

OMsorg

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Abstract.

In the worldview of a traditionally Eastern cultural context, consciousness and matter are intertwined.

In that context negative and positive spaces relate to each other. With that in mind, the vessel is an interesting object to work with.

In my master work I explore "Thinking through making", a process where making and thinking alternate back and forth, in iterations. The making or designing can be taking place intuitively.

Scaling down the vessel, to the point where it has no contemporary practical function, as a way of talking about the exercise of sensitivity, in a fast, loud and insatiable present.

Questioning the prevailing value system.

By re:learning to become more sensitive, empathy for different types of existence becomes possible, and togetherness between human beings and their companion species opens up.

By making (diminutive) stoneware vessels, I enter a long tradition of the time-consuming, hand-building technique of Yixing clay. And hence, contrasts with the technology and scale of contemporary mass production.

Perhaps my vessels are pots to plant seeds for the hope of a future human existence?

Or, maybe they are vessels for grief, over human existence?

At least they are parts of bedrock coming back together from dissolution, for union.

Keywords: crafts, thinking through making, phenomenology, sensitivity, consciousness, design, temporality, permanence, perishability, thinking technologies, thinking practices, knowledge, transitional design, affective design, critical making, corpus, vessel.

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1 Introduction

The title of my master degree project and thesis is OMsorg. You can read it either as “*care*” or as “*about grief*” in Swedish. The development of my master thesis has been an intuitive process. All started with a sentence that I located from my stomach; “A thousand vessels”. My mother had just passed away. I started to watch videos of handmade pottery from Africa, China and Korea. During the years of my master I have been reading, attending lectures and reflecting in seminars almost exclusively concerning; the difficult questions we face today, globally. These are big questions about liveability on earth, not just small practical problems that need to be addressed.

That is why I did not develop an industrial mass produced product and the reason why my theme might seem like taking on much. But I experience it, as the opposite. For me this is small and quiet. A practice in letting my rational mind go, trying to perceive what is happening right now. This is not great art, nor cool design, it is a way of thinking and acting together with a material and a technique. I experience living in a *transitional age*. The Anthropocene, where I find that words like passage, reset mode, stewardship and bridge to be vivid in my mind. With verbs that involve motion like; walk over, swim over and travel to.

The word vessel in English means container but also ship, which I find connects to my thoughts on us being in a transitional stage in human history. The vessel communicates and offers the practical function of holding something. Where something existed, exists or may come to exist. There is an opportunity there. Seed capsules, lakes and bodies are vessels. In the vessel is an inherent meaning of care or/restraint. Vessels have a grounded root in human history. The negative form of the vessel has been serving both life and death for many thousands of years. There are vessels for all practical usages, utility items, for everyday use, so informal that we forget to consider them. Or ceremonial, for example through religion, giving solace with water or filled with ash. There are even *lachrymatory*, small ancient vessels for mourners to gather their tears.

The Japanese philosophical concept of Ma describes a relationship between form and interspace.¹ But it can also be between sound and silence. Perceiving how without a pause in the music, there would only be tone.

And without space between visual entities, there would be no composition. In the concept of Ma, both the positive and the negative have value and a common exchange. It is active in architecture, interior design, painting, social interaction, rites and ceremonies.

Ninia Svederup's exploration of the concept is that Western society tends to perceive reality from an outside perspective, where the days follow the absolute and linear scientific proof of the watch.

“ In Tokyo's driven up increasingly western influenced market economy system, there is not much room left for Ma, said Ega, a Japanese DJ and music and art writer”²

The traditional Japanese perception of reality is based on a perspective from the inside, where one perceives the room as a physical experience, rather than a visual one.

To enable the perception of; both what stands out in the world and what is not heard or seen, a sensitivity is required. Sensitivity is perceived through a bodily and material attention to subtle differences. Through simple disappearing actions, sensibility is noted and valued. Elisabet Yanagisawa Avén, doctoral student (2013), talks about a differing approach to objects between Eastern and Western culture. About sensitivity training, surface, body and mind, during The Rostock seminar's publication;

“There is an approach to matter and consciousness linked in one ethical-aesthetic perspective”.³

¹ Svederup (2006, ss. 1-2)

² Svederup (2006, ss. 1-2)

³ Yanagisawa Avén, (2013, ss. 36, 39)

She goes on to talk about how older categorizations that divide aesthetics and ethics, life and art still prevails and claims that; The temporal aspect is also attributed to a hierarchy. Sandra Cohen Callman (2012) refers in her process description to affective design, coined by Professor Mitsuo Nagamachi from Hiroshima International University of Japan in the end of the 60s. In design research, it is a concept that describes that design creates feelings that become important for our approach to the objects.

1.1 Personal background

I was born in the green wave of the 70`s, growing up on my mothers organically farmed vegetables. She was a pusher in aviation, light as air, travelling the world and different cultures. Disappearing up among the clouds for a couple of days before she returned home, to our house in the middle of the forest. My father was a sculptor and worked mainly in stone, this is his piece *Envig*⁴, which stands at Tegelbacken in Stockholm. His sculptures remain unchanged, even though he himself passed away twentynine years ago.



Figure 1. *Envig* (Rothlin, C. 1974).

⁴ <https://www.stockholmkonst.se/konsten/konst-pa-allman-plats/envig/>

I trained as a ballet dancer from the age of four and was with the Royal Swedish ballet from the age of nineteen to thirty four. Working six days a week, keeping the condition of the instrument/my body tuned and ready at all times, rehearsing the choreography, over and over and over again.



Figure 2. Mayerlingdramat Kungliga Operan (Rothlin, A. 1996).

After that I worked as an actor in theatre and film until I was forty seven. Both dancing and acting on stage is an ephemeral work . It's only *there* while the curtains are not drawn. It can never be perfected. One moment unfolds into another, there, only to then disappear.

Subsequent reflections about the body in relation to space, time and perception are a natural part working with yourself as an instrument. I have been reflecting on the difference between the ephemeral and the permanent throughout my life.

1.2 Foundation

I will refer to my Bachelor's degree work in my Master thesis, as I feel that they are in a continuum of the same theme. The title of the degree work was; *Permanence and perishability*, where I reflected on the two concepts.

I referred to permanence as something with a long lifespan and perishability as something with a short lifespan.

My work resulted in a dining table in Swedish diabase stone with a film exposing temporality, as background in the exhibition. Stone is not a plastic material. It cannot be hammered, pulled or pressed. You can only remove material from the base material. The big stone cannot be moved, it becomes part of the place it inhabits. The patterns of the stone exhibit the recipe of the stone, as an image. They can be compared to everything from paintings with brush strokes over larger surfaces to denser patterns or a purely compact black mass. I wanted the material to have a movement in it. The origin of diabase is global and central, it comes from the inner centre of the earth. I searched for a diabase from Sweden which had a vivid pattern in it and found Biskopsgården diabase. The table's two components; the frame and the tabletop would be out of the same bedrock, but surface treated in different ways and thus get a different expression. The surface of the tabletop is polished, the eye is guided into the material, as if diving into it like a forest pond or looking out into the universe. In it we see the meeting of the components in the stone and what the material is made of. The table is round, all top views of the table include circles. The frame is blasted diagonally on two sides, giving it a matte gravel effect and visualising a twisting movement.



a.



b.

Figure 3(a + b). Matbord i Biskopsgårdendiabas (Rothlin, A. 2021).

During my Bachelor I conducted a survey, showing that ephemeral forms of art, like dance, were valued lower than works in resilient materials, like architecture.

In terms of materials and the concepts of permanence/perishability, my survey showed that stone was perceived to be highly permanent. And paper, as a highly perishable material.

Stone even though, by time, will become stoneware clay, for example.

More surprising though was that we were divided about: whether the experience of a meal was worth more to us than the scene where the action takes place, hence the object - The dining table. Equally interesting is that almost half, 42.9%, do not consider themselves able to own an experience.

1.3 Research question

In the traditional Eastern perspective I find the invisible to be filled with value. It is equivalent to the visible and a prerequisite for composition. Without the interspace in between visual entities, what enables the drama/ balance of a composition? How can I make the invisible visible? Emphasise the value of negative space in reference to the positive? What *thinking* does *slow & diminutive making* do?

2 Method; *makingthinking*

In my master work I explore the method of "*Thinking through making*".

Anna Maria Orrù (2017) refers to Natalie Loveless *makingthinking* practices in her PhD, when she mentions that practice and research are messy and entangled, that both are deeply creative practices, a kind of thinking that can take many transdisciplinary forms.

I remember what I had read by Walker, I quote:

“The divergent, the intuitive and non-rational are vital aspects of design because they are vital aspects of being fully human. It is these facets of design that provide the basis for developing a more profound and, potentially, more sustainable notion of material culture”⁵

⁵ Walker (2014)

Orrù (2017) also quotes Donna Haraway “a mode of *‘staying with the trouble’* “ as critical knowing that asks for all bodies to become physically involved in the trouble. Loveless argues that making is a situated relation construct that carries accountability, an ecological responsibility.

You have to be in relation to the material and generously listen to it, in order for the *making* to work. And you have to be able to reason with yourself, because the work process is largely introverted. Your work partner gives silent answers, you listen through your hands.

This is an internal-external, embodied knowledge building practice.

Daniel Charney talks about making;

“ Making is the most powerful way that we solve problems, express ideas and shape our world.

...” Makers start to think through their materials and skills, almost unconsciously”.

...” Yet making is also an active way of thinking, something which can be carried out with no particular goal in mind. In fact, this is a situation where innovation is very likely to occur.”⁶

Hand building vessels in clay resembles the practices of dancing or playing an instrument, they develop tacit knowledge and develop a close relationship between body and thought.

Andreas Nobel, cabinetmaker, interior designer & professor of furniture design at Malmstens Linköpings university talks about the importance of the body in technologies for thinking;

-You forget that theory is practice...– Text is form...To make the experience of the body's importance for knowledge an aspect that can be derived to one or another textual reference is to reject both phenomenology and its sources⁷.

⁶ Charney (2011)

⁷ Nobel (2014)

3 Research; technique, material, shape and scale.

I wanted to find the most labour-intensive way of making stoneware clay vessels, which is hand building. I am using parts of the time-consuming technique still used in China today to make hand built Yixing teapots. By making these stoneware vessels, I enter a long tradition of the hand-building technique of Yixing pottery and the even longer tradition in history of potters, as a novice. I had no guide book entering this project. I tried to mimic the Chinese potters I saw on the internet and began trying.

I won't be able to build a thousand vessels for the exhibition, but I will do as many as I can. I use stoneware clay without chamotte. The material originates from eroded bedrock that becomes importantly slow in dealing with temporality of permanence and perishability. Stoneware can be fired at a higher temperature than other clay, so that it sinters. The shard thus becomes more durable and waterproof, without the need of glazing. Stoneware clay has a double face in relation to time. Handled with care it is a most resilient and "permanent" union, but it can also easily scatter into shards, parts, and particles in dissolution. Looking for concepts of permanence and perishability existing in form, I find that the sphere is constant in relation to the fact that it leads forces on but it is not constant in relation to place, it moves. The square is persistent in its compact symmetry and harder to move. The edges on the square and the rectangle are less persistent the more distinct they are.

I used the same technique for doing all vessels, once I decided on the shape.

It would consist of a foot and a body that ended in an opening that directed towards the centre. Then the foot and the body and the opening could vary from vessel to vessel.

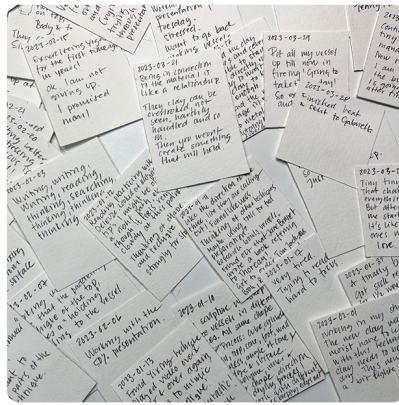
I choose that shape because of the "holding on" that I experience in the opening having a radius towards the centre, as a caring embrace so long the vessels are without lids.

I wanted the shape to be very simple and ordinary.

Downscaling the vessel to lose its practical function and resemble the narrow but sharp *welding flame* of my concentration, and able to fit in my hand.

4 Process

Making, thinking, reading, writing. What will come out of this? Making the vessel is a now-oriented practice. Like stage art. Almost endlessly returning to the moment, reframing the experience of time. I filmed my makings at a speeded tempo and I kept a journal through the making.



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Figure 4. Diary (Rothlin, A. 2023).

2.3.1 Making.

When making I need to be focused, and open to what happens. Suddenly the room is warmer, so the clay dries faster. Or I bang the clay too soft or too hard, because I was in a specific mood that day.

My goal with each vessel was to try to make it as carefully balanced as possible.

What state I was in when working was a parameter, without a question. This is very much a practice of concentration. Some days I was in a flow and others I couldn't coordinate my thoughts and hands. As I worked I discovered what happens when I slow down my work, or haste to as many as possible (still keeping my goal to make every vessel as carefully balanced as possible). And what difference the scale has. How the clay's humidity and drying time affects and when it was time to do a certain action. All learning was through mistakes or innovation. Thinking of Plato's world of ideas, of course I failed at making a vessel perfectly balanced. Every time. But having that goal made my work meaningful and full of energy.

Later, looking at the result I appreciated the marks I made, because they bear my commitment and sometimes I am most attracted to the ones I failed the most with. I accept them.

This is an ongoing process, a be:coming. Here I am now, today, forward I will continue thinkingmaking vessels.

The repetitive doing of the Yixing technique has a clear connection to temporality. In what order and with what speeds does the action of making take place? This has a vibration, a tempo. The beating of the clay has a voice that makes a repetitive sound, as the *Inter Action*, the negative space in between actions, makes a rhythm.

“Do, DONE. Do, DONE. Do, DONE....”

Returning again and again to the same material, technique and object.

Learning by the hands, what timing, pressure, and humidity is needed?

I made my own tools, when I understood what I needed. A hammer tool out of birch and thinner and more flexible paddlers and shapers out of bamboo. I kept the small metal brush that I used to apply slip and burnish the surface with.

2.3.2 Thinking.

Within phenomenology, the relationship between awareness and the objects of awareness is studied in particular, and seeks to explain or describe ideas and essence to us, as they appear to us. (Das Ding für Uns, "the thing for us", and Das Ding an Sich, "the thing in itself".)

I turned inward towards an empty openness. Thinking that nothingness can not die, that all change is union or dissolution of parts.

This quote is from The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, one of my favourite authors;

“ I must let my senses wander as my thought,
My eyes see without looking...
Go not to the object; let it come to you.⁸

Ulf Klarén (2014) describes the experience of reality as indescribable in its entirety but based on different levels such as categorical perception, direct experience and indirect. The perspective on our reality has changed since the middle of the 20th century. The satellites place us above our real physical reality as spectators with a god's gaze.

I think that is why I chose this analoge working process and the method of thinking by making. We find ourselves today in a juxtaposition between the near and the far, the side by side and in the dispersed.

⁸ Bennet (2010)

5 Result and discussion

The sixties *wear and tear battle* in Swedish Design history had a profound psychological motive (to free the youth from binding furniture inheritance) but led to spying on the already started, great acceleration in the Anthropocene. The climate crisis now challenges us to, without delay, try to re: think. New ways of material culture and value. Raised above the endless discussion of what is art or craft, now that Cartesian dualism and free market economics have been shown not to be resilient in systems.

So, is there hope of a future human habitat on earth?

There are many parts of us, trying to come together again from dissolution, trying to union.

Stillness is the opposite of life, but at the same time the binding that Bruno (Bornemark, J. 2019) talks about is only possible because everything strives to last.



Figure 5. Vessels OMsorg (Rothlin, A. 2023).

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Figure 2. Mayerlingdramat Kungliga Operan (Rothlin, A. 1996).

Figure 3. Matbord i Biskopsgårdendiabas (Rothlin, A. 2021).

Figure 4. Diary (Rothlin, A. 2023).

Figure 5. Vessels OMsorg (Rothlin, A. 2023).

7 Appendix