



ASSEMBLE 2010: AUDIO TRANSCRIPTS

Session: Provocation: 'Making Value'

Speakers: Mary Schwarz, cultural sector consultant
Dr Karen Yair, Research & Information Manager, Crafts Council

KAREN YAIR: Thank you Mike [*Professor Mike Press, Chair, Assemble 2010*] and good morning everyone. Mary and I are delighted to be able to present to you today the findings of the 'Making Value' research, which Rosy's [*Rosy Greenlees, Executive Director, Crafts Council*] just introduced you to. We've been working on this for the last five months, and today we're going to be giving you a little background about the project, highlighting some key findings, and posing some important challenges from the research for you to debate during today and afterwards. We hope the next ten minutes will entice you to read the full report [which] you can find on the Crafts Council website. We found it a really fascinating project and we hope that you will too.

So, 'Making Value', as Mike says, is a qualitative research study into makers [who have a] portfolio practice, who are working 'beyond the making, exhibition and sale of craft objects', and contributing to a range of industry sectors and community and education settings. Other quantitative studies have shown that sixty-five to seventy per cent of makers work in this way, are creating careers in this way, but despite this prevalence, this is a phenomenon that's under-researched in the sector.

Through 'Making Value' we've had a great opportunity to talk to people in-depth about their work – looking at people who are working in different parts of the country and are at different stages in the development of their businesses – to understand in detail the nature and impact of their work, and to contextualise our findings within a focused literature review.

We found makers working in a great range of places, with more different types of people and on more diverse projects than has been realised or recorded before. We've heard how concepts bounce between projects. We've seen how work in other sectors and settings is a creative impetus, and that there's a creative dynamic between different elements of a portfolio practice. We've seen how there is not always a distinction, at least not a clear distinction, between a person's own work and their other work, and how portfolio working allows commercial development whilst enabling creative development.

First, we're going to talk a little bit about 'Making Value' in industry sectors. Over three-quarters of the makers who we interviewed work in industry sectors beyond craft, with a particular focus on the creative industries, the cultural heritage industries and the cultural tourism industries. Those we met tend to group and regroup on particular projects, so they'll come together with other professionals and work in different ways in different settings.

There are just four key points that I want to make in relation to makers working in industry, four things that came out of the research that we thought were particularly exciting that we'd [like to] share with you today. First, those who work in industrial manufacturing settings seemed to have an ability to stretch the existing processes and technologies in front of them, not to stretch them beyond breaking point but to just manoeuvre them slightly so that they could develop new and patentable innovations and materials and products, which went on to gain critical acclaim and success in the marketplace. And here we see an example of a product developed by Guy Mallinson, which was used in the Laban Centre. Secondly, we noted that makers who were working in film and TV showed a particular ability to convey meaning through materials, developing costumes or costume fabrics, for example, which enhance the depiction and character of dramatic narrative. Third, across architecture, interior design, fashion and many other sectors, we saw makers solving design, technical and creative problems through materials. Finally, makers' particular understanding of people, materials and objects, and the relationship between them – both functional and emotional – informed work ranging from medical care and bathroom design through to cultural tourism.

Mary is now going to talk about education and community settings.

MARY SCHWARZ: So, let us turn now to what makers are doing in education and community settings. We found that over half the makers we interviewed work in community settings, and with all sorts of community groups, with people from all sorts of different backgrounds and cultures, people of all sorts of ages, from the 'tinies' to the older generations. One third of the makers work in formal education, whether that's at preschool, primary or secondary levels, and when I say 'work', I mean working as makers, as opposed to teachers. And in these settings we found that makers bring their materials knowledge, together with their making and facilitation skills, to enable people to experience for themselves the distinctive, creative and social benefits of working with materials, objects, and making.

So, just a few examples. For some participants, being allowed and supported to experiment with materials and processes offers a freedom, autonomy and a sense of control that they really enjoyed, and we found that this was particularly true of certain people with disabilities where sometimes in other areas of their life they don't have those opportunities. And there's a gorgeous picture of [some children], as I'm mentioning, getting involved in things.

For some people, the opportunity to explore the transformative nature of materials - and the different meanings that they hold for different people from different backgrounds - enables conversations and connections between participants, as well as sparking creativity. And for some participants the sustained manipulation of materials develops focus and concentration. The process of acquiring a difficult skill, and using it to produce something concrete that belongs to the participants, develops confidence, self-esteem and a new sense of value. And we found some really quite humbling, I think, examples of makers working with people, enabling them to capture and move on from very difficult experiences in life through that process of making.

And again, another set of examples, particularly among projects where makers were working with young people, where, for those young people, engaging with risk and experimentation, coping with problems and learning through trial and

error, were all aspects of making which helped to develop transferable skills, so useful in other aspects of life.

And here again is a summary slide with this lovely idea, I think, of one of the makers we talked to, [who] wasn't just talking in community work about the 'hard to reach' people, but people who are 'hard to hear', and we came up with this notion that, through making, there is a sort of 'material voice' that can come through.

What was also really interesting about this research, was that if we looked across makers' work, in industry sectors and also community and education settings, we found some commonalities. It's very clear that the value of making, both economic and social, does not lie solely in objects, but also in processes and services built on the reflective engagement with materials that is so characteristic of craft.

The makers we profile in the research [are] seizing the opportunity, and they really *are* seizing it, to build sustainable, creative businesses around their knowledge and their 'thinking through making', working as 'sociable experts' in these different sector settings and in all sorts of creative teams.

So, in that quick ten minutes, we have been able to give you a brief insight into the nature and impact of the work of the portfolio makers we've interviewed, and you will find more descriptions, more analysis, in the full report.

While we know there are even more narratives to tell, this new, more detailed, nuanced picture we now have raises some key challenges. First of all, how do we use these stories as advocacy for the sector, and inspiration for emerging makers? Second, how do we all – with our different spheres of influence – ensure that policy makers are informed by the significance of portfolio working makers and their social and economic contributions? And lastly, how do support and delivery agencies develop partnerships and programmes that create new and relevant opportunities in the light of both the reality, and the potential, of this particular aspect of craft practice, 'beyond the making, exhibition and sale of a craft object'?

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Provocation: Making Value, Mary Schwarz and Dr Karen Yair

So we look forward to hearing your ideas and thoughts today, and to you reading the full report (which is available on the Crafts Council website) continuing the debate, refining some answers – and indeed some actions – in respect of the challenges that this research provokes. Thank you very much.

Our recent research reports, including 'Making Value: craft & the economic and social contribution of makers' (Crafts Council, 2010) by Mary Schwarz and Dr Karen Yair, can be downloaded from our website: www.craftscouncil.org.uk/professional-development/research-and-information/our-research.

For more information about our research programme, please contact us on research@craftscouncil.org.uk



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