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Soft and Sustainable Studio Work: Recycling Media, Representing Ecology, and Re-envisioning Craft with the International Fiber Collaborative

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Joining the International Fiber Collaborative

Much of the art that I create has uncertain archival potential. I work with recycled and ephemeral materials, and often it is the idea or theme and not the material that matters most. In contrast, particular teaching moments and memories remain with me as an educator. For example, while I was in graduate school, a mentor warned against "putting all my eggs in one basket." This phrase and predicament seemed personally and professionally poignant in terms of sustaining myself in my field. There are myriad considerations (or containers) for an art educator. How much time should go into curriculum building versus one's own work, what topics are most relevant to pursue in research and teaching, and which theories and approaches will be of most value to one's field? Responding to these and more personal considerations of social and family commitments, I began to weave hundreds of tiny baskets from colorful recycled telephone wire and filled them with collections of tiny beads and ceramic forms (Figure 1). Crafting this web of baskets was a sort of reflection of my attempts to make a meaningful constellation out of so many possibilities in art education, and to keep several interests in mind and in hand. Rather than accept art and craft making as a small part of the already crowded life of an art educator, I sought ways to integrate my making, teaching, and writing.

Working as a teacher educator, I continued to look for models and approaches to teaching art that address many contexts and considerations. I found a blend of craft, activism, community, and ecology within the International Fiber Collaborative (IFC). Sometimes the most atemporal, ephemeral, and discursive artistic projects (like the IFC or my baskets) can serve as connective constants in the changing landscapes of our lives.

The IFC is a global craft initiative with members creating collaborative, large-scale, public projects. The IFC projects include wrapping a gas station, large tree, and NASA rocket in giant fiber cozies contributed by artists and makers around the world. Like many artists and art educators, I have continuously contributed to the IFC projects over the past 6 years. My participation as a contributing artist have seen me through graduate school, my experiences teaching in higher education, and geographical shifts across the country.

Figure 1. Longings and Baskets, 2008, by the author

Jennifer Marsh's International Fiber Collaborative (IFC) and its communal, monumental artworks have been pedagogical, artistic, and activist companions to my students and me. I first stumbled upon her project online in 2007 and envisioned opportunities for collaboration within my K-12 and university teaching, which later extended to my artistic practice, and then to my arts research in a dialogue with IFC's

activist framework. Like a constellation of points in a unified whole, her projects combine small artistic exercises and investigations into a monumental, meaningful finished work.

The IFC is situated as a community-based and craftivist (combining craft and activism) group with an ephemeral physical presence and persisting digital space. Overlapping aspects of craft, culture, and politics sustain and inspire communities and individuals through online art documentation. The IFC is well documented in blogs, Flickr sites, and digital videos. My research as a participant observer spans multiple collaborative projects with Marsh, my students, and the IFC community over the past few years, including digital IFC sites. This article examines the potential of sustainability within the IFC in terms of repurposing and "upcycling" artistic media, creating ecologically and environmentally activist artistic expressions, and reinventing media ecology of art education and craft media within digital communities. Goals and purposes of the three projects of the IFC will be considered in relation to contributions from and discussion among craftspeople, artists, artisans, hobbyists, and other makers.

Framing the IFC and Arts Research

In her book addressing artists and social responsibility, Becker (1994) asserted, "Questions need to be asked . . . by artists, writers, and intellectuals themselves—with a generous spirit of investigation: What is the responsibility of the artist to society [or] of society to the artist? How might this relationship be understood?" (p. xv). Marsh takes up these questions of community engagement directly in her interdisciplinary work as founder and organizer of the IFC. She began the IFC because of a sense of disillusion with loneliness and disconnectedness of the art world from communities and the

environment. Rather than work with isolated artists and galleries, Marsh took up tactile traditions of fiber and connective frameworks of collaboration (J. Marsh, personal communication, March 19, 2008). The 2007-2008 *Gas Station Project* was composed of crocheted, knitted, stitched, patched, or collaged 3-foot square fiber panels that expressed various interpretations and implications of human dependency on oil. I observed how Marsh facilitated canvas or armature for artistic expression of personal and political issues by securing a gas station for public art to realize her project. Additionally, Marsh builds relationships between communities in the arts, the sciences, and corporate and civic life to create IFC projects. Increasingly, the IFC projects have involved partnerships with public parks and fairs to sustain the work, through the creation of panels within workshops and the hosting of exhibitions prior to the final installation. These partnerships extend both the themes of the artworks and the values of its contributors in terms of outdoor education, ecology, and community outreach.

Curriculum theorists Krensky and Steffen (2009) have argued that such community art organizers "manage . . . by establishing and maintaining relationships with administrators, funders, government officials, nonprofit professionals, and property and business owners. They *inspire gatekeepers and stakeholders* to trust the community-centered process" (p. 22). Similarly, Marsh acted as a spokesperson and liaison to introduce outside parties such as businesses and public figures to the project, and then invite them to contribute to various dimensions of construction, funding, and publicizing. The monetary and physical frameworks of public projects exist alongside (and underpin) the artistic production of community contributors. To sustain her project in all its

physical fleetingness and extended planning and digital presence, Marsh must also balance the placement of numerous “eggs” in various “baskets.”

The finished works of the IFC (a wrapped gas station, tree, and NASA rocket) exist in their communities only for a limited time physically, and persist in the digital documentation of their processes and preliminary art exhibitions of groups of works. Krensky and Steffen (2009) have asserted, "community art is both a process and a product" (p. 19). Similarly, Donahue, Stuart, Elkin, and Mistry (2010) observed how "community artists believe that the process of their art is as important as the resulting artwork in promoting social justice" (p. 40). The digital displays of photos, videos, and comments from the artists and community surrounding the IFC enables a certain exploded documentation of the processes and products of each work, especially ecologically and politically-motivated messages and symbols. To explore Flickr sites and Facebook posts about the multi-site exhibitions is to encounter the makers, their messages, and their techniques in photos, captions, and blog posts. As Prain and Christenson (2011) aptly observed, "while our faces often glow in the light of laptops, many of us still have the urge to express ourselves through tactile experiences" (p. 17).

My process in researching the messages and meanings of Jennifer Marsh’s International Fiber Collaborative is cooperative and organic, not unlike the project itself. I acted as a participant-observer in creating panels in 2007 for the *Gas Station Project*, leaves in 2008 for the *Tree Project*, and patches with my own students and artistic communities over the past 5 years toward the current Dream Rocket Project. As a researcher, I analyzed and contributed to material posted on digital communities of the IFC website and adjoining Flickr and Facebook sites. I also assisted with exhibitions of

individual panels leading up to the final installations, helping to categorize the works into shared themes. I aimed to describe craft practices of the IFC and interpret their various meanings and contexts, in collaboration with organizers and participants in my area. Speaking metaphorically, arts researcher Leavey (2009) has observed how "both artistic practice and the practice of qualitative research can be viewed as *craft*" (p. 10). Design writer Ahl (2010) has even ventured that "the process of forming questions and thought is a form of craft; it is linked to practice" (p. 608). Along these lines, I view my craft as a researcher in parallel with my creative process. I posed questions, collaged various resources, and sought to understand and represent artists and communities from within. This model of crafting research in concert with artmaking may be of interest to other art educators wishing to synthesize aspects of their teaching practice with their artistic projects. In this way, we can begin to sustain ourselves as art educators and artists.

Sustainability of Materials

The central aim of Marsh's work is contributing to and creating a community through fiber explorations. While the IFC projects are open-ended and include many diverse opinions and experiences pertaining to the environment, the contrast between the resources and processes involved with hand-made crafts and those involved with manufactured materials communicate themselves clearly and with links to individual named makers. This criticality models layers of considerations for art educators. During the 2007-2008 *Gas Station Project* collaboration, I noted several panels documented on the Flckr and Youtube sites that gave craft materials and techniques a personal or political context (discussed throughout this article and viewable online at: http://www.internationalfibercollaborative.com/html/photos.html). California artists

Courtney Stricklan and Jennifer Van Trease created a panel from over 200 plastic shopping bags (which are created from petroleum), but tied together in a traditional quilt pattern. Maine artist Ann C. Kittredge Houlton contributed two panels for the *Gas Station Project* that juxtapose petroleum-based yarns with natural yarns that correspondingly read: "I AM OIL" and "NOT OIL." A sculpture professor, (who coincidentally once taught me when I was a student) Rob Millard-Mendez, similarly created a *No Petrol Panel* from cotton fabric and cotton thread that reads "no petrol products in this square." Aesthetically, the panels combined into a covering look almost like windows or framed paintings about oil and the environment. In this way, the IFC frames messages, questions, and ideas artistically as well as conceptually.

We might view the IFC projects as *eco-art education*, defined as a hybrid area of environmental and art education that addresses issues like interdependence, conservation, and sustainability artistically (Inwood, 2010; p. 34). As eco-art, the themes of various panels were incredibly diverse in concept and appearance, but materiality and message were often very consciously considered. Carol Lowell, a New York artist, recorded the rise in gas prices with a sort of knitted chart for her panel. Minnesota maker Jane Fisher-Merritt generated a geometric blue and yellow panel repurposed from teabags (Figure 2). A UK artist named Rebecca Wombel similarly used recycled VHS tapes in her crocheted black and white geometric panel, taking on antiquated audio-1visual media and transforming it into a craft material. These distinctive material choices demonstrate social and ecological inquiry. Meanwhile, German artist Barbara Schneider created a tantalizingly colorful and textural panel made from layers of cast off stuffed toys that

addresses re-using symbols and perhaps reconfiguring childhood memories through cast-off materials (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Teabag Panel from the Gas Station Project by Jane Fisher-Merritt

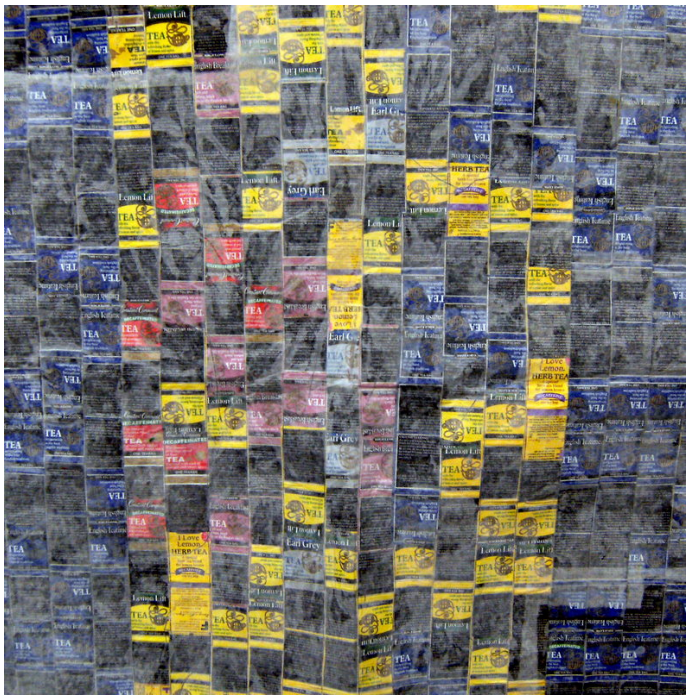


Figure 3. Toy panel for the *Dream Rocket* Project by Barbara Schneider

Jeannie Clark, an Australian environmental educator, worked with her elementary school students to create images of the Red Gum Woodlands which is recovering from drought. Students created iconic glimpses of hollows in trees, green sprouts, and life-giving water that celebrate biodiversity. Other pieces reference both natural material and symbols of nature, such as *Burlap Membrane* by Costa Rican collaborators Aura Madrigal, Irene Chaves, Gaby Chavarria, Alina and Carlos Chavvaria, and Alex and Antony Gonzalez. California artist Karen Rosenberg created a wool and silk composition of shapes of various sizes and colors evocatively titled *Earth, Sea, Sky*. Each piece can be viewed as a singular composition and materially relevant interpretation of related earth science themes.

The variety of themes and political ideas is often matched by materials used by IFC makers, including crochet, knitting, stitching, patching, and collage. As book artist and author Drucker (2010) has observed, craft can reconfigure consumption of its various materials: “possibilities for reinventing traditions of art making and of shifting the relation of critical opposition to mass media into a different key can be enunciated, one in which the pleasures of consumption are an acknowledged part of aesthetic production rather than a repressed one" (p. 595). In the IFC, there is a wonderfully complex interplay of materiality: of celebrating materials consciously, even while critiquing commercial and consumer aspects of contemporary culture. Educators may ask students to consider such questions of personal aesthetics and the politics of the materials and objects that fill our lives.

Sustainability as Message Through Materials

The IFC community's use of materials is meaningfully linked not only with subjects of nature, but also with ecological and political messages. The *Gas Station Project* investigated the environment through a variety of images that address ecology and sustainability. Missouri artist Lauren Jacobs quilted and painted a panel that powerfully evokes (and perhaps predicted) the 2010 BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill, centering on an oil-slicked eagle trying to fly against an ominous grey background. Addressing community and ecology more directly than the *Gas Station Project*, the second major work of the IFC (*The* Project *Tree Project*) examined interdependence as a theme in terms of roots, branches, and leaves. Participants were asked to create and submit leaves from fiber materials and/or techniques, culminating in the form of a giant tree on view in museums and parks. Metaphorically, this project took on a similar approach to the *Gas Station*, joining multiples by various individuals into a larger, unified work. However, *The Interdependence* or *Tree* actually simulated a gigantic living tree, highlighting a natural object instead of a distinctly commercial, human-made form. In this way, the Interdependence Project inverted a previous subject of oil and pollution into the theme and subject of nature. Marsh also integrated the installation portion of this project as part of her own teaching practice in a Public Art course, integrating arts practice with critical inquiry in education. While there was a great deal of artistic freedom allowed in the creation of leaves, Marsh (2009) specified for participants that each submission should "relate to interdependence in a social, economical, political, ecological, or geographical way" (www.internationalfibercollaborative.com/html/treeproject.html).

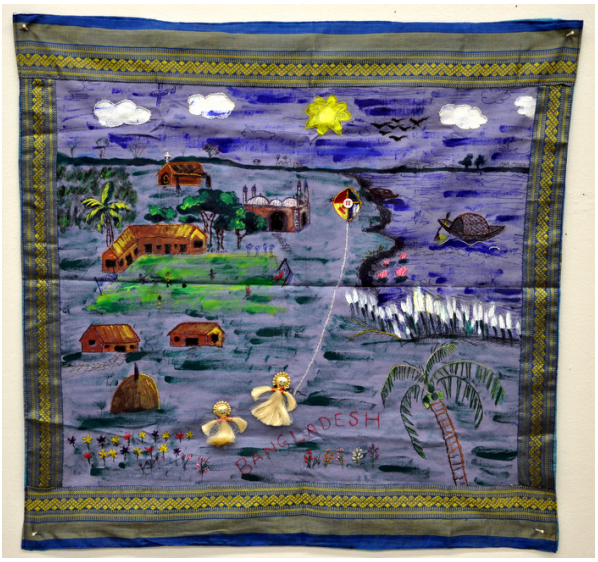
The leaves featured in this community work seemed to take on a certain gem-like quality, from my observations of the digital sites (see http://www.internationalfibercollaborative.com/html/gallery.html) and final installation in a children's museum. They evoke a micro and macro-ecology in size and symbolism. Although still ultimately connected as communal art from individual fragments, each piece was precious and involved a great deal of process when viewed in isolation within digital photos submitted prior to their installation. California artist Linda Laird directly repurposed remainders from the *Gas Station Project*, using remnants of her cabin quilt to create a leaf pattern. Jane Linders, of Missouri, explored the metaphor of photosynthesis through cloth, negatives, and cyanotypes (involving water and sun, like actual leaves). Suzan Engler, from Texas, created "leaf fossils" by fusing grocery bags, recycled buttons, and fragmented leftovers of yarn and cotton.

Many of the leaves in the Interdependence Project were aesthetically focused on nature rather than overtly political, perhaps to a greater extent than the IFC's first *Gas Station Project*. The shape, color, and texture of the leaves themselves were frequently emphasized. Florida artist Susan Wallace explored the shape of local leaves, underscoring in her website description the complexities of red bay trees in her area, which are being killed by a fungus. Ann-Marie Sjoberg, of Sweden, worked from wool and yarn, generating a leaf for each season of the year. These examples nicely demonstrate the idea of ecology as metaphor for the space of the makers, the digital space, and the artistic representations of nature. Lin (2011) has similarly examined the context of physical space in terms of "learning ecology," (p. 12), going beyond simple artmaking around the physical world to also address relational networks between various

makers in digital realms. If learners can locate such preciousness and precariousness in nature and community, they can also make meaning in a more metacognitive way.

Other IFC leaves were more linked to the symbolism of trees and leaves, such as New York artist Lisa Post's commemorative leaves for her mother and grandmother, perhaps responding to the metaphor of the "family tree." Similarly, Venezuelan artist Maria Parada created leaves in honor of her grandchildren from collaged cloth and paper. Concepts of family also emerged in the stories of the makers, many of whom created their work in collaboration with their children, exemplifying another kind of interdependence and sustainability of family within the creative process. Meanwhile other artists addressed hopes for sustaining larger cultural and geographical communities. Hana Hong, from Seoul, worked with Korean paper and the Korean flag motif. New York artist Melissa Kraft assembled a leaf from ribbons, threads, papers, and ink, inscribing the materials with words of peace in several different languages. Still, several submissions combined family and communal symbols within ecological contexts. For example, makers from the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka visually emphasized the natural resource of rivers, while also including materials like *jute* (the golden fiber of this region), *Shapla* (pink water lilies, the national flower of Bangladesh), and *kashful* (the white flowers in bloom on the river side) (Figure 4). Anecdotally, Marsh and I have observed that most of the panels submitted outside of the United States are made from natural, local materials, whereas the materials of most U.S. panels are man-made, purchased, and/or recycled. Such a global artistic exchange brings considerations of materiality and geography to bear.

Figure 4. Dream Rocket Panel from the Department of Economics at the University of Dhaka



IFC artists' individual approaches are pedagogically rich in material as well as message: telling stories, posing problems and questions, and inspiring viewers to action. For instance, during their experience participating in the *Gas Station Project*, art education students and art teachers with whom I worked in Virginia reported that they became more cognizant of abandoned gas stations in their communities, and informally discussed their questions about the ecological impacts of fuel consumption, as well as the economic and communal implications of run-down plots of land. This exploration also led to related conversations about mountaintop removal in our geographical location. In these ways, we may note the interdisciplinary threads within IFC panels, from embroideries that mathematically chart gas prices, to fabric collages that advocate for animal rights, to leaves addressing deforestation and ecology with a focus on the sciences. While the IFC projects are intentionally open-ended and include many diverse political and ideological responses; the shared message of community and local activism proves a common thread that sustains each work and brings about public dialogue.

Weaving Webs: Sustaining Crafts and Community Arts Digitally

Researchers Adams and Goldbard (2002) have noted that "artist-organizers . . . collaborate with others to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media, while building cultural capacity and contributing to social change" (p. 8). They specify that community may be delineated by geography, common interest, and identity. In this way, Marsh's projects through the IFC create particularly valuable examples of individual and communal social change through socially conscious and politically symbolic craft techniques of fiber. Though the original function of craft objects have utilitarian meanings, (such as a potholder or quilt), the purpose of an individual artist's panel is often a uniquely personal and/or political expression. Educators can benefit from such projects within classroom teaching, for they bridge many academic subjects and uniquely human experiences across geographies and identities. The IFC project sites and makers are also charted on a digital map image that shows globalization and connection. Marsh divides her work for the IFC into both virtual and manual connections of digital documentation and hands-on making (J. Marsh, personal communication, January 2, 2009), embodying a hybrid craft and activist practice. Black and Burisch (2010) have asserted that "key features of craftivism such as the IFC include: participatory projects that value democratic processes, the use of various cross-disciplinary media, and an ongoing commitment to politicized practices, issues, and actions" (p. 614). The current IFC Rocket Project (which will wrap a NASA rocket) particularly emphasizes interdisciplinary connections of science and art through space exploration, and also evokes the social and cultural history of astronauts and space exploration in the news, literature, and personal identifications. One prime example is

the collaboration of Alabama fiber artist Celia Dionne with her engineer husband to represent an atom, formed from feathers, acrylics, fabric, and yarn (See http://www.thedreamrocket.com/dream-themes-and-art.)

The IFC projects reach and connect a diverse collective of participants through websites, magazines, and other announcements of organizations such as College Art Association and *Fiber Arts Magazine*. Marsh's past two projects and current *Dream Rocket Project* reveal and celebrate reclaimed and reconfigured craft techniques of the past through digital documentation. Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch (2010) have similarly examined craft within feminist theory and DIY cultures, arguing that "the accessibility of global communication networks have [generated] . . . increased sharing of craft knowledge and skills, and created an overall democratization of crafting practices " (p. 609). Many artists of the IFC wrote to Marsh about the processes of their work, and these descriptions are included online alongside images of each individual piece (See http://www.flickr.com/photos/thedreamrocket/). In reading the artistic descriptions to students and audiences, I am often struck by unexpected materials and processes employed and layered messages. For example, artist Annie Perry submitted a striking panel for the *Dream Rocket* project that is an iconic, ecologically-positive image of the silhouette of a bicyclist (made from scraps of clothing and accessories worn to shreds from biking, See http://www.flickr.com/photos/thedreamrocket/4408102682/). At the same time, this panel employs Art Deco style of the 1920s and pays tribute to Annie Londonderry, the first woman to ride her bike around the world. Digital social networks open to all facilitate such rich sharing and rare, little-known art historical commentary.

The individual pieces function almost like visual encyclopedia entries selected and crafted by the makers.

Each fiber panel is a separate entity, but perhaps is best described and understood as a unified whole. It is the digital format of the IFC website (http://www.internationalfibercollaborative.com/) that allows us to view the entire process, combining concepts of the individual panels with the total monumental project (especially in the case of YouTube videos of the installations). There are some interesting parallels in terms of unity and craft in related disciplines. Portraiture methodology creators Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) also emphasize that attaining unity in the structure of the research narrative as akin to creating a quilt or weaving, with separate but related pieces forming a cohesive whole. Craft communities like the IFC are on the one hand social groups where artistic sharing, technical conversations, and critiques take place; yet the community interactions may be asynchronous and visitors may even lurk or visit a site without making one's presence known as in the physical world. In this way, we can also examine layered roles within these contexts, as user, viewer, and maker. These various layers of participation provide a diverse craft community that is understood and experienced in several different ways simultaneously.

The individual pieces composing IFC projects were connected manually on the sites, and also synthesized digitally on websites by Marsh herself. Within this framework, the founding artist takes on a connective role of curator and custodian of the artworks of many individuals. The potential role of the viewer as she/he engages with the IFC's projects is structurally two-fold. Visitors to the actual sites of the *Gas Station,*

Tree, or *Dream Rocket* installation could view the wrapped structures during the brief period of exhibition. On the IFC website, viewers can continuously peruse photos or video of the project itself, which engages an appreciation of the process of installation involved with large-scale artworks. The digital interplay of weblogging, linking, and online commentary allows a range of overlapping and divergent voices to coalesce in digital space.

Krensky and Steffen (2009) have observed, “in addition to having a clear and empowering framework for interaction, a positive community art experience needs a *safe space* that feels like a non-threatening and lighthearted social setting" (p. 27). This distinction of physical setting was crucial to my contributions as a facilitator and participant in creating collaborative works for the IFC with my students. It was not the classroom time or space per se that lent itself to these endeavors, but rather out-of-school, after-school occasions and settings that were conducive to the kind of informal, knitting-circle-like gatherings of production. Engaging public school classrooms, fiber artists from universities, an increasing number of girl scout troops, library outreach, and more traditional craft groups within online forums allows IFC's many participants to dialogue with one another about how the crafts interplay with contemporary visions of ecology from various perspectives. At the same time, craft itself is becoming increasingly subversive and visionary as an accessible and communally expressive activity.

Conclusions for Craft, Community, and Ecology

Throughout this article, sustainable approaches to material, methods, and messages of craft have been considered. The IFC meaningfully balances the sustainability of craft traditions and media with individual makers’ artistry and identity.

As Starr (2010) has observed of collaborative work in art history, "only now are we learning, partly from dismal experience of life barren of beauty and variety . . . that no man can execute artistically what another man plans, unless the workman's freedom is a part of the plan" (p. 156). In Marsh's IFC projects, both planning and execution are thoroughly collaborative, from surveying project ideas from previous participants, to communal installation and shared digital documentation. Through the collaborative, democratic, and engaging social networks of blogs, social networking and personal sites, any participating artist in the IFC can be known to a viewer. In fact, the Collaborative itself is often more recognizable than Marsh's individual name.

Over the past few years, I have learned a great deal about art and education from my observation and collaborations with this interesting group and its many members. Marsh's Collaborative has provided a space of possibility within my research of digital communities, my personal artistic practice in craft, and my interdisciplinary teaching. My hope as a researcher is to enlarge and open up more dialogues about ecology in craft education with Jennifer Marsh. The IFC creates much-needed artistic and social spaces for many individuals to experience craft, community, and sustainability as personal and collaborative endeavors between artists and their communities. Michele Hardy (2004) claims that "craft is a particular engagement with the world, a particular way of knowing the world" (p. 180). The IFC provides many unique and hopeful examples of relating to the natural world, and reflects ways in which community, conservation, and craft can be imagined and realized.

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