

Cutting the Crap – a New Crafts and Sustainability Policy

The crafts sector has a responsibility to do more to support Government (DEFRA) initiatives designed to tackle climate change and support related environmental and economic sustainability initiatives. The RSA's art and ecology programme and the recent Barbican exhibition are good examples of what is already being done. DEFRA, English Nature and environmental campaign groups are also working with artists, designers and architects to devise creative solutions to environmental problems. These include design of sustainable 'green' housing schemes, more energy efficient vehicles and domestic appliances, design-led recycling and waste management systems, and imaginative public arts and environmental education projects for schools and the general public.

Currently arts and sustainability initiatives seem to be developing in three main areas:

1. Behaviouralist tactics; projects aimed at promoting wider public awareness and understanding of core climate and environmental sustainability issues and related corrective policy initiatives, and/or employ imaginative arts-led educational and campaigning tactics to achieve behavioural change within the general public.
2. The moralist/didactic approach; documentation and 'witnessing' strategies whereby artists seek out direct engagement with some of the more contentious or critical environmental issues sites and attempt to re-energise public environmentalist discourses through high visibility direct action projects, e.g. Cape Clear's artists' voyages into the Arctic's melting ice caps.
3. New technologies and design efficiency discourse; artists and designers collaborate with scientists and engineers in devising new technological and scientific solutions to issues about climate change and energy depletion, i.e. producing better designed and more environmentally sustainable consumer products.

This paper will argue that there is a fourth area which is also particularly relevant to the crafts community, by referencing the crafts' rural origins and other exciting new crafts interfaces with digital media. However, if the crafts are to address some of the sustainability challenges now emerging in response to climate change and global warming, it urgently requires a new strategic vision and more clearly articulated crafts and sustainable policy. Currently, the Crafts Council's development policy and ideology seems to reflect its preoccupation with high-end design and urban consumer orientated crafts-as-designer products, or worse, continues to be distracted by the notion that the crafts can still hack it critically by pretending to be part of the contemporary art world.

These policy biases are also preventing the crafts sector from carrying out its main social and intellectual duty; engaging more fully and creatively with the new economic and environmental sustainability partnership initiatives being advocated by DEFRA, DCMS and Arts Council England. The paper will conclude by arguing that the crafts sector is in fact ideally positioned to take on these new creative challenges and opportunities, if only the Crafts Council would move a little bit faster to change its outlook and policy priorities. In short, unless there is a fundamental cultural shift change within such crafts institutions the crafts practitioner community (in this country at least) will continue to struggle to play its full role in addressing these compelling new intellectual, environmental and professional challenges.