

Call for Papers Material Culture in Action: Practices of making, collecting and re-enacting art and design

Date : February 3, 2015

DATES: 7-8 September 2015,

Keynote speakers:

Prof Guy Julier

Prof Esther Leslie

Ian Helliwell

Closing remarks by Prof Tim Ingold

Glasgow School of Art, UK

This two-day international conference will investigate new directions in material culture studies by focusing on creative, critical and theoretical engagement with the material culture of art and design, both within and beyond the art school. The material culture of art and design covers a wide range of art practices, from professionally designed works within the art school, to the less official works of the self-taught amateur. An emphasis on processes means paying close attention to places of production; from the art school, the studio, the print workshop, the pressing plant, the factory, the street, to the discrete – yet equally significant – realms of domestic life. Although places of consumption and display have been readily mapped out in academic and non-academic literature (Attfield 2007; Bronner 1989; Zola 1883), little has been written about the eminently complex environment of the studio and the art school.

As such, the aim of this conference is to discuss these under-explored areas in material culture

studies. For instance, traditional approaches fail to fully engage with the multi-materialities and 'plasticity' or flexibility of works of art and design, or with the affective resonances of objects (Andrews and O'Sullivan 2013; Moran and O'Brien 2014). We would like to engage more explicitly and more closely with the sensorial aspects of the object and realms of seeing, touching, hearing, making. By recentering our attention on material practices and processes, on artists and makers, we may be able to reconcile the study of material culture with that of affect and aesthetics—and politics.

We hope to generate a cross-disciplinary dialogue, engaging theorists and artists, thinkers, makers and collectors/connoisseurs of objects. Suggested areas of discussion include, but are not limited to:

- **THE ART SCHOOL: objects, meanings and subjectivities in the making**
- **Un/made and un/finished objects and narratives**
- **Archives and indexes: Making with the archive / Reenacting the archive**
- **The Glasgow School of Art and C.R. Mackintosh**

One could embrace the art school as a place where traditional skills and canons are perpetually (re-)invented and sustained, as well as a unique repository for ultra-specialised – and sometimes obsolete - knowledge and hand skills (which are generally lost in the 'outer world', having long fallen out of use). The art school, as a living archive, conversely allows for further re-enactments of the past. Rather than freezing traditional skills, it releases, re-presences and remediates them, as it leads to the creation of new works of art and design. The incorporation of new techniques into traditional craft, and most notably the use of digital tools, would also be a fruitful area of inquiry. One could also ask who is in charge of the 'narrative' of the art school – and explore the idea of the art school as a self-authored or self-fashioned institution, whose role is constantly being (re)negotiated and re-inscribed into the cultural narrative.

Presentations addressing the indefectibly entwined stories of the Glasgow School of Art and C.R. Mackintosh would be particularly welcome. One could contemplate the living, collective memory of the art school, as it was notably expressed in a spontaneous outburst of novel narratives, grassroots projects and other creative and emotional responses after the fire of May 2014. At the same time, the struggle to maintain a unified and authored 'image' of the art school in the aftermath of the event is equally worth reflecting about. The debates surrounding the reconstruction of the Mackintosh Library, as they crystallise the tension between experts' 'authoritative' voices and less official voices, between the weight of the past and the school's ambitions for the future, need to be examined.

- **Materiality and narrative of the self**
- **Attachment, entanglement and appropriation**

Art school students can be thought of as self-fashioning professionals, and most broadly as young adults engaged in varying processes of self-creation and self-narration through material practices. The role and processes of making could be explored in relation to identity-formation, where the maker and the object exist in a relationship of co-constitution.

- **MULTI-SENSORIAL and AFFECTIVE MATERIALITIES: touching, seeing, hearing, making**

Recent studies of materiality have commented upon the multi-sensoriality or intersensoriality of objects (see Howes 2006), which invites us to engage in the realms of seeing, touching and hearing. This multi-sensorial and multi-sensual aspect of material culture is also that which resists attempts of narration or rationalisation. How can this crucial multi-sensoriality be reflected in writings about material culture? Complementarily, the very specific status of works of art must be reflected upon, as that which resists categorisation and systematic thinking, and may elicit affective rather than rational responses (Andrews and O'Sullivan 2013; Lyotard 1979).

- **Pleasure and practice: craft (activism), amateur practices, DIY and vernacular cultures**

Of particular interest is the continuous appropriation, within the art school, of vernacular cultures, and the repurposing of various amateur practices. The inclusion of 'clumsy'/DIY aesthetics, notably within visual communication (in the form, for instance, of unruly elements: irregular typography, 'unprofessional' drawings or doodles, graffiti), is worth thinking about. It represents an example of the continued dialogue between the vernacular and the art school, and the paradoxical, potentially subversive, transformation/re-valuing (in all the senses of the term) of the amateur fabrication into an art object.

- **TYPOLOGIES OF COLLECTING**
- **The connoisseur and the amateur collector/hoarder**

(Un)official curators and popular archivists

Literature on collection, collecting, the archive and the index accounts for a large part of the canonic corpus of museum studies (Pearce 1998; Karp and Lavine 1991; Pomian 1990), the collection being – in a simplified manner – the 'body' of the museum (and of its faraway ancestor, the cabinet of curiosities). The notion of the personal archive as a creative resource, the dynamic relationship between archive and practice, have regrettably received less attention (despite a forthcoming exhibition at the Barbican: *Magnificent Obsessions: The Artist as Collector*).

Similarly the roles of the non-professional collector, the hoarder and 'do-it-yourself' curator are less often evidenced. The contributions of everyday collectors and fans to the preservation of alternative stories, ephemera and small-run artefacts such as fanzines, artists' books and prints (Herrada 1995; Vale 1996; Darms 2013), commercial labels, advertisement packagings (Oka 1967; Robert Opie's scrapbooks) is crucial to the writing of the (unofficial) history of everyday art and design. The figures of amateur collectors and curators may offer precious critical voices in the (un)doing of design history (Baynes 1976: 32).

- **The seen and the invisible, the disappearing and the lost**

Part of the nature of objects eventually lies in their fluidity. There is a residual element, something which resists and cannot be fully grasped; a raw, polymorphous (perhaps even amorphous) and transformative quality of material culture which exists in time. This element of change perhaps is what can lead to original questioning of the limits of material culture studies, of the dysfunctions, the 'mistakes', the excessive; when the machine no longer works, when the art work breaks apart. This is true not only of physical artefacts but also of digital ones (Gabrys 2013).

The use, repurposing and assemblage of found objects, ready-mades, fragments and more general debris is common in contemporary art practices. The poetics of ruins may offer a critical route into processes of (private/collective) memory, aging and disappearance. This may also allow one to reflect upon larger processes of consumption, recycling, excess and waste.

- **IM/MATERIAL CULTURES**

- **Haunting, hybridity, and the interpenetration of the material and the immaterial**
- **Digital materialities and practices**

The notion of haunting and hauntology is useful to examine the multiple temporalities at work within objects, especially as they become obsolete, age and slowly fall into disuse. The concept of haunting – which defines that which is between the material and the immaterial (Derrida 1994; Pile 2005) - may allow for a more complete thinking on the immaterial and the dematerialised nature of objects as they circulate in digital contexts. It can also be used to address multi-media installations and works of art. An emphasis on media and its ruptures or breaches (Kelly 2009) may allow us to combine the multi-sensorialities, multi-materialities and multi-temporalities embodied in complex digital art objects (Julier 2006: 6). An urgent challenge for material culture studies is the development of new tools and frameworks to address dematerialised worlds or digital objects which, though they cannot be directly grasped, continue to fashion the (art) world and need curating (Graham and Cook 2010).

The hybrid nature of digital craft and 'fabriculture' (Bratich and Brush 2006), the relationship between the localised homemade artefacts and their global, corporate distribution (through platforms such as Etsy) are worth addressing.

We will welcome proposals for **20-minute papers**, **60-minute panels** and **5-minute poster presentations**, from researchers and practitioners. 300-word abstracts and short biographical notes – as well as any enquiries – should be sent to Dr Frances Robertson (Fr.Robertson@gsa.ac.uk) and Dr Elodie Roy (E.Roy@gsa.ac.uk) before the **15th of March 2015**. Candidates will be informed of the outcomes in April 2015.

We hope to publish a selection of conference papers in an edited book.