

# Connected Communities

## Connecting Craft & Communities

Dr Nicola J Thomas, Dr Fiona Hackney, Dr Katie Bunnell



# Background

## Executive Summary

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**The Connecting Craft and Communities network responded to the current resurgence of interest around craft and addressed the ways in which making works to connect people together.**

The purpose of the network was to consider the nexus between people and the changing cultures, politics, practices and skills of craft in the 21st century. Discussions focused on developing an understanding of the role of craft in strengthening connections, enabling self-reliance, enhancing health and well-being and making sustainable economic futures through the workshop themes: 'Crafting Communities', 'Crafting futures' and 'Crafting sustainability and wellbeing'. The networking project took place across three, two-day participatory workshops held between April and September 2011. In all, the workshops brought together 76 professional and amateur makers, activists, creative organisations, intermediaries, policy makers, researcher-practitioners and academics. Together these participants reflected on the challenges and opportunities of connecting craft and communities.

The workshops were supported by a website: <http://connectingcraftcommunities.wordpress.com>

## Researchers and Project Partners

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### Principal Investigator

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### Co-Investigators

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*Award Leader MA Twentieth Century Art & Design: Histories & Theories and Senior Lecturer in Historical and Cultural Studies*  
University College Falmouth

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*Associate Professor of Design*  
University College Falmouth

### Organisations involved in the network include

**Arts for Health Cornwall and Isles of Scilly**

**Charnwood Arts**

**Crafts Council**

**Craftspace**

**Devon Guild of Craftsmen**

**Creative Skills**

**Happy Museum Project**

**Heritage Crafts Association**

**Leach Pottery**

**Museum of English Rural Life**

**Transition Town Movement**

**Victoria and Albert Museum**

**Wolverhampton Arts and Heritage Services**

## Research Council funded projects presented through the network:

### **Dr Justin Marshall**

*Bespoke, RCUK Digital Economy Programme*  
(EP/H007296/1)

### **Dr Anna Upchurch**

*Warwick-Duke Humanities Project* (AHRC AH/G001081/1)

### **Dr Louise Valentine**

*Past, Present and Future Craft Practice* (AHRC, MRG-AN6783/APN19384)

### **Prof Philip Crang**

*Fashioning diaspora space: Textiles, pattern and cultural exchange between Britain and South Asia* (AHRC AH/E508766/1)

### **Dr Caitlin DeSilvey and Dr James Ryan**

*Small is Beautiful? Visual and Material Cultures of Making and Mending*, AHRC

## Key words

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Craft  
Making  
Participatory  
Sustainability  
Well-being  
Resilience  
Politics  
Economies

# Connecting Craft & Communities

## Workshop themes and recommendations for future research

The purpose of the network was to consider the intersection between communities and the changing cultures, politics and practices of craft. The diverse composition of participants at each workshop facilitated conversations that pointed to future research and reflected the heterogeneous terrain of 'craft'. Through the course of the workshops a multitude of themes and ideas were aired which form the basis of a forthcoming paper written by the project team. This report presents the key themes that emerged from the workshops, existing outcomes and areas for further research.

## 1. Craft and participatory engagements with communities

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Workshop discussion reflected on the ways in which making practices are drawn on or enrolled within participatory arts practice. The workshops acted as a reference point for the diversity of engagement with community *led* practice, and the ways in which craft works to produce communities of practice. Projects demonstrated a strong commitment to engage with marginalized, vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups. This was often aligned with funding initiatives and commissioning decisions.

Discussion questioned taken for granted understandings of the benefits of 'making' in community projects informed by social policy agendas linked to the improvement of people's wellbeing/outcomes. Some participants aired concerns around reinforcing craft as the quotidian 'go-to arts discipline of social policy'; for others, the accessibility of disciplines such as needlepoint or knitting presented a democratization of creative

practice. Participants were passionate about the potential power of making as a life enhancing activity. The workshop participants drew on their experience working with participatory approaches and progressive models of engagement. A call was made to ensure that institutions maintain space for such methodologies in commissioned work.

Workshop participants discussed the well-being benefits that accrued to those engaged with making projects. Such discussions were underpinned by an acknowledgement of ongoing social inequalities that such projects sought to ameliorate. Concerns were raised that it was easy to draw too readily on the making-as-therapy model to help vulnerable groups without tackling the deeper-rooted issues that marginalize such groups in the first place. Here the importance of craft as a political position in drawing attention to and addressing issues of equality and exclusion were at the fore.

### Future research

Future research should address the varied methodologies of participant engagements within the crafts sector and to place this within a broader understanding of participatory arts practice and social policy. Methodologies for evaluating the well-being benefits of craft practice were particularly raised. Future research needs to address the evaluation methodologies that can respond to the experiential affects of making, alongside the quantitative values often looked for by policy audiences.

### Outcomes from the workshop that respond to this theme:

AHRC Connected Communities workshop: 'Can Strengthening 'Communities' Improve Health and Well Being? A Public/Policy

Dialogue on Theories, Interventions and Action' September 2011, organized by Dr Elliott. Contributions from PI and Co-Is and workshop participants Jayne Howard, Arts for Health Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly and Deirdre Figueiredo, Craftspace.

AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) application in partnership with the Craftspace. 'Crafting community participation: Craftspace, the creative economy and community engagement praxis'. PI: Dr Thomas, University of Exeter; Co-I Dr Hackney, University College Falmouth and Deirdre Figueiredo, Craftspace. Decision pending.

AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) application in partnership with Arts for Health Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly: 'Use Your Hands for Happiness': crafts practice as a means of building community assets, health and well-being'. PI: Dr Hackney, University College Falmouth; Co-I, Dr Thomas University of Exeter & Jayne Howard (Arts for Health Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly). Decision pending.

AHRC: Genealogies of Place: PI Prof Fyfe, Co-Is Dr Hackney, Prof Frohlich, Steve Thompson. (£15,000) (2010)

AHRC Creative Communities: Community Remix (CoRe): PI Professor Fyfe, Co-I Dr Hackney, Dr Frohlich, Dr Brandt, Dr Jordan, Paul Egglestone (£1.4 million) (AH/J005355/1) (submitted July 2011, unsuccessful).

## 2. Craft, Communities and Political Cultures

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Throughout the workshops the relationship between craft and social and political transformation was central. Paul Greenhalgh's

call (Crafting Futures, keynote speaker) to re-centre craft as a social and political position, resonated with workshop discussions. The workshop witnessed the heterogeneity of political positions, discourses and subjects that inform contemporary practices (arts and crafts socialism, punk cultures, DIY movement, craftivism, feminism, environmental politics, etc.), with many of the different political positions folding into and permeating each other.

### Future research

Workshop conversations pointed to the need for a better understanding of where contemporary craft sits in relation to varied political cultures. This called for a need to fully understand the transformative power of making and how 'communities' are understood and come into being within this nexus. Such research requires both methodological and conceptual approaches to understand the role that participatory making approaches play in the development of political cultures.

### Outcomes from the workshop that respond to this theme

Fiona Hackney presented the paper 'Under the Pavement the Antimacassar: Quiet Activism and Domestic Crafts' at Design Activism, the Design History Society annual conference, Barcelona (Sept. 2011); the paper is being developed for a special issue of *Design and Culture* (Berg) edited by Dr. G. Julier (Submission July 2012 for publication July 2013).

Community-Appropriated Research Model (CARM): PI Dr. Anne Light, Co-I Dr. Hackney (Connected Communities, AH/J006688/1). This project was informed by workshop themes and includes stakeholders that

attended the workshops including Hilary Jennings (The Happy Museum) and Deirdre Figueiredo (Craftspace)

Prof Philip Crang (speaker, Crafting Futures workshop) has subsequently appointed Laura Price, PhD student, Royal Holloway, University of London to undertake research on 'Creativity and the material politics of yarnbombing'.

### 3. Facing economic uncertainty: crafting resilience

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The workshops witnessed responses to the economic crisis: the restructuring of national economies; creative arts spending cuts; local and household responses to economic change. Alongside this context was discussion around building sustainable futures in the face of climate change and continued global economic uncertainty. Participants reflected on the relationship between making skills and individual and community resilience (from mending clothes to the development of new markets and products). The connection between skills, innovation and digital technology was strongly represented in the workshops, particularly in the ways in which craft and design contributes to the creative economy.

In the face of economic uncertainty workshop participants identified the value of making skills, the ability to adapt and innovate, and the social benefits that accrue when people collaborate. Participants discussed 'hopeful' projects that drew on the transformative power of making, and discussion often turned to the ways in which such projects might enable a post-capitalist future.

A linked topic that emerged through the workshops addressed the reduction of craft

based education in schools, colleges and higher education, and the impact that this would have on the capacities of future generations. Schemes to build capacity and the inclusion of skills based training in education and appropriate apprenticeship schemes were raised as critical needs for the sector.

### Future research

Further research is needed to consider the multiple ways in which craft practices may act as a brokering agent: to connect disparate groups of people, to strengthen communities to enhance cohesion between generations, to sustain education and improve the material/ immaterial relations. This research should pay attention to new economic models (such as social enterprise) and older models of working and training that have continued resonance (such as apprenticeships). This research should recognise the diversity of craft practices (from innovation led digital making to the continued importance of heritage crafts) and consider the multiple ways in which craft practice may contribute to a sustainable economy. Research should attend to the political genealogies of craft and see the contemporary discourse of the new economies of craft within this long continuum of transformative thinking.

### Outcomes from the workshop that respond to this theme

In association with the Leach Pottery, St Ives, Dr Nicola Thomas, Dr Fiona Hackney and Dr Katie Bunnell are developing a major grant to be submitted to the Connected Communities programme in Summer 2012.

AHRC research informed by the workshop (Situating Craft Guilds in the Creative Economy: Histories, Politics and Practices, AH/ I001778/1, Dr Nicola Thomas) will explore the connections between Craft Guilds and

the communities/economic roles that such organization support. Participants in the workshop are also starting to take part in this research, including Robin Wood (Heritage Crafts Association) and Rachael Matthews (Art Workers Guild).

A new Connected Communities funded scoping study will consider the role of online communities and economic transformation: 'Crafting communities of practice and interest: connecting 'online' and 'offline' making practices' (AHRC, AH/J012009/1, PI Dr Nicola Thomas, Co-Is Dr Roberta Comunian and Dr Caroline Chapain).

Fiona Hackney is developing a co-edited collection on domestic crafts with Carol Tulloch (UAL V&A) for Black Dog press. The publication emerged from the exhibition 'Hand Made Tales: Women and Domestic Crafts' (Women's Library, London) curated by Carol Tulloch, who gave a tour of the exhibition for participants at the first workshop.

## 4. Crafting Online/Offline Communities

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The workshops showed how important digital/ICT/social media has become for craft practitioners. Online and digital tools enable: social exchange; access to educational resources; audiences; peer support; marketing and online selling; just-in-time production/ bespoke manufacturing; customer engagement and bespoke customization. Discussion around face-to-face interactions and the grounded materialities of making underscored the importance of thinking though how communities linked to 'making' navigate online/offline worlds.

## Future research

Within future research there remains a need to unpack the new materialities and socialities of making associated with online connections. Craft offers an important lens through which to explore social and virtual worlds, particularly in relation to connectivity (both between people, materials, innovation, place and space).

## Outcomes from the workshop that respond to this theme

Many members of the workshop had a very active online presence. Their participation in the workshop informed the development, and subsequent research on a further Connected Communities scoping study:

Crafting communities of practice and interest: connecting 'online' and 'offline' making practices (AHRC, AH/J012009/1), PI Dr Nicola Thomas, Co-I's Dr Roberta Comunian and Dr Caroline Chapain. This research was developed in partnership with workshop stakeholders: the Crafts Council, Craftspace and the Leach Pottery.

## Conclusions

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This report is indicative of the conversations that were started at the workshop, and it is clear that many workshop attendees are engaged in ongoing dialogues and dissemination, for example:

Carolina Escobar-Tello talk on sustainability, happiness, and the power of 'making and doing' initiated a dialogue between University College Falmouth and the Sustainable Design Research Group at Loughborough University. Dr Escobar-Tello was also invited by Dr Polly McPherson to present her work to the University of Plymouth.



Julia Twomlow (Leach Pottery) and Stuart Shotton (Craftspace) are sharing knowledge around apprenticeships.

Jamie Chalmers was invited by Trevor Pitt to take part in 'Conversations with Boys Who Sew' (January 17<sup>th</sup> 2012)

Following discussion with Ezra Shales and Paul Greenhalgh, Julia Twomlow attended the 2012 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts conference in Seattle

Nicola Thomas presented workshop findings at the Annual Association of American Geographers, New York 2012, Geographies of Craft, one day session.

Nicola Thomas and Fiona Hackney were invited to attend the AHRC funded Work/Shop/Talk symposium to contribute workshop findings.

Crafts Council cited their collaboration with the network in their briefings, and have subsequently become a stakeholder in further Connected Communities research (see above).

Participants indicated: "[The workshop] did give me the chance to know people in 'real life' who I only previously knew digitally and therefore I would feel more able to talk to them about potential projects together in the future due to the mutual trust we developed."

Finally, one participant expressed the value of the multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder network:

*"Having so many different people together from different disciplines is special these days because [...] we're more often to know people in our own disciplines, while others that are similarly minded in other disciplines remain strangers – which is such a loss!!"*

The network presented a timely and highly appreciated opportunity for professional and amateur makers, activists, creative organisations, intermediaries, policy makers, researcher-practitioners and academics to spend time reflecting and considering future direction for research linked to the Connected Communities thematic.



# References and external links

The website that supports the network contains participant profiles (including the projects and research the participants have been involved with alongside web and publication links), resource links, podcasts of the talks, summaries of activities, photographs and twitter feeds.

<http://connectingcraftcommunities.wordpress.com/>

## Publication outputs

A workshop report will be offered for publication to the *Journal of Modern Craft*. A bibliographical search and preliminary literature review was produced to accompany the workshop. The review and the findings from the workshop are informing the main publication arising from the workshop:

**Thomas, N.J, Hackney, F, Bunnell, K, and Moreton S.** (forthcoming) Making connections: material and social futures, *Geography Compass*.

References used in the development of the literature review include:

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