



Transforming Shoes: Storytelling Through Artifacts and Design as Narrative

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MDes, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, 2019

BA, University of California, Davis, 2016

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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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This project explores the relationship between personal narratives and everyday objects. It aims to gain an understanding of the relationships people have with a specific everyday object: shoes. My research explores how people's memories are connected to their shoes. The primary aim of this research is to explore the role design can play in transforming people's ordinary possessions into artifacts that tell stories and convey meaning. The intent throughout has been to encourage people (users and designers) to look deeper into their relationships with everyday objects.

As one of the most common things in people's daily lives, shoes are a means communicate and be expressive. Inspired by people who treat shoes as more than daily objects—sneakerheads who collect, trade, and admire sneakers as a hobby and artists who create provocative artifacts and messages out of converted sneakers — my research aims to use narratives and history to explore different possibilities of shoes' transformation. I have done this with the intention of addressing the following questions:

How might people develop deeper understanding of their relationship with possessions through storytelling?

Can designers transform objects into new artifacts based on people's remembered and shared personal narratives?

Through collecting people's old shoes, documenting stories related to shoes gathered from their owners, and deconstructing shoes, my practice seeks to transform shoes to artifacts that reflect the original stories and convey memories and emotions of the former owners. As a result of this research, multiple artifacts were created from shoes including customized hats and tapestries made with shoe parts. Customized hats and tapestries were also created to explore the notion/used of the souvenir and the collection in relation to design objects. My intent has been to connect and evoke a sense of value to people's belongings.

My practice challenges the notion that shoes as utilitarian products only valued for their physical function (assist in walking) and aesthetic pleasure (to be seen) . I have come to understand making as functioning as a means of realizing and making connections with our own shared and built narratives with everyday objects. The process of making and unmaking can facilitate new relations with objects, where the object is 1) perceived and recognized; 2) conceived as made; 3) understood. Through my work gathering narratives and emotions is validated as an important aspect that is relevant to the creation of artifacts made from previously used objects, in this case shoes. Shoes contain memories and mutual experiences across time that influence thoughts and feelings about both personal experience and the objects that we carry along with us over time. Through my explorations I found that personal narratives can serve as inspirations for designing new/residual objects. The stories gathered and the artifacts created have led to the reflections on self-expression and self-identity among the people who did the initial storytelling and myself as a maker and designer who responded with my own set of story objects in what I call "design as narratives".

KEYWORDS

Design, shoes, sneakers, sneakerheads, storytelling, transformation, utilitarian goods, narrative

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List of Abbreviations and Definitions

Utilitarian goods

Products that are acquired and used mainly for a specific function or final usage outcome, characterized by their practical aspects.

Customizable

To build, fit, or alter according to individual specifications/needs.

Personalize

Design or produce (something) to meet someone's need or interests. A means to bring value and more loyalty to the user.

Research through design

Research through design is a design research methodology that focuses on the process of iteratively designing artifacts as a creative way of investigating what a potential future might be (Zimmerman, J., Stolterman, E., & Forlizzi, J., 2010, p. 312).

Practice-led design

Practice-led research is a conceptual framework that allows a researcher to incorporate their creative practice, creative methods and creative output into the research design and as a part of the research output.

Material culture

Material culture refers to the physical objects, resources, and spaces that people use to define their culture.

Non-material culture

Non-material culture refers to the nonphysical ideas that people have about their culture, including beliefs, values, rules, norms, morals, language, organizations, and institutions.

Sneakerhead

A sneakerhead is a person who collects, trades, or admires sneakers as a hobby. A sneakerhead may also be highly experienced in distinguishing between real and replica sneakers. Sneakerheads have deep knowledge not only about sneakers, but also the lifestyle that has evolved with sneakers. This type of sneaker collecting is a hobby often manifested by the use and collection of shoes made for particular sports, particularly basketball and skateboarding.

Sneaker

A soft shoe with a rubber sole worn for sports or casual occasions (running shoes).

Artifacts

Webster's Dictionary defines an artifact as "something characteristic of or resulting from a particular human institution, period, trend, or individual." In the world of storytelling, artifacts can tell the audience a lot about someone's personal history and experiences. Artifacts define people, and offer a way to map out and understand key milestones and years in people's lives.

Storytelling

The National Storytelling Network defines a story as "a specific structure of narrative with a specific style and set of characters and which includes a sense of completeness." Storytelling is a process, a medium for sharing, interpreting, offering the content and meaning of a story to an audience.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Garnet Hertz, for his advice throughout this Masters program at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Sincere thanks to my Internal Reviewer, Hélène Day Fraser, for her insights, advice and use of her Saori loom. I would also like to thank faculties and staff at Emily Carr University of Art + Design for providing me help and advice throughout my journey of making in the Masters program. I need to thank the entire 2019 MDes cohort for the countless hours spent working together inside the studio. Thanks to my parents for supporting me and providing me with inspiration. Finally, I need to give a special thank you to my boyfriend Randy, for his inspiration, support, and company throughout these two years.

Note to the Reader

This thesis project contains early material explorations related to sneaker culture. While these were used as a way to find a context for this research and uncover design opportunities, it is important to note that the research does not focus on the subculture of collecting sneakers, including sneakerheads and industry growth of the sneakerhead market. Instead, shoes are considered as one of the many common objects in people's daily lives.

My work focuses on the qualities of old shoes and associated memories connected to them—to shoe and sneaker culture. Rather than treating sneakers as coveted possessions that sneakerheads collect to express desired identities, my work considers shoes in terms of culture—as a storytelling device capable of evoking our lived experiences, memories and sense of belonging. According to Diana Conroy (1998) in *Material Matters*, the art and culture of contemporary textiles, “a succinct definition of ‘culture’ is a ‘system of shared meanings’ (p.56). I am interested in these shared meanings and the capacity of shoes to afford this. The transformation of shoes into artifacts suggests that everyone who wears shoes/sneakers can be part of the sneaker culture because of their personal and cultural stories.

My research highlights the transformation of objects into artifacts. I am interested in enabling shifts in perspectives about the common everyday sneaker. I would like to understand and reframe people's relationships with their possessions. Material exploration of shoes has been my means of exploring this. Concerns pertaining to sustainability and needed changes to material culture and consumption patterns inspired this research. It is important, however, to note that this thesis does not include provide solutions or systems for transforming shoes or objects in an Eco friendly way. It does not offer up a sustainable product solution or address the ‘avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance’, defined by Webster's Dictionary about ‘sustainable’.

Introduction

”Instead of granting too much perceived power to human agents, power is relocated to the seemingly insignificant, petty and lowly everyday routines, techniques and material artifacts which are implicit in what we do in everyday life”
(Jørgensen & Strand, 2012)

Inspired by people’s enthusiasm towards sneakers, my research focuses on exploring the relationships between people and their daily objects, taking shoes as example. Several base questions informed this exploration are: How are people’s memories connected with their shoes? What do people lose when throwing away their shoes? Can objects made from previously worn shoes help people to regain their stories and encourage them to share these narratives with others? Storytelling through and about shoes has played a significant role in my work. I have come to see it as the main driver of my explorations. Clare Patey (2016), Director of the Empathy Museum notes that “Stories are the way we understand and make sense of the world we find ourselves in” (para.4). This aspect of storytelling – presenting a different perspective of the world – is important when it comes to connecting with one another. It gives people an opportunity to learn from other people’s experiences.

Stains and marks on shoes are frequently acknowledged as part of the owners history. According to marketing analysis association 14ideas on Medium (2017), “the most beautiful product is really designed by you [the consumer]. Every tear, stain and duct tape patch proves the bond that can develop between a person and their gear” (para.8). The artifacts I have created use these remainders/ reminders of past experience as main elements to tell stories. The transformation of products (shoes) into alternate/ new artifacts and the material practice I used to do this form another facet of my explorations. According to critical theorist Homi Bhabha, ‘the process of transformation, [makes artifacts] continually mobile and itinerant’(p.16). This thesis explores processes of transformation. It considers how this might inform a design tool, method or practice aimed at shifting perspectives and deepening understanding of stories and daily objects. I have done this with the intention of addressing the following supplementary questions:

How might people develop deeper understanding of their relationship with possessions through storytelling?

Can designers transform objects into new artifacts based on people’s remembered and shared personal narratives?

Introduction

All of these questions are explored in this project using a three-phase approach. I have played different roles in this process: acting as the designer that explores through acts of making, as the designer that reflects on the outcomes I have created, and finally through it all as the designer that seeks to better understand creation of new objects from personal narratives. Phase one begins with self as story receiver. Two of the most important resources for my material practice have been people's stories and old shoes. Personal narratives and insights collected/gathered during this phase have been mostly accompanied by conversation. Phase two is comprised of the journaling of the stories I collected as well as a comprehensive literature review of other artists working with shoes. The journal created during this phase was later used and transformed into artifacts in Phase Three. Phase three has been my ongoing Research through Design – the material practice that I have taken on throughout the past 16 months. This has involved physical making and material exploration: the deconstructing of shoes, the creation of multiple artifacts— a unique pair of shoes, the cube, shoe-hats, and shoe tapestry— the final design artifacts themselves.

Background

As a product designer, I have always been excited to see everyday products in daily life. I have a background in wearable technology. The objects I make always connect to the theme of helping users to better express themselves. In today's fast paced, networked and wireless world, the dynamics of the society and advanced communication technologies determine the ways in which messages are transmitted and received. In an age where identity is increasingly fluid and multifaceted, the static clothing and unresponsive materials people wear are often insufficient means of expression. Shoes are one way to communicate and express. Keenan (2007), a researcher at Nottingham Trent University, notes that "as cultural signifiers, shoes are indubitably potent power and status symbols speaking volumes about life-styles and life chances" (p.437).

I am also a sneaker collector. I am fascinated by the designs of coveted sneakers produced for this unique market, and equally interested in finding out more about the sneaker culture connected to these shoes. The sneaker culture, as people normally define it, belongs to people who collect, trade, or admire sneakers as a hobby. Like any other type of collection, each worthy piece has a story behind it; where it is from, how it was obtained. It is a marking of a particular point in the past, ultimately creating memories. What makes this obsessive collecting so unique among other fashion trends is that there are no restrictions on who can participate in terms of race, gender, body type, etc. "You can tell so much about a person by what they have on their feet," said Andre Speed, 36, at a Portland specialty sneaker store called Lifted (Skidmore, 2008). The shoes are an expression of who we are and, in the contexts where everything is the same, a way to express ourselves.



Fig.1// Sneaker Con Vancouver, 2019 (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2019)

Design Precedents

Many artists and designers have made artifacts from daily objects. My secondary research led me to look at the work of artists who make artifacts from sneakers/shoes. Freehand Profit (Gary Lockwood) and Brian Jungen both transform sneakers into wearable masks. Their transforming actions keep the wearability of sneakers but transfer the sneakers to be worn on another body part – the face. Different reasons/intent drive their creation of these masks that are used to convey messages for viewers to consider.


Freehand Profit/Gary Lockwood is known for destroying coveted “kicks” in order to make gas masks. He applies his knowledge gained from working behind the scenes and rappers to his art career. In his artist statement (2015), Lockwood compared his artistic process working with shoes to a DJ or producer samples a track or scratch a record. “Shoes, kicks, sneakers – whatever you call them – have always been a part of Hip-Hop” (para.3). “The shoes on our feet came to represent a part of our identity. The lines, color and textures of sneakers sold today even parallel those used by graffiti artists” (para.3). He notes that all of the masks in some way are a reflection of, or a tribute to hip-hop. “Hip-hop has always used existing art as ‘materials’ and transformed it or remixed it into something completely new and exciting” (para.4).

Mask making is an ancient art form that Lockwood uses to link to modern times and contemporary concerns. According to him, the gas mask is the mask of our times, it represents atrocities at war, civil unrest, environmental collapse. It also works both as a symbol of fear and of protection and tips its hat to the keepers of the graffiti flame who wore/wear respirators and masks to protect their lungs from their poisonous art of choice (Lockwood, 2015).

<http://www.freehandprofit.com/#/no125-sport-blue-iii-gas-mask/>

Fig.2//The 125th sneaker mask by Freehand Profit, crafted from custom Air Jordan Sport Blue 3s (Photograph by G. Lockwood, 2016)

Design precedents



<https://catrionajeffries.com/artists/brian-jungen/works/brian-jungen-prototype-for-new-understanding-5-1999>

Fig.3//Prototype for New Understanding #5, nike air jordans, human hair, 9 x 11 x 2 in. (22 x 27 x 5 cm)
(Photograph by B. Jungen, 1999)

Canadian artist Brian Jungen uses unexpected found objects like Nike sneakers to create sculptural pieces that pay tribute to his Indigenous ancestry. Giving a nod to both his Swiss and Dunn-za First Nations heritages, the artist uses contemporary materials and juxtaposes them with traditional Indigenous craftwork. The masks also call to mind the relationship between consumerism and Indigenous artifacts and the exploitation of the traditions of indigenous peoples reflected in collectible souvenir gift shops found across Canada.

Jungen reconstitutes the Nike shoes in a kind of totem object of a different cultural milieu, but that mask or that totemic icon is also a reflection of the way in which the culture and authority of those Indigenous is made consumable, both within the culture itself and for those outside.

Critical theorist Homi Bhabha observes that, “even if you see something that reminds you of certain stereotypic form, the various materials and elements that create that signification create an inner clash and never allow the stereotype to claim what it wants to claim”(p.23). Jungen’s work “brings to people’s attention the stereotype as a form of perception and then undermines the very material and signifying process by which stereotypes create their own hegemony or unquestionable authority” (p.23).

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

Practice-led design

According to design researcher Maarit Mäkelä, in practice-led research approaches, artifacts are conceived both as answers to particular research questions and as argumentation on the topic concerned (p.158). As an object made by a designer-researcher during the process of research, an artifact can also be seen as a method of collecting and preserving information and understanding (p.158). Practice-led research is characterized by a focus on issues, concerns and interests that are explored and manifested through the production of creative artifacts. As an object of experience, the creative product is as important as any knowledge embodied in it (Scrivener & Chapman, 2004). These types of artifacts translate messages between concrete objects and abstract requirements. (p.159). As such, making artifacts was my main method of exploring questions about shifting perspectives and deepening understanding of stories and daily objects.

I see the making of objects during the process of developing my thesis research as a method of collecting and preserving information and understanding. I have come to understand making as functioning as a means of realizing a thing which has to be **1)perceived and recognized; 2)conceived as made; 3) understood**. Working through the stages of this process, I have explored different ways to present personal narratives with multiple artifacts. The artifacts have helped me better understand the relationship between objects and myself as a designer, and also the relationship between people and their daily/everyday objects. Artifacts “encourage complex and meaningful reflection on inhabitation of a ubiquitous, dematerializing, and intelligent environment” (Dunne, 2006, p.147, cited by Bardzell, et al., 2012, p. 288). Since the concept of self is hardly something that can be clearly articulated due to multiple hidden layers, practice-led research was an effective approach to employ. It enabled me to generate new knowledge and insights around the development of this project.

The diagram below is a visualization of my design process that extended from left to right. In the phase “self as maker and designer”, I presented people’s stories of their shoes in the form of artifacts created to reflect my understanding of people’s stories. In this project, I mainly tried to transform old shoes into artifacts to tell personal narratives.

As mentioned above, I see myself playing different roles in exploring, reflecting, and understanding human experience. In Phase 1, “Self as story receiver”, collecting shoes from people (friends, family, coworkers) as well as asking them about the stories behind their shoes allowed me to get “material” to work with in my practice-led research. As a story receiver, I instigated conversations with people by asking them to tell a story relating to their shoes. The stories that followed were led by the individuals and took many different forms. I was told stories in both Mandarin and English; I received these stories in different ways via face to face conversation, through texting, on the phone, etc. Interestingly, in my act of collection I found that the relationships between my friends, family, coworkers and I shifted. I got to know them more. Moving into Phase 2, “Self as journalist”, I used my habit of keeping a diary everyday to record the conversations and encounters I had connected to shoes. Details about these stories can be found in section the “Self as journalist” below.

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

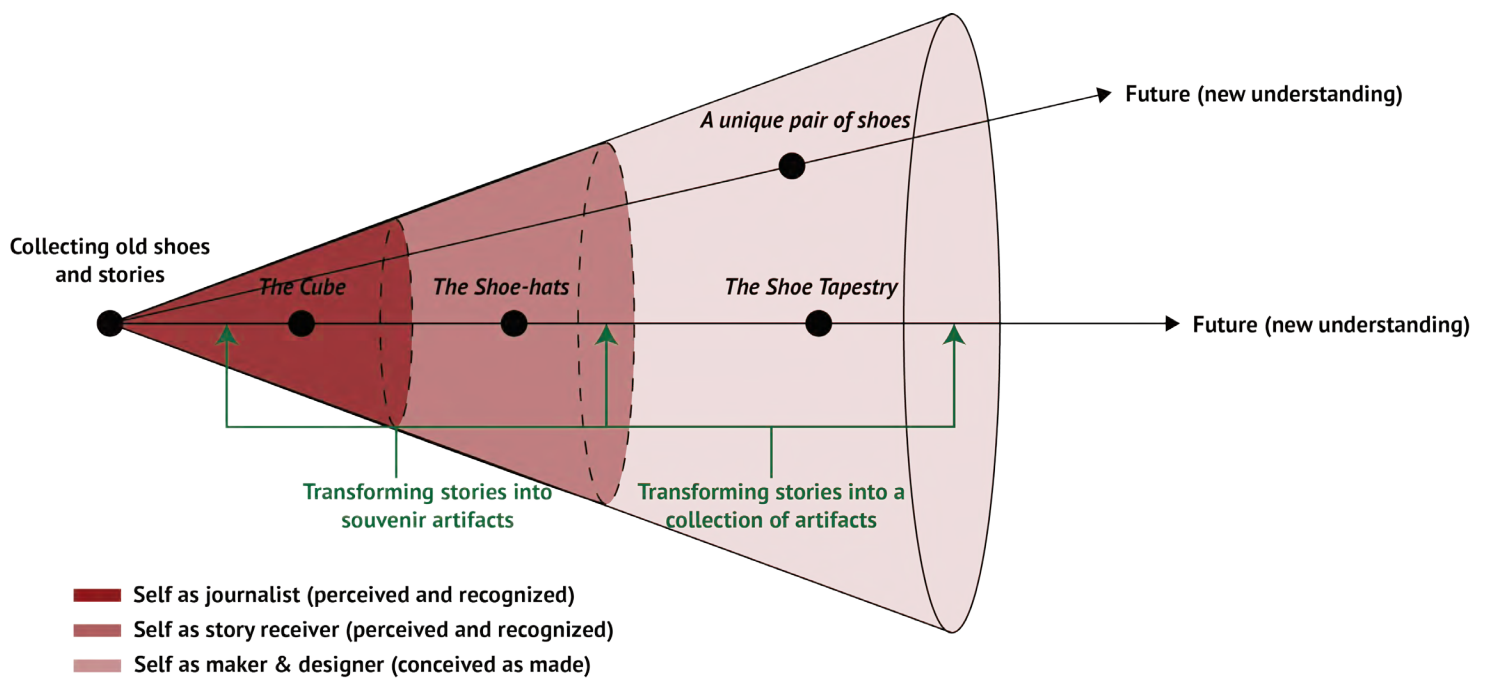


Fig.4//Diagram of design research process (Digital Image, Z.Tan, 2019)

Stroytelling

In this project, there were different forms of 'telling' stories. People told stories, the artifacts I created interpreted experiences and opened up the possibility of new stories. The National Storytelling Network defines a story as "a specific structure of narrative with a specific style and set of characters and which includes a sense of completeness" (para.6). Storytelling is a process, a medium for sharing, interpreting, offering the meaning of a story to an audience.

In my work over the past two years I have played both the teller role and the listener role and the teller role – I have received and passed on stories. As a story receiver, I had contact with other story tellers (friends, colleagues, relatives). Storytelling is performative, it is also an interactive art form. In my case, I responded to other teller's words and actions through making. I found that when I had face to face conversations (stories told to me in person) I had more emotions connected to narratives that were shared with me. I created images in my mind based on the non-visual image telling by others (my story tellers) and on my own experiences. I, in turn, took on the role of teller. Through the transformation of old shoes to artifacts, I passed stories to my audience – designers as well as people who care about their daily utilitarian objects and are interested in transforming them while also holding on to associated memories. The artifacts I made used both verbal and non-verbal communication to present people's past experiences and my understandings.

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

Pre-phase: A unique pair of shoes

Sneaker culture is connected to the many art forms and expressions that have been created out of communities that resisted the erasure of their identities. So-called “sneakerheads” have created a cultural phenomenon that embeds significance in commodities, such as sneakers and shoelaces, all the while consuming and showing off polished Air Force One’s or Adidas. In this way sneakerheads constitute and consolidate their unique style. Run-D.M.C.’s hip-hop song “My Adidas” (1986) states that “it is all about the look, you wear sneakers to impress others”(Simmons, et al.). In this context the conspicuous consumption of sneakers not only reveals the wearer’s identity, but also differentiates them from mainstream culture.

Dylan Miner (2009), the assistant professor at Michigan State University, argues that “the consumption of sneakers, located within the cultural context of youth culture, is an act that posits a unique proposition to those able to understand its meaning” (p.85). Shoes have the ability to imbue a sense of self-respect to those who don “a good pair”. According to British sociologist Hebdige (1979), “the subcultures is through the distinctive rituals of consumption, through style, that the subculture at once reveals its ‘secret’ identity and communicates its forbidden meanings” (p.102–103).

Inspired by sneaker culture and moving into people's daily lives, I took on a project to explore the role and function of shoes to help express identity. In first year of MDes I created a pair of customizable shoes (see Figure 5-7) from an existing pattern from Shoe Design Book by Fashionary. My pair of "Unique shoes" had a detachable sole using snaps and velcro decorations, including felt shapes, buttons, embroidery patches, etc. This pattern design allowed me (the user) to change the top of the shoe and decorations thereby giving a new look to the shoe based on my interests and taste. This project also encouraged people to find their own decorations that could be attached to the shoe. When this project was presented to the class of 2019 MDes, personal decorations were attached to the shoe—decorations they found in their personal belongings— such as pins, stickers, etc.

This project could be compared to the customizable sneaker service provided by many footwear companies, but these shoes were more "customizable" than just color choices. Customizable sneakers may help users better express themselves through the act of designing, creating shoes from their imagination, interests, and taste. The project was more like a Do-it-Yourself (DIY) activity but without any instruction. A Do-It-Yourself activity can be anything that is constructed or assembled from parts after being purchased from a manufacturer. This project allowed users to be more creative and express themselves through these actions. By building and decorating, shoes may become more valuable to their owners because the shoes are unique and personalized by making people feel more involved and emotionally attached to the final product. It led to a new direction of using shoes to show identity or tell personal narratives for future projects.

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research



Fig.5//Prototype of Unique Pair of Shoes, 2018
(Photograph by G. Hertz, 2018)



Fig.6//Prototype of Unique Pair of Shoes, 2018
(Photograph by Z. Tan, 2018)



Fig.7//Prototype of Unique Pair of Shoes, 2018
(Photograph by G. Hertz, 2018)

Phase 1 & 2: Self as story receiver and journalist

My journey of collecting stories and shoes from people was triggered by a personal insight. It came to my attention when my boyfriend Randy was trying to throw away a few pairs of old sneakers. We began speaking about the shoes he was going to throw away. In our back and forth conversation, he told me stories (connected to his sneakers) from the time before we met. Inadvertently the sneakers he was throwing away gave me a chance to get to know him better. As researchers focusing on the study of narratives in design argue, “narratives are one of the most natural ways for people to exchange information, because they evoke more meaning and emotion than bare facts” (Grimaldi, Fokkinga & Ocnareescu, 2013, pp.201). The philosopher Richard Kearney (2002) wrote: “telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what makes our condition human” (p.3). To better understand the role of stories in people’s lives, I decided to expand my research to seek out more stories from people around me. I began to ask my friends or family if they had old shoes at home that they did not want to wear anymore but did not want to throw away. I would ask them to give me their shoes and their stories to provide materials for my research.

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research



Fig.8-15//Pictures of shoes collected from people--part 1, 2018

(Photograph by Z. Tan, 2018)



Fig.16-23//Pictures of shoes collected from people--part 2, 2018

(Photograph by Z. Tan, 2018)

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

In order to record conversations with my target people, I kept a journal and wrote down the stories about shoes that people told me. Questions that came up during our discussion included “Where did you get the shoes” and “What do you remember the most about them”. My exploration about people’s stories with shoes turned to the exploration about people’s lives. I found that mainly three types of stories were collected during our conversations: 1) the original stories with shoes, including the stories about how they got the shoes, the places people went to and times they wore the shoes. 2) stories related to the shoes and connected to another person. For example, the person bought the shoes with the owner, the person traveled with the owner when she/he wore the shoes, etc. 3) stories that happened recently which did not relate to shoes but grew from our initial conversation around the shoes. Names were not attached to the journal entries in order to protect their privacy.

The journal gave me inspiration about transforming their shoes into artifacts during later phases. The objective of this action was to obtain the basic materials of the project—old shoes to work on and personal narratives—in order to create a series of artifacts inspired by the collected materials. The image below is one of the 11 journals. Other stories/journals can be found in the section “Appendices” below.

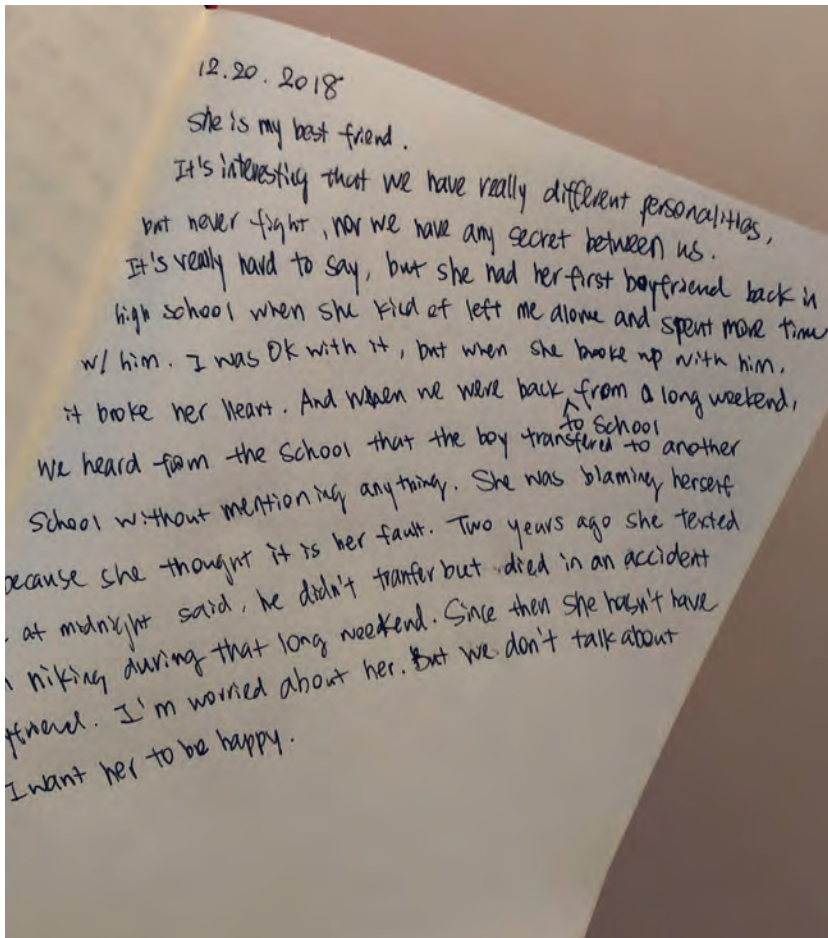


Fig.24//Journal of stories (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2019)

"She is my best friend.

It's interesting that we have really different personalities, but we never fight, nor we have any secret between each other. It's really hard to say, but she had her first boyfriend back in high school when she kind of left me alone and spent more time with him. I was ok with it, but when they broke up, it broke her heart. And just one week after they broke up we got back to school after a long weekend and heard from the school that the boy was transferred to another school without saying anything. She was blaming herself because she thought it is all her fault. Two years ago she texted me at midnight, saying he didn't transfer but died in an accident during that long weekend. Since then she hasn't had any boyfriends. Today we talked about this again. I want her to be happy, and to be honest, I think this will be our first secret because she didn't want to talk about this."

After all these years I already forgot him. I didn't know her feelings about him until two years ago she texted me at midnight, saying he didn't transfer, but had died in a hiking accident during that long weekend. Since then she hasn't had any boyfriends. Today we talked about this again. I want her to be happy, and to be honest, I think this will be our first secret because she didn't want to talk about this."

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

Through talking about different stories around one pair of shoes, many of the people realized that the fragments of memories that seemed not to relate to their shoes were actually connected to them. The people who shared stories reflected on the past and had new feelings toward the past. The new feelings people had were: 1) shoes were ignored and they wanted to care more about their shoes. 2) some good memories were evoked that were connected to the shoes. 3) bad memories which did not relate to shoes came up during conversations, but they felt relieved.

This storytelling process was similar to telling stories when looking through photo albums. An article in *Psychology Today* by Pamela Rutledge (2011) describes the power of storytelling through photos, “they are the common ground that allows people to communicate, overcoming our defences and our differences. They allow us to understand ourselves better and find commonality with others”(para.3). Interestingly the shoes that people gave me also seemed to act like a memory recall device to help people pull fragments of memories together – in passing off their shoes to me people seemed to want to tell me stories – it made it easier for people to share somehow.

Phase 3: Self as maker & designer

My role as maker and designer plays an important part in this project. Several artifacts were made during this process to explore the aspects of artifacts in storytelling. Many of the objects created within the sphere of material culture make up a critical part of who we are and how we identify ourselves to one another (see glossary for the definition of material culture). According to the artist Diana Conroy, “material culture is seen as not only reflecting the broader society but also as active in forming social relations” (p.58). The artifacts were also created with the understanding of souvenirs and collections in the realm of design.

A significant portion of the primary research for this project takes direction and inspiration from Susan Stewart's book *On Longing*. Susan Stewart provides an in-depth analysis of the souvenir and collection. She applies a variety of methods to outline the position and function of the souvenir. She speaks extensively about phenomenology and psychoanalysis in her analysis of the souvenir.

A souvenir is an object a person acquires for the memories the owner associates with it. A souvenir can be any object that can be collected or purchased and transported home by a traveler as a memento of a visit. Objects are magically transformed into precious belongings, becoming from that moment, a pathway for the owner to create stories and narratives around their experiences of the past. The origins of the object – its ‘creation’ as a mediating object—is also taken into account as having a part to play in the sequence of events that occurs in the process of commodity exchange.

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

The Cube

Before I could begin making souvenir artifacts, I needed to explore the materiality of the shoes. Ideation began by deconstructing the shoes into pieces that broke down the wearability of shoes. Wearability is one of the most important aspects of shoes and by destroying it, the material becomes simply pieces of fabric that only show the stains and history on them. While working on the deconstruction process, several shoes and stories were collected and the journalling process began. These explorations shifted my view towards the shoe pieces from just fragments of shoes to its potential to become artifacts.

The Cube is a 40 cm x 40 cm artifact which combined shoe fragments with my journal that presents people's stories through multiple mediums. The Cube was assembled with mainly two parts: shoe fragments and acrylic boards with laser engraved text. I selected 11 written stories from my journal and transformed onto the acrylic boards. The Cube presented people's stories from a story receiver's perspective, so that instead of showing the original stories the artifact shows my feelings towards people's stories. Additionally, with the transparent frames, the shoe fragments in the cube were visible from the outside. The color, stain and marks of the shoe parts formed the background of the journal.



Fig.25// Shoe Fragments (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2018)

Stewart provides me an idea to create “[souvenirs that] function to generate narrative” (p.147). I see The Cube both a souvenir and collection. The collection of people’s stories and shoes formed the dominant part of The Cube, but the function of this artifact was to generate narratives and tell stories with multiple mediums (text and objects). Stewart’s statement towards the transformation of souvenir to collection argues that “we cannot be proud of someone else’s souvenir unless the narrative is extended to include our relationship with the object’s owner or ... we transform the souvenir into the collection” (p.137). In order to pass personal narratives and my feelings towards people’s stories to a wider audience, I presented my journal on the acrylic boards easy for people to read.

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research



Fig.26// *The Cube* (Photograph by G. Hertz, 2019)



Fig.27// Closer view of *The Cube* (Photograph by G. Hertz, 2019)

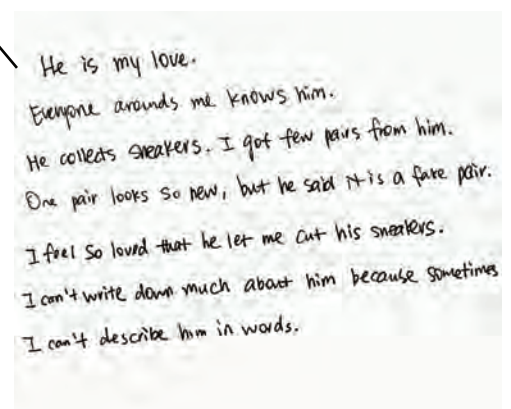


Fig.28// Journal for laser engraving on fabric
(Digital Image, Z. Tan, 2018)

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

Shoe-hats

Inspired by Gary Lockwood and Brian Jungen, I made two “shoe-hats” for two of my friends aiming to help them better remember their stories. Through this project I was seeking to allow worn-out shoes to become wearable again. I made new objects from fragments of the shoe parts. The pattern and construction of each hat was inspired by the stories from the shoes owners.

Hat #1 was made out of a pair of Converse sneaker, which looks new but almost abandoned by the original owner. I received this pair of sneaker from my coworker when she was trying to throw it away because she bought the shoes with her ex-boyfriend and wanted to throw everything related to him away. I first deconstructed the shoes and laid out all the pieces. I chose to place the shoe piece which contains a Converse logo upside down to show the owner's determination about forgetting her ex-boyfriend. I was inspired by her stories with her ex-boyfriend as well as her braid hair style as the shoe laces mimicked her hair.



Fig.29// Shoe-hat #1 (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2019)



Fig.30// Shoe-hat #2 (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2019)

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

Shoe-hats

Hat #2 was made out of a pair of adidas superstar sneakers, which the owner bought them in the year of the snake. Inspired by the owner's stories back to the time he wore them in high school, the design of the hat mimicked the helmet to protect the head because the owner felt lonely when he studied abroad at the age of 16 alone. As the owner is from China, I picked Chinese elements from the shoes—green “jade” — and put them on the prominent part of the hat.

Through journaling, I transferred people's oral stories into written text based on my own understanding. In this project one of the most important steps is to embed text into artifacts which does not directly tell personal narratives, but shows the moods/thoughts/feelings about the storytellers. In order to put text onto artifacts, I tried laser engraving on multiple soft materials such as jeans, cotton, canvas, felt, and leather. The texts are either hand written text from my journal or typed fonts. Also to make the hat artifacts more unique to their owners, I made a care label to indicate some facts and importance of the hat.



Fig.31// Textile engraving iteration (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2018)



Fig.32// Label of care (Digital Image, Z. Tan, 2018)

The hat was built for the original owner and I promised to give the hats back to people who donated the shoes. As a designer, I created customized objects for a small range of people. One of the goals of this project is to encourage people to look deeper into their relationships with everyday objects, so only creating objects for specific person would not help to achieve this goal. Tim Dant, professor of Sociology at Lancaster University, describes the role of the object in these circumstances as a mediating object; “one that carries communications between people -- information, emotions, ideas and expressions that could have been communicated by speech, gesture, touch or expression -- if the people had been with each other” (p.153). According to Dant, material culture uses “an object to mediate messages between time, or spaces...” (Dant, p.173). This action opens up the possibilities of transforming shoes into other artifacts which are not for one specific person, but a wider audience.

These two shoe-hats may help the original owners to define their culture and present their past stories. Stewart argues that “the souvenir distinguishes experiences [and] involves the displacement of attention into the past” (p.135 & 151). The shoe-hats are “representation in another medium” (p.136) because the hats kept the ownership of the shoe owners but transformed materials to another form in order to emphasize the period of time behind the shoes. “The memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self” (p.133). The function of the shoe-hats are “to envelop the present within the past” (p.151). The shoe-hats set up a memory point within the owners’ timeline, so from now on their memories with the shoes were enveloped in the hats and new memories with the hats began.

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

The shoe tapestry

The structure of a fabric or its weave— that is, the fastening of its elements of threads to each other— is as much a determining factor in its function as is the choice of the raw material. In fact the interrelation between the two, the subtle play between them in supporting, impeding or modifying each other's characteristics, is the essence of weaving

— Anni Albers, *On Weaving*

Tapestries have been created for many centuries and in every continent in the world. “Hand-woven textiles have provided a place for recording information, memory and symbolic perception, and the means to communicate social, magical and/or religious ideas and values” (Smith, p.61). Mark De Vitis (2018), the researcher in art history from University of Sydney, provides a vivid scene that the unicorn tapestries presented to tell stories:

Materially, they are breathtaking. Their elaborate millefleur (“thousand flowers”) backgrounds form hypnotic patterns. The sumptuous stuff from which they are woven—wool and silk, dyed with rich, natural dyes—insulate the beholder (literally part of their original function). They muffle sound, creating an atmosphere of quiet meditation. The air is stilled, and light is enriched by their surfaces, generating a transcendental aura that draws the beholder into their complex internal universe (para.3).

Especially important to the language and meaning of textiles has been the association between the act of weaving and the generative aspect of life. According to T'ai Smith, researcher in art history at the University of British Columbia, "since prehistoric times, patterned cloths have served as a bridge between the weaver (traditionally female) and the Creatrix (the universal source of all life)" (p.61). Moving from the shoe-hats I had created for specific people, my practice moved to focuses on creating artifacts still from old shoes but for a wider audience. I was inspired by Bauhaus Weaving because as the name Bauhaus—"building house"—suggests, the textiles were combinations of architecture and weaving. Although these tapestries weren't telling stories in the way older ones had the ideas connected to the Bauhaus weaving patterns there seemed to be a link.

An interview of Anni Albers conducted 1968 by Sevim Fesci documents the comparison between weaving and architecture. "Painting is applied on to something," Albers reasons. "Sculpture uses a given material... [Weaving] is closest to architecture because it is a building-up out of a single element, building a whole out of single elements"(Lehmann, n.d.). I chose to weave with the shoe parts because I wanted to explore the contrast between the traditional hand weaving machine and modern materials. Also this action allowed me to bring multiple shoes together to make one new object through the lens of creating a collection.

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

The shoe tapestry

The pictures below show different parts of the shoe-tapestry. The tapestry is a 60 cm x 600 cm piece made on the Saori loom. Four main components formed the shoe-tapestry: sliced shoe parts, yarns, leather engraved journal slices, and shoe laces. Inspired by the Bauhaus Weaving, my tapestry seeks to explore storytelling through abstract images formed by stories and shoe parts. Yarns and shoe laces functioned as the base/background of the tapestry. Albers attempts to bring the practice of structuring and combining threads on a loom into text. In her essay “Work with Material” (1937), she argues that it is important to recognize the limitations or “veto of the material”. Shoes vetoed/shifted the way I approached the weaving as I set rules for myself in terms of breaking shoes into pieces. I kept the original shapes and margins of the shoe parts—shoe tongue, shoe top, sole, etc. I sliced shoe pieces in order to weave and let yarns cover around the shoe parts to keep the original shapes. The old shoes I gathered from people became my own collection and the means to produce a new object – a piece of woven cloth. I chose to weave at the same time as I continued to collect shoes from people. Because of this the order of my collecting is evident on the tapestry. My tapestry became the timeline of the stories and the shoes collected.

The old shoes I gathered from people became my own collection and the means to produce a new object – a piece of woven cloth. The journals I wrote were transferred onto pieces of leather then were weaved into the woven cloth. When slicing the leather fabric, I re-read my journal and reviewed people’s stories, thus I had different moods when weaving. My mood had influence on the yarn color choices and the styles of slicing the shoe parts. The journal was accessible, and with the combination of the shoe parts the tapestry presents vivid, multi-sensory images to the audience. I chose to weave at the same time as I continued to collect shoes from people. Because of this the order of my collecting is evident on the tapestry. My tapestry became the timeline of the stories and the shoes collected.

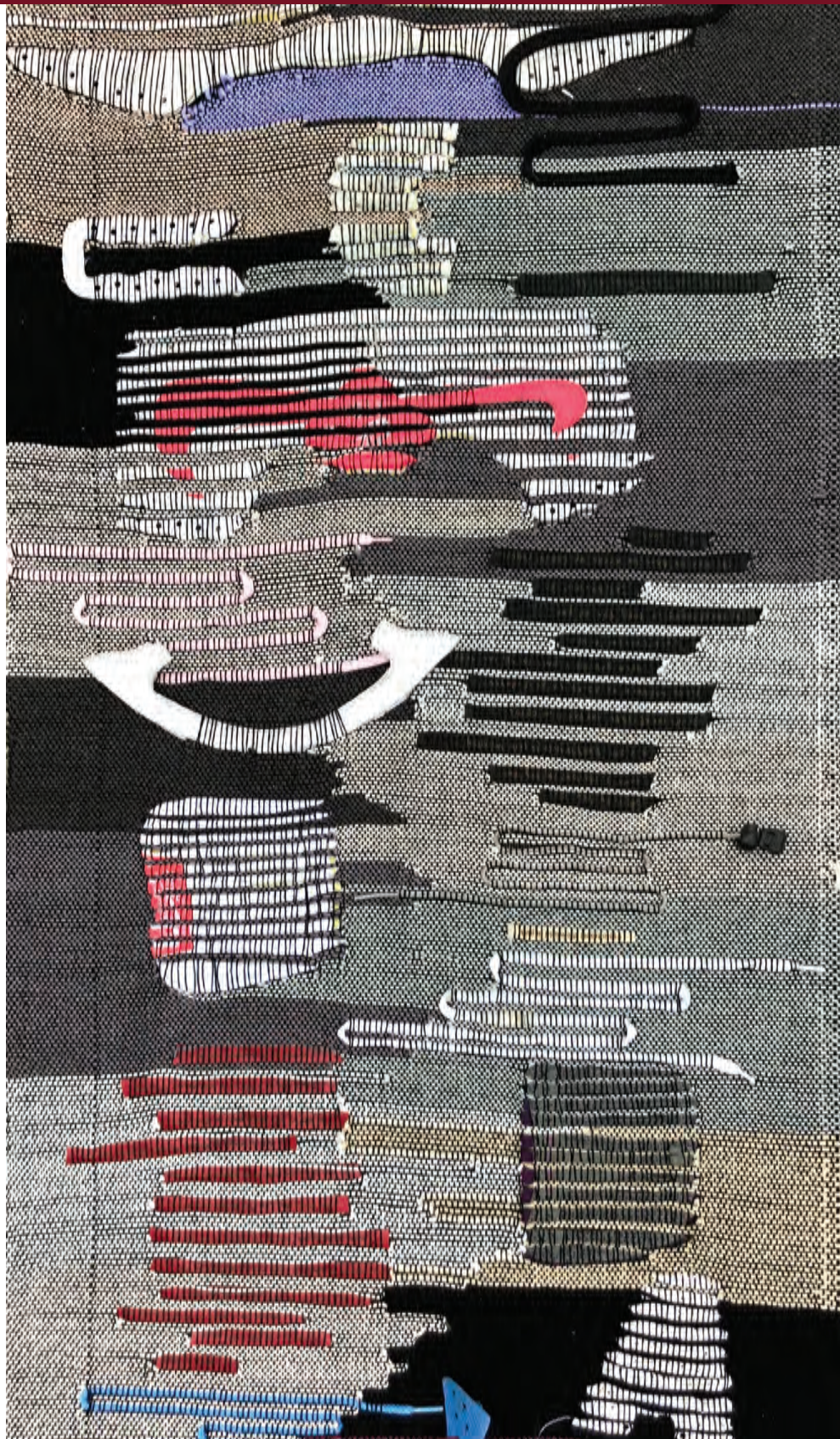


Fig.33// The shoe tapestry 1 (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2019)

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

Reflection on the tapestry

As Stewart observes, “The souvenir magically transports us to the scene of origin, but the collection is magically and serially transported to the scene of acquisition, its proper destination” (p.165). Using this insight and perspective I began to consider my woven textile imbedded with shoes and their narratives as my own sort of collection. In this case one where not all of the details were showing. My textile shoe collection became a means to explore how different people’s personal narratives can be blended into one artifact.

The “souvenir” and the “collection” are objects mediating experience in time and space (Stewart, n.d.) . Stewart argues that souvenirs are metonymic to their place of origin and mapped onto one individual’s experience (p.135). The double functions of the souvenir are to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time to discredit the present (p.139). My tapestry acts as a collection (of shoes) and a souvenir (of my experience of weaving).

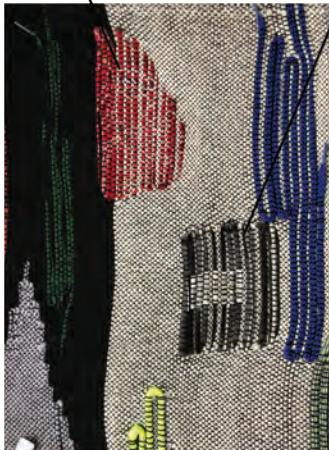
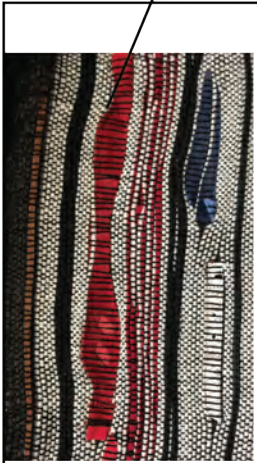
Placing the tapestry on the floor gave me chances to view the whole piece not according to time, but the patterns created from shoe pieces. Viewing it from different angles challenged my assumption that my tapestry should be hung vertically on a wall (to be seen). I considered what it means to engage with an object of narrative (to walk on it). This latter action deposited dirt and leaves onto the tapestry - onto the shoes. The inverse of the usual scenario/relation between shoes things on the ground – a different story made up of the same components – a different perspective to consider.



Fig.34// The shoe tapestry on street (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2019)

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

The shoe tapestry



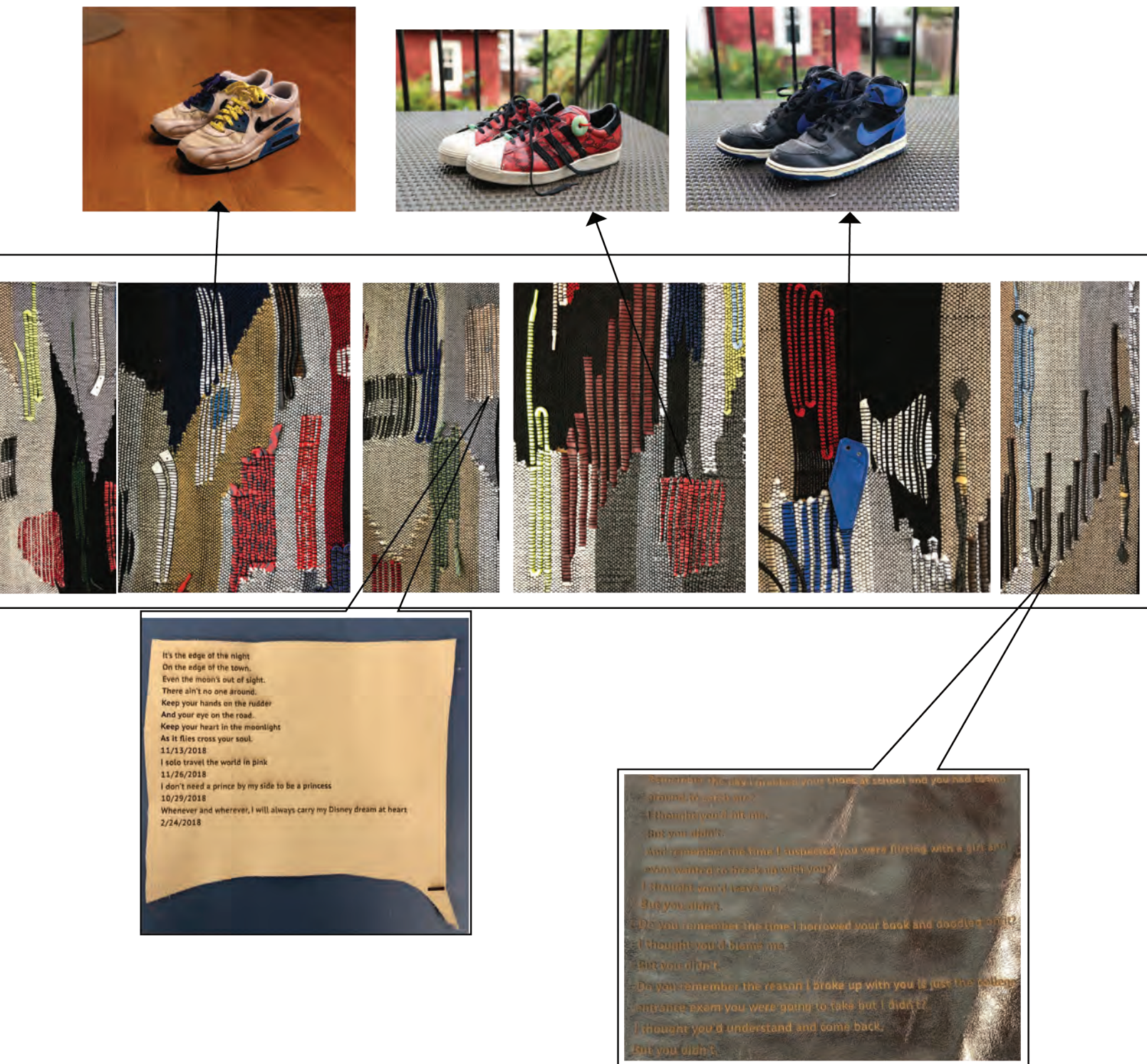


Fig.35// The shoe tapestry 2 (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2018)

Primary Research & Practice-Led Research

The shoe tapestry





Fig.36// Full view of the shoe tapestry (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2019)

Conclusion

The importance of this project stems from problems and topics related to the loss of memory and identity when people throw their old daily products away. Originating from conversations with people about their stories and shoes, this research evolved to exploring the role of artifacts in storytelling through the transformation of daily objects in the realm of design. The study focused on exploring different ways of storytelling through artifacts –transforming text, oral stories and objects related to stories into artifacts—which can lead to reframing people's relationship with daily objects. As a result of this research, the process of transforming objects into artifacts for storytelling provides inspiration for designers as well as people who care about their daily utilitarian objects and are interested in transforming them while also holding on to associated memories.

Material practice was essential to this work. The artifacts produced through this process served as means for collecting and preserving information and understanding. In Shoe-hats, personal narratives and history functioned as elements that moved old shoes into souvenir/memorial objects and as a way for shoe owners to remember and speak to a period of time when they used to wear the shoes on their feet. For the Cube, personal narratives were collected by written text from a story receiver's perspective (me). The Shoe Tapestry, acted as a collection of personal stories through the integration of a multiple mediums (text, shoe pieces, patterns and scale) into a woven textile. They were also a way of presenting personal stories and expressing identity.

All of these artifacts were attempts at providing ways to process and transform daily objects into new artifact forms, which hold and contain earlier “original” stories and earlier object forms. The process of transforming offered new insights and knowledge through critical reflection. The steps for transformation were **1) perceived and recognized; 2) conceived as made; 3) understood**. The perceiving and recognizing step allowed me to receive the basic materials to work on as well as inspirations. However, more importantly I recognized materials by treating shoes as fabrics and deconstructing shoes into fragments. The conceiving as making step was essential to the transformation process.

Personal narratives can be important for designing objects. The stories I collected played different roles in making artifacts: in shoe-hats as story holders, in the cube as story transmitters, and in shoe tapestry as inspirations. Narratives offer designers the means to create design objects as forms of text that allow users to take on the role of ‘readers’ that interpret the objects within their own frames of reference. It promotes a form of thinking that is personal, relevant and open to negotiated meaning in transforming objects and design with personal narratives.

The process of collecting objects and the stories previous owners wanted to share with me affected my own subsequent connection and interaction with the object/materials. As I broke them down to make something new I thought about the personal narratives that had been shared with me - people’s emotions connected to their own stories were always on my mind. I found that I treated people’s shoes and stories as my possessions and in doing so I was more emotionally attached to the objects. To conclude, I have begun to see my work and design practice as one that considers and applies design (forms made and used) as narrative. Artifacts hold and tell of people’s personal history and experiences and can have power in social settings: they translate messages between concrete objects and abstract requirements (Mäkelä, p.159); they offer an interpretation of the story of their existence; they give back echoes of their past. It is my hope that practice of transforming personal narratives and daily objects into artifacts in different contexts might offer alternate ways in designing objects.

Conclusion

Final Note--Future Exploration

The process of transforming personal narratives and objects into new artifacts has the potential to be used as a design method for future investigation of presenting personal narratives. Based on the insights I gathered through my own process of making I have begun to develop a DIY toolkit to help designers transform objects into new artifacts that draw on the personal narratives of everyday people.

I see this toolkit as a means to collect and transfer stories through the transformation of daily objects - to create new residual objects for further design inspiration. The kit applies four different methods to collect and present personal narratives: filling the box with objects, oral story recording related to the objects, writing letters, and sealing the box with the action of self reflection through drawing /writing/doodling on the acrylic box .



Fig.37// Tool kit (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2019)

Key features:

- he toolkit includes tools for collecting, recording and documenting stories—a large acrylic box, a recorder and three SD cards for oral story recording, a pen with three sets of paper and envelopes for literal documentation, a marker for any creative action on the acrylic box, and a pair of scissors for cutting objects if necessary.
- On the first day the user (the designer or other co-creative participants working with the designer) is invited to fill the box with object he/she has which contains memories of past experience.
- Over the next three days the user is invited to use the recorder to tell stories relate to the objects he/she has put into the box.
- The user then asked to spend days four, five and six writing a series of letters to themselves about the experience: noting new thoughts/ideas that occur as a result of the process.
- On day seven, the user is instructed to put all of the content produced over the previous six days (recordings, letters, objects from day one) in the box and seal it using the lid provided. Following this action the user is asked to use the provided marker to draw/write/doodle on the acrylic box with any thoughts the user may have after filling, recording, and writing.



Fig.38// Tool kit 2 (Photograph by Z. Tan, 2019)

Conclusion

Future Exploration

This seven-day practice, based on my own experience of creating the Cube using people's old shoes to fill the box and laser cutting my journals on the surface of the cube, the last action is designed to give the user time and opportunity to form a deeper understanding of our relationships with possessions. The use of different modes of storytelling that applies multi-sensorial stimulation (spoken word, reflective letter writing, responsive writing on the clear box) is key to the process. The action of touching/cutting possessions and putting them into the box promotes tactile communication between the user and objects. The action of recording stories encourages the user to connect memories with the objects while watching/touching the objects during recording process. The action of writing letters helps the user attach themselves to the objects via a writing process that gives time for new thought associations with the objects. The last action of drawing/writing/doodling on the box helps the user to review the past actions.

For designers, this toolkit offers the opportunity to work through the process themselves or invite others (with appropriate participatory consent) to do so. In both cases the kit provides a potential source of inspiration – a means of seeding ideas for new designed objects based on personal narratives. In designing this toolkit my intent has been to help other designers better understand their stories and or other people's stories connected to objects. By considering everyday objects from different angles and through the lens of storytelling it offers a way to help us transform existing objects into new artifacts/objects through multi-sensory perspectives.

Drawing on people's memory narratives to create new objects presents a potential opportunity for transforming objects in the design world. The act of transforming personal narratives and objects can be further develop and bring important awareness of personal stories of lived experience and their influence on the relationship of people and their possessions.

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Appendices

Journal of stories

1. This is the second pair of sneakers I got from one of my friends. It is even hard to say she is my friend because we are coworkers and barely work together. She handed this to me during break and went through the story behind it.

Here is the story:

She got this with her ex-boyfriend and her ex-roommate. Now she broke up with both of them because her ex-boyfriend was lying to her that he is actually a gay. After they broke up, her ex posted on facebook saying that she broke up with him first without any reason. To be worse, her ex-roommate knew everything and didn't even mention to her. So she moved out of her apartment and decided to throw everything related to them away, and that's why I got this pair of almost new sneaker even I'm not so familiar with her.

When she first started talking and mentioning about her ex-boyfriend and her ex-roommate, I thought he cheated on her and dated the roommate. I was showing too much empathy to her at the beginning because I thought we have the same story. But it turns out to be a different story, and I felt so much better.

2. He was my English teach from high school. And he will always be my favourite teacher. He looks so young, so young that I just knew that he is already 38 but looks like around 30. He has been single for years but always asks me if I have a boyfriend. And he was very happy about me having someone who loves me. I always want to introduce some girls to him but he always refuses. He is still enjoying the freedom of living alone.

I wouldn't be able to stand the pressure he has right now because a man around his age should get married. If not, his family will be mad at him and consider him as an unfilial son. So I can't imagine his stress, even he was smiling when talking about this. We have known each other for years. This is the first time he talked about his own life instead of asking me about mine. No idea about what does marriage mean to him.

3. She is my best friend.

It's interesting that we have really different personalities, but we never fight, nor we have any secret between us. It's really hard to say, but she had her first boyfriend back in high school when she kind of left me alone and spent more time with him. I was ok with it, but when they broke up, it broke her heart. And when we were back from a long weekend to school just one week after they broke up, we heard from the school that the boy was transferred to another school without saying anything. She was blaming herself because she thought it is all her fault.

After all these year I already forgot him. I don't know her feelings about him until two years ago she texted me at midnight, saying he didn't transfer, but has died in a hiking accident during that long weekend. Since then she hasn't have any boyfriend. Today we talked about this again. I want her to be happy, and to be honest, I think this will be our first secret because she didn't want to talk about this.

4. She is my youngest cousin. I watched her grow. She knows everything right now even she is only ten. But everyone arounds her treat her as a adult. She got this pair of sneaker from her sister. Her sister got this from me. So this is literally my sneaker. But I couldn't remember the time I wear them. Plus, they are ugly.

My cousin doesn't like it, her sister doesn't like it, and I don't like it, We all don't know why this pair of shoes passed through us. And they still look new.

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5. She is my aunt. I like her a lot when I was young because she is pretty and nice to me. She has very soft voice and she was a designer, which was my dream job at that time. My mom admire her because she married to a good man and quit her job and became a housewife. Now her only job is to take care of her two kids and her husband. But I feel like her life is so boring. She keeps sending me photos of her dog and cat everyday because her kids are at school. And she doesn't go shopping very often, so I had been seeing her wearing this pair of sneaker for many years. I can't imagine a life as a housewife and barely walk outside the apartment.

6. She is my friend from grade 13. She loves pink. EVERYTHING is pink. Definitely for this pair of sneaker. Her mom is an actress in China. And she was born in the US She went to Brown university. I wish I can live her life. She started working at Disney from last year. It was her dream job. She knows her dream, her interests, her favourite colour... I don't think I know. She seems so happy everyday. I'm happy for her.

7. He is a friend of my friend. So I can barely call him my friend. He knows me. We have dinner together sometimes. He is always late. I saw him wearing this pair of sneaker once. They were expensive. So I was a little bit surprised when he gave them to me. I should make good use of them. He called my friend at night once because he was rejected to enter the US when he was travelling to Seattle. He told us that last time when he was in Los Angeles with his ex-girlfriend, he was arrested by the police because his ex-girlfriend called 911 when they quarrelled with each other. He was told to leave the US after released from custody. I don't know why he traveled to the US again even he knew he would have problems.

We graduated from high school in the same year. Now I'm graduating from a master program, but he is still finishing his college. He is such a weird guy.

8. He is my best friend. Always.

We have been friends for 12 years. He made fun of me when we were young. I remember that he drew on my school uniform with permanent markers. I hated him. But now I like him and treat him as family. When I was studying in California, he was my closest friend geographically and emotionally. He is always clean. So his shoes are clean too. He struggled with depression for a long time. I couldn't help him. So I wanted to study psychology in college, because of him. I can't imagine my life without him. Now he lives far away from me. I can't see him very often. I wish we can go back to the days when we go to school together.

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9. He is my love.

Everyone arounds me knows him. He collects sneakers. I got few pairs of shoes from him for this project. One pair of shoes look so new, but he said they are fake and didn't want me to use them. I can't write down much about him, because sometimes I can't describe him in words.

10. He is my instructor from one of the basic design classes. I heard of him before taking the class from other students because he was one of the meanest instructors. On Rate my professor website he only had 1.2/5. But it turned out that he really liked me. I got A+ for all the assignments. We chatted a lot. He was a poet, a musician, a guitar player, and an artist. He gave me his anthology at the end of the quarter. He retired from university two years ago and continued his career in music and poem. Last year he wrote me a poem on my birthday. I missed him so much.

11. I met him from my ex-boyfriend on an after-graduation party. He had a crush on me even I was dating my ex-boyfriend at the moment. He became one of my best friend in the end.

He went to study in the US in 2010. We were both in California for many years so sometimes I could see him and we hanged out. It must be hard for him to live on his own since age 15. I was the only one who knows he was raised in a single family. In Chinese culture it is something people want to hide as a secret. He graduated from UCLA last year but oddly he stayed in the US without a green card. Two weeks ago when he passed his shoes to me he told me he has been dating a girl for a year and half. I was so happy for him. One week later I heard from other friends from UCLA that he was arrested by FBI because of using fake ID and taking exams for others to earn money. I still can't understand why he did this. I felt like I lost a good friend.

