

The Matter at Hand

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This paper questions what the experience of hand-making, with its haptic qualities and tactile sensations, might still have to offer in a culture increasingly defined by digital technology and 'economic rationality'. Grounded in the literature on craft theory (Adamson, 2013; Gauntlett, 2011; Frayling, 2011; Sennett, 2009) the nostalgic view of craft is rejected in favour of a more critical and forward thinking one based on a broad and inclusive concept of craft making, which embraces the use of digital technology.

Using the author's own textile design and print practice as the core experiential driver for enquiry, the contrasts between working with hand based and digital technologies are closely observed. What starts as an exploration of the aesthetic differences between analogue and digital processes of design and production in the field of textile print (Fig. 1) quickly becomes an exploration of the experiential differences of working in these two contrasting ways.

The paper is based on a two-stage method. First, reflexive and critical observation of the author's own practice was conducted through the production of placement prints on two textile test pieces (Fig. 2). From this emerged three areas of difference when working with analogue and digital processes, which relate to physicality, mode of thinking, and sense of agency. In order to gain a broader perspective, stage two involved semi-structured interviews with fellow contemporary designer/makers who work with both analogue and digital techniques, and a survey of design undergraduates, of a younger generation, also testing out both ways of working at the start of their careers.

Analysis of the interview and survey responses revealed commonalities and underlying factors at play in the contrasting experiences of working with hand based and digital technologies. Analogue processes, where there is a wider range of sensory feedback, and actions are seen to have more consequence, are compared to digital processes where the material relationship is repeatedly postponed. Strikingly, analogue processes, with their greater physical constraints and risk of failure, can give rise to a greater sense of agency and accomplishment. Based on these observations three significant themes are discussed with reference to the increasing dominance of digital technology:

- materiality and embodied knowledge - considering the hand as a site of learning to which materiality offers feedback in a relational sense (Sennett, 2009);
- individuality and embodied meaning – considering the degree to which the individuality of expression can resist the 'rigidity' of coded technology (Lanier, 2011);
- perceptions of freedom and control in the process of making and their impact on the creative experience and its outcomes.

Reflecting on Lanier's suggestion that 'the most important thing about a technology is how it changes people', the paper concludes with a critical reflection on these themes in relation to the development of the author's own practice (Fig. 3), within the wider context of an emerging 'maker movement'.

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