



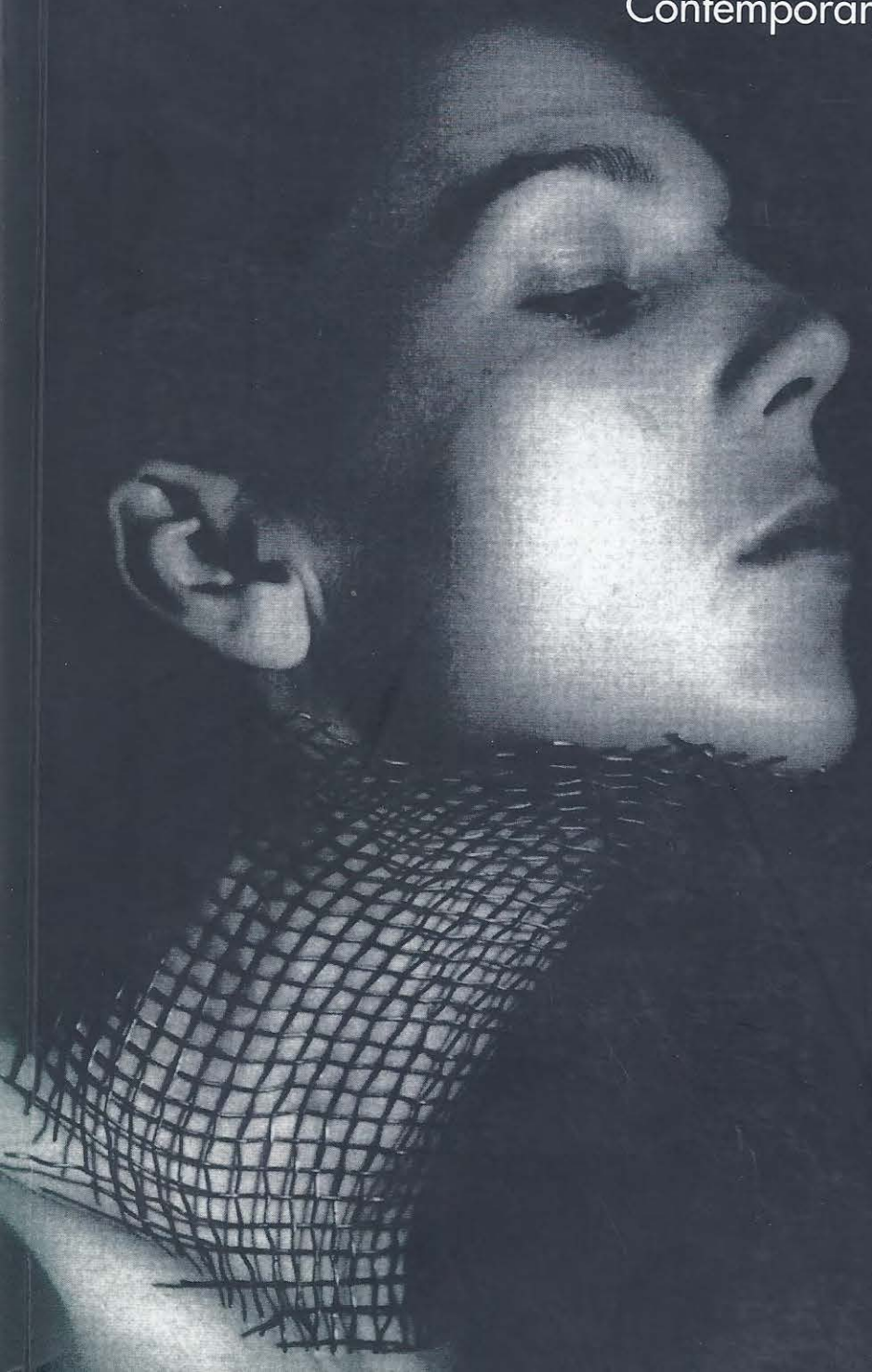
A resource for craft contextual studies

Fellowship in Craft and Criticism

University of Northumbria, 1998/1999

The Body Politic

The Role of the Body and
Contemporary Craft



Introduction

This conference addressed the multiple uses and role of the human body in contemporary craft. The aim was to explore and construct frameworks for the shaping of conceptual rationales where the body is involved in the appreciation of craft objects through tacit knowledge or through the body itself becoming the central subject matter.

During the last decade, research into craft history and the consolidation of design history as an academic discipline have contextualised the crafts within art and design theory for the first time. The crafts have long been in need of a historical location and a consequence of this new approach is that the emphasis in criticism has moved from object to context. In contrast to historical debate, attempts to theorise actual craft practice are still fraught with difficulties. Many makers and critics believe that craft is a practical philosophy, and question whether it is advisable or even possible to apply theories to certain types of craft practice. Peter Dormer expressed the view 'Craft and theory are oil and water,'¹ and warned that attempts to develop a critical language would 'distort the integrity' of craft. Only recently, the potter Jack Troy asked why anyone would want to 'slog into the miasma of critical theory about ceramics'.² The sanctity of the craft object and its making still seems to be shrouded by a mystical and inviolable right.

What are the options for craft criticism today? Does craft continue with the ineffective theories that have marginalised crafts within the greater visual arts? Or perhaps continue to adopt ideas from literary criticism or align itself to the amalgam of academic disciplines referred to as 'material culture'? Neither of these options seems able to encompass the complexity of appreciation that craft objects demand, something which John Dewey discussed over sixty years ago, in his philosophical analysis of aesthetic experience: '...at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of the self and the world of objects and events.'³

The appreciation of an apparently simple cup and saucer, for example, involves an appraisal of two interrelated forms, of surface treatment, ergonomics, tactile characteristics, kinaesthetic appreciation, architectural site specificity, relationship to other objects, human scale, perceptions of heat and cold, conveyance of taste and smell and, of course, aesthetic discernment. These constituent elements are assessed in relation to historical precedent and a highly complex social structure in which the cup and saucer exists in a variety of modes, ranging from static display of 'best' to animating the passage of time in formalised use. Underpinning this is the maker's

intentional surrender of environmental control. Just as an equivalently complex set of criteria operates, for example, for the wearer of a necklace or the user of chair, so the drinker from the cup and saucer sets in motion a new set of juxtapositions on each occasion of use.

While recent craft criticism has concentrated on the world of objects and events, less attention has been placed on Dewey's *self*; either the self of the maker as it informs the conception and execution of work or the self of the audience in appreciation of an object. While it is naïve to expect an inclusive theory of craft criticism given the plurality of contemporary craft, perhaps the resistance to theorise *per se* has been in part for the lack of inappropriate models. However tempting Peter Dormer's renunciation of literary criticism and his football chant of 'oo-ah Baudrillard' at the *Context for Critical Studies in the Crafts* conference in Loughborough in 1995 may be, critical diversity is essential but needs to include models that are receptive to objects and practice - theories that move beyond the conceptual to include the corporal.

In spite of numerous references to 'tacit knowledge', little progress has been made in unlocking this elusive term, despite the sheer physicality of objects. While anthropological models such as Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* have helped in the understanding of a cultural context for craft objects, theoretical models are needed to contextualise the 'haptic', a term defined by the *Complete Oxford Dictionary* as 'the psychological orientation of touch'. In order to discuss these complex relationships we need to understand how the body relates to objects. Ironically it is in the sciences, not the arts, that innovative work is taking place. Many scientific disciplines are challenging a long-accepted duality of mind versus body, and re-assessing the role and contribution of the body to human development. Paleo-anthropological research has reversed the accepted view of man the thinker creating tools, to the notion that man's tool-making created the capacity for thought:

There is growing evidence that *H. sapiens* acquired in its new hand... an impetus to the redesign, or reallocation, of the brain's circuitry.⁴

In psychology, the late James Gibson challenged the assumption that perception was a product of mind alone, writing:

... to perceive the world is to coperceive [perceive at the same time] oneself. This is wholly inconsistent with dualism in any form, either mind-matter dualism or mind-body dualism. The awareness of the world and of one's complementary relations to the world are not separable.⁵

In linguistics, hand gesture is now regarded as an integral feature in the development of language:

But with their hands and developed brain and greatly increased eye-brain-hand neural circuitry, hominids may well have invented... true language, with syntax as well as vocabulary, in gestural activity.⁶

The educationalist Howard Gardner has challenged assumptions of the cerebral classification of human intelligence, offering new categories of multiple intelligences, including linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, personal and bodily-kinaesthetic intelligences.

if we are to encompass adequately the realm of human cognition, it is necessary to include a far wider and more universal set of competences than has ordinarily been considered.⁷

Research in the physical and behavioural sciences acknowledges the importance of the body in the perception of self-identity, and its emotional embodiment in social interactions, and argues that even consciousness is a result of our physical experience of the world. It would seem that craft, which intuitively operates through these means, can be seen as a fundamental means of reinforcing our sense of self. If body and hand gestures are regarded as the precursors of verbal language, then what are craft objects but material gestures of the body, operating as externalised, pre-linguistic expressions that through haptic engagement reinforce the very source they spring from.

It is inevitable that the presentation of craft as an expression of bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence is met with opposition. It is not a propitious subject for the entrenched disjunction of mind and body in the visual-art or literary world. Apart from the symbolic presentation of the body as an icon of cultural identity, somatic themes in contemporary art rarely extend beyond cultural representation. Even the more visceral work of Marc Quinn's *Self* or Sarah Lucas's *All Nature* only rely on the body as source material, with only an intellectual interaction. The body as a vehicle for conveying ideas is accepted, but the body as receiver is at odds with the orthodoxy of high modernism and post-modernism.

The twenty-three papers from this conference go some way to repositioning craft as a discipline dominated by a moralising code of utility or the concern of solace. They explore the radical nature of craft's challenge to assumptions about self-identity, and overwhelmingly demonstrate the ability of craft to engage our intelligence through a fundamental marriage of mind and body for, as Oliver Sacks writes: 'One does not see, or sense, or perceive in isolation - perception is always linked to behaviour and movement, to reaching out and exploring the world.'

On the basis of these papers, the crafts have embarked upon a new era of body politics where critical writing has begun to unlock the eloquent voice of objects.

Julian Stair, July 2000

Notes

1. Peter Dormer, 'The Language and Practical philosophy of Craft', *The Culture of Craft*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997, p.219.
2. Jack Troy, Letters, *Cosmic Review*, No. 185, Sept/Oct 2000.
3. John Dewey, 'The Live Creature', *Art as Experience*, Perigree Books, New York, 1980, (first publ. 1934), p.19.
4. Frank Wilson, 'Hand-Thought-Language Nexus', *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1998, p.59.
5. James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1979, p.141.
6. D. Armstrong, W. Stokoe and S. Wilcox, *Gesture and the Nature of Language*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1995, p.197, quoted in Frank Wilson, 'The Articulate Hand', *op. cit.*
7. Howard Gardner, Introduction, *Frames of Mind: The theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Fontana Press, London, 2nd ed., 1993, p.xiv.

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Front cover:
Neck Brace by Lesley Vik Waddell
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