

# The Craft Readers

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## Abstract

A chance meeting at Making Futures (MF) 2015 led to us creating Craft Readers, a network for postgrad and faculty researchers at University of the Arts London interested in critically discussing craft texts and themes. For us, 'texts' includes exhibitions, experiences, images, inspiring people and objects, as well as documents - anything relevant to starting the discussion, focussed on social/technological change and 'new ways of being'. We gather on a semi-regular basis to discuss suggested key 'texts' or themes arising from previous discussions. Looking at common themes, topics and sticking points, Craft Readers attempt to understand the nexus points in craft research and has become a space for making ideas, making conversation and making connections between disparate practices. Through it we have been broadening understanding of the craft field and research within it, within our university and our individual colleges, along with our own practices. As MF2017 provides an ideal platform for garnering ideas and opinions around key questions in the field, we would like to propose a Craft Readers session, inviting delegates to participate. As this is a highly flexible format we are proposing two modes of 'presentation': - As a presentation slot After a brief introduction to Craft Readers, our aims and the theme, the rest of the session will be devoted to discussion. We will publicise the theme and suggested 'texts' ahead of the conference. The discussion will be recorded (potentially as an audio file, along with notes and diagrams). - As an unconventional format, throughout the conference As a drop in/out conversation, we would place an introductory poster to Craft Readers, our aims, and the theme in a space (even in the grounds, preferably where many will pass), along with facilities (eg, copies of key 'texts', post-it notes) for participation outside of scheduled pop-in discussion time(s) (eg, presentation slots, lunch breaks). We will record this through the notes, diagrams and audio files. Theme Narratives, as our theme, engages with the expanding and ever-changing academic field of craft research, and the conference themes. Specifically we would discuss: - Developing narratives which work for small and large production scales; for developed and developing countries; for process based and product based investigations - Truths in craft narratives and craft histories; in written and object based research - The role of narrative in justifying making We hope this will show overlaps and gaps in approaches, identify key thematic texts, and suggest alternative research questions to be explored in future Craft Readers iterations. We will summarise the discussion for the conference journal using our notes and diagrams, and publish the minutes on the Craft Readers website. We are currently developing our website as resource and so hope to use the conference discussion to begin mapping the approaches of delegates, based on disciplines/processes, methods and focus. Please notice we are submitting papers around our own individual research and consider them our primary. This is an additional group proposal, as agreed with the conference organisers.

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## **First encounters**

In his introduction to *Together* (2013), Richard Sennett says that he has sought to explore cooperation as a craft. He states that cooperation 'requires of people the skill of understanding and responding to one another in order to act together, but this is a thorny process, full of difficulty and ambiguity and often leading to destructive consequences' (2013: X). The Craft Readers study group is a cooperative space for making ideas, making conversation and making connections between disparate practices and separate colleges. We use it to find common themes, topics and sticking points or provocations, and show potential crossovers and diversion points in contemporary craft research.

The group was set up soon after the Making Futures conference in Plymouth in 2015, when Bridget Harvey and Giorgio Salani met for the first time – despite both being PhD students at the University of the Arts, London (UAL). Bridget is a lecturer, maker and AHRC researcher at Camberwell College of Arts. Her study is defining repair as part of an expanded practice, looking at durability for circularity. Giorgio is an LDoc researcher from Central Saint Martins whose study explores salient operations in the making of thrown tableware, and links them to manufacturing and cultural aspects in the work. The creation of a new study group originated in the realisation that researchers with such diverse approaches to making shared, in fact, many texts, and benefitted greatly from the contextualisation of their specialist subjects.

The meeting in Plymouth highlighted the lack of a dedicated platform at UAL for discussing craft-related subjects. We anticipated students would be interested in sharing thoughts on making and materiality, as they are an integral part of many established courses and disciplines taught at the university. The cross-boundary set up for the group echoes the multifaceted discourse on craft in literature (see e.g. Adamson, 2010) and was a welcome addition to an already vibrant postgraduate community.

## **A new platform for discussion**

We began to meet in February 2016, after advertising our group across colleges. Katherine Pogson, a maker and PhD student from the London College of Fashion, soon joined Bridget and Giorgio as one of the organisers. Dedicated rooms accessible to all UAL students and located within the library space at Central Saint Martins became the logistical focus of our meetings. The conversations typically consist of informal discussions attended by a maximum of 10 students, around themes pre-announced to a mailing list of about 40 members.

Students are invited to read short extracts from academic journals or other publications prior to each session. As a group, we are interested in critically discussing craft texts and themes, and gather regularly to do so. We include in our definition of texts, exhibitions, experiences, images, inspiring people and objects, as well as documents - anything relevant to starting the discussion. In inviting others to join us in conversation around our current topics of interest, we open a stimulating space for conversation and fill a gap within the university for a network of craft-based researchers. While, as makers, we may be accustomed to reading and discussing objects, materials and/or processes (and indeed there are plenty of texts about reading material culture, e.g. Fariello and Owen 2005; and asking others to read your drafts of your writing, e.g. Booth et al. 2008), the opportunities to unpick texts together, to relate them to (our) material practice seem to be scarce.

## **Themes explored**

Glenn Adamson's introductory texts and selection of readings by other authors in his influential anthology, *The Craft Reader* (2010) – which also inspired the name for the group – often guides our conversations. Discussions initially revolved around general aspects of craft studies which could be relevant to students of material culture, textiles, ceramics, photography, leather work, fashion, ceramics, or digital making. A powerful

article by Bryan-Wilson (2013) on the multiple nature of contemporary craft making set out the discussion in one of the earliest sessions. Reflections followed on the role of tradition and innovation in making, guided by readings of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Stewart (1984). An editorial in the *Craft Research* journal (Woolley and Niedderer, 2016) invited reflections on authenticity and its relevance to post-industrial craft practices, whilst articles by Law (2003) and Ingold (2010) inspired thoughts on the role of creativity and originality in making.

Conversations are often stimulated by the unsatisfactory opposition of binary terms, e.g. craft as product or process, making or re-making, handmade or machine-made, and localism or globalisation. Well-established Arts and Crafts theories on craftsmanship and division of labour frequently enter the discussions and are systematically challenged by more contemporary concerns around post-humanism, environmentalism or philosophical theories of making. Key texts by Richard Sennett, Glenn Adamson, David Pye and Tim Ingold are increasingly familiar to most participants and offer useful points of reference.

Information on talks and events related to art, craft and design inevitably enrich the conversations and offer further material for reflection. This occasionally results in organised visits to events which in turn generate more material for discussion. Betty Woodman's show at the ICA, Alison Britton's exhibition at the V&A, and Ceramic Art London in 2016 are notable examples which were discussed on site and after the visits.

### **The dynamics of the discussions**

While we have formal meetings, these are informal in their structure. We endeavour to keep on topic, but are open to conversational meanderings. We take and yield the floor as necessary, participants come and go as they please, and occasionally we perform as provocateur to ensure the conversation is not self-satisfied. The dance between formality and informality in meetings can create productivity, and maintain connections even when opinions divide (Sennett, 2013: 241) there are moments when opinions truly oppose in *Craft Reader*'s meetings, this is one of the things that keep them interesting.

Texts and topics are chosen by the group at the end of each session, often with the intention to continue the conversations by incorporating the next theme. Different facets of craft theory are explored whilst maintaining the conversations relevant to those attending. Theoretical texts provide the appropriate structure and vocabulary to then reflect on the specifics of the research conducted by each student; learning from each other as much as from the texts, we stretch the boundaries of our own practices and studies, and develop a critical view on common themes.

By reading and discussing together, we endeavour to draw on our collective greater knowledge pools to flesh out the picture we are attempting to understand and create. This allows us to look at existing stories with fresh eyes, seek or generate meaning in text, learn from it, and critique that which we feel might be revisionist, inaccurate or sweeping. As readers, we collectively walk a line looking for and decoding truths in craft narratives and craft histories, and in written and object-based research, where use of narrative sometimes veers towards a dangerous nostalgia or romanticism, but, crucially, where lived experience is key to explaining what we do and why we do it. Subjective narrative may be a better route to truthful meaning than 'detached and seemingly more objective methods' (Goett, 2016: 125), but discerning where the importance lies is easier done together.

Just as with making, writing and reading are both topic and tool: useful and relevant to many. However, as Catherine Richardson suggests, when trying to understand the 'significance of the relationship between words and things, reading is ... a kind of performance of objects in itself; a reanimation of the relationship between language, materiality and the imagination' (2015: 56). Just as we all see the objects and materials of our studies from our own individual perspectives, so we read texts as such, and texts perform for us as makers, readers and writers. The specific use of reading to us as makers comes in so many forms – not least

contextual studies, understanding instructions, and understanding how better to communicate ourselves – reading performs the objects, the movements and the histories of our disciplines for us.

David Mikics posits that as individuals, through reading ‘we quest after something more original than ourselves – new experience, a radical break from what we know too well. This newness finds its place in us, and makes us rise to embrace it’ (2013: 318). Our interest in reading, and specifically reading in order to later discuss together as a group takes this a little further – we quest for newness, but also a deeper understanding through the knowledge or perceptions of others, willingly shared.

### **The conversations continue online**

As we continue to hold meetings and events in person, we notice a lower attendance by the end of each academic year, when students become more and more involved with personal projects and deadlines. Our online presence aims to coordinate all activities, collect information about the meeting at UAL and extend the conversation to those who cannot attend in person (see [craftreaders.co.uk](http://craftreaders.co.uk)). Social media is increasingly used to drive additional conversations, and even extend them outside our university. Through our accounts and hashtags on Twitter and Instagram (@craftreaders) we select and circulate relevant posts by others, or share information on events and short reviews of texts the students and organisers are reading for their own research.

### **The Craft Readers at Making Futures 2017**

For our session at Making Futures 2017, we planned to introduce ourselves and then hold a discussion, however, this intention was flipped by the first response - a question about how we organise as a group. The interest in logistics was not limited to one person, as many others chimed with agreement to the question. That the discussion centred on our organisation was a pleasant surprise – we had not, until that point, really articulated what we had created, how and why. As such, we have put together a bare-bones toolkit which we feel forms a basis for starting such a group:

- Find at least one other person who likes to read about craft
- Find a textual starting point for your first meet
- Arrange a date, and an accessible space to meet
- Share the meeting information with potential interested parties
- READ THE TEXT BY THAT DATE!

At the meeting:

- before discussing the text, agree who will endeavour to keep the conversation on (or at least not too far off) track
- have snacks available
- record the conversation, in notes and, if possible, audio
- try to keep to theme and time
- round up by suggesting next themes, drawing from any conversational interest points that came up – use these to suggest texts

### **Taking it forward**

As our doctoral studies enter the more solitary writing up stage, commitment to the group remains strong. We are currently working on new contents for the website, which will soon include a thematic review of literature

on materiality and making. Our aim remains to provide useful content and continue to facilitate cross-contaminations among like-minded craft researchers.

The Craft Readers group effort has side benefits as much as main ones. 'Reading between language and objects allows us to refine our sense of the meaning of words' (Richardson, 2015, p. 49), this liminal space is potentially where constructive conversation comes in. Articulating ourselves well is part of contemporary craft research, and reading together aids us in learning how our narratives might justify our making. As plentiful reading is a route towards writing well, the more we read the better (hopefully!) we will write ourselves, and the more we may understand our own writing styles.

The experience of setting up the group alongside other doctoral (and life) commitments has been challenging, but very rewarding. Only three years ago there was no hub for such discussions at UAL, and the Craft Readers now comprises an inspiring team of researchers working across disciplines, departments and workshops. Activities planned for 2018 include a panel discussion in May during London Craft Week hosted by the Craft Readers at the Camberwell Space gallery in South London.

Our aspiration is to develop our activities outside of university boundaries and continue to support - and be supported by - a growing community of craft researchers.

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