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Special issue introduction: Craft Economies and Inequalities

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Abstract

Craft as a creative industry has received increased public, academic and policy attention in recent years. However, this tends to centre on a Westernised, white, middle-class version of craft practice associated with values of authenticity, the valorisation of the handmade, and 'hipster' culture. At the same time, despite a rich body of work on inequalities in the cultural industries, some of which is published in this journal, little attention has been given to craft. These matters are addressed in this special issue which interrogates the character and workings of the contemporary craft economy and provides much needed insight into experiences of inequality in the sector, drawing on research from the Global North and South. It also includes Cultural Commons contributions from Susan Luckman, Carol Tulloch and Saskia Warren which reflect on various aspects of contemporary craft.

Keywords

Craft, cultural labour, inequalities, race, gender

In May 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement gained worldwide traction after George Floyd was killed in police custody in Minneapolis, USA. The outpouring of anger and grief on social media, captured through the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, helped to highlight the pervasiveness of racism across all spheres of life. In June 2020 organisations took to Instagram to demonstrate their support for the Black Lives Matter movement by posting black squares on their account, as part of #BlackOutTuesday. Crafts Council, the UK's main development organisation for craft,was one of those organisations that took part but it was met with a backlash from makers, who pointed out that Crafts Council need to do much more to address racism and inequality in the sector (for an example see Hamilton-Brown, 2020). The period between May and June 2020 felt like a significant turning point in the wider conversation about racism and inequalities, not least in craft. Open forums were held about tackling anti-racism in craft (Crafts Council, 2020a), more space was given to these issues in craft magazine articles, and more visibility given to ethnically diverse makers on websites and social media.

At the same time, the sector continues to feel the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. A Crafts Council response to the UK Government's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in October 2020 highlighted that many makers were unable to access government financial support measures, exacerbating instability and precarity for makers (Crafts Council, 2020b). Similar concerns were raised about the creative sector as a whole, in particular the likelihood that the pandemic will only deepen existing inequalities in the sector (Comunian and England, 2020; Eikhof, 2020; Patel, 2020). There was a time during the first lockdown in the UK during March 2020 when the outlook appeared positive for craft, with the Crafts Council noting "a surge in people buying to support makers and crafts people" (2020b, p.1).

New craft television shows such as *All that Glitters, Home is where the Art is* (both BBC UK) *Blown Away* (Netflix USA) as well as the enduring popularity of *The Great British Sewing Bee* (BBC UK) and the *Great Pottery Throw Down* (Channel 4 UK) demonstrated that the appetite for craft and craft-related entertainment had only increased during the pandemic. However, those who were able to turn to craft were likely to have had the time, resources and safety at home to take up craft, and these privileges have not been available to everyone. Key workers, many of them from ethnically diverse backgrounds, on lower incomes or with existing health concerns, were more likely to be working on the front line and exposed to the virus. In England it was acknowledged that the effects of the pandemic have “mirrored, and in some cases exacerbated, our entrenched health and social inequalities” (Public Health England, 2021). Thus those involved in the surge in popularity of craft, are likely to be from more privileged groups.

There is a risk, then, that despite the increased conversation about inequalities in craft, spurred by the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement, we will see little change because of the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on marginalised groups. It is crucial that the current moment is used to rethink what the craft economy is, and this special issue is an attempt to start that conversation. Many of the articles are derived from a conference held in Birmingham, UK in December 2019: *Craft Economies and Inequalities.* However we were delighted to include additional articles, particularly in the Cultural Commons section. The contributing articles to this issue provide a variety of perspectives on craft practice from the Global North and South. Together they help to build a picture of craft as it was, as it is now, and what it could be.

Inequalities in craft

In *The Subversive Stitch,* Roziska Parker (2010) identified the historical hierarchical division between fine art and craft which was a major factor in the marginalisation of women's craft work. Craft itself has been 'othered', where 'craft, often coded as feminine or even as 'ethnic,' is always seen as inferior to the hegemonic category of art' (Adamson 2007, p. 5). Yet the work of Roziska Parker highlights how such assumptions about craft practice are ingrained within our educational institutions, 'fostered by school curricula which still direct boys to carpentry and girls to needlework' (In Adamson 2010, p.492). Unlike many other creative industries, craft has a 'simultaneous existence as an elite, professional artistic practice and a weekend hobby, and everything in between' (Luckman, 2015:51). While other creative industries do of course include elements of amateur practice, none have been as synonymous with amateurism as craft. The demarcations between 'professional and 'amateur', 'art' and 'craft' continue to characterise a sector which has fought very hard to be recognised as a creative industry (Luckman, 2015). Because of craft's tenuous status as a creative industry, critical research on the labour conditions of craft in the contemporary economy are relatively scarce.

Research on inequalities in the wider creative industries has been much needed and welcome. Much of that work has focused on film and TV (for example Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015; Malik, 2013; Nwonka, 2015) and publishing (Bold, 2019). Brook, O'Brien and Taylor (2020) highlight how inequalities in the creative industries are reinforced by senior men. Their research, drawing on UK Labour Force Survey statistics, claims that craft has more people from working class backgrounds working in the sector than any other creative industry, but the authors acknowledge an ambiguity with which types of jobs should be included in reporting on craft. The

confusion over which practices constitute craft and its diversity of activity across the "amateur" and "professional" spectrum makes it particularly challenging to create a sense of what the craft economy looks like. Organisations such as the UK Crafts Council draw on industry figures and labour market statistics which generally paint a picture of a craft economy which is not too different from the rest of the creative industries – dominated by the white and relatively privileged. The *Market for Craft* report (Crafts Council, 2020c) states that "the sector has to go further to ensure craft is an inclusive space for all ethnicities and genders, with the proportion of BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) makers remaining unchanged compared to 2006 at 2-4%" (p. 8). The report also states that three quarters of makers identify as female, but other research on the craft market highlights that women makers are more likely to be working precariously and for lower pay than makers who identify as male (see Spilsbury, 2018). Susan Luckman and Jane Andrew note that in Australia, the craft sector "remains marked by its whiteness" (2020:18). They argue that while makers of colour are visible in craft microenterprise relating to foreign aid and strategies for economic sustainability, within the Global North the picture of making is "predominately a white one", not only in the demographics of the makers but also the customers and "the very aesthetics of the goods" (ibid). Luckman and Andrew's comment points to a wider issue within the global craft economy. Craft is a prime example of the asymmetrical power relations between the Global North and Global South. The economies of the Global North benefit from the craft expertise of the Global South, sometimes without adequate recognition or payment (Myers, 2005; Murray, 2010). For example, the circulation of 'inauthentic' art and craft is a major issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander makers in Australia (Productivity Commission, 2021). In India, Annapurna Mamidpudi states that modern markets risk

appropriating the work of Indian makers, and either “disenfranchising them as objects of charity, or museumizing them as cultural heritage” (Mamidipudi, 2018:37) thus Indian makers do not get adequate recognition or payment for their craft expertise. These issues arise because of uneven power relations, where “some, but not others, are able to align their ideas about craft with ideologies of gender and class, as well as claims to and claims against capitalism, industrialism, corporatism, and consumption.” (Wilkinson-Weber and DeNicola, 2016:6).

The global inequalities in craft production, particularly the exploitation of makers and the obfuscation of the craft expertise of women and minoritized groups from the Global South, is something researchers interested in inequalities in cultural work more widely should learn from and be attentive to across different creative sectors. These issues are symptomatic of entrenched hierarchies of value which require further interrogation in cultural and creative industries research.

Challenging hierarchies in craft

The existing published research suggests that the contemporary craft economy in the Global North context is a relatively homogenous space, but little is known about the lived experiences of inequalities in this context. Furthermore, there is relatively little research on craft contexts in the Global South, reflecting the white, Eurocentricity of craft research, as well as the sector itself. The hierarchies within craft are dealt with throughout this special issue across different contexts, highlighting how structural inequalities in craft affect makers at different stages of their craft journey. These inequalities have some relation to who, or what, is valued in craft, and the question of cultural value is explored in the first article in this issue, written by Karen Patel. In her research on the experiences of makers of colour in the UK who identify as women, Patel highlights the racism and microagggressions

experienced by participants at various craft spaces, such as fairs, studios and when dealing with suppliers. While outright racism is relatively rare, microaggressions, which are ‘Brief, everyday interactions that send denigrating messages to people of colour because they belong to a racially minoritised group’ (Rollock, 2012) were much more common. Microaggressions often emerged during moments of evaluative judgement, meaning that many of the participants felt that their work was judged unfairly or devalued, on account of their ethnicity, gender, and in some cases class. Patel argues that judgements of craft expertise are based on aesthetic codes and classifications which are historically racialized, gendered and classed. She argues that in order to problematize these hierarchies, judgements should be less universalising and grounded in community, based on Janet Wolff’s work on community evaluation. In this way judgements of value are made within specific communities and contexts, and not set against patriarchal, exclusionary criteria and processes. A focus on the expertise of the maker – their skills as applied and manifest in the cultural object – within a specific context, can potentially challenge existing hierarchies. This means paying more attention to the entire craft ecology and its interrelations, not just the professionalised, high-end part of the sector. Fiona Hackney et al’s article provides a rich and illuminating account of community crafts in the Midlands of England, highlighting the value of craft programmes for inclusion, sociality and wellbeing. Hackney et al conceptualise these programmes as ‘edge places of creativity’ where purposeful, social making can facilitate a form of creative enterprise which is inclusive and supportive. The article also highlights some of the tensions which can arise in such settings, for example a racist remark being uttered from a member on a bus trip which went unchallenged, apart from a member of the

research team, highlighting that prejudice and discrimination can prevail even when people are brought together through craft.

Craft contexts

There are two articles in this issue which provide further case studies of how craftspeople negotiate various challenges and tensions within specific contexts. Roberta Comunian and Lauren England highlight the experiences of craft intermediaries in Cape Town, South Africa. Their research reveals the political and economic conditions in which the intermediaries operate to try and support craft. They also highlight the barriers for makers from marginalised backgrounds, particularly those living in the more deprived townships. The case study reveals the dynamics of the domestic economy which has little room to grow because of the socio-economic makeup of the city, and where the majority of people cannot afford to buy craft. Radhika Gajjala focuses on women makers in Sumba, Indonesia, their shifting role and perceptions of their expertise in an increasingly commercialised craft industry. Gajjala draws attention to the invisible labour of the women, and how an entrepreneurial and gendered subjectivity is produced in tandem with the enduring ideology of the 'housewife'. As women receive little credit for their labour and expertise, gendered hierarchies of value and expertise are reproduced within the Sumbanese handwoven cloth industry. Gajjala highlights how the industry has become more tourist-facing and catered towards more urban markets, influenced by the neoliberal ethos of the Global North. Thus, the image of the woman weaver from Sumba which is circulated is seemingly empowered and entrepreneurial, even though in reality her conditions remain shaped by the reproduction of patriarchal, hierarchical structures. Gajjala's work provides an account of the experiences of

these women as they negotiate the complexity of a Global South craft industry which is increasingly influenced by, and oriented towards, the Global North.

In research on craft relatively little attention has been paid to education and the experiences of early career makers, and Lauren England's article attempts to address this oversight. England explores the experiences of early career crafts graduates and the skillsets required for craft micro-enterprise in England. She highlights the importance of networks and social capital for graduates who are starting out in craft, and how combinations of skills and resources required to begin a career in craft has implications for those from less privileged backgrounds and marginalised groups, which reproduces inequalities in the professional craft sector.

Individual experiences in craft

The remaining contributions to this issue explore the specific experiences of women in craft. First, special issue co-editor Karen Patel's conversation with Deirdre Figueiredo MBE, Director of Craftspace in the UK, provides a rich insight into Deirdre's journey as one of the few women of colour in a cultural leadership position. She talks about her specific intersectional experience, and the ways in which Craftspace has successfully brought the professionalised and community elements of the craft ecology together through collaborative and outreach work. She talks about the possibilities for alternative routes into craft, demonstrating ways in which existing hierarchies can be challenged. Deirdre also reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on her work, and the optimism for change brought about by the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.

The issue concludes with three short Cultural Commons pieces, providing reflection and commentary on various aspects of craft. Susan Luckman questions who counts, and who is counted in craft, arguing that cultural studies researchers need to attend to the absences within craft, and reclaim a broader vision of what craft is, and the social and wellbeing benefits it can have for a healthy society. Carol Tulloch's piece provides a first-hand account of such benefits, as she reflects on her life and practice as a maker and academic. She discusses the centrality of making in claiming psychological and physical space for herself during challenging times. Finally, Saskia Warren makes the case for including religion and faith in analyses of inequalities in cultural production. She discusses the co-curated exhibition – 'Beyond Faith – Muslim Women Artists Today' – in the wider context of decolonising museum practices, and suggests that religion and faith offers an important dimension to the process of decolonisation in the museum and cultural sector.

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