

## Finding the Right Language for Things

by Jessica Hemmings

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The American critic Janet Koplos put it simply: “If I were looking for a ‘better’ crafts criticism I would simply want better writing, showing thought and care.” Koplos expanded on what this might be, calling for “writing to be less self-conscious, less ruled by inherent suppositions of what criticism should be and what sort of language it should use, less worried about what peers and competitors think.” Her call was disconcertingly basic, but a decade on from her call and exemplars continue to be thin on the ground.

Don’t look to academics. Academic writing is a right-of-passage that is irritatingly difficult to master and, perversely, a tough habit to break. The cultural theorist Sarat Maharaj sums up the academic voice as needing “to explicate from within the confines of a stock of approved pre-given sources, authorities and canons – which makes for rigour of argument but at the price of being a death kiss.” Intentions may be in the right place, but the outcome is usually tough going.

In *The Writing Life*, the American author Annie Dillard describes the writing process as a precarious journey. “When you write, you lay out a line of words,” she explains before going on to describe an experience that sounds disconcertingly similar to the production of craft: “The line of words is a miner’s pick, a wood-carver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow.” This is not the kind of writing that knows its outcome. Instead it is writing that is as creative as the stuff it writes about.

I can’t be the only one whose profession and choice it is to take interest in what we write about craft, but who struggles to conceal reading fatigue. I think we might need a little encouragement to admit the disinterest that the vast majority of writing about craft generates. “Those who do not listen to their boredom when reading, like those who pay no attention to pain, may be increasing their suffering unnecessarily”, warns Alain De Botton in *The Consolations of Philosophy*. He goes on to caution that there are “pitfalls in never allowing ourselves to lose patience with our reading matter”. It may be high time for a few craft temper tantrums to let loose.

I’m not suggesting that the future of crafts writing lies with concrete poetry arranged in twee shapes across the page or shrieks of pseudo-performance art. But the crafting of words does share some similarities with the crafting of materials. Not everything of course. But we do the crafts a disservice if we do not ask for the same sense of risk, excitement and curiosity to determine the language with which we talk about craft as we demand of the objects themselves.

Part of the challenge comes down to specificity. I once took a six-week course in ceramics, which was to be followed by the beginner's introduction to glass blowing. My naive intention was that I would then write about these materials with the same enthusiasm I have for textiles. I could not stand the feeling of clay between my fingers, never even made it on to glass, and beat a hasty retreat to the stuff of cloth and thread I had spent an entire undergraduate degree studying. Finding words for the stuff I know is a pleasure. Finding words for things you don't really know is a bit of a trick – not impossible, but tricky.

In *The Case for Working with Your Hands* Matthew Crawford sums up why the likes of Ikea furniture assembly instructions are so maddeningly impossible to follow: "Technical writers know *that*, but they don't know *how*." Craft writers honestly have to do one hell of a lot. If they are to speak across material concerns, they need to know both *that* and *how* about a range of truly particular skills and conditions. (I don't buy the argument that we don't need to talk about making; that meaning is everything. For craft meaning – at least some portion of it – resides in the making.) But we might do everyone a favour if this was all tackled with a little more oomph. It is high time we heed one more request from Koplos: "The best writing would be like the best work, enlightening and from the heart."