Beyond Objects: Materiality at the Edge of Making

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Beyond Objects, Materiality at the Edge of Making, the title and focus of this volume, expresses a desire to place the presumed inevitability of object making under closer scrutiny, and to do this in the context of the widespread knowledge of the climate crisis we face due to our current habits of linear production and vast industrialisation. It aims to ask questions about how the imperative to improve our relationship with the environment might be consistent with the production of objects of art and design, even those we celebrate for their power, beauty, social value and material invention.

This collection of essays expands the notion of the artisanal object beyond its visible registers to examine the territories of knowledge, inquiry and practice that are largely illegible—the conditions for object production that are shifting not only how we make crafted objects, but examines why we continue to make objects, consciously knowing their impact on the environment. As educators the authors explore the potential for a notion of creativity and a critical studio practice that is always informed by the full life-cycle dynamics of making—a thinking beyond merely an object's form or display, to consider its larger ecosystem which encompasses material selection, distribution, knowledge exchange, and equitable access. The collected thoughts here treat the pre- and post-of the object as not only critical to their form, but in many cases the primary work, where the object functions as material evidence of the relationship between people, community and place.

Moving toward a reconciliation between object making and a more holistic, regenerative creative relationship with the natural world, this volume asks how greater material knowledge opens up new roles for makers with a shift from a culture of extraction to a culture of material empathy. Aligned with the question posed by the conference on this relationship between creative authorship and the material intelligence of nature, the discussion revolves around the following:

Could an approach to design and craft characterised by a full lifecycle consciousness change the way we think and shape the material world, in order that our subjectivity as makers can be more aligned with the agency of nature?

Can we imagine an interface with the natural world that is more transformative than merely becoming "greener" in our customs and technologies?

Is there a contemporary creative role that seeks co-authorship with both the systems of nature and our digital infrastructure that can be a more resilient, living and generative form of material objecthood?

The indication seems to be, judging by the conference presentations and the essays selected for this iteration of the journal, that many of us answer 'yes' to these questions. Artists, artisans and designers increasingly share the idea that craft culture is going through a wholesale shift, motivated by a new and innovative identity which is less a romance with preserving the past toward a willingness to establish the fundamental building blocks of a creativity that bears witness to the forces of nature at every scale. It is apparent that ceramicists, weavers, glassmakers, textile designers, are collaborating with material scientists, chemists, physicists, biologists to meet in the overlapping spaces where they are ready to redefine, or more poignantly, refuse, a simple reductive division between the cultivated and the wild, the representational and the merely material.

These new creative materialists are caught at this moment between two energising forces—the urgency of climate change and its devastation, and the acceleration of our understanding

of the material properties of matter that act as creative agents on behalf of life. Beyond biomimicry, biomorphism and the visual analogy of the perceivable world which has defined much art and craft over many generations, advanced biotechnologies, new and novel materials and cross-disciplinary art/science collaborations enable us to transcend historic dualisms between our observation of and our representations of the world, inviting us to understand the processes of life as those open to our reinvention, extension and protection. New biosynthetic materials and advances in material engineering, including molecular engineering, biophotovoltaics, bioprinting, natural sensing systems, memory materials, and other living technologies that utilise the behaviours of life itself, extend into the realm of design where they establish a vocabulary of living systems.

The divide between the code of materials and the code of computation has narrowed, placing us at a great threshold in human and social development where these living technologies equip us with an intimate, behavioural knowledge of life as material that can be reconfigured—a proximity that invites ethical and moral responses that are inseparable from aesthetic responses. This new proximity is also a challenge to our cultural drive to make objects in the first place, and to imagine an active (verb: crafting) rather than static (noun: craft) aesthetic paradigm, one based upon living, phenomenal notions of beauty beyond a Kantian dialectic set on juxtaposition between form and matter. We are poised at the precipice of a more intimate material reality, where we must ask ourselves new questions about the extent of our contribution to a better future and where the domain of the beautiful might now be located to enable that future.