Object Narratives: storytelling through objects

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A CRITICAL AND PROCESS DOCUMENTATION PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF DESIGN

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank my parents for their selfless and unconditional support for me to pursue my dreams.

I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to my supervisor Keith H. Doyle for his knowledgeable and constructive guidance through my research. With his support, I became more confident and have faith in my work.

Thanks to Hélène Day Fraser for being my internal reviewer to share her insights and to provide valuable advice.

Thanks to all the faculty members, Louise St-Pierre, Laura Kozak, Deborah Shackleton, Garnet Hertz, Christopher Hethrington, Katherine Gillieson, Craig Badke, Gillian Russell for their instructions, conversations and opinions.

Thanks to Darlene Nairne, from the Ceramics Studio, for her technical support in making my ideas come true.

Thanks to Lucy Kinsella and Heather Fitzgerald for their editorial support on this documentation.

Thanks to Emily Carr University for this opportunity to learn, explore and research.

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ABSTRACT the vase as a medium

Abstract the vase as a medium

This thesis explores the political and the narrative nature of objects. It questions how we can "charge objects with issues" (Marres, 2012), and looks at the ways we build up stories through objects. In order to explore these questions more comprehensively, it considers why we need to tell stories, and what kind of stories can be told through objects. The focus of this body of work is not the functional improvement of objects; rather critical design objects are used to trigger and mobilize thoughts and reflections from the audience who will view those objects, or participate in the scenarios formed through those objects. Through critical design and a practice-led approach, the historical origin of domestic objects, and their capacity to embody our humanity and hold our attention are explored. The work focuses specifically on ceramics as a medium to tell stories.

The humble vase has not only served as an ambassador of cultural exchange but a witness to history. This document introduces a historical context of cultural and economic trade and exchange and brings forth contemporary examples of storytelling through objects. A historical survey of Ming to Delft trade initiated the work and helped me consider aesthetic appropriation of culture, and the contexts that inform making. My practiceled projects incorporate traditional craft processes and skill development, supported by case studies of contemporary design practitioners, and the logic and inspiration behind their work.

The main methods at play in my research are heuristic study, survey, and material practice (learning through making). I have focused on how different objects (singular) can tell different stories as well as how a collection of objects (multiple) can tell stories. Through this exploration, and in order to understand my context for making, I learned skills of making in a traditional craft: ceramics. I gained knowledge from expert craftsmen by working with them in a professional studio. I explored ideas and concepts of contemporary decolonization through a practice of making. Material agency enabled me to piece together and reconstruct stories related to my personal experience, social events and the relationship between people and objects.

Keywords

Critical design Storytelling Social study Material practice



Glossary

Critical design

Critical design is a practice that differs from traditional industrial or product design. In critical design, designers not only focus on the functional improvement or fiscal gain of products, but also use industrial or product design to mobilize debate and inquiry into matters of concern (Malpass, 2017).

Storytelling

Storytelling is a way of passing knowledge and experience. In my research, storytelling does not mean telling stories with explicit details, but using stories as the resource and inspiration for the creative process.

Learning through Making

Learning through making is a way of obtaining knowledge through handson experience. Making generates knowledge and encourages exploring the condition and potential in human life, and also offers profound reflections on personal knowledge, the meaning of design and the work of the hand (Ingold, 2013).

Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic inquiry is a method of investigating and exploring human lived experience (Sultan, 2019), and is a dedicated pursuit inspired by a hunger for new insights and revelation. (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985)

Craft

Craft is a concept of shaping and is difficult to verbalize (Harrod, 2018). Craft represents the artefact from any culture, in this document, craft means the traditional artefacts of ceramics.

Political Objects

Political objects are the ones with the potential to project a particular role, to bring in positive and negative environmental and social side effects, and to embody specific forms of issues (Winner, 1980).

Affirmative Objects

Affirmative objects are subject to problem solving and changes to suit consumer's needs (Dunne & Raby, 2009). Those objects usually focus on functionality and the utilitarian values.

Contemporary Decolonization

Decolonization means the change of a community's attitude; it represents breaking free from the constraints that were given by a different group, outside of the community, to spontaneously and symbolically reclaim the autonomy of self-identification (Betts, 2008). In this thesis, Contemporary Decolonization means using traditional Chinese ceramic techniques, that have been constantly colonized by European culture, to tell stories in a contemporary social context.

The Audience

The audience for my projects are people interested in design, who are willing to participate with objects in a domestic setting, or in an exhibition space. Differing from the traditional exhibition concept, where lies clearly distinguished boundaries between viewers and presented work, the exhibition space for my projects leans closer to a more open and participatory workshop. In my presented work, there is a dynamic flow from static pictorial representation, to constructed scenarios actively inviting participation.

Note to reader

Throughout the author's descriptions of Material Exploration, the main descriptive text is accompanied by sidebars to complement the main text with additional anecdotes, which provide personal and sentimental commentary with additional background behind the material exploration.





Introduction It's learning through making

Objects have a political and narrative agency (Verbeek, 2005). Our lives are packed with affirmative design products that are valued for their practical functionality, optimization, and efficiency (Dunne & Raby, 2009). However, objects can also function in more symbolic and evocative ways, forming a relationship around and with their users (Walker, 2011). As designers, we can tell stories through features and functions of objects. We do so in order to provoke reflection and discussion on specific events and as a means to reconsider the role and significance of daily objects in our lives. In storytelling through objects, designers act as storytellers, they shift the "focus beyond efficient use to embrace uncertainty, interpretation, and meaning" (Malpass, 2017, p.62).

Storytelling is a way to pass on knowledge and experience about where we come from, our past mistakes, and the future directions we will take. Stories helps us to understand ourselves better and make better choices when facing a similar situation. Like the fable, The Lion, the Ass, and the Fox tells us, we learn from the experience and misfortunes of others.

"A Lion, Fox and Ass are all hunting together. They all gathered a huge amount of food and now had to decide how to divide it. The Lion asked the Ass to divide the food. So, the Ass chose to divide the potions equally. This made the Lion, the king of beasts angry and with his paw he killed the Ass. The Lion then asked the Fox to divide the food. The Fox wasted no time. He quickly gave a huge heap to the Lion and only kept a small portion to himself. The Lion asked the Fox, who taught you to divide so fairly? The Fox replies, I learned from the Ass."

The Lion, the Ass, and the Fox (Aesop, 1994)

When we talk about mundane everyday objects, we often ignore or neglect the added symbolic layers and importance that mundane objects play in our lives. The sheer ubiquity of these objects masks how important they are. We make the objects, and the objects make us as well (Verbeek, 2005). Despite this, we often fail to see how the objects we interact with and form our habits and routines, and in doing so our perspectives and sense of self.

Studying, working, and living - we all have gained very specific routines, some of which have influenced our way of behaving. Through making to know (Ingold, 2007) I have observed that the more I integrate daily objects into my routines, the less attention I pay to relationships and connections within my daily life, and these objects and actions often become taken for granted (Ling, 2012). I am interested in rebuilding those connections through acts and artifacts of questioning - through lived experiences and design research activities. I use these to explore if an active regard for the objects around us can aid in regaining an awareness of the silent interconnections that occur between individuals, communities, and societies.

My master's thesis project has also been an exploration into the ontological existence of daily objects to which we are so habituated. Like other designers (Hella Jongerius, Formafantasma, etc.) I have engaged in material practice as a means to question general understandings of cultural and popular issues. As well as through the making and the assembly of objects that I have created, I have embedded my knowledge and experiences (Fisher, Pazzani, & Langley, 2014).

It is important to note that my design does not end at the moment it comes in contact with the user; Parallel with Latour's observation of the Actor-Network-Theory (Latour, 2007), I understand my design to really begin when it arrives in the hand of the user - it starts from there.

HISTORICAL CONCEPT OF CERAMIC AS THE STORYTELLING MEDIUM



Historical concept of ceramic as the storytelling medium

"Design is not about products. Design is about relationships. Cultural and historical awarenesses are woven into the DNA of any worthwhile product." (Jongerius & Schouwenberg, 2015)

Over the past 14 months, in my work, the vase has been a key narrative medium for stories related to my personal experience, social issues and the relationship between people and objects. In Spring 2018, I began researching the history and origin of Delftware, Chinese, Ming Dynasty, blue-and-white ceramics and the trade routes between China and Northern Europe.

I came to realize that trade is not only the reflection of economy, but also the extension of politics and the interaction of culture. Trade holds a narrative true to the history and culture of exchange. It turns out that the modest bud vase, the commodity of exchange between two cultures, was a very powerful political object. Ceramic housewares of blue-and-white porcelain have simultaneously hosted Chinese and European culture, values and the representation of daily lives. In the 16th century the Dutch came to know the Ming blue-and-white ceramics due to trade growing between the East and West (Xi, 2017). Chinese blue-and-white ceramic, also known as Qing Hua Ci was the original inspiration of Delftware.

Chinese blue-and-white porcelain developed over a 1000-year period. It originated in the Tang and Song dynasty, evolved in the Yuan dynasty, became the mainstream porcelain during the Ming dynasty and peaked in the late Qing dynasty (Jun, 2015). In the 16th century, the Dutch royal court started collecting porcelain from Ming China. This coincided with the flourishing maritime "Silk Road" and the development of the shipbuilding industry. Through these maritime routes, increasing amounts of Chinese porcelain was imported from China to Europe. The Silk Road became the main route for exporting Chinese porcelain to Europe (Qian-gong, 2008), causing the trade of porcelain from China to expand dramatically.

In the early 17th century, in response to the popularity of the Chinese goods, the Dutch royalty established their own ceramic factory (Jun, 2015) to mimic and appropriate the Chinese blue-and-white porcelain style. The Dutch factory adopted a similar manner of recording stories on ceramics. Instead of applying images of cranes and plum blossom, however, the Dutch created their own life scenes. In doing so, they colonized and claimed emblematic power over the original culture and fables that Chinese porcelain carried. Objects whose forms derived from China were modified and appropriated. Images portraying Dutch culture and value now replaced the original Chinese motifs (Jackson & Jaffer, 2004). Over a period of 200 years, the Dutch developed their own aesthetic emphasis for ceramics. Starting in the late 18th century, those ceramics with Dutch features were exported back to China and had reciprocal impact on Chinese design and motif portraying a more pervasive and homogeneous fable. The backflow of Dutch-colonized porcelain in China demonstrates the European lifestyles and the connotation of cultural exchange between China and Europe.

The diagram below that I created demonstrates the chronological relationship between different dynasties in China, different ages in Europe and the developing condition of Chinese and Dutch blue-and-white ceramics.



Figure 1. The historical diagram of Chinese and Dutch blue-and-white ceramics





MEANING OF TELLING STORIES THROUGH



Meaning of telling stories through objects

Stories have different functions in our lives. They can help us to remember significant events through memorial and commemoration and they can also help us to rethink our relationship with the ubiquitous objects around US.

Remembering is also a means of knowledge generation; in that act of remembering we analyze and reflect on events from the past or near past. In her book, The Ethics of Memory, Avishai Margalit questions if we are "obligated to remember people and events from the past?" (Margalit, 2004). This resonates with me insofar as "that the ethics of memory is not just a branch of religion, traditionalism or moralism." (Margalit, 2004) This act of reflection and remembering gives us a new perspective that might not necessarily have been accessible in the moment.

Objects contain the potential to help people to remember and gain knowledge through the process of remembering. In Taoism, objects are understood and engaged with on different levels. The basic level treats objects as useful tools created by human beings. In this level objects are mainly seen as physical machinery/tools. In the next level, we see objects as the reflection of the way we live and behave. The final level acknowledges that we are independent individuals who decide how we embed our values into the objects around us through our participation and interaction with objects (Chung, 2013).

Objects can be created to trigger and remind the public of what happened and how certain events changed people's lives. The stories embedded in commemorative objects are explicit and the way of seeing and experiencing the story is explicit as well. Before the late 1990s, for example, it was common for many Chinese families to have an enamel mug with Mao's portrait on it. For my parents' generation, this was a way to



remember the great leader of our country and to share their common zeitgeist. For special events, such as the anniversary for our country's establishment, special edition mugs, coins or stamps would be released as a souvenir for remembering the specific occasion. This way of remembrance, although connected to small things, is similar to the role of architecture that acts as memorial (Bonder, 2009). In seeing these types of objects, as with an architectural site, people are drawn to remember a specific story or event based on the visual cues provided by the designers of these objects/sites.

Figure 2. Three different level of understanding and engaging with objects in Taoism

What stories can reveal to us are not only imaginary vistas, but also moral boundaries and social expectations (Williams, 2009). Like what fables can do for us when we are facing dilemmas, doubts and uncertainties in our lives, the past experience and knowledge that are embedded in fable stories will guide us in a moral direction.

A story in The Analects of Confucius says that - what you do not wish for yourself, do not impose on others (Confucius & Waley, 1989). This story shows the moral boundary we should follow, so do some stories in Aesop's Fables, for example the story of the Hungry Wolf and the Lamb indicates that a bad excuse is good enough for a bully (Aesop, 1994). It also affirms a similar moral boundary when interpreting relationships between individuals.

Stories can also teach us about social expectations which help us to be more related to and responsible for society. The Strong Bundle of Sticks tells the truth that in a community it is always stronger being united than being divided (Aesop, 1994). There is a surprising overlap of the connotations behind Chinese stories and Western ones; a Chinese saying exhorts that it is easy to break one chopstick, but it is more difficult to break a bundle of them. All these stories employ admonishment as a tactic to exemplify certain guiding boundaries and expectations.

There are many different ways of telling stories through objects. Onkar Kular notes that designers use many forms of storytelling, but that the more contemporary use of design storytelling is to form scenarios as a means to arise empathy and desire among audiences (Kular, 2016). One such example would be the series of re-skinned vases and vessels by Hella Jongerius. These vases are inspired by Ming vases from China, she

objects.

experiments with adding contemporary 'skins' to traditional materials (Schouwenberg & Verweij, 2003) in order to tell contemporary stories about history, during which knowledge is refreshed and regained through



Everyday objects and their significance

"Everyday products are used, seen, touched. The tactile and expressive qualities of materials are important means of communication." (Jongerius & Schouwenberg, 2015)

When you are tired, there is a couch you can rest on. When you are thirsty, grab a cup to fetch water, instead of holding water with your bare hands. I want to bring attention to the presence of these types of objects around us and to consider how these nuanced interactions can impact our lives. Being aware of these objects and the daily actions that are triggered by our interactions with them, changes the way we see our relationships with everyday objects.

The daily activities we perform consist of our relationships with other individuals and with objects. Every small thing has its own role and nuanced values associated with it. It is important to see everyday products for more than what they appear to be. Everyday objects embody an Emotional Quotient (Colman, 2008) a term derived from scientific fields that describes the human skills of managing interpersonal relationships. There is a plethora of theories in the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology that elaborate on how to recognize, understand, categorize and perform in human-to-human relationships. Although within our society, it is necessary to learn how to understand and deal with the relationships between people, I believe it is also an ethical imperative (Margalit, 2004) to realize and respect the embodied emotional quotients of human-to-object relationships.

Many times we pay little attention to the everyday objects around us. We are accustomed to those objects that we keep using every day: the bed, the sofa, the chair, a teapot. What if, one day these objects suddenly disappeared and there was nowhere to keep doing the daily actions of resting on the bed, lying o of tea to drink?

This hypothetical moment of discomfort would trigger us to reflect on how those objects play a significant role in our lives - we would recognize the stability and comfort those objects bring to us. When an object functions or appears in a different way than what we may expect, we react. The new scenario triggers us to think differently. Objects have an immense capacity to stabilize us in our everyday. As such they have important emotional value. Objects can also be made political in order to provoke people to rethink the way we live - the value they hold.

resting on the bed, lying on the sofa, sitting on the chair, or pouring a cup

THE MULTIPLE ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

The multiple role of contemporary design

This research has explored and added to my perspectives on the possibilities for an expanded role of design. Prior to taking on this work, for me, design research and practice meant simply making a tangible solution according to a particular utilitarian function. Through my work, however, design has shown a different face. I have come to see its important capacity to serve as a platform for the intangible, for those invisible stories that function as educational tools that can ignite people's thoughts.

By repositioning the utility of objects and focusing on their political or spiritual aspects, we begin to consider objects in a new light. The design process can result in more than a utilitarian product, but can also result in a more spiritual self-actualization. Through design, I come to know both the users and myself. My research is comprised of heuristic inquiry, making to know and material practice. Objects have been made and used throughout and explored as a tool and narrative medium.

This research explores the expanding interdisciplinary scope of a contemporary design practice. The expanded role that a contemporary design practice affords a designer is the ability to determine and find a vehicle for ideas in objects of everyday use (Schouwenberg & Verweij, 2003). I design objects as the medium for stories that explore my lived experience and the reflections that arise from it. My lived experience includes the knowledge I gained through observation and material practice, self-reflection upon human behaviors when negative social incidents occur, and also the curiosity of finding insights about the nuanced relationships between people and objects.

STORYTELLING THROUGH OBJECTS

Storytelling through objects

How do I tell stories?

During this research, I have been experimenting with means of storytelling through objects. There are many ways of employing and utilizing an object to tell stories. In recounting my research practice, I will mainly focus on three different stages:

First, I tend to tell visual stories, by combining and applying different graphic elements to the surface of ceramic plates, teapots, teacups, and vases. The images I create often represent stories I gather from the news. Pictorially they are explicit and straightforward.

Second, I move on from the use of surface level appliqué to a more structural engagement with my objects. I alter the physical body of vases to form implicit stories. In this way, my approach to storytelling evolves from the pictorial plane to the three dimensional - providing the objects with the ability to tell new stories through their physical form.

Finally, I move my attention from the ability of an applied and embodied story to the exploration of how a group of objects in proximity to one another can illustrate or relate stories to an audience.

The types of stories I tell

There are two types of stories I am telling through objects:

The first type of story is explicit. I simply choose stories from the media, provide an illustration and apply decals, marks or textures to the surface. These stories usually have a clear plot development. For example, I have applied stories about my own life in my material explorations, this has been done through the use of representative and graphic symbols, such as maps and birds. I have also used stories that are widely distributed in society. For example, when a child is missing, and/or murdered, all the media will report about it and the public will be outraged to condemn society and the system. When the heat of this story cools down with time, people gauge that is flat - forget about it gradually. When a similar incident happens again, media will use the same approach to render and report the story, and people will react the same way that they did before. I believe perhaps we should come up with a follow up question about why we did not learn from the previous story and prevent it from happening again. In order to remember and reflect on what is happening around us right now, I use ceramic objects to record stories. I capture stories from the news and use them as the inspiring source for concept creation and material practices; all the emotion, assumption and reflection the stories brought to me, catalyze the reaction and interaction between me and the objects I make. One project from my material exploration was inspired by a shameful story I came across on the news and it reflects my intention to remember that incident and my hope to learn a lesson from it.



Figure 3. Snapshot of teacups with birds

The second type of stories that I work with are implicit. Instead of expressing stories in a literal way, indicating 'conflict' through language in a two-dimensional degree, I tend to let the expressions occur through physical elements of the vases. I deconstruct the vases and manipulate their structural elements to form stories that represent concepts related to the significance of objects around us. Furthermore, those vases also have the potential to form a scenario in which the audience can participate and interact with those objects.

By telling different types of stories and exploiting the political¹ and narrative features of objects, this research also provides a means for the audience to recognize and understand the relationship between ourselves, objects, and the actions that these objects enable, forming a more reflective awareness. By participating in scenarios formed with these objects, the audience would find moments of discomfort or difficulty adapting which could trigger their awareness of the roles and nuanced actions these objects play.

¹ Political feature: The feature that enables objects to be charged with issues that affect





Summer fieldwork

In order to obtain a better understanding of Chinese ceramic craft, I took up residence in a traditional ceramic production studio in China for two weeks.

In the factory that I worked, I observed the daily routine of the expert craftsmen there. They were very busy, producing a large order commissioned by a Beijing artist. All the vases they were making were of a traditional order incorporating a magpie perched on a plum blossom branch - a symbol of auspice.

The production process can be divided into several stages: mold making, the first firing (bisque firing), underglaze painting, glazing, and finally the second firing (glaze firing). There are separate studios in the factory according to these different stages.

The studio I was working in was the underglaze painting studio which is located in the most internal part of the factory. Every time I went to the studio, I had to pass through the whole underglaze painting studio where thousands of bisqued vases were piled up on shelves. The underglaze painting studio had the most craftsmen. A very detailed way of organizing and dividing the work among craftsmen was applied in this studio. Every craftsman went through thorough training as an apprentice before becoming considered an expert.

There is an invisible assembly line in the factory, after the first firing, all the bisqued wares are sent to the underglaze painting studio. Craftsmen in the underglaze painting studio then take over and start with drafting and transferring of the graphic², and finish by painting with pigments. After that, all the bisqued wares are sent to the glazing studio for a final coat of transparent glaze. Then the whole production process is complete after the

second firing (glaze firing).

I noticed that in the underglaze painting studio, the workload of painting with pigments is broken into several distinct parts. For example, in an order commissioned by a Beijing artist, there were different graphic elements, such as magpies, plum blossoms, tree stems, and stones. Some of the craftsmen took on the task of painting only the blossom petals, others focused only on the feathers of the magpies, while another group worked solely on painting the color of the stones, and so on.

These vases might depict a static story on the surface that represents best wishes from the artists. However, the vase itself holds a more dynamic story that describes the working routine of those craftsmen behind the process of making the vase. All the deliberate modifications and unconscious embellishments enrich the vases.

While working in the ceramic studio, I adopted the same schedule as the master craftsmen. My days there started by observing and talking to them, then I turned to my own practice. I kept practicing the process of drafting and transferring the graphic, and of painting with pigment. I gained the basic skill of making ceramics and explored storytelling through objects in an early stage, which laid a foundation for my later practice.

).

² Drafting and transferring of the graphic: The first stage in the underglaze painting process. It means drafting a frame of the image on semi-transparent paper with pencils, then transferring the draft by scrubbing the semi-transparent paper on the ceramic surface so the mark of the drafted frame can be used as a reference for underglaze painting.
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Contemporary examples

Hella Jongerius

"Aesthetic value is a potent means of communication. Ugliness is also a potent means of communication." (Jongerius & Schouwenberg, 2015)

As a pioneering Dutch designer, Hella Jongerius has many projects that consider the relationship and communication between humans and objects. From her perspective, it is not necessarily a design practice formed from scratch; there are a lot of qualities we can seek to apply to objects on different levels. In an interview in 2013, Jongerius states that endowing objects with a new skin (Dezeen, 2013) makes a new design. In her opinion, avoiding designing new forms allows a designer to explore a new dimension, a different function or story of a familiar form (Schouwenberg & Verweij, 2003).

Jongerius tends not to dictate how the user should use and interact with her work, but rather seeks to anticipate the current tendency and future needs of her audience; because she thinks that through the spontaneous participation of using her design objects or space, the users will inevitably attach their own significance, incorporate their own media and establish their own presence within the objects or space (Adea, 2014). Her projects, Giant Prince and Prince and Princess are vases that have perforated images inspired by Ming vases from museum archives. They aim to translate a traditional ceramic technique and expression into a contemporary condition. By changing the skin of existing objects, Jongerius creates new stories that represent contemporary life and stimulate people to see things in a different way (Jongerius & Schouwenberg, 2003). A new design idea or knowledge arises from the process of experimenting with traditional materials (Jongerius & Schouwenberg, 2003). Prince and Princess, Hella Jongerius, 2000





Figure 4. Jongerius, 2000

> Figure 5. Giant Prince, Hella Jongerius, 2000

Rare Earthenware

Rare Earthenware is a project by Liam Young and Kate Davies of a nomadic design research studio called The Unknown Fields Division. Their work also involves a collaboration with photographer, Toby Smith and artist, Kevin Callaghan. This project is part of the exhibition, What is Luxury? in 2015, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London UK, which interrogated the idea of luxury today. Rare Earthenware traced the trade routes from manufacturer to consumer, all the way back to the origin of our luxury electronic devices. This project consists of three vases and a film that documents the supply chain of electronic devices. The three vases were made from radioactive mud retrieved from a tailings lake in Inner Mongolia. Each vase is made from the same amount of toxic clay generated in the production of a smartphone, a laptop, and the cell of a Smart Car respectively (Russel, 2017). "The three vases are presented as objects of desire, but their elevated radiation levels and toxicity make them objects we would not want to possess (Carter 2015)."

As consumers, we simply need to go to any number of stores to purchase the newest smartphone, and it seems that there is no need for consumers to be aware of, or understand what is behind this chunk of aluminum wrapped silicon. We jump into the stage of using the final products directly, and it seems that we are granted access to possess and use a smartphone in the contemporary era while ignoring the production process. Naturally, we seem to neglect what it takes to present what is in front of us.

This project peels off all the complicated and mysterious coats that cover the process of manufacturing those electronic devices. The Rare Earthenware team went to the factories where smartphones are manufactured and then traced back the raw materials to mining operations. This project advocates for people to think about their own conception of luxury, and possessions critically and encourages people to form a stronger sensibility towards the objects we use. The three vases that were made with radioactive clay are a medium for stories that are embedded with traces of human activities, influencing ourselves and the world.



Figure 6. Rare Earthenware, The Unknown Fields Division, 2015

The Material of A Natural Disaster

The Material of A Natural Disaster, from the Swedish designer, Hilda Hellstrom, is made from the radiated soil from Fukushima, Japan. It consists of four slightly radioactive vessels. It is hard for the general public to imagine what life is like in a land that has been contaminated by extremely dangerous chemicals released wholesale by a combination of human error and natural disaster. This project turned an event that seems so remote into seemingly normative objects (Marres, 2012) that we could be in contact with every day. It tells a story about rebirth and evolution.

From a common perspective, after the chemical and nuclear radiation leak, the land is wasted, uninhabitable, affording no direct value for inhabitation. While Hilda used soil from Fukushima to create objects, she imbued those objects with raw natural elements endowing stories that fundamentally changed our perspective on the artifacts and the world. Incorporating these raw materials provides a footing for the narrative capacity of objects and shows how powerful those objects can be when they play the role as the central storytelling medium. Like a phoenix reborn from the ashes, stories about the natural disaster are generated from the mud of that abandoned land. At the same time, it provides a hint to people about how we identify ourselves and our relationship with the objects and the organic environment around us, because personal identities are defined by the narratives that we weave around ourselves (Kular, 2016).





Figure 7. The Material of A Natural Disaster, Hilda Hellstrom, 2012

Moulding Tradition

Studio Formafantasma is an Italian designer duo based in Amsterdam. Their project Moulding Tradition is a set of ceramic objects that are made up of vases, bowls, and bottles that represent stories about immigration, assimilation and historical cross-flow between North Africa and Italy (Trimarchi & Farresin, 2010).

Different shapes represent different scenes in Italy related to immigration and labour, such as fruit harvesting, or immigrants coming in on boats. Each ceramic object includes pictorial portraits of immigrants, combined with data about them, and news to form the stories that trigger reflection about the identity of, and the issues connected to immigrants. Work like this affords a clarity and understanding to issues of immigration and cultural exchange more objectively and comprehensively. This project helps people to realize our position in society by playing with a combination of individual objects.

Moulding Tradition addresses current attitudes and opinions that Italian society has against African immigrants. It also draws the viewer's' attention to historical ties to immigration, when immigrants within Italy were favoured as positive members of the workforce. In grouping the ceramic forms together, Studio Formafantasma creates a complex scenario that provides an imaginary and reflective space for the public to reexamine their relationships with immigration.

the image can be retrieved from: https://www.formafantasma.com/filter/home/moulding-tradition

Figure 8. Moulding Tradition, Formafantasma, 2010

the image has been removed due to copyright restrictions



Material Exploration

Summer marked the divide of my research focus. The historical survey of ceramic artefacts and those contemporary design practitioners who communicate stories through them, made me curious about how one can build stories by applying a new surface to mundane ceramic objects. I also longed to explore the possibilities of storytelling in the contemporary social context. This curiosity directed me to my material exploration and field observation in the summer. Since I started working at the ceramic studio in China in the summer of 2018, the emphasis of my research has been shifting from theoretical inquiry to material exploration. I explored different ways of storytelling through ceramics, and experienced the conversation and interaction with materials by getting my hands dirty.

In this more concrete stage of my research, I have three different levels of exploration that use material to tell stories. Each level is getting deeper from the graphic elements on the surface, to the physical body of the vases, and finally to a dynamic participant-involved immersive interaction. The stories that inspired my creation and ran through the material exploration process have shifted from static, to flexible, to dynamic.

The Surface

I am inspired by the origin and production of traditional Chinese porcelain vessels. During my two-week residency at the Chinese ceramic factory, I observed how expert craftsmen practiced their skills and how they told stories that embedded traditional Chinese cultural characteristics. Through observing those craftsmen, I gained a deeper understanding of this form of craft, expression and storytelling which affords me a method to make, to learn, to feel and to explore.

In the studio, I encountered examples of traditional Chinese cultural

elements, which were formed many years ago and are rooted in language. After hundreds of years, these concepts are still flowing through our cultural and linguistic traditions. Images that appear on the vases emulate traditional Chinese painting; there are many common elements, for instance: plants, like plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemums, and animals, like horses, and magpies. In the Chinese language, there are a lot of idioms that represent different good wishes that use these elements - for example, a magpie standing on a plum blossom represents happiness. The craftsmen at the studio would play with these traditional visual elements constructing narratives through representation.

I created a lot of works in that studio. Some of the pieces were very intuitive: I had no determined goal that I planned to achieve, and I went anywhere my intuition took me. Some of the pieces were very narratively driven: I knew what my intention was to make this object; the story that inspired me was hovering around through the whole making process.

My first project, Self-Introduction, consisted of four plates, each with the outline of a different map: of China, Hunan province, Loudi city, and Xinhua town. In this project, I introduced myself visually and geographically by illustrating directly on raw ceramic vessels.

In China, the geography of the world is a compulsory course in middle school. All students are required to memorize maps and capital cities of different countries. Some of my friends from different places, however, cannot recognize the outline of most countries. This idea of demonstrating my background through the outline of my country, province, city, and town, came to me as an interesting way to tell a story about myself. came to me as an interesting way to tell a story about myself.



Figure 9. Self-Introduction #1 China



Figure 10. Self-Introduction #2 Hunan

This project explicitly conveyed background information about myself, which was expressed in a straightforward manner for the audience to understand. They easily picked up on the idea of identity being linked with symbolism behind this project. As my first attempt to tell stories through detailed pictorial representation, the results of this project encouraged me to explore storytelling through a more minimal and poetic manner.



Figure 11. Self-Introduction #3 Loudi



Figure 12. Self-Introduction #4 Xinhua

My second project contained three teacups, each covered with an image of a different bird: a crow, a Canada goose, and a magpie. Crows and Canada geese are everywhere in Vancouver, and they are symbolic of my fear, because they have a reputation of being aggressive and randomly attacking people. In Chinese culture, the crow represents bad luck, but the magpie represents good fortune.

I once heard a story that if you are scared of something, you should stand up and confront it. If a child is scared of lightning, their mother would tell them to draw the lightning on paper again and again; in the end, the child would conquer their fear of lightning. I know it is just a beautiful story that comforts children, but it does make some sense. In order to commemorate my first year living in a foreign country by myself, I left traces of my fear on teacups.

Teacups are ubiquitous objects in Chinese families. They originally represented Chinese tea culture. The slight shift of the teacup's shape and the frequency of their usage in Chinese families represents a change in people's attitudes towards tea, traditional Chinese culture and their lifestyles. I took an object that holds stories about a part of Chinese culture, and refreshed that object with my contemporary lived experience, which built up a brand-new story reflecting how I coped with a new living environment and society.



Figure 13. Teacup with Crow

I had never seen so many crows together before and I had never seen a Canada goose in my life until I moved to Vancouver. It was exciting and frightening in the beginning. Before I came to Canada. I received a lot of Figure 15. Teacup with Canada Goose tips from the internet about how to live in Vancouver safely. They say, Canada is a very safe country compared to the US, and it has a relatively low rate of crime. But there are two evil creatures, they attack people whenever they feel like doing so and they are beyond legal sanction, be careful! Stay away, when you see the crow and Canada goose. I kept that information in my mind carefully, and I always tried to be reverent when I saw a crow or a Canada goose, hoping they would not attack me out of nowhere. So far, the crow and goose have turned out to be nice birds.



Figure 14. Teacup with Magpie



My final summer project, Red, Yellow, Blue, consisted of a teapot with a red bottom, a yellow handle and a blue body, and one set of red cups, one set of yellow cups and one set of blue cups. This project is based on a story from the news. The story is about kindergarten teachers in China molesting their students within the educational group called Red, Yellow, Blue. These objects would resonate with the Chinese public, as this was a very well-known story in the Chinese media. I want to retell and emphasize the story with the intention of preventing people from forgetting this shameful incident. The objects in this project represent the media story I want to tell, and they also function in a utilitarian way. Every time I use them to make tea, the visual features of those objects aid in internal storytelling, affirming moral boundaries and my personal ethical compass.



Figure 16. Red, Yellow, Blue - Teapot #1



When I was making this project, this story kept haunting me. The whole story makes me feel extremely sad, for the kids, for their parents, for the system, and for society. We always learn from failures, but with the premise that we first have to realize and remember that we failed.



Figure 17. Red, Yellow, Blue - Teapot #2

Figure 18. Red, Yellow, Blue - Red Teacups



Figure 19. Red, Yellow, Blue - Yellow Teacups



Figure 20. Red, Yellow, Blue - Blue Teacups

As my projects evolved, I worked to provide less obvious reference in each outcome. I obscured stories, by embedding them into material and form. Interestingly enough, those who are already aware of my intent as a storyteller would immediately recall the origin and resonate with it. Inversely, individuals who had not previously encountered the story saw the items I had created as just another pretty tea set, which functions no differently from any other ubiquitous sets. By making it visually appealing, the object itself functions as the hook to catch the audience's curiosity in order to dig deeper into the meaning of this project, which affords me the opportunity to explain and interpret the background story for the audience. In this way, the project also benefits audience members without prior knowledge of the story.

The Body

Instead of elaborating on a specific inspiration for the skins of my vases (Dezeen, 2013), like Jongerius did, I began to explore the human body's materiality as a narrative device by deconstructing the vases, collapsing, cutting, and turning parts of the vessels into narrative elements. I started with abstractly modelling relationships between people. Upon reflection, the varying ceramic forms of inter-individual relationships remind me of the different structures of not only individual people, but an entire society or mutually entangled societies.

I created five different ceramic forms with parts that represent different possibilities of relationships. This is an attempt to explore a different means of storytelling, rooted in physical relationships and visual metaphors. By expressing explicitly through form but obscurely through content, this project gives the audience a free space of imagination and subjective selfprojection. Viewers might reflect on a more personal level with their own experience, or find affinity with the specific narratives I create through the vases.



Figure 21. Commitment





Figure 22. Conflict

Figure 23. (Self)-destruction


Figure 24. Utopia



Figure 25. Emergence

The second collection of vases I created is an internal argument, as I tried to consider and examine value and prejudice within society. My work can be separated into two parts, the unmodified and the modified. There are two vases with black pen marks mimicking the pre-surgery marks a plastic surgeon might make on someone's face or body. And there are four halfand-half vases, consisting of one half with a hewn surface and one half with a shiny, smooth surface. They represent the situation before and after transformation through plastic surgery. I intended them to be a trigger to encourage the audience to see themselves, their connection with others, and mainstream matters differently and critically.



Through observation and reflection, I realized that within different societies and cultures there are unique mainstream aesthetics and attitudes towards life. For example, in some cultures, people might be more apt to seek to transform their appearance in order to conform, because they feel uncomfortable that they do not fit the accepted norm. This seems like a superficial concern to examine, but I see this as a door to a different space, or way of seeing the world.

Figure 26. Unmodified VS. Modified #1



Figure 27. Unmodified VS. Modified #2



Figure 28. Unmodified VS. Modified #3

In this transitional stage, from representation as a two-dimensional shape to a three-dimensional form, I assembled, disassembled and reassembled the physical bodies of vases to metaphorically represent different possibilities of relationships.

All of the pieces are presented with titles respectively, for instance, Commitment, Conflict, (Self)-destruction, Utopia, Emergence. These titles are not prescriptive, rather, they are meant to provide a free space for imagination and association for the audience.

These titles function as referential interpretations, though they are not necessarily decisive. I expected that some of the audience would agree with these interpretations of relationships reflected by the vases, but I also expected them to combine the visual representation with their own experience and interpretation, so that conversations around relationships can be aroused, through which knowledge can be generated in the process of arguments and debates.

The Immersion

With time, my exploration of narration through objects focused more on the stories that a series of objects can tell due to their political and narrative nature³. How can an audience actively participate in forming and telling stories through the relations between groups of objects, and how can we rethink the relationships between people and objects?

I iteratively created two sets of vases and presented story pieces that the audience would be able to play within. Story pieces are scenarios I preset for the audience when they are playing with objects. In these scenarios, I have general expectations of how the story's plot will play out. During their participation, the audience might diverge from the plot, and bypass my expected solutions. These divergences test the limitations of the scenarios I set for my audience. In this project, unlike earlier explorations, I made no attempt to apply any specific or detailed story elements to those objects. As the final stage in my research, I hand over the autonomy to the audience.

Through this project, I hoped to readdress the significance of daily actions in which objects play an important role. I was interested in exploring how these actions are enabled by the interaction between humans and our daily objects. The ceramic vases which I designed can be engaged with in several ways: as a whole collection (made up of 40 vases), in parts (smaller groupings of vases), or as individuals. In each case, they can be used as a means to build up scenarios where the audience is invited to participate and explore alternatives to daily actions.



For example, I would replace the mug I always use for drinking water with a texturally rough vase from the group of vases I made. I am habituated to the action of drinking water, and I repeat this action many times a day; because of the high repetition, the action becomes unconscious. If I replace my mug with a rough vase, this new object would consciously remind me of the action of drinking water. It would make the action of drinking more obvious and I would be reminded of the relationship between myself and the object.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger's metaphor in his book, Being and Time, discusses the clearing of Da-sein. Da-sein can be understood as existence, the metaphor says that if a part of forest is cleared, the clear part is what regains our attention in our lives and we are able to realize the existence and significance of what has slipped from our consciousness (Heidegger & Schmidt, 2010). In this stage, I tell stories that help the general public to form a more comprehensive view of our relationship with the

³ Narrative nature: It is beyond the functionality of objects and enables the potential of being the vehicle to condense and remember experiences, and to organize memory and the whole of human experience (Grimaldi, Fokkinga, & Ocnarescu, 2013).

Figure 29. Collection of 40 Vases

world. These stories help us recognize the existence of certain things and understand the significant roles of daily objects around us.

By clearing associations of existing scenarios and altering perceptions through story pieces, the audience could feel a sense of discomfort and this sudden moment of discord ignites consciousness and awareness of daily objects and actions hidden in people's unconscious. This may trigger the audience to re-examine the relationship between themselves, the objects, and the actions they provoke.



Figure 30. Immersion - Stage photo #1





Figure 32. Immersion - Stage photo #3



Figure 33. Immersion - Stage photo #4



Figure 34. Immersion - Stage photo #5

In the drinking scenario, the participant's reaction fit my expectation. The abnormal process of implementing an extremely common daily action, informed by an eccentric vessel, made the participant aware of how much we take daily objects for granted. It was an interesting way to observe the audience's interpretation and reaction to these altered scenarios, which inspired my hunger to build up and explore more re-constructed daily scenarios as a way to figure out how we can be reminded of the significance and habituation of daily actions.



Conclusion

I went through a long journey to answer my research question: what can I do, and make, with the political and narrative nature of objects?

Beginning by researching the historical origins of, and connections between Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and Dutch Delftware, I started along the path from theoretical grounding to learning through making. I gained experiential tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967) by working with a group of craftsmen in a ceramic studio in China, and gained an understanding about the relationship between myself and the materials I used, and finally I gained the physical outcomes generated through my process of making. While in residence in China I experienced very direct storytelling about my own lived experience through the surface of ceramic vessels.

In my own material practice, I explored using the physical body of objects to construct stories. Instead of narrating specific stories with exact details and representations, I employed the body of the vessel as visual metaphor. My knowledge of the condition and potential of the object's materiality and different means of storytelling was fleshed out during the making experience. The outcomes are meant to inspire people to reflect on their behaviours and roles in society, and their relationship with objects.

Through exploring the political and narrative nature of contemporary objects and their materiality, I have learned that vessels can be transformed, becoming the medium to convey knowledge, information, culture, and power. When the Dutch royalty started to collect blue-and-white ceramics and the industry gave rise to a local ceramic tradition, they also wielded a political power over another culture. Culturally colonizing the stories and histories of the Chinese imperial dynasties. By telling stories through a contemporary context, I am exploring a different perspective of ceramic objects, and utilizing the hidden potential that objects have, providing new angles for cultural decolonization. If the Dutch colonized Chinese culture by appropriating, and overriding the surface of their ceramics, I can also decolonize these cultural constraints through a similar process.

This design and practice-led research project is a practical and empirical exploration about objects that surround us. Knowledge is generated through the process of making and reflection.



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