How to conceptualise the amateur...

... speaking within my own research interest in amateur craft.

1. The concept amateur, for me, does not represent a person or a group of people (amateurs) but a time-space state, or zone, that we all pass in and out of. It is not defined by poor skill, but by autonomy, or the closest thing to it in the capitalist everyday.

In addition, amateur craft requires what is afforded by leisure and modern capitalism, in that it requires social-economic conditions where people have access to surplus time and surplus income. It is thus reliant on these conditions. Amateur craft is limited by tooling – dependent on the stationary and growth in infrastructures of tooling from the late eighteenth century onwards that allow the non-expert to practice something – by space – it has to take place around other more critical functions of everyday life – and by time – it is a practice that usually takes place at evenings and weekends (spare time.)

French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s notion of ‘differential space’ is particularly useful to describe amateur craft. Something that is different to the everyday, yet simultaneously both relies on it and feeds back into it with the potential to change the way that everyday is conceptualised and lived.

2. Amateur making is by definition productive. Quite emphatically, you end up with a thing that often lies somewhere between exchange value, gift value and aesthetic value. The object ends up existing in networks despite being produced in ‘alternative’ or ‘autonomous’ sites and times.

3. The spaces that amateurs use include those under-represented in the literature. Sheds, backyards, one’s lap, the foldable carpet bench, places well served by the concept design historian Cheryl Buckley mentioned as ‘fragmented spaces’.

4. Amateur craft not a new thing. It has a long history that we can work from. Micro-history might be a suitable methodology for accounting for this past.

5. The agency of the amateur. Often it is important to stay small, ambiguous and private if you want to maintain the autonomy of amateur practice. The ‘agency’ of the amateur if difficult to harness – you cannot impress a politics on this vast array of making. In addition you cannot simply ‘use’ amateurs for whatever political, research, or design ends without serious consideration of the following:
   a. That amateur crafts have structures of self-organisation with histories of their own, infrastructures, social codes, norms and expectations. (London’s Model Railway Club’s history is over 100 years old.)
   b. The privacy of amateur craft. Sometimes it is okay to leave things in the workshop/shed.
   c. Recognition of the different attitude to critique and political representation.
d. Recognition of the possible dissonance between the politics, or more broadly the intentions, of the subject of amateur craft studies (as it were) and the researcher.

The difficulty of encountering and collaborating with amateurs is a challenge. In my book *Amateur Craft* I study the subject mainly from one step remove: the traces, objects, and literature left behind by amateur activities and resources aimed for amateurs (of which there is a vast quantity).