Studies in
Material Thinking

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Critical perception seizes, shows, exposes, and announces the truths of a situation and its potentiality as it sees it. Design, the process of the realization of these perceptions—these truths—into an actualized form (whether that of an artifact, a situation or a perceptual tool) is the process of translation of these perceptions into a composite synthetic configuration that is the realization of these perceived truths (no matter how intuitive their origin) and the realization of the critical truths of configuration.
(Dilnot , 2008, p. 179)

Explorations into the complex relationships between the immaterial realm of ideas and experience and the material realm of objects and actions, that is, the relationship between perceptions and actualized form are common enough in design literature concerned primarily with three-dimensional artefacts or with the built environment, including engineering design, architecture and urban planning. However, this kind of inquiry is less common in design research and literature concerned with visual communication and communication design. This is not surprising since the materiality of designed artefacts and built environments together with their capacity to endure as a form of concrete reality makes them pretty hard to ignore. The relationship between the material dimension they occupy and the immaterial dimension in which they have been conceived is an ongoing experience for users over a considerable period of time. This offers much potential for evaluation, analysis and reflection.

Visual communication on the other hand is somewhat more ephemeral and usually only endures as a historical record, assuming it is archived after its initial function has been completed. In a sense, its general lack of durability and materiality, especially in the digital age, means that it can remain invisible despite the fact that so many forms of communication design dominate the visual media landscape in which we are enmeshed. In spite of this it has a profound impact on our experience of the world and the materiality of that world.

Visual communication has a long historical relationship with the advertising industry and its role, in that context has primarily been concerned with getting people to consume more. This understanding and practice has overshadowed its less obvious role as an educational tool for instructing people on how to do things or informing people about political and social issues. Nevertheless, all these interpretations of visual communication practice share a central interest in influencing the behaviour of people who come into contact with it. In this regard, although the artefacts of its production usually have a material manifestation, what they seek to change is inherently immaterial. Notwithstanding that the images produced by communication are both everywhere and short lived, they are nonetheless a persuasive part of the visual landscape of the world in which we live. Because vision is one of the primary senses through which humans perceive the world and our perception of the world informs how we act within and upon that world, then this ubiquitous and ephemeral visual landscape plays a central role in how we understand and act in that world.

This special issue of *Studies in Material Thinking* brings together research papers from a variety of design perspectives, exploring visual communication's role in meditating the complex relationships between the immaterial realm of ideas and experiences and the material realm of objects and actions.

In their paper, Communication Design for Refugee Women, Elena Caratti, Umberto Tolino and Erik Ciravegna report on a human-centered and multi-disciplinary project undertaken in collaboration with the Sammartini Polifunctional Centre for refugee women in Milan. Their objective was to co-design a range of visual collateral to help female refugees access 'basic information for everyday life and to facilitate their orientation inside' the centre and transform their experiences of it. This is a significant piece of social innovation that responds 'to social needs, support[s] human welfare and safeguard[s] vulnerable groups in society'. More importantly, it facilitates 'fundamental changes in people's attitudes and values'.

Gabriel A. Maher 'considers how design presents a distorted system of gender representation by using the vehicle of the media and contributes to the establishment of gender norms' in 'De_Sign, Revealing The Condition of the Mediated Body'. Maher analysed *Frame Magazine* over a twelve-month period using a methodology of 'visual deconstruction' that involved physically dissecting issues of the magazine by cutting away represented bodies 'from their contexts and the objects they were photographed with' to reveal 'how specific gender ideals and the mediated body are positioned to culturally frame gender'. The results of the study were presented to the editors of Frame Magazine who were so struck by their own persistent use of stereotypical gender images that they published

the work in issue 100. This project is exemplary of critical design practice, and is a form of design activism that is both innovative and concerned with the ethics of visual communication design, clearly demonstrating the power of the image to shape our perception of the world. The work also demonstrates the potential of critical visual design practice to influence the editorial direction of a magazine.

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The centrality of the visible image in our transformation of the world is explicitly highlighted in Mark Roxburgh and Stephen Cox's paper 'Visualisation and the Service Sector'. The authors report on a series of experimental student design research projects conducted in partnership with one of Australia's largest banks. These projects used a wide variety of visualisation techniques to transform ideas into hypothetical realities. The authors argue that since 'the relationship between perception, imagination and action is fundamental to design creativity and that the imagining of future states and scenarios, is what

design does', then design is not so much a problem solving activity as it is 'a transformative, creative, and imaginative inevitability that is bound up in our perceptual synthesis' in which the image is central.

In 'Culture—Practice—Discourse', Veronika Kelly takes a more theoretical approach, highlighting the discursive dimension of cultural practices at large, and visual communication design in particular. Her aim is to develop a 'methodology for analysing communication design as a discursive practice', and to 'consider the suitability of this approach as a means of providing insight to the production, organisation and dissemination of communication design practice knowledge that at the same time presents the potential to transform its operations.' She articulates the type of theoretical underpinnings that are implicit in many of the practices reported on in the papers in this special issue. Kelly provides a cogent argument for the use of various tools for the kind of analysis needed to engage design as a form of critical practice.

Whilst the work of Marco Quaggiotto and Giovanni Baule, in their paper 'Communication of the Territory and Cartographic Interfaces', is also a theoretical mediation, it is exemplary of the kind of discourse analysis Kelly discusses. Quaggiotto and Baule demonstrate the discursive power of cartography, both in its analogue and digital manifestations. They argue poetically and cogently that maps not only exist as a geographic index but also as a form of political index. They argue that communication design is the force that enables us to imagine these forms of representation as a kind of reality by connecting them to a geographic reality. They see the map as a kind of cultural tool used to develop 'an intellectual abstraction, which allows us to act upon reality in

ways that were not possible before'. This understanding, and communication designs' role in it, is powerfully political for 'the map-plan enables the organisation of an intervention, displaying a hypothetical future space, a configuration of possibilities.' Once again this thesis points to the power of visual communication, a practice rooted in the immaterial, to transform the material world.

REFERENCES

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Mark Roxburgh is Associate Professor of Design at the University of Newcastle. Mark's research interests cover design research, visual communication theory and practice, photographic theory and practice and user experience design. His PhD explored the central role that visual images and visual perception play in design, with a specific emphasis on how photographic images condition us to perceive, experience and transform the world in a self-replicating manner. His ongoing research pursuits have been: developing a phenomenological theory of photography to counter the dominance of critical theory and semiotic deconstruction; developing a theory of design as a form of embodied perceptual synthesis to counter the dominance of the design problem solving metaphor.

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Nancy de Freitas is Associate Professor of Art and Design at AUT University in New Zealand. Her installation works have been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Research interests include: active documentation as a research method; 'material thinking' approaches and professional education models for the design, creative and cultural sectors. De Freitas is well known for her postgraduate workshops in writing and reporting on artistic research projects. She lectures internationally on art and design research practice and material thinking method.

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