

Material Thinking Design Research Workshop ***An experiment in open peer review process at*** **ConnectED: International Conference on Design Education** **University of New South Wales, 2007**

The papers in Vol. 1, No. 2 of *Studies in Material Thinking* were subject to an experiment in academic quality assurance. They were not blind refereed but rather underwent what could be called an open peer review process. The reasons are multiple.

The project brought together people from the fields of art and design. The more or less veiled paranoia about contamination that often exists between the fields of design and art frequently conceals commonalities in process and objectives. Increasingly there are practices that are explicitly blurring these distinctions – design art, critical design, design for debate, relational aesthetics – and a blended discourse is having to play catch-up. However, there are disparities between the approaches of art theory and design theory, not least because the former has a far more established tradition. This *Material Thinking* project, in trying to discover what design research could learn from a text primarily concerned with art practices, presented challenges to the establishment of reviewing criteria and the selection of reviewers.

The project brought people together around a common focus. Despite the fact that designing is almost entirely a collaborative process, there is surprisingly little formalised commonality in the field of design research, something that is surely necessary in a mature discipline. There are for example rarely invitations from publications for multiple critics to evaluate the same new design. A strong exception was the Delft Protocol project undertaken by the 1994 Design Thinking Research Symposium where researchers were all provided with a common data set (documentation of observed design processes) to analyse, recently repeated at the Open University in 2007 (see <http://technology.open.ac.uk/design/cross/DesignThinkingResearchSymposia.htm>). Selecting a text for this common focus was difficult. Choosing a text for example rather than an artefact, exhibition or practice, was already a challenge to the habit of design research. The pride the discipline of design sometimes exhibits when shunning texts is not useful to its development, not least because it fails to recognize the extent to which texts are themselves instructive designed artefacts. The text we sought had to be rich enough to sustain interrogation from a range of perspectives. The participants wanted the text to be a relatively recent one, though this was to some extent a necessity given the lack of riches in existing design research literature. So Carter's *Material Thinking* was chosen. This text has some currency in the Australian art and cultural studies scene, but is not widely known beyond that. This meant that the contributors were some of the only people we knew familiar enough with the text to be reviewers. Further, Carter's book has a strong commitment to modes of working and knowing not currently tolerated by institutional disciplines. It seemed important for our project not to be merely a reappropriation of Carter's book into conventional disciplinary frameworks such as those emblematised by blind peer reviewing.

We therefore needed to find another way of quality assuring the resulting essays. The process we selected was borrowed from what we understood of a workshop held as part of the production of Brenda Laurel's edited collection *Design Research* [MIT Press, 2003]. There, all the contributing

authors circulated their papers amongst themselves and then held a closed workshop for a day sharing comments on each other's papers. To this format, we added the element of publicness. Our workshop was held as an advertised section of the ConnectED conference in Sydney in July, 2007. This meant that an audience witnessed, and was able to make contributions to the process of, a participant's paper being critically reviewed by two other participants. The intention was that the publicness would mitigate the fact that the reviewing was not being done blind nor by outsiders to the project. The result was something more akin to a 'design crit' than the open blind peer reviewing that has been used by some design research conferences (for example, The 6th European Academy of Design Conference at The University of the Arts, Bremen, 2005 - <http://ead06.hfk-bremen.de/>)

The reviewers assigned to each of the papers prepared substantial critical responses for the workshop without prior consultation with the authors under review, even though they were our colleagues. Those responses felt if anything, more critical than conventional blind peer reviews, perhaps out of compensation. They also felt longer and more detailed, partly because they had been prepared as small conference papers in their own right. Certainly, the nature of the process allowed the authors reviewed to seek much greater clarification from the reviewers about what needed to be reworked. The validity of the process seemed to fall down only on pragmatics - in particular, the size and preparedness of the audience to the open peer review conference session. The disparateness of the papers despite the common object became apparent at the event, so the strong hand of an external editor, Terry Rosenberg (with the assistance of Duncan Fairfax) was sought. Following the open peer review workshop, papers were reworked for submission to the editors of the current volume of *Studies in Material Thinking*, for a final review and critique.

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