Arts and Crafts and Money

by Christopher R. Graham

When “small batch” equals big dollars and one-person companies are supported by corporate-size websites, is “hand-made” what we think it is? A report from North America’s largest consumer craft fair, where the competition for puppet dollars is intense.

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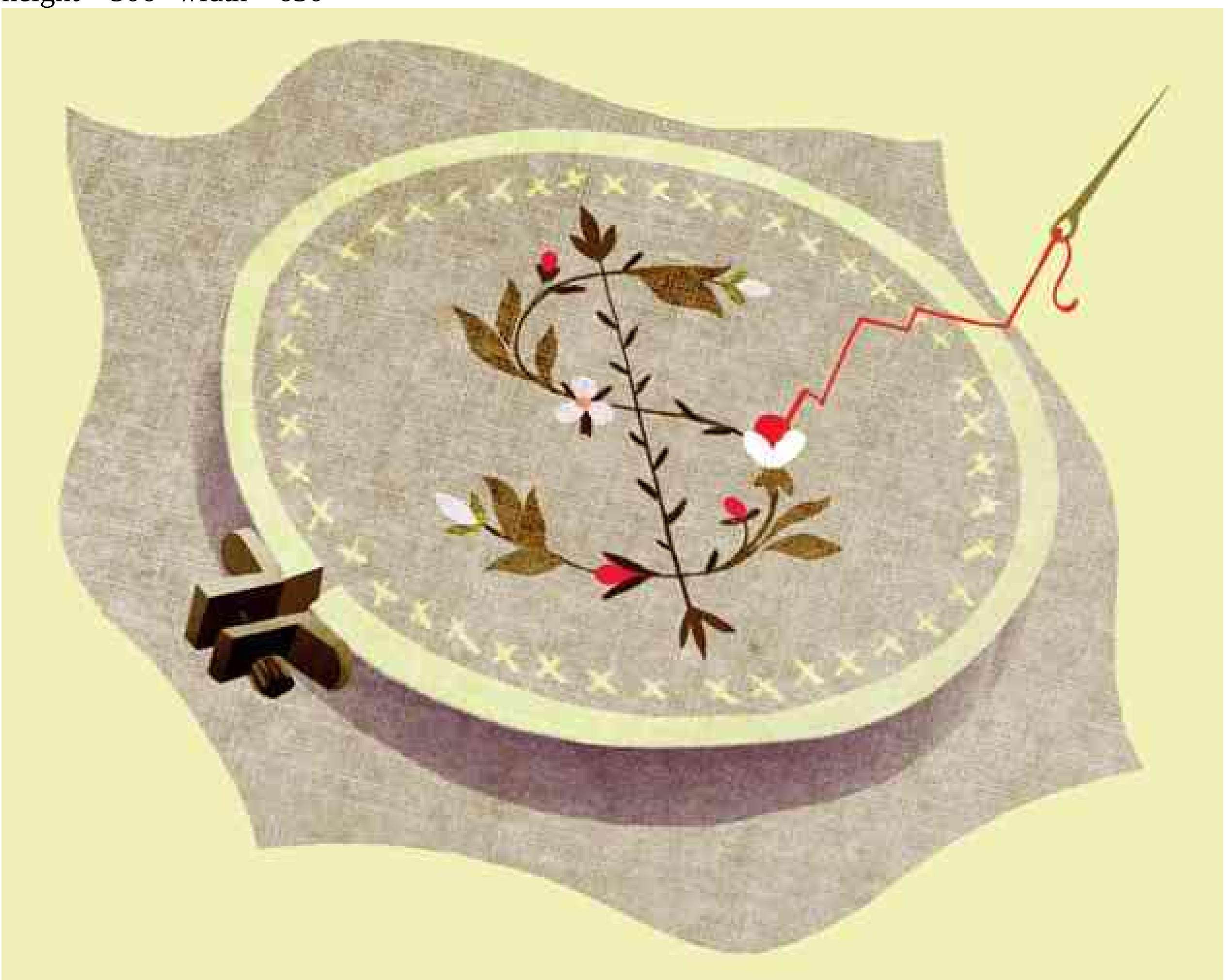

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I ate dinner recently at a pop-up restaurant. It’s the latest thing for urban foodies, at least in Toronto, where I live: Individual chefs doing small, high-concept dinners in fly-by-night venues. People at the dinner were young and chic and talked about websites like Pinterest and Etsy. Interest in all things local and small batch was intense: clothes, home décor, jewelry, desserts. My impression was that everyone who’s anyone makes a life from this, or strives to. All things artisanal have become the default preference, unambiguously good and worthwhile and “with it,” supportive of creative people and communities, the best of all possible worlds.

Does any of the following sound familiar? The interpretable gist of a dozen people talking at once: “There’s a guy in my neighborhood who does tremendous book rebinding.” “My grandmother knitted

this sweater for my grandfather." "I only eat Ontario tomatoes." "I like being able to have a conversation with somebody who cares as much about coffee as I do. Who cares that I like good coffee [full stop]." Being a bit of a slow thinker, I spent the dinner mostly listening, but admittedly I liked what I was hearing. My neighborhood in Toronto is determinedly un-franchised, small business, a summertime surfeit of farmers' markets and outdoor craft stalls. Bikes can seem to outnumber cars, the best bars are the worst preserved. The neighborhood's more shabby than chic, and that's why I moved here.

It's also why suburbanites arrive by the SUV-load on weekends, new coffee shops are designed to look vintage, and jeans so tight they squeak end up costing a week's pay. Something for everyone, maybe, depending on where your interest lies, but unanimous enthusiasm always makes me nervous, and some post-prandial web searching didn't help this feeling.

The clearest indicator of ur-commercial preference is probably handicrafts, which preference turns out to be *serious*. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, in 2011, the worldwide market for handmade sewing, woodwork, jewelry, and the like was roughly $30 billion. The largest growth is happening online: Sales of $1.4 billion in 2011 are expected to reach $2.2 billion in 2016. The website Etsy.com is the biggest online player, accounting for nearly half of 2011's revenue. Consumers want "a sense of authenticity and buying from people who they know," Etsy CEO Chad Dickerson told the *Journal*, all but channelling the guests at my boutique dinner.

There's something incongruous and strange about large-scale interest in stuff that's ostensibly small-ish and personal, literally handmade. Not quite the irony of mass-market expressions of self, but something like it, maybe, lurking and dissonant. But it's hard to figure just what when you're sitting at a restaurant table set for 12, even harder when you're online and alone. It so happens that during the winter I attended the One of a Kind Christmas Show and Sale, North America's largest consumer craft fair, perhaps the clearest example of contemporary interest in handicrafts. It's certainly the most tangible: Featuring 800 booths erumpent with creativity and charm, the show is both corporate and non-, providing a unique vantage from which to view what might be called the "new commercial life."

The show is staged at Canada's largest exhibition space, the Direct Energy Centre, which occupies a vast sweep of Toronto's waterfront. (It's basically an international airport terminal. Other events held there include the Canadian National Exhibition and the Royal Agricultural Fair.) Held annually since 1975, the show began with just 80 participants, artisans all, looking for a place to vend their work at Christmastime. The event was a hit—interest from vendors and patrons grew apace. There are now subsidiary shows in Vancouver and Chicago, and a smaller spring show in Toronto, held at the end of March.

This year's show was the largest ever: The aforementioned 800 booths are laid out in 48 rows on a showroom floor that's 233,433 square feet, the size of four NFL football fields. The aisles are carpeted, and most of the light comes from pro-caliber spots affixed to the poles that delimit each booth's 3-D space. Imagine the world's largest living room but everything's for sale. The ceiling is corrugated beige, arcing gently 60 feet up, possibly the underside of yet another vast, terrestrial world.

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The venue's size and sophistication are a good indication of just how successful and popular the show's become; also, how serious and corporate, a kind of life-scale model of the handicraft phenomenon. Some back-of-the-notebook calculations make the point in a different way. The show's estimated

attendance is 140,000. With an entry fee of $14 (Canadian) per person, that's just under C$2 million over 11 days of craft fair action. Booth rental ranges from C$2,000 to more than C$6,000, so assuming an average rent of $3,000, that's $2.4 million in rental revenue. Together with the gate that's $4.4 million, plus who knows how much the show's sponsors pay. (The sponsors' thematic link to the show is also dubious: various Canadian print media, the national Pizza Pizza chain, and Porter Airlines.)

The obvious expenses are facility rental, local advertising, and staff, none of which are knowable to yours truly but what *is* knowable is that the show's negotiating team has considerable bench strength, as it were, because it turns out the show is part of a larger corporate entity called MMPI Canada, a national trade show production concern; that MMPI Canada is itself a division of Merchandise Mart Properties Inc., a Chicago-based corporation that does the same thing as MMPI Canada but is a world leader thereat; and the Chicago-based corp is *itself* a division of Vornado Realty Trust, a colossal real estate investment trust that owns and manages commercial real estate primarily in the United States, market capitalization roughly $16 billion as of this writing.

It's probably impossible to understate the contrast between the corporate edifice behind the scenes and the show's vendors, which are all, basically, small business owners. The rules for entry require artisans be involved in creating whatever's for sale at their booth, which must be produced in Canada or the United States. Applications require step-by-step explanation of production, including any and all use of assistants. Division of labor is kept to a minimum.

An example of the foregoing is my favorite booth at the show. Fancy Pants Kids sells medieval costumes for children, including vinyl suits of armor, crowns, and colorful dragon tails. It's pretty much irresistible. The owner is a pleasant, earnest lady who wears one of her own red dragon tails, strapped over her shoulders like a rucksack, and a matching crown. In total reclamation of the phrase *dragon lady*, the FPK proprietress smiles at everyone who passes by, and answers questions, and helps people try on the tails, and is generally warm and friendly, and so too appear the people walking away from her booth.

So here is a question that's literally all over the showroom and, pretty clearly, wherever else small scales start to loom large; I wish I'd thought of this back at dinner, for the people who thought a website like Etsy cultivates commercial intimacy: Both Fancy Pants Kids and Vornado Realty Trust are looking to make a profit from the show—and all else being equal, both will be happier the more profit they make. So what's the difference between the two businesses? More specifically, is the difference qualitative or just quantitative? Is there a point at which a quantitative difference just *becomes* qualitative, like the light at day's end fading gradually into night? Because a quantitative difference doesn't make me feel so good about my FPK experience—more like I've been had, that I'm maybe missing something. The relevant notebook entry now seems prescient and weirdly apt: "…the vertical gulf between the booths' lights and the DEC's ceiling—a vast hanging nothingness, weightless but somehow looming—is starting to make me dizzy."

The show bills itself as "a Canadian shopping tradition for those in search of the unique, handcrafted and the fantastic," which yours truly thinks is a very apt description indeed. Trolling the showroom from east to west, taking observations basically at random: There's a booth selling fresh bread covers, i.e. loaf-shaped fabric sleeves in which to store your homemade bread. A demo loaf's been bagged for two days and really does smell fresh. There's an entire booth of woollen socks from somewhere in Quebec. Bug-themed metal work, Vintage Neckties Made Awesome. My program lists 16 milliners, plus a lot of booths selling clothes also sell hats. Jewelry booths are also plentiful, and there's a booth selling wood-framed harps, some of which are floor-sized.

Participation in the show is juried, meaning applications are considered for quality, uniqueness,

saleability, and overall balance of merchandise; nevertheless, artisans do face competition out on the floor. There's a booth selling hand-lathed salt and pepper mills; another whose pepper mills look like old tree branches; and a third whose mills are styled like little men in penguin coats. The first of these is on a corner, which means they need to sell over $6,000 worth of hand-lathed mills just to break even on the rental.

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I'm not sure quite how to convey this, but the caliber of stuff for sale at the show is high. Nothing's knick-knacky or kitsch, mass-produced or cheap looking, which speaks to both the quality of the workmanship and to how this is *not* what's expected at large-ish chain stores or the average shopping mall. This is also, more generally, a big reason people like stuff that's artisanal: It's perceived as better made and (*sic*) more unique.

In fact, this turns out to be the show's big marketing pull, that its vendors aren't readily accessible elsewhere. Every vendor has to sign an exclusivity agreement that prohibits participation in other shows within a 50 km radius for 30 days before and after—which at first seems shady and co-optative but on reflection is sort of difficult to parse.

On the one hand, the pitch is classic corporate doublespeak, the proverbial offer that can't be refused: "We heavily market and promote the fact that the artisans and products found at The One of a Kind Show are unique and cannot be found everywhere…. Therefore, we embrace artisans who understand and believe in our philosophy." On the other hand, the show's 800 artisans are free to find the best available deal, and over time have migrated here.

On the (further) other hand, though, what about other, smaller craft fairs, which *ipso facto* have greater difficulty attracting high-quality exhibitors and patrons? If the vendor agreement facilitates what individual artisans prefer anyway—solves a collective action problem—does that make each of the show's artisans at least complicit in the same basically anti-competitive behavior of which corporations like Microsoft and Clear Channel Communications are routinely accused? Or is this way of thinking ridiculous in light of craft fairs and vendors—Fancy Pants Kids—being just so… small?

Halfway through my afternoon at the show, I break down at the food court and buy a "gourmet coffee," poured out of a diner-ish glass carafe with plastic spout for $2.50. Cappuccino is an eye-popping $4.75, a thimble of espresso $3.75. *Food court* is my own descriptor for the curtained area off the showroom's north side. There's no carpet, and the stalls all look exceedingly temporary, a trailer park of franchised food: crepes, sushi, pizza, deli sandwiches, Asian stir fry, pasta bar, shawarma and falafel. Prices are uniformly extortionate, plus tax, as if the people going to eat are actually what's being served for lunch.

The food court's definitely the show's most irksome, suburban shopping mall-type feature. The atmosphere's loud, un-pretty, and harshly lit, the chairs plastic lawn furniture style, most of the tables having at least one sugar packet or folded napkin wedged under a wobbly leg. Mobile phone use was rampant. People were looking to vacate the food court ASAP, which commercially speaking is a double bonus: Faster turnover means fewer tables can serve more people, and people who spend less time eating spend more time back on the floor, shopping. Another way to describe the food court's

atmosphere is “high efficiency,” which, for the first time during my visit, occasioned certain familiar feelings of loneliness, resentment, and despair.

It’s maybe obvious that the thought of even low-level corporate activity fills me with dread, a self-righteousness that’s also bereft and kind of sad. *I told you so but wish I hadn’t*. The reason’s simple and banal but also deeply significant: I can’t tell whether anyone helping me is being genuinely nice and helpful, which undermines or impugns the good feelings their kindness otherwise engenders. So many interactions are commercially mediated that the dissonance becomes just background noise, ambient and always, and eventually only noticeable when the entity’s literally faceless, only technically a person. (This noise is inaudible at pop-up shops or restaurants, patent and gross at Wal-Mart and McDonald’s, and online you can’t tell Etsy’s got more than 200 employees.) Plus the realization’s awful, implying that we’re all inevitably and profoundly fungible. An existential non-starter.

Hence my latent unease back at Fancy Pants Kids, and after the food court it’s clear the show’s practically squealing with psychic angst. The visible scales of commerce make any corporate/non-corporate dichotomy obviously false, at least in terms of my personal shopping experience. Discrete categories are easier to wield than a spectrum or range, but there’s also a language trick: Almost all business is “corporate” in the unloaded, non-legal, adjectival sense. My intuitive preference for the artisanal turns out to be aesthetic and deeply naïve—it seems to me the modifier in “small business” stands for something like “too small to see the things that cause loneliness, resentment and despair.” It so happens I’ve recently read a short story by Kafka, *The Businessman*, which makes the point exquisitely: The *businessman* laments, “My money is in the hands of strangers.”

In lieu of more booth detail, let’s skip right to the end of aisle H, where I discovered the show’s Hall of Fame. On a black curtain hang painted gold stars and framed pictures of inductees. Underneath each star, a printed caption explains why the artisan loves his or her work: e.g., “Lorraine Chien, Artist: I can never really explain the love I feel for what I do. I don’t make bears for a living, but live to make bears.” A large placard explains the Hall of Fame “honours the quality, craftsmanship and outstanding achievements of our talented exhibitors.” This year’s inductee, Kevin Gray (“Glass Artist”), has been coming to the show since 1981.

Filtered of sentiment, what’s common to all the Hall of Fame captions—in fact, to all 800 artisans—is the specialness of the work described. Many of the captions begin with phrases like “I *transform* silver and gold…” or “I *create* fabrics…,” which simply reiterates that what’s available at the show is the result of *this person’s* thought and planning and effort and care.

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Herein lies the most compelling feature of the show and its small-batch brethren. Farm markets, pop-up shops, innumerable craft fairs, and websites all trade on the chance to support this kind of personal productive effort, like the manifestation of another human’s consciousness. I’m not sure how to say it in a less uptown way; it’s definitely Marxist, though, this emphasis on manifesting consciousness through physical production. *I did this. Made by me for you*. Notice how this is different from the prenominate desire to get things that few others can. The vision here is of work as self-identity —”…I *live* to make bears”—which makes the show’s commercial interactions about sustaining people in a way that other, “I’m just in this for the pay/dividend check”-type interactions are not.

At this point my personal morale registers a noticeable uptick, but it’s illusory and short-lived because so much of what’s involved at the show is decidedly un-crafty: the metal used by jewelers, potters’ kilns, the glass blower’s furnace and dollop of pre-blown glass. Plus the artisans probably all have cars,

and use these to transport equipment and materials and ultimately salable goods, and their booth's lights and display materials are definitely not artisanal, nor by any stretch of the imagination is the DEC itself. Not to mention just about everyone has a MacBook. All of which makes the food court's point in a different sort of way: If artisanal work is a silver bullet against commercially induced malaise, then the rehabilitative outlook's not only technologically bleak but almost entirely decorative and hugely expensive. You don't want to know the cost of a portable puppet theater, and websites that specialise in crafts are even more weirdly incongruous—the *internet* helps artisans *sell more* to *more markets*. The phrase "creative destruction" takes on a whole new meaning. Joseph Schumpeter's in his grave doing cartwheels.

In fact, all the craft-as-lifework theory really explains is why everyone at the show's so polite and pleasant-seeming. Notwithstanding the endless things to pick up and touch—toys to manipulate and try, pepper mills to heft, jewelry to finger—no one seems to be doing that, or at least not with the cavalier abandon people in malls or regular stores seem to handle the merchandise. I'm thinking of being in someone's home—their living room—where it would be obscene to randomly touch things, to start treating someone else's stuff like it's mine. What's missing from the show is any pretense of vendors as courtiers to customer royalty. Aside from in the food court, nobody here's at anybody else's service, which realization strikes me as both redemptive and kind of sad.

The afternoon's only interview was with a woman I met outside the showroom, on dinner break. It turns out she'd been coming for 18 years, helping her friend with his booth selling handmade chocolate, which she loves. Both the work and the chocolate. Apparently the show's lucrative for vendors; at least, it is for her friend, who makes about half his book here every year. (She didn't actually say "book.") On the weekends the show is mobbed, she says, absolutely jam-packed, but you can't believe how calm it is. People form multiple queues without being asked, and everyone falls all over themselves trying to let the person in the other queue go first. It's really something to see.

I headed for home and the food booth lady returned to the show with a carriage and stride that can only be described as jaunty. Everything she said sounded… entirely reasonable, which at first seems like a lightweight or useless kind of reaction. Like saying a book you've just read or a person you've had a conversation with was "interesting." Mentally just shrugging. But then I was cycling home and high up in the emergent western sky appeared a billboard for a company called Inglis Home Appliances. The LED display flashed steadily through the slogan's three parts, too long to fit all at once: "Courage and initiative come when you know your purpose in life."

I laughed out loud, and still think this is the perfect right bracket to the entire afternoon. The slogan is marvelous in its awfulness, its absurd hyperbole. Compared to what the food booth lady said, the slogan seems entirely *unreasonable*, or maybe more like *implausible*. The notion that fundamentally personal characteristics like "courage" and "initiative" have any meaningful relation to a company that manufactures refrigerators and washing machines is wildly implausible. Fantastic even, an abuse of language, but even more striking was how easily I could see the sign and *just know* what to think, how to feel, which aspersions to cast; how everything could be so terribly straightforward. And for the first time that day, I felt neither cynicism nor dread. The comfort of uncertainty, perhaps.

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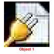

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