

CultureCast: Talk



In Conversation

Laurie Britton Newell
James Beighton
Catherine Bertola

17 May 2008
Shibley Art Gallery, Gateshead

(Start of episode)

(Short introductory sound effect)

Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Museums.

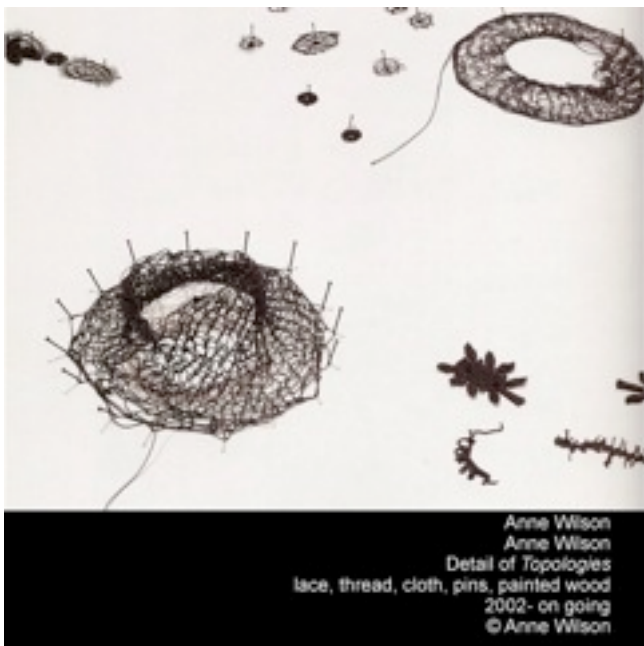
(End of sound effect)

(Melodic ambient music plays for five seconds)

Catherine Bertola (CB)- Hello everyone, sorry it's starting a little bit late. Just to say thanks for coming and welcome to tonight's event. I'm Catherine Bertola, and this is Laurie Britton Newell, who's the curator of 'Out of the Ordinary' (exhibition). And this is James Beighton, who's the Curator of Craft at mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) in Middlesbrough.

Tonight's event is really just a chance to have a conversation about some of the issues that surround the exhibition 'Out of the Ordinary', and also more generally around contemporary craft.

So I first wanted to ask Laurie to just talk a little bit about the exhibition and the kind of thinking and concept behind the show.



Laurie Britton Newell (LBN)- Absolutely! (Laughs). Hello. 'Out of the Ordinary' brings together a group of artists who all use craft in their practice. The artists, as you can see (in the gallery), all work in different media using very different techniques and processes. But they're all joined by a preoccupation, if you like, for the transformation of ordinary things into extraordinary things. And really, that's where the title of the show comes from. This idea that the everyday, the daily, the humble are sources of inspiration for many artists. This particular group have used craft as a way to transform these ordinary subjects into extraordinary works. I think that's a loose overview.

Really, what it's probably important to start off by saying is that the approach to craft is very much looking at craft as process, as an active ingredient in the making of artworks. And taking it away from a discussion about craft being a separate discipline, and looking at it as the subject in this exhibition. So that's really the premise for the approach to craft in this exhibition. I'll start by saying that, and maybe can go into other things....

CB- James, maybe it would be interesting for you to talk a little about what you do in your approach, because you work more with a collection than...



James Beaton (JB)- Yes, I'm a craft curator, that's my job title. To start with, we're possibly, in theory, coming from very different positions, because I have to, according to my job description, treat craft as a category of objects rather than just as a subject that can be used by people who might be working far more with a fine art discipline.

Having said that, personally, coming from a background that wasn't as a practising artist or as an art historian, as it says in one of the blurbs that you might have had distributed, I studied English Literature and Critical Theory at university. So I've always been incredibly troubled by the idea of craft as a category. The fact that so often you are making objects which can be very beautiful but which seem to fail to engage with aspects of society in a way that fine art has been so good at. So I've been troubled by that. And I think probably in theory, that I come from a much more similar background to

Laurie. Which could in fact make for a very boring panel discussion because we're actually not going to disagree with one another at any point.

LBN- Perhaps the audience can! (Laughs).

JB- I might have to adopt a more hardline approach than I would naturally want to do! I suppose, looking at this exhibition particularly, and the vast sense of our anticipation that led up to this exhibition being curated, just to give it some context of course, it came within a few years of the Crafts Council closing its gallery on Pentonville Road. So people in the craft world generally were very disillusioned with the infrastructure for craft with the opportunities they had to show work. And I think they were looking to this exhibition to save everything for the craft community. And then they see the exhibition launched, and I think it was Emmanuel Cooper in his review in Crafts magazine said that there's no ceramics in it. I think many people saw it as a survey exhibition that had to show somebody working in craft from every different background, who was doing something spectacular. And of course, it's not a survey exhibition. From my point of view, as much as I am a ceramic aficionado and as much as I came to craft by falling in love with a Walter Keeler teapot, I really don't care that there's no ceramics in this show! For the purposes of this (panel discussion) I might have to say that I do care! (Laughs).



(To LBN) How did you go about choosing the artists that you did bring in? Are you conscious of the fact that certain craft genres have been missed out? And why?

LBN- Completely. I think what you say, it's an important point. It's not a survey show. And I was obviously very aware of the timing of the show in conjunction with, as you said, the history of what had happened at the Crafts Council. And it's very important to say that the exhibition was produced in conjunction with the Crafts Council who were very important to the advisory process. In a way, I think it's fair to say that I was quite surprised when I came up with what I felt was the most feasible proposal for the show. That the crafts council were really keen. Because I actually expected that, perhaps more of what you were referring to, them being interested in a discipline, it covering every single media, in a survey show.

I think the important thing with all of those things is that one can't attempt to do everything with one's show. Also, the context I was presenting the show in within the V & A (Victoria & Albert Museum) was an important one, in the sense it took some of the heat off because we have such vast collections. And again, in this context with the Designs for Life (exhibition) next door (in the Shipley Art Gallery), it's interesting and allows you to see craft in many different forms when Out of the Ordinary is presented in conjunction with a craft collection, such as the V & A and here at the Shipley.

So, I'm kind of avoiding the subject of why there's no ceramics! (Laughs). I looked at a lot of artists from across the world, and that was a really important part of the remit, both from the V & A and the Craft Council's side. That it was an international show. So I looked at artists from very different disciplines. When you take craft into an international context, the concept of craft in an international context is confused and complicated enough in this country. When you put it onto the world stage it's kind of mind boggling. Really, it was about finding a kind of way to make a link between a lot of the artists that I was looking at. And it wasn't intentional that ceramics wasn't included. There was some ceramics artists that were in the selection lists. And really, all sorts of constraints to do with space. Size of space really affects the way in which you make your final list.

But the other important thing, as (JB) said, is that these artists aren't standing for particular material areas. They're not standing as representatives for whole countries. They are just artists who are preoccupied, as I've said, with this transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary. And really that's where Catherine (CB) came into the project, when we commissioned her to make her piece 'Everything and Nothing'. And I don't know whether I can turn it over to you (CB) to talk a little bit about! (Laughs).



Naomi Filmer
Naomi Filmer
Lenticular Series 1, featuring *Hand Manipulation*
animated integral image, produced by Create 3D
and Bluloop, 2006
© Naomi Filmer

CB- Yes, I suppose it might be worth talking about that. When 'Out of the Ordinary' was at the V & A in London, I was commissioned as an eighth artist to be part of the exhibition but to respond to the V & A. To make a site-specific work that was dealing with issues connected to the show but that was very much a site-specific work. My work, although it isn't here in the Shipley Art Gallery, it was part of the show in London. Which is I guess why I've been asked to do this (panel discussion)! (Laughs).

I suppose what I think is quite interesting is that myself and Susan Collis and Annie Cattrell, we don't see ourselves as craft practitioners at all. We're all of us from a very fine art background. I would never call myself a 'craftsperson'.

So the show was quite interesting for me to be put in that position, to think about my work in a very different context. And for the idea of craft to be more about the process of making and the obsessive, repetitive and very much about materials as well.

LBN- And labour.

CB- And labour, yeah, which was quite important in my piece. I should probably talk about what I did! (Laughs).

LBN- (Laughs).

CB- I've done a lot of work that's used wallpaper patterns and I've done a lot of work that's used lace. And the V & A's been quite an important research tool for me over the years. And when I was asked about the commission, I immediately thought I'd be drawn to working with a particular part of the V & A's collection. But actually what I became interested in was the idea around conservation and care of objects; that a lot of the labour that goes into making the objects in the V & A stay the same is completely hidden. And everything's very invisible. So when you got to the V & A, you're only seeing a very small part of that whole institution. The idea of this continual cleaning, is used every week to remove dust from the museum. Which I found quite interesting. Because I always thought of museums as dusty places. Which is probably quite an old fashioned view.



Olu Amoda
Queen of the Night, 2007
Chicken wire mesh, nails and scrap metal on
board
Photo: Philip Sayer
© V&A

So my work involved working with the cleaners to collect dust, and I recreated a William Morris wallpaper pattern that was originally called 'Marigold'. It was originally used in the museum as a backdrop to paintings. The work was about reintroducing something into the space that had been part of the space's history. It was kind of recreating the past but using this kind of matter that's continually removed. It was quite interesting as well in how by doing that, the dust became valuable in a way. I was making a work of art and it was classed as an object and they (the V & A) had to write loads of reports about how to look after it. Which is just quite perverse, because it was just the stuff they throw away every day.

I had to also work quite closely with the conservators to come up with a method of using dust in the museum which was quite an interesting process.

JB- One aspect that you touched on at the start there is that you're quite clear to stress that you don't associate yourself with a craft background. And at least two other artists in the show don't associate themselves (this way).

LBN- I think they'd probably say they all (don't associate themselves with a craft background). (Laughs).

JB- I suspect so. Looking at Naomi Filmer, she is from a background that you might say is traditional craft. She studied jewelry making which is one of the genres, which is so often associated with craft. But it's not very often a word you'll hear her utter, I don't think.



Naomi Filmer
Naomi Filmer
Lenticular Series 1, featuring Hand Manipulation
animated integral image, produced by Create 3D
and Bluloop, 2006
© Naomi Filmer

(To LBN) How have you found that other artists respond to this idea of being in an exhibition that's so strongly promoted within the craft community? Has it come across as being constrained, because I think one thing that was quite interesting you said there Catherine was that you were positioned within this exhibition. And that word 'position' suggests, to an extent, the constraints.

CB- But that's what happens as an artist. You make work and then other people interpret it. And curators use it to make a sort of story with it. So in a way that's kind of what happens. Whenever you let your work go it's going to read in a hundred different ways and there's not very much you can do about

that. I know what my work's about and I know where I'm coming from and where I stand, but how that's used by the people...it's something you have to be quite careful of sometimes, by not being in exhibitions you're not happy with the context of. But I'm quite interested in the idea of...



Yoshiro Suda
Yoshiro Suda
Weeds
paint on wood, installation view at Naoshima
Contemporary Art Museum
2002
Courtesy Gallery Koyangi

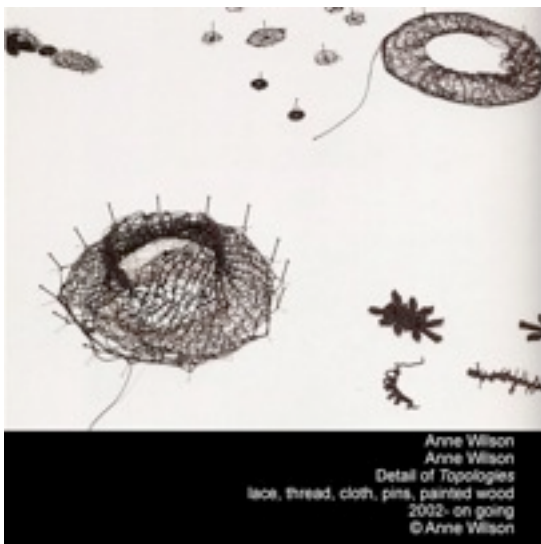
JB- I think that's the important point- these contexts have to be something you're happy, and I suppose that's what I was coming to. (To LBN) Generally speaking, were the artists happy with the context here? Did you feel that there was a concern that this was going to be too much of a craft exhibition? Because it seems to me that there's potential for concern coming from two ends- from the 'dyed-in-the-wool', often literally, craft community who feel that they should be in the exhibition because this is what they've been waiting for for so long. The chance to have a craft exhibition in the new contemporary space at the V & A. And yet that aspect of the community isn't represented. At the same time, you have people clearly from fine art backgrounds who are represented in a context with which they might not be happy.

LBN- Yeah, and I perhaps should have said in response to your last question is, the brief for this particular exhibition was to attract new audiences to the subject of craft. So really, what we were trying to do was to open out the discussion around craft and present it in a way that the general public- and that comes with a lot of assumptions and also a lot of evaluation and study, general public- to engage with a discussion around craft. And I did a lot of research, and had a lot of help from different experts in the field. And it was really felt that for the general audience member, to engage with a discussion

around craft, you had to open it up to being about a wonderment and a storytelling around the value and importance of 'making' in how an object comes to life. Really, it was about trying to inspire people by showing them exceptional examples of making.

And just to answer the other point, some of the artists that I approached to be part of the exhibition, who are now in the show, that was definitely a discussion that we had to have at the beginning. Everyone really wanted to know what the approach to craft would be. And everybody, I think, was reassured by what they felt was a slight shift and a new approach to the subject of craft that's actually just it's a separate category and it has it's own gallery and its own audiences. And bringing it into the general throng, throwing it into the mix. Because I really felt for craft that it's sink or swim time. Which is perhaps what we felt with the closing of the Crafts Council Gallery as well. It's about dragging it into the general arena.

I should just say the contemporary programme where the exhibition originated, we deal with all aspects of contemporary visual culture. Craft is just one strand of subject that we deal with. So I think it's very important that the craft show, if you like, started off in our gallery at the V & A and not in one of our collections galleries, which perhaps have more clearly categorised approach.



JB- I think that's I'm really interested in. It's going to be fascinating to see what's going to be happening over the coming years where you're saying it's sink or swim time for craft. I agree entirely. Except that this exhibition could only happen now, to an extent, and Glenn Adamson talks about this in his essay about the popularity of these handmade techniques within the wider visual arts field at the moment. He talks about Marcel Wanders' macrame

chair, for example, within a lot of high end Dutch design. Craft practices are very current and you can really see this in the current exhibition. So I think this has led to a great critical body and a movement, from curators as well, towards the idea of looking at craft as a subject- which is again what Glenn Adamson talks about in one of his essays- and almost turning our back on craft as a category. Which myself included, is something I'm inclined to do.

I worry about what's going to happen in five, ten years time when suddenly the interest has moved away from the handmade and Marcel Wanders is no longer making macrame chairs but is actually going back to very industrial processes, as has happened regularly within the art world. Then all of the infrastructure for craft as a category will have been weakened and actually that could be the sink time for it because it's so popular now. Actually, that could be the death knell.

So, I find that it's a fascinating time to be a craft professional, to be somebody who's so dedicated to craft. And certainly, our levels of exposure have never been as high as they are now but I do also have this great worry that it's...

LBN- It's flavour of the month.

JB- Yes.

LBN- I think that's a very interesting point. I don't know if I'm really the right person to throw it into a bigger discussion about whether we will be able to go back to mass industrialised processes, etc. And whether the way in which the world is evolving means that we are going to have to keep things local. This idea of 'industry of one', designer makers and things, whether that will shift back or not. And I think that is a very good point. It's actually something that really needs a lot of thought about.

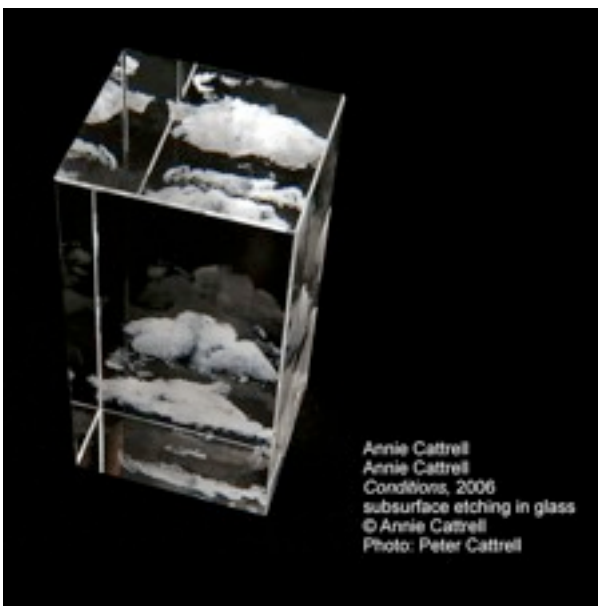
I think the other thing is in doing a show like 'Out of the Ordinary', it's the first in a tri-annual series of exhibitions that we're doing at the V & A, and it does sit alongside all sorts of other craft projects. We have a whole series of Craft Rocks events that happen in the museum which work with perhaps what we can define more safely as artists or crafts people working in the craft category.

And so I think there was a lot riding on this show because of various other factors, and because there are not enough shows dealing with the subject of craft. So really, all eyes are on this show for the fact that there hasn't been enough activity. And I think it shows that there's plenty of scope for lots more

activity and discussion around the subject. And that's always been craft's strength and weaknesses, is its undefinability and its amorphousness. That it can mean ceramic pots and it can mean cascading paper books and it can mean so many things.

(To CB) I don't know, how do you feel craft fits neatly within....

CB- I suppose I'm quite interested in how craft feels like it has become much more..people generally, and not just within the visual arts community culture, but generally there seems to be a real interest in craft and the handmade. I think if you look at the food industry and clothing industry, how we're all much more aware of how things are produced. I think it's interesting how craft has become, or the idea of the handmade and the locally grown allotments, we're so much more aware of them and buying into that because of the world and the environment and the politics around that. Whether that's actually happening in reality or it's just....



LBN- It's fashion.

CB- I mean how people do have an allotment? Is it just an ideology that people are interested in?

JB- I think it's certainly is happening. It's something that is of the moment. Taking the allotment idea, the number of people who started growing vegetables after Jamie Oliver is quite phenomenal. And I think it's also true that craft does have its moments which in the past have tended to coincide with this ethical framework. So you go back to the 60s and 70s which was the second coming of the brown pot and was very much tied in with the

alternative lifestyle approach and getting back to a slower pace of living. And again going back a bit further to how Bernard Leach and how Michael Cardew were working, again there was very much an emphasis on the ethical dimension. And that is an aspect which I think, looking at the two writers in this catalogue, on the one hand you've got Glenn Adamson who's saying that this is not about ethical craft in any way, shape or form. Tanya Harrod who seems to coming from the other approach, who's saying actually, this is all about ethical craft. And she says that it's about giving voice to the individual and a sense of empowerment, a sense of pride in work which mass production and industry strips away. Because people no longer understand the processes. Whereas Glenn seems to disagree with that entirely.

(To LBN) As curator of the exhibition, where do you fit between these two luminaries? Are they ethical or are they positively immoral?

LBN- I think for the artist it's more personal than that. Lu Shengzhong (an artist commissioned for 'Out of the Ordinary') is probably quite a good example because for human walls these figures (points to figures on display in gallery) are all hand cut with a scalpel. And layering bits of paper, but only small sections because you won't get the precise cut. He could produce this piece much faster using laser cutting techniques. The reason he doesn't use laser cutting is not because he's ethically opposed to it, in fact I think some aspects of it really quite interest him, but it's because in doing it by hand there are infinite variations in each little figure, even though they look exactly the same. They have slight differences if you look very closely. And it also means he gets to retain the cut out. So the negative and the positive, which is very important to what he feels are ideas around Ying and Yang. And relating to his personal feelings about life. Again, it's on a more personal level and I think that's true for all of the artists. I think, none of the artists in the exhibition are making an anti-global stance or anything. I think it's on a more local level. On a very personal level. That they're interested in the value of labour in their work.

(Recording fades out)

(Recording fades back in)



Susan Collis
Susan Collis
Waltzer
Wooden broom
opals, turquoise,
garnets, seed pearls,
mother of pearl, black
diamonds, white
diamonds, fresh water
pearls, coral, black
onyx, maracite, 2007
Image courtesy of
SEVENTEEN
© Susan Collis,
courtesy of
SEVENTEEN

JB- What I love about Susan Collis (an artist commissioned for 'Out of the Ordinary'), is the way it's installed here, it's actually to overlook it because it's a discreet little room that could actually just have been forgotten to have been roped off, and it actually is a behind the scenes space. At the V & A it was much more in the corner of the gallery with other work around it, so you were forced by the context of the surroundings to realise that there's an artwork lying on the floor.

But what I love about that is something I experienced as I was looking at it this evening. That even though I know Susan Collis' work and even though I've spent a lot of time examining the embroidery and detail and I appreciate it as an artwork, still, as I was looking at the stepladder I caught myself half wanting to shove the tarpaulin out of the way. Because there was still part of my mind that wanted me to think this is just...

LBN- To tidy up.

JB- Yes, exactly. And in some ways she's too successful because what's going on with really all of that room is not just taking the ordinary and making it spectacular, but also the overlooked and the ignored. And making that interesting.

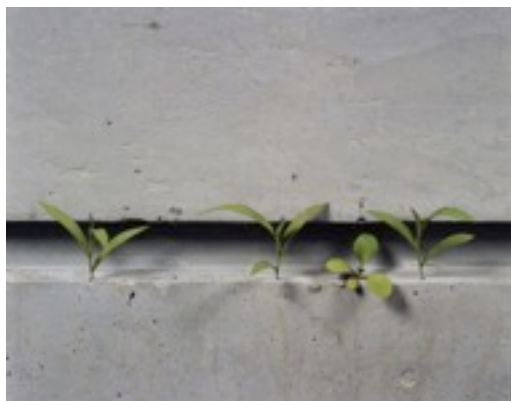
That's happening with Naomi Fulmer, for example- casting parts of the body that are outside what you might consider the classic repertoire of duty. Things like the elbow, the neck and the heel. It happens with Olu Amoda (an artist commissioned for 'Out of the Ordinary') who's using literally discarded pieces to making the gates, exactly. And with Susan Collis, again it's incredibly successful in that in one sense she's creating that effect in which you can be completely absorbed. Also she's perhaps one who uses the most obvious repertoires of beauty with the gold and diamond nail. She's using absolute preciousness for an everyday object. But at the same time you still have this sense that maybe you can just sweep it away.

LBN- It's not valuable, no.

CB- Do you think that, talking about beauty and the idea of craft almost being as decoration, they're kind of words, they're almost loaded words...

JB- It's context as well, isn't it. And I think that in the agenda that you sent around, one of the questions that you wanted to ask was about how craft situates itself at the moment. I think in this gallery you've got two very distinct approaches, actually. Because you've got 'Out of the Ordinary', which shows craft situating itself against a fine art context within a fine art context, in fact.

And craft in the way of the 'Designs for Life' exhibition which has craft within a design context and within a decorative arts context. So that's one of the great difficulties that craft has, or perhaps it's one of its most liberating aspects. Trying to define it as a category is really a false errand I'd say, because it has to function in so many different ways. It has to be that the church hall craft fair where you have your knitted doilies and your peg dollies. That is craft and it has a right to exist but it doesn't have a right to exist in this type of environment.



Yoshiro Suda
Yoshiro Suda
Weeds
paint on wood, installation view at Naoshima
Contemporary Art Museum
2002
Courtesy Gallery Koyangi

The craft you see through there (in the gallery), much of which, even with the likes of Lucy Rie who might be considered by many to be one of the greatest ceramicists of the 20th century was, if I can be allowed to say this, really knocking her work out at a tremendous rate. She made what you might consider production ware, domestic ware with Hans Coper, particularly in the late 1950s, but also her more one-off, her gallery pieces, were made at a phenomenal rate. So moving away from this idea that craft has to have a lot of man hours or woman hours invested in it, so it's interesting to see her in some of those cases contextualised against industrial design. But then in

other cases you'll see it very clearly contextualised with the decorative arts. And I think that's one of the difficulties I have as a craft curator because I work in mima, which is Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, it gives me the responsibility on one hand to represent what is happening in craft at the moment; but on the other hand, to do that within a white cubed gallery environment.

And so there are fabulous artists who are making domestic ware and I can go weak at the knees over a Walter Keeler teapot, as I've already said. And actually I think Walter Keeler is an exception, his work is intellectually very rigorous as well. But there are people who I really want to represent in my collection and work with but actually feel I can't because can they actually stand up to the context of the white cube. That is a problem and at the same time a liberation for craft, I think.

CB- We've probably got about five minutes. I don't know if anyone else has got anything they'd like to add or ask or say? No? (Laughs).

JB- At the risk of running over, can I just ask about the question of the spectacular? Because that was one of the things I found slightly surprising when I heard the title of the exhibition. Because here is an exhibition with craft very much situating itself within a fine art context, using a term like 'the spectacle'. Which has lost a lot of currency, I think, within fine art circles and is held in great suspicion. Aside from that ideological issue, there's also the question that perhaps spectacle is too much linked to modernism and separation from everyday life and is not integrating itself enough into society. (To LBN) Why did you choose to use that word, because it's obviously a very loaded decision?

LBN- It's a very loaded word, and it's something that went around the houses a lot, and had a lot of stakeholders inputting into it. Yeah, I think for two reasons- it kind of goes back to when I was trying to work out- I should say I started off by looking at artists working around the world and didn't have a specific theme in mind. Which is quite different from how a lot of curators start out with an exhibition. They have their theme, they find their artists to fit. I started out by looking at artist and trying to find the theme within what I was seeing. And really, I wish I could remember where it came from but the term 'the spectacle of the everyday' came from somewhere that I don't know exactly. And it seemed to suddenly explain so much of what I was seeing in the work I was looking at. And draw these kind of links between very different and diverse, and disparate in some cases, work.

So in part the spectacular craft refers to the fact that all of the artists in the exhibition are doing what I think- and Glenn has outlined in his essay- theoretically on very dodgy ground because it brings together the spectacle and the everyday, which are two totally separate bodies of theory. But you can witness it and it is visible in each of the artists work. So we needed 'the spectacular' to sit with the 'Out of the Ordinary'. We couldn't keep the title 'The Spectacle of the Everyday'. Our titles are sent out to a cross-section of audience for people to respond to and say what they would expect to see in an exhibition with that title. So it goes through quite a rigorous process of consultation.

And so 'Out of the Ordinary' had the pun of lots of layers but also 'the spectacle of the exhibition. The fact that we were talking about for the most part, excluding Olu (Olu Amoda. An artist commissioned for Out of the Ordinary), non-functional work. It's about a kind of spectacle in itself. And also making a spectacle of oneself... I don't know, I'm not really answering it very well. But all of those things are in the mix.

But also, very importantly, if you leave the word 'craft' alone without what most people find a very jarring juxtaposition, 'spectacular craft', they are not two words that come together very easily or very often, it prepares the audience for what they're about to see. In the sense that if we left 'craft' floating without the spectacular, I think we would have had more surprised and perhaps disgruntled visitors who were expecting one thing and got something very different when they came. So it kind of...lots and lots of reasons. Yeah, it was much deliberation for the title.

CB- I think we probably do need to wrap up. So, a final word (to panel)?
(Laughs).



LBN- Well, I hope that exhibitions like this are not putting a nail in the coffin for craft existing in all sorts of different ways. In the V & A, it's the first of many shows we'll do around craft. It (Out of the Ordinary) was a starting point really for discussion.

JB- I would be intrigued to see if it's possible for artists working within the craft genres to continue to gain attention if they're not making spectacular work. Work in the sense of it being a spectacle. I think this exhibition has set certain challenges for the way we think about craft and the way people within the crafts think about their own work and those of others. It's going to be intriguing over the next few years to see how the ground settles and what future there actually is for craft, as a discipline as well.

(Applause from audience)

(Short sound effect)

Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Museums.

(End of sound effect)

(Melodic ambient music plays for five seconds)

END OF EPISODE.

With thanks to-
Catherine Bertola
Laurie Britton Newell
James Beighton
V & A

With thanks to-
Olu Amoda
Annie Cattrell
Susan Collis
Lu Shengzhong
Yoshihiro Suda
Anne Wilson