

Craft Designer as Researcher

Theorising design from practical perspectives

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Abstract. Although the discourse of craft design centres upon creative productions and products, craft designers rarely discuss or articulate them verbally. This paper aims to illustrate how a craft designer can play the role of a researcher in theorising design based on creative practice. My textile art practice was utilised as the vehicle of my research, which seeks to elucidate how a physical material employed in art textiles can influence the formation of experiences and thoughts of both the craft designer and viewers. This study proposes the conception of materialness, which is the power of a physical material to express meanings to the creator and audience through its physicality. This conception is an example of how a design theory can be theorised from the practical perspectives of a designer through her reflective practice.

Keywords. practice-led research; creative process; reflective practice; craft design; textile.

Introduction: Craft design and practice-led research

Craft design tends to be directed towards producing creative work in a tangible or consumable form. Its collective understanding mostly concerns the subjective visual communication of completed artefacts rather than the verbalisation of the artefacts and creative productions by their designers. Craft designers seem to create material artefacts and let the artefacts express themselves; they rarely write about the artefacts and the creation processes.

Craft design knowledge thus seems individual, belonging personally to the designers who create the artefacts, and is hardly known to other people. The creative practitioners' unwillingness to articulate their creative work in words is caused by positivist and romanticist viewpoints that have accused them of being deficient in scholarly ability (Refsum, 2002). Although the unarticulated creative work can implicitly advance the personal knowledge and skill of the designer, it cannot be shared with other designers working in the same field. To establish shared knowledge, research carried out through the professional creative practice of the researcher has emerged during the last two decades, especially in Europe. The researcher is also the practitioner who seeks answers to the research questions by means of artistic practice. This form of research through creation has been defined and discussed (Frayling, 1993; Biggs, 2002; Mäkelä and Routarinne, 2006; Rust et al., 2007), and has been labelled "practice-based research" or more recently "practice-led research".

In Finland, several completed doctoral research projects were performed by means of craft design practice. Craft design, such as ceramics, glass, wood, textile, etc., lays emphasis on material. Material thus seems to be used as a

means of enquiry in practice-led research in craft design. In ceramic design, Mäkelä (2003) presented the concept of femininity that can be transformed and realised by clay into ceramic art. In the field of textile, Lukkarinen (2008) examined the meanings of recycled textile material in the light of women's studies.

The above studies demonstrated how craft designers could play the role of researchers in synthesising craft design practice and theoretical examination. Both studies dealt with a physical material for creating artistic work; however, the researchers investigated the material by looking at their creative productions and products in retrospect, not during the actual process of creation. The issue of how a physical material can lead or influence the creative process is lacking.

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate how a craft designer can play the role of a researcher in theorising design based on her design practice and how the result of this form of research can contribute to the knowledge and understanding of design theory. This paper is based on my practice-led doctoral research, which explicates the influence of a physical material (paper) and its expressive qualities employed in art textiles on the experience and thoughts of the maker during the process of creation and on those of viewers during the process of contemplation. The study portrays the way I, as a textile artist/designer, have attempted to theorise textile design in relation to the philosophical question of how a tangible material can incorporate artistic expression in a creative process (i.e. explaining the relationship between the two components and how I give form to a specific kind of material in order to express artistic content).

Craft practice as a vehicle of research: "Paper World" as the case study

In my study, I used my textile practice as the main vehicle of theoretical enquiry, through *making* art textiles of two artistic productions from a specific material – paper string – publicly shown in two exhibitions – "Seeing Paper" (2005) and "Paper World" (2007). Other supportive methods applied to this research were *reading* literature, Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's theories of phenomenology in particular, and *questioning* the audience using questionnaires. These methods were applied in combination with various means of documentation, e.g., writing a diary, photographing, drawing diagrams, sketching, etc., to capture my thoughts in the process of creation that could later also provide sources of data for analysis. This way of doing research is similar to "reflective practice" theorised by Schön (1983). According to Schön, a practitioner attempts to understand a unique situation in which she is involved professionally. Schön suggested three components of reflective learning: First, "knowing-in-action" signifies a process through which an experienced practitioner can act spontaneously in a regular situation, i.e., the practitioner knows what she is doing without thinking about it and often cannot describe verbally what she knows. Secondly, "reflection-in-action" describes a process through which

the practitioner comes across an unusual situation and has to take a different course of action from what she usually does or has originally planned. Lastly, "reflection-on-action" includes an analytical process through which the practitioner reflects on her thinking, actions and feelings in connection with a particular event in her professional practice. The reflection would demonstrate what she has learnt from her previous action that can help improve the future action when she encounters a similar situation.

In this paper, only the creative production and exhibition "Paper World" (Figure 1) as well as the artworks in this series will be examined as the case study revealing my reflective practice. "Paper World" followed "Seeing Paper" whose result revealed that the influence of the expressive qualities of dissimilar kinds of paper string on my feelings and thoughts had shaped my creative process and interpretations of the ongoing artworks (Nimkulrat, 2007). However, when the series was exhibited in a modernistic gallery, the questionnaires filled by some visitors showed that the differing materials seemed to have no influence on their interpretation of the exhibits and to be even rarely recognised by them. To reflect on this shortcoming, I analysed the making and displaying of this series and inferred that the shortcoming might be caused by three factors: First, the modernistic gallery was not neutral, but instead significantly influenced the audience contemplating the artworks, so that they barely recognised the visual differences in materials. Second, the differences between the types of paper string might be too subtle to notice. Third, the audience experienced the wholeness of the exhibition rather than the details of the exhibits.



Figure 1
"Paper World" series
exhibited in a gallery
converted from an old
wooden house

Making "Paper World" in my studio

"Paper World" therefore intended to both explore the expressive potential of paper string as a physical material and demonstrate the existence of it in the artworks and exhibition as the expression of the maker. The creative process began by considering the context for situating my artworks created within the concept of paper string as metaphorical beings (the same concept as "Seeing

Paper”). Context, in particular the type of exhibition space and elements in it, became the starting point of the creative process. The creative process of “Paper World” was thus structured in the opposite direction compared to that of “Seeing Paper”, which hardly touched upon the contextual elements during its creation (Figure 2). Although I did not begin the process with a material selection, paper string remained as the material whose type would be specified later in the process. The overall exhibition was expected to lead spectators to recognise the material composing the exhibits.

Paper string was the focus in the actual making of “Paper World”, not only in each artwork it constructed but also in the overall exhibition where all artworks were to be shown. While conceptualising the art production, I tried to anticipate the experience of visitors to the exhibition in order to decide on the theme of the exhibition and artworks, which could direct most people to experience them as I intended. To achieve this, I needed to find out how people experience things by reading more on phenomenology. Heidegger’s concept of “being-in-the-world” inspired me. According to Heidegger (1988), one interprets the meanings of a thing and an activity as they are “in the world”, not by looking at them as a general thing or activity but by looking to her own contextual connections to that particular thing and activity. What one sees is not merely a thing, but the thing, the thing for doing something in the space (ibid. 69-70). Similar to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty (1962: 77-83) maintained that one experiences an object or an event within a spatial temporal context, and knows it from an embodied perspective, i.e., one sees an object, hears it and touches it at one time in one place. To experience an object is to be in its world where it shows itself. By being in the same world as the object, one also perceives other co-existing objects in an act of seeing, so that every object reflects all others (ibid. 206). Different entities in a space can refer to one another, and thus create a significant whole. The process of perceiving an object is therefore a meeting a person has with the object as well as with other objects and people existing in a specific place and time.

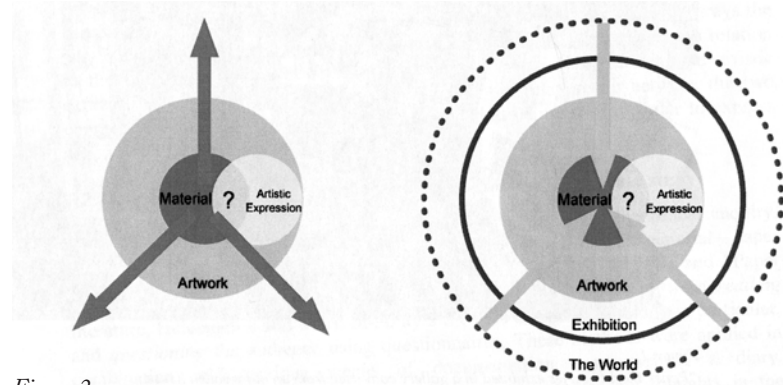


Figure 2
The creative process of “Paper World” (right) in comparison with the process of “Seeing Paper” (left)

Based on the above thinking, for visitors to experience and interpret my artworks as I intended, I imagined myself as a viewer who would be in the same exhibition space as other viewers and artworks, and created the artworks from this perspective. For the audience and I to have a similar experience with the artworks and exhibition, the works would appear in forms and in space with which they and I were familiar and which had meaning for them and for me, so that we could look to our relations to the artworks similarly.

I then conceived the idea of everyday experiences of people residing in a familiar space surrounded by ordinary things at a specific period. I developed this idea further, so that I could determine the context for the exhibition – a house in snowy wintertime. A house is a familiar space. Most people know how a house in general could be and what they can expect to see in it. Places and objects whose essences and functions are known can establish inter-referential significance shared among people. Moreover, snowy winter is the season when people feel cosy and warm when at home, meaning that it could be a supportive contextual element. Next, the context of a house in snowy wintertime was connected with the concept of materials as metaphorical beings, originating a particular concept of “Paper World”. This concept showed that a material lives in this world just as ordinary entities surround us in our everyday lives at home. The artworks to be created in “Paper World” thus comprised artworks representing ordinary household objects, neither of which was seen in separation from its context and other artworks situated in the context. I then searched for a house to be used as the exhibition space, and found a gallery converted from a wooden house built in the 1960s. I reserved it for January–February, the period I supposed that Helsinki metropolitan area would be covered with snow.

Regarding material, only one type of paper string was to be employed in every artwork to emphasise the distinctive characteristic of paper string. One chosen material may invite an audience to recognise that paper string served as the material of all the artworks, yet not demanding the audience compare and distinguish between the various kinds of paper string. My interaction with the material became my visual and tactile experience of not only the emerging artworks representing the actual entities surrounding me but also those entities represented. Objects surrounding me in my studio environment acted not only as sources of inspiration for creating artworks for the imaginary home, but also as moulds for forming the artworks into the shapes of household entities I attempted to represent. I started with one imaginary artefact and continued to the next, with the picture of the gallery house as the exhibition space in mind. Each artwork was designed in relation to other artworks as well as other existing elements in the gallery.

Viewing “Paper World” in a specific exhibition context

The gallery surrounded by snow (Figure 3) became a temporary imaginary home for the completed artworks when they were installed in the space based on the layout plans previously designed in the making. The layouts attempted to establish both the relationship between the artworks and that between the artworks and the exhibition space (See Figure 1 as an example). The installed artworks appeared in the gallery space in a similar way to how people and everyday artefacts would reside in a dwelling in reality.



Figure 3
The gallery viewed
from outside during the
exhibition “Paper World”

During the exhibition, questioning as method took place in the form of a question on printed questionnaires (Figure 4) for the visitors to voluntarily fill in. I did not bother all visitors by asking them to fill in the forms because some visitors might feel forced to take part in an extra activity that they were not willing to, so that they might give false answers. Also, I did not restrict the number or the eligibility of visitors according to age, occupation, nationality, etc. This was because the exhibition was open to the public just like any exhibitions

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Nimi (valinnainen) / Name (optional): _____

Ikä / Age: _____

Sukupuoli / Gender: Mies / Male
 Nainen / Female

Kansallisuus / Nationality: Suomalainen / Finnish
 Muu / Non-Finnish

Ammatti / Occupation: _____

Mitä sinulle tulee mieleen näyttelyä katsellessa? Kirjoita ajatuksesi.
What comes to your mind when you are seeing the exhibition? Please write your thought freely.

in galleries that usually welcome anyone interested in the works displayed. As the method was deliberately implemented in a random manner, collecting as many visitors’ comments as possible was important. To attract people to stop and fill in the forms, a brief question on a small piece of paper was expected to give an impression that the form required only little effort and time to complete.

Figure 4 Feedback form for “Paper World”
(actual size 10cm x 10cm)

The feedback form documented the responses of some visitors who would be willing to share their opinions on my artworks and exhibition. Their comments reflected on various types of experiences. To understand and be able to explain their experiences reflected as their written comments, I turned to Heideggerian phenomenology. Heidegger (1962: 191) asserted that people know how they will interpret things before they actually see them, by relating what they are experiencing to the meaning of similar things they have earlier experienced. In the “Paper World” case, the visitors had not only been familiar with the appearances of artefacts and dwellings in their daily life, but also known that a gallery is a place for artworks to be displayed. As the visitors had known those functional forms, the unusual material led them to interpret and experience the objects differently. They thus understood that those forms of household artefacts were not objects for daily use as such, but representational artworks.

Materialness as a conception derived from the practice of a textile practitioner

With the support of gallery space and its contextual elements, paper string as the physical material for creating “Paper World” could transform the ways in which people perceived and interpreted things. As can be seen from most comments, people experienced the artworks in forms of functional things differently from the actual ordinary things when their material was atypical. This occurrence implied that paper string has expressive potential for creating a new meaning for ordinary forms and that the concept of the series that paper string metaphorically lives in this world in forms of ordinary entities came across to the audience.

The study suggests the conception of materialness. It is the ability of a specific material to express or to convey a meaning through its physical qualities to the creator and audience. This conception intertwines a tangible material with artistic expression. Physical qualities of a material affect the ways in which people apprehend and comprehend artworks. In “Paper World”, paper string functions as a symbol of non-functionality, indicating that the artefacts in forms of utilitarian objects do not have any practical uses. The unusual material when used to make a functional form of an everyday object such as a chair can arouse a question in viewers: Is it a chair or an artwork in the form of a chair? This question informs the aesthetic potential the object possesses, which is given to it by the choice of material. The information about the object’s aesthetic potential can challenge the viewers to reflect on their habitual recognition and understanding of a thing. Paper string expresses its power over the form. When the form is affordance but the material is not, the artefact appearing in the functional form of a utilitarian thing thus becomes fictional. My artworks made of paper string give new expression to reality. The artwork reveals what an entity it depicts is in truth through the reproduction of the general significance

of that entity. In my work, paper string gives expression to and raises up what is untransformed that is the essence of a particular utilitarian thing, such as the parts of “The Chair” (Figure 5) that remain the same in a functional chair (e.g., seat, backrest and four legs). These untransformed parts together with the transformed – paper string – informed the audience interpreting “The Chair” about the truth of it, that is, its appearance is similar to a chair but it does not function as a chair. In other words, it appears to be a chair on which no one can sit. In this sense, I give another meaning to a form perceived, recognised and understood by the viewers. The material of the artwork not only determines the artwork’s functionality, but also raises the issue of appearance as related to function. “The Chair” is an example of an object becoming a metaphor for supporting (i.e., the affordance of a chair). The functional form of “The Chair” serves as a visual sign representing the meaning or metaphorical truth of a chair that I as artist called forth to express or to serve as a means for understanding the affordance of an ordinary chair.



Figure 5
“The Chair”

Conclusion: Craft designer as researcher

Craft design discourse has centred upon the artefacts and the craftsmanship of the designers rather than the articulation of the meanings of the artefacts and the process of creation. When involved in the creative process a skilled designer knows what she is doing and going to do (i.e., knowing-in-action). When the process encounters an unusual situation with which the action for normal situations cannot deal, the designer can try a different procedure (i.e., reflection-

in-action). Once the process of creation and reflection-in-action is methodically documented, the documentation can provide material for reflection-on-action. This is how practice-led research plays its role in enhancing and articulating knowledge of craft design embedded in the professional practice of craft designers who also take the role of researchers. Research through own creative practice enables a deep and thorough examination of the research problem, and makes knowledge of craft design practice no longer personal but available and shared among other practitioners, educators and researchers.

In my study, I researched the expressive qualities of paper string in the creation of textile through my own artistic practice. I studied the influence of the material on the artist, the production, the artworks and the exhibition,

by constantly looking at and evaluating it in relation to these events, and by obtaining some theoretical concepts for discussion. Documentation by means of writing a diary about or photographing the progress of artworks can capture the issues I examined during its creation and can be used for writing a fuller account later. This study exemplifies a way in which a textile practitioner can theorise design based on her practical perspectives.

Having positioned myself as a craft designer-researcher using my own artistic work as the vehicle of research, I can point out the strengths and limitations of this approach. Its strength is that theoretical assumptions can be tested in practice. Moreover, creating one’s own artworks as case studies in research enables craft designers to maintain their artistic intelligence while performing doctoral research that is a time-consuming and demanding commitment. If a practitioner stopped making artworks for a long period, the development of her craftsmanship and conceptual creativity would be held back during the period. Nevertheless, positioning designers as researchers has limitations too. The study takes time and requires a good balance between the practical and the theoretical. Also, positioning artistic work in academic research demonstrates a strenuous striving of practitioner-researchers to balance their needs: maintaining the virtue of their individual practices while clarifying a vigorous and credible theoretical context.

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