

Nancy de Freitas

Postgraduate Studies
School of Art and Design
Auckland University of Technology
Auckland, NZ.
nancy.defreitas@aut.ac.nz

SMT

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Material Thinking as Document

Material thinking as a concept is without firm definition despite evidence in many fields of art and design that the intellectual exercise itself, its effects and concrete results, are sensed and trusted. The evidence is to be found in all kinds of artistic and design artefacts throughout history. Material thinking skill is acquired experientially, through practice and contemplation. Historically, this specialised knowledge that comes from the handling and forming of materials has been shared between specialists, passed down from master to apprentice, even closely guarded by professional guilds. The intellectual experience of material thinking has always been tangible to practitioners, even if it has not been communicated outside of the studio. The need to define it as a concept, to analyse its affects, communicate what it means and define it as knowledge is a recent phenomenon that results from the positioning of art and design activity as research within academic contexts.

Typically, art and design research students are engaged across multiple intellectual and creative processes, including the production of material artefacts, explanatory/critical textual artefacts and digital documentation artefacts as well. Visual and written texts document their creative and research approaches and fulfil institutional requirements for evidence of material thinking in practice-led research. More significantly, however, the organisation and writing of analytical texts can work positively to support rigorous studio practice and promote refined, focused material thinking. Writing can bring the researcher into close critical contact with the conceptually difficult parts of the work, the *troublesome knowledge* that Meyer and Land describe as *counter-intuitive or even "alien"* (Meyer and Land, 2006, p. 39) resulting in a transparent explication of the actual work involved in art work and potentially leading to more profound insights.

Exegetical and philosophical texts are composed in many different forms, the purpose of which may be to acknowledge or to challenge existing discourses, to explain aspects of the design or exploration not readily apparent in the artefact. Accompanying texts are an excellent way of representing critical moments/events in the creative process and sometimes function as independent parallel artefacts alongside the artwork or design. Written work usually takes on a particular

relationship with the material practice when they both evolve in tandem, or when they intersect as a cycle of successive, reflective interventions. Written texts may serve in a supportive way when they provide context and background information on the work, but they can be more valuable when they intersect in a more deliberate, dynamic way, leading the work at times and also providing necessary detachment for critical viewing. Material thinking emerges from all of these crossovers and intersections where thoughts and actions are untangled from within habitual studio practices and familiar materials. If it were only a question of justifying practice-led research activity within the university, the study of material thinking could be dismissed as merely a sceptical adaptation to external academic constraints. On the contrary, the more attention we pay to the intersection of all the various practices used by art and design researchers - writing practices, oral and performative practices, material practices and conceptual practices - the more we discover about the potential of multi-literacy and multimodal approaches for improving and energising research and creative production.

Working under established, older programmes in the UK, Europe and Australia, as well as the newer programmes in New Zealand, Canada and the USA, artists and designers are discovering dynamic working intersections in those unfolding spaces where their intellectual and physical work, in its spatial and material form, is documented and analysed using many different methodological approaches. Undoubtedly, these intersections (making + documenting + discussing + writing) have an impact on the creative artefacts produced and on the practitioner's own work processes as well. Writing and art making, when practiced together, reveal their soft boundaries. They adhere and acquiesce in ways that affect the creative approach. The material practice and the evolving conceptual framework coalesce. Moreover, many practice-led researchers are now entering university with a wider range of literacy skills that reflect new technologies, changing educational philosophy and an undergraduate curriculum informed and challenged by researchers in the field who recognise the new demands of living and working in an increasingly globalised world.¹

In this volume of research papers, a selection of different approaches is brought together to review some of the issues that arise from the practice perspective and from the institutional perspective. It opens a dialogue about the forms of research documentation and analysis we use and may guide us toward a more confident, inclusive understanding of appropriate research orientations for artists and designers. The text selections stand independently as material thinking orientations and in each case the accompanying reflective components bring to light broader applied contexts, theoretical frames or the particular unique significance of the writing examined.

The original selected texts are all exegetical, documenting the materiality of their authors' observation of their own creative working processes. We see in the texts evidence of the forming and handling of materials and ideas, the growing awareness of a material reality beyond that which has been imagined. We also see a struggle with the materiality of writing: as documentary record; as a representation of belief; and as a negotiation toward the achievable. The selections of writing chosen for this volume are all examples of the way in which writing can be a useful conceptual ally in the studio and a transparent form of communication throughout a complex creative process. In art and design

¹ Commentators in the field of multiliteracy studies point out that in an increasingly globalised world, all aspects of communication involve negotiations across increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural fields (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2000; Unsworth, 2001).

research, these writings demonstrate a range of textual forms that are capable of capturing broad and fine distinctions of how the material thinking process is at work. We can discern how these researchers are evaluating what is 'right' in material form and we appreciate the mental interlinking required across their multiple literacies.

The texts in this volume reveal how the authors are rendering ideas; responding to materials at hand; crafting forms; assembling intellectual tools for practice and theorising their creative contexts. Scollon (2001) speaks of this as a nexus of practice, an emergent system developing through time in which "practice changes with each action as does the habitus of the social actor." Theoretical tools and studio methods are mediated in action through the design or art practice resulting in constant adaptations, which are of interest to the research community particularly in relation to how these tools for thinking and making are co-ordinated or modified across different modes of production. Constant variability in the use of theoretical tools makes it difficult to find stability and common ground in the field.

Steven Scrivener speculates that material thinking "leaves a trace or record of itself in the material that is formed" and undoubtedly, these traces are to be found in the material form of written texts as well as artefacts. In his selection of exegetical writing and subsequent conversation with the thesis author Welby Ings, he challenges any simple interpretation of the relationship between thought and production. Their post-examination dialogue reveals the complexity of material and theoretical unfolding in practice when inquiry and production take place across a multimodal platform.

In the discussion raised by Ian Jervis and Linda Roche, important issues come into view in relation to the challenge of articulating methodological intentions to meet the requirements and expectations of the degree and examination process. When art is described as research and accompanied by an exegetical text, the methodological imprint and evolutionary narrative that is inherent in the form may be regarded as less accessible than the version provided in the written text. This is a significant risk for some practice-led thesis submissions. Jervis' arguments highlight the importance of raising the bar and maintaining high disciplinary expectations in relation to the examination process. An intelligent reading of the artefacts themselves can draw out the research narrative that is contained within the form of an individual artwork, in the combined body of work and also in the exhibition strategy. This close reading of the material conditions of the work must be a fundamental expectation of the examination process for practice-led work.

Laurene Vaughan and Yoko Akama reflect on a similar dilemma occurring at the examination stage. Akama's methodological process of visualising relationships and discovering meaning within various elements of her research became an integral part of the final submission, including a performative oral presentation at her examination. Akama's approach values the social and dialogic interactions that take place in the process of designing. Her supervisor acknowledges the way in which this important tacit knowledge was handled in the research documentation. However, the examiners' responses revealed the continuing difficulty for practice-led researchers who wish to incorporate new methods and material thinking approaches appropriate to practice-led research. Some examiners continue to focus inappropriately on the written component to the exclusion of other texts and other forms of research communication. It is generally agreed that particular approaches are needed for documenting a

practice-led research degree when it focuses on emergent or unfolding creative artefacts, relationships between image/object and writing, and its processes. Multimodal research approaches and presentation models may not yet be sufficiently well understood and internalised within the academic community, including examiners. The new ways in which art and design research documentation can be effectively encoded for examination and archival purposes needs to be examined and more widely discussed in order to build familiarity and to assure effective communication and good judgement in the use of multimodal approaches.

From a Canadian perspective, Kathleen Vaughan's selection of two PhD candidates' documentary/analytical texts provides an opportunity for her to reflect on the function and performance of writing as an intersecting developmental process. Vaughan's two selections show how candidates Natasha Reid and Danut Zbarcea engage differently with an unpredictable, evolutionary process and attempt to discover the materiality and the full conceptual potential. Both candidates move strategically between subjective and objective phases as they negotiate their reflective cycles. It appears to have been constructive for both authors to identify subjective and objective modes in their methodological approaches to the creative work. This may well be a productive direction for further investigation into material thinking and writing as it is applied in practice-led research.

In some cases, there is a large variation in the length of the submission parts such as in Kathleen Vaughan's response and comparison of two selected texts. It was an editorial decision to limit the length of the reflective component and this may have limited the scope for these authors. I take responsibility for that decision, but hope that any perceived imbalance is positively read as an indication of the focus of Volume 3 on interesting forms and methods in research writing/documentation and in particular the use of multimodal approaches in practice-led research.

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