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Only connect¹

Twenty First Century Cultural Practice; Thinking and Making Across Continents

In recent years a number of European and America arts institutions have been trialling projects where students are exposed to short term engagement with craft/artisanal communities in the developing world. These projects raise questions about student expectations of cultural engagement and expose ambiguous ethical parameters. In MA Design; Ceramics Furniture Jewellery at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, we believe that a more considered and longer term view is necessary. Key issues identified in the day to day experience of our researchers and tutors, are politics, geography, skill, visual language, cultural ownership, economics, industry, endangered craft and luxury consumption.

It is our experience that researchers often join us looking to find new models for craft practice and theory. With current thinking frequently dominated by a set of educational paradigms defining success mainly through the unique artefact or batch production model, it is rare to explore how craft methodologies can provide alternative perspectives.

In the light of the questions raised by the conference statement, it is timely to review a series of projects from the course over the past seven years to identify transferable themes. As with all areas of cultural production the issues raised are not necessarily discrete or indeed easily divorced from each other. For example, de-skilling is a global phenomenon not a disease of western, or should we say first world Art and Design Colleges. As colleagues will be aware, Japan is struggling with a parallel issue.

This paper will consider case studies that examine how these ideas have been embedded in Masters level research projects, looking at different approaches to high craft and conversely artisan communities, commercial imperatives, long distance relationships, intimate conversations and alternative locations. Case studies will consider both pure and hybrid craft practice, from craft for crafts sake to craft as an industrial catalyst. They will include contemporary artefacts realised from a diverse range of sources; Brazilian ceramics; dug earth ware to bourgeois dining, Thai Niello jewellery; using rural and urban production, Guyanese Wai Wai weaving and mass production thinking, silver and gold wrapped furniture from Jaipur, San People and Botswana silver casting NGO projects, Taiwanese re-commercialisation of rural Chinese embroideries, the silk road re-visited through historic Persian enamelling, cross cultural ceramic practice between Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Japan, endangered European silver filigree and traditional Korean high craft furniture informing industrial innovation.

These examples are defined by a moment in time where researchers have begun to explore a new approach to thinking about craft's role and ability to sustain historical practice in a contemporary context.

From a position of local and global relevance sustained through design and a keen interest in the nature of production, this paper will reflect on the critical indicators from daily experience to examine approaches to problem solving when the practice is resident in different locations, different time zones and often involves many hundreds of years of historic cultural capital.

¹ Forster E. M. Howards End, Edward Arnold, London 1910