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Review of NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts

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Her thoughtful critiques suggest that museums should be doing much more than they are, yet her conclusion does not explicitly urge that. Instead she states: “Yet despite the continuing allegiance to Eurocentric installation paradigms, when we compare the new exhibits to those replaced there can be no doubt that the impacts of globalization on Western museums are no less important for the circular path they have been traveling around the globe” (p. 100). This statement importantly recognizes that, rather than existing solely as “Other,” non-Western objects and cultures are critical for Western museums’ self-understandings. But, given her insightful critique of the exhibits themselves, I felt that Phillips could have argued more strongly for further interventions.

As the preceding discussion indicates, Pollock and Zemans have brought together a range of experts who provide insights into the possibilities for museums after modernism. They include analyses of specific exhibitions, educational programs, institutional approaches, and historically marginalized voices. The authors they have included offer a broad mix of the theoretical and practical, of the historical and the contemporary. As such, this collection provides much food for thought and should be an important text for anyone interested in museum studies and/or art-historical analysis.

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Sandra Alfoldy, ed., *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*. Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2007, 273 pp., 64 black-and-white illus., \$39.95 Cdn.

In his 2002 book *The Persistence of Craft*, Paul Greenhalgh warns, “Those cultural practices that do not engage with Modernity, which will speed and grow exponentially from now on, will be peripheral.”¹ The fifteen essays, introduction, and foreword included in *NeoCraft: Modernity and the Crafts*, edited by Sandra Alfoldy, form an articulate and cross-disciplinary response to this challenge. Published in conjunction with a conference of the same name held at NSCAD University, these essays draw on methodologies from multiple disciplines, including art/craft/design history, anthropology, philosophy, women’s studies, museum studies, and fashion theory.

As Alfoldy states in her introduction, the interdisciplinary approach was consciously applied to discover “an alternative model for accessing craft” in order to “[solidify] the discourse of craft history, theory, and critical writing” within modernity (p. xiv). Written by prominent international scholars, craftspeople, and curators, the essays are organized under five themes: Cultural Redundancy or Genre under Threat; Global Craft; Crafts and Political Economy; Invention of Tradition: Craft and Utopian Ideals; and Craft, the Senses, and New Technologies. Alfoldy, who has done much groundbreaking research into craft activity in Canada, goes on to stress the importance of incorporating international perspectives rather than focusing myopically on the Canadian context when dealing with issues of modernity. The theme of gender, also often discussed in craft writing, is not distinguished as a focus in *Neocraft*, but rather it “extends across all themes,” as feminist investigations have greatly informed each of the disciplines involved (p. xv). Alfoldy’s insightful introduction also provides a useful historical survey of decorative-art writing in the nine-

teenth century and contextualizes the essays well within the chosen themes.

The first section, “Cultural Redundancy or Genre under Threat,” features three essays that situate the crafts within modernist art discourse. This establishes a somewhat unsettling tone for the book as the reader is forced to question the precarious position that contemporary craft has occupied as a practice within modernity. In the eloquent and well-organized essay “Replacing the Myth of Modernism” (previously published in *American Craft* in 1993), Bruce Metcalfe, American jeweller and writer, sets the parameters for the discussion by defining craft practice and modernist ideology before examining how the interaction of the two have led to damaging effects for the crafts. Central to the essay is the view that contemporary craftspeople have incorporated modernist values (such as making art for art’s sake; privileging the visual experience; and the separation of art from daily life) into their practices without an understanding of the resulting negative repercussions. He states: “Transforming the craft object into autonomous art denies the ways that craft relates to real life” (p. 14). With this dismissal of non-functional art made by craftspeople, the author does not address the fact that many “craft artists,” as he calls them, do make their work about and are inspired by their craft and its function—not in denial of it. He also accuses writers about craft of borrowing “ideas uncritically” from painting and sculpture, and questions the repeated use of the words “expression” and “concept” being applied to functional craftwork as an indication of a discourse that “lacks a distinct language to describe its own practice” (p. 7). While this statement rings true in many ways, it is worthwhile to note that several books have recently been published that attempt to construct a language around craft-specific concepts.²

Larry Shiner, an American philosopher, enlarges the discussion in “The Fate of Craft” by charting the “turbulent 150 year history of the idea of craft” from Ruskin to the Bauhaus

and by examining the “tripartite relation” between craft, art, and design today (pp. 34–40). He concludes by asking if, in the age of Computer Aided Design (CAD) and Computer Aided Manufacture (CAM), there is “any reason to engage in the arduous and time consuming task of learning a traditional craft practice.” But he ends by positing that the intellectual and physical satisfactions of making and using a handmade object may retain craft’s reason for being (p. 44). David Brian Howard, a Canadian art historian, focuses on exploring the tensions between modernism and regionalism in Regina, Saskatchewan, which became “a centre for Canadian craft” during the 1960s (p. 48). Howard contextualizes the rise of the Regina clay movement within the prevailing modernist art ethos exalted by critics such as Clement Greenberg.

In the next four sections of the book, the context of craft within modernism is incorporated in a variety of ways. The authors examine particular time periods, or cultural practices, or technologies, but in all these sections there is a continuing engagement with modernism. The second section, “Global Craft,” includes curator and writer Grace Cochrane’s enlightening essay, “Australia and New Zealand: Design and the Handmade,” which focuses on the innovative ways that craftspeople have collaborated with manufacturers in Asia to develop sustainable small-batch production lines. She describes the funding models that have been established in Australia and New Zealand in order to assist makers with the training and support they need to transfer their hand skills into larger projects (pp. 77–79). Many of these ideas could be studied and adapted to assist Canadian practitioners as a way of partnering small-scale craft with industry. Art historian John Potvin also considers cross-cultural exchange, but in this case within the realm of high fashion. In “Lost in Translation?: Giorgio Armani and the Textualities of Touch,” Potvin investigates the materiality of Armani’s work and the ways in which the designer has borrowed and adapted fabrics and forms from a variety of global textile traditions. Taking a poetic and theoretical approach, Potvin uses the idea of “translation” as his starting point and considers the “socio-cultural modalities of gender, class, and ethnicity” in order to comment on how Armani’s works “collapse boundaries” (p. 84).

The focus then shifts to the economic challenges faced by craftspeople around the world in the section “Crafts and Political Economy.” Canadian historian Beverly Lemire examines gender divisions of labour and skill in “Redressing the History of the Clothing Trade: Ready-Made Apparel, Guilds, and Women Outworkers, c.1650–1800.” Her findings trace and “redress the historic invisibility” of the female workforce and the resulting discrimination experienced within the clothing trade in England (p. 103). This essay is followed by Irish art historian Joseph McBrinn’s chapter, “Handmade Identity: Crafting Design in Ireland from Partition to the Troubles.” In his informative account of the

changing place of craft in Ireland in the twentieth century, McBrinn examines the significance of craft with reference to modernism, design, and national identity in a divided country. Contemporary craft practice is further explored in B. Lynne Milgram’s chapter, “Entangled Technologies: Recrafting Social Practice in Piña Textile Production in the Central Philippines.” Milgram, a Canadian anthropologist, examines the conflated “holistic” and “prescriptive” approaches that allow small-scale entrepreneurs to operate in the competitive piña (pineapple fibre) market (p. 140). She compares two contemporary piña co-op workshops in terms of their production methods, ways of adapting to the market, delegation of gender roles, and the ability of artisans to assert autonomy over their working conditions (pp. 146–51).

The role craft has played in contributing to national identity is discussed in the fourth section, “Invention of Tradition: Craft and Utopian Ideals.” The significance of patronage and the development of the Royal Irish School of Art Needlework is the subject of Canadian art historian Janice Helland’s “Making it Irish: The Politics of Embroidery in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland.” The author traces the founding of the school and related educational programs geared on the one hand towards the establishing of suitable employment for Irish women in reduced circumstances and on the other to creating high-end fashion pieces for the wealthy British aristocracy. In “Pure Magic: the Power of Tradition in Scottish Arts and Crafts,” Scottish art historian Elizabeth Cumming gives an account of the ways in which the Arts and Crafts movement was interpreted in Scotland and applied to the revitalization and restoration of major urban centres. She discusses the incorporation of Celtic imagery and Scottish sensibility into the establishment of a “national character,” as typified by the embroidery work of Jessie Newbery and others (p. 184). Canadian art historian Alla Myzelev investigates the significance of the *kustari* craft revival in contributing to the formation of national identity in “Ukrainian Craft Revival: from Craft to Avant-Garde, from ‘Folk’ to Traditional.” Myzelev examines the exchange of designs and ideas between the peasant folk artists and the Russian and Ukrainian artists of the avant-garde and the underlying political and economic climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The final section, “Craft, the Senses, and New Technologies,” includes three significant essays that serve as important contributions to contemporary discourse about craft. The authors address ways of rethinking the making process and nature of craft in the contexts of sensography and new technologies. Canadian anthropologist David Howes, in “Sensory Basket Weaving 101,” explores the “notion of sensography” in its current parlance in the humanities and social sciences (p. 217). He demonstrates this model of thinking by examining the significance of basket making and use within the Desana tribe (in the northwest Amazon), for whom the basket holds great meaning

as a metaphor for the life process (p. 221). By examining the sensorial nature (smell, taste, texture, etc.) of a chosen object in a holistic manner, Howes develops a useful model for the contemporary discussion of craft beyond the visual.

Tanya Harrod, British writer and curator, tackles the relationship between craft and new technology head-on in “Otherwise Unobtainable: The Applied Arts and the Politics and Poetics of Digital Technology.” This essay looks at the positive and negative impact of the computer on the way we think and create. The politics and also the poetics of combining craft knowledge with computer-controlled technology are discussed here in a very articulate and thoughtful way. Harrod charts the literature on new media that examines how the “physically externalized process” of “hyper-linking” is different from the more conventional internalized and “unobservable” mental and creative process (p. 228). Artists who have discovered ways to “subvert” the functions of technology in order to create artwork that would be “otherwise unobtainable” are discussed to illustrate these new approaches.

Innovative collaborative projects between craft and new technology are further explored in Love Jönsson’s memorable essay, “Rethinking Dichotomies: Crafts and the Digital.” Jönsson, a Swedish critic and writer, provides examples of the way in which contemporary craftspeople and designers are embracing technology rather than perceiving it as a threat. He cites several fascinating young collectives in Sweden, such as Front, who in its project *Sketch Furniture* uses “motion capture software to record sketches of furniture made by hand in the air,” which are then made into real furniture using rapid prototyping (pp. 243–44). Mike Press, in “Handmade Futures: The Emerging Role of Craft Knowledge in Our Digital Culture,” articulates ways in which material expertise, hand skills, and craft process can be applied and are even essential in developing innovative cross-disciplinary research (in, for example, art, science, healthcare, and space exploration) at the doctoral level. Press, a British academic in design policy, cites several cutting-edge examples of projects that have had unique and relevant real-world applications (such as the work of Graham Whiteley, who was able to apply his knowl-

edge of furniture making towards his PhD research into a robotic arm that was later used by NASA) (p. 256).

This collection of essays illustrates a multifaceted approach to situating craft in a modernist context and the editor should be congratulated for pulling together such a timely anthology. Although many interesting viewpoints are presented, it would have been valuable to include more makers among the authors to balance the predominantly historical approach. It also would have been interesting to see more references to Canadian studies and examples, although many of the findings included here have relevance for Canadian craft practice and post-secondary education. As we, in Canada, gravitate towards a research culture in our art and design programs, it is worth bearing in mind the lessons learned and international models presented here. Several books have been published in Canada that preserve the important research presented at craft symposia,³ and this book, which references a major conference on the crafts, is a very relevant new addition to this genre.

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Notes

- ¹ Paul Greenhalgh, ed., *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today* (London, 2002), 207.
- ² See, for example, Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford, 2007); and Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2007).
- ³ See, for example, Melanie Egan, Alan C. Elder, and Jean Johnson, eds., *Crafting New Traditions: Canadian Innovators and Influences* (Gatineau, 2008); Jean Johnson, ed., *Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory and Critical Writing* (Toronto, 2002); Gloria A. Hickey, ed., *Common Ground: Contemporary Craft, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts* (Hull, 1999); and Gloria A. Hickey, ed., *Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft* (Hull, 1994).

Joan Coutu, *Persuasion and Propaganda: Monuments and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire*. Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006, 496 pp., 160 pages of black-and-white illus., \$60.00 Cdn.

Public monuments, as Joan Coutu argues persuasively, “are about the empire, but more important, they are about the people in it” (p. 4). Coutu’s incisive study of colonial sculpture in her aptly entitled book, *Persuasion and Propaganda: Monuments and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire*, is embedded in the tangled web of

social and political relationships spread across Britain’s colonial expanse in the eighteenth century. By focusing on specific individuals, she analyzes how monuments to which they were linked either forged connections with or marked divisions within different communities in colonial settings and in Britain. Such an approach critiques eighteenth-century ideas about heroism, self-sacrifice, and duty vital to maintaining a keen sense of British identity even in the colonies. At the same time, it also dismantles the popular focus on London as the center of Britain’s empire. Instead, Coutu navigates the locations of Jamaica, Barbados, Charleston, New York,