OBSCURE OBJECTS OF DESIRE

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Obscure Objects of Desire Reviewing Crafts in the 20th Century was the title of a small but ambitious conference held at East Anglia University in Norwich, England, from January 10-12, 1997. It was organized by Tanya Harrod under the auspices of the University of East Anglia Fellowship in Critical Appreciation in the Crafts and Design. The Fellowship, whose purpose is to provide a means of stimulating debate around the contemporary crafts, is funded by the Eastern Arts Board and the Crafts Council and is hosted by the School of World Art Studies and Museology at the University of East Anglia. Harrod is the second recipient of the Fellowship; the first was awarded to the writer and critic Peter Dormer who died just a few weeks prior to this conference. Harrod dedicated the conference to his memory and his presence seemed to pervade many of the private conversations throughout the three days of the conference.

Because the conference attendance was limited to only 150 delegates, a third of whom were delivering papers, it was quite intimate. Meals, tea and drinks in the evening were served in the elegantly modern Sainsbury Centre. Delegates were taken by bus from their accommodations to the campus, where the talks began at 9:30 am, and stayed until the buses returned for them at about 10:15 pm. One invariably found oneself during the breaks, at lunch or dinner, engaged in conversations or arguments about one point or another made in one of the earlier talks.

I had wanted to attend this conference because I had heard from friends that this was the largest conference on the crafts held in Britain since the late 1980s and I was curious about how the British were dealing with the problem of what exactly defines modern crafts and how they were going about writing its history. In the United States over the past 15 years, the desire by the modern crafts to be part of the more glamorous and lucrative fine arts has caused crafts' academic, commercial and non-profit institutions to scurry around looking for new ways to reinvent themselves as some sort of 'New Art Form', a kind of avant-garde sub-genre of postmodernist fine art. There have even been suggestions modern crafts might best be explained and understood within the context of the decorative and applied arts. I suspected, but was not entirely sure, that the situation in Britain was somewhat similar. The British magazine *Crafts*, for example, which is funded by the British Crafts Council, advertises itself (at least in American publications) as 'The Decorative and Applied Arts Magazine'. Harrods' statement that, "this is a conference about the crafts – things made by hand in the 20th century. Phrases like 'decorative art' and 'applied art', somehow do not convey the conference's aims and emphasis," set the tone for the conference and shows, I think, her belief that craft must be understood on its own terms and that its history cannot be ignored simply because it may momentarily be out of fashion.

The conference was structured into two distinct parts. There were six plenary sessions and five parallel programs which were organized by themes such as 'National and Regional Identity', 'Relations with Modernism and Postmodernism', 'Production, Consumption and Value', 'Language, Poetics and Methodologies' and 'The Dissident Workshop'. There were an average of 10 speakers addressing various facets of each of these topics.

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With a few notable exceptions I found the 'strands', the name given to the section of parallel programs far more interesting and to the point than the offerings at the plenary sessions. I am not sure why this was except that perhaps the talks in the plenary sessions, which were given by speakers from outside the crafts field and who, therefore, were not quite sure of the issues most of the delegates were struggling with, did not resonate with the same sense of urgency that seemed to exemplify the talks in the strands. In one of the plenary sessions, for example, the film historian Philip Dodd, who was just appointed as the new head of the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, gave an exuberant talk on Nationalism. He opened it by showing the credits from the James Bond film, *Dr. No*. The idea being that film graphics like this were particularly English and that they were a type of craft that was not being recognized preserved or studied. He even seemed to suggest at the end of his talk that perhaps while we were engaged in writing the history of modern crafts we might find a place for this idiom inside that history. His talk was full of literary references and highly entertaining but his shotgun-style approach left everyone wondering exactly what his point was. Yehuda Safran of Columbia University in New York, who spoke on Heidegger, seemed to have even less of a direction. His presentation, which he concluded by reading from Heidegger for 15 minutes, was mind numbing and there was a palpable sigh of relief when he finished. The opening plenary talk, was the bright exception. It was given by Idris Parry and titled "Rilke and Things". Parry's enthusiasm for Rilke and his sincere desire to share Rilke's ideas had his audience transfixed. He explored Rilke's thoughts about not only the making of a common object like a shawl and its 'equivalence' to life, but also the difficulty in expressing that equivalence in language. On the last day of conference, after attending more than 14 lectures, I could not help but long for the sincerity, clarity and the incredibly rich content of Parry's talk.

One of the interesting talks from the Strands that elicited a strong response was given by Pamela Johnson and titled "Out of Touch: The Meaning of Making in the Digital Age". She posed the question, why do we make crafts in a digital age? In answering that question she argued that the element that separates crafts from the fine arts and makes it special is 'sensuousness', that it is understood through touch. She gave some interesting physiological explanations to lay the ground work for her argument, from the number of receptors in the spinal cord to suggesting that the skin can be seen as the body's largest organ. She also suggested that touch was the only sense that cannot be tricked. All of this raised the hackles of many of the academic theorists who apparently believed that making such a fuss over touch was inherently anti-intellectual and might, therefore, make the crafts less viable as a subject for academic research. There is, however, an important American philosopher from the 1930s who did not find touch and the intellect to be at odds. John Dewey, in his book, *Art As Experience*, which was based on his lectures on aesthetics at Harvard University in 1932, wrote that "there is no limit to the capacity of immediate sensuous experi themselves – that is in the abstract – would be designated 'ideal' and 'spiritual'."

There was another session that also fired a debate among the conferees. This was a plenary session panel on The Oral History and the Crafts. Mike Hughes, Paul Thompson and Moira Vincentelli spoke about their reasons for doing oral histories as well as the methods they employ. For the most part there seemed to be the feeling that they were trying to find some sort of 'truth' that needed to be preserved for posterity and that this truth, judging from the explanations of how they conduct these interviews, was

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something that the craftspeople whom they were interviewing would always try to hide from them. There was an effort to try to make these interviews sound as scientific and objective as possible, until at one point Paul Thompson related a problem he faced while working as a consultant on a BBC project. A number of people were interviewed for this particular television series and at one point they had to choose between an articulate and professional nurse, whom he seemed to have admired, and an Irish woman who prepared the dead so they could be laid out for wakes. The nurse, he said, just seemed flat on video, but the Irish woman, whom he said was neither articulate nor had any a important insights, ended her explanation of what she did with a devilish grin that she delivered directly into the camera and held for an unnaturally long time. They decided, he stated, to go with the latter more visually captivating interview.

One of the conferees then asked what criteria were used to make that decision. Thompson answered that sometimes art was the most important factor in putting together an interview like that – an admission that seemed to confound many in the audience and begged the question of whether oral history was about a unbiased scientific study for posterity or was it about the search for a commodity that could be used to build a career. Vincentelli was at odds with Thompson and Hughes on a number of points and seemed alone in understanding the responsibility for the trust the interviewees placed in those who request these oral histories.

There were only a small number of makers at this conference. Two of them were potters who gave talks that challenged some of modern crafts most deeply held beliefs and questioned the validity of the views of one of modern English crafts' most pivotal figures. Julian Stair, in his paper, disputed the common view held in the crafts world that the supremacy of the fine arts and the critical writing that supports this cultural position has kept the crafts from achieving the status it deserves. He argued that in the 1920s and '30s, modern crafts, even though it was in an embryonic stage, occupied a far more important position in English culture than the crafts have achieved since. His examination not only of the writings of Herbert Read and Bernard Rackham, but also of the art journals and popular press of that period, showed how widespread and intense the critical discussion was. With this historic precedent in mind, he questioned whether the second class status to which crafts feel it has been delegated, might be self-imposed.

Edmund de Waal, whose book on Bernard Leach will be published by the Tate Gallery in 1997, examined in his talk the myth of Bernard Leach and his role as a 'conduit' from Japan to England for the ideals of the Mingei movement. He showed how Leach's narrow group of friends in Japan blinded Leach to other aesthetic strains in Japanese culture. The result, he pointed out, is that we now have generation upon generation of Western potters who are engaged in aesthetic practices they believe to be either Japanese or Korean but which in reality represent the views of a rather small, marginal group of Japanese idealists from the 1920s whose philosophy was to a large extent based on the writings of Ruskin and Morris.

At the end of the conference, I felt both excited and bewildered. The latter because it seemed impossible to me to reconcile all the diverse positions about how we should look at and what we should expect

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from modern crafts. And yet, I found it was heartening that so many obviously intelligent and talented people found the crafts so compelling that they were willing to devote their energy and attention to trying to understand why this activity still moves us and has meaning when, some might argue, it has lost any real significance it once had. In fact, I felt somewhat flattered (as a craftsperson) that all of these people were trying not only to understand and articulate the qualities and feelings crafts objects are capable of containing, but also to give those attributes some measure of cultural significance. *Obscure Objects* underlined the importance the British place on the idea of craft and made it plain that crafts have to look no farther than their own history to find meaning. It may have provided the needed impetus and laid the foundation for the beginnings of a critical history for modern crafts in Britain.