

## **Volume: After the Makeover**

**Douglas Lloyd Jenkins**

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### **Introduction**

It's a sunny day in Hawke's Bay. We are, most of us, here on what is for all intents and purposes a weekend away. We are here to talk about craft, something we all believe in, and we're doing so at a time when the craft sector is buoyant. The match for city and state of mind is perfect as it generally accepted that intellectual thinking and indeed complex culture do not flourish in the bright light of sunny climates think Los Angeles, Brisbane or Dubai. For serious contemplation of issues one need to invite look further south.

We can relax here in Napier fairly secure in the knowledge that craft and contemporary object making are back in the spot light. We know this from the magazines and the media who feature craft artists and craft exhibitions with greater frequency than either before. One just need only to look to the example of *Home New Zealand's* most recent issue [Oct/Nov 2008] – featuring Trudie Kreof, Ben Pearce, Andy Kingston and Richard Stratton. Appearances like this are far from the exception and indeed are almost a normal occurrence in any number and types of New Zealand magazines. We even have a permanent presence in the key outlet in the Australian craft media.

There is great new work out there and it can be seen at any number of exhibitions in galleries throughout New Zealand. Private dealers are now exhibiting craft artists and some have significant numbers of object makers in their stables – whom they promote with the same veracity as they do their fine artists. Some of what were once traditional craft shops have taken a more welcoming approach to the new attitudes of contemporary object makers, providing clearly articulated zones – for the temporary use of individual artists. Other, more problematic, craft shops, have simply disappeared, as an increasingly sophisticated audience adopts broader notion of quality and an increased understanding of

craft practice. Unexpectedly – definitely not even on the radar a decade ago – the auction houses have established a strong secondary market for New Zealand craft and design.

There is more chance than ever of getting craft work into institutional galleries.

Rather than focus on one institution, good quality craft can now expect a largely receptive hearing from any number of exhibiting venues – not least of all ‘one of our own,’ centrally funded, in Auckland.

Some of those institutions that through the 1980s and 1990s played key roles in exhibiting craft have since then taken a back foot – refocusing their brands – as is part of the natural life of these organizations – and a process that is to be encouraged. Other galleries have stepped up, although not perceived as craft focused by any means the HB MAG has since 1998 undertaken – a significant programme of exhibitions that deal with craft or design or craft and design history themes – supporting many of those with publications – the most recent three *Raising Boys*, *Absent Jewels* and *Like* are in the gallery as we speak.

Creative New Zealand’s staunch adherence to a policy in support of publication has not only meant that there are now any number of craft writers (although still not enough). But that, more than this, there is a tangible record of what craftspeople have done over the last decade – held in lots of small, some medium and a few large, publications. A history of New Zealand craft and design has taken the country’s top literary prize – a comment I make no apology for making – it is an achievement of which I am proud, but one that is contextualized by noting that books with craft/design themes have featured strongly in the Montana Awards over the last few years.

So at one level craft activity is stronger, or at least more visible, than ever before and it is no longer necessarily to compulsorily link the words craft and crisis. We are a long way from where we were at a decade ago. Things are so good someone in the room probably has the Powerball number.

In this spirit of new optimism – remembering that things are never simple – let’s now complicate things.

## I.

The issue that most plagues me at the moment is whether, to get where it is today, craft may have sold its soul? Have we, on our way up (or in this case back into the public's good graces), discarded all the things that we're going to need to survive now we're there?

One of the areas in which modern craft has struggled to find a place is within contemporary education. In my essay in *Upstarts*, the publication that supports *Raising Boys*, I have attempted to give some background to the failure of craft (particularly as it pertains to clay) to gain any traction in the postwar education system. In that, I argue that this stems from the insertion point in the 1940s when craft was seen as play rather than profession. By the time attempts were made to change that attitude, through tertiary education aligned to the technical institutes, it was already too late.

I want to start by expanding on that idea and to look at the broader legacy of polytechnic craft education. To understand how craft got to where we are today it is necessary to understand the education system that has produced most of the current batch of younger object makers as opposed to the batch of older craftspeople who were schooled differently

The decision to establish craft courses in the technical institutes in the 1980s came as a result of a failure to adhere crafts to the universities in previous decades. The decision was flawed in two major ways, only one of which was immediately foreseeable. The idea that New Zealand could support the delivery of comprehensive education in each of ceramics, glass, wood, textiles and jewellery was quite sustainable. What wasn't sustainable was that these courses were to be duplicated in every technical institute of size through New Zealand. The decision to spread craft education too thinly, to ensure its own future, came in part from a problem that the craft sector still grapples with – the inability to deliver short term bad news in order to achieve long term goals.

The other less foreseeable issue was that the very nature of technical institutes was about to be radically overhauled. Within a decade of crafts' arrival, technical institutes – which

had long and proud histories connecting education, training and skills – ideally suited to the crafts – were about to change, not only their names, to polytechnics (which proved only to a stepping stone to another name change to university) but the very nature of their role in society.

The phenomenon is/was not solely New Zealand one – nor is the problem it has generated. The writer Jane Jacobs gives a Canadian example that should seem familiar. She writes and I paraphrase –

Community colleges grant two-year diplomas in the applied arts and provide among other essentials the designers of graphics, lighting and costumes for television shows, expositions and plays and many other skilled workers and craftsmen. In recent years these institutions have moved to a type of credentialing disconnected from education, skills and training. Community colleges have begun to promote themselves into an ‘elite-level’ offering four year degrees in place of two year diplomas, ‘upstaging’ the diplomas that had once been their core business. (Jane Jacobs *Dark Age Ahead* Random House New York p. 50.)

Jacobs’ notion of credentialing is an important one. She argues that Western culture no longer educates – it credentials – providing a piece of paper that represents neither the mastery of skills, or the possession of knowledge, but that suggest only that the holder has been exposed to the idea those things.

No one can have worked in the New Zealand polytechnic system in the last decade without witnessing the runaway inflation of qualifications and with it the decimation of certificate and diploma courses. We are in ourselves in part responsible for this, as Jacobs reminds us – ‘high school students are forever being warned [that without a degree] they will be doomed to a work life of ‘flipping hamburgers.’ (Jane Jacobs *Dark Age Ahead* p. 45.) Diplomas were seen as second rate qualifications delivered by institutions (polytechnics) that in themselves were second rate – second rate in that they were not universities.

That craft didn’t fit with the thrust of polytechnic education though the nineties and into this decade, is no surprise, given the emphasis that society has put on the importance of

the joint notions of business and commercial viability. As businesses, polytechnics have searched for courses that are economic to run – in which a single lecturer, supported by a couple of assistant tutors, can teach a maximum number of students in as large a room as possible.

Coupled with this, the rising cost of tertiary education means that the corresponding career delivered by any course of study needs to be highly remunerative. Student's degree choices are pegged to stock market performance (when a couple of years ago the NASDAQ crashed – enrollments in computer courses plummeted) and because of this the education system now invests in the needs of students – rather than in the needs of the society. Therefore we fund courses that are profitable but also ones that return a profit on student investment – law and business come to mind.

It's not hard to see why craft has had problems fitting into this model. Good craft education is complex and expensive to deliver and therefore comes top of the list for attention in times when the balance sheet of the business needs readjustment. Numbers enrolling into craft courses are small – and therefore negative effects of economies of scale are exaggerated. Add into this that student delivered from primary and secondary school systems have little in the way of manual skills and almost no awareness of craft skills, and that craft qualifications do not obviously deliver high paying careers at the other end. Given these factors the observation that any craft courses survive at all in the current educative system is a tribute to the bloody minded stubbornness of those who teach in them.

Although a place for craft teaching in the polytechnic and university system has long been a goal, we need recognize in the contemporary circumstance at least, that the polytechnics and universities have sold their souls to business courses and law schools regardless of the broader needs of a fully developed culture. There is little we can do about that – until that particular system collapses on itself – as it will, unless of course culture collapses into itself first – a result not as impossible as it sounds.

The biggest problem for craft courses in tertiary education in the last decade then, has been survival – leaving those in the thick of it little time to examine the broader picture.

There was, for those who were there, little point in resisting the abandonment of diplomas – in part we saw the shift to degrees as putting a gap between us and the poor quality student being delivered into the tertiary system by secondary teaching – which in itself is one of the most chilling aspects of contemporary education. That a school child is from day one in the education system no longer required to do anything they consider hard or boring (craft we will all recall is at start-up both boring and hard) illustrates the disconnect between modern educational theory (determined by its own internal theoretical logic) and the needs of the culture.

However to bring the discussion back to the specifics of craft and the craft degree, the question through most of the 1990s was – what do we fill courses with that might transform them from diplomas to degrees? The solution could not be the obvious one of craft skills – because skills were the very stuff of diplomas. Technologies were acceptable as long as they were the fashionable ones – computers were good – certainly not kilns or looms.

The solution generically adopted was a combination of history and theory, although the coupling of the two disciplines proved only momentary. In part this suited because history and theory courses could be delivered by a single lecturer, supported by a couple of assistant tutors, each teaching a maximum number of students in a large room. Yet in this lay another problem. While there were few available historians, there were even fewer craft or design historians, the incremental growth of degree courses meant that small short term jobs enticed not the necessarily qualified expertise but recently graduated artists – into what were part time positions.

Artists unable to sustain professional careers entirely on the making of their own art have traditionally found places in secondary education – where their impact has been another negative factor for the craft courses – directing as they have their best students back to their own alma mater and consequently to the fine arts. These same figures gained entry to the polytechnic's craft and design courses on the assumption that they would up-skill, learning the specific history and theory of craft and design. They didn't – instead they taught the art theory they themselves had learnt at art school.

The immediate result was the downplaying of the dual notions of skill and function (both central to craft and neither of which have any place in art school theory) and upgrading of concept – as the primary factor in creative production. The next shift was to reposition craftspeople themselves by encouraging them to adopt an artist/designer approach that prioritized originality and ideas over the very technological virtuosity, that same virtuosity that the theorists teaching them themselves neither possessed, valued nor understood. The crucial point that polytechnic craft education failed to grasp is, as writer Rachel Mason expresses it, ‘that the aesthetic, moral and cultural significance attached to artworks are as much a function of their technical excellences as are there so-called creativity and intellectual ideas.’ (Rachel Mason 'The Meaning and Value of Craft,' in Richard Hickman ed. *Art Education 11-18*. Continuum International Publishing 2004. p 131)

Somewhere the necessarily fine balance between conceptual strength and sophistication of execution, that the new craft in the tertiary sector had initially aimed for shifted out of kilter. Little matter – the issues of craft could, we were told, be articulated and therefore solved entirely in dealing with the semantic issue of its name. Trading craft for object was, in retrospect, a mistake. (I’ll put my hand up as implicated but I refuse to plead guilty). It is easy to dismiss the issue of the name change from craft to object as semantics but it is instead a betrayal of language and with it the culture of craft.

Words have specific meanings and if at times those meanings trouble us, we need to examine ourselves, rather than trade-in one word for another one. Craft and object are not similes they represent a significant shift in meaning. The word craft may have seemed embarrassing but the word object is disconnected – marooned without real meaning embarrassing or not.

## 2.

As part of the *Volume* programme we have selected some of the sexiest minds in the country and asked them to present an array of the works that currently fascinate them. This is designed to provide a snapshot of where craft is now. This is its own way a notional, virtual, version of the type of exhibition you might encounter at *Objectspace* or any number of galleries that have newly turned their attention to the craft/object.

There will of course be exceptions, but I suspect a lot of what we will see this afternoon – a lot of what is currently positioned as contemporary craft and that provide the buzz around craft – is not craft at all, but contemporary object making. This new phenomenon, contemporary object making, is not so much the image makeover of craft that we think it is - but an invasion of territory, one that needs to be exposed for what it is – contemporary sculpture.

These new objects, the work of object makers are an entirely new product born of that flawed polytechnic system. At their best, the new objects have conceptual strength but largely come with significant technical limitations, even deficiencies. They meet the desire of a highly commodified, highly visual, contemporary culture but do little to meet the broader and longer term needs of the human condition. This type of object making is by in large a short term fix, a sugar rush, a momentary amusement, in a society where the long term, negative, impact of momentary amusements or conveniences are starting to become more broadly recognized.

In previous writing I have used the term ‘culturally inane’ to describe the plethora of non functional objects that currently flood the galleries – both as object making and as contemporary art.. Despite being the director of a large regional art gallery I have been known to express the opinion that most contemporary art is – and my terminology is carefully chosen – pointless crap. For elucidation of that point I’ll borrow the words of British commentator Sarah Thornton’s who in her book *Seven Days in the Art World* argues

‘More people than ever are buying contemporary art and the chances are that most of it is historically insignificant. It may be personally meaningful, intelligent, even edifying, but in the long term many of these collections will end up looking like the tattered silks of an age gone by, or the archeological remains of an ancient garbage heap. They won’t be definitive or influential. They will not have changed the way we look at art.’ (Sarah Thornton *Seven Days in the Art World*, Allen & Unwin, London 2008 p100.)

The cross over space that is contemporary art / contemporary object, may well however give us the opportunity to rethink the way we look at and approach craft.

I expressed the danger of trading in the distinctive cultures germane to design and craft in favor of the culture of art in a 2004 essay in the *New Zealand Listener* – subtitled ‘What should we expect from a gallery devoted to innovative design and craft’ – which covered the challenges facing the then newly opened *Objectspace* gallery in Auckland. In that essay I commented:

“open an art gallery and it makes sense that the first people that come knocking will be artists, Open a smart looking design and craft gallery and the first people on the doorstep will be artists who specialize in breaking down art/craft boundaries. Accommodate them and you’re in danger of creating a generic art gallery just like all the others - one from which the legitimate craftsman becomes excluded. Definitions and boundaries might be deeply unfashionable in the age of cross-disciplinary, multi-media, experiences. However whereas breaking down boundaries might liberate art, it has the potential to suffocate local craft. Craft and art are different.” (Douglas Lloyd Jenkins ‘Watch This Space’ in *New Zealand Listener* 2004)

I leave it to you to decide how *Objectspace* has subsequently navigated that territory.

### 3.

It could then be argued that in 2008, craft is as mired in complexity as it was a decade ago. What we’ve seen in the last decade may not have been change in any real way but simply an image makeover – one that, like all makeovers, only papers over the cracks. Have we spent the last decade simply updating the appearance of our own cultural irrelevance and playing with words, while all the time selling away our birthright?

In raising this possibility, that we might have got things wrong, we also present an opportunity to create a newly relevant version of craft – one that knits with the one direction being taken by contemporary society?

*Raising Boys* attempts to illustrate how polytechnic culture has, almost by accident and despite itself, produced capital C craftwork of excellence. As I make it clear in the introduction to my essay *Clayplay* – the number of interesting potters under 40 is larger than three but not significantly so. (Douglas Lloyd Jenkins 'Clayplay' in *Upstarts*, HB MAG, Napier 2008 p 20.) That each of the five artists in *Raising Boys* in some way works within the parameters of functionalism – is not an accident – it remains the key to their ongoing relevance.

Conversely that the ultimate, almost pure product of the polytechnic system – contemporary New Zealand glass (producing largely non-functional work) – is on a highway to the greatest cultural smacking since the one delivered to pottery in the mid eighties, is apparent to almost everyone, except the glass practitioners – is in part the direct result of no one teaching those object makers history. Alternatively, that contemporary jewellery has not only sustained a presence in the polytechnic system but flourished there without ever losing site of its origins or its sense of self – that is its grounding in craft and in function – deserves greater study than can be afforded here. Textiles remain the dark outsider.

There is still a need for craft, as opposed to object making, in the world in which we live. It can be argued that although contemporary society is characterised by constant change and therefore requires the constant revisiting of ideas and positions, what then becomes important is the identification of an element of consistency that makes sense of those shifts.

There are essentially two ways of looking at craft.

Most constructions of craft have been happy represent craft as a backwater in which old ideas collect. Historically, there have been any number of philosophical stances that have tried to connect craft with the past and in particular with the technological past. Yet at

the same time history itself has proven that there is no system that can protect craft from change. Because technical historicism is the dominant way of looking at craft – in a global culture obsessed with the new – craft is in danger of always seeming irrelevant.

Another way of seeing craft (or if you prefer theorizing craft) – less seldom articulated – but probably the idea of craft most commonly held by those at this symposium is that craft is a counter-culture, an alternative view to mainstream that in itself provides not only an ‘another way’ but potential solutions to the problems that plague mainstream society. This type of craft is capable of being both respectful of the past and future focused. What’s more this approach satisfies needs in society for alternative viewpoints and alternative production systems that are far broader and far more effective than the alternative historicized craft.

At the same time we need to remind ourselves, to accept, that counter cultures have neither large audiences nor large bodies of practitioners. Counter cultures also need to be distinctive and have a strongly defined sense of self. The meeting of those demands should seem possible, they might even seem familiar. Craft has been there before – providing brown bread culture in the pre-sliced white bread world of the 1960s and 1970s. We are good at this sort of stuff as long as we remember who we are – which is not contemporary artists – but craftspeople.

In many ways craft, compared to contemporary art, is in a stronger position to occupy a position as a preeminent in twenty-first century counter culture. Although contemporary art thinks of itself as the ultimate expression of the underground and the alternative – it is increasingly revealing itself a highly commodified commercial unit – substantially weakening its claims to alternative status.

Where the differentiation between the two (between art and craft) is about to become highly apparent however – is through the notion of environmental and cultural sustainability.

Sustainability is essentially a fad or a fashion. It is what the Nineteenth century writer Charles Mackay – called an ‘extraordinary popular delusion,’ because what no one quite

wants to address is that human culture's time on the planet is finite. A change of light bulbs won't change anything, except the way we look under electric light. The problem—as craft should know – is that fads and fashions have great upswings and devastating downswings. However for the next decade, at least, there is going to be an obsession with examining modes of production, the use of materials and the enviro/cultural usefulness of any manufactured item.

I'll say from the outset that it's one of those unaddressable cultural unfairnesses – which craft (and particularly design) are going to have to prove a certain sustainability in their practice – that will never be required of contemporary art. Accept the fact and then take advantage of it because the process of examination will bring craft into the cultural dialogue in a way that contemporary art will never be. Remember crafts great advantage over art will always be its accessibility, as long as the craft we make provides an access point – the role traditionally played in craft production by function.

There are pitfalls on the way to a revived craft through sustainability. Sustainability could easily cast craft back into hippy mode. Those who lived through the first hippy period will recall the hippy belief in their right to tell other people how to live – while maintaining their right to behave exactly how they wished. Already the condescendingly moralistic standpoint of much contemporary eco-design (like much of that of hippydom), is matched only by the aesthetic failing of what they produce.

Sadly there is nothing new about turning cans into jewellery or bottles into light fittings and the result are usually ugly. Does sustainability mean having to rethink our whole notion of aesthetics? No, sustainable craft doesn't need to be ugly it needs only to be relevant and connected.

One of the problems is that craft, since the mid Nineteenth century, has consistently positioned itself as nic nac makers to the middle class. This is the very place where the political sensibility that is sustainability most strongly resides. The first question to pose might be to ask how do we continue to make – when the only sustainable goods are the secondhand ones? How do we justify the decision to keep making?

This is where the notion of cultural rather than environmental sustainability comes in – there is no point living on a planet without ideas or were the culture we live in is not reflected in the objects that surround us. Environmental determinism, which is what sustainability is the popular face of, is in many ways the enemy of cultural expression. We can deliver to that audience, but the irony is that to do so is going to require a high level of technical skills – because by their nature functional objects have far more sophisticated technical requirements than those of non-functional objects. That wouldn't be a problem except we long ago the polytechnics stopped teaching technical skills to those that are about to need them.

## Conclusion

For the person in the audience with the Powerball number in their pocket – perhaps these things are, after tonight, no longer an issue. For the rest of us it is really worth considering whether the last decade has addressed issues or like a television makeover simply papered over the cracks?

Like any makeover the experience has been energizing, producing a tangible degree of confidence building – but the truth is, like any makeover, after your wardrobe has been reorganized, the 360° mirror has been folded away and adoring friends and family members departed with the film crew – it doesn't matter how good you might look – the hard truth of the matter is that you then need to go back to work.

## End

**Douglas Lloyd Jenkins** was once described by Wallpaper magazine as one of the most influential design writers in the Southern Hemisphere but he prefers another epithet – 'the most quoted man on Trade Me.' He is one of New Zealand's best-known and most highly respected design and craft writers - specialising in restoring to prominence those overlooked practitioners of the architecture, craft and design who contributed enormously to the creation of contemporary New Zealand culture. He is well known to New Zealanders through his design and architecture columns in a number of magazines and journals and as the face of TVNZ's *The Big Art Trip* – one of New Zealand's the most often repeated arts programmes. He has established a strong international profile, contributing design criticism both locally and overseas. He is a curator of exhibitions and lectures on New Zealand design and architectural history around the world. He won the Montana Book Award for *At Home: A Century of New Zealand Design* in 2005 and in 2008 was awarded MNZM by the Queen for his Contribution to Design. Douglas is currently Director of the Hawke's Bay Museum & Art Gallery, Napier.