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CEO Report: 2022 year in review

2022 was an incredible year for Craft ACT representing a period of significant growth for the organisation and a massive recovery from the challenging years of the pandemic. We met and exceeded our strategic goals of Innovation, Collaboration, Value, and Security, with a full year of vibrant events, including the ninth and most successful DESIGN Canberra Festival, innovative exhibitions in our gallery, markets, auctions, workshops, public programs, competitions, awards, retail sales, and our Artists-in-Residence program. The synergy and vitality of our programming has been achieved through collaboration with over 1600 generous stakeholders and has been well received by our community with engaged audiences growing.

We achieved our strategic goal of Innovation via exhibitions, research, residencies, and workshops. We reached our goal of Collaboration through both Craft ACT and DESIGN Canberra programming working with local, national, and global artists, organisations, and partners. We enacted our pillar of Value through expanding Craft ACT's physical premises (with our Hub Shop and workshop space and working on the future Kingston Arts Precinct project), growing our audiences, providing opportunities for our members, and enhancing our online engagement. Further to this, we achieved our goal of Security through growing organisational sponsorship and artist's income, growing the DESIGN Canberra Festival, increasing staff numbers, providing professional development programs to our artist members; and ensuring our governance reporting and acquittals were of the highest standard—being successful in our application for ACT Government organisational funding.

On a personal level an example of our many successes was an evening of programming during the Festival:

On a balmy Friday evening in November 2022, I sat in Civic Square as the sky went pink and learnt how to make woven bracelets under the expert guidance of accomplished Wiradjuri artist Jessika Spencer. The sensory combination of the natural texture of the raffia, and the

repeated rhythm of the stitching was both calming and compelling—exemplifying the wellbeing benefits of making by hand and the satisfaction of learning new skills and deepening my understanding of First Nations Culture. I sipped on a glass of crisp local Lake George Winery Rosè and nibbled on cheeses from the region—indulging in local delights further enhancing my state of relaxation. I chatted with strangers as I wove feeling a gentle sense of connection to each other in this shared making activity and to place—the beautiful Ngunnawal country we live in.

We sat immersed in public artwork which altered our perception of the urban landscape and provoked me to ponder new ideas. Under foot was on an incredible large-scale mural by Kamilaroi artist Leah Brideson that represented cultural shift in knowledge through a First Nations lens: symbols of waterways and rocks in velvety blues, oranges and white served as a potent reminder that whilst surrounded by concrete, we were on country and urgently need to pay attention to caring for country and climate.

Behind me on the theatre ramps and the lane ways into the square was the mural by artist Lymesmith which used geometry and colour to reference the surrounding heritage architecture; enhancing the arrival and departure experience to the Square.

As I looked up toward the Craft ACT building, I could see the incredible woven sculpture, *Given Conditions*, by artist Lucy Irvine climbing up out of her temporary studio (CRA Second Space) into the windows of the gallery on the floor above like a strange alien organism, disrupting my perception of the building, of the definition of the craft of weaving, and the power of public art to change perspectives.

Next to it a-top the building lights, were bulbous forms, exploring contemporary weaving practice by artist Julie Monro-Allison, her installation *Becoming* an exploration of biological life and the web of entanglement that exists between all living organisms.

This lovely November evening in 2022 immersed me and our community in transformative experiences of being surrounded by artworks, making by hand, connecting with each other, learning traditional First Nations culture, celebrating Canberra, and being challenged to think in new ways. It encapsulates so much about why Craft ACT's artists, exhibitions, and programs are essential to our lives and in celebrating our beautiful cities' significant design legacies and futures. Our artists, craftspeople and designers make work that reflects and reveals our society, tells our stories, connects us with our community and strengthens our sense of identity. It enhances our wellbeing and replenishes our human spirit.

The arts are essential to our city, our culture, and our survival and what we do at Craft ACT is so incredibly important to our city and our world. Canberra has an extraordinarily high number of creatives per capita and in 2022 Craft ACT has been instrumental in showcasing their work and providing opportunities for audience engagement and income generation for artists.

At 51 years old, and the longest running visual arts organisation of our kind in Australia, Craft ACT has played a vital role in sustaining Australia's high-quality studio practice and supporting craftspeople, designers, and audiences, and we are proud to continue this tradition and continue to thrive because of our incredible artist members. It is these artists that give so much to our community and our world, with generosity they continue to enrich and challenge

us. Often these makers cannot earn a living wage from their work and Craft ACT continues to advocate for fair pay for artists and provide opportunities for income generation and connection to growing audiences. We were delighted in 2022 to double fees paid to artists and through all our programs supported artists to earn over \$485,142 (up 45% from 2019).

Our 2022 exhibition program exemplified the best in innovative contemporary craft and design practice, showcasing the diversity of practice globally. A highlight for me was our annual members' exhibition which demonstrated excellence and innovation of our artist members' creative activities, and the diversity of practice in our region. The works presented complex responses to the theme of nurture, the post pandemic social environment, the influence of the pandemic, the climate crisis; and the critical need to look after each other and our world; demonstrating how important creative endeavour is in reflecting our communities' experiences.

Other highlights for me included the exhibitions *Fire Country*, *CONFLUENCE*, *BEEing*, the 2022 *Robert Foster F!NK National Metal Prize* and *Home Life*.

The timely exhibition *Fire Country* by Rebecca Selleck and James Tylor addressed the physical and cultural significance of fire in Australia in a sensitive and poetic manner that captured the emotional trauma of fire in sparse sophistication resonating powerfully with our community.

CONFLUENCE showcased the extraordinary work of 2021 Artist-in-Residence artists Valerie Kirk AM and Harriet Schwarzrock resulting from their immersion in the collections of Geoscience Australia and the environment of Namadgi National Park. This outstanding exhibition was awarded a *Canberra Critics Circle Award for Visual Arts*.

The accompanying exhibition in July, *BEEing*, featured the work of established craft-based artist Dr. Julie Bartholomew and early-career contemporary ceramic artist Mahala Hill and sparked critical discourse around the intersection of art and awareness of biodiversity threats.

Craft ACT was honoured to present the new *Robert Foster F!NK National Metal Prize*, supported by the Tall Foundation, F!NK + Co. Director Gretel Harrison, and Craft ACT. This bi-annual award is an important professional development opportunity for metal practitioners and celebrated the outstanding work of ten emerging and established contemporary metalworkers, designers, and craftspeople across Australia. Artists from New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and the Canberra region were represented, with two outstanding artists, Gretal Ferguson and Larah Knott, awarded cash prizes.

Our international sensation—the *Home Life* exhibition from Rome, showcased the best in Italian design in the Craft ACT Gallery during the DESIGN Canberra Festival. We were so excited to continue our long-standing partnership with the Embassy of Italy to bring this incredible exhibition to Canberra (thanks also to the support of the Institute of Italian Culture and the Prosecco Consortium).

Other exhibitions demonstrating excellence in contemporary craft and design in our 2022 program included:

- *Collide + Divide*, an experimental collaborative exhibition featuring eleven emerging JamFactory associates which explored the opportunities of a cross-discipline collaboration between the four JamFactory studios of glass, ceramics, jewellery, and furniture.

- *Tension[s] 2020*, the Tamworth Textile Triennial exhibition focussed on the future of people and place through textile as a material and human experience as materiality.
- *Home Grown* by artist Jeremy Brown, contrasted design-by-nature and design-by-human, and linked raw materials to their final product as an ode to the harmonious existence of the two elements in Canberra's own streets.
- *You Get A Rhythm About It* showcased the work Peter Minson, spanning his 60-year career as a lampworker.
- *6:30 Sessions*, by Nellie Peoples and Michelle Stemm featured objects created as the result of a collaboration in lockdown.
- *Emerging Contemporaries*, the Craft ACT National Award Exhibition for early career artists showcased the best in emerging graduate work from educational institutions in the region.

As part of our online audience engagement, We were delighted to host a website-based exhibition of some of the best journals from 2021's DESIGN Canberra Creative Journaling Challenge - developed to encourage daily creative practice which is proven to improve wellbeing and creative thinking. This online exhibition presented the winning journal of mixed media artist Laura Canty and a shortlisted group of 26 of these wonderful journals. Further to this, a selection of five of the journals were highly commended by the judges and were exhibited at the Craft ACT Gallery. In November 2022 we ran the challenge again as part of the DESIGN Canberra Festival expanding its reach to national audiences thanks to our new partnership with Eckersley's Art and Craft.

In October 2022, we were excited to launch our new initiative the *DISCOVER: Craft + Design Trail* (supported by the City Renewal Authority) in which six shortlisted Craft ACT members were given a unique professional development opportunity to work with mentors to create public art works on display in the Canberra Art Biennial and the DESIGN Canberra Festival 2022. These extraordinary public artworks brought craft and design practice into a public context and activated City West, engaging new audiences in a process of discovery and delight, and with a new way of engaging with craft and design.

Our major outreach program, the DESIGN Canberra Festival, returned with a bang—being our biggest festival to date, after two years of being compromised by the pandemic. With over 250 events, we enriched the city with an exhilarating, rich program of symposiums, talks, tours, exhibitions, public art installations, and workshops for all ages. The Festival theme of transformation invited us to speculate on how we might transform our city, our community and our world through design and creative practice. Inspired by Craft ACT's golden anniversary in 2021, and gold's symbolism as an agent of transformation, we reflected on the ways that artist, designers, and craftspeople act as alchemists, transforming raw materials and ideas into objects, spaces, buildings, and concepts. The look and feel for the festival was created by the 2022 Design Canberra Designer-in- residence, Lucy Irvine. The Festival engaged design thinking and creative enterprise to speculate on how to solve the big issues of our time, improve our wellbeing; and to foster a vibrant, equitable, sustainable, and innovative society.

The results for the 2022 festival were astounding, demonstrating the public appreciation for engaging with contemporary design and our community. 470,660 people engaged with the Festival (an increase of 310% from our pre-pandemic highest statistics in 2019); 396,802 people with our public art + public exhibitions; and 73,858 attendees with our programs + gallery exhibitions. We supported our creatives to generate \$327,443 of income (an increase

of 71% from 2019) and supported more First Nations artists in the program than ever before. We saw an impressive 35% increase in interstate visitors to Canberra for the festival, 59% new audiences to our website, and a 48% increase in our DESIGN Canberra social media followers and 65% increase in Craft ACT followers. We were thrilled to develop new family audiences through targeted inclusive programming, including our *Creative Kids* programs and the *Forage* at DESIGN Canberra.

The Festival was an extraordinary collaboration between over 1400+ stakeholders—artists, designers, craftspeople, industry, sponsors, educational institutions, organisations, and supporters. Their creativity, generosity and commitment contributed to community wellbeing and identity; and embedded contemporary craft, making and design at the centre of everyday life in Australia’s capital, a global city of design. There were over 40 partners involved including 11 arts and design organisations, 4 National cultural institutions, 8 government partners, 3 embassies, 3 education institutions and 26 business partners and sponsors. We secured \$440,157 in cash support for the 2022 festival (this was 21+ 22 combined) and \$300,000 worth of in-kind support. The Festival is only possible due to the generosity of these collaborators, and I wholeheartedly thank them for their loyalty and support.

Craft ACT has been incredibly fortunate to be partially supported by the Australian and the ACT government which ensures organisational stability and growth. We are also partially supported by the Australia Council for the Arts four-year funding 2021 to 2024, and the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments and the ACT Governments Arts Organization Investment funding—being successful in 2022 in securing additional multi-year funding for 2023 to 2026. I would particularly like to thank ACT’s Arts Minister Tara Cheyne MLA, Senior Advisor Michael Liu, and artsACT staff for their unwavering support of our activities.

In 2022, we commissioned two evaluation projects with DESIGN Canberra partners University of Canberra and Thinkplace to develop qualitative evaluation frameworks and methodologies to measure the impact of the Festival programming on our audiences, partners, artists and stakeholders based on our organisational values of connection, creativity, inclusivity, and wellbeing.

We implemented evaluation tools including surveys, interviews, and focus groups to inform the continuation of high-quality participant experiences and inform the development of future sustainable festivals based on quality outcomes for both audiences and stakeholders.

‘Inclusivity’, was ranked highest by our audiences and we were delighted to discover from the results that more than 78% of attendees felt connected to a shared creative experience in an inclusive environment, with more than 70% stating that after engaging in a DESIGN Canberra program their wellbeing had improved. The concept of ‘connection’ was readily recognised with participants sharing a sense of Canberra place-based relationships.

‘Creativity’ was powerfully felt through active participation in activities such as Nurture Making by Hand Workshops and the Creative Journaling Challenge as well as when attending more passive events like artists talks and symposiums. Other kinds of participation were also seen as creative, sometimes qualified as being ‘vicariously creative’ or ‘passively creative’, such as attending artists talks or producing events as a member of an affiliated organisation.

These learnings will be used to inform the structure and planning for future festivals in order to increase both audience and artist satisfaction.

During 2022, I had the privilege to work with an incredible and completely delightful new team of staff whose creativity, commitment, energy, warmth and tenacity ensured organisational success and growth across all our activities and our Board of Management has provided invaluable strategic leadership and vision to Craft ACT - I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the staff and board of 2022.

And finally, I thank our member artists who are at the centre of all of our activities — I came to Craft ACT because of my passion for supporting artists to grow and thrive and it has been a complete privilege to work with the Craft ACT member's whose creativity, generosity and determination ensure the growth and success of our organisation and contribute to a vibrant arts culture in Australia.

I am so grateful to work in an organisation that makes a tangible difference in the lives of our artists, our community, and our city, and invests in long term cultural and economic gain.

I feel incredibly proud of what the Craft ACT team and community has achieved in 2022 with an:

- exceptional program of innovative exhibitions and public programs
- increase in income generation for artists by 45% percent
- increased representation of First Nations Artists,
- increase in members to 576, up 80.8% from 2019
- increase in DESIGN Canberra festival programs and audiences
- additional pop up retail shop.

As well as the intensive corporate work:

- completing two four year government funding applications for Arts ACT and the Australia Council for the Arts
- developing a new four year strategic plan for 2025-2028 (required for the Australia Council application)
- running two evaluation projects with UC + Think place
- running the Craft ACT rebrand project with Inklab
- implementing a new customer relationship management system to better service our members and sponsors
- and increasing activity on the planning for the new Kingston Arts Precinct.

These achievements have not been without their challenges. Whilst we are grateful to receive the additional four years of Arts ACT funding, this funding only represented an 8% increase on the funding levels we have had in recent years, and no increase in DESIGN Canberra Festival funding.

With massive increases in inflation, mortgage rates, costs of living and comparative staff salaries in other industries - Craft ACT faces increased challenges to organisational stability, with staff turnover continuing to be one of our biggest issues. We are not alone with our sister organisations in the ACT having to reduce staff numbers and cancel parts of their programs to match their government funding levels which have not kept up with inflation.

Salaries at Craft ACT are well below current National Association of Visual Arts fee standards and are considerably lower than those in both Commonwealth and ACT Public Service. Craft ACT staff have worked enormous amounts of overtime to achieve the goals we did in 2022 and as a consequence of which staff turn over remains high. On 100% of exit forms staff report low salaries and high workload as the key reasons for leaving the organisation.

Each time a staff member leaves this puts extra pressure on the rest of the team who often have to absorb their work whilst we recruit and train new staff in market where it's hard to find anyone - and then if we do, it can take new staff 3 -6 months to come up to speed with their roles.

During 2022 we attempted to slow down staff turnover by increasing salaries by a modest 5% and increasing the number of staff to match resources with workload, however this had limited success due to the scale of the festival and the additional load of two unexpected four year funding applications being due during this period. In 2022 we lost eight staff and in February this year we lost three staff which has affected our ability to meet our core business obligations and maintain the high standards we are proud of at Craft ACT.

At this point I would like to thank the staff that remain as the pressure on them has been enormous - they have worked incredible hours for the past few months, upskilled themselves and pulled together to support each other as team - they are incredible people who have demonstrated commitment, professionalism, and resilience in the face of adversity, overwhelm and complaints. I thank the core staff Welly, Moraig, Belinda and Christian for their extraordinary work; our casual staff Dan, Eve, Ella, George, Melissa, Elmi and Maree, and our awesome photographers Davey, Tim and Tim.

I would also like to thank the member artists who have been supportive of us during this period showing understanding, patience and kindness - recognising and acknowledging the team's personal sacrifices and commitment to the organisation.

Looking forward to 2023 the goal of the board and staff is to increase our focus on organisational and financial stability which will mean making some tough strategic decisions about our program, processes and service delivery to what is achievable with the resources we have. This will mean significant change for the organisation in order to survive and thrive, and we are excited to work together with our members to achieve these goals.

Thankyou



Jodie Cunningham
CEO + Artistic Director
Craft ACT: Craft + Design Centre