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What's in a Name

The marginalisation of craft in contemporary society

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During recent discussions with makers regarding the submission of work for a forthcoming exhibition, concerns were raised about the use of the word 'craft' in promotion and publicity material. This was not surprising, considering the widely held notion that craft has always had a marginal status in contemporary society. In outlining the conventional historiography of craft in the nineteenth century, Glenn Adamson, in *The Invention of Craft*, cites the belief of William Morris and his followers that 'handwork could only be marginal within a capitalist economy.'¹ Through the lens of modernism, Henrik Most suggests, 'craft has generally ranked on the bottom rung of the ladder of form, relegated to the subservient existence in the shadow of celebrated design.'² In an education context, James H. Sanders has described how 'craft and its aesthetic experience, grounded in human need, are largely trivialised in primary and secondary education as lesser art.'³ What is surprising, however, is the realisation that craft's marginalisation, and resulting low self-esteem, appears to emanate largely from within its own circle.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, it seems as if the establishment, educators and even practitioners have been queuing up to disassociate themselves from craft. In 2002 the American Craft Museum, formerly the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, changed its name to the Museum of Arts and Design. On the American Craft Council's website today we are told that this reflected 'the new position of craft and its integration with the other disciplines.'⁴ International fairs such as *Sofa*, *the Annual Sculptural Objects and Functional Art and Design Fair*, and *COLLECT, the international Art Fair for Contemporary Objects*, which feature objects by the world's leading makers, shy away from using the word 'craft' to promote themselves and their events. Furthermore, the galleries that exhibit at these fairs provide us with a bewildering array of terms to describe the work they represent. It seems that crafts, according to *The New York Times* in 2001, 'have been masquerading for art lovers under labels like functional...studio art and contemporary decorative arts' for many years.⁵

In a debate at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2012, Sir Christopher Frayling commented that 'craft courses at undergraduate level are an endangered species'⁶ⁿ¹ while, in an article in *The Times* in 2006, Grayson Perry, 2003 Turner Prize winner, commented that while he loved and admired craftsmanship, craft had become a concept that he did 'not always want to be identified with'.⁷

According to Paul Greenhalgh 'craft has always been a messy word' and for centuries was used in 'contexts that had nothing to do with creative artistic practice of any kind.'⁸ When makers were recently invited to share their views on the subject,

a reticence to use the word 'craft' in relation to their work was apparent. This was largely due to perceived negative connotations among the public, perpetuated mainly through lack of understanding and clarity, but also through the mainstream media who, as one maker suggests, continue to imply that an 'adversarial relationship exists between fine art and craft which is detrimental to the image of craft as a confident art form in its own right.'⁹ This is in addition, of course, to the media's propensity to engage in word plays on the word 'craft' in headline writing. Thus readers are treated to phrases such as 'Crafty business', over an interesting article on Arts and Crafts inspired houses and garden in England and 'The crafty



way to see Ireland', over an informative article on workshops and studios throughout Ireland.¹⁰ The continued inclusion of craft in the interior and home sections of newspapers and magazines, as opposed to the arts and culture section, was also mentioned. However it can be argued that the media are simply reporting what they have been given and, apart from our inability to control headline writers, it is our ineffectiveness to clearly state the case for craft that has resulted in the scarcity of informed reporting.

In 1939, *Fortune* magazine ran an article on ceramics entitled 'The art with an inferiority complex'.¹¹¹² In 2007 Gagosian Gallery in New York held a major exhibition of work by Marc Newson and when interviewed about the event Larry Gagosian was asked 'is design the new art?' He responded that design did not need art to give it importance. In recounting this story in an essay entitled 'How Envy Killed the Crafts' Garth Clark comments 'if only craft had the same confidence.'¹² It appears that the issue of craft's 'inferiority' has been around for a long time. Nowadays, one of the main reasons most often cited is the perceived lack of theoretical discourse which, when applied to art, has provided the framework to transform it from object to concept. It is suggested that it is the absence of this framework in craft, which helps explain its low prestige and, consequently, its inability to overturn what fine art critic Donald Kuspit sees as a 'fixed hierarchy of the arts, a hierarchy in which fine art sits at the top.'¹³

Craft certainly needs theoretical discourse, but one that it develops itself, and that is faithful to its own tradition and history. To assert its relevance and value in contemporary society, it seems that craft needs to understand, and to trust, its multi-layered self.

Craft's need to acquire a theoretical structure has resulted in its desire to emulate fine art and a belief that, in doing this, it will flourish. But writers and critics have, in fact, argued that the opposite is true. In urging ceramicists to 'know themselves' and 'to understand ceramics strengths and values', Janet Koplos has suggested that 'lusting after equality with art has, in fact, been destructive to crafts.'¹⁴ Garth Clark took this a step further, arguing that craftspeople's ambition to be accepted as artists was worse than quixotic; it has led to their downfall and, 'compared to art and design, craft is so marginalised that it is practically irrelevant.'¹⁵ However, critic Glenn Brown's assertion that 'the failure to develop a body of



theory that is faithful to the craft tradition, yet effectively asserts the contemporary relevance of craft practice, has left craft consciousness vulnerable to pejorative stereotyping' may provide a greater understanding of the problem.¹⁶ Craft certainly needs theoretical discourse, but one that it develops itself, and that is faithful to its own tradition and history. To assert its relevance and value in contemporary society, it seems that craft needs to understand, and to trust, its multi-layered self.

There is no doubt that, in discussions on craft, focus on material and process and the challenges of bringing an object into existence prevail. In *The Principles of Art*, R. G. Collingwood suggests that the chief characteristics of craft include a distinction between means and end; that is, between planning, execution and raw material and finished product.¹⁷ ⁿ³ However, does a focus on material and technique undermine craft and lessen



its value? After all, material is integral to craft and the field is both categorized and identified by it. A quick review of recent essays in craft publications, websites and other media, reveals a focus on material and process when writing on craft, but there is also description, biography and, in most cases, theoretical discourse. For ceramist Sara Flynn, for instance, the theoretical is expressed through the medium, and while the emphasis of her work lies in resolving questions about form, she also has a profound interest in the notion of space: how it exists all around us and how it is contained and held within her vessels.¹⁸ In discussing his work, Jack Doherty reflects on the fluidity of the material and the physicality of making. However, he also characterises his pots as 'figurative pieces; each with its own character, particular emotional range and response'.¹⁹



Some commentators also take the view that increased professionalism in the sector has resulted in the marginalisation, or worse, of traditional crafts which have not embraced a contemporary aesthetic. In an essay for an exhibition entitled *Modern Languages*, which explores the relationship between indigenous Irish craft and contemporary international creative practices, writer and craft historian Eleanor Flegg discusses how activities once undertaken within a simple rural lifestyle have now become part of contemporary art practice.

'Basketry, for example, has been transformed almost effortlessly and without losing its traditional

*forms...The work of the saddler and the musical instrument maker has no need to reincarnate as expressive art; it is still in demand for its original use. Other crafts have struggled. Where is the twenty-first century incarnation of the cast iron pot or the cooper's barrel?'*²⁰

Indeed some crafts have fared better than others. But is it also an inability to embrace new technology and collaborate, while continuing to use age-old techniques, skills and materials that has resulted in the marginalisation and ultimate decline of some traditional crafts? In Birmingham, Westley Richards & Co. has been making bespoke

sporting guns since 1812. In the nineteenth century, the company expanded into press tools for manufacturing, which brought about a partnership between craft and engineering. In 1998, the engineering department began trading as a separate entity and moved into a new factory complex where it continues to make parts for engineering. It is an image, suggests Marilyn Zapf, that 'powerfully demonstrates the interwoven nature of crafts and industry.' Zapf writes that while the two companies' products and clientele are now as different as their working environments, 'closer inspection shows that the craftsmen at each work in remarkable similar ways. Both sets of artisans deploy the highest levels of hand skills to craft the seamless functioning of their products' ²¹

Craft skills, which include knowledge of material and technique, are the basis of many manufacturing techniques. But there are many instances today where craft is collaborating not only with technology and industry, but also with art and design. The recent exhibition *Modern Makers*, at Chatsworth House, aims to challenge perceptions about the role of contemporary crafts in a historic setting. The work 'in its seriousness, content, and skill in the making, can be claimed simultaneously by the fine art, design and craft worlds'.²² In 2011 the V&A and the Crafts Council celebrated the role of making in *The Power of Making*. In discussing the exhibition, guest curator Daniel Charny explores both traditional forms of making and those that are innovative concluding

that 'both are crucially important...but they serve different purposes'.^{23 n4} In 2008 an exhibition at the V&A, entitled *Out of the Ordinary: Spectacular Craft*, brought together the work of eight contemporary artists who, while embracing both traditional and new technologies, place craft at the center of their practice.^{24 n5} This multidisciplinary approach reflects the reality for many of today's internationally successful makers who continue to use a craft vocabulary but clearly speak many languages. Some, like Joseph Walsh, whose work is included in the Mint Museum's contemporary craft collection, simply wish to avoid any categorisation and just want the freedom to create.

Others, like Simon Hasan, work in the territory between ancient crafts processes and industrial design. Combining techniques and materials from these two 'contradictory worlds' ⁿ⁶, Hasan's collections of leather vases and furniture have received attention for their innovative use of the medieval armour-making technique, *Cuir Bouilli*. In *The Nature of Art and Workmanship* David Pye explores the meaning of skill, its relationship to design and manufacture and proposes a new theory of making based on the concept of good workmanship. Pye suggests that 'the word craft is a thought preventor'.²⁵ For those who continue to successfully embody craft sensibilities in their studio practice, this appears not to be the case.

Today, international fairs such as *Sofa* and *COLLECT* may not use the word 'craft' in the title but anyone attending these events can clearly see that this is



work which, for the most part, is rooted in the craft aesthetic. Institutions such as the Museum of Art and Design may not have the word 'craft' over the door but they continue to bring the work of contemporary makers to the wider public. The exhibition *Against the Grain: Wood in Contemporary Art, Craft and Design*, part of the museum's ongoing 'Materials & Process' series, explores some of the most cutting-edge conceptual and technical trends in woodworking today, while individuals such as Janice Blackburn, who has curated numerous shows for Sotheby's, continues to be a passionate advocate for craft and refuses to believe that it is marginalised. According to Grant Gibson in a 2011 interview with Blackburn: 'She thinks it [craft] can be absolutely central to metropolitan culture, and she's gone and told people about it.'²⁶



As we continue to explore the process of craft in contemporary culture and the engagement of the maker with material and making, perhaps it's time for those within craft itself to stop focusing on the use, or misuse, of the word. Time to stop obsessing about boundaries and distinctions, labels and interpretations. Perhaps it's time to just unapologetically state the case for craft. Because, as curator Brian Kennedy has pointed out, 'while we engage unduly in the negative, we are failing to embrace the positive.'²⁷ We are also unable to really understand craft and define its potential and its domain. Until then it will remain at the margin, unable to establish or articulate a role for itself in contemporary society.

I'll leave the final word on the matter to Irish wood turner Roger Bennett, who exhibited in the 2005 exhibition *Forty Shades of Green*, curated by Brian Kennedy. In his catalogue statement Bennett writes:

'the word craft evokes such a mass of knots and tangled grain that it should be avoided as much as possible. On the one hand we want the craftsperson to be the embodiment of pre-industrial values, cheerfully preserving the purity of traditional techniques and practices; on the other, we look for individuality and daring originality. We argue endlessly about status, about the differences between craft and fine art and the gaps between the manual and the mechanical; and we squabble about the worthiness of the functional as opposed to the preciousness of the non-functional.

I would love to be able to put the word on my lathe and try to reduce it to shapely core values; good design, skill, beauty...But it would probably split before I could finish'.²⁸

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27. Brian Kennedy, email interview, 5 September 2013
28. Bennett, R. (2005), in *Forty Shades of Green*. Clonmel: Coracle Press, p. 39

Notes

- n1. Sir Christopher Frayling was speaking at a debate organised by the Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust entitled *Art Craft and Design: cross-overs and boundaries in the 21st Century*. His comments were in response to a presentation by bookbinder Tracy Rowledge who spoke on the lack of full-time courses in pure bookbinding in the UK.
- n2. In an essay in *The Craft Reader* titled 'How Envy Killed the Crafts' Garth Clark discusses crafts 'unhappy, contentious relationship with the fine arts' referring to a 1939 survey of ceramics in *Fortune* magazine with the title 'The art with an inferior complex'.
- n3. Without claiming that these features together exhaust the notion of craft, Collingwood suggests 'that where most of them are absent from a certain activity that activity is not a craft'.
- n4. In a text from an online article 'About Making', written to accompany the exhibition, Charney describes traditional making as having been

accumulated over generations, passed down from person to person and learned through repetition while innovative making was described as being 'less rehearsed...more exploratory with the potential to open up dramatic new directions'.

n5. On their website the V&A describe the exhibition as bringing 'together the work of eight contemporary artists who place craft at the heart of their practice...Collectively these artists use a diverse range of traditional and new technologies... Working with exceptional skill and attention to detail, they use ordinary materials – paper, thread, dust and nails – to make works that are both intricate and large in scale...Together, these eight artists suggest new directions for the handmade in the 21st century. They have found ways to transform the ordinary into artworks that are truly extraordinary.'

n6. Simon Hasan's website describes his work as being 'imbued with a richness and texture borne from the combined use of techniques and materials from these two contradictory worlds.' <http://www.simonhasan.com>

Images

1. Jack Doherty, *Group of Vessels*, 2013, porcelain. Photo Rebecca Peters. Image courtesy Jack Doherty

2. Sara Flynn, *Gesture Vessels*, 2013, porcelain. Photo Stefan Syrowatka. Image courtesy Sara Flynn

3. Jack Doherty, *Guardian Vessel*, 2013, porcelain. Photo Rebecca Peters. Image courtesy Jack Doherty

4. Joseph Walsh, *Enignum Motion*, 2010, Olive Ash. Photo Andrew Bradley. Image courtesy Joseph Walsh Studio

5. Simon Hasan, *Twist Pendant Lamp*, 2012, boiled leather, brass, electrical fittings. Image courtesy Simon Hasan

6. Westley Richards and Co. Image courtesy Westley Richards and Co.