**Time Traveling the Techno-Handmade Revolution
Sally Fort
*Commissioned by Future Everything, 2011***

We’ve been here before.

It seems ironically inevitable that advances in technology lead to a renaissance in the handmade.

The past 300 years of Western industry has seen technology and machinery entangled with handmakers in a pattern of development, fear, rejection, embracement and integration.

As innovation races along, we separate out into those who run ahead, harnessing its energy and shaping its path; those who run a little way behind the tail of its comet trying to make the most of the best we can do; those who blink bewilderedly at it’s pace, standing shell-shocked in its wake and carrying on as before; and those who were somewhere else and didn’t see the race at all, oblivious to the event, distracted by other circumstances.

In the late 18th century, textile machinery innovations were so fearsome to the existence of hand loom weavers that they protested by burning and destroying them, and battled the British Army to try and uphold their protests.

In the 19th century Marx understood that technology affects people. He saw industry force people into situations where they performed monotonous, disenfranchised tasks, working on one piece of a production line towards an end with no meaning. For him technology prised people away from a heartfelt relationship with one another and the production of things. They lost the opportunity to control the creation of an object from start to finish and with that became alienated from the achievement and ownership of their own destiny.

Widely conceived in the Western craft world as a god of the handmade revolution, William Morris transformed Marx’s train of thought into craft and design terms near the end of the 19th century with his theories of the value of the handmade. His story advocates personal involvement of every stage of production from design, to dyes, to print (in his case) though he begins to appreciate the positive values of technology amidst the fear,

“‘I would do some things with machinery which are now done by hand, and other things by hand which are now done by machinery; in short, we would be the masters of our machines and not their slaves, as we are now.”(Art and Its Producers, 1881)

In 1915 he established the Design and Industry Association which aimed to ‘restore joy in labour’ by restructuring the relationship between craft and machine, in order to influence manufacturing processes, and find ways to create financially viable handmade production as an antidote to ‘cottage industry’ handmade work which came at a price that excluded many from buying it.

Skipping forwards, in 1974 the book Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance revisits these themes and suggests that the relationship between art and technology, can be addressed first and foremost on an individual level; that the gap is bridged not by changes to ‘the system’ but by people, one at a time, for themselves. It’s an interesting exercise in how people and technology can be enveloped in a harmonious relationship; how tools, parts, maintenance and production can improve the quality of our existence and conversely how as individuals we can improve the quality of our technology.

In writing the book, Robert M. Pirsig gives glimpses into the current environment of our handmade nation,

“Actually, a root word of technology, techne, originally meant “art”. The ancient Greeks never separated art from manufacture in their minds, and so never developed separate words for them… The real ugliness of modern technology lies in the relationship between the people who produce the technology and the things they produce, which results in a similar relationship between the people who use the technology and the things they use. The creator of it feels no particular sense of identity with it. The owner feels no particular sense of identity with it. The user feels no particular sense of identity with it… You’d be amazed at how you can modify parts designs so that you can make them with your equipment, and the work isn’t nearly as slow or frustrating as a wait for some smirking man to send away to the factory. …To run a cycle with parts in it you’ve made yourself gives you a special feeling you can’t possibly get from strictly-store bought parts… The specs, the measuring instruments, the quality control, the final check-out, these are all means towards the end of satisfying the peace of mind of those responsible for the work. What really counts in the end is their peace of mind, nothing else. …The way to see what looks good and understand the reasons it looks good as the work proceeds, is to cultivate an inner quietness, a peace of mind so that goodness can shine through”

(Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, 1974)

In the present we have experienced another technological revolution where digital culture shapes the way we hold knowledge and production in our hands. Much of a history of craft can be seen in the lines above, the personal drive to make, to control our destiny and feel more harmonious in an alienating world; where we choose to navigate a commercialised planet in ways we feel can make the world and each other’s lives better rather than worse. We now use digital technology as a tool, a process, an output, a source of inspiration and a place to be part of our communities. Yet simultaneously we turn against it as John Naisbitt explored in his ‘High tech, High Touch’ work which suggests that the more people are physically in touch with technology, the more they need to step away from it to something more small scale and personal,

“the more we toil on computers using our brains not our bodies, the more high touch and sensual our leisure activities become”(High tech, High Touch, 2001)

The love hate relationship is now played out over and over by makers, hackers, crafters and designers across the country. Reliance on technology can lead to simultaneously infuriating and productive consequences, as online crafts woman [Kirsty New](http://lovepaperfish.com/), who used [Etsy](http://www.etsy.com) to build her now thriving home-run maker/ supplier business explains,

“When the PC breaks down and that means I cannot work online, upload photography, get into my online bank accounts, order stock…. when I stop to breath and look around me, I have my felt and my buttons and my threads and I am still working, calmly, productively, tangibly. Technology has a huge and fascinating influence on my art and craft but it is more inspiring when that reliance on technology is taken from underneath me at a moment’s notice.”

Surface pattern designer [Lu Summers](http://blu-shed.blogspot.com/) adds,

“Technology to me is second to how I create; I draw and print by hand. I could quite happily never use a piece of technology in the making of any of my work. BUT technology has helped me in so many ways: the internet has given me the ability to make a living out of doing what I love whilst looking after my family. I used to send my drawings through the post to have my screens made for printing, now I pay online, email the designs and save on 3 or 4 days waiting. If I want to have a get my head down and on with some work, there’s always the off button!

Leisure crafter Alison Bond McNally tells how, “through the internet, technology has improved my creativity – it challenges me to try new things, inspires me to be more active in my own creations and offers me support.  It offers some remote companionship, although no replacement for real life relationships, more than anything it helps me feel less isolated – I can be part of something global and beautiful in the comfort of my own room.”

Ceramicist [Lisa Stevens](http://www.etsy.com/shop/seaurchin) talks about her relationship with technology,
“My kiln has a digital controller, and I wouldn’t be without it….it’s so hit and miss messing around with cones and having to come back to the kiln every hour or so to adjust the temperature. I program the kiln and it ramps up the temperature, soaks it on top temperature if I want it to and then switches the kiln off. I don’t have to do anything…..it even tells me what the inside temperature is when it’s cooling, so I know if I’m likely to burn my fingers”

Artist [Nikki Pugh](http://npugh.co.uk/) adds,
“Through the use of tools such as the Arduino platform I am able to build devices to augment people’s relationships to their surroundings. I have relatively easy access to the hardware needed to build objects such as sonar goggles and the extensive internet community and documentation provides me with the skills I also need to do this. As my knowledge and experience increase, I am starting to build, from scratch, devices that I would previously have bought off the shelf. I’ve always been a maker and technology has always been there as a tool to be used. To use digital technologies as a material to build with (rather than as a communication medium) is a natural process.”

For now, in some circles, it seems the harmony between technology and making is restored. Until the next technological breakthrough, and when that happens, should we be surprised if the outcome is fear, and integration, and a new resurgence in the handmade?

[**Sally Fort,**](http://futureeverything.org/conference-3/sally-fort/)**a craft & design curator, cultural participation and learning consultant is one of the speakers in this years**[**“Post Craft”**](http://futureeverything.org/conference-3/post-craft/)**session at the FutureEveything conference.**