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Chapter 7

Mapping Etsy: Reflections on (Spatial) Relations in an E-Commerce for Handmade Things



Lydia Maria Arantes

Introduction

In 2005, *Etsy*, an online marketplace for people who “live the handmade life” (Etsy 2013a), was founded in the United States. Currently, among the over 30 million members, more than one million are active sellers (Etsy 2013b), trading their hand- and with-love-and-care-made goods. Their goal is to establish alternative economies and foster a direct and personal relationship between producer and consumer by providing an opportunity for handcrafters to sell their unique products to a clientele that also appreciates their effort and devotion.

Missions and Philosophies *and the Creation of a Space for Crafters*

A glance at Etsy’s mission statement will illustrate what kind of rhetoric and ways of expression are in use in order to attract sellers and buyers from the whole world.

Our mission is to empower people to change the way the global economy works. We see a world in which very-very small businesses have much-much more sway in shaping the economy, local living economies are thriving everywhere, and people value authorship and provenance as much as price and convenience. We are bringing heart to commerce and making the world more fair, more sustainable, and more fun. (Etsy 2013c)

Elsewhere the self-appointed ambassador of empowerment and economic change elaborates its philosophy further:

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We are anthropologists of commerce. We're curious about people and what they make, exchange and consume. (...) Around the world, there's a new clamoring to know the story behind what we buy — who made it, how, what route did it travel to our door? We're here to tell these global stories, to introduce you to makers and collectors and the history of their goods. (...) Like you, we're bored by the artificiality and ugliness of most products out there. We endeavor to inspire you with the imaginative, the durable, the forward-thinking, the lovely, the comforting, the provocative. (...) Together we're going to define what it means to live the handmade life, and how goods can relate to the common good. Etsy is a beautiful experiment in restoring community and culture to our commerce. (...). (Etsy 2013a)

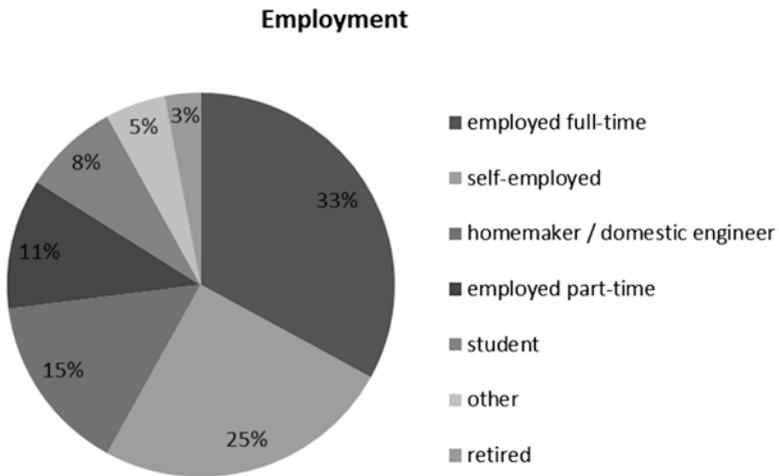
Globally dominant and successful anti-alienation and sustainability discourses favoring locally embedded production and consumption, serve as a useful foil against which Etsy can promote itself as an alternative. Despite being a globally active and acting company itself, Etsy hops on this discursive train that is trying to run down the capitalist system of mass production. Ideas and concepts of love, community, and commonality, which are presented to be intrinsic to craft and therefore, opposing or dissociated from a capitalist economic system, further support an approach of playing off craft against capitalism. In doing so, Etsy's rhetoric produces itself as space in the *digital*¹ *here* where loving, caring, and comforting craft practices and their materializations are located – in contrast to the “ugliness of most products *out there*” (Etsy 2013a; emphasis added). Making use of these dualistic and oppositional narratives, Etsy creates spaces of us versus them, hiding the fact that their so-called alternative is perfectly integrated into the global capitalist economic system.

Basically, anyone can become an entrepreneur and sell his or her products in these social-commerce-type marketplaces. At first glance, the only requirements necessary involve the skills and creativity to make things, concealing the fact that a number of further criteria come into play in order to be eligible to sell one's crafts online. Although narratives of deterritorialization coin the characteristics of the internet as space of possibilities, virtual marketplaces such as Etsy are also subject to (practices of) demarcation and exclusion. The term deterritorialization refers to “the pulverization of the space of high modernity” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 20) and can be related to (narratives of) dematerialization of space. Mass media and the internet in particular are viewed to be expediting processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization as digital spaces also feature practices of inclusion and exclusion. In the specific case of Etsy, at a very basic level, a computer with access to the internet is required – the fact that materiality is fundamental to virtuality is also referred to as the “materiality of infrastructure and technology” by Miller and Horst (2013: 25); furthermore, computer skills are necessary in order to establish and maintain one's virtual shop; additionally, one needs to be willing to become a declared member of the Etsy community by performing the “border-crossing ritual” (Schroer 2003: 229) of registering with a valid credit card for verification purposes; and lastly, various technical and aesthetic skills are entailed in order to photograph

¹In line with Boellstorff who argues that “[i]t is possible to craft frameworks in which these terms differ, but it is a flawed folk theory of language that the mere existence of multiple lexemes entails multiple corresponding entities in the world” (2013: 57), *physical*, *material*, and *offline* as well as *virtual*, *digital*, and *online* are treated as synonyms in this paper.

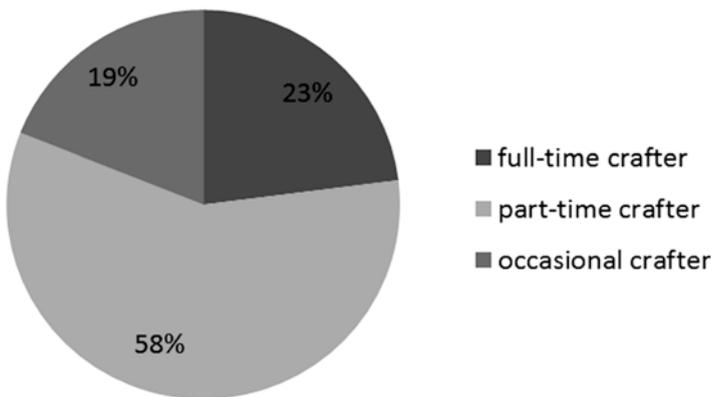
the items and draw attention to their features (refer to later discussion). Etsy’s spatiality is thus also regulated by rules of inclusion and exclusion, which are in turn based on specific skills and access to resources such as computer, credit card, and camera required at entry-level.

These factors and competences do not necessarily relate to a specific sex. Still, according to the 2008 Etsy survey (Etsy 2008), the majority of responding sellers (96% out of a total of 27,000) are female. The average responding seller is female, 35 years old, and married (55%, 46% of those with children), holds a university degree (58%) and lives in the United States (86%), and commands a household income of around 62,000 USD, suggesting that they grosso modo belong to the



Graph 1

Self-awareness about being a crafter



Graph 2

middle class. The statistical data referred to on graphs 1 and 2 (abstracted from Etsy 2008) further indicate Etsy is mostly not the only source of income [Graphs 1 and 2].

The Gender of Craft

The domination of women selling handmade things in virtual Etsy shops is also being discussed in the online community, as well as in literature, on the so-called new domesticity (e.g., Matchar 2013). One particularly severe critique is that of Mosle who argues “what Etsy is really peddling isn’t only handicrafts, but also the feminist promise that you can have a family and create hip arts and crafts from home during flexible, reasonable hours while still having a respectable, fulfilling, and remunerative career” (Mosle 2009). Developing this thought further, Etsy is criticized for enabling the reinforcement of the middle-class ideal of being a stay-at-home mom, while at the same time conforming to contemporary feminist claims of female participation in the economic realm.

Historically, the seemingly high number of women trading on Etsy can be related to the gendering of the home and crafts during the era of industrialization at the end of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century. During this time, traditional gender roles of women staying at home and looking after the children as well as the “feminization” of crafts (most notably textiles) were established. Crafts such as knitting and embroidery were instrumentalized as a disciplining mechanism for young girls in order to engender female bodies displaying desired ideal female values such as industriousness, placidity, emotional control, passiveness, purity, and decency (Ladj-Teichmann 1983; Ehrmann-Köpke 2010). It was also common for non-wealthy middle-class wives (who were not allowed to work) to secretly produce and sell textile crafts in times of financial distress in order to be able to at least keep the maid befitting their social rank and thus to maintain status appearances. In many American cities, starting in Boston in 1877, middle-class reform women established Women’s Educational and Industrial Unions, which included a salesroom with display cases for selling women’s craft products anonymously so that middle-class women could maintain their ‘non-working’ status (Spencer-Wood 1987: 15,16,18). The notion of craft not being classified and viewed as work, which is also a repetitive narrative on Etsy and in the crafts sphere altogether, can thus also be dated back to these times where middle-class and elite women constantly had to be committed to demonstrations of idleness (e.g., knitting and embroidering) while at the same time conforming to the ideal of being ‘non-working’ women (Ehrmann-Köpke 2010). From a historical perspective, women therefore, seem to be particularly prone to the combination of ‘the alternative’ (working from home) and caring for kin and others, resulting in tremendous amounts of materializations of love in the form of self-made gifts (Ehrmann-Köpke 2010; Schmid 2008). Whilst Etsy thus seems to be offering a return to nineteenth-century ideals of gender roles, spheres, and practices, coincidentally, it carries a feminist aura for increasing the status of homecrafts by expanding their market and prices.

Outline of This Paper

On the following pages, Etsy and its spatiality will be scrutinized by focusing on the following three relations between (1) producers and consumers and the discursive universe about their relationship; (2) virtual and physical worlds, looking at the specific spatial quality of Etsy situated at the convergence of these worlds; and (3) Etsy as an alternative economic model versus the global economic and capitalist system and the related narratives.²

The thoughts laid out in this paper are based on research on Etsy's website and their blog as well as five interviews with members of Etsy and other e-commerce for handmade things, all of which formed part of a doctoral research project on contemporary handcrafting practices in Austria. In order to illustrate these considerations, one member will be referred to frequently, Nik, who will be introduced subsequently. As a novice on Etsy at the time of the lengthy interview in April 2012, Nik's accounts are a good example of the complexity, skills, and efforts involved in establishing one's business, while at the same time also revealing a narrative that clearly opposes do-it-yourself philosophies promoted by globally acting platforms for craft items such as Etsy.

Portrait of a Seller on Etsy. Nik from Linenandwood

Nik is in her 40s and lives at the outskirts of Austria's second most populous city, Graz, with her partner and three dogs. She spends the days renovating old wooden furniture or sewing items from antique Transylvanian linen or huge French mail bags. For her this is not a matter of 'upcycling' waste (as the trend of extending the life cycle of broken and old products by shaping and arranging them anew has come to be termed; see, e.g., Emgin 2012). She particularly values the quality of antique natural materials because of their non-exposure to air pollution at the time of growth, making a clear point that it's the specific materiality as well as material quality which distinguishes her crafts.

In her descriptions about the meaning of craft and the materials she uses, she constructs her identity as an independent and autonomous person, striving to get the living environment she wants without having to rely on what the market offers. Throughout the interview, a somehow rebellious character reveals itself, acting against certain collective aesthetic norms and developing her unique aesthetic voice, while at the same time defying the discursive universe Etsy as well as other similar

² Other forms of relations playing important roles in the case of Etsy or similar platforms might be the relation between working for pleasure and working for profit, as well as gender relations (as briefly sketched at the beginning).

platforms are supporting and disseminating. As her strong interest in antique materials and associated craft practices dates far back into the past, she does not identify herself much with current do-it-yourself ideologies working against globalization and depersonalized mass production.

Nik has been a member of the Etsy community since December 2011 and has sold 145 items in 2 years. She also has a Facebook profile and a bilingual blog where she puts her products on display and reveals stories about their ‘history,’ portraying how these things are given a place in her house, her life, and ultimately her online presence; in doing so she complements her profile on Etsy which is linked to certain items for sale.

While discussing her profile on Etsy in April 2012, she explains how much time it takes to actually put an item up for sale, reflecting on the importance of photographing her items: “After having made it, you need to take pictures of it. These should make a professional appearance because they are all the potential customer sees. Having an eye for the visual is very important because the customer buys on the basis of the photos of the products.” This means placing them in a sunlit spot as you are not allowed to use artificial light, decorating them if necessary and capturing them from different angles in order to portray them as fully as possible. Subsequently, the items need to be measured and described in detail, ideally in different languages (and different metric systems) so that a wider circle of people can be addressed as Etsy is a global market. Then categories or tags have to be determined in order to make the items easily searchable, and shipping costs for diverse countries have to be calculated in accordance with the local mail service’s fees. Only when having accomplished all of the above, the items are ready to be put up for sale in the virtual marketplace. Nik explains that this preparatory process took her up to 4 h per item at first. Even having gathered some experience after a few months, it still takes her 2 h to prepare an item for sale.

Although not striving to be able to solely live off selling handmade things on Etsy, Nik puts a lot of time, bodily and aesthetic effort, and self-management into establishing her virtual shop. She is working on her personal enterprise by somewhat molding her everyday life around Etsy (as will also come out subsequently) and in doing so seems to be turning into an “enterprising self” (Bröckling 2007).

Relational Topology of Etsy

In what follows, an attempt of mapping the virtual platform for the sale of handmade things called Etsy will be carried out by focusing on the following three relations: (1) between humans, namely, between producers and consumers; (2) between digital and material worlds, looking at the specific spatial quality of Etsy at the junction of these worlds; and (3) between different economic systems or likewise the discursive construction thereof. Though intertwined with each other, they are presented separately from each other.

A Community of Producers and Consumers

The establishment of a “more direct and more fair” relationship between producer and consumer³ is one of the key goals pursued by the implementation of the Etsy platform. Therefore its description and analysis are going to be allocated most of the space within this part of the paper.

Etsy provides a space for people with common interests and/or philosophies. This is particularly the case because opening a shop requires putting up a (very personal) profile which is visible to window-shoppers and potential customers. Upon entering, the customer can instantly get to know the seller by reading his or her story. Central to these narratives is the seller’s trajectory of how they came to start enjoying/loving to make things themselves, reiterating and reproducing Etsy’s template-like rhetoric of providing a marketplace for things that are made with love and care. These individual mini biographies give the shop and its shopholder a very personal note, obligating the potential customer (probably himself or herself an Etsy shopholder) into an apperception and recognition of the visual presence and values portrayed in the profile text.

Nik’s Etsy profile reads:

Hello everyone, I’m Nik and I live in beautiful Austria. It’s quite nice living here, mountains, lakes, forest, cold and snowy in winter, nice warm summers. Sounds like paradise, however, I’ve always felt I should live by the sea. (...) / I feel very much attracted by antique things – very often I feel it deep inside my heart – I think I’m living in the wrong time period. I absolutely adore old houses, antique furniture, reclaimed wood, antique linen in every possible appearance, old iron things, even rusty ones. / And I keep working, redoing, painting, repairing, sewing – this is my life, these are the moments I could forget about time. I’m in a different world – my world...I would like to invite you having a look into my blog <http://nikantik.blogspot.com> (sorry, etsy doesn’t allow direct links, you’ll have to copy it...) / There you can see many facets of my work and my life. It is written both in German and English. / Feel free to contact me whenever you’ve got a question – I will try to answer it. / Welcome in my world / Yours, / Nik from linenandwood (linenandwood 2013a)

By revealing her innermost thoughts, Nik obviously performs a kind of self-marketing strategy, an attempt of distinguishing her shop from the one million others by specifically drawing the attention to her and her products’ uniqueness. This is further emphasized by localizing herself and her crafts in “beautiful Austria.” At the same time, she imagines her existence somewhere else – in other times and places.

At this point it is important to remark that this description has not been translated from German to English by the author. Nik chose to establish her Etsy presence as international as possible and opted for making use of the English language, as well

³ At the moment most buyers are themselves sellers on Etsy (email conversation between author and the Etsy office in Berlin, November 2012), which is also supported by Nik’s experience, suggesting that the Etsy community sustains and reproduces itself.

Fig. 7.1 Linen bag (sack)



as USD as a currency to translate the value of her crafts into economic standards. Though clearly locating herself in “beautiful Austria,” she establishes a virtual shop that addresses people well beyond the germanophone countries and is perfectly adjusted to the US market (as well as the global market). This also reflects in her choice to upload new items in her shop in accordance with US daytime in order to raise chances for her items to be noticed by the biggest population of Etsians right away. In various senses, Nik’s life is characterized by multi-locality and multi-temporality.

In order to overcome the intangibility of crafts in the virtual world (which in Nik’s case is seen as an advantage of selling online because one can evade “people touching the items as they like without asking for permission which often happens when selling in local markets or exhibitions,” she remarks), words are employed to assume the function of tangibility. The following image depicts a “Linen bag (sack) made of antique Transylvanian linen, plain sewing, linen embroidery” (linenandwood 2013b) for sale in her shop for 42.81 USD. Apart from this image, the item is visually presented by four others, all from slightly different angles, among them one with a hairdryer in front (suggesting a possible way of usage by complementing the composition of the picture with an item of her choice) and two others zooming in to the embroidery (revealing its aesthetic features by pointing to its details) (Fig. 7.1).

This approx. 18.5 x 17.3 in linen bag was made from antique Transylvanian linen. To be closed with ribbons. I like to use these bags for hiding things in the bathroom like toilette paper or hair dryer. / This 100% organic antique embroidery gives every room a homy [sic!] appearance, a warm cosy look and makes you feel good. It looks fantastic when combined with reclaimed wood. / The plants these fabrics are made from have grown in a time period where the air was still clean. (...) / Women from Transylvania (formerly immigrated from Saxony, today in Germany 100s of years ago) had the ability to create an absolute stunning handcraft. At first they spun the flax they had planted and harvested by themselves, then

they handwove the linen thread and manufactured a very lovely material – linen. How they converted the handwoven linen into awesome plain sewing or white work linen embroidery is really, really gorgeous! // It is a perfect gift for nearly any occasion! // Worldwide delivery possible – please ask for postage. (linenandwood 2013b)

The stories behind the crafts on virtual (hence not tactile!) display become the capital of the small-scale businesses alongside with the crafts themselves or rather instead of the crafts' materiality. They compensate the intangibility of the crafts in the virtual shops by rendering them vivid through words. One may also argue that the materiality of visualized words and images takes the place of the crafts' materiality. Further, the material assemblages depicted in the images and suggested usage in the description preempt any kind of imaginative skills on the side of the customers and present them with possibilities for the item to be promptly translated into the practicality of everyday life.

Digital Globality and Material Locality. Dialectic Spaces

The relation between a global digital space and a local material space directs us toward an expansion of space. Crafting practices, traditionally local in scope, in this case acquire a global dimension. Crafters expose themselves at the same time to the dynamics of global competition as well as to the opportunity of global dissemination of their crafts. Furthermore, the mass of local small-scale producers joining each other in the global Etsy community is considered, as well as really felt, to be a powerful force to change the way the global economy works, as becomes evident in comments on the Etsy page informing about the Hello Etsy conference in Berlin in 2011. There are voices like: "(...) it's a movement gaining ground, and it's high time for the world to look at sustainable alternatives such as micro economies and local consumption." or "I love seeing Etsy becoming an influential force in this matter, it's wonderful that there are still some visionaries in this world. We all MUST help it!! Thank you Etsy." or "Amen to organizing this vital event. We all can make a difference. Thank you for your commitment to sustainability." (Etsy 2011).

This feeling of being a part of a global movement is to a great extent enabled by the spatial quality of Etsy, being both locally and globally embedded. Etsy's spatial dimensions are thus a key characteristic of this global movement toward sustainability, as it is referred to by Etsians.

The relation between digital globality and material locality is also revealed in the relationships between platform members. They consist of virtual encounters as well as encounters in the physical world, and they form the global community that is manifested locally through organized meetings. Etsy members can become members of virtual local communities that occasionally translate into the material world in the form of organized gatherings (e.g., Etsy Team Austria). On a larger scale, Etsy organized a conference in Berlin in 2011.

Hello Etsy: A Summit on Small Business and Sustainability is a hands-on gathering for small business owners who want to connect with their peers, learn the skills to find success and independence, and be part of the movement to build human-scale economies. Decades of an unyielding focus on economic growth and a corporate mentality has left us ever more disconnected with nature, our communities, and the people and processes behind the objects in our lives. *We think this is unethical, unsustainable, and unfun.* (Etsy 2011; emphasis in original)

The materiality of the encounters in the physical world helps exchange know-how on how to best set up one's business within this global movement, etc. Virtuality alone does not suffice; only in conjunction with the corporeality and materiality of bodily encounter is virtuality considered to play an influential and even enhancing role. Material spaces extend into the virtual and vice versa and influence one another in a dialectical manner.

Systemic Relations. Etsy as a Whole vs. the Global Economic System

Assuming there is *one* global economic system, a reflection on Etsy in relation to this global system gives insight into the way entrepreneurial philosophies are instrumentalized and used. Ideologically, Etsy is urging people out of the global economic system. By employing a set of discursive strategies which establish a *digital here* for the crafters and their practices as opposed to the *out there* of mass production, it tries to situate itself outside of the global economic system. As elaborated at the beginning of this paper, by way of its narratives, Etsy produces a space within which it offers an alternative to 'big bad capitalist mass production.' Fostering a space for creative crafting practices ultimately keeps *their* (globally spanning) business going. Etsy acts within the global economy and capitalism by earning millions⁴ by providing the infrastructure for their virtual marketplace and benefiting from perpetuating a kind of global anti-alienation discourse. While Etsy staff enjoys "company-paid health benefits, generous time off, and Eatsy, our weekly locally sourced company meal" (Etsy 2013d), crafters need to get their health benefits and social security from somewhere else – companies where they work full time, the government (unemployment benefits), their spouses, and so on. Social security remains a responsibility of the crafters themselves. As these forms of craft are located in the private realm, perceived to be rather fun than work (conveniently both by Etsy and the crafters), social security is not an issue that has to be taken into consideration on the side of the company providing the infrastructure.

⁴Etsy charges a fee for listing an item (0.20 USD for listing an item for 4 months) as well as a fee on the sold item (3.5% on the sale price on Etsy) (Etsy 2013e) leading to sales of 525.6 million USD on Etsy in 2011 (Etsy 2013b).

Conclusion

Summing up, analyzing Etsy by focusing on (discursive) relations between humans, digital and virtual worlds, as well as different economic systems, Etsy is conceptualized as a space of overlapping spatial relations. Discursive spaces, physical spaces extending into digital spaces and vice versa, and spaces regulated by economic principles and power, all of them gendered in some way or another bring about the intricacy essential to Etsy.

Discursive spaces, home to beauty, love, and community, are opposed to "the artificiality and ugliness of most products out there", and engender crafting practices and rhetoric perfectly in sync with these concepts and ideals. Crafters draw on these discursively proliferated and well-established notions of the "forward-thinking" and "lovely" economic alternative on Etsy, arguing the motives for their crafting practices by relating to notions spread out in mission statements, Etsy blogs, etc. Most obviously, we deal with a self-referential system here.

Handmade things – emerging in the materiality of lived physical space – advance into global digital space when displayed in the online shop and are finally relocated in the physical space of someone else, somewhere else, and sometime else. Here the temporality of spatiality comes into play. Crafting practices and their materializations, rooted in the here and now, are adjusted to the *here* and *now* of somewhere and sometime else. Consequently, the crafter's here and now becomes itself the *there* and *then* as crafting practices become attuned to the temporality and spatiality of the other, the potential consumer.

In order to succeed within this alternative system, not only the know-how of crafting but to a much greater extent the adjustment to the global character of this venture is needed. Constant management of the self, development of adjusting to someone else's time-space, and self-improvement of staging-the-items-online skills are in demand. Similarly, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) speak of flexibility, creativity, and self-responsibility as catchwords of *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. With this in mind, selling craft items on Etsy – a kind of nonstandard work many women try to be able to make a living from – becomes a paradigmatic demonstration of what Etsy is originally trying to eschew: neoliberalism and capitalism themselves. The products sold on Etsy and their production process might differ from mass production and therefore appear as an alternative. However, the conditions under which these crafting practices take place, being governed by neoliberal principles that are thus extending their sphere of action into the (mostly) domestic realm, paint a different picture. From this standpoint, the alternative does not appear that alternative any more.

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