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Dialogue Between Art and Craft: Textile Materials and Techniques in Contemporary Art

Sinikka Pöllänen
University of Eastern Finland, Finland

Kati Ruotsalainen
Finland

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the ways in which textile materials and techniques are expressed in contemporary art in Finland. The first phase of data collection was to identify a population of Finnish artists who use textile craft-based forms in their art and who produce their works themselves. After that, six discretionary selected artists' works were analyzed using essence analysis based on photographs and artists' statements. The analysis brought out the reciprocal and complementary dialogue between art and craft, contributing to an ongoing debate about topical issues and the valuation of everyday relationships and objects. Artists are viewing their work from an artistic perspective but also basing their process in the appreciation of craft. The works of art portray mental associations with the help

of craft techniques and materials. This article argues that the dialogue between art and craft helped these artists cross over borders and traditions.

Introduction

In the Western world, art and craft have historically been seen as distinct modes of production (Auther, 2008; Barrett, 2008; Dormer, 1997a). According to Ihatsu (2002) and Owen (2005), art has been seen as expressive-based, creative and communicative, while crafts have been seen as a traditional, skilled, and repetitive activity. Instead, craft has been seen as vernacular (Greenhalgh, 1997) limited to the materials, techniques, and functional qualities of the object (Ihatsu, 2002). As a consequence of this valuation, craft has automatically been denied art status (Risatti, 2007) and some media have had associations with certain processes and functions; for example, fiber has been relegated to the domains of craft and female culture (Auther, 2008).

Veiteberg (2005) has called the space between visual arts and crafts an “intervening space”; the space between tradition and infringement as well as a space between craft-based art and idea-based art. Ultimately, as both style and artistic expression have gradually become more and more complex, new forms of expression have come alongside the traditional techniques and materials. Today, craft has begun to break through the conventional boundaries of functionality and tradition and art reflects a wide range of materials, media, and technologies, as well as opportunities to consider what art is and how it is defined (Ihatsu, 2002). Craft may play with traditions and cultural symbols, breaking down common perceptions and creating metaphorical objects (Haveri, 2013; Winge & Stalp, 2013). In practice, new work in materials traditional to craft has blurred the boundaries between art and craft, such as fibre art, soft sculpture, soft art, contemporary subversive craft and conceptual art (Auther, 2008; MacDonald, 2005; Winge & Stalp, 2013).

According to Andrew (2013), craft and textiles have their own language and vocabulary, not only for the artists, but also for viewers. Textiles may bring a degree of three-dimensionality and tactility to art, as well as the symbolic content of memories, narratives and cultural meanings from the previous lives of materials and everyday living. With skillful work, crafted objects may construct an illusion of being other than what they are, for example, creating the illusion of used material (Ihatsu, 2006). Andrew (2013) notes that textiles are emotional materials, representing soft values, such as humanity, coziness and familiarity. According to researchers (e.g., Andrew, 2008; Auther, 2008; Bryan-Wilson, 2013; Pöllänen, 2015), textiles are entertaining, conveying a sense of playfulness, humor, fun, relaxation and meditation (see e.g., Sōetsu, 1989). Craft is seen as slow and intentional tactile making with ecological basis (Bryan-Wilson, 2013). However, textiles may be a form of argumentation in an ongoing

debate and take a point-of-view in socio-political and sociocultural issues (Bryan-Wilson, 2013; Dormer, 1997b; Winge & Stalp, 2013).

Buszek (2011) claims that today, content and subject are more important than art materials and media; therefore, experimenting with the latter may, according to Nimkulrat (2010), be needed to convey the artist's intended meaning. In this regard, Rantanen (2014) sees the transition from substance to context and from representation to presentation as a synthesis of the site of the works of art, communal space and discourse. Risatti (2007) invites viewers to approach art and craft with an open mind and to see what the objects have to say.

Categorizations and hierarchical genres of the arts and crafts have been open to question in a changing society (Ketovuori, 2007; Sennett, 2008; Tiffany, 2004), but craft's influence on contemporary art has been obscure (Bryan-Wilson, 2013; Sōetsu, 1989). Especially in Finland, craft has been mostly tradition-based making with materials but without artistic impression (Ihatsu, 2006). Nonetheless, many artists have been working with the craft medium with various techniques and materials in a way that is original and creative (Barrett, 2008; Buzek, 2011). In the same vein, craft education has been challenged to re-evaluate its traditional pedagogical aims and practices and discover new orientations (Karppinen, 2008; Pöllänen, 2009). Starting in the autumn of 2016, the new national core curriculum in crafts (Fnbe, 2014) will require accounting for self-expressive and experimental ways of working and increasing cooperation with experts outside an educational context. At school, an artistic approach in crafts may impart sensitivity toward different cultural or ecological phenomena, help students reflect on culture and society, and understand and accept their differences (see Pöllänen, 2011; Song, 2009; Upitis, 2009). To give perspectives for the open discussion of art and craft (see Risatti, 2007; Veiteberg, 2005) as well for craft education (Karppinen, 2008; Pöllänen, 2011), the main goal of this study is to investigate the ways in which textile materials and techniques are expressed in contemporary art. This kind of artistic approach may serve as an example of how to break down art and craft boundaries in education.

Method and Data Collection

This study is based on a qualitative investigation of Finnish contemporary art. The first phase of data collection was to identify a population of Finnish artists whose textile craft-based forms of visual art works had been displayed and who produce their work themselves. Nine artists were found by searching websites, art museum pages, exhibition catalogs from 2013–2014 and the journals *Tekstiiliopettaja* [Textile Teacher] and *Taito* [Skill]. Because the focus in this article is craft, the purpose was to find art works that would best reflect textile materials and techniques.

After that phase, six works by non-random discretionary sampling process (see Creswell, 2014) from artists who were most recognized, for example, by the media or by an award or a grant, were selected for the final analysis. One work from each artist (see Table 1) was chosen to represent different materials and techniques as examples of Finnish contemporary crafted textile-based art. Because, the main purpose of this study is to focus on the ways textile materials and techniques are used in contemporary art, the data collection concentrates on artists and not on artisans, in spite of that they also may make art works. The artists in this study named themselves as a textile artist or a visual artist.

Because this study is implemented through the lense of craft, the method of analysis takes advantage of the methods and perspectives of craft science. The works of art were analyzed by using photographs and artists' descriptions of their art with the help of Luutonen's (1997, 2008) essence analysis to uncover the unstated information inherent in a crafted object. The general form of essence analysis is based on Peirce's (1958) semiotic theory of signs and phenomenological categories. Semiotics provides tools for the study of meanings, while products convey ideas associated with cultural, psychological, social and economic values.

Luutonen's (1997) essence analysis begins with a *first impression*. This means intuitive examination from the recipient's point of view – a first impression made by the crafted item itself without any contextual information. The second phase in the analysis is *depth study*, where the main idea is to find any factual information about the product or phenomenon. The purpose is to specify the physical properties of the product and to analyse their representation. As an aid for systematic review, the essence analysis makes use of Papanek's (1971, 1995) function complex in which the method, use, need, consequences, association, and aesthetics of the product are specified. However, in this study, the works are generally not intended for use. Thus, in this phase they will be viewed only from the standpoint of method (i.e. materials and techniques), association and aesthetics. The depth study may also contain, according to craft science, data about the construction process. The third and last stage of the essence analysis is *interpretation*, which draws together the intuitive and factual analysis to form a general understanding of the research results, constituting the researcher's conclusions. In this study, the main point in the analysis is to find the dialogue between art and craft, thus the works are not categorized or analyzed according the concepts and distinctions of art. Still, it is worth noting that the chosen method has some similarities with other methods of reading images (e.g., Panofsky, 1972; Rose, 2001).

Clearly, all studies have their limitations: in this study, the process was carried out from the lenses of craft and the works of art were chosen as examples of textile-based art in Finland. This means that the examples are not comprehensively representative of such art and it is

possible that the results are not transferable to other types of art and other contexts. Following common practices in qualitative research, this study is carried out according to a particular perspective based on researchers' conclusions and interpretations. However, bias has been minimized through a thorough, transparent process (Darawsheh, 2014). Of course, interpreting art reflects an individual's subjective experiences and worldviews (Lim, 2013). As a counterbalance, it is hoped that the researchers' deep involvement in crafts will offer unique insight (see Flyvbjerg, 2006). As Mayring (2007) argued, in most cases, a qualitative study's conclusions may be more general than the results. Careful consideration will reveal the contexts suitable for an application of the findings. An in-depth methodological description seeks to facilitate a scrutiny of conclusions and results (Shenton, 2004). Moreover, the qualitative study approach focuses strongly on validity, which was underpinned in the present study by having two researchers work independently and challenge each other's interpretations to avoid subjectivity and bias toward verification (see Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Results

The main goal of this study was to investigate the ways in which textile materials and techniques are expressed in Finnish contemporary art. To begin, the basic information of all the chosen works of art is characterized with first impression. Next, the depth study gave more information about the physical characteristics and properties of the art works and, thus, the artist's comments of their source of inspirations, the materials and techniques used will be described in detail. Finally, the interpretation of the works elucidates some of the meanings of craft in these works.

First impression

In the first impression the works of art were analyzed from the outside observer's point of view. Attention was paid to the initial observations of the object. Table 1 with the Figures 1–6 give the basic information of each artists' work, for example, the technique used, the material and, and the most distinctive features of the works.

Table 1. *Artists and works of art in this study*

Artist	Figure No./ Name and year of the art work	Technique	Material	General information	First impression
Outi Martikainen	F 1. <u>Cathedral</u> (2008) http://outi.in/art/14.php	sewing, embroidery	insect net, nylon,	190x240 cms, black and gray colored	tower silhouette, space driver, panel or curtain, light, transmittance, like a transparent weave

Tarmo Thorström	F 2. <u>Perintö (2014)</u> [Heritage] http://www.thorstrom.com/2014/10/nyp-latty-kolmiulotteinen-pitsireliefi/	bobbin lace and variety of bobbin techniques	flax yarn	face size with ribbons, white and red	image of a face, a white colored mask with red effects, like a lacy work, variety of lace patterns
Sonja Salomäki	F 3. <u>Julkitilataiteen ihailija (2008)</u> [The admirer of public space art] http://www.artists-o.fi/sonja-salomaki/	tufted rug	wool	a rug size, colorful, soft	tufted rug as a soft yarn work, a part of street view, bright lights and a male figure, like a rug
Kaija Papu	F 4. <u>PI541 (2012)</u> http://www.kaijapapu.com/english/e-news.htm	crocheting	wool, wood, foam, plastic, embroidery and sewing thread	a car size, blue and white	a police car, authentic-looking, time-consuming
Ulla Jokisalo	F 5. <u>Kynnyksellä (2011-2012)</u> [On the Threshold]	cut-out pigment print, embroidery, thread and needles on fabric (linen)	thread, photograph, pins	134x104 cms, black, white and gray colored	a picture of mother-daughter relationship, cartoon-like, tapestry
Anu Tuominen	F 6. <u>Fleurs de sel (2006)</u> http://www.anutuominen.fi/fi/teoksia/25/#prettyPhoto[gallery2]/3/	crocheting	salt shakers with red cap, thread	14 salt shakers, 14 little circles, white and red colored	red cover salt shakers and white crocheted patterns, an arrangement



Figure 1. Cathedral. Artist: Outi Martikainen. Photo: Juha Reunanen.



Figure 2. Perintö. Artist: Tarmo Thorström. Photo: Sonja Salomäki.



Figure 3. Julkitilataiteen ihailija. Artist: Sonja Salomäki. Photo: Tarmo Thorström



Figure 4. PI541. Artist: Kaija Papu. Photo: Jarkko Mikkonen.



Figure 5. Kynnyksellä. Artist: Ulla Jokisalo. Photo: Ulla Jokisalo



Figure 6. Fleurs de sel. Artist: Anu Tuominen. Photo: Art-U room, Tokyo.

Depth study

Association and aesthetics

The information from the art works revealed that the inspiration for the art came from the artist's own life, experimentation with materials, and environmental effects. A few works presented some kind of argumentation in an ongoing debate, injustice or circumstances. Thus, the artists' own lives, memories, recollection, experiences and interests created the starting point for associations. As a result, artists have done works related to themselves like the three-dimensional lace relief of artist's faces as a picture of identity (see figure 2). Artists' own environments and the contexts of the intended work provided associations for the relationship between the human being and environment (e.g., figure 3). The art work criticizes urban living environment which have forgotten the ideas of beauty showing how, despite tight

public space regulations, for example regarding to public art, all kind of advertisements are permissible, making street views oppressive.

Sometimes the source of inspiration had been material-based. For example, salt shakers (figure 5) as easily-discarded everyday objects as well as all kind of materials that can be recycled or bought from flea market had been a starting point to installations for one artist. The material itself and the explorations of its possibilities as well as colors and surfaces had also been a source of inspiration (see figures 1 and 2). As an example, the artist wanted to create something opaque and transparent as a play of material and light, to evoke the fountain of Milano cathedral, and mosquito net served this purpose. Those art works give associations of simplicity and minimalism. On the other hand, the illustrations from eighteenth century children's literature inspired one artist to make an art work to depict young girl's departure from home in an embroidery (figure 5). It includes a reference to the feminism of French philosopher Lucre Irigaray and the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

While all of the works explore some environmental or human phenomenon, the main idea for most of the works is to take part in a topic of discussion. Two of the artists (see figures 2 and 4) wanted to break down gender boundaries and orthodoxy by using unusual materials and changing the standard type and scale of craft making. One of them also wanted to modernize the feminine- and tradition-based lace making technique. The life-sized crocheted police car (see figure 4) was based also on the artist's interest in societal concerns. The artist wanted to link associations of masculinity to soft values.

Materials and techniques

In the works of art presented here, different kinds of materials have been used, often typical for textile crafts. The most typical material is yarn in some form, such as wool yarn, sewing thread, lace-making or embroidery thread. The most commonly used fabrics are natural-based, such as cotton and wool, which are typically used also in textile crafts. However, recycled and industrial materials or objects were also used, such as a mosquito net, which are less typical material for textiles. Objects from everyday life have also been used in these works, such as salt shakers, needles and pins, and old photos. The police car, as a sculptural work, had soft (polyurethane foam) and hard filler (wood) materials to give shape to the life-size police car with a crochet cover (figure 4). Materials intended for other purposes seems to have served the artist's purposes.

The artists used skill-demanding traditional craft techniques as well as creative new forms of application. The used techniques are crocheting (see figures 4 and 6) embroidery and sewing (see figures 1 and 5), bobbin lace (see figure 2), and tufting (see figure 3). Typical uses of traditional craft techniques have often been combined with atypical tools and materials, as

needles on the fabric (figure 5). In any case, usually either the technique or the material is used in the traditional way. Some of the artists described that concentrating on techniques, materials and the making process had given them time to express their motives and intentions. The long-lasting, tactile and bodily component had been meditative and stress reducing.

The analysis revealed, that in many cases, there are a variety of different and often self-developed techniques in the art works. The techniques and materials are usually symbolic; for example, crocheting refers to the passage of time and slow work (see figure 4) and old artefacts used in homes suggest a private space on public view (see figure 6). Unorthodox new applications of bobbin lace have been used to create three-dimensional lace representing the artist's own face (figure 2). Notably, artists have played with craft techniques and orthodox standards of art and craft production.

The associations (see Papanek, 1995) that the works may evoke can be linked to the techniques or the materials, forms and subjects that are used. For example, embroidery makes the work resemble visual art techniques (see figure 5). A common way to arouse associations is to use material to convey different moods (see figure 3) and expressions of opinion (e.g., figure 4). The forms in the works may lead to other associations than the actual content of the work, making flowers of salt shakers (figure 6).

Interpretation

Interpretation of the analysis is built upon the first impression and depth study of the works of art. Its purpose is to describe the dialogue between art and craft in the chosen art works. Ultimately, the interpretation showed how craft traditions, materials and techniques were used in these works, as well as what kind of meanings they were conveying.

The artists seem to have used traditional craft techniques and materials in a creative way to break out of the traditions and conventions regarding both art and craft. They used techniques in new ways or a mixture of several disparate techniques, combining both craft and art techniques in the same work. Materials gave artists the possibility to create and strengthen contrasts and associations, such as heavy-light, soft-hard or masculine-feminine. Atypical materials that are not associated with handicrafts, for example salt shakers (figure 6), were used to carry out the artists' visions. Such new materials with traditional textile craft techniques create new associations and contrariety with connotations and sensory experiences as well as with arousing different moods and memories. Thus, everyday materials or recycled materials with common known craft-related techniques may describe little discrete themes in large scale art work (see figures 1 and 4). They evoked sometimes visual images of another material or optical illusions, but in the same time reminded about ecological responsibility. Minor details in a larger installation were experimented with new combinations of materials

(e.g., figures 1, 4, 5, and 6) or created a light-playing element for an architectonic space (e.g., figures 2 and 6).

On the other hand, the artist had used a common technique and material to evoke people to look and reflect. This has led to an unusual handling of the topic, even though the technique and production process were carried out traditionally, for example, the tufted rug from a legendary place in the Helsinki capital with all variety and complexity of life (figure 3). With the choice of techniques and materials, the artists had been able to stress their messages and the process of making art (e.g., associating trash as material, figure 6; contrasting values with crafting, figure 4; and gender equality with lacemaking, figure 2). Atypical material, such as needles and pins on an embroidered work (figure 5), may surprise with a topic depicting departure from home. As a result, this kind of materialization helps the viewer to analyze the context in spite of the topic being private, but at the same time common to anyone.

The artists' technical skillfulness in craft making as well as their responsiveness to their raw materials were other sources of inspiration. The works have been time- and labor-intensive, like the life-sized police car made by crocheting (figure 4). In most of the works, craft was combined with art techniques to confuse the viewer. This can be seen as a way to reform craft but also as a way to diversify art using craft, for example sculpture (figure 4), pigment print as painting and graphics (figure 5), photography (figure 5), and conceptual art (figure 6). In all of these works, craft techniques have been used as a visual arts medium. The breach of traditions have helped the artist to communicate with the audience telling something from the artist's construction process and position-taking. Many of the works have features from everyday life but they intentionally disrupt traditions. All of the works show serious dexterity, product quality, and respect for craft work. Craft in art making has brought warmth, humour and human intimacy with soft materials and intensive hand work, investing the techniques and materials with symbolic and metaphorical meanings and highlighting contrasts. In spite of that, the artists' process has been self-conscious or self-referential, the precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns is hoped to open the viewers' eyes to see something hidden or easily forgettable.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the ways in which textile materials and techniques are expressed in contemporary art in Finland. The research results revealed the artists' holistic way of working, a materialisation of original and creative ideas, and a use of skills to translate the artist's expressions and intellectual curiosity in experimenting. In the same way as Tiffany (2004) described about appropriation of traditions, the artists individually accommodated traditions in the fields of both art and craft. Each artist emphasized his or her own craft-based techniques according to a personal style. They were

borrowing, adapting, and integrating art and craft elements. For example, woolen crafts in Nordic countries are based in ancient history and invented traditions (Hayeur-Smith, 2012; Helgadottir, 2011; Luutonen, 2008), but in this study, the artists improvised in their own ways. As a result, the artists played with traditions by choosing textile-based techniques and materials to represent an atypical subject for that kind of craft or by depicting common subjects using new techniques and material applications.

The results show that textile materialization had been a form of argumentation in hidden aspects of everyday things or in an ongoing debate (see Dormer, 1997b; Winge & Stalp, 2013). It may be concluded that the works are conceptualizing, taking a position and telling stories. Thus, the art works portray mental pictures and associations with symbolic and metaphorical techniques and materials. The precedence over traditional aesthetic, technique and material concerns help the viewer to see things, for example familiar environment and human relationships, from a new perspective (see Andrew, 2008, 2013; Winge & Stalp, 2013). Either the colors, surface, installation or the unorthodox size and shape challenge the viewer to dialogue. As Tiffany (2004) concluded, once an object crosses the arts and crafts border, it becomes mysterious and attractive, creating a meaningful story about the object.

In spite of the art works breaking down textile craft traditions, they serve as familiar signs into cultural past and craft-based national identities (see Hayeur-Smith, 2012; Helgadottir, 2011; Luutonen, 2008; Tiffany, 2004). They carry craftsman's traditions, dexterity, product quality and human meanings, with the making process (see Auther, 2008; Dormer, 1997c; Pöllänen, 2015; Tiffany, 2004). Altogether, the results of this study show that through the lenses of craft, contemporary textile-based art can also be defined as both material and process-based craft art or art craft (see Ihatsu, 2002; Risatti, 2007). This kind of intervening space (see Veiteberg, 2005) may have helped the artists to move freely between art and craft. Craft seems to have eased the creation of contrast and inclusion of associations in contemporary art, such as using soft or recycled materials to express messages or describe cultural phenomena. The works are implementing a way of seeing things from an artistic perspective but also a way of doing things based in the appreciation of craft. The dialogue between art and craft in Finnish contemporary art is a reciprocal and complementary relationship helping artists transcend borders and traditions.

The contemporary art in this study, are examples of the dialogue that comes into being as a result of the synthesis of the site of the work, as well as communal space and discourse. The main ideas in the works focused more on context than substance and more on presentation than representation (see Rantanen, 2014). From society's point of view, art works do not primarily highlight an individuals' capabilities. Rather, they remind us about important global and local issues. Indeed, an art work moves across social and cultural borders in a

postindustrial commercial culture (see Tiffany, 2004). From an individual's point of view, art also highlights the artful and meaningful aspects of life (Sennett, 2008; Sōetsu, 1989) and reflect the boundaries and hierarchies of social constructions (see Tiffany, 2004).

As the distinctions have blurred in many contexts, the need to re-evaluate the traditional practices in craft education has become obvious. Crafts are not just about distinct subject areas, techniques or aesthetics but may include functions which are integral to being human, transcend the individual (see Garber, 2002; Sennett, 2008). Art-based learning processes and artistic sensibilities may incorporate a reflection and awareness of the impact of one's actions and practices in a larger context (e.g., Karppinen, 2008; Song, 2009; Upitis, 2009). Therefore, the findings of this study will hopefully contribute to a broader recognition of the artistic potential inherent to self-expressive crafts. The findings are also intended to increase teacher collaboration during optional lessons in arts and crafts in basic education and the contexts where craft materials and processes are used as part of educational programs in general. It is also hoped that, in practice and among the sciences, crafts will be seen as a broader skill than manual labor or traditional handicrafts (Sennet, 2008).

In this study, the data did not provide answers as to why the artists took different approaches to their art. Accordingly, further research is needed to take the artists' perspectives more fully into account and compare their intentions and different approaches against external critic interpretations. This would provide applicable case-based examples for artists' and educators' co-operation and help develop multi-artistic workshops for children.

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About the Author

Sinikka Pöllänen, Ph.D., is a Professor in Craft Science at Savonlinna campus of the School of Applied Educational Science and Teacher Education in the University of Eastern Finland. She has been teaching and studying in the field of art-based craft and design. Her recent research focuses on the meaning of crafts, crafts and well-being, and on pedagogical models, especially

on situated and authentic learning environments. She has been, for example, the leader of an art-based teacher education project funded by the European Union Regional Fund. In addition to numerous book chapters, she has published several articles in international journals.

Kati Ruotsalainen, M.A., is in the beginning of her research career. She has graduated from the Craft Teacher Education at the University of Eastern Finland. Her major subject was craft science, and in her thesis she has been concentrating on textile art.

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