

Craft Research

Volume 2

© 2011 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/crre.2.37_1

MAARIT MÄKELÄ AND RIIKKA LATVA-SOMPPI

Aalto University, Finland

Crafting narratives: Using historical context as a reflective tool

Keywords

art
craft
exhibition
history
narrative
reflection

Abstract

This article aims to discuss the use of crafting as a reflective tool in creative practice in relation to a particular historical context. The task will be approached by introducing the project 'Power of Everyday Life', which includes an exhibition at the Gallen-Kallela Museum, Finland, as well as the craft-related processes of participating artists. In this article, we discuss the processes related to the making of the works by four of the exhibition artists. In this study, the provided historical context functions as a shared platform that offers a variety of approaches to the given task, dependent on the experiences and life situation of each artist. Working in the context of practice-led research, we utilize our position as reflective practitioners, i.e. practising artists who document, reflect and contextualize our own craft-related processes in the field of art and design.

1. Introduction

During the last three decades, research in art and design – together with craft as an integral part of this field – has begun to explore new dimensions, as artists and designers have taken an active role in contextualizing and interpreting the creative process of their own practice, as well as the products of this process. Particularly over the past two decades, in the field of qualitative research, the personal experience of the researcher has been focused upon as an integral part of the research. This has led to several self-reflective research projects, where practitioners use their own experience as part of their research. This approach has been used by researchers who agree upon the contextual nature of research, and acknowledge its situatedness and time relatedness (see, e.g. Ellis and Bochner 2000). The idea of situatedness, or emphasis on personal experience, is also a basis of the feminist epistemology, as evinced in the first-generation feminist mantra ‘the personal is political’.¹ This epistemology has challenged and deeply influenced the comprehension of knowledge production in the field of contemporary research in general. Therefore, parallels might be drawn between certain forms of feminist knowledge production and knowledge gained through artists’ and designers’ own art and design-related practices.

Evelyn Fox Keller (1985: 127–98), who is particularly interested in the relationship between gender and science, speaks about ‘dynamic objectivity’. By this, she refers to knowledge production, which, when aiming at more effective objectivity, reclaims subjective experience. The conception of dynamic objectivity is one of the central bases of feminist epistemology, as well as one of the basic requirements for feminist knowledge production.

The idea of dynamic objectivity is also included in the term ‘politics of situatedness’, which refers to the idea that the process of theoretical thought is not abstract, universal or objective, nor separable from its context or from the researcher. Thinking is considered to be related to the randomness of personal experience, and is seen to always be partial (Stanley and Wise 1993: 135–45). Therefore, partial viewpoints, as well as their acknowledgement, are considered to be integral to the process. According to the American science historian Donna Haraway (1991: 188), feminist objectivity is socially situated knowledge and produced from a specific speaker’s position. The point is not to see the knowing subject as an external observer, but as a subject who is conscious of her situatedness, history and discursive nature. Hence, the knowing subject becomes participatory, mobile and embodied. This kind of understanding of knowledge production also forms the epistemological basis of this article.

The notion of research through art and design-related practices can be traced back to the separation made by Christopher Frayling (1993) in his examination of the role of art and design in relation to research practices. He divides design research into three different categories depending on the focus and mode of the given task. By research into art and design, he implies that art and design is the subject of enquiry to be looked into, a phenomenon to be studied from the outside. This stands

1. The idea of private experiences becoming public issues was discussed already in C. Wright Mills’ seminal book *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). In the field of feminist research, this idea was refined to the form ‘personal is political’ (e.g. Humm [1989] 1995).

2. In this context, 'artefact' refers to objects created or altered by human beings. An artefact can be a concrete object, such as a painting, a composition of ready-mades or a design object, or an immaterial work such as digital art or a theatre performance (see also Mäkelä 2006: 64).
3. Mika Elo (2007) reminds us that a reflective relationship with tradition has been part of the practice of art at least from the Age of Romanticism, just as in the natural sciences the production of 'epistemic things' has been intimately connected to experimental praxis throughout the modern era. In this regard, the notion of 'practice-led' or 'artistic research' is not new – the new element is rather the connection between the art practice and the university institution (Elo 2007: 14). As a result of this connection, a new actor has appeared on the stage: an artist–researcher with a double position – a practitioner who also reflects upon her/his own practice.
4. The topic of reflection, especially in relation to Schön's ideas, is discussed more

for traditional theoretical research, for example, art history. By research through art and design, he proposes that the creative production can be understood as a research method. This is representative of development work that may be scientific or not. By research for art and design, he refers to a kind of research in which the end product is an artefact within which the thinking that led to its making is embodied (see also Scrivener 2009: 71; Refsum 2008: 20). The exploration of knowledge partly through making artefacts has brought a new dimension to design research as the practitioner–researcher not only creates an artefact, but also documents, contextualizes and interprets the artefacts, as well as the process of making them (Mäkelä 2007: 157).

Thus, the knowledge and the skills of a practising artist or designer have become an important part of the research process. This has enriched the field of research with a new viewpoint. It has also influenced the overall tendencies of research topics by shifting the emphasis from artists and artefacts² towards creative processes and the role of the maker in the process. The development has also produced a new way of conducting research in the field of art and design. In this new approach, a part of the research is carried out as art or design practice. In recent discourse, such attempts have been labelled more or less interchangeably by the terms 'practice-based', 'practice-led' and 'artistic research'. The main idea of these terms is related to an artist or a designer who produces an artefact and reflects³ on the creative process:

The whole issue is ... about the self-reflective and self-critical processes of a person taking part in the production of meaning within contemporary art, and in such a fashion that it communicates where it is coming from, where it stands at this precise moment, and where it wants to go.

(Hannula et al. 2005: 10)

This corresponds also to social scientist Donald Schön's theory of design as reflective practice (Schön 1991), which aims for new knowledge gained in action. According to Schön, our knowing is in action, ordinary in tacit form and implicit in our patterns of action. Reflection-in-action indicates a process in which practitioners encounter an unusual situation and have to take a different course of action from that which they usually do or have originally planned (Schön 1991: 128–36). On the other hand, reflection-on-action includes an analytical process in which practitioners reflect their thinking, actions and feelings in connection to particular events in their professional practice (Schön 1991: 275–83).⁴

In this study, following the tendencies of research through practice, we are utilizing our position as reflective practitioners, i.e. practicing artists who document, reflect and contextualize our own creative processes in the field of craft. The article introduces the project 'Power of Everyday Life', which includes an exhibition, as well as the creative processes of the participating artists. The question

in focus is: what kind of creative practices did the given historical context raise? In this article, we approach the tasks by examining four cases from the project. We will first position our case as part of a contemporary museological approach in art, where traditional museums are used as a site of artists' intervention. We will also frame the case by presenting the main steps and themes of the 'Power of Everyday Life' project. After this, we will discuss Gallen-Kallela's work in the context of (handi)craft and mark his life and production as a platform for diverse contemporary works made during this project. Finally, we will analyse the artefacts produced for the exhibition, as well as processes related to the making of these works.

2. The museum as a site for artists' intervention

In his book *Art and Artifact: the Museum as Medium* (2001: 7), curator James Putnam discusses an emerging museological tendency in art, supported by the use of the traditional museum as a site for artists' intervention. He states that as the intermediary between artist and the audience, the museum provides a site for the essential encounter with a work of art. Thus, in its traditional role as a philosophical institution, a museum has recently been used as a place of stimulation and inspiration, which serves to mirror aspects of the past, present and future. According to Putnam, there is an ideological exchange taking place where artists exert an equally powerful influence on museums.

The same phenomenon is approached also by glass artist Outi Turpeinen. In her doctoral dissertation *A meaningful museum object: critical visibility in cultural history museum exhibitions* (2005), she examines the relationship between a cultural history museum exhibition and the objects on display. As part of the study, she created sculptural glass works as fictional museum objects, and based on these works constructed installations. For this purpose, Turpeinen visited several cultural history museums and analysed their exhibitions. Some of these museums displayed exhibitions that were done in collaboration with artists. In these cases, Turpeinen examined how artists changed the exhibition design and how this brought new meaning to the museum objects. Based on the above-mentioned experiences and studies, she created three installations,⁵ which were then displayed as part of her doctoral study.

For Turpeinen, the related artistic working process functioned as one of her main research methods, which on the one hand produced data for the study, and on the other served as an outcome of the research. According to Turpeinen (2005: 40), the aim of this kind of practice-led study does not lie in one singular or objective truth. Rather, the aim is to open up the creative processes related to the study, as well as analyse the process of constructing meaning. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to open up some parts of the creative processes and, through this, provide a possible step towards the process of meaning construction in relation to the project, where a group of craft-based artists were creating new works for the specific museum exhibition.

profoundly in other forum (see Mäkelä and Nimkulrat 2011).

5. All the installations were exhibited in Finland: 'Imprisoned Setting' at the Design Museum, Helsinki, 2000; 'Memories from a Curiosity Cabinet' at the Vantaa Art Museum, 2001; and 'A British Noblewoman's Collection from 19th-Century India' at Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, 2003.

This project, called 'Power of Everyday Life', was conducted in collaboration with the Gallen-Kallela Museum. The museum, situated near Helsinki, Finland, also served as the site for the actual exhibition. Maarit Mäkelä acted as an author and curator for the entire project. After negotiating the collaboration with the museum and framing the research enquiry, she invited artists to participate in the project. From 1994, the Gallen-Kallela Museum has hosted numerous contemporary art exhibitions (Pelin 2008: 91). During these years, the museum has displayed several exhibitions where the works of contemporary artists have shared a mutual theme or technique with Akseli Gallen-Kallela. In these exhibitions, Akseli's role as the pioneer in the field of design in Finland and the responses to his craft and design-oriented production has gained less attention than his work in the field of fine art. The starting point of the exhibition 'Power of Everyday Life' was to highlight his important role in the field of craft and design in Finland as well, as to re-examine his production, linking it to the experiences of everyday life.

Therefore, a group of ten female artists, who work in the field of material-based art, using ceramics, glass and textile as their mediums, were invited to create an exhibition at the Museum. The exhibition holds two themes. The contemporary works of art specifically produced for this exhibition converse with both art and design works done by Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), one of Finland's most renowned artists of the National Romantic era in nineteenth-century Finland. The other theme is to comment on Mary Gallen-Kallela's (1868–1946) role as the executor of her husband's artistic products, as well as the person in charge of everyday life in the artist's family. The museum, which holds Gallen-Kallela's artistic production and the family's personal artefacts, was also an atelier and home for the Gallen-Kallela family, designed and built by the artist (1911–1913).

The initialization of the project included several ways in which artists were introduced to the historical context. At the beginning, all artists familiarized themselves with the life of the Gallen-Kallela family by reading several literary sources, including an article dealing with the life of Mary Gallen-Kallela (Karvonen-Kannas 1992) and a study about the craft and design works done by Akseli Gallen-Kallela (Suhonen 1989). In addition, the personnel of the museum presented slide-shows related to the story of the family, as well as the craft and design sketches and works done by Akseli. The artists also had an opportunity to visit the museum archive, where they could explore not only paintings, prints, drawings, sketches and prototypes made by Akseli, but also different kinds of everyday objects related to the Gallen-Kallela family life. They were also familiarized with the history and spatial design of the Tarvaspää building – the museum where the exhibition 'Power of Everyday Life' was going to take place between 6 February and 31 April 2010.

Each artist chose a viewpoint on the theme based on everything they experienced and saw during the initialization of the project: some of the artists were inspired by a specific work or sketch, some wanted to make a site-specific work for Tarvaspää, and some were set upon commenting on the story of the family with their works. The artistic processes related to this project can be briefly

divided into three phases: getting to know the history, processing the information through one's own ideas, and producing the work reflecting the phases above.

When the artists were proceeding with their ideas, Mäkelä visited the studios with a photographer. Mäkelä interviewed the artists, while the photographer documented the visits by videotaping and photographing. The video was edited to focus on the working processes and the main ideas of each artist's works. It was presented as a part of the exhibition. In addition to the visual documentation and interviews, the artists also kept working diaries during the project. For the diary, they collected various textual and visual materials related to the project. They also reflected on their creative processes in their diaries. Some of the artists used diaries for clarifying their thoughts and developing their ideas in a written format, while some used them in a more visual manner, collecting visual material related to the project and based on that developing ideas by sketching.

All this material serves as data for this article, in which we discuss the works and processes related to the making of these works. The exhibition included works by ten artists, all working in the field of material-based art. Two of the artists, Riikka Latva-Somppi and Outi Turpeinen, utilize glass as their medium, while four of the artists – Eliisa Isoniemi, Catharina Kajander, Hanna Mikola and Maarit Mäkelä – have their background in ceramics. Three of the artists – Niran Baibulat, Nithikul Nimkulrat and Silja Puranen – have started their careers in the field of textiles, while Pia Staff has utilized all these mediums in her previous works.

In order to be able to take a closer look at some of the artistic processes related to the exhibition 'Power of Everyday Life', we concentrate on four of the ten artists cases. Two of the reviewed case studies focus on the artworks created by the authors of this article, as one of the main intentions of the research project was to utilize our reflection, interpretation and understanding as artists about our own creative practices. Because these case studies approach the task through the mediums of glass (Latva-Somppi) and ceramics (Mäkelä), we have chosen the two other cases from the field of textiles. As Nithikul Nimkulrat, one of the textile artists, discusses her own creative practice profoundly in her recently published doctoral thesis (2009) and Pia Staff is just completing her own Doctor of Arts (D.A.) degree about her own creative working process, we decided to include the case studies of Baibulat and Puranen in this article.

The aim of the project was not only to produce an exhibition, but also to reflect on the entire creative process. Therefore, the artists who were invited to join the project were all reflective makers who were willing to share their experiences during the various stages of the project. Thus, many of the artists involved in the project had either experience of, or at a least positive attitude towards, a research-oriented way of working. In the following chapters, we will discuss via the chosen case studies how the provided historical context was utilized as an inspirational source. Before reviewing the cases, we will briefly consider how the cultural meaning of (handi)craft has changed from Gallen-Kallela's epoch to that of today.

3. From necessity to expression

Akseli Gallen-Kallela was a fine artist, graphic artist, architect and a pioneer of applied art. Although he was very productive, the family's financial situation was always overshadowed by scarcity. Therefore, it was natural for Mary Gallen-Kallela to create her husband's textile designs herself. She would dye fabrics and yarn to make pillows and weave textiles. She also assisted by fabricating clothing for the models, and even modelling herself when needed.

In Mary's era, handicrafts were not separated from other household chores. Industrialization and structural changes in society have subsequently diminished handicraft's role as a means of creating household necessities and ways of economic survival. Simultaneously, the nature of crafts has changed from copying the old to creating the new. Traditionally in the western society, textile handicrafts have been associated with women. Although handicrafts were for a long time a gender-bound obligation, they also provided a chance to express one's artistic creativity.

It is said that handicrafts are based on tacit knowledge (Dormer 1994: 147), which is also relevant in contemporary craft and material-based art, including textile, ceramic and glass art. Within the past few years, the works of material-based art have also assumed a significant role as a part of the contemporary art field. Fundamental elements of traditional handicrafts, such as craft skill, usability and decoration are still used in material-based art. On the other hand, the basic elements of fine art are considered to be expression, aesthetics, conceptuality and interpretation. When attempting to define the distinctive features of conventional craft and craft with more expressive content, Finnish craft researcher Anna-Marja Ihatsu states that the latter has broken away from potential functionality and instead emphasizes contextual aspects with experimentation, conceptualization and narrative elements (Ihatsu 2003: 15).

In the exhibition 'Power of Everyday Life', Mary's role and Akseli's artistic production offered perspectives and acted as a generator and mirror with which contemporary artists could process their new works. In the following chapters, we discuss the works produced for the exhibition, as well as the creative processes related to the making. We begin by presenting the work of Riikka Latva-Somppi.

4. Riikka Latva-Somppi: Confronting emotions

In the case of Latva-Somppi, the artist found the thematic link between her current life situation and the history of the Gallen-Kallela family. Akseli's and Mary's first-born child, Marjatta, passed away at the age of 3 in 1895. Akseli's woodcut print 'The Flower of Death' (Figure 1) was created soon after the death. It was affected by Akseli's fatherly feelings of grief, and in relation to the work he wrote a poem: 'The words were my own, they were born, by themselves as I carved out the image with tears in my heart' (Pelín 2004: 107). Riikka Latva-Somppi was drawn to this image as the water draws a little girl to pick the flower of death in the graphics. What is left after the death of a close



Figure 1: Akseli Gallen-Kallela's graphics 'Flower of Death', 1895. Courtesy of the Gallen-Kallela Museum.

6. The insight is documented in the video created while Maarit Mäkelä was interviewing Latva-Somppi in her studio, 27 October 2009.

family member is memories and emotions, reflections of self. Through the works made for the exhibition, Latva-Somppi reflects the motherly emotions of Mary with her own, as a daughter who has recently lost her mother.

The installation 'Eternal Bond' is formed by almost 300 solid glass tears that seem to descend from heaven. The tears are tied together with time-consumingly crocheted silk yarn to form a thin but extremely strong tie between generations. Both the technique of crocheting and the idea of forming the large amount of glass tears bring the dimension of time to the work. 'Eternal Bond' dedicates a high, white, round room to the emotions of loss and grief. In the space in which the installation is built, the ceiling is a high dome, and a tall window lets in natural light. The space reproduces the sacred space around the installation (Figure 2). For the artist, 'the hall is a metaphor for a mental space where grief is present. With regard to mourning in everyday activities, it is not a state to be lingered in, but more like a hall, a room one walks through several times a day'.⁶

Dutch art historian Liesbeth den Besten has remarked that the hands are the most sensitive part of our body and hence the most important organ to physically investigate our surroundings. Our fingertips are the centre of many nerves, and thus our hands are able to touch, feel, manipulate and handle materials and tools (den Besten 2009: 15, Sonneveld and Schifferstein 2009: 53–54). den Besten proposes that there is a direct linear connection between the hand, skill and craft, and therefore we are able to think through our hands. She also claims that until recently the brain behind the design has been accorded greater esteem than the hands that realize it, and only recently have we begun to understand how we actually rely on 'the haptic repository within the body' (den Besten 2009: 15).

According to den Besten, craft is also about the ability to develop one's own materials, techniques and knowledge, with which one can then create meaning and appeal to an observer to become involved and create their own stories. Therefore, the meaning of skill is more in mediating what one has to tell than in maintaining traditional techniques and materials (Figure 3). As den Besten has argued, and also evident in the case of 'Eternal Bond', the meaning of this work is in the human touch, in the immanent factors of time and dedication, and in the stories they evoke (2009: 18–21).

According to Ihatsu, conventional craft communicates directly with the user by function and skill, whereas content-oriented craft resorts to personal emotions. Where conventional craft leaves little room for questions, personal interpretations and suppositions, content-oriented craft may raise many questions, even leading a person into a state in which they can process some of the fundamental questions of life (Ihatsu 1998: 181–82). Latva-Somppi's artworks, shared her own experiences of facing death and sorrow. In the exhibition, these works served as reflectors for the visitors and offered them the possibility to process their own related experiences and feelings.



Figure 2: Riikka Latva-Somppi at glass studio. Photograph Oskari Parkkinen. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3: Riikka Latva-Somppi's installation 'Eternal Bond' in the Gallen-Kallela Museum. Photograph Riikka Latva-Somppi. Courtesy of the artist.

5. Niran Baibulat: Everyday objects in transformation

Some of the artists, such as Niran Baibulat, chose to portray the everyday through representing familiar day-to-day objects in transformation. As the artist has an overall interest in building site-specific work, she let the architecturally inspiring Gallen-Kallela bathroom, the intimate stage for everyday activities, direct her work. The artist studied the dimensions and visual structures of Gallen-Kallela's bathroom. She photographed and drew constructions and schemas in her working diary based on her photographs (Figure 4). Via this exploration, she built a site-specific textile installation in the bathroom in which the cumulative chaos of ever-growing piles of laundry is organized and colour coded to form an according language with the bathroom's blue and white tiles. The bathroom, an intimate place for cleaning routines, is now used as a canvas on which the image of everyday life builds (Figure 5).

Baibulat knows the already loaded content of the materials she used, the intimacy of the second-hand textiles.⁷ An ideal, where everything has its place and order is formed by neatly folded shirts and underwear, our second skin. The exact stacks of material also refer to the expectations and ambitions we have regarding keeping our homes immaculate and well organized. Through these bodily metaphors of repetitiousness and even boringness, the daily routines become tangible. Folded clothes form the water in the bathtub and the sink to extend the monotonous tile pattern to all horizontal surfaces. The wavy surface of blue textiles in the bathtub may also contain a hint of escapism: a hope of being able to dive into the depths of the water, relax and forget routines.

The unending task of folding and organizing can be paralleled with a craftsman's state of production, often referred to as a meditative state. As jewellery artist Dorothea Prühl puts it:

Craft is anti-acceleration [...] If I want to make an object, it will take time. The process is toilsome. I believe that one can't do anything good without contemplation, without occupying myself with the object in a contemplative way [...] Therefore, I have to devote my attention to the material and to the possibilities of craft.

(Prühl in Dewald 2009: 24)

German curator Gabi Dewald has pointed out that all this takes time. The process of handmade also takes the maker away from the flow and the rhythm of the daily stream, and in this way, drops one out of time. This, according to Dewald (2009: 25), is actually a requirement of the process of crafting.

In her working process, Baibulat manipulated a large amount of old clothes and transformed them into a spatial installation. She spent several days in the museum testing her ideas, trying her colour-coded and ironed textiles in different positions in the space. In this way, she was interacting not only with the recycled textiles, but also with a certain space in an intuitive mode. In her work,

7. Interview between Maarit Mäkelä and Niran Baibulat in Baibulat's studio, 8 October 2009.



Figure 4: Niran Baibulat's working diary 2009, photograph and sketch. Photograph Niran Baibulat. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5: Niran Baibulat's installation in the Gallen-Kallela Museum. Photograph Riikka Latva-Somppi. Courtesy of the artist.

Baibulat links the crafting process to the craft of everyday through time-consuming processes, repetition and the tactual senses of the material. These are also the elements that are present in daily life and household chores.

6. Silja Puranen: Significant stitch

In this study, some of the artists based their contemporary working on a particular work of Akseli Gallen-Kallela. Silja Puranen produced her contemporary, gender-related interpretation of Gallen-Kallela's painting 'Seductress'. It is obvious that the gender roles were strongly present in Gallen-Kallela's epoch. Where Akseli expressed himself by painting, Mary would rather hold a sewing needle than a painting brush. Craft researcher Glenn Adamson also reminds us that craft has been understood as a strategy through which feminist artists have expressed themselves. He refers to the ideas of Judy Chicago, the pioneer of American feminist art, who proposed that: 'Women had been embedded in houses for centuries and had quilted, sewed, baked, cooked, decorated and nested their creative energies away [...] Could the same activities women had used in life be transformed into the means of making art?' (Adamson 2007: 154).

Silja Puranen's work, too, participates in the gender discussion by using sewing as a metaphor for womanhood. A moving image of anonymous female hands incessantly sewing is reflected on a white tablecloth. Puranen's work appears as an endless act of impersonal marking, which results in a white square on a white cloth (Figure 6).

In his article 'On Craft as a Boundary Wrecking Ball' (2005), Henrik Most, a Danish curator in the design field, discusses why the meaning of craft seems to be emphasized and the whole field of craft is recuperating (see also Adamson 2007: 166–67). He links the evolution of craft to the digitizing of the public and private spaces, that is, to the situation where our concrete and bodily relations are being replaced by social structures constructed through digital media (Most 2005: 12–13).

This in turn has led to the fact that the bodily significations have diminished, and in a sense the body has been excluded from the physical world at the turn of the twenty-first century. According to Most, it is nevertheless possible to create a slow, material art requiring time and space and feeling, and that insists on the body and vision. As Hungarian Michael Polanyi, who has reasoned the essence of tacit knowledge, has stated, the slowness of things is present in those habits and skills that have been passed through centuries. Most suggests that craft could be interpreted as an imprint left by *Homo sapiens* and a response to the speed of the life we live in. This makes craft the refuge of vulnerability and fragility – a kind of allegory for what is unique and delicate in humans (Most 2005: 15). Ihatsu, too, has discussed craft in relation to virtual realities, but from the point of view of a creator. She believes that craft is an answer to basic human needs, such as self-expression, activation, self-esteem or connection with nature. She suggests craft as one answer to the negative consequences of hypermodern ways of life (Ihatsu 1998: 148).

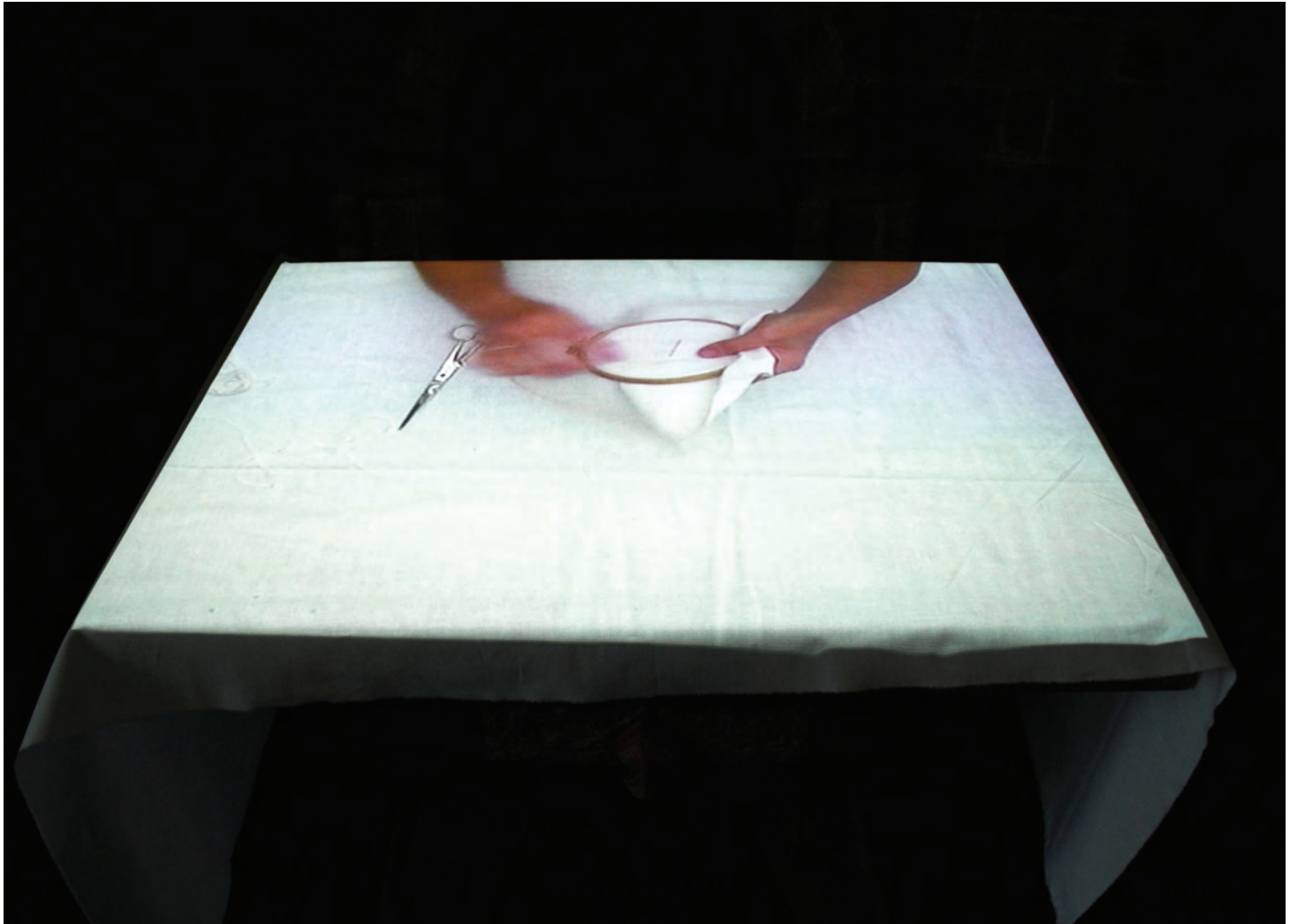


Figure 6: Silja Puranen's installation 'Seamstress' in the exhibition 'Power of Everyday Life'. Photograph Riikka Latva-Somppi. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7: Silja Puranen's installations 'Seductress' in the exhibition 'Power of Everyday Life'. Photograph Riikka Latva-Somppi. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8: Silja Puranen painting the replica of the painting 'Seductress' in her atelier. Photograph Oskari Parkkinen. Courtesy of the artist.

This is why we feel craft to be so essential today. As Most writes, as ‘creatures of the caress’ with five senses, we are bridging the gap between a digitalized vanishing reality and humanity (Most 2005: 15). Vision is often regarded as the most important sense in western society (e.g. Stewart 1999). Similarly, in the field of art, art forms that are ranked highest in acceptance are founded on feelings of distance, whereas art forms based within reach of touch and contact are regarded as less important (Doane [1982] 1992: 231). However, for example, philosopher Michel Serres recognizes the importance of tactility, thus elevating touching and feeling. He understands the skin as a blurry, ticklish, fluctuating field where the world and the person meet and mix in varying proportions and ways. Most (2005: 17) sees the strength of craft precisely in its ability not to limit but to link the contexts. In her conceptual work ‘Seamstress’, Puranen discusses (handi)craft’s role in feminine context but also comments on the topic above in a visual form: the diminished presence of crafting and the absence of touching and feeling in our digitalized everyday life.

In addition to the video, Puranen has placed an unfinished needlepoint work in the exhibition (Figure 7). In this work, the artist has reproduced Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s painting ‘Seductress’ on a piece of needlepoint fabric. A carefully chosen selection of numerous yarns is set by the painting as the artist invites viewers to participate in recreating the painting with a method familiar to many women and typical to the women of Mary Gallen-Kallela’s time. Puranen also relates painting as a masculine art form to needlework, which was suitable as a feminine art form in that epoch. Although transferring the painted image through computer-aided methods would certainly have been possible, Puranen chose to tediously paint the replica of Akseli’s painting onto the needlepoint fabric (Figure 8). In the context of the exhibition ‘Power of Everyday Life’, Puranen presents her work as handmade narratives where the history of handicraft is discussed in contemporary discourse.

7. Maarit Mäkelä: Made-ness as passage between art and life

Maarit Mäkelä also chose Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s art as the basis for her work. She was intrigued by the mystic painting, ‘Pain Girl’, of an exhausted nude girl who sits on the Mountain of Pain grinding earthly pains in a vessel on her lap (Figure 9). Gallen-Kallela also made a sketch for a box based on this painting (Figure 10). However, he was not satisfied with the prototype and records in his notes of 1908 ‘I burned it’ (Okkonen 1949: 297). Therefore, Mäkelä interpreted his action into practice, and literally re-fired the idea of the box into ceramic form. While setting up the exhibition ‘Power of Everyday Life’, Gallen-Kallela’s unfinished prototype for the ‘Pain Girl Box’ was unexpectedly found. When looking at the box with the eye of the craftsman, it is evident that in this work there is a contradiction between the content and the material, or, more specifically, how skilfully the material is toolled. Mäkelä presumed that Gallen-Kallela saw the contradiction between the idea, the chosen material and his own skills, and therefore never finished the wooden prototype.



Figure 9: Akseli Gallen-Kallela's painting 'Pain Girl'. Courtesy of the Gallen-Kallela Museum.



Figure 10: Akseli Gallen-Kallela's sketch for the 'Pain Girl Box'. Courtesy of the Gallen-Kallela Museum.



Figure 11: Maarit Mäkelä's 'Pain Girl Box I'. Photograph Riikka Latva-Somppi. Courtesy of the artist.

In Mäkelä's ceramic work, the girl, who in Gallen-Kallela's painting is clearly related to Finnish mythology, leads us to think about the contradicting interpretations of today's femininity. In the new work, the 'pain girls' grow from skinny creatures into voluptuous female figures with sensuous half-open mouths, balancing on the borderline of pleasure, pain and guilt (Figure 11). The sombre tones of Raku-fired boxes call for mystical interpretations, yet the fleshy images bring us to wonder what the female pain of today is. A fine line between sensuality and brutality makes us think of the multifaceted roles required from women in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

The Pain Girl Boxes are also incomplete objects if we think them as part of the sphere of vessels. While firing, all the boxes have been broken into several pieces. Afterwards, the pieces are glued together. Still, as such, they remain broken vessels. For the artist, the unexpected marks left on the works during the process of making, the 'friendly flaws' as craft writer and critic Peter Dormer (1949–1996) would call them, are an essential part of expression. Via the craggy and imperfect female representations, as a result of putting the broken pieces together, Mäkelä is able to express her own experiences as a woman. What seems to be central here is the artistic intention and the question of how the made objects communicate. This requires knowledge about how materials act in order to guide the process towards a meaningful expression (Mazanti 2009: 43).

Danish craft theorist Louise Mazanti has discussed the meaning of uniqueness, how the made-ness functions as the passage between art and life. In her opinion, it is precisely being made imperfect that is the passage between a material and an autonomous practice. By being made, an object speaks of its own coming into existence, and thereby transgresses autonomy – simply because it comes into existence as a material fact, an object that belongs to the 'real' material world. Being made is also the process during which every object obtains its own personality: the uniqueness, the unusual, the functional or material imperfection, or the breach with expectations. Mazanti proposes that in this way objects receive their identity and authenticity. This is also the way in which they gain their status as artworks, and from this position they are able to speak, as it were (Mazanti 2009: 43).

8. Conclusions

In this article, we have reviewed different ways in which providing a historical context as an inspirational source affects the creative processes of an artist or a designer. The cases portrayed above demonstrate that the particular context – as in this case, the historical frame of the Gallen-Kallela family – can function as a shared platform that offers a variety of approaches to the given task. Not only do interests towards different topics vary, but so, too, do the ways the sources are utilized in the creative processes. This seems to depend on the experiences and life situation of each artist.

Based on the introduced cases, it can be concluded that artists find multiple ways for utilizing historical context for their contemporary works. First, as in the case of Latva-Somppi, the given

source can provide the artist with a strong thematic link to the history. In this case, the artist's challenging life situation, i.e. the death of her mother, made her choose the corresponding theme – death – in the narration of the Gallen-Kallela family. Second, as apparent in the case of Baibulat, an opportunity to work in a particular historical context can direct the chosen task. Baibulat's overall interest in building a site-specific work led her to filter the theme of the everyday through the architecturally challenging bathroom of the Gallen-Kallelas. Third, the particular work or sketch can act as a source of inspiration for a new contemporary work. In this study, both Mäkelä and Puranen based their contemporary works on Gallen-Kallela's production. Mäkelä started to follow and interpret the idea behind the theme 'Pain Girl', while Puranen produced her contemporary, gender-related interpretation of Gallen-Kallela's 'Seductress'.

In these materialized narrations, the act of crafting plays a significant role. Crafting provides not only a medium of fabrication, but also content to the artwork through expressing the idea of time and labour. Craft skill is used to narrate. The application of traditional techniques and materials places the work in a historical context. When understood as a method, crafting does not rely on presenting the sublime, but rather resorts to the experience of the body.

References

- Adamson, G. (2007), *Thinking Through Craft*, Oxford: Berg.
- den Besten, L. (2009), 'Deskilled Craft and Borrowed Skill', in L. den Besten and M. Gaspar (eds), *Skill*, Gmunden: Think Tank, pp. 15–21.
- Dewald, G. (2009), 'Out of Fashion, Out of Need, Out of Time', in L. den Besten and M. Gaspar (eds), *Skill*, Gmunden: Think Tank, pp. 22–26.
- Doane, M. A. ([1982] 1992), 'Film and Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', in J. Caughie and A. Kuhn (eds), *The Sexual Subject. A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, London: Routledge, pp. 227–43.
- Dormer, P. (1994), *The Art of the Maker. Skill and its Meaning in Art, Craft and Design*, London: Thames and Hudson.
- Ellis, C. and Bochner, A. P. (2000), 'Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 733–68.
- Elo, M. (2007), 'Ajatteleva tutkimus'/'Thinking Research', in M. Elo (ed.), *Toisaalta tässä. Valokuva teoksena ja tutkimuksena/Here Then. The Photograph as Work of Art and as Research*, Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki and Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, pp. 9–29.
- Fox Keller, E. (1985), *Reflections on Gender and Science*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Frayling, C. (1993), 'Research in Art and Design', *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, 1: 1, pp. 1–5.
- Hannula, M., Suoranta, J. and Vaden, T. (2005), *Artistic Research – Theories, Methods and Practices*, Helsinki and Gothenburg: Academy of Fine Arts, Finland and University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
- Haraway, D. (1991), *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge.
- Humm, M. ([1989] 1995), *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Ihatsu, A.-M. (1998), *Craft, Art-Craft or Craft-Design? In Pursuit of the British Equivalent for the Finnish Concept 'käsiyö'*, Joensuu: University of Joensuu.
- Ihatsu, A.-M. (2003), 'Taidekäsiyötä ja käsiyötaidetta'/'Art-Craft and Craft Art', in Klementtinen M. and Niemi H. (eds.) *TAIKO 20-vuotta/TAIKO 20 years*. Helsinki: Finnish Association of Artists and Designers TAIKO, 12–19.
- Karvonen-Kannas, K. (1992), 'Naisen muotokuva. Mary Gallen-Kallela 1868–1947'/'The Portrait of the Woman. Mary Gallen-Kallela 1868–1947', in Espoo City Museum (ed.), *Naisen elämää Espoossa/Womans Life in Espoo*, Espoo: Espoon kaupunki, pp. 9–69.
- Mazanti, L. (2009), 'Skill as Passage', in L. den Besten and M. Gaspar (eds), *Skill*, Gmunden: Think Tank, pp. 39–43.
- Mills, C. W. (1959), *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Most, H. (2005), 'On Craft as a Boundary Wrecking Ball', in L. Jönsson (ed.), *Craft in Dialogue. Six Views on a Practice in Change*, Stockholm: Craft in Dialogue IASPIS, pp. 9–28.
- Mäkelä, M. (2006), 'Framing (a) Practice-Led Research Project', in M. Mäkelä and S. Routarinne (eds), *The Art of Research: Research Practices in Art and Design*, Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki, pp. 60–84.
- (2007), 'Knowing Through Making: The Role of the Artefact in Practice-led Research', *Knowledge, Technology, Policy*, 20: 3, pp. 157–63.
- Mäkelä, M. and Nimkulrat, N. (2011), 'Reflection and documentation in practice-led design research', in NORDES, *4th Nordic Design Research Conference: Making Design Matter*, Helsinki, Finland, 29 May–1 June (in press).
- Nimkulrat, N. (2009), 'Paperiness. Expressive material in textile art from artist's viewpoint', D. A. thesis, Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki.
- Okkonen, O. (1949), *A. Gallen-Kallela. Elämä ja Taide/A. Gallen-Kallela. Life and Art*, Helsinki: WSOY.
- Pelin, A. (2004), 'Taidegraafikkona'/'As a Printmaker', in Gallen-Kallela Museum (ed.), *Axel Gallén*, Espoo: Gallen-Kallela Museum, pp. 104–15.

- (2008), 'Nykytaide Gallen-Kallelan museossa'/'Contemporary Art in Gallen-Kallela Museum', in T. Wahlroos and K. Karvonen-Kannas (eds), *Tarvaspää, Akseli Gallen-Kallelan ateljeelinna/Akseli Gallen-Kallela's atelier castle*, Espoo: Gallen-Kallela Museum, pp. 90–95.
- Putnam, J. (2001), *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Refsum, G. (2008), 'What is Artistic Research? Contribution to Clarifying the Concept', in G. Refsum (ed.), *State of the Arts. Annual Review 2008*, Oslo: The Oslo National Academy of the Arts, pp. 12–24.
- Schön, D. (1991), *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, New York: Basic Books.
- Scrivener, S. (2009), 'The Roles of Art and Design Process and Object in Research', in N. Nimkulrat and T. O'Riley (eds), *Reflections and Connections: On the Relationship Between Creative Production and Academic Research*, Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki, pp. 69–80.
- Sonneveld, M. and Schifferstein, H. (2009), 'The Tactual Experience of Objects', in H. Schifferstein and P. Hekkert (eds), *Product Experience*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 41–67.
- Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1993), *Breaking Out Again. Feminist Ontology and Epistemology*, London: Routledge.
- Stewart, S. (1999), 'Prologue: From the Museum of Touch', in M. Kwint, C. Breward and J. Aynsley (eds), *Material Memories. Design and Evocation*, Oxford: Berg, pp. 17–36.
- Suhonen, P. (1989), *Akseli Galle-Kallela käsityöläinen ja osallistuja/Akseli Gallen-Kallela Craftsman and Participant*, Espoo: Gallen-Kallela Museum.
- Turpeinen, O. (2005), 'Merkityksellinen museoesine. Kriittinen visuaalisuus kulttuurihistoriallisen museon näyttelysuunnittelussa'/'A meaningful museum object. Critical visibility in cultural history museum exhibitions', D. A. thesis, Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki.

Suggested citation

Mäkelä, M. and Latva-Somppi, R. (2011), 'Crafting narratives: Using historical context as a reflective tool', *Craft Research* 2, pp. 37–60, doi: 10.1386/crrc.2.37_1

Contributor details

Maarit Mäkelä is docent of artistic research and material based art at Aalto University, School of Art and Design, Helsinki, where she also works as a coordinator of the Design Connections Doctoral School. She has published her articles in different arenas and is co-editor of the anthology 'The Art of Research. Research Practices in Art and Design'. Mäkelä also works as an artist in the junction of

ceramics and fine art. She has had several solo exhibitions in Finland and has taken part in frequent group exhibitions in Finland and abroad. Her works deal with femininity. She has discussed this theme broader in her doctoral dissertation 'Memories on clay: representations of subjective creation process and gender'.

Contact: Aalto University School of Art and Design, Department of Design, Research. Hämeentie 135 C, Helsinki. PO Box 31000, FIN-00076 Aalto, Finland.

E-mail: maarit.makela@aalto.fi

Riikka Latva-Somppi is a visual and glass artist (MA). She works at the intersection of fine art and craft and has exhibited widely nationally and internationally. Her public work Satakieli/Nightingale was awarded The Certificate of Environmental Art 2009 by The Foundation of Environmental Art (Finland). She has worked as a part-time lecturer as well as in various positions of trust and evaluation at Aalto University, School of Art and Design, Helsinki, for the past fifteen years. She is the chairwoman of Artists-O and a board member of The Society for New Craft (Finland). www.latva-somppi.com

Contact: Aalto University School of Art and Design, Glass studio, Hämeentie 135 C, Helsinki. PO Box 31000, FIN-00076 Aalto, Finland.

E-mail: riikka@latvasomppi.com
