

## **Tinkering: Australians Reinvent DIY Culture**

By Katherine Wilson

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### Reviewed by Karma Eddison-Cogan

**R**EGULATORY RESTRICTIONS, WARRANTY WAIVERS, NON-REPLACEABLE PARTS, AND planned obsolescence combine to prevent us from opening up and repairing consumer products. This has profound consequences for the way we consume, discard, and divest ourselves of our things, and tinkering opens a space in which the engagement with the material is one way of negotiating power and revising the future trajectories of things. Katherine Wilson's *Tinkering: Australians Reinvent DIY Culture* explores tinkering as an engagement with the materiality of the world. As a writer, editor, researcher, and tinkerer, she examines those who 'adapt, invent, mend, create, modify, repurpose, renovate, improvise and build' (4), often in ways that are unremarkable and common-sense to themselves. Situated within Cultural Studies and made accessible to a wider audience through her well-crafted and engaging prose, Wilson explores tinkering over ten chapters, providing a critical insight into the way practices of tinkering are 'invented, reinvented and circulated' (8). Tinkering, she argues, cannot be simply reduced to thrift or need, and it is a practice that crosses class lines. Drawing from original ethnographic research with tinkerers in Melbourne explored in her doctoral thesis, Wilson also astutely explains the methodological and ethical considerations surrounding her research, offering a transparent account of her approach. This book would suit a scholarly, student, as well as general audience.

The first chapter after the introduction, 'Hindsight', examines the etymological and historical origins of tinkering before turning to the way that tinkering has been discursively placed within Australian cultural history and how it sits among broader contemporary do-it-yourself and maker movements. The next chapter, 'Magic', explores one tinkerer's invention, the iSlate, a crafted material made of wood, slate, steel and stone and remarkably similar to an iPhone, and his sense of enchantment. This chapter examines the point at which 'a material project becomes more than a sum of its labor and parts... [with] its own palpable spirit and character that the maker couldn't foresee (or conjure)' (82). Wilson draws out

the sense of magic arising from the tinkerer and shows that far from being a static end-product, the invented object acts upon its subject in a way that blurs subject/object boundaries. The relational engagement with materiality helps to constitute the identity of the tinkerer.

This analytical thread is further picked up in the following chapters 'Sanctuary and Home'. In 'Sanctuary', Wilson argues that raw materials and tools are not subject to the external imposition of human will, but with agentic potential that could disrupt notions of human certainty and mastery. As one participant put it as she was making quince jelly: 'It will do its own thing when it's ready' (104). For this tinkerer, the temporal rhythms of tinkering offered respite and sanctuary from psychological and other demands. In 'Home', Wilson draws from the symbolic, material, and relational concept of home and astutely examines the relationship between tinkering, the tinkerer, and the home. Where it is practiced in the home, tinkering itself becomes a form of home-making (115), argues Wilson.

In 'Vocation', Wilson explores tinkering in terms of its place between professionalism and amateurism in the context of the work of steampunk artist, Kate O'Brien, arguing that it resists the dialectical pairings of modernity. The next chapter, 'Risk', provides a vivid account of Adis Hondo's pursuits in making his own Steadicam. While the invention did not eventuate due to a missing final part—one that was unable to be made with his existing equipment, Hondo saw value in the enterprise. Rather than risk as failure, Wilson theorises risk as an investment in knowledge and one that is integral to the process of tinkering.

Wilson returns to steampunk in the chapter 'Utopia' and examines it as 'a belief that tinkering in your home can somehow change the world' (199). Wilson's findings illustrate the future-oriented potential of tinkering, as accumulated material knowledge has the capacity to raise critical interventions into the marketing promises of commodities. In the chapter 'Exhibition', Wilson asks the question: 'By what benchmarks are the products of people's tinkering to be understood by the rest of us?' (235). Wilson answers that in some contexts, such as a gallery, the products may be seen as expressive of aesthetic concerns, and in others, may be used to demonstrate more utilitarian expectation—the relationship between tinkering and public and cultural institutions is one of ongoing negotiation around values, vernacular, marketing, power, and status.

The final chapter, 'Reform', frames tinkering as an optimistic practice that responds to, and negotiates, power. This is not the same inflated, nationalistic, and heroic optimism of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. While tinkering is often practiced in what appears to be the private confines of the home, Wilson sees potential for a broader politics: rather than the tactics of tinkerers simply negotiating with the realm of the 'strategy', or the realm of the 'producers' and institutions that wield

power in Michel de Certeau's terms, tactics can rewrite and renegotiate the terms of strategies. Wilson cites industrial design as one example, where do-it-yourself cultures have mobilised a move away from the idea of a 'final' product and towards a notion of 'products-as-process' (267). 'Reform' explores the open-endedness towards the material world afforded by a tinkering mindset and its ability to shape policy. Wilson highlights the important potential of such an orientation to material engagement, contextualising the practices within a broader context of the environmental impacts of discarding huge amounts of electronic and plastic waste. Wilson avoids the well-rehearsed Cultural Studies tropes celebrating the subversive potential of the everyday, and offers a lively, insightful, theoretically rich analysis of tinkering practices and how they can help us rethink our futures.

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