

Book Review: *Craft as a Creative Industry* (Karen Patel: London and New York: Routledge, 2024)

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Abstract:

Karen Patel's new book, *Craft as a Creative Industry*, critically examines craft's position in the wider field of creative and cultural industries, drawing on case studies from the craft sectors of the UK and Australia. The book highlights the prevalence of discrimination and marginalisation in craft, connecting both to the cultural logics of capitalism and colonialism undergirding production generally. In exploring the more overtly equitable practices of community-based social craft enterprises and First Nations led craft organisations, Patel suggests that craft organisations grounded in the experiences, cultures and interests of marginalised peoples hold potential for a reconfiguration of our collective judgement of craft. The book argues that such a reconfiguration would necessarily prioritise the goals and experiences of makers in their craft practice at the same time that it considers the social context against which the craft object was produced. Useful as a reorientation of political priorities, Patel's framework recentres underrepresented and marginalised craftspeople and their communities in assessing and envisioning craft. A useful intervention in craft culture and policy, the framework does not necessarily consider pathways toward collectively challenging the underlying relations of capitalist and colonial oppression and exploitation, something that would require the intentional crafting of movements of intersectional solidarity and resistance.

Keywords: craft; creative industries; cultural industries; workplace discrimination; cultural policy

Book Review: *Craft as a Creative Industry* (Karen Patel: London and New York: Routledge, 2024)

Karen Patel's *Craft as a Creative Industry* is a small book with ambitious goals. It sets out simultaneously to interrogate craft's position within the creative and cultural industries literature, critique the conditions of marginalisation in the craft sectors of the UK and Australia, and reconfigure our collective assessment of craft objects and expertise. As a whole, the book stands out as a reflection on the intricacies of craft and the various ways that theorists have attempted to understand its renewed relevance for the 21st century.

Patel begins her examination of craft by introducing its relative obscurity in the creative industries literature. Specifically, she reveals the seeming lack of critical engagement with the category of craft, rightly pointing out that the dominant paradigm in craft studies tends to celebrate the potentials that it presents while obscuring the less equitable relations that flourish within it. Central to a critical examination of craft as a creative industry is a recognition of the industrial imperatives of craft as it

exists in capitalist contexts. Craft, as embedded in the creative and cultural industries, is both a category of symbolic production and a vehicle for the generation of profit.¹ Such a recognition necessarily calls into question some of the more optimistic readings of craft as a social phenomenon (e.g. Sennett, 2008; Gauntlett, 2011; etc.). For example, Richard Sennett's (2008) assertion that craft is simply the act of doing something well for its own sake, open to anyone who exercises care in their productive activities, falls flat when we consider the manner by which craft industries reproduce some of the worst characteristics of capitalist enterprise.

This is exactly what Patel sets out to do in her two primary case studies. Drawing on ethnographic research in the craft sectors of the UK and Australia, Patel critically examines the cultural and institutional practices of the craft movement, particularly along the lines of marginalization and barriers to access. Although the case studies are built upon a critique of craft's tendency to valorise Eurocentric ideals of art and culture, her focus tends toward the optimistic, identifying community based social enterprises and First Nations craft production as counterpoints to the main current of the craft industries. Both serve as examples of craft communities marginally freed from the worst excesses of profit-seeking, affording them the ability to reach craft discourse's promise of accessibility, obviously within specific institutional constraints. Patel highlights the challenge of funding for both case studies, signalling deficiencies in national policy schemes meant to support and sustain otherwise less marketable forms of cultural production, in this case craft. Obviously, this challenge is not limited to craft but is characteristic of wider funding challenges in the creative and cultural industries generally (Daughtry & Whiting, 2025).

Patel sets these case studies up against the backdrop of professional craft in the UK. This segment of the UK craft sector more closely resembles what one might expect of industry in general, marked by entrepreneurial drive, gatekeeping, and self-exploitation. Moreover, a close examination of mainstream, professional craft also reveals a tendency to valorise those products that best conform to Eurocentric aesthetic ideals, devaluing the work of craftspeople of colour while reinforcing existing social hierarchies. Indeed, Patel's participants reported frequent micro- and overt aggressions, from colleagues and customers alike, often asserting an otherness to their work (or, indeed, themselves).

Socially engaged craft enterprises, for Patel, present a counterpoint to this tendency, standing out as a path toward more equitable and inclusive ways of organising craft. The examples she gives, CraftA in London, the Flourish Jewellery Project in Edinburgh, and Path Carvers in Birmingham, all, in distinct ways, directly respond to community needs, and in doing so ground their operations on a connection to the place and the people who inhabit it. Of course, in social enterprises, just as consistent funding is a challenge, so is staff and volunteer capacity, the administration of the spaces and the search for funding seemingly standing out as perennial hindrances to these organisations' ability to meet the needs of their members and their communities.

First Nations' craft practice in Australia also stands out as an instructional counter current to professional craft. Built upon pre-contact traditions, responses to settler colonialism, and communal approaches to the production of symbolic objects, Patel sees organisations like aboriginal art centres and First Nations' led social enterprises as important examples of craft that is less directly influenced by the Eurocentric demands for homogenous products. However, as she admits, the lack of governmental support for these organisations puts them in a similar bind to those in the UK, in this case often pushing them to resort to a certain level of entrepreneurialism. National political priorities

and policy decisions are once again responsible here, as Patel explains: “any policies that originate from institutions and governments that were built on colonialism and capitalism are likely to reproduce and uphold oppression and systematic inequality” (pg. 61). That such political decisions necessitate marketisation is unsurprising. In fact, one might even assume that this is partially the point, to force traditional ways of making into the box of conformity. However, for Patel organisations like the JamFactory in Adelaide and the Social Studio in Melbourne point toward a kind of making from the margins, wherein the relative stability of Indigenous led social enterprises in the Australian context allows them to reassert tradition and culture simply through the act of practicing craft, albeit within the boundaries of a more traditionally market-oriented approach.

Taken together Patel sees these case studies as warranting a reassessment of how we collectively judge craft. Judgement of craft expertise, according to Patel’s proposed framework, should hinge on a vision of craft production as the pursuit of personal and community development that also takes into account the social context of production. In such an approach, communities themselves would ideally be empowered to judge the quality of craft products, thereby reasserting the value of culturally resonant craft practices that have historically been marginalised by elitism and Eurocentrism of institutional arts and crafts. It is in this final section of the book that Patel finds herself squaring up with very powerful social and cultural tendencies, ones built upon centuries of colonial dispossession and capitalist exploitation. Commendable as it is to assert that communities can and should be the arbiters of their own conditions, the proposed framework is ultimately one that points toward a refined ethos for approaching policy decisions and reassessment of cultural values without necessarily offering an actionable way for marginalised communities to contest the social forces that have created these conditions in the first place. In fairness, Patel recognises this, closing the penultimate chapter by asking “what role can craft realistically play in imagining more inclusive and equitable creative industries?” (pg. 85). Her answer, seemingly, is for scholars, practitioners, and policy makers to see craft’s potential as a site for “resistant knowledge projects” wherein oppressed people are able to assert the value of their practice while also demonstrating alternatives to the routines and value judgements of professional craft.

And while progressive pedagogy is a good first step, particularly in terms of how it can work to shift policy around craft, and indeed the creative and cultural industries more generally, I would argue that it must be supplemented with a vision for the collective contestation of the underlying logics of capitalism and colonialism writ large. This is, of course, much harder to pin down, particularly as the craft sector (in both its professional and more equitable forms) is organisationally diverse, made up of larger neo-craft enterprises, smaller service-oriented firms, individual entrepreneurial enterprises, social enterprises, non-market collectives, and everything in between and beyond. Whereas it is relatively simple to imagine how workers in a large neo-craft firm might fight for their interests (unionisation, work stoppages, etc.), one wonders if the category of craft is internally coherent enough to provide the necessary foundation for formulating material strategies for overcoming the exploitation and oppression reinforced through these titanic social forces. If not, perhaps we should be content with the incremental opportunities presented in instances from within the cracks, the actually existing alternatives to business as usual, where the marginalised and oppressed have the power to assert more equitable, inclusive, and culturally relevant approaches to cultural production.

Alternatively, perhaps, the path forward shouldn’t find its inspiration in the practices of craft organisations themselves, but rather in the promise of craft as an approach to action. In an admittedly

ironic reversal, I find myself wondering if Richard Sennett (2008) was unwittingly right all along: maybe in order to contest exploitative and oppressive conditions, we should exercise craftsmanship, but craftsmanship in the form of the incremental, intentional, and painstaking development of expertise in the craft of movement building and solidarity. Such an assertion is, of course, fanciful in the way I'm articulating it, but we see examples of radical collective craftsmanship in a number of contemporary and historical political movements. From successful (and unsuccessful) worker organising drives in neo-craft businesses (Anderson & Jenkinson, 2023) to independent sellers' resistance in the so-called Etsy strike (Richings, 2023), to the building and maintenance of the barricades and community services of the Gaza solidarity encampments (Wilson & Smith, 2024), care in production and action is a driving force in the development of collective expertise in challenging oppression. Changing minds, culture, and policy is an important step, but to change the underlying conditions for marginalised craft workers, we must collectively craft an appropriately scaled intersectional movement to challenge them at their root.

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Endnotes

For a critical examination of this interaction, see Alessandro Gerosa's (2024) *The Hipster Economy: Taste and Authenticity in Late Modern Capitalism*.
