A fly walks across a newspaper. The faster he walks, the faster the words pass beneath him. The words are moving so fast now, they are streaming past. No longer words as such but letters, hieroglyphs, patches of black on white. Places. A full stop becomes a passing island. A ‘G’ a curved entrance and a cul-de-sac. A black line becomes a road. The fly changes direction at random, walking diagonally across the text, running upwards then downwards. The faster he goes the more the words feel like an attack; a torrent rushing beneath him. Slowing down, his walk becomes a dance in and out of blackness.

The train of reading grinds to a halt, its brakes screeching. Visual literacy and material cognition have now taken centre stage in the production of knowledge, the former norm of textual literacy considered too limited for a real encounter with the world. The changeover went more quickly than was first expected, the seeds already having been planted by the flourish of practice-based sciences, the rise of artistic research and the proliferation of material cultural studies. The universities are a different place now, intellectually (and increasingly physically) clustered around the art academies. Close looking, listening and touching replace close reading as the standard academic practices. Students with poor visual, aural and haptic scores are allowed to apply for the lower, text-based, parts of the university system. The government is trying to decide whether to allow them to be granted degrees on the same level. There is much controversy about the proposition that text-based knowledge can reach the same standards or be as rigorous in its approach as practice-based knowledge.

The intuitive knowledge produced through visual and material encounters is valued as being the direct vision of the mind by the mind with nothing intervening. The thing in question is no longer cut out of the whole of reality by language or rational understanding. Reflecting the continuity of the flow of inner life, the new immediate consciousness is scarcely distinguishable from the object seen.1 Studied intellectual endeavor is now considered a secondary and rather suspicious means of knowing. The loss of knowledge entailed by prioritizing the 5% of thought produced consciously was no longer considered an acceptable basis for institutions that claim to be engaged in knowledge-production.ii
A Japanese architect was asked some years ago why it was almost impossible to locate the door to enter the museum he had designed. His answer was that difficulty would be the quality of the future. Ideas that have sprung from intuition and begin by being obscure are now appreciated for this quality. This obscurity is seen to operate like a torch, shedding light on other areas around itself.iii There is widespread consensus among academics that the historic focus on textual representation did not only provide an impoverished image of things, but that it took on the weight of an ‘index of reality’ that had become stabilized to the point of relative inertia.iv Even those initially against the change of epistemic focus acknowledge the extent to which the new literacies create conditions for new thought. Many embrace the newfound freedom to engage with things that lie beyond the grid of intelligibility.v Speculation continues on why such a shift remained beyond discussion in the academic field for so long among the very people who confronted one another at the level of declared interest in intellectual innovation.vi

Reading has not so much disappeared in the new educational system as been displaced. New reading practices have emerged that aim to undo the forced clarity of text in response to the now widespread recognition that there is inevitably more intellectual content in disorder than in order.vii Among the new practices, ‘generative reading’ is perhaps the most prevalent. Guided by the creative reading of dyslexic scholars, texts are read in a staccato-like fashion, pausing at random to produce constantly renewed outcomes. The notable difference between generative reading and post-structural reading is the fluidity of the words themselves, with given letters now perceived in a variety of spontaneously perceived combinations. ‘Associative reading’ based on observations of artists’ engagement with academic text is also common. With this reading practice, students are not encouraged to consider the text in relation to existing frameworks of references, but as a departure point for an open-ended trajectory of associative thinking. Moments of apprehended meaning and finds through ‘misunderstanding’ are considered more important here than comprehension in the old sense.

The decision to relegate old-style academic reading to the sidelines and to focus on material outcomes was expected to bring about a short-term decrease in textual output. Often compared to the technique of ‘mulching’ a garden in which weeds had become too prevalent to be removed singly, it was hoped that the barren period would be followed by
unprecedented fertility in writing. In fact the initial silence that emerged immediately opened up possibilities for interpreting that silence, for imputing speech to it and inevitably writing. The writing that has subsequently emerged comes from a different place. Drawing on hands-on knowledge in the flow of life as much as conceptual thinking, it seems to be building a vocabulary and a language of its own, a way of writing that feels closer to making.

The former dominance of reading texts by theorists distanced from practice had instilled a sense of passivity that was verging on hopelessness among the younger generation of students. Perhaps the most dramatic outcome of the epistemic shift has been a newfound sense of agency. Sensitivity to and knowledge of materials and their latent possibilities has facilitated a kind of pouvoir-savoir— a feeling of ‘can-do-ness’ that comes from really knowing something in the hands-on sense of the word. There is a shared realization that it has not all been done before; that there are ways of thinking that we don’t even know about yet.

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2 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson assert, ‘Conscious thought is the tip of an enormous iceberg. It is the rule of thumb among cognitive scientists that unconscious thought is 95 percent of all thought—and that may be a serious underestimate. Moreover, the 95 percent below the surface of conscious awareness shapes and structures all conscious thought.’ Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought, New York: Basic Books, 1999, p. 12.
3 See Henri Bergson, The Creative Mind, p. 30 and 35. Bergson discusses the relative disregard of intuition vis-à-vis intelligence in the history of philosophy.
5 Bill Brown observes, ‘Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside of the grid of museal exhibition, outside of the order of objects.’ ‘Thing Theory’, p. 5.
6 As Pierre Bourdieu suggests, the more fundamental politics of any field lies in ‘everything that remains beyond discussion (in the field) that is, beyond the reach of discourse and which is accepted tacitly without discussion or examination by the very people who confront one another at the level of declared political choices.’ Language and Symbolic Power, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, p. 132.
Mulching is a technique used in gardening in which plastic sheeting is laid around plants to avoid weed growth, or, as I have envisaged it here, an old carpet is laid over a piece of weed-ridden area for a given period to clear the ground and enrich the soil for growth to begin anew.


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