

## rob barnard essays

CAN JANET KARDON LEAD THE CRAFTS?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Published in *New Art Examiner*, October 1989.

The American Craft Council (ACC)'s three-year search for a director of the American Craft Museum ended with the appointment of Janet Kardon. Kardon, who received her B.S. in education from Temple University and an M.A. in art history from the University of Pennsylvania, has been the director of the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) for the past ten years. Exhibitions she curated during her tenure include: *Laurie Anderson, Works from 1969-1983* (1988), *David Salle* (1986), and *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, which was recently canceled by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, its third stop on a six-city tour. She has served as the United States commissioner for the Venice Biennale (1980), as chair of the selection panel for international exhibitions for the United States Information Agency (1987) and as vice-chair of the visual arts panel of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. On numerous occasions she has served as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts (visual arts panels: 1975, 1978, 1979, 1980; the inter-arts panel: 1985; and museum panels: 1984, 1985, 1988, and 1989).

For all her credentials in the fine arts world, however, Kardon is a virtual newcomer to the crafts field. Charles Peebler, chairman of the board of trustees of the American Craft Council said that Kardon was chosen for her accomplishments as the director of the ICA. More than likely he is referring to her capacity as a fundraiser. While at the ICA she increased by fourfold its programs, staff and budget. Kardon's final accomplishment was the raising of \$2.9 million of a \$3.5 million capital campaign to relocate the ICA to a larger, more visible space in 1990. The widely reported rumor that the American Craft Museum is still deeply in debt from its 1986 move to its new space across the street from the Museum of Modern Art in New York – a rumor that no one at the ACC, including its treasurer George Saxe, would confirm or deny – could lead one to conclude that the most important factor in the choice of a new director was a good track record in fundraising.

There seems to be no question about Kardon's administrative and fundraising skills or that the American Craft Museum is sorely in need of them. But the museum also needs someone who is conversant in the craft language, someone who not only has a broad historical and cross-cultural view of crafts, but also insight into the peculiar dilemma that contemporary American craft faces in our culture. Said Peebler in announcing the board's decision: "Janet Kardon represents a very important statement about the future of the American Craft Museum."

RB: What do you think distinguishes a craft object from a painting or a piece of sculpture?

JK: I think that traditionally craft distinguishes itself from those other expressions because of its affinity to the medium of the process, and by the very intent and definition of the artist who is making the object.

RB: If I'm working in clay and I'm firing it in a kiln and I say that my intention is to make craft, then I'm a craftsperson regardless of what I make.

>>

CAN JANET KARDON LEAD THE CRAFTS?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

JK: I would say so, yes. It goes back even to Marcel Duchamp, who said that anything the artist says is art is art. So we have to go back to the artist if we are talking about creation of objects and find out what's on the maker's mind.

RB: So in other words, you'll accept anyone's work as craft as long as they state that that was their intent? If Andy Warhol had decided to change the name of what he was doing to craft so that he could get a grant, then by your definition he would be a craftsperson working in craft milieu.

JK: I don't know that I go around inspecting grant applications, but I try to talk to the people who make art, though.

RB: What I'm getting at and what I'm trying to find out is what kind of criteria are you going to put forward for the objects you are going to show and collect at the museum; what exactly is the American Crafts Museum going to hold up as craft? If it's the same thing as fine arts then why is the museum there? That's my question.

JK: That's not an unusual question; it's asked all the time. The criterion will always be quality.

RB: Of course, but what is it that separates craft? If you say medium, process, and intention, then all anyone really has to have is the intention.

JK: That's right.

RB: Then anything can be craft if someone decides to call it that.

JK: Yes, but anything does not necessarily have to be of high quality.

RB: How do you define quality in relation to intention? Is Andy Warhol's work high quality in terms of process, medium, and material, or is it high quality in terms of concept?

JK: It's high quality in terms of his intention. Quality is a big, vague term.

RB: Then let's narrow it down a little bit. If medium and process to a large degree define crafts, then we can say a certain element of craftsmanship has to be present in an object for quality to exist in that object?

JK: Not necessarily.

RB: So there doesn't have to be a high level of craftsmanship.

JK: I didn't say that, either. I'm not saying that the questions you are posing are not valid or frequently asked questions, but I don't find them interesting questions.

>>

CAN JANET KARDON LEAD THE CRAFTS?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

RB: Why aren't they interesting?

JK: Because they've been asked so many times.

RB: The reason they keep getting asked is because no one's answered them yet.

JK: Some questions are unanswerable; that's the way the world is. Even answering them is not interesting, it doesn't produce anything or add anything to our understanding of craft or art. I think what is interesting to me, as I have said, is: what are the materials, what is the process, what is the maker's intent, how close has he come to achieving this, what does it have to do with the continuum of objects that have been made in history, how does it relate to that history, how does it break away from that history, how does it redefine the future? These are the things that interest me. I'm as interested in what is on the borderline as I am in what is in that main channel. I think that in those intersections a lot of interesting work is being done. I think that, historically, if artists stick to a certain definition and don't ever attempt to break out of that definition, I don't know if we would think that they were very good artists. So while your questions are really valid and are the traditional questions, they really don't interest me because tradition as such is not particularly of interest to me.

RB: One of the reasons for these questions about what defines craft is that there has been an uproar over some of the National Endowment for the Arts [NEA] grants this year. People are complaining that a lot of the objects submitted in the crafts category were in fact sculpture and they feel that the reason they were submitted in the crafts category was because the makers had a better chance in that category than in the visual arts category. These artists' intentions for claiming that their work is craft may have had more to do with getting a grant than making what you refer to in the history of continuum of objects, things that are recognized as craft objects. That is one of the things that is troubling lots of craftspeople right now. What is the definition of craft? Craftspeople who make cups, tables, or brooches are beginning to feel that they are not part of the "craft world" anymore as it is represented by the American Craft Museum and the National Endowment. Do you see this as a problem? Isn't funding for a constituency an interesting question?

JK: It's a question I can't comment on because I don't have any information about it.

RB: Well, as the new director of the American Crafts Museum do you have an opinion?

JK: I don't have any information about it so I can't comment.

RB: What kind of exhibitions are you thinking of doing? What do you think has been missing in the crafts field in terms of exhibitions that you would like to see done?

JK: I have the feeling that a number of things have been missing; I don't even know if they're missing, but they're the sorts of things that interest me. What interests me is establishing a good history of the

>>

CAN JANET KARDON LEAD THE CRAFTS?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

craft movement in the 20th century and processing what has happened in the crafts with thought-out exhibitions that are documented by scholarly catalogues that will pick up on the really important events in the craft world. So one focus will be looking back historically and picking up on threads that have never been picked up before. One has to look into history, because I think we are going to be able to understand the work that is being made in the present against a historical context. And then I think there has to be a certain amount of selectivity that happens. I've never liked big, postage-stamp kinds of exhibitions where there is one piece from hundreds of artists. I don't know if these exhibitions teach us as much or do as much for the field as seeing a single person's work in depth. I think there is work to be done at both ends: We have to look at the masters of craft and at the emerging craft artists.

RB: Some people feel, as you seem to, that one of the weaknesses of craft in terms of its exhibitions is that, unlike the fine arts, there are relatively few exhibitions of one individual's work. Consequently, one never sees their work in a larger context or gets the full idea behind their work.

JK: Right, so you don't have the chance to see how that kind of artist develops, you don't see early, middle, and late work; you see an object or three objects. It's not enough sometimes.

RB: What about exhibitions where material is the theme?

JK: I think those kinds of exhibitions have to be more rigorous, too.

RB: Do you think we have outgrown those kinds of exhibitions?

JK: Probably.

RB: Theoretically, then, a show could be premised on a concept that could encompass all kinds of crafts without becoming medium-oriented.

JK: Well, when I think of the history of the kinds of exhibitions I have done, I don't think I'm going to change just because I'm the director of the American Craft Museum instead of the director of the Institute of Contemporary Art. I have always been interested in finding the emerging talent or the issues that will have enduring significance. I don't see that interest or inclination changing simply because I'm sitting at a different desk. I'm also interested in thematic shows that have to do with issues that are of concern to artists. I don't think that my shows have been these great, huge, all-encompassing categories. I've never done a painting show, for example, and I can't imagine I'd ever do a clay show.

RB: Is the museum's relationship to *American Craft* magazine and American Craft Enterprises going to be any different?

JK: I expect it will be quite different and it is quite different already. The American Crafts Museum and the American Crafts Council are in the process of becoming two separate entities. The museum will have its own board of governors, its own budget, be a separate legal entity.

>>

CAN JANET KARDON LEAD THE CRAFTS?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

RB: Will the museum be funded by the Crafts Council?

JK: There will be independent budgets.

RB: Is the museum going to be responsible for raising its own funds or will it get funding from the Crafts Council?

JK: Well, some of these details haven't been worked out yet. But will I be involved in fundraising in my new position? Yes, I will be, just as I was involved in fundraising at the ICA. I rather like fundraising; it is the one thing that I do that is very measurable. I can do an exhibition and like it and think that it's pretty good and I can like the catalogue, but it's very qualitative. Fundraising is very specific.

RB: What is going to be the rough size of the budget?

JK: About \$1.5 million.

RB: Since the 1940s we have looked at or defined craft by medium; that definition seems to be played out. The craft world now seems to be separated not by medium but by differing conceptual positions about what defines an object as craft. Painting and sculpture have their own language and we understand them to a great degree inside or through that language. What do you think distinguishes the craft language from, say, painting, something that helps us read an object and understand it?

JK: I think one of the really exciting things is that some of those boundaries are being broken down. I recently, for example, saw the Mark Burns show at Helen Drutt Gallery and I was thinking of that work very much along with Jeff Koons' recent show at Sonnabend and they both are looking upon mass culture and the kitschy aspects of mass culture. They take the tchotchke and blow it up to monumental scale. It's all that glitzy kind of surface, a very seductive kind of surface, and what really is the difference there, and is there any difference, and if there are differences are they as important as looking at a Jeff Koons object or a Mark Burns object and responding to it? I think it is more important to respond to them as objects than necessarily to make comparisons.

RB: But already you've made a comparison.

JK: No, I haven't. I said I'm not making a comparison. One called the other to mind.

RB: I'm not talking about a qualitative comparison. Part of the way the human brain understands things is by making analogies comparing this to that to understand what it is. I wonder, for example, what language Mark Burns is using. Is he using what historically we recognize as the craft language or is he using craft materials and processes inside the modern fine arts language?

JK: I think probably what you are discussing is the content of the work and the intent of the work.

>>

CAN JANET KARDON LEAD THE CRAFTS?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

RB: I'm talking about how he's speaking to the public, how we understand his work.

JK: I don't quite understand what you're saying.

RB: If I'm a furniture maker and I make this chair and we sit in it we understand it in the history and context of chairs.

JK: But isn't that sort of old-fashioned, that craft is going to serve a specific function? Aren't there marvelous craft objects being made today that are denying function?

RB: I wonder if they are still craft objects; that's my question.

JK: I believe they are, yes.

RB: So if a person cuts up a chair and hangs it on the wall, they're a craftsperson just like the person who makes a chair for use.

JK: If that person says they're a craftsperson, yes.

RB: Do you see any implications in that for the craft field? I'll go back to the NEA grants: Don't you think it is difficult for someone who works inside the traditional language of craft to compete with artists who have abandoned that language?

JK: I can't comment on the NEA process. I don't know enough about the NEA process or the information you have to make any kind of comment on that.

RB: In the context of the craft world and its survey exhibitions, what kind of work is rewarded? In other words, is the making of traditional craft objects, like a chair you sit in, a retrograde activity?

JK: I wouldn't say so. I think it all comes back to the individual object and to a body of work that a person has produced.

RB: I'm sorry to keep bothering you about this, but I get the feeling that you're suggesting that we use the same criterion for judging the chair that hangs on the wall and the chair that is made to sit in. It doesn't seem to me that you would. People want to know what the criteria are.

JK: I don't think that's important; I think it's irrelevant. Whether a chair hangs on the wall – the chair as idea – or sits on the floor – chair as actuality – is not as important as: Is it a good object? How does this object, for example, fit into the historical continuum of other objects that have been made?

RB: I understand that point, I'm just trying to figure out how you would decide that this chair that is

>>

CAN JANET KARDON LEAD THE CRAFTS?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

made to sit in has the same kind of quality of concept as the chair that has been cut up and re-fabricated to hang on the wall.

JK: You're making a comparison that I'm not making. I'm not comparing the chair on the wall with the chair on the floor. I'm only comparing this new art object to every other art object that has gone before it, or other art objects that are being made in its own time. And that's your basis for deciding whether a piece is interesting or not.

RB: So you would compare chairs to chairs and chairs hung on the wall to chairs hung on the wall.

JK: I'm comparing objects to objects.

RB: There is a feeling in the craft field that the chair on the wall is going to be perceived as better because it appears to be avant-garde craft, while the chair on the floor appears to be traditional, which is not thought of as important or interesting any longer. I suppose I'm looking for some kind of reassurance from you that the chair on the floor has its way of speaking to us and it's not the same as the chair on the wall's way of speaking to us.

JK: I thought I had just said that. It's not important whether the chair is on the wall or the floor. What is important is how the chair on the wall fits into the continuum of other "chairs on walls" and how the chair on the floor fits in with other "chairs on floors."

RB: So you don't see those things competing with each other; they're like apples and oranges.

JK: Yes, I would say so.