

***Thinking Through Craft.* Glenn Adamson. New York: Berg, 2007. 209 pp.**

***The Journal of Modern Craft.* A triannual journal published by Berg.\***

Reviewed by Jane Webb

Glenn Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft* is a thoughtful, exciting, and well-written book that touches on so many interesting ideas concerning craft that if one were to fully explore each concept in turn, entire worlds of scholarship would be opened up. The author explains that the book was written in "the spirit of instigation," (p. 169) and its agenda for future scholarship is the overt plan for the other editorial work of Adamson's—*The Journal of Modern Craft*—launched simultaneously with the book. There is a handing over of the philosophical baton between the texts via Simon Starling, who features at the end of Adamson's book and is then the subject for Tag Gronberg's article in Volume 1 of the journal, followed by the words of the artist himself.

One senses that the breadth and agility of ideas evident in *Thinking Through Craft* is the result of much time spent ruminating. This impression comes from the book being concerned more with resolving the philosophical problems in trying to pin down a coherent and useful sense of "craft," than providing any systematic survey. Craft is "a moving target," (p. 75) suggests Adamson, and in response, he devises five plans of attack in the form of themed essays. The first three explore philosophical approaches to considering craft as the supplemental, materials and skill, while the latter dwell more specifically on the cultural associations of craft—the "Pastoral" and "Amateur."

What is immediately striking for those interested in the crafts is that these essays are not strictly about craft in the way that one might expect. Indeed, in its very construction, the book reveals an indebtedness to the freedom from the value-laden constraints of traditional art and design history created by the emergence of material culture from anthropology. For the author, craft is a series of philosophical positions and actions, important despite and because of its often culturally and institutionally lowly position. Thus Adamson's concept of craft oscillates between a generalized sense of action and idea and a practice that is culturally labeled, resulting in a book that closely aligns discussion of craft with fine art. Indeed this is both the book's strength and perhaps what might be perceived as its weakness, in that it could be considered to be a text about fine art, rather than craft. Yet this would miss Adamson's point that craft has played the role of other to fine art in such important ways that it is most usefully discussed in those terms.

The first essay provides the outlining of this relationship and is where Adamson conflates Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the autonomy and power of an art work, i.e. that the "painting needs its frame at least as much as the frame needs the painting" (p. 13) with the idea that craft is like this supplemental frame. Adamson demonstrates that, though craft would appear to promote the practice of making, it is actually a setting aside of skill in favor of the objective in hand—its application or function—that is most common. This he suggests is like the denial of

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the frame's presence, yet as the actual frame makes the work of art what it is, he proposes that the very practice of craft offers a critique of the apparent autonomy of fine art. Such an argument in which dichotomies are dealt with as poles around which practice moves does not restrict Adamson but rather embodies the author's notion that "craft only exists in motion," (p. 4) and this motif is continued in the second essay, which concerns the frictions between the perceived visual/optical bias of fine art, and the challenge of the tactile/haptic of craft.

The fourth essay, "Pastoral," is the highlight of the book and explores the importance of the concept of authenticity and arcadia across both craft and fine art. "Amateur" offers an interesting consideration of amateurism through a brief but tantalizing discussion of hobbyist craft, which shifts into a dynamic exploration of feminism, via Robert Arneson's ceramics. But for me perhaps the most telling essay is that entitled "Skilled" and, as the third in the series, it is the fulcrum around which the others work.

"Skilled" offers a series of tableaux in which ideas surrounding skill emerge from the author's staged encounters between David Pye and Michael Baxandall, the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College, North Carolina, and Charles Jencks and Kenneth Frampton. It is, like the rest of the book, an extremely well-written chapter, but it prompted me to consider the entire enterprise of Adamson's book and journal in a different way. Perhaps my thoughts had been prompted by the end of the second essay, in which Adamson's comments on Dale Chihuly's work reminded me of the author's institutional context at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Once this thought had germinated, I read "Skilled" as a piece of theory about situated knowledge, very much itself situated within an institutional setting. This is not to denigrate the ideas in the essay, but rather to suggest that it, and Adamson's conclusion, made me also consider in particular the timing of the publications.

As Adamson points out in his conclusion, craft is booming as a cultural commodity. Yet ironically, this intellectual expansion is occurring at a time when an education in studio crafts, particularly ceramics, in institutions in Britain, is rapidly disappearing. The growth of discourse alongside the demise of traditional studio practice, makes Adamson's post-studio world in which a dedicated space for either art or craft production is "the pastoral idea of a protected space of retreat," (p. 167) most pertinent. Providing time and space for students has become economically unviable and puts a twist to the essay title "Skilled"—which could be read in a past tense.

"Skilled" did not let me forget that knowledge and ideas are often economically-driven and institutionalized and, despite the open and undogmatic introduction by the editors of *The Journal of Modern Craft*, I could not help dwelling on the title of the journal. To choose the term "modern craft" rather than "contemporary craft"—a phrase used by many craft practitioners in Britain—sets a clear distinction. This is certainly not at odds with the aims of the journal, which are, like *Thinking Through Craft*, to consider the philosophical notion of craft in a much broader context, as the editors point out. I am also in no way criticizing what I consider to be a truly inspiring book and an exciting new journal, I am simply thoughtful about not only the interiority of these texts but also their exteriority, i.e. their locations within an emerging cultural landscape that is forming, forging, and maybe also forcing a new type of craft practice to emerge.

*Jane Webb is a lecturer in Material Culture at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her doctoral research concerned early 19th century manufactures and she is also a writer on contemporary craft practice and practice-based research.*