Which craft? Politics &aesthetics of handicraft (Milan, 20-23 Jul 16)

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Which craft? Politics and aesthetics of handicraft in post-industrial contexts.

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Short Abstract

Transdisciplinary, contextual approaches looking beyond the formal dimensions of "what is craft" are needed to unravel the political economics and aesthetics that underlie the growing social demand for handicraft, a once inconsequential activity now at to the forefront of global identity politics.

Long Abstract

Social sciences have trouble grasping the widely polysemic notion of "craft". Anthropologists have often approached it through their early idea that "material culture" was a reliable depository of a cultural universe's specificities, before focusing on the reinterpretation and revival of traditional crafts. They tackle aspects of apprenticeship or the issue of authenticity and assess whether forms of social "resistance" are to be found in a realm of activities that has outgrown the ethnic-and-tourist-arts paradigm defined by Nelson Graburn.

Generally posited in contrast to industrial production, handicrafts are less clearly sited in postindustrial economies. The "past" is not necessarily a source of legitimation for design-oriented or "arts-and-crafts" practices, and tradition-rooted projects cannot always mobilize it in multicultural contexts. This or other predicaments resulting from cultural ownership disputes are addressed through identity rhetorics or legal strategies, especially when commoditization is at stake. World-

wide, a once inconsequential activity has come to the forefront of global identity politics: the current labor, technical, economic and aesthetic dynamics of crafts call for renewed ethnographies and comparative studies.

Transdisciplinary, contextual approaches must now look beyond the formal dimensions of "what is craft". Centered on when and how diverse acceptions of the notion are brought into play by all actors (including the clients, from accidental buyers to systematic collectors), keeping in mind that not all craft production has commercial purposes, they'll aim at unraveling the node of political economics and aesthetics that underlie the contemporary growing social demand for craft and associated values.

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