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Published in: Temes de Disseny

DOI: 10.46467/TdD34.2018.34-43

Published: 01/06/2018

Document Version Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Please cite the original version:

Niinimäki, K., Groth, C., & Kääriäinen, P. (2018). NEW SILK: Studying Experimental Touchpoints between Material Science, Synthetic Biology, Design and Art. *Temes de Disseny*, *34*, 32-41. https://doi.org/10.46467/TdD34.2018.34-43

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New Silk: Studying Experimental Touchpoints between Material Science, Synthetic Biology, Design and Art

This article presents a study in which new materials are developed through experimental knowledge construction and knowledge exchange between different disciplines. The New Silk research project (2017-2020) is the building block for the research. New Silk aims to produce new types of silk-like materials in the context of synthetic biology. In this article we discuss the initial experimental touchpoints between material science, synthetic biology, design and art encountered during the project's first year. Firstly, the study shows that shared material experiences in the setting of workshops build foundational understanding of perceived material agency leading to discussion on material activity and research ethics. Secondly, our research identified that all of these disciplines, material science, synthetic biology, design and art, approach materials research through experimental methods, even if the goal of the research differs in each discipline.

INTRODUCTION

As part of recent general developments within ma-Most new materials for designers' use are developed through a science-driven approach, meaning that scientific (mostly terials research, multidisciplinary, or even interdisciplinary, technical) innovation is commercialised (Ashby and Johncollaboration is becoming more common. In multidisciplison 2002). In contrast, designers can bring in their design nary collaboration, partners stay in their own disciplinary knowledge into a dialogue on material development by proknowledge areas. In interdisciplinary collaboration, real posing material attributes needed in a certain product or knowledge sharing or even knowledge co-producing is happening (Grix 2010). Designers and design researchers are production (e.g. Niinimäki et al. 2017). Moreover, designers invited to help materials researchers to develop attributes can contribute their understanding of aesthetic or sensorial material qualities (Ashby and Johnson 2002). Karana for materials or to find suitable application sectors for new (2009), in particular, has studied material experiences and materials. Through these endeavours, more experimental how designers may include experiential aspects of materials collaboration between disciplines is emerging. The bioin the product design phase. Designers can even play with logical production of materials is expected to be one of and apply different production techniques to enhance mathe key enablers of the future bio-economy, and designers terial properties and characteristics, achieved through new have the possibility of playing a key role with this. Protein production techniques in combination with new materials materials relying on recombinant DNA technology offer (e.g. Härkäsalmi et al. 2017). This more creative and even distinct advantages: when *designing molecular structures* for experimental knowledge adds to the technical qualities of protein polymeric materials, the *properties can be tailored* new materials. according to the final applications. Even fibre requirements

new materials.
Materials research is attracting new attention
from many corners, especially from a design point of view.
Recently, artists and designers have increasingly started to
explore and experiment with creating their own materials.
These materials are either new combinations of existing
materials or attempts to *grow* new materials that in one way
or another create themselves (e.g. Thompson and Ling 2014,
203). The Eksig 2017 'Alive, Active and Adaptive' conference
featured many such endeavours (Karana, Giaccardi, Nimkulrat, Niedderer and Camere 2017). Materials that have a
biological existence are alive and behave in unexpected ways.
They can be controlled by the creator to a certain extent,

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KEYWORDS

Interdisciplinarity, Design research, New Materialism, Synthetic biology, Experimental knowledge, Designing materials.

HOW TO CITE

Niinimäki, Kirsi, Camilla Groth and Pirjo Kääriäinen. 2018. "New silk: studying experimental touchpoints between material science, synthetic biology, design and art". *Temes de disseny* 34: 34-43.

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but the material displays an agency of its own. With these materials, the explorative approach is the only possible route until the creator gains enough experience to be able to start controlling the material and to design a use for it.

how spiders produce their silk - a material with properties and alter the course of events. Bennett (2010) argues that this that surpass existing synthetic materials. The New Silk pro- grounding in positive ontology stretches our understanding ject combines the knowledge of silk protein production with of agency, action and freedom of matters and material. She skills in polymer processing and the creative perspective of furthers her argument by saving, 'what issues would surround designers. The project's aim is to open this new research stem cell research in the absence of the assumption that the path and to lay a foundation for this type of materials design, only source of vitality in matter is a soul or spirit' (ibid., viii). materials which are possible to produce in the distant future. Therefore this research is not yet even in the fuzzy-front end vious material experiences and embodied knowing (Johnson, stage of the innovation process (Lee and Markham 2013) but 2007) of material properties provide a basis for our underin the very early stage of fundamental science.

to construct new knowledge through an experimental ap- happens through bodily interactions with it, through sensoproach, studying touchpoints between early-stage fundamental materials research, synthetic biology, design and even art. In this article we will first present key theoretical Wastiels 2014; Zuo, Hope, Castle and Jones 2001). This is a perspectives and then describe the case study and discuss topics that emerged in the interdisciplinary collaboration and material experimentations. We will then discuss the findings on a more general level, such as what these initial encounters could mean and where these initial touchpoints could take interdisciplinary materials research in the future. embodies part of the knowledge and displays this in concrete

1.1. Human-material interaction

The emerging interest in materials research and new ways of designing with materials have raised philosophical discussions on materials and their use. We are used to thinking of materials as resources that we master and utilise for our own purposes. We can control our material environment since we have the intelligence, power, skill and intentionality to do so. However, this hierarchy has been questioned recently with the advent of post-humanistic thought. New Materialism proposes a non-anthropocentric view of the main goal is usually to create something new, something the human-material relationship that is more symmetrical and that suggests a more democratic proposition (Coole and Frost 2010, 10).

even non-biological material has agency (Bolt 2007, 2013; and tie the solution or answer to a research problem, as this Malafouris 2008). Through her concept of *vital materiality*, often aids in developing concepts and building further knowl-Jane Bennett (2010) proposes that materials are vibrant actants. According to Bennett (2011, viii) materials are capable of motility and change, to act on their own terms, not only other traditions for their research processes on what somethrough the activating force of a living agent such as human or animal will or intentionality. Thus, we must abandon our hierarchical attitude towards materials (Coole and Frost 2010; unexpected behaviour from the materials. We can only make Bennett 2010) and accept materials as an equal force in creative action (Bolt 2007). Both Bennett (2010) and Malafouris (2008) describe human-material interaction as a collaboration rather than a utilisation, and Bennett (2010, 31) describes it as a 'complicated dance that humanity and non-humanity per- context. In our interaction with materials, our understanding form with each other'. Having said that, it is understood that of the processes may be analysed based on the background materials do not have intentionality or will in themselves, and that this agentic force of the material is our (human) perceived impression of the materials agentic activities. However, this perspective on materials as actants opens broader and more diverse discussions on our relationships, dependencies and responsibilities with and towards materiality in general. It also connects with specific discourses and ways of making sense in felt experiences. In particular, in cases where the material is disciplines. In the studied case, the focus is on these interdis-

in the context of synthetic biology. The project is inspired by in fact 'alive' and active, these materials can produce effects

In designers' experimentation with materials, prestanding of new material experiences (Fredriksen 2014; Groth The design research component in New Silk aims 2016, 2017). Experiential knowledge building with materials rial, visual, haptic, auditive and olfactory experiences (Karana, Pedgley and Rognoli 2015; Ojala 2013; Shifferstein and sense-making process (Harrison 2000) that can be difficult to put into words, but it is to be taken as a knowledge-building process equal to the more explicit process of the scientist (Tin 2013).

> In this material sense-making process, the artefact form (Mäkelä 2007: Niedderer 2012, 2013: Niedderer and Roworth-Stokes 2007). Art and design researchers typically work with and through material, exploring the material through its physical properties, its affordances and limitations (Gibson 1983, 1986). These are bodily, felt experiences that lead to new questions and propose new pathways for further experiments (Groth and Mäkelä 2016).

1.2. Experimental interdisciplinary approach

Designerly processes are experimental in nature, as that did not exist previously. Designers' processes are constructive, as knowledge is literally created through a *building* of concepts and material experimentation (Koskinen et al. New Materialism theory puts forth the idea that 2011). Designers as well as artists are thus used to uncertainty edge, reaching more developed and sophisticated results.

> Although scientists have another epistemology and thing is or how something comes about, in the development of new materials they too are confronted with the unknown, with predictions about new materials through our past experiences with them or with similar materials and experiences. Therefore, intensive material interaction and material exploration is the route by which we can construct knowledge in this knowledge of material research in other similar materials and chemistry, biology or even physics. Such a position forces the intersection of disciplines that have the potential to construct knowledge together, knowledge that would not be possible to achieve within the separate disciplines alone (Hennessy and Murphy 1999).

In this study, we explore how an experimental creative practises and the poetic language used in describing approach to collaboration can create touchpoints between

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ciplinary moments where different disciplines work together workshop. In our case, the phenomenon under study is the and share their own disciplinary practice and knowledge dialogue between disciplines. To set up the framework for (constructed beforehand in a multidisciplinary manner) in the research of these interdisciplinary touchpoints, we oran experimental workshop setting. In this way, dialogue be- ganised two creative and exploratory workshops during tween disciplines can take place. As Grix (2010, 99) points the project's first year. These two workshops provided the out, "the aim is not the knitting together of disciplines in a empirical evidence for this study. The data consists of field seamless mass of interpretations and explanations, but rather notes, video recordings and photographs from the workshops the sharing of insights, best practice and methods with other and feedback from the participants. Data were interpreted disciplines". Grix argues that the need for an open mind is by descriptive analysis. A qualitative approach guided our essential in interdisciplinarity, and that collaboration can inquiry in locating themes on our phenomena of interest. The even lead to cross-fertilisation in which a real overlapping of following research questions guided our analysis of the data: different perspectives can happen. In our study, participants from material science, synthetic biology, design and art col-What are the interdisciplinary touchpoints in this context? laborated and shared their experiences of the properties of What is the experienced material agency in this context? a new material, a material yet to exist.

2 TOWARDS FUTURE MATERIALS THROUGH THE NEW SILK PROJECT

2.1. Research design

This exploratory case study is based on two interdisciplinary design interventions, during which participatory gain understanding of what kind of collaborative activities observation took place, that have been analysed through would make sense in this context. descriptive data analysis. Yin (1994, 18) defines a case study The one-day workshop was divided into two sesas an empirical inquiry that focuses on a contemporary sions: in the morning four material scientists gave 20-minute phenomenon in its real context. We expand this definition presentations on their field of expertise (Biomimetics, Short and bring the case into a design research context where a introduction to polymers, Spider silk as a polymer, Recombinant design intervention is made through an interdisciplinary protein production). The afternoon consisted of two one-hour

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2.2. Workshop 1

The first workshop with material researchers and design students took place in June 2017. There were 23 participants: twelve design students, two chemistry students, eight researchers from material sciences and one design researcher. The main aims of the workshop were to familiarise the scientists with the designers' mindset, and vice versa, and to observe how designers embrace synthetic biology without previous knowledge. The secondary aim was to in synthetic biology) presented the New Silk project. The As the material is expected to be light and durable, it could presentation included micro-scale images of real spider silk have applications in transportation or even in space travel. and the artificial material with which the team is working. It could be sprayable and used as a glue or for adhering The artificial material seems to have a special characteristic: products. Textiles, garments, different kinds of flexible confilaments formed by pulling can fuse to each other permanent of plastics and rubber, filters, films, nently. We asked: How do these molecules work, and how thin optical fibres and construction applications were also does this behaviour happen? What could future applications mentioned. One team noted that the question of reusing be, e.g. adhesives, fibres? To conclude, the project leader and recycling the new material should also be taken into pointed out the need for a new dimension of communicating consideration. between programmes and disciplines to get inspiration, stating that research is all about inspiration and how to look at things from new angles.

In the first task, introduced by the workshop facilitator (designer), participants were asked to explore the new new people from different disciplines. Several participants material by playing with modelling clay (see Figure 1), which in its properties behaved similar to the original material. Participants were encouraged to start working hands-on and use bodily exploration with the material. After a 15-minute hands-on session, participants wrote down their personal observations and reflections regarding the material, its "I think that the biggest positive message for myself was to properties and general insights. The most popular ways of working with the modelling clay were rolling bars, stretching thin filaments, pulling and flattening the material, twisting, ripping, braiding, layering and testing the stickiness of the material. The participants were active and attentive and continued discussing what they felt when touching, testing and playing with the material. While playing with the materials, they especially noted the effects of pulling, fusing, and stretching behaviour and how the material breaks.

grouped into six teams. Each team consisted of 1 or 2 material scientists or chemistry students and several design students. Each team was handed an empty notebook containing one question. Three notebooks included question 1: What kind of me more confused... I understand the material as sticky another question) and the three other notebooks included question 2: Where could New Silk concepts be applied? (or find another *question*). The teams were asked by the facilitator (designer) to discuss and reflect on the proposed questions freely. They were also encouraged to make other comments and propose other questions based on their conversations. Finally, the teams were asked to document their discussion results and reflections in the notebooks, and to present their ideas to the other teams. Playing with different scales (nano-micro-human scale) and creating conceptual design ideas arose in these reflections. Furthermore, the challenge of sharing knowledge between disciplines was identified as one important aspect in by the bio-artist. The main aims were to familiarise scienthe collaboration. Some of the participants from the workshop are quoted as follows:

"Differences in fields - different form of knowledge."

"Sharing knowledge from silk needs more simplifying, more

interesting - the challenge!"

"How to overcome the abstract?"

applied? – was given to three teams and resulted in a long list of potential applications. Due to biocompatibility, the pants with the material itself through the hands-on, bodily material was seen to have great potential in medicine and health care, for example as bone replacements, replacements Figure 2). Participants were blindfolded when touching the

assignments. To get started, the project leader (researcher for connective tissues or ligaments, or as plasters or stitches.

At the end of the day, all participants were asked to anonymously write down one positive and one critical comment about the workshop on separate post-its. The most positive issue seemed to be the inspiring encounter with mentioned that they had gleaned completely new information and learned a lot about the materials and materials research in general.

- "It has been really interesting to hear and talk to people doing something completely different."
- consider more collaborations outside the science field."
- "I got to know a new material, some of its properties. It also inspires me a lot and brings back my creativity."

"Interesting new ideas to develop."

Critical feedback was mainly related to the lack of time and the difficulty of absorbing and understanding so much new information in a very short time. The fact that the For the second task, the participants were re- real, tangible material samples were missing, as these were still under development, and the experiment with modelling clay were found to be both inspiring and confusing. One participant said, 'The modelling clay experimenting made shared actions would support the New Silk Collaboration? (or find threads...?' Another said, 'It would have been nice to see a new silk material sample.'

2.3. Workshop 2

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The second experimental workshop was organised internally for the research consortium in collaboration with a bio-artist in November 2017. The two-day workshop took place in Biofilia, a special lab for bio-art at Aalto University. The participating team consisted of two designers and seven material scientists. The topic was to explore the growing of microbial cellulose in the context of art, outside the scientific environment. The workshop programme was planned tists with artists' working methods and to explore potential touchpoints between art and material science, especially in the New Silk project.

The workshop began with a short introduction of to share and make understandable - also makes it all participants and continued with three lectures: a general project presentation by the project leader (professor in synthetic biology), a presentation on the molecular visualisation Question 2 – Where could New Silk concepts be of silk proteins (scientist) and a presentation by the workshop leader (artist). The next step was to familiarise the particiexperience of touching and feeling microbial cellulose (see





exploring the material's behaviour. Photo by the researchers.

with microbial cellulose. Photo by the researchers.

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Participants	Roles	Activities	Results
12 Design students	Workshop participants	Presentations Playing with modelling clay Written individual reflection Group brainstorming	Imagining how future materials could behave
2 Chemistry students	Workshop participants		Possible application sectors for this new material yet to exist
8 Material researchers	Presenters Workshop participants		
1 Designer	Facilitator		

Table 1. Participants in workshop 1, their roles and activities, workshop results

Participants	Role	Activities	Results
1 Bio-artist	Presenter Facilitator	Presentations Exploring living organisms Microbial cellulose growing	Discussions on:
7 Material researchers	Presenters Participants		with "living" materials
2 Designers	Participants	Discussions	2) disciplinary practices3) interdisciplinary touchpoints

Table 2. Participants in workshop 2, their roles and activities, workshop results.

Experimental approach with new, active materials			
Discipline	Design	Material science Synthetic biology	Art
Focus	Material properties	Material activity (and technical qualities)	Artistic expression
Interest	What the application areas are	What it can do	What it expresses or what it is
Perceived material agency	Design ethics	Assembly options	Representations or How it grows

Table 3. Experimental approach in materials research.

material for the first time, and the team agreed afterwards different disciplines, learning about bio-art and bacterial that the physical experience was strong. cellulose, and art + science interaction were mentioned as the "It was not as slimy as I thought." (Material science) most interesting experiences. One of the participants said. "I know this material and when it is white in colour, it is no "The most interesting and probably most valuable [thing] problem to touch it. This was off-white and the was the glimpse into a completely different perspective of colour is very skin-like, and the colour changes materials and science in general" (Material science). the experience." (Design) "It had the same texture as the human body, skin or flesh." (Design) 3 "I had a strong feeling of leather, like touching a horse." RESULTS AND DISCUSSION (Material science) "It was disgusting, I had a very strong association of the material being alive." (Design) Material experimentations through imagination are chal-"I expected it to be softer, but it was so hard, you had an lenging if the actual material does not vet exist. This could association with skin." (Material science) be seen in the reflections from the first workshop. This is "When it was folded I didn't know where it started and where especially challenging for designers, who need physical exit ended." (Design) perience and embodied knowledge to deeply understand the The afternoon session focused on preparing the material's properties, affordances and perceived agency. On cultures and discussing lab versus DIY protocols, mould the other hand, it was interesting to note that by playing with protection and culture inoculation. The first day ended with substitute material, it was possible to understand the actions a feedback session during which experiences were discussed. of this new material, the material to exist. Experiences with

materials were led by bodily actions, as our documentation shows pulling, flattening, twisting, ripping and layering the modelling clay. An understanding of material properties and especially material agency was sought in order to move from an abstract to a concrete level, from material theory to design practice. By physically playing with and replicating the material actions, the participants could create a mental is alive. I have to take care of it and, for example, when I am travelling, I have to make preparations, image of New Silk (the material yet to exist) and transfer not like with a dog, but anyway, I have to take care this understanding to other scales (from nano to the human of it." (Art) scale). This was an important knowledge transformation The second day also started with a discussion, this process through which participants could understand the future material through embodied experiences with substitute material and transform this embodied experience into ideas about possible application sectors (design expertise). The perceived material agency was the event here in which activ-

The material being alive and active was an interesting topic and raised intense discussion on research ethics, artificial food, mimicking flesh and taking care of the material. "I felt that I have to take care of it and warm it." (Design) The artist who usually works with this material explained: "Yes, I feel that I have a relationship with something that time with a specific question: What is the biggest challenge in your research? Each participant wrote a sentence, each of which were discussed individually, to give space for everyone's personal thoughts. Time and resource limitations and management, communication, accuracy, uncertainty of what ities that the material performs under a microscope and on went wrong, and how to formulate the right questions were a nano level were 'imagined' through embodied encounters mentioned as the general challenges. One of the participants with the substitute material. Through bodily interactions, said, "The most challenging [thing] in my research is to through playing with material, experiential knowledge was formulate good questions to be able to address significant constructed: how the future material can act on a nano scale problems in an approachable way" (Material science). An- and what the modelling clay can 'tell' us about this future other participant said, "Uncertainty of what went wrong, if material. As Norman (1993, 49) argues, "representations are something went wrong" (Material science). important because they allow us to work with events and

Philosophical discussions about research ethics things absent in space and time, or for that matter, events continued. Is the material alive? What is alive, what is dead? and things that never existed - imaginary objects and con-Do microbes have gender? If the material is alive, does it cepts". He further argues that representations can ground have a will? Does it have agency? Are we allowed to study an 'idea' through which we can think (we think through this material? Is the New Silk method the most sustainable representations). Through this knowledge-making action way to produce new materials? Are we doing the right thing? we can 'discover higher-order relationships, structures, and There were no clear answers, but the opportunity to discuss consistencies', and we can better understand a particular these topics in an interdisciplinary team was eye-opening. phenomenon (ibid.). After agreeing upon the importance of mistakes in research In the second workshop, the strong tactile experiand life, it was time to go back to the laboratory to observe ences created emotional associations of the material being and analyse how the growing of the material proceeded and alive. This led to discussions on research ethics and a strong if it was succeeding (see Figure 4). association of the material possessing agency. Does this

The day ended in an artistic way: instead of written material have a will of its own, and what are we allowed feedback, the participants were asked to visualise their expe- to do with it? Can we modify it and do we have a right to riences on paper. Other feedback was collected afterwards design it? These associations take the designer closer to through a digital survey. Discussions between people from generic engineering. The question of material agency in

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these experimentations provided no answers. Instead, the growing of these materials further strengthens the assoexperiments pointed towards future research paths to follow. ciation of material agency or anthropological and animate One important question is how we can produce and design features of materials. Bodily interaction with the material material if it is alive, if it has a "will" or goals of its own. helps in reflecting on it more concretely on a more fundamen-Moreover, what are the ethical issues regarding synthetic tal level rather than only visual or conceptual explorations. biology, and how should designers deal with them?

about the artist's work, and the team had several discussions creative processes, and therefore a more pragmatic approach comparing the approach and procedures in art and in sci- may be useful later at the actual product development stage. ence. Disciplinary practices were compared in this manner and the discussions reflected interdisciplinary sharing. In this knowledge-sharing process, physical experimentations with the material helped the discussion to evolve. All participants agreed there are some touchpoints between these disciplines. Interestingly, the experimental approach, a trial and error type of research strategy, was obvious in all dis- This study aimed to find new perspectives and interdisciciplines. The importance of learning from mistakes while creating something new, and even when doing science, was recognised. In design research, experimentation and de- experimental approaches to knowledge building. This is sign interventions are conducted to push boundaries and to especially so when the material research process is in the explore alternatives, which leads to integration of making/ initial phase of development. experimenting and theorising (Redström 2017).

interesting ones from these collaborations: perceived ma- than others. They argue that designers can demonstrate and terial agency and an experimental research strategy (see exploit these qualities in the product design phase. Perhaps Table 3). Based on our empirical data we argue that all designing needed attributes and intrinsic qualities into new areas, design, material science (synthetic biology) and art, materials will be part of design work even more so in the use an experimental approach in materials research, yet future. In this development, it will also be important to enthe interest of the inquiry differs in each discipline. Firstly, gage more deeply in the understanding of perceived material in material science the foundational investment in how the agency, especially when designing in the context of synthetic materials function and, especially in the New Silk project, biology. In this research context, we can advance our unhow two different materials (with different DNA) affect each derstanding of perceived material agency and explore this other or even blend together, is the focus of the research. issue through imaginary materials. Moreover, in the future Moreover, materials researchers study how these materials' we might design not only material attributes but perhaps activities can be 'designed'.

As the leading material scientist pointed out af- materials and their 'will' or behaviour. ter the workshop, genetic engineering is needed to create materials the way they are done in nature. He added, 'Next these first interdisciplinary collaboration encounter advance we need to know a lot about how the actual materials are while aiming to build new knowledge, knowledge that comformed using the building blocks produced by the microbes. This "assembly process" is actually very demanding, as it verbal knowledge and even ethics with practice. Through physics, material science and biochemistry.'

erties and the application sectors are central. Even if the and sensorial material qualities. These first workshops were material does not yet exist (it is still a material scientist's mainly a starting point for a series of shared actions falling dream), designers imagine the material properties and 'en- under the context of interdisciplinary material development. vision' their possible (sometimes even utopian) application As one of the participants noted: areas. In the context of design, the core question will be: what the process? Through the recognition of perceived material agency, aspects of design ethics enter the discussion. This requires further study.

Thirdly, artists explore materials as expressive media which they can use to support their own artistic intention and they select materials according to what the materials can represent. 'Relationships' are created with materials, especially when the material is alive and active or has human connotations or attributes. The motility and

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These intuitive reflections support the connection to the new In the second workshop, the scientists were curious materiality theory in the initial stage of ideation or in the

4 CONCLUSIONS

plinary touchpoints between materials research, synthetic biology, design and art. Interestingly all these areas use

Ashby and Johnson (2002) point out that all mate-We argue that two topics emerged as the most rials have intrinsic qualities, but some are easier to identify we must learn to 'negotiate' with these new engineered

During the coming years, we intend to monitor how bines materials research with design knowledge, tactile with requires combining a lot of different fields such as polymer combining design-specific and scientific knowledge, it will be possible to create new materials that include not only Secondly, in the discipline of design, material prop-technical attributes, but which also have strongly aesthetic

"Research is a process that takes a lot of time and are the ethical implications of designing with live materials, the possible uses of the new materials in 'real' life can take do we design for or *with* the materials, and who is in control of many years" (Material science). Therefore, exploratory and experimental collaboration will continue.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge all the participants in this study, especially the Bio-Ar Margherita Pevere, the scientists and the lead designer who all contributed to this arti through the generation of data and contents. This research was supported by the Acade of Finland under Grant 307476 NEWSILK The New Road to Silk: Bio-based production silk-like materials

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