

Editors' introduction

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Relational Craft and Design

Current debates surrounding craft and design tend towards contrasting the past and the present, the Western and the non-Western, the industrialised and the developing world. This indicates the need within the academy to address a series of issues affecting the relationship between design and the crafts in a world that is often perceived as problematically 'globalised' and homogenous. What are the processes through which local producers, entrepreneurs and consumers, operating from both cosmopolitan and provincial sites, interact to create connections in this global context?

At the same time, vigorous debates about disciplinary parameters see craft and design and their relations with art characterised by wildly divergent interpretations. 'Craft' has again become a significant and weighty word at a time when the meaning of 'design' is shifting both within and outside the visual arts. Today, we note everything from drug design to policy design, where 'design thinking' indicates a higher level of consideration, conceptual and strategic thinking. Within this context, contemporary craft might appear as specific and cultural, while design's ubiquity carries certain risks. Design's claim to a significant social role links us back to earlier craft polemics, as was highlighted in the previous issue of *craft + design enquiry*, in its discussion of sustainability as having its own history as an idea in design and craft (Hughes, 2011).

While definitions of craft and design are diverse, we can be sure that today they are embraced by the broader arts and humanities in a way they have not been since the nineteenth century. The inter-disciplinarity that has driven society and culture since the late-twentieth century insists upon this, at the same time that the relationships across art, craft and design remain open to endless interpolation.

One somewhat neglected aspect of this relationship is craft's role in connecting aspects of creative culture. How is craft articulated (or elided) in contemporary art, architecture, fashion, and design generally — as well as in film — if one considers the rise of model-making and other visual effects in contemporary art culture? What does it mean that overlooked aspects of craft have been at work in all of these practices, but were often referred to with different language, through terms such as 'technique' and 'process', during the years that craft was 'unfashionable'? Within this trajectory, what is the current understanding of the relationship (and lack thereof) between craft and design in itself?

It is a pity that many attempts to argue for the social and cultural value of craft and design do so by collapsing distinctions between this pairing and also with art. To regret this is not to devalue craft or design. Rather, the distinct, meaningful and valuable aspects of visual culture can be maintained in both their connections to and contradistinction from art. In Maria Elena Buszek's excellent *Extra/ordinary: Craft and contemporary art* (2011), a set of essays addressing the use of craft in contemporary art makes clear that to maintain the distinctions across media and disciplines is to better understand what happens when they come together in their diversity.

Despite the risks of turning craft and design too closely towards art and its interpretation, it was with that coming together in mind that we, in this issue of *craft + design enquiry*, were keen to acknowledge that a number of writers had recently referred to Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) concept of 'relational art and aesthetics', as relevant to craft and design. Bourriaud's concept has been enormously influential in the interpretation of contemporary art, but how much of what he identifies in the importance of the generation of social relations over the object of art can be seen as that which marks out the historical distinction between art and craft? In celebrating audience response and cultural reference over the value of the art object as such, how much does Bourriaud's concept of contemporary art allow us to understand it as following craft and design? A crafted object reiterates the values of its culture and the importance of continuing to make the same thing, because it is 'good' and it is designed and made well. When the crafted object communicates those qualities effectively and meaningfully to its audience so that they might share an understanding of something greater than the object itself and its use, this seems entirely consistent with what Bourriaud refers to as the 'relational'.

Bourriaud's insistence that art services the activity that surrounds it seems a possible means for articulating something that, in other contexts, has been a 'problem' for craft and design: their emphasis on material and process. As signs not just of social relations but models for those relations, the exchange of ideas and information that the 'relational' characterises is able to acknowledge the material and conceptual life of craft and design. Importantly, it does this without collapsing medium and disciplinary distinctions.

The editors called for papers addressing these issues as part of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) conference in Adelaide in 2010. We welcomed contributions that accessed craftsperson's work as 'design' or reconsidered the ground on which such disciplinary claims have been made. A surprising number of papers with a strong historical focus came forward. The notion of the 'relational' seemed to allow a variety of scholarly operations to take place; the term may have fostered an almost sociological sense of the 'actors' operating in a 'field' of action as much as an aesthetic response to the topic, although the latter is strongly present in the essays that resulted.

Sally Gray's 'Relational craft and Australian fashionability in the 1970s–80s: Friends, pathways, ideas and aesthetics', studies a group of artists' and

designers' shared aesthetic enthusiasms for, for example, the visual legacy of modernist artist and designer Sonia Delaunay. This enthusiasm, she argues, connected a group of interdisciplinary Australians who were also friends and creative collaborators. 'Relationality' is described by Gray in a number of ways. The first meaning is literal; what are the dynamics of such creative collaborations and how can we recover this particular constellation of creative relationships as an historical episode? The second aspect of 'relationality' that interests Gray rests with institutional collecting trends, and the curators who exhibited and interpreted the work of the fashion designers and artists she addresses. Her third engagement with relationality is as a set of ideas, influential on their work, and current at the time. These include an intellectual and material inter-disciplinarity that moves across craft, art and fashion; an impulse to engage with eclectic visual ideas from a range of global sources, and an interest in proposing versions of identity and cultural location. Her work could be seen to respond to Bourriaud's claim that 'the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist' (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 13).

Juliette Peers's paper addresses a very different time and place but also reconstructs the relational network of two creative practitioners working in close proximity in 1888, at Grosvenor Chambers, 9 Collins Street, Melbourne, at the very centre of nineteenth-century, boom-time Victoria, Australia. Unlike Gray's set of creative agents from the 1970s and early 1980s, who were partly expatriate and constantly on the move, Peers's subjects must have seen each other pass by each day in their prominent commercial chambers. Yet they and their patron-clients would have exercised a very different hierarchical attitude towards each other. Peers takes as her empirical material the well-known artist Tom Roberts and the couturier 'Mrs Eeles', representing in a dialectical fashion the 'fine arts' and fashion; but is it correctly described as 'fashion design' here or is it rather an act of deft 'crafting', just as material as Roberts' sketchy oil painting? Roberts, an iconic Australian painter, paid his way through portrait commissions but has been venerated for bush pastorals that played a role in establishing Australian identity as rural, not urban. In Australia, his is a household name. Mrs Eeles, on the other hand, is practically unknown, but has been rehabilitated by Peers in recent journal articles, where she demonstrates the mastery of composition, colour and technique found in the few surviving examples of Eeles's high fashion, women's garments.

Peer's essay here also rescripts a space. Grosvenor Chambers was claimed to be the first building in Australia built specifically for use by creative professionals. Until being façaded (which is a type of civic mothballing) in the 1980s, the tenants' list of the building was glamorous and romantic with several generations of famous names making the building their base. Peers focuses on the contrasts in Roberts's and Eeles's reputation and output. While Roberts's *Shearing the Rams* was being painted, an ambitious 'salon de couture' operated from a floor below. Such relations can certainly be seen to respond to Bourriaud's interest in

‘a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space’ (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 113).

Part of the value of Peers’s approach is that within her argument ‘place can also be a point of sense-making in discussing historic, pre-twentieth century Australian art and craft’. What does it mean to consider a nineteenth-century commercial space in contemporary terms as ‘hub’ or an ‘incubator’? How can we rethink and reconceptualise histories? Peers’ concludes that: ‘Deploying more recent paradigms for sense-making in visual culture and its histories offers a more productive and informative point of interchange between Roberts and Eeles than twentieth century fine-arts centric constructs’.

Berry’s ‘Relational style: Craft as social identity in Australian fashion’ returns us to the present. The contemporary Australian fashion label Romance Was Born enacts a complex set of relations between craft, art and design as manifested across the production, display and consumption of their collections. Designers Anna Plunkett and Luke Sales combine culturally debased handicrafts such as crochet and macramé with the cultural cachet provided by collaborations with artists such as Del Katherine Barton and Kate Rohde. The result, Berry argues, is a collection of ‘phantasmagorical garments’ that transgress design imperatives of conventional wearability and establish a tension between ready-to-wear, wearable art, couture and homemade fashion.

To contravene the distinctions between art, craft and design is not unique to Plunkett and Sales, or to contemporary fashion. They draw on a history of colloquial craft in Australian fashion, most notably explored during the 1970s and 1980s in the parochially emblematic designs of Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson. Making important links with Gray’s work on the 1970s, Berry argues that Romance Was Born extends Kee’s and Jackson’s ‘articulation of a uniquely local kitsch aesthetic to include a global and eclectic mix of ethnic, popular culture, historical and artistic referents’. They approach these elements with tongue-in-cheek humour by using overblown craft techniques to exaggerate the symbolic qualities of high fashion to the point of kitsch. In this way, Berry concludes, Plunkett and Sales appear to be consciously playing out the perennially unstable balance between fashion’s avant-garde imperatives of individualism and uniqueness and the commercial modalities of mass appeal. Berry demonstrates how style for Romance Was Born is based in a relational aesthetic that acts as a site for the expression of cultural and historical reference and their dynamic interpretation and reconfiguration of these sources.

Sera Waters’s ‘Repetitive crafting: The shared aesthetic of time in Australian contemporary art’ analyses a strain of contemporary art whose method of production is that of time-consuming ‘repetitive crafting’. Contemporary Australian artists Justine Khamara, Tim Sterling, Troy-Anthony Baylis, Laith McGregor and Ray Harris are examples of artists who craft their art through repetition. Their processes are predominantly derived from everyday activities; fine biro drawing, precisely cut photographs, laboriously knitted forms, limitless

shampooing, or interlocking paperclips en masse. Through this repetition, small and ordinary gestures are given critical value and are able to traverse subversive territory.

Central to Waters's discussion of repetitive crafting is the re-evaluation of the term 'craft', contemporarily understood as 'not a movement or a field, but rather a set of concerns that is implicated across many types of cultural production' (Adamson, 2010, p. 3). Here, these concerns refer not to precision or sustaining traditional skills, but rather to artistic manifestations of physical proximities (between art and body) that speak of endurance, intimacy, and complex relationships with 'labour'. Above all, repetitive crafting employs 'time' as an aesthetic that acts to slow down and reiterate the bodily and personal connections to the making and viewing process. The values of repetitive crafting, Waters argues, transfer to viewing audiences and proliferate through networked and participatory cultures. Consistent with Bourriaud, she argues that by employing and exhibiting the aesthetic of 'time' in the relational sphere, such artworks become part of a larger political project to 'encourage an inter-human intercourse which is different to the "zones of communication" that are forced upon us' (Bourriaud, 2002).

Sandra Karina Löschke's 'Crafting relations: Aspects of materiality and interactivity in exhibition environments' provides an architectural historians' response to concerns of this issue of *craft + design enquiry*. Her initial thoughts were about the Constructivists' concern for *faktura* as an organising principle of creative production, which can be seen in opposition to the idea of 'facture' in traditional painting. *Faktura* was a notion that united the arts (and crafts) of painting, sculpture, architecture, film, and the design of everyday objects under the basic premises of material and construction. In this context El Lissitzky's demonstration rooms provide an important case study. As the editors posed in their call for papers, is it possible to examine *faktura* as a replacement for the notion of 'craft' in response to new developments in materials, science and technologies at that moment in time?

Using Lissitzky's Hannover and Dresden demonstration rooms as case studies, Löschke identifies 'an inventory of techniques and materials deployed for the construction of what has been considered the first relational environment'. Here her aim is to consider art practices associated with *relational aesthetics* and *postproduction*. How is *faktura* different to the concept of craft (which it rejected) and industrial production (which it embraced)? Is it an adequate aesthetic response to new developments in materials, science and technologies as well as the rapid industrialisation at that moment in time? By focusing on the iconic 'Hanover demonstration room', visited by Alfred H. Barr in the 1920s and subsequently celebrated in his now classic writings, Löschke identifies an inventory of tools, techniques and materials (immaterial and concrete), deployed for the construction of what has been considered the first 'total environment'.

We conclude our special issue of *craft + design enquiry* with Richard Read's 'The relational origins of inter-media art in painting, interior design and picture framing',

which addresses the craftsperson Pamela Gaunt's *Errant Abstractions*. Read's paper closely examines the particular historical charge associated with Gaunt's work and its self-conscious anachronism of traditional floral designs from Britain, Italy, India and Central Asia, incorporated as basic modules in her installation *Errant Abstractions* (2008). Starting with a phenomenological response to several kinds of fantasy that viewers might experience from interaction with the work, the essay establishes a broad historical framework for the confluence of painting, interior design and frame-making in contemporary multi-media art and craft. Read's essay also addresses the role of art and decoration in increasing the immediacy of nature within buildings or abstracting it to a civilising distance from the world outside. He also identifies modern hybrid works as exploiting anachronism (in Walter Benjamin's sense) when they re-enact the creative conflicts between painters, interior decorators and picture framers that once informed their necessary collaborations. Read's careful historical readings and allusions which range from collecting and the marketplace, to the outfitting of houses, remind us that for contemporary craft and design practice to flourish, a firm grasp of its antecedents, relationships and discontinuities is necessary.

And so we return to the idea of relationships as defining the work, the external and multiple factors that draw the work into its form and content. Bourriaud's concepts of relational aesthetics offer an obvious challenge to the disciplines of craft and design that have been historically constituted in social relations. The papers collected here show the limits but also the opportunities for practices that play across the gap of aesthetics and social meaning; of art, craft and design.

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