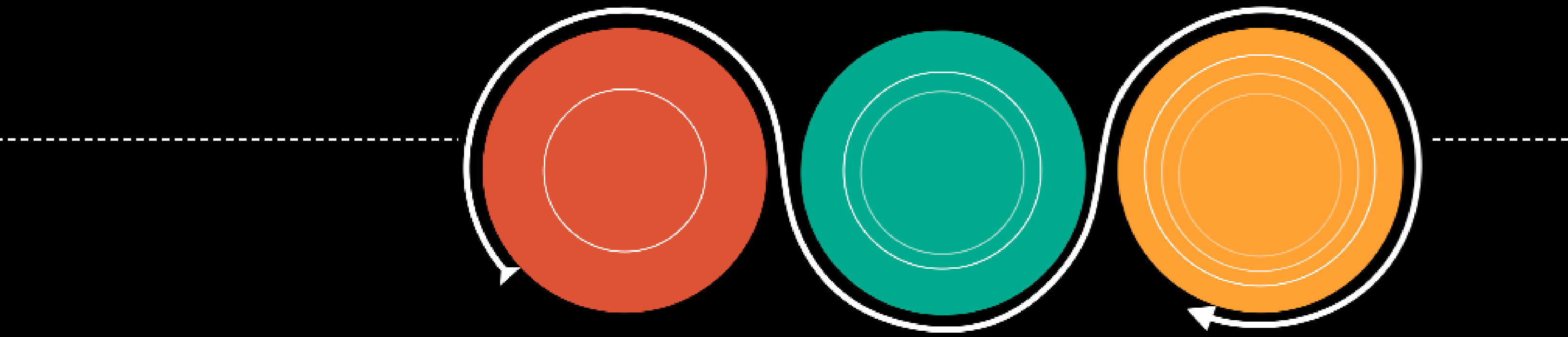
The Social Life of Everyday Objects

SITUATING THE DESIGNER IN A COLLABORATIVE-CREATIVE PRACTICE



Sheen Darbari
B.Tech (Mechanical Engineering),
Delhi Technological University, 2018

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by

Sheen Darbari
B.Tech (Mechanical Engineering),
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A critical & process documentation paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Design

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ABSTRACT

The everyday objects that we surround ourselves with are deeply connected to our understanding of the world. These objects have the power to manifest and propagate particular world-views. This makes it particularly important for designers to study artefacts and the engagement we have with them. The meaning we (as introspective and social beings) draw from or affix to our objects is rooted in the socio-cultural perspectives of the world, an understanding that is largely created through actions of storytelling.

This thesis explores the act of narrative-building through the process of making. It considers the significance of this in relation to understanding and expressing personal identity through objects. It seeks out ways a designer might use narratives as a means to - understand and make sense of personal experiences; situate oneself in relation in the act of making itself; create new forms and; engage with people around oneself. The research employs a reflective material practice made up of design methods such as research through design, heuristic inquiry, narrative inquiry and participatory workshops with peers in the studio. These were used as ways to actively respond to theories connected to emotional design, product longevity and shared practices of making. Through the act of making, the research explores unfamiliar ways of engaging with objects as a way to consider the multi-faceted relationships that can be found - between groups of people, between people and their everyday objects, people and their construction of identity in relation to their socio-cultural backgrounds.

Through sharing the empirical learnings and insightful outcomes of these acts of building narrative and generative making with others, the research proposes a methodological framework that situates the designer within a collaborative-creative practice, driven by a heuristic inquiry.

KEYWORDS

Everyday objects
Human-object relationship
Narrative
Storytelling
Socio-cultural perspective
Identity
Expression
Reflective material practice
Material culture
Collaborative making
Emotional design
Product longevity

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To my roommate Laura, and our (permanent) house-guests Camilo and Shrushti, thanks for all the burnt cookies, midnight conversations and wonderful stories. I'm very lucky to have you guys around.

Lastly, to mumma, papa, nanaji and the rest of my sweet, beautiful and funny family, thank you for believing in me, unconditionally.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Ambiguity	The quality or state of being doubtful or uncertain.
Co-creation	Refers to a design process that involves an active inclusion and collaboration with users towards generating design outcomes.
Collaborative-creative practice	A type of creative practice that involves generating outcomes and insights through shared acts of making with people from different disciplines and knowledge perspectives.
Design for disassembly	A design methodology that aims to ease deconstruction procedures for repurposing of material.
Emotional design	A design approach that aims to consider and understand the users' emotions elicited in the interactions with designed artefacts.
Human-centric design	A design approach that involves considering the human perspective as its focus to respond to people's needs and desires.
Industrial design	A field of design that is concerned with the aesthetics, form, features and functions of manufactured products produced on a large scale.
Material culture	The interaction between persons and things (Malafouris, 2013, p. 2).

Product longevity	A set of methodologies adopted in the design process to ensure a longer product lifespan.
Product semantics	The study of the symbolic qualities of man-made forms in the context of their use and the application of this knowledge to industrial design (Krippendorff & Butter, 1984, p. 1).
Reflective material practice	A practice involving cognitive engagement with materials that continually progresses through a process of reflective thought and action.
Relationality	The state or condition of being relational.
Tacit-knowledge	Knowledge that is gained from personal experiences and is difficult to communicate.

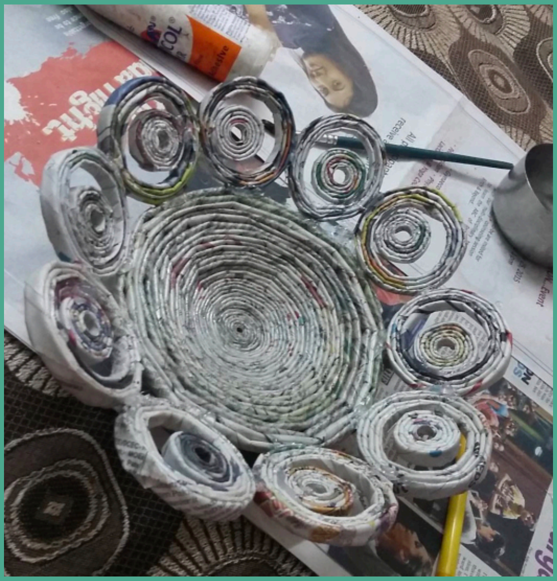
FOREWORD

Dear readers,

This is Sheen. I was born and raised in the capital city of India, New Delhi. My family belongs to the state of Jammu & Kashmir. I recently moved to the city of Vancouver, Canada, situated on the traditional territories of three Local First Nations: the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh. In this thesis document, I present to you a summary of a non-traditional practice developed over the course of the Masters in Design program offered at Emily Carr University of Art+Design. It has been informed by an amalgamation of industrial design processes, engineering principles and craft-based practices.

This approach to a design practice has been made possible due to a consciously cultivated habit of reflective thought and criticality. It can be categorised as practice-based, that follows a relatively novel approach of performing research. An aspect that separates this type of research from other branches of study and which also makes it incredibly valuable and special, is that it doesn't exact a strictly defined problem space. The practice of performing the research in a generative, explorative manner that situates the unknown (and sometimes uncontrollable) as a tool for insight within the framework of investigation allows the practitioner to discover unexpected perspectives and possibilities (Fraser, 2017). It allows the design researcher to learn and borrow theories from other branches of study, in order to advance, explicate, respond to and disseminate the knowledge gained in this process (Krogh & Koskinen, 2020).

The subject of this research inquiry has been inspired to a great degree by my personal life and interests. This is best explained through a short anecdote about my relationship to making as a teenager -



When I was about 14 years old, I had become grossly consumed with making ornate-looking bowls out of week-old newspapers. Unlike the old newspapers that my grandfather would save for the scrap collector, who would buy bundles in exchange for some petty cash, these bowls would serve little practical purpose around the house. They were fragile - would bend or break at the slightest of involuntarily strains - meaning they had to be discarded almost immediately after being put into use. Reconciling with this loss was quite hard for me since I would toil for hours to perfectly craft the seemingly meaningless bowls. My mother - almost in response to the predicament my bowls faced - started storing and displaying these creations on a higher shelf in the living room to keep them safe.

Making those bowls was a strange fixation for me. The process - of measuring and cutting strips of the newspapers individually and rolling them thinly at an angle into sturdy, long pieces, that would eventually be rolled into coils to construct the base and the ornate outer structure of the bowl - was very time-consuming and painstakingly monotonous. I didn't own many professional crafting tools, so I relied on my patient hands and my mother's kitchen skewers to make this process as efficient as possible. The most frustrating part of the process was holding down each individual coil to the base structure and waiting for the glue to dry (I eventually bought a hot glue gun that would make this operation much more convenient). After leaving these to rest overnight, the next morning, I would paint these awkwardly constructed bowls in bright and cheery colours, being extra cautious and delicate so as not to mess with the form, that I had tired over so hard to make as symmetric as possible. By no means was this a relaxing recreational activity. I would strain my neck and my eyes for days trying to get these bowls to turn out as perfectly as I envisioned them. However, it was extremely meditative and almost soothing in a different way. The making process allowed me to be alone with my thoughts, reflect on my day-to-day and sometimes simply tune out and observe the movement of my fingers. My cousin would often joke about this odd interest in such a seemingly frustrating hobby, to which I didn't quite have an explanation back then. My stoic grandfather who didn't really understand this meticulous but seemingly purposeless pursuit, would however nod and slightly smile in encouragement at the final results and that would make the effort all the more rewarding. For a few more weeks I would continue to consume myself with this fascination into constructing exquisite newspaper bowls - till I graduated to making sturdier plastic bottle pen stands and shiny bangle containers.

A few years later, I went on to pursue mechanical engineering for my undergraduate degree. Contrary to the field of design, which prompts the practitioner to study and engage with the immediate world around them, mechanical engineers are taught to follow prescriptive procedures to achieve desired results for defined problems (Finger & Dixon, 1989). Engineering problems are defined within limited constraints, the solutions to which are explored through established mathematical and analytical procedures. I became used to envisioning real physical problems - that could be observed and experienced through direct contact with the physical world - through abstract mathematical concepts. I was taught to work with software for engineering simulation, studying the dynamics of the real world in the digital realm. The success of the outcomes of these processes are governed by the degree of accuracy and efficiency. A slight deviation from the accepted range of values would completely botch the results and make the entire investigation inconclusive. The high degree of control required in this process would give me a certain feeling of detachment from being able to visualise and understand these concepts as tangible or natural, which would counteractively end up making me feel less in control of the problem. Comparing this with the hands-on experience of constructing the newspaper bowls, I felt so much more in control during the making process as I could completely rely on my sensory responses to my actions, as usually one tends to. The outcome of that newspaper rolling process wasn't at all perfect or viable from an engineering standpoint; it didn't perform its functional purpose of holding things effectively. However, it allowed me to visualise the form, the structure, the fabrication technique and its functional properties in a much more tangible way.

For a long time, I believed that my education as an engineer was the backbone of my design aptitude. Engineering school has taught me important theoretical skills such as the mechanics of motion, material science and manufacturing processes. However, these concepts would prove to be futile without my strong interest and experience in hands-on making. Learning to manipulate and work with the materials in a hands-on manner allowed me to establish a stronger connection to the physical experience of interacting with objects, that consequently helped identify and reflect on the underlying stories about human experience.

Objects are incredibly interesting and hold so much information about the world. Progressing through this Masters program, extensively reflecting on the socio-political space around everyday objects as a designer/maker, has helped advance my practice into a space of conscious, creative and critical engagement with our built world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

4 ABSTRACT
5 KEYWORDS
6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
8 GLOSSARY OF TERMS
10 FOREWORD
14 TABLE OF CONTENTS

15 1.0 INTRODUCTION
17 2.0 PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

3.0 METHODS

19 3.1 Research through design
20 3.2 Heuristic inquiry
21 3.3 Narrative inquiry

4.0 STUDIO EXPLORATIONS

22 4.1 Reflections on personal identity
26 4.2 Lamps as offerings
35 4.3 Gallery of Meaningful Disposables: Lamp Edition
43 4.4 Stories of a water bottle
49 5.0 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK
55 6.0 DISCUSSION
57 7.0 FINAL THOUGHTS

62 REFERENCES
66 LIST OF FIGURES
67 APPENDIX 1
68 APPENDIX 2
69 APPENDIX 3
70 APPENDIX 4

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Research question
How can narrative building, through a continuous process of diversified actions of making and engagement with everyday objects, be used as a method to explore multi-faceted relationships connected to identity construction - between oneself and the things they own and between oneself and the people around them?

This thesis summarises the reflective process of my exploration into engagement with everyday objects and the process of making. The work discussed actively reflects and responds to narratives that emerged through the process. The research space is predominantly located within a reflective material practice, that emerged through an initial inquiry and interest into emotional design for everyday objects. The everyday objects that form the basis of my inquiry are household non-perishable products that include essential utilities such as kitchen utensils, bottles; small domestic appliances such as lamps, clocks; and some furniture, decoration items and ornamental centrepieces. All of these are objects that serve some sort of functional purpose but also allow the user to construct and share aspects of their own identity with others through presentation, customisation and curation of these things (Hinte, 1997, pp. 46-49).

Additionally, everyday objects also serve as pools of reflection into our own consciousness, personal identity and world-views. These objects, no matter how mundane or insignificant, have the capacity to mould, shape and reinforce our belief systems to a certain degree (Norman, 2005). The actor-network theory perspective towards design proposes that objects are designed to shape human action and mould or influence decisions (Akrich, 1992). In this way, the objects' design serves to mediate human relationships and can even impact our morality, ethics, and politics (Latour, 1993). These qualities of everyday objects make them an appropriate focal point for unravelling, understanding and expressing narratives around one's construction of identity and subsequent situation of oneself amongst one's social circles.

The thesis proposes a methodological framework for situating the designer within a collaborative-creative practice, one that is largely formulated and developed through a heuristic inquiry. Through the process of making and consequent reflection, the research intends to elucidate a designer's relationship to their own practice; illuminating insights into the internal dialogue that ensues in the practice of making and its significance in advancing the work within the framework of investigation. The research also employs diversified means of engagement with everyday objects to identify, consider and express the convoluted narratives of personal identity and social relationships associated with these objects.

Arguably, recognising these nuances in the relationships between humans and the built environment allows the designer to be aware of the different world-views they promote through the things they design. My practice aims to employs these considerations in the design for everyday things to potentially mediate sustainable practices in terms of production and use, relationality and co-creation.

2.0 PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

> "In order to cope with ill-defined problems, the designer has to learn to have the self-confidence to define, redefine and change the problem-as-given in the light of the solution that emerges from his mind and hand. People who seek the certainty of externally structured, well-defined problems will never appreciate the delight of being a designer" (Cross, 1982, p. 224).

As a previously trained engineer, having little knowledge or any prior encounter with the field of design research, the one didactic advice that seemed the most strange to me, also one that my professors seemed to share the most, would be to acknowledge, get acquainted with and take advantage of ambiguity. They reiterated this very curious suggestion in most of our class interactions in the first year, emphasising the importance of embracing ambiguity that ensues in practice, toward revealing insightful direction and advancing the research inquiry. As an individual trained in technical research - a field that requires the practitioner to be very precise and analytical - being introduced and suddenly immersed into a system that seemed to have no prescribed direction except for learning to be self-reflective in one's practice, felt freeing but admittedly quite unsettling at the same time. I believed I knew exactly what my course of action would be, as I formulated the research inquiry, however, each outcome I produced lead to an unexpected discovery that challenged me to redefine my path of inquiry.

My conception of the practice of design has changed vastly since the time I was still in engineering school. Back then, I only understood the role of designers through their contributions to capitalist economies - their marketable skills. I believed that the designer's value in any organisation was limited to synthesising and visually communicating ideas that other parties would request of them. I believed that their role was confined to producing solutions, to problems borne out of necessities, or a lack thereof. Part of this understanding was perhaps also created due to cultural reasons - it's common in my community to measure the worth of any professional pursuit in terms of its financial output. This reinforced my reductionist beliefs about the field of design and designers' contributions in producing and contributing to knowledge creation.

English philosopher Richard Stanley Peters (1965) proposes criterions for determining whether a particular field of knowledge can be deemed as educational. One of his criterions explains that there is a difference between being trained in skills that allow one to perform a task satisfactorily and being able to cognitively respond to the acquired skills. This important distinction is worth considering, as it is the cognitive perspective of being able to connect the acquired training within the larger context of practice, that constitutes educational learning. According to British design researcher and educator Nigel Cross (1982), the consideration of the field of design as merely a skill-based activity poses challenges to this criterion. Seemingly, it was also largely the reason behind my misunderstanding and dismissal of the ways designers learn, engage and respond to stimulations.

According to Cross (1982), the cognitivism in the practice of design can be understood by examining material culture. Malafouris (2004) advances the hypothesis to consider human cognition as not being isolated from material culture. He posits that cognition resides at the enactment of the interaction between people and things. This argument provides a critical outlook into the cognitive perspectives of material culture and helps advance an understanding of the 'designerly ways of knowing' (Cross, 1982).

Stepping into a creative space afforded by Emily Carr University, that is largely motivated by reflective thought and critical examination, offered me a fresh perspective on the role of a designer, not only in relation to the community at large, but also to one's own practice. My practice as a maker and designer evolved from simply constructing new forms to considering, understanding and reflecting on the internal dialogue that ensues in the process of making. This allowed me to identify and explore narratives related to the relationship between me and my practice. I learned to critically examine and question my own learnings, which often lead me to discover unexplored territories, this helped advance my research inquiry in ways I couldn't have predicted.

> "A basic principle of practice-based research is that not only is practice embedded in the research process but research questions arise from the process of practice, the answers to which are directed toward enlightening and enhancing practice" (Candy & Edmonds, 2018, p. 63).

3.0 METHODS

My investigation into the capacity of generative making to explore the socio-political space around everyday objects comprised of the following methods and approaches:

3.1 Research through design

British educationalist and writer Christopher Frayling (1993) presents three approaches to performing design research - research into design, research through design and research for design. These approaches have become widely influential in the design community to develop and share an understanding of the nature of design research. He offers three main subcategories that constitute research through design - material research, development work, and action research, all carried out with a practical approach to generating knowledge which can be disseminated.

Based on the ideas presented by Frayling, many researchers since then have attempted to explicate the nature of research through design within different frameworks (among others Buchanan, 2001; Cross, 2001; Friedman, 2002; Margolin, 2002; Sevaldson, 2010). Bang, Krogh, Ludvigsen & Markussen (2012) propose a framework model to discuss the ways of constructing hypothesis through the method of research through design, or constructive design research, as they describe it. This framework recognises the continual experimentation that takes place in the process of constructive design research and its role in providing a medium for reconsideration and reframing of the foundation of the research itself.

My research inquiry into the socio-political space around everyday objects to uncover and express narratives, was nowhere near linear. My practice constantly shifted and transitioned to explore a variety of areas of focus pertaining to the research inquiry through studio-based explorations. These explorations were motivated by the desire to experiment with different methods to build on the insights generated in the process of self-reflection. I believe it is this nature of experimentation embedded in the approach of constructive design research that allows the researcher to express, share and advance understandings of the field of practice.

3.2 Heuristic inquiry

As described by Douglass and Moustakas (1985, p. 39), "heuristics is a passionate and discerning personal involvement in problem solving, an effort to know the essence of some aspect of life through internal pathways of the self." Introduced by American humanistic psychologist Clark Moustakas, heuristic inquiry is an approach to discern and decipher human experience, especially through an in-depth inquiry into one's own lived experience. Through the process, the researcher "experiences a growing sense of self-awareness and self-knowledge, promoted by self-search, self-dialogue and self-discovery" (Given, 2008, p. 390). This approach allows for the researcher's lived experiences to actively shape and develop the research inquiry.

3.3 Narrative inquiry

“Narrative inquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures” (Bell, 2002, p. 207). As human beings, we all have our own conceptions of personal identity. Through stories we construct an understanding of who we are, defining our identity not only to others but also to ourselves (McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich, 2006). In my practice, I explore identifying, creating and sharing narratives through the process of generative making. My explorations into expressing narratives are closely connected to my own conception of personal identity.

In the studio, I proactively invited my peers in my making process, to share stories with me. McDonnell, Lloyd and Valkenburg (2004) propose that storytelling is a useful approach to adopt in collaborative practices as stories offer extremely effective and powerful ways of sharing knowledge. Through acts of collective storytelling, my peers and I were able to offer, share and consider different perspectives. This offers opportunities to allow creative collaboration between people of different backgrounds to collectively approach and solve problems.

4.0 STUDIO EXPLORATIONS

4.1 Reflections on personal identity

I had begun my Master studies exploring the space of storytelling through objects, ideating product concepts that communicate narratives about more-than-human beings that are particularly relatable to people who have been exposed to stories and family values instilled from an early age in the Western culture. My conceptual products embodied narratives such as the childhood tale of ‘the goose that laid the golden eggs’ and other common narratives such as that of a chicken laying eggs and a pet cat scratching its owner. My intent was to communicate these common scenarios through playful, humorous interactions and in a simplistic and relatable manner.

At this early phase of my work, I was challenging myself as a designer to explore the concept of playful interactions through conceptual products for everyday use around the household, that alluded to the stories I had decided to portray. In an attempt to comically subvert the story of ‘the goose that laid the golden eggs,’ I designed a mechanical container resembling the body of a goose that would contain and periodically dispense certain units of a commodity that the consumer is trying to limit the usage of. To portray the narrative of a chicken laying eggs, I designed a serving tray - drawing influence from the character of a chicken - that would hold eggs. The third story, about a pet cat scratching its owner, was realised in the form of a back scratcher that’s shaped like a cat’s paw.

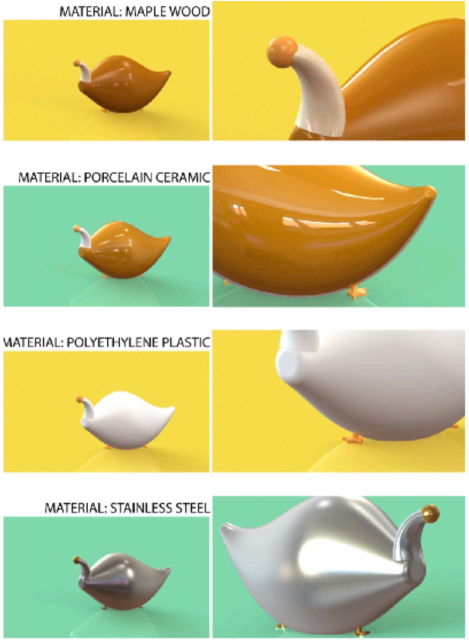

MATERIAL: MAPLE WOOD
MATERIAL: PORCELAIN CERAMIC
MATERIAL: POLYETHYLENE PLASTIC
MATERIAL: STAINLESS STEEL

Figure 1: Virtual form exploration of goose container

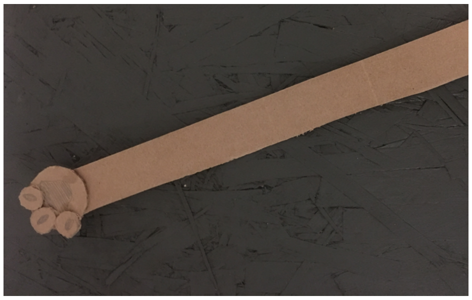
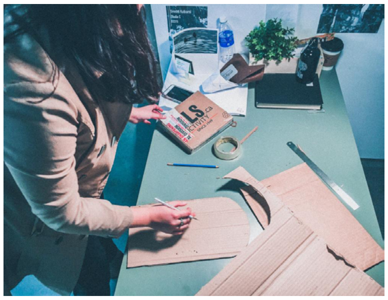


Figure 2: Cardboard mockup of cat-paw back scratcher

Figure 3

Figure 4



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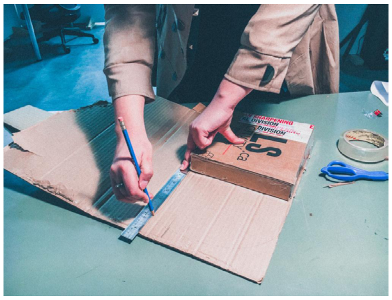

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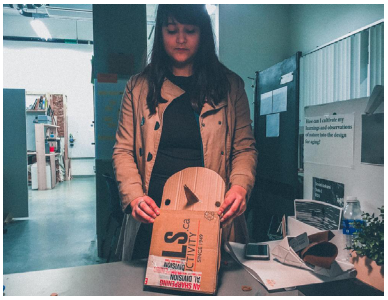

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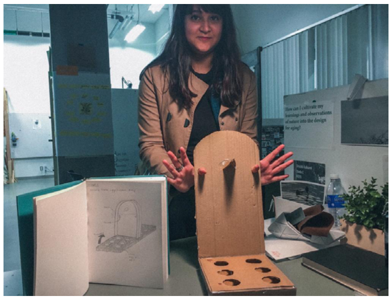


Figure 8

Figures 3-8: Ideating, sketching and building the prototype of the egg tray using cardboard

As I proposed and prototyped these product concepts questions were opened up by myself and my peers - what was this for? Who was this for?

Trained as an engineer it had not occurred to me to consider the type of consumer I might be making for. Game to approach this query I delved into considering who I might be designing for. I started to reflect on the socio-political aspects of the narratives that I instinctively chose to portray through my creations. It started to become clear to me that the choice of portraying these stories was largely influenced by my exposure to popular culture and media, particularly from the West.

As an individual who had not lived in the western part of the world until recently, and had only just moved to Canada, my instinctive choice of portraying stereotypically western stories that dwell within western family values and world-views, started to seem very strange to me. My conceptual products that I had initially seen as lighthearted and fun and a generative way of prolifically exploring the space of storytelling through objects started to unfold narratives about my own personal identity and my identity as a designer.

I was born to a family of displaced Kashmiri Pandits in the capital city of India, New Delhi. Growing up, I was always reminded that we weren't financially as strong as probably my friends' families who lived in the particularly posh part of the city. This difference in financial strength was more apparent to my parents, they constantly worried about our dwelling conditions and tried to work tirelessly to afford better amenities for our family. Despite these constant reminders and comparisons, my parents' concerns about our overall well-being seemed a little exaggerated. I was a teenager who attended one of the premier English-medium private schools in the country and came from a family that could afford luxuries that were not afforded to a substantially large segment of the population of the country. Basically, I was a privileged young Indian girl with access to learning a colonially enforced language that allowed me access to information and a cultural subsection that a large majority of the country could not even conceive of having access to/'being in on'. Although I was constantly rewarded with the consequences of this privilege from a very young age, a conscious understanding of this privilege didn't exist until very later in my life. A lack of perceptiveness of this albeit very obvious privilege could be attributed to the lack of comprehensive discussions around religious, caste-based, racial and class-based struggles in our education system, combined with an ignorance around the same subject in my family. I don't mean to disfavor my family's moral teachings in any way, for they were brought up without a similar understanding of their own privilege that allowed them social and financial security over many other less-fortunate communities. Although the consequences of our colonial history aren't at all merely 'a thing of the past' - considering certain communities are still reaping the benefits of discriminatory and hierarchal systems over other less privileged communities - it's not considered polite to bring up these topics of discussion at the dinner table.

Returning to my conceptual product creations, it now makes complete sense to me why I would intuitively gravitate towards exploring typically western themes. Having been a part of a society and education system that rewards privilege afforded by colonial systems, my identity was both proactively and abstractedly moulded by cultural references belonging to the Western world. I see my Masters work as partly about seeking ways to allow people to explore their own identity through the process of making. Reflecting on my thoughts and making process has lead me to discover this constant identity struggle - of belonging to a culturally-rich Indian community but sharing ideologies and world-views of a completely different, somewhat stereotypically abstracted version of a Western lifestyle. Although this identity struggle might not immediately be apparent through the products I designed, the act of making itself - most part of which happens over internal dialogues and subsequent conversations with peers and pals - is very much about this. The process of making allows me to reflect on and share my personal narratives, which is the essence of my practice-based research.

4.2 Lamps as offerings

In the spring of 2019, my investigation into the emotional concentrations around everyday objects started to take shape. I decided to explore the concept of relationality by making objects that would embody the relationships I share with my peers.

My practice as an industrial designer is primarily human-centric. As an individual who tends to design in response to the needs of others, the growing realisation that the things I put out in the world affect the users' lives, to whatever degree, was daunting. Often times, we assume we know others' needs and preferences and as a result, unconsciously force our own judgement on other people. I wanted to be genuine in acknowledging the complex giver-receiver relationship, and my own limitations as a giver/designer. So as I began to delve into the vast and often ambiguous space of communicating stories through objects, I chose to explore my current context. I decided to design in relation to the people around me, people I had recently met and shared a connection with – my MDes colleagues in the studio. As a recent immigrant to Vancouver and an international student, the moments I shared with my cohort over the first few months of Emily Carr University's Master's program were my point of connection to the city and the new life I had chosen to pursue. To make sense of this change, I decided I would design and make simple objects for my peers that alluded to specific types of interactions and ways of communication that were part of our shared relationship. Aiming for a cohesive design element, a base line/ a control of sorts I decided that all my explorations into relationality would, in one way or the other, take the form of a lamp.

As I whipped up my serial lamp making scenario I couldn't help musing how many modern lamps seem particularly uncharacteristic and bland. I decided to purposefully counter this - I would attempt to bring personality and expression into an otherwise mundane, everyday thing, whose primary practical purpose/function was to give light. My lamps would be warm, quirky and playful as opposed to the sleek, modern and almost clinical design language of most of the commercially produced lamps nowadays.

As I planned my course of action, I grappled with the anxiety of not being able to do justice to my relationship with the people I was designing for. After much thought, I decided to push these thoughts aside. My goal after all, was not to accurately represent each and every aspect of these relationships, but rather to consider an alternative manner of approaching the design process of an everyday object.

Welsh design researcher Stuart Walker (2003), furthering on the work of philosopher Martin Buber (1927), suggests pursuing a “substantial shift in the way we conceive of, design and produce functional objects” in order to develop a more sustainable relationship with material culture (Walker, 2003, p. 189). Walker emphasises on the importance of ‘direct encounter’ in the creation of material goods to pursue an ideology that professes a ‘reciprocal relationship’ with material culture. Based on these ideas, my lamp making process would employ a direct approach in procurement, manipulation and assembly of materials while acknowledging the transient nature of material goods.

To start my making process I began by reflecting on my thoughts and feelings connected to each of the eleven individuals I had decided to design for - the relationship catalysts of my endeavour. I looked back upon my conversations and interactions with each of my classmates and started to ponder ways that I could represent a specific encounter or evoke a certain feeling that reminded me of them.

Still mulling over these considerations, I headed to a local Dollar Store to find some inspiration, for my prior experience as a crafter demanded visual stimulation. Since first arriving in Vancouver, I have come to rely on the Dollar Store for sourcing most of my supplies. The vast variety of material, ranging across a multitude of applications is extremely useful for both quick and elaborate prototyping. Each time I visit a Dollar Store I find something surprising or unexpected - useful things that can be manipulated as tools for making.

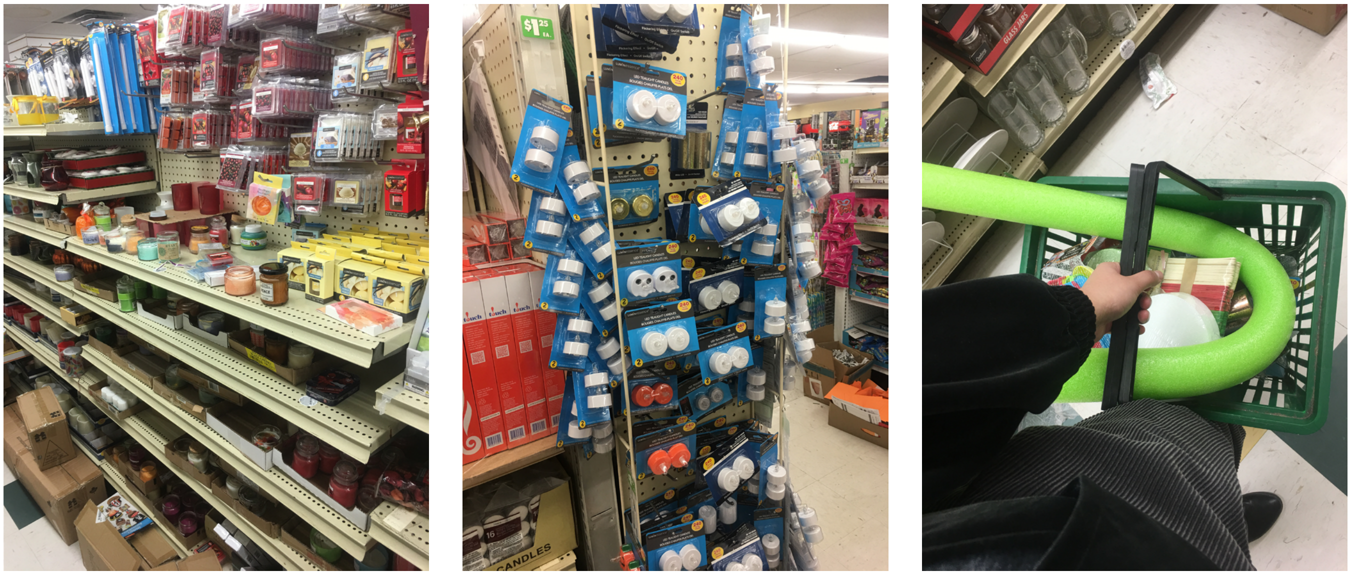


Figure 9 *Figure 10* *Figure 11*

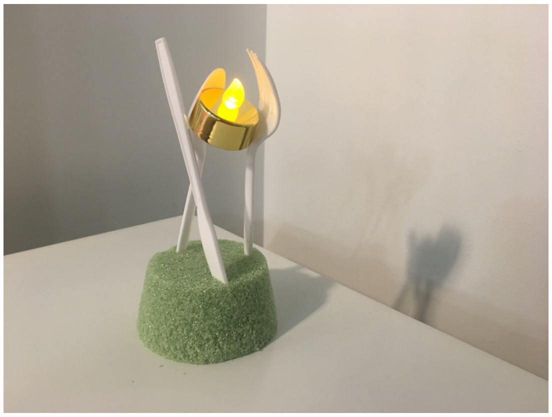
Figures 9-11: Exploring the aisles at the local Dollar Store to find materials for the lamps

Searching the aisles at the store, I found numerous products that would serve as viable pieces for my lamps. I was interested in the feel, versatility and simplicity of the material, and how it could be manipulated to suit a craft-based making process. These materials included ice cream sticks, coin wrappers, yarn, paper clips - consumer products that serve specific, well-defined purposes in our daily lives. Some of the material, including used glass bottles, jute twine, styrofoam, was sourced from the recycling in my home or from my collection of leftover materials. I would be using these materials to make something that skewed their original form - that both used the functional properties of the material and countered the original, intended purpose. The lighting source for all the lamps would be a small tea-light (also purchased at the Dollar Store) that operated on battery. There were two kinds of tea-lights, one had a flip switch mechanism and the other's base had to be rotated in either direction to turn on or off.

Ashby and Johnson (2014) pointed out that intangible issues such as the perception and association of materials are significant factors for selecting materials for products. I made choices about these Dollar Store 'building materials' based on my perceptions of the people the lamps would be meant for. This was sometimes connected to conversations I had had with them, sometimes related to their own work and explorations in the studio.

For instance, I knew that one of my classmate's work revolves around experiences with food, so I consciously chose to work with plastic cutlery for her lamp; another classmate of mine likes working with structures and exploring ways to join them, so I knew I wanted to work with Legos for her lamp; another classmate was at the time interested in the benefits of gardening for old age care homes, so I picked up fake grass and plant pots for her lamp. I also found other interesting objects in the Dollar stores like a plastic toy gun that shoots rubber pellets and a set of fake teeth that chatter when you rotate the attached key. I wasn't exactly sure for whose lamps I would be using these items for, but I supposed they would allude to the cheeky, whimsical moments I'd spent with some of my peers.

Back in the studio, I laid out all the gathered materials and divided them into clusters based on my initial ideas. Next, I picked out the materials that I had specifically chosen for some specific people. Using other materials like styrofoam, sticks and twine as the bases, supporting structures and binders, I created free-standing forms. The tea-light would be adhered to the form in such a way that it looked like it belonged and wasn't merely an appendage.



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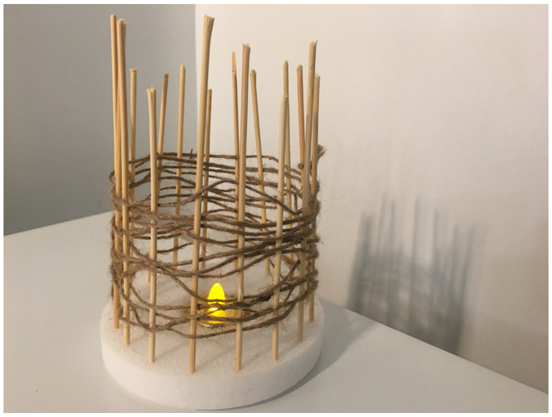

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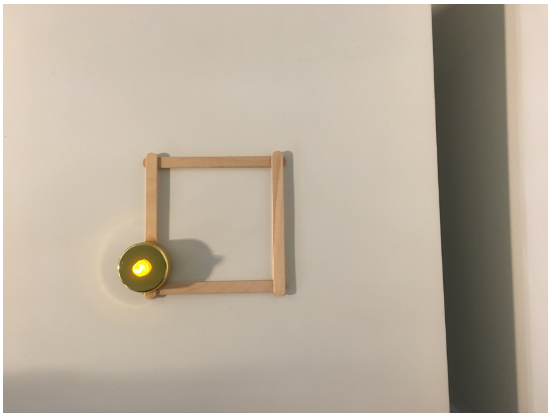
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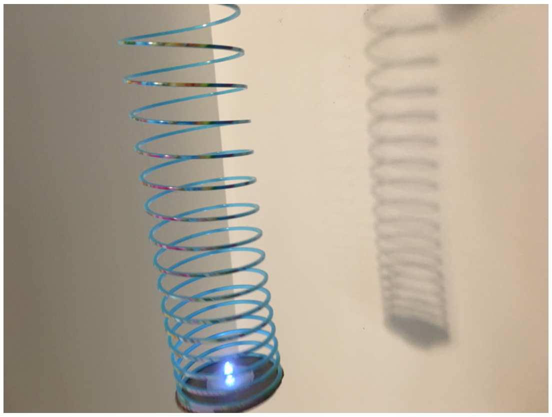
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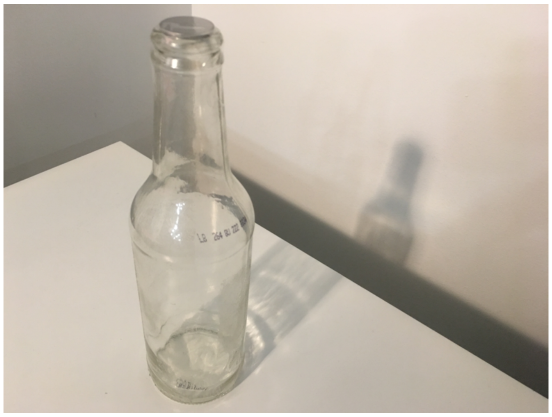
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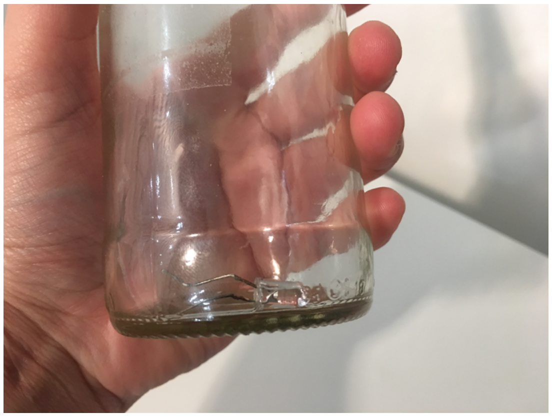
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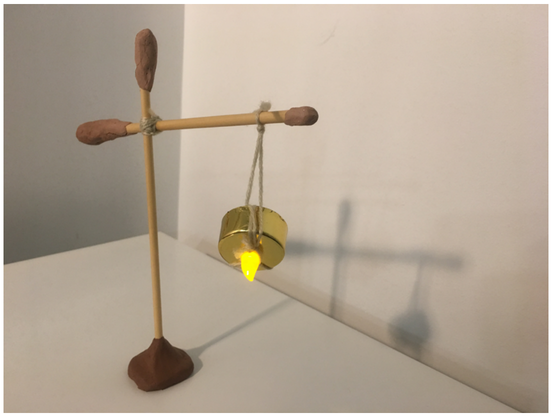
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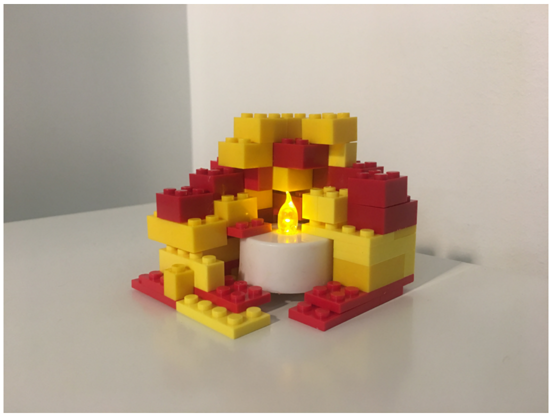
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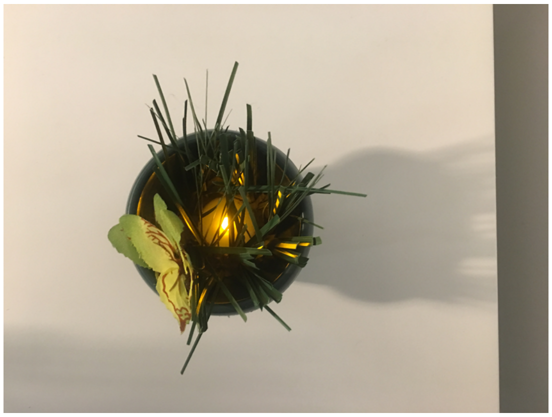

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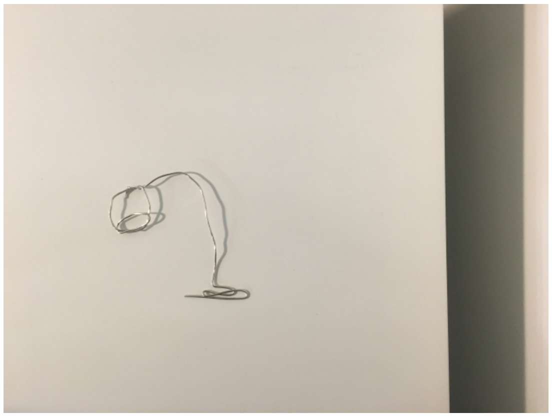

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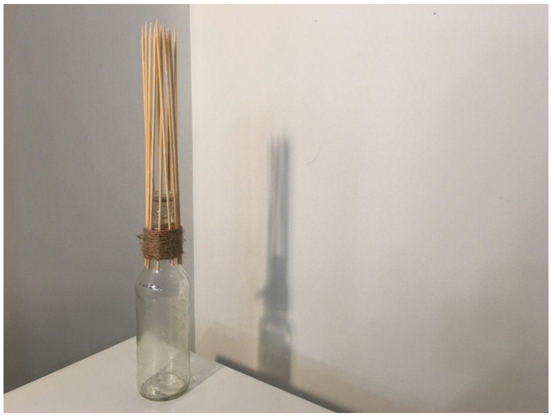

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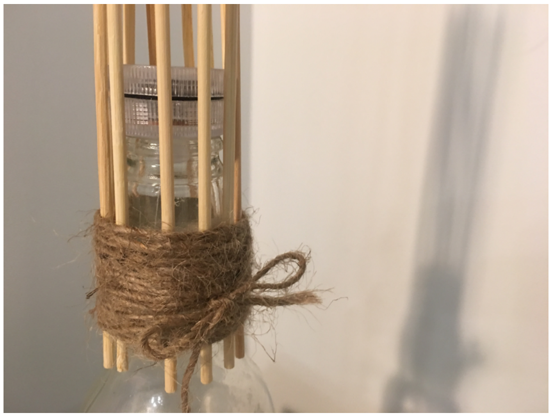


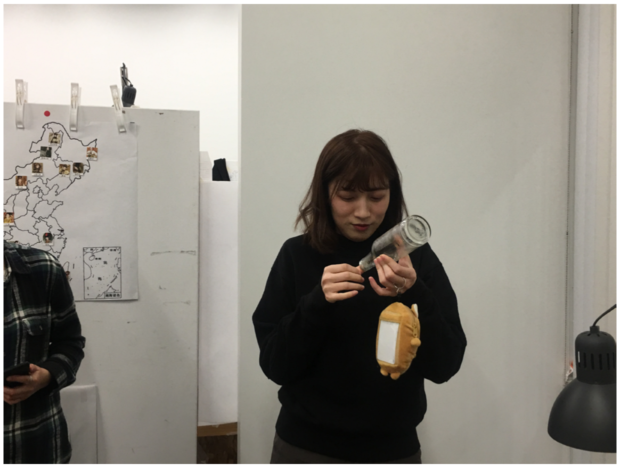
Figure 23

Figures 12-23: Lamps made out of the procured materials ready to be offered to my peers

In total, I made eleven lamps, each taking twenty minutes to an hour to make. Each material I used presented a new set of challenges and ways of manipulation. My intention to make each final ad hoc object look presentable and functional (to some extent) made the making process a little challenging at times. I enjoyed this though! It was fun to get acquainted with the different materials and to think about ways I could subvert the forms and use them in different and unexpected ways.

The lamps were presented to my peers on the day of a studio crit. My goal was to document their initial reactions upon receiving the lamp and record the types of interactions that were motivated by this action. I purposefully chose different approaches to my act of offering. To some, I presented their lamps with a short story about how it represented my perception of our relationship. Some of the lamps were made to be quasi anti-functional or confusing so the people's first interactions with their lamps were quite playful and delightful. For example, one of the lamps had long skewers all around the light source that made it difficult for the person it was intended for, to switch on the LED. This apparent barrier was initially met with confusion, that transitioned into careful examination and meticulous operation, and subsequent joy upon successfully lighting the lamp. Another lamp had been deconstructed to look like an empty glass bottle but it contained an inconspicuous LED light and a battery attached to the opening. The trick was to shake the lamp several times and reposition it upside down so the terminals of the LED would come in contact with the battery - this took some time for my classmate to figure out, but when she did, it was met with a sense of wonder and bewilderment.

For a few of my peers, I simply placed their lamps on their desk while they weren't in their space. The element of surprise wasn't there quite as much as I had hoped, since they'd already seen the lamps earlier. But later, a number of people reached out to me to express their gratitude. This opened an opportunity for more conversation regarding people's thoughts about their lamps, and our shared sense of community. In this way, the lamps seemed to fulfil their purpose of extending friendly gestures to these people and consequently helping maintain and evolve an ongoing relationship. This helped brush away all my previous anxieties about not being able to do justice to my shared relationship with my peers.



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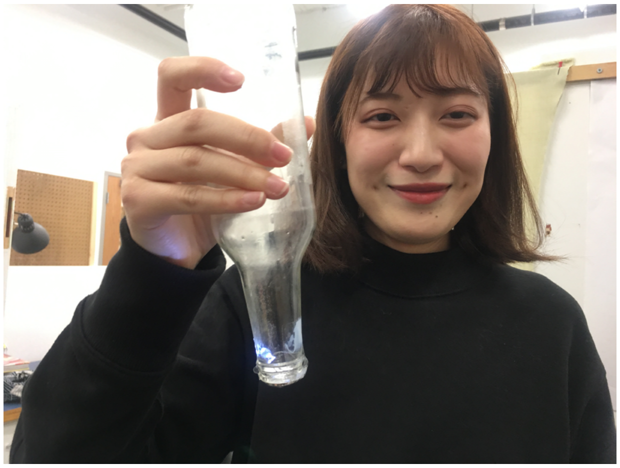

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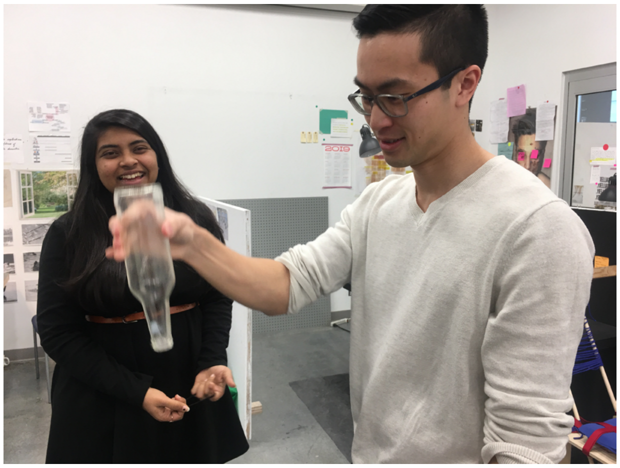


Figure 26

Figure 27

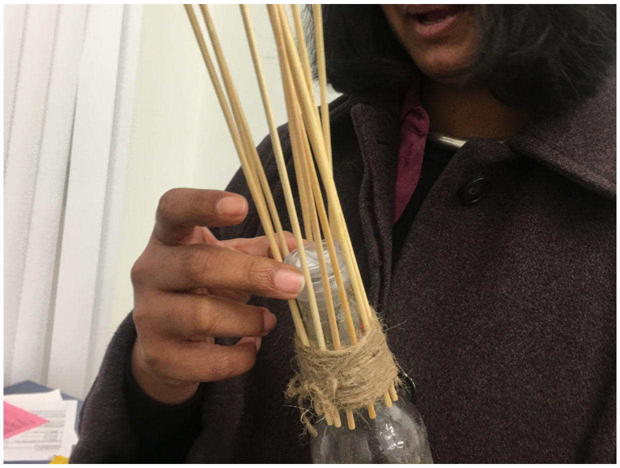


Figure 28

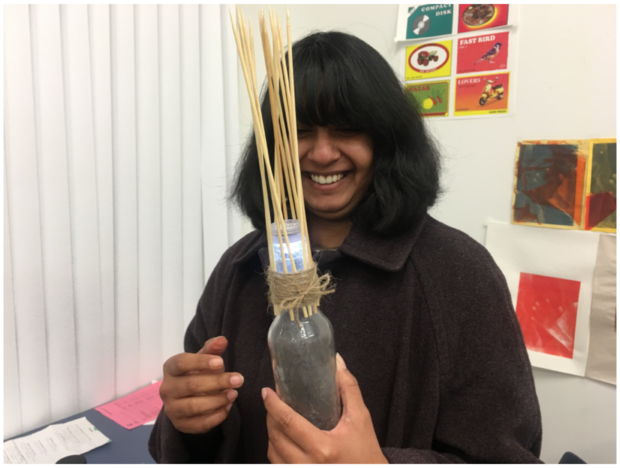


Figure 29

Figures 24-29: Presenting the lamps to my peers

Still I was conflicted with the thought that I might not be doing what I came to Emily Carr to do. I feared that the approach that I was taking was deviating too far from the conventional workflow of an industrial designer. Over the summer, I spent a considerable amount of time writing and reflecting in detail about each of the lamps I had made as offerings to my peers. This practice provided valuable insights about my making process. In addition, these written pieces served as standalone narratives about my internal reflection about engagement with materials and the role that external factors and sensorial responses play in the conception of a design project that was inspired predominantly by emotional connections with other people.

Through an iterative process of picking out keywords and phrases from the written documentation about the lamps, and subsequently placing them next to each other, I started to discover patterns in my making process. I grouped the phrases that alluded to similar types of interactions with the materials and categorised them according to the sensorial responses these interactions evoked such as visual, auditory and tactile (see appendix 1). I began to realise that the approach I took with this project could be understood as ‘a cognitive engagement with material culture’ (Malafouris, 2004) and I became increasingly interested in what these tactics afforded me.

It took several weeks of self-reflection and discussion with my professors to ultimately lead me to reframe my understanding of my practice as it exists now. It had shifted from a problem-solving methodology to an ambiguous space of explorative making. My hands-on approach to material manipulation was a means of materialising my perceptions of shared relationships with the people around me. It allowed for an adaptable and reciprocal conversation between my imagined outcomes and the realised actions.

As an individual with prior training as an engineer, with assumptions about what constituted typical industrial design practices, I found something particularly interesting about this approach. I was constructing forms to fit the specifications of the material, rather than the other way round. This type of method allows the designer to flexibly modify structures and reimagine alternate uses for everyday things as tools for making. It became apparent to me that "following an approach of hands-on manipulation of materials can positively influence the creative process" (Karana, Pedgley & Rognoli, 2015, p. 17).

4.3 Gallery of Meaningful Disposables: Lamp Edition

In the fall of 2019, inspired by similar ideas of creating narratives around everyday objects to recognise and enhance their emotional value, I created an installation: The Gallery of Meaningful Disposables. The gallery was a collection of artefacts that I designed with my peers in a series of studio workshops. These workshops explored ways of building narrative and giving afterlife to mundane objects of everyday use. The outcomes, a set of designed artefacts, were presented to the public during an open-studio event in November 2019. Each article was labelled with short and slightly humorous descriptions of the narratives produced through the studio workshops (see appendix 2). These were also supplemented with information booklets that explained the motivations and rationale behind these workshops and transcripts of the stories discussed by the participants. This next project was meant as an exploration towards inviting others to make with me and speculate, imagine and narrate stories about everyday objects.

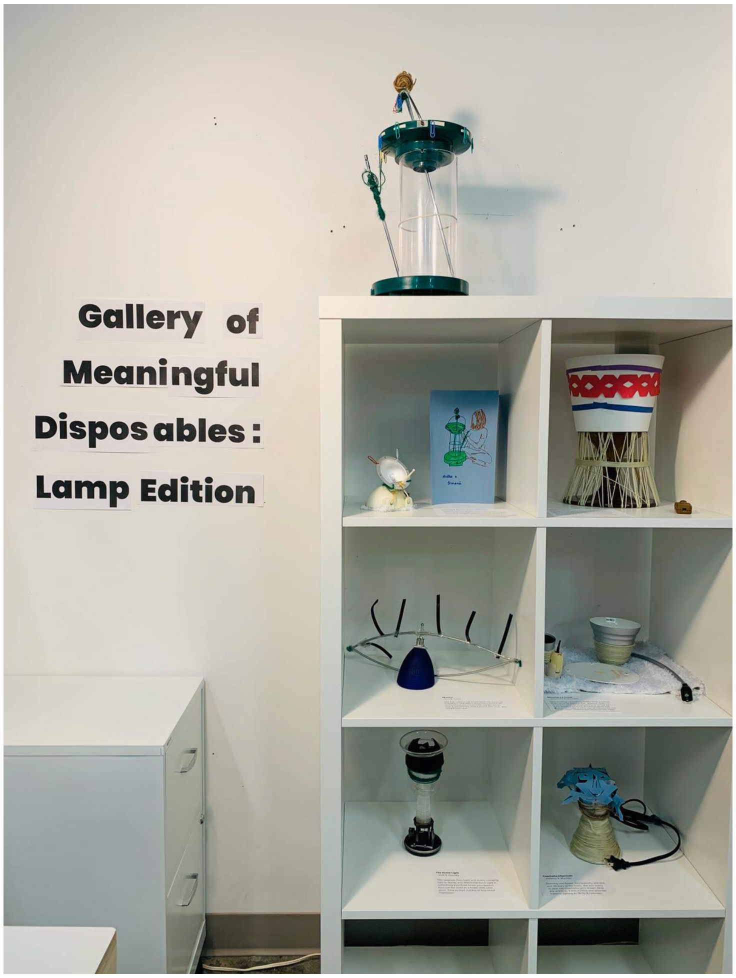


Figure 30: The gallery set up in my studio space

“Stories are an important part of product identity. Stories can be generated by user experience and also artificially by ‘immaterial design’. The possibility of creating added value by cooking up associations was brought to the attention of Eternally Yours by designer Marcel Wanders. Together with Dinie Besems he designed six identical pearl necklaces, each with a different experience. For instance, one had a label with the name of a famous designer attached to it. A second one was packed in a bar of chocolate and a third one was pictured as a weapon, to strangle someone. Stories, true or not, can be part of a planned product career” (Hinte, 1997, pp. 52-53).

Drawing on approaches to designerly storytelling and notions of scripting discussed above, I planned a series of studio workshops. Set in three phases, this studio work explored distinct actions connected a single object: again a lamp. This time I oriented my work around discarded lamps that I found in a thrift store. Over a span of three weeks, my peers and I gathered in small groups of 4-6 to respond to my provocations. Pairs of designers were provided with a single lamp to work on over the three phases. In addition to tracking the interactions and insights that would appear around the secondhand lamps my intent was also to encourage conversation amongst peers. I was interested in the dynamics of collaborative making among the different pairs in the studio context.

The first phase of these studio explorations was speculative. I asked my peers to visually inspect their lamps and discuss amongst themselves their initial thoughts connected to its use and affordances. I provided prompts to keep the discussion going: “Who was the past owner of the lamp? Describe their relationship with their lamp. What might be their aspirations in life?” These prompts eased my fellow designers into imagining and telling stories about: fictional people, their lives and personalities, the people around them, their future – all with a central focus around the lamp itself. My intent was that the prompts I provided in the studio would help to assure that no one became lost in the semantics of the lamp, recognising that the first and indeed an important part of the discussion around the lamp was to guide the discussion in a particular direction - towards uncovering the human stories associated with the materiality of the lamp. To a certain degree, the semantics and affordances of the lamp dictated the stories told about the personas and lifestyles of the central characters that were imagined. Sharing and discussing the implications of the actor-network theory towards design (Akrich, 1992), the “script”, or the semantics and affordances of the lamp allowed for the participants to consider its “thingly actions”, or the interaction and use of the lamp by its imaginary previous owner. The prompts that I provided allowed the discussion about the uses and affordances of the lamp to naturally grow into a space of collective storytelling about the speculated characters - the past owners of the lamp.

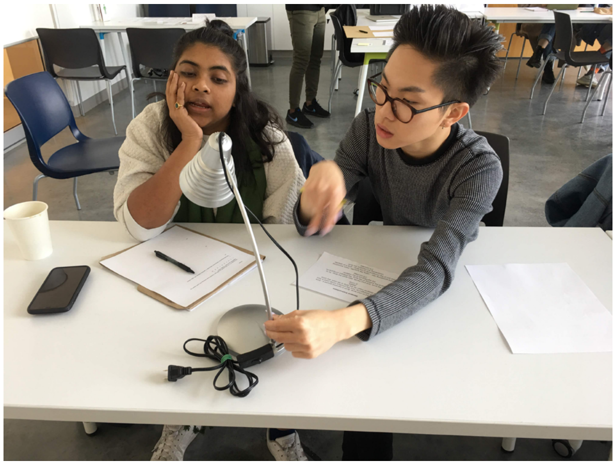


Figure 31

"It looks like a desk lamp for a student, but it looks way too clean and spotless to be used by one. No, this lamp was in an office space. We speculate that the previous owner was the secretary and she used to get bored often so she would play with the head of the lamp and that's why it's loose now."

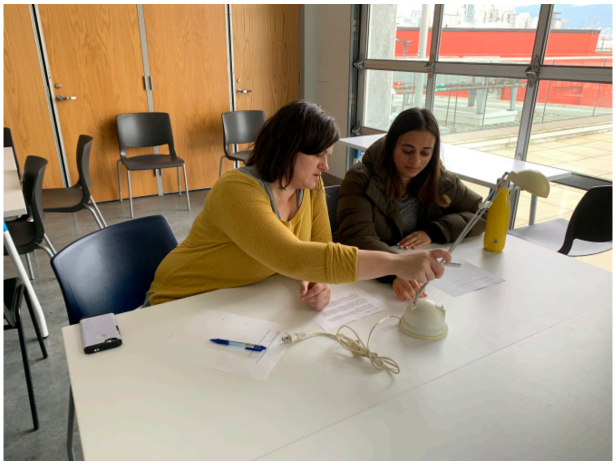


Figure 32

"The name of the previous owner is Greg Curt. He owned this lamp since he was in college. Now he is married and his wife wanted to get rid of the lamp for a long time so he finally gave in."

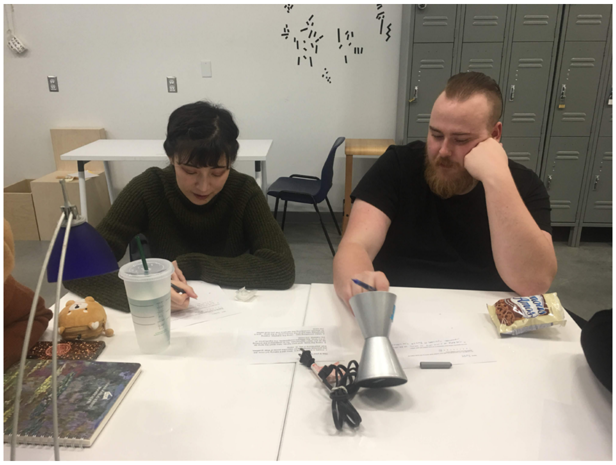


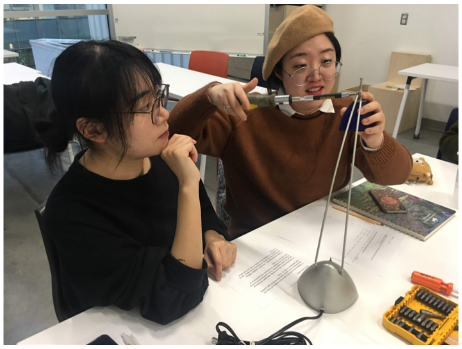
Figure 33

"The butterfly stickers on the lamp tell me that the previous owner is a young girl. There is also a 420 sticker which means that she's not very young, probably in her teens. She's a Coachella girl."

Figures 31-33: The participants visually inspecting their lamps and speculating narratives

In the second phase, I asked my peers to take apart the lamp they had created imaginary stories for. I was interested to see if new understandings of each lamp's inside functional components would be afforded through the unmaking. Drawing on an unmaking approach taken by a fellow ECUAD alumnus, Theunis Snyman who notes that "the resistance to adopt more sustainable lifestyles partly lies in a lack of understanding of our built environment, the resources and energies involved in its production, and a sense of value in the objects we encounter in our daily lives" (Snyman, 2018, p. 11), I wondered what the act of unmaking might afford in connection to an object that we have been acquainted with. Like most consumer products that are available in the market today, the lamps used, were to a certain degree 'blackboxed', meaning that their functionality was opaque and obscure (Latour, 2000). This quality of being black boxed implied that a part of the story of the lamps was inaccessible.

I invited my peers to deconstruct their lamps down to their smallest components using some basic tools: screwdrivers, pliers and scissors. Unlike the prior phase this time I took on the role of a silent observer. My main objective, in taking on this role, was to note the various human and technological factors associated with trying to overcome the philosophical and ecological concerns of blackboxing.



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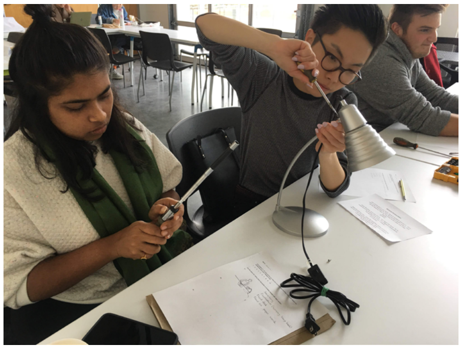

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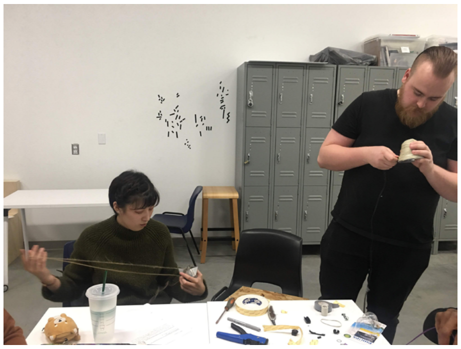

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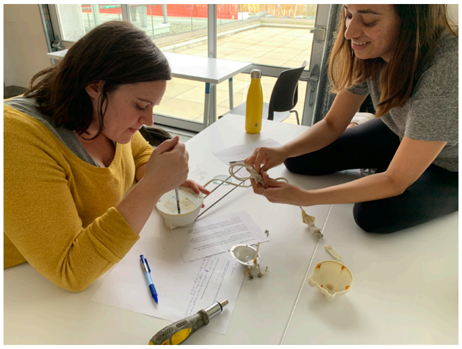

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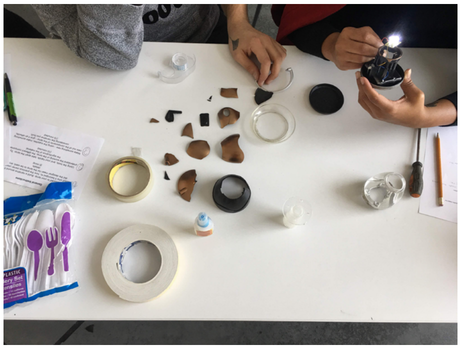

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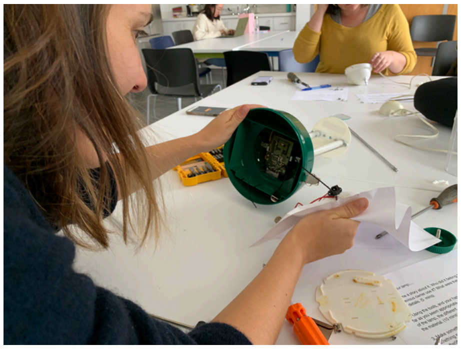

Figure 39

Figures 34-39: The participants 'unmaking' their lamps using the tools provided for the workshop

Each of my peers seemed to respond differently to this phase of the workshop. A few of them engaged actively in this process, they were not apprehensive of using the tools or even breaking a few pieces of the lamp if it meant getting access to a deeper level. On the other hand, some of my peers were cautious and meticulous in their approach and tried to not make a mess.

The process of unmaking with my fellow designers proved to be very constructive in terms of illustrating the other part of the story behind the lamps - the one related to the lamps being a product of intricate and elaborate manufacturing systems. The unmaking allowed us to recognise the efforts and complexities that go into conceiving devices that seem so mundane to us, but are the products and fruits of remarkable amounts of labour.

In the third and final phase, I asked my designer peers to give the lamps an afterlife - to create something new out of their lamp's components - keeping in mind the initial narrative they had built around them it in phase one.

"With the emphasis on environmental sustainability, remanufacturing has become a major aspect of life cycle engineering with the intention to bring a product or part back to its useful life" (Soh, S., Ong, S., & Nee, A.,2015, p. 577). However there are many challenges to design for disassembly faced by the industry in the current methods of production (Rios, F. C., Chong, W. K., & Grau, D., 2015). Walker (2003) addresses these issues in his work, he directly responds to the ephemeral nature of everyday objects and creates his own unique designs using mass-produced components, that are not meant to last long, much similar to the products of the current mass-production economy. However the approach he proposes is based on a conscious acknowledgement of the transient nature of material goods, one that is not observed in the current system of production, which consequently leads to unsustainable patterns of consumption.

It is evident that the current system of production must be reevaluated to counter the grave ecological dangers of consumerism. Through these workshops, I also wanted to learn how designerly sensibilities in terms of collective making can offer insights in relation to the research around design for disassembly.

By asking my peers to follow the narrative they created in the first phase of interactions with the lamp I afforded studio based opportunities for thinking about the psychological and emotional considerations connected to old, broken, familiar, not so familiar everyday objects and turning them into something new, exciting and slightly ambiguous. These practices, if considered in the product design process might allow for long-lasting relationships to be formed between products and their users, thereby extending product lifespan. It also allows for potentially generating a skill-based local economy that is more resilient and less wasteful.

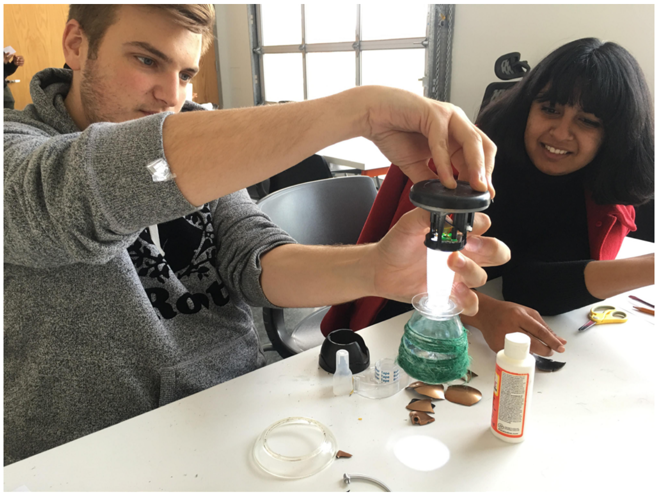

Figure 40

"The lamp in its original form seemed like a cheap and portable ambient light for camping purposes. We imagine that the user would no longer be interested in outdoor activities so we changed it into a directional torch light for more general purposes around the house."

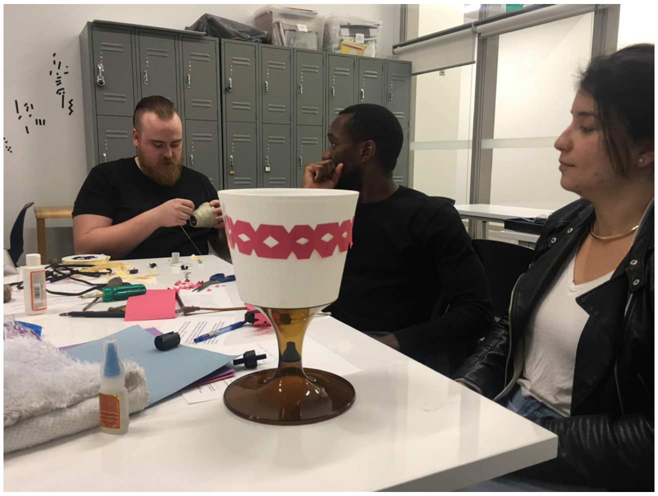

Figure 41

"The previous owner, Timmy got the lamp from his mum as a gift. After he broke the lamp accidentally, he made her a gift with the pieces. The new lamp means something to every member of the family."

Figures 40-41: The participants building something new out of the components of the lamps, considering the initial stories

In sum, my time spent with my peers proved to be very productive, it allowed us to collectively explore, through a set of broken lamps remade into several 'functional concentrations' (Walker, 2003), the way that objects have the capacity to carry speculative narratives of their past lives. Unlike the everyday objects produced commercially that are based on the values of longevity, these objects directly acknowledge the short-lived nature of material goods. The condition of the low-fidelity nature of the workshops, seemed to follow Walker's propositions of using mass-produced elements to create artefacts of personal value with a direct encounter to making methods. This exploration opened a new perspective to me. I began to see it as a means to propose a shift in the design process that explicitly includes considerations of user narratives in the semantics of everyday products as a means to develop a consciously cultivated emotional relationship with these albeit ephemeral possessions. It also proposes consideration of these narratives for generating a more user-centric approach towards design for disassembly.

The final action of absurdity - of displaying these roughly made, sort of low-fidelity artefacts in a fictional gallery setting - was a provocation to invite conversation around people's perceived notions of how everyday objects should look like. It was meant as a proposition to the audience to consider the nature of human-product relationships more critically and recognise the rich narratives these ordinary objects carry with them.

4.4 Stories of a water bottle

In December 2019, I travelled back to Delhi to be with my family and friends. During my time there, I started to notice things around me that I hadn't quite looked at from the same perspective before. These things were mundane, everyday objects that had been around for as long as I could remember. Although these objects didn't particularly hold any sentimental value, it would be difficult to recount personal stories from my childhood without situating these objects in context. To further my exploration into speculative narratives held by everyday objects, I decided to explore the narratives from my home situating these objects as a lens to express personal and communal identity.

One such object that particularly grabbed my attention was an ordinary Tupperware water bottle. These bottles were used in my home to store water for many years. It was perhaps the functionality of the bottle that appealed to us at first, but after several years of using it, we just became habituated to it. Several of these bottles, which I remember were all bought at the same time, line the bottom rack of our fridge door that ensures that cold water is available at all times. I remember that we used to have a different kind of Tupperware bottle before the one we have now. It was slender and transparent with a white lid as opposed to the pink coloured, bulbous kind that we own now. I also remember that the choice to switch to the new kind was made by my mother who was influenced by my aunt's then-recent purchase of the pink bottle. Neither of the rest of my family was involved in this decision, and we didn't care. However, each one of us has their own ways of using and interacting with the bottles, that is also modulated by each other to a certain degree.

Recalling my visits to my friends' homes over the years, I remember noticing the different variations of the Tupperware bottle in most of their homes. It seemed as though this brand of bottles, which both my mother and aunt had in their fridges, was a household essential for most middle-class homes in India.

What lead me to look into this particular object was an unexpected moment on a warm winter afternoon of December 2019, when a waiter in a restaurant in South Delhi, served water to my friends and I in a Tupperware bottle. This was strange and surprising - the bottle he was using is so closely connected to our memories from home, it didn't seem to belong within the fancy, urban setting of the restaurant. Reflecting on the subtle whimsy of that moment lead me to dive deeper into stories from my childhood revolving around this mundane object.

The book titled *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, is a collection of autobiographical essays by scientists, humanists, artists and designers that describe "the power of objects in their lives, objects that connect them to ideas and to people" (Turkle, 2007, p. 5). These essays are not primarily concerned with the objects' material facility, but rather aim to highlight how these objects connect the emotional worlds and introduce invigorating possibilities through realising a cognitive engagement with material culture.

Retuning back to the studio in Vancouver, I challenged myself to explore the potentials of the Tupperware bottle. Drawing inspiration from the ideas presented in the book Evocative Objects, I began to tell stories about the water bottle, expressing narratives from my lived experiences as a means of revealing and exploring my socio-cultural perspective. I tried to seek out ways to express these anecdotal narratives through an appropriate medium. Almost instinctively, I jumped to my sketchbook to illustrate these narratives in the form of drawings. The drawings were then supplemented with written cues that would guide the story. This explorative illustrative process into narrative inquiry ended up taking the form of a comic/zine. I'm not trained as an illustrator so this exploration was certainly new to me. However, as I progressed through illustrating the various anecdotal narratives, I started to become increasingly invested in the medium.

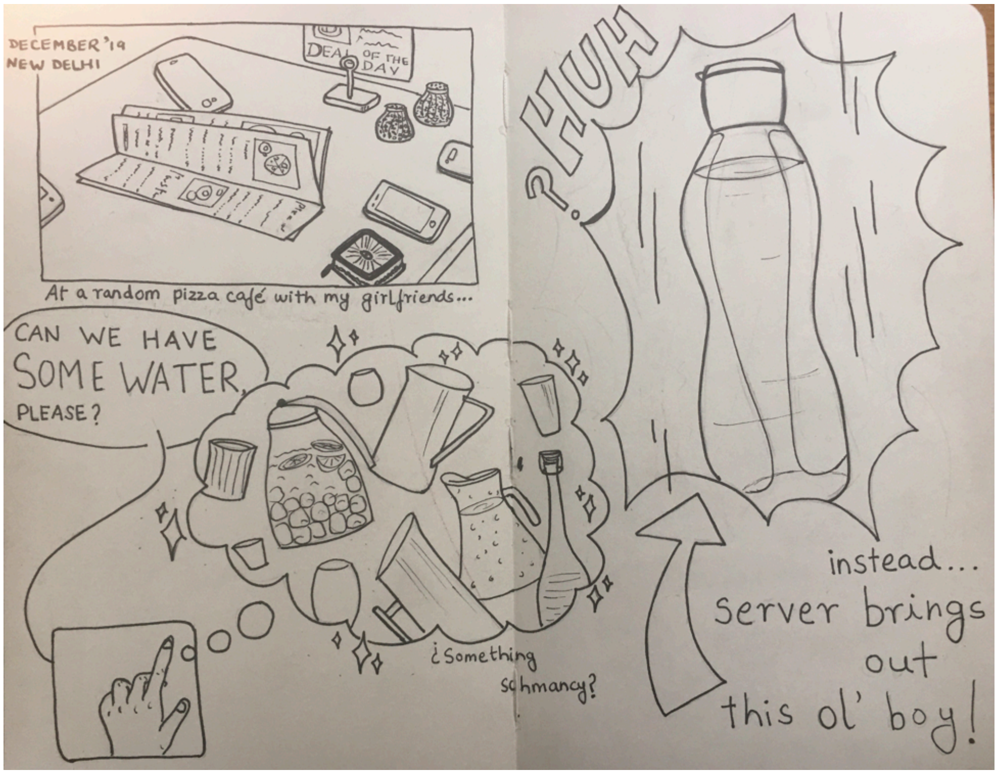
DECEMBER '19
NEW DELHI
DEAL OF THE DAY
At a random pizza café with my girlfriends...
CAN WE HAVE SOME WATER, PLEASE?
¿Something schmancy?
? HUH
instead... server brings out this ol' boy!

Figure 42

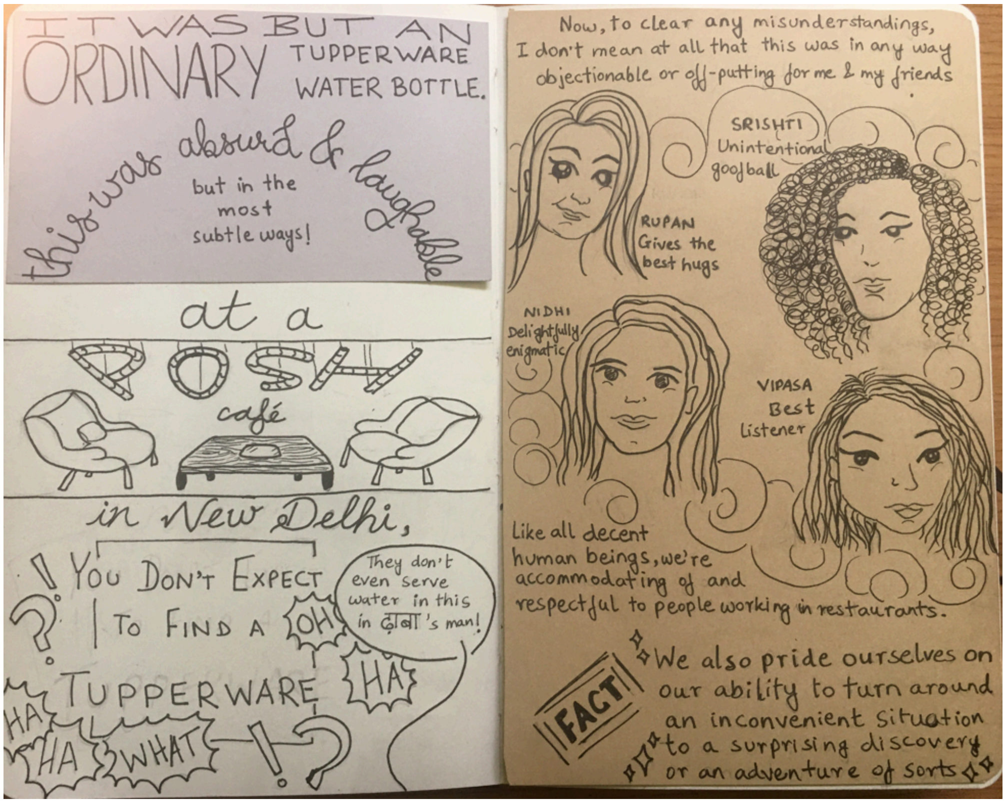
IT WAS BUT AN ORDINARY TUPPERWARE WATER BOTTLE.
this was absurd & laughable
but in the most subtle ways!
at a POSH café
in New Delhi,
YOU DON'T EXPECT TO FIND A TUPPERWARE
OH
They don't even serve water in this in ढ़ाबा's man!
HA
HA
HA
WHAT
Now, to clear any misunderstandings, I don't mean at all that this was in any way objectionable or off-putting for me & my friends.
SRISHTI
Unintentional goofball
RUPAN
Gives the best hugs
NIDHI
Delightfully enigmatic
VIPASA
Best listener
Like all decent human beings, we're accommodating of and respectful to people working in restaurants.
FACT
We also pride ourselves on our ability to turn around an inconvenient situation to a surprising discovery or an adventure of sorts

Figure 43

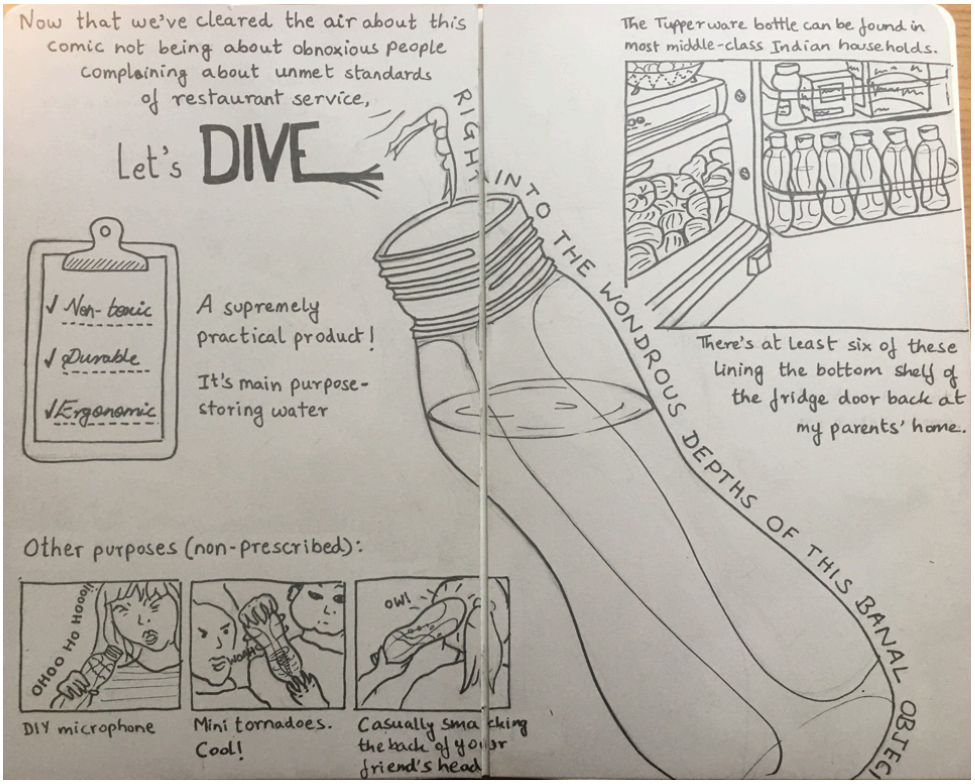
Now that we've cleared the air about this comic not being about obnoxious people complaining about unmet standards of restaurant service,
Let's DIVE
RIGHT INTO THE WONDROUS DEPTHS OF THIS BANAL OBJEC
✓ Non-toxic
✓ Durable
✓ Ergonomic
A supremely practical product!
It's main purpose- storing water
The Tupperware bottle can be found in most middle-class Indian households.
There's at least six of these lining the bottom shelf of the fridge door back at my parents' home.
Other purposes (non-prescribed):
OHOO HO HOOO!
DIY microphone
WOOSH
Mini tornadoes. Cool!
OW!
Casually smacking the back of your friend's head

Figure 44

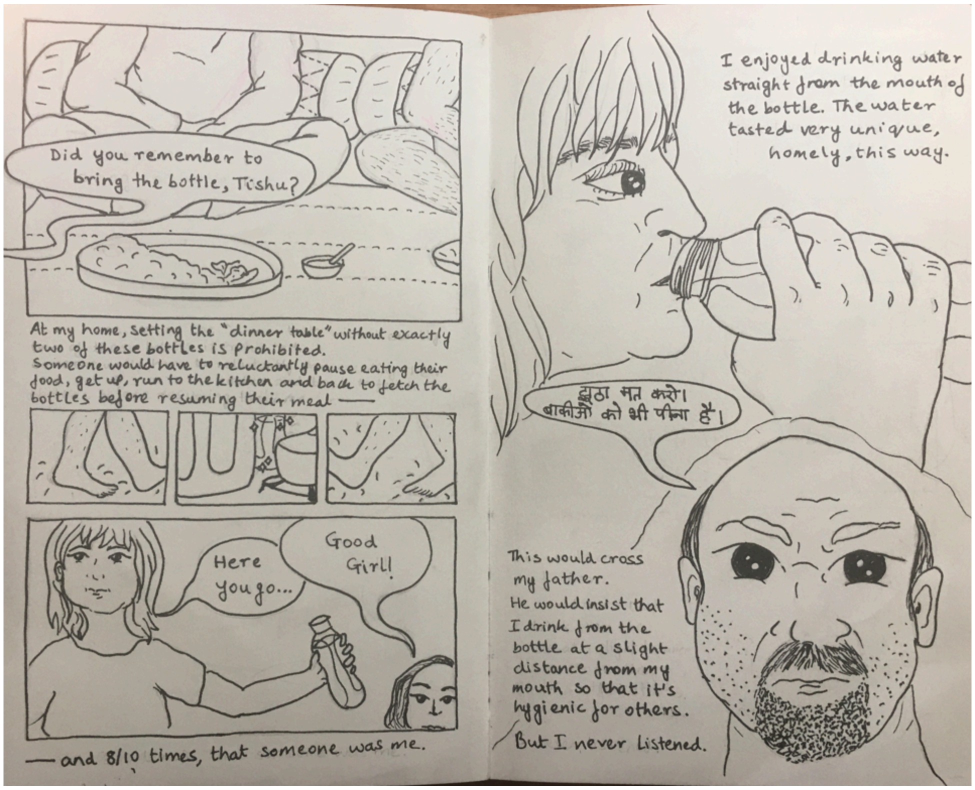
Did you remember to bring the bottle, Tishu?
At my home, setting the "dinner table" without exactly two of these bottles is prohibited.
Someone would have to reluctantly pause eating their food, get up, run to the kitchen and back to fetch the bottles before resuming their meal —
Here you go...
Good Girl!
— and 8/10 times, that someone was me.
I enjoyed drinking water straight from the mouth of the bottle. The water tasted very unique, homely, this way.
झूठा मत करो। बाकीओं को भी पीना है।
This would cross my father.
He would insist that I drink from the bottle at a slight distance from my mouth so that it's hygienic for others.
But I never listened.

Figure 45

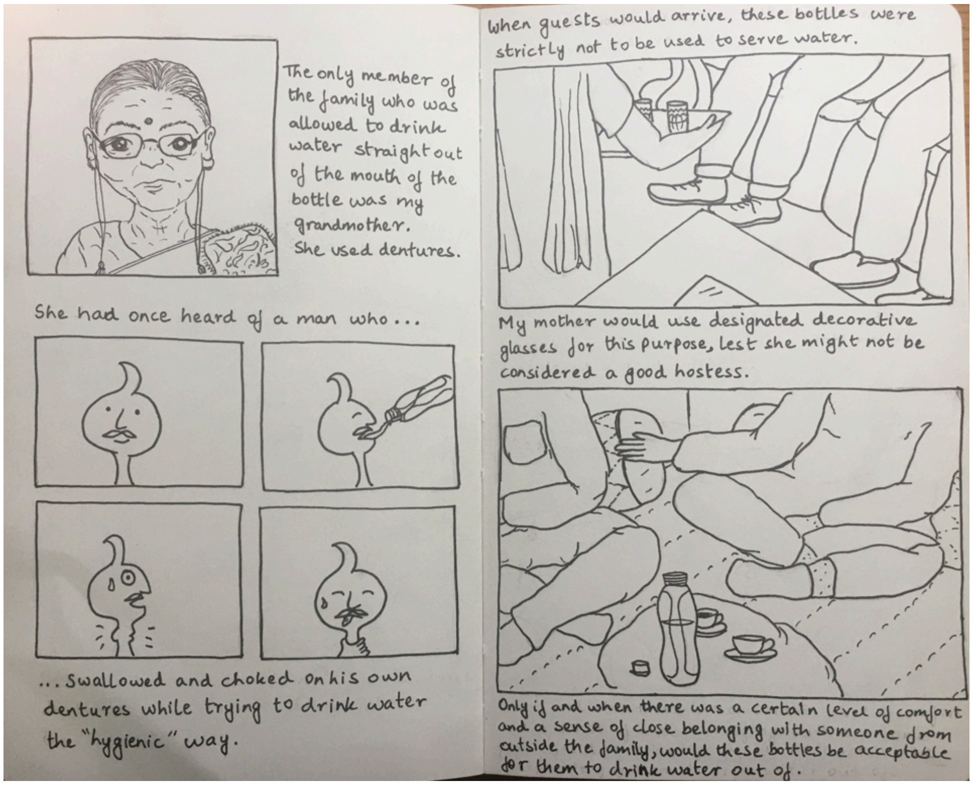
The only member of the family who was allowed to drink water straight out of the mouth of the bottle was my grandmother. She used dentures.
She had once heard of a man who...
...swallowed and choked on his own dentures while trying to drink water the "hygienic" way.
When guests would arrive, these bottles were strictly not to be used to serve water.
My mother would use designated decorative glasses for this purpose, lest she might not be considered a good hostess.
Only if and when there was a certain level of comfort and a sense of close belonging with someone from outside the family, would these bottles be acceptable for them to drink water out of.

Figure 46

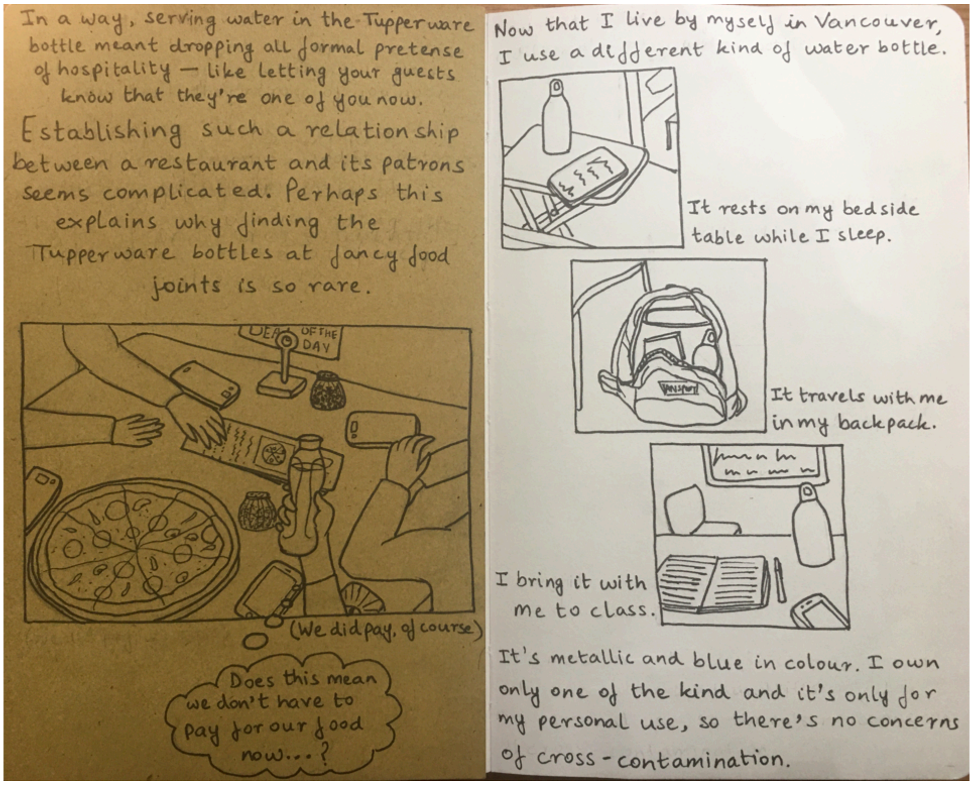
In a way, serving water in the Tupperware bottle meant dropping all formal pretense of hospitality — like letting your guests know that they're one of you now.
Establishing such a relationship between a restaurant and its patrons seems complicated. Perhaps this explains why finding the Tupperware bottles at fancy food joints is so rare.
DEAL OF THE DAY
(We did pay, of course)
Does this mean we don't have to pay for our food now...?
Now that I live by myself in Vancouver, I use a different kind of water bottle.
It rests on my bedside table while I sleep.
It travels with me in my backpack.
I bring it with me to class.
It's metallic and blue in colour. I own only one of the kind and it's only for my personal use, so there's no concerns of cross-contamination.

Figure 47

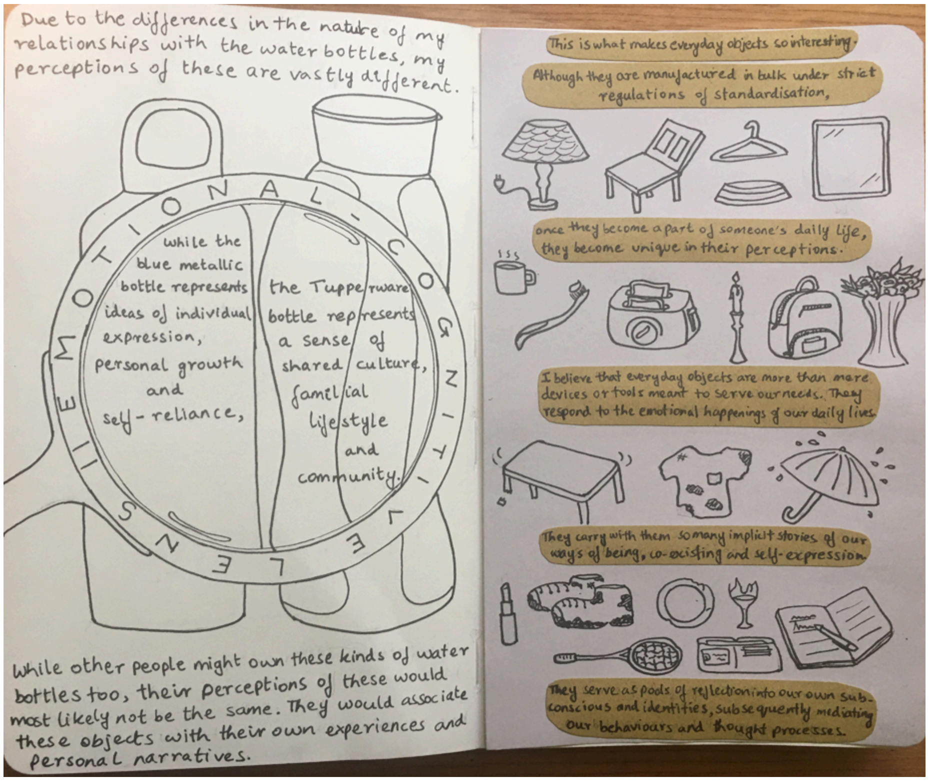
Due to the differences in the nature of my relationships with the water bottles, my perceptions of these are vastly different.
EMOTIONAL-COGNITIVE LENS
While the blue metallic bottle represents ideas of individual expression, personal growth and self-reliance,
the Tupperware bottle represents a sense of shared culture, familial lifestyle and community.
While other people might own these kinds of water bottles too, their perceptions of these would most likely not be the same. They would associate these objects with their own experiences and personal narratives.
This is what makes everyday objects so interesting.
Although they are manufactured in bulk under strict regulations of standardisation,
once they become a part of someone's daily life, they become unique in their perceptions.
I believe that everyday objects are more than mere devices or tools meant to serve our needs. They respond to the emotional happenings of our daily lives.
They carry with them so many implicit stories of our ways of being, co-existing and self-expression.
They serve as pools of reflection into our own sub-conscious and identities, subsequently mediating our behaviours and thought processes.

Figure 48

Figures 42-48: Illustrated story about the Tupperware water bottle

The goal of this project was to dive deeper into people's narratives and conception of socio-cultural identities through an examination of everyday objects. Illustrating the anecdotal narratives about myself and the people around me, connected by a common thread of investigation (the water bottle), prompted me to recall and visualise the ways the characters (my friends and family) in my stories express themselves. This self-expression alludes to ways of being that are reflected in the examination of my socio-cultural identity. As an engineer trained to examine things only from a material perspective - often isolated from an anthropological perspective - identifying, expressing and reflecting on the narratives I illustrated in the zine opened up opportunities for me to examine and perceive these objects as entities that mediate and are simultaneously mediated by social, cultural and political world-views (Daston, 2008). I plan to further explore this medium of illustrated narratives to share personal stories about everyday objects with the larger community, in the hopes that it facilitates a broader conversation around the perception of everyday objects as windows into anthropological understandings of the world.

5.0 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Pursuing the methods of heuristic and narrative inquiry and collaborative explorations with my peers in my studio practice, I began to identify an emergent methodological framework, that I hadn't anticipated or considered initially. This framework is situated within the context of a collaborative environment (offered at Emily Carr University) and the heuristic nature of my work. The conceptual ideas and tangible outcomes generated within this research inquiry are consequences of the unique perspectives offered through my own making and interactions with my peers in the MDes studio.

As I began to consider my methodology, I started to identify distinctive elements that represented the dominant ideas behind the particular approaches or strategies I adopted in my work. Each of these elements could be described as a cluster of tacit-knowledge, that when situated in relation to each other illuminate the nature of my practice-based research methodology.

The Conception of Self

My creative practice involves a cognitive approach to the process of making. Over the course of the past two years, my studio practice involved a number of projects oriented around an intuitive, generative making process. Throughout, my approach has been actively hands-on. I work with materials that are accessible and allow creative manipulation to conceive and realise ideas that are generated in and through the process of making. In a way, the process of making can be understood as a threshold between my practice and my acquired sense of being and knowledge. It prompts a reflective conversation between my practice and my notion of personal identity. This allows for the conception of narratives about my lived experiences, that advance the practice, and simultaneously are illuminated through practice.

The Designer’s Assumed Roles

My practice as a designer who primarily designs in response to human needs, demands an in-depth consideration of other peoples’ stories and conception of selves. A number of my studio explorations involved collaborative acts of making with my peers as a proposition to create and imagine speculative approaches to designing objects. These explorations were based on principles and approaches from co-design and participatory design practices. One of the goals of these collaborative acts of making was to create a better understanding of how to design using human relationships as the catalyst. Another was to find ways to share and advance learnings across different design disciplines into the prototyping, manufacturing and usability of everyday objects.

As I pondered over the different approaches I took while working with my peers, I started to identify and categorise different roles that a designer might assume in a collaborative practice. These roles describe the nature of interactions between me and my peers and their significance towards generating new insights that advance the research.

Learner

As a Learner, the designer

- **listens** to the stories shared by people
- **observes** the unspoken gestures of communication
- **absorbs** the acquired information
- **immerses oneself** in the circumstances of people
- **empathises** with peoples' experiences
- **considers** peoples' experiences when forming opinions and making decisions

Giver

As a Giver, the designer

- **processes** inner thoughts and dialogues
- **manifests** tacit-knowledge into actionable outcomes
- **expresses** one's individual characteristics of presentation
- **offers** their own perspectives in context of the situation
- **presents** genuine and informed insight
- **provides** ways of addressing situations of concern

Facilitator

As a Facilitator, the designer

- **invites** people into their creative process
- **shares** one's empirical learnings as a means to prompt discourse
- **converses** reciprocally to form a shared sense of understanding
- **mediates** discussions among several people with varying perspectives
- **encourages** dialogue between other people to promote collaboration
- **furthers** the conversation by disseminating the learnings to the larger community

Arguably, these roles identified in my practice of making with my peers, offer potentials for insight into a designer's capacity in social practices. The book titled *The Pearl Diver: The Designer as Storyteller* is a collection of papers by several authors and practitioners across various disciplines, offering an understanding of the designer's capacity as a storyteller to address social innovation (Bertolotti, Daam, Piredda, Tassinari, 2016). It recognises the importance of listening to people's stories towards presenting outcomes that work well with people and nature rather than disrupting them. In my practice, I have made a conscious effort to acknowledge and readdress my understanding of what it means to design for human needs. Identifying and constantly reminding myself of the importance of maintaining reciprocal relationships has helped cultivate a more holistic approach to my human-centric design practice.

The Nature of Practice

The nature of my practice is illuminated by situating the elements delineated above in relation to each other. The designer's conception of personal identity is mediated by and through the practice, and vice-versa. The designer's roles while pursuing collaborative actions with others, are often assumed cyclically with one taking the dominance over the others at certain points of time depending on the kind of interactions being pursued with other people. So, the nature of practice could be described as cyclical, and simultaneously grounded by the designer's creative identity that is realised through making.

Design researcher Lisa Grocott presents a critically reflective process called 'figuring' as a method to aid visual interrogation of the potential of a design practice in a research context. She writes, "figuring allowed me to extend the process of negotiating complex ideas, which as a researcher I found to be a useful strategy for drawing attention to the often-times tacit process of designing" (Grocott, 2012, p. 3). Inspired by her ideas, I utilised the method of 'figuring' to visualise the emergent methodological framework in my work.

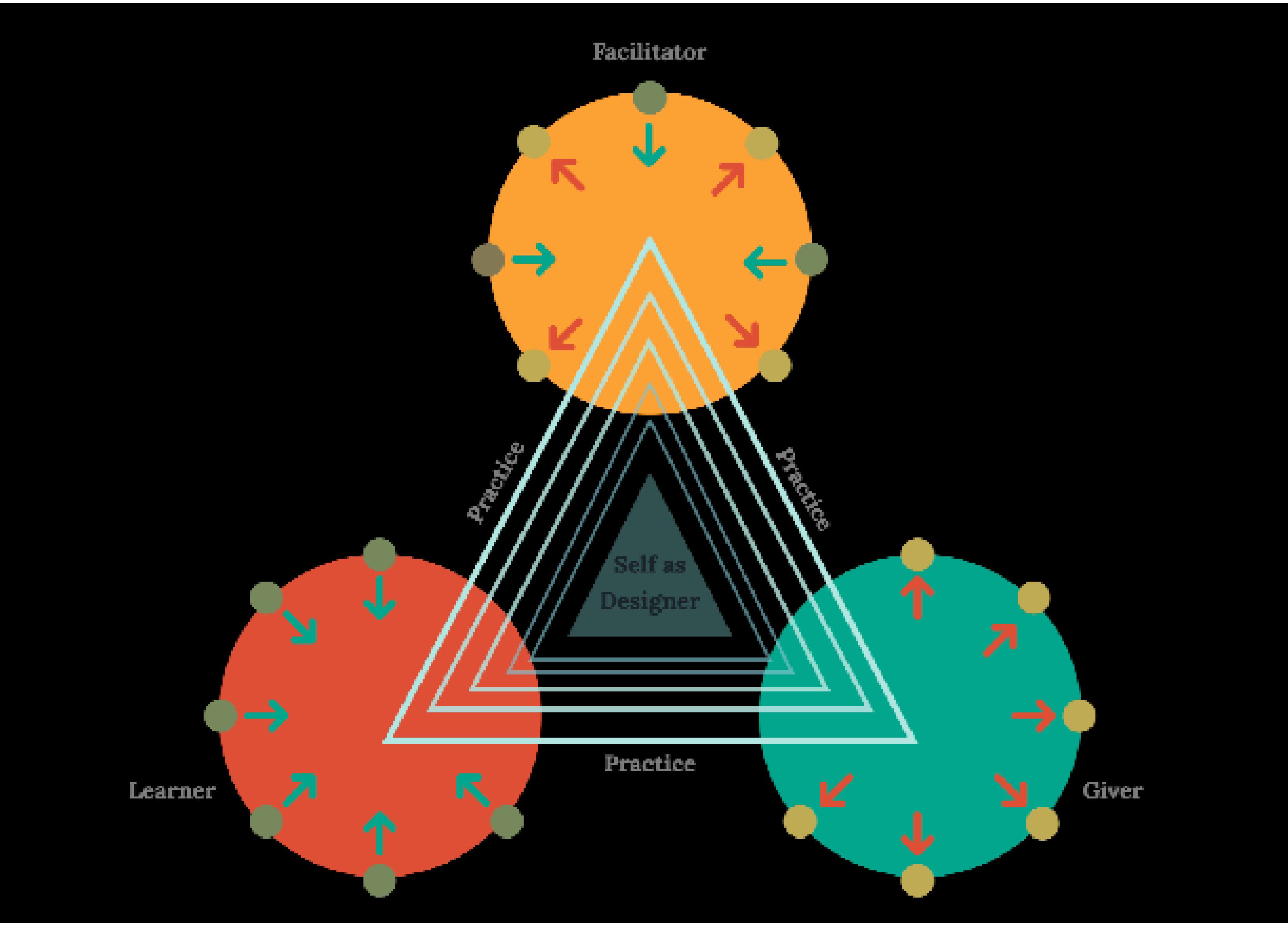
Facilitator
Practice
Practice
Self as Designer
Practice
Learner
Giver

Figure 49: The proposed methodological framework

To summarise, the framework I propose sheds light on

- situating the designer's identity and lived experiences in relation to their practice
- the three distinct roles undertaken by the designer, which I have identified in the process of my practice-based research inquiry
- the nature of relationships between the designer and the people around them with respect to each of the proposed roles assumed by the designer

A note

In the sections above, I have summarised my approach to practice-based research into the capacity of generative making to explore the socio-political space around everyday objects. My studio practice involved explorations into the conception of the self by investigating narratives based around objects and further explorations into the roles that a designer assumes in relation to the people around them in a collaborative-creative practice.

The methodological framework I have proposed in this section situates the three elements - the conception of self, the designer's assumed roles and the nature of practice - in relation to each other. The framework delineates and visualises the often implicit thoughts and decisions that occur in the process of designing. If one were to attempt to read this thesis backwards, having an idea of the framework that brings forth the 'nature of doing things', perhaps it would offer an alternative insight into the 'things that were done.'

By no means should this framework be understood as prescriptive or uniformly applicable to everyone. My primary reason for delineating a framework for my practice is to provide the reader with a better insight into my creative process. I would encourage other design researchers to contest, interpret and modify this framework to best suit their own practice-based research.

6.0 DISCUSSION

Through this practice-based research inquiry, I have come to realise that as designers, we must acknowledge first and foremost, our own limitations. The word 'limitation' sounds like it has a negative connotation, but in the context of addressing the ethical responsibility of designers, it's rather useful. I believe that if we truly understand our limitations towards fully understanding each and every aspect of a particular problem that we're trying to address, it absolves the designer of a demiurgic responsibility of willing to accomplish a magical solution to all the problems of the world. The real-world problems that designers deal with are rooted in incredibly complex systems, and it would be totally unjust, and rather ignorant to expect that the paramount responsibility of designers is to be able to find a perfect solution. As Italian design academic and author Ezio Manzini (2019) proposes, design problems should be addressed from the perspective of the workflow of a bricoleur. He writes, "the bricoleur model and the dialogic attitude toward reality that underlies it are emerging precisely because they are proving more appropriate for navigating in complexity" (Manzini, 2019, p. 50).

In my work, I have found that there are many structural similarities to the process of bricolage. These similarities can be observed in the oddly constructed forms that are put together in intuitive, careful yet impulsive and precarious ways. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) describes bricolage as a dialogic relationship between the bricoleur and the things they make. In my work, this dialogic relationship is apparent in the way I transform my ideas into the physical realm by collecting, manipulating, assembling, decontextualising and reinterpreting materials and objects that are accessible to me. An important distinction, as described by Lévi-Strauss, between the bricoleur and the engineer, is that the bricoleur approximates their results but the engineer operates under the knowledge of a pre-decided set of notions and precise objectives. The latter approach, as pointed out by Manzini, does not hold value in most real-world scenarios and can be used "only in simple cases where it may really be supposed that all the information is available and the best way to act may be deduced from it" (Manzini, 2019, p. 50). On the contrary, the bricoleur, by proceeding through a series of findings, recognises evolving potential in their storehouse of objects that often leads them to challenge their preexisting notions and advance with a sense of intentionality and acknowledgment of their limitations, into their subsequent projects.

Manzini's ideas have important implications for practices that are fuelled by social innovation. Such practices are situated in complex systems where one decision might impact several ecosystems. To address these situations, designers must be able to think like bricoleurs, to act intentionally with the things they have at their disposal, while acknowledging their limitations. This approach towards design allows for potentially creating sustainable relationships between designers and the people that they design for, in the context of a human-centric practice. My intention towards addressing the roles of a designer is primarily to explicate the nature of relationships between the designer and their community. It is based on a dialogic relationship cultivated between the designer and the people that influence the decisions they make. In whatever role they may be assuming, designers must be aware of the potential consequences of their decisions. This is not to say that they should be intimidated by their responsibilities towards their community, rather the contrary- by being responsible in acknowledging their own shortcomings, strive towards facilitating ways of addressing problems collectively.

In grad school, I was able to begin to uncover the complex relationships that a designer builds, maintains and evolves with their community. Since this was based on a heuristic inquiry, my knowledge and experiences from pursuing crafts, engineering and industrial designing in whatever limited capacity, have strongly influenced the study. Further conversation and research around this subject would open up possibilities of including diverse perspectives, from people of different disciplines. This would potentially engender more communicative and sustainable methods of cross-disciplinary research, grounded within certain contexts and limitations.

7.0 FINAL THOUGHTS

I had begun my Masters' work by framing my research inquiry as a way to explore generative methods of designing objects with the explicit intention of evoking feelings of happiness, laughter and playfulness in the users. It was an experimental inquiry that was based on my desire to express the fun, imaginative side of my personality. Having recently graduated from engineering school that didn't allow for much creative expression, I was excited to be in a space that encouraged unconventional thought and individualistic expression. So upon joining the MDes program, I geared up to explore my creative potentials of designing objects evocative of light-hearted, relatable humour. As joyful and prolific that approach was, it soon started to become clear to me that it wasn't coming from a place of genuine introspection. Only after about a month of following that approach, I strongly felt the urge to reinvestigate and reform my research inquiry.

Still unsure of what I was really doing or was supposed to be doing, I decided to take a step back and realign myself in relation to my current context. This was actively and effectively facilitated by an emerging sense of community and a welcoming studio culture in my cohort. Prior to this, in the previous semester, we had been asked to get acquainted with a fellow designer and make an appendage for their studio space as an assignment (see appendix 3). Recounting on that making scenario, I decided to take this exploration further. I decided to design lamps for my peers that would allude to the warm, playful and curious interactions I had had with them. This focus still mostly aligned with my previously formulated research inquiry - I would be exploring methods to design everyday objects with the intent of evoking positive emotions - however, this exploration would be motivated by a more honest and grounded perspective. As I realised the outcomes of this project, I became immensely absorbed and excited about the possibilities it opened up towards exploring stories of human connections and relationships through the design of everyday objects.

Progressing onwards, I pursued an approach of inviting my peers to participate in the making process with me. I invited them to participate in a series of workshops to speculate narratives about old, used and broken lamps that I had found at a thrift store. This exploration was also grounded within the research inquiry of exploring narratives around everyday objects, but this time it was about telling stories through the process of collective making. It revealed insights into the approach of shared practices of making and prompted me to introspect about my responsibility as a designer pursuing a human-centric design practice. I was driven to investigate and reflect on the roles that designers assume in such practices. This lead me to think about and formulate a framework that situates myself as the designer responding to stimulations offered by the people around me, in the process of making.

For my final studio exploration, I found myself wanting to delve back into a fun way of exploring my creative self-expression. I decided to share anecdotal stories about an everyday object (the Tupperware water bottle) that has always been a part of the basic kitchen essentials at my home and to a certain degree, reflects and mediates my family's experiences and lifestyles. This approach was different from the first one in the way that this was grounded in my personal experiences and narratives. Illustrating the stories allowed me to uncover and reflect on the stories of human experience that mediate and are simultaneously mediated by everyday objects.

These explorations or provocations, as I like to call them (since they are meant to provoke curiosity and conversation around the subject), were motivated greatly by an approach of collaboration and collective contemplation. Contrary to popular belief and modernist assumptions, most design projects are rarely borne out of ideas generated in isolation (Manzini, 2019). Designers are always learning from other people - people they interact with, who influence and inspire their innovative ideas. In their pursuits, designers aren't merely the actors, they are also growing and changing through their actions. From my perspective, in collaborative projects, the role of the designer is particularly unique. In such pursuits, designers behave as facilitators- allowing for the voices and perspectives of other people to be heard. However, at the same time they are also active investigators.

In their pursuits, designers take on the responsibility of interpreting and mediating a lot of different ideas to reach a certain form of consensus. This consensus will inherently look different for each contributor, depending on the kind of worldviews they hold and operate under. In my work, I see this consensus as a balancing act - a site that involves a constant back-and-forth relationship - between inviting and learning from the perspectives of others and sharing my own in return. I believe that since designers operate with a certain intentionality, their own perspectives and methods of inspection, analysis and synthesis shape the outcomes of collective pursuits to a significant degree. As such, reflecting on and sharing my own perspectives and personal narratives was a driving factor for the research described in this thesis document. Inserting one's own perspectives to such a degree may seem counterproductive to collaborative practices - after all the objective is to pursue a collective effort towards addressing problems. However, even in doing so, the designer acts with certain intentions that are unique to them and consequently brings/ offers up their own individual perspectives to the table.

Reflecting on and sharing the personal narratives that emerged while considering the choices of the themes I explored in the first exploration, prompted me to situate myself in relation to the space I was designing in. I identified my community for the research space - the MDes cohort. In the second exploration, I decided to invite my friends and peers into my creative process by offering them handmade objects that would serve as symbols of our shared relationships, which I hoped would keep evolving through subsequent interactions. The third exploration of sharing narratives around old, broken lamps was meant as a way to learn about and bring forth my peers' perspectives. As a way to keep this conversation going, I felt the need to share my own perspectives, through the production of a comic book that detailed multiple personal narratives connected to an object I'm closely familiar with. Having the opportunity to take on this project further, I would envision ways to encourage people to share in turn – find ways to let them tell their stories connected to their everyday objects. All this as a way to continue the conversation.

Sharing and listening to stories that humans come to associate with their everyday objects allows for more inclusive ways of designing these objects. Shared practices of making and storytelling could potentially allow for taking into consideration more diverse perspectives, that would influence the way we design everyday objects for people across the world. Under the current standards of manufacturing, it is certainly important to address alternative design approaches so that we may begin to comprehend ways to counter the consequences of rampant consumerism. Through my work, I hope that other design researchers are motivated to adopt practices such as intuitive making and collective storytelling to enlighten ways these could be effectively adopted as design strategies in the industry for more sustainable outcomes.

Briefly reflecting on my journey from entering the space of design research as a complete beginner to writing this thesis - it's been a genuine, pleasant surprise. Two years ago, I absolutely would not have been able to conceive that my practice would evolve into such an explorative and introspective approach of looking at the design of everyday objects. By sharing the generated outcomes and gathered learnings of my practice-based research methodology, this thesis proposes a critical examination into the potentials of mundane things towards revealing wondrous, unforeseen depths.

To quote the Roman fabulist Phaedrus,

“Things are not always what they seem.”

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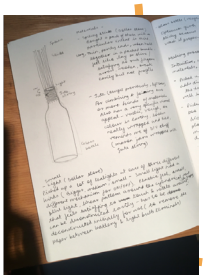
LIST OF FIGURES

23 Figure 1: Virtual form exploration of goose container
23 Figure 2: Cardboard mockup of cat-paw back scratcher
23 Figures 3-8: Ideating, sketching and building the prototype of the egg tray using cardboard
28 Figures 9-11: Exploring the aisles at the local Dollar Store to find materials for the lamps
29-31 Figures 12-23: Lamps made out of procured materials ready to be offered to my peers
33 Figures 24-29: Presenting the lamps to my peers
36 Figure 30: The gallery set up in my studio space
38 Figures 31-33: The participants visually inspecting their lamps and speculating narratives
39-40 Figures 34-39: The participants 'unmaking' their lamps using the tools provided for the workshop
41 Figures 40-41: The participants building something new out of the components of the lamps, considering the initial stories
45-48 Figures 42-48: Illustrated story about the Tupperware water bottle
53 Figure 49: The proposed methodological framework

APPENDIX 1

A summary of my reflective analysis of the lamp making process



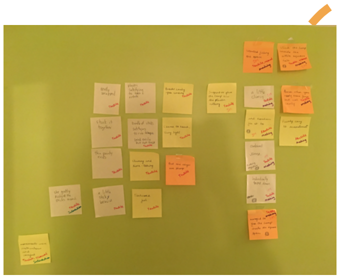
Writing about the making process

Picking out keywords

Placing keywords next to each other to find any patterns

Repeating same process for all the other lamps

Colour coding the keywords based on categories such as memories, interactions and sensory receptions

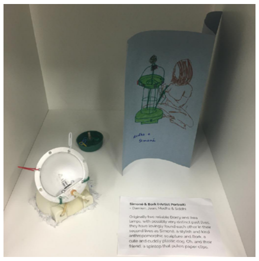


Forming clusters and analysing the patterns, as a way to understand own making style

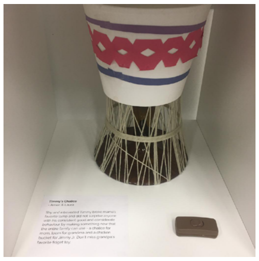
APPENDIX 2

The description of the labels as presented in the Gallery of Meaningful Disposables

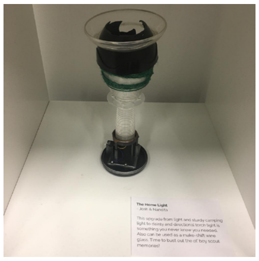
Simoné & Bork (+Artist Portrait)
Originally two reliable Dorcy and Ikea lamps, with possibly very distinct past lives, they have lovingly found each other in their second lives as Simoné, a stylish and kind anthropomorphic sculpture and Bork, a cute and cuddly plastic dog. Oh, and their friend, a spintop that pukes paper clips.



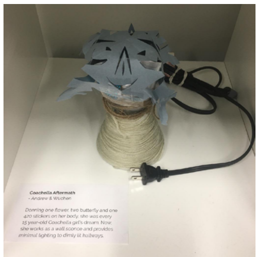
Timmy's Chalice
Shy and introverted Timmy broke mama's favorite lamp and did not surprise anyone with his consistent good and considerate behaviour by making something new that the entire family can use - a chalice for mom, loom for grandma and a chicken bucket for Jimmy Jr. Don't miss grandpa's favorite fidget toy.



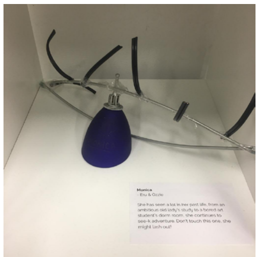
The Home Light
This upgrade from light and sturdy camping light to dainty and directional torch light is something you never knew you needed. Also can be used as a make-shift wine glass. Time to bust out the ol' boy scout memories!



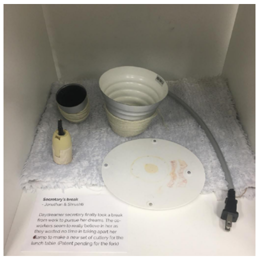
Coachella Aftermath
Donning one flower, two butterfly and one 420 stickers on her body, she was every 15 year-old Coachella girl's dream. Now, she works as a wall sconce and provides minimal lighting to dimly lit hallways.



Monica
She has seen a lot in her past life, from an ambitious old lady's study to a bored art student's dorm room, she continues to see-k adventure. Don't touch this one, she might lash out!

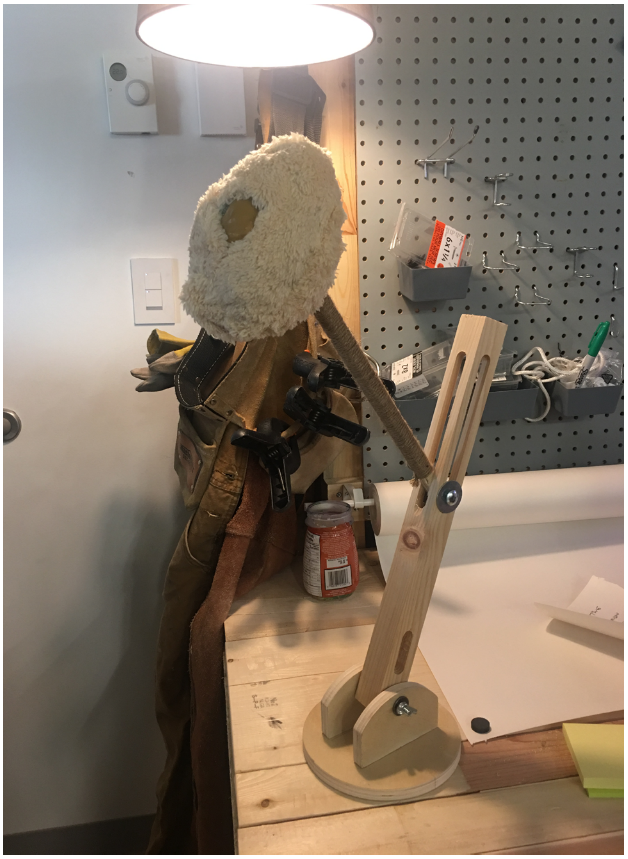


Secretary's break
Daydreamer secretary finally took a break from work to pursue her dreams. The co- workers seem to really believe in her as they wasted no time in taking apart her lamp to make a new set of cutlery for the lunch table. (Patent pending for the fork)



APPENDIX 3

Making an appendage for a peer's studio space



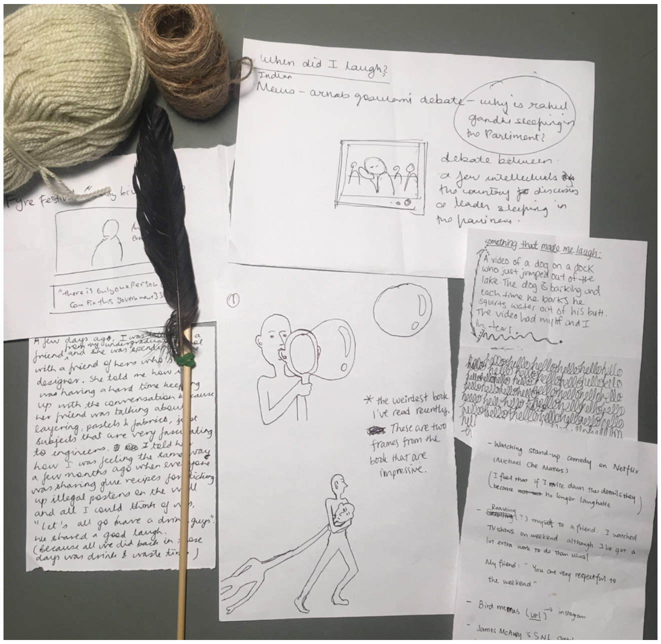
The prompt:
Make an X appendage or intervention into a colleague's studio space. Choose your approach(es) from the list of 'making' terms. Be prepared to explain why you chose that approach to making, and to discuss those words/ways of making. Intervene in the studio space of someone you're unfamiliar with.

My observations:
The colleague I picked for this particular action worked with large-scale materials and used power tools and heavy machinery. Their studio space was organised, very functional. They've got all their tools organised in well-defined spaces. After having a conversation with him, I found out that he has back pains and sore hands because of his previous injuries and using heavy tools triggers the pain.

The appendage:
Based on my learnings, I decided to make an object that would work as a stress-relief ball and at the same time offer some 'softness' space to their studio space. For this purpose, I designed a portable desktop squeeze toy that has adjustable angles and heights. This form of the object was very curious - round and furry. I named it Ava, because to me, it seemed to resemble an avocado. Other people had their own interpretations - one peer said it looked like the lamp in the Disney movies, another laughed and explained that it reminded them of a woman's breast.

APPENDIX 4

Informal DESIS workshop with my peers


When did I laugh?
Indian
News - arnab goswami debate - why is rahul gandhi sleeping in the Parliment?
debate between a few intellectuals of the country to discuss a leader sleeping in the parliament.
"there is only one person ... can fix this government's ..."
Something that made me laugh:
A video of a dog on a dock who just jumped out of the lake. The dog is barking and each time he barks he squirts water out of his butt. The video had my bf and I in tears.
①
* the weirdest book I've read recently. These are two frames from the book that are impressive.
- Watching stand-up comedy on Netflix (Michael Che Matters)
(I feel that if I write down the details they become no longer laughable)
- Roasting (?) myself to a friend: I watched TV shows on weekend although I've got a lot extra work to do than usual.
My friend: "You are very respectful to the weekend."
- Bird memes (url) → instagram
- James McAvoy's SNL
A few days ago, I was ... from my undergraduate ... friend and she was spending ... with a friend of hers who ... designer. She told me how ... was having a hard time keeping up with the conversation because her friend was talking about layering, pastels & fabrics, just subjects that are very fascinating to engineers. I told her how I was feeling the same way a few months ago when everyone was sharing glue recipes for sticking up illegal posters on the wall and all I could think of was, "Let's all go have a drink guys". We shared a good laugh. (Because all we did back in those days was drink & waste time)

Pursuing my Directed Study with the DESIS Lab at ECUAD, I decided to perform an impromptu workshop with my peers. The idea of the workshop was based on exploring ways to allow storytelling with peers to inform the making process.

The guidelines of the workshop were simple - each of us were to write a story that had made them laugh in the past week. After going around in a circle, sharing the stories with the rest of the group, we were to place all the written stories in a pile in the centre. Then each of us were to pick another person's story for the next part of the workshop.

In the next part of the workshop we were going to take about 15 minutes to use the provided material (mostly scrap from around the classrooms and studios) to make something that speaks to the narrative each person picked. There wasn't much time allotted so people mostly jumped into action on their first instincts.

What happened was that people came up with brilliant and amusing ways to represent the narratives. As we shared the outcomes of our making with each other, it allowed us to bond, share and laugh and that air in the room felt completely different, more open and welcoming.

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