

Conference: 'Craft History' (with the Crafts Study Centre)

University for the Creative Arts Farnham. 15 March 2017

The Crafts Study Centre is home to one of the great public collections of craft, comprising not only exemplar objects but also significant archives. The International Textile Research Centre places contemporary textiles in aesthetic, cultural and theoretical contexts, often setting out radical argument through exhibition practice. This is craft history written in the moment, interpreted through artefact. The combination of these elements can be seen as a narration of craft history written by the makers' themselves. They are the unmediated materials for critical discourse. The speakers were Glenn Adamson and Alison Britton as Keynotes with Liz Cooper, Rachel Johnston, Dr Stephen Knott, Dr Gail Baxter, Kimberley Chandler, Dr Colin O Dubhghaill who developed ideas around 'Britain's memory bank of craft' in the words of Glenn Adamson.

Abstracts

Dr. Glenn Adamson (Keynote)

Production Values: Narratives of Making in Contemporary Art

In recent decades, the production of fine art has become increasingly highly capitalized. Large scale, luxury materials, and outsourced fabrication have all been used to create distinction in a highly competitive market. In this talk, based on his book *Art in the Making* (co-authored with Julia Bryan-Wilson) Glenn Adamson will critique the politics of contemporary art production and offer some thoughts on the history and possible future of art making.

Rachel Johnston

Intertwined - Narrative Cloth

The Narrative Cloth project was a collaboration between Fine Art and History staff at the University of Chichester. The aim of the project was to make a series of material interpretations based on research by historian Dr Danae Tankard into the clothing of the 17th century rural poor and the Clothing Project based at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum.

The stories that Danae Tankard brings to life through her research are very human and identifiable. She uses inventories, court records and wills to form a 'dynamic view of clothing' in which a study of textile production and clothing forms the basis for understanding a period in social history. In her paper "A pair of grass green woollen stockings": the clothing of the rural poor in seventeenth century Sussex', Tankard relates the story of Elizabeth Coulstocke of Ditchling who was indicted in 1651 for the theft of one and three quarter pounds of wool. My response to this historical document and the themes of value in making, craft, personal identity and social dynamics that arose will be the focus of this paper.

I used spinning and textile techniques as a way of examining human experience, "The hand registers and measures the pulse of lived reality." (Pallasmaa, 2009) The interpretation of the Coulstocke story became a series of woven gloves interconnected by a series of threads. As the gloves were worn, they became shaped, the interconnecting tangle of yarn reflecting the chaos and uncertainty of the original account. A consideration of the tension and entanglement inherent in human relationships and the cooperation and restraint required in negotiating them, seemed as relevant now as it had been in Coulstocke's time.

Dr. Gail Baxter

Craft in Context(s)

'the radical potential of material culture, of concrete objects, of real things, of primary sources, is the endless possibility of rereading'.

– Hooper-Greenhill

Primary sources stand mute, untouched and unaltered by external readings; it is the readings of their meanings that are subject to change not the documents and objects themselves. The purpose and the point of craft history can be demonstrated by considering the multiplicity of readings which can be associated with craft objects. Such readings may challenge the intentions and ethics of the original makers or they may uphold and strengthen them. This paper will address such interpretations by considering historic handmade lace through a range of conceptual lenses.

Historically lace-making was largely undocumented as a craft practice but the material which was produced represents the materialisation of time, skill and labour. Lace can be understood as an expensive fabric which conveyed social status but it was also as a product which was manufactured and traded internationally and which drove innovation. Re-evaluating the history of lace as a craft object permits new histories to be formulated and tested. Consideration of issues such as class and changing morality permit lace to be understood as a unit of currency, which was traded at many levels of society. It also offers the possibility of exposing the darker side of lace which was at times an item on the smugglers most lucrative list and a regular target of thieves.

The paper will also consider how these histories can offer both inspiration and contextualisation for contemporary practice. The use of historical craft objects, such as lace, to raise contemporary issues including gender bias, child labour and working conditions in the textile trade demonstrates that these objects can be thought provoking as well as visually beautiful.

Dr. C oil n  Dubhghaill

Translation / interpretation in contemporary metalwork and jewellery

This paper addresses the transfer of traditional craft skills in contemporary metalwork and jewellery with a focus on the materials and processes of Japanese metalwork culture and their spread internationally.

The origins of Japanese metalworking can be traced from the arms and armour of the samurai, through to the production of export driven objet d'art of the Meiji era. Modern Japanese metalwork culture is characterised by the loose divide between the world of the *shokunin*, craftspeople working with and preserving traditional Japanese techniques, and the world of the contemporary design and concept led art school trained metalworkers and jewellers.

This Japanese metalwork culture has spread internationally beginning with the early transfer of knowledge through the writing of *oyatoi*, foreign advisors employed by the Japanese government during the Meiji era such as William Gowland and Raphael Pumpelly. Of particular interest to these experts was the wood-grained patterned metal called *mokume gane*.

The *mokume gane* process has its origins in 16th century Japanese metalwork, and has been used in the West since Tiffany & Co, and Christofle adopted the process in the 1870's, producing prize winning work for the international trade fairs. Research in the 1980's enabled the production of precious metal *mokume gane* jewellery and commercialisation of production, particularly for wedding and engagement rings.

An ongoing interdisciplinary project between material scientists and researchers from the jewellery and silversmithing field in Sheffield has led to the production of a new form of *mokume gane* using friction stir welding.

The friction stir process was invented in Cambridge in 1992 and is used in industries such as aerospace and shipbuilding. Friction stir welding simultaneously bonds and patterns, enabling large scale production of patterned composite sheet in a unique combination of modern technology and ancient process.

Liz Cooper

Valuing the Imperfect: the individual histories of crafted objects

Arising from exhibition projects in 2009 and 2015 around repair and damage, this paper is about research into the personal stories that exist around damaged objects, and how these stories alter individual perceptions of an object. The objects are hand crafted, sometimes by makers of significance such as Lucy Rie and Michael Cardew.

In craft we value the aestheticism of the individual maker and how their particular combination of learned and innate skill and technique, materials knowledge and eye-to-hand working creates a body of work that is assessed to be of great beauty and significance. Often the assessors are connoisseurs, collectors, writers, academics, peers and organisations. The status of the object acquired through its design and manufacture by a skilled and well-known maker, and this 'status' may be devalued if the object is subsequently damaged or simply worn through age and repeated usage.

But where an item may no longer be of value to the secondary auction market or the high-end collector, it may still have a great significance to the individual (or organisation) who owns or uses it, who treasures the damage as much as the object for the story that it tells about how that object fits into their lives or the journeys that it has been on. What is it that is held so dear about the object, if it is no longer perfect or looking exactly as it was when it left the maker's workshop? Who else has used or regarded it? Where has it been and what action or environment makes it appear as it is today?

The individual history of the bowl or teapot, the embroidery or rug, may have just as much value (or more) to the owner as the provenance. This presentation will focus on a handful of pieces like this, where the imperfections and the intimate history that they tell is what binds the owner or user to the piece, rather than any sense of financial worth, or even cultural status.

Dr. Stephen Knott

Out of Hand: Craft history's lessons for contemporary art and design

This paper mobilises various moments in craft history to make sense of, and provide a backstory to, developments in contemporary art and design. Use of the phrase 'out of hand' is deliberate; a response to the

critic who balks at the quick, unthinking marginalisation of craft history or its unfair characterisation in contemporary art and design discourse. I play on potential meanings of the phrase 'out of hand' to characterise two recent developments in art, craft and design practice, and how craft history provides an important and vital lens through which to understand them.

The first thematic strand presents designers working 'out of hand' – with machines and devices – in a manner that is still redolent of craft practice. Designers Anton Alvarez and Silo Studio both use adapted, engineered machines to produce their work: *The Thread Wrapping Machine* (2014) in the case of the former, used to create furniture joined together by string and glue, and a modified centrifugal contraption in the case of the latter that was used to create the *Newton's Bucket* series (2014). Both practices can be situated as manifestations of David Pye's 1970s conceptualisation of 'diversity,' practices that imbue machinery's tendency for certain output with the risk associated with hand production. These works also relate to the practice of augmenting and tinkering with machines and offer potential insights into our broader cultural understanding of technology and industry.

Second, I will explore recent participatory projects whereby authority, agency, and, to an extent, control passes 'out of the hands of' the artist-choreographer to collaborator-participant. I situate the recent projects of ceramicist Clare Twomey and textile artist Hannah Leighton Boyce alongside the Turner Prize winners of 2015, Assemble, and their work with a Community Land Trust (CLT) in Toxteth, South Liverpool to set up a production space: *Granby Workshop*. A reading of Clare Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012) will help establish what making *does* to projects where authors cede something of their labour into broader networks of production.

Francine Norris

Defining Craft – West Dean 1971

The paper explores the development of craft education at West Dean College in West Sussex. Opened in 1971, this small privately funded institution was reliant on offering a distinct alternative to the public sector art schools of the time. As such, its particular and sometimes idiosyncratic approach, in addition to being interesting in its own right, has a wider significance in shedding light on the norms and thinking of the educational mainstream.

The College was founded by poet and Surrealist patron Edward James with the intention of spreading culture and preserving knowledge through the teaching of crafts. James's conception of craft was influenced by his own classical education in the early twentieth century and later specifically by the writings of Aldous Huxley in the late 1930's. He was also committed to preserving his father's aesthetics and values through protecting the future of his collection, house and estate at West Dean. But by the 1960's, James was spending most of his time in Mexico constructing the Surrealist architectural structures at Las Pozas and so the project, thirty years on, of turning the college into a reality fell to someone else. James's clarity of vision and intent for West Dean was not entirely lost but certainly translated.

Alison Britton (Keynote)

What Kind of History is an Exhibition?

In this short lecture Alison Britton will discuss the way in which a selection of objects, historic or contemporary, although seen in a temporary exhibition context, can still in the long run contribute to the retrospective understanding of the history and culture of craft.

The longevity of this understanding is, of course, sustained by documentation and interpretation in words and images. Britton will explore a few occasions over three decades when her practice has involved the curation of historic and current works across art craft and design, and what the surviving residue of these projects might be.