

the shape of things

sharing the impact



2003

April–August

David Kay undertakes Decibel funded research for an exhibition project commissioned by Arts Council England South West

November

Agreement with Arts Council England South West to undertake further research and development

2004

November

Grant awarded and first R&D commissions underway

November–June 2005

Contacts with potential future venues

2005

June

Spike Island, Bristol meeting to discuss ideas for *the shape of things*

2006

February

Watershed, Bristol Seminar presenting commissions from Rezia Wahid, Vannetta Seecherran, Takeshi Yasuda

2007

March

Grants for the Arts award granted of £400K

April

Steering Group formed and first meeting held

September–January 2008

Rezia Wahid exhibition at the Crafts Study Centre

October–October 2008

Development of partners, fundraising and identity / logo produced

2008

January

Legal advice obtained on legality and how to approach artist recruitment – results in Steering Group decision to shift *the shape of things* concept from offering artist commissions to offering bursaries without constraint

June

Appointment of Melissa Davies-Lawrence to post of administrator

October

Web site created – designed by Bharat Patel and engineered by Alex Barnard

Bursaries advertised – 2,000 downloads made by artists; 94 proposals received

2009

January, February

Short-listed artists meet venue curators and selection made

April–September

Audience development toolkit produced

September

Rezia Wahid exhibition transfers to City Gallery, Leicester

October

Launch at RSA, London

December

Emma Syer appointed as administrator

2010

January–February

Evaluation tendered and Hybrid appointed

February–April

Rosa Nguyen and Alinah Azadeh exhibition at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

May–July

Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita exhibition at Bilston Craft Gallery

July–October

Tanvi Kant and Taslim Martin exhibition at Touchstones Rochdale

September–November

All artists show at 'the shape of things at flow', Flow Gallery, London

October

Event to debate acquisition of craft by private buyers and public collections in the context of *the shape of things*, Pentagram, London

December

'the shape of things at flow' exhibition transfers to the Crafts Study Centre

2011

February

Event at Crafts Study Centre as follow up to Pentagram event

July–September

Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita exhibition transfers to Touchstones Rochdale

September

Event at Touchstones Rochdale to discuss encouraging culturally diverse audiences for crafts

David Kay retires as Director, Ruth Hecht appointed

2012

February

'Disruptive Difference' Symposium at University of Leicester, Museum Studies Centre

February–March

Chien-Wei Chang exhibition at New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester

April–May

Maggie Scott exhibition at New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester

June

Hybrid presentation of evaluation, and formal event with artists and curators, marking the close of the project

August

Legacy website launched

Plans put in place to deliver final legacy programme linking with Higher Education prior to formal closure of project

the shape of things' artists, curators, Steering Group members, Directors and project evaluator, June 2012, Birmingham



what was the shape of things?

the shape of things was a national initiative which considered what distinctive contribution culturally diverse artists whose practice is contemporary craft make to influence or reflect national identity.

the shape of things encouraged new thinking about cultural diversity within the crafts sector in relation to professional practice, developing audiences and creating new markets.

The main delivery phase of *the shape of things* was from January 2009 to June 2012 following an extensive development and action research period.

Delegates at the *Disruptive Difference: Transnational Craft Dialogues Symposium*, February 2012, Leicester



the shape of things' aims were:

- To provide bursaries to artist makers for the production of significant bodies of new craftwork as a context for considering and debating what distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, to connect Britain with global cultures and to reference the intercultural nature of British society
- To create opportunities for that work to be presented in specific locations and venues, and to introduce artists and curators to each other's work thereby supporting their creative and professional development and enhancing their professional profile
- To connect the process of commissioning contemporary craft with that of making acquisitions for public collections, and to explore ideas for extending audiences, and the market for private buyers
- To provide a programme of professional development events to engage those creatively involved in making, presenting and interpreting contemporary crafts in critical debate, and build a strong network of those concerned with diversity in crafts
- To add value to the work of museums and galleries in education and enhanced curriculum development, as well as in building audiences and marketing for exhibitions

the shape of things at flow, group exhibition September–November 2010, Flow Gallery, London



Disparate Nature by Taslim Martin, July–October 2010, Touchstones Rochdale



The main activities of *the shape of things* were:

- Nine artists were awarded bursaries to create new work which was exhibited in galleries across England: Rezia Wahid at the Crafts Study Centre (Farnham) and at the City Gallery, Leicester; Rosa Nguyen and Alinah Azadeh at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery; Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita at Bilston Craft Gallery and Touchstones Rochdale; Tanvi Kant and Taslim Martin at Touchstones Rochdale; Chien-Wei Chang and Maggie Scott (exhibited separately) at New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester; all the artists also exhibited at Flow Gallery (London) and the Crafts Study Centre
- The exhibitions were supported by curators Julia Carver, Natalie Cole, Emma Daker, Yvonna Demczynska, Kathy Fawcett, Yvonne Hardman, Sophie Heath, Simon Olding and Hugo Worthy
- A public engagement programme linked to the exhibitions, including participatory workshops for the public, artists' talks, work with schools (supported by NSEAD), and workshops for undergraduates
- A programme of professional development including seminars, a Symposium, an audience development toolkit, on-line essays, films and commentary



the shape of things was researched, developed and delivered by David Kay until his retirement in September 2011 when Ruth Hecht took on the role, overseeing the remainder of the programme and devising a legacy. Craftspace (the craft development organisation based in Birmingham) was the managing agency which included the provision of part time administrative support by Melissa Davies-Lawrence followed by Emma Syer. Elements such as audience development, PR and branding were delivered by freelancers.

the shape of things was managed by a Steering Group made up of representatives from the bursary artists, the venue curators, Arts Council England, Craftspace, and specialist advisors. Steering Group members were Lesley Butterworth, Julia Carver, Kathy Fawcett, Deirdre Figueiredo, Jackie Lee, Taslim Martin, Alnoor Mitha, Rosa Nguyen and Hugo Worthy.

the shape of things was primarily funded by Arts Council England with significant support in kind from the participating venues.



what difference did the shape of things make?

the shape of things stimulated rich debate about the term ‘diversity’. It explored the complexities of cultural diversity, ethnicity, national identity and creativity – and in doing so it provided a programme of work that questioned existing categories, approaches and overly simplistic audience development initiatives.

the shape of things raised questions that were not being addressed at the time within the crafts sector, and was a forerunner to Arts Council England’s Creative Case for Diversity: ‘diversity and equality are crucial to the arts because they sustain, refresh, replenish and release the true potential of England’s artistic talent, regardless of people’s background.’¹

“It was pioneering, it had never happened before, and was a long term embedded project with the support of Arts Council England – in this way it was strategically significant.”

“The Arts Council’s thinking has moved on hugely since this project started. This was the first project that I felt was addressing the concerns of the practitioners and was one that I felt confident about signing up to.”

the shape of things by bringing crafts into a close association with diversity positively challenged museums’ programming, and as a result most of the venues made changes either in their programmes or in how they approached their programming decisions.

“It extended a sense of issues around politics within craft – [the] challenges of using craft media to explore social, economic and political issues.”

¹ Arts Council England,
What is the Creative
Case for diversity?,
September, 2011

Cut, Stitch, Adorn by Tanvi Kant, July–October 2010, Touchstones Rochdale



Negotiations: Black in a white majority culture by Maggie Scott, April–May 2012, New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester



Crafts Show and Share Day, part of *the shape of things'* public engagement programme, September 2010, Touchstones Rochdale



the shape of things' participating venues built new audiences for their work. In part this was because marketing of the exhibitions reached specialist media that the venues hadn't previously been featured in, and in part because the venues tried new marketing and/or audience development techniques which curators said they would use again in the future.

"The exhibitions extended our crafts audiences and our audiences from diverse communities – which is exactly what we wanted from the shape of things"

the shape of things challenged audiences' understanding of the parameters and definition of contemporary crafts and applied arts, particularly by using installation as a form of presentation.

"None of the audiences saw the exhibition as a craft show, [but] rather as fine art; the level of specific issue-based politics [being exhibited] was not associated with craft, which is what made the shape of things programme very exciting"

Rosa Nguyen installing *Still Living*,
February–April 2010, Bristol Museum
and Art Gallery



Rezia Wahid, a *shape of things* bursary artist
speaking from the floor at the *Disruptive
Difference: Transnational Craft Dialogues*
Symposium, February 2012, Leicester



the shape of things significantly developed the professional practice of the bursary artists, who found it an empowering experience that allowed them to move their practice in new directions, as well as learn a range of new artistic approaches. This included changing their expectations of how participation takes place, working with new materials, working in an installation context, artistic experimentation, and learning new communication skills such as how to negotiate.

“It was an extraordinary opportunity – dealing with the challenge of the physical space, being given full creative license and building a strong collaboration with community engagement”

“the shape of things definitely changed my understanding of how participation takes place – particularly by working alongside [one of the other artists] but also through the museum’s learning infrastructure, which brought up new ways of working. I also had the freedom to work with new materials – this was an unexpected benefit as it was not my aim.”



“A new body of work has enabled me to experiment and play and understand the challenges of producing quality work. It has opened up new possibilities and I will refine ideas that developed as part of the shape of things”

“Although my work remains conceptual in its primary intentions, it brought me closer to the physical making of my work and so a new balance of process and product emerged i.e. a self-contained artwork as a result of a combination of mass participation/contribution to the work & my own studio practice”

the shape of things’ curators all felt that the programme impacted upon their own learning and development. This was for a variety of reasons, both thematic and practical and for each curator it was very different.

“It was the first time I’d worked closely with artists”; “I developed an understanding of collaboration”; “it was my first time developing a commission”; “it was my first time curating a new exhibition”; “it was my first time actively working in marketing”; “it broadened my artist knowledge”



facts and figures

1,350,000 people (approximately) read about *the shape of things* in the national arts press, the national BAME press, and local press – articles appeared in a-n magazine, Arts Industry, Asian Art, Asiana Magazine, Bristol Evening Post, Ceramic Review, Crafts, Eastern Eye Newspaper, EMEL Magazine, Express and Star (Midlands), Manchester Evening News, Selvedge, Staffordshire Living, The Voice and World of Interiors.

114,000 people (approximately) attended the exhibitions.

1,111 people attended **73** separate events linked to the exhibitions in Bilston, Bristol, Leicester and Rochdale including participatory workshops, talks, and Private Views.

563 followers on Twitter (as of July 2012).

667 days when *the shape of things* exhibitions were open to the public.

277 attendances by curators, artists, academics, and policy makers at four events held for the crafts sector to discuss various themes raised by *the shape of things*.

94 proposals were received from artists for *the shape of things* bursaries.

21 people spoke at the *Disruptive Difference* Symposium in February 2012: Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Annabelle Campbell, Professor Steve Dixon, Andy Horn, Dr. Janet Marstine, Rosa Nguyen, Professor Catherine McDermott, Hassan Mahamdallie, Sara Makari-Adhdam, Karin-Beate Phillips, Nima Poovaya-Smith, Maria-Anne Tseliou, Maiko Tsutsumi, Carol Tulloch, and seven International MA students: Mhairi Gowans, Hanne Fauerby, Emiko Ota, Lida Vásquez, Mariela Velasco, Fu-Chun Wu and Yue Yi.

18 essays were written to support the programme by Alison Britton, Julia Carver, Kathy Fawcett, Deirdre Figueiredo, Raimi Gbadamosi, Bonnie Greer, Caroline Griffin, Yvonne Hardman, Sophie Heath, Jessica Hemmings, Ellie Herring, Janis Jefferies, Teleri Lloyd-Jones, Frances Loeffler, Frances Lord, Alnoor Mitha and Simon Olding.

13 freelancers were contracted by *the shape of things* to work on everything from management and audience development to documentation and PR: Munsur Ali, Ed Chadwick, Caroline Griffin, Ruth Hecht, David Hyde, David Kay, Sophie Mutevelian, Bharat Patel, Mary Rahman, Chris Smart, Richard Van Gramberg and Samina Zahir and Joanne Peters (Hybrid).

Many other artists, curators, journalists and arts managers contributed to *the shape of things* including: Bim Adewunmi, Lucy Bayley, Emmanuel Cooper, Emma Crichton-Miller, Liza Cody, Anita Dinham, Bonnie Greer, Momtaz Hussain-Begum, facilitator Will Kay, Magdalene Odundo, George Ruddock, Vannetta Seecharan, web design company Smith & Milton, Erica Steer and Takeshi Yasuda.

recommendations for future initiatives of this type

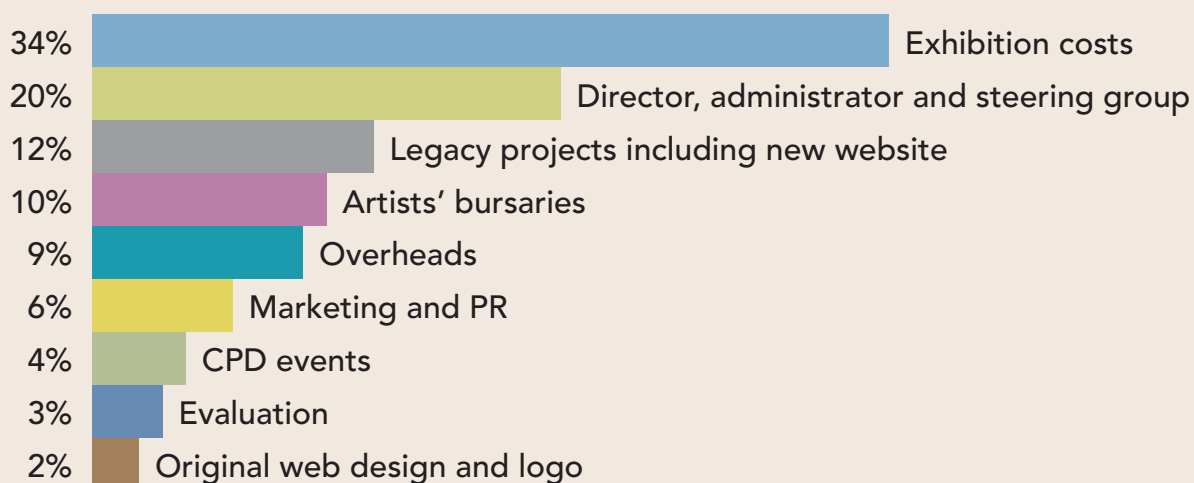
In addition to the successful outcomes of *the shape of things* listed on pages 7–11, there are some things which we learnt during the delivery of the programme which we would recommend:

- Regularly revisit structures and strategies: with initiatives which take place over a long period of time such as *the shape of things*, inevitably there are changes which affect the programme – at a micro level such as staff changes to broader changes such as shifts in the economy – all of which are potential threats to the project. Acknowledge these changes and take necessary action to mitigate the risks, for example by reworking the aims, clarifying roles, reconfiguring the budget and forging new relationships.
- Utilise digital opportunities for forming networks – whilst *the shape of things* encouraged a network of artists and curators directly involved in the programme to come together in real time, and we built up a good following on Twitter, other digital opportunities for building a wider network weren't utilised (for example on-line discussions might have been more successful using LinkedIn rather than through *the shape of things*' website; more regular discussions could have taken place using Skype).
- Several pieces made by the artists for *the shape of things* were bought for public collections, but there could have been a greater understanding amongst those involved in *the shape of things* about how private collectors and public bodies acquire work. More information about the contemporary craft market can be found in *Making it to Market: Developing the market for contemporary craft* (Arts Council, January 2006) and on the websites of the Crafts Council and the Contemporary Art Society.
- When commissioning support materials (such as an audience development toolkit) or collecting data (for example for evaluation purposes) ensure all relevant stakeholders are engaged with the process and understand how it can positively impact on their own outcomes, as well as on the initiative as a whole.

Audience at event with Maggie Scott in conversation with Bim Adewunmi, April 2012, New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester



tsot total spend including support in kind from venues (£528,000 in total)



archive and learning resource

the shape of things has a rich archive of essays, film, audio, and photographs. These, along with more detailed information about the programme itself (such as the full evaluation report), can be found on a website designed specifically as a lasting legacy for the project: www.theshapeofthings.org.uk

acknowledgements

the shape of things – sharing the impact

Produced in August 2012 by *the shape of things* to contribute to the programme's legacy by providing a summary of the programme and the impact it made.

Text by Ruth Hecht, design by David Hyde of studiohyde.com, photography by Ed Chadwick, David Emeney (Bristol's City Museums, Galleries and Archives), Tas Kyprianou, Stephen Lynch, Andra Nelki, Chris Smart of Silva Productions, David Westwood and Xavier Young.

Photographs on front cover of work from *the shape of things* exhibitions are by the following artists (from left to right starting from the top row): Taslim Martin, Chien-Wei Chang, Maggie Scott, Halima Cassell, Reiza Wahid, Rosa Nguyen, Tanvi Kant, Seiko Kinoshita, Alinah Azadeh.

Some of the information in this document was taken from *the shape of things'* evaluation report produced by Hybrid (available on our website).

the shape of things would like to thank *all* of the arts practitioners who took part in the programme: for their time, for their commitment to its aims and values, and for their contribution to the delivery of the various exhibitions, events and publications. We would also like to thank Arts Council England for its funding and support throughout.

contact details

For more information about *the shape of things* please refer to the website: www.theshapeofthings.org.uk

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