

A WAY OF DOING

USE, DURABILITY
AND TEXTILES

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In this age of mass production when everything must be planned and designed, design has become the most powerful tool with which man shapes his tools and environments (and, by extension, society and himself).
Victor Papanek 1971

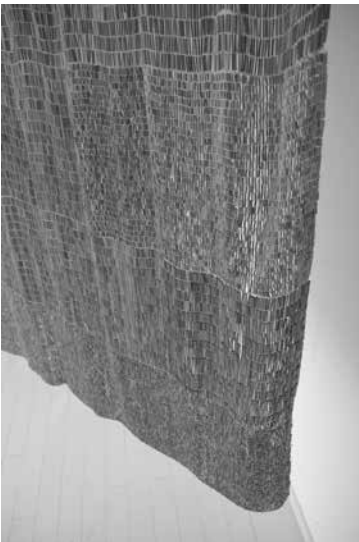


TACIT KNOWLEDGE

On a languorous summer's day, you arrive at the field and observe what has changed since your last visit. You had been counting the days, waiting. With the modest knowledge of a beginner, you had predicted the right moment with uncertainty. Carefully crossing the bordering weeds, you approach the allotment. You move to the middle of the crop that you planted all those months ago and have meticulously followed ever since, which now rises well above your waist: straight up, swaying gently. Just a little longer—perhaps just a few days—and the grain will be ripe. Then the stems will dry out and become brittle. It is best to harvest today. After all, you have set your sights on those stems. This time, the grain is just a by-product.

Design is shaping the world, and is doing so to an ever greater degree. In our Anthropocene age, a plethora of possible domains have unfolded for designers. The potential objectives of design are also becoming more diverse. The usual answers to people's basic needs, such as food, clothing and shelter, are being complemented by poignant problems concerning the provision of clean air, for example, or pure water. Today, things that people had for centuries considered self-evident are under threat by commercial interests in a defective global system. Beyond the glitter of the new and the temporary, designers are looking at real problems in broad societal contexts. An attitude of engagement drives the design practice that has relevance today, and research and education play an important role.

A designer is always a researcher. The development of one's own design practice means seeking appropriate frameworks, critically questioning apparent certainties and continuing to explore concrete design problems. That investigative character often prevails as certain fundamental questions surface in the practice of design. *Textiles as a Vessel for Tacit Knowledge* is a research project in the arts in which design practice is connected with ecological and sociological issues. This research is specifically focussed on the preservation and perpetuation of tacit knowledge. In an age in which the pressure



to quantify everything is increasing, we risk misjudging the potential of less articulated practices.

You greet the field as you have known it until now, and waver between using shears or a sickle. You decide on the latter. The sickle reminds you of a hooked knife, and a cutting gesture corresponds with that idea. Hesitant –this time, you hadn't looked online, nor had you read the instructions, which in any case had not come with the sickle—you start a first row. It is arduous work. You think that perhaps the sickle needs to be sharpened, but the sudden, deep cut that you unwittingly slice in your hand would indicate otherwise. So that is not what is wrong. The sickle is razor-sharp, but it is neither knife nor shears. It has ways all its own. The cut in your hand humbles you, and you resolve to be more pliable. You try again, paying close attention to the tool. Your movements gradually become fluid, effective. The sickle carves a path across the plot, cleaving and collecting stalks. The plants tumble apace, off to the side.

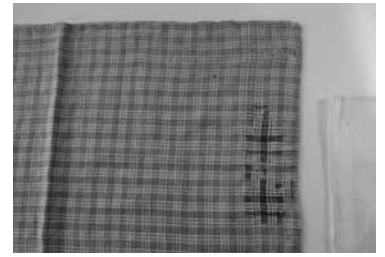
We can know more than we can tell. A good deal of our knowledge does not lend itself to words, cannot be expressed in words. We are referring here to tacit knowledge.¹ This is a concept that can best be unravelled by linking it to actual practice. In practice, insights are at work, ways of knowing that do not submit to specification. This, however, is not to say that knowledge of this kind cannot be expressed at all. Nonetheless, explicit efforts to articulate such knowledge end in failure, as anthropologist Tim Ingold claims. There are ways in which tacit knowledge can be spoken about, so that it does not only adhere to the individual practitioner, and its insights can be expressed. This kind of speaking requires a different kind of listening, an attentiveness that shifts the focus from a noisy rational motto to a discourse expressed between the lines.

Tacit knowledge is at home in the workplace. It reveals itself in the reality of doing, of making things happen. It is not unthinking, but rather highly concentrated, yet it manifests itself in the act more easily than in the description. Telling its story, it works its way to our attention, but does not let itself be known in weighed-up rationale. Tacit knowledge defies the urge to make everything quantifiable. It values what cannot be put in words, yet can still be known.

In this context, what does 'practice' mean? A narrow interpretation stifles good understanding. Hence, we approach practice as an

¹ See Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 1966.

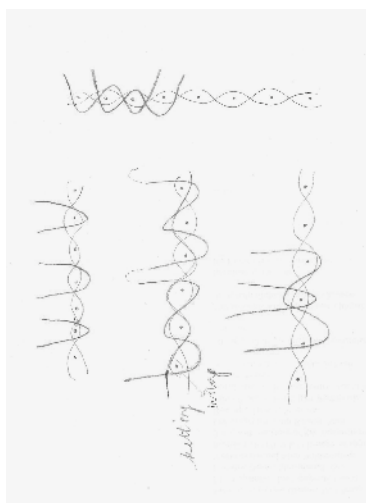
assembly point for everyone who actively finds himself in reality. A certain repetition of actions is implied, so that one can actually speak of practice, of persistent doing. It is important to recognize the breadth of this term, because in this way, tacit knowledge does not exclusively belong to any specific domain. In abstract form, tacit knowledge connects the most diverse domains and disciplines.



The work of the craftsman lends itself well to the discussion of the connection between practice and knowledge. Skills developed through long-term practice and devotion characterize the processes of the craftsman. An experienced capacity for observation directs the decisions that are made, but should not be translated into a specific, rigid procedure. Materials and awareness correspond with one another in the working process. We also find such dynamics in the skilful practices of, for example, health practitioners, teachers, farmers, cleaners and parents, in short, everyone who does not simply follow the instructions but engages themselves in attention to what is taking place in living reality.

The importance of work carried out or done by hand is hard to overestimate. It is not summarized as a literal production with the hand, but refers to what the hand does for our thinking. Martin Heidegger gave the hand a supremely important role when he stated that the hand was the cradle of mankind.² The hand comes before the thought. It feels and exists in reality, and gives us the ability to identify and assess. The hand makes the world around us recognizable, and in so doing, gives us a way of being that is filled with perception. From this correspondence between material and consciousness, significant actions and insights acquire form. This perspective undermines the hitherto accepted hierarchy of the head before the hand, the intellectual above all else.

Where the sleeve ends and the wrist begins, there are threads hanging loose. That was not always the case. The threads used to be gathered in neatly arranged loops. As time goes on, they become looser, until they are flapping around your wrist in unruly semicircles. There is a clear evolution in this process. Apparently, the unravelling is contagious. You know that you have waited too long. Otherwise, you could have stopped the initial unravelling with a single quick stitch. Carefully, you tug at a loop that is still small, assessing the damage. It makes no sense just to attach something that clearly wants to detach itself.



You search for a beginning, and following the stitches, you realize that the start is much higher, far beyond reach, at the top of the sleeve. Determined, you decide to follow the seam upwards.

CRAFT OF USE

Textiles, as a material and a medium, are so strikingly close to humans that they sometimes have to do without special attention. With a certain self-evidence, we crawl under the covers at night and into our clothes in the morning. In acquiring new pieces, made of textiles, we more frequently concern ourselves with fleeting notions about status and appearance than where it comes from and how it was produced. Just as with other merchandise, the supply is constantly expanding, while transparency about origins is ever decreasing. From a commercial perspective, a certain obscurity about how things are produced is even desirable, if consumers are to continue to play their role with a clear conscience.

Unknowing and apparently powerless, all that is still expected of us is that we passively continue to consume. The dominant mode of capitalist production demands constant growth and forces us to play our part as willing purchasers of its superfluous products. Perpetually reinventing itself, this system compels us to consume ever newer merchandise with its own market logic as the only ideology. The slick campaigns intended to convince us rely on the illusion of products that are devoid of use, without life.³

Where use is concerned, we in fact find interesting practices that have greater potential for personal development and well-being than the commercial circuit. Use is a multifaceted world that requires skills in maintenance, adaptation, repair, wearing, exchanging, recycling and so on. Use reveals itself, just like the tacit knowledge on which many of its practices depend in the reality of everyday life. In contrast to the short-lived moment of the (impulsive) purchase, use takes place in the space of time. Time allows objects to shift from merchandise to junctions of social exchange.⁴

The fact that you own something does not yet mean that you know how to use it, as Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen has said. This poignant wisdom indeed presumes that use requires certain knowledge. Researcher Kate Fletcher introduced the term 'craft of use' to refer to practices of use that operate from a social and ecological benevolence that runs parallel to or is even entirely distinct from the

³ 'When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance.' John Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, 1934.
⁴ When time is ignored ... the object becomes a commodity of capital exchange rather than a crucible of social exchange.' Jeremy Till quoted in *Craft of Use: Post-growth Fashion*, p. 102

marketplace. A many-sided collection of examples—primarily related to apparel, but equally applicable to other kinds of objects—illustrates how attention can be paid to our careful and meaningful relationship to everyday objects. The shifting of emphasis from acquisition to use reflects an appreciation of the process, more than the product. A well-maintained object lasts longer. This lasting longer inherently already enlarges its durability coefficient, but the attitude that drives this well-considered maintenance also reaches farther than the single object. Beyond the most visible virtues of good use, craft of use also shows us a different route in the world and allows us to be more actively involved in the external world and its complex systems. Although greater durability can conceivably be created by materials, design and production, a different strength is required: ‘a social system that shapes an ideology of use’.⁵



Cautiously, you loosen the thread, but just a short distance further, you make a radical decision. You cut off the entire cuff. Ha! The sleeve now ends in little loops, surprised by the scissors. Carefully, you pick them up, loop by loop, and collect them on a long, narrow needle. The piece that has been cut off can now unravel to its heart's delight. From it, you pull out a continuous thread, and roll it into a ball. The problem is now a completely different one, and it is reminiscent of the familiar image of an incomplete piece of knitting. A second needle makes it possible to work again, to reknit. The thread and the loops are once again united and end up curling solidly back together.

SOCIAL SYSTEM

According to ecological principles, nothing is truly independent of the whole, and every intervention in the system has consequences that reach further than what is consciously intended or can be immediately perceived. Everything is connected to everything else. This interconnection has become more emphatic, now that the expansion in the scale of human activity seems to be making the world ever smaller. Our current geological age, the Anthropocene, even explicitly defines human activity as the predominant power that shapes the world. In increasingly radical interventions, techno-industrial processes shape the foundations on which our civilization rests. Earth is no longer a neutral material formed during enormous spans of time, but increasingly a product that is—intentionally or otherwise—

⁵ 'Durability, while facilitated by materials, design and construction, is overseen by an altogether different vector of action: by a social system that shapes an ideology of use.' From Kate Fletcher, *Craft of Use: Post-growth Fashion*, p. 183



produced by mankind.⁶ It reveals how the scale and the impact of our actions have expanded, alas all too often with disastrous consequences. For this reason, it is urgent that we learn to think as we act, expand our capacity for perception and our attention to our actual environment.

The perspective from which we observe durability needs to be expanded to social systems that apply judicious living processes, and do not simply await future technological innovations.

Sociologist Richard Sennett responds to this by stating that we would understand the world better if we better understood how things are made.⁷ We can indeed justifiably ask ourselves how we can take responsibility for a world that has been handed to us ready-made, and in the face of which we individuals are powerless. Modern society allows people to lose their skills and their insights. Perhaps we are even not materialistic enough, because we simply experience the material world as consumers, without real appreciation.

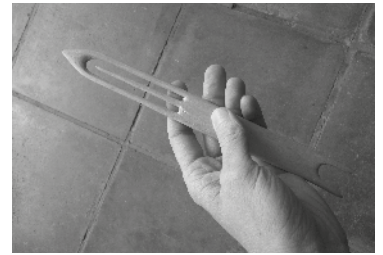
A craftsman's motivation to produce good work is intrinsic. He or she is involved, engaged. In a never-ending process of finding and solving problems, the craftsman improves on the quality of his work without being crippled by a drive to achieve inhuman perfection. Dedication characterizes the process of craftsmanship. This inherent characteristic encourages craftsmanship to deal constructively with specific problems.

In the footsteps of the craftsperson, we can learn how to be good citizens. Craft as a practice in which tacit knowledge is applied offers useful knowledge that can also be applied in other domains. We can be the craftsmen and craftswomen of our environment, in which we not only develop certain skills to that end, but equally involve and dedicate ourselves to concrete problems. With a pragmatic attitude we can apply ourselves to complex work, the results of which can often be uncertain. From the craftsperson, we can learn to dedicate ourselves to work which takes place in the here and now and which is human and consequently imperfect.

Making lye, with caution, wearing safety glasses and gloves. Water and —this time—white powder. Fumes escape when the two are brought together. Vinegar water is always close by, in case you mess up with that caustic material. You leave the turbid fluid to sit, letting it cool off. Meanwhile, you have heated water in a bain-marie to melt oil and wax. Beeswax—the good kind. The smooth grains dissolve willingly in the warm oil. It is all fluid now.

⁶ See also Stephen Graham, 'City Ground', *Places Journal*, November 2016.
⁷ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 2008

The still-caustic lye meets the oil and wax mixture. A whisk encourages the two substances to be receptive to one another. You keep whisking, and try to feel just when the reaction you are hoping for will take place. You do not know how long—it is your first time, and you can't feel anything through the top of the whisk. You have to try to see when the soap leaves a trace, without knowing what a trace of that kind looks like. Someone who has been doing it for years says it is a bit like thickening a sauce. Time passes, and still no sign. You think you are imagining that the substance is growing thicker. The deep yellow colour makes you hopeful, but your arms are growing tired. The whisk suddenly draw marks in the brew; you can see where it's been. The trace slowly sinks back into the surface. The two substances have accepted one another and assumed new characteristics. You pour it out. Let it sit, then cut it in pieces. Soap!

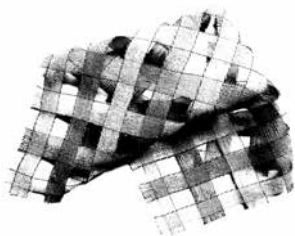


LEARNING TO READ

Textiles take shape through connections. Threads move in loops around and through one another, are crossed over one another, are knotted and woven together. Countless ways to make such connections result in an enormous diversity of techniques that again and again create a supple whole. Making textiles is making connections. The entire practice of creating textiles is itself also housed within a greater whole. Uses and narratives—both collective and personal—are sustained in textiles. As our most commonly shared functional material, textiles are living heritage. Today, they are still being produced according to some of the same techniques used thousands of years ago. Production increased in scale and speed, but it still relies on more or less the same principles as when our civilizations first began. It is not only the techniques, structures and materials that form a direct connection to the past, but textiles incorporate cultural codes, motives and formal elements that refer to the thinking and practices of our distant ancestors. For example, the 'sown field' is a much-loved theme whose origins go back to Neolithic times. It expresses the hope of a good harvest and fertility, and it still adorns the trim of clothing and household linens.⁸

A large percentage of our material culture is made up of textiles and textile-related objects. Instead of wanting to bear witness to some unequivocal universal history, in all their variety, textiles bear witness to a chronicle told in many voices. It is precisely as something

8 The 'sown field' is a motif composed of lines and dots. The lines refer to furrows in a field and the dots to grain. There are many variations on this motif and they are still in use in parts of Eastern Europe. See E.J.W. Barber, *Weaving the Social Fabric* (1991).



that is ubiquitous and sometimes even banal that textiles harbour such wealth. Learning to read these chronicles calls on sensory capacities and requires an involvement that is lacking in the mere consumption of objects.

Consumption is the opposite of use. It is the unthinking acquisition and disposition of products, a giving over of oneself to the desires or requisites of the marketplace and its production. Everyday living is in fact so unpredictable and changeable that there can be no absolute guidelines. In order to satisfy our real needs, we need to learn to trust our own sense of judgment in how we relate to the physical world. We find winks of the eye to this in the materials themselves. When you polish your shoes, why do you use a woolen rag when you wouldn't use that specific rag to wipe up spilled oil? How do you clean such a rag and indeed, is it worthy of being cleaned? What are all the things that a piece of fabric can be used for? Was it once a curtain, now suitable for a coat? Perhaps a blanket, and now something else?

Good usage assesses objects in their specific context and down through time. It is our sensory capacities, and more specifically our hands, that gives meaning to how we relate to textiles. Learning to read textiles takes place by means of feeling it, stroking it, toying with it. People read textiles more with the hands than with the eyes. We are encouraged to touch, to decipher and to assess. It is from all this sensibility that such insight can evolve.

INDUSTRY

The necessity of investigating these processes comes from the current critical state of design, production and consumption. How we relate to objects is characterized far more by alienation than by any meaningful significance or substance. The social conditions exemplified by the sector raise urgent questions. The expansion of scale that has taken place since the Industrial Revolution has created horrific problems that we today still have no idea how to cope with. The abominable conditions of our own regions some two centuries ago have migrated to other parts of the world, where textile production carries on in merciless ways.⁹ The market dictates a speed and scale that is inhuman and unsustainable. Everyone loses.

How can we produce locally without falling back into a preindustrial society of scarcity? How can we satisfy varying needs with local means? In what way is technological innovation really meaningful?

9 For a compelling account of a worker who survived the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh on 24 April 2013, see Sara Ziff, 'The Factory Collapse', in *Women in Clothes*.

Answers to these questions can primarily take shape in practice, in the workplace, where people have to overcome practical objections and obstacles and where trying something else or experimenting can lead to real alternatives. But that practice has to meet certain conditions in order to be constructive. The one-sided principle of perpetual growth must be replaced by a living dynamic of diversity. Working at a small scale does have that potential, if the means of production are connected in networks. Local production and knowledge does not have to be home-bred or domestic, but can be united in a global system. It calls on us to also rethink economic structures, shift objectives and share profits differently. Co-ops and commons require local contexts, and are a valuable way of managing labour and sources of help in a more sustainable way.



In addition to a recalibration of driving economic powers, we must also pay consistent attention to a rethinking of means of production and user patterns. Making materials traceable to their sources and a cosmetic reworking of industrial production is not enough. The technology must itself also be transparent. The concept of being made 'by hand' must find its way back into manufacturing. This is necessary in order for us to once again make technology our own. The consumer today is also a producer, as they say, but only according to the strict conditions of today's mass industrial production. The information that flows back to the producers by way of consumers, is once again employed in processes that seem self-evident in a rather grim way. The intent of industrial production continues to determine things. Nonetheless, it is certainly thinkable that greater flexibility can be brought into this process. In this sense, this text is also a plea on behalf of what may indeed be indeterminable. An ambiguous character speaks to the capacity of the user to assess and judge, and can convince that user to absorb the tacit knowledge inherent to material objects, and engage himself in relating to them.

In turn, production must also allow objects to be read in several different ways. People need to think about designs that can be open, undefined and widely applied. In textiles, which often take on the status of a semi-finished product, these characteristics are present by nature. Textiles are also supple in how they are used. For centuries, we were afforded the time to learn to read textiles and make them our own, in the way we use them. Liberated from the culture of exclusive experts using forceful voices to impede any alternative use, or a personal aesthetic, textiles can truly express their inherent and tacit knowledge.



In this way, we can help ourselves seek out real needs, and shift the paradigm from consumption to use.

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