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The Unity of Experience: Perspectives on the Products of Design

K Tooming

HDK, School of Design and Crafts, Göteborg, Sweden
kaja.tooming@hdk.gu.se

Introduction

This paper arises from practice-based design research that I am conducting for my doctoral degree. In that research, I am investigating the acoustic and aesthetic properties of hand-tufted fibre products that may be used in interior spaces. The first phase of that research involved the creation of aesthetically pleasing fibre modules that serve as samples of what is possible using the technique of hand-tufting. After the creation of a variety of modules, I tested the acoustic properties of these samples, trying to find the best solution for sound absorption. With these results in hand, I am now moving on to further questions about the experience of such materials in situations of practical use. Specifically, I am investigating how such materials may be used to enhance experience when they are placed in interior spaces. I want to understand the possible criteria for explaining how these materials help to create a unified experience. To me, this is a question of principles. What principles shape our understanding of wholeness in experience? To address this question, I will explore the idea of unity or wholeness of experience in three philosophers, seeking criteria that may be employed by the practicing designer when seeking a concrete solution to a problem of interior space. The three philosophers are Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Roland Barthes and John Dewey. Through this work I also hope to demonstrate how practice-based research can lead to fruitful investigation of empirical phenomena as well as fundamental theoretical problems.

I presented the results of the first phase of my research at the DRS International Conference *Futureground* in Melbourne in 2004 (Tooming, 2004). I explained that the goal of phase one was to give an account of the initial aesthetic observations and the acoustic tests that have been performed on a selection of the produced material samples—note that hand-tufting is a modern weave technique that is largely unresearched. I also explained that the goal of the second phase of my research is to understand what principles may be at work when hand-tufted materials are placed in an environment of practical use (e.g. the interior spaces of a building).



In that presentation, I concluded with two considerations that are important for understanding the interaction of people with an interior environment. The first consideration is how artefacts in the environment (for example, a room in a large public building) are related to each other. How does the experience of the wholeness of the room arise when colour, form, placement in the room, and relationships of various elements to each other are brought together? In this consideration, the focus is on the design elements independent of human beings. The second consideration is the relationship of people with each other and with the artefacts of the environment. In this consideration, the artefacts are stable and the people are engaged in activity. These two considerations provide a basic framework for investigating the issue of unity or wholeness in experience.

It quickly becomes apparent that there are several alternatives to explain the unity or wholeness of an experience. Indeed, the different possibilities are, themselves, worthy of investigation and exploration. This is where practice-based research deepens into serious theoretical issues, requiring a method of investigation that allows one to compare and contrast different perspectives on unity or wholeness. The method I have selected is the comparative case study, derived from the Swedish architect Rolf Johansson. He argues that his methodology—modified from the case study methods of Robert Yin as well as Stake—“is distinguished by a manner of approach which aims to both explain and understand a case in context, including as many relevant variables and properties as possible (Johansson, 2002:2). In practice, this method allows the researcher to explore several hypotheses about “wholeness” in the practical use of hand-tufted materials.

The hypotheses that I will explore are derived from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Roland Barthes and John Dewey. With Merleau-Ponty, I will explore, first, whether a change in any of its parts would have a repercussion in the composition as a whole, and, second, whether the whole remains unchanged when all the components change simultaneously while concurrently preserving their interrelations. With Barthes, I will explore whether a small change in the placement of coherent parts, whose peculiar placing creates a concrete meaning, brings about a change in the whole. And with Dewey, I will explore the *unity* or *wholeness* constituted by a *single quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variations of its constituent parts. The remainder of this paper is a discussion of the core ideas about unity or wholeness in the work of each author.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The fundamental starting point for phenomenology is that reality appears primarily to the intentional consciousness—that is, a consciousness directed toward something other than itself. In phenomenology, one attempts to find the a-theoretical foundation that liberates us from the theoretical and historical constructions, which hinders us from understanding phenomena as they present themselves in direct experience (Tooming, 2005).

Merleau-Ponty attempts to clarify a series of important concepts significant for the understanding of phenomenological reasoning. He develops the Husserlian concept of the *life-world*, one of the central concepts in phenomenological discussions. Another concept of great importance to Merleau-Ponty is the concept of *being-in-the-world* and interaction with the world. In order to understand the latter, one must clearly understand how Merleau-Ponty views the relationship between the *object-subject* and the *lived body*. All this should be seen in



the context of *time and space*. Henri Bergson's theory of perception had great influence on the philosophical thinking of Merleau-Ponty, which prompted him to see perception as the essential starting point for understanding consciousness (Bergson, 1992). This is explained by the observation that a perceiving consciousness persists and can therefore not be comprehended unless the human body, which moves in a world, is taken into consideration from the start (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 2004 p. 10).

In his thesis *La Structure du comportement* Merleau-Ponty attempts to formulate a new philosophical theory of perception inspired by gestalt theory (Merleau-Ponty, 1983). According to Merleau-Ponty, a gestalt is a composition, which cannot be reduced to the sum of the parts composing it. On one hand, a change in any of its parts would have a repercussion in the composition as a whole, while, on the other hand, the whole remains unchanged even when all the components change simultaneously—so long as they concurrently preserve their interrelations (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 11).

To Merleau-Ponty, the *life-world* is the world vividly apprehended in our perceptions and which is thus indivisibly joined to a perceiving *subject* (Bengtsson, 2001). For Merleau-Ponty, the subject is chiefly its lived body. The life-world's distinguishing feature is the circular relation that prevails between the world and the subject: the subject characterized by the world and the world characterized by the subject. Merleau-Ponty continually returns to the fundamental circularity between body and subject. The lived body is a *subject-object*—an irreducibly ambiguous existence. A lived room and a lived time arise through the *lived body* and its *being-in-the-world*, from the subject's interaction and its communication with the world. For Merleau-Ponty perception is historical and cultural as well as social, in the sense that what is perceived appears to us against the background of former experiences developed by the perceiving subject in the world.

Roland Barthes

“Structure“ means the relationships of order between the elements of a language. Over time, “structural” came to mean this way of looking at things. Roland Barthes furthered the application of this structural way of seeing things in other areas than linguistics—for example, in ideologies and art. This is possible when these other areas display a linguistic structure, in which case they can be viewed as a system of signs, that is, a system of communication. Structuralism highlights the unconscious character of the level exposed by structural analyses. It maintains that what is actually real or carried out is positioned elsewhere than in the “subjective”, conscious level, of the experience of the subject. The subjective level is, on the contrary, governed by unconscious working structures. Structuralism constitutes a reaction against “existentialism” (the philosophy of subject), or, more accurately, the phenomenological-dialectical tradition (*Filosoflexikonet*, 1997, p. 528-529). Barthes is of the opinion that structuralism is able to provide a broader description embracing more levels than the reflexive level of language. He presumes that there are artists for whom a certain structure (not just thinking)—when put into practice—represents a particular experience.

When writing of coherent parts (signs) forming a whole, Barthes states that the goal of every sort of structuralizing activity, reflexive as well as poetic, is to reconstruct a certain “object”. Through the result of reconstruction one can discover rules for the functions of the object. Structure is in fact the actual imitation of



the object, but not an imitation without concrete direction or goal, for the imitation materializes that which had been invisible or unintelligible in the imitated object. The structuralizing person *takes the real, tears it in pieces and compiles it again*. This precise process has a decisive significance, since *between these two objects—the two stages of the structuralizing activity—something new arises* (Barthes, 2002, p. 21-22). The temporary tearing, subordinate to the imitation, involves finding mobile parts whose particular placement creates a concrete meaning. Though such a fragment has in itself no meaning, just a small change in placing may bring about a change in the whole meaning (Barthes, 2002, p. 23-24).

John Dewey

Dewey attempted to break with what he considered the traditional philosophical dualism between knowledge and the world: he argued that we cannot step outside of ourselves and place ourselves on equal footing with something absolute, i.e. we cannot think of the world without describing it in one way or another (*Filosoflexikonet*, 1997, p. 112). Dewey therefore attacked what he saw as an “epistemological theory of observance,” that is, the supposition that knowledge is a passive viewing of an eternal and invariable world. Truth is not the correct image of a reality existing independently of people and their actions. For Dewey, reality consists of problematic situations, and the solution to these problems is experience. *Unity* “is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts” (Dewey, 1934, p.35-57). *An* experience, as a whole, is a process of movement from a beginning to a close. Fulfilling and consummating are continuous functions, not mere ends. *A conclusion* is the consummation of a movement, not a separate and independent thing. An experience has pattern and structure, which consists of doing and undergoing in relationship. The relationship gives meaning, and to grasp the relationship is the objective of intelligence. The scope and content of the relationships measure the significant content of an experience. “In every integral experience there is form because there is dynamic organization” in the fusing of experience with the vital organization of the results of prior experience, bringing about dynamic growth through inception, development and fulfilment (Dewey, 1934, p. 55).

Action itself is dominantly practical. The activity is, according to Dewey, too automatic to permit of a sense of *what it is about* and *where it is going*. Any *practical* activity will have aesthetic quality, provided that it is integrated and moves by its own urge to fulfilment. The aesthetic “is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience” (Dewey, 1934, p. 46). Dewey takes this to be the only secure basis upon which aesthetic theory can be built. The word *aesthetic* refers to experience as appreciative, perceiving, and enjoying. It denotes the *consumer’s* rather than the producer’s standpoint, which instead is denoted by the word *artistic* referring primarily to the act of production. Since the two words *artistic* and *aesthetic* refer to different processes, there is unfortunately an absence of a term designating the two processes taken together. An object yields an aesthetic experience when the determining factors of “*an* experience are lifted high above the threshold of perception and are made manifest for their own sake” (Dewey, 1934, p. 57).



Discussion of principles: *Merleau-Ponty, Barthes and Dewey*

Dewey points out that *an* experience is a *unity* with a single individuating quality, where *emotional, intellectual* and *practical* qualities are integrated parts of experience. For Dewey, unity requires aesthetic quality and consummation. The subject has central importance for both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty. The world is experienced through the subject and a circular relationship arises between the subject and the world. Both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty emphasize the importance of the historical, cultural and social context of experience. Moreover, all this should be viewed in the context of time and space. According to Merleau-Ponty, this context is of importance in the sense that the perceived always appears to us against the background of former experiences developed by the perceiving subject in the world. Dewey emphasizes even more strongly than Merleau-Ponty that everything is built upon former experiences and that experience is a flow, an on-going process on its way towards consummation. Both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty highlight the subject's interaction and communication with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, this is facilitated foremost through one's own lived body and through one's being-in-the-world.

Dewey even points out that any practical activity will have aesthetic quality, where the aesthetic is the clarified and intensified development of traits (properties) that belong to every complete experience. According to Richard Buchanan's interpretation of Dewey, *Emotional qualities, Signs or Symbols and Overt doings* tells us *what* "an experience" is about. One should even distinguish between *material, form* and *purpose* in an experience, in which *nature of form* and *making form* constitute common patterns of experience. Finally, differences among experiences arise because of differences of interest and purpose (Buchanan, 2006).

Wholeness (*gestalt*), according to Merleau-Ponty, is a composition that cannot be reduced to the sum of the parts composing it. He accentuates the fact that a change in any of its parts has a repercussion in the composition as a whole, while the whole remains unchanged when all the components change simultaneously while concurrently preserving their interrelations. It is interesting to compare Merleau-Ponty's theory of *perception* with Roland Barthes' evolved theory of *structuralism*. Barthes' point of departure is that even a small change of position of mobile parts (units), whose peculiar position creates a concrete meaning, brings about a change in the whole. He accentuates the fact that, quite contrary to Merleau-Ponty, the whole changes when even a small change of position of mobile parts occurs, since these coherent mobile parts form a whole. Barthes emphasizes the process as a structured activity where the subject is a "structuralizing person", who takes the real, tears it in pieces and compiles it again. He emphasizes the process of this structural procedure. For Barthes, it is a precise process, since between these two stages—tearing and compiling—something new arises. He means that the structuralizing goal of activity is to reconstruct a certain "object".

For Dewey, the emotional phase binds parts together into a single whole. For Barthes, the wholeness consists of the structuralized activity. Barthes emphasizes the doing as an *activity*. He did not place this activity in a broader context, where *emotional* qualities are integrated parts (of doing) of experience. For Dewey, who also emphasizes doing as an activity, the *unity* is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts.



From a theoretical perspective, it appears that the concept of unity or wholeness is progressively deepened from Merleau-Ponty's concern for the *perceptual whole* (gestalt), to Barthes' concern for a *meaningful whole* in the arrangement of signs, to Dewey's concern for an *experienced whole* that integrates perception and meaning through the interaction of thought, practical action, and emotional or aesthetic quality. The final paper will explore precisely this unfolding of wholeness and its implications for the kind of design work in which I am engaged.

Future work

One of the essential points of the research project as a whole is that the material under investigation can be produced within conditions of the research process and can be tested and used in real environments. For this practical work I will carry through one case study example. The context for this study is a mansion, called *Jonsereids Herrgård*, which is the property of Göteborg University and is utilized as a conference center. The dining room has poor, disturbing acoustics with considerable noise (clamor) when many people are present in the room. My aim in this case is to attain two goals simultaneously: first, to improve the acoustics in the room through the agency of hand-tufted elements, and second, to present these "acoustic" elements in such a way that they have qualities that would be visually and aesthetically appealing to the observer, that is, have artistic qualities. Consideration must be given to a larger context, in which the social, cultural and historical aspects are included. Not least does this apply to the mansion house, which was built in the 19th century. This case study is an on-going process and this practical work is in its preliminary phase.

Conclusion

This research project is a concrete example of how practice based-design research can be fruitful for theory as well as practice. It demonstrates for example, how empirical research can lead to theoretical issues such as the problem of unity or wholeness. This research is also aimed at applied knowledge and the development of new technical ideas for industry, especially regarding textiles and acoustic materials. My research project with hand-tufted module elements is a concrete case for studying the role of the creative production in the development of new knowledge. The research results will be of significance foremost for architects, designers and design researchers. Furthermore the conceptual framework of unity developed here could be a promising step in the process of theory-generation and practice based design research.



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