

Review of Salon London Future Victorians Event August 2012

By Tej Adeleye

Times are a changin'

[The second night of Salon London's Future Victorian talks](#) began with speaker [Ben Hammersley](#) descending the staircase to Michael Jackson's *Ben*, a cooey ballad about a boy and his beloved rat. But perhaps in Hammersley's world, boys wouldn't have real rats- for what function could they serve in the great march of humanity's progress? No no, we might instead have robotic pets, or weird hologram rats, cats and dogs- far better testaments to human innovation. They'd be highly convenient- as they wouldn't require feeding, which is just as well because as we humans evolve evermore into cyborgs, our memories and emotional capabilities are rapidly dwindling. We probably wouldn't remember to feed the rat, or give it any affection (unless we could send it endless streams of tweeted affirmation, limited to 140 characters of course).

Hammersley is a genius- his talk was witty, humourous and entertaining. Reflecting on the speed of changes to technology- he acknowledged that the human race was facing unknown territory as technological advances are dictating so much of our lives. But his talk fell short in his focus on how the future, and our future selves would be shaped more by technology than human endeavour. Our relevance to our own futures pales in comparison to our own inventions. His messages for the future? The times, they are, and will keep on a changin' according to science and technology alone, "artificial intelligence is replacing you, I hope you can sleep well tonight", oh and the "computers are going to kill us" were his messages of hope. And as there is apparently nothing we can do to stop this, we might as well embrace our new found cyborg state.

The future is yours if you choose to claim it

This made the messages that came from the next two speakers all the more crucial and urgent. [JP Flintoff](#) was next, where he built on the ideas he explores in his book *How To Change The World*. Flintoff focused on psychology, the power of the mind and the endless possibilities that lie at our feet when we not only make the right choices, but acknowledge that we have power because we have the free will to choose, and to act. It's embracing the knowledge that each act and each choice contributes to history and affects not only our own worlds, but also the world around us.

This means each and every one of us has the power to change the world. Rather than allowing ourselves to be victims of circumstance, or bystanders as technology changes our world, we can change it too. Flintoff offer examples from history of people who had made momentous choices- Rosa Parks, [the White Rose collective](#). But changing the world needn't be about huge, sweeping changes. After becoming "freaked out about climate change", he joined every campaigning, lobbyist and political group under the sun, before he decided that the little changes he could make in his own life would also make a difference. So he changed his buying habits, moved from being a consumer to being a creator: he even started making his own clothes, growing his own food, and adopted a quiet form of activism

- speaking to his neighbours (people still do this?) to encourage them to change their lifestyles too.

Flintoff's message? The future is yours if you choose to claim it.

Craftivism is as grassroots as you can get

The final speaker, Sarah Corbett, founder of the [Craftivist Collective](#), continued the creative theme with her talk too. There to speak about the power of arts, craft and [craftivism](#), what lay at the heart of her message was the power of human creativity, expression and endeavour to move people and harness change.

“Craftivism is slow activism”, Corbett declared. In a world of instant gratification, instant updates Twitter and Facebook - the idea of any slow activity could seem a little anti progressive. But as a “burnt out” activist, Corbett was tired of having to fill quotas with lots of people signing petitions and only being connected to a cause for five minutes before going back to their lives; or going on demonstrations to demonise politicians with lots of loud angry folk. How could a creative introvert like her make a lasting difference to the issues of injustice that pre-occupied her thoughts continuously?

The answer lay for her in Craftivism- using her passion for craft (stitching, knitting, sewing) to communicate and campaign.

Craftivism is powerful because it's pure, unadulterated people power. It's as grassroots as you can get- with little groups all of the country sitting down, engaging with issues, bonding through creativity and communicating with power with a refreshing human approach. Rather than pelting paint at a politician, Corbett would sooner speak to them, hand them a hanky with a hand-stitched message and plead with them not to “blow” (geddit??) their opportunity to change the world. It's the element of surprise, simplicity, the care and attention to detail invested in each piece that really move people to take real notice.

Corbett pointed to the case of Chilean widows who'd created tapestries in order to mourn for families lost to Pinochet's regime. These tapestries were then used in court cases against the regime by Amnesty International. Craftivism then is global, and as old as time- for millennia all of the world people have been using arts and crafts of all kinds to express themselves.

Craftivism encourages reflection- not just in the groups who sit down to create campaigning material, but in viewers who are forced to stop and think for longer than five minutes about what they are seeing, what it means to them, what they think and how they feel about it. It's not only a creative form of communication and protest, but one that encourages creative engagement from all who encounter it. It's this deep engagement which makes it more meaningful than any number of likes, shares or retweets ever could- especially as it doubles as art that Craftivists often leave in public spaces to share and spread positivity. As Corbett says, that connectivity is great for society, and great for our souls (we still have 'em Hammersley!). As we stitch and make we are also engaged in an inner monologue with ourselves, spending time introspectively reflecting too- so effective is this that it is used in prisons for enterprise and rehabilitation.

The best moment of the night came when Corbett invited all the guests to do some craft by stitching their own signatures into bits of cloth, “this will be your permanent imprint- something that you will take home with you, and hopefully put on your fridge to remind you about tonight. Think about the future of you, and how you can be a part of changing the world in a positive way, and also making time to reflect on your own lives and creativity- and hopefully turn into a Craftivist!”

It was pretty surreal, watching a crowd of strangers cross-stitching in the dark basement of what used to be a Victorian Pleasure Garden- but what I was seeing wasn't hedonism, but people bonding over creativity, checking each over others stitches, talking, beaming with pride at their creations. Best moment? Watching Mr Hammersley put his phone away, let go of his inner cyborg, brows furrowed, tongue clenched between his teeth as he focused on getting each stitch just so. He later tweeted “Really good talk from @Craftivists after me at tonight's [@SalonLondon](#) - has me doing embroidery on the tube home. Wonderful new meditation”, and that my friends, is the very human, power of craft and human creativity.