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The Stigma of Fabrication: Craft Education in the 21st Century

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The word 'craft' is, like so many important words in English, brief, pungent and ambiguous.

Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Story of Craft*, Cornell University Press, 1981

Edward Lucie-Smith's quote, while taken entirely out of context, is well-suited for looking at craft within a post-secondary environment. The fact that craft is both *brief* and *ambiguous* word is generally understood--the compact term has long been open to both illustrious and embarrassing connotations. Its *pungency* is perhaps lesser known. While some may understand this as an evocative perfume of rich sensory experience, within the context of higher education, the pungency of craft is more likely to be a strong and fairly disagreeable odour.

I am interested in looking at the word *craft* through the specific lens of institutional learning, and to give some consideration to the following questions: What are some of the overarching tensions that invite closer scrutiny when looking at craft within higher learning? Do these tensions offer new opportunities for rethinking how craft programs are taught or institutionally positioned? And what role does language play in our analysis? My vantage point on these questions is anchored in the field of textiles, and is chiefly based upon the college/university system in Canada. While I appreciate that significant differences may exist both within and beyond our borders, many of the issues likely have broader relevance than the classrooms from which they originate.

As a teacher within an art and design university Fibre program, I have long been interested in why students are lured towards the making of things. It is striking to me that significant numbers are choosing to do so within a broader social, cultural, and economic climate that marginalizes acts of fabrication. Research I embarked upon earlier in 2012 stemmed from this concern, probing into experiences of emerging makers to determine the lure and benefits of material practice in a present-day context. My intent was to investigate some of the pedagogical merits of material fabrication, and perhaps add an underrepresented set of voices to how craft is presently theorized.

Early into this research, it became evident that there were roadblocks that needed to be addressed. Chief among them was the language I adopted in the study to describe acts of making. Textile practice has commonly fallen under the purview of craft; many of its cultural institutions have been ensconced in this field, and the present-day theorizing that continues to break ground is unapologetically situated here. I was trained according to a studio craft model so feel a level of comfort with the term, although fully recognize the range of challenging connotations it can pose. In fact, I discovered that most emerging makers distance themselves from the term, finding it an inaccurate descriptor for their mode of working.

Their sources of inspiration and professional mentors were overwhelmingly also outside the sphere of craft practice.

It was of keen interest to me that while many emerging makers describe their experience using the tactile, expressive, and skills-based language of craft, it was the word itself that caused difficulty. When asked to define their practice, they commonly adopt hybrid descriptors: they are “artists working with design processes”; they are “designers using fibre as a primary medium”. In classroom conversations, students describe their professional practice similarly: few make claims to working within the sphere of craft, and if they do, a host of additional words modify the term. To be clear, these are emerging makers who are commonly positioning themselves within craft venues, exhibiting at craft shows, or applying for funding from provincial crafts councils.

This clear avoidance of the word has an interesting broader context. On one hand, theorists who used to steer clear of craft have now given it considerable attention, allowing the field to develop much needed scholarship and critical discourse. The slow death of modernism has diverted some tired attention away from the art-craft binary, while the ubiquity of technology in all aspects of our lives seems to have carved out a meaningful new spot for the hand. That *craft* has been centrally featured by visual artists and designers alike is undeniable. In recent years it has been showcased, if not downright venerated, within both realms by those who seem delighted to use its visual vocabulary as well as its descriptors.

British trend forecaster Anthony Hughes advises us that craft will continue to play a central role in interior design as it “cushions us from everyday strife.” In fact, a warmly appealing, commonly ironic, and eminently marketable manifestation of the hand has infiltrated much of our material culture. Canadian curator Gloria Hickey asks on her blog “Has anybody else noticed how craft based art has edged its way from the margins of the art world to the main stage?”¹ And we have. We’re the cutest kid in town to some, just not to ourselves.

It’s here that we return the pungency of craft. Why does it smell so foul within an academic institution? Right off the bat it’s worth noting that the language in these settings tends to steer clear of the word craft, preferring the more generic term “design.” Design is an expansive term---it is a forward-looking shape-shifter. In its problem-solving mandate, design is continually able to redefine itself, ripe for innovative hybrids and sexy institutional acronyms. But design also wears its limitations. As curator M. Anna Fariello states, it is “a well-respected intermediary...that stands between concept and execution” (2011, p. 24). It is not, however, a synonym for craft.

Definitions may be fraught with challenges, and any categorization will necessarily be fluid, evolving, and contentious. Nonetheless, language is not unimportant to our analysis. The relationship between craft and design is more porous than dichotomous, but craft cannot be readily subsumed under the label of design. In its emphasis on material knowledge, a rich vocabulary of techniques, and a keen attention to the process of making, craft distinguishes itself from design. Craft wears its history; its particular skills in object making overtly link it to its legacy. Perhaps this emphasis makes the term more stodgy, but nonetheless apt for describing the activities unfolding within a college/university Fibre department. To a degree, craft flies in the face of postmodernism, an attitude that prefers the restless and forward thinking *design*; its appealing vagaries convey the impression of interdisciplinarity and irreverence for

¹ <http://gloriahickeycraftwriter.blogspot.ca>

boundaries. An institution's interest is economic, and language is used very carefully when the money of funders or tuition dollars is at stake.

Language and economics join forces to define craft within higher learning, establishing a culture that works hand-in-hand with socio-cultural trends. Curator Glenn Adamson (2010) considers the field to be a relational one when he states "It is only when artisanal labour is placed in explicit contrast with another means of production that craft itself becomes a locus for discourse...*It is a term established and defined through difference.*" Since the late-eighteenth century, craft has been pitted against Western industrialization, and all discourse hinged on this dichotomy. So what happens when Western industrialization ends? As post-industrialist nations we have entirely divested ourselves of fabrication. All consumer goods are currently produced by the global community's lowest bidders, and as Westerners we have an economically vested interest in this continuing. In the golden age of capitalism, there is little tolerance for getting hands dirty. Not only that, but the supply chain of the impoverished supplying the wealthy has led to further stigmatization of particular forms of labour. If industrial activity has been adopted by globe's poorest, it's certainly not a desirable pursuit for Westerners. The distance between designing and making becomes far greater.

If, indeed, craft finds itself without a relational partner, and is swept up in a global marketplace from which it perpetually finds itself out of step, are there opportunities for redefinition within higher education that may not have previously existed? One idea in this regard would be to foster aspects of the term that are entirely divorced from economics. If we distance ourselves from our pedagogical blue-collar, tech school legacy that posited craft as a viable way of making a living, and replace that with a viable way of making *meaning*, we may be able to find new relevance in the term. It is clear, in the responses of students and emerging graduates that this is precisely what craft has done. Economically implausible programs abound at universities---generations of students have filled departments of philosophy, world religion, or women's studies for a litany of reasons beyond economic ones, and these programs, in turn, have provided students with new forms of knowledge and new ways of seeing.

Author Richard Sennett draws on this definition, highlighting the physicality of craft---the material skill, embodied labour, practice and repetition---as prized forms of knowledge production. "The value of experience understood as craft" (288), is that of leading to new socio-cultural understandings in present-day human relations. Artist and educator Bruce Metcalf describes the embodied knowledge of craft as a "conscious rejection of a Western worldview that devalues physical labour." It is, at best, an assertion that "we still live in a body rich in potential" (2007, p. 25), or more extremely a profound critique of labour alienation, mass production, and global homogenization that dominate our material culture (Alfoldy, 2007, p. 101). It asserts a way of knowing that is insistent and persistent; constructing as well as asserting agency. Virtue, something commonly ascribed to the field since the theorizing of John Ruskin, has been left out of the discussion. These are different times, and craft's very perseverance within a vacuum of fabrication invites new rules of consideration.

And perhaps one rule could be this: There is no way to present craft as a way of making meaning without calling it by name. No individual, group, or movement has asserted its status by remaining nameless. The word "craft" needs to be included in program titles and descriptions. Teaching craft does not preclude fostering interdisciplinarity and innovation, but it does establish a vocabulary of craftsmanship which is essential to any fabrication. Adopting the name means addressing the legacy, but addressing the legacy does not mean being trapped by it. There is room to look both backward and

forwards, on one hand considering how the field has been shaped, while at the same time questioning what it means to be making objects in the 21st century. If the experience, theory, and practice of craft is to be properly addressed within post-secondary study---and this is where it's positioned already, albeit under a different name---it demands such institutions build upon critical discourse and embed *both* studio *and* theoretical classes into curricula.

Garth Clark (2010), former curator and critic, points to the need for craft becoming “proud, confident, and easy in its own skin.” Higher education plays a critical role in how craft is positioned, taught, and named. Many interesting prospects lie in this brief and pungent term.

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