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Craft in the Twenty-First Century: Theorising Change and Practice.

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Citation Details

Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

PEACH, A. and REW, C., 2002. Reinterpreting the craft object. Available from *OpenAIR@RGU*. [online]. Available from: <http://openair.rgu.ac.uk>

Citation for the publisher's version:

PEACH, A. and REW, C., 2002. Reinterpreting the craft object. In: *Craft in the Twenty-First Century: Theorising Change and Practice*. 15-17 November 2002. Edinburgh: Edinburgh College of Art, Centre for Visual and Cultural Studies.

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Andrea Peach and Christine Rew

Reinterpreting the Craft Object

Craft in the Twenty First Century: Theorising Change and Practice.

Introduction

How does an art gallery make its collection more accessible and meaningful to students of design and craft today? How can today's students be persuaded that galleries are not simply places 'full of old stuff', but instead a potentially valuable and stimulating source of primary research material? How can an art gallery and art school build a relationship of mutually beneficial dialogue and cultural exchange, as well as validate the future role of the museum or gallery in the lives of a new generation of designer-makers and crafts practitioners? This paper, which has been written from the perspective of both Craft Curator and Design and Craft Course Leader, will focus on an ongoing collaborative project between Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums and Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen. 'Object analysis' methodology¹ is a key aspect of the project, culminating in a co-curated exhibition of gallery objects and students' studio and written work. The project is of particular interest to this conference, not simply as an exemplar of possible good practice, but for the questions it raises concerning the perceptions and approaches to 'craft' objects, both by design and craft students and staff, as well as the consumption of the craft object in a gallery setting by the student of design and craft.

Background / Methodology / Context

The project uses as its departure point the methodology pioneered by the MA degree course in History of Design and Material Culture, run jointly by the Royal College of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum. The course, which was established in 1982 by Professor Christopher Frayling of the Royal College of Art, and Sir Roy Strong, Director of the V&A Museum, formed part of wider initiative to move the V&A Museum: '...away from being an antiques arcadia... to the encouragement of contemporary work in both the crafts and the

¹ As taught at the Victoria and Albert Museum/Royal College of Art MA in Design History, and detailed in Kate McIntyre's essay 'Structures and Practices: Towards a Discourse of the Craft Object', Ideas in the Making – Practice in Theory, Crafts Council, 1998.

arts of design'. Education, Strong argued, was crucial as a means of 'taking in' and 'teaching the opinion-formers of tomorrow.'²

This project also is indebted to Kate McIntyre, a graduate of the V&A/RCA MA course, whose essay 'Structures and Practices: Towards a Discourse of the Craft Object' has proved an invaluable starting point. In McIntyre's words, 'using the technique of object analysis enables the student to avoid the kind of uncritical "history of" or monograph approach that can be slipped into all too easily.'³ McIntyre's outline of a brief used with her students, taking as the departure point 'If individual objects are touchstones of current thinking in societies, what are they telling us?' is predicated on the semiotic approach outlined by Roland Barthes in his work 'Mythologies', and provided an exemplar for interpreting objects, using the headings of 'production', 'consumption', 'mediation' and 'critical analysis'.

In correspondence with McIntyre, she noted that her work was an amalgam of ideas gathered from a variety of teaching posts. Her students used the Chelsea Crafts Fair, the Victoria and Albert Museum and other craft galleries as a starting point for the project. According to McIntyre, 'Chelsea was popular because it facilitated contact with the maker'⁴ whereas choosing objects from the V&A was not always successful in that making contact with curators was often difficult.⁵ Interestingly, McIntyre also used Hove Museum when running the project at Brighton University, and noted that: 'Often a local gallery/museum is more accessible than the V&A'⁶ This observation has real parallels with Aberdeen, and more specifically, the attractive but rather rural campus of Gray's School of Art, whose physical location precludes access to a variety of sources that one might find in neighbouring Art Schools, such as Glasgow and Edinburgh.

² Foreword, Prospectus MA Course in the History of Design, Royal College of Art, School of Humanities, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1998.

³ McIntyre, Kate, 'Structures and Practices: Towards a Discourse of the Craft Object', Ideas in the Making – Practice in Theory, Crafts Council, 1998, p. 83

⁴ Email from Kate McIntyre, August 2000

⁵ Email from Kate McIntyre, August 2000

⁶ Email from Kate McIntyre, August 2000

Using the methodology of object analysis with art school students as a means of decoding craft objects is not unique to McIntyre, and there are many instances of it being successfully employed by others in a variety of contexts. Some notable examples include the fruitful relationship between the V&A ceramics department and the University of the West of England, established by the late Mike Hughes and continued and expanded in his absence, and Glasgow School of Art's 'object/text analysis' project used with their First Year students. Glasgow's project is based on students writing an initial, intuitive response to a chosen gallery object, which is then clarified and expanded on through selected background reading. The basic idea underpinning the project being one that 'intuitive responses may be radically altered, confirmed or enhanced by the reading of texts.'⁷

Our particular collaborative project, has attempted to draw from this existing material and experience in a way that could be mutually beneficial to both students at Gray's School of Art and Aberdeen Art Gallery. Gray's School of Art, established in 1880, is the smallest of the four Scottish Art Schools, and its four year BA in Design and Craft, around which this project is based, currently comprises 250 (check) students who specialize in one of the three subject areas: Visual Communication, Three-Dimensional Design, and Textiles and Surface Design. The student cohort is by and large not multi-cultural: the majority of students coming directly from Scotland and more specifically from more remote regions of the Highlands and Islands. This makes for a body of students with a strong awareness of indigenous culture and a rich sense of national heritage and place, which has both advantages and disadvantages. Getting students to actively seek and engage with contemporary work out with the Art School can sometimes be challenge. Despite access to an excellent library and to the work of many practicing makers teaching at the School, the nearest major cities offering a diverse range of cultural attractions are Glasgow and Edinburgh, which are three hours away by car or train, For this reason, the relationship with cultural centres, such as Aberdeen Art Gallery, are an essential lifeline to the Art School.

⁷ Object Analysis brief, Glasgow School of Art, Historical and Critical Studies, Session 1999/00

Background Aberdeen Art Gallery?

How did the project develop? Gray's Perspective

The project is a product of the recent move at Gray's School of Art to integrate theory and practice through the amalgamation of contextual and critical studies and studio modules. Until recently, this would have been perceived as a radical move, as historically these areas of practice would have been kept very separate, however there has been a noticeable softening of boundaries, and an attempt to promote makers who can theorise, and theoreticians who can make. The project was therefore a means of testing this integration of theory and practice, by asking students to initially select, research and critically evaluate an object from the art gallery, and then using this critical research, to reinterpret their chosen object in studio, by either changing the original object's meaning, context, consumer or function. The initial examination took the form of an essay and presentation, using primary and secondary sources, and where possible, conducting interviews with the actual makers. This part of the project was underpinned by a series of lectures and seminars, each examining the notion of 'object and meaning' in a variety of contexts, using texts such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's The Meaning of Things, (1981), and Judy Attfield's Wild Things (2000):

'One of the strengths of using objects is the potential to explore a plurality of meaning for any one object, and in the exploration of the range of possible meanings, to show how objects can carry meanings to do with love, memory, a particular event, a special person, in addition to meanings connected to their material nature, individual history and so on.'⁸

The project culminated in an exhibition of student work, alongside the original gallery objects that inspired the work, in the exhibition area of the Georgina Scott Sutherland Library at Robert Gordon University. The exhibition was co-curated by students and Aberdeen Art Gallery, and students were asked to write their own labels, and select work

⁸ Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean, Museums and their Visitors, Routledge: London, 1994, p.153

for their show. The final interpretive objects demonstrated a wide exploration into meaning, using a range of approaches and sources of information, as well as integrating a contextual and critical understanding of the original objects.

How did the project develop?

(2001/2002 - Christine – AAG&M perspective)

Aims & Objectives

(Christine)

Selection of Objects

(Christine)

Touch

(Christine)

Student Reinterpretations

In the first year of the project, students were given the choice of several hundred objects, ranging in date from the 17th to the 20th century. The majority of students gravitated toward objects from the twentieth century; and although there were some exceptions (ie: the choice of an 19th century silver caddy spoon; and an 18th century Chinese lacquer vase), it was disappointing to note that students were initially dismissive of the Art Gallery's collection, one referring to it as 'the room with all the old stuff'. In their choice of object, students were also swayed by the dates and information on the labels and tended to choose objects whose labels gave clear details about the designer and provenance, probably thinking that this would make their analysis easier. Because contact between the Gallery and students was not structured at this point, it was up to the students to make contact with the Gallery in order to gather their initial research material. This created pressure on the Gallery, as students would often turn up without appointments and expect to be seen immediately.

In the following year, with the range of objects limited, and no labels attached in the initial viewing, the students' choice of object was as a result, more intuitive and personal. Rather than getting them to concentrate on the 'histories' of the objects, we encouraged a stronger material culture approach, drawing heavily on the readings from Csikszentmihalyi, Attfield, and Baudrillard. The intention was for students to take a 'wider' reading of the objects in question, one that wasn't predicated on the maker as 'hero', and which would hopefully make students question 'meaning' in a wider context. The Gallery also provided 'dossiers' on each of the objects, providing vital information, which could subsequently be viewed in their library, but only after the initial object choice had been made.

The students' initial impression of the 'glass case with objects' was mixed. Without the trappings of visual stimulation in the form of panels, labels, textual narratives and colour, some students reported that on first appearance, the objects came across as dreary and uninspiring. With the objects so deliberately devoid of context, some students found them very difficult to 'read'. This was particularly the case with some Visual Communication students, who grumbled about objects such as 'the boring brown spoons'. Some students were more inspired by the 'unassisted' first viewing, and the ability of the objects to 'speak for themselves', as in the case of Robin Palmer, a student who chose Deborah Fladgate's 'Clover Cut Bowl':

As soon as I saw Deborah Fladgate's Clover Cut bowl, it wasn't the art gallery that gave me the impression of this being a unique item. This bowl is different and as I continued to research [Fladgate] and her work, I realized just how special her talent is.

Through Palmer's research he found that Fladgate was very inspired by 'the elements' and in the case of this piece, water. For his reinterpretation, he changed the influence from water to fire and flames, and experimented with the idea of the repetition of the flame form. His finished reinterpretation, somewhat unintentionally, began to resemble a shell, which he serendipitously felt had taken the Fladgate piece full-circle:

I started with water, moved on to fire to get the simple shape, and then back to water with the final product, hence the name 'flamed shell'.

In some cases, the very absence of context or apparent function at the first viewing, became a point of particular interest, as was noted by Alistair Law, who chose Malcolm Appleby's silver nightlight holder:

Nestled in among the other items vying for attention within the display cabinet was this slightly peculiar cube of metal with a small dip in the top. The other objects displayed were larger, more brightly coloured or had a relatively obvious use. The cube on the other hand, out of context, did not have an obvious use to me. It was only upon closer inspection did I realize that it was a tea light holder. The surface decoration was what initially attracted me to the piece in that it was not altogether clear what its precise purpose was, how old it was, where or who had made it.'

Jenny Lewis, another student who chose the nightlight holder, was also attracted to it for its physical qualities:

Its purpose wasn't clear and I was more drawn to it because of its highly decorated style and the way that each picture that had been engraved on its sides seemed to tell a story.

Although Law and Lewis and chose the same object as a starting point, their reinterpretations were markedly different. Both students focused on the strong associations of Scottish identity manifest in the Appleby piece, but whereas Lewis decided to change the object's culture and material, by exploring African symbolism and iconography through her wooden nightlight holder, Law chose to emphasise the commercialisation of the Scottish image and Scottish humour, through his Irn Bru nightlight holder:

I have taken elements of the original but changed the scale, emphasis and context to create an entirely different meaning, reflecting Scottish humour and the

commercialization of the Scottish image. It still, however, maintains a Calvinistic Scottish sense of having a function, as a tealight.

The choice of objects also raised important questions in students' minds as to meaning and value of 'craft' objects and the nature of contemporary collecting and commissioning of these objects, as Alistair Law queried:

What kind of society puts a tea light holder into a museum?

Indeed, students seemed to feel that the act of putting a craft object into a museum, conferred a status of immortality and immutability upon that object, one from which they as makers, felt detached:

Handcrafted items do not go out of fashion; they are considered precious and are kept as family heirlooms or put in Art Galleries as Malcolm's nightlight holder was.

Has the fact that this piece, which was originally a private commission, has now become public property changed the way it is perceived? I would say yes. It has lost the sense of context it would have had if it were still within a home. By that meaning that this is no one to explain the story behind the markings on the piece itself which then reduces the surface to merely decoration and there is no meaning beyond the form. However, if it had never been in a gallery I would never have come across it and been able to investigate its origins. (Jenny Lewis)

Students' particular perceptions of wealth, power and privilege as related to the objects were also interesting to note. Some seemed not to see any correlation between themselves, as students of design and craft, and the makers whose work was in the gallery:

It should be taken into consideration that with wealth often comes power and influence. These are the people who have objects commissioned and also have the ability to donate

them to be immortalized in an Art Gallery. So we have to ask ourselves how much of a representation of our society are these objects when they are created for the privileged and housed in a building, though public, is not accessible to all sectors of society
(Alistair Law)

This notion was also iterated by Jenny Lewis, whose comments raise interesting questions as to student's perceptions as to the status of craft and its patronage:

Most of Malcolm's creations are purchased by wealthy people, in my opinion someone willing to pay eight hundred pounds, or even eighty pounds for a candlestick holder must have money to burn

Robin Palmer, whose research touched on Thorsten Veblen's theories of conspicuous consumption, was particularly interested in how artifacts of material culture are deployed and displayed as a means of attesting status:

I believe Fladgate's work is meant for a very elite clientele ... By buying a piece of her work you are inadvertently saying something about yourself ... You may see her work as a status symbol or a reflection of your personality, either way 'the things that surround us are inseparable from who we are.

Kathryn Brown a Visual Communications student who chose to reinterpret the Sam Herrman Glass Vase, linked the status of craft objects to the complexity of processes involved, a status which is then transferred to the owner of that object:

The status of the maker is inherently linked to the attitude of the society towards that type of object. The process of the creation of an object determines the value placed on it by the consumer.

The vase by Herrman holds more value in society than a designed and mass produced object such as a vase from Ikea

Kathryn chose to reinterpret Sam Herman's glass vase through a series of time-based photographs, and was attracted to the idea of glass and movement frozen in time:

I made a cross section of the vase in ice that was itself an object of movement. As the ice melted, the object shifted and changed form. This was to mirror, in reverse, the way the molten liquid had evolved in Herman's hands.

Perhaps the most rewarding reinterpretations for the students were those which involved meeting the designer or seeing the work in context. Fiona Bell, who chose Geoff Roberts 'over-sized necklace and bangle' made an appointment to see Roberts at his workshop near Buckie in the North East of Scotland. She wrote:

Whilst much research on this piece and the artist himself could be done through the relevant literature and by visiting Aberdeen Art Gallery, I felt that to complete an analysis of the piece and gain further insight into the meanings that it embodies, it was necessary for me to arrange an interview with him. The interview provided a clearer understanding of the artists own intentions in creating this piece, and whilst Roberts prefers the observer to draw their own conclusions as to the meaning within his work, a valuable insight was gained into the place that his work holds in Jewellery design and to the original context of this piece – out with the gallery in which it is now held.

By speaking with Roberts, Bell was able to understand that through his work Roberts was trying to dispel the image of Jewellery as a sign of wealth and evoke a meaning other than status through the contradictory use of corroding metals and acrylic.

Contemporary values are reflected in this piece, in that despite the use of cheap materials and relatively simple construction, its value comes directly from its design.

Bell decided to retain the central element of protection in Roberts piece, which she saw as *strong steel cages wrapped around delicate roses in order to protect them.* Her

reinterpretation was a reversal of this notion of protection, in the form of a neck ornament with sharp roses and stems protecting the wearing in a strong steel cage.

Kathryn Sharpe, who chose to reinterpret Tim Stead's corset chair, was able to see Stead's work in a variety of contexts outside of the gallery, in his 1979 furniture commission for Café Gandolfi in Glasgow and his fitting for the memorial Chapel in the Kirk of St Nicholas in Aberdeen. She was struck by the structure and craftsmanship apparent in Stead's work, as well what she perceived to be a masculine chair which was confronting feminist issues. Her reinterpretation was intended to convey the opposite, through the use of 'unnatural materials' and obviously feminine form and colour.

Conclusions

The three subject areas approached the project very differently, and some subject areas found the project more accessible than others. This speaks as much about the project itself, as it does about staff and students 'interpretation' of it. In particular, staff prejudices and preconceptions to the thorny issue of 'craft' became apparent. In the first year, there were, for example, problems with Visual Communications who perceived the project as being too '3DD' and 'craft-based', both issues that were felt to not be relevant to their own students. Students also tended to feel that their reinterpretation had to be in 3-dimensions, which was not the case (Liza Ferrari). Three-Dimensional design students tended to be more literal in their approach to the objects: a chair remained a chair, whereas Textiles, which currently embraces both 2 and 3 dimensions, while perhaps the most open and inventive in their interpretation, focused on 'themes' rather than objects (teabags). The most successful tended to be students who made contact with the actual designers (Fiona Bell), or see the objects in context (Kathryn Sharpe). This experience often changed their original perceptions and was essential in truly understanding the original object.

Other points

-Students generally attracted to work which appeared 'contemporary'

-Writing the labels and curating the exhibition was a valuable experience. Students found the act of having to 'precis' what they were thinking very difficult and it forced them to focus on what their work was really about. Often they weren't very good at expressing in words what they had so eloquently done in objects.

-2 pieces of student work was purchased: Fiona Bell's protective necklace, Liza Ferrari's necklace. Liz Norrie's teabag hanging was considered, but because of the precarious state it was in, was turned down. This raised issues about students preparing work which can 'last' or have longevity in a conservation sense. Students at the art school are encouraged to work 'conceptually', not worry too much about the final piece. Students whose work was purchased viewed their work differently – the Gallery appearing to elevate its status.

-Object handling session in Gallery – first year no students wanted to pick up the objects worried they might break them (preciousness of objects) in second year, students were able to pick up the objects they had chosen to research. This made a difference in their analysis, made the object more 'real' and 'accessible'

-Perceptions not always accurate - Malcolm Appleby's object 'looked old' to Jenny Lewis