

# ‘Making / Thinking The craft of education’

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## Introduction

This short paper aims to question how making resides in contemporary art and design institutes. We are at a cusp of divergence between aspiring to create sustainable makers while faced with culling discipline specifics, arguably to make sustainable the art and design institute.

The need to make can often be driven by a personal endeavour to have ownership over materials and processes resulting in art artefacts. While many question if we need to surround ourselves with more objects and artefacts I will have to confess, I like 'things', I like to experience evidence of creative making, I like to see the visionary and innovation of the made. Edmund de Waal notes 'ultimately craft is about the value of things, the value in things' (2014). In a contradictory era of individualism, alongside the pervasiveness of globalization and mass production; the self made / crafted by hand is seen as an antidote. The problem is, this antidote is often laced in sentimental tradition and novelty as opposed to what de Waal proclaims 'craft is central, absolutely central' (2014). It would be a mistake to define all making as craft, equally it would be a mistake to see craft as the last bastion of skills, to some degree this has an element of truth, but not all makers locate their practices in craft, yet this does not make them less of a maker, as making is 'absolutely central' to them.

Making is a physical activity of thinking. Arguably we all make, my mother 'made things out of her head', a famous phrase in our household, while this was no less creative, not all making is viewed as craft. So by what criteria and definition is a maker determined? For me it is based on the belief that making is a state of being, a way to intellectualize and to reason. Starling talks of 'thinking through craft', but I am more inclined to relate to Adamson who talks of 'thinking' through process with 'no assumptions about the pre conditions of the results of the endeavour' (2007: 167). The making / thinking is often a intuitive relationship with a specific material or process or both; the holistic materiality with process becomes conceptual or philosophical, whereby process can have more importance than the outcome. Sullivan says 'thinking in a medium, thinking in a language and thinking in a context' (2005). This affinity with materials is proactive, Carter talks of 'material thinking as 'not passive' in the 'creative process' (Nimkulat 2012: 3). This active role can reveal understanding the influences of a physical material on the makers' forming of thought during the creative process.

For some the term 'craft' is loaded with contention, seen as traditional, isolated skill acquisition or as passive without provoking change. Craft outcomes are often categorized by material and techniques rather than by application or the makers' intention.

If we think of craft as an activity as opposed to a sector that aspires to notions of craftsmanship (or to be PC 'craftship'), it is easier to comprehend, as Edwards puts it, 'art as thoughtful workmanship' (Harrod 1997: 349).

A number of years ago there was a Department of Craft in the National College of Art & Design which included ceramics, glass, metals and jewellery but this was thought an inadequate name, it was only to be replaced by a much less imaginative and much more wieldy title of the Department of Ceramics, Glass and Metals and Jewellery; which illustrates my point of delineated silos as opposed to finding common thinking and approaches. This department has once again been reconfigured to one that is called Applied Materials, Adamson talks of 'craft is indeed always applied, always in motion towards some objective' (2007:11). But more expansively applied materials questions what could happen in a space where materiality and process-led thinking are central.

I find the word 'craft' is synonymous with the 'Crafts Council of Ireland' organization, while I am in no way deriding it, I am a member, there are many makers whose outcomes do not sit easily within the tight categorization. Even with the 'rebranding' of the council becoming the 'Design & Crafts Council of Ireland' has not broken the established categorizing. On the one hand this location of craft in and with Design may be a coincidence resulting from Ireland's bid for 'Year of Design', but on the other hand, this pairing of 'design' with craft' redresses the fact that craft making is the bedrock of design practices. Design in the institutes has evolved from the craft maker disciplines. It is true makers are strongly rooted in a discipline not in a 'sector' or for that matter in a college faculty, but maybe we should think of craft in terms of what Adamson says 'as a conceptual (horizon) active throughout modern artistic practice' (2007:2).

Edwards states the strong 'dialogue between maker and object; an interdependency between process and intention which is linked by skill', demonstrates the unique imperatives and characteristics of the maker. (Harrod 1997: 351). Making / thinking arguably fuses as one reflexive activity, engages the maker to find methods for articulation and communication that brings the introspective personal knowledge to the fore, welcoming the unexpected, unprescribed happening but crucially knows what to pursue and what is pertinent to the intention.

Cohn says 'Thinking will often need to be undone as a way to discover different approaches' (2012: 37). Applying these conditions suggests a more organic and osmotic relationship with materials / processes and intention. It is in the application that the intention should be understood. Or in other words through process and progress of making there is a continuous open dialogue that forms knowledge. Nimkulat talks of the 'hands-on intellect; through handling materials in practice a form of tacit knowledge arises providing a particular way of understanding...that is grounded in the hands-on practice itself' (2012 vol. 6 no. 3).

As by example I will reference my own case to illustrate the process and progress of a making practice. My practice has radically shifted from that of large-scale 2D machine embroidered outcomes, that had a recognisable 'style' and a receptive audience, yet I questioned 'was this it as a practice?' I wanted to break away from the decorative label and connotations that quickly pigeon holed me by the materials and techniques I used as opposed to themes or context of the made artefacts. Primarily I wanted to become more masterful as a maker where the outcomes would engage the viewer in a different 'read', and would demand more than a passive read of a pictorial rendering. The knowledge of the practice identified the shift in making to that of 3D hand embroidered shoe derived forms that continue to be the vehicle to narrate and emblematic of a 'simpatico' pairing.

We may consider the experiential 'making' a fundamental, yet it never the less has lagged behind other fields in taking an academic position. In comparatively recent times the maker, practitioner and the craft debate are finding a voice for the making experiences. Only by a full articulation of the process of the experiential by its trial and experimentation does this knowledge find its rightful voice that in turn informs the nature of the practice based activities.

Sullivan's takes the position that "the ever-expanding practices used by artists advance our understanding of who we are, what we do, and what we know" (2005:19).

Finding a voice is more often than not, referring to articulation and language through writing. Makers are good at making and are always equally at ease with writing, like all practices, there is implied time investment and up-skilling. '...like any skills, have to be learned by doing the task in practical situations under supervision' (Phillips / Pugh 2005 pp20-22). As a maker I wanted to take ownership of my practice and field that I locate my practice in, as opposed to one step remove of others interpreting and telling me what it is I do.

Yet for many makers there is anxiety regarding what can often feel as a task that removes them from their practice. The need to write, whether for the institute, for documentation and archiving, or for funding, can feel like time away from making. As Moore notes 'for many makers, time writing is time out of the studio and time outside their area of expertise' (2009: 20) While not for everyone, the writing practice for this maker is a tortured practice, yet I am equally aware how finding a voice and articulation has greatly informed and fed the making practice. While very different and not in equal measure, the reflecting on making and making made manifest by writing never the less demonstrates a reciprocal partnership. Yet Adamson identifies a particular articulation that makers do understand; that of 'our evaluation of the craft objects centres on matters of touch, which we sometimes loosely describe as a form of reading' (2013: 101). It can be a shock to use the very practice that brought one to critical research, only to find the practice has been so rigorous dissected in the pursuit of answering the research inquiry that it can suffer or even cease to be needed.

I am a maker, I was before research, then I utilized making in order to answer critical inquiry that could not be answered any other way, resulting in a changed practice. Once the research was answered I still had a need to make, a need to think by making, to manifest physical outcomes and to exercise the making practice. It has taken me a number of years to split what was a conducive 3-way relationship of practitioner / researcher and educator now to separate educator from the maker's practice that has to be active for its own sake and not to solely exist for research outcomes, or worse, to be seen as a mere side activity to illustrate research.

Often makers had a reluctance to articulate or define their practice, believing that the made outcome was self-explanatory because the made now exists. But Sullivan states 'it is no longer plausible ...to claim that the visual (object) is merely a way to saying what cannot effectively be said in words' (2005). I now understand this as a result of my engagement with the research process (which incidentally I see as another form of making where like all skills needs practice and time to hone). I now agree with Biggs who says, "objects alone cannot embody knowledge because they need to be interpreted in order to communicate knowledge' (2002: 23-24). The making is a method that needs articulation for meaning to be understood. It was only through the rigour of the process could I arrive at conclusions that were not prescribed but shifted from what I previously held as universal truths. These 'discoveries' have been well articulated by Adamson who says, 'innovation ...is often not a matter of creating a work, rather, it is a matter of inventing a whole way of working', which with personal critiquing can be identified in ones own practice (2013: 33).

What is emerging with significances is the connection between the making methodologies with that of research building. Schon says 'The exploration of knowledge partly through making artefacts has brought a new dimension to ... research as the practitioner informs the nature of the researcher'. This knowledge requires a distinction from that of the subjective private knowing to that of the objective externalized knowing for dissemination. The private knowing as Caudy points out 'is not relevant if it can not be shared' (2006: 5).

The art and design institutes talk of 'master classes' and 'master designers' and 'crafters', that singularly pride and protect what it is to be an 'expert'. The experiential knowledge from making has significance for research; Dorst distinguishes between the expert designer / maker and that of master designer / maker. 'expert' designer; ("expert" as in better, not as in "specialized"). The master practitioner has 'achieved a high level of innovation that questions the established way of working of the experts, their work representing new knowledge in the field' (2010: 136).

For example, Carlo Scarpa was a glass expert creating new glass techniques yet became a master by innovating the discipline and changing the field with new architectural applications. In a differing way Grayson Perry may be considered an expert potter, yet the role of his pots is to communicate pushing this knowledge into the expanded field. Grayson Perry says of himself that he is not an 'innovator ceramics wise'; he uses traditional forms and techniques yet melds theses with social commentary via the pot forms. He sees craft as 'easy to live with, it isn't controversial', yet the pots are used as 'carriers of messages' that take them outside of the passive 'easy' role (2015).

It is in this role of being innovative, pushing the discipline that places the making methodology in a central role, a hub if you like, with other domains.

Sullivan notes as 'emancipatory' that can 'enact artistic, social, political, educational or cultural change' (2005). Disciplines need to enact change. Often the perception is that craft disciplines do not reflect these changes, instead perceive craft as some kind of Noah's ark or zoo for the survival of skills. The role of the art / design institute is not only to be a place to up hold certain skills; it is alarming to think some do not even see this as the institutes' remit at all. Makers can fear loss of their identity resulting in an introspective stagnation of their disciplines. Practice based inquires increasingly needs 'the ability to communicate and get into dialogue with... other knowledge producers, in ones own, as well as other disciplines and fields'. (Dunin-Woyseth / Nilsson 2012: 9).

Referencing my own case, my practice is rooted in the discipline of embroidery making shoe derived forms for installation and gallery contexts. The shoe motif becomes artefact, visual communicator, narrator, and protagonist. The research necessitates crossing into material culture, Venetian art history, culture studies of Venice and gender studies. There was a need to understand the notion of artefacts collected, hoarded, displayed, as social codifier, metaphor, fetish and gender signifier.

The making of artefacts contextualized the research in the applied arts, craft debates and narrative for sculpture / installation and audience engagement. I found the inter / cross disciplinary knowledge of shoe making aligned with embroidery techniques creating a conducive partnership that shared similar sensory responses with the hand held scale. The shoe maker and the embroiderer are often similar in that both use their laps as 'workstation', resulting in an intimacy or sensory relationship of body with process.

It could be argued that the applied arts / applied materials by definition are interdisciplinary. The 'inter' play can only happen when the discipline(s) are recognized in the first place. Never the less interdisciplinary is non-conformist; neither linear nor singular, variables are endless as it pushes boundaries creating new fields of study. The activity of making allows for the 'inter' discursive. This is evident when textile processes methods are in conjunction with collaborative dialogues. Textile processes have been the vanguard in public engagement and participation, a means for social commentary and political debate that by default still are seen as 'outside art'. The fifty-fifth Venice Biennale was by far the best in my humble opinion, because of the emphasis with making and especially with materiality of the made. Yet Yentob (2013) viewed much of this making as 'outsider art' (a term I do not like, as it implies an 'in club', suggesting someone other than me determines if I am 'out' or 'in' by what I make and how I make it). Yet it is exactly because of being on the edge that Alice Maher (Nickell: 410) sees as a deliberate positive to her practice. "I am scraping at the edges of fine art and craft and decoration as it were, and of course decoration was always considered a 'bad' thing in art school. If it was very decorative it wasn't meaningful! But then it plays right into my interest in margins".

The textile making experienced by communal groups, still perpetuates this view of 'outside' of formal art and design. Yet ironically while this terrain is as popular as ever, it is the 'popularist' aspect that keeps from being part of formal dialogues. Dissemination is thought good, but dissemination that appeals to the 'popular' is not considered good. Yet textile objects and processes are found to be anchoring more and more of the discursive.

Not only is the discursive forging the personal practice but it also enables new sites and foci of research. Primarily female affiliated, textile groups function by a seemingly democratic collective making, each is enabled to contribute, essentially decision making aims to reflect a collective view and each is part of the overall whole. Textile processes allow for narrative, local interest, historical documentation, such as produced by 'The Women's Institute' or the 'Coot Hill Textile Panels' located in their Library in Co. Cavan. Group making is particularly 'successful' in such artefacts as peace quilts often community initiatives, such as the Day of the Dead – embroidery for peace project, Mexico, another such example, Lycia Trouton's Linen Memorial 2005 or the quilt from the Wave Trauma Centre – Quilt of Remembrance 2014. While there are strong collective over tones, these engagements belie contrary frictions in terms of 'authorship' where the designer may not participate in the making, and where makers are not cited either by name, noting invested time or whether employed or not. For example Joana Vasconelos employs highly skilled knitters (crochet) and expert glass makers for her installations, while employees are nameless they are paid. Same can be said of Ali WeiWei's very controversial ceramic sunflower seed production. Yet the largest Irish trade union SIPTU ironically did not pay the skilled embroideries for their time in making the '1913- Lock-out' panels, instead commissioned the Irish artist Robert Ballagh as the designer.

Knitting, no longer gender bias, has become a socially engaged medium for activism; popularised by groups such as 'Pussy Riot', 'Guerrilla Knitting', 'Yarn Bombing', and 'Urban knitting for the Street'. The collective activity of making, the emphasis of the individual's contribution suggesting the participatory making is valued more than the artefact outcome such as The Derry Quilt produced during 'Year of Culture' 2013 or that of similar outcome by Jane Avila in Mexico.

There is an intimacy that textiles harbours and holds emotions and memories that few other materials and objects can do. Indeed the making by repeat process whether by such processes as weave or stitch, is often used as a metaphor to express notions of suppression and oppression, such as articulated with Bristow's work. Mary Kazoun talks of, 'My repetitive process is anxious, focused, tense, determined'.

She pushes the visceral aspects of making, speaking of the physical pain and body wrenched as she makes, or more acutely as she performs making. 'I am in physical pain because of the labour of (their) making and I embrace it' (2005: 17).

McGuinness "found the most effective work and... effective tools for communicating...to various audiences were still all rooted in cloth' because of 'how it can speak to people...cloth can operate in society, to navigate and open up different spaces' that engage with the community and involve people as 'collaborators' rather than 'participants', 'donors' rather than 'consumers'. (Nickell: 56) He used textiles to engage and communicate the difficult and sensitive theme of male suicide in Ireland. McGuinness applied his textile practice with clinical scientist Kevin Malone in their socially engaged visual arts PhD in a project called 21 grams that references the weight of a ghost.

Makers can often speak of the state of well-being through making, the therapeutic, the need to retreat, to recoup. Notions of recoup and therapy consolidated thinking that took concerted focus after the Second World War. Textiles processes were widely used in the after care to 'broken' soldiers. This recognition notes that textile processes can help to heal, never the less created and perpetuated stigmas of re-appropriation of 'female' activities that often only compounded feelings of being worthless and de-masculinised. The re-appropriation of textiles activities may seem out-dated, even un-sympathetic when gentrified, yet there has been a surge in debate of the relationship between the need to make through textile processes as being integral in recovery. This relationship has often been an unrecorded, unarticulated private experience is now finding a voice to define and understand this relationship. Rebecca Early (2015) talks of her making and the need to make as repair and mend that accompanied her recovery from illness. This should not be construed as occupational therapy or solely called upon when low or in times of need. I would contend it is more profound than that, to make and have an affinity with materials and or processes are about a sense of well-being. Understanding that a sense of well-being can have significance outside of the individual to outward social engagement by applied practices has an importance for education and health as well as interfacing with participatory practices.

Participatory practices which enable and can have impact when making is central. Seliena Coyle states the importance of a 'tangible legacy that will increase skill, (provide) sector awareness, collaboration and inclusion' (2013: 10). By diverse makers she stresses the importance of embedding craft and making activities into education, into community engagement and ownership over creating conditions whereby these practices are sustainable as micro professions and as macro cultural legacy.

The interdisciplinary is not only about interplay of existing disciplines but to forge new notions of the crafted. The emergence of makers who are embracing new technologies and striving for new application with known traditional disciplines is growing expedientially, significantly influencing and changing the expanded fields. For example Mark Raby's couture crafted garments from 3D printing processes. Nigel Cheney's prodigious making practice, applies digital processes of print and multi-head machine embroidery along with hand generated imagery and hand stitch surfaces, this fusing of new and old, hand and machine for many makers are 'dialects' within the one language. The outcomes are no less made, crafted and evidential of invested labour and time. New applications constantly push boundaries and contest the field.

Making had been always central to the art / design pedagogy and methodological approaches. I never considered that making would not be seen as an imperative and a pre requisite in art and design pedagogy. At best for some disciplines, there is the feeling of merely existing on the edge, at its worst other maker disciplines are barely surviving and become defensive stagnant, and inward looking, believing instead that staying 'pure' and singular will up hold the discipline. On the contrary the sustainability can only be had by finding a voice, finding relevance, being discursive and adaptable. The meshing of the inter play of practices of maker, researcher and educator continually sees change. Irwin talks of 'living (our) artworks, representing (our) understanding and performing (our) pedagogical positions as (we) integrate knowing, doing and making through aesthetic experiences' (Lim 2006: 4).

Yet these roles are organic and need time to find their levels, its in the 'balancing multiple identities is empowering art educators to demonstrate their artistic processes and pedagogical strategies'. Lim makes the point that not only the artistic role but that of the educator 'develop as a life time process' (2006: 12).

The National College of Art and Design has implemented a controversial restructuring of the 4 year undergraduate degree to that of a 3 year degree. The singular anxiety for academic staff, is where and when will the 'making' happen? The educational landscape conditions students to think that a making practice could be forged after three or four years, we present to them time measured in blocks, as credit related. Time becomes something to be shortened and thought of as an indulgence if you have enough of it. Whether you think craft is an activity, a sector, or a state of mind, it is the invested time that defines a making practice. Time becomes conceptual or as a philosophical agent that gives 'currency' to the practice. It is notions of time in and on a practice where articulation becomes difficult to analysis and quantify its 'value'. It is the thing that academia can not shape appropriately with a universal model or matrix to apply. Time is determined by what is needed to realize the intention. An unnamed netsuke maker may spend three days observing a deer before beginning to sculpt his miniature form. Chun Kwong Young needs to make thousands upon thousands of carefully and ritually wrapped parcel like forms; an investment of labour lost to the viewer. The Irish based textile 'Print Block' could only collaborate when they invested in, as Neilson (2015) says 'time to talk, to tell stories and to 'play' .This focused use of time not only informs individual practices but is seen as a way to push the boundaries of their relationship with making.

#### To Conclude

What is clear at this junction of change within the art and design institute is the need to take stock and to revalue the 'function' of craft making disciplines. Taking stock not only in terms of content and outcome, but also to critically stock-take how the making methodology should be fundamental to delivery dissemination and to the expanded field.

Knowledge of the experiential through craft making disciplines are not just to be understood as continuing skill based traditions, instead to think of these craft disciplines as the bedrock of the art institute. 'Design' in the institute has morphed out of the making disciplines yet it now no longer only resides in the art college as a defined field of art study, but reflecting a thinking to be current in the fields of architecture, engineering, digital interaction, more often defined in terms of strategies, systems and services. Yet without grounded craft making principles and philosophy design can quickly evaporate without substance having no true location.

2015 saw Ireland be the venue for 'ID - A Year of Design'. Yet Design in Ireland is relatively young, its origins rightfully recognizes the hugely influential 'Design in Ireland, Scandinavian Design Group in Ireland' report commissioned by the 'Irish Export Board' in 1962 at its roots. Its findings encouraged and enabled the establishment of the state funded 'Kilkenny Design Workshops', the precursors of the 'Crafts Council'. Yet it was by aligning design with the indigenous craft disciplines that still has currency and a lasting legacy. It cited that the already existing craft disciplines had much to contribute in defining such burgeoning fields as industrial design and product design. Such crafts disciplines are still relevant in shaping contemporary design and its expanded application; reiterated by the RTE series (2015) [Designing Ireland](#) episode 2.

For the contemporary institutes there are many outside influences that shape agendas, it is important not to lose sight of the very 'function' and role that such craft making disciplines can shape, inform and create new contexts for the institute.

The constant need to change by reforming, re-imagining, redefining equates to an interdisciplinary methodology of practice. The core practice of thinking through making, illustrates that crafted disciplines are alive and well, underpinned by the time invested in making a practice and in the practice of making. Clearly time is subjective yet it is in this 'punctuation' that forges a making practice. While time is difficult to categorize in a making process, it never the less is by rationalizing, articulating and intellectualizing the application and context of making that permeates what defines as a human activity. Edmund de Waal succinctly says 'it's about being embedded in material, embedded in encounters with people and about being embedded in time' (2014).

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