



Beyond Objects: Materiality at the Edge of Making

Stephanie Owens

Associate Professor, Arts University Plymouth

Keynote

Introduction

This 8th gathering to reflect on the relationship between craft, sustainability and new technologies has been convened by the University since 2009, bringing together a host of international artists, designers, scholars and cultural leaders in a critical conversation on both traditional and innovative materially-led creative practice. Our gathering for 2024 has brought together approximately 98 speakers from around the world, including those from Australia, Portugal, Peru, France, Japan, India, Columbia, Canada, Sweden and the United States, as well as participants and speakers from across the United Kingdom. This demonstrated collective passion for craft and the importance of sharing knowledge and understanding of the material world through creative practice and practice-led research is one of many forms of ongoing inspiration for me in curating this event.

Held biennially, and drawing contributions and ideas from countries across the globe, Making Futures has been an early pioneer in recognising the link between small scale artisanal and place-based craft production and the need to find a more equitable and environmentally responsible way of living with each other and our planet.¹ Previous iterations of the conference have focused on identifying the ways in which new distributive manufacturing protocols and networked technologies provide an opportunity for localised skills and indigenous knowledge to be shared more broadly, and identified a then emergent axis between vernacular, regional creative practices and sustainability—our now common awareness of the need to reimagine our relationship to contemporary habits of consumption and accumulation. The international aspect of Making Futures is an important part of its knowledge sharing, and many previous conferences made vital links between the global north, western and European nations with the global south and Southeast Asia, Asia and many other regions. As this axis of knowledge has become more defined and visible over the last few years, expressed in concepts such as distributed design, community craft cooperatives, the platform economy, citizen science, green craft and the internet of things, among others, Making Futures has provided a space for speculation and debate on the impact of these practices on the form and meaning of what we make, challenging the the notion of globalisation as the inevitable arc of economic and cultural development, and providing alternative narratives for how our vast information infrastructure might equally extend our imagination for how this connected world can foster a greater sense of collective purpose.

Beyond Objects, Materiality at the Edge of Making, the title of this conference, 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 production and commercialization. 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 that we are here to celebrate for their power, beauty, social value and material invention. This three-day conversation seeks to expand the notion of the 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

¹ 'This is an ongoing programme that aims to contribute to a more comprehensive and sector-wide understanding of the contemporary crafts in relation to environmental and social equity issues, and especially in the way that these factors impart new ideological purpose to the idea of craft.', M. Ferris, Introduction to the first Making Futures conference 2009.

continue to make objects, consciously knowing their impact on the environment. As educators we will 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 incorporates resource acquisition, distribution, disposal and storage as integral to the creative process as whether to make from clay, wood, or code.

Moving toward a reconciliation between object making and a more holistic, regenerative creative relationship with the natural world, this conference asks how greater material knowledge opens up new roles for makers and a greater potential to shift from a culture of extraction to a culture of material empathy. Could an approach to design and creativity characterised by a full lifecycle consciousness change the way we think and shape the material world, in order that our agency as makers can be more aligned with the agency of nature? Can we begin to 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 objecthood? The indication seems to be, judging by the proposals received for this iteration of Making Futures, that many of us answer ‘yes’ to these questions. We share the idea that culture is going through a wholesale shift, motivated by new creative and innovative identities which are more than merely restorative or romantic in regard to craft. We are ready to redefine, or more poignantly, refuse, simple reductive division between the cultivated and the wild, the representational and the merely material.

Makers are caught at this moment between two energising forces— that of the urgency of climate change and its devastation and the acceleration of our understanding of the material properties of matter that make it possible to 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 collaborations enable us to transcend historic dualisms between our observation 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 are accessible to creative reuse, interpretation, or application.

The divide between the code of life and the code of computation has all but disappeared, 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 (crafting) rather than static (craft) aesthetic, 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.

To pose these and other questions, this conference was assembled through a call for papers aligned to six primary tracks of thought;

Track 01, Craftsmanship, Artisanal Knowledge and Aesthetics of Place considers the ways in which the notion of craft is a physical manifestation of where and how we live in situ—our backyard, neighbourhood, bioregion, environment and planet;

Track 02, Rethinking the Relationship Between Body, Fashion and Ornament is a call to renew our assumptions about the practices of fashion and apparel that transcend current systems of manufacture to move beyond improved supply chains to consider new notions of sustainability as a factor of time—new adaptive materials, regenerative or grown fabrics, zero-waste or upcycling, repairable systems, all which require a reassessment of the value of permanence vs the value of the temporal as a social objective;

Track 03, Generative Materials? Toward a convergence of AI and Matter, approaches the interface between materiality and cognition, where new processes that cross physical and digital boundaries of experience might enable novel ways to characterise these boundaries where we can harness the power of networked computation to provide more ethical pathways to developing technologies less alienated from living, human and planetary systems;

Track 04, Softsystems: Biology, Networks and Post-natural Frameworks for Co-creativity speculates on a post-representational approach to creative authorship where we see ourselves as cohabitants and coagents in emergent, ecologically informed worlds, and builds upon current knowledge of biology and chemistry as well as ancestral customs to outline a method of working in tandem with, rather than against, the natural world;

Track 05, Optimising Craft Techniques for Sustainable Alternatives to Extractive Practices is perhaps the most known and most urgent topic around the ways in which we can immediately reverse the degradation of the planet and its diminishing biodiversity. The presenters who responded to this call offer case studies for the ways in which practitioners are already refining new creative and design methodologies which do not merely reverse the harm done, but suggest an empathetic ideology of making that will change creative education and serve to frame new policies that make real beneficial change less out of reach.

There are two sessions that explore the focus of Track 06, Futurecraft: Pathways for Art, Design and Materials Science Research Collaborations, where the most practical and most speculative ideas grounded in innovations in materials science and engineering, as well as new explorations of 'circularity', rooted in cellular, nano and metabolic mechanics, are considered in the context of creative practice.

Following these two days of formal presentations here in St Luke's Church, the third day of the conference will move to our campus right next door at Tavistock Place, curated as a series of workshops, masterclasses, demonstrations, roundtables and panel discussions as the more hands-on and discursive component of the Making Futures programme. One highlight of this third day is a roundtable that is the culminating event of a month-long artisan-in-residence programme sponsored by the British Council in partnership with Arts University Plymouth, featuring master weaver Shamji Vankar from the Kutch region of northern India. An expert in traditional indigo dyeing and loom weaving processes perfected over many generations, Shamji has worked with our Textile Course in an exchange of

knowledge and techniques that will inform how students relate to place-based dyeing processes, particularly in the context of our Natural Dye Lab and the university's research focus on this area of practical scholarship. I would like to thank the British Council for their support of the residency as well as for their long support of Making Futures. In addition to this special project and the material workshops offered on day three, there are a number of panel discussions led by industry leaders, including a roundtable discussion celebrating the 10-year anniversary of our FabLab Plymouth, with a review of the meaningful case studies and impactful innovations we have developed as the first FabCity in the UK.

To guide our discussions and to help frame the possibilities and challenges set by the conference, Making Futures 2024 is fortunate to have three accomplished keynote speakers whose scholarship, leadership and vision offer models of this expanded view of object making.

Sherry Lassiter, co-founder of MIT's FabLab network, and CEO of the Fab Foundation, joins us to share her views and experience of the power of new technologies to shape not only creative practice and manufacture, but to shape our relationship to knowledge, where access to emerging technical skills and increased digital literacy transform communities. Sherry has recently undergone major surgery for repairing her shoulder, and will therefore join us this afternoon in a live online presentation from Boston in the United States. We are grateful for her participation while she recovers.

The conference also welcomes entrepreneur and designer Elissa Brunato, Founder and CEO of Radiant Matter, a London-based start-up company which is revolutionising the small in size but not insignificant environmental impact of the metallic sequin used in fashion around the world and consequently lodged in our water supply and landfill. Elissa has worked closely with physicists and materials engineers to develop a new Biosequin made of structured cellulose through a molecular design that transforms a naturally clear polymer into a brilliant, iridescent surface. Her iridescent Biosequins demonstrate that biologically derived and ecologically resilient design products can be beautiful, colourful and, most recently through a partnership with designer Stella McCartney, a viable alternative to fast fashion.

Our third and final day will be led by a keynote from University College London Professor of Materials and Society, Mark Miodownik, who is co-founder of UCL's Institute of Making. Mark's deep knowledge of materials and their impact on our society and social relationships provides artists and designers with the opportunity to return to the very building blocks of the natural world with new eyes. His work provides us with a pathway to reimagine the broader role of creativity in designing a world that is less alienated from the phenomenal forces around us. This is Mark's second appearance as a keynote speaker at Making Futures, where he spoke in 2017, demonstrating his lasting influence on the project and the ambitions of this research platform.

We are grateful for the willingness and enthusiasm expressed by each of the keynote speakers to frame our discussions over the next three days.

I want to welcome those scholars, curators and cultural leaders who have accepted my invitation to lead the conference thematic sessions as peer reviewers and Track Chairs, including: Beno Juaréz, Director, FabLab Peru; Assistant Professor Carla Paoliello, of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon; independent curator Ligaya Salazar, Jonathan Boyd, Reader in Jewellery and Head of the MA Programme in Ceramics and Glass at the RCA

and Heather Martin, design educator and Course Leader at Arts University Plymouth in Fashion Design. I want to also thank Nancy Diniz, Course Leader in MA BioDesign at Central Saint Martins for reviewing the abstracts for Track 04 and for her expert feedback on the papers which informed the session tomorrow on post-natural creative practices. I also wish to express our gratitude to sponsors Delhi Crafts Council, Micronomy and Plymouth Art Weekender for their support in providing the funding, content or promotion of the conference and its participants.

I'd like to offer a word of appreciation for the co-founders of Making Futures, curator Malcolm Ferris and former President of Arts University Plymouth, Andrew Brewerton. We are fortunate to have the rich catalogue of scholarship and writing upon which to continue this project, which Andrew and Malcom established with such a humane and visionary agenda. Andrew continues to support Making Futures as Patron and we look forward to his continued support for its future directions.

Moving closer to home, I want to offer our gratitude to our neighbours, The Box, for providing the venue here at St Luke's Church and for hosting our opening reception and VIP dinner later this evening. Tonight's networking event will feature a new live sound performance by sound designer Neil Rose, Course Leader in Film and Screen Arts at Arts University Plymouth, and Bristol-based artist Harriet Bowman. This live version of their collaboration follows the exhibition of the same work at MIRROR gallery on our campus in May this year.

In closing, I want to thank my many Arts University Plymouth colleagues for their contribution in developing and producing this event, especially Cat Edwards and Adam Levi who have been working closely with me for a year to realise its aims; current BA Student in Graphic Design Jessika McCarron, who designed all of the conference branding and visual materials; Lauren Taverner-Brown, who heads our Brand and Communications team, Katie Elloway for her managerial assistance with hospitality, Ian Hutichinson and Dr Alexandra Murphy for operational support and Tima Metcalfe for her very practical wisdom when this iteration of the conference was in its early stages.

I'd like to express my sincere gratitude to all speakers and participants for joining Making Futures 2024 and for the provocations and creative insights which you have brought to the conference. I wish you all a rigorous, informative and inspirational experience over the next three days.