

THINKING MATERIAL

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Since its inaugural exhibition in 2011 Launceston's Sawtooth ARI has always branded itself primarily as a space for two things: emerging artists and creative experimentation. Sawtooth of course, has broken no new ground in identifying the need for the exchange of art and ideas at the coalface of contemporary practice. Like so many ARIs and institutions around Australia, and indeed the world, we understand the necessity for a convoluted intersection between artist and audience where abstraction of appreciation or understanding is allowed. Contemporary approaches to art making and theory should be a place of entanglement and destabilisation of previous knowledge – isn't that where we will find the new?

Through the outcomes of a Thinker-In-Residence initiative at Sawtooth in 2013, *New Materialism* surfaced as a concept that seemed prevalent in recent academic literature, yet ambiguous in practice. *New Materialism* is often thought about only in reference to gendered discourses or, indeed, Feminism, and as a way to deal with the apparently ephemeral being any form of moving/projected image or electronic art. As a concept, we wanted to consider its potential more broadly. The then 'Thinker' Dr. Deb Malor invited participants to engage with *New Materialist* philosophies for an open session of dialogue. Participants were asked to consider Materials, materiality, and matter which had been identified as a departure point for a way of thinking about object oriented ontology – essentially *thing theory*. Artists and audiences are no stranger to things. Materials are undoubtedly, to one extreme or another, the arsenal of the artist: at the minimum a body, anything beyond that an extension of the body – a material used, shaped, applied and worked in order to produce a(nother) thing to be perceived by the audience. Artists are trained to think materially and even if their art is reliant on absence it requires a concept of the material to bring absence to presence.

With the idea of subverting mastery, *New Materialism* seems to suggest that contemporary thinking and traditional pedagogical approaches to making and materials are set to be questioned and re-imagined. On ideas of the virtual, Jussi Parikka acknowledges that 'the notion of materiality occupies a curious position in itself (2010)' which reminds us of the modern reality – nothing is as it seems, or was. If nothing is as it was, then it could be suggested that the creative thinker is at the heart of *New Materialism*, and the emerging artist is the thumping heart of contemporary practice – the kind of practice we see occupying spaces the world over. The arsenal of the artist is shifting for progress and materiality is being positioned in a new way. The immateriality of the virtual can't exist without the material hardware, can it? As an example, the virtual realm and ideas of global online connectivity challenge many a paradigm about making, audience, and object. As artists are finding new ways in which to work, the dialogue around analysis and critique needs to keep up as a symbiotic way of sustaining radical approaches to arts practice and education.

Artist-run spaces provide an essential testing ground for working out the finer details of these approaches and it is critical that ideas have a place from which to disseminate them. *New Materialism* became somewhat of a flag-bearer for the Sawtooth TIR initiative and spawned a range of independent research and artistic investigations for the participants involved. The outcomes were not planned, but not entirely unexpected either – the reason perhaps being that open dialogue, and indeed openness of mind, planted seeds of resistance to conventional modes of artistic concept and creation.

1. <https://jussiparikka.net/2010/06/23/what-is-new-materialism-opening-words-from-the-event/>

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