

# Situating Creative Artefacts in Art and Design Research

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## Abstract:

This paper aims at discussing the positions of art and design artefacts and their making in a practice-led research process. Three creative productions and exhibitions featuring my textile artefacts inclusively carried out for tackling specific research problems are examined as case studies. The first two cases include the production of two series of artworks and exhibitions namely *Seeing Paper* and *Paper World* created as part of completed doctoral research entitled *Paperness: Expressive Material from an Artist's Viewpoint*. The study examines the relationship between a physical material and artistic expression in textile art and design. The third case includes the production of a series of luminous objects called *The White Light*. These objects are expected to generate a discussion on boundaries between functional and aesthetic objects and those between art, craft and design disciplines. Both cases exemplify the roles of creative productions and artefacts situated in the process of inquiry. Throughout a practice-led research process, art and design artefacts can serve as inputs into knowledge production and as outputs for knowledge communication. As inputs, both art productions and artefacts can be the starting point of a research project from which the research questions are formulated. They can also provide data for analysis from which knowledge are constructed. As outputs, artefacts can indicate whether the research problem requires reformulation, demonstrate the experiential knowledge of the creative process, and strengthen findings articulated in the written output. Creative practice in a research context can contribute to generating or enhancing knowledge, which is embedded in the practice and embodied in and by the practitioner. This knowledge can be obtained in the artist creating the artefact, the artefact created, the process of making it, and the culture in which it is produced and viewed or used, all taking place at a different stage of a research process.

**Key words:** practice-led, artefacts, art, craft, design, experiential knowledge

## Introduction: creative practice and practice-led research

Artists and designers often claim that research is always a component of their professional creative practice, especially when they delve into topics beyond their professions and own personalities, through visual methods such as drawing and painting (Scrivener 2009: 71). Research in this sense can be categorised as research *for* art (Frayling 1993: 5), which is not considered academic research but rather a means to explore ideas and gather information in an artistic process (Nimkulrat 2009: 33-34). Nevertheless, research in professional art and design practice can extend its territory into the academic context and function as part of a case study to be scrutinised and reflected on in a piece of scholarly research. Conversely, artistic processes and artefacts created as a vehicle for research can be recognised as 'art proper' in the artworld when they can also reach a non-academic audience (Figure 1).

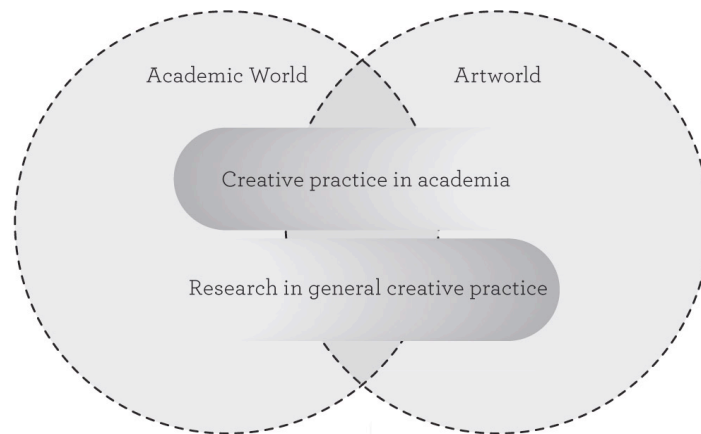


Figure 1. Model of the situatedness of research in general creative practice in academia and that of creative practice in academia in the artworld (Nimkulrat (2009: 34).

Having emerged in art and design academia for nearly three decades, the practice-led research approach considers the researcher's creative practice (i.e. the making of material artefacts) as the main vehicle for research, the results of which include not only a written text but also artefacts to be evaluated in a research context. Creative practice involved in research is intentionally utilised as a questioning process constructed as a means to collect data or to generate reflection in the practice (Durling 2002: 81-82). Durling (ibid.) also stresses that although practice and research coexist and interact each other, they are distinct categories and should not be misunderstood as identical. The understanding of 'practice as research' contributes to a problematic assumption that the outcomes of creative practice, i.e. artefacts, can be considered the outcomes of research without the inclusion of a substantial written outcome (Nimkulrat 2011: 60). Biggs (2004: 19-20) points out that if non-linguistic research outcomes alone were acceptable in art and design, the discipline would be no longer comparable to other disciplines, and therefore, should not be positioned in an academic context at all. While an artefact created with a research intention can contribute to communicating the tacit content of the research non-linguistically, experiential feeling in creative practice has a representational connection to experiential content that can be represented linguistically (ibid.). Accordingly, the results of practice-led research are expected to include not only a written text but also artefacts to be evaluated in a research context. Knowledge contribution that is a core requirement of academic research should also be explicit enough in the artefact produced (Lycouris 2011: 68). The array of terminology including practice-led, practice-based, process-led, studio-based, arts-based, practice as research, research by design and artistic research has been used to refer to this form of academic research (Biggs 2006: 185). Although various terms reflect the different roles of creative practice in academic research (Niedderer 2007), their meanings and usages vary among countries, institutions, subject areas or even scholars within a higher education institution. For example, 'practice-led research' is the current term used in most universities in the UK and in the design discipline, whereas 'artistic research' is used more extensively in other European countries and in the field of fine arts (Nimkulrat 2011: 60).

This paper aims at discussing the positions of art and design artefacts and their making in a practice-led research process. Three creative productions and exhibitions featuring my textile artefacts inclusively carried out for tackling specific research problems are examined as case studies. The first and the second cases comprise the productions of two series of artworks and an exhibition namely *Seeing Paper* and *Paper World* created as part of my completed doctoral research (Nimkulrat 2009). The research examined the relationship between a physical material and artistic expression in textile art and design. The third case

includes the production of a series of luminous objects called *The White Light*. These objects were expected to generate a discussion on boundaries between functional and aesthetic objects and those between art, craft and design disciplines, especially when they were displayed in an exhibition arranged in parallel with *TRIP: Textile Research in Process*, a textile symposium held at Loughborough University, UK.

The term 'practice-led' will be adopted in this paper, because it highlights the active role of creative practice in the research process (Nimkulrat 2009: 37) and most clearly explains my study in which professional artistic practice leads the process of inquiry to generate new or enhance understanding of the expressive potential of material in textile art and design.

## **Creative productions and artefacts in process of inquiry**

### Cases 1 and 2: *Seeing Paper* and *Paper World*

The thesis entitled *Paperness: Expressive Material in Textile Art from an Artist's Viewpoints* (Nimkulrat 2009) performed at the University of Art and Design Helsinki in Finland examines the relationship between a physical material and artistic expression in textile art and design (Figure 2). The material chosen for this investigation was paper string.

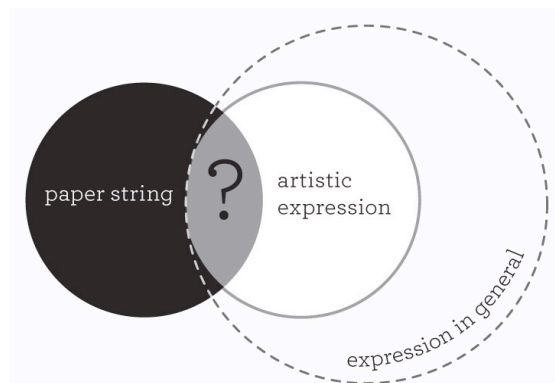


Figure 2. Model of the research problem investigating into the relationship between a physical material and artistic expression in textile art and design (Nimkulrat 2009: 24).

To tackle the research problem, this study set out to investigate paper string's influence on an artist working with it in actual artistic practice, including the creative process and the resulting artefacts. The research problem was approached by examining my own creative practice and discussing my experience with paper string as used in particular art productions. The thesis was thus practice-led and regarded the artistic productions and resulting artefacts as case studies. With this approach, the researcher can scrutinise creative processes by creating artworks as an artist, and by documenting and reflecting on them in addition to the literature review as a researcher. By means of documentation, the creation of artefacts that attempts to solve the research problem can give rise to the connection between academia and the artworld (Figure 3).

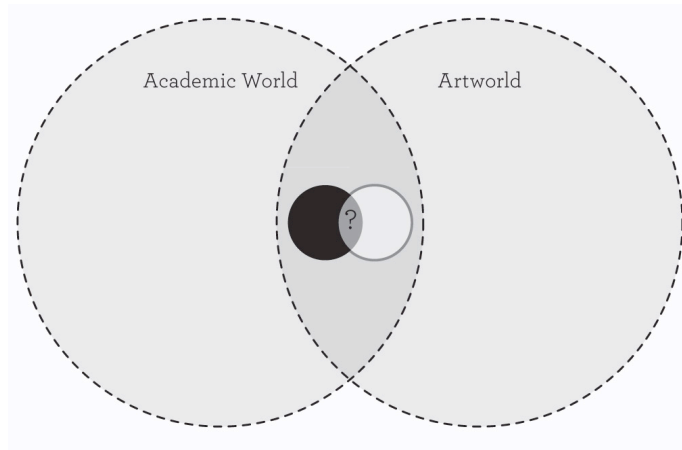


Figure 3. Location of this research in the academic and art worlds (Nimkulrat 2009: 26).

In this paper, this study is used to exemplify the roles of creative productions and artefacts situated in the process of inquiry, which was constructed around two art productions – *Seeing Paper* and *Paper World* – into five phases: 1) Before the actual creation of the artwork, 2) The actual creation of *Seeing Paper*, 3) After the actual creation of *Seeing Paper*, 4) The actual creation of *Paper World*, and 5) After the actual creation of *Paper World* (Figure 4). This practice-led research process began with the problem preliminarily posed, i.e. the relationship between a physical material (paper string) and artistic expression in the creation of art textiles. This problem stayed the focus throughout the whole research process.

As can be seen in Figure 4, the research problem was framed first as two elements: physical material and artistic expression. To study their possible relationship, the two elements must interact with each other and a type of material must be specified. A literature survey and my own experience as an artist helped me decide to focus on paper string. This material and artistic expression were then explored separately. Studying them as an individual element made me become familiar with them and be able to generate ideas of how they could be incorporated into my actual practice. The conceptual interweaving of the two elements equipped me for the second phase of research that involved the actual creation of *Seeing Paper* and the intertwining of material and expression.

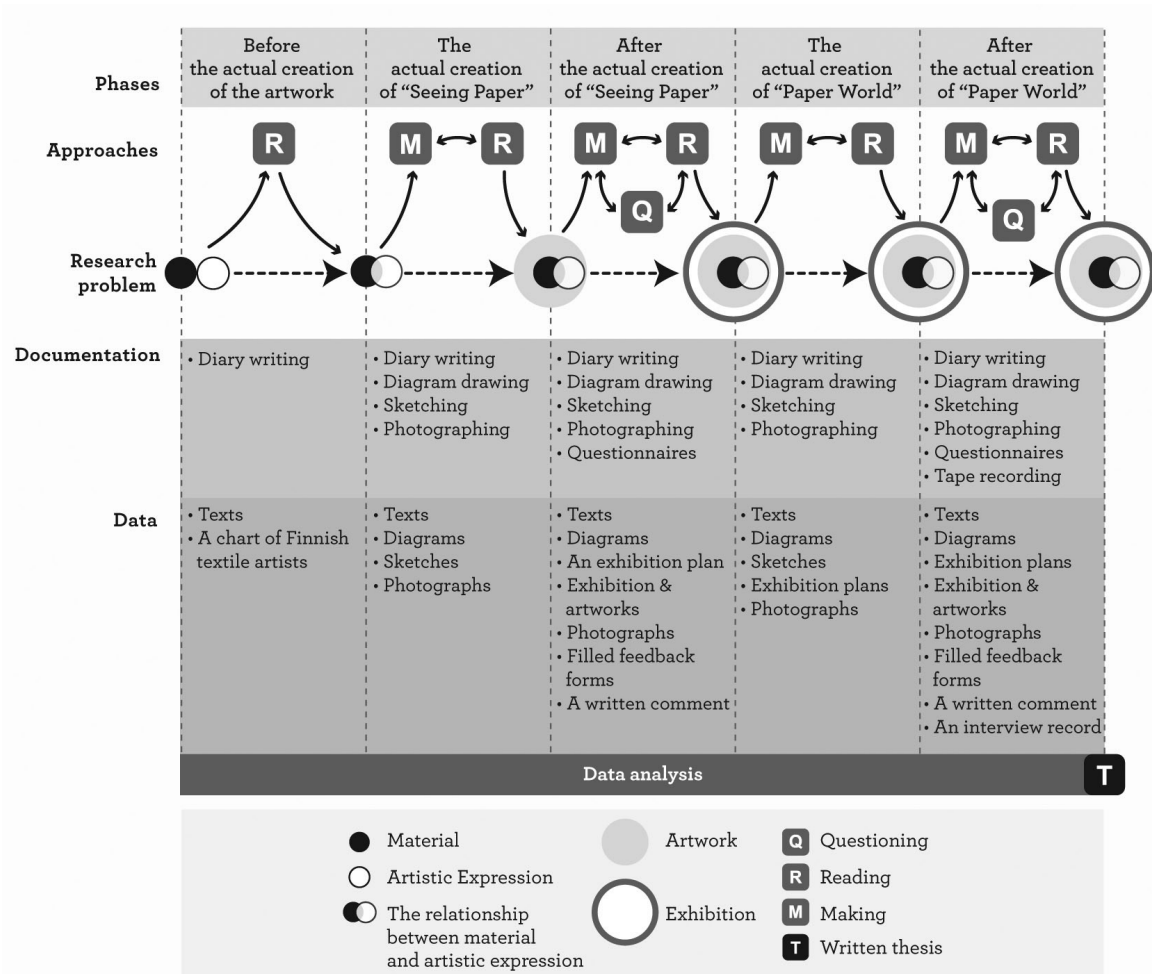


Figure 4. Process of inquiry divided into five phases (Nimkulrat 2009: 57).

To create *Seeing Paper* in the second phase, three different kinds of paper string were used as the material (Figure 5). Originating from the argument that a material has specific expressive potential, the concept of *Seeing Paper* aimed to illustrate that a material metaphorically 'lives' in this world. This concept was developed into the idea of creating artworks in a form of dress-like sculptures, as a metaphor for female human beings. Manipulating each type of paper string by hand initiated a distinctive dialogue between the material and the maker's expression. When expressing the idea through the hand manipulating the material into a tangible form, I felt that the material reacted to my manipulative act. This indicated that the visual and tactile qualities of each material I touched in the creative process influenced my thought and imagination. I then manipulated the material in response to the influence. The three types of paper string used to create this series of artworks performed differently and gave rise to unwearable dresses representing women of different characteristics at the end of the second phase of research (Figure 6). 'Reflection-in-action', to use Schön's term (1983), took place by means of writing and drawing diagrams about each work in progress in my research diary daily as well as photographing it in different states. It is one way of critically looking at one's own creative process and contributing to the transparency of research led by art practice.

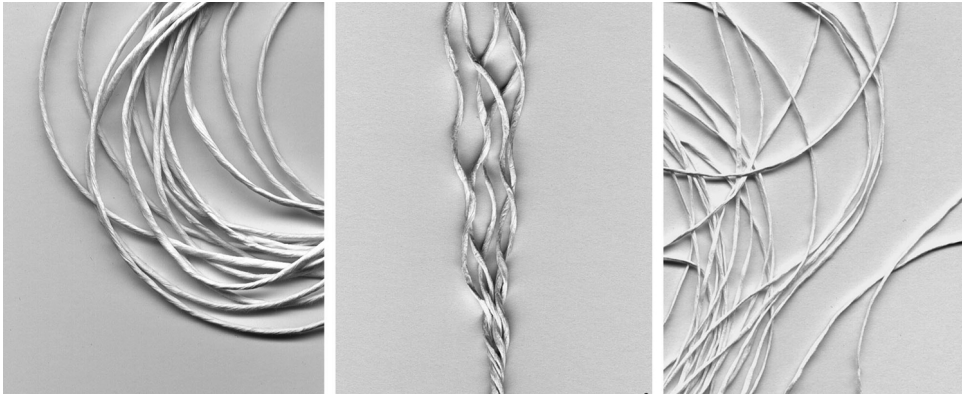


Figure 5. Three different types of paper string used in the creation of *Seeing Paper* (Nimkulrat 2009: 110).

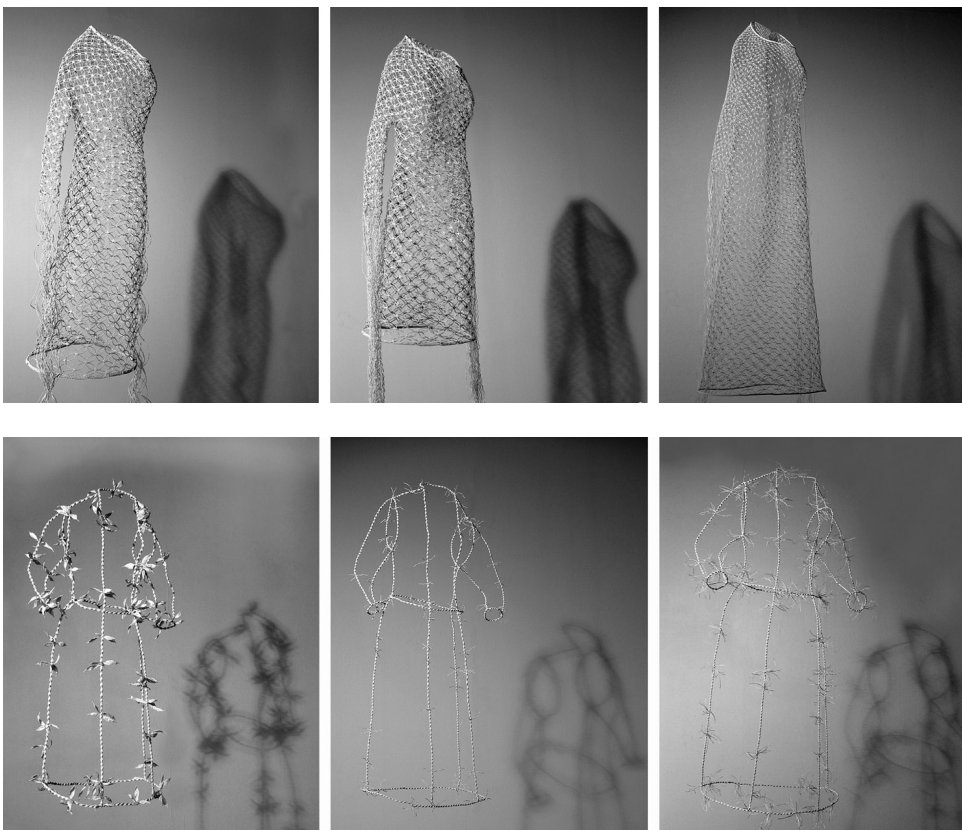


Figure 6. Six dress-like sculptures in the *Seeing Paper* series. From top left: *Let Go*, *Get Sorted*, *Breathe Easily*, *Private Garden*, *Private Area* and *Personal Joy* (Nimkulrat 2009: 123, 127). *Let Go* and *Private Garden* are made of the same type of paper string, so are *Get Sorted* and *Private Area* as well as *Breathe Easily* and *Personal Joy*.

The artistic output (i.e. the *Seeing Paper* series of artworks) produced in the second phase became the research problem in the third phase when it was publicly displayed in an exhibition (Figure 7). In the exhibition, questioning as a research approach was utilised in the form of printed questionnaires for visitors to fill in (Figure 8). The questionnaire was intended to guide the visitors to interpret and remark upon each individual artwork. All artworks can be considered inputs into the production of knowledge in this phase of research. The viewers' written feedback revealed that they could not recognise differences in expressive qualities of the three types of paper string, nor could they interpret the female

dress-like sculptures as a metaphor. Unrecognisable concept and variations of the materials in the artworks offered the issue of the influence of an exhibition space on exhibits for consideration. The concept of ‘the white cube’ (O’Doherty 1999) shows that the white space of a modernistic gallery creates the feeling of timelessness in visitors and hence is not as neutral as it appears to be. This directed me to ‘reflect on action’ and reformulate the research problem to incorporate contextual elements into the study and to adjust the way of creating the next art production.



Figure 7. *Seeing Paper* displayed in a modernist gallery (Nimkulrat 2009: 158).

1	
Nimi (valinnainen) / Name (optional): _____	
Ikä / Age: _____	
Sukupuoli / Gender:	<input type="checkbox"/> Mies / Male <input type="checkbox"/> Nainen / Female
Kansallisuus / Nationality:	<input type="checkbox"/> Suomalainen / Finnish <input type="checkbox"/> Muu / Non-Finnish
Ammatti / Occupation: _____	
<b>Mikä</b> tulee mieleesi kun katsot teoksia? Anna jokaiselle teokselle <b>yhden sanan (adjektiivi)</b> . / <b>What</b> comes to your mind when you are seeing each work? Please give <b>one word (adjective)</b> for each work.	
Teos nro. 1 / Work no. 1	_____
Teos nro. 2 / Work no. 2	_____
Teos nro. 3 / Work no. 3	_____
Teos nro. 4 / Work no. 4	_____
Teos nro. 5 / Work no. 5	_____
Teos nro. 6 / Work no. 6	_____

Figure 8. Questionnaire for *Seeing Paper* (Nimkulrat 2009: 67).

In the fourth phase, the relationship between paper string and artistic expression was explored in connection with the exhibition context. The creation of *Paper World* as a vehicle for research in this phase was reframed to emphasise not only the material that constructed each artwork but also the overall exhibition in which all artworks were to be situated, in order to gain knowledge of the relationship between the material and artistic expression (Figure 9).

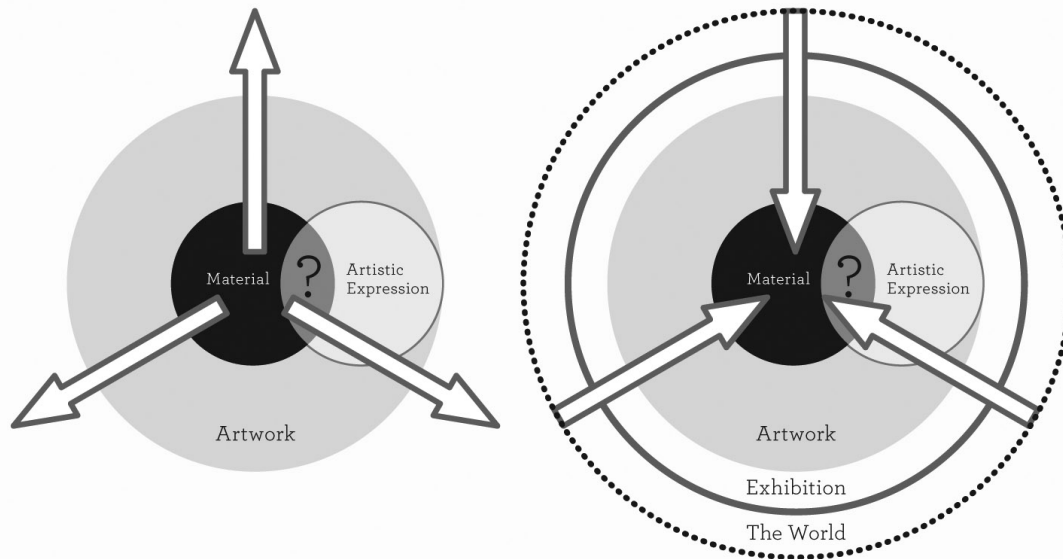


Figure 9. The creative process of *Paper World* (right) in comparison with that of *Seeing Paper* (left) (Nimkulrat 2009: 129).

My awareness of the visitors' perception that connects their contemplation of the artworks with surroundings and with their personal experience increased. While conceptualising the art production, I anticipated how the visitors might experience the exhibition in order to determine the art series' concept that would lead most people to experience the artworks as I intended. When the artist adopts the position of a viewer while creating artworks, the viewers in response would attempt to learn the artist's standpoint to understand what the artworks try to convey (Dewey 1934: 48-56). Heidegger (1999) shed light on how people experience things. According to his phenomenological thinking, one interprets the meaning of a thing as it is 'in the world', not by looking at it as a general thing but by referring it to his or her own contextual correlation (ibid.: 65-70). Merleau-Ponty (1962: 77-83) states that one experiences an object from an embodied standpoint within a spatial temporal context. To perceive an object is to be in the same world as the object experienced. Its coexisting objects are also perceived in an act of seeing, all reflecting each other. These phenomenological concepts informed the creation of *Paper World*, helping me conceptualise its theme. In order to shape the visitors' experience and interpretation of my artworks in the direction as I had anticipated, their forms and space in which they are presented should be recognisable by the audience and I and should have a comparable meaning for them and for me. Accordingly, the concept of *Paper World* showed that a material *lives* in this world as everyday objects surrounding us in our daily lives at home. A gallery converted from a residential home was selected as the context for the exhibition (Figure 10). 'Reflection-in-action' in visual and textual formats also played its role throughout this phase of research by various means of documentation, e.g. photographing and writing about each work in progress.





Figure 10. *Paper World* displayed in a gallery converted from a residential home (Nimkulrat 2009: 225).

The output from the forth phase, i.e. the *Paper World* series designed for a particular context, became the research problem and input into knowledge production in the last phase. The positions of all artworks in the gallery intended to establish both the relationship between them and that between the artworks and the exhibition space. As can be seen in Figure 10, the proximity of some artworks was envisaged that imaginative dialogues would be created between them. Questioning in the form of printed questionnaires was used to collect feedback from visitors during the *Paper World* exhibition. As shown in the third phase, some people filled in the feedback form a piece of text or the same word for several artworks. Asking visitors to give one word for an individual artwork thus seemed too demanding. The question and the feedback form were modified to give the visitors more freedom to write about their views (Figure 11). The small feedback forms documented how some visitors experienced and interpreted the artworks and exhibition. I then scrutinised the visitors' experiences as reflected in their written feedback. Heidegger (1962: 191) portrays the structure of experiences that people know how they will construe things before they really see them, by associating what they are experiencing with other similar things they have earlier experienced. The specific exhibition context affected most visitors' experience and interpretation of the artworks and exhibition. As they were familiar with forms of the everyday artefacts and home and knew that a gallery is a place for displaying art, they understood that those forms of household artefacts made of paper string were not functional objects, but representational artworks. They experienced and interpreted the artworks and exhibition in a way close to the concept I had conceived.

1  
 Nimi (valinnainen) / Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ikä / Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Sukupuoli / Gender:                     Mies / Male  
     Nainen / Female  
 Kansallisuus / Nationality:         Suomalainen / Finnish  
     Muu / Non-Finnish  
 Ammatti / Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_  
**Mitä** sinulle tulee mieleen näyttelyä katsellessa?  
 Kirjoita ajatuksesi.  
**What** comes to your mind when you are seeing the  
 exhibition? Please write your thought freely.

Figure 11. Questionnaire for *Paper World* (Nimkulrat 2009: 72).

### Case 3: *The White Light*

*The lamp* (Figure 12), an artwork in the *Paper World* series and an output of the research process aforementioned, became an input into a creative production after the completion of the PhD. It inspired me to produce a series of artefacts namely *The White Light* that possibly conveyed more than just one definite meaning or function. *The Lamp* was created to have a two-fold meaning. It can be considered on the one hand as a functional art piece, and on the other hand as an artistic product, as it can produce light, illuminating the space in which it is positioned. Consisting of illuminative objects, *The White Light* aimed to discuss the meaning of contemporary art and design, whether there are any boundaries between them.



Figure 12. *The Lamp* exhibited at Sfera in Kyoto, Japan. Photographed by Kanako Takimoto

Textiles and other material-based creative disciplines such as glass, ceramics, jewellery, etc. emphasise the medium and skills. This emphasis could be considered a characteristic of material-based fields that is rather distinguishable from fine arts (Nimkulrat 2012). Since 1980s, there have been debate about the position of artefacts created by hand, or craft objects, whether they are situated in the art or design context (Rowley 1997; Lees-Maffei and Sandino 2004: 207-219; Coles 2007). This form of creative practice has been termed design art, fine craft, new craft and many others (Coles 2005; Moline 2007; Risatti 2007: 308-399). Regardless of the terminology to define art, craft or design as a discipline, Coles (2012) addresses the specificity of current trend that artists and designers are now defined not by their discipline but by the transdisciplinary of their practices moving between the fields of art, design and architecture. Similarly, Moline (2007: 4) suggests that instead of blurring the boundaries of visual art, craft and design practices, integrating all practices into a creative process indicates common ways of doing things shared among them, and comparing the specific characteristics of each integration contributes to new potentials for creation.

Following from the above discussion on craft together with the intention of traversing the boundary between art and design, the concept of *The White Light* emphasised that such boundary is in fact illusory. The series consists of illuminative objects, each of which can give light and was made of white paper string. The making process of this series utilised hand-knotting techniques to integrate electrical components into the structure of each paper illuminative object. Paper string knotted around electrical cables also functioned as an additional electrical insulator. Whether the objects are art or design works is not as important as how people experience them. In other words, they are the objects or outputs of experience regardless of they being categorised as art or design works or as useful or not.

The experience of seeing these objects was varied, dependent on the context and ambience in which they were installed. The context also signified different groups of audiences and how they might perceive the objects. *The White Light* has been publicly shown within both academic and art worlds: in a university's gallery as part of an academic research event (Figure 12) and in an art gallery (Figure 13). In the academic context, the two illuminative artefacts were looked at from an academic perspective and recognised as research tools, methods or outcomes. On the other hand, when one of these objects was displayed in the art context, it was seen as an art piece accessibly by non-academic audience with commercial value. In addition, when the objects were exhibited alone in the academic context (Figure 12), their function as electrical chandeliers was more evident than when one of them was set up together with other artefacts to compose a visual narrative in an installation (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Two illuminated pieces in *The White Light* series. From left: *The Chandelier No. 3* and *The Chandelier No. 2* when exhibited at the Loughborough Design School Gallery during *TRIP: Textile Research in Process Symposium* in November 2011. Photographed by Nithikul Nimkulrat.



Figure 13. *Chandelier No. 2* exhibited together with other artefacts to compose an installation in an exhibition namely *Tendenser 2012: Time Out* in Moss, Norway in March-June 2012. Photographed by Terje Holm.

## **Artefacts in combination with texts as inputs into knowledge and creative production and outputs for knowledge communication**

With the interaction between different research approaches, i.e. literature review interacting with making artefacts or questioning the audience with making artefacts, Cases 1 and 2 (*Seeing Paper* and *Paper World*) could lead the process of inquiry. Thorough documentation of both art productions and the whole research process provided visual and textual data for analysis (Figure 4), generating the concept of 'materialness' as the main research finding. This concept emphasises the capability of a particular material to express meaning through its visual and tactile qualities to the artist and viewers. Its physical qualities influence the ways in which people apprehend and comprehend artworks.

When leading the process of inquiry, both art productions and artefacts produced can function as inputs into knowledge production. This function can be recognised in the second phase of research in which the production of *Seeing Paper* attempted to uncover the expressive qualities of three different types of paper string. The metaphor for female humans expresses the idea that although the forms and structures are the same, the temperament and personality of each individual are inimitable due to the material's unique quality. Material is the major factor influencing both the emergence of the artworks and the artist's interpretations of the ongoing artworks in the creative process. As Dewey (1934: 89-91) states, the artist's experience and action in controlling visual elements and a medium developed from his or her imagination in the mind establish the expressiveness of an artwork or embody a meaning in it. The hand responds to the image and idea the artist intends to express through manipulating the physical material and the material in return sends the information about its qualities to the mind (Sennett 2008: 149). The knowledge of material expressivity is thus attained because of the creation of artworks in the *Seeing Paper* series.

When providing material for discussion and analysis, both art productions and artefacts produced can perform as outputs for knowledge communication. This role can be seen in the final phase of research, not only in the *Paper World* exhibition but also in written thesis. The *Paper World* exhibition in which all exhibits are in the forms of functional objects situating in a contextualised space can demonstrate the material's expressivity over the form, serving as a symbol of non-functionality designating that the artworks in the forms of useful objects cannot be used. In order to recognise and understand the meaning of an artwork, viewers cannot superficially look at the artwork but have to recognise and comprehend it (Risatti 2007: 9). Phenomenological thinking (Heidegger 1962, 1999; Merleau-Ponty 1962) influences the creation of *Paper World* to start from the totality of the exhibition and art series. Physical qualities of a material manifest the meaning of artefacts exhibited in a specific exhibition context that are constructed by that material. An artefact becomes the embodiment of its maker's expressive thought. The actions of making embeds meaning into the material artwork which in turn defines and conveys its meaning through its physicality. The artworks (i.e. form and content), the context (i.e. space and time), and the people (i.e. artist and audience) are crucial elements involved in the research process and contribute to the output of research that is concept of 'materialness', or specifically, the expressivity of paper string, i.e. 'paperness' (Nimkulrat 2009). 'Paperness' is not communicated solely through the artefacts produced in the researcher's process of inquiry but in the written thesis in the form of published book in which photographs of the ongoing and completed artefact are included. Artefacts and their processes when visually documented can facilitate and support the articulation of knowledge to other people. Biggs (2002: 24) stresses that the combination of artefacts and texts can bring effectiveness to knowledge communication, as follows:

Neither artefacts alone nor words/texts alone would be sufficient. What is required is the combination of artefact [painting, design, poem, dance, etc] and a critical exegesis that describes how it advances knowledge, understanding and insight.

Artefacts displayed in an exhibition can also simultaneously serve as outputs for knowledge communication and inputs into knowledge production. As can be seen the third phase of research when *Seeing Paper* is publicly displayed in a modernist gallery, all artefacts in this series become the output of this phase of research contributing to the knowledge of a material expressivity through its physical qualities that affects not only the hand of the artist but also her expression. When the means of questioning the exhibition's visitors is utilised, the exhibition and artworks function as a test space, developing into inputs into knowledge production. These inputs when discussed with some theoretical foundations (e.g. O' Doherty 1999; Dewey 1934) contribute to the development of the research problem grounded the forth phase of research.

Moreover, in Case 2 (*Paper World*), an artefact together with the reflection of its production in the written thesis led to not only subsequent research practice but also creative one. Artefacts created in the academia thus influence and contribute to both the academic and art worlds, the outcomes of which include research-informed artefacts.

## Conclusion

The above cases exemplify the roles of creative productions and artefacts situated in the process of inquiry. Throughout a practice-led research process, art and design artefacts can serve as inputs into knowledge production and as outputs for knowledge communication.

As inputs, art productions and artefacts can:

- 1) be the starting point of a research project from which the research questions are formulated;
- 2) inspire a new creative production;
- 3) provide data for analysis, from which knowledge are constructed.

As outputs, art productions and artefacts can:

- 1) indicate whether the research problem requires reformulation;
- 2) demonstrate the procedural or experiential knowledge of the creative process; and more importantly,
- 3) strengthen findings articulated in the written output.

In an exhibition, artefacts functions simultaneously as outputs for knowledge communication and as inputs into knowledge production when audiences' responses to the exhibits are recorded and analysed by the researcher. Moreover, in an exhibition open to public, artistic processes and artefacts produced in academia can be recognised as 'art proper' in the artworld as they can also reach a non-academic audience.

Creative practice in a research context can contribute to generating or enhancing knowledge, which is embedded in the practice and embodied in and by the practitioner. This knowledge can be obtained in the artist creating the artefact, the artefact created, the process of making it, and the culture in which it is produced and viewed or used, all taking place at a different stage of a research process.

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