

NW Craft Network

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Prepared on behalf of: NW Craft network

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Introduction

In November 2012, representatives from craft organisations across the NW met to discuss the state of play of the craft sector in the North West of England.

With support from Arts Council England, a steering group was established and prioritised commissioning this piece of research. The Craft Network identified four priority areas that it wanted to interrogate:

- Market development including developing the collectors market
- Maker development, improving access to funding, studios, equipment and support
- Perception and advocacy of the craft sector in the region
- Curatorial development including critical writing

A 'Craft Ecology' questionnaire was developed and distributed between March and May 2013 to identify and understand the challenges and opportunities that museums, makers, commercial galleries and craft-related higher education courses are experiencing.

The 14 surveys that were returned (of about 26 surveys distributed) came from the following:

4 from museum professionals

5 from makers

4 from commercial gallery representatives

1 from higher education institutions (tutors)

The results are collated and summarised in this paper.

This paper is organised under 7 headings made up of the 7 questions in the questionnaire. Craft makers that responded to the questionnaire did so from personal experience (as opposed to responses made on behalf of the organisations surveyed) and so their comments have been inserted as quotes throughout the paper.

1 What are the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the NW craft market?

"I believe there are existing and potential collectors in the NW, but I struggle to figure out how to access them. Shows like 'Collect' in London seem like a very straightforward and strong way of doing this, but it's hard to gain representation there." -Maker's quote

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>Major collections of historical craft</p> <p>Active contemporary collecting taking place</p> <p>Collections of international craft</p> <p>Good range of large regional venues presenting craft through exhibitions, events and projects and many smaller, regional venues with strong exhibition programmes of intellectually and aesthetically stimulating work</p> <p>Many museums and galleries are linked with Higher Education, especially MMU, for craft-related courses and research potential</p> <p>Talented makers in the region</p> <p>Several HEIs with good quality courses developing makers (MMU, Hope, Burnley College, UCLAN)</p> <p>Makers with national and international reputations working in the region (eg Steven Dixon, Alice Kettle, Junko Mori)</p> <p>Strong provision of commercial craft which is elevating craft and supporting emerging makers in an approachable, accessible and affordable manner.</p> <p>High profile events like Great Northern Contemporary Craft Fair and Design Show Liverpool</p>	<p>No incubation spaces / studios for new graduates</p> <p>Lack of funding and support for craft makers, organisations and galleries</p> <p>Non-specialist curators don't understand the market from the maker's point of view</p> <p>Craft exhibitions often happen in silos with inconsistent scheduling of contemporary craft activity</p> <p>The craft sector is not networked and so we are not making best use of our assets or sharing audiences</p> <p>Opportunities to see non-commercial contemporary craft are few and far between</p> <p>Curators still make artificial distinctions between craft and fine art, rarely daring to show the two together</p> <p>Lack of framework for cultivating potential collectors</p> <p>Taping into collector's networks is difficult with so few commercial galleries operating in the region.</p> <p>Collectors' market still fairly weak (not helped by the current economic climate and the fact that it is regional rather than national/international)</p> <p>Lack of visibility of successful makers and cost of makers participating at GNCCF is a barrier</p> <p>Insufficient connection with national organisations</p>
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p>The GNCCF has a critical mass of interest that makes it a real draw to the region</p> <p>To create a bridge from graduating to paying rent on a studio space and more subsidised studio spaces</p> <p>Craft making can be very widely practiced and can have a huge impact in the educational and social value/cohesion areas.</p> <p>Improve targeted advertising to potential collectors who already collect 'fine art'</p> <p>Creating a network that links museums, commercial galleries, makers and HEIs to raise profile of craft</p> <p>Organisations attracting wide and international audiences to them through touring shows, Artist residencies, lectures etc.</p>	<p>Leaking graduates to other parts of the county</p> <p>Positioning of craft within the same paradigm as contemporary art.</p> <p>Weak commercial links and development opportunities to support curators and venues</p> <p>Lack of high profile commercial galleries representing craft, and paucity of high profile exhibitions (e.g. First Cut at MAG) in the public realm.</p> <p>Disconnect with 'fine art' sector with generally poor perception of craft amongst art professionals and artists, resulting in lack of 'champions' for high-end craft.</p> <p>Prohibitive costs of new makers participating at craft fairs</p>

2. Describe the current routes to market. Are they robust and / or diverse enough to support different kinds of makers at various stages of their careers? Are there particular craft disciplines that are being missed out and need particular attention in order to flourish?

"I can only speak from my own experience – and it's been a long, hard slog. You either need to have a commercial aspect to your work, or multiple income streams. Unlike fine art which has a much more established network of private galleries and collectors, craft has few. There are also less high profile makers, public exhibition spaces or awards that distinguish and publicise the best of contemporary practice." -Maker's quote

The current routes to market for makers are through:

- a) Direct sales (local / regional / national / international craft shows, selling from own a maker's own websites, selling from studios (for example MCDC)
- b) Gallery based sales (commercial and exhibition),
- c) 3rd party websites e.g. CraftFinder, Not on the High Street,
- d) Public / private commissions
- e) Working with manufacturers / licensing designs

Respondents expressed very different viewpoints for this question.

It was felt that high levels of commissions from gallery-based sales had frequently poor remuneration and that there was a need for skills development in the pricing of craft, develop a model for commissioning and exploring digital sales and marketing.

Many mentioned a lack of opportunity for newly emerging makers (e.g. graduates) to sell work and that this affected graduate retention in the region. This is due to extremely rare or limited facilities for incubation to bridge the gap between makers graduating and subsidised studios which then leads to them becoming an established maker (eg. three years down the line).

The reality is that makers earn much less in the North as opposed to in London. Shows in London attract more makers and more international buyers. For example, Collect has a very international audience that we do not capture at events in Manchester.

One respondent felt that the market and routes to the market need to be considered in a much broader way so that it can integrate into the mainstream, high street offer. They went on to comment that the market itself needs to be re-evaluated and that craft should not be considered in terms of income generation but as a hobby. This would imply that craft working would sit comfortably alongside another job (for the maker) and be valued for other benefits aside from income.

For museums, they tend to collect through established dealers or auction houses, some buy direct from makers after seeing their work (eg. at Collect). Curators concurred that they want more opportunity to visit studios and buy direct from makers earlier in their career before they are under wing of established dealers.

Museums and galleries defined the following challenges for supporting makers and disciplines:

- Time limited exposure at one off events
- Artists are increasingly selling direct to consumers and selling online
- Need for larger venues to champion local makers
- Ceramics is particularly strong because they are easier to display, store and care for
- Other disciplines such as textiles and larger and design-led disciplines, such as furniture, are less progressed due to scale and display requirements
- Pricing and sales of glass is problematic due to high cost of making

“There are lots of shows across the UK, that show fantastic makers, but I still think there is a need for a show like Origin in London, which is affiliated with the Crafts Council, which gives the show kudos and extra credibility.” -Maker’s quote

“If you are lucky enough to get a gallery commission it can still fail to be financially viable. Since ACE stopped publishing recommended rates of pay for artists the daily fee has reduced whilst the amount you are expected to do has risen.” -Maker’s quote

“Sheffield is a brilliant example of a craft network and industry which has really thrived, created a high reputation for itself and works together as a city-network to carry itself forward. Sheffield is also a great example of how independent makers and larger scale craft ‘factories’ can support each other” -Maker’s quote

3. What are the key barriers for makers in the region? What do they require in terms of support to access funding, studios and equipment?

“Direct selling is the most beneficial to the makers in terms of profit and publicity, however, many makers who work from home are severely hindered in their access to direct face to face sales. Many craft fairs are too expensive for new craft businesses but this I feel doing these are crucial for all aspects of a new craft business.” -Maker’s quote

“Isolation is a problem... there are not enough opportunities to meet other makers, network, skills exchange, or find peer support.” -Maker’s quote

What makers need to help them succeed:

- Improved financial advice and training in business development skills.
- Shared resources including studio facilities with a peer-support environment (eg. like Cockpit, Craft Central in London, Manchester Craft and Design Centre).
- Mentoring scheme pairing new makers with more established artists and supporting established makers to become ambassadors for the region.
- Funding opportunities for studios, technology and equipment.

- Access to information about opportunities to link-up the limited provision currently available.
- Access to networking opportunities to facilitate maker and curator collaborations.
- Top level stakeholder support, funding and advocacy.
- Increased media and exposure and endorsements for makers.
- Professional practice and creative business advice offered on university and college courses.
- Regular museum residencies combined with an exhibition at the end.

“The demise of the Setting Up Scheme has had an impact on the quality of ambition in the region. It developed a cohort of makers who achieved high profile recognition and in turn influenced the next generation (e.g. Junko Mori, CJ O’Neill, Claire Norcross). Whilst schemes like these are resource-heavy, they have a significant impact on the image of the NW as ‘a place to make’”. Maker’s quote

“From 1999 – 2001, I was lucky enough to have a place on the Northwest Art’s Board’s Setting Up Scheme. It was a brilliant opportunity to establish my practice and a network of peers. I had access to business advice and training, was invited to tender for targeted opportunities, given support and mentoring and a subsidised studio space. It was really excellent, and together with a dedicated craft officer, is sorely missed.” -Maker’s quote

4. How can further education institutions, the Craft and Arts Councils, museums and galleries work more effectively to nurture and retain makers in the North West?

“Improving and aiding makers’ to link internationally and with London would be very beneficial.” Maker’s quote

- Create more opportunities for new makers
- Create more one-year incubation projects
- University-supported residencies for new graduates.
- Support makers for a limited period with studio access.
- Gallery exhibition opportunities, offering advice and feedback to new makers.
- Build relationships and networks and forums (the subject specialist networks are a start).
- Nominate speakers to the regional Museums Studies courses where craft currently is not discussed.
- ONE organisation to act strategically, pull everything together and to look at the bigger picture
- Museums and galleries to increase understanding of how to sell craft, how to appeal to buyers and where to find or encourage buyers.
- A ‘portal’ that connects the various craft-based Subject Specialist Networks.
- ACE: Strategic Funding for initiatives linking to priority development areas, plus support for regional / national networks.
- Stronger regional links with Crafts Council

- Top level support for craft within museum and gallery structures including investment in curatorial expertise, presentation of large-scale and ambitious exhibitions, active support for sales via shops, contemporary collecting activity.
- Encourage the hobby version of contemporary craft.
- A strong programme of top notch craft exhibitions and by supporting early career makers by showing and selling their work.

It is not necessarily a bad thing for newly qualified makers to want to spend time in London, building national and international networks. What would be desirable is for Higher Education Institutions (UCLAN, Cumbria, John Moores, Bolton, Chester in addition to MMU) to be able to attract makers with high profiles on to their establishments by providing research and other opportunities, and for the crafts ecology to be healthy enough to attract established makers back to the region.

“My recent experiences of ACE have been less positive. There doesn’t seem to be much of a relationship between the funders and the communities they are meant to serve.” -Maker’s quote

5. What skills and experience do our curators need to develop and deliver dynamic, world-class craft based shows? What are their development needs and how can these be addressed?

A key challenge is the legacy of the hierarchy of the arts, which has traditionally prioritised fine art over craft. Many of our art curators are well versed in contemporary fine art and have plenty of opportunity to keep up with developments, but craft is still regarded as secondary to this, despite the crossover between the two forms of practice, creatively and intellectually.

As staffing levels are cut, curators need to have a broader outlook on the kind of work they promote. The First Cut exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery is a good example of this crossover, an exhibition programmed by curators who generally work within fine art, but one which showed work with a strong craft element to it.

There are plenty of MA-level curators around, but very few with craft expertise. Hands-on understanding of making is useful, in particular maker-curators. A perspective on the historical and international context for craft is often over looked, resulting in reductive curating that is modest in ambition.

Another reality is that exhibitions are usually led by what will sell – if museums could afford to take more risks they could produce more ambitious shows.

Mid-career development and access to opportunities for continued professional development are key and should include national and even international research, critical debate, analytical approaches through conferences and.

Curators need to:

- Be more proactive and look around at current practice including viewing top quality craft (in UK and abroad) and visiting maker studios
- Network and share experiences, subscriptions and acquisitions between museums.
- Seize the opportunity to work with galleries outside of the UK – exchange programmes between galleries in the UK and beyond.
- Access to modest development grants to allow this to happen.
- Develop a web-based hub for crafts which draws in all regional craft activity.
- Digitise craft collections so other curators can see what's in store across the region.
- Cultivate potential partners, sponsors and donors as a sector.
- Develop a regular slot and space for showing the best of non-commercial craft
- Adopt a more intellectual and strategic approach.

“Curators need more contact with makers, more opportunities for makers to show at their local institutions. (Like ACE, local galleries seem to have become increasingly distanced and more focused on national, rather than regional objectives). How about appointing makers as representatives on gallery/funding boards?” -Maker's quote

6. Describe what a strong, regional craft sector looks like? What are the key elements of an improved sector and what is lacking in the NW?

“A strong regional craft centre is constructed on many makers from different backgrounds, social classes and media all being able to sustain a profitable business producing the craft they desire. It would have a strong network which supports and nurtures new makers with the region and pushes the boundaries to build a strong, high-class reputation.” Maker's quote

“Social diversity is key... the craft world is quite elitist (even within makers). Vicious circle of lack of funding means that the sector isn't diverse in terms of social background.” -Maker's quote

A strong regional craft sector will be distinctive to this region and its particular mix of post-industrial urban elements and rural hotspots such as the Lake District and parts of Pennine Lancashire. It will reflect the breadth of what we understand as craft, ranging from contemporary art that appropriates craft knowledge to small-scale craft businesses and craft that has an interface with the built environment.

Key features of an improved sector include:

- A strategy and a plan to deliver the strategy.
- Passionate leaders and advocates.
- Good studio choice and a variety of facilities for makers to choose from.
- Increased profile of 'contemporary craft'.
- An audience including collectors who understand, appreciate and buy contemporary Craft.
- Well supported and networked organisations and individuals.
- Investment in the gallery infrastructure, and reorganising the specialist skills and venues across the region.
- A range of makers at all stages of their careers, supported by great institutions (colleges, galleries, funders) and collectors with a lively events programmes to educate and engage the wider public.
- Cross promotion to audiences and share good news stories such as successful funding, popular exhibitions etc.
- A strong atmosphere of loaning contemporary craft from institution to institution.
- Support for makers and incentives for them to stay in the region (studio spaces, exhibiting and teaching/public engagement opportunities).
- A range of different sized venues presenting craft across the region- and craft in its many different manifestations – and well informed curators to deliver the programmes.
- Dynamic commercial outlets.
- Clear and accessible routes for maker development mapped out, with access to support.
- Some high profile regular events and temporary exhibitions in the region.
- Craft sector embedded and celebrated within wider visual arts ecology.
- Representation of NW makers on national & international level.
- Strong links to other regional, national and international networks and organisations.

7. What one thing would you change that would make the single biggest difference in terms of raising the ambition of the craft sector in the North West?

"More publicity of NW craft, more networking, more spotlight on the achievements, more press coverage by NW publications, a real champion of British handmade craft product and the makers behind those products, more skill sharing with overseas makers, more championing of what we do and love." -Maker's quote

1. Support and recognition of importance of craft sector and investment to build infrastructure, raise profile of artists and events and venues / galleries
2. Less distinction between art and craft and more dynamic exhibitions that make full use of the best of both.

3. Buy in from the large city / county councils.
4. Creating a strategic network enabling us to share knowledge, resources, collections and opportunities.
5. Improved advocacy of the range of activity that goes on in the large urban centres and in rural areas to raise the profile of quality craft.
6. Proactive support from the major galleries in the region for both national and international level exhibitions as a key feature of their programmes.
7. Visible opportunities for regional makers to work with galleries and Universities and show their work in this context.

“Educating the market to create a wider craft audience; new makers, supporters, customers etc which would make the sector self-sustaining.” Maker’s quote

Summary

There are distinctive pockets of craft activity with makers, museums and commercial galleries and a number of Higher Education Institutions championing craft practice across the North West. There is however, a perceived lack of support, including funding, leadership and advocacy at a top level for the craft in the North West for it to flourish.

The establishment of a regional network is the first step to bridging some of the gaps highlighted in this paper, particularly in terms of joining up communications, programming, creating opportunities for makers, market expansion, developing curators and brokering relationships between makers, HEIs and commercial / public galleries.

Based on these findings, it is the intension of the network to develop short, medium and long term recommendations and a plan of action to strengthen the regional craft sector and to share practice with other regions.