



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Review: Thinking Through Craft

Citation for published version:

Verhoeven, A 2008, 'Review: Thinking Through Craft', Studio: Craft and Design in Canada, 3 1.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Author final version (often known as postprint)

Published In:

Studio: Craft and Design in Canada

Publisher Rights Statement:

©Verhoeven, A. (2008). Review: Thinking Through Craft. Studio: Craft and Design in Canada 3 1

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Thinking Through Craft

Glenn Adamson

Berg Publishers (31 Oct 2007)

ISBN-10: 1845206479

When I first immigrated to the Netherlands I found it difficult to memorize my new mobile number. It seemed an impossible task to share my number with others, and after 4 years, it still presents challenges.

The challenge lies in how the 10 digit number is grouped. In North America, 10 digit numbers are clustered into 3 sets, and always delivered in a familiar cadence. The 416-555-1212 format is instantly recognizable and makes the number easy to remember. In the Netherlands, however, the number is grouped into 5 clusters of two digits, and is written (and expressed) as 41-65-55-12-12. This notion of chunking bits of information together in order to make it easier to remember comes from George A. Miller, who elucidated on this concept in his 1956 paper *The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information*. (1956, *Psychological Review*, vol.63, 81-97). Miller's hypothesis was that we have a limit on how much information our immediate memory can store (7 parts, plus or minus two), but by chunking information together (10 isolated digits becomes 3 clusters of 3 to 4 digits) we are able to retain and recall more information, and it becomes easier to recall.

As an experiment, try stating your own phone number in the European format presented. Though it may seem a simple task, you may find you stumble, pause and reconsider the sequence of digits you already know. Re-chunking the data into another format instantly presents the same information in an alternative manner. But old habits die hard, and changing to a new chunking heuristic doesn't come without challenges. It does, however, allow you to look at the data new way.

And this brings me to Glenn Adamson's recent book, *Thinking through Craft*. (2007, Berg Publishers). Adamson doesn't discuss Miller, or his work. Adamson is tackling the old issue of craft: what it is, what it means, and where is it going. Adamson presents, however, a novel and fresh approach to the subject, by performing a re-chunking of the arguments that already exist. In that sense, *Thinking through Craft* reframes the familiar craft debates, and opens an avenue for a new discussion, new insights and a fresh approach.

The book takes on 5 major themes, which have all been recounted in prior craft theories. In the first chapter, Adamson tackles the vexing problem of the relationship between art and craft. He argues that the issues in this debate that practitioners consider problematic might actually be a new dialogue in disguise. By re-chunking the concept that craft is somehow a branch of art, a sub-discipline, or in some other way related, he introduces the notion of the supplemental theorized by Jacques Derrida. Derrida describes the supplemental as an idea (or object) that is embedded within a conceptual construct, and when illuminated, these supplementals point to gaps, or problems within the conceptual argument. Adamson uses the example of the guilded frame surrounding artworks in major

galleries. The frame is not necessary to the artwork itself, but it serves as a supplemental to create a distinction between the artwork inside the frame and everything else outside it. Without this conceptual idea of the frame, the world of art blends into mass culture, thereby undermining its own position as being autonomous and outside external influences.

In this regard, Adamson discusses craft as a supplemental for art practice, and that the position for craft is not to become art, but perhaps is to compliment an incomplete ideology in the arguments that art criticism is positing. To this sense, the further exclusion (or inclusion) of craft creates a paradox within the dialogue of art criticism itself. It seems, according to Adamson, that as much as the art world has a problem with craft, it is nonetheless bound to it in order to further its own dialogue and agenda of autonomy.

Adamson continues with this dialectical, re-chunking style of prose to open up new perspectives in the remaining four chapters of the book. He reframes the arguments of materials into materiality, techniques and process into skill, nature into the pastoral and the political aspects of hobby, DIY and feminist craft into the concept of the amateur. In all these points, *Thinking through Craft* deftly dissects the existing arguments and reassembles the present ideas into new constructs, illuminating new ideas and alternate pathways to forge a new, re-chunked, theory concerning craft.

While the ideas behind the text are vast and complex, Adamson is still able to maintain a readable, relaxed writing style, constructing his complicated arguments into chapters that compare art giants with craft cult heroes, and he includes plenty of full colour plates to satisfy the eye. For any craft advocate, this book is an absolute must-read, and it will likely prove to be a leisurely, enjoyable one as well. It is doubtful, however, that it will improve your memory regarding any future phone numbers.

Arno Verhoeven is a designer/maker, writer and lecturer on craft and design. He is presently based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.