

Amy Twigger Holroyd on collaborating and 'unventing' in the contemporary crafts world

Why it's important to be open

Ooh, you should patent it! If I'd invented that, I'd keep it to myself...

I've become used to hearing such comments – from makers, students and curious observers – each time I demonstrate the distinctive techniques I use in my work. For example, there are the methods of seamless machine knitting which I initially devised during my MA over a decade ago, and have used in my knitwear ever since. A more recent development is the technique I call 'stitch-hacking': a means of retrospectively reconfiguring stitches within an existing piece of knitting.

I sense an implication within these comments that I should create a shroud of mystery around my making processes, revealing only finished artefacts to the world. However, this willingness to share is not a naïve mistake on my part, but a conscious choice to embrace openness – and particularly openness to amateur makers – within my craft practice.

This interest in openness has emerged as my work has evolved. I started off in classic designer-maker mode, creating collections of knitwear for sale to individuals, galleries and boutiques. Later, I started to sell patterns and run workshops at my studio, including an ever-popular option to knit my 'signature' cardigan in a single weekend. My recent doctoral research – which explored amateur making as a strategy for sustainable fashion – took my open agenda to a new level, as I aimed to support amateurs in designing for themselves.

The surprise which people express at my willingness to share is, I think, based on an assumption that it will harm my livelihood and status as a professional maker, and that people will copy my ideas, techniques and designs without giving me any credit. Of course, this is a danger, but in my experience the people that can do the most damage – high street companies – will copy simply using images of the finished article, which I can hardly hide away if I wish to promote my work.

In fact, sharing has a positive impact on my practice, partly because the workshops I run are an important source of income. Furthermore, I've found that sharing my techniques actually enhances the credit I get for what I make. The processes I use are aesthetically understated, and their significance can

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easily be missed. When I demonstrate the techniques, people start to understand them, but it's only when I hand over the tools and let them have a go for themselves that the penny really drops.

However, my interest in openness goes beyond a strategy to gain more business or respect, and relates to a more fundamental conviction. For me, craft is integrally associated with openness, collaboration and sharing, and I feel strongly that we should actively work to maintain these associations.

While I've put a great deal of effort into developing the techniques I use, I bristle at the thought of saying I invented them. I much prefer knitting advocate the late Elizabeth Zimmermann's term 'unvent', which recognises that anything one knitter devises might also have been developed by others. Knitting has a rich history of shared designs, individual adaptation and communal evolution. If the knitters of the past had kept their methods hidden away, knitting would surely not be the varied and vibrant craft it is today. To lay claim to a technique would feel like a snub to these fellow makers – and I'd hate to be the one to break the chain of openly shared knowledge.

While this might all seem rather romantic and backwards-looking, my commitment to openness is primarily about the future. Openness is a growing movement, which is

challenging conventional systems and hierarchies in many fields of life.

This movement is integrally linked to sustainability, presenting a genuine alternative to the 'closed' systems which created the environmental and social problems we face.

Amateur making is a potent strategy for sustainability. It gives people the skills to create and repair their possessions, connecting them to the world and to each other. To increase engagement with making, we need to spread knowledge, ideas and inspiration. My current work involves developing techniques for re-knitting existing items of knitwear, and tools for designing these interventions. Far from wanting to keep the re-knitting techniques for myself, I'd love to see them being adopted, adapted and appropriated by others, travelling far beyond my control.

I've found an exciting role for myself within the open culture of amateur making: facilitating, encouraging and inspiring action by others. I now see everything I do – whether making garments, techniques or ideas, working individually or collaboratively – as part of one, incredibly satisfying, open craft practice.

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14GB, Amy Twigger Holroyd, found vest, stitch-hacked, 2012