



# Commitment and communication

Sara Impey takes a look at Quilt Art in its 30th anniversary year

THE GROUP QUILT Art celebrates its 30th birthday this year with two exhibitions and a book. 'Quilt Art: Dialogues' is at the Quilt Museum and Gallery in York from 11 September to 31 October, and 'Quilt Art: Small Talk' can be seen at the Silk Museum in Macclesfield from 19 September to 31 October. The book *Quilt Art: Dialogues & Small Talk* showcases all the work from both exhibitions, and the text consists of profiles of the artists by the quilt academic and historian Dr Sue Marks.

## Beginnings

The group was founded by The Quilters' Guild in 1985 to provide a forum for artists who wished to experiment with the quilt as an art form but who faced limited opportunities to show and sell their work. At that time, the idea of quilts on gallery walls as works of art rather than functional objects was a novelty, as indicated in press reviews of early Quilt Art exhibitions. In 1988, the group

exhibited nearly 30 quilts at Nottingham Castle Museum and the Barbican Centre in London with an exhibition called simply 'Quilt Art'. This exhibition was discussed on BBC Radio 4's arts programme *Kaleidoscope*, in which the reviewer Rosemary Hill said: '... the variety of work here I think will absolutely astonish anybody who's expecting a lot of duvets.'\*

Quilt Art attracted attention then by working in an unfamiliar medium and by being the first group of its kind. For several years it remained the only one. Today there are numerous exhibiting groups and many more venues showing textile art. The internet, too, has hugely expanded the opportunities for work to be seen. So the challenge facing Quilt Art today is rather different: remaining distinctive in a textile art world that has blossomed around it.

## Connections

Rather than simply listing Quilt Art's past exhibitions, this article

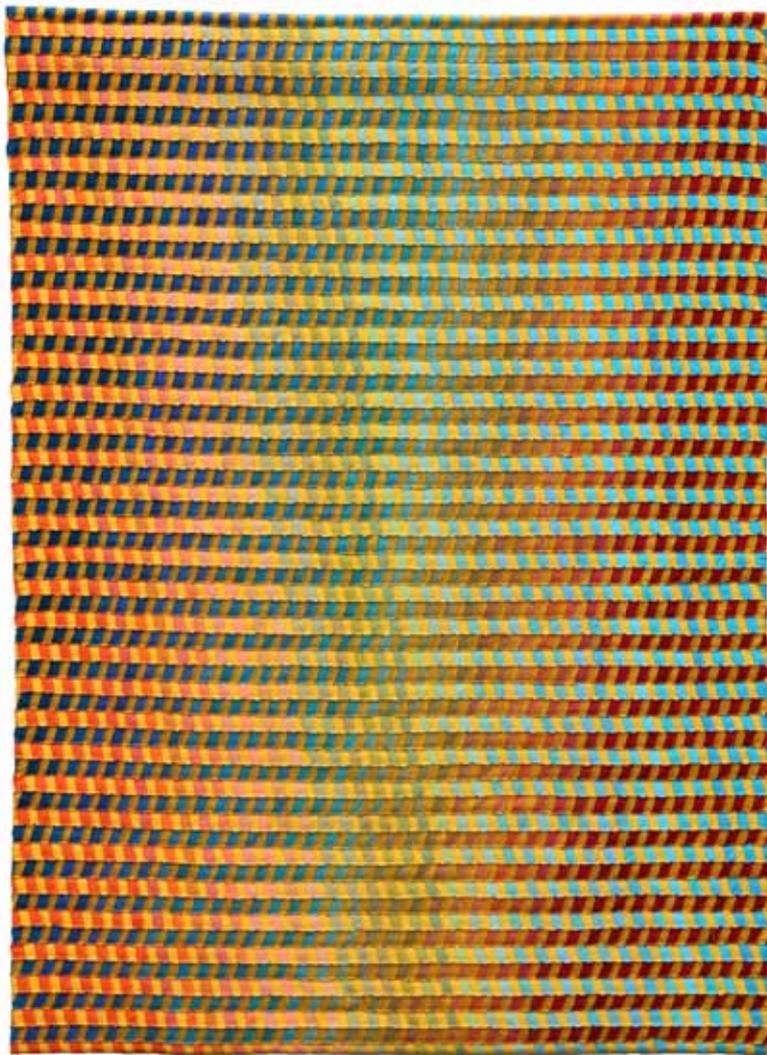
Above:  
*Around Here* by Elizabeth Brimelow, 2014. 182.5cm diameter

PHOTO: MICHAEL WICKS

looks at how the group functions and examines why it continues to flourish in spite of the potential drawback of having members in eight different countries: the UK, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United States. This geographical spread makes getting together difficult, but it has the advantage that artists can draw on contacts in their own countries to arrange exhibitions. In addition, the variety of their backgrounds brings diversity to their work.

The small size of the group – only 18 members – can be viewed as one of its strengths. Limiting the membership reduces the administrative burden involved in simply keeping the group running. But it does mean that every member has to be prepared to work for the benefit of the group: finding venues and then liaising with them, supplying condition reports, organising packaging and transport, and arranging publicity. This was particularly so in 2013, when Quilt Art staged its most

"A quilt can make a big statement"



ambitious exhibition ever, in Russia. A total of 75 quilts, which consisted of the three most recent exhibitions put together, were exhibited at the Tsaritsyno Museum just south of Moscow. Getting all these quilts together, properly boxed and with the necessary paperwork in place, was a huge challenge.

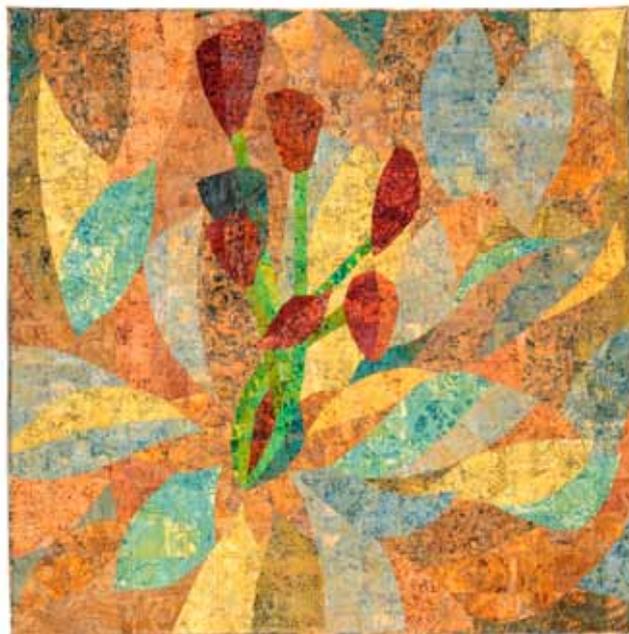
## Communication

Quilt Art has mounted a series of touring exhibitions over the years, some containing large quilts, others smaller ones. Each major exhibition is accompanied by a book which is illustrated, designed, published and sold by the group. Quilt Art is fortunate in being able to draw on the special skills of some of its members: Charlotte Yde, for example, designs the book and the website. The Treasurer, Fenella Davies, keeps control over the group's finances – Quilt Art is an educational charity, so the accounts have to be professionally audited. Other members have developed their own roles. Dirkje

van der Horst-Beetsma, for example, has transported exhibitions in her car all over Europe, and is an excellent and enthusiastic seller of books! Others contribute by hosting meetings or taking on particular administrative tasks.

The group only meets four times a year, and not all the members are able to attend each time, so the key to its smooth functioning can be summed up in one word: communication. As well as using its website and ordinary email, the group has a Yahoo site which acts as a repository for all sorts of information, from tracking book sales to keeping a list of useful contacts, as well as more fun things like sharing photos of exhibitions. One, and sometimes two, of the four meetings a year takes place over a whole weekend so that members have time to talk about the artwork rather than merely business.

But, as with any group, the most important attribute that members bring is commitment: a positive attitude that is prepared to overcome logistical difficulties



**Above left:**  
*Colourscape* by Inge Hueber, 2014.  
200 x 146cm  
PHOTO: ROLAND HUEBER

**Top:**  
*Grandiflora Gold* by Janet Twinn, 2014.  
120 x 120cm  
PHOTO: MICHAEL WICKS

**Above:**  
*Gossip* by Willy Doreleijers, 2014.  
84 x 74cm  
PHOTO: HERMAN LENGTON

and geographical distances. The longevity of the group, even with many changes of membership over the years, acts as a bonding element. Inge Hueber, from Germany, is a founder member, and half the members have belonged for 15 years or more. But Quilt Art is by no means inward-looking and is actively seeking new members.

## Shared experience

Ultimately, of course, the reputation of any exhibiting group rests on the quality of the work. From the outset, Quilt Art has had a selection process to ensure



the highest standards. The group is looking for well-established artists working independently and consistently, whose work is not only technically proficient but demonstrates something that is harder to define: the artist's own unique 'voice'. The work does not have to conform to the traditional definition of a quilt, and many members originally come from non-quilting backgrounds: Janet Twinn from fine art and painting, Yael David-Cohen from painting and printmaking, Allie Kay from weaving, and Val Jackson from embroidery. This year Quilt Art accepted a new member: Willy Doreleijers from the Netherlands.

The small size of the group means that the artists can produce larger work than would be possible if there were more of them competing for often restricted gallery space. Unlike many art forms, a quilt can make a big statement, while little quilts, however beautiful, sometimes lack that dramatic visual impact.

However, the cost of transport means that large quilts have to be rolled up, eliminating the possibility of work that is three-dimensional, freestanding or containing rigid elements. In Quilt Art's smaller exhibitions, such as 'Small Talk', the artists have free rein to be more experimental.

For many members, belonging to Quilt Art is about much more than an opportunity to exhibit. It is about international friendships and the opportunity to share the issues and concerns everyone faces working in isolation most of the time. After 30 years, Quilt Art is a mature and self-confident group of textile artists, still finding inexhaustible expressive potential in the quilt as an art form, and looking towards the future and the next challenge.

© Sara Impey 2015

\* Rosemary Hill, transcript of review of 'Quilt Art' at the Barbican Concourse Gallery, BBC Radio 4, *Kaleidoscope*, transmitted on 25 August 1988.

Clockwise from above:  
*Reality and Rhetoric* by  
Sandra Meech, 2014.  
100 x 260cm  
PHOTO: SANDRA MEECH

*Metropolis 5* by Jette  
Clover, 2014.  
109 x 111cm  
PHOTO: POL LEEMANS

*Stills from a Life 45*  
by Dominie Nash, 2014.  
157 x 135cm  
PHOTO: MARK  
GULEZIAN/QUICKSILVER  
PHOTOGRAPHERS



To find out more about Quilt Art, visit [www.quiltart.eu](http://www.quiltart.eu)

**'Quilt Art: Dialogues'**

11 September – 31 October

The Quilt Museum and Gallery, St Anthony's Hall, Peasholme Green,  
York YO1 7PW

[www.quiltmuseum.org.uk](http://www.quiltmuseum.org.uk)

**'Quilt Art: Small Talk'**

19 September – 31 October

The Silk Museum, Park Lane, Macclesfield SK11 6TJ

[www.silkmacclesfield.org.uk](http://www.silkmacclesfield.org.uk)

Quilt Art: Dialogues & Small Talk, text by Dr Sue Marks, is available at the above exhibitions and also from [www.quiltart.eu](http://www.quiltart.eu) (£18.00/€25, 120 pages, ISBN 978-0-9527609-9).