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Surface Pattern Design

ADAD5004

Research in Practice

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Proposal

Uniqueness Making Tactility

Wordcount - 2465

Uniqueness Making and Tactility

In this essay I will seek to define the meaning of the words, Uniqueness, making and tactility. As a student of surface pattern design, Materiality, craftsmanship and the desire to produce a unique style personal to myself are very important, therefore I will endeavour to find relationships between them and my chosen discipline.

Uniqueness

Uniqueness is described as; the quality of being the only one of its kind, the quality of being particularly remarkable, special or unusual.

“In principle the work of art has always been reproducible, what man has made can be made again.” (Benjamin 2008 p.3)

In his piece, *The work of art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin argues that works of art must be understood in relation to how it came to be made and in relation to the new ways in which the audience receives it, medium matters as much as context. The work of art may become devalued as it becomes a part of everyday life.

Benjamin believes that a work of art possesses its own “aura” that is to say a magical or supernatural force arising from its unique status.

The work of art originally derived from ritual, as religious artefact or idol, is rooted in the context of tradition, usually by worship.

As an example, Benjamin Cites Venus whom the Greeks saw as an object of worship whereas the medieval clerics saw it as a threatening Idol. Both struck by its aura. The only way it was embedded in the context was by worship.

The uniqueness of genuine artwork has its foundations in the ritual in which it had its initial value, in the modern age the aura has been diminished as art has become easier to produce.

“That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (Benjamin 2008 p.25)

The aura included a sensory experience of distance between the viewer and the work of art, their presence being more important than actually being seen, for example artworks in a cathedral cannot be seen at ground level.



Fig.1 Michelangelo, 1508-1512, fresco Sistine Chapel Ceiling



Fig.2 Michelangelo, 1508-1512, Noah and the Flood

As artistic production becomes emancipated from content of religious ritual, display opportunities increase, and the uniqueness of the object is lost. When a work of art is reproduced the uniqueness of its location as an object occupying one specific place the importance of pilgrimage is undermined.

Reproduction allows the work of art to be reappropriated, art no longer needs a unique or original object, there is no original photo or film, all copies are the same.

In our ability to reproduce the artwork, we free it from its dependence on ritual, therefore, the question arises as to whether the original art is unique and if it still possesses its meaning. Benjamin believes the object becomes underpinned by politics. rather than by ritual.

“Capitalism transforms social relations between people into economic relations between objects. It renders people as passive consumers rather than politically engaged citizens resulting in art being treated like a consumer product” (Benjamin 2008)

Capitalism may be responsible for our loss of intimate connection to physical objects which has been nurtured in human development for thousands of years.

As useful as an object may be, its manufacture is remote from the user. As a culture the consumer may be in danger of becoming out of touch with the intelligence that is imbued in a unique object.

According to Glenn Adamson (2018), while we can be “pro-object” that doesn’t have to mean being in favour of any object. Having an abundance of possessions is contrary to human need, the reason we have too many is that they do not possess any unique qualities and we no longer care about them enough.

Up until the late eighteenth century everything was made to order “The whole world was bespoke” (Adamson 2018 p66). Today this term is used within the high-end fashion industry to suggest an exclusive form of consumption, as opposed to something unique, made especially for you.

He states “In craft every material rendition of a design will differ if only minutely. No maker no matter how skilled, can produce a truly exact copy ...as opposed to mass production which will be the same every time” (Adamson 2018 p.30).

In this respect every object has a potential narrative or meaning, and should be treated as if it is singular, special or significant.

The Japanese technique of Kintsugi could be an example of this in practice. when a valuable ceramic object is broken, the break is filled with a metallic lacquer, drawing attention to the repair, the repair bestowing the object with a uniqueness of its own.

Once it has been broken it will never be the same again, the fact that it was touched and treasured becomes part of its value.

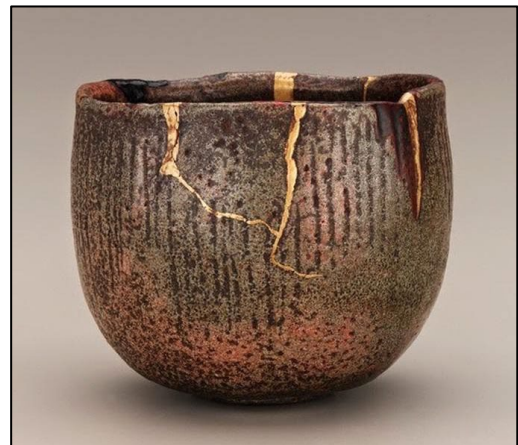


Fig 3 & 4 Kintsugi Bowls

Making

Making has been defined as; The act or process of producing something or To create, prepare something by combining materials or putting parts together.

" A well-made object is informed by thousands of years of accumulated experience and knowledge, whenever we make a tangible thing, we commune with this pool of understanding." (Adamson 2018 p.3)

Hand making is often seen as inferior to the processes of industry or the study of fine art. To dismiss craft in this way we ignore the skillset and satisfaction in this labour. When someone crafts an object they put their whole selves into it, both body and mind drawing on skills acquired their whole lives, making it a deeply meaningful activity.

While craft is seen as opposite to design which is less of a manual activity, if you go back far enough into a good designers background you will find a period of intense Hand making. For example, Alexander McQueen began his career as an apprentice in Saville row, reputedly working on his first collection himself. His dedication to craftsmanship apparent in his lavish use of embroidery and other techniques.



Fig.5 Alexander McQueen, 2011 Romantic Nationalism

The best way to learn about an object is often to copy it directly, as the apprentices of the renaissance imitated their masters in the workshop. This was considered the

best way to understanding bodily and conceptually, only when the student graduated to master status would their work set an absolute standard.

Richard Sennet (2009) draws upon the example of the Violin maker, Stradivari's workshop. He, himself, began his learning by repairing instruments, the young would do the menial preparatory tasks while those further up would do the finer work. The workshop would revolve around the talent of the master.

Technical training involved hands-on contact and spoken explanations passed on through generations, one thing the master could not pass on was his tacit knowledge, "the thousand little everyday moves that add up in sum to a practice" (Sennett 2009 p.77) The gathering and processing of thousands of pieces of information only he could see the importance of an apprentice would not be able to absorb in the same way by performing just one part of the task. In the case of Stradivari his genius was taken to the grave.

Making also involves reflection, when working with highly valuable material the stakes are high, something going wrong can be extremely costly. Other materials offer the opportunity to change course of action continually, varying the colour, ornament by variations of materials.

A good example of this is the work of artist Dorothy Barnes Gill which involves long periods of preparation before assemblage. The artist carves patterns into the bark of a tree waiting months or years to harvest. The growing tree makes natural abstract patterns.



Fig.6, 7 & 8 Work by Dorothy Barnes Gill

The slow pace of craft serves as a source of satisfaction and enables imbedding of skills, we are then able to take ownership of them. It also enables both reflection and imagination. As we judge while performing our task, we are better able to satisfy the material or ethical consequences of our work, the end result being more satisfying to both the maker and the consumer.

Once among the most highly patronised crafts for furniture, architectural decoration and pub signage for example, wood carving has become an unusual trade. Appreciation of the skill is often only when we notice the quality in the thinness or fragility of carving, perfect repetition of pattern for example. Making is not just about dexterity but the total productive situation, an understanding of tools and raw materials is valuable.

Tactility

Tactility has been described as; the quality or condition of being discernible by touch and responsiveness to stimulation of the sense of touch.

Tangible experiences are largely overlooked, touch being ranked as the lowest of the five senses. Traditionally tactility was thought to be more instinct rather than

rational thought, Vision taken to be the method by which knowledge entered the conscious mind by observation.

“The skin is a totally active surface; it is the largest sense organ we possess”

(Ackerman in Adamson 2018 p94)

Because ideas on touch usually start from our ability to perceive properties of objects, they tend to overlook features of touch that are crucial to our understanding of tactual perception.

Theorists’ opinions are based on the same form of touch, the hand contacting a solid object. Looking at the world of animals it is notable that hands are a rare feature; only primates’ hands are comparable to the human hand. Feeling objects is impossible in non-humans, this implies that the ability to touch does not fully represent the sense of touch, sensitivity being a whole-body feature. Nearly every area of the body can sense when something touches it, serving as a warning sense”.

The sensitivity of the eye is an example, rather than serving to explore objects, being touched by something triggers avoidance of a foreign object.

Mattens states that, the vital function of touch is not dependant on our ability to perceive features. When we are touched, we become aware of the presence and to which part of the body is being touched.

Acutely aware of the importance of touch, is the author, Helen Keller. Born deaf and blind, she was able to learn tangible concepts through physical experience.

“Sometimes it seems as if the very substance of my flesh were so many eyes looking out at will upon a world new created every day.” (Keller 2002 p.285)

If sight is impaired, touch becomes more discriminating, perception can be received by atmospheric changes and vibration. As an example, footsteps can be a good indicator of the character or mood of the walker, hurry, fatigue, indecision. Interruption by jolts can indicate sitting or getting up.

The body senses vibrations through the air that can convey impressions of sounds much in the same way music reaches the ears. The sensation of light can be sensed by the blind, the heat of a glaring light or the warmth of a dim light.

The hands only share a small portion of the world through touch, simultaneously the body feels heat, vibration and atmospheric changes, to perceive the world around us.

“Bodily contact provides an opportunity to find out what lies beyond the visual”
(Mattens 2017 p.694)

The ways in which we touch provoke a response from the object, it is not a sensation but a perception of mechanical events.

Matten concludes that, from birth, we perceive how we are being handled long before we start handling objects.

“Tactility is no more thought provoking than when challenges to sight become the subject of a painting” (Day 2013 p.62)

In his article, *Please Do Touch*, Jon Day (2013) refers to the painting by John Singer Sargent, *Gassed*, a depiction of the aftermath of a mustard gas attack on soldiers in the trenches. The figures locate themselves using their hands finding their way by touch led by one sighted soldier. “We become voyeurs to their blindness” he states, it also offers a comment on the untouchability of art. This was to change with

the advent of Modernism and the interest of creating works which employed texture and materiality within their compositions, not just in depicting tactility figuratively.



Fig.9 Gassed, (1919) John Singer Sargent

In his Manifesto of Tactilism in 1921, the Futurist, Filippo Marinetti called for new art based on the sense of touch. After his own experiences crawling through the trenches, he believed that touch was the basis of all sensation and saw the possibility for a new mode of art, a multi-sensory evolution of futurism.

Despite his best efforts, tactile art was seen as subversive and it was not until the early 20th century art scene, when viewing was challenged with handling, touch became as dominant as sight.

Over the past few years, tactile art has been gaining ground, with exhibitions focusing on ways for the visually impaired to engage with art, such as, The Touch Art Fair in London and also special tours for the blind in Museum of Modern Art in New York.



Fig. 10 & 11 The Touch Art Fair, 2013 Haptic Tactile Art London

More recently we see the emergence of inclusive Design. Designer Pui Yee Nikkie To, has a unique approach to exhibited art, based on literature, observation and interviews, her designs apply sensory attributes such as sight, sound, smell, position and touch.

She, and Students of The Ontario College of Art & Design Multisensory course, have designed 3-D replicas of paintings to give visitors a sense of the mood and shapes in the images through touch. The models included food for tasting, jars of scent, 3-D printed objects a teacup or wine glass to handle, touching the vessels triggered the sound of a liquid being poured.



Fig. 12 & 13 Multi-sensory tours at the Art Gallery of Ontario

Conclusion

Based on my research I conclude that the three words interconnect. Tactility is an undervalued quality, a tactile object bestows intimate connection to the owner, the owner then attaches a personal value to it. A mass manufactured object does not differ from any other, the hand crafted has is unique if only in a small way.

In order for a designer to make a good quality object they must be understanding of their tools and materials, they must take ownership of their work, in order to satisfy the ethical consequences of their product.

I believe in the great importance of originality in the design process, a designer should strive to find their unique style. To succeed a design should be both practical and desirable, making the object desirable promotes a connection to it and counter our obsession with over consumption.

Research Question

This work explores the importance of hand-crafted products in a culture of consumerism, by means of promoting sensory connection, focusing on texture and materiality.

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Fig.1 Michelangelo Sistine Chapel Ceiling available at <http://www.italianrenaissance.org/a-closer-look-michelangelos-painting-of-the-sistine-chapel-ceiling> (accessed 1/5/2022)

Fig.2 Michelangelo Noah and the Flood (1508-1512), available at <http://www.italianrenaissance.org/a-closer-look-michelangelos-painting-of-the-sistine-chapel-ceiling> (accessed 1/5/2022)

Fig.3 <https://historydaily.org/kintsugi-the-ancient-art-of-broken-pieces>(accessed 30/4/2022)

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Fig.5 <http://blog.metmuseum.org/alexandermcqueen> (accessed 30/4/2022)

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Fig.12 <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2019/01/07/ocad-students-reimagine-ago-artwork-for-visually-impaired-visitors> (accessed 29/4/2022)

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