

Artists' discussion
with Liz Whitehead

Jonathan Parsons
Clare Twomey
Roy Voss
Liz Whitehead
Tracey Rowledge
Lin Cheung
Katie Pratt

Jonathan Parsons An artist can do anything they want. Literally any activity is embraced as having an equal status with any other. The idea of context being important in the art world is something that's quite strongly promoted and something I wanted to do with this show, is to say actually it's the art that's the important thing, not the context or the training of the artist. It's the art and the intentions of the artist.

Liz Whitehead I would say Lin's piece, *Deviant Ring*, seems to take the language of jewellery and is asking for it to be read in another way.

Roy Voss Depending on your cultural position, you could make an assumption that *Deviant Ring* is political as a title if not obscene.

Lin Cheung Yes, there's deviant, being led astray, overlooked, neglected or ignored. I suppose it boils down to personal experiences of 'deviant'. It was a starting point for the work, what happens if I ignore my own jewellery language? If I neglected all the knowledge and all the skills that I had, that I'd learned in the past and through making jewellery. What would happen to the work? That got my imagination going – running riot really, imagining these pieces of jewellery taking on slightly deviant forms.

RV I think what Jonathan was saying, that the artist can do anything is true. I think as a jeweller, if you declare yourself to be one, or are recognised as one in some way, anything that you do that doesn't fall within the remit of what we understand a jeweller to be will necessarily be 'deviant'. What you seem to be hinting at at least,

is that the deviancy is of some other order. The term *maker*, which is used by crafts people – I'm slightly puzzled by this. Is it that if you use so-called crafts skills to make something, but decide to make it into art, then it is art?

LW Well there's probably no absolute definition for the difference between makers and any other kind of artist, but one of the definitions that I would suggest is that makers want to develop a facility with a particular set of materials. Maybe on the one hand to develop a product such as domestic tableware and on the other hand using this portfolio of techniques and tacit knowledge of materials to develop conceptual projects. I'm just thinking about Lin, she might be simultaneously developing gallery pieces and making pieces for sale in shops. Those are two really different contexts for work and probably two very different sets of work will result.

LC Coming from a crafts background, the courses weren't defined. It was wood, metal, ceramics and plastics, and that's why I first thought of the materials, so perhaps that has a lot to do with the way that my jewellery pieces have come out. They're not traditional jewellery, but they do sell in shops, they sell in gallery shops. I have tried to push the ideas in the work and not let myself fall into the trap of remaking pieces because they're popular and people like them. But if that's the case, then I hope that the message still comes through in those particular pieces that are set up to be viewed in this way.

JP What interests me about you, Lin, is that you said you use the language of jewellery to deliberately communicate. You very self-consciously always title your work, so that automatically sets it up as something other, by giving it a title, a kind of totemic power of conferring content. There is a story behind each piece that you make and you're investing that piece with certain qualities by supplying a verbal indicator of that. I just wanted to come back to something we were talking about before, about the idea of making. I wonder what role the actual physical production of the piece has on this idea of a maker. It seems to me that there's a certain emphasis placed on who actually does the making.

Discussing this exhibition with some of the other staff at the Crafts Council, we were talking about certain pieces which perhaps needed to be fabricated, or not and someone said well, it depends on whether that person makes it or not. And to me, as an artist who engages quite heavily in the fabrication of work, it was irrelevant who made it as long as the piece was made. Because it still carried my intentions. In the case of flag-making, for example, my intentions are better served by them being manufactured by flag makers in the traditional way that a flag would

be, because that's a very great part of what they're about.

Clare Twomey I have trained as a maker on a ceramics course, yet my work for this exhibition is being made by industry. This is important for that piece, rather than me being the maker. I am the maker at every point. I can't release being the maker, from the point of concept to the production with industry and even some of the very fine tuning. I don't think that material is the only definition of your activities, material can define the quality in your activities. I have a specialist knowledge and I think that knowledge is transferable. You may be trained as an artist who makes very well made beautiful well crafted objects because that's your intention, maybe that's what you set out to do. Or you can make pieces that don't have the same level of craftsmanship, but they are objects of intention.

JP I'm interested in that point you made about your technical knowledge Clare, and how it enables you to do things in certain ways and to realise certain projects. I think that's a key attribute for an artist to have in terms of realising intentions, that you need to be able to know what the possibilities are before you can imaginatively apply particular approaches or ideas to methods or techniques.

LW I'd agree. I'm just thinking particularly of the sensual relationship that you develop with a particular material, built up over a long period of time of working with it, say that potters might have with clay. And that's just as true actually of painters.

Katie Pratt You don't get a technical training – I did a painting BA as opposed to a broad based fine art BA.

LW But what you do if you're working with paint, like Clare's been working with clay, is that you develop this kind of tacit knowledge of the material. You know what you can do with the medium and that in itself is a really interesting place to start in terms of developing ideas.

RV It's interesting to start from not knowing how to do something though. I'm struggling with this idea of maker and I'm trying to think of a word to replace that and I can't think of one. But I can think of one to replace artist, which would be faker. So you've got makers and fakers. The idea of having to defend yourself if you're a jeweller seems slightly desperate in a way. I think artists have to defend themselves all the time though, which could be equally desperate.

KP Isn't that part of confirming to yourself a point, a question of re-evaluation for yourself, but so that your ideas aren't static. They're being reconsidered all the time. So that something doesn't become a kind of doctrine for yourself. It's a constant questioning, that is what being an artist is all about. It's about contemplation

and considering where you've come from and where you're going and you know, the kind of journey of the work.

RV Yes, this thing about intentions which we're interested in in relation to Jonathan's essay and the exhibition and so on. I feel slightly wary of the idea of having an intention, or the intention of having an idea even, and then somehow making that manifest in a piece of work. I think maybe you make something in order to find out what your intentions might be.

KP That's true.

JP I was remembering one of your *Notice* pieces that was either entirely blank or it was white on white and I remember you telling me that you had difficulty describing to the person who was making this exactly what you wanted.

RV I've had lots of problems having *Notices* made, because the people that make them who are skilled notice-makers, or sign-makers, want to know what they're for.

JP You were saying that you wanted to fill the whole gallery with the idea, but that kind of fails with *Something to do Something*. I like the way that these pieces point categorically towards ideas and how ideas and intentions are in terms of producing intention. You said earlier that the *Notice* pieces normally direct people away from themselves. Would you say that's the case? Because I would suggest that what they do is actually direct attention toward themselves.

RV I suppose they do both in some way. It's hard to know quite how people react.

JP *Notice 30* is much more, seems to me, to do with its specific site. It presents a set of objects which are used for making notices, so what you're doing is focusing attention towards the mechanism of notice-making, so that brings the attention much more on the physical object than the previous *Notices*.

RV I'm asking people to imagine this thing which isn't there, which could be the notice with these being tools to make the notice. Inevitably you're left with the tools to look at, or at least the suggestion of that's what they might be.

JP Let's look at the things which are.

RV I'm also drawing attention to the failure of notices, of the potential failure of things, or things that don't do what they intend to do, or don't appear to do what they have done. 'The thing is' – a determined start and then it gets lost, and we're not sure anymore. I'm terribly jealous of Richard Prince because he uses jokes in his art. They're not his jokes, they're other people's jokes and nobody knows where jokes come from, but they're things that we all share and they communicate incredibly well, maybe better than a lot of art does.

JP Laughter is the ultimate act of communication because it's a spontaneous recognition of

something – a person telling a joke or what have you. Sometimes people laugh in front of artworks that are deadly serious, because they take delight in that act of communication. I know Tracey has seen things before and has laughed out loud, not because it was funny but because it was wonderful and, you know, engaged with it.

Tracey Rowledge The first time I was taught etching by Sam Fisher I laughed because of the detail and the specific knowledge that he had. I was just euphoric. All the detail of it. I love it. I thought, oh this is perfect.

LW I'm interested in what this exhibition means for the various artists around the table. I'm interested in Katie's and Jonathan's take on showing here at the Crafts Council and the way that your work might be seen in a different way, by a very different audience.

KP Well when we were talking earlier about materials and Clare was saying that her training as a ceramicist enables her to have a specific subject knowledge, I was thinking conversely; it also illustrates how an idea can almost be autonomous from its medium or from how it's actually made. But at the same time every artist or maker in this exhibition seems to have a kind of involvement with various materials or materials are their specialisms and the ideas are projected through the actual manufacture. But initially I was slightly apprehensive about showing – can I say this – in a crafts context, because it implies possibly that there is no conceptualisation behind a making and that's what we're all always battling against. But then, these things ought to be redressed and the people sitting around this table right now, you can see visibly in their work some kind of thinking process. It's a kind of two-way thing, attacking something from both angles.

It's partly a question of context that you can be someone who trains as a painter, say, who doesn't paint, but uses that language. Tracey was saying that her work came from a painting language. I was interested in that.

TR It's using a dry process rather than a wet process.

JP But your work is constantly about painting. I mean, that's just something that's brilliant. Your sources come from all over the place.

TR When I was at Goldsmiths I was trying to do what I now do, I hope successfully, using gold tooling. I was trying to play around with different surfaces on the same surface, so that you get a foreground and a background, like Jonathan's done so successfully with his painting. And then the technique of gold tooling presented itself and I thought, this is the perfect vehicle for me. Other people call me what they perceive me to be, and that's fine. I'm more interested in thinking about the work rather than what I might be

called, I am a craftsperson. I am an artist.
I am a bookbinder. I make the work.

LC I find myself learning about techniques that weren't taught to me before, or that are not perhaps conventionally available to a jeweller. Interestingly, some of the work that Jonathan has seen, and most particularly the mirror brooches, won't be in the exhibition, it will be used for a poster, it's a final piece of work shown as an image. There's a photographic image of a piece of jewellery trying to express the intentions of that piece, so I feel I can comfortably pick up a camera and produce a final outcome – I don't feel restricted.

RV But you are restricted, because you are a jeweller, therefore your primary mode of operation is within the learnt techniques of jewellery. I don't mean necessarily that's a bad thing, but I think Jonathan, for instance, works with so many different techniques, ways of making and producing work that you can't find a label for him, or not a sensible one, but you can always find a label for you, which is jeweller. And I think that necessarily puts you on a back foot, unless you decide that's not a weak position. But I think other people will decide that's a weak position for you as an artist, because they'll say, you're a jeweller being an artist, whereas Jonathan, for example, is an artist being an artist.

LC I think I'm comfortable with that, even with the photographic pieces there is a reference to the world that I'm in, which is jewellery. But these pieces have a different perspective on that world. There are still references that bring me back to jewellery and the jewellery world, but it's not so clearly defined.

KP I think those parameters are important for everyone – there's a whole load of givens or things that are decided for you by virtue of what you're not, which in some ways narrow the possibilities for the work, but in another way focus your intentions or ideas so you've got a smaller number of things to consider. On the other hand it is a question of a language, or context.

CT It's a question of accessibility.

TR I think we have to accept that different artists are working with different languages.

KP It doesn't prevent people from suddenly understanding something that they don't have training in.

RV I don't know the answer to this question, I'm just asking it – but do you think one of the functions of making art in whatever form it takes is for people to understand it?

JP I think it is. The other day I went to see two very different exhibitions of sculpture; works from the Chapman family collection, where the Chapmans have created twenty-four wood carvings that are carefully produced to look

antiquated and to ape the condition of African art objects in ethnographical museums.

This is conflated with imagery associated with McDonalds in a very sophisticated way that has a very particular set of associations and, dare I say it, meanings. Then I went to the Aztecs exhibition at the Royal Academy, where you've got some incredibly powerful items of sculpture that are completely removed from their original context – this work is radically different in intention from the Chapman's carving. I was thinking about the comment that one reviewer made about the Aztecs show, 'This is a culture that is so alien to us, how are we to understand it?' And I thought, well you know, do some work! If, say, a Richard Serra sculpture was isolated from its context and projected a few hundred years in the future, how would one make sense of its very specific contextual associations? How would we recognise reference or irony? It seems to be a very important issue. An archaeological interpretation of an artefact is necessarily different from a contemporary art reviewer's interpretation of a piece exhibited at the White Cube gallery but the objects are the same in the sense that they are made by people with a purpose.

RV So the context is fairly crucial and the idea that we're showing, all of us are showing art in the Crafts Council gallery will not be something that is ignored. There's nothing we can do about it, and therefore we're discussing it and trying to work out quite what that might mean to someone else.

LW Tracey, you mentioned earlier, this show allowed you to reposition yourself, to be perceived in a more appropriate way.

TR I think that is what's interesting about where I'm at. Bookbinding is what you might call a minority craft, and there's nobody else doing what I'm doing. On top of that I'm making art using very traditional bookbinding materials and techniques. I've shown equally in art and craft venues, so it's not going to be interesting in that sense. I think it's going to be interesting in terms of exposure, and seeing what the knock-on effect of that is on the interpretation of my work.

JP One of the principal motivations for putting on the show here with this group of artists is to see what sort of critical interpretation it will get. I'm thinking of the art press.

CT It's not only artists that are disarmed by their environment, but also the critics who will be looking at this exhibition in a different space to that of the general spaces given to painting and non-craft related sculptural practice.

JP This is why I was particularly interested in including oil painting, photography and your work Clare, which is an installation, and my flag which is made out of a specific textile.

CT It's a debate in criticism that has occurred in

three conferences that I have attended in the last year, it was aired that some of the craft criticism is not as critical or understanding as it could be. It isn't as critical as some of the 'fine art' coverage, this being raised possibly from people who are receiving the criticism – or lack of criticism.

KP That can sometimes be a question of style because frequently people interpret the very first aspect that they receive from the work.

CT I think there's also a safety in this interpretation.

RV Can I suggest that you are a critic then? All of us around this table are and what we say will be written down and offered up as criticism.

KP You have to be critical to make work. Not only do you have to be a critic, you also have to be able to make it and it's quite easy to say what's wrong with something and what you shouldn't do or to literally criticise rather than to contribute something.

RV I remember asking one of my favourite writers what he did when all else fails, what did he rely on when looking at something in a gallery? He said 'Oh I can't do that, it must be good'. So he starts from a position of 'That must be good, I'll stay here a bit longer'. But there are people who take an opposite position, which is 'I don't know what's going on here, therefore it can't be very interesting'.

JP Well I would agree with him in that regard, because if I think there's something totally unrecognisable to me or baffling to me, I think it's either purposely misguided or in some way hugely significant.

RV And either is interesting.

December 2002