



Voices for Our Future

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

The Contemporary Fibre* Movement in the 20th Century.

The arts and technologies of fibre work have been part of human existence since prehistoric times. They have been key to our physical survival and have fuelled our economic and technological development. They took place globally and were familiar to almost everyone.

In recent centuries the Industrial Revolution relocated those arts and technologies behind factory walls, where they became less and less visible to the public. In recent decades, programs in home economics were dropped from schools, and the public's last major exposure to fibre's arts and technologies diminished further.

At the same time traditional methods of working other media such as ceramics, glass, metal, and the like were being lost too. In response, a formal craft art movement arose to help preserve these arts and technologies before they died out completely. Our contemporary fibre movement was a major participant in that important development.

In fact, the contemporary fibre movement grew into arguably the largest sector of the entire contemporary craft art movement. The fibre field had the largest number of publications. Local, regional and national guilds were formed throughout the entire world. Fibre-related museums and galleries were established. Fibre art departments were created in colleges and universities.

Over recent decades the contributions of our fibre community ensured that this flourished. Ours has been a community of committed people who changed our world by preserving very important fundamental arts and technologies. And in doing so that made our cultural, aesthetic, and intellectual lives today much richer.



Challenges to the Contemporary Fibre Movement

The officially named Market Based Economy that arose in the early 1980s requires almost everything to be based primarily upon a financial value set by a purportedly free market. Almost everything is transformed into a commercial equation where profitability is the primary importance. But our field's publications,

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

organizations, exhibition sites, suppliers, schools, etc., arose largely as labours of love, and not for maximum profits. Thus, most of our support structure has been suffering financially, especially in the recent careening of that Market Based Economy. This series of essays in *Fibre Focus* has asked questions about our voice in this process. Where has our field encouraged ongoing thoughtful dialogue about our field, its challenges, and its future?

In this final essay, I try to make some specific suggestions for ongoing discussion. The points are based on my own experiences as an artist, crafts person, teacher, and writer who has participated in our contemporary fibre movement over the past third of a century. These suggestions are based as well on my formal training as an academic researcher. These suggestions also reflect my decades as an active community member in a city — New York City — which is home to one of the world's largest concentrations of museums, art schools, universities, and art galleries. It is also the city which named the advertising and public relations industry — “Madison Avenue” — upon which survival in the Market Based Economy is so greatly dependent.

1. Censorship

Our field has established a myriad of opportunities for our technical voice. Ask almost any technical question and you will certainly receive a wealth of solid advice — an eloquent testimony to our field's deeply ingrained generosity and community spirit.

In contrast, ask important questions about a crucial non-technical issue and you will most likely be advised that your dialogue is unpleasant and disruptive and be instructed to take your questions somewhere else. If fibreists do not know how to discuss such issues without being unpleasant or disruptive, then we should be encouraging the skills of civil discourse and teaching our field how to discuss issues constructively. Unfortunately even Internet bulletin boards, including at least one run by a

university receiving public monies to train students to think critically and survive economically, will unsubscribe inquirers overstepping this prohibition.

Furthermore, non-technical dialogue does not sell magazines to the broadest market. Many of our fibre publications are now owned by financial investors focussed on maximum quarterly profits. Now our publications rarely include thoughtful discourse about our field's issues.

So where do fibreists plan for the necessary deeper thinking and problem solving to take place? This question is very important. But it is difficult to answer because it is so widely censored. Our field's voice is unwisely muted without any open discussion why.

We cannot afford to silence ourselves thoughtlessly this way. When imposing any restrictions, our censors have an ethical responsibility to ensure that an alternate opportunity for open discussion exists elsewhere. But that has not been happening. If our field hopes to staunch the current losses of opportunity, of exhibition access, of educational resources, of reliable access to top quality materials and equipment, etc., then we need to ensure that thoughtful discussion is encouraged to take place somewhere.

2. Art vs. Craft Debate

For decades now, our field has found itself continuously ensnared in the art versus craft argument. There have been many conflicting theories promoted regarding what art is and what craft should be. Has that exhausting debate ever helped us in any way? It only seems to have distracted the fibre field endlessly from discussing other more important questions, such as gender discrimination, research practice, professional courtesy, etc.

At best, the art vs. craft question seems to be an attempt to define marketing positions. Fibreists officially creating art seem to get special access to the benefits of the commercial art world. What

access do fibreists officially creating what is deemed to be craft get? Not so much.

Makers of the officially defined art end of the fibre field hesitate to be identified with the craft base that is not prestigious. But they do certainly prize the large supportive audiences provided by that same craft end of the fibre field and seek them out. Conversely, the officially defined craft end of the field chases after the art world's benefits and denizens, but then has resentments for the sparse crumbs its supportive efforts invariably reap.

The bottom line is that despite our significant differences we are all fibreists. We all work with fibre. We all draw from the same broad timeless river of fibre's traditions, regardless of whether we hew closely to them to create more traditional items or use those arts and technologies traditions for a spring board to explore radical aesthetic transformations.

Let's finally put the discussions of the theoretical discriminations between art and craft on the back burner and take a break from it for a while. Instead, let's start developing a dialogue clarifying why all our best work is valuable and significant and how to let the public know.

3. Branding

Looking back over the past several decades, there is very little in the fibre field's record that connects what the field does with the marketplace that is required to sustain our field's work economically. That's an alarming blind spot in an age dominated by the Market Based Economy. When our field's organizations reach out publicly, the message is usually heavily weighted towards the importance of the history and traditions of our work. The visual appearance of the work is also emphasized. Otherwise very little information is imparted about the inherent values of the fibres and their construction.

This omission is a major handicap. Most other fields have successfully developed flourishing niche and gourmet markets which have defined

themselves as significantly different from the standard fare. They are smaller, more focussed, and more clearly defined. Their goods sell at prices much higher than normal. There is a strong emphasis upon what the added values are that merit the higher prices.

How our field is publicly branded is very important to everyone in the fibre field. The mere existence of a high end specialty market for fibre work would enhance the prestige and importance of the entire field, and that would help support our field enormously.

Where has our field's voice been to explore this process? Where have we been encouraging a discussion about these markets on the internet? In our print media? At our conferences?

4. Research Distortions

The fibre field is arguable the largest constituent in the contemporary craft art movement. For decades now one of its ongoing concerns is how this huge field is accorded minority status in academic and curatorial research. The American Craft Museum acknowledged the distortion in the 1980s. Paul Smith, its Emeritus Curator, acknowledged this again two decades later. Why have these distortions continued uncorrected? Where do fibreists encourage discussions probing this?

There are objective standards in academic research that foster accuracy. For example, when a field is surveyed, those standards require clarification about what work was and what was not included in the preliminary survey and the reasons why.

Not too long ago there was a highly publicized museum exhibition of contemporary craft art that was greatly deficient in fibre work. There was no transparency in the research enabling anyone to be able to check and understand why. Only later was it divulged that fibre was under-represented because fibre works were deemed to be too large by the researcher. That expert seemed to be unaware that some of our largest fibre groups

frequently mount exhibitions of top quality miniatures. The museum research also failed to disclose that participants had to “pay to play.” For inclusion in the purported expert researched exhibition the work had to be donated to the museum. At the very least, minimal standards of scholarship require complete disclosures of both of those research criteria that limited that survey and its deficient research conclusions.

In recent years there have been major uproars about undisclosed financial dealings that have influenced what art museums have purported is reliable accurate scholarship vetting what they select to include in their exhibitions. There has been so much controversy that the American Association of Museums issued *New Ethical Guidelines* calling for increased transparency in museum research.

This isn't a minor issue, for numerous books have been published recently about these types of problems in art research. So where has our field's voice been? Where do we encourage transparency in the scholarship and research on our field?

The international College Art Association has its Mission Statement posted publicly on the internet: “Representing its members' professional needs, CAA is committed to the highest professional and ethical standards of scholarship, creativity, connoisseurship, criticism, and teaching”. Here is an international professional organization that calls for ongoing discourse about standards of research practice, including issues of gender discrimination.

If our field wishes to be taken seriously and survive appropriately, we need to work with the College Art Association and other professional organizations to examine our questions about the accuracy of scholarship and research done on our achievements.

5. A Research Conundrum

Since the beginning of our movement professional textile experts, especially textile curators, have always supported our field with their enthusiastic interest. It seems perfectly natural that professional experts delight in examining new work and materials. But unfortunately those interested fibre professionals are not the experts who create most of the formal record on fibre as a member of the field of contemporary craft art.

Instead, most of that research record is created by curators of contemporary craft art, owners of commercial gallery selling contemporary craft art, and people who write professionally about contemporary craft art. They demonstrate great enthusiasm in surveying work in ceramics, glass, wood, and the like, but survey little fibre work, and have very little enthusiasm about examining our field. Even when reasonable opportunities to see fibre work are brought to their attention, most often they feel free to decline to see it. Most of these experts examine fibre work carefully only when they are paid as jurors.

How can a field of work be judged accurately when it is not examined fairly, carefully, and knowledgeably? The characteristic lack of natural enthusiasm among contemporary craft art experts to survey fibre seems to betray a damaging prejudice. If fibre is perennially treated like the Ugly Duckling in the official record these experts create, isn't something amiss? Would that be a gender prejudice or commercial or financial preferences?

Where is our field encouraging discussion to explore these extremely serious research concerns?

Our Future?

This series of essays in *Fibre Focus* has attempted to encourage a thoughtful discussion about some of the significant challenges confronting our field in this new century. Many more need to be explored as well. Our educational structure, our suppliers, our researchers, our organizations, our media and our public display opportunities are all

struggling in the current economy. Somewhere we must encourage ongoing dialogue to explore how we can address this situation productively.

The field of contemporary fibre art and craft was founded by the dedication of a small group of committed people. The challenges now confronting us can also be engaged by a small group of committed people in our field. The first and most important step is to provide for constructive discussion.

By encouraging this series of essays, the Ontario Handweavers and Spinners has taken a major step forward in this effort. Both the leadership and membership should take great pride in this essay project in *Fibre Focus*. Where else is intelligent

discourse about our future? Where else are fibreists encouraged to meet our field's urgent challenges and pass on the treasurable aspects of our field to oncoming generations -- in even better condition than we received it?

Margaret Mead is quoted as saying, "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. It is the only thing that ever has." Her characterization certainly applies to the Ontario Handweavers and Spinners.

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