

GILLIAN McCracken ANALYSES THE COMPLEX ISSUES
RAISED BY A RECENT KEY PUBLICATION

similarity & difference

craftspeople & visual artists

"The study of any subject can advance only with the discovery of new facts. Explanation of those facts may follow, but interpretations will differ according to the beliefs and biases of the proponent and the social and political influences at the time when the data are under consideration."¹

Early in 1997 the Australia Council published *Similarity and Difference: Craftspeople and Visual Artists in Australia*, by Claire Bardez and David Throsby. This research report no doubt arises from the continuing questions raised about the relative funding to craft and visual arts practices by the Visual Arts/Craft Fund, and the relevance of funding programs across the spread of art practices for which the Fund is responsible.

In order to investigate the issues stimulating these questions it is important to view the range, modes and changes in contemporary craft and visual arts practices in 1997. A study titled, '*Similarities and Differences: Craftspeople and Visual Artists in Australia*', would be expected to look at the art practices of these people rather than the demographics of who they are.

In the wider view, there are many commonalities between artists across all practices, the concerns addressed through their work and the audiences they reach—be it on stage, through a gallery, broadcast medium or public venue. It is not at all clear what separates performance artists, sound artists, video, film and electronic artists and fine artists who use language and book works as their mode of practice, from those in the performing arts and literature. Funding bodies draw arbitrary lines in order to ensure fair and relevant distribution of support. Such a line was not drawn between visual and craft art practices when the two independent Boards with separate and equal budgets were amalgamated in 1987. This was a significant and brave decision and was certainly unprecedented within the Australia Council, however it should have been accompanied by a continuing determination to monitor and evaluate subsequent grant decisions and policy development to ensure that dominating views and practices did not colonise a greater share of the budget thus stifling development in younger and less easily understood practices.

A positive outcome of this decision is that it allowed for the fluidity and hybridity in contemporary visual practices, however the downside was a serious movement of support away from craft practice and the craft infrastructure, particularly the support for a broad range of major projects involving and supporting craftspeople.

Contemporary art does not have fixed boundaries, and it is frequently the challenging of boundaries and artists whose work has resided on the margins which results in the most eloquent and

perceptive cultural practices. Traversing of boundaries by visual and craft artists is not new and it is only problematic when categorisation is imposed for hierarchical eminence or public or private largesse. The noted European textile artists of Europe of the 1960s and 70s, who had a profound influence on Australian textile practice, produced textile installations not so very different and no less eloquent than Ken Unsworth's installation at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1997, however it is the difference between these works rather than the similarity, which is significant. Magdalena Abakanowicz's installations at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the early seventies, arose from within the long textile traditions of Poland, the highly professional attitude of the European studio model and the industrial textile environment of post-war Poland. This history informs and contextualises her work. Media histories and contextualisations are inherent to contemporary craft practices, along with women's narratives and gender roles, the domestic environment as a place for making and siting 'art', complex issues of functionalism, cultural and environmental concerns, and the languages of materials and process.

As the report states, many crafts practices cannot be narrowly categorised as they are informed by the historical trajectories of contemporary fine arts practice, the history and issues of design or a broader cultural terrain. Artificial lines of division between art practices are convenient devices for description by comparison as well as to maintain control. We have seen the insubstantial nature of such categorisation during the last decade.

Through the 1980s, women's visual cultural practices remained largely unacknowledged and unfavourably compared to male art practices. Although no doubt statistical analysis would have noted many similarities between male and female artists, women did not apply to the Australia Council for grant assistance in the same numbers as male artists. A range of uninformed and facile opinions were put forward to explain this, however on questioning, it was apparent that at that time women did not believe that they were likely to receive support, their work was barely represented in contemporary public collections, their work was not written about and they were not represented in major survey exhibitions of painting and sculpture. This seems hardly credible in 1997, when women's practice has revealed so much about our culture and ourselves as individuals, alternate views of sexuality, humour and power structures. However the conceptual shift which has provided this understanding, remains inadequate in its accommodation of crafts practice which does not substantially address 'fine arts' issues.

Interestingly, in the period when women fine artists were still finding

it difficult to gain recognition, women in the crafts applied for and received similar levels of grants from the Australia Council to their male colleagues. In an article in *Periphery* magazine (No 16/1993), Sue Rowley raised the question of whether the prevalence of women in crafts-practice historically and in the 1980s and 90s, may in fact have contributed to the marginalisation of craft from other contemporary cultural practices. I also consider that post modernism's rejection of skill and aesthetic based art practices contributed to this marginalisation. Interestingly this was also the period when mainstream art attitudes and power structures were said to be under challenge. Ephemeral and installation art challenged the commodification structures around art, 'important' public art was challenged by art which addressed issues of site and community, and art from non-Anglo cultures including Australian indigenous cultures was re-evaluated.

This report does not address any of these issues, nor does it consider the full range of assistance provided to visual art and craft practices by the Australia Council, and the relevance and needs across the spectrum of these practices. This includes infrastructure support, critical writing, review and promotion, specialised training and professional development opportunities and various modes of presentation, collection and placement of art and craft.

I find the report's conclusions disappointingly slight, and I fail to see how research undertaken in 1993 providing demographics of who makes art, craft or both and of how many degrees and of what gender,

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can inform relevant policy discussion in 1997. I also question the assumptions made from comparisons of numbers of craft versus visual art applications. As I indicated previously in writing about women visual artists, it cannot be assumed that low numbers of craft applications indicate a lack of need for support.

Without viewing the questionnaire from which these statistics have been elicited, it is difficult to respond to conclusions made in the Executive Summary, however I make the following comments:

- Many of the categories of practice used in the 1993 research study are ambiguous. An obvious example is the category, 'Installation'. Painters, sculptors, electronic, ceramic, textile, wood and glass artists to nominate only a few, have worked in this 'category'—where then are they classified within this research?
- My current curatorial research for the 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial (1998) highlights once again the many quality artists and

craftspeople working outside the mainstream who would not have been included in 1993 databases of professional practitioners in Australia, and whose practice demographics would not be consistent with the findings of this report. Of particular importance are indigenous craftspeople who would not have been on Crafts Council databases and women working in the crafts from within non-Anglo cultural groups.

- Insufficient emphasis is given to the very different responses from craftspeople and fine artists to questions of training. Craftspeople were shown to be significantly dissatisfied with formal training opportunities in Australia. Current 1997 information is vitally important in a consideration of training issues. Since 1993, changes within art schools and the closure of numerous craft media specific courses or collapsing of others into sculpture courses for example, causes even greater disquiet and may affect the ability of practitioners to generate on-going income from studio production. Opportunity for supplementing income through part-time tertiary teaching is virtually unobtainable. Alternative avenues for training, including studio-based training, combined with formalised training remains essential for a great number of craftspeople, and although not formally registered as post-graduate training, many will seek opportunities for continually extending their practice through specialised courses and workshops in Australia and overseas.

- The key determinant behind a craftsperson earning on-going, if abysmally low, income from their work is not so much that they are

able to do so (as Throsby and Bardez state), but that individual crafts-practice can include a spectrum of work from production work through to one-off or 'conceptual' work without fearing a loss of status in the view of their peers. Regrettably it is still the perception of the larger proportion of fine artists, that undertaking commercially orientated artwork will compromise their status in the view of their peers. There is not the perception that earning such income lessens their status in the view of their peers, as is regrettably still the perception of the majority of fine artists.

I found other observations in the report very confusing, such as: a number of craftspeople are variously described as "*preferring other specific forms of art practice*", "*wanting to shift to another type of practice*", and "*desire to shift to another field*". I don't consider these three statements to be synonymous. Are we to assume that many craftspeople have a desire not to make craft; or to move to another