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Voice of Material in Transforming Meaning of Artefacts

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When practitioners adopt craft as the major diligence of their creative practice, they naturally create work for not only the design context but also the art one. The nature of craft that involves direct experience, personal vision and mastery of a medium retains ‘material-based’ fields of practice, such as ceramics and textiles, for which practitioners tend to create both functional and aesthetic artefacts. Textile practitioners recognise the importance of material as the fundamental element for constructing visual, physical artefacts. However, the written accounts of the meaning of material in shaping the artistic process is barely contemplated and reflected.

This paper looks at craft as a personal experiential process for creating textiles and unfolds how a material can construct the tangibility of artefacts and simultaneously generate particular meanings to them. It is based on my published PhD thesis that examines the relationship between material and artistic expression in the creation of textiles. My textile practice was included in the research process to examine this relationship. In this paper, specific productions and exhibitions are scrutinised in order to exemplify how a material can transform the meaning of artefacts.

The main finding of this research is a concept called ‘materialness’. The concept shows that a material can lead not only a craft making process, but also the process of viewing completed artefacts. Materialness is the totality of the textile creation rooted in a material that includes the elements of form, content, context and time for the artefact. This concept is experiential knowledge that is made explicit because of the practice-led research approach and careful documentation. The inclusion of practice in the research process facilitates the communication of the tacit part of experiential knowledge, so that the meaning of material in textile creation can be articulated.

Keywords: Craft; Materiality; Practice-Led Research; Experiential Knowledge; Reflective Practice
Introduction: craft and design

Craft was inseparable from industry or design in the fifteenth century in which craftsmen designed and produced customised goods for consumers (Carsodo, 2010: 321-326). One-off or bespoke artefacts and the relationship between makers and users were commonplace before the beginning of modernism in the sixteenth century (ibid.: 331). The modernist view and mass production have overshadowed craft and made it inferior to design until the recent paradigm shift in design that emphasises the individualisation of experience and brings the purpose of fulfilling users’ individual needs back to the arena (ibid.).

The vulnerable status of craft seems to take place due to its definition as a discipline on its own. In fact, craft can be considered ‘the application of personal knowledge to the giving of form’ and ‘the condition in which the inherent qualities and economies of the media are encouraged to shape both process and products’ (McCullough, 1996: 22). Therefore, craft is broadly defined as skilled practice with specific materials and tools applied to a personal-scale and direct process that aims to gradually create well-finished artefacts. Adamson (2010) offers a similar notion of craft that highlights the application of skills and materials to rather small production across a wide spectrum of activities, such as painting, design prototyping, digital drawing, etc. Based on this understanding, craft can play its role even in industrial production and is a ‘crucial aspect of art and design’ (ibid.: 2). Craft thus involves 1) direct experience, 2) personal vision and 3) mastery of a medium, and thus is a form of practice applicable to any design or art processes and activities.

When practitioners adopt craft as the major diligence of their creative practice, they naturally create work for not only the design context but also the art one. Craft becomes ‘a way of thinking through practices of all kinds’ (Adamson, 2007: 7). This phenomenon including the nature of craft that centres on the knowledge and skills of a medium retains ‘material-based’ fields of practice, such as ceramics and textiles. Practitioners in these fields tend to create both functional and aesthetic artefacts. Although functionality may not be implemented in aesthetic artefacts, their making has the same principle as functional ones whereby the basic importance of craft (i.e. direct experience, personal vision and expert skills of a medium) is emphasised. They are considered artistic works situating in the design discipline. As can be seen in the Finnish art world, textiles, ceramics and other forms of material-based practice are part of the design domain rather than fine arts. Although works by practitioners in these fields may appear similar to and exhibit together with works in the field of fine arts, the difference is determined by the fundamental value of materials and skills for working with them (Nimkulrat, 2009: 21). In other words, the emphasis on the medium and skills could be considered a distinctive characteristic of material-based fields that distinguishes them from fine arts.

This paper will look at craft as a personal experiential process for creating material artefacts that is involved in my professional textile practice. It attempts to unfold how materials can construct the tangibility of artefacts and simultaneously generate particular meanings to them.

Uncovering (In)tangible Qualities of Materials in Textiles

In material-based fields such as ceramics, textiles and glass in which craft is maintained, a material functions as the fundamental element for constructing visual, physical artefacts. As its term suggests, textiles as a field of expertise emphasises the use of textile materials in relation to textile techniques, such as printing, knitting and weaving.
These techniques seem to limit the understanding of a material to its tangible qualities, especially how the technical skills and craftsmanship of a textile practitioner can manipulate the material and constitute the ‘form’ of resultant artefacts. The importance of materials in any creative work is implicitly known among textile practitioners, as the written accounts of this topic seem uncommon. Even if the topic is articulated, it usually concerns technical information of how a material can be handled in the making of a physical object. The material’s role in shaping the artistic process is barely contemplated and reflected. The meaning of materials therefore appears bounded to their physical characteristics rather than their intangible ones.

From my experience as a textile practitioner, a tangible material possesses intangible attributes, such as qualities to shape the practitioner’s interpretation of ongoing work, that tacitly influence a creative process and artefacts (i.e. the results of the creative process). The knowledge of the expressivity of materials is considered experiential, and can be acquired primarily through vocational practice of professional craft practitioners (Dormer, 1997; Niedderer, 2007 and 2009). Seldom has research examined textile materials from this perspective. Studies on materials in textiles tend to explore the physicality of materials from a historical (e.g. Priha, 1999), technological (e.g. Peterson et al., 2011) or sustainable (e.g. Fletcher, 2008) viewpoint.

Focusing on the expressivity of a tangible material in textiles, my published PhD research (Nimkulrat, 2009) shades light on experiential knowledge produced from within a textile practitioner’s craft making. The research problem centres upon the relationship between a physical material and artistic expression, i.e. how a textile material can influence the maker’s experience during the process of creation and the viewers’ experience during the process of contemplation. As a written clarification of the abstract role of a material in the creation of textiles, this study expects to encourage further discussion among textile practitioners, so that their experiential knowledge of materials in the processes of creating textiles will be more expansively articulated and shared. The study also anticipates that the creative process conveyed in it can inspire some textile practitioners to revisit their creative processes and to improve them accordingly. The development of individual textile practitioners could then contribute to the development of the field of textiles on the whole.

Based on the above research, the purpose of this paper is to discuss craft as the process of generating and applying personal/experiential knowledge through the sense of touch, i.e. tactile experience. The paper illuminates how the material’s expressivity can form the meaning of artefacts during creation productions and exhibitions. The research in question utilised practice-led approach (Rust, Mottram and Till, 2007; Lycouris, 2011) to seek the relationship between artistic expression and paper string as the chosen material.

Concentrating on this research problem, I created and exhibited artefacts made of paper string as a textile practitioner, and examined and reflected on the artefacts and their productions as a researcher using the phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Heidegger, 1962 and 1988) as well as art and social space (Lefebvre, 1991; O’Doherty, 1999) as theoretical foundations. In order to maintain the focus on the material’s expressivity, most of the artefacts produced within the framework of this research are not required to fulfil any functions and can thus be considered aesthetic objects.

Craft practice can be the subject and the vehicle for theoretical inquiry (Nimkulrat, 2009; Scrivener, 2009). My experiences of making artefacts from the material in the creative production that was constructed around the research problem become the tacit forms of knowing. Knowing and making (i.e. theory and practice) are connected according to Lakoff and Johnson’s concept of embodied mind (1999: 16–44; 551–68), by which the
mind is inseparable from the body. In other words, one experiences and forms the understanding of things in relation to his or her bodies. Designers know what they are doing in a creative process and why they are doing it (Cross, 1999; 2003). The ‘designerly’ way of knowing resides in the designer’s action and experience of creating an artefact as well as in the artefact itself (Cross, 1999: 49-55). In my research, I reflected on my experiences in making artefacts by adopting the role of a ‘reflective-practitioner’ (Schön, 1991). Schön’s conceptions of ‘knowing-in-action’ maintains that practitioners’ knowing is tacitly embedded in their routine actions and their acts of touching the material they are handling (ibid.: 49). To make ‘knowing-in-action’ explicit, Scrivener (2002) emphasises that ‘reflection-in-action ought to be achieved through methodical documentation that thoroughly captures actions in a creative process (Nimkulrat 2007a).

Documented actions can then become data for analysis or ‘reflection-on-action’. As Niedderer and Reilly (2009) points out, experiential knowledge can generate data and validate hypothetical implications. Analysing experiential data in connection with relevant literature can generate an understanding of the subject studied (Mäkelä and Nimkulrat, 2011). My art productions built around the research problem thus aimed to derive experiential knowledge that delivers data and proves some conjectures.

Two exhibitions, namely Seeing Paper (Figure 1) and Paper World (Figure 2), featuring artefacts produced inclusively for the practice-led PhD were open to public as part of research dissemination. Theories in other disciplines were brought into the production of artefacts to inform and influence the creative process. During both exhibitions, questionnaires were used to gather the visitors’ interpretations on the complete artefacts and exhibitions. Accordingly, there were three research approaches utilised in this study: 1) artistic production or making artefacts and reflecting on my own artistic experiences, 2) reading literature, and 3) expert interview and surveys or questioning others about their experiences and evaluating their answers in comparison with my own. Supported by various means of the documentation, these approaches were simultaneously employed in the research process, so that they can be seen as an interaction between creative practice and theoretical discussion that gave rise to data collection (Figure 3).
Figure 2: *Paper World* (2007) in Galery Gjutars, Vantaa, Finland.

Figure 3: interaction between research approaches, documentation and data collection. Source: Nimkulrat (2009: 52).
In this paper, the discussion on craft as an experiential knowledge production process and that on how the material’s expressivity can form the meaning of artefacts are mainly based on the *Paper World* exhibition.

**Paper World: Meanings of Material, Artefacts and Context**

The research problem of how a textile material can influence the experience of the maker during creation and that of viewers during contemplation gave rise to the argument that a material possesses particular expressive potential. Originating from this argument, the concept of both *Seeing Paper* and *Paper World* showed that material (paper string) metaphorically *lives* in the world. All artefacts in both projects appeared in the functional forms recognisable by people. Whilst *Seeing Paper* consisted of unwearable dresses as representations of women, *Paper World* comprised artefacts in the forms of household objects, including two unwearable garments as representations of human beings.

The expressive qualities of different kinds of paper string employed in *Seeing Paper* shaped the interpretations of the artefacts in progress and the overall creative process (Nimkulrat, 2007b). However, through the filled feedback forms collected during the *Seeing Paper* exhibition, the differing materials seemed to have no influence on the visitors’ interpretation of the completed artefacts displayed in a modernist gallery. The inconspicuousness of the material from the viewers’ standpoint was considered, because if it were not noticeable, its expressivity would not be worth examining.

‘Reflection-on-action’ was adopted to retrospectively examine and pinpoint factors that possibly contributed to this shortcoming. The first main factor was the modernist gallery. The aesthetic neutralisation of ‘the white cube’ encloses any displayed works with eternity, transforming them into art with commercial value (O’Doherty, 1999). The exhibition space thus markedly influenced the viewers’ interpretation of *Seeing Paper*. The second factor partly followed the first one – the audience experienced the overall exhibition rather than the detailed components of the exhibits. The material – paper string – became insignificant and was hardly noticeable. Phenomenological thinking shed light on this matter. Merleau-Ponty (1962: 77-83) states that in an act of seeing, one experiences an object within a spatial temporal context, perceives other coexisting objects, and understand the circumstance from his or her embodied outlook, so that all objects and their context reflect one another. Similarly, Heidegger (1988: 69-70) asserts that things in a space can refer to one another to create a meaningful whole. In other words, what one sees is not a general thing, but *the* thing for doing something in *the* space in the world. Space can serve ‘as a tool of thought and of action’ (Lefebvre, 1974: 26) and an artist creates a space for viewers to scrutinise an artefact not as a single entity but in relation to the whole space (ibid.: 125). Dewey (1934: 112) also points out the relationship between the material and the world:

*The material out of which a work of art is composed belongs to the common world rather than to the self, and yet there is self-expression in art because the self assimilates that material in a distinctive way to reissue it into the public world in a form that builds a new object.*

Informed by the aforementioned theories to which direction the subsequent artistic production should be led, I modified *Paper World* to accommodate the issues of the exhibition context (Figure 4) that had an impact on the investigation of the research problem. In order to investigate the influence of paper string as material on viewers’ contemplation, it is crucial to direct the viewers to experience artefacts in an exhibition as I intended. Dewey (1934: 204) suggests that a creator ought to embody the attitude of a viewer while creating an artefact in order to understand them. The viewers in response would try to understand the artist’s viewpoint and message.
I tried to anticipate the experience of visitors to the exhibition, by imaging myself as a viewer. For the viewers and I to have a similar experience, the artefacts would be in forms and in space that had meaning for us and we both were familiar with, so that we could associate ourselves with the artefacts similarly. I then conceived the idea of everyday experiences of people residing in a familiar space surrounded by ordinary things at a specific period. A house in snowy wintertime was determined as the temporal context for the exhibition. Most people know the appearance, essence and function of a house. The chosen exhibition context (Figure 5) was then connected with the concept of materials as metaphorical beings. The connection between the concept and context suggested the transformation of paper string into the functional forms of household objects. Neither of them was seen independently from the context and other artefacts situated in the context. The generic meaning of a house shared among people was expected to establish inter-referential significance and a personal connection between the viewers and the exhibits. *Paper World* thus united people’s feeling of home and the visual reality of it, as Langer (1953: 397) suggests:

> What [a work of art or anything that affects us as art] does to us is to formulate our conceptions of feeling and our conceptions of visual, factual, and audible reality together. It gives us forms of imagination and forms of feeling, inseparably; that is to say, it clarifies and organizes intuition itself.

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**Figure 4**: Creative process of *Paper World* (right) and that of *Seeing Paper* (left).  

**Figure 5**: *Paper World*’s venue – Gallery Gjutars converted from a residential home.
Material Manipulating Meanings of Functional Forms

All works in the *Paper World* were ‘intentional objects’ with aesthetic dimension that ‘compels the viewer to engage the work’s content by holding attention on the work in such a way that the work itself determines the contemplative thought engendered in the beholder’ (Risatti, 207: 268).

As revealed in the filled questionnaires distributed during the exhibition (Figure 6), when attentive viewers of *Paper World* recognised unanticipated features in an artefact whose form was common but material was not, they seemed to readjust their understanding, so that the artefact was no longer interpreted in the same way as the common object. As Heidegger (1962: 191) asserts ‘interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance—in a fore-having. As the appropriation of understating, the interpretation operates in . . . an involvement whole which is already understood.’ Grounded their interpretations by a prior understanding, they knew the appearances of the artefacts and home and that a gallery is a place to ‘display’ artefacts, most of which cannot be used. Consequently, they were able to identify that those forms of household things were representational artefacts, not objects for everyday use. The gallery also became a part of the exhibition as the representation of a home.

![Figure 6: Questionnaire for Paper World.](image)

Source: Nimkulrat (2009: 72)

Artefacts included in *Paper World* offered visual pleasure but was limited in physical functionality. Although they shared similar forms with functional objects, such as a dress, a chair, a coffee cup, etc., what differentiated them from the actual functional objects was the material. The unusual material (i.e. paper string) shaped the viewers’ experience and interpretation of the utilitarian forms in relation to their ‘fore-having’. The viewers experienced a ‘tacit, personal, illuminating contact with symbols of feeling’ (Langer, 1953: 401), that is, homey atmosphere but none of the functional forms could be used due to their material. Paper string signified that the meanings generally tied with those useful objects were no longer relevant. The material served as a manifestation of non-functionality, indicating that those artefacts in the forms of useful objects had no practical uses. Heidegger (1971: 44-45) draws a clear distinction between an aesthetic object and ‘equipment’ based on how the material of which they are made is used. In line with Heidegger’s definition, an object is a ‘tool’ or equipment if its production ‘uses up’ a
material, i.e. the material vanishes into the utility. In contrast, an object is an aesthetic object if its material does not cease to exist or is not ‘used up’. The forms of household objects in *Paper World* were thus considered aesthetic objects, because they did not cause their material to disappear. Rather, they prompted it to emerge in their world, i.e. the exhibition, and set themselves back into the original state of paper string, i.e. white colour, fragility, etc.

The material when shaped into the form of such an ordinary thing as a cup posed the viewers a question whether it is a usable cup or an aesthetic artefact in the form of a cup (Figure 7). The choice of material provided the form with aesthetic potential that challenged the viewers to reflect on their routine perception and understanding of a thing and the world. *The Coffee Cup* made of paper string functioned as a symbol that I as the maker employed to express the importance of a cup in the world. Paper string thus expressed its control over the form. When the form of an artefact resembled that of a utilitarian object, but the material of it did not follow the usual material of the object, the artefact in that utilitarian form became representational. The material imparted new expression to the object represented and exposed the object’s basic features that were related to its function. As can be seen in Figure 6, *The Coffee Cup* lost the function of a cup but gained new meaning given by the maker, which was perceived, identified and understood by the viewers. ‘Identity and meaning’ are parts of the interpretation process. Interpretation, as discussed by Heidegger (1971: 32-36) is the knowledge of praxis through a reminiscence of a person’s past experiences combined with his or her current aesthetic experience of what is portrayed in an artefact. The artefact’s material influenced its usefulness and raised the question of appearance as associated with function.

**Figure 7: The Coffee Cup as an aesthetic artefact representing a useable cup.**

**Voice of Materials – Materialness**

The study has demonstrated the *active* role of materials in textile art and design. Its main finding is the conception of ‘materialness’. The concept shows that a material can originate both the form and content of artefacts and exhibitions, intertwining artistic expression and a physical material. The expressivity of material functions not only in a craft making process but also in the process of viewing completed artefacts. ‘Materialness’ is the totality of the textile creation rooted in a material that includes the elements of form, content, context and time for the artefact. On the one hand, ‘materialness’ leads the skilful hand and the sensitive mind of the practitioner to reflect on
and execute the resulting artefacts in a specific fashion, and to display them in a relevant context. On the other hand, it directs the audience to relate their current experience with the artefacts in the exhibition space to themselves and their earlier experiences.

This concept can be considered experiential knowledge that is made explicit because of the practice-led research approach and careful documentation. The mutual relationship between hands and eyes operates both the doing and the perceiving (Dewey, 1925 and 1934). Craft is the application of skills and ideas – not only a way of making things by hands, but also a way of thinking through the hand manipulating a material (Nimkulrat, 2010). Through the skilled hands of a craft practitioner, not only form is given but also meaning is embedded.

The Paper World exhibition has demonstrated that a material can transform the meaning of forms of functional objects when exhibited in a recognisable environment. In a gallery in the form of a house, although the exhibition was literally quiet, the material employed in all artefacts metaphorically spoke to their viewers, giving information that they were the representations of utilitarian objects and emphasising the importance of ordinary household artefacts. A material can thus express its intangible qualities that shape not only the textile practitioner’s creation but also the audience’s interpretation of artefacts and exhibitions. Considering the exhibition space already in the creative process can also contribute to strengthening the material’s expressivity, so that the practitioner’s intended message can successfully convey to the viewers.

**Materialness in Practice: An Example**

The concept of Materialness as an alternative approach to creating textiles has been introduced to textile pedagogy (Nimkulrat, 2010: 78-81) and utilised in my artistic practice after my PhD. In 2010, I was commissioned to create work for a group exhibition namely *The Power of Everyday Life* in the Gallen-Kallela Museum in Finland. The themes of the exhibition were craft and the artist’s relationship with the material (Mäkelä, Kalajo and Wahrloos, 2010), with a focus on the life and work of the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931) or his Tarvaspää studio and home, which is currently the Gallen-Kallela Museum. The exhibition aimed to establish a dialogue between the traditions and practices of two different eras and to address questions concerning the boundaries of crafts, visual arts and design.

Paper string still played its role as the material for this creative production. Materialness was adopted to focus on the material and to bring contextual elements to the creation of form and content together with the intention of designing an overall experience for viewers. My creative process started with the scrutiny of Tarvaspää’s space. Particular contextual elements in Tarvaspää that attracted me most were a large shelf in the studio space and old painting frames stored on it. The empty frames made the space as if it still functioned as the artist’s studio rather than a museum. While examining them, the following questions came to my mind: 1) what paintings these frames have been used for; 2) where those paintings are; and 3) whether the frames are as important as the paintings.

In search for answers to the above questions, literature about Gallen-Kallela and Tarvaspää (e.g. Jackson, 2006; Wahrloos and Karvenen-Kannas, 2008) contributed to my conceptualising process. Gallen-Kallela was most famous for his paintings whereas his craftsmanship was demonstrated through frames he specifically made for his paintings. This implied that if both paintings and frames were created by the same artist, their value would be equal. However, the visual presentation of Gallen-Kallela’s paintings in media (e.g. books, exhibition catalogues) usually excludes their frames. The absence of the frames aroused the issue about their neglected meaning within me. This
commissioned work hence aimed to emphasise that paintings and their frames were of equal importance. The existing shelf on which piles of old frames were stored was chosen to be the exhibition place. Using this specific place in the gallery in connection with paper string to create an art series, which was subsequently entitled *The F(r)ame without Painting I, II, III* (Figures 8 and 9), I imagined the form and content of artefacts into which the material would be transformed. Considering that both were created by the artist, if paintings are art, frames can be art too. This idea has developed into a concept of frames as artworks that do not function as picture frames, thus requiring no paintings. Empty frames made of paper string, which is an unusual material for picture frames, as a metaphor for holding both Gallen-Kallela’s missing paintings and his fame. The frames’ dimensions corresponded to *Madonna* (1891), the frame of which being made by the artist.

Knowing the material from my previous artistic production, its *paperiness* suggests non-functionality even if it is made into a functional form. It has power to manipulate the meaning of functional artefacts. Although hand knotting and paper string have been my media, when using them again to create this site-specific work, the hand sought ways of forming the material into the form of picture frames. The knotting techniques were readjusted in order to accomplish the desired form. While hand knotting my work, I regularly examined the form and details of picture frames, e.g. the inner rectangular is thinner than the outer one, etc. The touch of material and the gradually materialised paper frame made me understand the value of craft in making a frame specifically for a painting. The production of this series highlighted craft as a process of generating meaning of artefacts suggested by a choice of material and exhibition space. The complete series in the form of frames were exhibited together with *Madonna* (1891) and the existing painting frames on the shelf in the museum from which the inspiration of this series came.

**Figures 8 and 9: The F(r)ame without Painting I, II, III site-specifically created for the Gallen-Kallela Museum.**

**Conclusion**

Craft as an experiential process involving direct experience, personal vision and mastery of a medium plays a significant role in the practice of material-based sub-fields of design,
including textiles. The study discussed in this paper used craft to tackle the research question about the expressivity of a physical material used in textiles (i.e. paper string). The inclusion of practice in the research process or as a research outcome can facilitate the integration and communication of the tacit part of experiential knowledge that cannot be easily made explicit (Niedderer and Reilly, 2010). With its tactile nature, craft can be utilised in a research process as a vehicle to explore experiential knowledge embedded in actual interaction between the practitioner and a material. The hand as a craft tool can probe not only a material’s capability (McCullough, 1996: 29), but also its expressive potential when the hand working in concert with the mind. The practitioner’s interaction with a material with a purpose of unfolding a research problem can shape his or her experience, and consequently, a concept for a creative production constructed with that medium. The result of the production is a creative artefact that is also considered a research outcome supporting the communication of tacit knowledge that might not be fully expressed by a textual means.

Materialness as a concept generated from within an experiential process can be articulated because actual textile practice was included in the research inquiry process. Having been utilised in teaching textile students, this concept is proven useful for the creative processes of both artistic and functional textiles, especially when material leads their creative processes in a new and more informed way (Nimkulrat 2010). The application of the materialness concept to my own creative practice exemplified in this paper suggests a way in which a research outcome can be disseminated outside academia. Conclusively, without this research and careful documentation throughout the process, experiential knowledge embedded in artistic practice could not have been known and communicated and voice of material would not have been heard.
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