

Material thinking: the intellectual adventures of making

John Rae

The notion of thinking ‘materially’ is reflected in the title of a wonderful book by Paul Carter called *Material thinking: The theory and practice of creative research*. Carter writes about the ‘intellectual adventure peculiar to the making process’ (Carter, 2004, p. XI), which is similar to a term Cameron Tonkinwise (2008) used: ‘makingly knowing’. So, here we are ready to start making — to go on an adventure about knowing. The nice thing about this of course is that we are doing it together so we might imagine, or even expect, that our knowing will be expanded as we share our perspectives with each other.

The conversation that we are having here conceptualises making as a relational activity deeply connected to our lives — we are thinking *of* making not just *about* it. Together, we are entering the unknown and hopefully) moving towards what will become known (Sullivan, 2009), which is different from intensifying what we already (believe that we) know. Such is the nature of making, be that making craft, a story, art, something from the digital world, or even porridge (Narrative 1). We will develop local (contextual) knowledge and knowledge about ourself and probably be less concerned about generalisability.

I look forward to my own making but before I get to that I want to acknowledge at least some of what I have made previously. I think this acknowledgement is important, possibly more so than for other forms of knowing. Material thinking resists closure. Indeed, making is just as likely to generate the next idea.

Sorting through my electronic files of text and images over the past few years I identified a painting, or perhaps it would more appropriately be called a ‘sketch’, that I completed a few years ago. What I was concerned with was getting some raw thoughts down — not too much more.



I was exploring Carter’s notion of ‘material thinking’ and trying to better understand creativity. My initial mental image for the sketch was a folding together of art and knowing. I allowed the watercolour to make fine tracks across the paper, breaking a corner of the paper into folds. I wrote the word ‘of’ in black paint on the paper, trying to think *of* creativity rather than *about* it,

and external to it. These marks, and the negative spaces they made, or the ‘pattern made of holes’, as Carter would probably call it, told me what to do next, and how to respond to achieve a visual and intellectual satisfaction, which I usually interpret as ‘balance’. I wondered what would emerge next and searched for clues. Familiar shapes began to

appear; shapes from earlier paintings, to which I had attached meaning. I gave them a nudge, wondering about their associations. One shape was the letter 'C', which had a particular meaning to me through earlier work on metaphor and what I refer to as the 'sea of creativity' metaphor. A participant of an earlier research project came to life too – his black rimmed glasses making him easily recognisable. In this way, the sketch had begun as a social relation (Carter, 2004, p. 10) – the relativity of collaborators and artefacts over time.



Carter might say that I was working at an 'unfulfilled relation' (2007, p. 21), though I sense my sketches to be more 'a structure for reinventing human relations'(Carter, 2004, p. 10), where the discourse 'provided the testing ground of new ideas'(Carter, 2007, p. 19). I say this because I had not previously placed the 'C' (of creativity) in against an image of, in fact in the face of, another person.

Referring to Walter Skeat, Carter considers that art has 'a flow in two directions, for the painter can work on the discursive material that comes to him, can elaborate it, transform it through labour, and return it to the social domain as an alteration of or revision of society's discursive field' (as cited in Carter, 2004, p. 10). Put in a slightly different way, invention is a double movement of '..... decontextualisation in which the found elements are rendered strange, and of recontextualisation, in which new families of association and structures of meaning are established'(Carter, 2007, pp. 15-16). My sketches — and this narrative — might even be considered an artefact of this reconceptualisation being returned.

A relativity also exists between artist (myself) and the materials that I used. Following Blanchard, Carter points out that 'a homology must exist between matter and mind, between the qualities of the material to be worked and the creative disposition of the artist who selects and works it' (2004, p. 186). However, 'the malleable material is subservient to the dream of the artist; it is the artist's fantasy that matter serves'(Carter, 2004, p. 186). It is in this recording of process, as I am doing here, that takes us, as we have said, beyond simply writing *about* art, and more about writing *of* creativity.

I interpret writing *about*, say creativity, as being 'parasitic' and *of* as being 'coeval' – the difference between locating yourself, as maker, writer or artist, external to, or within, the artefact (and its production). To use Carter's words again, and to continue to take on this 'about/of' tension: 'The process of making the work becomes inseparable from what is produced'. In painting, for example, control is passed over to the paint (Roche, 2009), in a 'transactional and responsive, action/reaction: I do/it does'(2009) fashion. 'This occurs even when the outcome is unknowable, writes Tonkinwise, who describes a similar process, where 'each next move in the making seems to come of its own accord, with a strong,

perhaps even clear, purpose', akin to Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow perhaps. For me, the character of marks on the paper informed the action of my loader brush, and the location of the next mark, fuelled, I believe, by a process aptly described by Roche: 'There is a sense of emergence or revealing that occurs outside of myself as the work develops' (2009) in a practice of material thinking' (Vaughan, 2008, p. 1) where the practice is an epistemological act (Vaughan & Akama, 2009, p. 2).

Making is also inseparable, according to Carter (2004, p. 4) at least, from a prerequisite (Rosenberg & Fairfax, 2008) of non-linear discourse of collaboration – like 'a lover's readiness to be plastically moulded by the other's (intellectual) desire' (Carter, 2004, p. XIII). As beautiful as this simile is as a description of collaboration, it does require a little scrutiny. Surely there is much room for movement between Carter's intimate depiction and Tonkinwise's more removed and implicit take on collaboration:

'No expertise is solo. If acts are not explicitly collaborative, they will nonetheless tend to involve negotiations with suppliers, sub-contractors, sellers. Even if conducted alone, the recipients of what is being expertly done will be in mind' (2008)

Vaughan's perspective contributes to this discussion too: 'I am concerned with the individual, their experiences, and their sense of placed self. (2008, p. 1). Vaughan does not disregard the importance of collaboration but extends it to the notion of the individual relative to place – to the 'space or location of material thinking' (2008, p. 2). She elucidates: 'I argue that the practice of making, the materialising of ideas through materials and processes, is a process of place-making' (Vaughan, 2008, p. 2). And the power of place, according to Margaret Somerville, is that it connects the local and the global.

Without an intimate knowledge of local places that we love there is no beginning point. Without a concept of the local, action is not possible. However, under conditions of global contemporaneity, it is no longer possible to consider local problems, such as a drought that affects every local area in Australia in different and specific ways, as independent of global issues (Somerville, 2008).

This takes me back to my sketches and to where it was produced, amidst the security of my studio, a place of 'intellectual desire' fuelled by the references listed at the end of this article, the art galleries that I have visited, my interaction with the internet, and of course, much more. These global influences have imbued the place where I made my sketches, and getting back to Vaughan, (2008, p. 2), my sketches have, in turn, helped to make that place.

To continue with our emphasis on prepositions, Vaughan has introduced the relatedness of making *in* and *of* a place, say a landscape, as a form of collaboration in material thinking. This opens the discussion to other possibilities of collaborations and productive relativity in material thinking which might include the intellectual space, or adventures, between maker, and in my case, the materials I use. The way that wax softens in my hand as I think, or in the making of my sketches, the movement of watered down paint that I allowed to make tracks freely across the paper to form folds, are evocative events – events that I work *with*. In fact, these events, when they emerge or are manufactured, have an air of significance, sometimes equal, even if only momentarily, to that of a deep conversation. Barbara Bolt,

taking her lead from Heidegger, makes the point that: 'in the artistic process, objects have agency and it is through the establishing conjunctions with other contributing elements in the art that humans are co-responsible for letting art emerge' (Bolt, 2007, p. 1) – this occurs collaboratively as a 'co-emergence'(Bolt, 2007, p. 3) where 'the outcome cannot be known in advance'(Bolt, 2007, p. 3).

These collaborations could be considered at least equal to those between 'material thinkers' (Vaughan, 2008, p. 2) and might be extended even further, conceptually, to include memory. Memory is drawn upon in creative practice. An 'artful scholar' might have in mind a recent article, or a piece of writing that is underway, or the transcription or tone of an interview, and work 'in collaboration', or in productive relativity, with them: 'To make something new is to recall something lost through a concomitant mode of production'(Carter, 2004, pp. 183-184). To (re)member, as Carter points out, where 'member' is derived from the word 'limb', is to use 'memory as a material process of putting back together scattered pieces'(Carter, 2004, p. 195) to produce, say, a 'body' of work. This, says Carter, is remembering 'beyond nostalgia' (2004, p. 5) where, recalling Carter's emphasis on collaboration, the accumulated re-assemblage of memories leads to something new – local invention (2004, p. 5). This would be an appropriate explanation of how images from earlier paintings re-emerged to make my sketches. And here another bridge usefully connects Carter's notion of material thinking and Somerville's description of emergence, as part of her research methodology that she calls 'postmodern emergence'. Somerville describes researchers 'becoming' in their research so as to be open to emergence and in turn by '*opening the mind, expansion, seeking to know the unknown, being uncertain; not proving, but wondering* [original emphasis](2007, p. 228). Emergence here is 'a point of transformation'(Somerville, 2007, p. 228) which arises out of an undoing of preconceptions (Somerville, 2007, p. 230), where complex patterns emerge. Somerville writes: 'as a trickle in my brain and gathers other images as it goes'(2007, p. 231), and where 'these images want to develop into forms'(2007, p. 231). The images that Somerville refers to are memories, and in the case of my sketches, they are of conversations, past paintings, and the events that lead up to them, all the other elements that formed the place of production of my sketches, and of course technique.

For artful scholarship, 'Technique is necessary, but in the transformation referred to above, it falls away'(Carter, 2007, p. 16) and can be considered, if we take Katy Macleod's (2007, p. 1) line, to be replaced by writing that is 'indissolubly connected to the research art' (Macleod, 2007, p. 1). For Macleod: 'The written text is in the form of a highly reflexive address to [the artwork]'(2007, p. 3) which I hope is, at least to some extent, demonstrated here. Artistic technique, correctly located, is a means to an end, a connection between productive relativity and its outcomes.

To recapitulate, an examination of the outcome of an artefact, say of a sculpture, noting its graceful line and beautiful patina, is an inquiry *about* art or creativity, and an inquiry that pays full attention to say the sculpting processes, is an inquiry *of* art or creativity. Carter likens this notion to that of 'becoming' (compared to 'being'), and indeed this seems to fit perfectly with the practice of research where: *becoming-other* is a 'condition for generating new knowledge (Somerville, 2007, p. 234)'. This, through the productive relativity of place, memories and also the materials of art, which according to Carter (2007, p. 19) are themselves in a state of becoming is material thinking. Material thinking is the 'discourse of

creative research' (Carter, 2004, p. 9), 'the supplement of matter that haunts communication'(Carter, 2007, p. 15), 'what happens when matter stands in-between the collaborators supplying the discursive situation of their work.'(Carter, 2007, p. 19), where invention '.... is located neither after nor before the process but in the performance itself' (Carter, 2007, p. 19). And what we are left with from creative research is not 'simplification and closure'(Carter, 2004, p. 13), or 'a 'discovery' that can be generalised or patented'(Carter, 2004, p. 13). Rather, we have a localised practice (Carter, 2004, p. 185), a conceptual advance mediated materially (Carter, 2007, p. 16). In this light, one that illuminates the views of Bacon, outcomes of creative research are:

... offcuts of infinity. Bunching perceptions or grouping phenomena in new ways that are memorable, they provide the 'prenotion' that enables mediation between the immediately to hand (or local) and the otherwise ungraspable (the global) – the activity of material thinking'(Carter, 2004, p. 184).

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