

EXHIBITION REVIEW

All makers now? Craft values in 21st century production

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Visions of twenty-first century production, at least the kind popularized by science magazines and technology blogs, promise a near future in which we, the consumer, become the makers of our own stuff. It is a future foreshadowed by the drag and drop templates of desktop publishing and the filters of photography apps, a future in which specialized design skills become routinized in domestic software. Designs for digital devices may be downloaded, customized on-screen and 3D printed at home. Furniture will no longer be shipped around the world, but cut, bent and assembled to order by computer-controlled machines located in every town. If our objects can be specified digitally, we are told, they may be shared globally and made locally, enabling networks of co-creation and novel business models to emerge. This context formed the foundation of *All Makers Now?: Craft Values in 21st Century Production*, a two day conference presenting academic research with a practitioner-based approach at Falmouth University, UK.

The promise of ‘democratized’, ‘decentralized’, or ‘personal’ production is not without precedent, stretching back at least as far as William Morris’ craft-driven socialism, and forward through Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog* of late sixties self-sufficiency. What is new, however, and what inspired *All Makers Now?*, is the ever-increasing access to computer-controlled fabrication equipment, and the digital tools necessary to design for such machines. As 3D printers, laser cutters, open-source electronics and online information sharing provide new opportunities for low-volume production, there is a burgeoning community of craft practitioners and academics claiming this as a key area for future practice. In contrast to the one-size-fits-all nature of industrial design and mass manufacture, the craftsman’s approach to creating bespoke objects is held up as a model for a more individualized world of things.

Despite the question in its title, *All Maker’s Now?* managed to avoid intractable debates over the more radical predictions for twenty-first century production. No one argued for or against an entirely homemade, 3D-printed future. We heard instead from a diverse range of practitioners exploring the potential of existing techniques – how they can be used, modified and shared with others.

There were those pushing the limits of the machines they worked with, designing their own, or modifying mainstream software to provide idiosyncratic results. Keynote speaker Fred Beyer gave an insightful history of computer-aided design and manufacture, from his perspective as a furniture maker. Beyer’s struggle with the limitations of digital design in the early 1980s, whilst now humorously ‘old-fashioned’, still resonated

with attendees. For those attempting to coax ceramic slip from a CNC syringe, programme lasers to fuse textiles, or print on glass, working experimentally at the intersection of the digital and physical world continues to reveal the resistance of materials.

As well as exploring how things can be made digitally, practitioners also demonstrated how digital technologies can be incorporated into artefacts, thereby extending their palette as craftspeople. Keynotes by Jayne Wallace and Chris Speed offered an insight into how digital devices can move beyond the realm of consumer electronics, providing more meaningful, personal links between digital networks and the physical world. In this, it is the craftspeople's response to individual needs, and their ability to foster new forms of user engagement, that has been repurposed for contemporary making.

Hosted by Falmouth University's Automatic Research Group, *All Makers Now?* also made a valuable contribution to the emergent issue of how best to support practice-based research in an academic conference setting. As with the *Research Through Design (RTD)* conference (2013, Newcastle Gateshead, UK and 2015, Cambridge, UK), the richness of practice-based research inspired a wide variety of discussion. Whilst a presenter may have planned to consider overarching research goals and achievements in a seminar session, fellow practitioners were often as interested in the minutiae of a project, the details of how exactly something was made. Both *RTD* and *All Makers Now?* managed these diverse interests by encouraging conversation across three formats – through an exhibition of artefacts; thematically grouped seminar presentations; and workshops hosted by a selection of presenters. It is a model that provides a good fit with practice-based research. Seminars took on the familiar feel of art and design school 'crit' sessions, often with an emphasis on the future direction of practitioners' work. And the *All Makers Now?* workshops proved particularly engaging – presenters had gone to great lengths to transport manufacturing equipment, setting up temporary versions of their real workshops in order to demonstrate their techniques and works-in-progress. Future conferences looking to present practice-based research might benefit from taking a similarly literal approach to the *workshop* session.

Throughout the conference, the focus on 'craft values' at *All Makers Now?* brought to mind the discussions that emerged with the advent of desktop publishing. As advances in 3D production technologies enable more people to design and make things, questions regarding criteria of quality, expertise and the distinction between professionals and amateurs will no doubt continue. Conferences like *All Makers Now?* offer an important vehicle for craftspeople to steer the development of digital manufacturing tools early on in their development, pushing the possibilities of low-volume production techniques and exploring their potential as expressive media. And for design research more generally, *All Makers Now?* showed that, where debate is structured around designed *things*, both made and in the making, the academic conference can become a valuable forum for practice-based research.

Notes on contributors

Philip Luscombe is a product and furniture designer, with a deep interest in the processes of making and their relationship to design. His current PhD research investigates the improvisatory nature of workshop practice. In the context of increasingly digitized manufacturing processes, Philip explores the contrast between understandings of production that prioritize accuracy to a predetermined form and those that rely on step-by-step adaptation. He teaches, as well as designing furniture for production.