Hands-on intellect: integrating craft practice into design research

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Additional Information:

- This article was published in the International Journal of Design [© the author] and the journal’s website is at: http://www.ijdesign.org/ojs/index.php/IJDesign/index

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/11352

Version: Published

Publisher: © Nimkulrat (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License)

Please cite the published version.
Hands-on Intellect: Integrating Craft Practice into Design Research

Nithikul Nimkulrat
Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

Over the last two decades, craft practice has played a considerable role in practice-led design research, especially as the subject and the vehicle for theoretical inquiry. This article aims to reveal how craft as a way of thinking through material can be incorporated into practice-led design research. The author’s completed dissertation exploring the expressivity of materials in textiles is used to demonstrate how craft can drive a practice-led research process and how research can enhance craft practice. The dissertation exemplifies how the author employed her own craft practice as the main method for design research. The method was utilized in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s and Heidegger’s phenomenology and the method of questioning viewers during two exhibitions featuring artifacts resulting from the author’s craft practice. Positioning craft practice in a research context can facilitate the reflection and articulation of knowledge generated from within the researcher-practitioner’s artistic experience, so that the knowledge becomes explicit as a written text or as a means of visual representation. Research can not only transform ways of designing or making artifacts, but also theoretically inform practice so that the practice can develop the practitioner’s aesthetic intelligence, the results of which are craft objects that can be understood more easily by viewers.

Keywords – Material, Phenomenology, Practice-Led Design Research, Reflection, Textiles.

Relevance to Design Practice – This research demonstrates how craft as a way of thinking through material can be positioned in a design research context and facilitate the reflection and articulation of knowledge generated from within the researcher-practitioner’s creative practice.

be acquired from within the practice itself. In other words, thinking and knowing are inseparable from making in any craft or designerly practices.

Since the 1990s, creative disciplines including art, design, architecture, and performance have increasingly engaged with academic research. The practitioners’ creative practices are employed as vehicles of theoretical inquiry and subjects for scholarly research, which has often been labeled practice-led or practice-based research (Nimkulrat, 2009b, p. 484; Rust, 2007; Scrivener, 2009, p. 69). This approach encourages the inclusion of the researcher’s creative practice. Its main concept concerns the researcher who simultaneously takes the role of an artist or a designer and carries out the creative process and production of artifacts as the target of the reflection. According to Rust (2007, p. 75), for artists and designers to be considered researchers, they must prove the ownership of their research by: (1) indicating the research problem and its rationale; (2) demonstrating a good understanding of the research context; (3) acquiring research methods and consolidating them in an explicit way that is understandable by other researchers; and (4) verifying the results and contribution of their research. Unlike historians or philosophers, practitioners are in the position that enables the study of creative artifacts in progress. (Daichendt, 2012, p. 55). Gray and Malins (2004, p. 30) identify practice-based methodologies in art and design as involving “making art/design/creative work through specific project frameworks or as a body of work exploring the research questions”. According to Gray and Malins, social science methods can be adapted and adapted to supplement creative work. The methods include case study, participant-observation, interviews, questionnaires, and surveys for seeking the opinions of others (Gray & Malins, 2004, p. 30). However, the recent focus on practice-based or practice-led methodologies has shifted from the supplementary adopted or adapted social science methods or other fields of inquiry to the intellectual development of creative practice as a basis for theoretical questions and as a place for undertaking artistic, cultural, and scholarly studies (Sullivan, 2009, p. 62). The shifted emphasis on what could be called knowing in practice implies: Firstly, the implementation of methodologies operating from the “unknown to the known” rather than the “known to the unknown” in more established research methodologies (Sullivan, 2009, p. 48), and secondly, research processes involving data that are “created” rather than “collected” in traditional research (p. 50). The creation of artifacts thus comes into play as the “driving force behind the research” and also “the creator of ideas” (Mäkelä & Routarinne, 2009, p. 22). Within the practice-led methodological framework, practitioner-researchers address themselves to the challenge of theorizing their practice (Sullivan, 2009, p. 62).

The aforementioned characteristics of practice-led research accord with the British Arts & Humanities Research Council’s definition of research (2012, p. 10) – research is concerned with the definition of processes rather than outcomes, and must specify the research problem, context of inquiry, and methods employed. Mapped in relation to this definition, Niedderer and Roworth-Stokes (2007) suggest the following uses of creative practice in research: (1) practice posing a research problem; (2) practice providing a context of inquiry; (3) practice serving as method to gain new knowledge and understanding; and (4) practice as providing evidence to support outcomes of research. Purposely utilizing creative practice to conduct research demonstrates its rigor and general criteria of objectivity, reliability, and validity that research entails. It also reflects Cross’s (2000, p. 98, 2007, p. 126) criteria for best design research conduct that includes “purposive, inquisitive, informed, methodical, and communicable” attributes. However, it does not mean that creative practice always constitute research. Any practice can do so “only if it is 1) a systematic investigation, 2) conducted intentionally, 3) to acquire new knowledge, understanding, insights, etc., that is 4) justified and 5) communicated” about a subject,” as Scrivener (2009, p. 71) points out.

Accordingly, design research or the production of design knowledge is involved in creative practice or the production of material artifacts. Craft as a means of thinking through making things by hand (Nimkulrat, 2012) has played a considerable role for over two decades in practice-led design research, especially in Europe including Finland. Most practice-led design research projects especially in doctoral education have focuses on topics arising from within the creative production of craft practices, such as ceramics, jewelry, and textiles. Framing the research project in relation to the nature of practice and the researcher’s expertise as a practitioner is one of the major strategies for developing craft-based design research methodologies (Malins & Gray, 1995, p. 9). Other important strategies includes, for example: constantly outlining and sharpening the research question to allow methodologies to emerge; maintaining openness, rigor, accessibility, transparency, transferability, all being attributes that distinguish research from routine creative practice; and observing and reflecting on practice to inform research. The emergence of craft in practice-led design research confirms that design has not taken over the making of material objects from craft. Rather, craft making has been included in design research carried out in academia that in return enables practitioners’ voices to be heard and the implicit knowledge embedded in the making to be reflected.

This article aims to reveal the way in which craft thinking can be incorporated into a practice-led design research process. It addresses how the author as a design researcher carried out a research project using craft as a way of thinking

---

Nimkulrat, Nithikal

Nithikal Nimkulrat is a lecturer in textiles at the School of the Arts of Loughborough University. She earned a Doctor of Arts from Aalto University in Finland in 2009. Her research interest is rooted in her textile practice, reaching across experiential knowledge in art and design, especially the role of creative practice in research and that of materials in creative processes. Having situated her work at the intersection of art and design, and at that of the academic and art worlds, her creative artifacts have received awards and been exhibited internationally, while her research has been published in international academic journals and publications. She is co-editor of the book Reflections and connections: On the relationship between creative production and academic research (2009) and Journal of Research Practice’s special issue On Reflecting and Making in Artistic Research Practice (2011). Nithikal is convenor of DRS Special Interest Group on Experiential Knowledge (EKSIG).
through material. The author’s completed doctoral research (Nimkulrat, 2009a) is used to exemplify how craft can facilitate a practice-led research process and how research can enhance craft practice. The study utilized the researcher’s own textile creations within the framework of practice-led research, as a method to gain experiential knowledge about the subject of the expressive quality of materials in textiles. This subject concerns the meaning of material beyond its physical, touchable qualities. The investigation of a material’s expressive qualities suggests that the research ought to look at an actual textile practice employing that particular material as medium. The research project was then tailored in response to this nature of the subject and the researcher’s expertise as a practitioner. Having expertise as a textile artist, the author was able to employ craft thinking and skills to work with the material in question and adopt the role of a “reflective practitioner” (Schön, 1983) to scrutinize and reflect on the making processes and resulting works. The viewpoint of the reflective practitioner informed the conduct of practice and that of research throughout. On the one hand, craft practice forms the body of practice-led research and leads the process of it. On the other hand, research informs the practitioner-researcher how to proceed with the craft practice.

Role of Craft in Practice-led Research Process

[Touch delivers invasive “unbounded” data, whereas the eye supplies images that are contained in a frame. … [A] neural network of eye-brain-hand allows touching, gripping, and seeing to work in concert. (Sennett, 2008, pp. 152-153)

The above account illustrates a view similar to Dewey’s (1934, pp. 89-91) insight on “Art as Experience”, which addresses the mutual relationship between hands and eyes operating both the doing and the perceiving – “[a]s we manipulate, we touch and feel; as we look we see; as we listen, we hear”. This statement affirms the importance of craft practice and the actual making of work in contributing to knowing through immersive sensory experience.

The author’s textile practice was purposively used to approach and to refine the research problem – the relationship between a physical material and artistic expression in the creation of textiles. For the knowledge about this relationship to arise, a pragmatic engagement with the material, tools, and idea of practice was performed. This way of gaining an insight into a particular practice from within the practice itself followed Heidegger’s (1962) notions of “handling” and “handlability”. According to him, knowledge or the way of understanding “the world” comes into being from the process of “handling” things around us, not from a detached contemplation of those things. Carter’s (2004) conception of “material thinking” offers a view on active materials in creative processes. According to him, materials are not passive nor are instruments, but interact with the maker’s artistic intelligence when his or her hands, mind, and eyes are connected in a creative process. Through handling materials in practice, a form of tacit knowledge arises, providing a particular way of understanding the practice that is grounded in the hands-on practice itself.

With the aim of uncovering the “active” role of a material in a creative process, the study attempted to understand the influence of a physical material on (1) the maker’s formation of thoughts during creative processes and (2) the viewers’ thoughts during contemplation. Paper string was used as the material in artistic productions specially carried out for this investigation. It was formed into two series of artifacts which were then publicly displayed in two exhibitions (Figure 1): Seeing Paper (a) and Paper World (b). These exhibitions together with textual analysis or explanation demonstrating critical reflection and supporting the creative practice’s position constructed a complete whole of this research.

Figure 1. Two artistic productions and exhibitions: (a) Seeing Paper (2005) and (b) Paper World (2007).
The researcher’s own textile practice or making material artifacts played its role as the main method and “way of investigation”, to use Niedderer’s and Roworth-Stokes’s term (2007, p. 15). Intentional, methodical creative productions can test a variety of ideas in practice and openly demonstrate the researcher’s way of improving his or her professional practice, i.e., what and why an action takes place in a creative process, and the result of it (Scrivener & Chapman, 2004). In addition to making artifacts, other supportive methods included reading literature, Heidegger’s (1962) and Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) phenomenology in particular, and questioning the audience using questionnaires (Figure 2). Phenomenology examines the ways in which physical and social environments shape our experience, understanding, and intersubjective interactions. It highlights the role of embodiment in perception and cognition, exploring emotional, aesthetic, and action-related experience as informed by environmental elements and by actual bodily movement. For this reason, phenomenology is directly relevant to the design discipline, which involves the invention of creative outputs in various formats (e.g., products, interfaces, systems, etc.) that influence how people experience their surroundings.

In this research, reading and making mutually supported each other. While literature brought about ideas to be experimented in creative practice, creative productions suggested relevant literature to be discussed in relation to the productions. The questionnaires aimed to record the viewers’ response to the exhibitions and exhibits and to investigate the material’s influence on the viewers’ interpretations.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the three methods interacted one another, demonstrating the integration of practice in a consistent research process and the creation of data for analysis over time (Sullivan, 2009, p. 62). When implementing different methods, various means of documentation (e.g., diary writing, diagram drawing, sketching, photographing, and questionnaires) were utilized to record the data created (i.e., research activities throughout the study). Methods regarding how key forms of documentation were used can be described as follows:

![Figure 2. Interaction between methods, documentation, and data](adapted from Nimkulrat, 2009a, p. 52).
Diary writing was carried out at the end of everyday after making artifacts in the series Seeing Paper and Paper World and when a problem occurred in the making, as well as when reading literature related to the research problem. The diary entries contained chronological events which were both objective facts and subjective interpretations. A diary entry calls for reflection on experiences before or during the writing which makes the writer become more conscious of his or her experiences (Holly, 1984, pp. 5-10). In this study, diary writing enabled the consolidation of experiences through a textual interaction between reading and making artifacts within the overall research process.

Diagram drawing was employed as a visual tool to illustrate the creative process, especially when experiences were too difficult to be articulated, and also to facilitate the researcher’s understanding of literature read in relation to the creation of artifacts. Diagrams clarified the sequence of thinking and later guided the written explanation of what had not earlier been put into words.

Sketching, an ordinary activity involved in design practice, was used in this research to support the conceptualization of creative productions.

Photographing captured each artifact in progress and when completed. The gradually materialized artifacts were photographed to depict the process (Figure 3). Photographs together with diaries supported the researcher’s “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983) in evaluating and solving problems in the creative process, and facilitated written communication in the stage of writing up the thesis. Photographing was also implemented during the exhibitions to document the visitors’ actions and positions in relation to the displayed artifacts (Figure 4).

Questionnaires8 were used to collect opinions from the viewers of the artifacts and exhibitions. For this study, they were designed to be small in size to give the impression to visitors that filling in their comments would not take much time. The feedback forms used in both Seeing Paper and Paper World were in “open-answer” format (Bradburn, Sudman, & Wansink, 2004, p. 153).
but slightly differed from each other in detail (Figure 5). The open-ended question allowed the visitors to answer in their own words which produced qualitative data for this research. The forms were distributed in the exhibition without the presence of the researcher to maintain the autonomy and anonymity of the respondents (Figure 6).

Methodical documentation gave rise to diverse forms of text and visual data to be reflected on throughout the research process, the result of which was a written thesis.

The three methods of making, reading, and questioning were employed in the research process that was structured around the research problem and divided into five phases based on the periods of the aforementioned two art productions and exhibitions (Figure 7). The explicit structure of the process aimed to guide the researcher in how to approach the research problem at each stage, and also to acknowledge accessibility and transparency, which are characteristics that research entails. The openness, rigor, and clarity of the process differentiate creative practice performed in the research context from everyday creative practice (Malins & Gray, 1995). The transitional stages of the production were carefully documented (with surveys, etc) in order to ensure the rigor and transparency of the overall production process (Nimrulkat, 2007a). Thorough and methodical documentation throughout this project helped to emphasize that purposeful creative practice can serve as a useful method of scholarly inquiry.

This article intends to shed light on the facilitation of craft in the design research process by examining the second phase: the actual creation of Seeing Paper, the third phase: after the actual creation of Seeing Paper, the fourth phase: the actual creation of Paper World, and the fifth phase: the actual creation of Paper World. These phases utilized at least two methods – making and reading – to investigate the relationship between paper string as a physical material and artistic expression. The utilization of these methods demonstrated the connection between theory and practice.

Craft Influencing the Meaning Making in Seeing Paper

This section illustrates the evolution of the research process and research question when craft was the key to conducting the research in the second and third phases (Figure 7). The research problem in the second phase focused on two interacting components: Physical material and artistic expression, the results of which were a series of artifacts. The artifacts and the relationship between material and artistic expression embedded in them became the problem to be considered in the third phase.

Seeing Paper (Figure 1a) explored the expressive potential of three different kinds of paper string. The first type of paper string was single-ply, straight, and rather stiff. However, its stiffness was noticeable only through touching, as it appeared
smooth and gentle (Figure 8). The second type was untwined from the robust, straight, and smooth five-ply string. The visual and tactile characteristics of the untwined paper string changed due to the untwining. The material became weak, wavy, and coarse (Figure 9). The third type was a fine single paper yarn. It looked fragile but was in fact physically strong (Figure 10). The research hypothesis that the different tactile qualities of paper string express different things was tested in the production of this series. Translated from the hypothesis, the concept of Seeing Paper that a material metaphorically “lives” in the world was presented as dress-like objects shaped in similar forms and structures (Figures 8, 9, & 10). Each unwearable dress was made using a knotting technique and a distinct type of paper string to represent a metaphorical living individual. To represent different individuals, different kinds of paper string were expected to embody the meaning of dissimilar personalities and temperaments.

Through the act of knotting, meaning was embedded in the physical material gradually transformed into an artifact, which in turn articulated this meaning through its physicality back to the maker (Nimkulrat, 2007b, pp. 17-24; Nimkulrat, 2009a, pp. 105-128). The maker’s experience and action to resolve creative pressures in the medium manifest the material object’s expressiveness (Dewey, 1934, pp. 60-69). The materialization of an object, i.e., craft making, can be considered the “subject-matter and sustainer of conscious activity” (Dewey, 1925, p. 393). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1962, pp. 365-378) points out that human perception and consciousness tends to seek association between the current tactile phenomenon and the prior one the touching person has experienced.

I am able to touch effectively only if the phenomenon finds an echo within me, if it accords with a certain nature of my consciousness, and if the organ which goes out to meet it is synchronized with it. The unity and identity of the tactile phenomenon do not come about through any synthesis of recognition in the concept, they are founded upon the unity and identity of the body as synergic totality. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 369)

According to the above statement, a tactile phenomenon concerns touching as physical contact. When one touches an object, the touch searches for a connection between the object

Figure 7. Five phases of research (adapted from Nimkulrat, 2009a, p. 57).
touched and the consciousness of the person who touches it. In the Seeing Paper case, when handling a type of paper string, the author sought a connection between the material in her hands and her consciousness. Combined with the author’s prior life experience, the influence of each material’s physical qualities shaped the interpretation of the work. As a result, each work was given a title that reflected the author’s thought during the action-oriented experience of craft making. For example, the first type of paper string was employed to create Let Go and Private Garden (Figure 8). In the production of Let Go, hand knotting around the mold of the female body form was the only manipulation technique applied to the material. The strings were left unknotted on both arms of the unwearable dress. The action of letting the strings hang freely was interpreted as giving the material the freedom to speak. The interpretation of this action-oriented experience was reflected through the artifact’s name, Let Go. The author learned while making this work that the material was easily open, exposing the long strip of the raw material. When this material was used again to create Private Garden on a wire skeleton shaped into the form of a dress, it was untwisted to be even more open. The untwisted string appeared similar to the shape of a leaf. After manipulating the material at certain spots, the association of the open strings with leaves generated the idea of a garden. The piece was then named Private Garden.

The same technique and process of making Let Go was applied to the second type of paper string (Figure 9), which was paper string untwisted from five-ply string. The messily tangled, curly material was easily broken if the pulling force was too strong. Frequently breaking strings interrupted the repetitive action of knotting the lacy structure around the mold. The interruption caused the maker to pay more attention to the material and to seek a way to fix the broken strings in order to continue making the artifact. “Reflection-in-action” came into play when the maker tried to understand the situation and to make a decision in the creative process. The messiness and fragility of the strings was controlled in the completed artifact that was then
named *Get Sorted*. The disturbance caused by broken strings gave rise to the association between the broken strings and barbed wire the maker had experienced in life as her embodied memory. “For if a thing perceived were made up of sensations and memories, it would depend for its precise identification on the contribution of memories…” says Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 24). According to Heidegger (1962, pp. 406-412), when a tool or piece of equipment breaks and stops serving to support actions, its properties or characteristics become more salient than when it functions properly. Disturbance leads us to notice the aspects of the tool and turns it into an object to be thought about. In this case, the second type of paper string temporarily ceasing the knotting actions revealed its visual aspect as similar to barbed wire that was not earlier noticeable. This visual aspect illuminated an idea for the subsequent artifact that used the same material. When strings were knotted around the skeleton wire of the same shape as *Private Garden*, they were intentionally pulled so strong that they were broken. This artifact was later titled *Private Area*.

Despite the author’s distinguishable experience with each material, the viewers’ experience seemed to be the same with all materials. When *Seeing Paper* was exhibited in a modernist gallery, the majority of filled feedback forms (Figure 5a) showed the same word given for all three artifacts produced with the same technique. This implied that the different materials hardly had influence on the viewers’ interpretation of the exhibits or the differences between the materials were not as apparent to the viewers as they were to the author since touching is generally prohibited in exhibitions. The viewers’ interpretations contradicted the author’s. This was considered a weakness of the craft practice that required some actions to be made in order to prevent it to reappear in subsequent creative productions. The author’s “reflection-on-action” was that *Seeing Paper*’s visitors experienced the exhibition as a whole rather than each individual exhibit and its details. Moreover, the modernist gallery or “the white cube” did not actually give the neutral effect to the artifacts, but instead influenced the visitors’ experience while contemplating them (O’Doherty, 1999). The reflection was confirmed by Merleau-Ponty (1962, pp. 3-9, 77-83) and Heidegger (1988, pp. 69-70) who assert that people experience a thing within a spatial ephemeral context, as “the thing in the world” in Heidegger’s term. In other words, an artifact is seen together with coexisting artifacts in the same space, all referring to one another and creating a significant whole.

The overlooked variations of the materials used in *Seeing Paper* introduced the question of the influence of an exhibition space on its exhibits. This contributed to a reformulation of the research problem for the fourth phase to include the exhibition context as part of the exploration.

**Designing Experience through Craft in Paper World**

This section presents the research process carried out to solve the reformulated research question in the fourth and fifth phases of research (Figure 7). Having received input from phenomenological thinking, the author’s craft practice was redesigned. The creative process of the second craft production, namely *Paper World*, was structured differently from that of *Seeing Paper* (Figure 11). Unlike *Seeing Paper* in which context, in particular the type of exhibition space, was barely considered, the exhibition space and

---

**Figure 11. The creative process of Paper World (right) in comparison to that of Seeing Paper (left)**
(adapted from Nimkulrat, 2009a, p. 129).
elements in it became the starting point of Paper World. This was to emphasize a person’s actual activities that take place within the world or being-in the world in Heidegger’s sense (1962). The artistic production of Paper World thus broadened the research problem to encompass the topic of paper string’s expressive potential in a specific exhibition context (Nimkulrat, 2009a, pp. 128-150). In other words, the material’s expressivity was comprehended in a context, not as an individual entity secluded from its overall settings.

Dewey (1934, pp. 48-56) points out that the maker must embody the attitude of a viewer while making an object in order to understand the audience who in return would try to understand the maker’s intended message. Adopting the role of a viewer into craft making with the aim of encouraging viewers to experience and interpret artifacts in a particular way, the author imagined herself being surrounded by the exhibits in the same space as other viewers. For the viewers and the maker to have a comparable experience with the exhibits and exhibition, the forms of artifacts and space in which the artifacts would be exhibited ought to be familiar to or have meaning for both. As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 292) states, perception is a bodily phenomenon which coexists with movement as an interrelated whole, both grounding the objectivity and subjectivity of experience including the inner feel and intentional grips on the world. The creation of Paper World thus attempted to understand the viewers’ interpretation as an objective and subjective act of perceiving and bodily engaging with all artifacts as a complete unit.

Further reading the history of Finnish design (e.g., Kruskopf, 1975; Priha, 1999, p. 120-131; Wiberg, 1996) and the history of Finland during and after the Second World War (Singleton, 1986, 1998) illuminated the formation of the Paper World’s concept and the setup of the exhibition space. Before the outbreak of the war, although Finland was the leader in manufacturing cotton and linen textiles in the Nordic countries, the production was dependent on imported raw materials and machinery (Singleton, 1986, pp. 58-59). After the war, Finland as a defeated country had to pay high reparations to the Soviet Union in the form of industrial goods and materials including wool, timber, paper, and wood pulp (Singleton, 1986, p. 66). Due to poor economics, the import of raw materials, such as cotton and linen, was stopped (Singleton, 1998, p. 147). When textile materials were scarce, paper string as a material of little value (and thus not required to supply to the Soviet Union) became one of the few materials available for Finnish designers to use between the 1940s and 1950s (Kruskopf, 1975, p. 73; Priha, 1999, p. 124). As a result, people’s everyday life around this period frequently included products made of paper string, such as clothes, shoes, curtains, and upholstery. Together with Dewey’s attitude of makers as viewers, paper string’s everydayness in the Finnish design history led the design of Paper World to express the meaning of paper string through the functional objects’ forms and to choose a residential home converted into a gallery as the exhibition venue (Figure 12).
The manipulation of paper string became the author’s visual and tactile experience. Objects found in the studio served as sources for inspiration and as molds for constructing the works into particular functional forms. During the craft production, the eye focused on the moving hand that manipulated the material according to the image of expression arising in the mind (Figure 14).

“[Thinking] is a craft, a handicraft, and therefore has a special relationship to the hand. … Every motion of the hand in every one of its works carries itself through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element. All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking”, says Heidegger (1978, pp. 356-357). The movement of the hand knotting the material into artifacts facilitated the process of thinking and embedded the maker’s thought in the artifacts. Merleau-Ponty (1962, pp. 365-378) maintains that when one touches an object, the touch as physical contact searches for a relationship between the touched object and the consciousness of the person who touches it. In the author’s craft making, the sense of touch sought a connection between the image in the mind and the material in hand. The connection became information about how to implement the technique in order to actualize the idea in a physical form.

During the Paper World exhibition, questioning the audience as method was utilized. Feedback forms modified from those used in the Seeing Paper exhibition (Figure 5b) were distributed to visitors. The open answer on the form encouraged people to give their nuanced opinions. Their comments showed that they understood the meaning of the overall exhibition and exhibits the author intended to convey. Due to the material used, the viewers experienced the non-functional craft objects in the functional forms differently from the actual useful objects. Paper string hinted that the practical functions were inapplicable to them. This incident suggested the expressive potential of a material in giving new meaning to ordinary forms. By reproducing of the objects’ basic characteristics, form, and scale, Paper World not only represented the actual everyday objects but also highlighted the meaning of the objects represented. As Heidegger (1962, p. 191) points out, 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. As the visitors to the Paper World exhibition knew the outward looks and the materials of everyday artifacts and the fact that a gallery is not an actual home but a place for displaying creative work, they understood that those forms of household artifacts were not objects that can be used, but representational artifacts.

**Conclusion: Craft Can Lead and Be Informed by Design Research**

This article has demonstrated through the author’s practice-led research project how craft as a way of thinking through the hand can be involved in design research as a research method. Craft practice facilitates and leads the research process into a particular direction in order to tackle the research problem. When the practitioner-researcher is able to pursue a suitable means for connecting creative practice with academic research, research can not only transform ways of designing or making artifacts, but also theoretically inform practice, so that the practice can develop the practitioner’s aesthetic intelligence and the results of it (i.e., craft artifacts) can be understood more easily by the audience at large.

The practice-led methodology gives a researcher who is also a practitioner the opportunity to study his or her own work. Practice-led design research tends to center upon craft disciplines, such as ceramics, jewelry, and textiles, because knowledge in these disciplines is rarely articulated although embedded in the practice and embodied in the practitioner. With the slow pace of a craft making process, the practitioner-researcher is able to generate “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983) and document the process. Positioning craft practice in a research context can facilitate the reflection and articulation of knowledge generated from within the researcher-practitioner’s artistic experience. The procedural and experiential knowledge thus becomes explicit as a written text and/or as visual representations.

The author’s research undertook two craft productions (Seeing Paper and Paper World) to explore whether a physical material had specific expressive qualities. Through this study, the author also realized alternative approaches to craft making:
One approach was to start the creative process with the material (e.g., Seeing Paper) and another with the overall exhibition (e.g., Paper World). The latter approach illuminates a new perspective on craft making, namely, the importance of the exhibition context. The context influences the way one experiences an exhibition, exhibits, and their material. It also affects the craftsperson during his or her interaction with the expressive material.

The use of the author’s own artistic work enabled her to plan the particular craft productions that focused on the research problem, suggesting a dialogue between craft practice and academic design research. The specially planned craft productions not only led the research process but also made the author’s aware of her own artistic processes and temporary experiences while making. Publicly exhibiting the craft objects created in connection with research in galleries made the approach of questioning audiences using the feedback forms possible, i.e., the audiences received opportunities to interpret and comment on the exhibits and exhibitions. The audiences’ comments can benefit a practice-led research project. They can function as research material and/or as basis for a subsequent craft production. The viewers’ involvement in an exhibition creates a cultural activity where the maker and the viewers can meet and exchange thoughts, generating mutual understanding.

The integration of craft practice into design research presented in this article is neither a definite nor singular way for conducting design research within the practice-led methodological framework. Rather, it serves as an example for other practice-led researchers to learn from and adapt parts of it as they conduct their own research.

Endnotes

1. Craft has often been identified as a discipline in its own right, not as a sub-discipline of art or design. For discussions on this regard, see for example, Dormer, 1997; Jönsson, 2005; Risatti, 2007.
2. For an account of the development of industrial design in Finland, see Valtonen, 2007, pp. 64-74.
3. The array of terminology including practice-led, practice-based, process-led, studio-based, arts-based, practice as research, research by design and artistic research has been used to refer to this form of academic research (Biggs, 2006, p. 185). Although various terms reflect the different roles of creative practice in academic research, their meanings and usages vary among countries, institutions, subject areas, or even scholars within a higher education institution. For example, “practice-led research” is the current term used in most universities in the UK and in the design discipline, whereas “artistic research” is used more extensively in other European countries and in the field of fine arts (Nimkulrat, 2011, p. 60). For debates on the discourse of practice-led research in art and design, see for example, Rust, Mottam, and Till, 2007; Lycouris, 2011.
4. According to Scrivener (2009, pp. 69-80), the contribution of creative production to academic research can be categorized into six categories: intention, subject, method, justification, communication, and goal.
5. For completed practice-led design doctoral research, see for example, Summatavet, 2005 (jewelry); Tooming, 2007; and Nimkulrat, 2009a (textiles), etc.
6. In Heidegger’s (1992, p. 188) analysis of ‘being-in-the-world’, intersubjectivity refers to one’s practical engagement in the surrounding world that is not private, but public and communal. Entities one encounters in his or her daily life hold references to indeterminate others, because they are made by others or the work they can perform is intended for others (Heidegger, 1992, pp. 193-194).
7. According to Schön (1983, pp. 128-136), reflection is the center of an understanding of what practitioners do. “Reflection-in-action” suggests a process in which a practitioner encounters an unfamiliar situation that requires a different course of action from which he or she typically does or has initially planned. “Reflection-on-action” entails a critical process in which a practitioner reflects on his or her thinking, actions, and feelings in relation to a specific experience in professional practice (Schön, 1983, pp. 275-283).
8. Questionnaires as a social scientific method were implemented in this research in order to get additional information from people visiting the exhibitions with regard to the expressivity of paper string as a material. However, as the research is not a social science study, the questionnaires were not validated as social science data.
9. All other available materials were from forests, such as birch bark and wood.

References


