The idea of craft is enjoying a moment of visibility and scrutiny of which this volume is a part. Tellingly, the recent spate of conferences, books and exhibitions on the subject has gone hand in hand with distancing manoeuvres where, as Frances McDonald puts it, ‘the establishment, educators and even practitioners have been queueing up to disassociate themselves from craft.’ Grayson Perry, who calls himself ‘the poster boy of craft,’ said in his 2013 Reith Lectures: ‘All art is conceptual. If it’s not conceptual, it’s craft.’ In one stroke he restored a polarity that his work, and his exhibition *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, had gone some way to dismantle. Celebration, denigration, provocation, ambivalence, reversal, paradox: the lively consequence of shining a light on a notion such as craft, with its long history, many meanings, and its lowly position in the art-design-craft matrix.

The writing of Richard Sennett and Glenn Adamson represent two different angles from which craft can be understood. Sennett, a sociologist, is interested in the values, skills, attitudes, benefits and kinds of knowledge involved in making something well for its own sake. Tolerating ambiguity, dialogic exchange, using resistance, and empathic address are skills needed to build pots, sonnets or sonatas. They are also, Sennett argues, skills needed for social co-operation. This connection between craftsmanship and social exchange may have a particular resonance in educational contexts, and is taken up in the book *Craft and Collaboration*, reviewed below.

Adamson, on the other hand, considers craft to be an approach or attitude that acts as a conceptual limit, a horizon that can never be reached, but is necessary for modern art to locate itself. Hence he attends to the polarities in which the idea of craft participates: optical vs. sensual, mental vs. manual skill, professional vs. amateur, industrial vs. pastoral. The power of craft is not seen in terms of skills employed, or benefits accruing to individuals, but in terms of craft’s
power ‘to upset the well-laid table of art.’

Provocatively, he suggests that ‘craft’s inferiority might be the most productive thing about it.’

Sennett and Adamson are touch-points for many articles in this volume which position themselves variously in relation to the two sorts of concerns. At times the contributors step back to examine the idea of craft and how it operates in the field of contemporary art. At times they attend to the concrete realities and outcomes of craftsmanship and ‘making,’ however that is understood. The critical and educational potential of craft operates across both poles.

Frances McDonald alludes to the history of craft’s subordination to both design and art. Craftspeople have different takes on the problem of definition and status, and contemporary craftwork shuttles between ancient processes, manufacture and industrial design. The marginalisation of craft, in this writer’s view, comes largely from within its own circle. Rather than trying to emulate contemporary art, craft needs to develop its own theoretical discourse, faithful to its tradition and history.

Irish basket-maker Joe Hogan challenges one of the ways in which craft tries to emulate contemporary art: the emphasis on innovation. The Arts Council, for example, asserts that contemporary craft must not seek to reproduce or restore. In Hogan’s view, this is unnecessarily restrictive. Useful learning happens during these processes, and in any case fluency, technical skill, understanding of material, and workmanship is bound up with innovation (Richard Sennett has interesting things to say about the creative potential in different kinds of repair). The gradual, layered process of learning by doing rather than by talking is undervalued in an art world preoccupied with ideas. Hogan calls for more uncertainty and humility, and a rethinking of unhelpful oppositions between ‘traditional’ and ‘innovative,’ and ‘professional’ and ‘amateur.’

Two of the articles explicitly address the question of the amateur. Fiona Hackney writes about the CARE project, a partnership between Craftspace, Voluntary Arts England (VAE), Bealtaine Festival, Ireland, and Falmouth University. CARE works with hobby craft groups to explore collaboration through making, enabled by digital technology. This article employs Alison Gilchrist’s idea of ‘untidy making’ and considers hobbies a form of productive or serious leisure. Craft has the potential to bring individuals and communities together and bridge differences of culture, age and identity. Moreover, uninhibited by professional dictates, the ‘new amateur’ might be able to re-imagine his or her practice in distinctive and activist ways.

Andrew Stooke looks at a particular category of amateur, the Outsider artist. It is no accident that an interest in Outsider art has emerged alongside the surge of interest in craft. Outsiders are normally presented as exemplars of raw or innate creativity – nature rather than culture – and their lives and biographies supply the narrative that justifies
inclusion of their work in a contemporary art context. Stooke argues that the mechanism through which the Outsider is brought into the field of art can illuminate broader questions of craft’s vexed relationship to art.

James Herring considers spaces for making in the larger context of science and children’s museums, tracing their origin through the makers movement and DIY. In science museums, ‘tinkering’ and ‘tinkerability’ are the buzzwords used to describe a messy, ad hoc, bottom-up approach. In the US context, the provision for making spaces is well co-ordinated, well researched and well funded in science museums and certain children’s museums. Herring is of the view that although American art museums have the experience and ability to lead in this area, they could learn from other museum contexts and develop more co-operative and ambitious strategies.

What kind of skills and attitudes does craft develop? How is craft used with different audience groups? Deirdre Buckley and Deirdre Figueiredo discuss craft activities as a way of building human and social capital. Through interviews with participants and makers in Craftspace projects, they consider the use of craft with people with disabilities, to explore place-making and to address sensitive subjects.

Penny Jones, Helen Adams and Rachel Payne write about a craft-based teacher training and continuing professional development programme, a partnership between *Skills in the Making* and the Pitt Rivers Museum. Research findings have been organised around concepts such as mimicry, frustration, collaboration, safety, language, and restriction. There is evidence that the programme has had results, both in terms of teachers’ experiences, and the transfer of what is learned to the classroom. With fewer opportunities for art, craft and design teacher development, and a reduction of university-based art teacher training, collaboration with museums and galleries is essential to ensure the continuation of making in the art curriculum and beyond.

How does gallery education use craft as a critical tool? How can craft contribute to understanding concepts, contexts and meanings of art and visual culture? Christine Checinska draws examples from the Whitworth Art Gallery’s 2012 *Cotton: Global Threads* and *We Face Forward* at the Horniman Museum in London, to argue that textile metaphors are woven into the history of global diasporas. The closeness of textiles to skin, their presence in everyday life, their use in ritual and as a sign of social hierarchy, make textile crafts a powerful tool for opening up questions of racial, gendered and cultural identity.

Maria-Anna Tseliou considers radical craft interventions in museums and galleries. Using Fred Wilson’s work on race in the US and Matt Smith’s on sexuality in the UK, she argues that craft interventions in permanent collections have the potential to unsettle normative museum narratives.
Due to the subtle ways objects can be placed in collections, craft intervention is a safer and possibly more effective curatorial method for initiating discussion on contentious themes, particularly in conservative contexts. The everyday nature of crafted objects and materials puts the emphasis on commonality and ordinariness, representing sexual or racial otherness in subtle ways. Such interventions might have the potential to reach a wider audience.

In 1968 David Pye famously wrote: ‘Craftsmanship is a word to start an argument with.’ Craft is a particular set of disciplines and activities, and craft is an idea that can be operative in any activity. Craft is capable of being deeply conservative and radically activist. To ask why we argue about craft is to open up a whole box of questions about human ingenuity, the history of art and its institutions, education and learning, social hierarchy, class and gender. The argument is, in effect, the point.

Notes

