

Making and Thinking in the Intersection: Conversations about Craft and Design

Salon Conversations: one of a series of five papers, 28 August, 2008.

'*Salon Conversations* is a free City of Melbourne program of intimate, invitation only talks by and for artists, designers, makers, architects and writers at the City Library.' (Jeff Taylor, City Culture Program Manager).

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Crafts and design: making and thinking in the intersection

Presented with images and summary points; not originally a written paper. These notes, some of which have been documented elsewhere, expand on the issues discussed.

There are many intersections within this topic: between crafts and art, crafts and design, crafts and industry, crafts and society. All those words change their meanings over time and place, and the relationships and intersections between them change as well.

Whatever the intersection is, I have always been interested in people who know how to do things well. That includes their knowledge of materials and the skills and processes needed to work with them – what craftspeople and those in specialised industries do. I believe this knowledge is also an essential part of design, whether carrying out the tasks oneself, or designing for others to make or manufacture.

But many things are changing; there are both challenges and opportunities for people working at the intersection of the crafts and design. Some time ago I said, in passing, that these days I was more interested in strategies than theories; now I'm pretty sure I believe it. But what are they?

What's been going on?

Art: the benchmark for value

The crafts have always sat in a changing place between art and industry, expression and necessity, personal and social, and this has varied across cultures, and over time. While we draw on all those histories, in the last fifty years the benchmark for success in what we now call the studio crafts has been primarily in their acceptance as 'art'. We want evidence of the unique hand of the maker and we enjoy emotional attachments with objects made by someone we know, or can identify. Whatever the crafts represent as a set of values, we have still sought their validation as art. The post-war influence of the celebration of the individual and the self-made person as it translated into the modern art world has also been an important – perhaps pervasive – model, especially as the arts moved out of a technical vocational system and became absorbed into university systems: the crafts became art. We all know the strong infrastructure that supports this approach to the crafts. And by and large, it works, though the local marketplace for art-craft is comparatively small but supportive. Nonetheless, despite our significant global profile, we are a long way from bigger, and often richer, population centres.

The issue of design:

Although for many practitioners, making objects in limited series is very much both part of their history and their work ethic, craftspeople have tended to shun associations with processes that imply the impersonality of designing for industrial manufacture. And

despite the fact that there is a strong history of craftspeople and designers working with industry, especially in Europe and the Nordic countries, the studio crafts marketplace tends not to want to know that its artists might also make production lines or commissioned series as part of their livelihood, or that they might want to involve others in the making process.

But we can't ignore the reality that in the broad audience and consumer groups of which we are all part, there is a strong interest in 'design'. A new hierarchy has developed round the idea of design, which has its own infrastructure of brands, promotion and identity, with high profile magazines and promotional events and showrooms, and where designers can be superstars – in a system not dissimilar to that of the art world. It is a big and affluent marketplace.

This is a very attractive profile for many makers, and it can offer a different economic reality. And even for one-off works, the value of new industrial technologies cannot be overlooked. The contemporary world for makers, or craftspeople, is just as much to do with design and industry as it is with art. If we are going to discuss the crafts in the context of one, we have to allow a place in the other.

Manufacture: global-local shifts

But design implies links with working for a client and manufacturing through industry, and for some time the nature of industry has been changing rapidly. We are all aware that large scale crafts-based manufacturing is closing in the West and rapidly moving to countries where labour is cheaper, often using hand skills. We all notice when well-known industries – textiles, glass, metal, furniture, ceramics – have closed or shifted, and where skills we take for granted, go with them.

There are huge changes in cultural identity both in countries where these losses are taking place, and in those where they are developing. Think of the changes in the Nordic countries, Italy, Germany, the UK – and sometimes your own home town, and what these mean to the people there, and to us.

However, in the wake of the departing large industries, small specialised, skilled industries are emerging, many combining highly sophisticated technologies with knowledge of materials and hand-processes. As well as 'employing' designers, there is an increasing tendency for designers to 'employ' industries, usually through close collaboration.

Style: the look of the handmade

At the same time, within 'design', over the last few years, there has been an identifiable stylistic shift in some aspects of that marketplace towards objects that reflect the values of the handmade: through the way they look and what they represent. Many contemporary designers are interested in texture, showing evidence of process, reference to domestic crafts, often using fabrics and materials worked on by skilled people elsewhere. There are conferences about 'design and emotion'.

In fact crafts skills and material knowledge sit behind much successful design: some brands depend on the skills of generations of craftspeople.

Technologies: global local/local global

Indeed, central to change are the new technologies that are totally transforming access to markets and audiences – as well as designing and manufacturing relationships and

cost structures. Digital media makes the global local – and the local global – in more ways than we ever imagined.

We can communicate directly and instantly with people we may never meet about objects we may never actually see: almost every dealer and most practitioners have their own websites. Our audiences are increasingly used to customising what they want and need, from i-pod music lists to personal chat-pages.

And in terms of making, customisation, once the province of the handmade, is now possible on a large scale through the possibilities for designing and manufacturing on-line: 'mass-customisation' is not a contradiction in terms; it is a reality.

Consciousness of sustainability:

In developing sustainable businesses (because they are businesses), artists, designers, makers and their consumers are thinking responsibly about the resources they use. Materials, water, energy sources and transport costs are all part of what we now call the carbon footprint, and are increasingly part of the process of making decisions about how and where things are made – and sometimes if we need them at all. Ethics include considerations of issues of employment or exploitation in contracting skilled labour, sometimes off-shore.

Craftspeople: one-off into production

One of the things I have noticed in recent years is that many craftspeople are looking again at what they do, who they are doing it for and why, and how they go about it. As well as making one-off works as artists, a number of them want to put some of their work into production as designers. They want creative, sustainable livelihoods that grow out of their crafts values and experiences, sometimes outsourcing aspects of the design and manufacturing of what they do to others, both at home and overseas. They also have to look differently at the marketplace. I have considerable respect for this position: the crafts have always, in reality, had a place within and between art and industry.

Case studies: Smart works: design and the handmade

Until recently I've been working at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney; a major design museum, its collections cross decorative arts, crafts and design, science, technology and industry and social and cultural history. When the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council offered funds to put towards a 'crafts project in an international context', we proposed an exhibition that would look at design that was based on knowledge of the skills and materials associated with the handmade.

Smart works: design and the handmade opened in March 2007 with 41 case studies from Australia and New Zealand, a book, and a 3-day symposium. The project focused on the choices each of those people made in deciding how to establish and sustain their practice – when moving to put one-off works into production. While each of the case studies had its own story of ideas and designs, growing out of the handmade, each one also addressed common questions, and every one had different solutions.

How do they develop sustainable, viable businesses? What are their options? What choices are they making? In particular:

- How does production associated with industry affect the values of the handmade? Is it compromising or creative?
- Can they set up production themselves, or should they contract aspects to specialist industries. How do they do this, and where?
- How do they integrate new technologies with hand skills?

- How important is a knowledge of materials? And processes...
- What are their experiences of working in other countries? Are they exploiting or providing opportunities?
- What are the needs in education, training, mentorships?
- Where are their markets – local or global; how do they reach them?
- What does all this mean to makers, and their perceptions of their practices?

These stories can be found on the Powerhouse Museum's website:

www.powerhousemuseum.com/smartworks/

+ [Exhibitors](#)

+ [Symposium](#)

+ [Symposium speakers](#)

+ [Video recordings from symposium](#)

+ [Publication](#)

Impact

For many in the opening symposium of *Smart works*, it was the first time they had been in a forum where people working in other media were telling their experiences. Since then many have resolved decisions as a result of the experiences of the people they met. In the symposium, presenter of BBC4's radio program *In Business*, Peter Day, provided an extraordinary overview from his vast experience of the changing global business and manufacturing patterns. He finished up by saying:

And how do rich world businesses survive in this global, cutthroat world ...by moving closer and closer to customers, by listening to them and convincing them that they are being taken seriously...crafts people are uniquely positioned to take advantage of this. It is after all the world they have come from... The 21st century is about businesses and organisations that can cope with the complexity of messy individual demand, and I think that is something that craftspeople can never lose sight of. This is probably your century, if you want to take it. (see Powerhouse website: video recordings, above)

There has been considerable interest in this theme. In recent years a number of initiatives from state crafts and design organisations, funding bodies and universities have resulted in innovative collaborations between education and industry: practical variations on what have become known as the creative industries, that include mentorship programs in almost every state and development initiatives between designing, making, manufacturing and marketing. Research in Australia is carried out in universities around ideas and issues from ethics and sustainability to fashion and function and business practices, and these are also explored in different ways by crafts and design centres and state design festivals.

This particular direction has become a subject for discussion overseas as well, for example by a number of speakers at the 'Neocraft' conference in Nova Scotia in November 2007: <http://www.neocraft.ca/> ; see review by Mike Press, Dundee <http://craftresearch.blogspot.com/>

Australian policy development

Where does this intersection of crafts and design feature in Australian policy development at the moment? Currently a number of organisations are addressing different aspects in reviews and reports that are part of wider research into the 'creative economies', 'innovation economies' and 'creative industries'. They consider issues such as innovation, sustainability, new technologies and commercial application across, for example, fields of design, arts, industry, science, environment and society.

They include the following (see Appendix 1 for weblinks):

- 2020 summit, held in April 2008
- Creative Innovation Economy Report (Cultural Ministers Council)
- Enterprise Connect (\$251m)
- Proposed Creative Industries Innovation Centre (\$17m)
- Review, National Innovation System
- Creative Innovations Centre, Queensland
- Council of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHASS)
- Australian Bureau of Statistics

However, in many cases it is clear that the 'Smart works' kinds of people, and indeed object designers at large, tend to fall into a crack. They are not always identified as part of arts and culture, and neither are they easily identified as industries. They are sometimes unsure how to define themselves. It is often observed that many of our institutions and government departments, as well as some of our professional organisations, operate as 'silos' – which means there can be cracks between them, into which it is possible to fall.

Yet the stories of the many designers and makers we know, some of whom are speaking on this panel, confirm that there are rewarding consequences for the intersections and interactions between arts and industry, design and the crafts. Their involvement with new technologies for designing, prototyping and carrying out aspects of manufacture, must be equally as important as for screen-based outcomes; their way of working with skilled industries must include them in current opportunities for encouraging SME's (small and medium enterprises).

Attempts are made to bring some of these areas together under the label 'creative industries' but these are difficult to define. The Creative Innovation Economy report for the Cultural Minister's Council, looking at opportunities for the creative sector in the digital environment, acknowledged that the authors had no firm definition. They cited that of Queensland's Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI) which proposes six industry segments, including 'Architecture, Design and Visual Arts', but much of that centre's work is on 'digital content industries', of communication, information and marketing research and services, and the commercial exploitation of intellectual property (see references to CIC and creative industries, below).

There are some reassuring words. Here is Dr Terry Cutler, chair of the Review into the National Innovation System, speaking on August 19, 2008 in a talk entitled 'Creativity, the Arts and Innovation'.

www.currencyhouse.org.au/pages/artsandpubliclife

He started by citing the Prime Minister, speaking at the 2020 Summit conference:

This false divide between the arts and science, between the arts and industry, between the arts and the economy: we've actually got to put that to bed. (Kevin Rudd, 2020 summit)

Cutler went on to note some issues that need to be considered:

1. The challenge from the balkanisation of innovation
2. The role of the imagination in innovation
3. The craft of innovation – embedded practice (and learning by doing)
4. The role of the creative industries

Of the 'craft of innovation', he said:

The other great cultural divide is between the realm of the conceptual, the intellectual, and the artisan and craftsman. The role of crafts and trades in innovation has been massively neglected, particularly in the important areas of continuing incremental innovation in the workplace, whether that be a workshop, a factory floor, office, or farmyard. We know that often major breakthroughs come from seemingly little ideas or insights arising from hands-on engagement, and from learning by doing.

However, it is interesting that this part of Dr Terry Cutler's paper, that confirmed his belief in this aspect, didn't appear to make it into the final text of the report: *Venturous Australia - building strength in innovation*.

<http://www.innovation.gov.au/innovationreview/Pages/home.aspx>

Shortly after, Senator the Hon. Kim Carr gave an address, 'The Art of Innovation' to the National Press Club, on 3 September 2008.

<http://minister.innovation.gov.au/Carr/Pages/THEARTOFINNOVATION-ADDRESSTOTHENATIONALPRESSCLUB.aspx>

He pointed out that the humanities have an important role in innovation, citing a number of initiatives, and that: 'These days, innovation is:

- increasingly collaborative and networked
- increasingly mobilised by pull from users rather than push from technology
- increasingly globalised; and
- increasingly dependent for its success on the availability of skilled and creative people.'

Conclusions:

For me, a few points regarding the intersection of crafts and design remain convincing:

- **craftspeople:** can work in a number of ways, from one-off to production and each approach deserves to be valued equally; design and industry is as much part of the crafts world as art is.
- **designers:** a knowledge of materials and hand skills as well as new technologies remain important in designing for production; material experiences do form part of the creative process, whether carried out by in one person, or as the result of collaboration between an artist, craftsperson or designer and skilled people in industry.
- **industry:** there is a strong evidence of the values of collaboration with industry; these interactions can be creative rather than compromising; what has been truly impressive with these people is their willingness to meet skilled industry half-way, to listen to and learn from what those particular specialists can offer, and to develop what become mutual challenges.
- **technologies:** there are many applications for new technologies beyond 'creative digital content'; these need to be included in 'innovation economy' discussions.
- **relevance:** for many people where we are, this approach is appropriate for our location, and we are not unique. We need to keep this designing/making agenda part of wider strategic discussions.

I believe that these developments – amongst the many other forms of practice in Australia – are an important, and maybe necessary, response to the changing circumstances of our time, from our part of the globe.

Appendix: web links to recent reviews and reports. 8/9/08 (amended 12/11/08)

2020 Summit

<http://www.australia2020.gov.au/>

Building a Creative Innovation Economy Report

In February 2008 the Australian and New Zealand Cultural Ministers Council endorsed the report: *Building a Creative Economy: opportunities for the Australian and New Zealand creative sectors in the digital environment*. (Emphasis is on access, information and communication; where there are 'product' outcomes, they are digital.)

[<http://www.cmc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/7817/Building_a_Creative_Innovation_Economy.pdf>](http://www.cmc.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/7817/Building_a_Creative_Innovation_Economy.pdf)

CMC 2008 Communiqué home page

[<http://www.cmc.gov.au/media_releases/meeting_communique/cultural_ministers_council_communique_29_february_2008>](http://www.cmc.gov.au/media_releases/meeting_communique/cultural_ministers_council_communique_29_february_2008)

Enterprise Connect

<http://www.enterpriseconnect.gov.au/Innovation/Pages/AboutUs.aspx>

'Enterprise Connect is a \$251 million national initiative established by the Australian Government. It was launched by Senator the Honourable Kim Carr, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research on 21 May 2008. A copy of the media release is available [here](#).

Enterprise Connect comprises two components, the Manufacturing Network and Innovation Centres. The initiative is administered by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research in collaboration with a number of [Partner Organisations](#). Enterprise Connect aims to provide comprehensive support to Australian small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), which are a vital part of Australia's economic future.' (from web page)

The Creative Industries Innovation Centre

<http://www.enterpriseconnect.gov.au/Innovation/Pages/CreativeIndustriesInnovationCentre.aspx>

'The Creative Industries Innovation Centre has funding of \$17 million over four years and will help creative industries SMEs make a larger contribution to the Australian and global economy. The Centre will have a strong commercial focus and deliver professional business advisory and related business development services to target SMEs across Australia.

The Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (the Department of Innovation) invites proposals from organisations to host, and to assist in delivering, some elements of the Creative Industries Innovation Centre (CIIC). The CIIC will form part of Enterprise Connect.' (from web page)

Senator the Hon. Kim Carr

Address *The Art of Innovation* to the National Press Club. 3 Sept.2008

<http://minister.innovation.gov.au/Carr/Pages/THEARTOFINNOVATION-ADDRESSTOTHENATIONALPRESSCLUB.aspx>

Review: National Innovation System (to be released before end 2008)

'...a wide ranging review of Australia's national innovation system to be conducted by an expert panel chaired by Dr Terry Cutler...The establishment of the review recognises the vital role innovation plays in boosting productivity and international competitiveness, and

re-iterates the Rudd Government's commitment to fostering innovation across the economy.' (from web page)

<http://www.currencyhouse.org.au/pages/artsandpubliclife.html> (for Cutler's report on progress; Dr Terry Cutler, 'Creativity, the Arts and Innovation')

Report: *Venturous Australia - building strength in innovation:*

<http://www.innovation.gov.au/innovationreview/Pages/home.aspx>

 [494-Craft Australia](#) (Submission to review by Catrina Vignando, Craft Australia)

Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts

http://www.arts.gov.au/creative_industries

'Creative industries have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent. They have the potential to create wealth and jobs through the generation and use of intellectual property. Creative industries can include music; performing arts; film; television; radio; advertising; games and interactive content; writing; publishing; architecture; design; and visual arts. The Department administers policies and programs to develop creative industries and encourage the cultural sector's engagement in the digital environment.'

(from website)

Creative Industries: definitions and history

Stuart Cunningham, 'The Evolving Creative industries: from original assumptions to contemporary interpretations'; 9 May 2003, QUT, Brisbane

http://www.creativeindustries.qut.edu.au/research/documents/THE_EVOLVING_CREATIVE_INDUSTRIES.pdf

Higgs, P., Cunningham, S., Pagan, J. 'Australia's Creative Economy: Definitions of the Segments and Sectors', ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries & Innovation (CCI), Brisbane, 2007

<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00008242/01/8242.pdf>

Annual report, Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, Queensland University of Technology, 2007

http://www.cci.edu.au/sites/default/files/alawrence/CCI_2007_Annual_Report.pdf

Perth's Creative Industries: an analysis

<http://www.cityofperth.wa.gov.au/documentdb/617.pdf>

Council for Humanities and Social Sciences:

www.chass.org.au including:

<http://www.chass.org.au/papers/PAP20080521JH.php>

CHASS Occasional Paper No.5, John H. Howard, 'Between a hard rock and a soft place', a background paper prepared for the National Innovation Review.

'Australia has major commercial strengths in fashion, visual art and object art that are often overlooked in discussions of innovation. The production of original work is a significant aspect of the Australian craftdesign field. There is an extensive system of private and public galleries that support, promote and collect this work. Moreover, one-off practice is vital for the development of designed works. Designers regularly cross the boundaries between production and research practice, to evolve their position in the cultural framework.'

Arts and Culture in Australia: A Statistical Overview, 2008 (First edition) (cat. no. 4172.0) Australian Bureau of Statistics:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4172.0>.

Click on Details tab on that page for the full report.

(GC comment: there seem to be many gaps in categories of identification in 'art and craft' and 'design'. Low numbers in some areas where we know there are many practitioners; and appears to be no category in design (or visual arts/craft) for product design/manufacture. Hard to find designer-makers as a category of small business/organisation, and hard to find small designing/manufacturing businesses or showrooms alongside the commercial galleries as 'organisations'.)

Design Institute of NZ: series of seminars

DINZ Design Skills: INNOVATIONZ

http://www.dinz.org.nz/main/calendar/detail/DINZ_Design_Skills_INNOVATIONZ_.html

'We are saturated with policy statements. We are fed up with truisms dressed as discoveries. Give us a break. We know the bald facts. Yes, New Zealand is a long way from anywhere else. Yes, we live in difficult times. Yes, the carbon footprint is a problem. Yes, design is important; really, really important. Yes, New Zealand will only survive by being smarter and more agile. We know all that. We have known it for years. Of course good theory, strategy and policy has informed us and given us a platform of knowledge and a sense of direction. We know the whys and wherefores. But what we would really like to know right now, with some sense of urgency, is: HOW to do it.' (from website)