



Fibre Focus

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Our Unofficial Voices

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

We've been exploring where the fibre field* encourages or discourages probing open discussions of our field's significant concerns. While constructive dialogue is always important, in the current downturn of the world's economy, dialogue has grown increasingly important to our field's future. Since rising in its modern form in the mid-20th Century our field has focussed on maximizing social networking and support as the key to preserving its technical knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, that focus has discouraged activities deemed divisive, such as dialogue about our field's challenges.

Furthermore, the rise of the "New Market Economy" in the 1980s altered our cultural economic environment. Now almost everything everywhere is being valued in terms of maximum immediate profitability. Now, most of our commercial publications have been monopolized by financial investors focussed on quarterly profits. They promote our field to the public as a "stress reducing hobby," further discouraging important dialogue.

The crux of these issues is not a suggestion that everyone has to participate in discussions. But the crux is that ongoing open discussion of these issues has to be officially encouraged and supported somewhere, otherwise we cannot successfully address the goals we have set for our field.

Too often we hear that we can only openly discuss

technical advice and that we must take our discussions about issues somewhere else.

Therefore, it is to the great credit of the Ontario Handweavers and Spinners that *Fibre Focus* has been hosting and encouraging this exploration here.

The Vital Importance of Divergent Views

By having two ears, intelligent creatures benefit more than simply having a spare organ for hearing sounds. The additional ear provides an entirely new ability to sense the position of the sound's origin and any speed and direction in which that sound might be moving.

By having two eyes, intelligent creatures benefit more than simply having another spare organ for their sense of sight. The second eye provides an ability to sense depth and three-dimensionality accurately.

This is no minor biological development. Stereophonic hearing and stereoscopic sight have been absolutely essential for survival of intelligent life on this planet. And yet both constitute a striking contradiction that seems counterintuitive. Whereas the importance of an eye or an ear is obviously the sensory information a solitary organ sends to the brain, the far greater importance of a pair of eyes or ears depends entirely upon the **disagreement** between the information each individual member of the pair sends to the brain. It is precisely the dissonant information sent to the brain that provides living creatures those essential benefits of additional perspective, of movement,

*This and a number of other spellings reflect the preferred Canadian spellings.

of speed, of depth, of location, of three-dimensional shape, etc. Think about this carefully. It is not the agreement of information sent to the brain. It is the conflicting information here that offers vitally important perspective and more balanced viewpoints

Life is simply too complicated and multidimensional for individual viewpoints alone to grasp it comprehensively. And yet, in our field of fibre differences in perspective are discouraged as stressful and disruptive.

How long is the bibliography of probing discussions in our fibre media? How many addresses have been presented at our conferences about our issues? Which of our many fibre bulletin boards allow discussions about our issues? Where are the academic papers from college programs claiming to prepare their students to survive in the real world? The deficiency is mind-numbing.

Our Unofficial Dialogue

In sharp contrast, for decades our field has been weighed down by unofficial repetitious complaints under our breath. These chronic issues include, for example, concerns about how our field's work is under-appreciated due to the public's loss of knowledge about fibre over the past century. Another complaint is that our work takes too much time to create to enjoy adequate market value. A third complaint is gender discrimination and its painful history in the formal art world. These unofficial discussions persist decade after decade without much progress.

Loss of Public Awareness

For decades, fibreists have informally expressed concerns about working in a medium that is increasingly less familiar in the marketplace of goods and ideas and therefore less valued. In the 1960s our field first addressed this by urging individuals and guilds to reach out to the grassroots public with displays and demonstrations to educate our market. Almost half a century later, we can all now see that this strategy was simply not working. For example, in

their formal research art museums still accord our field lesser rank in the field of contemporary art and craft, where fibre should be ranked as an equal among equals.

Over the very same four decades, university art departments, art museums, art scholars, art organizations, art writers, etc. have worked together on an organizational basis to educate the public audience and marketplace fully about the great artistic importance of, for example, art work created with vials of urine, elephant dung, dead animals, etc. If they have great market success for sales, exhibitions, books, etc., regarding those materials, why is our field failing to create a similar market demand for work made from our materials?

Earlier I cited two different published references on how fibre work has recently commanded impressively high market prices. Where are the official discussions on how our members can participate in that type of market activity?

More Time is Invested in Fibre Work

For decades, fibreists have also groused that our field's market is necessarily limited by the time-consuming nature of our work. For hourly factory work aimed at competing in the mass market, perhaps this old complaint is valid. But why define our field that way?

Art and craft is not normally marketed on the basis of hourly wages. Nor are luxury goods priced to compete in the mass market. Instead, the value of work in the art and craft field is normally based on design, materials, utility, desirability, etc. Where are we officially encouraged to discuss this?

Ironically, in the real marketplace for contemporary art, the most expensive work is often the work requiring the very least amount of the artist's time. The artist's time seems to have very little to do with pricing. In *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark* economics professor Don Thompson detailed how that expensive popular art work was not created by the artist, but

contracted out. Nor was it the artist's original inspiration, having been inspired by someone else's earlier work. Nor was the art work unique, since multiples were made after the artist's first piece rotted away.

So wherein lay the astronomic financial and aesthetic value commanded by this type of art? According to Professor Thompson, much of it lay in the "branding." So where has our field officially encouraged discussions about how we and others "brand" what our field creates?

Gender Discrimination in the Art World

The art world's painful and ongoing history of gender discrimination against women in the arts is a complaint long dominating unofficial discussion in our field. There is now a wealth of documentation available from other sources about this major problem, even if our field itself will not discuss it very openly.

Women playwrights have struggled for quite some time with issues regarding gender discrimination in the production of plays ("Charging Bias by Theaters, Female Playwrights to Hold Meeting," by Patricia Cohen, *New York Times*, October 25, 2008). This past April, Emily Glassberg Sands published a research paper in the Department of Economics at Princeton University, "Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender: An Integrated Economic Analysis of Discrimination in American Theater" documenting some very interesting statistics.

Regarding the study, "eminent economists vouched for its high quality, including Christina H. Paxson, the chairwoman of Princeton's economics department and the newly named dean of Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs; Cecilia Rouse, a member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers; and Steven D. Levitt, the co-author of *Freakonomics*." ("Rethinking Gender Bias in Theater", Patricia Cohen, *New York Times*, June 24, 2009).

One of the findings that Ms. Sands documented in her research was that the Broadway plays and

musicals authored by women sold 16% more tickets per week and were 18% more profitable than the productions authored by men!! Does this mean that discrimination is stronger than even profitability?

In another part of her research Ms. Sands sent identical scripts to artistic directors and literary managers around the country, half naming a man as the writer and half naming a woman as the writer. The half identified as written by women were rated "significantly worse" than the half identified as written by men. Ms. Sands said: "These results are driven exclusively by the responses of female artistic directors and literary managers."

The majority of the craft art field's editors, writers, curators, administrators, professors, teachers, fibre gallery owners, officials, etc., who direct the fibre field have been women, and not men. With many women in positions of power in the fibre field, here is an opportunity to draw the unofficial complaints of gender discrimination in our field out into the broad light of day for open discussion. Here is a golden opportunity to ensure that fibre work begins to be treated fairly and accurately in today's marketplace of goods and ideas.

The Bottom Line

Absolutely no one in our field should be pressured to engage in dialogue against their preferences. But for its survival the fibre field must ensure and officially encourage reasonable discussion somewhere.

Over recent years we have been losing vital supports and resources. Now current economic problems are accelerating those losses. It is essential to begin encouraging open, probing, challenging dialogues somewhere in our field as an effective, essential, beneficial, and ongoing aspect of fibre art and craft. Other fields enjoy tremendous benefits from that. Why has fibre been discouraged from similar beneficial activity?

Currently we do not encourage discussion about

how to confront our growing challenges successfully. By not encouraging diverse view, we have deprived our field of perspective and balance which are essential to survival.

ourselves half blind and half deaf, how can we pass on the heritage we received in the 20th Century in better condition to the next generations?

We are depriving our field of the advantage of the many human and material assets it richly enjoys, including the valuable perspectives of our varying viewpoints and ideas. If we purposely render

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Bio: Stanley Bulbach is a fibre artist who lives and works in New York City. He holds a Ph.D. in Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Literature from New York University. More information about his work can be found on his website: www.bulbach.com and more of his writing can be found in the Library section there.