

## **Live Materiality in Art, Craft and Design.**

Keywords: Craft, Art, New Materialism, Pragmatism, Aesthetics

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It is mere ignorance that leads then to the supposition that connection of art and esthetic perception with experience signifies a lowering of their significance and dignity. Experience in the degree in which it is experience is **heightened vitality**. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; **at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events**. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing. Because experience is the fulfilment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience. (John Dewey, 1934:19. My emphasis)

John Dewey (1859 – 1952) is the best-known Pragmatist philosopher of the twentieth century. Pragmatism is a philosophical enterprise formulated in the 1880s and 1890s by American philosophers especially Charles Peirce and William James, and later developed in the early 1900s, with Dewey being the most evident before World War 2. While the formation of the movement is associated with these men it included many women such as Anna Cooper, now considered an early exponent of intersectionality and Jane Adams. After World War 2 and the death of Dewey in 1952, Pragmatism faded from the philosophical landscape, not that it was ever really well known or practiced outside of the United States. More recently, over the past thirty years, Pragmatism has gained a new place in critical theory as being seen as a possible bridge between analytical and continental philosophies and as a way out of the endgame of postmodernism's debilitating indifference. Basically, Pragmatism argues

ideas are tools for prediction, problem solving and action, and that they should be measured against their usefulness. Pragmatism's discussion is broad and by nature pragmatic, examining the impact of philosophical production in its everyday effectiveness. Dewey especially opened Pragmatism to a political dimension in a series of postulations considering the social worth of ideas by prioritising experience, as opposed to religion and ideology, as the means of negotiating being in the world. Pragmatism's subject is more fluid, responsive, adaptable, creative and especially relational than postmodernism's disinterested, disenfranchised, 'cool' and usually male agent. Similarly, pragmatist aesthetics, foregrounded in experience through embodied practice is functional and not disinterested in the traditional Western, Kantian sense (Shusterman, 2004).

Recently Dewey has found a new voice through, as well as many others, the work of American philosopher Jane Bennett, a protagonist in the development of New Materialism. It has been argued Bennett belongs to the Pragmatist tradition (Richards: 2019) and indeed Bennett does lean on Dewey for a particular aspect of her New Materialist thinking. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things* (2010) Bennett evokes Dewey's discussion of a 'public' in his *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). Citing Dewey's notion of a public as expansive and contingent, Bennett extends this vision of inclusive political agency to encompass matter. Bennett emphasises Dewey's theory of a conjoined public as a 'confederation of bodies, bodies pulled together ... by a shared experience' (2010:100). While it is not hard to extrapolate 'a shared experience' to include other living entities, especially in light of Dewey's discussion in *Art as Experience* (1934) of the 'lived creature', Bennett's great leap is to extend Dewey's conception of a public to include 'non-sentient' entities such as power grids and trash by virtue of their being constituted by 'vibrant matter'. What Daniel Richards (2019) calls a 'posthuman public'.

In the spirit of New Materialism and pushing further Dewey's ideas of 'complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events', I would like to suggest that the vitality of matter be extended to include those materials we use when making artworks. Might it be that clay, for instance, is a material that has its own vitality that allows us to understand it in an empathetic manner mediated by aesthetic experience? Dewey seems to be suggesting in the passage above is that aesthetic experience is the recognition of this way of knowing this complete integration of the self and the world of objects and events. What is wonderful about this idea is that it is not just an empathetic relation with material but also an event by which this empathy is fostered. For Dewey aesthetics is a doing. Lived aesthetic experience is relatively easy to understand when speaking of human relations with the world. But what of innate and non-sentient material – is it capable of being in an aesthetic experience? It certainly is part of the collaboration of making art. Without material art is not possible. Even for the most de-materialised practices, such as the most rarefied Conceptual Art, materials mediate and transmit ideas through the physical qualities of speech (air), writing (ink, paper) or virtuality (electrons).

Clay is a material that has qualities. It has many ways of being; soft, pliable, runny (such as slip), rough (lots of aggregate), hard (fired) and heavy or light in weight according to how much moisture it contains. Similarly, metal, wood and paint all have qualities that allow certain types of relationships and possibilities with a maker while denying others. The understanding and knowledge of these qualities and what they allow is the basis of craft practices, integral to making most forms of art and also central to design. Working with these materials, any material, requires a knowing that will allow an interrelationship by which something is made or comes about. I would like to call these qualities that materials possess, inclinations. A natural tendency or disposition to act in a particular manner. As a material clay allows you to do certain things with it. It can be moulded, 'thrown', caste, fired and so on. It has a set of inclinations that determine how it can be used. These inclinations are inherent in clay and not brought to it. It is its character; its nature. If we suspend our

usual manner of knowing clay as a dumb material and acknowledge these tendencies and persist in a practice with clay, after years of working with the material a knowledge of it builds to point of intimacy. An affinity and rapport is established.

In *Vibrant Matter* (2010) Bennett recounts how what she calls 'thing power' (2004) is in part due to an experience she had on a sunny Tuesday morning in Baltimore, USA. She speaks about coming across a storm-drain which contained a mix of debris. In noticing this seemingly ordinary and inconsequential scene she: 'felt something else: a nameless awareness' (2010). In comprehending this experience Bennett realised that the trash (which included a dead rat) was able to generate affect. Bennett uses the words shimmer, smooth and spark in describing part of the debris, a stick. By using these adjectives, the stick (and thus the trash) are no longer dumb, it has attributes; it comes alive to Bennett's apprehension as a thing in itself. She continues to describe this experience as what sounds like an aesthetic encounter bordering on an epiphany: 'a nameless awareness'. This revelatory moment, when she 'caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of the things', leads to an understanding that the trash has, in a sense, made something happen. It (they – the constituents) had brought this encounter into being. If we apply this notion to the materialities of making, Bennett's apprehension of 'a nameless awareness', I would suggest, is that moment when materials such as clay through their inclinations determine the event of making. We like to think we use clay to make, but is it possible that clay makes us act in a manner that realises its tendencies in a moment that Dewey seems to be suggesting as that of 'the complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events'. Could it be that clay through its tendencies makes us transform it and not the other way around, as we like to believe? This is a radical and new way of speaking to the community of all things where the traditional binary of subject and object breaks down giving way to a different type of knowledge and ontology.

This knowledge is not simply theoretical or even logical but deeply situated in experience, especially a haptic one in the case of making. Like the relationship between a musician and their instrument (material) the knowledge of what is possible can only be gained through a protracted relationship, eventually determining a level of collaboration and cognition that can only be understood as a feeling or aesthetic.<sup>i</sup> Epistemologically traditionally aesthetic experience has stood outside the understanding of what knowledge might be or how it might be formed. As I said it is not logical or theoretical but felt; anathematic to the prevailing epistemes of the Enlightenment and science. What Dewey calls 'the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience' may well represent a change in the epistemological landscape. A landscape that is beginning to morph.

In a recent paper *What is New Materialism?* (2019), Gamble, Hanan and Nail give an account of the development of New Materialism through an appropriately historical discussion of materialism and its more contemporary and radical postulations. The authors show a deep respect for the Epicurean tradition, especially the Roman poet/philosopher Lucretius (c99-c55 BC) whose poem/book *De Rerum Natura (The Nature of Things)* (c50 BC) explains the tenets of Epicureanism. Fundamental to Epicurean belief is the dominance of an idea that all there is is either void or atoms and that atoms constitute all matter from which even thought emanates. A truly old materialist view that resonates as strongly today as ever. The founder of the movement, or school, Epicurus (342-270 BC) was an artist of sorts. He was a gardener. He used his garden as a physical space to live and gather, metaphorically and analogously as a means for his students to experience his ideas and teachings. For him the garden was a way of showing how atoms and life come together and dissipate as matter (plants). But more importantly how with proper care and cultivation, this matter can enjoy a moment of being exceptional. (Harrison, 2008) Following Epicurus, Lucretius emphasises among other things, the relational constituency of matter. Atoms are in constant act of forming matter and then falling out of matter. An endless cycle of creation, destruction and reconstruction that has no beginning or end; always being. Over immense

lengths of time an atom can be part of many manifestations of matter; a star, water, an organism, trash. This atomistic view of matter, events and abstractions allows for great speculations about the integration (Dewey's interpenetration) of all things with no real divide between object and subject. Such a traditional and highly Western demarcation is arbitrary and convenient and deeply anthropocentric.

Richard Shusterman's 2004 paper *Pragmatism and East-Asian Thought* is, in part, a call for the recognition of Eastern aesthetics in a broader consideration of what aesthetics might bring to our lived experience. His paper discusses Japanese and Chinese aesthetic and philosophical traditions highlighting many overlapping notions with Pragmatism. In the spirit of his initiative and the expanded thought of an atomist or Epicurean explanation of matter I would like to push this discussion further to consider a possibility that Dewey's idea of the interpenetration of matter might be a model of what I will call 'empathetic materialism' by which the relationship between artist/craftsperson and the materials they work with is one of unicity devoid of any distinction between subject (artist/craftsperson) and object (material). One in which material is 'alive' to exchange, community and purpose.

So, back to clay. Anyone who has tried to throw a pot or mould clay will know how the stuff sticks. It gets into the pores of your skin and has to be washed off. The border between the clay and skin is hard to determine. At a molecular level the clay occupies space within your skin binding and bonding – that's the sticky bit. At that level the skin and clay are conjoined occupying the same space. Here the relationship between object and subject breaks down as the stuff of clay joins the stuff of skin.<sup>ii</sup> Our bodies are in a constant play of absorbing and expressing material. For instance, the gases we breathe in and out are at one moment outside and then inside our bodies. Atoms of oxygen move into and out of us constantly as do so many other chemicals needed to sustain life. An extreme example of this is the things we touch that can poison us. Mercury is poisonous to the touch by virtue of penetrating

intact skin, as is nicotine, arsenic, PCBs and white spirits. Skin is highly absorbent and porous. So, one can speculate that when you are working with clay there is a thin layer where the clay and skin are indeterminate. This space is an anomalous zone, neither one thing or the other, both clay and skin at the same time. This intimacy between body and material might be, in a small sense, that moment of Dewey's 'interpenetration of self and the world of objects'. If we couple this relationship between material and body with the live qualities of materials, their inclinations, could the clay be a partner or a live participant in the act of making? Might the act of making be a collaboration of subject and object cojoined in an act of intimacy? Intimacy understood and experienced not only as touch but as a fusion of vitalities comprehended as a nameless awareness, to use Jane Bennett's term. Might it be an aesthetic experience? This is what is so special about art. When you are doing it, you are in it. No longer a determining observer but the thing itself. An act, a moment and an event. As a practice making is in this sense a kind of meditation; free from thought. It is like a small epiphany; an unnamable awareness. A connection to a sense of being that is not grounded but elevated, multi-dimensional and without a sense of time.

## Conclusion

Currently the pedagogy of art and design, and craft to a large degree, is dominated by the production of didactic meaning. Students are expected to learn how to, and then, make meaning<sup>iii</sup>. Meaning which is usually highly subjective and more often than not narrative and political. Conversely aesthetics has become a minor player in contemporary arts education. The demise of aesthetic discourse in arts education is a shame as it denies students access to a deeper dialogue with making based in the experience we have as living creatures. An experience we may well share with other entities such as the materials we use to make art. Epicureanism, Pragmatism and New Materialism do share a diminution of the dominance of the subject in constructing our relations with the world. Instead all talk to an exchange with the world which is not separate and discrete but deeply embedded in an awareness of a

wholistic and conjoined experience. Dewey's words 'Because experience is the fulfilment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience', are in a manner a call for the capability of such experience to be the basis of all arts education. One that could probably not be taught as such. But facilitated by allowing empathetic materialism to drive felt understanding and experiment (including failure) to determine open, embodied outcomes as opposed to didactic ones (meaning).

In Indonesian there is a very old word, *moksa*, that describes what is a kind of fusion with all things. A state in which everything is whole. The word has its roots in Indonesia's Hindu/Buddhist past beginning as early as the first century, but it continues today to be an effective and powerful motivator for many artists<sup>iv</sup>. Including some of those strongly associated with the 'political art' of that country, such Tisna Sanjaya. It is an integral aspect of Indonesian arts education reflecting values that are unfortunately on the wain in the West. I would like to suggest a radical shift in arts pedagogy. A move to doing aesthetics, in all its nuances, as a way of locating arts practices in the lived experience of being, especially its relationships with nature, community and expanded notions of materiality and subjecthood.

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<sup>i</sup> For a fuller account of this relationship see Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* Yale University Press. 2009

<sup>ii</sup> For a fascinating discussion of touch at the most micro level see Paul Thomas' 'Midas: A Nanotechnological Exploration of Touch' in *Leonardo*, Volume 42, Number 3, June 2009, pp. 186 - 192 The MIT Press

<sup>iii</sup> I use the word meaning as 'the end, purpose, or significance of something'.  
<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/meaning>. Accessed 3 May 202.

<sup>iv</sup> While the word comes originally from Sanskrit, the idea has persisted in Indonesia and has mixed with both indigenous animism and Indonesian Sufism. See Julian Howell's 'Sufism and the

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Indonesian Islamic Revival' in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 60, Number 3, August 200, pp. 701 - 729. The Association for Asian Studies.

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