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Meaningful objects:

Complementary research documentation of experiential qualities in art and design



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Abstract

The goal of art and design disciplines is often to produce objects possessing experiential qualities. Both consumers and practitioners in art and design may come across emotions, expressions and experiences in various occasions. However, when these disciplines enter the academic research, which aims to produce knowledge, objects created by the researchers who are also practitioners are rarely included. This paper addresses the meaningfulness of objects as the complementary documentation of research processes by emphasising how experiential qualities occur in the art and design practices of the practitioners-researchers. Two case studies of art objects exemplify the experiential development. While the first case focuses on the experiential qualities evolving in the dialogue between the artist and the material, the second case focuses on those qualities in the artist's interaction with the target group. Experiential qualities are identified in comparing similarities and differences of phenomena in the two cases. These are related to the subjective approach and to the personal experience. A greater focus on these phenomena can generate methods for experiential knowledge in art and design.

Keywords: art object, experiential, reflection, metaphor, interpretation

Introduction

The art and design fields have a strong tradition in creating objects whereas research has a strong tradition in generating knowledge. However, art and design practitioners, when undertaking researchers' role and aiming to produce knowledge, rarely consider their creative processes and objects as parts of the methods of inquiry. This paper attempts to illuminate the crucial role of artefacts as meaningful objects artists-researchers create in relation to their research.

This paper assumes that the relation between qualitative research in design and the everyday practice is valuable. An experimental attitude is attempted towards the interplay of research with objects, context and people. This paper poses two research questions: (1) what are the expressive and experiential qualities that can be identified or developed through artistic productions, and (2) how can these qualities improve practical knowledge in art and design?

The case studies comprise parts of two material-based arts projects integrated in PhD studies: "Seeing Paper" (paper sculptures by Nithikul Nimkulrat) and "Sunrise" (ceramic tiles in a funeral room by Arild Berg). Material-based arts here mean visual arts that are developed or originated from/within the field of design or craft, such as textiles, ceramics, glass and wood. The craft practices refer to contemporary reflections on craft being an active, vital and important alternative, in interplay with both fine arts and design. (Jortveit, 2005) The first case examines the expressive and experiential qualities in art objects evolving in the dialogue between the artist and the material. The second case looks at the artist's dialogue with a target group and how experiential qualities are created into the objects.

These types of research that art and design practices of the researchers are included could be called research *through* art and design. Other alternatives are research *into* art and design, and research *for* art and design. (Frayling, 1993) Art objects, when understood and realised, could provide the unique experiential qualities and that may generate practical knowledge in art and design. Seeking a common quality in art objects is not the goal of this paper, but rather providing explanation of alternative research methods to communicate and develop possible expressive and experiential qualities in objects.

Methods

As this form of research that includes artistic production just began to emerge, the research methods are still debatable. This mode of research emerged for the first time in the UK in 1980s. However, simultaneous development took place in Northern Europe. It is called with different terms such as: research through practice, practice-based research and more recently practice-led research. (Frayling et al, 1997; Frayling 1993, 1-5; Gray 1998, 83; Douglas & Scopa & Gray 2000; Mäkelä & Routarinne 2006.)

Design scholars Alex Seago and Anthony Dunne claim that by adopting methodologies from other academic disciplines, art and design research may lose merits valued in art and design field such as originality, vigour, style and intelligence. Art and design research are still opened for possibilities of using innovative methods. (Seago & Dunne, 1999: 11-15)

The methods chosen for conducting the two research projects, parts of them are examined in this paper, comprised case studies that are the researchers' art projects. According to Schön, practitioners-researchers can give an insight into the creative practice as case studies. (Schön, 1983). These case studies created a variety of data: visual and textual. Data collection within these case studies was through not only the observation captured in forms of photographs and research diaries, but also interviews. Photographs documented both the creative processes and the exhibitions. Diaries recorded evolving thoughts in the creative processes. Interviews with users and audience were conducted in order to understand others people's experiences with art objects.

The two corresponding processes are related to material experimentation and ways to create expressive and experiential qualities in objects. Differences are specifically related to the relationship to the user groups and audience. One was temporarily exhibited in a gallery; the other is a permanent art installation in a funeral room. While in the first case the audience is involved in the end, in the other case the users are the starting point. Although both cases are similar in the material-based art processes, they represent two fundamentally different ways of working in art and design, and the qualities that are identified can therefore be relevant to other groups of creative practitioners.

Case studies

Following are two case studies: the first case includes Nithikul Nimkulrat’s paper sculptures “Seeing Paper” and the second case comprises Arild Berg’s ceramic tiles “Sunrise”. These case studies uncover the experiential qualities emerging in the dialogues between artists and their practices. The focus of the first case was placed on the experiential qualities evolving in the artist’s dialogue with the material, and that of the second case was on those qualities in the interaction between the artist and the target group.

Case 1: “Seeing Paper” – the dialogue between the artist and the material

The case is an installation of six female dress-like paper sculptures created to explore expressive potential of different materials. “Seeing Paper” is a concept where an abstract idea forms how a series of artworks should be perceived. It showed that a material metaphorically ‘lives’ in this world. The metaphorical living thing was presented in a form of female dresses, as a metaphor for human beings. Every sculpture was constructed with a specific technique on a particular mould. These two factors were fixed, whereas the material factor was variable. The intention was to analyse the expressive qualities of dissimilar kinds of paper strings on artworks of the same technique and composition.

Three slightly dissimilar kinds of paper strings are employed in two series of artworks (see Figure 1).

This paper considers only Material 2 (Figure 2) and its employment in two artworks: “Get Sorted” in Series 1 and “Private Area” in Series 2 (Figure 3).

Material 2 is paper string untwined from larger five-ply paper string. The untwined string was much weaker than the original string; however, its weakness was hardly perceptible. The string appeared curly and coarse.

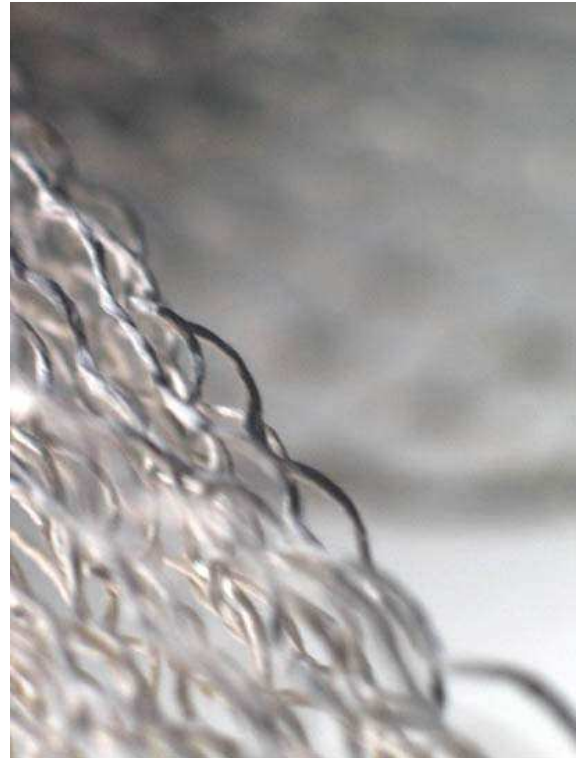


Figure 2: Material 2 Employed

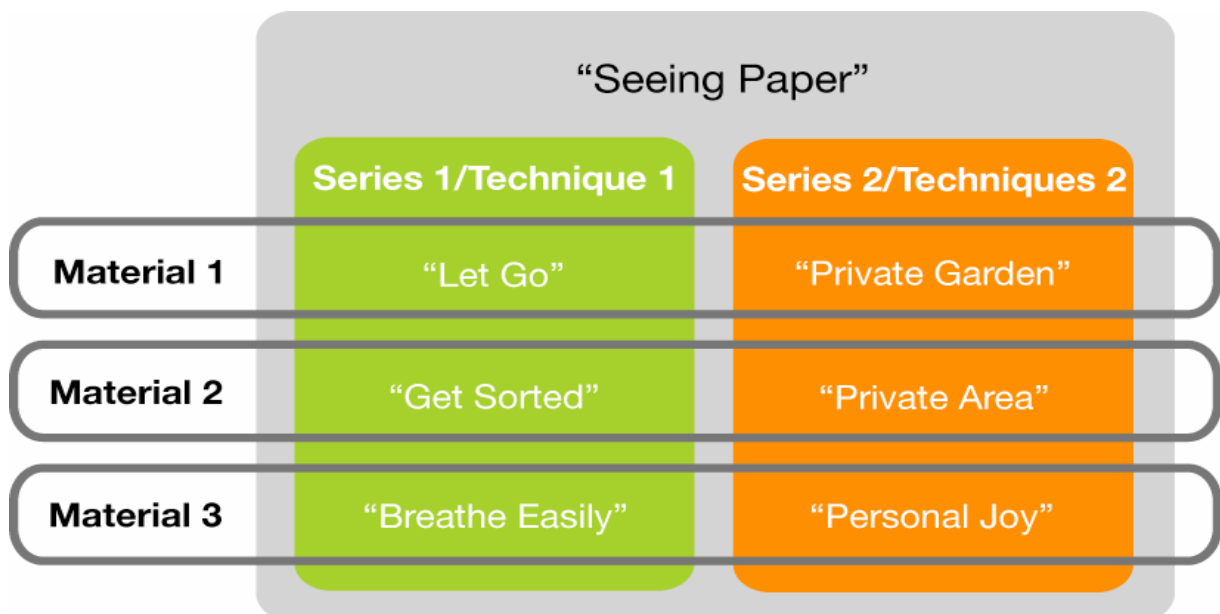


Figure 1: The diagram shows how the artist planned to employ three types of paper string in the artworks



Figure 3: "Get Sorted" (left) and "Private Area" (right) with Material 2 employed

Although both series followed the concept of metaphorical living beings, each series was created with a distinct intention. In Series 1, the material was let free to 'speak' for itself. Simple knotting around the female figure mould was the only manipulation (see Figure 4). Conversely, in Series 2, the material 'spoke' under the control of the artist as it was highly manipulated.

While preparing Material 2 for "Get Sorted", the artist sensed the texture and form of the material. She touched the paper string, and simultaneously, felt being touched by it. This bodily experience and emotions arisen was recorded in the artist's research diary.



Figure 4: Lacy structure of simple knots on "Get Sorted"

My life is a mess now! I am untwining the machine-made twisted yarn: from one yarn to five, from straight form to mess. It is very hard to manage. The length of a single string is reduced, because of the curly effect after I have untwined the twisted string. The strength of the twisted yarn disappears. One single string is very easy to break.... (From Nithikul Nimkulrat's research diary on 28 March 2005)

This record shows that the artist subjectively interpret the material by associating herself with it.



Figure 5: "Get Sorted" and its dented back

After removed from the mould, the back of this unwearable dress appeared dented (see Figure 5). The artist interpreted this imperfect form from not only the appearance of the artwork but also her experience with the material, and then named the artwork "Get Sorted".

The experience gained in the creative process of "Get Sorted" assisted the artist in creating "Private Garden". She knew how hard she should pull the string, and how it should be presented.



Figure 7: "Seeing paper" in a modernistic gallery



Figure 6: "Private Area" and its feature of broken string

The broken string became the major feature of the work (see Figure 6).

The memory of the broken string the artist had seen when making "Get Sorted", including the coarseness of the string that hurt her hands, reminded her of a feature of something-- barbed wire--she had experienced in her life. She associated the two experiences and expressed this new association in the work "Private Area".work (See Figure 6). The association of experiences was the way the artist interpreted her work. She naming the artwork "Private Area".

When completed, artworks were moved to a modernistic gallery for a temporary exhibition (see Figure 7).

As touching was prohibited, the spectators' contemplative experience was operated across distance by the sense of sight. The spectators were asked to separately interpret each artwork in the series and fill their interpretations in the small feedback forms (see Figure 8).

The feedback form was a means to document the audience's response to the artworks. From the answers on the forms, the spectators seemed to look at the overall exhibition rather to contemplate each work separately.

1
 Nimi (valinainen) / Name (optional): _____
 Ikä / Age: _____
 Sukupuoli / Gender: Mies / Male
 Nainen / Female
 Kansallisuus / Nationality: Suomalainen / Finnish
 Muu / Non-Finnish
 Ammatti / Occupation: _____
Mikä tulee mieleesi kun katsot teoksia? Anna jokaiselle teokselle **yhden sanan (adjektiivi)**. / **What** comes to your mind when you are seeing each work? Please give **one word (adjective)** for each work.
 Teos nro. 1 / Work no. 1 _____
 Teos nro. 2 / Work no. 2 _____
 Teos nro. 3 / Work no. 3 _____
 Teos nro. 4 / Work no. 4 _____
 Teos nro. 5 / Work no. 5 _____
 Teos nro. 6 / Work no. 6 _____

Figure 8:
The small feedback form

Regarding “Get Sorted”, the material employed in the artwork did not influence the audience’s interpretations as strongly as its form and lace-like pattern did. The spectators gave quite the same words to this artwork as to the other artworks made from different materials but in the same form and technique. This phenomenon may imply that the dissimilar appearance of the three types of paper string was not explicit.

However, the same material that was also employed in “Private Area” seemed to influence the audience’s interpretations. Many interpretations were quite close to the artist’s. The appearance of the broken paper strings created the same association to the artist as to the audience (broken strings associated with barbwire). There were words given such as sharp [terävä], dangerous, hurting [satuttava] and spiky [piikikäs]. (Finnish-English translation by Minna Soinen) These words showed the way some spectators interpreted this artwork by associating what they were looking at with what they had experienced.

Case 2: “Sunrise” – how meaningful art objects are created in dialogue between the artist and a specific group

This case study investigates how an artist can intervene in a community in a transdisciplinary creation of ceramic art tiles. The aim is to support a transformation process of cultural identity.

A church community wanted art works for a funeral room (Figure 9). A meeting was settled as a focus group interview. This was based on action research methods where the users influence is important. It was also based on sociological engaged art where the aim is an interplay with the existing culture



Figure 9: The task; to create art with spiritual guidance in a mourning room.

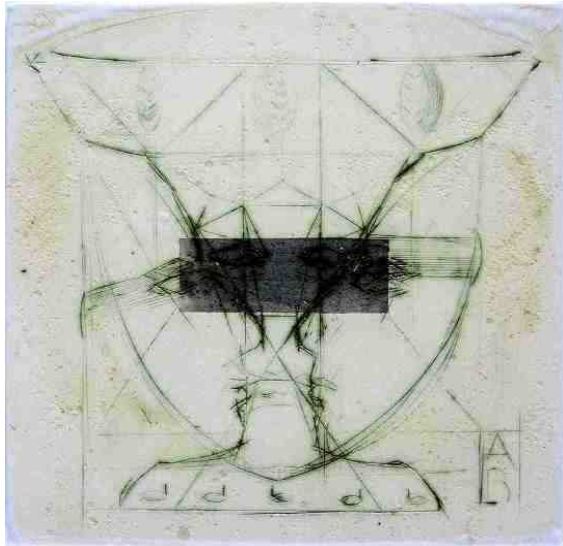


Figure 10 Example of porcelain tile; “Vanitas”

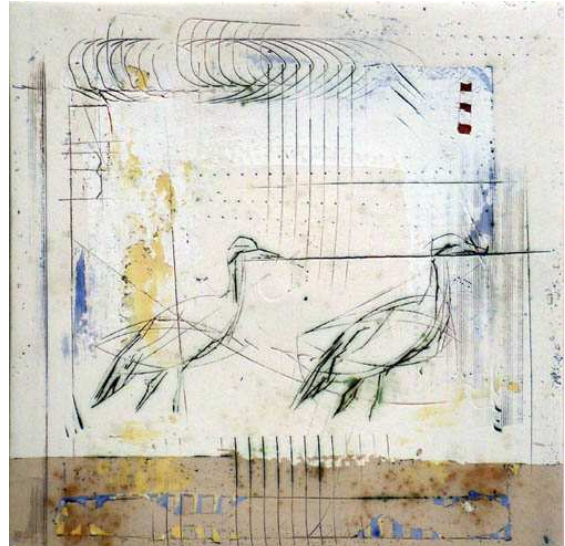


Figure 11 Example of porcelain tile; “Two birds”

A key quality for artists and designers is to be able to relate abstract and emotional feelings to concrete objects. In this case the users need to create an atmosphere of spiritual guidance were related to concrete examples of tiles (see Figure 10 and 11), with the question; do you more or less see qualities in these examples that refer to the things we have talked about?

“Tonight I woke up at four in the morning with a lot of ideas. Among others, there was an idea about a sunrise inside a coffin. Will it be a too powerful symbol that could work as preaching in a very vulnerable situation?” (From self-reflections recorded on a minidisk in the morning after the meeting)

This led to interesting discussions about associations. This seemed to be a good strategy because it involved the users. The values of the participants were made explicit, and associations and viewpoints were moving freely in the group.

In the funeral room, the architect rearranged chairs in several possible positions to adjust people in the room according to the views and functions. Fig. C was chosen (see Figure 12).

A novice priest proposed sunrise as a concept, instead of a bird, which not was a Christian symbol. Different meanings in the group were flowing.

The meeting provided a basic understanding of values, stories and ideas in the user group. This base represented a map, or a frame, or a touchstone, during the creation process.

Fig. 12

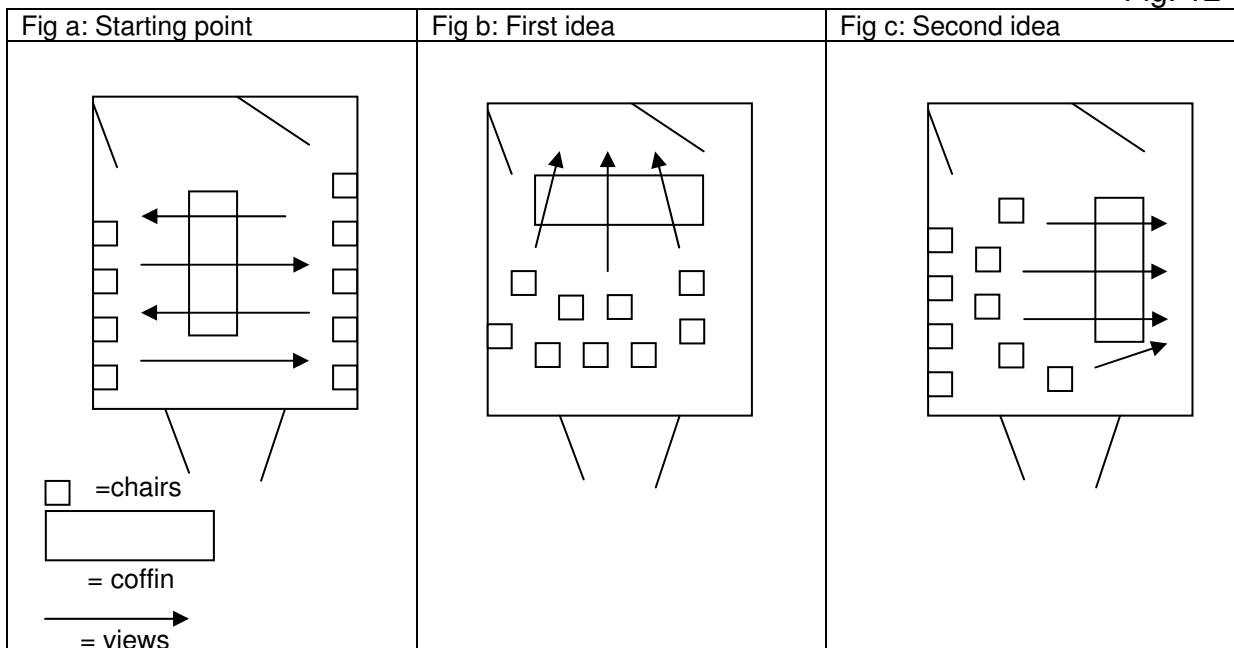




Figure 13: The tiles before the fire, with lines inscribed in the porcelain, metal colour oxides painted to fill the lines, and after being cleaned with a sponge, a technique derived from graphic copper etching.

During the process of making tiles, there are a number of stages where ideas, associations and colours can be introduced and manipulated. (figure 13) Expressions that was searched for during the making was to create lively lines, expressions of life, and open, abstract spaces, inviting but not pushing to associate. Moreover there had to be considerations of the colours in the funeral room, which were mainly in grey and wood.

In the studio technical challenges occurred. The tile surfaces became very vibrant in black and grey stochastic patterns, due to chemical glaze reactions. This could be associated to something burned or rotten, unsuitable for a funeral room (Figure 14).



Figure 14; surfaces unsuitable for a funeral room.

Next proposal was sent by e-mail to the art board in the regional art centre: some detailed images of parts (Figure 15)

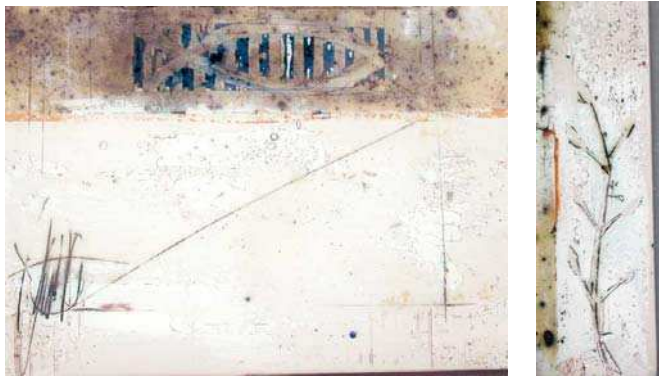


Figure 15; Theme proposals on e-mail for the art board.

They found the visual material too limited to make a decision. The tiles should be presented in real life. More tiles were made, with more focus on light blue, which seemed to be a beautiful and positively vibrant colour. There were made one main composition, and two more alternative compositions for the meeting

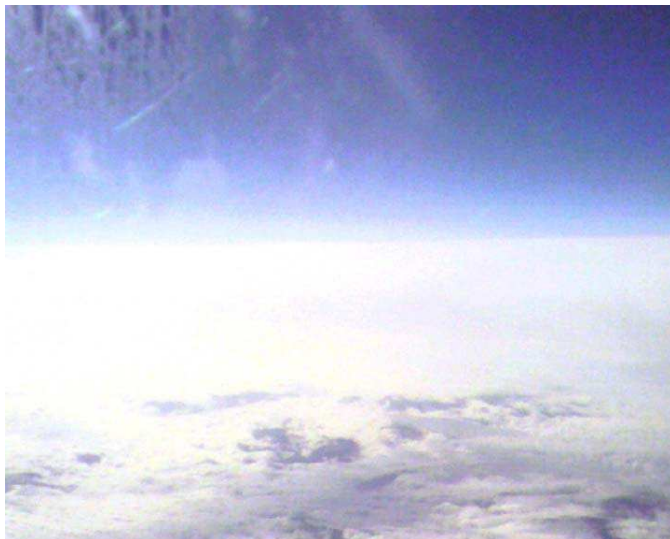


Figure 16: The blue sky seen from the plane

On the plane a series of photos were taken of the light blue sky above the clouds (see Figure 16).

“When I took photos of the blue sky above the cloudy mountains, I knew that the light blue colour in the images corresponded with the feeling we were all aiming for.”(See Figure 16 and 17.)

“The basic idea of this work was the sunrise, with light gliding in and out of areas, in relation to the wall behind. The different levels, the contradictions, the matt and the glossy, the cold and the warm, the vertical and the horizontal, are all representations of life and death, earth and heaven, water and air, what comes toward us (golden colours) and what seems to go away and disappear (blue colours).” (From the artists explanation to the art board at the Regional Art Centre)

The light blue colour can represent both hope and melancholy. It is positive and friendly. Another reflection about the composition was related to the funeral room, when the composition was approved by the reference group:

“ I have this strong feeling: It is important that the composition on the wall will be bigger than the coffin, to create a feeling that something gets bigger, and not smaller, and that the view is lifted up.”



Figure 17: A white and blue tile



Figure 18: A white dove on a porcelain tile represents the holy spirit that is a relevant theological viewpoint.



Figure 19: The funeral room after the art installation

The art in the funeral room was officially presented for the church community a Sunday in late autumn. The project was described in the Sunday brochure. The funeral room was opened and people could come in and see, and ask or comment if they wanted. In the brochure the church representative writes about the commissioned art project:



Figure 17: the Church community's Sunday brochure

From the Sunday Brochure:

The Artist Arild Berg has the last year challenged some of us to think and to tell stories. To him it was a new thing to make art for a church. Not at least art for a funeral room. He would like to know what we, who works in, and the users of, the church, thought. What he got to hear from our thoughts has been influencing his work. Therefore it was a big experience to see the result. It was like a mirror which discovers something about what we think about in a funeral room. The mixture of abstract and concrete motifs says something about both wondering and clear thoughts. The ceramic tiles can be experienced either one by one or together. Without any demands from the artist, I choose my favourite tile "The fish!" – the secret sign of Him who always follows us.

Objects and experiential qualities

An artefact can be seen as a sign, a symbol of identity or a representation of values. Examples of this can be national costumes or life style clothes. Art and design objects can be developed to gain experiential qualities that could be perceived by both practitioners and audience. In this section, the similarities and differences in the two cases are analysed. The analysis identifies and explains some phenomena in both the creative processes and the way of thinking.

As can be seen in both case studies, art objects are created as a test space of thoughts and ideas. Without the artefacts and their production, there would be a limited understanding of the unique creative processes. Material expression is present in both cases. It is explored how materials could contain any expressive qualities and what that specific qualities might be. Different materials, surfaces and colours are used to communicate the concepts and the metaphors. Both the broken paper strings and the stochastic ceramic surfaces created expressive qualities, which created new meanings to the themes.

In both cases there are references to bodily experiences in the creation process. Associations to earlier material experience are present in the creation process of the paper strings. The artist was touching the paper string, and simultaneously, felt being touched by the string.

This is in correspondence with Heidegger's Dasein (being-human). It can be touched by objects and other Daseins. (Heidegger, 1990:82). According to Dreyfus in his book *Being-in-the-world: A commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, Division 1, "Objects can touch in the sense of physical contact (a metaphorical sense), but they cannot touch each other in the sense of mattering to each other (a literal sense)" (Dreyfus, 1992:44).

The bodily experience is also represented in how the tiles should be installed in relation to the coffin. The creative process in expressing meaning is related to how we act to represent meaning in pre linguistic ways: Julia Kristeva is a psychoanalyst and philosopher. She writes:

When the fight between the imaginative creative process (art, literature) and the depression unfolds exactly on the threshold between the symbolic and the biological, we can state that the narration, or the reasoning, origins from the primary processes. The rhythms, the alliterations and comprehensions is shaping the transformation of a message, of information. Is it from then that poetry, and more generally, the style which carries the secret sign of poetry, witnesses concurred depression? (Kristeva 1994, Translation by author Berg)

The embodied meaning is related to the inner experience of the artist, which is expressed and represented in a bodily dialogue with the material.

Metaphors and representations are frequently mentioned experiential qualities in the practice in both cases. The dresses are metaphors for human being in the world. The symbols in the funeral room represent different values for the user group.

The quality of the material or the surface colour evidently adds meanings to the metaphors. This is represented in the way the paper knots are made or the focus on light blue on the tiles.

In both cases phenomena such as memories, associations and experiences are explained. These phenomena are related to self-reflections, group-reflections and discussions. Interpretation is an ongoing process in all levels of the cases. The Interpretation of the meaning is related to self-reflection, association and the values of the involving people in generating inner understanding and judgements during the process.

Experience accumulated in the creative process can be evaluated in terms of reflection-in-action. According to Schön (1983, 139), a practitioner's experience is a collection of examples, images, understandings, and actions. Once the practitioner sees the present situation similar to the situation he has experience before, he will act in the present situation as in the past one. Scrivener (2002a) explains Schön's term--reflection-in-action--as the primary cognitive means to handle unexpected results and situations, and to resolve the unexpected, i.e. the learning process of the practitioner. The reflection should be recorded and reported in a systematic way. Scrivener (2002b, 37-38) also points out that the documentation of reflection-in-action will support the practitioner's reflections on his practice and that makes the project consisting of creative production becomes more accessible. Intention is the factor that makes the creative production distinguished from the routine art and design making.

The two cases take different approaches to their audience. In Case 1, the audience is not defined from the start, but in Case 2, the target group is defined from the start and is used as a base for the project. The artists also evaluate their projects with different means. Case 1 uses a feedback form, while Case 2 observes the user group and analyse the local newspaper. This is reflected in that the titles of art objects and installation in the first case are given as an entrance to the content. In Case 2, familiar motifs are integrated in the objects.

Conclusion

The documentation of the subjective process from insiders in real life cases, gives valuable insight into the creative process. The images contribute in significant ways to the documentation of the phenomenon. Art and design practices are intricate phenomena involving many kinds of knowledge. A greater focus on these qualities, related to a subjective approach and inner experiences, can contribute to the research on how expression and experience can be developed

in methods used in art and design. These insights are knowledge related to the creative process, like different expressions by material experimentation, bodily experience, involvement of people and interpretation of metaphors. The knowledge also includes self-understandings that produced the experiential qualities contained in artefacts – the result of art and design practices.

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