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## **Editorial: At the Intersection of Poesis and Praxis**

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The overall aim of this inaugural volume of *Studies in Material Thinking* (ISSN 1177-6234) is to generate momentum and collaborative exchange around issues of art and design process, materiality and research practice, or paradigms by which we understand research. It is a collection of diverse position statements and provocations about the concept of material thinking from researchers working in a variety of disciplines. It is intended to stimulate research interest in the notion of material thinking, suggest opportunities for critique/analysis and provide a scoping exercise in anticipation of further volumes.

*Studies in Material Thinking* has come about in response to emerging trans-disciplinary interests and links that are developing in the newly named or restructured schools and faculty amalgamations such as those now being called ‘Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries’ or ‘Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies’ in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. The materiality of different disciplinary practices coming together in these new relationships opens the way for us all to re-imagine our approaches to practice, theory and methodology. It is anticipated that the distinguishing quality of this journal will come from a trans-disciplinary alignment and from accessibility to practitioners in artistic, design and industry sectors as well as academics.

Forthcoming volumes of *Studies in Material Thinking* will provide opportunities for the art and design community to better understand the relationship between research, art making, design and innovation. Sharing insights about appropriate methodological thinking will promote collective understanding of methods generally. Writing about experiential knowledge will enhance communication about the processes and artefacts of our research, design and artistic/creative practices. We may then be able to share a deeper understanding of the important issues that cross over between the creative, professional and business communities especially in relation to knowledge generation, innovation, new technologies and applications.

This first volume is simply a collection of commentaries, position statements and provocations about material thinking. These position statements and commentaries begin to explore the concept of material thinking as a multi-faceted effort taking place at the intersection of all the physical and cognitive processes typically engaged in design and art activity. Submissions were requested for a brief text of 500-1500 words, and a commitment to be involved in the peer review of one or two other

contributions. The range of different perspectives selected for this volume is intended as a stimulus for further analysis and exploration of the scope of this notion, particularly in the context of art and design research practices. The contributors represented here all have an interest in the notion of material thinking and have previously published articles relating to practice-based research in art or design.

It is hoped that these brief, provocative submissions will encourage a wide variety of independent critical responses and contributions for forthcoming volumes. There are, of course, many gaps which we hope will be identified and discussed. We invite you to contribute to the discourse on material thinking and the development of a dynamic theoretical focus across disciplines. Full papers are welcome for consideration at any time.

In this editorial, I will attempt to draw out and focus on some of the key themes and research provocations that emerge from this collection of statements. Lesley Duxbury provides a provocation connected to the concerns of designers and artists who also perform as academics within tertiary institutions. She focuses squarely on an issue that is central to the pedagogy of Art and Design schools offering postgraduate research programs, which is, that art and design activity, its physical/material evolution and the associated activities of the artists and designers is the source of new knowledge. This is an exciting and broadly contested field at present, not because the validity of the assumption is questioned, but because there are differing perspectives on where that knowledge resides, how it is interpreted, what forms of knowledge may be discerned and most important, the significance of it all. While some academic institutions place priority on the artistic/design action which makes up the creative project or may value the artefacts, systems/performances themselves as the embodiment of knowledge, others require substantial argumentation and representation through texts. This tends to relegate the artistic/design activity and even the artistic/design products to a secondary position, thereby dissolving the epistemological and cognitive value of the artefacts. In this context, some academics have begun to speak of the 'crisis of praxis, representation and legitimation. Duxbury highlights a number of questions that while not new, are certainly still to be seriously addressed, the most interesting of which, Duxbury notes, is the role that a university gallery can play in promoting art as research and disseminating research perspectives and outcomes. Like Duxbury, Estelle Barrett locates the on-going significance of discourses associated with material thinking squarely within the academic context of research degrees. She suggests that studio researchers have a valuable role to play in the 'refiguring and expanding' of what we typically understand research to be, not merely within the scope of creative practices that generate artistic or design artefacts, but also in the wider context of the broadest range of research practices and in the generation of new knowledge and cultural capital. Barrett believes that there is still a great deal of work to be done within the academy, to make visible the dialogue around appropriate research methodologies and approaches in the creative and artistic disciplines and to persuade institutional policy-makers that studio or practice-based research is not less significant because its methods cannot always be pre-determined, and its outcomes (to use the terminology of institutional accountability) are typically unpredictable. Both of these authors raise challenging areas for further research that would undoubtedly enrich the discussion around material thinking.

Katy Macleod draws our attention towards the possibility of greater precision in our explanations of the research aspect of art practice. She presents for analysis an atypical case of art and contextual writing in an academic context where the separation between the artwork[ing] and the writing was minimised by the artist's dialogical/analytical approach which Macleod calls art/writing. She puts forward the proposition that we may be neglecting the significance of the individual artwork when we search relentlessly for theoretical support and justification. She challenges us to approach more closely, the 'material specificities and purposes' of the artworks; to grasp their purposive structures. She emphasises the role of description as a strategy directly related to the way in which visual arts practices and intentions are changing, a strategy that is not inconsistent with Gadamer's (1989) discussion on the value and importance of artwork in developing understanding. He argued that the knowledge embodied in artworks is accessed and shared through the actual physical/material experience of the work in. In order to decipher meaning and discriminate between practices in contemporary art, we may simply need to pay more attention to descriptive analysis of what artworks are and how they function or perform in time and space. This may be a difficult task for artists who have previously focused their attention on philosophical and theoretical rationalization.

Barbara Bolt takes up a quite different and equally challenging position. She argues that artists working in many contemporary genres are often pre-occupied with notions of intentionality and meaning in the making of an artwork and in as a result, they may devalue the active power of their tools and materials. Bolt's proposition suggests that we might pay more attention to the role of the artist within the 'acting ensemble' of the creative process; the performative role 'in which linkages are constantly being made and remade'. This dynamic, emergent process in which the value and quality of the end result can not be anticipated is a potentially challenging and important area within which art and design research questions can be framed. It is an intellectual and creative relationship between the artist and her choice of technology which could be metaphorically described as 'mutually intelligent'. Both Macleod and Bolt open their challenges towards an interesting area that may well afford a productive direction for the discourse about material thinking.

Laurene Vaughan's position statement locates the material thinking discourse both within and outside of physical materiality by introducing the relational concepts of space and place. She reminds us that a sense of place has more to do with who we are than where we are. Her proposal points towards opportunities for art and design research questions in the framing of 'how we are' in places, 'how we know' space and place and 'how we connect' to the intellectual, cultural and physical locations that we inhabit. Such a spatially oriented perspective emphasises the importance of the artist's or the designer's creative sensitivity to materials, spaces and evolving environmental and cultural situations inherent in the work and its spatial existence. From that perspective, artistic and design research processes would inform a dialogue that transcends considerations of technical competence to include something like the Aristotelian notion of phronesis or practical wisdom. Vaughan also reminds us that language itself is connected to the concrete experiences we have in time and space.

Lily Diaz points toward the expanding and exciting area of virtual space and virtual materiality as a location for important research questions. Her work in this area has made her curious about how the ontological aspects of precious material culture will

be regarded in the digital domain in the future. Questions arise for her about the importance of various categories of material culture and whether or not they are important enough to be studied and perhaps even modelled using computing tools. Diaz introduces a vast range of research issues when she asks the niggling questions about how and why the digital, when employed in a particular manner, seems to corrupt the essence of what we perceive to be the essence of sacred matter. She asks the question “Why does it so trespass the integrity of the object?” and in so doing introduces concerns about value and values. M. P. Ranjan also locates his position statement in relation to values. He points out that the current, evolving definition of design locates important research edges at the centre of all types of human activity and innovation where meaning and value reside. He stresses the importance for all design activity and research to be sensitive, observant and discriminating in practice. The purpose of design and innovation should always be linked to thoughts and actions that account for meaning and value in society as a whole. In this way, Ranjan suggests, design and design research ought to be a strong and effective force in shaping future culture. His definition of contemporary design articulates a socially and materially informed practice for giving shape to our intentions; one that can be understood and brought about through manipulation of materials and equal sensitivity to the immaterial and intangible levels of systems, services and interfaces. Critical perspectives and research enquiry into areas straddling the material/virtual, the material/immaterial and the material/cultural spheres will enrich the future material thinking debate.

Terry Rosenberg uses his poetic description of a childhood experience to frame a cautionary note on the way in which representation acts to ‘connect and collapse the physical and the ideal in practice’, drawing attention to all issues of representation as another fertile ground for the exploration of material thinking. He also expresses his concerns about the bracketing of concepts and the setting of measures for inclusion or exclusion of dialogue. His resistance to the oversimplified boundaries that may inadvertently be set up when we define and bracket conceptual perspectives within our disciplines is a cautionary note. He suggests using the term more as way of focusing our different discourses in order that we may bring together the best of our wisdom and scholarship to connect our fields of creative practice and expose the conduits for trans-disciplinary thinking.

Reading between the lines and across the range of position statements, it is tempting to gather together all the various ideas and make a broad connection with the Aristotelian philosophical notion of practical reason. Across the creative spheres that these authors/researchers inhabit, there are clear issues of poesis and praxis under consideration through typically material means. Within this framing, an explanation of material thinking would seem to slide easily alongside the associated notion of phronesis, incorporating as it does concerns for situational parameters and the mediation of purpose, practice and form. Directly or indirectly, the statements in this volume point in the direction of what might be described as an intersection of poesis and praxis, where the wisdom of practical decision-making comes together with collectively shaped knowledge about those material and technical matters. Hannah Arendt (1958)<sup>1</sup> makes a unique distinction between poesis and praxis when she states

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

that whereas poesis is characterized by the univocity of its model, of its means and of its goal, the activities of praxis are thoroughly ambiguous, or equivocal, because they connect one or several individuals to others in and through the social relation. Her term univocity does not mean univocal - having one signification. She does not mean, for example, that a designed artefact, a painting, or a performance, can only have one meaning. The meaning of her 'univocity' is that the artefact or performance is the voice, or product, of a single maker, or a single (even collaborative) will. However, she describes praxis as equivocal because it arises from the interaction or interdependence of individuals and a plurality of wills. Using Arendt's interpretation, we might speculate on a 'linked poesis/praxis' concept that resembles a kind of glue binding together material, technological, intellectual and social realms which might otherwise remain unconnected. This active, linking or gluing concept may be another lens through which we might view our ideas about material thinking.

*Studies in Material Thinking* is a project that I hope will become a catalyst for better trans-disciplinary understanding of the paradigm shifts that are occurring in art and design research practice and education. There is a growing need within the postgraduate community and broader artistic and technological research fields for more thorough explanations of creative method and more comprehensive analysis of creative thinking, material process and innovation. Within the postgraduate sector we increasingly speak of the 'triple crisis' of praxis, representation and legitimation and everywhere we hear versions of collegial concern about the impact of this perceived crisis on creative practice in the academy.

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