

**FLEETING IMPRESSIONS OF THE INDIVIDUAL
(Paper)**



Topic: Design

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Abstract

Using as an example the experimental tactile laboratory *Seeing with the Hands, Touching with the Eyes* by Tjaša Bavcon, Katja Burger and Jasmina Ferček of the Oloop design collective, we will look at alternative approaches to learning and working in the field of design. More importantly, we will look at how to avoid getting trapped within the conventional design process, starting instead from nature's perspective; a perspective that—as Maria Blaisse, a Dutch designer and artist, reminds us—is also our own.

The text and the lecture will present the research, which incessantly questions its own results and the results of its experiments in order to transcend the boundaries of the expected. By raising doubt about the established, ordinary notions, it will make us confront the questions about the primary role of design and its purpose. At the same time, our endless exploration will reveal new areas of design potential. By focusing their investigation on perception, emergence, play, learning, action and cooperation, the designers of the Oloop collective sustain the conditions that allow the emergence of a variation of the product or, sometimes, even just a momentary result. The key word here is “variation”: every change in this process, however minor, is immediately reflected in the experiment – in the impression of the individual. This is the richness, the emotion that distinguishes their work from conventionally designed products. They set themselves apart by establishing an alternative approach.

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Fleeting Impressions of the Individual

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Premise



Maria Blaisse in collaboration with Oloop Design, the Density of Lessness workshop, from the “Seeing with the Hands, Touching with the Eyes” cycle of participatory events, photo: Tjaša Bavcon

With the three cycles of research/experimental participatory events by Tjaša Bavcon, Katja Burger and Jasmina Ferček of the Oloop Design collective as an example, we will look at alternative approaches to learning and working in the field of design. More importantly, we will look at how to avoid getting trapped within the conventional design process, starting instead from nature’s perspective; a perspective that—as Maria Blaisse, a Dutch designer and artist, reminds us—is also our own.

The text presents research that incessantly questions its own results and the results of its experiments in order to transcend the boundaries of the expected. By raising doubt about the established, ordinary notions, it will make us confront the questions about the primary role of design and its purpose. At the same time, our endless exploration will reveal new areas of design potential. By focusing their investigation on perception, emergence, play, learning, action and

cooperation, the designers of the Oloop collective sustain the conditions that allow the emergence of a variation of the product or, sometimes, even just a momentary result. The key word here is “variation”: every change in this process, however minor, is immediately reflected in the experiment – in the impression of the individual. This is the richness, the emotion that distinguishes their work from conventionally designed products. They set themselves apart by establishing an alternative approach.

The position of the observer

Broadly speaking, running a workshop involves two sides – the side of those conducting the workshop and the side of those who carry out the workshop activities under the supervision of the former. We challenged ourselves, along with the designers of the Oloop Design collective, to assume the third position – the position of the observer, one who strives to perceive, comprehend and observe the activities of both sides involved in the process. This is a position that workshops usually lack.



Valentina Čabro and Oloop Design, “Textile Body Textile” workshop, from the participatory events titled “Between Inside and Outside”; photo: Tjaša Bavcon

Another challenge was to figure out what I could achieve from this newly conceived position of the observer, this invisible fly on the wall; or rather, how what I observed could be interpreted using the ethnographic method. At the time of this writing, I've already played the role of the observer in three Oloop workshops. The first workshop cycle, titled *Textile Now!* (2016), was followed by an experimental project *Seeing with the Hands, Touching with the Eyes: Tactile Laboratory* (2017) and eventually by this year's participatory event, titled *Between Inside and Outside* (2018).

In anticipation of the first workshop, I wrote down the following question in my notebook: what in particular to observe? I added another question: where should I direct my attention? Should I focus on the participants' answers? On their posture, the energy they invest? Or mostly on the process itself and its results? Eventually I decided to surrender to the workshops' spontaneous flow, turning the observation of the first workshop cycle into a process of *active learning*. In the course of this spontaneous observation, a question arose of how to use unplanned research and experimentation to uncover the latent creativity in all of us, or rather, how to give this creativity the room to express itself and come (back) to life?

I carried on this approach to observation in the subsequent editions. As an observer, I came to the workshops with a blank piece of paper and no questions prepared. In the course of my observations, I was struck by an unexpected question that started to intrigue, even torture me. The questions that were generated also became goggles through which I observed everything that occurred thereafter; this way I was able to verify the validity of the questions while at the same time searching for and examining the multiple variations of the answers.

After the first question, which was how to uncover creativity through spontaneous exploration, the second tactile laboratory evoked in me a fascination with seeking the relationship between the emptiness and tangibility of matter; this came about in the course of researching the understanding of what is essential: the essence itself, or that which gives the essence the potential to exist? The last edition, which explored the space between the inside and the outside, generated a question that represented a sensible superstructure of the previous ones. The focus of the research spurred me to examine the search for ways of balancing the particular with the common, maintaining the equilibrium between the need to establish an individual's voice, while also recognizing, as well as potentially taking into consideration, the broader group they're part of.

In the following text is a selection of thoughts that emerged from the observations at the three workshop cycles. Looking back, it is evident that I inadvertently ended up applying the principles of both observational and perceptual learning. Using the terms introduced by James J. Gibson and Eleanor J. Gibson in the 1955 text "Perceptual learning: differentiation or enrichment?", I found myself alternately answering the following two overarching questions: "(a) In what sense do we learn to perceive? (b) In what sense can we learn by perceiving?". [1]

The necessity of touch

Bruno Munari wrote in his book *Design as Art* that "copying nature is one thing; understanding it is another." [2] The other side of the same coin is given by Maria Blaisse, who declares that "nature provides all information, but we are occupied with ourselves and we don't realize all information or all solutions are already there." [3] Creativity is similar; children would be described by most as inherently creative, whereas in adults we often perceive this quality as remarkable, as something only possessed by the gifted or the specially trained. The rest must resign themselves to imitation — or stagnation. The first cycle of workshops by Oloop, *Textile Now!* demonstrated the opposite. It showed that the key to unlocking creativity in adults is to let ourselves rediscover it, to allow ourselves to re-establish an (active) relationship with our own creativity. For this to happen, according to John Berger, we need to introduce a key component: touch.

"We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessary within arm's reach. To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it." [4]



Oloop Design, the “Dialogue with the Thread” workshop from the participatory events cycle “Textile Now!”, photo: Tjaša Bavcon

It is therefore touch, tactile stimulus, that lets us truly begin an activity, that opens the opportunity to (re)discover our latent creativity. At the workshop titled “Dialogue with the Thread”, there was a practical example of pondering this thought that revolved around a particular question involving the participants themselves. The question could be entirely personal in nature, or it could be general; it could be associated with that immediate moment or it could address something that had accompanied the participants for a long time. The only condition was that it had to be a question that the participants could not answer at that moment, and that this inability to answer had to feel significant to them, even to the point of being distressing. It was a question that we could also describe as a conscious or unconscious driving force; something that would make the participants continuously ruminate over it to in order to find an answer.

The merit of this assignment was in the details; at no point during the workshop did the question have to be disclosed to others (whether or not to do so was left to the discretion of the individual). To the contrary – the designers challenged the participants to think about how to manifest the question itself in the form of textile. It was a sudden turn. Only moments before, the participants were faced with their questions, unable to answer them, and now they were asked to perform a seemingly impossible task – in mere minutes, each had to materially express their question through the medium of textile. As soon as they got over the initial surprise at the unusual nature of the task, most of the participants dug into it, thinking about how to express themselves. They accepted the notion that there is no such thing as a wrong way to materialise their question; indeed, most of them ended up spontaneously realising that creativity is already within them. What remained at that point was to sense and touch the textile, thus beginning to form the relationship discussed previously.

To paraphrase Blaise – just as nature already provides all information, so do we all already *possess* creativity. But in order to discover this creativity, it is not sufficient to merely observe others create — it is necessary to touch, to start establishing a relationship, attempt, make a mistake (assuming there is such a thing as a mistake in the first place), start anew and finally surrender to the process of iteration. A rapport must be established with the material, as Mladen Dolar asserts is the case in the field of art: “you produce the idea with the material, with the matter.” [5] This is not a step that can simply be skipped.

By establishing such a rapport, all of us will find discover in ourselves the potential for creativity. By discovering this potential, we clear the path to the next stage of learning – the stage of acquiring new knowledge. The learning stage, in turn, will open the doors that lead to exploration and understanding, and once you have understanding, you acquire the ability to create something from nothing. Moreover, you can start questioning the established notions, blazing your own trail and breaking with tradition. You can start probing the essence.

The essence of the essence

Doubting what is established and examining the essence was more intentionally explored in the second cycle of Oloop's experimental participatory events: *Seeing with the Hands, Touching with the Eyes: Tactile Laboratory*. The workshops focused on the exploration of alternatives to the hegemony of vision (by exploring tactile feel, weight, sound and the motion of textile and other materials) with the intention of enabling the participants to examine their responses to situations they don't often encounter. At the same time, it gave them an opportunity to perceive their ability to look and to see in a completely new way.



Zlatko Đogić and Oloop Design, “The Sound of Textile” workshop, from the participatory events cycle “Seeing with the Hands, Touching with the Eyes”;
photo: Leonora Jakovljević

Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa would describe the latter as the ability to explore “the very essence of sight itself”. He asserts that “all the senses, including vision, are extensions of the tactile sense; the senses are specialisations of skin tissue, and all sensory experiences are modes of touching and thus related to tactility.” But that at the same time, our “body is truly the navel of [our] world, not in the sense of the viewing point of the central perspective, but as the very locus of reference, memory, imagination and integration.” [6] As the Italian designer Bruno Munari would elaborate – from the moment of our birth we perceive and acquaint ourselves with the world using all our senses; we should therefore dedicate a lot more attention, as well as intentional education, to all of our senses. [7]

An example of such intentional education of and familiarisation with own body in relation to the space we inhabit was the exploration of “spontaneous movement into the material”, mentored by Dominika Kacin. The main purpose of the first phase of the workshop was to expand the sensibility about what defines our feeling of the whole, which Kacin sought to elaborate based on the meaning of a movement through awareness of own body moving in space. Only once the body is free to move do we begin to understand what it means to have enough space, and it is this understanding that enables us to think our space – space that goes beyond the boundary of our skin. Indeed, this newly recognised space can be so much more – much bigger, much denser and much more a part of us than we had initially allowed ourselves to notice and perceive.

This was wonderfully demonstrated in practice during the second phase of the workshop, which Dominika Kacin had named “Seeking the Centre”. Every workshop participant received a piece of textile. Some pieces were soft, others firmer; some thick and smooth, others thinner and rough. The assignment was simple; following the space explored previously, the mentor instructed the participants to continue exploring their own body in space, this time in relationship to the piece of the textile they received. The participants were able to explore textile as an addition to or a part of their own space.



Dominika Kacin and Oloop Design, “Movement into Matter” workshop from the “Seeing with the

Hands, Touching with the Eyes” participatory events cycle;

photo: Tjaša Bavcon

After the initial clumsy and timid familiarising steps, most of the participants soon saw the textile become an extension of their bodies, a material manifestation of the space they previously probed with their movements. In mere minutes, numerous forms appeared and then collapsed, crushed under the weight of the material or the body. Open, closed, folded, crumpled – living sculptures of bodies and textile. A palette of potentiality emerged, from the potential of new forms, all the way to new uses, new relationships. The initial experimental exploration of the relationship between the body and the textile soon expanded into an interaction of the body and the textile with the walls, the floor, the corner, the emptiness of space... And in the latter, a collision of two exploring bodies was only a step away. Suddenly, one body became a prisoner in the textile form of another... And then an active collaborator in the construction of yet another body of space and textile. When the bodies freed themselves from the result, we gazed at their creation – gaping before us were two cavities that only a moment previously had been occupied by two bodies. What emerged were two voids that were not actually empty – they were defined by the fleeting impressions of two bodies. In effect, the voids still represented the bodies' space, space that the bodies had expanded and captured in a briefly materialised shell. In other words, the result was a captive emptiness that at the same time remained the bodies of the two individuals – in absence of their physical bodies, the emptiness was inhabited by their impressions.



Dominika

Kacin and Oloop Design, “Movement into Matter” workshop from the “Seeing with the Hands, Touching with the Eyes” participatory events cycle; photo: Tjaša Bavcon

An excellent analogy of the observed phenomenon can be found in Heidegger's reflections on the meaning of things. The German philosopher used a jar as an example; it was based on the question of whether a jar is its bottom and its wall, or if it is better defined by the empty space that they enclose, the space that facilitates scooping and pouring out a liquid. This void thus defines not only the jar itself, but the craft of the craftsman who manufactures the jar. The essence of the jar is the enclosed void that is displaced to allow a liquid (or air itself) to fill the jar. In other words, even though the jar appears to be a tangible clay object, its physical form is only important to the extent that it can be filled with and thereafter hold the potential contents. [8]

It is this latter notion—the possibility of filling and recognising the essence through exploration of sensations—that Oloop members, together with the selected mentors, confronted the participants of the second participatory event cycle with. They empowered them to think about and doubt the self-evident. They gave them the possibility to recognise what was overlooked, touch what was

untouched and hear what was missed. They enabled them to perceive all that is essential, that fulfils and defines us, yet often remains outside our field of perception; Maria Blaisse wonderfully summarised the latter at the introductory lecture – the essence is in searching for and exploring the freedom of yet-unnamed forms. This is the privilege that we so rarely allow ourselves to explore, even though this very exploration represents the essence that fulfils us. It fills us with the often overlooked meaning that enables us to change the way we see, hear, feel and move about in the world around us. It facilitates a shift in the attitude to our environment, and by changing our attitude, we also change our future behaviour.

The final thought brings us back to Blaisse and her answer to the question of what defines good design: what defines it is that we carry on, persevere in what we do. This was also the starting point of the third edition of the participatory events – the ability to carry on with this changed perception of self in relationship to the environment.

Equilibrium in Dissonance

In the last participatory events cycle, the aforementioned ability to carry on was applied to the exploration of relationships between the inside and the outside. If in the second edition it seemed that the exploration with bodies and textile opened up an astonishing number of potential ways to further our understanding of how we inhabit environment, the third edition of the workshops ended up examining the need to establish an equilibrium between the particular and the common. The common as the collective – the whole that is established again and again in the entanglement of our particular interests, our newly evoked creative impulse, with the others with whom we've briefly found ourselves inhabiting the same space.



Collaborative creation with Liz Collins and Oloop Design, from the “Between Inside and Outside” participatory events cycle; photo: Tjaša Bavcon

An illustrative example of the latter was a visual arts workshop with the painter Joni Zakonjšek, who announced in the accompanying text that the workshop is intended to guide the participants on the way from the substance to the essence, to “pure sensations”, where we end up able to recognize ourselves as individual units in harmony with the broader whole. [3] This workshop also began with

the perception of one's own body, first within the immediate circle of the participants, then later in the context of the space which already contained the textile structures created by the previous workshop participants. The introductory part of the workshop involved painting an invisible three-dimensional, spatial canvas with invisible paints and invisible brushes. In this step, the mentor hoped to establish a relationship to ourselves and our potential position in space.

In the second phase the material became tangible in the form of coloured strips of textile. The mentor's instructions were simple: "Find a spot in the part of the space you liked best in the previous assignment, then create something within it using the strip of textile. After a certain time, you will hear a sound, at which point you are to move clockwise, to the space where your neighbour was previously. Continue where your predecessor left off. Add to their work; elaborate on it, if you wish. This way, we will end up constructing a new spatial whole." What the mentor likely did not expect was that one of the participants would fasten the strip to the structure and then keep extending the coloured thread across the entire room. The gallery, a place where every individual was supposed to be able to find their space in relation to the whole and the other participants, thus immediately ended up occupied by a single individual. At the sound that signalled the switching of places, the aforementioned participant merely switched to a differently coloured strip and continued weaving her spatial web. With every minute the space became harder to traverse, forcing the other participants to not only respond to their neighbours' spots, but also to the continuously changing context of the gallery space.



"Aesthetic response" with Joni Zakonjšek and Oloop Design, from the "Between Inside and Outside" participatory events cycle; photo: Tjaša Bavcon

The questions that were coming up during my observations were: has disregard for instructions caused a practical manifestation of the loss of equilibrium between the will of the individual and the community as the whole? If that is indeed the case, how, if at all, is it possible to continue balancing the two? When collaborating, is it more important that we tolerate dissonance, or that we never deviate from striving towards harmony? Does attaining harmony necessarily require subordinating our own expression to the common, pre-arranged symphony? When, in the context of

arguing for our own personal interest, *struggling* for our own space, is it undesirable that the individual's voice drowns out the other voices in the environment?

Mladen Dolar would likely identify these questions as referring to “the catch of the universal”. In his book *Bit in njen dvojniki (Being and its double)* [9] he writes that the struggle for the universal in philosophy was based on boundaries that exclude. At the same time, what was excluded keeps returning into the very heart of the notion. Something similar happened at these workshops; in building personal space, personal expression, there was continuous re-examination of the relationship to the others and to the space that provided the opportunities. Yet at the same time, as soon as the possibility of personal expression ended up being curtailed, a *struggle* to establish one's own space, to conquer space as such, began. Moreover, a desire arose to transgress the established, seemingly too limiting boundaries. It seemed that the very restriction brought forth the desire to deviate.

This recalls Theodor W. Adorno's thought that in order for declared principles to survive, violation, deviation and dysfunction is necessary. [10] Dolar elaborates: “What appears to be a liberation from the prevailing order is in fact its internal precondition.” [11]

Nothing comparably intense and provocative was observed before the third edition of the workshops. Fact is that various boundaries are continuously being established in everyday life that require all of us to maintain an equilibrium between the internal and the external, between the common and our own particular interests. Yet on the other hand, while—according to Adorno—our opposition seemingly generates dissonance, this is often merely an illusion, the violation merely serving to preserve the prevailing order. We therefore benefit from the apparent satisfaction of the desire to construct our own identity, but at the same time—even as we yell while others whisper—we never truly cut into the common.

The inability of particular expression to prevail took me from thinking about the necessity of seeking balance to the question—how *do* we truly cut into the common? Alan Badiou assists us in thinking this question in his text *Eight Theses on the Universal*. He asserts that a boundary, a dividing line must be identified between the particular and the singular. He writes: “I will call *particular* whatever can be discerned in knowledge by means of descriptive predicates. But I will call *singular* that which, although identifiable as a procedure at work in a situation, is nevertheless subtracted from every predicative description.” [12] According to Badiou we therefore search for something that separates, subtracts itself. Something that, though manifesting within the common, also isolates itself with its sudden appearance. This subtraction leaves a hole in the common, while the singular that subtracts itself transcends the common and becomes a thought demanding a change of some sort. A change “originates in an event”, which is “intransitive to the particularity of the situation”. [12]

Going back to what I observed at the workshops, I can see that the latter is actually the source of their power. It is the apparent ineffectiveness of particular/individual revolt that illustrates the actual power of the workshops, which, through experimentation, dare to question the process, the established rules and the actualisation of the fleeting nature of the ever-changing results. The authors of the workshops, along with their participants, continuously cultivate doubt and this process also opens up whole new areas of learning and capability for questioning the development of design potential for me—the observer. This gives rise to a withdrawal from the established understanding of how to approach the design process, which is often taken too much for granted.

The end result: perceptual learning

The end result of active observation throughout the three workshops confirms Dolar's thesis that we produce the idea with the material, with the matter. At the same time, it is empirically verified and indisputable that John Berger's observation also holds: "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are." [3]

By manipulating the observed, manipulating the matter that was created at the participatory events, a thought was generated that (at least in my case, as the observer) sprouted new knowledge, new learning. In hindsight, what initially seemed to be the neutral position of an observer trying to decode the observed, interpreting and thinking it objectively, actually became a creative process—a creative learning process. That is, a process that I had already spontaneously set out on at the first cycle of workshops. Gibson would probably describe such activity as perceptual development. As "a matter of the correspondence between stimulation and perception", while adding that "the total range of physical stimulation [is] very rich in complex variables and these are theoretically capable of becoming cues and constituting information. This is just where learning comes in."

What turned out to be key to the creative act of learning was exploring the processes that center design and our activities around the recognition of the variability of nature and the acceptance of unexpected and unplanned, of mistakes; and around play, material, material manifestations, the human body, its senses in particular—while constantly establishing (and disturbing) the equilibrium of potential collaboration. All of these are part of an approach that is said by Blaisse to originate "from material and wisdom from nature." [3] With this she is actually alluding to a shift in our understanding, since by talking about the wisdom from nature, we're actually talking about our own nature, and our own wisdom. With this shift, we set up the conditions for a design that escapes the vicious cycle of established processes, and so provide a foundation for alternative approaches—approaches that, using the methods enumerated above, introduce into the reality of reshaping our everyday existence the potential of impossibility and thereby, step by step, transform the existing and the customary. In this, it not only transforms design as an act, but also the perception of our capabilities to redesign.

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