

Albert Borgmann

A Turn to Comprehension & Competence

6/21/12 DIY is a turn to comprehension and competence and away from ignorance and consumption. The ignorance I have in mind is ^{of} the unavoidable kind — how does your ~~computer~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ iPhone work? Yes, you push, touch, and slide. But why does that work? What makes the screen sensitive to touch and motion? Where do your movements summon pictures, music, and text from? Yes, from chips. But how does a chip work? And I'm just

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scratching the surface of these impenetrable and unintelligible structures.

Of course, there are the benefits of the opaque and concealed structures, the ease of calling up my favorite music, of getting the news, of contacting my friends. ~~It's sheer and unceasing~~ → The iPhone is a source of ~~rich~~ ~~of~~ ~~diverse~~ ~~and~~ ~~unnumbered~~ ^{of endless} pleasures. They're easy to enjoy and hard to resist. That kind of enjoyment is consumption.

Are there objects, other than iPhones, that

produce music? Consider my fellow
 Missonian, the violin maker Mark
 Hellingger. His major raw material is
 wood. He knows ^{its origin, its} ~~where it comes from,~~
~~what species,~~ ^{and} ~~what age,~~ ^{and} ~~what~~ grain.
 He shapes it mostly by hand, glues the
 pieces together, varnishes the thing,
 strings it. When ~~the violin~~
 he looks at the finished violin, he
 understands it all the way down,
 and he sees a monument to his
 competence.

6/25/12

Whether anything like a comprehension
 of the entire world is possible today,
 I'm not sure; and anyone's competence

has to be limited. And yet we can
 be sure that the circumscribed comprehen-
 sion and competence of DIY are
 immensely valuable - they circumscribe
 the good life in a culture of ignorance
 and consumption. More than that,
 they reveal that underneath and
 amidst the forbidding structures and
 slick commodities of the technological
 culture there is ~~still~~ an engaging
 and ennobling world.

Still ~~the~~ its limits cast a shadow
 on DIY. If it's so beneficial, is
 it enough that you and I and
 she and he each lives in their own
 little wholesome world? What fills

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me with great sorrow, and not just
me, I'm sure, is the fact that the
victims of DIY are found in so many
little worlds, and yet they fail to
have a collective effect on the
world at large that nationally and
globally is dominated by the forces
of commodification and its vaguely
sensed consequences of growing
incomprehension & incompetence.

Consider these movements: Voluntary
simplicity, farmers markets, the
hospice movement, the new
urbanism, ... All of them are
devoted to recovering within their

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compass a measure of understanding
and skill. But politically they
count for very little. They don't
converge & cooperate to take on
~~the~~ the deeply flawed mainstream
culture.

~~So~~

So that has to be next - recognizing
the diaspora of ~~the~~ good people and of
the good life, joining together,
and making a difference in
electoral politics.