



## ***Disruptive Difference - Transnational Craft Dialogues***

### **School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester - 17 February 2012**

*Disruptive Difference* was a one day symposium which explored how cultural and geographical dis/location is changing craft practice, and how notions of national and cultural identity are contributing to experiences of craft nationally and internationally.

The event was organised by **the shape of things** in partnership with the University of Leicester's School of Museum Studies, and New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester.

Below are the notes from Plenary Session held at the end of the day. The Plenary panel were Annabelle Campbell (Crafts Council), Janet Marstine (School of Museum Studies), Deirdre Figueiredo (Craftspace / the shape of things) and Hassan Mahamdallie (Arts Council England). The session was chaired by Samina Zahir (Hybrid Consulting)

#### **Panel members' 3 minute summary of issues from the day which were resonant for them / the themes running through the day:**

##### **Annabelle Campbell (Crafts Council)**

- The role of crafts and the critiquing of the museum, and how craft can re-animate collections
- 'Craft' means many things to people in many different cultures – the market can dictate the category of where things are placed – if they are called 'art' or 'craft'
- How do design and making relate back to craft?
- Issues to do with authorship and intellectual property kept popping up throughout the day, and were pertinent to whatever country someone was working in.

##### **Janet Marstine (School of Museum Studies)**

- Hybridity is central to everything that was being discussed throughout the day.
- Artists and craftspeople are curators and collectors – the roles merge (both ways) – how they merge is really interesting
- Does craft in particular fuel that sense of hybridity?
- Notions of recycling came up in really interesting ways throughout the day

##### **Deirdre Figueiredo (Craftspace / the shape of things)**

- Favourite word of the day was 'mick-mash' (from Rosa Nguyen's talk –her mother's way of saying 'mish-mash') and sums up how identities have become very complicated – and that's a good thing, and provides a real strength when it comes to influencing art.
- 'Confluence' is another word which has sprung from the day – different stories are juxtaposed and come together.
- Artists need more time away from their home to find their identity which we benefit from – particularly with International students.
- Queer theory and museology are not reductive – they are enriching and freeing.

### **Hassan Mahamdallie (Arts Council England)**

- The artist's presentations were a powerful reminder that creative work is about a quest for humanity and our place in the world.
- The craft community seems riven with disagreement along with every other part of the arts – which is a surprise!
- Thomas Carlyle's nineteenth century book *Past and Present* was a rant against the destruction of craft; and that capitalism had reduced all human relations to a cash nexus where social relationships were merely reduced to economic gain. Given the growing capitalisation of the international art market, maybe the craft sector needs to be careful that it is not pulled in that direction.
- In that context should we be more explicit and honest about the power relationships being exposed in the debates today, for example between the indigenous artisan and commercialism, and the first world and the developing world, and are words like 'hybridity', 'intercultural' and 'transnational' obscuring or illuminating those realities?

### **Questions from the floor (name of questioner added where known)**

**Nima Poovaya-Smith (Alchemy)** - one of the speaker's comments that modern Indian art was 'derivative' must be challenged.

**Sophie Heath (Bilston Craft Gallery)** – one of the aims of **the shape of things** was to build diverse audiences, and at Bilston they were pleasantly surprised that they did achieve that. **Yvonne Hardman (Touchstones, Rochdale)** confirmed that they also built audiences through their public engagement programme linked to **tsot**... **Alinah Azadeh (tsot artist)**, confirmed that the visitor figures for **tsot** in Bristol had been huge – 33,000 and that they reached out to communities who didn't normally go to the Museum (confirmed by **Barabara Disney (artist)** who lives in Bristol).

**Alinah Azadeh (tsot artist)** welcomed the opportunity to reflect on **tsot** two years on from hers' and Rosa's exhibition in Bristol, and said that it was really useful to have a project which spanned such a long time period as it gave people time to learn and reflect on their practice in a supportive way. It provided an opportunity for artists to fit in 'everywhere and nowhere'.

**Janet Marstine (School of Museum Studies)** – a lot of the debates today have been about ethics issues to do with representation and economics.

? (artist) Said that she had been involved in a Crafts Council show in 1991 which explored issues to do with diversity, and that it felt like the artists were being presented as 'non-white' rather than from a rich cultural background. She was looking forward to an opportunity to discuss how things had changed, but felt that for someone to say that 'Africa had no museums' in a Symposium such as this was extraordinary.

**Karin-Beate Phillips (British European Design Group)** responded that what she meant to say was that the concept of a museum where things are collected and stored is a Western concept, and that in Africa there is not a culture of going to museums.

? Suggested she see Gus Casely-Hayford's series 'The Lost Tribes of Africa' currently being screened on TV and read Basil Davidson who wrote extensively about African history and culture over 40 years ago.

**Janet Marstine (School of Museum Studies)** some museums in America are now becoming more like cultural centres where people learn from indigenous peoples – and where people's cultural heritage is being preserved. There needs to be a move away from the idea of a museum being a static institution where objects are fixed in a box.

**Shari Daya (academic from South Africa)** Felt that as a woman from Africa who did not conform to a stereotypical notion of what African women were like, she was often not represented in discourse; she felt that there *is* an authenticity which can be uncovered in relation to the issues being discussed, but that the complexities and integrity of the debate were missing at the Symposium, which was very disappointing.

? There needs to be a focus on craft – on the making of an object by an individual. Who is that individual? Has the notion of craft facilitated the dialogue about individuals and cultural identity?

**Rezia Wahid (textile artist)** When the Director of **the shape of things**, David Kay, spoke to her regarding taking part in the project she wanted to be recognised as a British Maker (now she sees herself as a handwoven textile artist!) and not be put in a box. They met just as she had started wearing the headscarf and was being seen as a 'muslim artist', which she is, but not just that. Her journey to weaving was through her British art education, and her practice is as it is because of the way she was trained at art college. Her background and who she is, is a natural part of her being - therefore it is unconsciously visible... so it is very important for her that her weaving is recognised before her cultural diversity...

David Kay reassured her that she hadn't been chosen for her cultural background but because he had seen her work during graduation and could see the development of her practice.

Rezia finished by saying 'as a maker it is important to keep making and that is how we can find the depths of connections with our identity.'