

Who Counts, and is Counted, in Craft?

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In their Introduction to this collection, the editors acknowledge the important role of quantitatively informed research in revealing inequalities in access to creative sector employment. This research all too clearly reveals what many of us can already see, namely that across the Global North creative employment is overwhelmingly dominated by people who are “white and relatively privileged” (Patel and Dudrah 2021), including in craft (Luckman 2015; Luckman and Andrew 2020; Patel 2020a 2020b, 2021). While the majority of my own research is qualitative, as someone examining cultural and creative employment it is difficult to completely avoid having to engage with (the limits of) statistics, especially when working with government, industry and community partners imprisoned in policy discourses that can overly privilege the so-called ‘hard’ evidence of numbers. What information an organisation or government chooses to collect (or does not) and the form the questions and responses are allowed to take, says a lot about the priorities and blind spots of any administration. That is, about what they think counts. British colleagues working with UK creative employment data note that the proxy that theoretically stands for class identification is ‘Father’s Occupation’ (Brook, O’Brien and Taylor, 2018). In Australia, it is ‘Local Government Area (LGA) of Residence’, with each LGA apportioned to one of ten levels in an Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD). As proxies for understanding class both these measures reveal little about the nuance of individual experience, but rather a lot about these respective nations (the lingering British obsession with familial inheritance, and for Australia the national fixation with property ownership, or lack of it).

Certainly one thing such statistics are not really set up to understand is the modern reality of precarious employment. This is important for any discussion of craft and inequality for much craft income generation occurs of necessity in the statistical cracks between self-employment, second (or third, or fourth) jobs, cash-in-hand or volunteer work, and variously can move between being understood as amateur or professional. Given the central role of official data in informing national policy settings, that the reality of increased employment precarity (not just for cultural and creative workers) is not always adequately built into the state’s official capacity to capture employment data really defies understanding. This is especially so given how COVID-19 has revealed as a key faultline in even relatively privileged societies the differences between those with more secure, white collar employment that can be done from home, and those at the casualised coalface of essential, and vulnerable, work. As we know, some are always more privileged than others. It is in this complex balancing act of multiple income streams that much craft labour is to be found.

So much like social security systems not being well set-up to account for the ‘feast or famine’ realities of much contract-based creative employment (Morgan and Nelligan 2018, p. 137), many data collection frameworks still largely assume a model of Fordist secure employment as the norm. Largely hidden, however, in these statistics is the small, but important and hopefully growing, significance of alternative economic models for craft production: collectives, not-for-profits, social enterprises, volunteering, micro-enterprises based on community networks. The simple reality is that it is difficult, though obviously not impossible, to generate a sustainable primary or main income from craft, yet this is the only kind of work that is rendered particularly visible in the statistics. The demography of who can ‘afford’ to do this work and manage the risks that creative self-employment generally carries (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin 2005), when viewed solely through

numbers represents a doubling down on the relative invisibility of the majority of craft work and the real diversity of craft practice when the “precarious and low-paid nature of most creative work means that those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are less able to survive in the field” (Morgan and Nelligan 2018, pp. 4-5).

While I have largely dismissed them here, statistics do clearly have a place in informing our, and others’, understandings of craft work. This is something British craft advocates, led by the Crafts Council, are all too aware of having had to fight for the ongoing inclusion of craft as a defined creative industry the UK government collected data on (Luckman 2015, pp. 45-46). Importantly too, as the editors to this edition note, they do lay bare creative employment’s exclusions (Patel and Dudrah 2021). But on the other side of the same coin, statistics also have the potential to make visible activity not immediately evident, especially to researchers working empirically from within their own often mostly white middle-class networks. For example, despite the limits of the Australian census’ employment questions only focussing on one form of employment—your ‘main job held last week’—what the last census does reveal is that in the week prior to data collection, 189 people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) were primarily employed as Visual Artists (2018a). To put this perhaps rather low sounding number in perspective, this represents 9.17% of all Australians employed that week in this capacity. With at this time only 3.3% of the total Australian population identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ABS 2018c) coupled with ATSI people being traditionally under-represented in all professions, especially the particularly desirable and thus hard to break into ones, this is not insignificant. It is even more notable when viewed next to the more craft-focussed or craft-inclusive figures: ATSI Australians were 5 out of 520 Potter and Ceramic Artists (0.96%); 15 out of 608 Sculptors (2.47%); 37 out of 1810 ‘Visual Arts and Crafts Professionals nec’ (‘not elsewhere classified’, 2.04% –used to capture residual occupational categories without a discrete code); and 11 out of 353 ‘Visual Arts and Crafts Professionals nfd’ (‘not further defined’, 3.12% - used to capture occupational categories inadequately described or otherwise outside the scope of the other classifications).

If we look here to presence as well as absence, the question to be asked is what is happening in the visual arts space that craft-based practice can build upon? The answer (which I do not have space to do justice here) is complex, but at its heart lies the decades-long success of Aboriginal arts centres which are ideally community owned and run, generally in locations remote from the large urban centres of Australia but within the artists’ own communities, and which collectively provide a means by which to realise economic, social and cultural benefits for Aboriginal people living on country. Increasingly, and offering a model for further growth, some art centres are selling items for sale that draw upon what we can easily identify as more craft-based practice, such as the woven items sold alongside canvas paintings produced by the artists of Bula’bula Arts.¹ These hybrid (craft and visual arts) centres operate alongside others focussed more specifically upon on-country craft production, such as the Hermannsburg Pottery², Tjanpi Desert Weavers³ and Ernabella Arts⁴ (now producing pottery, but with a history that includes collaboration with the Adelaide city-based JamFactory to produce textiles for exhibition, including rugs).

Recently, craft across the Global North has had something of its own reckoning with its exclusions, especially on the basis of race. While long before the Black Lives Matter movement grew to new levels of visibility and shared outrage in mid-2020, there had been practitioners and other voices who had championed diversity in craft and sought to draw attention to absences (Patel 2020a and 2020b), there is now a palpable and genuine desire evident among key craft gatekeepers to do

¹ <https://bulabula.com.au/>

² <https://hermannsburgpotters.com.au/>

³ <https://tjanpi.com.au/>

⁴ <http://www.ernabellaarts.com.au/ceramics>

better and be more inclusive in this space (Patel 2020c). This includes redressing histories of what counts as recognised professional craft practice. Across much of the twentieth century, craft advocacy bodies and their memberships sought to align craft more strongly with art, and thus to 'serious' professional and accredited creative practice. In many ways, the fight for credibility and respect for craft practice and knowledge remains just as alive today, but has fractured into a more diverse range of voices, opening the door for the inclusion of some craft objects and practices at the highest echelons of creative institutional gatekeeping. As leading craft writer and thinker Tanya Harrod recently acknowledged, if she were to write *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century* (1999) today: "studio craft would be scaled back and more attention paid to amateurs, to craft in industry, to vernacular rural craft, and to making within the Black and Asian communities" (Harrod 2020). In the same recent edition of the British *Crafts* magazine, Crafts Council Executive Director Rosy Greenlees used her 'Opinion' column to specifically address the need to tackle racism and the need to move beyond western European legacies in our understanding of what a craftsperson is. Quoting Jonathan Meuli's chapter from *The Culture of Craft*, she notes that many of us across the Global North operate within highly limited understandings of the craftsperson as artist, that is a solitary, original individual (more easily captured in official data), rather than someone operating within a more complex making ecosystem, perhaps collectively and anonymously, and consciously aware of the ways in which their making techniques and aesthetics are part of a longer lineage of making (Greenlees 2020, p. 14).

Greenlees' evocation here of aesthetics reminds us of another key third party mediating 'who and want counts' in the craft marketplace – the consumer. The Aboriginal Arts Centres I positively refer to above while ideally community-owned and run, tend to be largely managed by non-ATSI staff. As the administrative, including distribution and marketing, brokers facilitating the production of creative works for a largely non-First Nations consumer, a part of their role is to ensure that the market is educated in an understanding and appreciation of the particular cultural meanings of the work, while simultaneously having an eye out to ensuring production meets the aesthetic demands of this market. While all artworks produced within a centre will be 'bought', that is the artist paid for their work, not all will ever be sold⁵. The issue of the politics of aesthetics—what is acceptable, desirable, in demand, and who gets to choose—remains a challenge especially for the more commercial end of the crafts economy. Drawing upon interviews with craft event organisers and promoters in Detroit and Toronto, Dawkins's research has highlighted the way in which aesthetics can operate as a cover for 'ethnic cleansing':

While she [the Detroit organiser] denied that the 'ethnicity' of the maker influenced their vendor selection process, clearly what she perceived to be signifiers of ethnicity stood out among the seemingly racially unmarked work of white crafters ... although black crafters have applied to be in their show, 'their aesthetic doesn't fit in' because 'aesthetically, indie craft is very white.' ... According to a Toronto-based craft organizer I interviewed: 'I think it's odd when people submit work and they are of a non-white ethnicity, their work tends to mirror their ethnicity somehow.' (Dawkins 2011, p. 268)

Patel's research into the crafts in Britain as featured in this special issue similarly draws attention to "experiences of racism and microaggressions in craft spaces such as studios or fairs" (Patel 2021). Craft's commercial gatekeepers and consumers need to be made accountable for their behaviours here too, including of the ways otherwise progressive actions can have problematic outcomes (Bush 2019).

⁵ Even fewer will attract a significant price in the international art market, but some will. The Resale Royalty scheme is a mechanism by which some of this money can still be returned to the artist, even after the initial sale <https://www.resaleroyalty.org.au/about-resale-royalty.aspx>

Cultural studies researchers clearly need to remain attentive to the absences and erasures within craft, and cultural and creative practice more generally. But in looking to effect change is not just to identify the problem, it is important too to be on the look-out for the presence of possibility. Such presences mark not only opportunity, skill, and resilience in the face of entrenched barriers, but point potentially to better modes of socio-economic organisation that can benefit us all, or at least those of us who agree that COVID-19 has surely finally made clear that “the game is now up on 40 years of neoliberalism” (Banks 2020, p. 652). Craft practice is often looked to as a model of ‘good work’ (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013). Work that is self-actualising, fulfilling, meaningful, in short enjoyable. That leads to tangible, real-world results that are culturally useful and valued. While recently much of the focus in English-language crafts discussion has been on the individual craft worker as artist or micro-entrepreneur, historically much of this is work that has had a collective, community utility and wellbeing focus. It seems timely to more fully reclaim this broader vision of what craft is and can do, and to make it count.

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