

Conviviality and the joy of making

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*The shape of things aims to encourage a contemporary crafts professional practice, audience and market that is culturally diverse and representative. **The shape of things** is creating an opportunity and context for considering and debating what distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, to connect Britain with global cultures and to reference the intercultural nature of British society.*

*As part of **the shape of things** I was commissioned to lead an audience development programme that included the development of a toolkit and the facilitation of a discussion. This essay contains my reflections on the impact of **the shape of things** on audience development and potential for the future relationships between contemporary crafts and audiences.*

The idea of collaboration and partnership has been integral to **the shape of things** since its inception. From encouraging artists to collaborate together for the first time on an installation, to venues working closely with makers in developing their commissions, there has been a commitment to working together, listening and sharing throughout.

This has also applied to audience development— whether encouraging new visitors to exhibitions or buyers for craft work – which has been a strategic strand of the project. Throughout there has been a focus on supporting participating organisations and artists in developing a long-term and sustained approach to the audiences they engage, combined with a strategic view that considers the growth and change of audiences across the board for new installation work by culturally diverse artists.

The final project evaluation will demonstrate the changes in audiences and buyers across the seven exhibitions that have taken place. However, as the project enters its final phase, it is timely to reflect on the experience so far with regards to audiences, and to think about the potential for audience development in the long term.

To this end, a group of 16 people came together to discuss what **the shape of things** has meant to audiences, and to the relationship between venues and audiences and artists and audiences, and to think about how we, as a sector, use this experience to continue to intensify, increase and develop the opportunities for audiences and work to come together in a way which is mutually satisfying.

In this discussion the sense that one of the main features of craft, and something which is distinct from other art forms, was that it is particularly convivial. That is, that

when people are brought together to experience made objects, there is a tendency for them to feel comfortable with each other. This seemed like such a powerful feature of the ways crafts engages audiences that I wanted to explore it in some more detail for this paper.

The idea that social, cultural, familial and community connections are the main drivers for arts experiences was identified in *Culture on Demand* published by DCMS in 2008. Conviviality is, in effect, one of the things that audiences and potential audiences really need the arts to provide. This is not to say that barriers to engagement aren't there and need to be overcome: but it is to recognise that focusing on barriers is where venues, in particular, are currently very adept after years of audience development activity, and that focusing on drivers could add a new and extra dimension to the future approach to engaging crafts audiences and buyers.

So why is it that working with materials can bring people together in such a sociable and engaging way? The idea chimes with Richard Sennett's comment that "The craft of making things provides insight into the techniques of experience that can shape our dealings with others" (Sennett, 2009). As well as the findings of Mary Schwarz and Karen Yair in *Making Value: craft and economic and social contribution of makers (Executive Summary, 2011)* which suggest that crafts can resonate deeply with individuals "...by 'enabling sustained involvement and freedom of expression' and a sense of ownership: from experiencing the immediacy and concreteness of materials".

From the discussion and anecdotal audience feedback, the specific strengths of crafts that seem to be more strongly present than in other art forms are:

- **A strong connection to the material.** Materials for making are often very accessible and tactile. They have a tangible presence that is very familiar but that becomes special by the creation of an object.
- **A strong connection with the domestic and with domestic history.** Many of the works in **the shape of things** exhibitions relate to items commonly used in the home or skills practised at home, for example embroidery or wood working. These skills are often valued within the domestic environment, sometimes as a legacy of a domestic history and may be skills that have been passed down and taught from father or grandfather, mother or grandmother, to subsequent generations. As such there is a fond familiarity and a domestic point of reference that makes even the most contemporary work seem relevant and accessible.

- **A strong connection to technical skills.** We commonly expect contemporary crafts to be appreciated for their beauty and for their ability to 'talk' to audiences. However, for many people it is the high level of technical skill involved in producing these works that is the most obvious and appealing aspect to them.

In these strengths we can discern a combination of universality and specificity that seems to be a feature unique to crafts. That is, that the ability to experience materials, the skills associated with the manipulation of materials and the beauty of objects is a universal experience, whilst the associated cultural history and appreciation of objects can be unique to an individual or a community. It seems that anyone can delight in the experience of a made item, even if they are not specialists themselves or makers and even if the specific materials or techniques are a mystery to them. This is similar to the way that people can appreciate and enjoy good design, e.g. architecture or homeware, even without any prior knowledge or expertise in the history and development of that design medium, or indeed the cultural or personal background of the designer.

These features of crafts and contemporary crafts serve to make the work very accessible, even in forms which are extenuated from the practical, domestic origins of the work or materials. More than this, though, there is a sense that enjoying crafts – in whatever way – can be a focus for enjoyable social sharing. For this to be an important tool for audience development, we need to be able to understand how conviviality might engage at both tactical (engaging an individual or group of individuals) and strategic (developing the audience profile for craft work across the sector) levels.

On the tactical level, the ability of crafts to bring people together in an atmosphere of conviviality, for example sharing thoughts or stories, or practising and participating together, can be a powerful tool for organisations hoping to engage more or different members of the public. Experiences that are concerned with the domestic, local and culturally- or community- specific are often very interesting to people who are in what are classed as hard-to-reach groups: much more so than the idea of an arts experience. If we look at the Arts Council segmentation tool, *Arts Audiences: Insight* we find that there are three segments which are classified as having 'some engagement, but who participate only'. We would class all these segments as 'hard-to-reach' as all skew towards low income and lower levels of education – generally markers of hard-to-reach audiences for the arts. However, the descriptions of the segments show that they are interested in social activities, either with friends (the segment called 'Bedroom DJs') or with family, children or grandchildren (the segment called 'Mid-life hobbyists').

There is a possibility that the scope of engagement with what we might call high-end crafts, particularly exhibitions in formal spaces, might be increased if the private practice of craft was acknowledged and incorporated into these activities. That sense of conviviality, the pleasure of working with materials and the enjoyment of technical and design excellence are all commonalities that could be engaged to encourage non-professionals taking part in craft at home (hereafter referred to as home craftworkers) to experience crafts exhibitions. Artist makers, strategists and venue staff participating in **the shape of things** discussion were very alive to the quality of the skills and techniques employed by home craftworkers, and there was a sense that there is scope – and enthusiasm - for further engaging home craftworkers with venues, exhibitions and events.

If we take the idea of conviviality as a guiding light in the development of new audience development initiatives on an individual and a community level, we need to think through how we can deliver on what drivers audiences need. With regards to home crafts there are many strengths in terms of sharing through the generations, teaching (as well as learning) activities to do with children, a sense of domestic history, and skills and techniques which mark shared cultural and community identity. Programmes that aim to encourage home craftworkers should consider the following:

- Valuing the home craftworkers' technical skill and expertise – possibly providing opportunities to teach and share as well as to learn
- Encouraging enhanced creativity in home craftworkers – encouraging them to develop their work beyond that which may have been predominantly domestic and functional
- Providing opportunities to share stories through their work
- Using and sharing cultural and community contexts and using crafts as an opportunity to increase knowledge of particular communities or experiences

What might be of interest on the domestic and personal level, the experience of sharing skills and expertise across generations, can also form the basis of discussion and debate about issues of identity, and that most current of debates, issues of Britishness and the changing cultural make up of our communities. While individuals and communities might be most interested in experiencing the arts as a personal experience, those working on a strategic level are likely to also look for associated social benefits. For example they will be asking can contemporary crafts play a role in community cohesion, or in mediating the debate about how different communities can co-exist happily. Above all there is a case to be made about how

contemporary crafts are essential and intrinsic to a happy, healthy nation, and how they play a role in the institutions of our political infrastructure – on all levels.

This idea of crafts as being a catalyst and a foundation for discussions about identity, and about Britishness – so about the differences and similarities that mark nationhood – make the role of crafts on a strategic level very powerful. For example, crafts exhibitions can work effectively within communities as foci for events, talks, experiences, workshops and discussion that effectively bring together disparate parts of a community in an enjoyable and convivial way – as well as offering the same sort of role to individual communities wanting to explore their place within British culture (be that as immigrants or indigenous communities). On a macro level, this functionality can be used as Political Capital for organisations, individuals and sectors who are interested in engaging nationally and internationally with discussion of identity, for example in nation-building debates.

Strategically then, participating in debates about identity and nationhood, could be a major way of raising the profile of contemporary crafts, a powerful tool for supporting crafts people and growing audiences for this work. By taking opportunities to emphasise the elements of crafts that relate to community and cultural identity, contemporary crafts can make a significant contribution to the development of Cultural Capital within communities, whether that is on a micro or macro level. Crafts provide opportunities for deep, but convivial, conversations about domestic history, community and cultural identity, generational relationships and through these conversations individuals and communities can enjoy exploring their similarities and differences.

This sense also has other impacts for strategic approaches to audience development. For example, Craftspace are interested in new business models for crafts people and makers working together in small cooperative groups. This seems to be a natural fit for an occupation which, whilst often involving working alone, also has a great sense of community and an understanding that for some people sharing and working together is likely to be a more robust and supportive business model than the more traditional sole trader. This also relates well to the findings of Schwarz and Yair (2011) who find that 65-70% of makers develop portfolio careers and that these individuals happily take on different making roles within different contexts, suggesting that flexible business models are essential for them to continue to grow.

Overall, **the shape of things** has shown that the most effective development of contemporary crafts is partnership working. By working together, artists and venues have created outstanding exhibitions that have fitted quite naturally into the mainstream showing spaces. Core audiences have responded well and the exhibitions have generally attracted new audiences. Behind each such successful

event or workshop was a research and development process which considered the audience as part of the mix with other factors and which thought creatively about ways of bringing craft, makers and audiences together. All were agreed that the long-term view benefits contemporary crafts – and that having an ongoing and strategic relationship with audiences is integral to that.

Looking to the long term is particularly relevant here because **the shape of things** has a focus on diversity and this conviviality is the most positive, warm and passionate medium for the exploration of difference and similarly: identity, nationality and purpose.

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