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Please cite this publication as follows:

Jackson, A. (2019) Book review - Tinkering: Australians re-invent DIY culture. *Journal of Modern Craft*, 12 (1). ISSN 1749-6772.

Link to official URL (if available):

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17496772.2019.1568056>

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Tinkering: Australians Re-invent DIY Culture

Katherine Wilson

Monash University Publishing, Clayton, Victoria, 2017, 304 pages, illustrations, bibliography. AUD/US\$29.95. ISBN: 9781925495478

Reviewed by Andrew Jackson

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Tinkering, by the Australian writer and cultural theorist Katherine Wilson, is a book that follows in a recent line of publications addressing amateur making. This “turn towards the amateur”, if we can call it that, breaks a long-standing convention that regarded the work of amateurs with, at best, indifference or, at worst, disdain. Whilst researchers in the wider field of cultural studies have been taking ethnographic excursions into the everyday for several decades, art, craft and design historians have been much more reluctant to treat amateur activities as worthy of consideration. Glenn Adamson even suggested in 2007 that amateurs were essentially engaged in purposeless acts of self-gratification, whose only function was to unconsciously service the economy by buying commodities in the form of materials and tools (Adamson, 2007: 140). The issue for many scholars was that amateurs exist outside the public realm of the professions, often working in private, domestic spaces. They carry out work-like activity as a form of leisure, and they are simultaneously both consumers and producers. Falling between categories, they make uneasy subject matter. Jo Turney noted how within many studies of art and design practice “any discussion of home-crafted objects is marginalized to the level of all that is ‘bad’ in art, design and craft” (Turney, 2004: 268). In the past decade however, the topic has begun to be addressed in several different ways, including studies of Do-It-Yourself and home improvement, the political stance of Craftivism and the entrepreneurship of the Maker Movement. Wilson tackles the topic from the perspective of what she calls the “Tinkerer”; she devotes some time to unravelling this often contentious term, aiming to rehabilitate it as a descriptor for the subjects of her study.

The book is essentially a ‘user-friendly’ version of her PhD thesis, which used a qualitative methodology to better understand the making, repairing and inventing of enthusiastic Australian makers. From an initial sample of 32, Wilson finally selects and interviews 7 makers in depth, observing and participating in their activities. These range from the self-building of house extensions, textile and jewellery making, steampunk tailoring and the design and making of gadgets and robotics. After the introduction, each of the remaining nine chapters not only deals with one of the makers, but also incorporates an analytic theme such as home, vocation and risk. Wilson has skilfully translated her academic research thesis into a readable and engaging text. Her discussions of epistemological and methodological issues such as sampling, generalisability, and the ethics of participant research are masterfully transformed into easy conversational prose that nevertheless conveys the difficult decisions that must be negotiated by doctoral students. The book is coloured throughout with antipodean no-nonsense language, and the text is interwoven with Australian terminology which, for this UK reader at least, occasionally needs to be unravelled. A ‘smoko’ is a scheduled smoke break, ‘hard-rubbish’ is a local authority categorisation of scrap waste such as old washing machines, and ‘spruiking’ is a term used in Australia to describe selling your wares in public.

Wilson's study owes a debt to other Australian books espousing the qualities of makers in their workshops, including Mark Thomson's *Blokes & Sheds* (1995) and *Makers, Breakers & Fixers* (2007). Thomson (who is also one of the participants in Wilson's research) produces books that are primarily photo essays documenting workshop environments. Wilson, on the other hand, attempts to move beyond this approach by aligning her research with some heavy hitting cultural and social theorists. Whilst this offers some academic background to the rich descriptions of the makers she encounters, this is also the weakest aspect of the work. There is a tendency for a potpourri of theories to be appended to the end of each of the descriptive passages, but with none of these pursued in any depth. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory is dispensed with in one short paragraph, whilst the contribution of Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss is summed up in one side of writing. Unlikely theoretical bed-fellows are nestled together in neat summaries that ignore the contradictions inherent in their respective ideas; in just a couple of paragraphs Richard Sennett, Michael Polanyi, Peter Dormer and Joseph Moxon all get an airing. This is perhaps a consequence of editing a PhD into an accessible book, but it would have been a more satisfying read if at least some of the ideas that had been pursued in more depth and with more rigour. That said, the book is replete with rich and vivid passages that get to the heart of the processes, tools and environments that Wilson encounters. It is this that is the book's real strength, and it is a welcome addition to the growing range of texts that are prepared to take amateur making seriously.

References

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