

# The Paradox of Craft:

TUGGING AT THE HEARTSTRINGS OF CAPITALISM

by Dennis Stevens

In mid-July of this year, I attended a conference at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine, called *The Object and Making: Function and Meaning*, which was described as seeking "to examine the role of objects and object-making within the culture." For me, this description begs the question, whose culture are we talking about? If we are talking about our own culture of craft and the behaviors, habits, beliefs, and ideals of craft object-making, then who are "we"...really? This is the larger question that this conference struggled to answer, and I believe that many people involved in the national craft community are reluctant to answer it for fear of the answers that it might yield.

That said, my main impression of the conference was that, as object makers, our own internal ideology does not always coincide with other, more dominant ways of viewing the world. More specifically, it appears that quite often the more mainstream ideology of capitalism operates in direct conflict to many of craft's ideals. I base this notion on the core presumptions of one of the Haystack conference presenters, Lewis Hyde, who wrote a much-admired text called *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*.<sup>1</sup>

In his book, Hyde offers what can be described as an alternative economic model to

capitalism and commerce, by proposing that within traditional gift economies property is dispersed through acts of goodwill rather than with the intent of economic gain. Further, Hyde describes the function of art, in its original intent and form, as a gift, produced by "gifted" persons. During the Haystack conference it was suggested that craft serves a similar function in our society. For example, conference co-presenter and potter Chris Staley took to heart Hyde's idea that "a gift isn't fully realized until it is given away," and, following his lecture on creativity and influence, astounded the ninety or so people in the audience by passing around a number of unassuming brown paper bags filled with celadon-glazed porcelain tea bowls that he had made. As he asked each person to reach into the paper bag and select this gift from him, the audience was awestruck at Staley's generosity. This singular act seemed the embodiment of much of what had been discussed during the conference and certainly

Dennis Stevens is an instructor in ceramics and video art at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City, where he is also pursuing a doctorate in Art & Art Education.

Dennis Stevens  
61-47 148th St.  
Flushing, NY 11367  
Email: [denstevens@gmail.com](mailto:denstevens@gmail.com)  
blog: <http://www.redefiningcraft.com>

beauty or value. 2. It is difficult to see the whole picture when you are



demonstrated the heart of what Hyde's work suggests.

My own interpretation of Staley's act is that it was a profound strategy for improving the world through a single social action, the idea being that this will prompt other people to be equally generous with their own work in the future, with a potentially positive "butterfly effect" upon the world. Hyde's concept of "the gift" operates in similarly metaphysical terms, meaning that the act of giving and the subsequent presumed "return-on-investment" are karmic and cannot be measured in quantifiable terms. Staley's "gift" added a highly meaningful experience to ninety people's lives. It is precisely these types of exchanges, social interactions, and meaningful encounters with handmade art objects that many craftspeople believe can change the world.

Despite the appeal of gift economies as an ideal, the reality is that capitalism dominates American society, while gift economies are more common in traditional, non-industrialized cultures. Simply stated, capitalism is not bound by the domain of emotion; its rationality strives for financial gain through a cost-benefit analysis that detaches the emotions from decision making. Capitalism is an economic model that seeks efficiency in all matters, and when the passion and ethos of craft are viewed through the lens of a rational analysis, the attachment that object makers have to their materials, techniques, processes, and especially their traditions, appears not only inefficient but driven by naive, utopian motivations. There appears to be a disconnect here between the ideology of craft work and

that of the economic system that supports it.

Perhaps, however, instead of being driven by mere emotions, we could say that the ethos of object-making and the use of handmade objects in our daily lives represent an oppositional set of values that might balance out the forces of capitalism – a proverbial *yin* to capitalism's *yang*. Within this theory of balance, I would like to propose that studio education has the potential to play a reconstructionist role in society at large. I use reconstructionist here as an umbrella term for the idea of improving society through the application of a specific point of view or philosophic outlook. Therefore, I am suggesting that maybe the capitalist-oriented world has something to learn from the "gift" of the handmade.

Naturally, this is the type of mantra that the readership of this magazine wants to hear. To stop short of pandering to my audience, I would like to add a caveat: what I am suggesting is hard work. First, it would require rethinking and reinvention of our studio craft curriculum in relation to the ideals of service to society suggested by Hyde's notion of the gift. Second, it would require us to articulate exactly how handmade art objects can make the world a better place...realistically. We can articulate how we think the handmade improves our lives, but can we quantify or measure the improvement to demonstrate its value to society at large? This is not about simply replacing one teaching methodology with another, but about building a new understanding of what we already do. Any new curricular focus would require a lucid articulation of craft's ability to improve society and a clear demonstration of how that is possible. So the question is: Do handmade art objects really improve society?

The argument for the handmade in a social context is not new, but has its antecedent in the tensions between industrial progress and the alienation of labor. The utopian vision of craft can be seen most clearly in the writings of John Ruskin and William Morris, and later in works like Soetsu Yanagi's *The Unknown Craftsman*.<sup>2</sup> In my view, the ideals of craft relate to the historical context of social reconstruction-

the frame. 3. After learning the tricks of the trade, don't think you know

ES  
is Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination  
e Erotic Life of Property*. (New  
Vintage Books, 1977).

tsu Yanagi and Bernard Leach,  
*Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese  
t into Beauty*. (Tokyo: Kodansha  
ational, 1997).

orge Counts, *Dare the School  
a New Social Order?* (1932;  
t, Edwardsville, IL: Southern  
is University Press, 1978).

pty Bowls Project,  
/www.emptybowls.net/Imag-  
nder.htm (accessed  
er 16, 2007).

ism, a social and educational movement dur-  
ing the early twentieth century that sought  
to address social questions in order to create  
a better society. Social reconstructionism  
was interested in improving the condition  
of the underprivileged, disadvantaged, and  
underrepresented. The foundation of recon-  
structionist ideals can be seen in a work of  
George Counts called *Dare the School Build  
a New Social Order?*<sup>3</sup> Written during the  
Depression, the text suggests that teachers  
are responsible for shaping society's values;  
in the book, Counts strives to establish that  
the purpose of education is to ensure social  
equality and justice among all peoples in  
American society, regardless of their ethnic  
or economic backgrounds.

Jane Addams, considered to be the founder  
of the settlement house movement, was also  
an early social reconstructionist. Among  
other achievements, Addams co-founded  
Hull House in Chicago, which offered social,  
educational, and artistic programs for work-  
ing-class immigrants. Interestingly, several  
craft schools emerged from the ideals of  
social reconstructionism and the settlement  
house movement, including Greenwich  
House Pottery in New York City in 1909,  
Arrowmont School of Crafts in 1912, and  
Penland Weaving Institute (later the Penland

School of  
Handicraft  
and today  
Penland  
School of  
Craft) in 1928.  
While social  
reconstruc-  
tionism was  
most relevant  
during the  
time of the  
Great Depres-  
sion, the patri-  
otic fervor of



week pottery workshop at  
Arrowmont, in partnership with the  
hostel program. Fall, 2007.

World War II and threat of accusations of  
communism under McCarthyism eventually  
squashed its ideals, hopes, and momentum.  
The politics of war maintained that every-  
one had to make certain sacrifices; speaking  
out other than in the support of the war ef-  
fort was deemed unpatriotic.

The notion of education's responsibility  
for repairing social ills and ensuring social  
justice persists today, and despite capitalism's  
claims to civic responsibility, such ideals  
remain highly relevant to American society.  
A contemporary example of social recon-  
structionist efforts within the field of ceram-  
ics is Lisa Blackburn's and John Hartom's  
Empty Bowls project. According to the orga-  
nization's mission statement, Empty Bowls  
"strives to create positive and lasting social  
change through the arts, education, and  
projects that build community."<sup>4</sup> Potters  
from around the world have produced and  
donated handmade bowls, which are then  
sold to support food-related charities. As a  
result, Empty Bowls has raised millions of  
dollars to aid in the fight against hunger.

I bring this up not to suggest that this is  
all that functional ceramics can do, but to  
say that these types of altruistic efforts are  
aligned with the ethos of the gift. Perhaps  
social reconstructionism can offer a peda-  
gogical model that makes sense in light of  
craft's ability to balance out the rationality  
of capitalism. In my view, this model holds  
the potential to materially improve the  
world, demonstrating the direct application  
of the values of the handmade to everyday  
life. At the same time, this is not a lifestyle  
for everyone, but rather an alternative form  
of identity distinct from capitalism's ethos.  
A new pedagogy for craft education would  
address the need for social change according  
to the cultural values that functional craft  
seeks to confront.

Admittedly, this is a radical departure from  
the status quo, but it suggests the possibility  
of a new path for craft within education, at  
a time when a renewal is needed. Further, it  
suggests that rather than grumbling about  
how the world undervalues our talents,  
skills, and abilities, makers should "put our  
money where our mouths are" and pursue  
a positive and progressive educational direc-  
tion that would build greater cultural value  
into what we create.

t  
t  
s  
f  
i  
i  
s  
t  
e  
a  
i  
t  
f  
l  
t  
c  
e  
c  
t  
t  
g

ade. 4. We hear and apprehend what we already know. 5. The dog that stays