

Hands of Tactility

**What is the evolving relationship between the maker and
their materials?**

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Module Course: Coexistent perspectives

Course: (MA) Contemporary Dialogues (textiles)

Word count: 3901

Abstract

Hands of tactility delves into the evolutionary relationship between the maker and material, through a historically critical lens it analyses two textile designers that focus on the different relationships the maker has encountered since the first humans who chipped away at stones to craft tools with. The first relationship is explored through William Morris, a pioneer of the Arts and Craft movement. Morris's ideologies went against the current affairs of Industrial Victorian Britain, he felt there was a lack of the personal within manufactured designs, so he set out to revive the traditional crafts through rigorous material experimentation that resulted in a plethora of sensory experiences and beautifully crafted objects, all gifted to him through the connection of touch. As the 19th evolved into the 21st century, so did the interwoven dialogue of hand and materials, the breadth of technology available poses debates regarding the presence of human in design. Much against Morris's theories, modern design is riddled with the touch of the digital, however, as explored through Timorous Beasties, a contemporary textiles company, they show how the union of the hand and digital opens to a new system of thought and language; this is expressed through their highly captivating designs that honour timeless craftsmanship and the promising innovation of technology.

Introduction

This essay sets out to discuss the evolving relationship between the maker and their material and how this has/is changing with the rapid emergence of technology in design. This interaction between maker and material is facilitated through the hand, a part of the body that is seen to exclusively interact physically with the world, however it is a “supreme organ that tells stories of the world in its gestures, drawn traces they yield” (Ingold, 2013, p.112) or in this inquiries case, the way the hands interact with materials to create sensory experiences and relationships that help enable the maker to transform and better understand the world around them.

This is explored through the first humans who were able to transform their environment around them by shaping stones into tools. The tactile experience produced through the repetitive actions of the hand opened a network of possibilities for the human to explore, however as societies have progressed this relationship has been pushed and challenged in the light of machinery inventions.

Following from this evolution this essay will begin to discuss the ideologies and work of Willaim Morris who realised the mechanical process does not necessarily reflect the importance of the human within design (Naylor, 1979, p.7), he favoured the technical skills the hands possessed and set out to revive

the crafts amongst the enormity of the industrial revolution. Even after his death, his practices were highly thought of, especially within the contemporary world of digital design. As practices transformed into the digital platforms of the 21st century, this again, like the industrial revolution posed questions about the tactility of design and whether its overall design became less human and further away from nature.

Leading into the final section of this essay it will discuss how contemporary furnishing company Timorous Beasties is harnessing the power of technology whilst obtaining the nature of craft that William Morris loved so much. Through the entanglement of craft and technology, Timorous Beasties are formulating new systems of language and innovating realms of tactile experiences through their hybrid textiles. This relationship will be discussed through the works of Nimkulrat, Kane and Walter (2016), who express the importance of embracing the digital to explore new territories of design and expand the bounds of material practices, but also keeping in touch with the physical to maintain a balance of both.

The first tool makers

Humans have always crafted tools and objects with their hands to better understand and navigate the world around them. Burke and Ornstein note (1977, para 3) that the first people to develop this skill of shaping stones one

chip at time were the ancient hominids, also known as the “Axe makers”, the ability they had to craft in sequential order is down to the brain’s natural gifts. This precise and consecutive system (Treasure-Coates, 2019, p. 1) of shaping materials with their hands not only gave way to a multitude of sensory experiences, but also the physical act of manufacturing and using tools links to the development of language and logic, incidentally, giving way to the skills of retaining information to build upon the construction and change of one’s environment.

Looking closer into the idea of environment, the hands play a vital role in how one transforms their environment through generating tools and techniques.

The axe makers environment is pieced together through the continuous act of constructing tools, with each transformation of a stone, they are creating meaning and bringing into existence the environment around them; it is an ever-evolving process whereby they shape the environment, and it shapes them (Ingold, 2000, p.20)

The interaction between the Axe maker’s hands and tool making could be seen as a merely physical act in relation to constructing their environment, however, it gave way to a plethora of tactile experiences that explore the essence of oneself and the connections to the world around them. This dialogue between

one's hand and material are explored through the work of Tim Ingold, who states:

To correspond with the world, is not to describe it, or to represent it, but to answer it... it is to mix the movements of one's own sentient awareness with the flows and currents of animate life (Ingold, 2013, p. 108).

In relation to an Axe maker, this passage examines how one intertwines their perceptions with the materials of life, they spin "around one another on a double thread" (Ingold, 2013, p. 108), they are indistinguishable- the materials become an extension of the maker's hand. The idea of the material being an extension of oneself alludes to the idea of tacit knowledge. The tacit dimension was deeply researched by scientist and philosopher, Michael Polanyi, who argued "there was more to personal knowledge than the facts of our current systems" (Sathyamurthy, 2018, p. 12). In his book: *The tacit dimension* (1966), Polanyi discusses "we know more than we can tell" (Polanyi, 1966, p.4), in relation to the idea of this 'bodily extension', this suggests that the tool/ material becomes something one is unaware of, an impact that is transformed into a sense of the hand and body.

This type of tacit knowledge explored by Polanyi is integral to how the 'Axe makers' crafted their tools, because this "natural gift" Burke and Ornstein

coined, enabled the axe maker to craft through the act of precise repetition, each repetition leading closer to the inevitable transformation of separate entities becoming one, an emotional entanglement modern makers have with their materials today.

The axe makers world grew exponentially with the rise of tools and artifacts, crafted by the intelligent instrument of the hand. As Tim Ingold notes (2003, p.117), the act of making such tools creates correspondence between maker and material, they inform one another through a dance of exchanges, bringing forth the potentials of a new becoming world. With each crafted tool and ever-changing societies, the axe maker evolved into the modern day craftsman; they expanded out from their communities into a concrete jungle filled with progressively technology that has posed a challenge against the symbiotic relationship of hand and material.

“Change defines the modern world” (Nimkulrat, Kane and Walter, 2016, p. 9), and with the turn of the industrial revolution this posed questions regarding the role of the maker in the designing process, the machine ultimately suspended hand-labour, the hand no longer interacted with the material, it merely became “a tender of machines” (Glenn, 2010, p. 150). These notions of the maker becoming detached from the process of designing is explored through Pallasmaa’s work (2012), who states:

The computer creates a distance between the maker and object, whereas drawing by hand puts the designer in a haptic contact with the object, or space (Pallasmaa, 2012, p.14).

This passage further iterates the problems makers face in the age of the machine; an age that is barely 200 years old but one that has drastically altered the landscape of design.

Delving deeper into this passage, the word 'haptic' refers to the sense of touch which allows us to perceive the world around us, as discussed earlier in the essay this is how the axe-makers were able to transform the environment around them. Contrary to this, the word 'haptic' can also be used in a technological sense, whereby the "objects are manipulated by or explored by a machine" (Oxford, 2016). This interplay of meaning nicely reflects how the modern maker has evolved from the start of the industrial revolution where designers and artists from the arts and crafts movement (a period that will be explored further into the essay) revolted away from the machine to contemporary designers who "utilise both craft and high- technological methods" (Nimkulrat, Kane and Walter, 2016, p. 9) to develop and push the boundaries of traditional craft.

The evolution of the hand and material is tightly bound, both interwoven from each other, it is a means that has opened the world to us in ways it does and

cannot to the animal (Ingold, 2013, p. 113), it gave way to an abundance of experiences that “cast the humans beings out of nature” (Flusser, 1999, p.45) and into a world filled with beautifully crafted tools and artifacts that reflect their experience of the world around them through the tactile touch. This idea of the importance of touch within design can be seen in the ethos of designers from the arts and crafts movement, particularly through the work of William Morris (1834-1896), who favoured the hand made against the machine- the next section of this essay will lay out the first part of the argument regarding the maker and material.

The Arts and Craft movement

With the end of the 18th century came an influx of industrialism that had never been seen on such a scale. Britain was repaving the economic landscape, it “marked the beginning of a change in the value society placed on how things were made” (V&A, 2023). With the rise of each factory, the decorative arts were becoming underappreciated and perceived as a form of relatively low status, this was caused by the introduction of machinery in design, it created a division of labour which “devalued the work of the craftsman and turned him into a mere cog on the wheel of machinery” (Cumming and Kaplan, 1991, p.6)

In response to this, multiple societal groups, such as the Art Workers Guild, and Exhibition Society (V&A, 2023) came together in the late 1800s to create the

well-known Arts and Craft movement. The pioneers of this movement set out to answer these socially political dilemmas by re-establishing a unity between the maker and their craft. This 'unity' they set out to achieve interlinks to the ideas presented by Tim Ingold earlier in this essay, whereby the dialogue between maker and material is intricately woven together, they both correspond with each other in a way that the machines of the industrial revolution could not.

Within this movement were a set of key figures that drastically elevated the ideologies into the world and who prolifically altered the way in which society viewed craftsmanship in relation to the machine. A craftsman who particularly influenced the movement and one who is most famous for, is William Morris. Morris's set of ideals and work heavily carried the movement, an exploration into his work (particularly printed textiles) will be discussed in the next section of this essay.

William Morris (1834-1896)

William Morris was born in 1834, East London (V&A, 2023), he grew up to be one of the most celebrated figures of the arts and crafts movement, because, as Pevsner (1974) notes in his work:

it's not only that Morris had the designer's genius, but also that he recognised the indissoluble unity of an age and its social systems (Pevsner, 1974, p.48).

This passage examines the facts that Morris had an appreciation of the past crafts unlike anyone of his generation, whilst others did not question the turn of the machine, Morris looked back into the past for inspiration; this aided him in his success for reviving the crafts. These social systems Pevsner mentions correlates to the interests Morris had in medieval design, he felt there was a vitality to them which was "an expression of the creative intelligence of the individual craftsperson" (House and Garden, 2022).

This 'intelligence' Morris appreciated links to the makers relationship with material, because one must interact with the material through their hands, to ultimately gain a personal understanding of the limitations and potentials of the working materials (Naylor, 1979, p.104); like the axe makers who crafted series of tools to enhance their societies, William Morris set out to reestablish these means of incorporating the personal against the impersonal of the machine so to better allow the craftsperson's freedom of connecting to their environment.

Morris explored the tactility of materials through a breadth of mediums, his most famous is the printed textiles he crafted which are still as popular today.

Although Morris's textiles were highly elaborate expression of the natural world around him, they were also "a physical entity and a sensory experience" (Jackson, 2013, p.116). This experience of the sense's is a result of the meticulous processes Morris undertook to create his designs, he set out to "satisfy his need for a manual as well as intellectual engagement with design" (V&A, 2023), the intellectual engagement connotes the knowledge Morris had on the materials through his extensive interaction (with his hands) and experimentations of it. A particular design that is well known for its highly skilled approached that favoured the presence of touch within the design process is '*Strawberry thief*' (fig.1).

Strawberry Thief (1883)

Strawberry thief was produced in 1883 under a very rigorous print method called indigo-discharge, although time consuming it was one of Morris's most successful pieces (V&A, 2023), because of the clarity and detail that was achieved through this hand-dyed method of printing- this piece was directly inspired by the thrushes outside his window who'd pick away at the strawberries in his garden.

Albeit contained within the confines of the 2d material, '*Strawberry thief*' (fig.1) holds a breadth of material practices, achievable only through the extensive testing and knowledge of each process and material that Morris

carried out with the aid of the tactile touch; this method of working originates in how the axe makers navigated their way through the interfaces of their hands.



Fig.1, Strawberry Thief, (1883)

The skillful techniques employed in this design can be seen through the complex composition, each layer of the print has been achieved through the “rhythmic repetition of gesture” (Ingold, 2013, p.115). In Morris’s case this ‘repetitive gesture’ was the transference of the hand-drawn design to woodblock, and finally to the meticulous execution of hand dying, with each step the hand becomes further intertwined into the material process.

Through the act of Morris physically creating '*Strawberry thief*' he was learning the material, essentially experiencing it (Frayling, 2011, p. 99), this experience can be directly linked to the ideas of tacit knowledge explored earlier in this essay, because as Michael Polanyi notes (1966) the craftsman is responding to an internal unconscious awareness in effect of the impact of material to hand- the material becomes the extension, with each layer Morris produced, it unfolded revealing the true nature of the craftsperson.

In addition, the idea of unfolding can be seen in the composition of the design, the foliage in '*Strawberry thief*' (fig.1) vigorously extends upwards and around suggesting 'plenty of capacity of growth' (Naylor, 1971, p. 106), this reflects the notion of unfolding because both are never-ending, within the folds and creases there is a world of visual and tactile experiences (Barnett, 1999, p.34), that are in continuous dialogue with the hand.

William Morris worked hard to reestablish the connection of maker and material; he revived theories of craftsmanship during the height of the industrial revolution. However, as this revolution evolved into the 21st century, the overwhelming presence of technology became a deliberation for the modern maker and their material. The next section of this essay will discuss the comparison of contemporary design studio 'Timorous Beasties' and how they

utilise the machine, alongside using philosophies reflecting William Morris's to curate their hybrid textiles.

The evolving relationship of maker and material

With the rise of technology in design, the maker has had to reapproach their design methods in accordance with the current climate of today. Like the axe makers whose tools became organic extensions of their hands, the machine is replacing this extension, as Flusser (1999) notes in his work, technology is becoming "simulated organs of the human body" (Flusser, 1999, p.51). This explores that although the machine is 'simulated', an imitation if you will, the word 'organ' denotes that the machine can authentically act in place of the hand.

In response to this emerging relationship, the modern maker can advance and utilise their material knowledge with the aid of the machine; the maker is essentially creating a new system of language through the "two-way communication between human designer and the system" (Parkes, 2023). This new language parallels to the language devised by the axe maker, with each chipped stone it thrust them out of the primitives of nature and into a vastly new world filled with endless possibilities.

This entangled relationship of hand, technology and material can be seen in the works of contemporary textiles company, Timorous Beasties.

Timorous Beasties

Timorous Beasties is a contemporary furnishing company founded by Alistair McAuley and Paul Simmons in 1990. Their collaborative practice “embodies a unique diversity of pattern” (Timorous Beasties, 2023) that honour the timeless textiles industry under a modern-day narrative; similarly, William Morris practiced these ideals in how he repurposed medieval crafts under a new scope of design and revival for the hand made.

Timorous Beasties carefully unify the hand and machine within their visually complex designs by creating a balance of the hand drawn to the digital elements. Further discussing the ideas of Nimkulrat, Kane and Walter (2016) in relation to balance, they note that “making the digital tangible relies upon the connection with the material world” (Nimkulrat, Kane and Walter 2016, p.1). This explores how technology within design cannot reach its full potential without the presence of the material world, this is the same for the craftsman, because as explored through Ingold’s work, a correspondence (whether

physical or digital) is needed to establish systems of thought and experiences so the individual can navigate through the world.

This intrinsic relationship is reflected through '*Moire Damask*' (fig.2), a hybrid design incorporating the hand and machine.

Moire Damask

'*Moire Damask*' (fig.2) is a foiled backed wallcovering, it encompasses innovation in every aspect of the design whilst paying a homage to historical patterns and techniques (Timorous beasties, 2023). As mentioned above, both Timorous Beasties and William Morris share the same ideologies of reviving the hand made and responding to nature around them. This is seen in the damask motif which references traditional silk woven tapestries that depicted fruit, flowers and animals (F&P Interiors, 2018)- regarding *Moire Damask*, floral imagery and acanthus leaves can be seen within the motifs.

These motifs began as drawings by the hand, expanding on the work of Pallasmaa (2009) mentioned earlier in this essay, he states:

the designer occupies the very structure that the lines of the drawing represent...the images the designer advances are not mere visual renderings; they constitute a fully haptic and multi-sensory reality (Pallasmaa, 2009, p.59).

This explores the idea of the maker (Timorous Beasties) coming into the drawing itself as they are constructing it, there is a continuous dialogue between maker and material whereby they experience “one through the other, and one in the other” (Deleuze, 2017, p.260); this experience also relates to tacit knowledge because the act of seeing and feeling the drawing reflects an ‘uncontrollable inner awareness’ previously mentioned towards the object/drawing.



Fig.2, Moire Damask, (2021)



Fig.3, Moire Damask (2021)

In addition, linking back to the duality of ‘haptic’, this nicely reflects the overall composition of ‘*Moire Damask*’ (fig.2 and 3) because within the design there is

an array of layers comprising of traditional damask motif, 'overlaid again with geometric moire' (Timorous Beasties, 2023)- named after French silk, Moire is the mesmerising bands of overlapping lines creating an illusionary effect (Inside Science, 2020)- these opposing forces represent the synthesis of the hand made and technology. Through this merging of the hand and digital, unlike William Morris, Timorous Beasties is creating a new system of thought through the manipulation of digital and hand made elements. This combination has ultimately given way to additional visual complexities to patterns, but also to an element of phenomena (Anderson and Schoenthaler, 2016, p.86) that relates to how the maker experiences their material through the digitized touch.

Timorous Beasties is a prime example of how the modern day craftsman has evolved with the machine. Similar to William Morris, they practice traditional crafts using their hands which ultimately feel the invisible stimulus and pull it out into the tangible world, giving it shape and form (Pallasmaa, 2009, p.92). However, this is where Timorous Beasties methodologies go beyond the likes of William Morris because by harnessing the digital and using it to assist the hand (like an extension) rather than mimic it (Esquire, 2023) it opens a multidimensional platform that "pushes the boundaries of traditional skills" (Nimkulrat, Kane and Walter, 2016, p. 9) and creates rich symbols and new systems that redefine the relationship of maker and material for the better.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has explored the evolutionary relationship of maker and man, it has discussed and argued the significance of the human touch in relation to the materials that have shaped our environment over the centuries. This interlinking idea of hands to the environment was discussed through the work of Tim Ingold (2013) who explored the importance of how humans interacted with the environment, the relationship between the two and how they became intertwined together. This is reflected in the axe makers, the first humans to manipulate stones into tools to better understand their environment and evolve through it, thus creating a continuous dialogue of language and systems that progressed into the modern world.

As the axe maker evolved, so did the relationship of their encounter with the materials around them, this relationship was challenged in the age of the first industrial revolution, as the machinery advanced the craftsman was in danger of being lost, this triggered a resurgence and recognition of the crafts (Shercliff, 2016, p. 153). The notion of the craftsman being removed from the creative process gave way to the formation of the arts and crafts movement, a collective of designers who protested the norms of industrial Victoria Britain- a prominent figure who drastically challenged this was William Morris.

William Morris valued the personal, as explored through Naylor's work (1979) Morris "condemned the 'mechanical' in all aspects of design" (Naylor, 1979, p.106), so he strove to revive the crafts and emphasise the importance of skill and material knowledge, this is perfectly embodied in '*Strawberry thief*' (fig.1); there is a multitude of tactility within the design, which links back to Frayling's (2011) ideas of one experiencing their material. This experience is further intertwined to discussions of tacit knowledge presented by Michael Polanyi (1966), his work discussed the inner complexities of a person's awareness to an external object.

Such complexities were challenged by the magnitude presence of technology in 21st century design, similar to the industrial revolution it has again questioned the presence of human in design and the authenticity of it, however, many contemporary designers are taking this challenge as an opportunity to create new systems whereby the machine and hand are transformed, this idea was discussed through Flusser (1999) who notes how the machine is unifying with the hand through an extension to the material, that is ultimately creating new material possibilities and experiences.

These intertwined experiences were seen in the works of Timorous Beasties, although they share the same philosophies as William Morris, they went further and reconsidered the idea that "computation would only worsen the

hand-mind splits endangered by industrialism” (McCullough, 2010, p. 312), and instead revolutionised this relationship through interweaving traditional hand skills within the digital realm (see fig. 2), this in turn has given way to a whole new system of thoughts surrounding the digital tactile interface and the presence of the designer. This ultimately reflects how makers should be designing for the future, an amalgamation of traditional and digital to create a harmonious balance that opens the world in ways never experienced.

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Figure 1: Morris, W. (1833) *Strawberry Thief*. Available at:

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Figure 2: Timorous Beasties (2021) *Moire Damask*. Available at: [Timorous Beasties Moiré Damask Foil Wallpaper | Timorous Beasties](#) (Accessed: 12 December 2023)

Figure 3: Timorous Beasties (2021) *Moire Damask*. Available at: [Timorous Beasties Moiré Damask Foil Wallpaper | Timorous Beasties](#) (Accessed: 12 December 2023)

