Ritual, craft and camping: How the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift tried to re-make the world  
An interview with Annebella Pollen  

This is a transcript of an interview that took place in July 2016 with Andrew Sleigh, co-founder of Maker Assembly. The interview was published on 1 August 2016 and can be found at https://medium.com/maker-assembly/kindred-of-the-kibbo-kift-7943a4c095fc#.cunmdf6gf

Boys and men in the Touching of the Totems rite, Althing, 1925. © Kibbo Kift Foundation, courtesy of London School of Economics Library

If you had ventured out onto the downs of southern England during the 1920s, you might have crossed paths with a group of extravagantly-clad youngsters, bearing totems, and carrying on their backs hand-made tents and simple camping equipment. At their head, you might have seen their leader, White Fox, otherwise known as John Hargrave, who along with a group of like-minded pacifists, disgruntled ex-Scouts and woodcrafters set out to create a new social movement based on the principles of a healthy outdoor life, self-reliance, handcraft, and peaceful fraternity. They were the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift.
The movement was short-lived, and they never had more than a few hundred members, but their ambitions were global, and their extraordinary rituals, costumes and handcrafted objects, not to mention their charismatic front man, ensured their influence would continue on to today, and likely far beyond. A splinter group of the Kindred went on to become the Woodcraft Folk, an alternative scout-style organisation still operating today. By the late 1920s and 1930s, Hargrave had shifted his focus to campaigning for social credit, a theory of monetary reform which enjoys renewed interest today in the form of basic income. And thanks to Hargrave’s understanding of the power of images (he was an artist and an ad man by profession), we have a rich visual archive, which has inspired contemporary makers, students of fashion, woodcrafters and revolutionaries.

In 2015, the design historian and researcher Annebella Pollen wrote a beautiful, heavily-illustrated book *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* which tells the little-known story of Hargrave and Kibbo Kift, and brings to light, for the first time, the incredible archive of images and objects which they created during their brief existence. In August, she’s speaking at Maker Assembly in Sheffield. Ahead of that talk, I caught up with her to find out what makers today can learn from this remarkable, iconoclastic group.

*Photo: Angus McBean. Body of Gleemen and Gleemaidens, Gleemote, 1929. Courtesy of Tim Turner*
At first glance, Kibbo Kift look might like a group of outdoor types who liked dressing up in fanciful costume. But their goals were audacious, and global in scope. When founded in 1920, they were committed to, amongst other things: “bringing about an international educational policy, international freedom of trade, an international currency system, the abolition of secret treaties and the establishment of a World Council, including 'every civilised and primitive nation or race'”. It’s hard to imagine a craft movement today setting out such a far-reaching agenda, so I asked Pollen if there were factors in play at the time that created the conditions for such a movement to emerge:

“I do think it is important to remember the historical context for the emergence of Kibbo Kift. They were explicitly shaped by the devastating effects of the Great War (in which the founder, John Hargrave, had served as a front-line stretcher-bearer). First-hand experience of scenes of large-scale slaughter alongside the broader cultural effects of the devastation on everyday life led many to develop radical solutions for change. Some historians have referred to the immediate post-war years as a 'morbid age' where the prospect of complete cultural and social collapse was at the forefront of many people's minds. This explains, I think, how Kibbo Kift could have the audacity to propose such an all-encompassing scheme for world change. Hargrave and many others felt that any schemes for change that didn't address all the social, cultural and economic issues at once would be half-hearted in such end-times. The era was also an age of movements and manifestos, whether in politics (think of the all-encompassing aims of the League of Nations) or art (think of the rallying cries of any number of modern movements, from Italian Futurism to Dada).”

So where has the action gone today? Where are the making, art or craft-based movements that call for change on such scale, and have at least proposed a programme to achieve it?

“One could argue that there isn't the same level of urgency underpinning today's social and cultural reform movements compared to those established in and around the years of the First World War; the scale of that crisis necessarily explains the search for major solutions. Among twenty-first century makers and art practitioners who would argue that we are on the brink of crisis, whether this be global terrorism or climate change, I think few would suggest that a single group or one set of methods holds all the solutions; this would suggest something rather delusional and messianic. I also think that the various revolutions and political conflicts of the last century, especially when led by visionary leaders with singular purpose, have taught us valuable lessons about what can go wrong in schemes that attempt to design a whole new world from scratch.
“Interestingly, there's been something of a recent revival of interest in manifestos among art and design groups - think of the assertions of The Stuckists, for example, or Grayson Perry's Red Alan Manifesto. Where they do exist, however, they tend to be flamboyantly provocative (and usually ironic).”

Photo: Angus McBean. John Hargrave as White Fox Spirit Chief with children at Dexter Fam Tribal Training Camp II, 1928. Courtesy of Tim Turner

Anyone who’s trying to build a popular movement for change wants to know how movements gain traction. And in particular, how distributed movements, built on principles of openness and egalitarianism can achieve this. When I spoke with the technology writer Kevin Kelly about this recently, he suggested that when they do succeed, it is in large part thanks to maniacal leadership. He cited Linus Torvalds and the Linux open source operating system as a case in point. If true, this is troubling for those involved in attempts to create more equitable or distributed systems of technology. It suggests that such progressive movements may fail without a strong, hierarchical leadership, which to some extent must cut against any egalitarian programme.
Reading about John Hargrave in Pollen’s book, this thought resonated. He clearly had strong opinions, wild ambitions, and a knowledge of the tools needed to recruit people to his cause. So was Kibbo Kift under the control of one (perhaps benevolent) leader? Was it a personality cult? If so, to what extent did it succeed in growing a wider support base and sharing ownership through its membership?

“We must always remember that Kibbo Kift was a very, very small organisation with only a couple of thousand members and supporters across the whole of its life, and only a few hundred at any one time. Although it had the endorsement of many high-profile figures in politics, art and literature, it never really had mainstream appeal and it tended to confuse people with its wild claims and disparate ambitions and outlandish look in the 1920s, just as it does now. As such, I think it could only have ever been a minority oppositional movement. Hargrave realised this and attempted many reinventions for the organisation throughout its duration, latterly attempting to drop all antiquarian and artistic elements in the 1930s in order to become a single issue campaign group for economic reform (The Green Shirts). This was an attempt to form a mass movement - although it didn’t ever get there - in recognition that the arcane language and style and even name of Kibbo Kift tended to attract accusations of cultishness.

“I’d hesitate to call Kibbo Kift a cult. I certainly wouldn’t describe Hargrave as ‘maniacal’ although I do think he could be deluded about the potential of his organisation and he seems to me to have become increasingly unhinged in the 1930s. There was no brainwashing and no coercion, but there certainly were elements which make a twenty-first century observer uneasy. One of these was Hargrave’s belief in the power of unelected leadership. Kibbo Kift was originally collectively founded by a council of seven, and was originally to be a federation of allied groups with shared interests in outdoor life, crafts, and social reform. Hargrave was an elected head initially but he was increasingly uncomfortable at the possibility that his plans - for what was really his idea - risked being overturned by voting members. This was particularly the case in the early years when the group was populated by many socialist and pacifist former scouts who had left Baden-Powell’s organisation to follow him. Following a bitter dispute, these democratically-minded members walked out, leaving a much smaller group who loyally supported Hargrave as a singular visionary. (Those who left went on to found the more democratically-run outdoor youth group, Woodcraft Folk, which continues in the pink of health to this day.) This was an era, of course, which saw the rise of political dictators based on similar ideologies of all-powerful leadership so we can see with hindsight where these kinds of ideas might have ended up.
“Many would argue that iconoclasts and innovators, whether in art or industry, are often singular personalities who challenge authority and 'dare to dream'. I'm a bit sceptical about this, as the hard work of getting ideas realised is almost always a team effort and even visionaries are supported by others' inspirations and challenges to their thinking. So often these figures are divisive and can sometimes steal credit for ideas that come out of collective practice; you see it all the time in film-making and in architecture, where a singular auteur will will be given credit for the work of many hands. I don’t doubt that exactly the same dynamic can be found in new technology industries. Michael Petry's book *The Art of Not Making* shows how this division of labour and credit works in relation to artists and artisans in the twenty-first century. Western culture is still often enamoured with ideas of geniuses and so much of history attributes cultural change to singular ‘great men’ when this is not the whole picture.”

*Kinswomen dancing, c. 1924. © Kibbo Kift Foundation, courtesy of LSE Library*

The Kibbo Kift made effective use of rituals, ritual objects, and costume to create an identity, and give their ideas coherence and power. In fact, the visual record they left behind would be considerably less impressive, if it weren’t for this focus.
“The flamboyant aspect of Kibbo Kift, and their use of the visual, especially in terms of costume, is certainly one of their most intriguing aspects. It is also one of the things that makes them look ahead of their time, because they combine an almost proto-performance art style with the developing visual language of 1920s cutting-edge design and public spectacle. Hargrave and some other Kinsfolk worked in advertising so they were aware of the new psychology of mass-persuasion and also of the immediacy of imagery in communication. Some members were also interested in mysticism and world religion so the use of symbolism was also seen to have potential magical effects.”

With a few exceptions, such as the quasi-nostalgic garb of bushcrafters or the steampunk community, I suggested that today’s craft and social movements seem to take on a more casual approach. Pollen disagrees:

“Contrary to what you have said, I think there's actually been a remarkable renaissance of interest in using visual wit and arresting imagery in campaigns for causes. The kinds of banners that can be found in very recent years on protest marches in Britain, whether against austerity or student loans, for example, are often very sophisticated and subversive, and protest movements around the world now deploy innovative visual methods that constitute a new political aesthetic. The recent exhibition, Disobedient Objects, at the V&A showcased the powerful uses of sometimes subtle and tangential imagery, from badges and defaced banknotes to embroidery and ceramics, which have been used to communicate resistance. The need to create visual spectacles that can circulate quickly on social media has also compelled some dramatic campaigns, whether it is the bare-breasted protests of Femen and Slutwalk or the uncompromising tactics against the fur trade by PETA. This is closely integrated into practices of craftivism and guerrilla gardening and so on.

“There’s also been a renaissance of interest in ritual, paganism and the shamanic – even if only as motifs - in crafts practice and across the arts more broadly. This summer I’m working with some artists at Supernormal Festival, to recreate Kibbo Kift spirit masks and rituals in a specially built Wood Henge structure. Performance art groups such as AAS and Plastique Fantastique have drawn on Kibbo Kift ideas and imagery for inspiration, as have contemporary fashion designers, Liam Hodges and Mary Maggs, and graphic designers including Supermundane. The enthusiasm that has recently arisen in what is called Folk Horror – seen across literature, making and film – has also corralled interest in the British countryside and the occult (in its broadest sense). Kibbo Kift have been retrospectively embraced as a part of this.”
It’s evident from the archive of totems, costumes and marching regalia that craft was an important practice to Kibbo Kift. So what was the value they saw in making?

“Some of Kibbo Kift’s ideas about craft are fairly traditional. They asserted that craft provides skill and self-improvement, that it restores dignity and beauty in a world of mass-manufacturing and mechanised labour; that it provides a connection to a mythical past and to a kind of romanticised ‘tribal wisdom’. Kinsfolk – and there were many creative makers in the organisation, not just Hargrave - saw it as restorative and expressive but it was also more than this. Hargrave in particular argued for craft as a form of discipline rather than a therapeutic ‘sploshing out’ of self; it was something that had to be struggled through. He encouraged original thinking and was dismissive of copyist practices; in this sense craft was challenging and demanding, not merely today’s colouring-in for relaxation. The range of techniques and materials encouraged were extensive, from calligraphy, leatherwork, woodcarving and weaving to embroidery, photography, ceramics and printing. Kibbo Kift practitioners saw craft as a way of getting to the essence of experience and argued for the power of working with authentic raw materials. Craft was also essential to survival; it was not merely decorative but a vital, almost animal, skill.”
Hargrave, like John Ruskin and William Morris before him, tried to find a way for makers to operate in a world of mechanised production. Hargrave believed that craft was both a valuable way of living that we had lost in the past, and a vital tool to survive – and thrive – today. But he went further, seeming to suggest that Kibbo Kift were preparing for a future after the fall of civilisation, where their outdoor skills and self-reliance would become valuable assets.

Kibbo Kift looked both to the past and the future, but did they hold a coherent position that could suggest a viable response to an industrial (or post-industrial) society?

“Kibbo Kift absolutely were expecting civilisation to collapse and they were preparing for the world to follow. For me, what makes them interesting is that they combined futurist ideas fairly seamlessly with fantasies of the past (myths of Robin Hood, courtly archery contests and interests in archaeology). They were informed by utopian literature, science fiction, new thinking in psychology and new discoveries in science, the latest ideas in art, design, literature and advertising, and progressive practices in education and health including sex education and birth control. Members were expected to read widely and keep abreast of developments across a range of disciplines as well as studying history. At the same time, however, they understood that intellectualism had its limits; these new ideas needed to be combined with ancient knowledge and enduring practices. Hargrave - himself modestly educated - felt that a PhD held little value if you couldn’t build a fire and a shelter from scratch with the most basic resources. These were seen as timeless values.

“In a way, Kibbo Kift’s retrofuturist ambitions remind me of the imagined scenarios of post-apocalyptic literature such as Russell Hoban’s Riddley Walker or Tom James’ cult fanzine, A Future Manual: A DIY Guide for the Aspiring Survivor. Here the world they imagine contains fragments of the past but with a changed meaning for a new future. Kibbo Kift’s imagined future was surprisingly high-tech, in fact. There would be factories and robots doing all the mechanised labour and mass-electrification co-existing alongside handicrafts and traditional pursuits.

“They patently didn’t have a viable scheme for any of this! They had no money and tiny numbers and limited influence. They didn’t, however, let such small things stop them from imagining a better world. It could be argued that this is their lasting legacy. They
didn’t succeed in making the world they designed but they left us comprehensive plans should others decide to follow in their wake.

“In an age when we are still seeking solutions for social, cultural and political problems, their radical pathbreaking still resonates.”

Annebella will be speaking about Kibbo Kift at Maker Assembly in Sheffield on 31 August.