

## **Disruptive Differences - Transnational Dialogues Symposium on 17/02/2012 - by Nita Nathwani**

Having spent some time reviewing my artistic career, the symposium was a timely event to attend. As an immigrant to the UK myself, it gave me material for both introspection as well as thinking of a wider audience and marketplace outside of my own work. Brought up until my early teens in Kenya, I lived in a household and community where skilled handcrafting is an everyday activity. I now have my own arts practice here in the UK.

It was not until I wrote this review that the answer to the question why 'disruptive differences' and 'transnational dialogues' was an issue crystallised in my mind. It is because I have been an avid consumer of some of the outcomes of these 'disruptions' and dialogues, identifying naturally with many aspects of them, treating them as an extension of my own identity in the absence of my own undisturbed indigenous British norm. Sometimes these have been events or objects which have made themselves readily available to me because I actively seek them. At times of limited or marginal interest to the general public, they have been instantly attractive to me. I realise that a sizeable proportion of what I have enjoyed is a result of this transnational dialogue, deliberate or otherwise.

The notion of 'deaccessation' as discussed by Dr Janet Marstine was not something I had ever given any thought to and was surprised at my own reaction to it. In an era of recycling, upcycling and sustainability, there can be artistic, political and other significance of this. If a museum acquires your work, it cannot be seen as a final destination. Sadly, it may be deaccessed, losing all its original wealth - the creative motive, its original use or purpose and its reason for being curated or acquired. Probably this struck me the most in the day. Additionally, the subject of categorisation brought home a reality that the vagaries of economics, fashion and politics may contest decisions made at the time of acquisition, resulting in your own work being 'got rid of'.

Categorisation happens at a personal level as well as institutional. Whilst it may be frustrating for the artist or presenter, it is something that we all do by design or otherwise - whether it's making for an identified market or to a curated theme or having your book sold in specific sections. It enables us to make sense of what we see or experience.

Often and unexpectedly finding myself on the outside, I have vexed with the questions 'where do I fit in' or 'where does my work fit in'. Depending on the context, I could be presented, amongst other things, as an Asian, East African, British Asian, British, non-white, ceramicist, potter, artist, business analyst, mother, career changer. I liked Yasmin Alibai-Brown's discussion. There is no clean answer, but a composite response. It is important not to get boxed into a fixed category but to remain free flowing.

The issue of identity also appeared in the context of *The Shape of Things* (tsot), when one artist raised the issue of being seen as non-white and Rezia Wahid said she was initially seen as a 'muslim artist', rather than as an artist with very specific textile skills. This can be an advantage when culture, heritage, a culture specific skill or training are the focus, but is potentially a disadvantage if it needs to be contextualised elsewhere, binding you to your origin as your sole defining factor. So while I prefer to access my cultural 'capital', I must also recognise the danger of cultural 'baggage'. As Rezia put it 'as a maker it is important to keep making and that is how we can find the depths of connections with our identity'.

From an introspective point of view, the presentations around the 'back story' of craft - identity, the past and heritage - were hugely interesting. The work of Professor Steve Dixon and Rosa Nguyen resonated with me the most in the symposium, perhaps as they are both craftsmen themselves working across geographical borders and that also in ceramics. Reference to the crafter's background and origin can reveal a different culture and way of life. Yet as an indigenous Briton pointed out to me, it does not matter that you have come from another country - as individuals we all have this 'cultural' capital. It also does not matter that the craft does not possess the accepted hallmarks of craftsmanship. Grayson Perry has so successfully demonstrated this, openly admitting he did not feel he was skilled at throwing clay, instead adopting another technique and building a popular reputation on life stories instead. When a person is displaced from the norm or their country, that capital can be fractured or more interesting and perhaps more complex. I truly believe that adversity breeds creativity.

What Vietnamese-French Rosa Nguyen manifested in her travels to India and Japan, Deidre Figueredo summarised as 'sometimes you have to be away from your origin to clearly understand your identity, feeling at home in a culture not your own'. A fragmented identity can benefit from being in another place to 'fix' the puzzle of yourself. However, as Chein-wei Chang says 'don't entrap yourself in the past', instead make a reference to it while moving forward.

I empathise with the cathartic nature of a creative occupation, having practiced craft like this myself. This is evidenced in my references to relationships and lifestages in the layout of my exhibition 'The Fuller Picture' and in my work in 'Fresh', and to my cultural heritage in 'Scale'. The process of making something unique and personal from raw material is anyone's prerogative. It liberates and provides a voice without the need for conversation, invitation to join in or legitimising, at least in this country - unlike Ai Weiwei in China. In presenting this work to the public, I seek a kindred spirit that can appreciate the ethos, skill or logic behind it and those who can simply appreciate its beauty. The symposium has highlighted that this is very important to my work.

Professor Steve Dixon makes clever use of political narrative to present uncomfortable and inconvenient truths, from overt references to more invisible ones, for example the use of kangaroo bone in pottery on an Australian project about the aborigines. In his project in India, the dialogue between makers and participants is almost as important as the product itself. The process of getting to a final piece (or not), the back story and the ensuing discussion is really key to the whole life of the idea or the craft, and can do much to highlight or tackle issues. Referring to Marcel Duchamp's La Fuente 'Whether Mr Mutt made the fountain with his own hands or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view - created a new thought for that object.'

A disruptive difference like that created many years ago makes me think there are five broad kind of transnational dialogues which are not mutually exclusive. They are: natural dialogues through travel, influence and assimilation especially in the art world over centuries; current organic global dialogues affected by instant communication for example, an artist sends a digitised sketch of a craft item to be handcrafted in India and imported back to UK within short timeframe; deliberately curated dialogues to create equalisation of voice to immigrant and commonwealth issues; curated collaboration of different cultures to make new and perhaps more interesting work and lastly introduction of transnational work to influence or introduce a specific style or quality of work for example burnished African pots or Scandinavian porcelain.

Defining craft broadly as 'that which requires skill in making' rather than just handmade gives it multiple meanings and layers. These can be seen in isolation, or as stepping stones in a career path for an artist. Quality craftsmanship, the handmade look, the pedigree of the maker, the relevance of the craft amongst others are all factors in the acceptability and valuation of craft.

Quoting Thomas Carlyle and the work of Henry Moore, Hassan Mahamdallie was concerned whether arts and craft were facing a cash nexus and whether crafts can regularly reach the heady heights of money that 'art' attracts. Designing and making craft can be time consuming and expensive. Unless an artist is fortunate enough to have the right funding to enable a free artistic practice, payment for survival is fundamental. This explains why craft collectives have always been around. Dartington Hall was set up as such, based on Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan in India, William Morris and the Arts & Crafts Movement and Eric Gill's setups in Ditchling and Wales are all precursors of a continuing need to preserve, support and elevate the crafts.

Elevating craft as a whole to another status and making comparisons to the art market is fraught with issues in my mind. Again, referring to La Fuente, The Independent noted in a February 2008 article that with this single work, Duchamp invented conceptual art and "severed forever the traditional link between the artist's labour and the merit of the work". Artists often struggle with pricing their work, given guidelines such as hours x 3 plus extra. However, this can become totally irrelevant - the important thing is to recognise where to plot the artists or artisans (some anonymous) work, which then determines its valuation:

- Domestic crafts as pass time or necessity
- Domestic crafts as cottage industry
- Craft as small artist practice
- Craft practiced by a mature/ established/ desirable/ cutting edge practitioner
- Craft as avant garde of design and manufacture
- Craft as country's indigenous economy
- Craft as country's design export for manufacture or domestic use
- Craft as artistic vehicle for communicating issues and ideas
- Craft as a performance
- Craft as (perhaps disposable) part of temporary exhibition
- Current relevance and fashion of the craft

Domestic craft, including sewing and knitting, have often been dismissed as badly made or appearing too homemade, something that was explored by Carol Tulloch through her exhibition 'Handmade Tales'. In this heyday of handmade and vintage goods, I feel this is not a problematic issue. In fact, quite the opposite - handcrafting is seen as a valuable skill, and today affordable tools, education, facilities and numerous marketing opportunities available to the domestic worker have changed the landscape. As raised by Carol, 'domestic craft can be viewed as a cultural capital' today, gaining a premium price and recognition for itself.

In addition to traditional outlets, the marketplace is rich with quality fairs that revere good handcrafted work, also giving whimsy and frippery great scope to flourish. Additionally, in the west in particular, artists own or collective websites such as Etsy, Craftsy, not-on-the-high-street and social networking have given a platform to domestic crafters to present their work worldwide from their homes. This enables mainstream exposure and recognition without being channelled out at an early stage by corporate buyers, whilst

allowing quality websites and lifestyle blogs to sift through work that has been recognised as quality, quirky, innovative, or otherwise.

Creating a global identity for your product, style or lifestyle which is instantly recognisable across cultures reaches new markets too. Scotswoman Mharri A Gowans did this by creating the Lolita look which has a distinct dress and style associated with it in Japan as well as Britain, recognised and amplified by its presence on the web such as Etsy.com. My own network of family and friends is spread worldwide and contact through social networking has given us all ability to instantly access and share each other's worlds in a way previously unimaginable. Potentially this leads to another source of innovation and style, where products and lifestyles in one part of the world are lifted and adopted elsewhere, without its social and economic context.

In fact, craft is also a source of innovation and a route to manufacture. However, handmade, handcrafted goods are treated differently in different countries. Mexican designer Ignacio Ruiz Gutierrez extracts an element of local pop culture and transfers it to 'high' art. As Mariella Valesco pointed out, there is an active three way communication between the designer, artisans and the manufacturing company. In some ways this is the Holy Grail - being able to design and have it made up as a part of your craft and design portfolio for income and recognition. Hannah Fauerby of Denmark revealed that the organisation *Danish Crafts* has officially recognised since 1997 that craft is the avant garde of design, a hybrid somewhere between art and design. 'Crafts take their cue from free artistic practice while possessing skills and competencies which may be highly significant for innovation in Danish production companies'. Similarly, Design Factory and Crafts Council play important roles in the UK, but it seems that Danish Crafts is defining a look and identity for the country in an interesting contrast to the UK, where happily it is a celebration of a wider range of styles and origins. This is an area for me to harness more actively.

On the other hand, in some countries recognition of the real worker is an issue. As someone who aspires one day to liaise abroad, this was a really important issue. Linda Vasquez of Columbia, a designer who leads the country's craft market for sustainability highlighted that artisans are protected under an artisan organisation. Yet in many cases, the maker's marks are not visible in the hand made article, making the artisan invisible under the designer's umbrella. This is not really collaboration, but is it exploitation? I believe there is a balance - that the artist or craftsman makes a market when there isn't one, creating opportunities for the makers, albeit anonymously. Often, it is an advantage for the artisan to be involved in a known artist's work even if for little pay. Transparent economic sustainability without 'exploitation' could be a challenge for the artistic ego; depending on the size and type of project, collaboration with acknowledgement is the answer.

Creating luxury indigenous goods to be sold in higher end local and new markets is German Karin Beate-Phillips mission, which was vociferously presented. Exemplified by several cases where local fairs were not represented by indigenous goods in West Africa and India, there is a balance to strike between modernising and exciting an economy by introducing work from outside or offering traditional local produce. And actually, this could be seen as transporting this disruptive difference abroad. I think this issue is important wherever in the world, experienced recently by artist friends engaged in a dialogue with their local museums and galleries.

Karin referred to an example of a white South African lady marketing 'indigenous' style African goods, but which were produced in China. Is this exploitation, gross misrepresentation of authenticity or clever but perhaps unacceptable marketing? Protecting your ideas and style is a worldwide issue on an individual and corporate level, what about at a country level? Implications for colonial or imperial behaviour is rife. In an emerging world order, there are accusations of China doing this in Africa too. Fair pay for artisans in poorer countries can be harder to identify and negotiate.

Apart from using cheap and anonymous labour, individuals and institutions in seeking new routes to global markets can take different approaches.

- In the case of Chein-wei Chang - migrate to another country!
- Export by linking up to an international brand such as Lanvin for production of your craft - Fu Chun Wu of Taiwan
- Match your offering to the needs of the market as Kingston University has attempted to do by linking aspiring curators to emerging world economies such as China whose new and empty museums need to be filled
- Learn new skills to facilitate your communication with another country. In the discussion about Chinese Museums, learning a Chinese language was disappointingly dismissed as an option for progressing in that market.
- Create a global identity for your product or style such as Lolita mentioned above.

Amplified again by Rosa Nguyen, permanence and categorisation are real issues for the museums. Yet museums can be microcosms of the world as Catherine McDermott pointed out. With reference to her small Rochdale Museum being so much more than the empty new museum 'shells' in China, she emphasised the opportunity to collaborate with Britain.

Moving away from the restrictions of museums and galleries, the contemporary version of performance art has been applied to craft in innovative ways. Emiko Ota of Japan talked about artist Kimura Toshiro Jinjin who dressed in a 'charming' drag outfit and took a portable car with a tea ceremony kit and also pots and glazes. This performance combined the craft of glazing pots while drinking tea in the open air - thus joining together in a novel way the local attraction of ceramics and redefining Japanese tea drinking culture (Nodate). This was a lovely example of making craft alive.

Changing a product, its making process and even the dialogue between artists and artisans or workers can in itself be a means of reviving an industry or locality. Popular projects can be used as a driver for change and modernisation, to leave a legacy for growth and promotion. Connecting people to their heritage through a craft or art project, and using that to reconnect to local industry is also a positive intervention, as described in Rosa's project in France.

Professor Steve Dixon's work with artisans in Ahmedabad was another fine example of this. The textile postal exchange, the digitising of traditional woodblocks, and the reskilling and education of participating rag pickers meant the outcome of the collaboration lived beyond its completion.

In contrast, as pointed out by Yue Yi of China, Ai Weiwei's sunflower project at Tate Modern could have been more fully exploited for its potential for change. The ceramics town of Jingdezhen in Xingxi province has taken a downturn. Over 2 years, 1600 workers were used there to produce 100 million homogenous ceramic sunflower seeds that collectively reached a large audience and provided political exposure for the artist.

However, no new material, technology or arguably contemporary practice was utilised resulting in no long term effect on the town's ceramics industry.

Designing and making craft can be time consuming and expensive. Unless an artist is fortunate enough to have the right funding to enable a free artistic practice, a supporting structure that enables development, marketing and debate is critical. Travel and migration have always been a source and influence for makers and museums. However, globalisation and worldwide access to the internet, even in poor countries, is radically changing access to markets and information to the point where it may become, if not already, difficult to assess what are products of hybridity, confluence and transnationality, and what are truly indigenous.

I believe there is always a case for allocating a proportion of energy and resource to preserving and marketing indigenous and traditional skills and crafts in any culture and economy. However, total protectionism inhibits innovation and simply presenting indigenous goods in a new context may not be sufficient to raise the product to a luxury or contemporary level, despite being genuine and top quality; it needs alteration to suit current or different tastes - as judged by a silent reaction to some West African fabric displayed at the symposium. Anyhow, looking across centuries, what is considered indigenous now once may not have been. Craft and the practice of craft is organic and changes and influences can be subsumed without notice or long term damage.

This is where disruption can create innovation, and the collaboration between artists and local artisans can breed a new market or industry. Breaking the comfort zone in any discipline or walk of life can raise the bar, and transnational dialogues provide some of the disruptive differences that can do just this. The symposium has crystallised thoughts, raised issues and provided me with a wholesome view of the world of craft and I am very fortunate to have been able to attend.