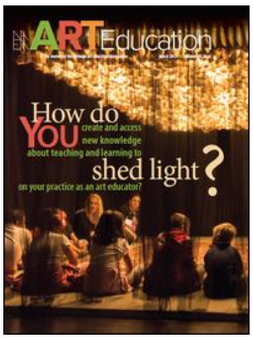

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Creative Matter:

New Materialism in Art Education Research, Teaching, and Learning

Emily Jean Hood and Amelia M. Kraehe

Figure 1. Materials set out for papermaking in a middle school art classroom. Photo from unpublished raw data (Kraehe, 2010).

In the art of inquiry, the conduct of thought goes along with, and continually answers to, the fluxes and the flows of materials with which we work. These materials think in us, as we think through them.

—Tim Ingold,
Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture (2013, p. 6)

A strong case has been made for rethinking *art practice as research* (Marshall & D'Adamo, 2011; Rolling, 2013; Sullivan, 2010). Artists pose questions, construct problems, conjecture, investigate, experiment, and many times fail but then make discoveries in the process. As "everyday artists" (Bentley, 2013, p. 7), children also engage in these kinds of practices. Creating a research culture out of art education practices seems like a logical next step, yet in doing so we face at least two philosophical challenges.

One challenge is the dualistic thinking that imprisons most research, in particular the kind of dualism that divides the world into two types of existence: human (life) and non-human (matter). It presupposes that human beings and non–human beings exist in a hierarchical relationship. Most Western paradigms are based on this hierarchy, whereby non-human things are understood to be passive objects acted on by self-directed human agents. Indeed, longstanding traditions in the humanities and scientific research are invested in (and blinded by) human-centered interpretation, representation, and control over all things.

The dominance of human-centered research models points to a second challenge for conceptualizing *art education practice as research* (Hickey-Moody & Page, 2016). "Each object," according to art historian James Elkins (1996), "has a presence—a being" (p. 12). For many of us, this is the attraction of being with art objects and creating things with material form. And yet, ironically, the art education frameworks that are often used to investigate materials and things—including discipline-based art education, visual culture art education, material culture studies, object-based learning, and choice-based art education—overlook the *thingliness of things*. That is, they do not satisfactorily capture the energetic contributions that material objects make in the creation of art. What is currently missing from these approaches is an ethical philosophy of inquiry that acknowledges the shared energies that move us when we are in co-creative relationships with the non-human presences in the world.

What if, as educators/artists/researchers, we took seriously our interconnectedness with things—lingering within wonderment, struck by the power of the things that pull us out of our routines? How might our everyday modes of artistic research and artmaking change if we were to focus on the thingliness of all objects by assuming that all forms of matter—human and non-human, people and things—have material vibrancy and agency? These questions reflect new materialism. Rather than *representing* the symbolic or cultural meanings of things as otherwise inert objects, a new materialist approach supports speculative questions and methods that seek to make sense of the vitalities of matter and agency of things.

New Materialism: Rethinking Art Education Practice as Research

New materialism is a contemplative, imaginative approach to research that is based on *being with* things (Bennett, 2010). This turn toward material and materiality asks the researcher to pay close attention to what it is that things *do* with us, not merely what they *mean*.

In this article, we explore how new materialism can help us conceive of *art education practice as research*. Our discussion is organized in three parts. First, we examine how a practicing artist talks about materials as an aspect of his creative artmaking experiences. In the second section, we introduce new materialist concepts for thinking about the power of things in art education. For these concepts, we pull from thinkers who offer vocabularies that can be useful for infusing a materialist orientation into artistic inquiries. This orientation to research embraces contemplation and speculation grounded in acute attentiveness and wonder. These sensitizing modes of engagement are necessary for developing

an artistic practice and creative research with objects that can account for both the palpable, material reality and cultural, ideological effects of art (Barrett & Bolt, 2012). In the final section, we consider the application of new materialist methods in two different sites for inquiry in the visual arts: a school art classroom and a museum gallery.

Artists and the Call of Things

There are certain human ways of being that situate people to be more attentive to the world of things. Philosopher Jane Bennett (2012) looks closely at hoarders and how they speak about things in an attempt to show how people who hoard have a keen sensibility about the objects that they collect. She also suggests that artists are perhaps another group of people who might have this sensitivity to the vibrancy of things. We contend that many artists have special understandings of the way that things participate in creative practices, and offer the words of artist Trenton Doyle Hancock to illuminate this point. Hancock is a contemporary artist who works in mixed media and installation. The following quotes are from an *Art21* (2003) segment about his creative practice. The quotes serve as an illustration of how one artist understands objects as co-makers of art and everyday life.

Imagine a studio space that is filled with various piles of colorful objects.[1] Trenton Doyle Hancock speaks about these objects in an interpersonal way. He explains,

> I tend to have an entourage with me wherever I go. Not necessarily people, but objects. I have a collection of grocery lists, plastic tops, amateur paintings, things I find on the ground, balloons. You can never have too many balloons. (49:02)

It is interesting how Hancock employs the term "entourage," which traditionally refers to a group of people, to explain the objects that surround him. Also, the majority of the objects he lists are not precious objects, or even traditional art media. They are everyday things that appear to him, or call to him as he moves about the world. He further illuminates his relationship with objects:

> Even here at home I like to have things out all the time. I'm a big toy collector and I've been actively trying to piece together my childhood by finding all of those toys. It's just an effort to reconnect with a time when I was just a little bit more open and receptive to things. And it is just great to have those things around me as a reminder. (49:47)

Although Hancock seems vested in maintaining a relationship with objects in his everyday life, he confesses that even still, his adult mind is fractured from being "open and receptive to things." Indeed, Bennett (2010) points out that a childlike reception of the world is helpful in facilitating a better understanding of the vitality of things. For Hancock, it is as though these objects serve as a medium for reconstructing a childlike vibrant understanding of things. They conjure a phenomenon where a change in perception takes place, and these things somehow connect him to a childlike sense of wonder. The final quote from Hancock explains how the objects he collects in his home, car, and studio communicate with him.

> Anywhere I move, these mounds seem to move with me. Like in my car there's a pile of things, a mound. In my studio there's piles of things all over the place. And that's how I pick from these piles—what's happening with the pieces that are in the studio. I see those as colorful blasts of energy or communication from the mounds, these visions of hope. (50:53)

Hancock has a sense of interaction with things as he and the objects enact their studio practice and everyday life. For him, the mounds are not inert and lifeless. Instead, they are full of communicative power and hope. The way that he speaks about things displays his understanding of the vitality of all materiality. His work is about human narrative, but at the same time, his attentiveness to things and their participation in making is foundational to his practice and construction of narrative.

New Materialism: Thing-Power and Distributive Agency

The quotes from Hancock offer insights into his unconventional conception of things. Culturally speaking, we often think of messes or piles of things as a hindrance or problem. However, from this artist we can see that mess-making might be a methodological practice, a way of becoming more in-tune with objects. Here, we offer some new materialist concepts that might better equip art educators to think about things as participants in artmaking practices, and methods, such as mess-making, as part of both pedagogy and research.

Thing-Power

Bennett (2010) uses the term "thing-power" to describe the qualities that objects have that in many ways are indescribable and intangible. Hancock has some understanding of this power, and collaborates with thing-power to generate works of art. Thing-power is not about assigning human characteristics to non-human things. Rather, it is about the elusive nature of materiality, and how at once, we sense that an object is real, while simultaneously acknowledging that things have aspects of their being that are always beyond human perception.

Objects and Humans Are Made of Matter

Thing-power applies to all material bodies. As Bennett (2010) states,

> Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief. … And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. (p. 13)

In thinking again about the constructed divide between human and non-human things, it is important to note that *we are all things*. For humans in general, understanding that everything and everybody is made up of dynamic materials is an important political point for consciousness raising, with implications for long-term sustainability and care with the world. For the artists in particular, it sets up a more ethical way of thinking about how matter participates in the artmaking process.

Distributive Agency

Material bodies never act alone. New materialist philosophy invites a different understanding of agency, one that recognizes the interbeing (Hanh, 2008) and interdependency of all bodies. Things always appear in relationship to other things. As I sit and type, the phenomenon that is taking place depends on the materiality of the computer, table, my hands, floor, screws, chair, light bulb, and so on. Independent movement of any of these seemingly separate bodies results in a change for the other things. We tend to think that humans have ultimate power (or agency) over all of these things. Distributive agency understands power as far more complex and infinitely intertwined. Power is among all material bodies, both human and more-than-human, and therefore does not belong to bodies independently, but rather happens because material bodies are always dependent on one another. This is distributive agency (Bennett, 2010).

The concepts of thing-power and distributive agency offer new frameworks for understanding the role of things in the context of artmaking and art education. They offer new ways of looking at taken-for-granted things that surround us every moment of every day. Not only that, but they help us understand that artmaking is always a co-creative practice. It is always a collective action between animate and inanimate things. This action situates all creative practice as collective calls for both ethical and political shifts in current Western paradigms because it requires that the human/non-human hierarchy be deconstructed and replaced with concepts that we believe are rich with possibility for helping humans become more attuned to the dynamism of the world.

Making and Learning With Things

New materialism goes beyond traditional inquiry methods in art education. It calls for contemplative speculation grounded in a relational ethics toward the materiality of all things (Hickey-Moody & Page, 2016). We now discuss how these ideas might be practically applied to concrete concerns in pK-12 art classrooms and art museums, each a richly co-creative visual arts environment.

Making With Classroom Things

By nature, the art classroom is full of thing-power—overflowing with art supplies, curious objects and images collected over time, and odds-and-ends left over and donated (e.g., Figure 1). I tend to gather these things, finding comfort and inspiration in the transformative potential they hold. So how can we encourage students to become aware of and receptive to the sensation of their own interchange with materials as they explore, experiment, and create?

HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO BECOME AWARE OF AND RECEPTIVE TO THE SENSATION OF THEIR OWN INTERCHANGE WITH MATERIALS AS THEY EXPLORE, EXPERIMENT, AND CREATE?

High school students might use these concepts to begin thinking about their artmaking space in new ways. Through distributive agency, things—human and non-human—become co-creators of the art classroom. Consideration of the material culture of a classroom is important (Woywod, 2015), but I suggest that this idea can be enriched when students begin to think about materiality as vibrant. This concept can serve as motivation for students to understand their classroom as a dynamic artwork that is made up of experiences between all materials in the classroom, both non-human and human. This new understanding might be fostered through class discussion and space-making.

For example, working in small groups of three, students can select a thing from the classroom. In the small groups they can work together to consider the following questions:

What might it be like to be this thing?

What does this thing do in the classroom?

How does the form of this thing call to you? What does it ask you to do?

How might you speculate about this thing?

What might it be doing that you have never considered or what activities can you dream up or for it?

The small groups might share their selected things and group reflections with the class. Then, the discussion becomes data that could help plan a new design for the classroom that responds to the call of the things and the speculations that the students have made about the things. This type of making might open up further inquiry such as, how do thing-power and distributive agency shift the identity of the artist? If things are co-creators, what does it mean for all artmaking to be collaborative? This kind of

Figure 2. Students viewing Cildo Meireles's *Missão/Missões* [*Mission/Missions*] *(How to Build Cathedrals)*, 1987. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin. Photo by Mary Myers.

artmaking allows students to engage in big ideas that challenge the way they look at the world. In addition, this type of activity offers the opportunity to think about art as process, participation, and perception. Their space-making involves research put into practice, and invites them to engage in contemporary art practices that are both conceptual and simultaneously grounded in the material world.

Learning With Museum Things

Museum educators have developed many strategies to help visitors engage in close looking and careful analysis. During my time as a gallery teacher, I was trained in asking questions that enabled children to focus their looking on the medium, subject matter, and formal elements of the work. This was particularly fun with contemporary work, such as Cildo Meireles's *Missao/Missoes [Mission/Missions] (How to Build Cathedrals).* This installation incorporated a floor of shiny pennies, a column of communion wafers, cow bones dangling from above, a perimeter made with concrete pavers of the sort you find at Home Depot, and sheer black fabric (see Figures 2 and 3). Visitors were encouraged to enter and touch the artwork, as human and non-human were illuminated from above. Often children posed their own questions about the installation and made cultural associations between their everyday lives and what they noticed in the artwork. But in seeking the semiotic meanings of pennies, cow bones, other artifacts, our investigation of the work overlooked the materiality of the things before our eyes.

Whether based on traditional lecture or progressive questioning methods, museum inquiries frequently convert material artworks into "texts" to be read. This is what happened with the Meireles

GETTING LOST IS TO BE CURIOUS, CAUGHT UP, AND ENTANGLED, NOT WITH THE IDEA OF ART BUT WITH THE MATERIAL WORK OF ART.

installation and many other pieces. This reductive tendency goes back to the human-centeredness of our methods of interpretation that too often foreclose more intimate, ethical entanglements with the art objects. Art museum educator Elliott Kai-Kee (2015) offers an alternative. He suggests that one of the best ways to experience art in a museum is by getting lost. In other words, wander about the galleries until something calls out to you, jarring your otherwise normal disposition. The jarring effect is registered through the body's senses. From a materialist point of view, it is indicative of a vital force of our own matter that lies just below the surface of awareness. Getting lost is to be curious, caught up, and entangled, not with the idea of art but with the material work of art. This "activity of matter impressing on the body" (Barrett & Bolt, 2012, p. 7) has the potential to propel artistic investigation. When working with children, getting lost can entail wandering/wondering through a single work of art. Speculative questions grounded in the materiality of artworks can facilitate getting lost with the things. We can ask question such as,

What is it like to be this one penny among 600,000 others?

How does the bone feel, not to me but to itself? How does it feel to be the cow's bone, dried and dangling?

What is the light looking for? What is it hiding?

If you could interview one part or material in the work, what questions would you ask of it?

These kinds of questions make us lose our bearings, if only for a moment. They are disorientating, as they require a decentering of the human experience. We feel awkward as these questions bring our art investigations under a different logic. New materialist art inquiries engender new educational insights precisely because they are disorientating.

Ethical and Political Implications of New Materialism and Research

We have discussed art education practice as research using examples that illustrate how new materialism might be applied to visual arts inquiries in different types of settings. These examples are not so much recommendations; rather, we offer them as starting points for rethinking the basis for how we understand and relate to art materials and objects. Indeed, there is much at stake here.

The "material turn" (Barrett & Bolt, 2012, p. 5) signals a radical ethical and political awakening that challenges the assumptions and methods of traditional philosophies of (art education) research. It positions the researcher (teacher, artist, learner) as one who is no longer separate from or more valuable than materials and objects with which they interact. Instead, the divide between human and non-human ceases to exist, and new ways for knowing the self and the object as interbeings emerge (Anderson & Guyas, 2012).

In acknowledging the creative potentialities of all matter, conventional thinking about who and what count as beings is

Figure 3. Detail from Cildo Meireles, *Missão/Missões* [*Mission/Missions*] *(How to Build Cathedrals)*, 1987. Coins, communion wafers, cattle bones, paving stones, and black cloth. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of the Peter Norton Family Foundation, 1998. Photo by Rick Hall.

inverted. We see this as a hopeful inversion on two fronts. Because of its unique focus on objects and making, we believe that art education is a field where imaginative and emergent forms of inquiry can flourish in different ways for different contexts, with insights for both theory and practice. It is also our hope that the radical awakening new materialism brings to inquiry in art education will foster socially responsive and environmentally sustainable practices that contribute to a future in which all materialities (human and non-human) co-generatively exist. ■

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Endnote

[1] See images of Hancock in his studio at www.art21.org/images/trenton-doyle-hancock/production-still-from-stories-2003-8?slideshow=1 and www.art21.org/images/trenton-doyle-hancock/production-still-from-stories-2003-15?slideshow=1