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Fiber Art Education: The Missing Half

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

Most fiberists want our publications, teaching programs, and organizations to thrive productively. That requires serious economic resources. In addition, while many active fiberists in our field do not consider themselves to be professionals, the majority would be utterly delighted to sell some of their work at fair, even profitable, prices, if only to help support our field more generously. Obviously these priorities are issues that need our attention and support, but unfortunately they are rarely discussed openly in our advocacy organizations.

For example, we are not encouraged to discuss openly our field's relatively low status in the arts, or the inaccurate research recorded about our field, or our poor economic vitality, and so on. This contrasts sharply with our educational focus on technical information, which is strongly encouraged throughout the entire field of fiber.

This blackout of dialogue on issues is not accidental. When anyone asks our advocacy organizations about professional issues, the usual response — if any — is “go ask somewhere else.” Even fiber related Internet bulletin boards automatically unsubscribe people for raising non-technical issues. A review of publication indexes and conference agendas in our field immediately reveals the pervasiveness of the censorship and self-censorship of these issues.

This does not make sense since almost everyone in our field agrees unofficially that our field has been unfairly accorded lesser significance in influential scholarly research. But much of this

lower hierarchical status results from unchallenged distortions, such as gender prejudice and undisclosed financial factors. Therefore, it also results from our own advocacy organizations imposing hobbyist status upon most of our field despite its wide spectrum of identities. Other divisions in the arts benefit greatly from encouraging intellectual vitality and probing dialogue on the important issues in their field. If we complain that we don't wish to be underrated in the arts, why shouldn't we be encouraged to discuss our issues openly too?

There is no question that scholarly research practice in the art world arbitrarily accords our field lesser significance. For example, art historian Edward Lucie-Smith, noted:

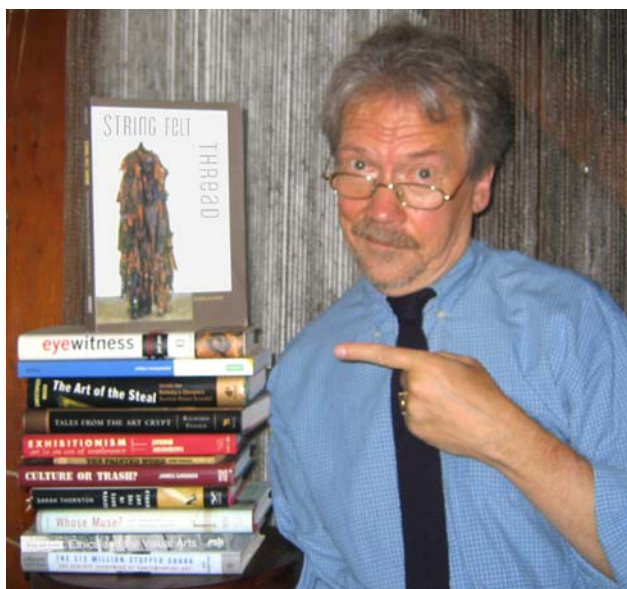
“[T]he recent history of craft as it is reflected in print is subject to some unexpected distortions. For example, although ceramics is not the largest field of activity — that honor almost certainly belongs to fiber — in the recent history of American craft ceramics is more fully recorded than work in any other medium.”

“Historical Roots and Contemporary Perspectives”, [*Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical*, edited by Paul Smith (New York: Weiden & Nicholson, 1986) p. 16.]

If most non-profit scholarly research on the contemporary craft arts occurs in art museums, then how could scholarly museum research generate unexpected distortions? This would have to indicate methodological defects in the museum research.

The essence of scholarly research is the requirement that it be designed with “transparency” and “accountability” to permit its judgments and conclusions to be challenged, reviewed, and, if mistaken, then corrected. But where in our educational focus has our field alerted members about this wonderful requirement? Where have we taught that open probing debate is needed, in fact, expected, for us to challenge and correct research distortions?

In 2000, the Association of American Museums issued its “New Ethical Guidelines”, calling for “more accountability, more transparency of action, and more leadership in the community.” This was in response to eroding public trust in art museums as financial scandals increased in recent decades. The AAM itself openly discussed the need for more professional transparency and accountability in the New York Times for accurate scholarship. So why hasn’t our field encouraged the same dialogue?



Stanley Bulbach with his friends ~ the books.

Some fiberists are surprised to hear that other areas of the arts discuss these issues openly. So here are some recommended books focusing on the issues discussed outside the fiber field that are missing from our fields advocacy and education:

1. *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust*, ed. by James Cuno, with contributions by James Cuno, Philippe de Montebello, Glenn D. Lowry, Neil MacGregor, John Walsh, James N. Wood, and Anne d’Harnoncourt; Princeton University Press, Princeton and Harvard University

Art Museums, Cambridge: 2004. This book is a compendium of essays by some of the most eminent art museum directors in the U.S. who are concerned about the loss of the public trust in museum research on contemporary art. It makes for rather dry reading and is somewhat self-serving, but these essays do describe some of the controversies and scandals that have rocked art museums which claim to execute reliable, accurate scholarly assessments of art today; for example, the Guggenheim and the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

2. *The Art of the Steal*, Christopher Mason; G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, NY: 2004. In this book, Mr. Mason details the Federal investigation of Christie’s and Sotheby’s for price-fixing while they dominated the North American and European art market. The book explains how Sotheby’s CEO and president, Diane (“DeDe”) Brooks, a former banker, was sentenced to house arrest and fined, and how Sotheby’s chairman, A. Alfred Taubman, a shopping mall developer, was sentenced to prison and fined. Sotheby’s and Christie’s had to pay back customers half a billion dollars. This potboiler is an enjoyable read. And while reading it, ask yourself what role breathtaking profitability plays in how art today is accorded scholarly significance.

3. *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art*, Don Thompson; Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY: 2008. Economist Don Thompson, a collector of contemporary art, has taught marketing and economics at the London School of Economics, Harvard Business School, and York University in Toronto. He details one of the most powerful marketing elements in the contemporary art market, “branding”. Our fiber field is strongly branded not as art, but as a hobby, which is why so few galleries even agree to look at our field’s work and why so little fiber is included by museum curators in mixed media exhibitions. What fiber advocacies have challenged that inaccurate branding? I strongly recommend this book for those who are unaware of these economic relationships in the modern Market Dominated Economy.

4. *Eyewitness: Reports from an art world in crisis*, Jed Perl; Basic Books, New York, NY: 2000. Here Jed Perl, well known art critic and writer, details how this is “the Age of the Deal Makers” where finances seem to have greater sway than good research practice. He states that the very “art experts” who research, record, and judge

contemporary art actually seem to know little and care less about its details. This book is good reading for fiberists perplexed as to how our field is prejudged by experts who don't even examine the actual work.

5. *Culture Incorporated: museums, artists, and corporate sponsorships*, Mark W. Rectanus; University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 2002. For a true democratization of cultural institutions, the author calls for more than just full disclosure of all of the financial arrangements involved in the museum projects. In contrast to fiber's advocacies, he hopes that "individuals and communities, including artists, assume a greater responsibility for and demand a voice in the institutions of culture."

6. *The Painted Word*, Tom Wolfe; Bantam Books, New York: 1975. *The Painted Word* is great fun to read. Wolfe illustrates how the modern art world depends upon controversy, sensationalism, and publicity to dominate both the public and academic stage. "In short: frankly, these days, without a theory to go with it, I can't see a painting. . . . Modern Art has become completely literary: The paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text." This classic Wolfe masterpiece will bring chuckles of recognition to many colleagues.

7. *String Felt Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Craft*, Elissa Auther; University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 2010. Prof. Auther explores the assignment of hierarchies upon artists and their art. Focusing upon the 1970s and 80s she illustrates about how art experts have used the very same factors in their art writing to elevate "fine artists" using fiber and denigrate "fiber artists". She openly describes — I believe for the very first time — how successful artists using fiber have done so after distancing themselves from

fiberists. She also casts light on the damage of the unwise antagonism between traditional and nontraditional factions in our field. I strongly recommend this book and hope a sequel is planned for the future.

In conclusion, our fiber field is wide, venerable, diverse, and filled with highly energized, talented, skilled, generous, dedicated members. And yet we seem to have a deathly fear of the intellectual vitality of non-technical dialogue and divergent opinions. Consider how it is not the agreeing view, but the disagreeing views our two eyes send our brains which provide the higher problem-solving ability of three-dimensional perspective. Explored wisely and constructively, disagreement and diversity help surmount challenges, and are precisely what our field needs to rise above our decades-old poor status in the arts.

How poor is our status? Just consider the ATA Links webpage that lists a total of only four North American galleries purportedly interested in tapestry art. Then ask yourself how many dozens of galleries feature ceramic art? Or glass art?

In particular, I recommend the above titles for my younger colleagues many of whom I know hope for better public appreciation and economic opportunities. These books will introduce you to perspectives, events, histories, and ideas widely discussed outside the fiber field, but not encouraged in our fields educational focus. They will help you understand some of the principal reasons why our field has not yet succeeded in equaling the stature and viability of the other craft-related arts. As education is supposed to do, these books will help point you to ways to improve your future as fiberists significantly.

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Stanley Walter Bulbach lives and works in New York City. His undergraduate studies were in engineering and history of religion. His MA and Ph.D. from New York University are in Near Eastern studies. He creates prayer carpets, carpet beds, and flying carpets with contemporary designs from traditional techniques as a modern art for enjoyment on the wall. He is active as a community advocate and organizer in Manhattan. No one else in the field of fiber art has written or lectured more than he has on encouraging constructive dialogue to challenge the standards of current academic research applied in the official recording of our field's achievements.