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Material Inspiration: The Practice-led Research of a Craft Artist

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ABSTRACT

A tangible material is a primary element in the everyday creative practice of any craft artist. Although craft artists implicitly understand the expressive aspects of the tangible material they use to create their artworks, they rarely discuss or give a written account of them. In this paper, I present a way in which my practice-led research on the expressivity and materiality of a fiber material can shape the total artistic process as well as the resulting artworks and their meanings. The research generates the conception of materialness in fiber art, which can assist fiber artists and other craft artists in creating aesthetic and meaningful artworks.

Author Keywords

materiality, expressivity, practice-led research, reflective practice, fiber art.

ACM Classification Keywords

A.m General Literature: Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Design, Documentation, Experimentation, Theory

INTRODUCTION

Craft art discourse has been recognized and classified by material (e.g., ceramics, glass, metal, wood, and textiles). It tends to focus on practical matters rather than concepts or theoretical issues. The discussion surrounding material seems to concern techniques for manipulating a material in order to produce a physical object. For example, in fiber or textile art, when discussing a specific material, whether on a professional or educational level, the topic is about textile techniques such as weaving, knitting, embroidering, and printing. It is more about skill and the end result (i.e., how to utilize techniques in relation to materials to make a beautiful object), rather than discussing the meanings of the creative process (i.e., how the material interacts with techniques controlled by the artist to convey meanings through the object created). The material tends to function as a physical entity excluding conceptual problems.

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate how the artistic

practice of an academic researcher who is also a professional fiber artist can contribute to generating a theoretical conception which can be useful for other practitioners and students in fiber art. Practice-led research in creative fields (e.g., fine arts, design, music, performance, etc.) denotes academic research that positions the practitioner as a researcher who takes his/her professional practice into research as a means of inquiry. This form of research has been discussed and developed during the last two decades, especially in Europe [1][2]. It has been labeled “practice-based research” [3], “practice-led research” [5], and “artistic research” [4].

SEEKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MATERIALITY AND EXPRESSIVITY OF A MATERIAL IN FIBER ART: MY PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH

My research attempts to clarify the influence of a tangible fiber material (paper string) and its expressive attributes on the experience and thoughts of both the fiber artist during the creative process and the viewers during the process of contemplation. It seeks the relationship between the materiality and expressivity of a physical material used to create fiber art, i.e., how a material can incorporate artistic expression into a creative production. To tackle this research problem, the study calls for the scrutiny of paper string used in actual fiber art practice. As a professional fiber artist myself, one way for me to look closely into a creative process is to adopt the role of a practitioner. As such, I become a “reflective practitioner” [6] who conducts creative productions using paper string as the material and takes the productions into research as case studies, reflecting on and writing about them as a researcher.

In my research, two particular art productions – “Seeing Paper” (Figure 1) in 2005 and “Paper World” (Figure 2) in 2007 – were planned around the research problem, forming the steps taken towards understanding the subject of study. Problem-focused thinking while having actual experience of the creation of artworks can result not only in tangible artifacts but also an understanding of the process in relation to the research question. The research thus involved an interpretation of my art productions and experiences. This form of research is sustained by the artist’s professional practice and reflections. The practical and the reflective sides inspire each other.

The creation of artifacts cannot be considered a research method as such. Nevertheless, a production can be used to

test various thoughts and ideas in practice. It demonstrates the artist-researcher's way of developing his or her own professional practice, i.e., what he or she is doing in a creative process and why, and what happens as the result of his or her actions [7], which can be described in related literature. In my research, reading influenced creation and vice versa. On the one hand, thoughts and ideas generated from reading literature were brought into my artistic productions, for the purpose of being tested in practice and discussing the processes of making artworks. I reflected on what I had read during the creation of particular artworks. On the other hand, the art productions influenced my decision about what literature seemed to be relevant to the research problem at a particular phase of research in order to offer theoretical discussions of the problem from different perspectives.



Figure 1. "Seeing Paper" (2005).



Figure 2. "Paper World" (2007).

CONCLUSION: MATERIALNESS AS A THEORETICAL CONCEPTION INTERTWINING MATERIALITY AND EXPRESSIVITY

Research through own art practice enables a deep and thorough examination of the research problem. By focusing on paper string, various themes have evolved during the study, revealing the active quality or expressivity of paper string in textile art, or what I call "paperness". With this quality, paper string can inform me (the artist) through its

physicality about how to proceed with the creative processes of "Seeing Paper" and "Paper World" physically and conceptually. Conceptually, the experience with paper string can gradually give rise to artistic expression. Thoughts and feelings are stimulated, leading to the conceptualization of the design and context of the art production. Physically, the results of the art production are artworks and an exhibition, which, however, not only appear as material artifacts but also hold artistic content expressible to an audience, i.e., the visibility and invisibility are melded together. *Materialness* thus formulates both the physical form and subject matter of each artwork and exhibition into which artistic expression incorporates the material.

The study has demonstrated that paper string incorporated artistic expression into the artworks I created at various stages, such as those in progress and the completed ones, through the interpretation made by me and by the audiences. In the case of the audience's interpretation, the study has presented how this specific material could create metaphorical meanings to the artifacts in forms of things seen in our everyday life. For example, in the case of "The Chair" in the "Paper World" Series, paper string informed the audience not only that "The Chair" in the form of a functional chair cannot be sat on (i.e., it does not function as a chair), but also that it is the representation of a chair or a metaphor for support (i.e., the affordance of a chair).

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