

Bokanmeldelse

Knut Astrup Bull and André Gali (eds.)

Document on Contemporary Crafts: Material Perceptions

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Material Perceptions is the fifth volume of the *Documents on Contemporary Craft* series, a now internationally renowned set of anthologies edited by Norwegian Crafts and produced, with great style, by Arnoldsche. Mirroring to an extent the Whitechapel Gallery-MIT Press *Documents of Contemporary Art* publications, each iteration brings together a range of writers to discuss craft practice, history and theory. Starting in 2012 with *Museum for Skills*, the *Documents on Contemporary Craft* volumes have proved vital and important in a field that has a scarcity of regular outlets for critical and theoretical discussion. It feels right to admit my own investment, having contributed an essay to the second in the series *Materiality Matters* (2013).

At its core, the essays of *Material Perceptions* discuss how the philosophy of materialism (or new materialisms) is important to understanding craft practice, and vice versa (this vice versa is important – the phenomenological experience of matter shapes materialist philosophy). The editors, Knut Astrup Bull and André Gali, foreground the issue of craft's presumed distance from autonomy; how craft is seen as falling short of attaining the highest place on the podium of the arts on account of its tie to function, the everyday, the domestic, and ultimately the inability to transcend its own materiality in the same way as a wonderful painting, sculpture or piece of music or poetry. Although historically a reason for its marginalisation, this connection to clingy, sticky, grubby material means that contemporary craft, and theoretical and critical writing associated with it, is perhaps uniquely positioned to offer insights into the 'material turn' that has gripped so many academic subjects. As the Cartesian split between subject and object becomes increasingly obsolete as a way of ordering knowledge in so many disciplines, what can craft theory offer to the effort to establish an alternative, materially-empathetic, *object-oriented ontology*?

According to the essays gathered in this volume, quite a lot. Anders Ljungberg provides a direct, empirical account of how features of various objects shape our interaction with them: cutlery is normally made with a curved handle to so that it sits proud of the table ready for use; pouring liquid from a vessel constitutes a connection between the source and destination. These are affordances that mediate our relationship to objects and shape use, a key argument in Georg Simmel's 1911 essay 'The Handle'.¹ Hilde Methi recalls the sound installations that were part of three 'Dark Ecology Journeys' in 2014, 2015 and 2016 where a group of artists, scientists and cultural producers travelled within the 50 km border-citizen zone between Norway and Russia (an area within which inhabitants require no visa to travel). The projects demanded that their participants pay attention, respond to the landscape and its material make-up, plug into its physical sensations and how it has impacted up the human cultures there. Martina Margetts presents a range of case studies – from Neil Brownsword's collaborative exploration of Gorsty Quarry, in Ibstock near Leicester in *Marl Hole* (2009) to David Roux-Fouillet's *Diamonds Forever* (2010), iridescent diamonds created by passing a 3D metal mesh through viscous soap liquid – to demonstrate how 'tangible materiality' is integral to many contemporary craft projects.

Uniting all the essays, the book's central idea relates to craft's pliability within the pantheon of aesthetics: that it can be *both* an object of everyday life – useful, functional, common – *and* worthy of aesthetic contemplation. Knut Astrup Bull applies this 'both-and' thesis in a close reading of *You in between*, an installation by ceramicist Anders Ruhwald. Bull argues that the category confusion that confronts the viewer of this work (Is it functional? Is it sculpture? Is it furniture? etc.) is helpful, avoiding the pitfall of how craft advocates often try to claim art's territory on its own terms, thus negating its particular ambiguity and conforming to existing hierarchies that position the fine 'pictorial' arts at the top of the tree. The emancipation from dualistic modes of viewing and understanding art – that Bull argues Ruhwald's work achieves – is what viewing contemporary craft through the lens of materiality offers. Building from Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin's *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (2012), Bull states that object qualities can be both 'concrete and conceptual *simultaneously*'. Acclaimed ceramicist Alison Britton advanced a similar thesis, not denying in her catalogue essay for the 1981 exhibition *The Maker's Eye* that her work can be defined as functional, but adding that her concern is with the 'outer limits of function' and how the work can be an object familiar within the structures of everyday life but also self-referentially draw 'attention to what their own rules are about'.² Craft objects invite us to consider their material constitution, challenging the dichotomies of subject–object, body–thing, human–non-human, everyday–exceptional that are often used to understand and categorise the arts.

The essays, as they try to deconstruct these dichotomies, introduce a wealth of terms that try to grasp craft's ambiguous status: semi-autonomous, hybrid, supplemental (from Glenn Adamson's *Thinking Through Craft*), indeterminate, oppositional relation, awk-

1. Georg Simmel, "Two Essays: The Handle and the Ruin" *Hudson Review* 11:3 (1958), originally published as "Der Henkel" and "Die Ruine" in *Philosophische Kultur* (1911).
2. Alison Britton, "The Maker's Eye" in *Seeing Things: Collected Writing on Art, Craft and Design* (London: Occasional Papers, 2014), 15.

wardness, bodily experience. These words are examined with care, attention and clarity, and helpfully applied to a range of examples.

This book is notable for some excellent theoretical and philosophical discussions, a rarity among publications on contemporary craft. Sarah R. Gilbert's essay that starts with the collaborative capabilities of *Leptogenys* ants, includes a quote from Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) where they talk about the symbiotic relationship between the blacksmith and his material: the blacksmith does not impose form on the metal but both are engaged in the 'continuous development of form' as the blacksmith follows the consistency of the metal, the 'syncopated attunement amongst interacting material forces'. André Gali's essay cites Graham Harman, who building on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and Martin Heidegger's reflections on tooling, considers what would ensue from looking at reality minus humans and thought. 'Speculative realists' – Harman's response – pay attention to materiality, aim to be pre-critical, and adopt imaginative methods to illuminate the ontology of the tool. Kant's concept of the autonomous art form is understandably mentioned a number of times in the anthology, but Søren Kjørup helpfully shows that the philosopher was not *de facto* anti-craft and embraced craft under the arts of architecture. In addition Kjørup stresses that Kant's attention was focused on taste and judgement of beauty and the sublime in nature, with very little word count devoted to the arts. And when he did focus on the arts his concern was to show art as a set of activities rather than the outcome of such activities. We're close to standard definitions of craft here.

Not just a passage of erudite discussion, Glenn Adamson's whole essay shows how craft can be effectively interwoven with theoretical discussion. Billed as a DVD extra to his influential 2007 book *Thinking Through Craft*, Adamson introduces the dichotomy of allegory–symbol that was intended to go alongside the other dichotomies that structure the book's chapters (for example supplemental–autonomous, amateur–professional). At a basic level the essay helped me understand allegory, and its relationship to both baroque and post-modern paradigms, achieved by quoting from literary scholars Joel D. Black and Craig Owens, particularly the latter's 1980 essay 'The Allegorical Impulse: A Theory of Postmodernism.' But this exegesis is then applied to enriching our understanding of craft, via another theorist interested in allegory: Walter Benjamin. Benjamin was fascinated with the convoluted, arbitrary, lengthy, and unwieldy ornamentation of allegory that is in opposition to the clear-cut 'sign' that hits its target like an arrow on a bull's-eye. Adamson reminds us that Benjamin's own fascination with fragmentary narrative is reflected in the facture of his writing, but he goes on to explain the correlations between pre-modern allegory and craft: both are appropriate, plural, as well as being conservative and deeply imbued in complex hierarchies. Medieval craftsmanship was largely unauthored (in the modern sense) and was in the service of fantastic wealth and power. It is both un-individual and collective – different to the common understanding today of craft practice as a means of individual emancipation. The essay concludes by suggesting that allegory 'a premodern means of representing things that are emotionally charged, concrete and sensuous' could help revisit our perception of history that is so often abstract or intellectualised. To hold the past close, we need to learn from those who hold material close, and it is this project of mutual understanding – theory addressing craft,

craft shaping theory – that Adamson encourages: *Thinking Through Craft* as a ‘two-way street’.

Adamson’s essay chimes with the trajectory of the whole book, which is to show how attention to materiality can re-orient our perspectives toward contemporary craft and perception more generally. I look forward to how Norwegian Crafts develop the series in the future.