



# THE CHURCH OF CRAFT

AN INFORMAL HISTORY  
(AND ONE WOMAN'S CONVERSION)



BY KIRSTEN HUDSON

In New York and San Francisco, people are gathering. In private places and public spaces, they arrive with bags of yarn, scraps of plastic, and other implements of construction. They are people who own glue guns and Be-Dazzlers, and who often look like they could, or do, make their own clothing. They look like artists and office managers and writers and designers. They look like you and me. In fact, I am one of them. We are the members of the Church of Craft.

The Church of Craft could be seen as performance art of the very best kind, where the people involved don't always know they are making art. It's the kind of art that is endless and endlessly meaningful, that generates discussion and prompts action. Art that is deeply personal, yet rooted in the world. And if you see the Church that way I wouldn't argue with you, and neither would many members or, indeed, its ministers. But the Church is also real—the kind of real that doesn't need quotes. The Church of Craft is, without irony or disclaimer, a church.

The trusted servants and co-founders of the Church are the Very Esteemed Callie Janoff, of the New York congregation, and the Reverend Trismegista Taylor, of San Francisco. On each coast, church meets once a month in the form of a craft-on. In addition, the East Coast group hosts regular study groups (including yarn study where people learn to knit and crochet as well as deepen their practice of the fiber arts) and

occasional special workshops, such as felting with Scott Bodenner, and dyeing with Diane Bromberg.

Many members speak of the Church as a haven from judgment and anti-craft attitudes. The Church is a place that allows people to make things without thinking about either utility or artistic value. "When I hobby-craft," says Johanna Burke, a member of the congregation, "I feel totally free and love the feeling of not being judged for what I make. Oftentimes my artwork and work-work feel too public, so the crafting feels liberating." The art versus craft tension is present in many members' lives, and the Church seeks to be a space where that tension can be released. For Janoff, the line between art and non-art is "one of those gray areas that I find magic," while for Taylor, "Art is craft and craft is art. I don't care what the art schools say. Making things is making things. The act of creation is valid whether you are making a birdhouse or an abstract painting."

The craft-ons began informally in the Bay Area in the spring of 2000. "I would have friends over and I would do a sermon and we would make stuff," recalls Taylor. Meanwhile, Janoff had been asked to officiate at the wedding ceremonies of three couples with whom she was friends, and became ordained as a minister in the Universal Life Church in order to do so. Up until the moment the first of these ceremonies began, she thought of her ministry as performance art. At that point, she says, "It was happening and it

was the most real and intense thing I had ever experienced. It was so devoid of irony. There was no artistic abstraction whatsoever." Discussing this experience with a wedding guest after a ceremony, the words "Church of Craft" were first spoken. Janoff recognized right away what could become a major act of creation—fostering an emotional and spiritual haven for people to make things and feel powerful and vibrant in their making.

In October 2000, Burke brought Taylor and Janoff together, and the Church was born. "The two of us, talking together in Johanna's pink boudoir," says Taylor, "hatched the Church of Craft idea, and Callie immediately took me down to the basement and ordained me over the Internet. It couldn't have happened...without both of our ideas and thoughts and vision. The 'gestation' occurred over our entire lives, in that we wouldn't be who we are without all the experiences we've had and the books we've read and art making we have done. And I think our soul connection with each other and our desire to gather and make a community really helped this idea come together."

It's ironic that the Church would not exist without the Internet and could not go on without email. Whether or not these "times" are tired, certainly everyone I know is exhausted—overworked, overstimulated, and overcommitted. News of the church arrives in my inbox, a welcome change from meeting minutes and offers of Viagra. The Church, for me, fulfills the



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—REVEREND TRISMEGISTA TAYLOR

promise of the Internet. It brings people together. Not online, but in person.

The Church is as much about community as it is about crafting. But if you are at a craft-on and not crafting, Janoff is likely to pull an easy craft out of her bag of tricks—such as a leather purse kit, or a lanyard. She does this because she believes that it is more fun to be making things at a craft-on, but she is also drawing people into the power of craft. Crafting doesn't have to be spiritual—but it can be. About the San Francisco congregation, Taylor notes that “Some folks are really into the spiritual side of making things, and others just come for the nice atmosphere and crafty vibe.” Janoff adds: “So much of our life is about consumption, about amassing. It's easy to get lost. At Church you are surrounded by a community of people who have similar values. You can be led or taught by someone who is committed to your spiritual betterment.”

After growing up surrounded by artists (children who not only made things but made them well) I came to believe that I was a thinker, that the only things I could put into the world were ideas and energy. That I could be a prime mover but not a creator. When contemplating the utopia after the revolution (“From each according to his means, to each according to his needs.”), I believed that I would be asked for ideas and more ideas, and that I would be given the (grateful) minions to carry out my plans, to make things actually happen. Meanwhile, I was left to my own devices, to think and talk and write things down. And to live in limbo. Then I became a member of the Church of Craft. And I became a doer, a maker, a creator—a crafter.

Bromberg, who considers herself an artist, says that for her, there is not always a distinction between art and craft. When there is, it is sometimes about utility—*this* is a toaster cover while *that* sculpture's function is much less clear—and sometimes about portability: craft is something you take with you on the subway. This definition reminds me of the distinction someone once made between poetry and novels. Poetry is a literary form open to the poor and the oppressed because poetry can be written on scraps of paper and carved into stone, it can be remembered with the help of rhythm and rhyme, and it can be spoken on the street to passersby. Novels, on the other hand, require vast resources including space, time, and energy to create, to distribute, and to consume.

For me, craft is meditative and rewarding in and of itself. But it is also, paradoxically, about multitasking (Don't just watch TV: Craft). And although I talk to strangers when they ask about my crochet, I also find that often I have my head down and my eyes on my project rather than fellow subway riders. Craft opens lines of communication and community, but it also allows you to build a world of your own—to make your world.

It is now Mother's Day, and I am at a craft-on. There are knitters, crocheters, and quilters, plus clothing design, feng shui planning, and writing. Janoff is wearing her satin jacket and matching apron, both festooned with the Church of Craft logo. She moves from group to group, offering encouragement. New York and my entire world, just for the moment, are as beautiful as I know they can be. ●

