and back again,” a rather vitriolic and ironic statement of her own disillusionment in trying of making a living/being successful as an Etsy seller:

Oh, Etsy... I support the handmade revolution! ...Do you!!?

I can do this! I will make some owl magnets and sell them on Etsy. But not for money, just to be part of the handmade movement. I know, I will sell them for negative dollars and ship each one in an eggshell! A PAINTED eggshell! I wouldn't even sell them if Etsy let me give them away for free. I will call my shop “No Name, No Boxes!”

I've been up for 61 hours waiting for people to heart me. I posted in every forum. I made 9,861 magnets. I wrote a letter to Emily Martin and told her how she changed my life, she's so creative!

Why can't I make a fucking sale?

I can't make a sale. I am worthless, talentless [sic], a joke.

...If I sell 200 pieces a week, I'll make \$300 a week. In 139 months, I'll have as many sales as the Black Apple ...minus supplies, tax, and shipping. \$8 a week, I'll make \$8 a week. ...Well, it's not about the money. I am happy...¹³⁶

¹³⁶“Etsy :: Etsy: From suspicion to therapy and back again,” 14 August 2008, available at http://www.etsy.com/forums_thread.php?thread_id=5761396; Internet; accessed 3 September 2008.

Martin posted a message to her own blog approximately one month after the episode of the Martha Stewart Show aired expressing that she felt she had become the virtual whipping post for other frustrated Etsy users and stating that:

...the number Martha Stewart announced on her show (explicitly against my wishes) is not a realistic reflection of my business. I don't think that the amount of money that I earn is anyone's concern, and I feel like it's a private matter, but I thought I should clarify the inaccuracy of the claim and also ask that people not use that figure as a stick with which to poke at me.¹³⁷

Ironically, where Martin's monetary success (presumably shared by Etsy admin with the Martha Stewart Show) was meant to stimulate inspiration, it has ultimately led to a sense of unity among those who feel they cannot achieve such an accomplishment, thus creating a group of Etsians who connect with each other through feelings of failure. The myth of success perpetuated on Etsy is reiterated by Kalin, when on July 25, 2008, he was quoted in an article by online magazine *The Deal* as stating that "there are 200,000 sellers making their livings from Etsy" there are 200,000 sellers making their livings from Etsy."¹³⁸ Etsy Bitch was quick to argue the inaccuracy of this statement based on numbers of sellers and items available for sale as indicated on Etsy.com:

Let's check some facts. If you go to the Sellers page on Etsy and have a look at the list of seller accounts, you'll see there are ... 208,160 sellers. But oh, just wait a second... if you sort the sellers by number of listings, you'll find that the number of shops with at least one item for sale in them [is]... actually only 91,020 ... Huh. Wow. So Chief Cupcake is off by a mere 117,140 sellers. Maybe it's a misquote? Possibly, but given Etsy's propensity for inflating numbers and Rob's history of bluffing his way into jobs, we doubt it. He either didn't bother to check the numbers on his own site, or he didn't bother to tell the truth... This is hardly the first time Etsy spins [sic] some incorrect numbers for PR fluff.¹³⁹

For many of the Etsians on *Etsy Bitch*, Kalin's statement reiterates their suspicions that Etsy admin are less than forthright. Without what they consider to be honest leadership,

¹³⁷“(Inside A Black Apple): No Clever Heading...,” 27 March 2008, available at http://theblackapple.typepad.com/inside_a_black_apple/2008/03/no-clever-headi.html; Internet; accessed 2 September 2008.

¹³⁸Mary Kathleen Flynn. “Kalin: Stepping down as Etsy CEO was my choice (Tech Confidential — Behind the Money Blog),” 25 July 2008, available at <http://www.thedeal.com/techconfidential/behind-the-money/blog/behind-the-money/this-was-completely-a-personal.php>; Internet; accessed 27 July 2008.

¹³⁹“Etsy Bitch — Biting The Hand That Feeds Us: Truth in Advertising (or lack of it),” 28 July 2008, available at <http://etsybitch.blogspot.com/2008/07/truth-in-advertising-or-lack-of-it.html>; Internet; accessed 28 July 2008.

these Etsians band together, forming alliances with one another that both solidifies the self-perpetuated status as victims and pits users versus admins in a form of “us” versus “them.” Rather than distinguishing insider and outsider status between Etsy members and non-Etsy members, respectively, though no less powerful in establishing a potential for a community of attachment, status is delineated between users and admin. In fact, this formation of status as insider and outsider may be the logical manifestation of a “community” that originated by way of a company’s design rather than by the organic developed needs of individuals in a particular time and place.

The “us” and “them” so essential to community building in this case does not manifest itself as Etsians versus non-Etsians, but rather users versus admins, ever narrowing the scope of experience to feelings of anger and frustration toward decision made by Etsy employees. The unaffiliated blog *Etsy Bitch* offers the following statement of purpose:

EtsyBitch is a communal blog of likeminded Etsians who are tired of the demeaning treatment, abuse, and general mismanagement of the Etsy.com site. We want Etsy to improve so we bitch to call attention to the unfairness and general stupidity of its admin and the unprofessional way they treat their sellers.¹⁴⁰

Specific incidents, such as the Etsy Five (a group of sellers banned seemingly without justification or a reason for their removal) exemplify a martyrdom of individuals who are willing to risk their own positions in order to enact what they see as necessary change to the very structure of Etsy.¹⁴¹ For the authors and participants on *Etsy Bitch*, they believe that a shared past exists in what they consider their mistreatment. Whether this is an accurate reflection of past occurrences or not is less relevant than the fact that it has manifested for some Etsy users as a way to create sentiment. Though it is reasonable to assume that Etsy Inc. does not share the belief that they have mistreated users, in this

¹⁴⁰“Etsy Bitch — Biting The Hand That Feeds Us,” available at <http://etsybitch.blogspot.com/>; Internet; accessed 10 July 2008.

¹⁴¹The naming of the ‘Etsy Five’ makes an indirect reference to the Chicago Seven, a group of a group of Vietnam War protestors at the 1968 Democratic National Convention who were arrested and charged with the federal crimes of conspiracy and inciting a riot. The events surrounding the Chicago Seven have historically been identified as a peak moment of conflict that characterized the relationship between late-sixties counterculture and official structures of the American governmental system.

element of community, *Etsy Bitch* is successful where the official Etsy is not. The shared history of *Etsy Bitch* is the product of Etsy users, while the myths and images perpetuated on the official Etsy website are imposed by admin in a top-down manner. The dissemination of myths and images from a central governing body denies Etsians the chance to assemble myths and images of their own choosing, based on their experiences and values rather than by the imposition of admins. On *Etsy Bitch*, the image is of frustrated and passionately devoted Etsians banding together to “call out for changes” to the Etsy system. The ‘about this blog’ sidebar on the Etsy Bitch website directly addresses their intentions:

We're bitching because we care, dammit. That's right. It's snark for a cause. Crabbing for progress. Whining to make the handcrafted world a better place.¹⁴²

The myth of *Etsy Bitch* is the sense of purpose that informs their complaints. By drawing attention to what they consider the idiocies of the Etsy system, Etsy Bitch members claim that their goal is actually an altruistic one.

Rituals and celebrations

Another of what Keller considers a constant element of community is the presence of shared rituals and celebrations. From Keller’s perspective these rituals are necessary as they help to generate a spirit of sharing and togetherness, to work out tensions and conflicts and to give a general sense of a collective life.¹⁴³ But on Etsy, users are often too busy buying and selling to consciously formulate or engage in such activities—to the detriment of community aspirations. The most ritualized activity that Etsians share is visiting the Etsy website to shop or to maintain one’s own store. But the frequency of which Etsy users visit the site and the duration of their visits is highly variable, dependent on if they are selling items, their shopping habits, etc. One might also consider the process of buying or selling their first item on Etsy as a ritualistic experience that represents a symbolic but official rite of passage into the world of Etsians.

Etsy maintains a robust schedule of events online, but these are almost entirely designed for the purpose of business education. Celebratory events associated with Etsy

¹⁴²“Etsy Bitch — Biting The Hand That Feeds Us”

¹⁴³Keller, *Community*, 267.

have also been limited on the website. In fact, the celebrations that have occurred have been designed for non-digital, face-to-face interaction at the Etsy Labs in Brooklyn, New York where Etsy hosts a weekly craft night as well as the occasional recipe slam and dance party. But these events, while open to the public, are severely limiting in geographic location given that the majority of Etsy users do not live in close proximity of New York City.

Perhaps most significantly, the Etsy website promotes local, independent craft fairs across the United States as a way to engage in celebration. These events are sometimes but not always affiliated with an Etsy team and appear to be a way for Etsy Incorporated to build on the enthusiasm and activities of the independent craft and design movement. Though it is clear that Etsy benefits from this affiliation, it creates a sort of nebulousness where the possibility of Etsy as community is concerned. The boundaries and turf delineation indicated in Keller's first element of community seem to give way here to Etsy's desire to become part of existing communities rather than establish itself as its own community. On one hand, Etsy promotes itself as a unique community, independent through connected to other groups with similar interests, on the other hand, Etsy eagerly affiliates itself as a part of a larger community, i.e. the indie/DIY craft movement.

A leadership structure

Etsy's leadership structure is directly connected to its institutional framework. As Keller explains, "Leadership is crucial. Indifference or neglect by leaders generally spells a community's decline."¹⁴⁴ As important as leadership is to the success of community, leaders, no matter how indispensable, are typically viewed with ambivalence. As original CEO of the Etsy company and creator of the Etsy concept, Rob Kalin (aka. Rokali) is typically seen as the lead admin on Etsy. But although there is a general acknowledgment of the value in Kalin's original concept, his actions as leader have been met with significant criticism. Some of the most vocal critics blame Kalin for what they consider to be a lack of professionalism among staff members and neglect in repairing and revising

¹⁴⁴Keller, *Community*, 268.

many of the technological features of the Etsy website. As leader, the 28 year-old Kalin himself acknowledges that he took on the role out of necessity rather than experience or desire to lead. As *The Deal* reports:

"I became CEO by virtue of necessity," recalls Kalin, who had no previous management experience. "In the beginning, we were too busy dealing with what needed to get done to find a CEO. So I just stepped into the role."¹⁴⁵

With regard to leadership then, it is important to discuss how Rob Kalin, as perceived leader and figurehead of Etsy, is viewed by Etsians. The attitudes about Kalin indicate this ambivalence, ranging from adoration to, as *Etsy Bitch* states, "We don't hate Etsy. Unless you're Rokali, in which case you can go to hell."¹⁴⁶ The resentment toward Kalin and personal vitriol aimed at his direction is a clear manifestation of the frustration of some Etsy users. Though Kalin has attempted to offer lip service to some of the issues addressed by these concerned Etsians, his answers almost always lead to more questions. On July 9, 2008, days prior to announcing his official resignation as CEO of Etsy, in a Virtual Labs chat designed to address the questions of Etsy users, I asked Kalin how his role at Etsy would be changing in the future, especially since the hiring of new Chief Operating Officer, Maria Thomas. His reply was the following:

It's been a great learning experience for me, watching Maria work here... [when] you start a company, and it grows so quickly. And with a Web company, we can't ever close shop at 5pm to clean up. Watching her work has shown me two things: 1) what I'm personally best at, [and] 2) what she's better than I am at doing. I love Etsy and I'll keep giving it my all, but I want to do it in a way that's best for me and for Etsy. This will certainly mean more product work, and I'd like to get bakc [sic] in the forums more. Maria's strengths are with the running the organization, finances, planning. So we'll play to her strengths, and play to [mine].¹⁴⁷

This response indicates Kalin's ability to characterize himself as earnest (while at times a bit self-righteous and at others, a bit naïve) and his tendency to employ politician-style rhetoric that circles around, but never directly answers, the question being asked. While some Etsians have been content with this style of leadership, others have grown

¹⁴⁵Flynn, "Kalin: Stepping down as Etsy CEO was my choice."

¹⁴⁶"Etsy Bitch — Biting The Hand That Feeds Us."

¹⁴⁷"Rob Kalin: Virtual Labs Chat Session." Transcription by author. http://www.etsy.com/virtual_labs.php; Internet; 9 July 2008.

frustrated with an approach that they see as ‘all talk and no action.’ Though this may not be an accurate reflection of the work that Kalin has done on and for Etsy, the psychological effect that the handling of his role has played has left many disenchanted with Etsy leadership. This is most certainly not the ideal situation for an aspiring community.

On July 2, 2008, Kalin seemed to, at least in part, respond to these personal criticisms with the announcement that he had chosen to step down as CEO of Etsy in order to focus his attention on [the Etsy site] design, working on a soon-to-be-announced Etsy.org non-profit initiative, making some things with his hands, including wooden furniture -- and "getting more than three hours of sleep a night."¹⁴⁸ His replacement, Maria Thomas was announced on the Etsy blog, two weeks after Etsy’s third birthday¹⁴⁹ in the following letter written by Kalin included in the post:

Etsy Inc. has new leadership. I have been working with Maria Thomas since she joined Etsy six weeks ago. We've been taking a clear look at what works and what doesn't work right now, and planning what we need to move forward. Maria brings heaps of experience with her, and her arrival marks a change in how Etsy is run as a company.

Her arrival also marks a change in my own role at Etsy. I am 28 years old. Before Etsy, I worked many jobs: cashier at a Marshalls department store, stock boy at a camera shop, freelance carpenter, lowest rung on the ladder at a demolition company, minimum wage floor help at the Strand book store (saving up to go back to college), amanuensis for an eighty-year-old philosopher from Vienna.

All of these jobs prepared me for being an entrepreneur and starting a company. Maria has the skills and experience required to lead Etsy through the upcoming years, and that is what she's here to do.

Right now we're focused on getting the right people and the right process inside Etsy. We can't make specific promises regarding when and what we will build – but I promise that your requests and suggestions and complaints and kudos have been heard. The proof will, of course, be in the pudding, and rather than offer any more promises, we want to let the results of our organizational and structural changes manifest themselves in the most important real result: a great product, a great seller experience, a great buyer experience, and great customer support.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹“Etsy :: The Storque :: Spotlight :: Etsy Find: Happy Birthday, Etsy!,” 18 June 2008, available at <http://www.etsy.com/storque/section/spotlight/article/etsy-find-happy-birthday-etsy/2015/>; Internet; accessed 27 July 2008.

¹⁵⁰“Etsy :: The Storque :: Etsy News :: The Long View: Rob & Maria,” 2 July 2008, available at <http://www.etsy.com/storque/section/etsyNews/article/the-long-view-rob-maria/2150/>; Internet; accessed 2 July 2008.

The shift in leadership emphasizes Etsy's focus as a business. Kalin acknowledges, that as an e-commerce site, not all Etsy buyers and sellers were invested in Kalin in particular but are rather dependent on the leadership to provide them with the tools they need to achieve a "great seller" and "a great buyer experience." As a young company, Etsy needs strong leadership to provide guidance as growth occurs. But the process of putting in place a new CEO misses a crucial opportunity to create a feeling of community and solidarity among Etsy users. As an anonymous user commented on a post made to Etsy Bitch, "if etsy [sic] was run properly there would be way less frustration and a lot more meaningful interactions (and selling)."¹⁵¹ Commenter Liza added:

Although I've only been part of Etsy for a (very) short while, I love the feeling of community as well as the ability to connect with other artists. I have very high hopes for lots of positive changes... I appreciate both the people at Etsy working to make it a fabulous place to be, and the people critiquing Etsy, in hopes that it will hold itself to a higher standard.¹⁵²

Although Thomas has assured Etsians that she holds the same core values as them, it remains to be seen whether she will be able to lead Etsy toward greater success as a company and a community.

Social relationships

As what Keller calls "significant building blocks of community," social relationships make up a crucial part of the emotional experience of reiteration and reassurance. Keller characterizes these social relationships as "personal, direct, responsive and trusting" citing the example of being recognized in the public arena as a member of a community as particularly powerful.¹⁵³ The social relationships on Etsy are difficult to discern since they are often tangled in the dynamic of economic exchange. On the website, Etsy offers a chat room where members may "meet and chat with other Etsy

¹⁵¹"Etsy Bitch — Biting The Hand That Feeds Us: Manifesto to Maria," 31 May 2008, available at <http://etsybitch.blogspot.com/2008/05/manifesto-to-maria.html>; Internet; accessed 1 June 2008.

¹⁵²Ibid.

¹⁵³Keller, *Community*, 268.

members.”¹⁵⁴ But like the forums, the chat rooms are sometimes occupied by Etsians working on some component of their Etsy shop/the business of selling. Other times, the chat rooms serve as a place for Etsians to engage in brief and often extremely superficial conversations about a myriad of craft and non-craft related topics in the context of showing their listings to other sellers in the hope that they might make a sale. In full, the chat rooms do little to promote any sort of deep dialogue between Etsians, but do, by design, remind individual Etsy users that there are other people “out there,” responding in real-time to your messages.

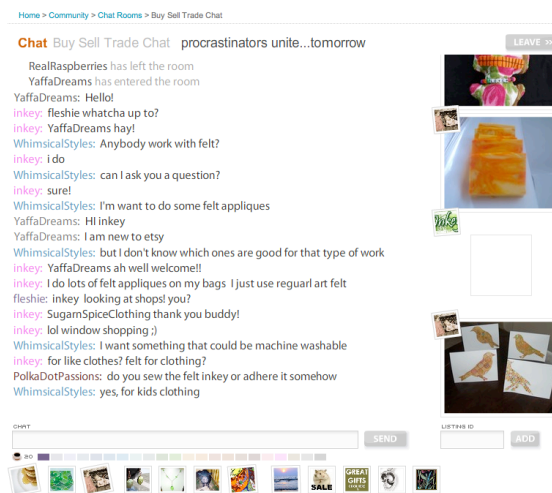


fig 16. A screen-capture of a chat room, taken on September 4, 2008. Note the bottom right corner of the image, where participants can add their listing ID to have a photo of their item(s) for sale visible on the right vertical space of the chat room.

Etsy teams offer another opportunity for Etsians to develop social relationships, often organized either around a particular material/craft, a geographic location or a political/social position, they provide Etsy users (particularly sellers) with a way to sub-identify their interests. Within their respective teams, members may develop friendships that transcend the virtual realm of Etsy.com. Perhaps most importantly, membership in an Etsy team is an opportunity to find support among a small group of self-selected, like-minded peers. Some teams have specific guidelines for criteria of membership while others are open to anyone who believes she or he belongs. The Semper Pink team, currently composed of three members, for example, requires that a member, “must be a

¹⁵⁴“Etsy :: Community,” available at <http://www.etsy.com/community.php>; Internet; accessed 1 May 2008.

Marine wife or fiancée (active duty or retired) - must have good product photographs in your shop - must have at least 1 sale and at least 1 feedback - must NOT have negative feedback.”¹⁵⁵ The FarmGirl Flair team, on the other hand, is made up of twenty-six members with a profile description that reads:

A farmgirl believes in the strong arms of friendship, community, and the just plain fun of being together. A farmgirl takes joy in the quiet satisfaction of making things with her own hands. She exudes kindness, grace, humility, gentleness, patience, and generosity, and loves the simple pleasures in life. Farmgirls love to get together to share their ideas. We are Farmgirls with a flair for creating that have come together to promote our shops, support each other, and grow our businesses.¹⁵⁶

The dynamic nature and frequency of social interaction is also highly variable. While some teams “meet” online once a day, other groups have no schedule for their interaction. Some teams work to promote particular fundraising efforts, while other focus on self-promotion and/or consciousness-raising.

Key to the possibility of a sense of overarching community on Etsy is the fact that Etsy teams, participation on the forums and in the chat rooms are entirely optional. Based on the statistics provided by Etsy, only a small percentage of Etsians (as defined by account holding status) use these features. Thus, the sense of trust and mutuality generated through social relationships in a particular Etsy team extend only to their “sub-community” and not necessarily to Etsy, as a whole.

Transcendent purposes and goals

Finally, according to Keller’s model, communities must have “transcendent purposes and goals.” In Keller’s perspective, this means that members invest themselves in the community by depending on one another to help satisfy their simultaneous desires for a sense of personal well being and the common good.¹⁵⁷ In this emotional state, community is realized. The qualities associated with a sense of transcendent purpose and

¹⁵⁵“Global Etsy Teams:Semper Pink,” available at <http://team.etsy.com/viewteam.php?id=357>; Internet; accessed 1 September 2008.

¹⁵⁶“Global Etsy Teams:Farmgirl Flair,” available at <http://team.etsy.com/profilest/farmgirl.shtml>; Internet; accessed 1 September 2008.

¹⁵⁷Keller, *Community*, 268.

goals are those of caring, empathy and trust. Based on the way that Etsy Inc. defines its membership and the structure of the organization, it is hard to accept that all Etsy members will give of themselves in this way. Keller argues that the digital format itself may be counterproductive to the kind of transparency necessary to reach relationships of trust and care.¹⁵⁸ Keller explains:

The absence of full sensory contact creates shadow communities at best. Solid communities provide ‘models of respect and assistance so we can learn empathy for others and the interdependence of our collective well being.’ They teach us the necessity of caring and sharing, cooperation and loyalty. Cyberspace interaction, exciting, challenging, new though it be, has other aims and other horizons.”¹⁵⁹

In Keller’s estimation, community requires a physical place, what she describes “a center and a heart as well as a public arena where public discourse and actions can take place.”¹⁶⁰ As a privately owned company, “community,” as Keller defines it, does not exist on Etsy. The site, rather, is representative of special and private interests that are indicative of goals outside of the realm of public interest and well-being.

Although Etsy members, particularly sellers, do invest their time, energy and effort into Etsy, the goal of community often falls secondary to personal profit motives. Where there is an emphasis on monetary success for individual sellers, there is no collective fate. It goes without saying that the capitalistic system within which Etsy operates means that some will fail as sellers and others will succeed. Everyone can achieve the status of buyer, but buyers tend to be less involved with Etsy as a whole. If we apply this sense of fate to Etsy Incorporated, we find that Etsians often see a division between individual and institutional responsibilities.

With sensitivity to issues of power and control on Etsy, the term ‘network’ rather than ‘community’ better characterizes the group of people that comprise the Etsy user base. Geert Lovink suggests the term ‘organized network’ to replace ‘virtual community.’ Lovink sees the term community as an idealistic construct that neglects to acknowledge

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 293.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 298.

¹⁶⁰Ibid.

the relevance of capital.¹⁶¹ In addition, theorists and champions of ‘community’ often ignore the fact that all groups/communities operate within society, not, as one might hope, as an alternative to society.¹⁶² Lovink also integrates into his definition of network their constant negotiation and ever-changing nature, highlighting the vulnerability and precariousness of networks.¹⁶³ By considering Etsy a network, we re-focus the attention to issues of power and control, issues that are often ignored when discussing community.

As a network, then, it is important to problematize the role of Etsy staff at all levels, including designers, programmers, forum moderators and transaction service providers. In *Virtual Organization, Towards a Theory of Societal Transformation Stimulated by Information Technology*, Abbe Mowshowitz defines the concept of virtual feudalism as having, “all the earmarks of classic feudalism except that it is based on globally distributed resources rather than land.”¹⁶⁴ This is certainly one way to see Etsy—staff as Lords, users as Vassals and the website/system as fief. In exchange for access to the system, Etsians are required to pay a fee to the company in exchange for their listings. Though I would argue that this perspective is a bit overly cynical and not entirely accurate, since there is no one-to-one relationship between user and staff member, the concept that Etsy users are simply ‘users’ rather than something more akin to company ‘shareholders’ is an important point. As Etsy continues to grow and change, Etsians have proven to be both interested and anxious in how the corporate structure will develop. Etsians, particularly sellers, have a real, vested financial interest in a high-level of performance from the company and the website, and yet, sellers and buyers have no specific rights or role in the company’s decision-making process, beyond those that Etsy chooses to give them.

¹⁶¹Geert Lovink, *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 241.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁶⁴Abbe Mowshowitz, *Virtual Organization: Toward a Theory of Societal Transformation Stimulated by Information Technology* (Westport, Conn.: Quorum Books, 2002), 185.

As members of a network, both literally and sociologically, they are ultimately only responsible for their particular ‘node’ in the network. Thus, members of Etsy are not willing to take responsibility for the fate of Etsy as a whole. Given the power dynamic between admins (the company) and users, it is difficult to imagine that “community” on Etsy will ever be interpreted as a collective creation. After all, Etsy is a private company, incorporated and designed with profit as a, if not *the*, primary goal. This, however, does not stop Etsy from presenting itself as a community. Etsy Incorporated’s strategy is to draw in users with the promise that they will be more than just consumers, they will be members of a community.

Performance of Community within the Etsy Network

In her analysis of community, Dorothy Noyes emphasizes the importance of the features of interaction within a network. It is through these qualities of social relationships that feelings of community manifest. The nature of these interactions is a result of performance, specifically through the processes of repetition, formalization and consensus. In order for feelings of community to appear, members must believe that a community exists. The “proof” of community is enacted through interactions that in turn reiterate the status of a network as a community.

It is challenging to analyze the performance of community on Etsy since interactions may occur both inside and outside the official Etsy space. The seven key features of interaction distinguished by Noyes, including: density of network, content of relationships, frequency of ties, affective intensity and exchange rights and obligations, respectively. Each of these features manifest themselves in a complex web of engagement between buyer and seller, between users, and between users and admin. Each category of identity (buyer, seller, user, and admin) is enacted through performance. Unlike practices of religion, for example, Etsy does not have clear rituals or stages/locales in which performance occurs, such as a christening, wedding or holiday celebration. Instead, these performances occur at many times and in many forms, but without the tenets of formalization, repetition or consensus. This implies much about the Etsy network and the “community of the social imaginary,” or in other words, the perceptions of connection

between members of a particular social group.¹⁶⁵ Without the an opportunity to perform community on the content-moderated official Etsy website, Etsians are left to their own, individual devices such as *Etsy Bitch*. For the Etsy company, this appears to be unproblematic. To them, their community is valuable only insofar as it benefits the proliferation of their ideology that attempts to put Etsy at the center of exchange relations.

Acknowledging what Noyes explains as a “project of a network of some of its members,” it becomes clear that “community” on Etsy was originally designed as a fiction used by the company to differentiate itself from its competitors, as a less harsh, more people-centered e-commerce venue. But as the Etsy network grew, so did the feeling among some users that the “community” on Etsy was real, or at the very least, a worthwhile and achievable aspiration. In his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Benedict Anderson explores communities’ ability to function beyond face-to-face interaction through the use of technological advances, which allow members of what he terms an ‘imagined community’ to perceive of themselves existing in a group, despite physical/geographic distance.

Anderson argues that it is this type of community that forms a nation:

What this means is that the work of making a nation as a community depends on the use of symbolic resources and devices: because we can never know or interact with all those others with whom we share national identification, we need ‘things’ to coalesce a shared sense of identity around – a flag, a national anthem, a set of customs and rituals (sometimes referred to as ‘invented traditions’). These kinds of communities only exist because their members believe in them, and maintain them through shared cultural practices.¹⁶⁶

On Etsy, users do engage in shared cultural practices and one can see Anderson’s concept of imagined community at work, but for economic, rather than nationalistic purposes. While Anderson’s book focuses on the historic relevance of print media, his concepts are quite useful in thinking about newer, virtual technologies. These technologies have helped collapse the physical space and foster community between people of disparate locations. The belief that Etsy is a community is one that is perpetuated by both users and the company. Ironically, some of the most vocal critics of Etsy, including the creators of the *Unofficial Etsy News* and *Etsy Bitch*, are also the ones who are making the

¹⁶⁵Noyes, “Group,” 452.

¹⁶⁶David Bell, *An Introduction to Cybercultures* (London: Routledge, 2001), 95.

possibility of achieving “community” much more a reality than it has been before. Even in the context of what Stephen Doheny-Farina considers the escapist and isolating nature of “digital communities,” the desire to connect with others and the yearning for wholeness manifest as powerful forces.

Conclusion

Ultimately, asking “Is Etsy a community?” denies the complexity of the term “community” itself. From a sociologist’s perspective, like Keller, one may ask, “Does Etsy achieve community?” but this also oversimplifies the notion of community. In the end, Noyes question, “How does the community of the social imaginary occasionally emerge?” is most apropos, for it acknowledges that community is both imaginary and dynamic. Rather than arguing that Etsy does or does not achieve community, in other words, rather than laying objective claims, the emphasis is on how the concept of community emerges as a marketing tool, as a mythic ideal and as a social aspiration.

In order to conceive of how to answer this question, Noyes advocates the perspective of group as network. By eschewing the cultural loaded and reifying terms ‘community,’ and ‘group,’ it is possible to analyze their structure and function without many of the biases that would otherwise be present. Articulating what Etsy calls ‘community’ as network re-frames the discussion. Networks are contextual, and the elements of network, independent on one another. Again, this formulation is strikingly fitting, since Etsy is literally a computer network system, in addition to being interpreted as a social network.

Having analyzed the qualities of “community” delineated by Keller, it is possible to see how the private, corporate interests of the Etsy Incorporated’s impact the possibility for a community on Etsy. Electronic networks, especially those that are privately owned, seem best suited, then, as a part of a larger social movement or community rather than one in and of itself. As Graham Day advocates, in *Community and Everyday Life*, computer networks should be interpreted as adjunct to community, not a replacement for them. As Michael Bugeja writes, “cyberspace is a poor substitute for community” particularly when Etsy users are engaged in what he terms “the never-ending browse.” And while Manuel Castells argues that electronic networks may offer new forms of social participation and

Benedict Anderson writes that media has allowed disparate individuals to feel a sense of collective experience, the web remains a communication device, a tool not a place or state of being.

Community is not a fixed, stable entity, as has been observed it is a slippery and fluid aspiration, an imaginary form used to frame a deep emotional need for connection with others and to something greater than one's self. What we have observed are actors engaging in the aspiration of community through their participation in a digital network of commerce and communication.

CHAPTER 3

ETSY AESTHETIC: CREATIVE, COMPLEX AND COLORFUL¹⁶⁷

Etsy's tendency to privilege the visual, given the nature of the two-dimensional space of the computer screen, requires consideration of the way visual culture acts as a part of Etsy's rhetoric. By analyzing the qualities of this aesthetic, one can see how both the Etsy company and a segment of Etsians make use of basic and ornamental features to serve their respective purposes. In the case of Etsy Incorporated, the aesthetic in itself functions as a commodity marketed and sold to consumers of the system. But for a specific population of Etsy users, the aesthetic of the objects sold and bought have a deeper significance. Though Etsy Inc. utilizes a particular aesthetic as part of their business strategy, this aesthetic simultaneously functions as a means for individual makers to express powerful, personal sentiments. As Daniel Miller writes, "objects can have a kind of agency that embodies and reveals what may be analyzed as expressions of gender, age, identity and power."¹⁶⁸ Examining objects of material culture can provide meaningful insight into the epistemological underpinnings of particular groups or organizations.

Both the basic and ornamental features on Etsy of many of the handcrafted objects on the site are deeply indebted to the contemporary independent/DIY craft movement. One can trace many of the qualities of this aesthetic evident on Etsy to a style that has been popular among the indie/DIY craft community for a number of years. Though the Etsy company does not directly acknowledge it, the design of the website itself and the goods it promotes reference the aesthetics of a movement that exists beyond the boundaries of the Etsy

¹⁶⁷This title references a statement made by Jen Railla, author of *Get Crafty* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004) and the founder of the *getcrafter.com* website, as quoted in Stacie Stukin, "Pretty Crafty," *Time*, 1 March 2005.

¹⁶⁸Daniel Miller quoted in Elizabeth Shove, *The Design of Everyday Life* (New York: Berg, 2007), 5.

website. With this in mind, it is possible to interpret how the aesthetic challenges traditional gender stereotypes of feminine domestic culture and subsequently concepts of maturity and adulthood. Ultimately, though, these objects lose much of their affective power when they are reduced to mere commodities of novelty in the privatized Etsy exchange system. The expressive quality of these objects is thus demoted to the superficial and cursory cycle of consumer trends.

Conceptualizing Aesthetics

In order to explore the aesthetic features most prominent on Etsy, it is important to first acknowledge just what is meant by the term ‘aesthetic.’ Like ‘community,’ ‘aesthetic’ has a long and complicated history, ranging from Kantian beliefs in the existence of ideal forms which represent a singular and ‘correct’ aesthetic to subjective interpretations that conceptualize ‘aesthetics’ to be, in the proverbial sense, something in ‘the eye of the beholder.’ For the purpose of this inquiry, I would like to highlight two definitions of aesthetics in contemporary use. First, the term ‘aesthetics’ is used to describe something that is considered beautiful. Here one can see implications of value with the use of the term. An aesthetic object is deemed to be one, which contains universal qualities that allow it to transcend its ‘earthly’ virtues. In this sense, objects fall into one of two categories—either they are aesthetic or they are not. Second, the term ‘aesthetics’ is used to describe something that offers an emotional experience, the sensuous qualities that manifest in the realm of personal affect.¹⁶⁹ Primary to this second definition is that objects and their aesthetic properties are hybrid and contextual. Both of these definitions must be understood in order to study the aesthetics on Etsy. As Henry Glassie writes in his book *Material Culture*, “all objects are simultaneously sets of parts and parts of sets... they must be analyzed in context.”¹⁷⁰ Glassie’s position emphasizes an understanding of aesthetics as subjective in terms of evocative power.. Thus, an observer’s view of

¹⁶⁹David E.W. Fenner, *Art in Context: Understanding Aesthetic Value* (Athens, Ga.: Swallow Press, 2008), 18.

¹⁷⁰Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 47.

aesthetic decisions is informed greatly by knowledge of a maker's background.¹⁷¹ These objects are also contextual in their affective ability. In order to understand an object's coding, an observer must be familiar with the current and historic socio-cultural environments from which the maker draws in the creative process.¹⁷²

In "She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman': Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue," Linda Pershing "examines the parodic conversion of a traditional faceless, childlike feminine image into a figure of adult sexual rebelliousness; the patriarchally designated sweet, cooperative female comes into her own as a mature woman."¹⁷³ For the purposes of this project, I would like to acknowledge, as Pershing does with her work on the Sunbonnet Sue quilt pattern, that the expressive power of these objects in addressing the issues of gender stereotype are my interpretations. In some cases, makers acknowledge their creations as rejections of social expectations. In other cases, makers wholeheartedly reject the notion that these forces are at work. This chapter, thus, should be seen as one woman's interpretation of objects based on a particular understanding of gender tropes. In order to reach this assessment, I examine particular stylistic elements and motifs that I have observed as particularly popular on Etsy. By looking closely at the aesthetic on Etsy, I problematize distinctions between art and craft, professional and amateur, masculine and feminine, and explore the way that gender biases and stereotype have figured into said distinctions. These elements inform how I interpret to craft objects produced by members of the indie/DIY craft movement and, in turn, how they are appropriated by Etsy Incorporated.

¹⁷¹Joyce Ice, "Women's Aesthetics and the Quilting Process" in Susan Tower Hollis, Linda Pershing, and M. Jane Young, eds. *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). 172.

¹⁷²Linda Pershing, "'She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman': Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue" in Joan Newlon Radner, ed. *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 98.

¹⁷³*Ibid.*, 13.

The Aesthetics of the Independent/DIY Craft Movement as Evidenced on Etsy

Etsy is deeply indebted to the indie/DIY craft movement, using their aesthetics as the website's signature style. Thus, in order to fully understand Etsy's aesthetic, one must look closely at the material features of the indie/DIY craft movement. In addition, aesthetics must be thought of contextually, indicative of a complex interweaving of popular/mass culture and folk culture, appropriating and inverting symbols of feminine domesticity.¹⁷⁴ Using a wide range of cultural sources, the makers explored here design and produce objects, which speak to a sophisticated conception of the world in which they exist.

The distinctive qualities of material culture can be broken into two categories. Following the work of Henry Glassie, objects may be categorized as having features that are: 1) basic and 2) ornamental. This is not to say that these attributes are mutually exclusive, but rather that Glassie's interpretation provides a structural framework with which to parse out particular aesthetic elements that figure prominently on the Etsy website. Both the basic and ornamental elements of a group's aesthetics are based on a certain level of consensus that "encompasses the ideal and the pragmatic."¹⁷⁵ Despite certain shared understandings, this does not mean that all share the group aesthetic equally, since each member interprets the collective ideals to suit her or his own sensibility.¹⁷⁶ On Etsy, this manifests in a wide range of stylistic features. In order to examining this aesthetic, then, I look at three elements that most frequently occur as indicative of visual tendencies: 'handcrafted-ness,' 'miniaturization,' and 'softness of medium.'

The most widely shared of these tendencies is the requirement that an object on Etsy be handmade. By referring to objects as 'handmade,' Etsy brands them as unique. Handmade, one-of-a-kind objects on Etsy are positioned in opposition to mass produced

¹⁷⁴Pershing, "'She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman': Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue," 99.

¹⁷⁵Ice, "Women's Aesthetics and the Quilting Process," 169.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 170.

goods, which are seen to result in dull uniformity for their buyers.¹⁷⁷ The desire to ‘buy handmade’ has been identified by scholars as indicative of a cultural tendency toward exaggerated fears of conformity. At its most severe, the anxiety of homogeneity may be perceived as a fear of ‘creeping fascism’—where unique goods cease to exist and creativity is repressed, favoring a standardized, generic aesthetic.¹⁷⁸ In order to understand how ‘handmade’ is interpreted in the indie/DIY craft movement and on Etsy, one is obliged to examine the features that identify objects as such. As we will see certain identifiable features in and on objects sold and bought on Etsy indicate that their origins as handmade.

One of the ways that an object’s ‘handmade-ness’ is reiterated is through the stylistic use of unfinished edges and visible stitches. The raw-edged object is visually opposed to the clean, polished perimeters of a mass-produced good.



fig 17. Mini Matryoshka (Russian Nesting) Doll
Pins by Etsy Seller Doolittledesign¹⁷⁹

As Etsian Doolittledesign writes in the description for her Matryoshka doll pins, “the edges of the dolls are left unfinished which will fray over time giving character to each

¹⁷⁷Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2004), 226.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁷⁹“Etsy :: dolittledesign ;; Three MINI Matryoshka Russian doll pin (1.75 inches) in a mini tin,” 3 September 2008; available on http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?ref=sr_list_3&listing_id=14878894; Internet; accessed 6 September 2008.

doll pin.”¹⁸⁰ The rawness of the material implies the use of hand-worked scissors, while the large stitches are evidence of hand sewing. The unfinished textural irregularity of the fiber, particularly around the edges, also suggests that material itself has not been overly processed by any machine. In addition to raw edges and visible stitches, the ‘handmade’ is also evoked in the use of hand lettering.



fig 18. *Quit Hatin'* Painting in acrylic and black ink on a pine plaque by Elise Towle Snow aka. ArgyleWhale¹⁸¹

In the case above, artist Elise Towle Snow takes a hand-drawn approach to typography. Her work exemplifies the quirky character of handcraft, drawing attention to the visual beauty of what on a computer screen would be considered a mistake. Where digital type has a limited set of characters and associated ligatures, each individual letter, when hand drawn, is unique. *Quit Hatin'* is also quite painterly, the robin's egg blue dots on the purple background show traces of brush marks. The unevenness of the solid colors; the blue, ink-outlined cloud, the red lettering and the purple background, reiterates the visual unexpectedness of handwork. The painting's features speak to an expressiveness characteristic of handmade objects.

¹⁸⁰Ibid.

¹⁸¹“Etsy :: ArgyleWhale :: Quit Hatin' Painting,” 12 July 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?ref=vl_other_1&listing_id=10473233; Internet; accessed 10 September 2008.



fig 19. *Rochester*, original map painting by Rachel Austin¹⁸²

In the piece, *Rochester*, creator Rachel Austin uses mixed media, featuring US road maps, to create a textured effect. The layering of collage-work creates irregular bumps and ridges throughout, reminiscent of a palette knife and the weight of liquid-saturated paper. Visitors and buyers on Etsy understand these traits to be indicative of the qualities of the handmade. It is integral to the Etsy company that the pieces on the website are interpreted as handmade, including the features listed above.

The second feature of this aesthetic is miniaturization. The popularity of miniaturization, exemplified in the neighborhood ring and the terrarium both shown below, is widespread in the indie/DIY craft movement and on Etsy. On September 6, 2008, a search for titles, tags and descriptions in handmade items for sale on Etsy containing the word ‘miniature’ revealed 21,834 items. Related searches for ‘tiny’ and ‘mini’ revealed 59,351 items, and 43,482 items respectively.¹⁸³ The presence of

¹⁸²“Etsy :: RachelAustin :: Rochester – Original Map Painting,” 9 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?ref=vl_other_2&listing_id=15066100; Internet; accessed 10 September 2008.

¹⁸³“Etsy :: Search Results - Miniature,” available on http://www.etsy.com/search_results.php?search_type=tag_title_description&search_query=miniature; Internet; accessed 6 September 2008. “Etsy :: Search Results - Tiny,” available on http://www.etsy.com/search_results.php?search_type=tag_title_description&search_query=tiny; Internet; accessed 6 September 2008. “Etsy :: Search Results – Mini,” available on http://www.etsy.com/search_results.php?search_type=tag_title_description&search_query=mini; Internet; accessed 6 September 2008.

miniaturized environments, in particular, homes and gardens recall the girlhood toy of the dollhouse. These objects are deeply imaginative—asking their observers to construct a fantastic environment from their features. As Susan Stewart notes in her book, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, miniatures are a profoundly ‘man-made’ concept, occurring nowhere in nature except among humans. Dollhouses, Stewart argues, are exemplary of a projected desire for a perfected domestic space. The neighborhood ring carries a dollhouse-like quality, though the wearer is limited to the exterior facades of the homes. The design of this miniaturized domestic streetscape is also noteworthy because it is incorporated into something that is wearable, thus enjoyable in a portable sense as the creation draws attention to the imaginative realm every time one notices their ringed finger.



fig 20. *Neighborhood ring* by Etsy seller JDavisStudio¹⁸⁴

The landscape in the terrarium is also miniature, though in a somewhat different form. The concept of the terrarium, or miniature ecosystem, is one that originally gained popularity during the Victorian period. Typically, a terrarium involves a glass-enclosed arrangement of living plants. While living plants are contained inside, terrariums require little to no tending on the part of the owner. Like the dollhouse, these are deeply imaginative creations, whose pleasure seems to derive from the request that they make on the observer to imagine her or himself inside the tiny landscape. Notice the terrarium shown below also includes miniature homes, arranged as a rural village. The moss, lichen and fungi typically used in terrariums are chosen for their ability to represent miniaturized

¹⁸⁴“Etsy :: JDavisStudio :: Neighborhood Ring,” 15 August 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?listing_id=11900147; Internet; accessed 6 September 2008.

versions of life-size landscape features. Moss becomes rolling meadows and mushrooms become exotic types of trees. This is not an urban microcosm, but rather a nostalgic, fantasy-infused landscape of desire. Thus, the terrarium is appealing because the landscape implies the details of infinity, into the emotionally limitless space of control and desire.



figs 21 and 22. Two terrarium available for purchase on Etsy.¹⁸⁵

Finally, the objects on Etsy show a strong tendency to be made from a textile material, utilizing fabric and yarn, often appearing as soft or having a quality of softness.



¹⁸⁵Left, “Etsy :: TheOakLeaves :: TERRARIUM No. 70,” 5 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?listing_id=14938952; Internet; accessed 7 September 2008. Right, “Etsy :: madebymavis :: Large Moss Terrarium,” 10 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?ref=sr_list_3&listing_id=14328926; Internet; accessed 10 September 2008.

fig 23. Etsy Seller Toggle's *Record Pillow The Beatles White Album*, close-up on right¹⁸⁶

In the *Record Pillow* on the previous page one can see an artistic reworking of distinctly hard objects as soft. Taking a common popular object, the Beatles' *White Album* record and re-envisioning it in crochet and felt. Care and attention to detail is taken in hand-stitching the 'text' on the record label. Metal, wood and paper also take on a distinctly soft appearance after the process of being worked by hand. In the case of paper, this is visible in the popularity of letterpress printing, where an impression is made by inked type or design. The results of this process are paper goods with a tactile and visibly indented surface.¹⁸⁷ With a hand-operated press, each print is slightly unique, thus making letterpress goods as adequately 'handmade.'



fig 24. Etsy seller Simpleink's *Bird Letterpress Card*¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶“Etsy :: Toggle :: Record Pillow The Beatles White Album,” 3 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?ref=sr_list_20&listing_id=14880228; Internet; accessed 11 September 2008.

¹⁸⁷The resurgence in the popularity of letterpress printing is explored in historical context by David Jury in *Letterpress: The Allure of the Handmade*. (Mies, Switzerland: RotoVision, 2004).

¹⁸⁸“Etsy :: simpleink :: bird letterpress card,” 3 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?ref=vl_other_1&listing_id=14865476; Internet; accessed 6 September 2008.



fig 25. *Lime Green Grenade Soap*¹⁸⁹

Often, this ‘softness’ is portrayed in juxtaposition to rough or tough subject matter. Representations of skulls, bones and weapons in cloth, felt or other fibers are relatively common. Stinkybomb’s *Lime Green Grenade Soap* is a humorous example of dangerous subject matter made approachable by a transformation of material and texture. This type of juxtaposition of dissimilar objects is popular among the indie/DIY crafters. By doing so, the makers plays with the conventions of feminine/masculine, private/public, leisure/labor and draw relief into the emotional connotations of safety/danger offer associated with these categories. In this case, the ironic re-envisioning asks the person interacting/using the soap, to engage in imaginary dangerous behavior. Stinkybomb’s description explains that the item is, “cast from an actual demilled grenadea Russian F-1 grenade.”¹⁹⁰ By reinterpreting an iconic form deeply associated the danger and destruction, the maker places objects from the battlefield safely into the domestic environment and produces a kind of humor in the process. The quality of soap, dissolving in water, literally softens the object. In this case, even the hybridized name ‘hand grenade’ becomes a play on words.

¹⁸⁹“Etsy :: stinkybomb :: lime green grenade soap,” 11 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?ref=sr_list_5&listing_id=14968903; Internet; accessed 11 September 2008.

¹⁹⁰Ibid.

Items on Etsy commonly employ aesthetics through the use of ornamentation common to the Art Nouveau and Scandinavian design styles. The ornate-ness of the Victorian style, particularly Art Nouveau (approximately 1890-1914), is commonly found in objects on Etsy¹⁹¹. This style features dynamic lines, and curvilinear patterns that reiterate shapes found in the natural world.¹⁹² It is also eclectic, seeking inspiration in a wide range of traditional crafts including the art of Japan and the Islamic world.



fig 26. Amazonite and Green Peridot Dragonfly Earrings by Susidjewelry¹⁹³



fig 27. Maple Tree Seed Pod Necklace by HightowerBotanicals¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹As a style of decorative arts, Art Nouveau is indicative of the “beginnings of modernity proper,” though often not associated with modernism. “Art Nouveau,” 2008, available at http://www.nga.gov/feature/nouveau/exhibit_sources.shtm; Internet; accessed 7 September 2008.

¹⁹²Ibid.

¹⁹³“Etsy :: susidjewelry :: Lilly Pond – no.2 – Amazonite and Green Peridot Dragonfly Earrings,” 7 September 2008; available on http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?ref=sr_list_2&listing_id=1494749; Internet; accessed 7 September 2008.



fig 28. Sycamore, 1905-1910, Cloisonné-enamel gold brooch, diamonds, teardrop baroque pearl, gold mount, designed by Mucha for the jeweler Georges Fouquet¹⁹⁵

The above earrings, posted on Etsy, feature a combination of features indicative of the Art Nouveau style. First, “The dragonfly was an especially popular art nouveau motif, a favorite of Lalique, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and Émile Gallé, all of whom would have seen examples in Japanese art. Probably its popularity in France grew after translation of a series of Japanese poems (Judith Gautier, *Poèmes de la libellule* [*Poems of the Dragonfly*], 1885).¹⁹⁶ Second, the pastel color of the semi-precious amazonite and green peridot stones are indicative of the pastel color palette popular with the Art Nouveau designers. Third, the coloring and tone of the dragonfly forms in contrast to the warm gold tones of the brass and fourteen carat gold findings are also exemplary of Art Nouveau, as was the use of semi-precious stones, in particular peridot. The necklace below, listed on Etsy, is also referential to the Art Nouveau style in its form and likeness to the maple tree seedpod for which it is named. The original Art Nouveau period brooch shown below, designed by the Czech painter and decorative artist, Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939), is a strikingly similar, through inverted, motif. Mucha’s design includes all of the features

¹⁹⁴“Etsy :: HightowerBotanicals :: Maple Tree Seed Pod Necklace,” 27 August 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?listing_id=14664090; Internet; accessed 8 September 2008.

¹⁹⁵Arthur Ellridge. *Mucha: The Triumph of Art Nouveau* (Paris: Terrail, 1992), 126.

¹⁹⁶“Teaching Art Nouveau: Images and Activities – Renee Lalique,” available at http://www.nga.gov/education/tchan_5_04.htm; Internet; accessed 12 September 2008.

mentioned previously; a natural motif, impressionistic pastel colors and use of (in this case, precious) stones in a cloisonné-enamel gold setting.

Art Nouveau has been historically understood as an urban style, used in architectural design features and the graphic arts displayed in cities such as Paris, Brussels and New York.¹⁹⁷ The ornamental referencing of the Art Nouveau style by contemporary indie crafters is more than coincidental given that the original proponents of this style, like the champions of the Arts and Craft movement, believed in “the unity of all the arts and, with that, a rejection of any distinction between fine and applied art.”¹⁹⁸ This is not the first time in recent American history that the style of Art Nouveau has been taken up as a means to express the style and social climate of a period. In the early 1960s, Art Nouveau re-emerged, in large part due to a comprehensive exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.¹⁹⁹ With this in mind, it is possible to interpret the indie crafters’ (and thus Etsy’s) interest in elements of the Art Nouveau style, as referential of both the original Art Nouveau movement at the turn of the century and its renaissance in the 1960s.

Second, the design of objects is also influenced by the simplicity and accessibility of Post-World War II modern design. The Scandinavian design style in textiles, furniture, home goods and architecture remains immensely popular among members of the indie/DIY craft scene. The simple cotton printed textiles, which feature bold, oversized, graphic patterns, are most easily identified in the work of Marimekko, a Finnish company founded in 1951 and still in existence today. Marianne Aav, curator of the 2004 “Marimekko: Fabrics, Fashion, Architecture” exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, writes:

When Marimekko introduced its first collection in Helsinki in spring 1951, the radical new designs, hand-printed on crisp cotton, invigorated the audience... The results were

¹⁹⁷“Art Nouveau”

¹⁹⁸“NGA – Teaching Art Nouveau: Sources and Inspirations,” available at http://www.nga.gov/education/tchan_6.shtm#applied; Internet; accessed 7 September 2008.

¹⁹⁹“New Look at Art Nouveau,” *Time* (Friday, August 21, 1964), available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,876046,00.html>; Internet; accessed 10 September 2008.

spirited, non-traditional patterns with vivid colors that expressed an informal, contemporary, accessible way of life.²⁰⁰

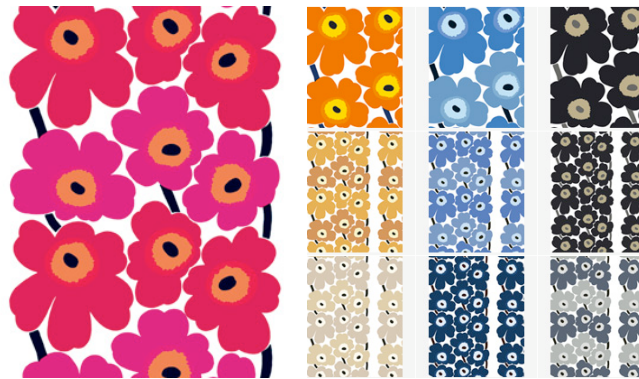


fig 29. Unikko pattern by Marrimekko, shown in a variety of colors and sizes.²⁰¹



fig 30. Kalla's Mini Pillow, hand printed in Bloom, an original print design²⁰²

The Unikko pattern, introduced by Marrimekko in 1964, represents what was a distinctly modern take on floral design.²⁰³ It was designed by artist Maija Isola in

²⁰⁰“Marimekko: Fabrics, Fashion, Architecture,” available at http://www.bgc.bard.edu/exhibit/exhibits/marimekko/press_release.html; Internet; accessed 11 September 2008.

²⁰¹“Marimekko,” available at <http://www.marimekko.fi/ENG/interior/fabric/maijaisola/unikko/frontpage.htm>; Internet; accessed 11 September 2008.

²⁰²“Etsy :: kalla :: Mini Pillow – Hand Printed – Bloom,” 7 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?listing_id=14990862; Internet; accessed 11 September 2008.

²⁰³Ibid.

response to a statement by company founder Armi Ratia who had announced that, “no floral fabrics were designed at Marimekko.”²⁰⁴ The ideological purpose of the design of the bright colored, large-scale poppies in Unikko is quite well suited for the indie/DIY craft movement, given a similar interest in remaking traditional motifs and designs to fit a more contemporary style. Etsy seller Kalla’s hand printed mini pillow fabric pattern bears a striking resemblance to the enlarged, simple blooms of Unikko. Like the Marimekko pattern, Kalla’s bloom print employs a simplified color palette, utilizing white as a significant graphic element, in the Unikko pattern as negative space, and in Kalla’s design as positive space. With its Pop Art infused take on flora, Unikko has remained the company’s most popular and famous design, still sold by contemporary furniture, accessories and fabric retailers around the world.²⁰⁵ Marimekko’s Unikko is distinctly casual and approachable, in opposition to the formality and grandeur of the Art Nouveau style. This contrast is indicative of an indie/DIY craft aesthetic sensibility toward the mixed use of formal and informal designs and patterns. The indie/DIY craft movement has created new hybrids of these styles through its use of selective elements in both the ornate Victorian and the streamlined Scandinavian modern style. The stylistic features of this and other Scandinavian modern patterns remain influential, particularly in the aesthetics of indie/DIY craft and design.

In addition to the previously mentioned borrowing of Art Nouveau and Scandinavian design styles, Etsy items also favor a tendency toward the whimsical illustrations of natural motifs and subject matter. These illustrations, evocative of drawings in children’s books, often feature anthropomorphized representations of deer, owls, octopi, birds, mushrooms, wooden logs, flowers and the like. The anthropomorphization of creatures and objects from nature can be seen in many cultures. In the indie/DIY craft movement’s version, the overriding sentiment is one of cuteness

²⁰⁴Ibid.

²⁰⁵“Marimekko Unikko Pattern – Fabric, Bags, More – Patterns,” available at <http://www.alwaysmod.com/unikko.html>; Internet; accessed 11 September 2008.

depicted by large, innocently gazing eyes or the presence of a face— eyes alongside a smile. Faythe Levine’s *Messenger Owl*, pictured below is indicative of this style.



fig 31. Faythe Levine, *Messenger Owl*²⁰⁶

The eyes are disproportionately large, occupying much of the owl’s head, and gaze innocently, yet intently at the observer. In his 2008 book, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism*, author Daniel Harris argues that the use of said motifs is indicative of a psychological desire to reconnect with our natural environment.²⁰⁷ In his estimation, this represents an attempt to reaffirm that “we, as humans, are part of nature rather than isolated from it.” Though this is a logical enough theory of the use of these motifs, I would argue a step further that the particular whimsical, natural creatures often found in objects sold on Etsy (and in the indie/DIY craft movement) is reflective of what I will discuss later as a re-appropriation of the objects of childhood in what Daniel Noxon defines as ‘rejuvenile’ and a product of the influence of Japanese *kawaii*, or cute culture. The child-like representation of flora and fauna are less realistic and more connotative of children’s book illustrations, which seek to frame the world as fun, friendly and approachable. The Etsy website itself reiterates this aesthetic by using cartoon-like, representational illustrations to accompany much of the official Etsy correspondence, i.e. blog posts, page descriptions, etc.

²⁰⁶“Mkeonline.com – Just craft it,” 5 July 2007, available at <http://www.mkeonline.com/story.asp?id=1401941>; Internet; accessed 7 September 2008.

²⁰⁷Harris, *New Wave Cultures*, 43.



fig 32. an illustration of an Etsy administrator on the Etsy Jobs webpage.²⁰⁸



fig 33. The image, which accompanies the ongoing Etsy blog series that features the work of particular Etsy Teams.²⁰⁹

Not “Painted Wooden Hearts”

In articulating some of the prominent features in the basic and ornamental qualities of what I consider to be the indie/DIY craft aesthetic visible on Etsy, I have observed that members of the subculture define the aesthetic by reiterating ‘what it is’ and ‘what it is not.’ The aesthetic is defined by presence and omission. The indie/DIY craft

²⁰⁸“Etsy Jobs,” available at <http://fix.etsy.com/jobs/index.html>; Internet; accessed 7 September 2008.

²⁰⁹“Etsy :: The Storque :: Spotlight :: Featured Etsy Team: EtsyBloggers,” 20 August 2008; available at <http://www.etsy.com/storque/section/spotlight/article/featured-etsy-team-etsybloggers/2441/>; Internet; accessed 7 September 2008.

aesthetic is thus presented in opposition to the style and tone of what is often identified by indie crafters as ‘country crafts.’ In order to understand these distinctions, the observer must be familiar with the stylistic tradition of country crafts in the United States. The designation of indie craft aesthetics in opposition to the country craft style is referential to prevailing (and subjective) notions of which styles are in ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste.²¹⁰ The subcultural quality of the indie/DIY craft movement aligns itself as being urban and youth oriented, thus differentiating itself from the taste of the masses, which the indie crafters often identify as “incredibly bad.”²¹¹ Often, though, it is far easier for indie/DIY craft scene participants to identify what is not in keeping with their style than what is. As a “strategy of our own desires,” the features that make an identifiable object in the indie/DIY craft style are both flexible and malleable. Members of the indie/DIY craft movement thus, use their aesthetic as a way to differentiate themselves from the masses, and in particular, from the ‘country craft’ style that has been popular for quite some time.

Members of the indie/DIY craft community sometimes find the criteria of their aesthetics difficult to quantify and verbalize. By characterizing those styles, motifs and methods that do *not* fit their aesthetic, indie crafters parse out the liminal boundaries of their movement. From these distinctions, the category of ‘country crafts’ comes to relief as the antithesis for a number of reasons. First, the motifs evident in country crafts do not display evidence to indie crafters of any acknowledgment or ironic awareness of feminine stereotypes. Second, they are seen as characteristic of hobbyists who are seen as elderly and ‘un-hip.’ Third, ‘country crafts’ are interpreted to represent a particularly rural, agrarian sentiment, out of touch with the urban, technology-laden lifestyle of many indie crafters. Fourth, ‘country craft’ has become connected to big industry, with retail chains like Hobby Lobby and Michael’s catering to their interests. As Meli Mossey and Alison Odowski, founders of the Crafting Out Loud fair in Tampa, Florida explain, country crafts are “...painted wooden hearts. Painted wooden hearts is our code name for crafts we don’t

²¹⁰Jukka Gronow, *The Sociology of Taste* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 25.

²¹¹Heath and Potter, *Nation of Rebels*, 123.

like.”²¹² The indie/DIY craft movement, alternately, is defined as a subculture or counterculture, composed of individuals who believe their interests and tastes to be outside the majority. Jean Railla states, “The new domesticity embraces traditional women’s work, yet it is not traditional... Just because I knit doesn’t mean I do all the housework. It’s not conservative.”²¹³

The rejection of ‘country crafts’ as a monoculture, devoid of ironic sensibility, relies on vast assumptions about their makers and their creations. In “‘She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman’: Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue,” author Linda Pershing explores the accessible transgression of women quilters who re-envision the traditional Sunbonnet Sue pattern as “an agent of mischief and transgression.”²¹⁴ On Etsy, in fact, one can see that many of the posted items for sale do not meet what indie crafters define as the criteria for their aesthetic, but it is of note that the Etsy company works diligently to promote handmade objects that *do* fit this criteria. Some in the indie/DIY craft community have begun to question this subcultural “elitism.” Blogger and indie crafter Betsy Greer was early to explore this concern in a 2005 post to her website, *Craftivism.com*. “The ‘country crafter’ is often ridiculed and mocked, bringing about visions of ill-dried glue, crooked balsa wood, and small animals made from fallen trees. In subverting the genre and creating ‘ironic craft’ we are just damning our forebears.”²¹⁵ Greer goes on to argue that the indie craft movement would be served well to acknowledge and seek to understand what lies beneath the surface of country crafts:

²¹²Curtis Ross, “Getting Crafty,” *The Tampa Tribune*, 2 February 2007, 20 [database on-line]; available at Newsbank, Inc., accessed 28 December 2007; <http://www.newsbank.com>; Internet.

²¹³Sheri Boggs, “Crafty Revolution,” *The Pacific Northwest Inlander Online*, 27 January 2005 [newspaper on-line]; available at <http://www.inlander.com/topstory/282474543224104.php>; Internet; accessed 25 January 2008.

²¹⁴Pershing, “‘She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman’: Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue,” 120.

²¹⁵“Craftivism: wee, yet mighty!: ironically, irony is no longer ironic,” 26 September 2005; available at <http://www.craftivism.com/archives/000159.html>; Internet; accessed 8 September 2008.

So what if you don't like Uncle Jim's footstools that he handpainted [sic] with a trail of geese wearing bonnets. Instead of re-creating the wheel and making a footstool with punkrock [sic] geese wearing bonnets (geese with liberty spikes, perhaps?), take a minute to talk to your uncle about why he choose to paint those geese. Or how he learned. Or why he chose to forego a stencil.²¹⁶

Greer's concern for what she sees as a tendency for indie crafters to embrace hipsterism as smug and self-indulgent is well taken, especially in light of how Etsy has lifted this aesthetic from much of the ideological foundation of the indie/DIY craft movement.

The Underpinnings of the Independent/DIY Craft Aesthetic

Both Thomas Frank, author of *Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* and Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, authors of *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*, argue that no cultural object can be truly subversive. From this perspective, subcultural objects cannot be co-opted by the contemporary marketplace because they already exist inside of it.²¹⁷ Though one must take into consideration the relevance of capitalist motives that often inform the exchange of goods in the marketplace, it is an overstatement to argue that objects cannot take on any subversive power. To deny the existence of this form of resistance within the indie/DIY craft movement would be to seriously undermine the power of material culture. However, as we will see, the power of these messages of rebellion is reduced because they must function within the capitalistic, co-opting structure of Etsy.

On Etsy, one can see traces of a rebellious independent craft culture, which brings to the fore reconceived expressions of gender and adulthood. Indie/DIY crafters challenge the gender stereotypes of femininity by exploring previously off-limits subject matter in their projects and by, more generally, engaging in crafts that have been traditionally understood as secondary to masculine realms of artisanship. Adulthood and 'signs of maturity' are also taken into question with the use of styles, materials and forms that have, for many, come to represent the toys of childhood. In taking on these subjects, the

²¹⁶Ibid.

²¹⁷Heath and Potter, *Nation of Rebels*, 150.

purveyors of the indie/craft aesthetic, largely made up of women, contest the biases and limitations of mass conceptions of contemporary womanhood in both direct and subtle ways.

Women's domestic life in America and Europe historically incorporated craftwork as a feature of the 'feminine domain.' Crafts such as needlepoint were seen as useful endeavors to remove the danger of idle hands and provide women a creative outlet to engage in their fundamental purpose, as the enactors of beauty. This was particularly evident in the traditionally feminine realm of the home, where women crafted and decorated. The activities of female domestic life were interpreted as amateur, positioned oppositionally to male professionalism. Even in the Arts and Crafts movement, which intended to reinvest value in craft and artisanship, the materials and methods of craft remained divided among those seen as masculine (primary) and feminine (secondary) arenas. Craftwork, such as metallurgy and furniture building, was seen to exist in the masculine or public sphere, and was ascribed with the esteem of "work."²¹⁸ The crafts of the feminine realm, in particular the textile arts of sewing and embroidery, were seen as activities of leisure.²¹⁹ Thus, when a woman embroidered, it was seen not as art, but as the expression of femininity. These psychological associations loosened somewhat over time, though the underlying distinction between male/female and paint/thread remains a relevant conceptual binary.²²⁰ In contemporary indie/DIY culture, the resurgence of certain styles that have historically been labeled feminine and therefore seen as secondary, can be interpreted as an attempt to re-affirm the value of women's culture and of "women's crafts." By maintaining qualities of women's craft while inserting rebellious sentiments or functions, the aesthetic of indie crafters takes on a decidedly unabashed approach to the feminine.²²¹ These strategies of coding, i.e. "words, forms, behaviors and

²¹⁸Penny Sparke, *As Long As It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Pandora, 1995), 112.

²¹⁹*Ibid.*, 151.

²²⁰Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984), 5.

²²¹*Ibid.*, 191.

signifiers of some kind,” as feminist authors Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser identify them, function by maintaining certain traditional elements while rejecting others in a context where, “the creators are protected from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages.”²²² As Radner and Lanser argue, these codes express feelings and attitudes, which would otherwise be seen as disturbing to the order of dominant society. Coding can occur in a number of sometimes overlapping methods. On Etsy one can most prominently find evidence of appropriation, distraction and trivialization.

Appropriation, is defined as that which “involve[s] adapting to feminist purposes forms or materials normally associated with male culture or with androcentric images of the feminine.”²²³ The indie/DIY craft aesthetic, as evident on Etsy, utilizes appropriation by using the techniques associated with women’s domestic culture to create norm-challenging subject matter. For example, Ansleybleu’s *Knit Breast Pillow* turns the act of knitting on its head by creating a pattern that depicts the literally objectified female body part. By presenting the breast in this fashion, Ansleybleu also makes use of ‘distraction.’ The humorousness of the subject matter serves as interference, which obscures the message from being heard by anyone except “those who listen very carefully or already suspect it is there.”²²⁴ In this case, the fact that the breast is a pillow and is totally abstracted from any image of the rest of the body, makes it funny. But the breast may also represent a desire to draw attention to the absurdity of female objectification and a liberation of a body part that women are required to keep covered.

²²²Radner, *Feminist Messages*, 3.

²²³Ibid., 10.

²²⁴Ibid., 15.



fig 34. *Knit Breast Pillow* by Ansleybleu²²⁵

The third method of coding, trivialization, is also apparent in the frequent use of traditionally relegated artistic methods such as the fiber arts of knitting, embroidery, crochet and sewing. Radner and Lanser describe trivialization as “the employment of a form, mode, or genre that dominant culture considers unimportant, innocuous, or irrelevant.”²²⁶ The *Knit Breast Pillow* exemplifies trivialization by constructing the breast in knitted yarn. These three methods: appropriation, distraction and trivialization, are most evident in the sentiment of humor and playfulness of many of the items. But beyond their humor, crafts that utilize these methods of coding speak to a non-conformist rebellion among the indie/DIY craft movement. In particular, the aesthetic of the indie/DIY craft movement re-appropriates women’s domestic arts for the purpose of dispelling gender prejudices. However, these strategies do not exist un-problematically. For Rozsilla Parker, author of *The Subversive Stitch*, the re-appropriation of traditionally ‘feminine’ skills, such as embroidery are indicative of women’s struggle to negotiate “the constraints of femininity.”²²⁷ While on the one hand, this can be seen as pleasure-full and powerful, these crafts are also “indissolubly linked” to women’s powerlessness.²²⁸

²²⁵“Etsy :: ansleybleu :: Pattern, Knit Breast Pillow,” 26 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?listing_id=15018092; Internet; accessed 8 September 2008.

²²⁶Radner, *Feminist Messages*, 19.

²²⁷Ibid.

²²⁸Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 11.

While attending to issues of gender stereotype, the aesthetics of the indie/DIY craft movement also challenge preconceived notions of age. The psychological burdens of adulthood in Post-Industrial society, namely the conception of maturity as staid and serious, is challenged by a style that Christopher Noxon has termed ‘rejuvenile,’ defined as “people who cultivate tastes and mindsets traditionally associated with those younger than themselves.”²²⁹ Noxon notes that this term is not meant to be pejorative, but rather an attempt to identify and provide a functional term to a tendency he sees as significant in contemporary American culture. Rejuveniles re-appropriate the innocence of childhood with the savvy of adulthood. Like the appropriation of traditionally gendered crafts, rejuvenile action involves challenging norms, in this case, rebelling against traditional age norms and “unapologetically embracing and indulging the ‘inner child’.”²³⁰ Adult identity is seen as more fixed than childhood identity, which is accepted as being a free and fluid time of self-discovery and creative exploration.²³¹ Much like indie crafters interest in rejecting the imposed stereotypes of gender, one can see the phenomena of rejuvenile as a desire to deny imposed notions of adulthood.

On Etsy, one can see a noteworthy presence of handmade objects that speak to an adult interest in toy-ified goods. One manifestation of this aesthetic is visible in the popularity of ‘plushies’ or ‘softies,’ words used to describe, “a type of doll made from fabric and filled with any kind of soft stuffing (i.e. cotton, feathers, nylon, etc.).”²³² Amigurumi, a particular type of plushie style that originated in Japan, involves knitting or crocheting small stuffed animals, creatures or objects with anthropomorphic features.

²²⁹Christopher Noxon, *Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-Up* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 4.

²³⁰*Ibid.*, 3.

²³¹Heath and Potter, *Nation of Rebels*, 218.

²³²“Plushie — Wiktionary,” available at <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/plushie>; Internet; accessed 8 September 2008.



fig 35. *Sour Green Apple* plushie²³³

The maker of the ‘sour green apple’ shown above suggests that, “this little darling can be used as a paper weight or a pin cushion.”²³⁴ Note that this plushie is embroidered with a ‘grumpy’ face—what might in and of itself be interpreted as an expression of cuteness.



fig 36. *Mr. Oak Tree* pillow²³⁵

The tree above is designed as a pillow that will “make your couch or bed look extra cute.”²³⁶ In both of these instances, the literal comfort of the objects and the psychological

²³³“Etsy :: FantasticToys :: Sour Green Apple,” 3 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?listing_id=14880471; Internet; accessed 8 September 2008.

²³⁴Ibid.

²³⁵Ibid.

comfort of their subject matter make for noteworthy means of aesthetic resistance. The ‘sour green apple’ and ‘mr. oak tree’ represent an interest among indie crafters to surround themselves, at least in part, with the imaginative joys of childhood. These crafts celebrate creativity, and perhaps more importantly, the importance of fun, even in the context of adult experience. The aesthetic, thus, is a pleasure-full rebellion, not in a hedonistic sense, but rather in homage to a sensitive and sweet memory of childhood. As a form of play, the material culture of rejuvenile takes on a rebellious tone in keeping with the questioning of traditional gender tropes. For many indie/DIY crafters, these objects represent the rejection of the rigid expectations of contemporary adulthood.

Aesthetics as Novelty

While the aesthetics of indie/DIY craft culture indicate a quality of rebellion against gender stereotype and age norms, it is noteworthy that these interests exist in a marketplace defined by some scholars as a ‘culture of cool.’ The objects that exemplify the aesthetic qualities previously discussed must be understood within the context of consumer capitalism. When handcrafted objects are displayed, shared, bought and sold *only* on Etsy, the transgressive properties of the aesthetic are subsumed by novelty.²³⁷ The novelty of ‘cool,’ in particular, is one of the major factors driving the modern economy.²³⁸ Those whose only participation in the indie/DIY craft movement is via Etsy drastically narrow the scope of their subversive power. Though the aesthetics of indie crafter’s objects on Etsy may carry with them traces of specific epistemologies, their affective potency is ultimately subsumed by the Etsy website and company. Ultimately Etsy becomes representative of a culture of cool that co-opts the aesthetics of the indie/DIY

²³⁶“Etsy :: hitree :: Hi Mr Oak Tree,” 8 September 2008; available at http://www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?listing_id=9035461; Internet; accessed 8 September 2008.

²³⁷The term ‘craftster,’ a combination of the terms ‘hipster’ and ‘crafter,’ refers directly to the relationship between the indie/DIY craft movement and their perceived trendiness.

²³⁸Heath and Potter, *Nation of Rebels*, 188.

craft movement for capitalistic purposes, leaving much of the underlying socio-political significance behind.

Where other e-commerce venues sell goods, Etsy sells an aesthetic, one borrowed (or in more harsh terms, stolen) from a subcultural movement with different intentions. The company positions itself as a purveyor of what is ‘new’ or ‘cool’ in the marketplace of style, “a designation that is meant to drive consumer spending.”²³⁹ This is not to say that Etsy is the only company attempting to benefit from the growing popularity of certain indie/DIY craft motifs and styles. Major retailers across the United States have incorporated qualities of the handmade movement for their own purposes. But these retailers do not directly propose an ethical mission the way that Etsy does. When viewed in this light, Etsy’s interest in promoting the buying and selling of handmade items falls vastly short of their goal to better the world. To paraphrase one Etsian, “You can’t solve world hunger with a felt mustache.”²⁴⁰ On Etsy one can see how the same aesthetics can repress as well as emancipate. While the aesthetics of the indie/DIY craft movement propose to rebel against the status quo, these same aesthetic properties, when used for the privatized capitalist interests of corporations, bolster a mainstream consumer demand for what was designed as anti-mainstream. The aesthetics that so smartly play with the stereotypes and norms evident in mass, consumer culture, on Etsy, are commercially transformed into mere fads.²⁴¹ But for the makers and consumers of these objects who are able to read and understanding their coded messages, their power remains intact.

In exploring the aesthetic properties of Etsy, it is evident that members of the indie/DIY craft movement who use the website as one of many venues to share, market, sell and buy objects more easily retain the affective power of their creations. On the other

²³⁹Ibid., 103.

²⁴⁰A similar sentiment is expressed by Annie Tomlin, a crafter and journalist for Time Out Chicago, “Some people make overt political statements with their crafted work, while others just like to ‘make stuff.’ In that latter category, I don’t see a lot of room for intentional activism. Knitting an iPod cozy alone isn’t going to protect the right to an abortion.” Phoebe Connelly, “Of Crafts and Causes,” *In These Times* 30, no. 12, 10 February 2006 [magazine on-line]; available at http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/2482/of_crafts_and_causes/; Internet; accessed 20 February 2008.

²⁴¹Heath and Potter, *Nation of Rebels*, 216.

hand, those who work entirely as Etsy sellers forgo much of the socio-political power found in the coded messages of their objects by allowing them to be acquired by Etsy and re-classified as 'novelty.' Objects are never wholly subversive or commercial. From earliest records, there is evidence that both counterculture and craft were entrepreneurial. But the entrepreneurial spirit of members in the indie/DIY craft scene should not be conflated with the corporate interests of the Etsy company. By parsing out the distinct interests of indie crafters and Etsy Incorporated, it is possible to see how material culture may be simultaneously utilized for very different purposes. The flexibility of the aesthetics explored in this chapter, from its subversive and transgressive power to its position in consumer fashion, is a distinct feature of these culturally coded objects.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION: CAPITALIZING ON CRAFTINESS

The marketplace owned and operated by Etsy Incorporated promotes and perpetuates a romantic conception of consumerism, counteracting the negative forces associated with conspicuous consumption. This spirit of moral consumption perpetuated on the Etsy website is grounded in the idea that people should make every effort to ‘buy handmade.’ The notion of moral consumption perpetuated on the Etsy website is grounded in the idea that handmade objects are inherently better than their mechanically produced counterpart. Etsy Incorporated is selling consumers ideologies as much as it is selling tangible goods. The objects are, in media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s terms (1964), both the medium and the message. By exploiting the novelty of handmade goods in a post-industrial context, Etsy asks its users to challenge capitalism, a system that it characterizes as the production and distribution of cheaply made mass-produced goods by private, corporate entities. As we have seen, Etsy does not actually avoid contemporary consumption practices but rather reframes them for alternate purposes. As mediator, Etsy acts as the platform between buyers and sellers as transactions are made. By presenting buying from Etsy as political and ecological action, the website claims that users can utilize their power as consumers to affect change. Etsy’s lack of traditional marketing methods emphasizes its innovative business strategy to sell ideology. Rather than promoting the Etsy website through a system of print ads and media spots, Etsy prefers viral and guerrilla strategies, which utilize pre-existing social networks of consumers to promote their products and their business via word of mouth. Viral marketing is a marketing phenomenon that facilitates and encourages people to pass along a marketing message voluntarily. This is largely because traditional advertising and marketing avenues are no longer considered trustworthy sources for information about the goods or services they promote. The ideologies perpetuated by are complex and require greater nuance than

traditional marketing outlets allow. The privileging of word-of-mouth marketing is connected to Etsy's desire to remain 'human.' Given its electronic format, the human face of Etsy is all the more critical. The personal nature of word-of-mouth marketing makes a compelling case for why would-be Etsy users should join and has proven to be successful strategy.

Etsy's success is largely dependent on how well it convinces users of its three main ideologies. First, they are selling the idea that community is important, and that Etsy offers a community for its users. Second, that aesthetics may be used as a means to expressive rebellious or transgressive behavior, specifically in the realm of feminine, domestic culture. Third, given the right context, labor can look and feel a lot like leisure. These beliefs define the ideology perpetuated by Etsy. These three beliefs work in tandem among buyers and sellers, encouraging users to become empowered consumers/citizens and are effective strategies for the company's success. Etsy's focus on beliefs that maximize pleasure among consumers is, economically speaking, a wise means to company profit. Etsy locates itself uniquely among its e-commerce competitors, offering an experience that purports to transcend the business exchange. In the context of Post Modern capitalism, Etsy commodifies ideology by exploiting the symbolic value of the objects bought and sold. But this commoditization is only part of the social life of things. As we have seen, the objects on Etsy operate within what Annette Weiner termed 'regime of value.' By interpreting these objects as having value as art, as artifact and as commodity, one can see how they deny simple definitions as either 'gift' or 'commodity.'

Defining Relationships: Makers/Sellers, Buyers and the Etsy Platform

The Etsy marketplace has three primary sets of relationships. First, makers/sellers and consumers are connected to each other through Etsy. As mediator, Etsy develops independent relationships with each party, both the makers/sellers and the buyers. Put most simply, Etsy's website is a service marketplace, offering craftspeople and consumers a venue to sell and buy things they have made. Etsy differentiates itself from its competitors through its marketing of its strong connections to the contemporary independent/DIY craft scene, thus ensuring that makers find likeminded buyers and vice

versa. Etsy carefully navigates its position as mediator, sliding into the background when wanting to emphasize the direct connection between makers/sellers and buyers, and other times pushing the platform into more visible territory in order to highlight the feeling of community among users. In both scenarios, Etsy is the system through which users interact. Whether quietly or loudly, users are consistently exposed to the ideologies that Etsy perpetuates. Within these different contexts, the objects bought and sold on Etsy take on multiple and complicated meanings and value.

“Living in a Loving Community”²⁴²

The promotion of Etsy as a community is undergirded by the notion that people benefit from their community affiliations. Etsy blurs the distinctions between marketplace and community in order to appeal to the human desire to connect with others. Etsy’s romanticized concept of ‘community’ denies the fact that the system is a private marketplace where administrators maintain control over communications and content. Despite this fact, the website explicitly and repeatedly states that Etsy is a community and argues that, “Etsy is not an us vs. them environment.”²⁴³ But, expressions of inclusion and exclusion, as we have seen, are an important component of community experience and action.

The notion that Etsy is a community that functions like a town, as administrator Stellaloella argues in a lengthy forum post, ignores the relevance of public and private space. The concept of ‘private citizen’ on Etsy is re-interpreted to mean a person who is engaging with a private business, rather than the democratic governmental understanding that defines the ‘private citizen’ as one who does not hold a public or official position. Etsy admin are not publicly elected officials and their primary interest as employees of Etsy Incorporated are to the company, not to its customers. Though it boasted having over a million users as of May 2008, this does not mean that many of these members have

²⁴² A comment made by user Faro in the forum post thread, “Etsy :: On community & Etsy,” 8 August 2008; Internet; available at http://www.etsy.com/forums_thread.php?thread_id=5185206&page=12; Internet; accessed 30 September 2008.

²⁴³“Etsy :: On community & Etsy”

actually ever engaged with other Etsy members on any level, or have participated in any more than visiting the website once in order to join. ‘In fact, the community promoted by Etsy is an extremely superficial one, made up of members who join and leave as quickly as a press of a button.

Be Good, Buy Handmade

While a particular vision of community is promoted and championed on the website, Etsy also advocates using one’s consumer powers for the betterment of self and humankind. In the Etsy model, consumers are promised good feelings, good selfhood, and good citizenship through the activity of conscious consumption. Consumerism is seen as a creative act whereby buyers simultaneously provide support for the handmade movement and individual artisans/crafters/artists, while expressing themselves by curating their environment with one-of-a-kind, eco-friendly objects. But the concept that shopping on Etsy is a ‘green’ activity is dubious. Even locally purchased items must be packaged and shipped, and the act of browsing and shopping online itself is a drain on energy resources. The notion of being able to produce, maintain and transform one’s own identity through the purchase on Etsy is problematic. The process of consumption is imbued with deep meaning as a result of being tied to the ideological qualities that Etsy claims to embody. The symbolic value of objects bought and sold on Etsy is far greater than the exchange value of the objects alone. In *Economies and Cultures: Foundations of Economic Anthropology* (2007), Richard R. Wilk and Lisa C. Cliggett explain, “...objects are desirable because of their meaning, because they trigger powerful emotions.”²⁴⁴ Etsy objects provide a sense of creative power and reiterate the uniqueness of the individual while simultaneously rejecting the mundane and guilt-filled experience of shopping at big-box retailers and connecting in with a ‘community’ of like-minded peers. In short, Etsy’s ideology offers a form of morality for its consumers (both as makers/sellers and buyers). It is relevant here to acknowledge that the value association with these objects is not static or intrinsic. As Arjun Appadurai writes, in *The Social Life of Things* (1986), “... no materials

²⁴⁴Richard R. Wilk and Lisa C. Cliggett, *Economies and Cultures: Foundations of Economic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2007), 119.

have a universal intrinsic value.”²⁴⁵ This perspective on the symbolic power of objects is in line with the work of anthropologist Victor Turner who, in 1964, argued that symbols and symbolic structures, “...provide a unique cosmological order in every society, that humans make order out of a chaotic universe...”²⁴⁶ Turner emphasizes that these symbols may not always function consciously, in fact they may represent unconscious interests and desires.²⁴⁷ On Etsy this is exemplified in the aesthetic referencing of styles that generate particular emotional responses. For example, the popularity of designs that reference childhood may be seen as a desire to re-connect with the exuberant freedom of one’s youth. In Marcell Mauss’s book *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, written in 1924, modern capitalism is interpreted as the driving force in the elimination of *haus*, or the spirit of the gift.²⁴⁸ This perspective interprets gifts in opposition to commodities. Later scholars, in particular, Arjun Appadurai in *The Social Life of Things*, recognize that the categories of ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ are fluid, acquiring different meanings at different points in their social lives. The distinction here is the emphasis on the value created by the emotionally evocative power of objects rather than their production process. In the context of cotemporary scholarship, it is useful to think of material culture objects as possessing what Appadurai calls “regimes of value,” highlighting the way that an object’s value adjusts depending on its social context.²⁴⁹ Etsy’s regime of value is one that plays with the conventions of value. The objects bought and sold are cultural, decorative, distinctive and memorable. They are also simultaneously consumer goods and artistic expressions of identity. As an object is attributed with specific connotations of value within a particular context, it is interpreted as having qualities of alienability (able to have a price or monetary value attributed to it) and/or inalienability (that which should not have a price). On Etsy, as is the case in many

²⁴⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 159.

²⁴⁶ Wilk and Cliggett, *Economies and Cultures*, 120.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 120-121.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 160.

²⁴⁹ Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 57.

regimes of value, objects circulate in a manner that often crosses these categories, operating as commodities and indicators of selfhood.

Labor as Leisure

In addition to techniques which alternately foreground and background the web-based platform itself, Etsy also promotes a particular perspective on the relationship between labor and leisure. Etsy works diligently to promote the concept that anyone can make a living doing his or her hobby. The ‘quit your day job’ series of articles in the Storque speaks to this ideology most directly. By promoting the concept that anyone can ‘quit their day job’ and make ends meet with their hobby, Etsy is assisting in a process where leisure is transformed into paid labor, at that. Although Etsy admin acknowledge that the process is neither simple nor easy, they unilaterally reiterate stories of success. As we have seen, this has become problematic for some Etsy users who find that they cannot make ends meet by selling their handmade objects on Etsy. Who wouldn’t want to quit their monotonous day job in exchange for getting to ‘play’ all day long? The pleasures of leisure activities, in particular hobbies that involve handcrafts offer a unique appeal. Unlike so many white collar jobs where ‘pushing paper’ both physically and digitally occupies the majority of workers’ time, the act of making something tangible offers a sense of satisfaction absent in the contemporary workplace. Etsy appeals to discontent laborers, inverting labor (the day job) with leisure (the hobby). In making this appeal, Etsy portrays work in the service sector as dull, thoughtless and uncreative while representing the alternative, crafting, as leisurely, effortless and, simultaneously, intellectually engaging; a simplification unlikely to match most realities. And yet, in a capitalist system, sellers must perform a range of tasks in order to remain viable in a free and competitive market. Suddenly, the hobbyist must adhere to a schedule, must produce according to consumer demand, must market their wares, provide customer service, and package and ship their creations. Ironically, the ideology of ‘making a living doing what you love’ ultimately negates itself—turning your hobby into a business may not lead to the happy life one envisioned. The romantic ideology promoted by Etsy takes for granted the basic structure of the market system, namely supply and demand. Even in a best-case scenario,

the maker/seller who finds success on Etsy will ultimately face the challenges of keeping up with demand while remaining true to the vision of the artisan in the workshop.

Etsy is smart to acknowledge that being a seller does not necessarily mean that one will necessarily achieve their maximum monetary income, but that the meaningful nature of the work, the happiness that one experiences being able to do what she or he loves, balances out a slight loss of income. In doing so it minimizes the perceived risk of committing full-time to become an Etsy seller. But what Etsy does not acknowledge, is that the hobby is, in part, pleasurable because it is part of the leisure experience, or at least it is performed during leisure time, time away from work. When hobby activities are transformed into ‘day jobs’ the Etsy seller must enlist in a whole host of commercial activities, which previously had no place in their ‘leisurely’ crafting experience. Etsy’s regime of value allows sellers to create objects that are both alienable and inalienable. The artist does not lose its profound and intimate connection with their creation once it is sold, but rather interprets the exchange of the object as a means for taking on new, additional symbolic relevance. Commoditization as only one piece of the social life of things. By acknowledging all three forms of value as art, artifact and commodity, Etsy’s regime of value becomes a powerful way of interpreting the world.

One of the Etsy website’s main sections, ‘Gift Guide’ is devoted to the gifting of objects purchased on Etsy. Here Etsy items are divided in categories by holidays and occasions (Christmas, birthdays, weddings, housewarming, etc.), recipients (baby, teen, him, her, etc.) and interests (gourmet, vintage, pet lovers, etc.).²⁵⁰ The *Buy Handmade* campaign, discussed previously, also emphasizes the concept that Etsy objects make better gifts. Gifts, particularly those tied to significant life events (birth, marriage, etc.), carry with them significant emotional weight. Aside from the justifications offered on the *Buy Handmade* website, an unspoken component of the gifting process is that the gift allows the giver to express her or his unique identity, requiring both parties to engage in mutual recognition of the giver’s perception of her or himself and her or his perception of the recipient. The emphasis Etsy places on gifting also reiterates their ideological desire to

²⁵⁰“Etsy :: Gift Guides ::,” available at <http://www.etsy.com/gift-guides/>; Internet; accessed 30 September 2008.

eschew the dehumanizing element of capitalism that obscures the labor that goes into making an object. Despite claims to “build a new economy,” Etsy is deeply dependent on capitalism. Etsy promotes the hand-made, eschewing the mechanization of objects, but engages makers in a kind of technological world that removes them—perhaps in similar ways that mechanization does/did—from the kind of maker-seller-buyer relationship fancied by the Arts and Crafts Movement.

The Appeal of Etsy

The complex intersection of social, historical and psychological motivations reveals why Etsy has been successful. An analysis of these intertwining factors reveals interesting revelations about a moment in contemporary American culture that embraces a multi-faceted way of viewing material culture and craft. Etsy is indebted to a wide range of socio-cultural precursors, including the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the century, the punk DIY movement of the 1980s and third-wave feminism. In particular, Etsy is the product of feminist interests in reclaiming the power of handmade/DIY objects, originating in part from the Riot Grrrl, indie craft and new domestic movements. It is also indebted to the proliferation of Internet systems that feature what has been characterized as web 2.0 components, i.e. tools that engage users in collaboration and content production. Etsy is uniquely positioned as the child of both e-commerce and social networking platforms on the Internet. Etsy is also indicative of a particular moment in 21st century America, borrowing ideas from the ecological movement and connecting itself to the Arts and Crafts movement of fin-de-siècle Europe that faced, in many ways, similar anxieties over the debasing process of mechanization and industrialization. Each of these elements has played a part in informing the development and current function of Etsy. Chapter two shifted attention to the prospect of community on Etsy. By analyzing the structure and content of interaction among users, we were able to examine the specific features of how Etsy does and does not function as a community. In fact, the concept of community is revealed to be a heavily loaded one, still rich with connotations of romanticism and utopianism. Though the promotion of the Etsy community has been a compelling marketing strategy for the company, we have also seen backlash from users

felt that they had not been given what they were promised. Finally, in chapter three, my research revealed how Etsy Inc. made strategic and deliberate use of motifs and stylistic features indicative of the indie/DIY craft community's aesthetic, thereby piggybacking on the appeal of that subcultural movement. The sum of these chapters is an analysis of Etsy's origins, how and why it has been, to a large degree, so successful thus far in its short existence.

In essence this project speaks to the deep complexity that lies in the invention of companies like Etsy, that whether knowingly or unknowingly, draw upon a wide range of resources to design effective systems and strategies for reaching and connecting with potential users. As we have seen, Etsy has been quite successful in perpetuating itself as a community with a particular and also unique aesthetic. Ironically, Etsy success has been the major determinant in their most recent challenges. When Etsy tells users to quit their day jobs, and people listen, on some level, the company becomes responsible for the financial, social and emotional well being of its users. Etsy has serious obligations to its users, in particular those who have worked enthusiastically to champion the virtues of its website. Over the last three years, Etsy has proven itself to be somewhat unprepared for the ramifications of the ideologies it perpetuates. The ideologies that make Etsy such a compelling study are also the same ideologies that put the company at risk of disappointing the most engaged members of their user base. In order for Etsy to continue on a path of financial success, it appears imperative that it acknowledge its users' concerns and take an active, engaged approach in responding to their users' needs.

"My Love Affair with Etsy is a Complicated and Beautiful Thing."²⁵¹

Regardless of whether Etsy becomes 'the next eBay' or fades into the background, as so many other web 2.0 ventures have, an exploration of the company's

²⁵¹The section title comes from a post by Amber Mortenson on the blog, *Painfully Hip*, 16 April 2007, available at <http://www.painfullyhip.com/2007/04/hipster-craft-bazaar/>; Internet; accessed 1 November 2008.

origins, contexts, and uses is a beneficial one.²⁵² Etsy provides fertile ground for discussions of how the tenets and stylistic features of subcultural movements can be incorporated into corporate marketing strategies and how the broad notion of community may be used as a selling point. Etsy also provides a starting point for conversations about aesthetics, specifically, how the qualities of style, design and motif may support a company's marketed ideology while at the same time remain culturally powerful as symbolic expressions of rebellion from certain, oppressed groups. But crafting for the sole destination of Etsy transactions does not carry with it the same level of activist potential that crafting and other DIY arts have in the indie subcultural movement. By examining both Etsy's past and present, it is possible to see how the desire to return to a pre-industrial existence is seductive, but ultimately misguided. The romantic desire for a simplified, 'good life' is understandable, but the direct correlation made between the harsh uniformity and perceived unhappiness of industrial and post-industrial society is, at best, an overstatement.

Etsy's slogan of 'Buy, Sell and Live Handmade' is quite nebulous. It is never made clear how Etsy believes users can achieve this handmade life, beyond the use of the Etsy website to buy and sell goods and to interact with their peers in the format of the digital 'community.' The tri-part ideology perpetuated by Etsy is a powerful and compelling ideal, but is not always successful in its political interests. At its worst, this kind of romanticism only feeds unrealistic expectations about the power of their Etsy existence and draws people away from the more tangible socio-political issues of everyday life. The hours spent on the computer are the same hours that might be spent in knitting groups, craft fairs, or volunteering for a local organization that promotes gender equality or green living through policy change and education. As individuals operating within the frenetic pace of contemporary life, we all must make decisions about how we will spend our time. Etsy users must be careful to be aware of the time they spend online. While Etsy promotes an ideology of self-sufficiency, it in fact shifts dependency from the

²⁵²For more on the debate over whether Etsy will achieve the same level of success as eBay, see "Distributed Mass Customization: Is Etsy the Next Ebay? – ReadWriteWeb," 27 February 2008; available at http://www.readriteweb.com/archives/etsy_ebay_distributed_mass_customization.php; Internet; accessed 30 September 2008.

shopping mall to the Internet storefront to the benefit of Etsy company investors. And yet, Etsy has provided a system where sellers may pursue their craft as well as advance their own political and artistic agendas, and ways of thinking about the world and the objects we surround ourselves with, in ways that challenge the tenets of a 21st century economy built upon a foundation of mass production, homogeneity, and the exploitation of our environment.

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