

THE NEW POLITICS OF THE HANDMADE

Craft, Art and Design

Edited by Anthea Black & Nicole Burisch



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INTRODUCTION

Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch

The New Politics of the Handmade: Craft, Art and Design takes on contemporary craft as a sphere of political action and debate. It responds to the last two decades of craft activism, which leveraged the aesthetics and values of handmaking to convey messages of political agency and optimism, collective organizing and anti-capitalist and antiglobalization critique. We begin with the premise that the increased circulation of craft, art and design within current economic, environmental and social contexts demands new modes of craft criticism and scholarship. Our aim is to use this book to have deeper conversations on the stakes for politicized making and thinking about craft, as it is intertwined with art, design and the flows of production-consumption in a transnational and global context.

To this end, we have assembled a group of authors and artists who are critically rethinking the role of the handmade across thirty years of artistic production, from the early 1990s to the present. This span of time is concurrent with the rise of neoliberal capitalism and a fundamental shift in the way we consume, communicate, live and work. As the demands on our labour, time and bodies have become increasingly shaped by the ‘absoluteness of availability’¹ under late capitalism, so too has the role of craft in day-to-day life transformed. Craft in a global context is now mobile, flexible, available on-demand, highly desirable and ready-to-use. Craft is a meaningful shorthand, a sign, a symbol, a representational system that flows across multiple sites of knowledge and cultural production. Craft is found not only in materials and objects, nor simply in the processes or actions of making, but also in the qualities and experiences of the handmade as it conveys and challenges emotive, cultural, political or economic values. This publication also acknowledges and builds upon craft theory as a field of inquiry that is intimately tied to materiality, and to the making and use of objects. This makes craft particularly well-suited to addressing topics of labour and economics and leads us to read craft not only through aesthetic or cultural frameworks, but to insist that it is embedded within broader social and economic structures.

This brief introduction presents the texts in this volume, suggesting links between them and providing prompts for how they might be read together. Some of the authors in this book examine the links between material practices, progressive politics and social change; and they advocate for the ongoing potential for craft to address and creatively respond to pressing social and political issues. Others take a more critical stance to ask how craft might be reflective of, or even complicit in, aspects of late capitalism such as overconsumption, precarious labour, austerity measures and hyper-individualism. By bringing these texts together, our intention is to continue troubling the idea that craft is definitively aligned with any particular ideology or political philosophy. Rather, we build upon recent scholarship that advocates for craft as the basis for critical inquiry,² entwined ‘in the fray’ of amateur and professional ways of making,³ ‘the ultimate service discipline, [with] its utopian and communal values both politically alluring and easily appropriated’,⁴ ‘a methodology’⁵ for reading and understanding other fields of practice or ‘vulnerable to manipulation and capable of being manipulative’.⁶ Craft theory and practice are not *inherently* progressive, but through closer readings, we can examine objects as intricate knots of political meaning and subjectivity that are shaped by many (often opposing, or contradictory) forces. Our contributors thus draw from design, art, museum studies, fashion, architecture and critical race and post/decolonial theories, to build on craft discourse and the politics of making. This book is indebted to the scholarship of Elissa Auther, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Maria Elena Buszek, Namita Gupta Wiggers, Judith Leemann, Kirsty Robertson and Shannon R. Stratton, and many others whose ongoing work on craftivism and craft politics has shaped our own thinking about these fields as responsive, intersectional, dense and always ripe for criticism.

Our contribution, ‘From craftivism to craftwashing’ (Chapter 1), directly follows this introduction in presenting the themes that guide *The New Politics of the Handmade*. In it, we update our text ‘Craft Hard Die Free: Radical Curatorial Strategies for Craftivism’⁷ to look closer at the emergence of craftivism and indie craft through the early 2000s and trace how these ‘movements’ became aligned with radical politics and revolution. Focusing on the recent marketing and consumption of craft in contemporary art, craft fairs, museums and advertising, we critically examine how craft now functions as a sign of good affect and moral purity. We use the term *craftwashing* to describe the use of craft as a marketing ploy that performs political and social engagement while obscuring ethical, environmental and labour issues in the chain of production.

The reach of craftwashing is further addressed by Elke Gaugel in ‘Ethical fashion, craft and the new spirit of global capitalism’ (Chapter 2), which traces the ‘ethical turn’ in fashion through UN global governance strategies, non-governmental organizations and sustainable fashion initiatives. Gaugel applies work by sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello on the ‘spirit’ of capitalism, and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on human rights cultures to

critique marketing claims and charitable initiatives - from Vivienne Westwood's *Ethical Fashion Africa Collection*, to those of 'fast-fashion' companies like H&M. Gaugele shows how these campaigns link fashion and aid to perpetuate a form of 'cultural colonialism', where luxury fashion labels capitalize on the aesthetic and moral associations of the 'authentically' handmade.

Just as the global fashion industry's initiatives use craft as a development tool, artists, museums, curators and educational departments have recognized the potential of craft (and especially *crafting*) for public programming initiatives, interactive exhibitions, performances and urban redevelopment. Often, these kinds of programs emphasize craft's accessibility, teachability and usefulness as a tool or prop for collaborative actions or projects.⁸ The demand for craft-as-social-practice to 'gently' drive social justice initiatives relates to broader moves within museums that include 'social media, funding imperatives, and the pressure to attract younger and more diverse audiences'.⁹ Amid this shift to social and experiential forms of culture-making, the value of craft has moved beyond objects and towards the actions of makers and the exchange of economic and social capital.¹⁰

In the first of six artist profiles, 'Selven O'Keef Jarmon: Beading across geographies' (Chapter 3), Nicole Burisch writes about artist Selven O'Keef Jarmon and his collaboration with South African beaders to create a large-scale public artwork in Houston, Texas. Linking this project to other relational and social craft projects, Burisch frames beading as a cross-cultural and temporal practice to examine how so-called traditional craft practices and materials circulate within a globalized contemporary (art) economy. Her writing highlights our aim for all the texts in *The New Politics of the Handmade* to chart the circulation of materials and techniques across broad geopolitical spaces and histories, while also urging for careful attention to local contexts.

Noni Brynjolson's 'The making of many hands: Artisanal production and neighborhood redevelopment in contemporary socially engaged art' (Chapter 4), considers the tensions between community engagement and economic redevelopment in artist-initiated projects Soul Manufacturing Corporation by Theaster Gates, and Project Row Houses and Trans.lation by Rick Lowe. She focuses on large-scale community works as spaces of self-determination for local residents, particularly in Black, Latinx and immigrant neighbourhoods. Brynjolson also negotiates the economic and social impacts of neighbourhood gentrification and tourism, which are accelerated as social capital accrues around artist-community projects, and engages larger conversations on the relationships between art and activism.

Shannon R. Stratton offers an experiential report on lifestyle crafting in North America in 'That looks like work: The total aesthetics of handcraft' (Chapter 5). She traverses between the takeout-food counter in Chicago, Half Cut Tea's romantic YouTube artist profiles and the highly aestheticized rural retreat of artist J. Morgan Puett's *Mildred's Lane* project. Stratton identifies a new circulatory

regime of curated lifestyle imagery that draws from and overlaps with craft and contemporary art practices, and examines how ‘narrated handcraftedness’ signals and exaggerates the political power of the consumer. The products and projects Stratton describes channel qualities of slowness, authenticity, sensibility, passion and ultimately, a desire for unalienated labour made visible through skill or its representations.

In Chapter 6, ‘Craft as property as liberalism as problem’, Leopold Kowolik evokes craft as a bourgeois character, somewhat unaware of its own pretensions as it perpetuates a philosophical lineage and economic position that is not critical of neoliberal capitalism nor counter to it, but rendered from the same beginnings. Kowolik charges that craft theorists and makers often rely on inherited misreadings of John Locke’s ideas of liberalism and property without questioning their political roots. Tracing this history, he cautions against casual understandings of personal property and the individual ‘right to create’, just as his text clears the space for new formations and critical positions for craft in relation to capital.

In the second artist profile, ‘Zahner Metals: architectural fabrication and craft labour’ (Chapter 7), Peggy Deamer considers how new technologies influence architectural fabrication, by focusing on the skilled workers who manufactured copper cladding for architects Herzog and de Meuron’s DeYoung Museum in San Francisco. She proposes that acknowledging craft, digital skill and the collaboration between architect-fabricator can refocus the field towards a more ethical understanding of labour that also reconciles historic craft/design divides. Deamer’s text adds to global dialogues on exploitative labour within art and architecture, such as those of The Architecture Lobby’s stance for a more socially responsible field,¹¹ or GULF Labor’s advocacy for the migrant workers building the Guggenheim’s international franchises.¹²

In ‘Capitalizing on community: The makerspace phenomenon’ (Chapter 8), Diana Sherlock considers the rise of makerspaces, through case studies including small grassroots collectives and large corporate-driven models in Calgary, San Francisco and Berlin. She describes how these spaces leverage social, intellectual and financial capital, thus reshaping public and private economic models for accessing resources for making. Sherlock is critical of the maker movement’s ‘optimistic rhetoric’ of individual creativity and shared space, and of the true cost-benefit to creative communities. She argues that such social-entrepreneurial and micro-economic models can accelerate capitalism’s reach and negative effects. She shows how the call to ‘Make. Just make.’¹³ cannot be divorced from the realities of expanding carbon footprints, urban gentrification, overproduction and divestment of public funding for public services.

Alexis Anais Avedisian and Anna Khachiyani’s ‘Morehshin Allahyari: On *Material Speculation*’ (Chapter 9), offers a counterpoint to the glut of objects produced in makerspaces in their consideration of *Material Speculation: ISIS (2015–2016)* by Iranian-American artist Morehshin Allahyari. In the third artist

profile, they describe Allahyari's 3D-printed versions of antiquities destroyed by ISIS in Iraq. They call her work an 'archival methodology' that transforms and preserves material knowledge and lost artefacts through open-source and cross-disciplinary research. In Allahyari's work, both plastic (the ultimate material of the Anthropocene) and petrochemicals 'retain the aura of a biomorphic prehistory', and are just as deeply connected to the earth as materials like metal, clay and fibre. She poses digital craft technologies as tools of resistance and repair that can shift understandings of value and cultural heritage in a time of war, destruction and the aggressive privatization of intellectual property.

Deamer, Sherlock, Avedisian and Khachiyan trace the development of craft-based knowledge through digital production within architecture, makerspaces and contemporary art. In this focus, knowledge is produced and redefined not only by the hand of an individual craftsman, but often by large cross-disciplinary teams and collaborators guided by new materials and tools. However, a focus on materials and their production reminds us that it is no longer possible to 'continue bad habits of thinking that allow humans to conceive of objects ... as distinct from the processes of their emergence and decay'.¹⁴ In light of the urgent need to address the causes and consequences of climate change and environmental catastrophe, it is time to ask how the craft and design fields account for their participation in overwhelming material excess and destructive extractivism. Though outside the scope of this volume, we are interested in how rereading craft politics within material culture could connect to emergent theories of the Anthropocene. What are the stakes for contemporary craft theory in a world brimming with stuff, when we consider making across geological time, and within the irreversible impact of our human epoch on this earth? The next group of essays builds on these themes of (over)consumption and material scarcity, ingenuity and reuse, connecting craft and materiality to survival.

In Chapter 10, 'From molten plastic to polished mahogany: Bricolage and scarcity in 1990s Cuban art', Blanca Serrano Ortiz De Solórzano traces shifts in Cuban art during the 'Special Period': a time of austerity measures that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. She examines how extreme material scarcity shaped everyday uses and adaptations of objects and domestic spaces, and in turn, how this 'provisional' aesthetic influenced artists and designers. Her reading of projects by collectives *Desde Una Pragmática Pedagógica*, *Los Carpinteros* and *Gabinete Ordo Amoris* considers their incorporation of bricolage, DIY and craft methods as a direct response to the economic and political conditions of the revolutionary project. Rachel Weiss has described the work of *Los Carpinteros* as a 're-estimation of artisanal value',¹⁵ and Serrano further articulates how the creative reuse of objects was both encouraged as a patriotic return to traditional Cuban ways of life, and an irreverent approach to the intended uses for everyday materials, their material properties and histories.

Nasrin Himada continues to pare back the runaway romanticism of the handmade in 'Things needed made' (Chapter 11), to focus instead on what is truly

essential for life: that which enables survival. Himada engages in a close reading of the documentary film *Khiam* (2000–2007), which shows the testimonies of six former prisoners as they describe the objects they made inside Lebanon's infamous Israeli-run torture prison. This writing bears witness to the images and objects that are produced with the most ingenious spark of necessity – a sewing needle made from an orange peel, a pencil made from a staple – the practical and creative impulse which gives life. Himada's text addresses how the gross injustices of the carceral settler state are amplified by technologies as large as prisons and can be resisted by very small gestures of making.

In 'Secret stash: Textiles, hoarding, collecting, accumulation and craft' (Chapter 12), Kirsty Robertson writes on extreme textile hoarding as a symptom of late capitalist excess. Robertson counters the recent pathologization of hoarding as a mental illness to suggest instead that it is a coping response to the conditions of overconsumption. Robertson draws together the recycled textile work of queer-feminist artist Allyson Mitchell, the transfer and acquisition of an artist's disorganized estate, the early hoard of the famous Collyer Brothers and the discussion boards of online craft communities. She considers the typical consumer cycles of 'purchase, discard, replace' to illustrate how the actions and collections of hoarders, crafters and artists both deviate from and intervene into capitalism, sometimes usefully and sometimes destructively.

The fourth artist profile resonates with Robertson's efforts to understand the sheer volume of textile objects and clothing that are produced and distributed around the globe. In this text, Julia Bryan-Wilson describes Shinique Smith's *Bale Variant* series and *Soul Elsewhere* in 'Shinique Smith: Lines that bind' (Chapter 13). These works powerfully connect a range of affective meanings between Black bodily experience, the global circulation of textiles, thrift, survival, intimacy and waste. Smith's (un)monumental accumulations link African American traditions of textile making and contemporary abstraction with conditions of 'contingency'¹⁶ and making-do. This formal resonance with artists such as Mitchell and her use of discarded textiles, similarly addresses the 'cultural and economic meanings of cloth as it circulates between markets and bodies'.

While some of the texts above draw postcolonial discourses into relation with contemporary craft, the next section considers practices that directly respond to and resist ongoing legacies of settler colonialism. Capitalism functions through a series of 'technologies of colonialism'¹⁷ that structure and consolidate white access to resources, land, state power and cultural expression. The 'invention'¹⁸ and 'use' of craft (as both a word and a category of classification) have been concurrent with colonial expansion, and integral to building empires, industries and national identities.¹⁹ Notions of authenticity in craft practice are not only central to the construction of craft as virtuous and politically conscious; craft's perceived authenticity is also underscored by the complex legacies of cultural imperialism, appropriation and fetishization of Indigenous cultural work as rare, 'untainted by

civilization' or 'powerfully expressive representations of a pure primitive soul'.²⁰ Craft's separation from high art, and its consequent marginality, is foundational to the Euro-Western art canon, devaluing works by women, people of colour and Indigenous communities. This categorical division has led to the exclusion of these makers from museums and galleries, or led to their misrepresentation within them.²¹ However, a rising wave of cultural workers have called for repatriation of objects, with demands for accountability and new curatorial models. As we envision how craft can address urgent issues of our time, it is clear that Indigenous perspectives and voices must also be recentred within contemporary craft politics.²² Writing about craft from a decolonial framework demands acknowledgement and action to address these exclusions. For many practitioners and authors within, this work begins by re-articulating craft as a world-making and geographically-specific aesthetic practice that connects to the land. As Ellyn Walker describes in her chapter, 'The sovereign stitch: Re-reading embroidery as a critical feminist decolonial text' (Chapter 15), 'renewable land-based materials, ancestral imagery and autonomous economic models represent practices of Indigenous sovereignty' that intervene into state, economic and museological power structures. We echo Heather Davis's proposition for decolonial work within feminist art practices, 'which cannot alone adequately address everything that needs to change ... but they can provide means of imaging otherwise outside of colonial frameworks'.²³ We extend this to thinking about craft: while craft alone cannot topple such structures, it can offer ways of knowing, imagining and critiquing that counter ongoing colonial realities and contribute to cultural shifts.

Where Brynjolson provides a critical read on the stakes involved in pairing craft and social practice, the fifth artist profile on 'Margarita Cabrera: Landscapes of *nepantla*' (Chapter 14), insists on crafting together as a way to 'challenge systems of oppression, of mass production, of isolation, and of exclusion'. Author Laura August contrasts the free circulation of tourists and consumer goods across colonial borders against the US repression and incarceration of immigrants. She reads Cabrera's projects as shared enactments of *nepantla*, or in between-ness, for border communities. Cabrera's collaboratively sewn sculptures of cacti, made from recycled border guard uniforms speak to the uneasy flows of people, non-human organisms and objects across colonial landscapes. They remind us of the life-forms and cultural traditions that lived and moved freely before the violent imposition and maintenance of artificial borders.

In Chapter 15 Ellyn Walker asserts embroidery as an act of decolonial resistance and everyday sovereignty that echoes across three distinct geographies in the Americas. She considers Chilean *arpilleras* produced during the Pinochet dictatorship, huipiles from Chiapas, and *Walking with Our Sisters* by Métis artist Christi Belcourt to address moves from mourning to critical action and sacred space. Recognizing the limits of Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch*, Walker offers ways to read embroidery 'beyond the scope of settler colonialism' and

whiteness. She works towards new readings of embroidery at the intersections of feminized labour, cultural tradition and Indigeneity. Walker grounds her work in the proposal that decolonization begins with the land, and that geographically and culturally specific practices remain vital forms of resistance.

In the final profile, 'Ursula Johnson: Weaving histories and *Netukulimik* in *Lnuwelti'k* ('We Are Indian') and other works' (Chapter 16), Heather Anderson discusses artist Ursula Johnson's contemporary reworkings of Mi'kmaq basketry. Johnson's performances critique and mitigate the loss of Indigenous knowledge and ways of making, centring the bodies of living people, while drawing attention to the archaic structures and inherent violence of Canadian law in relation to Indigenous communities. Anderson articulates that the value of Johnson's work is not limited to confronting the colonial present, nor in critiquing museological classifications of Indigenous art as 'artefact', but also in striving for *Netukulimik*, or self-sustainability, the Mi'kmaq worldview encompassing one's relationship to the land and surroundings.

As Black, Indigenous and artists of colour have challenged museums and galleries to respond to calls for representation and decolonization, the politics of inclusion have in many ways 'failed to disturb ongoing colonial power relations'.²⁴ Calls to re-envision exhibitions and collections, increase curatorial transparency, and for equitable hiring practices across arts organizations and academia must go hand-in-hand with unsettling the historical divisions between craft, art and design. This book is driven by a desire to reshape contemporary craft discourse – there is still much work to be done in studios, classrooms, and scholarship alike.

The book concludes with ‘‘The Black craftsman situation’’: A critical conversation about race and craft (Chapter 17), hosted by Namita Gupta Wiggers, Bibiana Obler and Mary Savig for the Critical Craft Forum. This conversation begins with the 1972 correspondence between weaver Allen Fannin and Director Francis Sumner Merrit of the Haystack Mountain School of Craft, and continues to include contemporary makers Sonya Clark, Wesley Clark and Joyce J. Scott, who unanimously trouble and reject the boundaries between craft, generational knowledge, daily life and artmaking. This crucial dialogue on race and craft is 'a contribution to shifting the course'; debating questions, terms and exclusions of craft education and theory, with a renewed call to see race at the centre of the American craft story, rather than on its margins.

With *The New Politics of the Handmade*, it is our hope that readers gain expanded understandings of craft and contemporary craft theory as political, economic, environmental and social processes. It represents a call to practitioners and theorists to continue building more self-reflexive and critical readings of craft's political dimensions, and aims to bring attention to the role of the handmade as it circulates globally across varied sites. The texts within examine craft in familiar spaces alongside those less often considered, including protests, prisons, museums, advertisements, factories, takeout counters, craft fairs and broadly within popular

culture. As the authors in this book contend with the state of craft politics in the twenty-first century, they continue to shift ideas of craft itself. Within these pages, craft hovers between sensory experience and fixed object; it conveys the mutability of form alongside the fluidity of language; and finally becomes evidence of politics in-the-making. Craft, in all of its diverse forms, remains a mode of production that is intimately tied to adaptation of identity, culture and survival to meet personal and collective needs. This makes the new politics of the handmade not a singular way of thinking about craft, but an essential series of questions and methods through which we can continue to witness and address the urgent political issues of our time.

Notes

- 1 Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2014), 14. See also Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2017) and Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).
- 2 Elizabeth Agro and Namita Gupta Wiggers, *Critical Craft Forum*, <http://www.criticalcraftforum.com/about/> (accessed 30 June 2018). Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber and Alicia Ory DeNicola, eds., *Critical Craft: Technology, Globalization, and Capitalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). Nicholas R. Bell, 'Acknowledgments', *Nation Building: Craft and Contemporary American Culture* (Washington: Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in association with Bloomsbury Press, 2015), 7.
- 3 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4–8.
- 4 Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 2.
- 5 Judith Leemann and Shannon Stratton, 'Circling Back into That Thing We Cast Forward: A Closing Read on Gestures of Resistance', in *Collaboration through Craft*, ed. Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle and Helen Felcey (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 219.
- 6 Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle and Helen Felcey, 'Collaboration through Craft: An Introduction', *Collaboration through Craft*, ed. Amanda Ravetz, Alice Kettle and Helen Felcey (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3.
- 7 Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch, 'Craft Hard Die Free: Radical Curatorial Strategies for Craftivism in Unruly Contexts', in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 204–21.
- 8 Nicole Burisch, 'From Objects to Actions and Back Again: The Politics of Dematerialized Craft and Performance Documentation', *TEXTILE*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2016): 54–73.
- 9 Kirsty Robertson and Lisa Vinebaum, 'Crafting Community', *TEXTILE*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2016): 5. See also Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology, or What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (London: Koenig Books, 2014).

- 10** Kevin Murray, ‘New Models for Craft Sustainability: Engaging with the “Experience” Economy’, *Garland*, 3 December 2018, <https://garlandmag.com/article/experience/> (accessed 15 May 2019).
- 11** The Architecture Lobby, of which Deamer is a member, states that: ‘As long as architecture tolerates abusive practices in the office and the construction site, it cannot insist on its role in and for the public good’, <http://architecture-lobby.org/about/> (accessed 11 June 2018).
- 12** Gulf Labor Artist Coalition, <https://gulflabor.org/> (accessed 14 June 2018).
- 13** Mark Hatch, *The Maker Movement Manifesto* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), 11.
- 14** Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, ‘Art and Death’, in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 5.
- 15** Rachel Weiss, ‘An Argument about Craft in Los Carpinteros’, *Journal of Modern Craft*, vol. I, no. 2 (July 2008): 258.
- 16** Laura Hoptman, ‘Unmonumental: Going to Pieces in the 21st Century’, in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, ed. Richard Flood, Massimiliano Gioni and Laura J. Hoptman (London: Phaidon in association with New Museum, 2007), 138.
- 17** Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no.1 (2012): 4.
- 18** Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xvi–xvii. Adamson describes how craft was ascribed ‘positive qualities of creativity, rootedness, and authenticity’ but how these very attributes were complicit in the colonial project of casting Indigenous cultures as dead, dying or in need of rescuing or reform. See also Ellen Easton McLeod, ‘Embracing the “Other”’, *In Good Hands: The Women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999), 203–33.
- 19** Kristen A. Williams, ‘“Old Time Mem’ry”: Contemporary Urban Craftivism and the Politics of Doing-It-Yourself in Postindustrial America’, *Utopian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2011, 303–20.
- 20** Charles Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 19.
- 21** Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 22** H. de Coninck, A. Revi, M. Babiker, P. Bertoldi, M. Buckeridge, A. Cartwright, W. Dong, J. Ford, S. Fuss, J.-C. Hourcade, D. Ley, R. Mechler, P. Newman, A. Revokatova, S. Schultz, L. Steg, and T. Sugiyama, 2018: Strengthening and Implementing the Global Response. In: *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty* [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla, A. Pirani, W. Moufouma-Okia, C. Péan, R. Pidcock, S. Connors, J.B.R. Matthews, Y. Chen, X. Zhou, M.I. Gomis, E. Lonnoy, T. Maycock, M. Tignor, and T. Waterfield (eds.)], (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018), 360.

- 23** Heather Davis, ed., ‘Proposition 2: On Colonial Patriarchy and Matriarchal Decolonization’, in *Desire/Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada* (Montreal: McGill Queen’s University Press and Mentoring Artists for Women’s Art, 2017), 134.
- 24** Kathleen Ash-Milby and Ruth B. Phillips, ‘Inclusivity or Sovereignty? Native American Arts in the Gallery and the Museum since 1992’, *Art Journal*, vol. 76, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 12.

of the Africans, with much ado, swooped off by the 2 young guides + guardians
The one moment that still hangs in my memory like a question is the departure

Poet M. C. Richards, reflected:
Arthur Green and Joyce J. Scott. A few months later, one of the attendees, poet
Black Crafts to coincide with the session led by African artists. The joint summer
session was attended by established and emerging artists in the field, including
Merritt and Fannin went on to organize the 1974 summer session American
to address the everyday needs of non-white artists.

political goals of the craft revival were devised with good intentions, they did little
craftsman situation to Merritt (Figures 17.1-17.3). He suggested that while the
us make some contacts for enrollment.² In response, Fannin described the black
taken enough initiative in developing the relationship ... I hope you could help
acknowledging the dearth of diversity at Haystack; I realize that we just haven't
African countries.¹ Merritt asked Brooklyn-based Weaver Allen Fannin for help,
students to a 1974 international summer session featuring instructors from
in Deer Isle, Maine, was struggling to recruit African American instructors and
In 1972, Francis Summer Merritt, director of Haystack Mountain School of Crafts

Introduction

Gupta Wiggers
Mary Savig, Joyce J. Scott and Namita
Sonya Clark, Wesley Clark, Bibiana Obler,

17 THE BLACK CRAFTSMAN SITUATION: A CRITICAL CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE AND CRAFT

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Mr. Fran Merritt
Centennial House
Deer Isle, Maine
04627

19 January 1972

Dear Fran:

Your letter of Dec. 29th has been sitting here waiting for me to get Dorothy over the flu so I could write back.

I am glad to have your comment in the letter on the black craftsman situation. As strange as it may seem to you, coming from me, I have had almost as bad luck with getting black apprentices as you have in getting black students. I have thought about the problem some length and have talked with black friends also. There are several factors that definitely turn black people off to the craft scene, which for whatever reason do not turn them off to "art" since there are a good number of black artists. The first factor that is the hardest to take is the almost total and complete domination of craft world by middle and upper crust whites who are, despite seeming indications to the contrary, quite conservative in their life styles. This is not true of the art world, since artists are always into some radical political activity or other. The fact is that black people have very basic human needs that the rulers of the craft world can in no way relate to. Then too, we have the 53rd Street crowd worrying more about making craft into funk "art" than about how to use the technical and design skills of craftsmen to improve the goods that the general run of people buy and use every day. This last is one of the basic needs that I was referring to. People who have no really nitty-gritty needs can afford to deal in terms of funk "art". The lack of social concern evident in the 53rd Street approach really turns off all the black people I have ever talked with.

FIGURE 17.1 Allen Fannin to Francis Merritt, 19 January 1972. Francis Sumner Merritt papers, 1903–1979. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Page 1.

Perhaps I could also point out that not enough has been done by those who are supposed to do those things, about getting people to understand that it is possible, with a broad enough approach, for a person to work full-time as a craftsman. You have to understand that being able to earn a living is one of the nitty-gritty needs that black people have and we are, justifiably, not interested in playing around with something that still, as crafts does, has a leisure time activity connotation to it. Because of our background, we cannot afford to play around and no one has any business telling us to change our culture so we can afford to play around.

I hope the brief explanation above will answer your one point as to why you have had so little response (black) to your offerings. However, your next sentence in the letter answers your point even better than I could: "...we haven't taken enough initiative in developing relationships..." One of the obvious reasons why you haven't taken that initiative is that it isn't your problem. You could continue perfectly fine as you have been doing and suffer no loss. Now in a sense, our response has been to simply discount the craft world as having little or nothing of relevance to our needs as blacks.

Now on the other hand, if you are, as I believe you are, sincere in wanting to do some things about the problem, then the first suggestion I can make is for you to try and see the problem somehow in terms of it being as much yours as ours. Then you may see some actual advantage to you so do something about it.

I think the first thing you have to try and do is take a strong position counter to what is happening on 53rd Street. I know how you feel about them and it would help if you were more vocal about it. With some change in the craft world, into a more socially concerned direction, you might just find more black people coming into it on their own. Parenthetically, your Soleri bit was not the way to do this since it was not immediate enough for our real needs and was far too abstract and far reaching.

The offering of scholarships, believe it or not is still not the approach, considering the trouble I had in trying to give away \$3,000 of the Tiffany money to a black person. Black people are deluged with scholarships of all kinds from all over so the one they would accept is the one that offers the money in a context that really meets their needs. Right now, the craft world does not meet our needs. So, we still get back to your having to do something about the craft world.

Practically speaking, I can suggest further that you consider developing, together with whatever black craftsmen you can find,

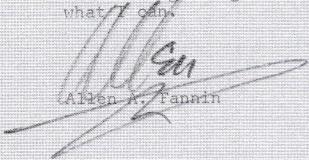
FIGURE 17.2 Allen Fannin to Francis Merritt, 19 January 1972. Francis Sumner Merritt papers, 1903–1979. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Page 2.

a special session that deals with some of the points I made before. The session could be taught by a group of self-employed black craftsmen who would not only deal with the technology of their particular crafts, but more important with the relationship that the craft world should have to black needs. Now, one trouble with this, which will have to be well thought out, is that there are black craftsmen, like everyone else, who are taken in by the 53rd Street mentality and who really have little or no concern for the basic needs of their brothers. So finding people to teach the session will be hard, but I'm willing if you are.

If you want some contact with black people who are involved in crafts, let me suggest: Ms. Margaret Cunningham, c/o The Hamilton Hill Art Center, 421 Schenectady St., Schenectady, NY. Ms. Cunningham is the director and single-handedly has built up a very fine thing. Try The Studio Museum in Harlem, Fifth Ave. & 125th St., New York, NY., att. Mr. Burgess. He is their director of something doing with education and has constant contact with young people who are into craft. Also, Ms. Wilhelmina Godfrey, c/o NY State Craftsmen, Box 733, Ithaca, NY. She has just established, with a group of others, a craft center in Buffalo. Now, all of the above people are not craftsmen, but have access to young people who might want to be. I would urge you to express your concern with doing something about the image of the craft world in the black community, to them.

Interestingly, your third paragraph about our not leaving ourselves open to your standard remuneration relates very much to what I have been talking about above. Because we are self-employed, and because of the lack of help from the craft world in publicizing craft as craft (not as art), we earn very little money relative to our time. Together, working 12-14 hours a day, Dorothy and I earned last year, after expenses, \$3900. So considering how hard it is to earn a living, need we ask why so few black people are into craft. If more were done to get more social relevance into craft world, perhaps the problem wouldn't be so severe. Nevertheless, we believe our place is behind the loom and money or not, that's where we intend to stay.

If we can get together on any of this, let me know, I'll do what I can.



Allen A. Fannin

P.O. Box 376 GPO
Brooklyn, New York
11201

FIGURE 17.3 Allen Fannin to Francis Merritt, 19 January 1972. Francis Sumner Merritt papers, 1903–1979. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Page 3.

from the state department, as if it were an honor to be black in America! I'm still wondering how that scene struck our black American friends, who are more likely to be arrested than feted for their appearance and ancestry, right? Ah me, the paradoxes.³

The observations outlined in these letters prompt comparison to the rising prominence of craft in art and culture. Although artists, writers and curators in the field of craft have engaged in multivocal discussions of gender, class and sexuality, generative considerations of race and ethnicity remain less prominent. In 2016, the Critical Craft Forum hosted a panel, chaired by Bibiana Obler and Mary Savig, at the College Art Association's annual conference to assess the state of the field some forty years later.⁴ What assumptions are being made about race in the craft world today? What are the systemic realities in the field faced by artists of colour? How do history and legacy inform the current situation? Given the complexity of these questions, the panel – which took place in Washington, DC, and gathered artists based in Virginia and Maryland – focused on race-based issues concerning this region, where #BlackLivesMatter banners and Confederate flags dot the landscape from Baltimore to Richmond.⁵

The following transcription, collaboratively edited and abbreviated for publication by Bibiana Obler, Mary Savig and Namita Gupta Wiggers with final approval from all participating panellists, is a contribution to shifting our course. The speakers, moderated by Wiggers, Critical Craft Forum Director and co-founder, represent three generations of artists invested in craft: Sonya Clark, Wesley Clark and Joyce J. Scott.⁶ The panellists began with brief statements in response to Fannin's letter and the questions just mentioned.

* * *

Sonya Clark (reading an excerpt from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* [1952]):

I am an Invisible Man. No, I'm not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe. Nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids, and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me.

I've been thinking about invisibility and about how to make the invisible visible. And I've been thinking about defining terms and about mentors. I've been thinking about these three things in the context of being a Black craftswoman.

Let's begin with the idea of invisibility. We (the panelists) were talking this morning about how comprehensive museums might not have many people who are of African descent represented in their craft collections. My immediate reaction is: it depends on how you define what craft is and where you're looking. Because comprehensive museums are actually filled with craft, and they're filled with craft created by people of colour. But that's not where we tend to define where craft is and where it is located within those museums. Making the invisible visible.

Also, invisible technological skills are often overlooked. Africans who were brought to other parts of the world through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Route were not valued as human beings. We were valued for our skills and our strength. Our skills were often technologies like weaving, basket making and blacksmithing. All of these things. Making the invisible visible.

I think about mentors, because I wouldn't be here if it weren't for a grandmother who taught me how to sew. I honour her legacy every day as a fibre artist and as a woman. Because of her genetic pool and the genetic pool of those grandmothers and grandfathers that I did not know, all the unknown ancestors, I have the strength, fortitude and legacy to be with you today. I have mentors and friends like this lady sitting right here (Joyce J. Scott), and two of my mentors in the audience: Joan Livingstone and Anne Wilson, who were my teachers at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

I think about my peers who make the invisible visible. Artists like Simone Leigh who are craftspeople, and of her project which brought attention to caregivers in her *Free People's Medical Clinic* (2014). Caregivers as craft. I think about Theaster Gates's project *Shine* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (2014), where he framed the idea of who is an artist by focusing the audience's attention to see the people who shine shoes in a new light. That's craft. In my own *Hair Craft Project* (Figure 17.4, Plate 23), where I think about hairdressing as a craft. I collaborated with twelve Richmond hairdressers to bring African and African American hairdressing into focus as a type of textile mastery. Making the invisible visible.

Joyce J. Scott: Sonya, I'm going to ask you to read with me what you read on Ellison. I don't have my glasses. Plus this is more theatrical. So would you start reading again?

Sonya: 'I am an invisible man.'

Joyce: I'm a woman and you see me all the time.

Sonya: 'No I'm not a spook like ...'

Joyce: I am a spook.

Sonya: 'Edgar Allan Poe. Nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms ...'

Joyce: You know that's wrong, because I'm totally Hollywood.

Sonya: 'I am a man of substance.'

Joyce: I am a woman. I created substance.

Sonya: 'Of flesh and bone.'

Joyce: Flesh, bone, and fat.



FIGURE 17.4 Sonya Clark, *The Hair Craft Project*, 2013, featuring hairstylists Kamala Bhagat, Dionne James Eggleston, Marsha Johnson, Chaunda King, Anita Hill Moses, Nasirah Muhammad, Jameika and Jasmine Pollard, Ingrid Riley, Ife Robinson, Natasha Superville and Jamilah Williams. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Photo: Naoko Wowsugi

Sonya: 'Fibre and liquid'

Joyce: I use them all the time.

Sonya: 'And I might even be said to possess a mind.'

Joyce: It's been said.

Sonya: 'I am invisible.'

Joyce: No.

Sonya: 'Understand simply because people refuse to see me ... Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass.'

Joyce: Thank you. My job, the one that I've chosen, is to break that glass. It's maybe why I use glass in my work (Figure 17.6, Plate 25). I believe that I'm always seen, but you refuse to see my quality. I believe that my work is art. I believe that my work is craft. I deserve to be with anyone, any artist, and I deserve to make as much money as any artist. But to defy or to say that I'm not a craftsperson as well as a fine artist, means that I diminish, spit [on], forget my mother, my grandparents, my great-grandparents who were potters, and weavers, and all the things that they did.

So my job as an artist – and I don't believe it's every artist's job – is to shine, and to use all of the facilities that were given to me. It is to break that glass, take a shard, and cut through the next veil. Because that's what someone did for me.

Wesley Clark: My work is aesthetically based in the antique; the warmth of the colour of the wood, the texture just makes you think 'old'. It's meant to question why is it being salvaged and put in this gallery space. My *Target* series, for example, deals with the idea of black people being targeted and the psychological effects that go along with that. The aesthetic is meant to draw you in with this beautiful warmth, and then to address the underlying issues. I'd not really considered how craft comes in for me, to be honest, until being asked to be on the panel. But it's in my process.

Historically, I come from a family of craftmakers. My grandfather was a craftsman. He built half the homes in Freetown and Glen Burnie (Baltimore, Maryland). When he passed, he made sure his tool set came to me because by that time I was working in wood. My aunt called me 'Little Gertrude' for a period, because I came home from college crocheting hats and making things of that nature. But I never really considered that to be anything. Now all these things are becoming part of my work, yet I've never considered it a craft. It's just the materials I used.

In the process of being in the studio, I am creating this narrative for myself, asking questions: What would a real craftsman do when he's finished his work? I'm playing a role as a craftsperson, so I consider myself to be a faux or fraudulent craftsman.

Namita Gupta Wiggers: Let's go back to terms. What *kind of craft* are we talking about when we're talking about craft? Fannin alludes (in his letter) to the '53rd Street mentality', which refers to what was then the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, and later the American Craft Museum and now the Museum of Arts and Design. He is speaking to that particular institution and location, but also about a group of supporters who separate out one kind of craft from other kinds of craft and art, as in the Studio Craft Movement.

For example, Wes brought up that he doesn't think of himself as a craftsperson ... and in terms of the artwork that has been presented today, it's not so different than artwork I've seen in a number of contemporary art institutions. When Mike Kelley uses thrifted quilts, it's considered art. Yet there's a particular aesthetic perceived in connection to craft, an attention to materials that you cannot find in other parts of the art world. The question is, in being a 'Black Craftsman', is it more challenging because you're trying to operate within that Studio Craft Movement? Or is it that the Black artist – as opposed to the Black craftsman – has more opportunity because of the kinds of things that can be done in the art world?

Wes: I think, to a degree, it is about defining terms. What I knew to be craft, or what I consider to be craft, was my grandmother who made the quilts, or my

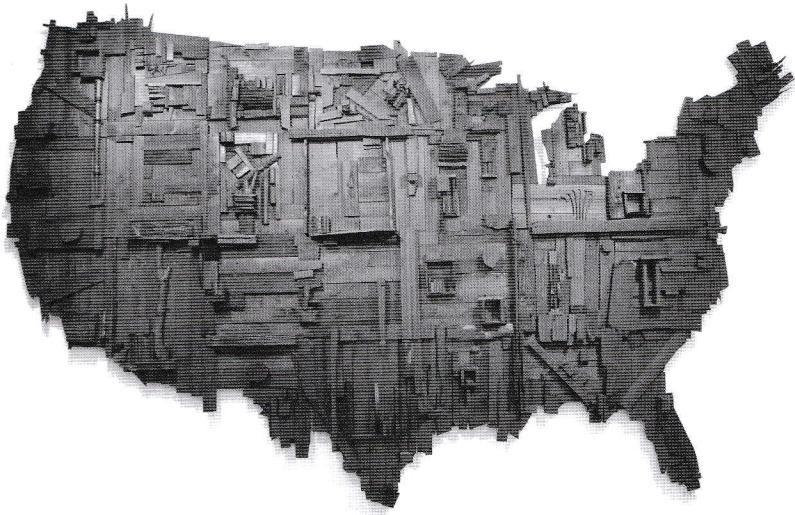


FIGURE 17.5 Wesley Clark, *Black Don't Crack but it Sho' Catch Hell*, 2014, spray paint, acrylic, wood, 24 x 32 inches. Courtesy: Wesley Clark.

grandfather who built functional items. I never considered the use of wood in my art or my crocheting with yarn. For me, it was just a simple matter of materials that I chose to express whatever it was that I was dealing with (Figure 17.5, Plate 24). To some degree, it was always a separate line for me. There was artmaking, and then there was craft, and there's craft in art and art in craft, but somehow, I simply never knew the difference consciously. I never drew that line in the sand, so to speak.

My grandmother wasn't trying to be in an art gallery, but that's what I was aiming for. For my grandparents, it was all functional and skill-based. The quilt was used because they were farmers and self-sufficient. That's actually what drew me to wanting to know how to make a hat, and some of the other skills I've learned that were craft-based was out of this idea of self-sufficiency. I've never really thought of them as the means for aesthetics.

Sonya: Your grandmother's quilts – were they beautiful?

Wes: It was beautiful because of its history, to my mind. It's not really beautiful when you look at it, no. But it was beautiful to me.

Sonya: So I don't think art should be judged just on beauty, but I was doing that to reframe the way you might look at a quilt. If it's functional, then it does what it needs to do. If it has a story, if it belongs to your family, then it has a story,

and imbued in that story is its power, right? You know why Wes is here, right? Because we invited him. He was waiting for an invitation. We defined him as being a craftsperson and here he is.

Wes: Yeah, pretty much. Thank you.

Joyce: Some of this has to do with the belief that [craft is] a bunch of nannies and squaws, and people who have no true intellect, who can cook really well, but never went to school who make crafts. There's this whole feeling that something is 'not equal to' when one makes a cup. Some people don't make cups because they know that a cup is going to make them very little money in contrast to painting a picture of that cup. Many times schools, and galleries, and museums, and people who have the money and the power to direct people, say: No, that's fine art. You just used wood and you made a chair. Now he just made a deconstructed chair, but that's sculpture. You made a chair, and that's craft work. And they can't have the same value. There are some people who believe that [craft is] the stepchild or bastard kid in the art world who really won't get that great exhibition in a museum. I don't think that is true anymore; there are a lot of people on this stage and in this audience who worked very hard to get people to understand the brilliance and to give respect to crafts as in and of itself a fine art.

Sonya said it. We're throughout museums, but we're placed in other departments. If Jeff Koons wants to do a blow-up balloon dog, that's called fine art, but someone else does something similar out of crochet and it sells for \$1,000. That's not talking about whether people are great critics. That's talking about something else deeply rooted, I believe, in the arts. And if someone who considers herself to be both ... I hear things. I've been told: Stop calling yourself a craftsperson; if you keep being rooted in the crafts, then you're not going to get the respect and the money that you deserve.

And then I say, 'How can I tell those Black people who raised me and made the things that I use as my touchstone, that I can't say [I am a craftsperson]?' That's like saying, 'Joyce, don't respect yourself. Go and put on another mask and go on out, or the face you have, just cover up that part because that cheek is not worthy of the rest of your face.'

A painter told me that when he saw the Gee's Bend denim quilts, you know the ones made out of overalls? He said, 'I've been trying to get the way that blue blends my whole life.' And they did it. And they're still blue jean quilts. It's bullshit. It's what humans do to each other.

Sonya: It's hegemony and it's racism and it's all sorts of things. Sexism, too. There's something even more deeply rooted than that, which is the Western notion of the mind/body split. We're still suffering from the Western construct of intellect and intelligence that resides in what we call painting and sculpture, versus things that are clearly made from the intelligence of our bodies, through kinaesthetic intelligence. It's as if paintings weren't made from the body and weavings weren't made from the mind. The strategy is so binary and antiquated but it still has resonance.

Namita: An image circulated recently on the internet: ‘White privilege is your history being part of the core curriculum, and mine being taught as an elective.’⁷ I think each of our panellists addresses this issue in a number of different ways. It is evident in Fannin’s letter, in which he states ‘that offering scholarships, believe it or not, is still not the approach’ to take.⁸

We need systemic change. This isn’t just about adding numbers, diversity, and/or meeting quotas. It’s about sitting down and reworking the system that is not recognizing the breadth of work that has been made and what is being made now. That involves changes to museums and academia. It involves thinking every day about how we live.

Let’s continue by thinking about some of those systems and to move this discussion towards what you think can be done: where is the problem and what needs to happen to fix the problem?

Sonya: It’s deeply rooted in our culture (the separation between), tech schools versus liberal arts schools is part of the problem. Now fast-forward to what happens with where students end up going to school, and what they end up studying. I got 800, a perfect score on my math SAT. And I was a Black girl, I was supposed to be an engineer. But in everyone’s story you can find a serendipitous connection of dots. That happened between my grandmother and meeting lots of other people in whom I found a like-mindedness. I came to believe that my mind and body work together, and craft could be a repository for ideas, thoughts, queries. It seems laughable when I say this out loud. Of course, the mind and body work together.

One of the things that happens is that Black students, if they’re first generation college-bound, or even if they’re not, their parents say, ‘You’re going to go to art school. Okay. Well, maybe you should become a designer because there might be money in that, in the design field.’

Here’s the thing. Craft is all about design and about function. So we should be getting those students; making smart utilitarian objects is exactly when a design works, right?

Namita: So why aren’t Black students showing up in the materially based programs?

Sonya: Some of them *are* because of serendipity, but it is about defining the terms. If we define craft by its utility and its connection to design, that’s a way of connecting to those students whose parents say interior design, graphic design, fashion design, all good. Craft should be on that list.

If you are interested in art because you’re interested in connecting to your culture, you just heard the three Black people on the panel say we do craft because of our legacy. So that becomes another way. It’s more how we are telling the story, who is telling the story of craft, and who has the biggest megaphone.

Joyce: If you look at what's happening in the United States with Flint, Michigan and Black Lives Matter, I think some kids are scared to go to schools where they will be marginalized, and will be seen as very, very different.⁹ I think it's wonderful that art schools exist where folks can just come and be real, be artistic. But in talking to kids, they think 'I'm not going to do well.' I always say: there is not a critical mass of Negritude. So you're the only one, you're one of three, you go through your entire undergraduate life where you are the Other.

Some people rally to you for all reasons. One is because you are the Other, and they see that light from you and they want to get it. Because some students wander around in some of these schools and they do cleave to their mentors, to their teachers, because they can in some senses, be lost. And I know that the Maryland Institute College of Art has suffered because of the uprising that happened last year because parents were scared to send their kids there.¹⁰ Well that's all parents, not just white parents.

Sonya: Should be Black parents ...

Joyce: And the other thing that you [Wesley] said that is so incredible to me – because my parents were sharecroppers – is the difference between the head and the heart. I don't think there's much difference, but it's the application, how we think about it.

I was at Haystack (Mountain School of Crafts) in 1974 (for the international summer sessions organized by Merritt), and I went back to be an instructor in 1976, which was the bicentennial year. That was the year that there were Indigenous professors; all of the Native American instructors were there, just like Black History Month where every Black person is working as a Black person.

When you were with Africans and when you were with Native teachers, they really didn't separate the two (head and heart). It's really helped me to be a better teacher when I'm teaching. You might be singing while you're weaving. You might be imbuing that thread with a different kind of spirit. You might talk about the use of the garment, or use of whatever you're making, the taste that you get from holding this cup and the cup being a certain colour, or the cup having a certain shape. And whether it won't ever get hot, but you can feel the warmth, that kind of thing. And that's the combination of the two. I've been in classes where it is so skill driven that it never comes up. This is a big loss.

Namita: Let's open this up to the audience.

Fo Wilson [speaking from the audience]: I want to pick up on something that both Sonya and Joyce said about the African identity. What gets confusing for the African-American experience is that we live in a society that privileges the Western way of thinking, of philosophical thinking about art and life. In many

cultures, not just African cultures, the idea of beauty is not separate from utility. It wouldn't occur to us as part of our genetic heritage to think about those things differently. But when you come to a university to be academically enforced, that's how it is. That's the way the power structure is. Your work [the artists'] to me is a form of resistance to that power structure because you're working against it. I want more scholars in craft that write from different points of view, from outside of that Western paradigm and French philosophy.

I also have a graduate student who happens to be African American. He is very rooted in African American tradition. He says he has to spend 30 minutes teaching the faculty and students about his culture before he can talk about his work. I said, 'You can tell them to do that work before they come to your crit. It's your right to do that and say, "Look, I'm going to be talking about this. You're going to get a lot more out of it and you're going to be able to give me better feedback if you read this article."

Namita: You've hit on a couple of places where there are things that can be done. Look for people who are writing and thinking outside of that Western philosophical construct. Go find them, they may not be in academia. Find somebody who is going to break down those boundaries and encourage them to write about your work. Bring them into the conversation.

Second, figure out how you're going to accept that teaching comes from many places, and help the system value your grandmother and the lady down the street who taught you to embroider as teachers. Figure out how to bring them into the academic environment in other ways.

Sonya: How can we together cultivate intellectual humility? We don't know everything, but if we're curious, we can learn together, right? If you do that in the classroom, then what your student was doing would just be natural. It would just be a natural thing, if that's at the heart of what we're doing together as educators.

I've been in academia now for twenty-two years. I stick with academia because I know that I can change something within the system. But I also happen to be a chair of the department, which means that I can hold people accountable for what they're doing in the classroom, too.

So for all the African American students and students of African descent, or students of colour, or whoever feels like they're Other in that situation, I'm not only looking to you and me, but *they're* looking to everyone in this room who might not look like them. And knowing that there's some level of cultural competency there. Cultural competency is something that I actually hold my faculty accountable for, because you can't teach craft without teaching about the world. It is impossible. So if you're managing to do that, stop. Revisit how blinding your privilege has been, and then let's figure out how to get these notions of other cultures and other

ways of thinking and being, and making, and evaluating, and critiquing into the classroom.

The second thing is to cultivate intellectual humility. Because I don't know everything. I don't know everything about Africa. I don't know everything about the Caribbean, Jamaica, Trinidad. I don't even know everything about myself. I really don't. Cultivating intellectual humility allows the space for us to say we don't know; how can we learn it together? And it is such a great antidote to privilege that blinds us. I say this as someone who is privileged. I'm aware of the privileges that I had. I grew up middle class, I went to prep schools, and I'm always trying to say, okay, is that my privilege blinding me, because I'm also a Black woman who got followed around in stores as a kid because store owners thought I might steal something.

Wes: I was thinking about Fannin's point that we have other issues as Blacks: we have to eat, we have to put food on the table, and the idea of value formed in my mind. It's the same thing, for instance, when I came home and was amazed that my family crocheted. I don't remember it growing up. It was a skill that was around me because I was on this blanket every day, but no one ever told me my grandmother made it. So there are these skills that aren't being passed on, or the idea of working with your hands. There's a certain level of value I felt that is missing early on. You can make a hat instead of buying that \$50 J. Crew hat that is crocheted. I can make that hat; I can then make anything. Once you have the skills, you can take that in other realms, but if you weren't introduced to the idea of crocheting in your sculpture class, even made to do it as part of the actual assignment, then it's going to get lost.

Sonya: Do men in your family crochet?

Wes: No, men do not. But when I was teaching in elementary school I taught the boys to do it and they loved it. I don't really know what to say as far as gender, simply that if you're taught it then you can do it. When boys aren't being taught it unless they actively seek it, and I guess no one ever thought to teach me.

Sonya: Sometimes as children, we don't know what's possible if we don't have role models or mentors. So if you crochet, then it becomes possible for a young man who looks like you, or looks up to you to say, oh, that's possible. That's not just something women do. That's one of the things that is also really important: to not only know our histories, but that fibre arts and textiles are not gendered across the globe, in fact. But also to be the role model in *this* place and when we teach, to make sure that we're sharing those models. And making sure we're not engendering more of them either.

Joyce: I was thinking earlier that if I were the audience, and I were white – I'm saying this because we talked about the cleave sometimes between ethnicity and class in the classroom – and I was doing everything that the panellists have so sweetly described to you, I might feel a little bit like, 'wait a second. I'm already ... what can I do?' For me, it's about getting close to a person that's not doing it. When I say get close, I don't mean have sex with them, or go out and have drinks, that's not what I mean. But sometimes you know that someone has great ability and it's manifest in what they do in class or what they do with their students. Sometimes you have the real ability to just be human with another human. Help people with what could be perceived as an academic shortcoming. It really is all of us working with each other. I think that's how change happens.

Joan Livingstone [speaking from the audience]: I was intrigued by the title of the topic, 'The Black Craftsman Situation,' and I know we referred back to this incident in Haystack as a kind of historical precedent for asking the question. But I'm curious if you could talk about what is the Black craftsman situation that we're referring to? I think there's meat there to talk about.

Joyce: A thing that spoke to me about change was just seeing a feature on Art Smith in *Essence* magazine. A lot of people are like, who? Art Smith was one of the leading art jewellers starting in the 1950s. But the article now is in pop culture. They had one of his necklaces, and on the next page featured a young contemporary Black jeweller.

I looked at the jewellery in the article. They were jewellers who were really pushing to have a really wide audience. So it wasn't just about Black Art Smith who did one of a kind work. It was, to me, much more about designers in a broader group. Anyway, my point was when that guy (Art Smith) can be in an everyday lexicon *and* some commercial thing, *that* says to me there's a very slow creeping difference. Because he's this mentor, but he's also in a magazine that talks about who your boyfriend is and something else. Well, that means he's in everyday conversation. Wow, that's a difference.

And the other difference is that because of what we do, we are by proxy instigating crafted everyday stuff. I've been making jewellery for a long time, but I've been selling since I was 16. Every year, we artists get together and have a Christmas show. I have people who have developed a real knowledge about jewellery, and they come wearing that necklace I made at the age of 16. They don't have a lot of money so we try to cap it at maybe \$600. And they come back to our show every year and they'll say, 'I went to the museum. Your work's in the museum, and I understand why this looks like this.' Wow. I like that it's an everyday conversation being worn by everyday folks. So that to me is a real change. And it's a change because they're more and more, I think, 'Black people are doing that.'

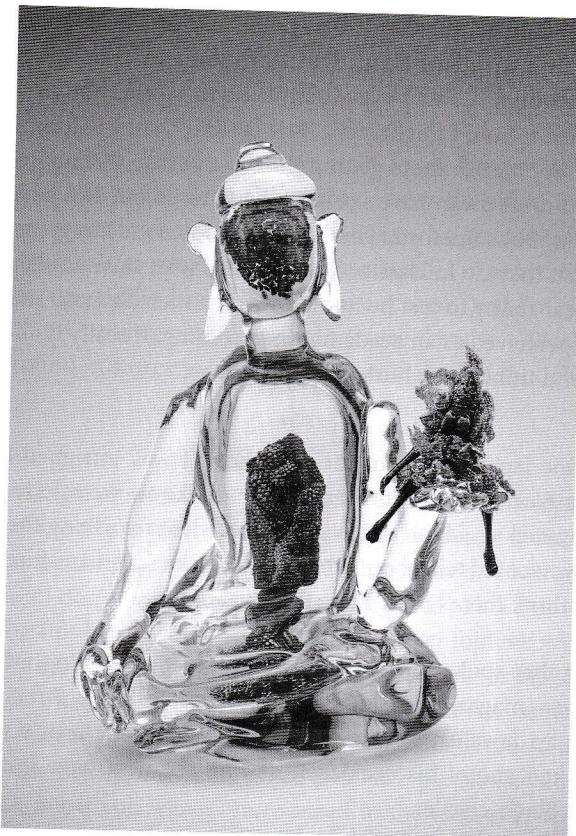


FIGURE 17.6 Joyce J. Scott, *Buddha (Fire & Water)*, 2013, hand-blown Murano glass processes with beads, wire and thread. Photo: Mike Koryta. Courtesy: Goya Contemporary, collection of NMAAHC Smithsonian Institution.

Sonya: Joan, when I was bringing up the idea of defining the terms, I actually had written down to define the terms of crafts, to define the terms of Blackness, to really dig in at what you were saying. In this panel we've talked about a lot of things, a lot of definitions that we could use for what craft is. We haven't really dug into the constructs around race. Maybe a couple of us said what that is, talked about African Americans as people of African descent, people from Africa. But I think the situation is that there are not enough people who are recognizing craft by people who are Black. And there are not enough Black students who are here, who are making work. There are not enough craftspeople in the power structures.

There's not enough in the classrooms, there are not enough teachers. We have been talking around it, so I really appreciate defining the terms. For me, that's the situation: there are not enough of us. There's not enough light being shed on the work that's already been done, the work that has to be done, and work that

is currently being done. To your point: What are we writing about? How are we writing about what we're writing about?

And that is not (a question) that is for Black people only. That is for every people. And it's necessary by design in this nation. In this nation in particular, it's necessary.

Joyce: That's what it is. You just said something that rings true to me. It's not just for Black people, it's for every people. We still have the [issue that] people don't see that we're Americans, and that what we do belongs to you as well, and it's all that stuff that you want to know, too. Sometimes we're not even in decision-making positions that would encourage the administration or even the student body to see us as a power force.

I can tell you one way that has changed. We're here talking to you. Not so very long ago, we might have been in the audience, but never chosen to be able to talk to you about Blackness.

Notes

- 1 Founded in 1950, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts is an international, non-profit, studio program in the arts, offering a residency program and workshop sessions to craftmakers and visual artists, led by prominent faculty artists. 'Mission & History'. Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, 2014. <http://www.haystack-mtn.org/about-haystack/mission-history/> (accessed 23 May 2016).
- 2 Francis Sumner Merritt to Allen Fannin, 29 December 1971. Francis Sumner Merritt papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 3 M. C. Richards to Francis Sumner Merritt, 22 August 1974. Francis Sumner Merritt papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 4 Critical Craft Forum offers on-line and on-site platforms for dialogue and exchange on critical questions in the craft field. Founded in 2008 by Namita Gupta Wiggers and Elisabeth Agro, and led by Wiggers since 2012, CCF has offered an annual session at College Art Association since 2010, a daily-moderated discussion via a Facebook group, and a podcast. 'Home'. *Critical Craft Forum*. <http://www.criticalcraftforum.com/> (accessed 1 May 2016).
- 5 #BlackLivesMatter was created by Black organizers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, and as a call to action against anti-Black racism in US society. The chapter-based organization works to broaden conversations around state violence against Black people in the United States and globally. 'Black Lives Matter Freedom & Justice for All Black Lives', *Black Lives Matter RSS2*. <http://blacklivesmatter.com/> (accessed 19 July 2016).
- 6 The Critical Craft Forum Session from which this interview is taken took place on 6 February 2016 at College Art Association, Washington, DC, and is available as a downloadable podcast at www.criticalcraftforum.com. Absent due to unforeseen circumstances were quilt-maker and scholar Joan M. E. Gaither and artist and curator Diana N'Diaye.

- 7** Thesociologicalcinema. 'Thesociologicalcinema, *The Sociological Cinema*, <http://thesociologicalcinema.tumblr.com/post/132334458625/white-privilege-is-your-history-being-part-of-the> (accessed 1 May 2016). Photo credit: Perry Threlfall.
- 8** Allen Fannin to Francis Merritt, 19 January 1972. Francis Sumner Merritt papers, 1903-1979. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Page 2.
- 9** For information on the lead pollution in the city of Flint, Michigan's water system, see Abby Goodnough, Monica Davey and Mitch Smith. 'When the Water Turned Brown', *New York Times*, 23 January 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/us/when-the-water-turned-brown.html> (accessed 24 July 2016).
- 10** See 'Timeline: Freddie Gray's Arrest, Death and the Aftermath--Baltimore Sun', *Baltimore Sun*, <http://data.baltimoresun.com/news/freddie-gray/> (accessed 23 May 2016).