Material meditation: Experiencing craft as an extension to soma design

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Citation  
MATERIAL MEDITATION: EXPERIENCING CRAFT AS AN EXTENSION TO SOMA DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory paper applies a mindful practice to crafting to explore material qualities and build on the relationship between maker and material. We present the method “material meditation”; soma design inspired auto ethnographical reflections on interactions with materials, along with the resulting texts. We discuss the emerging qualities, and implications of such methods, showing how it was used to surface and reflect on material, situational and relational properties.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Soma Design is an approach to first-person design work with a focus on “…movements, somatics, and aesthetic sensibilities…”, as coined by Höök et al. (2018, p. 2). It is based on somaesthetics by Shusterman (1999), a philosophy that advocates sensitizing ourselves to the lived experience of bodily perception, performance, and presentation. One recent example is how Tsaknaki et. al. (2019) used the act of breathing to connect with other bodies in a design project. Other examples include addressing feminist design qualities (Höök et. al. 2021), as a resource when designing for bodily awareness (Ståhl et. al. 2021), and novel musical instruments (Avila et. al. 2020). One aspect of lesser focus in SOMA Design is the experiences inherent in the crafting involved in any practice, which might also result in the estrangement of other bodies and materials.

INTRODUCTION

Everyday life is filled with routines and mundane interactions that are commodified or made ubiquitous, leading to wasteful behavior instead of teaching us, as Ingold says, to “take materials seriously” (2007). How can we build relationships with the materials around us? By approaching the experience of craft using first-person design methods in line with SOMA Design, a practice centered around somatic sensibilities (Höök 2018), we explore how one might build an appreciation of materials, and by extension change our relationship with the environment around us. We present the method “material meditation”; simple craft exercises approached as a bodily experience worth paying attention to, along with the results of practicing this approach and possible implications for future practices. This paper contributes to design research by presenting and discussing a method of how to perform “attending” to materials and our environments, encouraged by Ingold (2007), and Aktas (2022) among others.
One line of research bridging design and craft is work centered around preciousness. Earlier research on preciousness includes Verbeek (2005), who lists the aspects that make an object precious in terms of function, symbolism, and material qualities. This was expanded upon by Odom et al (2009) with more concrete examples of engagement, histories, augmentation, and perceived durability. Further, Tsaknaki et al (2017) discuss engagement and histories through imbuing technology with qualities related to jewelry, concluding that preciousness emerges as an object is used as well as something “more than its material components”. This suggests explorations of preciousness in different materials (and designs) to identify how they behave in different situations. More recent work touching on preciousness includes Carpenter and Overholt (2018) building jewelry devices and Wu and Devendorf (2020) disassembling textiles. Due to its intersection with topics such as preservation, disposal, repair, and longevity, the topic craft also relates to reflections on ‘heirloom status’ (Baytaş et al. 2018), designing for ‘ensoulment’ (Blevis and Stolterman, 2007), and sustainable design more broadly (e.g. DiSalvo et al., 2010).

Appearing in different contexts and cultures around the world, our use of the word ‘meditation’ draws inspiration from the everyday definition of ‘meditation’: “a written or spoken discourse expressing considered thoughts on a subject” (Oxford Languages, 2022). The meditations presented below are directly inspired by Ingold’s description of sawing a plank (2007), but focusing on the felt experience instead of the actions.

METHOD

To sensitize ourselves to materials, we performed “material meditation”; sessions of engaging with materials, precluded by somaesthetic activities, and followed by a written reflection. The attention given to the experience and the soma-material relationship is what sets this apart from other crafting practices. Preparations, included slow breathing and body scans as described by Höök (2018) to bring attention to the body and the somatic sensibilities. The meditations were performed by doing foundational craft work like cutting and shaping different materials to produce simple sample pieces (see Figure 1), with a reflection written after each activity. Figures 2 and 3 show hot glass and a field behind the patch of trees mentioned below.
MATERIAL MEDITATIONS

WOOD

It’s a late summer afternoon, and I’m walking through a patch of trees. Wet grass and mud make squelching sounds as I step. The air is fresh after a heavy rain, and I can smell the damp vegetation and freshly cut wood. I’m carrying a chainsaw and a length of rope, my father-in-law behind me carrying my one-year-old child. We approach the tree marked to get cut and gesture to discuss where we want it to fall. I place my hand on the trunk and think about its age. It’s probably about my age. When I make the first cut, I’m hit by the soft dewy smell of the wood and the oily tang of the chainsaw. My father-in-law gestures. He wants to do the last cut. I walk over to him, and we swap child for chainsaw.

I step away to safety, talking to the little life in my arms while he stares at the activity. I’m telling him that we are clearing space for the other trees to grow bigger. That material will not go to waste. There is a loud crack as the final piece of the trunk snap and the tree falls. The leaves make a swoosh as they brush their neighbors, then silence them. We pick out some lengths to be saved, then we go off for the next cut. Everything not worth saving is to be firewood. It’s a long afternoon at the chopping block. We set aside a mix of oak, beech, ash, cherry, and rowan, the ends are painted with glue and the pieces are set to dry. I check in on the pieces again in winter. My son is now 19 months and running around in overalls, exploring. I cautiously climb the ladder to the loft of the barn. The pile looks exactly like we left it, and it’s another couple of months until we can cut the material for use.

GLASS

I can feel the warmth striking my face as I step into the workshop. The air smells of hot steel and old wood. We greet the instructors and get a small tour. As we move about in the room the sharp heat coming off the furnace is a radiating presence. Warm but also promising danger and with a low hum filling the room. I’m completely warm and sweating slightly as we finally get to interact with the material. A steel rod is dipped in melted glass in the furnace, and we get to sit at a workbench, receiving the material for shaping. The glass is at first glowing white with the viscosity of running honey. A constant turning is needed to keep the glass on the end of the rod, and we can shape it by moving the rod or manipulating it with tools. We take turns practicing. It is stressful at the start. The glass keeps running like Greek honey. After a couple of tries, I can make more deliberate movements. Rolling, tilting, and cutting the glass with heavy clippers. The material is so hot I can feel the heat on my face and my hands, giving me a spatial sense of the closeness. First runny, the glass starts resisting as it cools down and a different technique is required. Different shapes can be made. Then I discover I have worked for too long with the material. The yielding resistance is gone. The realization starts in the low of my back and travels up my spine and out my arm. But I cannot stop the movement I’ve started. I watch as my hand cuts the glass. The clippers make a crunching sound and the material cracks, small pieces of glass are scattered across the floor. I have overstepped in the dialogue with the material, shoulders hanging in defeat. I’m comforted by an instructor that the material is gathered and reused and by the idea of knowing the material a bit closer than before. Trying other methods, we dripped, pushed, and rolled the glass into different shapes.

METAL

There is something special about the quiet in a space meant for work and activity, anticipation or potency. It’s early morning in the metal shop of a local maker space. The tang of metal and oil tastes rather than smells. I get settled and get out boxes of materials to use. Steel, a bit of brass, and a big chunk of aluminum.

Some are sharp, others scratched and worn down. I move to the workbench with my prices, all different shapes, and lengths, and weight comforting in my hand. I set out to make a small collection of samples, exploring shapes and sizes. I cut a solid brass cylinder, small chips flying as I pull the saw. Scraping away at the material. I trim and decide to polish a rectangular piece of steel. I sand it in several steps on top of a machinist’s stone. Making the surfaces flat. It becomes sharp, biting into my hand if I grip it tight, far different from the gentle piece I started with. Working with metal by hand is slow but rewarding. With each pull of the file and scrape on sandpaper I can feel material being removed. The metal is solid and unyielding, but still shapeable in increments. Finished with a cut, I’ve worked up a sweat and the metal are hot to the touch. The work has left an impression on both bodies.

PLASTIC

‘Acrylic cannot handle stress’ I joke to myself after cutting my finger on a corner of the piece I’m cutting. I was getting through to a corner in the material, and in my excitement pushed too hard, breaking off a piece instead of letting the saw file through it. I feel my stress, icy spikes running down my neck and back, reflected in the jagged edge of the plastic and I take a moment to gather myself. With more care, I’m able to sand the edges, producing a smooth edge, but as I wipe the piece clean, I can see scratches and wear, showing use after just a couple of minutes. The piece has the sharp chemical smell of new plastic and feels strangely light for the glossy surface.
DISCUSSION

As suggested by Verbeek (2005), Odom et al. (2009), and Tsaknaki (2017) the memory of crafting becomes embedded in the physical artifact, recalled by observation and touch as notions of *history*, and *engagement*. This plays out, similar to Schön’s “conversation with the material” (1968) in three different ways in the meditations above; with memories embedded in the pieces, memories of movement and being moved, and of context and effort. First, we can see above how the pieces bring about the memory of the movement and bodily sensations from the act of crafting. The *intra-action* (Barad 2007) happens sometimes violently, as in the case of acrylic cutting, when the more-than-human bodies involved act on each other. Secondly, the meditations reflect the situation and context of the craft, both physical and social, for example as the memories of family, weather, and time passing are linked to the slow process of drying wood. Similarly, the glass prototype was described with nostalgia from the experience of making it. Lastly, the pieces can be said to embody the effort, time and effort of sawing and polishing. Through material meditation, these processes and efforts are made visible.

In the meditations above, we see a wide berth of unearthed interactive qualities both material and relational, like the experience of hardness, density, thermal properties, texture, weight, friction, and aging. Each has a generative quality that could be the center of explorative design work. This result links directly to this paper’s aim of sensitizing ourselves to materials and shows potential for wider use. We speculate that material meditations can be used as an exercise to center work on the lived experience and build appreciation for materials, regardless of skill, and see potential in use in designing *heirlooms* and *ensouled* artifacts, by Baytaş et al. (2018) and Nelson & Stolterman, (2003). Further, it would be interesting to see meditations done on less tangible craft practices such as coding or digital art in the spirit of McCullough (1996).

One unintentional aspect arising in the meditations was the experience of the context. Soma design can be perceived as being focusing inward, ignoring, or devaluing the context of interaction in favor of the “inner” experience. We see in the examples above how some interactions become performative, even in single human material interactions as the material itself responds, like the acrylic breaking. This shows that the work of sensitizing to our soma can be used for approaching also other bodies and contexts, bridging SOMA Design and more material-centered practices.

Using the theory by Redström (2017), what is presented here is a *method* aimed at reassessing a designer’s base knowledge: their relationship with materials. Along with the referenced work above using craft and engaging in materials, this paper follows the movement or the unspoken *program* of building practices to design a sustainable future. The meditation presented here is a *particular* instance of us attending to the material through our bodies, an example of a new group of emerging methods attending more-than-human bodies.

CONCLUSION

This paper shows that by using ‘material meditation’ we can intentionally pay attention to human-material interactions in craft and bring the entanglement to the surface, in line with what is suggested by Aktaş and Noronha (2021) among others. The focus on these relationships is a way to build personal connections with materials, and by extension, the world around us. With the pressing crisis of both ecological and social sustainability, these methods could be vital to building practices and habits for a sustainable future.

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