

THE MAKING OF A JOURNEY - IDENTIFYING NEW DESIGN APPROACHES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how approaches identified in contemporary art can offer new perspectives in design education. The inquiry is done by involving product design students in such approaches through the designing of new products out of the existing IKEA merchandises; stool “ODDVAR” and box ”PRÄNT”, followed by interviews, common evaluations and discussions concerning how the approach influences the way they think about their practice in the future.

The creative technique “The making of a journey” (TMJ) emerged by context mapping of the art project “Blueboatblack” (BBB), by the artist Simon Starling (1997) which involves processes of emancipation from aesthetics and materials. This in turn led to the research question; how can the creative technique *Deconstruction of a found object* facilitate critical thinking in design education?

Working with the TMJ forced the deconstruction of an existing product upon the students and triggered product investigations about construction, material, functionality, usefulness, value, economics, sustainability and aesthetics. We identified that in some cases the project facilitated both a critical and unsentimental attitude towards the object itself. Such reactions elicited by the TMJ can contribute to knowledge transfer within education and industry through possible questioning of meaning and conventions- dimensions important for radical design processes. Furthermore the autonomous dimensions of the project led the students to define the project goal themselves toward products that were rooted in personal interests, inspiration and life experience. Products seemingly without any function emerged such as wooden carpet made with the goal to give an impression of plywood having textile characteristics.

Keywords: Art approaches, found object, creative technique

1 INTRODUCTION

This article is based on experiences from teaching product design students in the subjects of form and aesthetics. There is pressure put upon product design students to develop new product concepts after a short period of labour which can lead to unilateral and superficial product concepts. Hence considerations about contexts, meaning and experience can be shunned in favour of productivity skills and the creation of physical outcomes. Many students have their background in “art and design” specialization programs in the Norwegian high school which emphasis is within traditional design processes such as formal studies within form vernacular as approach to creative and artistic work. For students to see the potential of how products can elicit experiences on various levels and in broad contexts however they should break with their product oriented emphasis as starting point for their design process.

The aim of this article is to explore if the ideas and approaches identified in contemporary art can offer new perspectives in design education. By introducing product design students to strategies from contemporary art practice we explore and discuss if and how this can influence the way students think about being designers in the future. This is based on the assumption of that; engaging students in approaches by contemporary artists facilitate the developing of a reflective and critical relationship to one’s own practice as a designer. The aim is to describe and distinguish how the skills and knowledge acquired through artistic practice can add to design education through student experiences.

1.1 Blueboatblack

The art project “Blueboatblack” (BBB), (see figure 1) by the British artist Simon Starling was used as an example on a specific thinking and artistic approach to the students.

The term artistic approach is used to underline that an *approach* more often involves ways of viewing a situation or a set of actions that has developed over time. It is often development from previous art projects and research, it is likely to be part of an ongoing process that takes into consideration the complexity, uncertainty and uniqueness of every new situation compared with previous situations, to a larger extent than what is normally included in the term method in relation to design education.

This art project BBB was realized on a residency in Marseille. Its starting point was a disused museum display case from the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh which was transported to Marseille and resurrected, temporarily into the form of a small fishing boat. The boat was then put to sea and used to fish in the waters around Marseille. When several fish had been caught the boat was further transformed into charcoal in order to prepare the fish. The boat returned to the museum realm in the form of charred remains- a testament to the cycle of construction and deconstruction.



Figure 1. Blue Boat Black, Simon Starling, 1997

BBB has clear references in the working methods to the conceptual art movement. Typical for conceptual art is the creation of rules for the work. In this art project it is the journey to France and the act of gathering food for the basic needs that forms the set of rules or context in which the project develops. The technique or material that is used to produce the work is of less importance. Hence the story, references, thinking and the idea of the creation make the essence of the work. We found this to be of particular interest for this study because of the lack of focus on end product and the importance of knowing the process of creation to fully appreciate it.

2 METHOD

This article aims to explore the research question of; how can the creative technique *Deconstruction of a found object* facilitate critical thinking in design education. The technique was identified through analyzing the art project “Blueboatblack” (1997) by the artist Simon Starling (GB). An exploration of the technique was done through a case study that involved student projects and interviews. The research question starting with the interrogative *how* implies that the study sets out to explore and disclose techniques in a confined context that might have interest for design education which points towards case study as an apt method [1, 2].

In the research traditions of the social sciences and humanities the aim is more often to understand and/or describe situations rather than proving them through testing. By placing this work into such a landscape plural approaches to research might emerge. Furthermore it includes an interdisciplinary nature and can represent several dimensions such as the making of products or visual representations and perspectives on ideas. In this study the disclosure of knowledge is upmost related to analysis through the description of the project done.

This study emphasizes in particular on the negotiation between fine art and design field. It is mainly the exploration in *real* situations with the student projects which corresponds with the characteristics of mode 2 research [3-5]. Interdisciplinary cooperation serves to engender research approaches or questions that only can originate because of the specific combination of knowledge and skills in a prearranged situation.

The method for this research can be broken down to three steps. 1. Analysis of and merging of, theory and art (BBB) led to the development of a design approach TMJ, deconstruction of a found object. 2. The student project became a method for exploration of the creative technique TMJ. 3 qualitative research through the sub method of semi structured interviews [6-8].

3 THE POETICS OF TRANSFORMATION, AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH

BBB opens up a discussion around the life cycle of artifacts and the creation of things that are depending on situations and contexts. The attitude permeated in this work illustrates an unsentimental attitude for both change and temporality. The relation between objects created and deconstructed along the concept journey nurtures a dialogue between material, conceptual processes and anti-material.

By analysis of the art work BBB we identified four dimensions of doing and experience that can also serve as an artistic approach. These are breaking down/deconstruction, reconstruction, the making of a journey and finally new aesthetic value (figure 2).

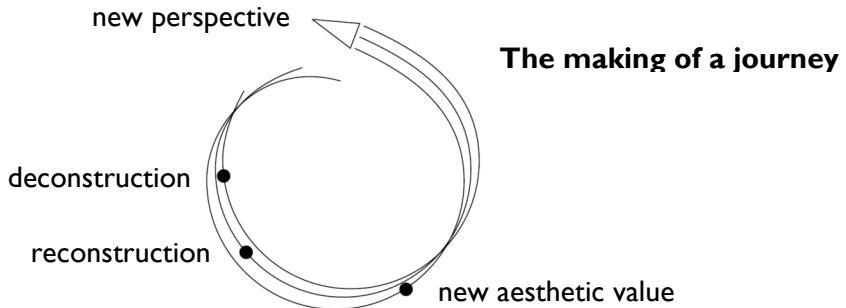


Figure 2.

Breaking down and deconstructing an old museum display furniture from the National Museum of Edinburgh has a certain symbolic impact in that it was a belonging to the realm of heritage and national treasures. The breaking down of an already existing object (found object, ready-made) [9] calls for courage to destroy something in the search for something else and perhaps provoke a disrespectful and finally perhaps critical evaluation of the object its meaning and purpose.

The reconstruction of the furniture into a small fishing boat in accordance with the local tradition shows an inclusion of context and the need to change in order to create meaning in a new environment. It also takes the display object intended used in a culture institution back to the world of everyday life. This stage in the process discusses both context and transformation

Further when the project involves a journey and the step where the artist goes fishing in the new built boat, the process of making art is moved even closer to the everyday life and the basic need to provide food. The aspect of storytelling (about a journey and everyday activity) permeates the whole art project by Starling. This articulates and questions the idea of functionality in the context of art practice.

The burnt out remains of the boat, belonging objects and tools used in the process are exhibited in a traditional art gallery context. The objects lack of connotations to- or immediate recognition as art and beauty invites us to search for meaning beyond these aspects and stimulates our understanding and search for aesthetics and meaning on different levels.

In order to explore how this art project can influence student's way of working with a task and the succeeding outcomes, the projects will be analyzed in light of these levels of experience and the analytic approach found through the analysis of (BBB) in this article.

3.1 Educational knowledge artefact

BBB was used as reference for the educational knowledge artefact [8]. This study introduces deconstruction identified in the work BBB as the creative technique "Deconstruction of a found object", (TMJ). Creative technique in this context is understood as an approach that liberates the designer from traditional design parameters based on experience through working with the deconstruction of a found object. Our understandings of *found objects* are; any made object, structure or space already shaped or materialized by man or nature.

The creative technique made the premises for the working method in two design projects for different first year bachelor students in a product design education. The student task involved the demand of transforming one existing object form IKEA namely the stool "ODDVAR" (figure 3) in 2011 and the box "PRÄNT" (figure 4) in 2012 into a new product. The students were given the constraints that that

they could only use the material from the stool/box to execute the work, no additional material was allowed apart from joints as nails, screws, glue and so on.

3.2 The students working process

The first exercise for the students was limited to 1 hour of labour; groups of 5 students had 5 stools/boxes as material. They could choose between the keywords *construction for two*, *high construction* and *gateway*. They could not use any additional material and had only cello tape available to join the different parts.

The next introduction exercise was to create a 3D model of the product by CAD. This involved having to measure each part, draw them and join them together.

To explore diverging ideas the students then were given the choice to use the following instructions to push the process further.

Present at least four sketches for the transformation of the stool/box: 1. based on the transformation of form or expression. 2. Based on the transformation of function. 3. Based on the transformation of the material. 4. Based on the method of “forced relationship” (for example combining the word box/stool with a random word) to promote unorthodox ideas. These sketches were then presented and discussed in group tutorials, and formed for some of the students the background for their working process. The students were also encouraged to create working titles as well as titulating their final product. This adds a dimension of words as a key or invitation to experience the work and perhaps to place the project in a narrative or journey as identified in BBB.

When this phase was completed the students started to alter the original parts of the *found object*.



Figure 3. Student projects with “PRÄNT”, 1. BA, 2011/12

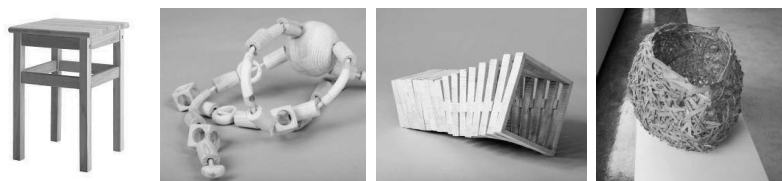


Figure 4. Student projects with «ODDVAR», 1. BA 2010/11

3.3 The student reflections

The students interviewed found the process frustrating, the assignment was experienced as too open and that it lacked demands for a final product. One of the students that were interviewed said that he had been very provoked by the task and found it very limiting. During his study of the IKEA box he also became provoked by the actual product he was given and wished he could have had the product from assignment the previous year. He said that he felt forced to look at the *box* from different perspectives, for example as a designed object that he had an opinion about and maybe wanted to improve, as a stack of plywood, as a piece of cheap furniture made to fit into most homes. He even calculated how much money IKEA in this case earned on each item. This student ended up making a walking-machine that actually walked a few steps with the help of a twined rubber band (figure 5).

Another student said, “the biggest challenge was to find ideas and to start defining my own structure and starting point for the investigation”. From her process a product seemingly without any function emerged, namely a wooden carpet made with the goal to give an impression of plywood having the characteristics of textile. The *flying carpet* was the inspiration for the project which was disclosed through the student’s exploration of her interest in fairytales (figure 6). The challenge given enabled the student to define her own goal and approach towards the project.

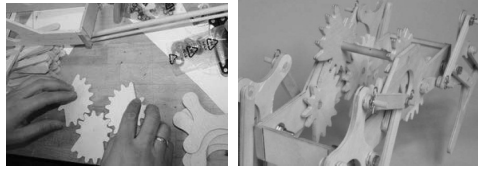


Figure 5. Student project from 1. BA 2011/1 “Little Theo” walking machine

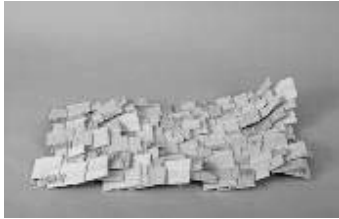


Figure 6. “flying carpet”



Figure 7 (a and b).
“Back to nature”



Figure 8
“Smuggling Oddvar”

The life cycle of the given material became a starting point and motivation for several student projects. The photo “Back to nature” (figure 7 a.) shows a juxtaposition of the original product and a tree made of the same material. The student that made this tree was exploring a visual reversal of the making of the stool, implying that all things originate in nature. She said her motivation was to make a tree to remind us of nature as an origin for products and as a statement of love for nature.

Another student project was also inspired by thinking of the origin of the material and the structure of growing in nature. After having tried to make a very large seed out the stool material through planning, chipping and gluing, he decided to focus on the existing parts of the stool and simply putting them together as in a stylized tree construction (figure 7 b).

Some projects had the intention to make elements in the original product recognizable in the end result. These students wanted to transform the product without actually having to change the original parts radically. “Smuggling Oddvar” (figure 8) is an example of such a project where the only changes made on the stool is underneath the seat and in between the legs serving to modify the negative space of the chair. The student’s motivation was to recreate what she found to be an uninteresting and very conservative stool into *somebody* with a hidden and much more exciting characteristics (a guy). Her way of finding motivation was to think of the object as a person.

3.4 Reflections on the student project

In general the creative technique (TMJ) motivated towards the deconstruction of an already existing product and triggered an investigation of construction, material, functionality, usefulness, value, economics, sustainability and aesthetical facets of the product. The students demonstrated a variety in the working approaches and consequently in the project outcomes.

The students interviewed found the process frustrating, the assignment was experienced as too open and they also found that the task lacked demands for a final product, which is typical for ill-defined problems [10]. This elicited frustration in meeting the ill-defined problems however seems to have enabled the students to define their own approach as well as to define the skills necessary to employ in order to start and finalize their projects.

The autonomous dimensions of the project illustrated by that the students defined the project goal themselves, led toward products that were rooted in personal interests, inspiration and life experience.

The projects spanned from big non-functional objects to machinelike products. In some cases it provoked a disrespectful attitude towards the existing product and even the task itself. The starting point for the investigations, a transformation of the given object and the outcome does not easily categorize within one or few themes. The process seems therefore to have motivated the student to define its own field of interest and approach- a process similar to the one of artists. The variability in themes might be due to a more emancipated attitude towards the design process because of the rigid and confined working space [11]. Such a motivation might emancipate and lead the student in other directions than the traditional design sphere.

4 REFLECTION ON THE APPROACH

The thinking behind “BBB” is relevant for this study since the main understanding of the art project describes the emancipation from aesthetics and materials, aspects we have found to serve as productive constraints in order to enhance critical thinking in design education. The use of a mass produced furniture as a found object for this student task works as an emancipating dimension from aesthetics and material by its poor material quality as basis for new design. The limitation mass production has for the Ikea designs also involve a perspective for the students to consider the qualities of craft and artistic skills.

Duchamp’s introduction of the readymade into art in the first decade of the twentieth century, offers a view on artists as thinkers and constructors rather than makers of fictive illusions. The traditional eye-hand relations of craft based artistic skills are subject to a new intellectual and technical base. Roberts suggests the functions of the hand after the introduction of the readymade to be *placing, ordering and selecting* [9]. This is not to underestimate the importance of the craft based skills, the experience with real situations and materials in artistic practice. The students projects described in this study are based on concrete products that are transformed through real material and form manipulations through working with the TMJ. The found object represents placing, ordering and selecting in this study.

If we look at design as an activity which goal is to make life better for humanity [12, 13] it involves raising questions about ethics and values during a design process. However design practice is also associated with being pleasing and these two aspects might be contradictory. It is an artist’s interest in societal problems and their ability to include painful dimensions of life in their work that makes it important as a communicative practice. Perhaps the infusing of such communicative practice in product design influence towards new perspectives as being designers for the future and by extension peoples experience of artifacts.

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