

## Book Review by Kimberley Chandler

### ***Seeing Things: Collected Writing on Art, Craft and Design***

Alison Britton

256 pages

London: Occasional Papers, 2013

'I have always been writing' (p.8) confesses British ceramist Alison Britton in the introduction to her anthology of texts, *Seeing Things* (2013). 'Many critics don't make things and many artists don't write' (p.9) she asserts, yet it is Britton's natural ability to do both that makes her so distinctive. *Seeing Things* is a collection of reprinted texts spanning more than three decades of making, curating, and educating from the 1980s to the present-day; and, as her title suggests, here is the artist acting as camera. Britton opens the lens on the field of contemporary craft through a careful selection of exhibition reviews, catalogue essays, and journal articles, at the same time as allowing autonomous histories, motifs, and concerns, to present themselves. Here, we see Britton as both a witness and a creator: an artist who has consistently questioned the field, as well as her own position within it. Writing has afforded her the space to reflect, as well as the chance to stand outside and observe. 'The slightly random nature of what I have been *invited* to write about in more than three decades,' she admits, 'and my situation in London at the start of a craft surge in the 1980s, are conditions that shape what is here' (p.8). Yet, it is also Britton's astuteness and invention that treads the path through this unquiet terrain.

The book has been beautifully designed by Sara de Bondt studio, who also designed the catalogue for the V&A Museum and Crafts Council's exhibition *Out of the Ordinary* (2007) curated by her daughter, Laurie Britton Newell. It too is a highly crafted object, from the tactility of the paper to the nuanced use of type to create visual hierarchies; as well as the careful selection of photographs. Britton has chosen to re-publish a wide spectrum of writing that evidences her many different modes—as maker, reviewer, curator, and educator—but not to impose an order on the selected texts besides chronology. The book is divided up simply by decade: 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Britton prefaces her chosen texts with a brief contextualisation; and each section is summed up in a Postscript. 'I am much more interested in combining these first reactions with recollection and my age-altered, built-up understanding' (p.11), she explains, and it is this respect for the historicity of the material that is the book's principle merit.

Organising the material in this way is effective for many reasons. First, it enables the reader to witness the decades *alongside* Britton: to observe the gradual shift in voice from the relatively inexperienced, and enthusiastic, young maker, to the judicious practitioner of today. This is not to say that, in the 1980s, Britton wasn't acutely aware of the field's history, its complexities, and tensions; rather that she has broadened her understanding through experience. *The Maker's Eye* at the Crafts Council Gallery in 1982 clearly marked the start for Britton, who, along with thirteen other makers, was invited to reflect on the position of the crafts through the choice of several objects for an exhibition. There is a palpable sense of caution in her text for the catalogue: this was a pivotal moment not only for the artist, but also the field as a whole. 'Some people will certainly feel that it represents the last decadent throes of an artistic crafts movement of dwindling relevance,' she speculates somewhat

unapologetically, ‘where over-self-conscious makers turned in on themselves for want of a real sense of necessity’ (p.15). In the 1980s Britton, along with fellow RCA-graduates Carol McNicoll and Jacqueline Poncelet, was poised to transform the critical landscape of craft practice. Here was a ‘group,’ in Britton’s own words, ‘concerned with the outer limits of function’ (p.15), willing to confront a period of increased experimentation and shifting categories. More than this, Britton was beginning to find her own voice: ‘In writing the essay after making my selection,’ she later reflects, ‘I found myself having a position, a discernible stance’. ‘I felt I was part of something emergent, reflexive and often engaged with ironic enquiry’ (p.79). This was a decisive moment, and the natural choice for the book’s opening text. This youthful confidence is further echoed in her response to a letter from John Fletcher that was printed in *Crafts* in 1984. Fletcher laments the modernising practices of the younger generation, and their predisposition to critical theory. Britton, however, is not shy to respond: ‘Good criticism,’ she retorts, ‘is stimulating to the maker and the viewer alike, and can facilitate rather than suppress creativity’ (p.30). Throughout the book, Britton is candid in her responses; much like a camera, she documents rather than sensitises.

This critical, and experiential, interest is carried through into the 1990s, where we find Britton loosening up a little. This period, it seems, was less about self-conviction and more about asserting her position; perhaps aided by the fact that Britton was offered a wider variety of commissions. ‘I want to write plainly without being dull,’ states Britton in ‘Notes for the Write Stuff’ written for the *Ceramic Millennium Conference* in Amsterdam (1999), ‘and without the use of jargon.’ Britton asserts the need to approach ceramics on its own terms, rather than in deference to other media: ‘Copy on the crafts is irritating if it has to keep referring the object in question to other art forms [...] I think that writing on the crafts, and ceramics in particular, has enough of a past now to feed its own commentary’ (p.145). Britton writes about subjects such as ‘the breadth and ambiguity of the craft field’ (‘Craft: Sustaining Alternatives,’ pp.95-103); ‘the craft-made artefact [as] a self-conscious thing’ (‘The Manipulation of Skill,’ pp.91-94); and the ‘expansion of possibilities’ for women in the arts (‘Gender and Art,’ pp.84-86). The texts in this section are bold and uncompromising, and reflect the expanding notion of contemporary crafts practice. This sentiment is encapsulated most succinctly in Britton’s catalogue essay for the Crafts Council’s exhibition *Beyond the Dovetail* (1991), curated by Peter Dormer. ‘Faced with the choice between a piece that is exquisitely well made and in a very well-trodden familiar form,’ writes Britton, ‘and a piece that is awkwardly made but in a convincing and unexpected form, I would always go for the latter. There is always plenty of overcooked work around that has skill but no thinking; the virtuosos twiddles without the guts or sense of place’ (pp.94). This is Britton at her objective best.

Jump ahead to 2012 and we find Britton reflecting on the objects chosen for her quasi-retrospective, *Life and Still Life*, at the Crafts Study Centre. While *The Maker’s Eye* was all about the state of craft practice in the early 80s, here, Britton is instead reflecting on her career through the objects that surround her in her studio and home: the everyday thinking that informs her practice. ‘Always a home includes objects that furnish your life beyond function; other needs are met: stimulus, self-representation, sensuality, recollection’ (pp.236) *Life and Still Life* is the culmination of three decades of assimilating the world around her, and a chance for Britton to meditate on

her objects as companions: ‘I came to see things I have scavenged, swapped, bought, and gathered around me in a slightly more serious light: they were my “study collection” also’ (pp.236), she writes. White high-fired cups, one-off and production-made; works by friends such as Richard Slee and Jacqueline Poncelet; photographs; and drawings—these are the objects that have earned their place in Britton’s inner circle after years of contemplation and study. ‘Not theatre then, more the habits of daily life’ (pp.245), observes Britton in the Postscript; where the things we are most familiar with are, in fact, the most remarkable. This, and her text for *The Maker’s Eye* catalogue, neatly bookends the anthology, demonstrating not only the steady cultivation of the artist’s voice, and the continuity of thought, but also the quietness of an authority.

This text, and others in the 2000s, demarcates a more sedate period for Britton, in terms of both her writing and reflections. Perhaps this marks the shift of responsibility; there is nothing left but the self-assuredness of a professional. This ease and ability is felt most profoundly in the 2001 interview with BBC journalist Michael Rosen. For me, this interview transcript bears all the hallmarks of Britton’s personality: astute, quick-witted, and intelligent. There is a sense of slight irritation in some of Britton’s answers, as she works on the clay under Rosen’s watch; yet she doesn’t give up. At one point, a bubble pops up in the clay surface, at which point Rosen asks: ‘Oh, right, so what will you do about that?’ ‘Just looking for something sharp, and I’ll stab it’, replies Britton. ‘Stab the bubble?’ he asks quizzically. Britton’s to-the-point replies betray her depth of knowledge and skill, and the many years she has dedicated to her practice. She is the consummate professional; and this book maps her journey.

Second, the book clearly documents the shift between past, present and future, between anticipation and reflection. It is a chronicle of events, an archival resource, and a telling biography. The diverse selection of texts—which, Britton reminds us, were commissioned and therefore out of her authorial control—tell of the preoccupations of the field; what was deemed worthy of a response, or account; and what has since become fixed in the history of craft practice. Here, Britton is the historian *qua* camera, who opens herself up to the present, while remaining objective and enquiring. Many subjects preoccupy her—the importance of skill; function; postmodernism; feminism; the role of public art; and the expanded field of ceramics—and the same questions arise again and again, although with each iteration, Britton is able to examine them anew. In several of the texts, Britton makes reference to earlier writing, yet she doesn’t disallow the views she held previously; rather, she values them for what they were *in that instant*. In fact, the book evidences a certain present-mindedness on the part of the artist that can be easily witnessed when collated as a book. For example, in an article for *Ceramic Review* titled ‘If Only...’ in which the artist was invited to reflect on the things she wished she’d known early on in her career, Britton laments the novelty of interest in ceramics practice: ‘New Ceramics was a buoyant phenomenon in the 1980s, and I felt I was part of a group. This of course has not lasted [...] Perhaps if I had known this I would have relished the sense of context more at the time’ (pp.197) This is not a defeat; rather, Britton acknowledges the inconsistencies of history: what was once novel can quickly become worn. The point is that, at every stage in her career, Britton has had the critical intellect to *see through*, as well as *at* the things in question.

Third, and this is a personal preference, *Seeing Things* is both a book, and an aural history. By this I don't simply mean that we have the opportunity to hear Britton's insights and perspectives first-hand, but that her speaking voice is so intrinsically tied-up in the words, and phrases, used. Reading these essays, Britton's voice is loud and clear, and for me, this is an advantage. It suggests that the writing is sincere: clear and unselfconscious. 'Why write?' asks Britton in her introduction. 'I have always liked using language as another medium, one that stretches across all aspects of living and thinking' (pp.9). As Glenn Adamson points out in the book's Preface, what has consistently inspired Britton's writing is her need to describe her reality; and these collected observations are highly individual.

It feels over-particular at this stage to mention what, to my mind, is the book's only flaw; however, there is one small point to be made. The introductory remarks at the start of each text can, at times, feel too brief. I find myself wanting to know more about the context in which the commission arose; who specifically it came from; what the conditions of the commission were; what her frame of reference was; and so on. Having said that, these snippets remind me of the inconsistencies of the research process: perhaps these fragments are there to encourage us to look closer. Besides, in keeping with the historicity of the texts, it could be that Britton herself can barely remember the details. These texts are simply the record; it is only in retrospect that Britton can truly make sense of them. In addition, there are slight inconsistencies in the editing throughout, which can, at times, feel uneasy; however, when you think of the numerous editors involved from the 1980s, as well as the present-day editing by Occasional Papers, this modest variation is understandable.

What strikes me most about *Seeing Things* is the humility and precision with which Britton has engaged with almost four decades of craft practice: as a maker, writer, curator, and critic. The book reflects this multiplicity. In her introduction Britton asks: 'Is this an assembly of random fragments, or a revealing of essential themes? Does it add up to a kind of history?' (pp.11) I would say that it achieves all of these things. With its simple chronology, *Seeing Things* reflects the historicity of events that have taken place within the craft field since the 1980s; and each of these discrete moments can be read simultaneously and over time. We can zoom in and zoom out with Britton as our camera. Although not a quick "snapshot" camera, but something like a Hasselblad, with a crystal clear lens and a long service life.

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