DIGITAL TO DIALOGUE:

COMMUNICATING THE SIGNIFICANCE AND COMPLEXITY OF OUR INTERACTION WITH EVERYDAY OBJECTS

Catrina Vignando

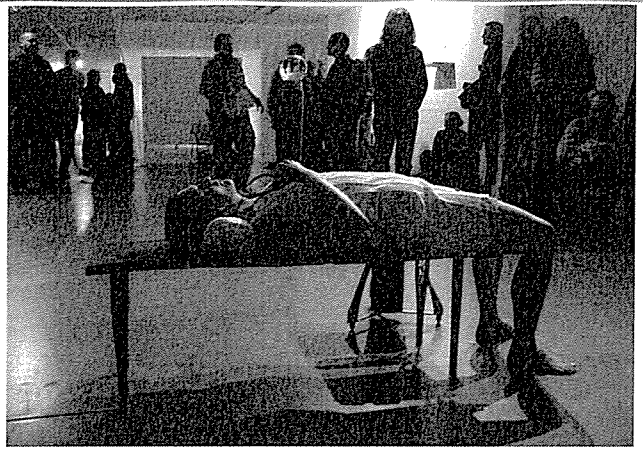
The discussion at the *Content(s)* forum about the significance and complexity of our interaction with everyday objects has been very lively in its exploration of the range of responses we have to the objects that surround us. The fact that we interact with them in a physical space and scale that is both intimate and personal charges the three dimensional objects in our lives with an array of meanings that are seemingly endless in their possibilities and outcomes.

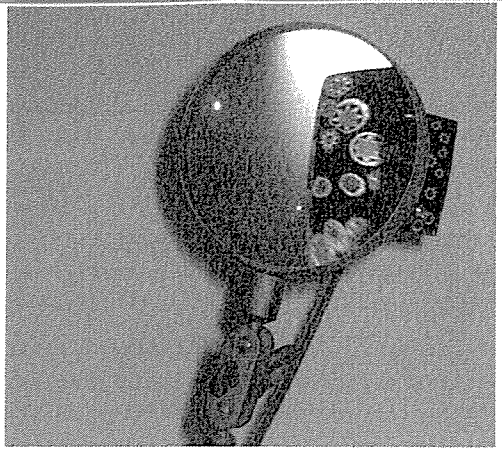
Objects as experience, ritual, narrative, ephemeral and material objects...makers draw on the richness of this material as inspiration and source information for the production of their unique works. Given that objects speak to us so eloquently of our often inarticulate lives, how is it that makers of these objects are accorded such a lowly status in our society?

Here we face an interesting cultural contradiction. Whilst culturally our society places great value on material goods, it does not accord the same status to the creative individuals responsible for their invention and design. According to the recently published report *Don't Give Up your Day Job* by David Throsby and Virginia Hollister, commissioned by the Australia Council, artists earn a princely sum that averages $7,000 per annum for the valuable work they do in assisting the majority of society to come to terms with their various obsessions about objects.

In recent years we have seen economic rationalism impact on universities, effecting the funding available for teaching. The upshot of which has resulted in the trimming of departments that don't have outcome-driven training. The arts have been a particular target of such strategies, resulting in the constant need to justify spending. This attention on post-training results has had a severe impact on art schools, with the main impact of rationalist cuts borne by the craft disciplines, particularly ceramics. Where once most tertiary art institutions teaching contemporary craft had a ceramic department, we are now seeing the opposite taking place. Often the rationale for cutting these disciplines is supported by the numbers game, quoting a falling number of students interested in these areas of study. So viability at tertiary level is not only defined by measuring post-study outcomes, but is also gauged against the number of students attending classes. Such measures do not favour the manual arts, courses that require a low student-to-teacher ratio and many hours of supervised training to acquire specialised skills. These courses

Above left:
Barbara Campbell, *The Grimwade Effect*, performance stills, Craft ACT, 1 May 2004. Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Jas Hugonnet.





Above left:
Barbara Campbell, *The Grimwade Effect*, performance stills, Craft ACT, 1 May 2004, courtesy the artist. Photograph: Jas Hugonnet.

Above right:
Helen Aitken-Kuhnen, *Enamel pins* 2004 enamel, millefiori, copper tops: 3.5 x 4.2 x 0.7 (irreg.) Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Jas Hugonnet.

achieve a range of training outcomes that can not be clearly mapped like other seemingly less costly areas of study.

As there has been no significant study undertaken on the changing nature of Australian craft practice in the past 5 years, it is difficult to refute the economic imperatives that are shaping the future directions of arts training. What is clear is that makers are not always defining themselves as craft artists thereby having a negligible impact on statistical material such as the Throsby/Hollister report. This view of declining numbers of craft practitioners only serves to further justify the decisions to reduce funding to craft training by tertiary institutions who are already struggling financially.

The reasons why people working in a craft-based discipline do not define themselves as such is not easy to answer, but I believe it is partly due to the diversity of approaches that makers have to how and why they make. It is true to say that the impact of digital technologies and the opening up of the market place to global rather than just local interaction, has had a dynamic impact on makers.

The post-industrial phenomenon of the designer-maker working independently of large manufacturing industry to survive has been a popular occurrence for craft people in the past decade. Such practitioners have had an enormous boost in the past three years from the accessibility of information. Communication technologies have become a tool to access the virtual market place. Through the use of websites, virtual marketing and email correspondence, Australia is no longer an isolated backwater but a vibrant stage for global exchange. The world is literally the designer-makers' oyster. The new century may be summed up by these creative entrepreneurs as 'I have a website therefore I am'.

New technologies are also increasingly used in the concept-development, design and production of craft objects. This trend has contradictory benefits for the crafts person. On the one hand new technologies are a tool assisting makers to increase their output by facilitating design, and/or manufacture. On the other, such processes call to question the unique quality that was once the obvious signifier of craft — the very uniqueness of the handmade nature of the object.

Working with new technologies obviously affords a great deal of flexibility to makers. It is this very flexibility that often makes the work they do so difficult to define — is it craft, design, production, installation, sculpture in public

places. The answer may in fact be across a range of these practices simultaneously. However just because craft practice is not easily definable, does that mean it does not exist?

From the evidence to date it is clear that contemporary craft is in fact a thriving area of practice with significant theoretical underpinnings, driven by passionate practitioners and taking advantage of global opportunities. Should art schools be looking at expanding their training in the craft-based disciplines rather than reducing them? Should they be providing more training opportunities for flexible outcomes? Given the potential sustainability of the creative industries, this could be a growth area for the tertiary sector.

Certainly the evidence through the Craft Organisations of Australia based in each capital city and representing craft practitioners from all over the country would support the dynamic nature of Australian contemporary craft. A quick glance at any of these organisations' websites will demonstrate this fact (find them via links at www.craftaustralia.com.au). To demonstrate the validity of this statement and to demonstrate the changing nature of craft practice, Craft Australia will be holding a national online forum, *Interact: Contemporary Craft in a Digital Future*, to engage the arts community broadly to give their view on the current status of Australian contemporary craft. This online forum is an open invitation for individuals to respond to the various themes targeted by the forum that have also been presented in this paper;

- The changing nature of the tertiary training sector and the impact of this on craft practice;
- The way makers choose to define themselves — in essence, the language that supports the variety of activities within the craft disciplines;
- And thirdly the impact of new technologies on the future development of craft as we know it.

Interact: Contemporary Craft in a Digital Future is an opportunity for national dialogue on the issues that are driving changes in the Australian contemporary craft sector. *Interact* will be delivered online through the Craft Australia website and presents an opportunity for makers, custodians, collectors, government agencies and interested members of the public to contribute to the discussion about contemporary craft in a digital future. Given the current debates surrounding craft nomenclature and its ramifications for Australian contemporary craft practice, a process to present and debate such issues is very timely.

Communication is information and information is the key to sustainable futures. The *Interact* forum is an open dialogue from mid-June till mid-August this year where you are welcome to join the conversation on future developments of contemporary craft in Australia. Craft is at an interesting junction and this forum is a pivotal opportunity to make a claim for the future.

***Catrina Vignando** is the General Manager of Craft Australia. From 2003 Craft Australia has been located in Canberra at the National Press Club Offices. The organisation has been celebrating and promoting Australian contemporary craft practice for the past 30 years. The focus of the organisation is to advocate and lobby for the sector in order to bring greater attention to the valuable cultural and economic benefit of contemporary craft to society. Catrina has a background as a maker working in textiles. Her career in the cultural sector spans over 18 years and has included working as a curator, arts manager, writer, teacher and general enjoyer of cultural material.*

Right: Barbara Campbell *Performance still*, 2003, inkjet print, photographed by Patsy Vizents, Melbourne, 55 x 108.5 cm
Performance costume, 2004, crepe bandages, butterfly clips, cotton, on a glass coathanger made by Peter Minson, Binalong, NSW, dimensions variable, Craft ACT, 1 May 2004, Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Jas Hugonnet.