



OBJECTs AND

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OBJECTs AND

An Investigation
into Our Relationships
with Material Culture

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ABSTRACT

We shape objects and objects in their own way, shape us. Still, despite this reciprocal relationship we humans lack awareness of the way we make and interact with our contemporary human-made material culture. Arguably, through our modern fixation with technology and ever increasing techno-centric world, we have lost the poetic aspects of products which causes a separation between us and products and could be the reason for a lack of empathy we have for our objects. The consequence is short-lived products and a growing consumer culture. Shifting our understandings of our relationship with material culture may play a role in adjusting expectations of the future and provide alternative notions of a material world.

My thesis explores ways that design can help us experience a deeper engagement with objects. It does so by seeking ways that design enables us to value the objects around us through the creation of personal meaning. My research, based on actions that I conducted between May 2020 and March 2021 has been a means to consider and better understand the agency of objects, spirituality, ways to reinforce our human's natural sensibility towards objects, and design for the creation of meaning. Objects can intervene in our life by making and changing our habits, behaviors, perceptions and emotions and this fact reveals the importance of considering the quality of our communication with the world of material things. In order to explore this communication I took on an approach that embraced practice-based design processes as a way to imagine other possibilities of the design of material things. I actively used making in order to think, reflect on and investigate our connection with objects. Doing so allowed me to work in my own quiet introspective and poetic way. Throughout, my intent has not been to find solutions, but rather to ask questions and promote consideration about our perception of material culture.

KEYWORDS

object relations, design values, material culture, material practice, human-object dynamics, connections, reciprocal relationships, meaning making, thinking through things, aesthetic sensibility, design poetics

TABLE OF CONTENTS

i	Abstract & Keywords
ii	Table of contents
iii	List of figures
iv	Acknowledgements
v	Introduction
1	Methodology/Methods/ways of working and sorting through
	On Objects
4	1. AND Agency
6	2. AND Association
6	2.1 Action 1 A Meaningful Object
	3. AND Signs
10	3.1 Action 2 Manipulating an Everyday Object
12	3.2 Action 3 Communicating with Stones
17	4. AND Aesthetic Sensibility
	5. AND Matter
18	5.1 Action 4 Weaving and Plastic Spons
21	5.2 Action 5 Need and Weaving in Public
25	5.3 Action 6 Weaving with Magazines
29	5.4 Action 7 Observation of Someones Elses's Work
30	Conclusion
32	References
36	Appendixes

LIST OF FIGURES

7-8	figs. 1-2	My Mother's Carpet
9	fig. 3	Loom AND Light
11	fig. 4	Plates AND Signs, My response to my friend's ideas
12	fig. 5	Stoney Brush
14	fig. 6	Stone AND Handle
15	figs. 7-8	Traces of Communication
19	fig. 9	Uninvited Spoons
23	fig. 10	Weaving in Public
26	fig. 11	Shreds of Magazine
27	fig. 12	Trapped Words
28	fig. 13	Trapped Words II
29	fig. 14	Exiled Object

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last year and a half I have had an opportunity to leave my comfort zone as an Industrial Designer and encounter the other sides of me that enable me to create and design. Through my Master studies and my research, at Emily Carr University of Art + Design I have realized that what I know as a product designer often inadequately addresses real world concerns within the field of contemporary design, related to what, why and how we design. Prior to my arrival in Vancouver, through my previous years of study in Industrial Design, I had been trained in the standards of product design based on existing industry and manufacturing systems that rely on particular processes of assembling and disassembling, structure, construction, and conventions for use of different materials to create the 'best' results based on efficiency. Pursuing a practice based approach within an interdisciplinary design setting has led me to a better understanding of the implications of the mass production systems I was trained to work within. My concerns connected to thoughtless consumption of disposable products and the residual environmental cost have become far more nuanced. Collectively the work discussed in this document has been a pause moment, a time for re-evaluation, an opportunity to relocate myself as an Industrial designer and identify how I might be able to bring forward products that people will hold on to and care for over the long term.

It is undeniable that we have to improve our consumption behaviours and practices as we are witnessing ongoing environmental concerns and dramatic changes in our natural world (Chapman 2015). My work assumes that a re-adjusted understanding of our relationship to our built material culture is needed if we are to design responsibly and with care of the planet in mind. I see reinforcing our relationships with objects through creating meaning as part of this equation. My work seeks means to think critically about our current understanding of material culture and a lack of meaningful content in our relationships with objects - it does so from my perspective as a designer, from Iran, and through my creation of poetic/thought artifacts. Welsh design researcher Stuart Walker (2013) states: "Perhaps the most important role for design today is to explore ways of re-uniting our material world with a world of meaning" (p. 3). I often think about this in relation/contrast to pervasive problematic business models that strive to create maximum through the prolific production and sale of products with built in obsolescence, of products which have been developed without consideration for enabling the users to keep, care and become attached to these things over time. It troubles me that mass production has changed our relations to need and redefined social desires in contemporary communities. British writer, broadcaster and director of the Design Museum, London, Deyan Sudjic (2008), argues that: "Today in the developed countries it (social desires) is being achieved by imposing a false standard of what is, and what is not desirable" (p. 7). I think of this "false standard" as inextricably linked to misleading emotions that are injected to our society through behaviour norms and relationships with material culture, that false standards encourage people to increasingly and impulsively consume instead of thinking, choosing and acting with intention.

As designers, we need methods that enables us to counter the development of products that feed into mindless consumptive behaviour. We also - simultaneously - need open creative spaces to express and share our feelings and seed emotions for others (the users of the things we design) - we do this by making. German de-

signer, Julia Lohmann, reflecting on Peter Senge's theories of system change notes that: "it's not enough to intellectually understand the challenges we're facing, we also have to understand emotionally what the decisions we need to make are, and how we can be brave enough to make the decisions and change" (Senge, 2020).

Over the course of the past eighteen months, my studio practice has involved a number of projects oriented around an intuitive, generative making process. In Fall 2019 I began my Master Studies asking questions related to the appearance of objects through investigating a method called objectology (Pani, 2009). Doing so provided me with different ways for generating creative forms in designing objects. Soon, however, I noticed that objectology had its limitations. In concentrating predominantly on the physical shape of objects it was unable to answer my curiosity and desire to explore meaningful human-object relations or to address my concern for design for sustainability. Realizing this, I shifted to working with natural, bio based materials. While I was considering the role of materials in shaping objects in a more sustainable manner I was also working on the narrative aspects of objects (see appendix I). My guiding research questions shifted as I progressed. By the summer of 2020 I had moved on. Responding to new insights from my design practice, I turned to emotionally durable design (EDD) theory, developed by Jonathan Chapman (Chapman, 2015) I wondered how designing objects based on EDD principles might help improve and contribute to sustainable approaches in product design. That summer, influenced by Stuart Walker theories of Spirit in Design, I also began to consider what it would mean to embed spirituality in design.

Through the whole process as I developed the body of this project, I have had one stable intention: to 'shift'. I have been seeking a shift in my practice as a designer from absurdity to value, from sameness to differentiation, from feeding our current constructed and unsustainable reality to contributing to a new reality inclusive of relations of reciprocal care of objects that have direct effects on the quality of our life.

I have also been seeking to identify aesthetic and form qualities that designers might use to encourage final owners (of the products they design) to better value the things they have by attaching personal meaning to their objects - by developing emotional relationships with these things. Seeking this, my design practice has been made of introspective actions (making objects by hand as a way to think has been a key strategy) coupled with secondary research, reflective writing and critical thinking. Doing so, I found myself transitioning from industrial design to interdisciplinary design, from product to practice possibilities. This has been an open-ended process creating spaces that 'inspire' me and expose questions for further consideration.

METHODOLOGY/METHODS/ways of working and sorting through

Our contemporary relationships with material culture – through making

This thesis explores the perception of material culture and questions problematic 'behaviour' towards it. It does so from the perspective of a designer (with access to insight connected to creation of form, materials, making and production) and with speculative and reflective consideration of possible end users. It draws on research through design and heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1985). Throughout my journey I reflected and responded to my own lived experience and previous training through making. A flowing self-dialogue shaped my self-directed and open-ended practice of making. This generative practice-led design approach has enabled me an opportunity for a "growing sense of self-awareness and self-knowledge" (Given, 2008, p. 390). Upon reflection, I have come to realize that I am constantly criticizing my own knowledge as a product designer and making direct and indirect arguments with myself through my creative practice. When I started my Master studies I was unconsciously breaking the borders, the previous definitions and perceptions of what I knew as the strict rules of design; freeing myself of my old assumptions of design. Over time this invariably led me to more purposeful, strategic acts of making; toward the development of simple tangible objects that explored the issues that were concerning me: our relationships with a streamlined manufactured material culture and contemporary consumption culture devoid of poetics and meaning. As I have done so I have considered: designers and users and their emotional relations with objects (Action 1, A Meaningful Object and Action 2, Manipulating an Everyday Object); the designer's use of poetics to communicate (Action 3, Communicating with Stones); The designer's role and contribution to society (Action 4, Weaving with Plastic Spoons and Action 5, Weaving in Public); and finally the designer's intention and response to problematic contemporary relationships with consuming objects (Action 6, Weaving with Magazines and Action 7, Observation of Someone Else's Work).

In this process my approach to using primary (making) and secondary (reading) research shifted back and forth. Sometimes my making led the way, sometimes an observation or a memory in/from my everyday gave me the clue I needed. At other moments secondary research, and ideas a theory I had read gave me new ideas for my next set of making. This was a wayfinding (Ingold, 2015) and of drifting (Krogh, P., & Koskinen, I. 2020).

I have divided this document into two main parts where I explore and consider: our 'perception' of material culture and our 'behaviour' towards it. The first section consists mostly of my thoughts and reflections around material culture as a designer. Here, I discuss objects 'AND Agency', objects 'AND Association' and objects 'AND Sign'. I detail my explorations into engagement with objects as I sought to understand and reveal the capacity and power of the social role of objects in shaping and reinforcing our mind/thought/belief as humans. In the second section I detail my attempt to investigate and consider how this exploration addresses issues of thoughtless consumption and unsustainability in design. The section discusses objects 'AND Aesthetic Sensibility' and objects 'AND Matter' as a way to consider our unhealthy social relationships with products as 'consuming' objects and the impacts of this view on our contemporary material culture.

ON OBJECTS

SECTION I

This section, made up of objects 'AND Agency', objects 'AND Association' and objects 'AND Sign', consists mostly of my thoughts and reflections around material culture as a designer.

1. AND AGENCY

Anthropologist Janet Hoskins in *Agency, biography and objects* (2006) argues that "agency is deliberately not restricted to persons, and may include spirits, machines, signs and collective entities" (p. 74). Objects, she also states are made to act upon the world and to act upon other persons. Even nonfunctional objects are created to influence the thoughts and actions of others. So, objects indeed possess an innate agency given to them by humans (as creators and users) that allows them to create change (p. 75). "Things have an impact and we produce them as ways of distributing elements of our own efficiency in the form of things" (p. 76).

Another way of thinking about the role of objects in our everyday lives can be found in actor-network theory (ANT). ANT asserts that artifacts/objects are deliberately designed to shape or even replace human action. From this perspective objects have the capacity to mold the decisions we make, influence the effects of our actions and change the way we move through the world. Doing so they play an important role in mediating human relationships, even prescribing morality ethics and politics (Latour, 1993). These qualities make objects an appropriate central point for exploring and understanding our relationships with material culture.

In his book *Affordance, Conventions and Design*, Design Researcher Donald Norman speaks to the relations we have with material culture in terms of affordances. He notes that: "Affordances reflect the possible relationships among actors and objects: they are properties of the world" (Norman, 1999).

The structure of the material world pushes back on people (Yaneva, 2009). Given this I have been drawn, as an Industrial Designer, to ask myself: How are we making and experiencing the contemporary material world? What has happened in designing artifacts in the last decades and how it is shaping our perceptions and our mind? These thoughts and questions connected to objects and agency have also led me to consider the role of technology in the making material world. Technology is embedded in the making, use and understanding of the things around us. We cannot ignore its impacts in changing the design of products. As an industrial designer I am very aware of the allure of designing techno-centric products that offer a plethora of new affordances: explicit, pattern, hidden, false, metaphorical and negative digital affordances. Notably missing from this list are physical affordances and the pleasure found in 'touch' and 'tangibility'. The Italian Philosopher Franco

"Bifo" Berardi and the Dutch theorists, Caroline Hummels have offered helpful perspectives as I have tried to grapple with these quandaries.

In his beautifully written book, *AND Phenomenology of the End*, Bifo describes the new techno-centric world we are living in and the way it is shaping us and consequently the material culture we design. Bifo contends that a shift away from 'conjunction'¹ to 'connection' is the reason for the destruction of our abilities to value and respond to emotional or aesthetic influences (Merriam Webster). His assertion that we are trapped in inescapable patterns of interaction coded by techno-linguistic machines, smartphones, and screens and the harmful corollary: the stress of competition and acceleration (Bifo, 2015) resonates with me. Bifo uses the phrase 'Touch me not' to describe a common behavior of modern society (p. 49) connected to the objects we surround ourselves with. All our so-called touch buttons and screens are manipulating our experiences and relations. We experience superficial connections through digital products and designs that no longer enable us to truly connect. Hummels (1999) states that the electronics used in technological products are 'intangible' and not mechanical. So, the functional parts of products do not impose a way of interaction (p. 2). These insights into contemporary relations with contemporary objects point to the tragedy of ignoring our aesthetic sensibilities in design. When we as designers lose connection to our sense capacities (such as the power of touch), we also lose a deeper perception and ability to draw and learn from the beauty of the world and create meaningful products. This has a trickle down effect on the users of the things we design. With modern technological artifacts users are not consciously involved with the material world. The result of our insatiable desire for designed technocratic artifacts, is a separation, a chasm between ourselves as humans and the material culture we surround ourselves with.

Finding means to sit with and consider these serious issues-disconnecting from material culture - has been an integral part of my research. I have consciously moved away from technology in my practices as a way to try to think, understand and grapple with the things that concern me as a product designer. I have chosen to learn by using my hands and making tangible objects. I have moved to using the analogue as a way to reconsider the implications of the digital.

1- an uninflected linguistic form that joins together sentences, clauses, phrases, or words Some common conjunctions are "and," "but," and "although."

- the act or an instance of conjoining : the state of being conjoined

Conjunction is defined by Bifo as the action or an instance of two or more events or things occurring at the same point in time or space. He describes this in contrast to the idea of connection which is dependent to an agent/code and is not intentional and vibrational. In connection elements remain distinct. In contrast, conjunction is independent to an agent/code. It is vibrational, and it is a process of becoming other (Bifo, 2015, p. 21).

2. AND ASSOCIATION

In his book *The System of Objects*, French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (1996) argues that: "Human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collision in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value, what might be called 'presence'". Objects are a subject of passion (p. 85). Further, I have realized (thanks to Walker's definition of country in his book *Design Realities*) an object is not just a material thing, it is a model of thinking, a means for feeling, a tradition and a culture. Objects are representations of us, humans. Deyan Sudjic (2008), describes objects as "The way in which we measure out the passing of our lives. They are what we use to define ourselves, to signal who we are, and who we are not" (p. 21).

Every object is a history; every speculation for creating a context that would end up adding a new object as a meaning to the world of material culture, is a reaction to a part of the history of that object. It is an inspiration; a history that has been recorded in humankind memory and most of our future decisions of making artifacts are contingent on what has been created in the past. Objects are the children of thoughts and thoughts are makers of the world. There are connections among components of existence and in my view, man-made objects are a part of this content as they are signs of human intentionality. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (1993) argues that products are created based on human intentionality "but that intentionality itself is conditioned by the existence of previous objects" (p. 23).

2.1. ACTION 1 | A MEANINGFUL OBJECT

In the summer 2020, I made a loom as an object, to implement some actions based on my secondary research (in that stage I was inspired by the salient perspectives offered up by the design researcher and educator Jonathan Chapman about the poetic aspects of objects as significant influences' of our own durable engagements with them. Working intuitively, I decided to make a handmade loom similar to looms that Iranian people traditionally use for weaving carpets. In *Design and order in everyday life*, Csikszentmihaly (1991) discusses the connection between people and objects based on their different experiences in their life: "in our culture and in the present historical period, objects do not create order in the viewer's mind by embodying principles of visual order: they do so by helping the viewer struggle for the ordering of his or her own experience. A person finds meaning in objects that are plausible, concrete symbols of the foremost goals, the most salient actions and events in that person's life" (p. 29). Before I came to Vancouver in the first days of September of 2019, my mother started to weave a small gorgeous carpet (fig. 1-2). She was weaving a story of patterns. Weaving in my tradition is not only creating masterpieces of art. It's a way of storytelling and communicating. A sign of 'being'. It's a style of life and an extraordinary way of telling mysteries which will never be born without weaving.

I think this personal experience of objects and my cultural association with weaving was the main reason for my making a loom as the first step in my research into human-object relationships. I was intent on making a thing to think with. In the case of my loom, I discovered that I did not need any knot or pattern woven on the loom to take up this task of thinking. The bare loom itself, I found out, was also meaningful to me. In *Emotionally Durable Design*, a book by Jonathan Chapman, he argues that 'Meaningful Association', where a product is significant as it carries cultural and/or individual meaning, is one of the main types of subject-object attachment (p. 47). Once I had constructed my loom there was a memory and a feeling behind the object that filled the space between me and the loom, between me and a faraway land. Memories of my country and my mother's hands, weaving a traditional carpet.



figure 1: My mother's carpet weaving, photograph by Sima Foroutanzadeh



figure 2: My mother's carpet weaving, photograph by Sima Foroutanzadeh

On a sunny afternoon, when the sun was shining and sunbeams were playing on the wall, I put my loom vertically on the floor of my apartment's balcony (fig. 3). Sitting in front of it, I started looking at the loom. After several long moments of being silent, I felt a strange new state of thinking. I was drawn in to the strong relationship between the environment and the object. The place, the sounds and the singing birds, the sunbeams and the clouds were all making a virtual context; I unwittingly explored how light was playing on the loom surface and between the threads, and how this was a process of making an ephemeral pattern as an unpredictable context. "It is now space which plays freely between them, (here object and light) and becomes the universal function of their relationships and their values" (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 21). Light in that specific moment was performing a magical dance through a series of fleeting glimpses as isolated shots in front of my eyes. It was the content of a concept. The concept of momentary changes. A series of temporary changes that creates 'motion'. Lights and shadows behind the threads were weaving different patterns, different colors and a variety of unknown feelings. I experienced minutes of stillness when nothing was absolutely still. I recorded minutes of thousands of moving light patterns. Thousands of different stories and possibilities.

In my experience, although, as a human I am the creator/maker of an artifact, I often feel that all of the thoughts that come to my mind after making an object, belong to that object (the thing I have created) and not myself. That rather than the object being the result of my thoughts, it is the reason for them. It was interesting that I had this experience and speculation in the summer, and then, two months later I read about the theory of material engagement presented by Creativity, Cognition and Material Culture researcher, Lambros Malafouris. This theory was a pleasant proof of my thoughts and something that helped me further expand my speculation around objects in the next parts of my research. In the case of the loom on my balcony, at first, it seemed I knew what I was doing and that what was being made was something from my mind, but as I moved forward, I began to lose my confidence. Being certain was an illusion then! I was not creating the object; but the object was creating my thoughts; as it was not a stable solid thing, it was alive. Light added a layer of fiction to the object that created an illusion of autonomy in the loom; it was a 'living object'. This reminded me of subject-object attachments that Chapman also discusses (Chapman, 2015). My loom was actively creating an emotional bond between me and itself! There is a point where an object gains independence from humans, their capacities and agencies are not restricted to human intentionality. Sometimes objects go beyond what is expected of them and this is one of the reasons that creates durable attachments with them.



figure 3: Loom and Light

3. AND SIGN

3.1. ACTION 2 | MANIPULATING AN EVERYDAY OBJECT

In the early stages of this project, I realized I wanted to better understand the array of emotional expectations that might be connected to everyday objects we use, often several times in a day. In Spring 2020, in an attempt to achieve a baseline and perhaps find a common and shared insight into this, I chose a plate as a case study to explore different perspectives. I decided to reach out to some of my old friends in Iran who were my classmates in my bachelor degree and are now all working professionally as industrial designers. We had the same training and background and I was eager to have conversations with them.

I planned to share and explore my plate, as a case study idea and a means to get their feedback. Connecting virtually through Telegram messenger, I hoped to draw on multimedia such as audio, videos and pictures to make my research subject more clear and easily understood.

I sent two pictures of a white IKEA plate to my friends (see appendix ii). As a completely functional, non-decorative object I hoped they could treat it, maybe as a white draft. I asked them, as designers, if they could think of ways to modify the plate in order to feel more attachment to it while still ensuring that the object maintained its functional role as a plate. Intrigued, my colleagues offered to take on some quick prototyping exercises and get back to one another and myself in one week's time. For my part I was curious about their perspectives and expectations too, of an ordinary everyday object.

My friends sent their ideas through online platforms as texts, audio files, visual files and videos. They offered up a plethora of different ideas and imaginings for changing the product. The many creative works, deep thoughts and ideas around changing an ordinary object that was shared with one another, inspired me.

Some of my friends produced fictional ideas. For example, one of them expected reactions from the plate while eating his food. He imagined a plate that screams when the fork scratches its surface! In this way a strong emotional connection will form between the user and the object as the participant said "by having this plate I would care for the plate more and will wash it gently after each meal" (A. Saadat, personal communication, October 17, 2020). Other friends had more realistic ideas. One of them liked the object more, simply by writing the name of her family members on it. "In this way" she said "we can have the name of each other in our plates while having a meal on a table together. I think there have been created a set of family kitchen plates that are more beautiful and meaningful for me, and I would like to keep them as long as I can" (M. Khalkhali, personal communication, October 20, 2020). Still other friends preferred to have cultural motifs, images of favorite things or persons, patterns and pictographs on the object.

Considering my friends' responses gave me different thoughts and insights about possibilities of creating personal values and emotional connections with an every-

day object like a simple IKEA plate. In our streamlined modern production system the main attention is always on rationalizing technology and lowering costs. Fast and cheap are two words I can attribute to describe this manufacturing system. The result is producing thousands of similar products that are not capable of creating emotional bonds with the user. Manufactured objects remove the sense of uniqueness, allocation and individuality while people seek differentiation. "Things do not become personal because we have selected some alternatives from a catalog of choices. To make something personal means expressing some sense of ownership, of pride. It means to have some individualistic touch" (Norman, 2008, p. 220). "We need a new way to conceive of objects. We must reconsider what the object can and should do to support differentiation" (Fraser, 2008, p. 31).

Apart from these speculations, I found something particularly interesting about this long distance studio exchange. I noticed the important role of sign in objects that create a meaningful content in a specific object (fig. 4). My friends had a common intention to create emotional meaning and more attachment with an everyday object during manipulating it which was deploying different kinds of signs in my white draft (the IKEA plate). They were expressing their own concerns and their own identities in interacting with an everyday object including tradition, culture, and social relationships with family, etc. by signing the object. So, the object was indeed a matter for mediation in their perspective. This speculation helped me think about further different practices in my project: object as sign.

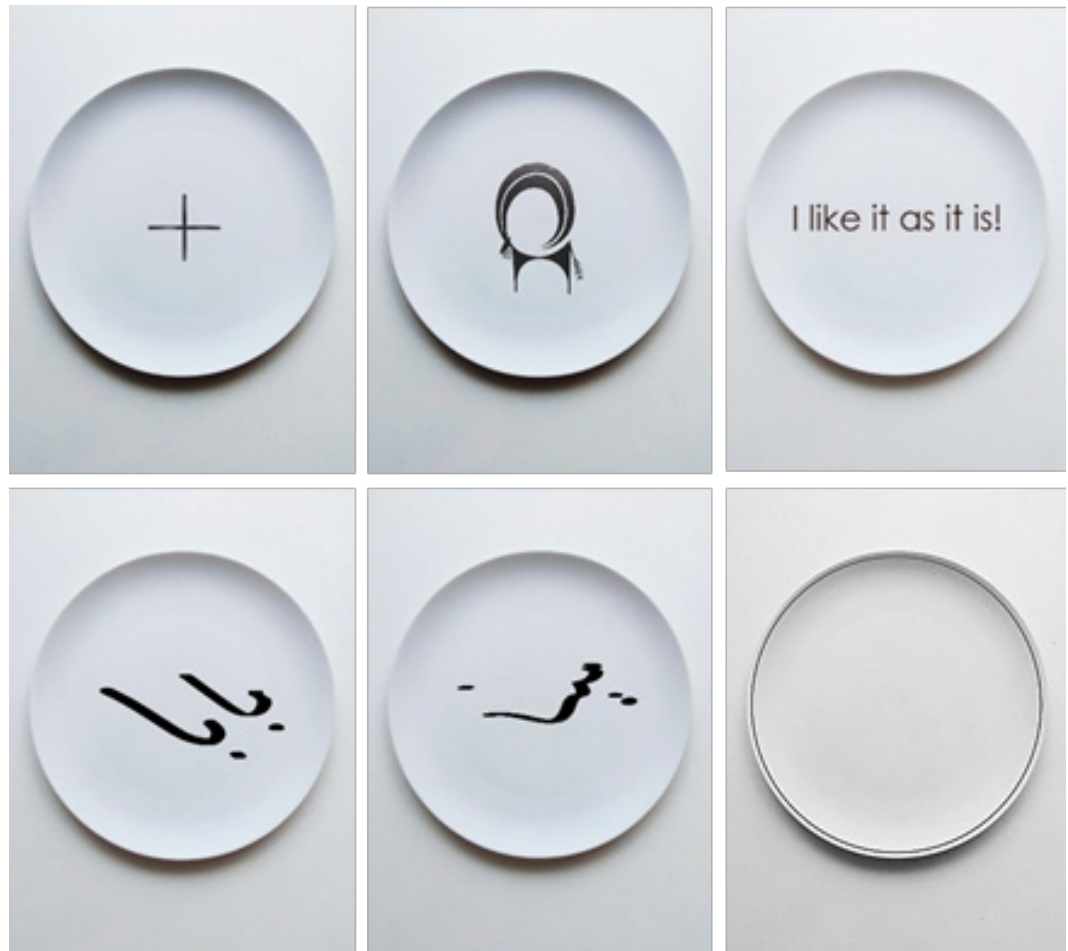


figure 4: Plates AND Signs, My response to my friend's ideas

3.2. ACTION 3 | COMMUNICATING WITH STONES

Stones are the language of the body of earth. They are narrators; when we use them in making objects, we borrow a part of the story of the earth.

I believe that every idea that comes to my mind and every connection with matters that matters to me, has a reason. I have a blurred memory of my childhood which is a memory of a sense, an unknown sense. The memory is walking with bare feet on stones and a strange feeling I could never describe, because there is no equivalent word for it in the language; Stones are the secret memory between the earth and the little I. Today a key part of this memory is that it is connected to an emotion that was generated based on my experience of touching the stones with my bare feet. "There is a sensible memory through which the body records its own history of contacts, and of experiences of tenderness or violence. These are bodily traces of psychic events that are expressed more particular as emotional inhibitions and psychosomatic issues" (Berardi, 2015, p. 48-49). The skin is the most ancient and sensible of our sensory organs, our first tool for communication that opens the body to the world by bringing messages from the surrounding environment towards the mind (p. 49).

In the first year at Emily Carr, when I was working on a project for my studio class, I made a tiny stone brush. At first I was not confident to present the artifact as one of my studio works, but then I received some positive feedback from different people in the MDes studio and I noticed that people liked it. At that time, I didn't know why I made that brush as I do now; but still I loved it then as I do now. Sometimes we make things that may seem meaningless. You make them in a few minutes while they hold a long story behind them. An object could act as a mediator that brings up old memories and refreshes an old unknown sense, an emotion as a sign (fig. 5).



figure 5: Stony Brush

From an anthropology point of view “we humans are thingers. We are embodying and self-bounding creatures able to influence our developmental paths by changing our means of material engagement — Human beings evolve by creating material things and assemblages which scaffold the ecology of our minds and shape the boundaries of our thinking” (Malafouris, 2016, p. 290). When we think “through things we overcome the limits of our ‘nature’ and enter into a separate ‘cultural’ realm” (p. 297). “In creating or manufacturing objects, man makes himself, through the imposition of a form (i.e. through culture) into the transubstantiator of nature”. (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 28). For example, by making objects based on human body features, we/designers/makers invariably create and shape meaning and values for ourselves. In this scenario where the object is essentially anthropomorphic the object serves as a mediator bounding a human/maker to the organs of their own body (p. 28).

Making to me, is a means of moving from one way of seeing a situation to a new way. Seeing is a method of thinking. Making is a tool to explore ‘tacit knowledge’ (Polanyi, 1966). It is a way to express knowledge through the language/act of making when I know that I can know more than I can tell (p. 10). We ‘make’ to create ‘meaning’. We do so with our mind and our hands. Hands, as architect and design curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York Paola Antonelli says, are tools for ‘thinkering’, thinking with hands, doing hands-on conceptual works (Escobar, 2017, p. 34).

We understand the world around by searching for what we can do, by what we find in the environment. Through making the brush what was clear is that I was trying to make a connection between myself as a human and a piece of stone. I did so by giving a character to a seemingly passive object; an anthropological sign, an assembling of human and nonhuman. I liked the new image of the object that was shaping in my mind, in my hands. It made me think about the affordance of the object and the material capacity as a means to create a new status for a natural tiny stone.

I decided to make more stony objects. I collected some natural stones and purchased different supplements such as a metal handle made to suit based on human bodily features – the way a hand grasps. I drilled a stone and simply attached the handle on that (fig. 6).

My activity of ‘doing’ deployed the imagination of an action as a way to connect to a nonhuman. Handles are traces of the human mind on the body of objects. They hold a scenario of human becoming in them; by adding a handle I deliberately changed the states of a piece of a stone to an artifact that invites us to think about the possibility of an action, a movement, shaping a process of mental evolution. A handle changes our perception of a piece of stone. It acts as a medium that defines a relationship between my hand, your hand and the object. The handle is an actor; I realized that this action of mine (that connected the handle to the stone) was an example of the most primary process of engagement by embodiment; the point at which the design of an action and an intent is shaping in mind. Designing a position of hand and an imagination of a movement/function. The object may remind us of some familiar man-made devices such as an electrical iron and in this way a symbolic meaning will generate. In other words, the handle creates a familiar code which is a tool for connecting with the stone. This is a dialogue that is created by distributing the agency of a material/stone and creates an interaction with material culture through addressing signs of communicating.



figure 6: Stone AND Handle

Figures 7 and 8 are more samples of my attempts to make new characters of stones and traces of communication.



figure 7: Traces of Communication



figure 8: Traces of Communication II

We define a framework for physical aspects of objects as 'shape', 'color', and 'texture'. But do these features introduce the inherent qualities of objects; or "are their meanings acquired through constant repetition, through familiarity and convention? __ The spoon could be understood as a fragment of genetic code - a code that can grow into any kind of man made artifact __ The code is partly a reflection of how the object is made, but also of its symbolic meaning __ what counts is the nature of the thinking" (p. 35). "The design of objects can offer a powerful way of seeing the world" (Sudjic, 2008, p. 8).

SECTION II

This section discusses objects 'AND Aesthetic Sensibility' and objects 'AND Matter' as a way to consider our social relationships with products as 'consuming' objects and the impacts of this view on our contemporary material culture.

4. AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY

Initially studying industrial design, in Iran, aesthetic was a word/content that I always encountered. All those features of the materiality and appearance of products such as surface, gestalt, identifying the micro and macro elements of the body of the products etc. for creating engagement in users and for modernist driven marketing goals. Later in my Master studies, when I started my investigation into our contemporary relationships with material culture, it also keep turning up, but in a different context.

Arguably, what we know as 'products aesthetics' is "derived from the system of manufacturing employed to produce the product" (Walker, 1997, p. 85). Aesthetics understood and used from this perspective becomes a problem when that system of manufacturing doesn't adhere to sustainable precepts. The field of Industrial Design is creating things that Walker notes Ivan Illich refers to as resisting "insights into their nature" (p. 85). Our perception of aesthetics is created by an inculcated manufacturing system which is set far apart and disconnected from vernacular production and its more sustainable methods of production (p. 85). We are drawn to perceive 'growth' as an inevitable part of/in combination with mass production and modernity which "creates products for all cultures, independent from locality and within a global marketplace" (p. 88). The result is a streamlined material culture, unable to create values for users who are frustrated from the 'sameness'. As Dunne and Ruby (2013) argue in their book speculative everything: many of the challenges we face today are aesthetic problems which are unfixable and the only way to overcome them is by changing over values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour (p. 2).

As I work through my actions I was consistently returning to and thinking about how the materiality of objects forms our aesthetic experience and consequently our values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. As Verbeek and Kockelkoren (1977) state: The specter of modernism and postmodernism design changed the state of matter in objects. In this view, materiality is separated from the meaning of objects and immaterial characteristic of objects are understood to play an essential role in creating the meaning of object and our perception of materials. In contrast to this view is one that asserts that the product as an artifact can only arise when matter matters (pp. 100-115).

3. AND MATTER

5.1. ACTION 4 | WEAVING AND PLASTIC SPOONS

I am not a weaver. I have a background in Industrial Design. Shifting from my comfort space of working in 3D to the flat 2D plane of cloth was literally weird. Faced with the lack of one dimension created a sense for me like a right-hand person must have when starting writing with their left-hand! But through the process I came to realize that it (weaving) is far more than about making a textile. It is equally about the language of the body and the mind. The loom I used to weave with was a Saori loom, a contemporary Japanese type of weaving that is full of meaning and philosophy. This method of weaving was invented by Misao Jo and developed by her son Kenzo Jo in Japan around 1969. There are no mistakes in this type of weaving and as Misao Jo says: "all is good". Because in Saori weaving, nature is the only thing that serves as a model and its philosophy is to value "spiritual fulfillment". Saori is not a technique but, rather a thought process, a free way of weaving for exploring and expressing the true-self, a balance between regular and irregular (Jo & Jo, 2016), perfection and imperfection, it is a practice of moving from "flaw" to 'flow'.

In September 2020, I borrowed a Saori loom to weave with. It is not an exaggeration to say that for me, it was love at first sight. The Saori loom as a machine is full of senses. It has a life of its own. The used materials, the structure and the process of working with the machine, even the sounds that are created while pushing the pedals or turning the Bobbin Winder are all representations of the soft and strong presence of the machine and its agency that invited me to experience a new journey. I began my interaction with this portable loom by setting up the warp. This involved threading the long warp threads, which had been previously wound up onto a tube, through heddles on the machine. This task was a challenging one for a skill-less person like myself. It took hours to thread the heddles and required patience and accuracy. When the task was completed, however, there was a reward. It was then the process of reflection by weaving started.

With many questions and concerns in my mind and weaving not as an artist but as a designer I began my embodied investigation into contemporary material culture and the environment that shapes us. I tried to depict our social relationships with material culture and the way this interaction impacts our perception of consumption. To me, weaving is one of the most romantic and meaningful means of creating. Separated from the beauty and the artistic tapestries as the outputs of the process of weaving, it is a tactic to create balance between wraps and wefts, length and width. It is a story of connecting through thought and touch. Tracing the sense of texture with fingers, the weaver touches the hardness and softness of each single thread and shapes meaning from materials.

Thinking deeply about my intention to weave as an action in these two years of my education at Emily Carr, except from my traditional background and my emotional bond to weaving, I found weaving as a way of critical thinking about our current production system and our methods of making material culture. Weaving by hand is full of spirituality. Here I borrow the term spirituality from Stuart Walker. Walker's

theory of spirituality of design, localization and sustainable consumption gave me insights as he says: "The period of modernity saw western societies focusing their efforts on secularization of society __ a new economic system based in industrial capitalism, whereby the profits of productivity __ through which we gradually separated from the spiritual life traditionally regarded as 'the best part' of our humanity" (Walker, 2013). Walker notes that this separation has changed our perception and expectation of the material culture, that the growth of consumption culture, instigated misunderstandings of what it means to create personal meaning – people have increasingly been drawn to objects with no actual value or meaning. There is a lack of spirituality in creating this sort of material culture which consequently impacts sustainability. "What we need today is considering the importance and implications of spirituality in our conceptions of reality" (p. 93).

The beauty and the philosophy behind Saori weaving led me to think about it as a medium. I wondered how the act of weaving with the loom might afford a way to speculate and reconsider our current consumption culture.

In my first stage of weaving, I was considering and thinking about consumption - how to reflect/represent it through weaving - I wove a tapestry using plastic spoons as uninvited guests. I caught them between the threads to see how their juxtaposition with strings might stimulate my own critical thinking of consumption. While I was weaving a story came to – one about time and the process of aging. I imagined one day far into the future. The strings of this tapestry have disappeared, the uninvited spoons are still there. Made of the petroleum based human constituted material – the plastic spoons would remain on the body of this planet unchanged physically durable but devoid of emotional connection – just leftover, lost spoons – plastic waste (fig. 9).

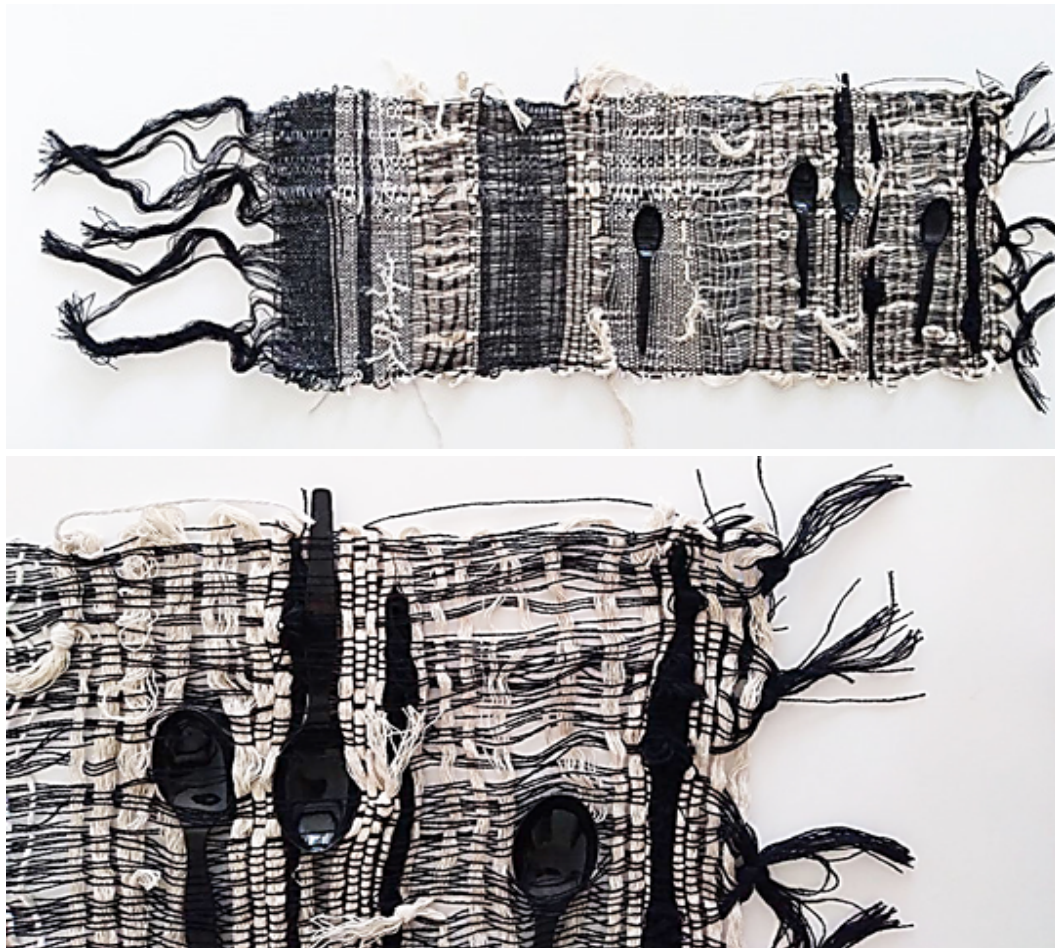


figure 9: Uninvited Spoons

Weaving with the Saory loom, it soon started to become clear to me that the object (loom) and the action (weaving) are literally capable of creating an iconic performance. A performance for recalling. I was inspired!

5.2. ACTION 5 | NEED AND WEAVING IN PUBLIC

In Fall 2020, I began a series of weaving performances in public spaces in Vancouver. My target places were specifically shopping centers as places that play a significant role in shaping people's perceptions of need.

Weaving with the Saori loom in public spaces served as a useful tool for me to address a wider social framework, relative to consumption. Traditionally weaving manually by hand is a time-consuming activity done in interior spaces designated specially for making. Here, out of its usual context, weaving provides a space to compare and contrast our current methods of fast machinery production and also the residual; fast machines are the reason for what I call fast consumption, fast feelings and short life. (fig. 10).

When I set my loom in public, people often approached me curious to know the name of the machine and its function. The object was an inviter; sometimes before starting to weave, people assumed the loom was a musical instrument. More than once as I set up, I had children waiting to hear a piece of music. People who came across me while I was weaving often asked to weave. Drawn to be more than observers they wanted to participate in the process, to experience what it was like to weave with the machine.

Myself, as I wove in the public mall, I thought of things: the reasons for our contemporary behaviour of consumption, our response to the enticing colourful world of consumerism and the way we/humans produce waste. Our behaviour, it seems to me, is the result of a faulty perception of our needs of goods. We are trapped in a network of need and waste.

In *Designing Things*, Prasad Boradkar (2010) addresses needs as forces in a network that starts at a specific location but quickly spreads outwards in space and time (p. 160). "Each and everything in this world of goods is an active participant in a continually evolving material culture" (p. 16).

While I moved over my concerns about skewed perceptions of need and the residual fallout of unsustainable consumption - waste – I also invariably thought about how I, as a designer, might contribute to changing the consumption behaviours of the people passing by me in the public shopping mall. How can we change this "unprecedented want" and this "illusion" attached to the using and consuming of modern material things? If "change will not be brought about through telling people what they can and cannot do", if "change will not occur when alternatives emerge that propose a more attractive solution than the one currently adopted" (Chapman, 2015, p. 86), how can we/designers encourage people to understand the meaning and the necessity of change and embrace the real change?

According to the book *Uncertainty and Possibility*: "We cannot make changes in isolation to the present because the present will not stay still long enough to be changed; it is always slipping away as the past. When we recognize that we are part of such a world, our only option is to participate more attentively in its changing. We can think of ourselves as moving forward with it, in ways that are open, responsive and with care" (Akama. Pink and Sumartojo, 2018, Chapter 1, p. 4). Here change equals modifying the existing material things to create new areas of reflection. "By change-making, we do not mean a solutions-based approach or formulate cause-and-effect. Rather we see change-making as a form of intervention in a process that involves the opening up of many possibilities" (p. 2). Modern strategies and approaches are required to reduce the negative unsustainable consequences of the rapid pace of the modern world, and acquire more time to find 'modern solutions for modern problems' (Escobar, 2017, p. 34). Because

traditional product-center approaches alone are not capable of fully addressing sustainability (Marchand and Walker, 2008).



figure 10: Weaving in Public

The result of this reflective action and weaving in public space was a shift in the materials I used to weave with. The threads; this action helped me engage with the problem of consumption by connecting two different objects: weaving and magazines both as mediums. I wondered at what it would arise if I allowed each of them to complete the other. This reflection was the reason for my next related action

5.3. ACTION 6 | WEAVING WITH MAGAZINES

Every time I open my mailbox, I see a bunch of papers in it: letters but also, advertisements and pamphlets and magazines full of a broad range of products. When I look at the images and read the content, it feels like I am condemned to be a 'consumer' as the pages are filled with a variety of aesthetically pleasant objects, often commercial goods, labeled with prices and the words 'on sale'! Sitting in contrast to their beautiful appearance, the 'on sale' creates a negative sense of absurdness because it seems these matters are only produced to be sold (for market profits). It provoked questions in my mind: how is that these material things are a projection of 'value'? Does the word 'choose' have a meaning or it is only the illusion of choice? Durable attachments with objects are seldom witnessed in our current consumer climate. We need to create design values by generating meaning as Chapman argues: "meaning is not something self-sufficient that lurks dormant within the semantic layers of an object until someone accidentally notices it, nor can it be universally designed or programmed. Meanings are created between people and things, and though designers can endeavor to create and trigger meaningful sensations within users" (Chapman, 2005, 165). If consumption is the 'conversion of meaning' (Chapman, 2015), what kind of meaning is transferred between us (humans) and material things?

In asking these questions of myself, I have come to realize how consumption is 'woven' into our social and personal life. In December 2020, I began to see the pages of the advertisements found in my mailbox as a metaphor for the threads of contemporary life. Questioning the values they promoted I began shredding the magazines ... to create threads that I then wove into the warp of my Saori loom (fig. 8). Colourful paper threads carrying sentiments of 'absurdness', 'guilt' and 'pressure'. As I moved forward in my action of weaving, creating a tapestry shaped by paper, by shreds of encouragement of consumption, I noticed the words trapped between the knots of weaving, one of them was 'life' (figs. 11-13).



figure 11: Shreds of Magazine

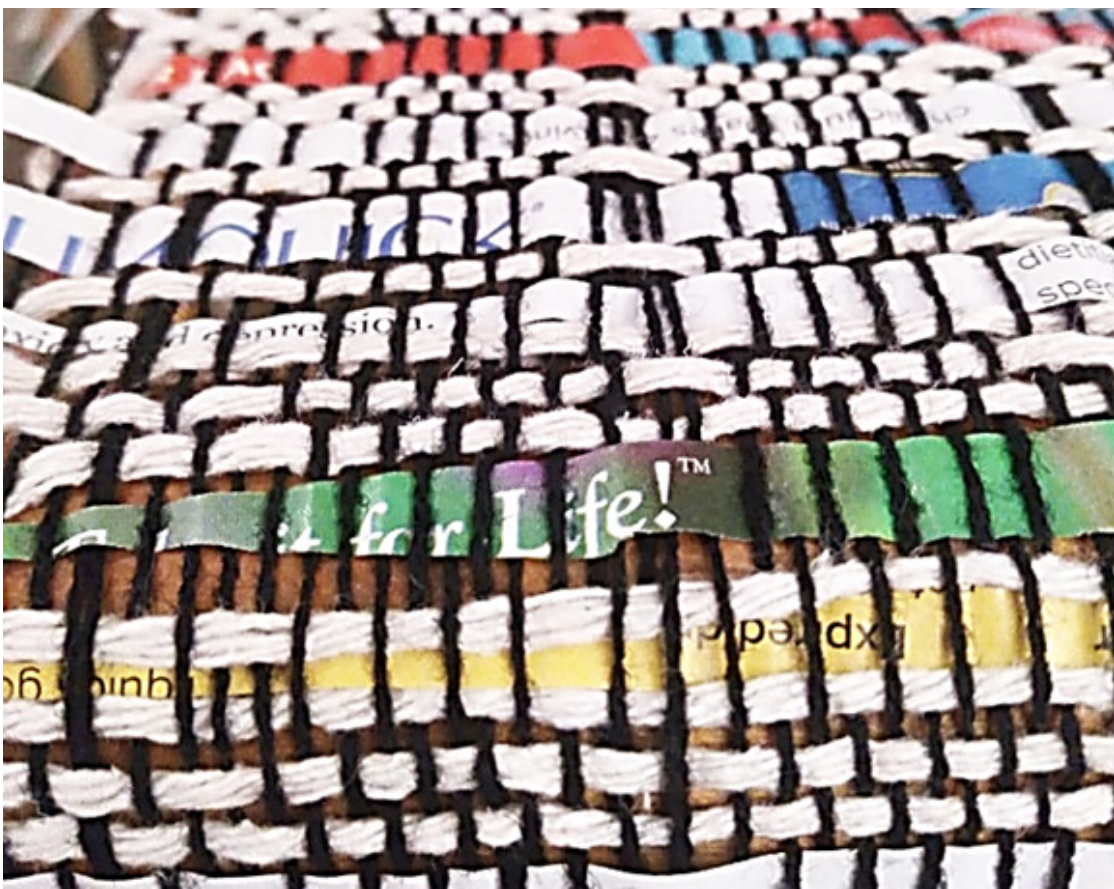
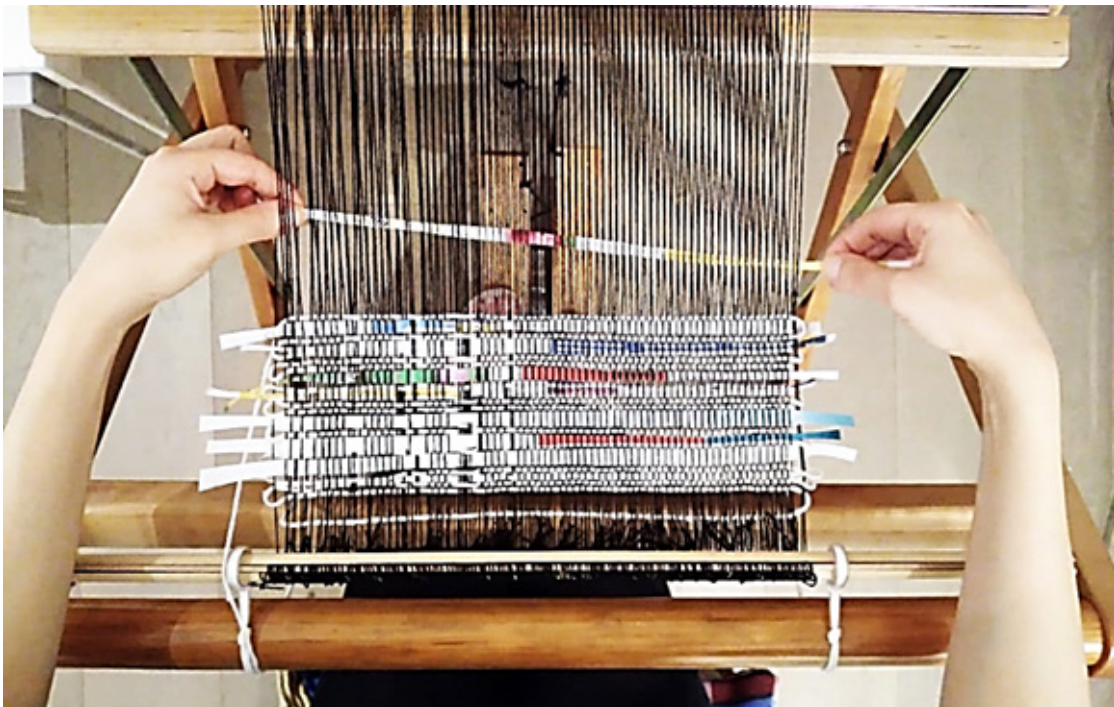


figure 12: Trapped words



Figure 13: Trapped words II

5.4 Action 7 | Observation of Someone Else's Work

A few weeks after I did my actions of weaving, when I was out walking, I saw a tapestry fallen on the ground near the sidewalk (fig. 14). I had fully expected to see many things in my walk but not a beautiful long hand-made tapestry left on the ground. The tapestry could have been there for a multitude of different reasons; but for me, it was a maker of sorts. This strangely sad view – this exiled object – reminded me of my own weaving actions, seeking beauty and value in our consumption behaviour. That strange feeling made me think that we still have a long way to go, to learn to value, to clean the so-called normal human-made views all around us/humans and again embrace “the best part of our humanity” (Walker, 2013, p. 89), the spirit of things.



figure 14: Exiled Object

CONCLUSION

My thesis considers human-object relationships in contemporary culture and ways of shifting our understanding of material culture. It does so from my perspective as a designer who actively engages and contributes to material culture. The work speaks to the themes of: agency, meaningful association, affordance, consumption, sensibility towards aesthetics, emotion and the environment around us. My design exploration has been made of a series of creative actions. As an established part of my practice these generative actions have enabled me to reconsider how material culture – the materials and made products I engage with - influences and shapes my own work as a designer.

In each phase of my exploration my intention was to create opportunities for internal critical reflection. Making and working with objects as mediators was key to my progress. The process and the outcomes I created provided me with new ideas and thoughts. They also served as a site for my own individual creative expression as an Industrial Designer. I did not create solutions but rather, afforded myself the means to reflect on the role of designer (myself) and to adjust my perception of possible material culture relations. I thought about how material culture influences my own actions and designs, I thought about how it also influences the end users of the products we envisage as designers. I found that the actions I took on and the objects I created had links to conceptual ideas and theories developed outside the field of design. These theories fed back into my work and offered up a range of useful insights. This was time for me to think, a space for reflection and addressing my concerns and values as a designer. It has been an opportunity to inform my future design practice.

Through this work, I have had several key insights:

- As designers we can re-adjust (shift) the quality of our connection with material culture and contribute to it, by:

Embracing the spirit of things.

I made a loom, I made stony objects and I wove tapestries with different materials. In each of my acts of making I had different intentions but I noticed a common thread through all of them. In the process of creating objects and working with materials there were other forces at play: tension with material, time, gesture, motion and agency that I applied to the objects and materials themselves. These forces sometimes changed my intentions and shaped my thoughts. I came to realize that objects are not stable, solid things. They have spirit; as do the materials they are made of. They are matters of influence.

Using poetics.

Poetics allows us/designers to explore and improve things by creating new thoughtful ways of consideration. In my actions related to weaving, I found that I could draw on poetics as a means for reflecting on and reinforcing relationships (mine and others) with material culture. Poetics I realized, is a tool that encourages us to make new connections. Because of this capacity, working with poetics, enables us to be more attentive to how we respond to the contemporary material culture around us and also how we, in turn, are contributing through our own making.

- Addressing sustainability can move beyond matter and use behaviour.

Sustainability in design involves more than considering the quality and quantity of materials used in a product or providing sustainable frameworks for our behaviour. By connecting on our perception of products and the quality of our emotional bonds with the material culture around us I was able to investigate other aspects that feed into sustainability –means of creating meaningful bonds with objects - (my own personal and cultural association with a loom in action 1 or emotional relationships with everyday objects in action 2 are good examples of this).

- Working with reflective material practices provides a space for designers to learn. All of my many exploration have been useful! Making is the experience of embracing the unexpected. It is a process of exploring new ways of seeing, a combination of observation, reflection and creation that constantly follow each other in a circle manner. It is a powerful means for engagement with a subject or concern or interest as it provides opportunities to rethink assumptions through both touch and thought.

As I move forward beyond my Master studies, I will continue my investigations into ways of contributing to a sustainable material culture. Based on my experiences working on this project, I think my role as an Industrial Designer is one that addresses contemporary issues by creating new spaces and innovative products that not only are functional, but are also means for critical reflection. I see poetics, emotions and the innate spirit in things as my starting points. They are a means for me to create a network of multiple solutions that address contemporary issues, a way to provide multiple opportunities for others (designers and users) to contribute to a more sustainable world by engaging in new ways.

When I started this work I was conscious that a readjustment of our understanding of our relationship to our built material culture was needed. I tried to criticize a shallow perception of material culture, our manufactured production system and consequently contemporary consumption culture. I also tried to find better ways to support meaningful more sustainable human-object relationships. Through my many exploratory actions, I came to realize that redefining human-object relationships requires moving beyond our built material culture- a shift in our perception of the environment we know and we live in is also essential. The relations we, designers, have with our acts making and the materials we engage with, have a significant impact on the things we design. Understanding this directly affects our capacity to shape a world that is different from the one that we have made.

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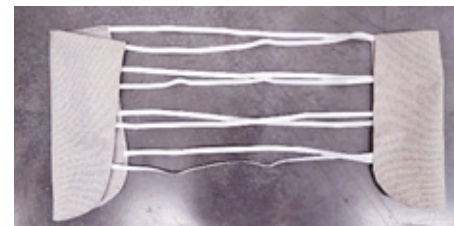
APPENDIXES

APPENDIX I

My first practice of objectology. I tried to make a series of propositions as forms of 'sitting' and my objective was making every possible structure that creates a form of chair and something for seating. Discussed on page vii



Objects create values; I made this wearable object to show the role of artifacts to define the type and quality of relationships. In this example, the artifact can connect two people, separate them etc.



My second practice of objectology. I designed a ring based on the form of a traditional Iranian pottery. Discussed on page vii



Objects as narratives.



Making/biomaterials
Discussed on page viii

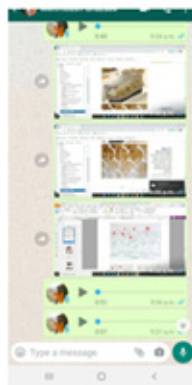


APPENDIX II

Changing an everyday object
(semi co-creation) pictures



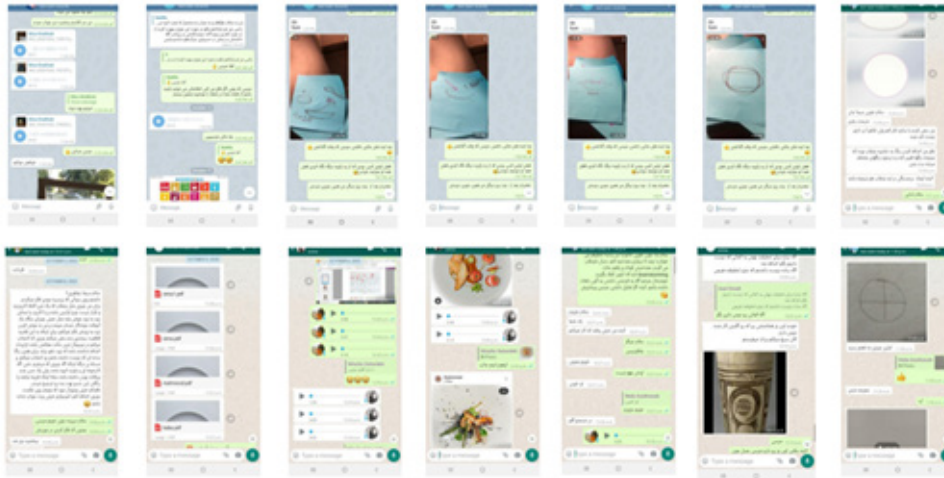
Explaining and Clarifying EDD theory to participants

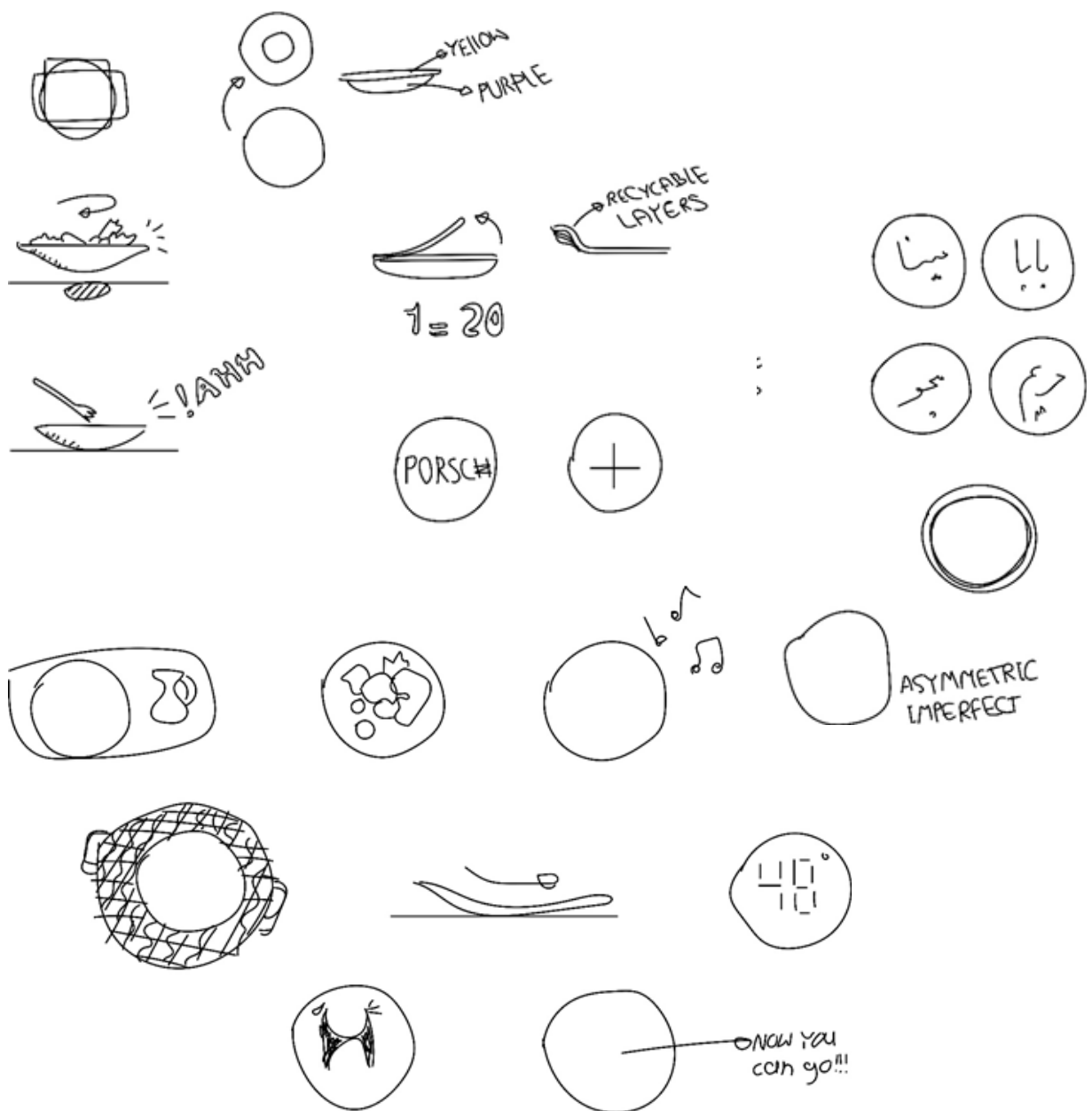


Sending pictures of the IKEA plate to participants
and giving them the information that are required for
Change-Making



Collective ideas from participants:





Sima Foroutanzadeh

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