



# Studies in Material Thinking

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*Multisensory materialities  
in the art school*

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This special issue of *Studies in Material Thinking*, focuses on the plurality of affective modalities that flow around the objects, practices, and meanings of art and design in that most mysterious of locations, the art school. Indeed, the ‘art school’ shelters many complex, hidden, and diverse habitats: from attempts at the private studio ideal of the painter; through to construction workshops; shared work areas of more public, team-oriented disciplines such as Environmental Art, Product Design, or Architecture; as well as the distributed digital spaces that are now also overlaying art and design practices. All these activities have different material and sensory aspects, including, given current developments in ‘pervasive computing’, the apparently immaterial virtual sphere. The flux of art education is full of un/made and un/finished objects and narratives, where traditional skills and canons are perpetually reinvented and sustained; where ultra-specialised, sometimes obsolete, knowledges and hand skills are exercised, appropriated and assimilated. Art school students are forced into the role of self-fashioning professionals, as young adults they are engaged in varying processes of self-creation and self-narration through material practices. Unlike many other students in higher education, they are not so consciously oriented to texts, but instead to images, objects, or environments and to the characteristic processes and materials of their chosen specialism.

While the products of art schools are often described under the umbrella term of ‘visual arts’ and theorised as an aspect of Visual Studies (as for example in James Elkins’s alert ‘skeptical introduction’ of 2003 to this field), this collection of writings draws on the insights of the ‘sensory turn’ in arts and humanities that challenge earlier textual and poststructural approaches to culture, and is also informed by many by-now

familiar critiques of vision as the dominant sense in the Western hierarchy of senses (Jay, 1994). Artists and researchers can now draw on the increasingly numerous and relevant writings in anthropology and related disciplines in material culture—for example through the recent survey of debates around ‘material cultures, material minds’ by Nicole Boivin (2017)—in part because art and design practice is moving closer to these fields in its procedures, that may now emphasise systems and processes rather than the visual. Our enquiry posits the multisensory nature of art and design practices, arguing that the art school always offers itself as one of the most eloquent sites of intersensory encounter that functions as an exemplary, inextricable entwinement of materials, bodies and minds in action. Practices of making, designing, forming (both objects and the technical skills of aspiring designers and artists) have traditionally been the primary, if not the only, *raison d’être* of the art school, an institution which persistently concerns itself with transmitting—and making explicit—sensory knowledge. The art school unfolds as a site of distinct, highly-disciplined studio specialisms that foster heterogeneous, multisensory encounters; in the words of Steven Connor: ‘The senses communicate with each other in cooperations and conjugations that are complex, irregular, and multilateral. This complexion of the senses knits itself together anew with each new configuration’ (Connor, 2004, p. 156). Rather than express or contain such communications between senses, art school education needs to fully embrace their disruptive diversity.

Making—no matter how conceptual or immaterial the end result may be—doesn’t occur outside or without the mediation, complicity and/or resistance of bodies/materials. This points to a form of embodied,

or material, thinking which seems to resist linguistic formalization, reflexivity and representation. How is it possible to account for instances of ‘tacit knowledge’ (Polanyi 2005 [1958]) and intuitive, precognitive operations? The artist William Kentridge once remarked of printmaking that:

*When you’re making an image, there’s something that happens between the thoughts in your head and the sheet of paper or piece of copper. You need some sort of spark between that vague idea, the material and the finished image. ...the material or the form of the printmaking is essential for that thinking. (Kentridge, quoted in Krauss, Malbert & McCrickard, 2012, p. 27)*

What happens between the idea, the material and the medium? In this issue, we attempt to translate, or approach, such moments of aesthetic encounters. Accordingly, the contributors of this volume often begin their enquiries with situated, lived, embodied or emplaced experiences. They remember, for instance, the unfolding of a piece of cloth, the cropping and fabrication of photographic ‘memory’ in commercial darkrooms, the ruination of the studio, the taking apart of a table built long ago. They reflect upon encounters between bodies and objects, observing the ways in which the artificial subject/object frontier effaces itself in the seemingly immediate and unmediated process of making. We are more concerned with the open-ended realm of making/unmaking than with the static territory of ‘the made’.

We remain aware that, as Michel Serres so powerfully conveyed in *The Five Senses* (2008), it is impossible to isolate or separate the senses, and that one needs language (a sort of sixth, rational sense)

to piece them together—at least provisionally. Serres eloquently invokes a constant epiphany of the body through mingled senses, as in his description of lifting bricks, stones, concrete blocks. ‘I exist’, he says, ‘entirely in my hands and arms... at the same time, my hand is lost in the grainy body of the pebbles’ (Serres, 2008, p. 25). For sensory objects are slippery and always temporary, gleefully dissolving again when we experience them. It may be that our encounters with the material world exceed and shatter apparently finite, external objects (Merleau-Ponty, 2004 [1948], p. 63). In engaging with the senses, we are therefore committed to ‘challeng[ing] mentalist approaches to material culture’ (Seremetakis, 1994, p. 147) in favour of a phenomenologically-oriented reading. The multisensory aspects of material culture are appealing because they appear to resist established or linear attempts at narration or rationalisation and offer instead a liberating means of opening the ‘doors of perception’ (Huxley, 1954); of being-in-the-moment.

## *The art school unfolds as a site of distinct, highly-disciplined studio specialisms...*

Because of the vision-centred emphasis of academic art training, avant-garde artists throughout the twentieth century have questioned the role of vision as the most authoritative sense in Western constructions of knowledge and truth by challenging the artifice of pictorial space in art. Feminist scholars have extended this attack on vision and the controlling

gaze of the patriarchy, as expressed in Luce Irigaray's widely-quoted observation that: '[T]he predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch, hearing, has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations... the moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality' (Irigaray, quoted in Owens, 2003 [1985], p. 254). David Howes, a major writer on the material culture of the senses argues that current Western hang-ups about the vision-oriented hierarchy of the senses is not derived from immutable physiological hard-wiring, but is only one current position amongst many. But as he explains:

*[T]he model of intersensoriality does not imply a state of harmony, nor does it imply a state of equality... indeed the senses are normally ordered in hierarchies. In one society or social context sight will head the list of the senses; in another, hearing or touch. (Howes, 2014, p. 164)*

In reverse, those hierarchies will have metaphorical ordering functions across categories in society so that, for example, inferior ranks such as women or working class people may be associated with a lower order sense such as smell. Individual artefacts in culture embody a particular sensory world, both in terms of production (where certain sensory judgements are prioritised in making) and in its consumption (in the meanings ascribed to objects by users in accord with their own sensory order of culture).

In art school education, we can see a history of such shifting hierarchies in recent times. The regimes of traditional academic training through the life room, observational drawing, and indeed, through design generated from drawing does appear to privilege sight in its most elevated metaphorical sense of 'vision' or

'insight', while the formalism of modernist art and design reinforced this emphasis by celebrating an often disembodied 'opticality' as the medium of judgment. By contrast, more materials-focused workshop styles of education, as pioneered most famously at the Bauhaus, asserted a more multisensory and embodied method of making and judging art and design. As Tim Ingold's 'activity theory' asserts, embodied knowledge is not something pre-conceived in our minds, but something that emerges from our actions and engagement with the grain of the material world—thus creative practitioners must engage with this flow of materials, not imposing design but entering into the 'worlds' becoming' (Ingold, 2013). In this issue, Knifton and Lloyd's article expands eloquently on

## *Individual artefacts in culture embody a particular sensory world...*

these various shifts in emphasis with reference to the experiences of one specific art school in the UK in the post-Second World War period, while Banerjee and Hendry—developing archival research in unexpected directions—attempt to get right inside this process of emergent knowledge.

There are different specialisms and different practices nested within the art school. In some fine art teaching, for example, Howard Singerman has noted how students from the 1970s onwards have started to lurk within small private dens, marking as he argues an individualistic turn in art practice of 'fragmenting and decentering' the craft skills that had previously

been at the centre of more collective academic teaching spaces since the days of Leonardo. As Singerman notes, studios are rooms that are now 'obligatory' but are more mysterious than ever in terms of artefactual production. They are instead 'chambers that create the artist' (Singerman, 2010, p. 40-45); and as we will see in Chris Dorsett's article, also spaces where the student must be allowed to 'decreate' herself.

In design, the situation with craft is differently complex. Design teaching does frequently work through stages of technical expertise through experiential discovery. Zeke Leonard's article in this issue develops a nuanced analysis of how such expertise in teaching can both draw on, then go beyond, the certainties of the carpenter's manual. Such writing, moving between the specificities of technical expertise and the broader explication of contemporary art and design processes, is rare. Previous descriptions that strike this balance and give inspiration as to how to approach the hidden sensory modalities of the studio and workshop can be found in the work of Johanna Drucker, for example in her essay 'Offset: the work of mechanical art in the age of electronic (re) production' in which she articulates the embodied judgment needed at every stage of artist book production by offset lithography, hidden behind what appears to be an utterly banal high-street process, demonstrating how labour in the 'so-called post industrial society... is rendered invisible, made to seem a natural function of the appearance of the object, rather than being a thing in itself' (Drucker, 1998, p. 190).

This issue posits the art school as a fluid psycho-material locus, a site of iteration, projections and re-creations, where the remembrance of past gestures, projects and practices endlessly mingle with the intuition of objects to come. The ideas

here can prompt questions for future investigations into the multisensory nature of art and design enquiry. Some further areas of the contemporary art explorations that immediately suggest themselves concern first current intense research into commercial applications of multisensory design under the apparently user-friendly face of 'emotionally durable design'. Indeed, carefully designed multisensory experiences have a long history in consumer society, with appeals to 'lifestyle' and fantasy the means for increasing throwaway consumption via multisensory and immersive consumer environments such as department stores. Further to this we might consider the apparently immaterial virtual sphere and the expansion of sensory elements of digital immersive environments, as discussed for example in a recent article on digital synaesthetic multisensoriality in the work of multimedia artists by Sylvia Casini in which she argues that 'we are all synaesthetes' based on neurological evidence that we do not have separate areas of specific sensory modalities in the brain so that 'our perception and experience of the world is multi-sensorial', senses emerging 'after sensory stimuli extend into and co-mingle in brain areas' (Casini, 2017, p.2). In this and similar approaches, we can see that the term 'multisensory' is often conceived more in terms of remediation or translation from one medium to another, or more broadly as the attempt to evoke one medium within the working of another. Common examples of this remediation might include images within texts (that may be heightened by deliberately imagistic approaches), or of touch and taste in films. As film theorist Laura Marks attempts to achieve in her own translations across mediums:

*[T]he task is to make the dry words retain a trace of the wetness of the encounter... to condense experience and re-explode it in other form. Symbolization, which includes language, is not a rupture with sensuous perception but exists on a continuum with it. (Marks, 2002, p. x)*

As we close this overview of the special issue, we continue with Marks's observation that 'All of us hold knowledge in our bodies and memory in our senses' (Marks, 2002, p. xiii). This special issue creates room to think of somatic knowledge and embodied memories in the specific art school context. And yet, we must accept that—if it is to remain fertile, disruptive and alive—part of this knowledge must always resist and exceed language and interpretation. The six articles in Volume 17, as introduced below, all offer diverse testimonies of the complex, hidden and iterative studio practices of artists, designers and researchers in art schools today, where new works arise out of memory, reflection and re-enaction.

#### **Unfolding: A multisensorial dialogue in 'material time'**

Sharon Blakey and Liz Mitchell's contribution takes the form of a perceptive and often provocative dialogue on 'material time', a term which the authors use to describe the seemingly slow, elongated time they spent together in a Manchester museum storeroom. The authors pause to describe a moment of encounter with a piece of cloth, which they unfolded together, intuitively forming a small child's bed. They speak of the tacit, enduring and embodied 'memory of the senses' (Seremetakis, 1994) which guided them. From the small episode of the cloth—a silent yet piercing

act of recognition—they develop a larger reflection on the ethics of care, slowness and implicit listening within art and design practices. In the course of the conversation, the authors graft together heterogeneous theories and thoughts, ranging from craft to neurosciences, creating a textured, iridescent yet always legible piece of scholarship. They invite us to reconsider the central value of slowness for the future of art schools, but also for that of research practices. What they propose is a subtle politicization of affect and sensation – this committed piece is central to understanding the senses as sites of resistance (Marks, 2008, p. 135).

#### **The collection as making tool in the classroom**

Zeke Leonard's piece centers upon the seemingly banal, largely invisible and multi-millenary-old mortise and tenon joint. Drawing from his own pedagogical use of the Stickley Museum's furniture collection (New York, USA), the author invites us to reconsider the museum as a significant and ever-pertinent place of learning for design students. Leonard's article offers an implicit comment on the increased dematerialization and digitization of the design classroom, arguing for a considered return to material objects and 'object lessons' in teaching environments. In doing so, he reviews the varied, multisensory modes in which design students learn how to make functional objects, focusing on tactile and haptic materialities. The invigorated distinction he makes between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that'—which he implicitly derives from Gilbert Ryle (1945)—helps further our understanding of the designer's challenges in a changing art and design context.

### **Studio ruins: Narrating ‘unfinishedness’**

Chris Dorsett’s article examines the private, non-display studio space of ‘failure’, mess, and material confusion of art, taking issue with various mystical pronouncements of the creative and avant-garde virtues of ‘failing better’ in the Beckettian sense. He describes the everyday activity of patrolling teaching spaces as a studio tutor—balancing ‘health & safety’ concerns against the nurturing of critical judgment in students (and indeed, artists)—in relation to the lure of artful disorder of the ‘anti-studio’ statements of artists like Jason Rhoades, and the theorised aesthetics of ruins. He warns that no one seems willing to argue that ‘unfinishedness’ is an inherent attribute of studio work and that an over-exaggerated appreciation of poetic failing now stops us encountering an actual failure to complete. Dorsett argues that it is material, rather than visual, culture that poses the right questions about creative failure. In his view, the materiality and topographical range of a ‘health and safety’ inspection steers descriptive processes rather more closely to the actual chaos of making art and creates a true recognition in practice-based research of the collision-like stalling of achievement (Agamben, 1995) and a critically embedded need to ‘decreate’ (Weil, 2008 [1952]; Carson, 2006; Hillyer, 2013).

### **Unruly principles: First year experimental pedagogy, Glasgow School of Art 1965-1975**

Debi Banerjee and Kirsty Hendry reflect on the subjective student experience of self-discovery through different approaches to art school education

in a way that echoes the historical enquiry of Robert Knifton and Fran Lloyd (see below), but conducted through a very different performative and anecdotal methodology. The starting point was standard archival research into the teaching practices emerging from the experimental teaching unit ‘Section V’ (within an otherwise fairly traditional academic teaching curriculum) devised by lecturer Ted Odling for First Year Studies at Glasgow School of Art (1965–mid 1970s). The existence and activities of Section V challenged GSA’s own position on what a creative education might necessitate, critiquing the institutionalised teaching norms of its time, and encouraging first year students to question fundamental assumptions about art. The technique was to scramble the faculties of individual perception as a means of understanding how these experiences could be deconstructed, transposed, and communicated via other sensorial registers. In addition to oral testimonies with former students and staff (now returned to contemporary discourse via podcasts), Banerjee and Hendry then moved to a performative restaging of Odling’s teaching ideas and principles in the form of workshops with current art students in order to explore how the materiality of the archive can be used as a critical tool, a catalyst, and a point of departure from which to develop generative critical positions that relate to current educational contexts. In this way the past experimental practices of Odling—previously hidden in the archive—can be given new material potency for current students, enabling them to explore and identify the pedagogical norms rooted within their own learning contexts.

### **Fugitive testimonies: An artist archive**

Su Fahy, an artist, lecturer and researcher, presents a consideration of the workings and subversions of memory through the appropriation and reworking of fragments from the analogue photographic archive in her own work and of other artists with similar concerns. Fahy's source material, and subject of interpretation, is gleaned from discarded newspaper photographic archives, a rich repository of documentary photographs that show traces of material alterations, retouchings and reprintings, utilizing techniques such as cropping, close-up, or the isolation of areas using stopping out medium. This photographic record allows us to see the darkroom construction of standard news items and reminds us of our own fugitive memories of family events, wars, propaganda imagery, the role of witness and visual testimony. She thus, in a shadow re-enactment of such cropping and montage techniques, constructs new artificial memories from the gleanings of the flea market, second hand shops, the attic, the shoebox, and archival researches. The objects encountered offer a haptic visual prompt for new works that pose questions of memory, artificial memory, and identity within the visual ecology of a fast eroding analogue tradition. The article presents case studies that demonstrate the intimate scale and fragility of such photographic scraps, showing the artist's re-working of found objects to create small visual series infused by a sense of narrative. Appropriating a material practice long outmoded within the communications industry in contemporary research and practice acts as a form of visual ecology, re-echoing the image recycling procedures of former newspaper art directors where photographers could not always secure the commissioned shoot again.

### **Multisensorial dynamics: Encountering and capturing the intangible heritage of the art school in Britain**

Robert Knifton and Fran Lloyd argue that the shifting teaching spaces and educational methods of art schools have been key sites for the formation of material culture, yet have resisted narrativisation of their own materiality. This article examines the heritage of art schools with particular focus on the history of Kingston College of Art, London, and suggests strategies for assessing the material and immaterial practices produced across time. The article surveys a number of counter-hegemonic practices historically within the twentieth-century art school, before considering material encounters in the art school and the spatial-temporal qualities of the art school site. The article argues for a model of temporal uncertainty and fluidity that can be experienced as Art School Time where flexible, cross-disciplinary spaces for as yet unknown material and immaterial encounters enable students to develop new tactics to address societal challenges within the multi-layered and multisensorial spaces of the art school. As Knifton and Lloyd argue, Art School Time is fluid and contingent—as it is held within shifting spatial and social envelopes. Unlike the standard institutional classroom or lecture theatre, the art studio is a continually changing space, changing according to annual cycles of teaching and making, culminating in the end of term, year or end of degree show, and the activities that take place on a day-to-day level both individually and collectively.



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