

Reflection and Transparency: Rhythms in Experiences with Craft

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Abstract

This paper proposes a framework for reading craft objects as embodying rhythms of transparency and reflection, and for contextualising their cultural placement as a rhythmical bringing together of flow and event. These terms are explained through approaches to engagement in Digital Art and Interaction Design as presented by Bolter and Gromala (2003), and through Dewey's analysis of the art object as experience (1934, McCarthy & Wright 2004). An analysis of three selected conceptual works from the author's recent practice opens a discussion of the potential value and shortcomings of the proposed framework. In conclusion it is suggested that craft's undecidability, while often problematic in representing the field to other creative domains, is analytically approachable as both an internal characteristic of the object, and as a unique and valuable aspect of its consumption as a cultural artefact.

Windows and Mirrors

This paper rests on a premise central to Interaction Design and Human Computer Interaction, that is, transparency. Technologies which perceptually disappear are held to be those that have the most profound effect on society (Weiser 1994). Transparency is conflated with usability, as the user is directed towards the task in hand rather than the frame of the technology itself (Norman 2002). To understand what is meant by this kind of transparency or disappearance, consider its counterpart, breakdown: Young, after Heidegger, gives as an example a car that fails to start – in such a situation “one is likely to become aware of the network of life-connections that is one's world and in which the car plays a vital role” (2001, p.37). It is the special role of art to approximate such breakdown, overcoming the inconspicuousness of the everyday.

The assumption of neutrality that underlies transparency as a goal is being reconsidered, however, partly because of the embarrassingly high failure rate of newly installed systems (HCI studies include the London Underground, building sites and air traffic control rooms). Methodological solutions to this situation are generally drawn from the disciplines of cognition and psychology (Carroll 2003, Benyon et al 2004), but the past five years have witnessed an increasing openness to approaches that treat the body, the object and the situation more holistically (Dourish 2004, McCullough 2004). The particular stance this paper examines is that of oscillation between transparency and presence.

Bolter and Gromala in their book *Windows and Mirrors* (2003) analysed works shown in the Art Gallery at SIGGRAPH 2000, one of the world's largest trade shows and conferences for computer graphics and applications. They concluded that while art has had its histories of disappearing, ‘painters do not have to aim for transparency and neither do digital designers’ (p35). A key example given is the Wooden Mirror; consisting of tiles of wood in a frame an image is created of whoever stands before it (p32-34). Using on-board cameras and servo motors, the tiles are tilted to reflect light, creating the likeness. While playing literally with notions of transparency and reflection, the work overcomes everyday expectations of material and function, and of our roles as users of digital interfaces and as viewers of art works. The authors comment that digital art tends to favour reflectivity, as this is its function in relation to the world of ‘serious’ productivity software, but propose that elements of reflectivity and transparency in oscillation produce the most compelling interactions (p67-68).

Flow and Event

Dewey's analysis of art as experience is deeply embedded in the culturally constructed textures of the everyday (1934), and his writings are currently being examined in the Interaction Design community in terms of user experiences with and through computer systems (McCarthy & Wright 2004). The art object in Dewey's terms, is not something apart and removed from our experience of life, but acts to punctuate that everyday flow, creating rhythms of struggle and achievement, and balance and counterbalance (1934, p16-17). For Dewey, (and this is why he is important to Interaction Design), experience is not something inherent in either the object or the subject, but something that occurs between them. He understands it to be a process of sense-making, and links individual experience to the broader contextual structures that support it. This allows us to approach objects for analysis and critique outside of the normative gallery environment.

Craft

Contemporary Craft has been found to be undecidable (Kettley 2005, Mazanti 2003, 2004, White 2004). It occupies a unique cultural position in which it can draw on deeply utilitarian roots, choose to reflect upon itself, or look outwards, reflecting aspects of the world around it. Thus, the contemporary craft object has a particular fluidity in terms of visibility: in the gallery space it is rarified by attention; in the home it may be similarly enframed as an art work, or be treated as a satisfyingly useful object. It may even cross back and forth between these two states, oscillating between spaces of social meaning.

Craft also has its own particular narratives of disappearance; as a deeply engaged process the discipline has often suffered for its emphasis on tacit knowledge, as the maker "withdraws into isolation and ascends along the arc that ends in a transcendence of consciousness" (Glassie 1999, p119). This 'unthinking' working state is held to produce in turn reliable objects that disappear in use (a beautifully balanced bowl, a well turned handle), the ultimate transparency sought by usability design. However, as Dewey helpfully points out, it is an odd notion that the artist does not think (1934, p15-16), and so we may look for rhythms of reflection and transparency not only in the framing of the object, as above, but also in the formal arrangements of the object itself.

In reflecting upon itself, it is the workmanship of craft that is often being reframed and commented upon. Originally revered for delivering utilitarian transparency, in an art object, framed only for its power to reflect, this workmanship becomes anachronistic. Out of context, and held up as an achievement in its own right, it feels false, and can become only a signifier of craft's historical identity, a strategy for narratives of elsewhere and elsewhere (Kälviäinen 2000).

In a continuity of experience, however, the intensity of that commitment, and the thoughts embodied in the qualitative media, may be transmitted to the viewer, engaged in sense-making with the resulting object (Brett 2005, p30, Dewey 1934, p16).

Three examples

This section of the paper introduces three conceptual designs from the author's research practice, situated between Contemporary Craft and Interaction Design. These are Speckled Jewellery (2004 – 2006), ensemble (2006-2007), and Stille (2007). Each is treated to an analysis of its internal elements as contributing to either transparency or reflection, and then to how it may be contextualised in the everyday as event. It is important to note that these cover experiential aspects of the works in both a visual and a digital sense. They have been developed with the materiality of interaction in mind as well as a visual and tactile materiality, with the ultimate aim of resolving the relationship between these facets.

Speckled Jewellery 2004 - 2006

The Speckled Jewellery was a suite of five networked neckpieces for a friendship group, and was intended as a concept for the everyday. It was a form of presence indicator, as each of the five wearers had a unique colour identifier, which would blink at a different rate according to their distance from others in the group. The aim of the work was to reflect processes of individual and group identity through the presentation of the means to approach or avoid others.



transparency and reflection – Reflection was encouraged in the interaction through the stripping back of functionality, and through the occasional breakdowns in radio communication due to environmental factors (Kettley 2007). In the current context of commercially available communication devices, the use of mixed media and the development of a personal visual language were also reflective strategies. Transparency occurred as the friends became familiar with the interface, reading the coloured lights seamlessly as the identities of the other women (“red is Jane”). Formally speaking, the jewellery was simultaneously reflective (because of its scale and the novelty of the flashing LEDs), and transparent (as colourways and visual motifs had been chosen with this group in mind, and in that the pieces formed a visual family).

flow and event – The jewellery was seen by the friends as eventful and not quite everyday, due to its size and of course the lights; as a strategy to counter this, most of the women wore plain dark colours, managing their levels of personal display. The jewellery was seen as suitable for events such as parties or public events that would call for “dressing up”. Similarly, evaluating interactive work can be problematic in the automatic creation of an event. In this case, activities encouraging approach and avoidance behaviour were set up at the Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, but this could not approximate long term ownership and use patterns of the jewellery, which was ultimately understood as a part of that event.

ensemble 2006 – 2007

This group of pieces is still in development at the time of writing, but an initial collection of dramatic body pieces were used to elicit movements in a workshop earlier in the project. At the same time, pieces resolved as contemporary jewellery without any technology were produced as part of the development of materials and visual language for the project, and these have been exhibited in their own right (CAJ 2007, reSkin 2007, Visual Arts Scotland 2007). The ultimate form of the work is an installation of sound and jewellery which can be manipulated and explored by audience members.



transparency and reflection – This series employed a visual language derived from a much wider range of materials and processes than in the author's previous work, with a heavy emphasis on areas of texture and dramatic form as a means to initiate interaction. This is reflective if the pieces are approached as jewellery, but is intended to offer transparent modes of interaction, presenting intuitive forms associated with actions, and textures which invite touch. The unpredictable nature of the sound feedback obtained through manipulation of the jewellery is a strategy for reflection on sound in our environment, and on the ways in which we share personal information (in that certain collaborative behaviour reveals pre-recorded narratives) (Kettley 2007, Kettley & Smyth 2007).

flow and event – These pieces are designed to be dramatic and to highlight the eventful nature of jewellery, almost as products with affordances for personal demeanour (Candy & Edmundsen 2006, Kettley & Smyth 2007). That is, jewellery enables us to create personas for public performance. Presenting these pieces as an interactive installation invites this kind of role playing outside of the everyday constraints of fitting in with expectations.

Stille 2007

Stille is a neckpiece which seeks to include sound in a coherent way with other material elements. It draws on the parched land of Australia as a metaphor for stillness and waiting, and uses insect sounds to suggest hidden life. The sounds are delivered through the high collar at a very low volume, audible only to the wearer as they move their head across the 'soft switches'.



transparency and reflection – The visual strategy of the piece is one of rhythm, achieved through repetition of form and colour; punctuation is achieved through high spots of a brighter tone at intervals across the form. Its texture is reminiscent of feathers or bark, reflecting other skins than our own. The interaction strategy oscillates between reflection and transparency – the wearer does not have to 'press a button' to play the sounds, but neither do the sounds play continuously; rather, they

rely on the roll of the head across three pairs of conductive ink patches (soft switches) to complete three different circuits, playing the sounds associated with those positions. While rolling the head is a natural thing to do in many situations, to do it continually in order to trigger an outcome will attract attention; thus a transparent interface can become a reflective one – if alone, the wearer becomes aware of their own physicality, and if in public, they become aware of their increasingly unusual action through the attention of others.

flow and event – This piece has been devised as an event, and its natural habitat is the gallery. Within this context, however, the piece is again a reflective event, as the normative static display does not reveal the sounds. To hear the sounds as intended, the viewer has to become involved, the piece removed from its case or plinth, and the collar put on. The wearer then has to go through a performance of usually intimate movements to hear the sounds (which perversely, cannot be 'performed' for others due to their low volume). Placing an event such as this in a gallery environment in turn reflects on the kind of flow we expect to encounter even there.

Discussion and conclusion

The works discussed above have been framed in different ways, setting up expectations of experience. Works presented within a gallery environment are treated often as exceptional instances, contexts for 'having an experience', as opposed to the experiences of daily life. In contrast, works framed as products are expected to become a part of the everyday flow; contemporary craft works, encountered in a gallery and taken into the domestic environment, blur these distinctions. Most interesting is contemporary work that in its internal elements continues to offer 'an experience', while simultaneously being subsumed into the everyday – in its ability to move from one configuration to the other it becomes fluid, ready to offer moments of experience rather than a grand spectacle, facilitating rhythm.

One interesting outcome of this brief analysis is the revealed normative rhythm of flow and event expected of the gallery space, a rhythm which digital craft disrupts. More work needs to be done in combining the two approaches into a coherent framework (Dewey for example also seeks to analyse rhythms inherent in the arrangement of moments of tension and release in art works). Using such a framework can help the artist and craftsperson see their work in new ways; it encourages us to pay closer attention to how our artworks may "come into being in a social world and what they mean as a result of how they move through that world" (Metcalf in discussion in Johnson 2002, p.117).

While the author's practice lies at the intersection of craft and technology, frameworks such as these can only be said to be successful if they are 'backwards compatible' – that is, if they work convincingly with existing forms of craft as well as with digital and technological forms. Further work would therefore include a more thorough test of the framework through reflexive analysis of extended experiences with such pieces. In the meantime, it is suggested that this approach potentially offers a valuable way to connect the internal formal elements of craft works with their cultural and experiential placement.

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