

The Virtual Incarnation of Crafts: Subverting Creative Destruction and the New Capitalism

Stephanie Levine, ENVS Thesis, 2012

Research Questions

1. What are the intuitive reasons that motivate crafters?
2. How, and in what ways, are crafters able to subvert the process of creative destruction and Richard Sennett's implications of the worker in the new capitalism?

Theoretical Background

Creative Destruction (CD)

- From Joseph Schumpeter's 1950 work *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*
- The driving force of capitalism is competition from market to market, not competition between producers
- Innovative markets will usurp previous markets, making them obsolete

The New Capitalism (NC)

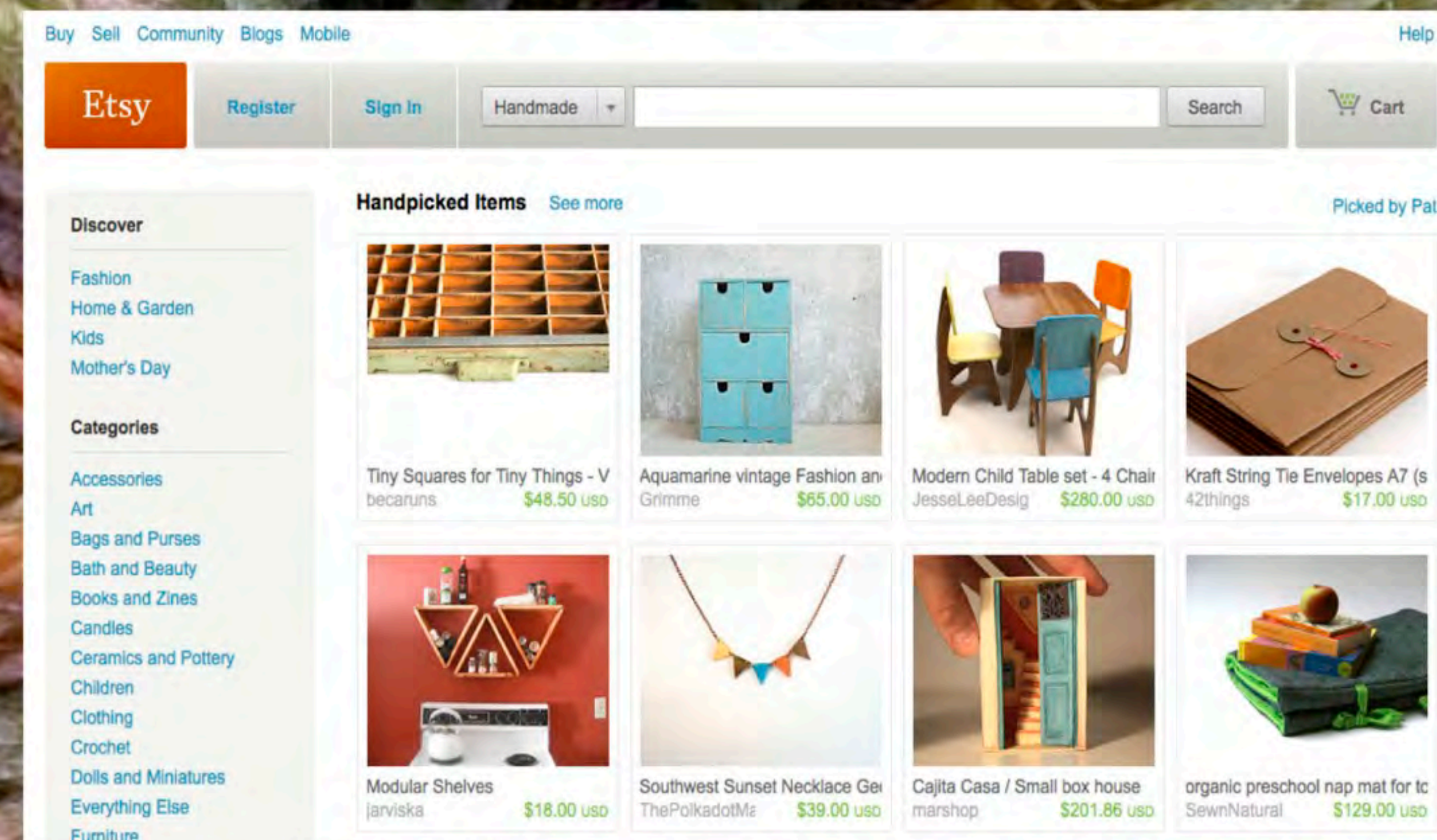
- From Richard Sennett's 1999 work *The Corrosion of Character*
- Market instability creates jobs and workers that exist only in the short term
- Workers cannot foster long-term virtues like formal obligation, commitment and purpose
- Without long-term virtues contemporary people have fractured identities and personal narratives

Arts and Crafts Ideology

- Focuses on Marx's "Estranged Labor," and values: the intention and skill of a crafter; the fusion of utility and beauty; interacting with materials

Etsy: "The World's Handmade Marketplace"

- Internet startup in 2005, by 2010 valued at \$300 million, currently has over 200 employees
- Has 12 million members and 800,000 online stores
- Site offers unique ways in which sellers and buyers interact and form communities: forums, circles, teams and treasuries
- Raises questions about the large-scale commodification of crafts: are crafters' inherent motivations still relevant on a site that exists for economic reasons?



Four Themes From Seller Profiles

The following are the four themes that I coded in my narrative analysis of Etsy seller profiles:

1. **Idealization of a handmade good:** emphasis on the uniqueness of a handmade good; idealization of manual labor; work as a source of pride
2. **Materiality and tactility:** ability to manipulate material to actualize a creative idea; tactility as a contrast to an increasingly virtual world
3. **Craft as Process:** a desire to creatively engage mind and body; idea that one can always improve their craft; crafts as relaxing and therapeutic
4. **Connecting to others:** the act of exchanging material goods; goods embodying the narrative of their creation; sense of community and camaraderie among participants

Means of Subversion

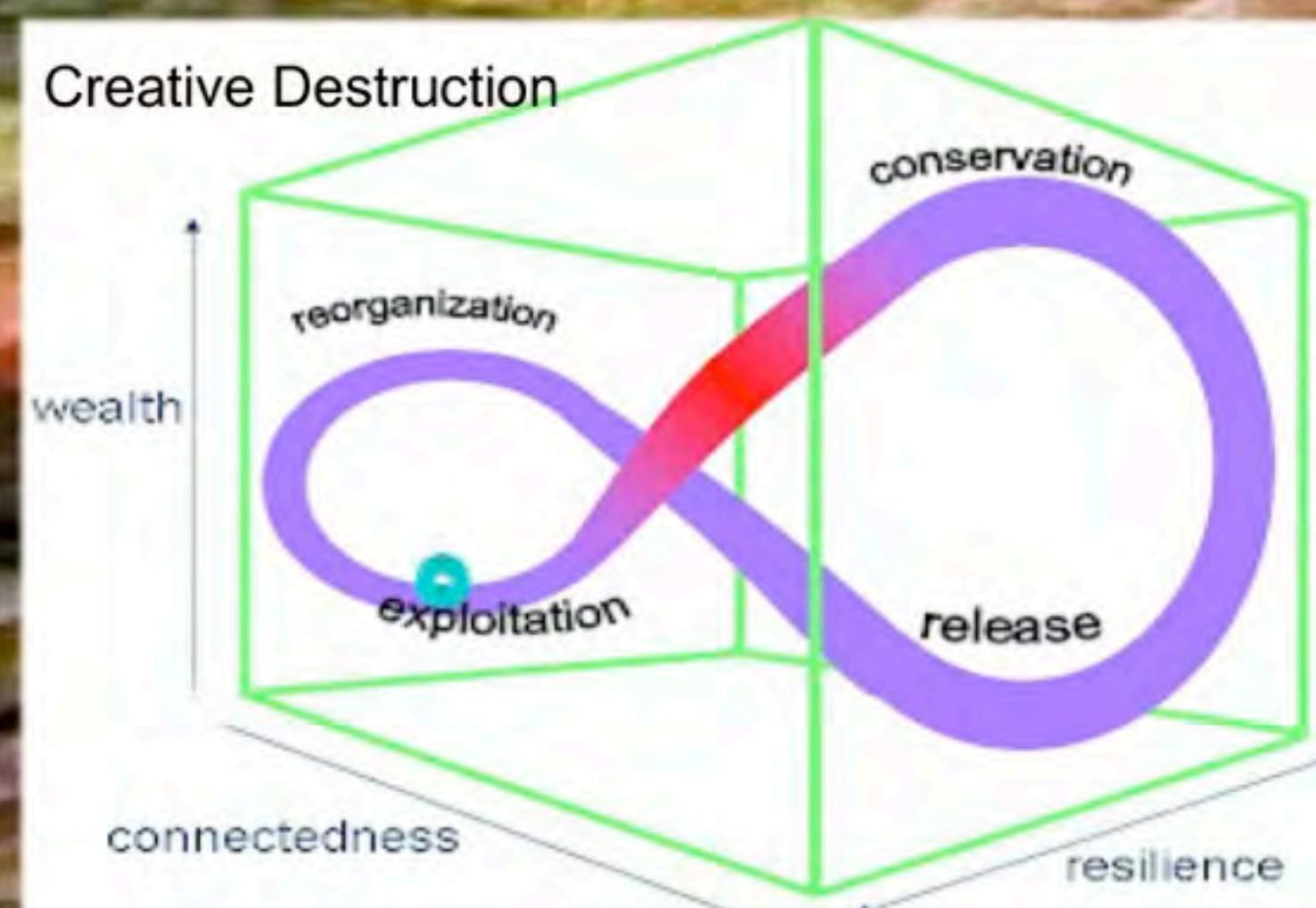
- There is joy in the labor of producing a craft, and crafts themselves become narratives of the crafting process. Thus, they exist for a reason beyond their own utility, unlike goods produced in the process of CD.
- Consequently, because of their intentionality, crafts are not subject to the immateriality and transience of goods produced via CD.
- Crafting embodies and necessitates long-term virtues: commitment to the process; purpose in creating; obligation to self in seeing a project to its end.
- The work, as a narrative, helps the crafter represent themselves materially in a virtual world, fighting the fragmentation of the contemporary identity.

Methodology

- Choose four Etsy categories that embody arts and crafts ideology and appeal to a variety of contemporary crafters. -Categories were ceramics, woodworking, quilting and knitting.
- Choose 10 Etsy stores from the "most recently updated" section for each category.
- Conduct narrative analysis of seller profile. Do a preliminary reading of each profile. On second reading, code for four preselected themes that are commonly found in crafting discourse.
- Themes were chosen based on their potential to provide insight into how crafters are able to subvert CD and the NC.

Further Reading

Bratich, Jack Z. and Heidi M. Brush. "Fabricating Activism: Craft Work, Popular Culture, Gender." *Utopian Studies* no. 22, (2011): 233-260.
Gauntlett, David. *Making Is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2011.
Lears, T. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.
Levine, Fayette. *Handmade Nation*. Film. Olympia, WA: Distributed by Buyolympia.com, 2009.



The New Domesticity As Public Space

The New Domesticity (ND): A term used to describe the contemporary resurgence in craft and handiwork.

- Unlike previous craft movements, ND is virtually situated in crafting websites and forums
- Crafting sites offer unique virtual communities because they foster virtual/material interactions and local/global connections
- ND brings crafting out of the private and domestic spheres and into the public sphere