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ISTEC PARIS

J.M.L Kint

DOI, Technical University, Eindhoven,
Netherlands

j.m.l.kint@tue.nl

Sietske Klooster

LUCA School of Arts Belgium

ABSTRACT

In this paper we cover a specific aspect of research-through-design: creating insight and enabling cultural dialogue through the auto-ethnographic and design-choreographic acting out of a 'meaning' making artifact.

The research-through-design project, as presented here, has been developed together with Sietske Klooster. Klooster is design-choreographer. Her design process was embedded in a very specific socio-cultural context: we dug into marriage rituals (Bell, 1992; Rappaport, 1999) as a means to dialogue with people from a migrated culture, living in Brussels. People with Islamic background perform life cycle related rituals that strongly differ from Western rituals. (Timmerman, 2009) Sietske Klooster developed a designed artifact as a vehicle to approach, get familiar with, understand, communicate and interact with the community in a transcultural way. This paper covers her intensive, seven weeks long research period of initiation, iteration and finalization. One previous paper on the project covers its initial exploration stage. A second paper relates to the meaning of transition rituals and follows the filmed process of how Sietske choreographs and designs a new ritualized artifact. (Kint, 2013; 2014)

This paper covers auto-ethnographic research on cultural issues. The research has been personalized by developing an approach based on auto-ethnography and with designing and evaluating a prototype, developed and experienced in context. In due course, inspired by the emotional and auto-ethnographic interpretation of the explored ritual, a novel ritual and artifact have been created that intend to embody shared values and stimulate cultural exchange on a non-verbal level. Auto-ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Hayano, 1979; Ellis, 2000) thus mediates as a personal and explorative way to grasp complex and culture related creative practices.

In this paper we further address the values, specificities, and challenges inherent to this specific research-through-design. We use design choreography as a vehicle (Hummels, 2007; Wilde, 2011), since the knowing and making body can experience meanings and values that lie underneath visual appearance. By doing so we bring about our bodily understanding for intercultural interaction and exchange.

We estimate that our research-through-design might introduce a novel approach and level to cultural studies: creative bodily interaction as a new way to explore common ground and value exchange. More than being merely a study of factual finding and why these facts are the way they are, we estimate that designers can facilitate and contribute to cultural studies. To paraphrase a quote by Glenn D. Lowry: our research-through-design project is an example of bridging the abstraction of theoretical insight in cultural matters with the tangible requirements of real life and a means to stimulate cultural dialogue and understanding.

1 INTRODUCTION

Culture is becoming more complex, hidden in the small details of our intercultural society and in the subtleties of human behavior. This complexity makes a first person perspective essential in order to gain a more thorough understanding of what culture, and cultural values are about. A first person perspective requires a more intuitive and sensorial exploration of culture, both for designers and for people to gain common knowledge on culture.

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Studies, exploring people's subjectivity and cultural insights as a means to inspire the design process, are booming. To mention some: the cultural probes method, developed in 1999 by Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti, is an experimental research method used for the purpose of information gathering for design inspiration. It is a way to explore subjectivity in design by letting people fill-in probes such i.e. postcards, maps, media diaries, etc., handed out to the user/target group as an open way to involve this group and their ideas and thereby to get to know them better (*instead of only using surveys or interviews*). (Gaver 1999) Another well-known method is drifting (*la derive*), a concept created in the fifties by the French situationist theorist Guy Debord. This method is used to investigate urban places and environments through a personal and emotional - psychogeographical - path as a unique and unplanned experience.

The study that comes closest to Kloosters exploration and cultural insights to inspire her research through design is by Nicolas Nova. In his thought provoking "Beyond Design Ethnography: How Designers Practice Ethnographic Research" (Nova 2014) Nova proposes rituals as a key to understand cultures and teaches designers how to understand these codes. The book describes a methodological approach of the use of ethnography in interaction design as an alternative to standard user-centered design. And unlike many resources on user-centered design, Nova takes a broader approach to design by considering cases in which design is a tool to speculate about the near future.

"Cultural liaisons" adds another approach to this critical discourse on society: choreography as embodied interaction, based on experience (Wilde, 2011). We look for choreography and bodily interaction (Hummels, 2007) to touch upon the meaning of life rituals within a small Turkish Muslim community living in Brussels. Choreography brings us closer to the essence of what rituals are, and what they stand for within the context of this community, in relation to our society. We work by bodily interaction (Klooster, 2005) to get a better understanding of nowadays marriage ritual, away from prejudices. We develop new expressions through artifacts or objects that matter in this ritualized context. What is the relation between clothes, jewelry amongst others? What role do they play in the marriage ritual? How can we understand the relations by way of changing the objects or artifacts and the way they change the ritual? In the following pages we focus on the two approaches of auto-ethnography and bodily interaction through design and choreography.

2 AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY AS A FIRST PERSON APPROACH OF CULTURE

Auto-ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997) focuses on the researcher's own experiences, feelings and reflections. It is a reflexive account of one's own experiences situated in culture (Hayano, 1979) and accepts the researcher's subjectivity rather than trying to prevent it (Ellis, 2000). There is the recognition that all writing is "writing for" (a purpose) and "writing in" (a particular, social, cultural, and political framework). (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.145)

Auto-ethnography mediates as Kloosters personal and explorative way to grasp this complex, culture related creative practice. Through design choreography, Sietske Klooster increases her understanding on her surroundings, reflecting on her personal experiences and analysing them. She captures and analyses the

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information in a subjective manner, trusting on her intuition, experience and empathy to select what is more relevant. Sharing information from person to person is what matters. It makes people motivated and passionate about it. Gaining a different, more personal relation to the research topic cannot be found by gathering general data. The people themselves are talking about and exchanging their personal experiences. It is a process starting from a person-to-person relationship to the understanding of the ritual of marriage. The research is transformed from what Muslim marriage is into what Muslim marriage means for a western person. It moves from generalizing to create resonance (connection and disconnection points). In what way she fits, in what way the story appeals to her and in what way it doesn't. In what way she wants to be involved. In what way she wants to interact. In what way she adopts and transforms. In return Sietske Klooster verifies if, where and why her interpretation triggers the Turkish again.

Impressions from Sietske Klooster on the approach in general

The marriage ritual is a complex issue. It is very confusing to understand from the perspective of our culture. "Turkish marriage ritual seems more of a process of transformation in family relations, instead of a moment of bonding, such as our moment with the rings. Choosing an object from the beginning was not an option. The Turkish marriage ritual is not built around one clear moment, point or object, but is a whole chain of events and places incorporating many accessories. I had planned to soon choose one object and investigate through that. While working I discovered I could not do so, yet had to go through the maximum confusion about all things that happen. Even with the Turkish there was a lot of confusion, having different ways of doing the same and also interpreting the values behind."

"I decided to dive into this confusion, give it time to settle and sink down to the pattern, principle that would emerge through taking time to see, listen and hear all this information. Here I decided to let my own process of feeling honest connection develop: where does it trigger a fundamental feel for common ground. Taking time to also let the feelings of social cultural difference and even rejection happen, to sense where I felt an appealing ground for exchange."

"Not where we are the same, not where we are different, but where I feel space for exchange and mutual insights...making a puzzle differences that fit with each other. Such as combining the notion of equality between man and woman with the notion of both being fundamentally different and combining these to become a basis for family bonding."

3 EXPERIENCING CULTURE IN CONTEXT: THE HENNA RITUAL

Connection points: creating common ground

Connection points emerge when you can personally relate to specific activities, behaviours or values from other cultures, and find value for your way of living and being. Connection points are where the honesty of interest resides. They act as inspiration to look at your life different and question behaviours that you took for granted. The confirmation that two persons share a connection point is the start to build an interaction, to know more about each other and create a common ground. The process of creating common ground is a transformation. Example of a common ground in the henna ritual is the transition of the

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daughter cared by the mother, to becoming a mother caring about her own daughters (transition in the woman line). The centring of the woman, celebrating both grief and joy was what she found touching. The connection points were the following: "a) the woman becoming independent of her mother, b) the woman feeling she is able to stand on her own feet, c) the woman being able to move into equality based relation with a man and to become a mother".

"The henna ritual triggers recognition of an important moment in life that is not ritually supported by our culture: the moment of a woman, saying goodbye to her daughter-mother relationship, to make place for becoming a mother herself. This ritual in marriage focuses on the relating of families and the transformations in there. It also brings in the combination of saying goodbye and being welcomed at the same time; grief and joy happening almost at the same time. Feasting this dichotomy of emotions feels as a very strong concept, which I recognize as a beautiful aspect of life, yet not so much celebrated in our culture."

Disconnection points: finding boundaries

Disconnection points emerge when rejection happens as opposite to connection points. You can't confirm something you don't relate to. Disconnection points help to explore your boundaries, the borders where you lose common ground and start conflicting. This method is also known as the Critical Incident Technique. (Flanagan, 1954) For Sietske the moment of feeling an essential difference with the henna ritual was the following: "The henna ritual triggers the recognition of a missing moment, essential in the Western way of marrying. The henna moment is about moving away from the basis of your own family, to become a basis in another family. In the Western culture it has become essential to stand on your own feet for a while, to feel your ability to be independent. From that independence you will be able to move into a relationship with a man, to start a family based on equality."

4 CHOREOGRAPHY AS EMBODIED INTERACTION

Choreography as embodied interaction gives a detailed description of how the concept was born and developed. It also covers how choreography was really deployed and helped the researcher to build the concept.

To further develop her interpretation of the henna ritual, Klooster explored the role of the hand palm, as this body part is central in the Muslim ritual. The reason for henna application on this body part is not univocal and involves a myriad of practical and symbolic levels. Yet instead of rationally determining the pragmatic and symbolic origin of this body part, Klooster explored her interpretation of movement pivoting around the palm of the hand, both in the act of separation (mother-daughter) and in the bonding (husband-wife). She primarily searched for the meaning experienced through the movement, since movement provides a common understanding.

Through her bodily investigations with different members of the community, Sietske explored the existing movements and impulsively transformed these into her interpretation, to the point where she started to resonate and felt a connection and meaning arising. It became a movement of letting go of the hand palm contact, by untying of the arms and fingers and hence literal

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loosening of the mother-daughter relationship.

From there she improvised the movement into the state of being on one's own, becoming an independent woman. Here her arms that just moved out of the entanglement fall into relaxation, hanging, grounding and looseness. This is the contemporary intermediate western European state that developed over the last decades.

After first having accommodated to this state, feeling stable yet flexible in it, she chose the moment to start a new bonding. The bonding of a woman that chooses a man to be with is about entangling arms and fingers and joining the palms of the hands in an act of symmetry thus mutuality. The reverse of the untangling she previously chose to go through with her mother; a bilateral entanglement.

To facilitate this movement, Klooster iteratively made an artifact or sleeve that literally incorporates all three states, and can be passed on over generations of time, evolving from one state to the other endlessly. She made several design explorations that she evaluated in physical interaction with different members of the community. The process resulted in a sleeve that covers wrist and hand. This sleeve facilitates the transition moments between the three states, and 'preserves' the states between the transition moments.



Performing the ritual with different invitees during the attended marriage ceremony. Film-still of intertwining movements with the designed artifact in-between Sietske Klooster and Gulcan Bozdog

The sleeve affords the intertwining moment of alliance with a man to start a new family. The movement ends with the bride having her hand covered in the flower-shaped entanglement, centered in the palm of her hand. An entanglement-glove that can be stored till the moment when the bride has become a mother that has to let go of her own daughter.

In the untangling moment of letting go, the entanglement-glove is put on again, transferred to the hand of the daughter, and untwined to become a light and free hanging sleeve around her hand; an airy sleeve with literal space to move into independence, and open for a new entanglement with a man, when she chooses too.

As said, in between these moments the sleeve can be kept as a frozen symbol of the transitions. Either as the loosened sleeve while living alone for a while, until the right novel relationship is found, or as entangled sleeve, while founding a family and until the daughter will leave the house. A novel symbolism is initiated here, through bodily investigation and interaction with the Muslim community members.

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5 CONCLUSION

We are on the verge of a new era that embraces diversity and interaction that is no longer standardized, fixed or rigidly defined anymore. Our approach is based on embodiment and phenomenology, allowing us to diverge from a pure rational, analytic approach and get grip on the tension between cognitive and emotional understanding of cultural values. As a conclusion, three questions need to be answered.

Is there a conflict between self-ethnography and transcultural focus?

As explained by Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner in *Autoethnography: An Overview*, auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, auto-ethnography is both process and product. As Deborah E. Reed-Danahay mentions in her introduction to "Auto/ethnography. Rewriting the Self and the Social": "... auto-ethnography is defined as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text, as in the case of ethnography. Autoethnography can be done by either an anthropologist who is doing "home" or "native" ethnography or by a non-anthropologist/ethnographer." (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.9)

"Cultural liaisons" differs from a classical design observation. Auto-ethnography has been developed as a means to find common grounds by writing a researcher's diary to get grip on the complexity of rituals and their meaning or relevance. Auto-ethnography is seen as the lens through which the designer, while exploring another culture, tries to consider and understand it and mediates with it through design. Auto-ethnography becomes part of the process of understanding and getting grip on the question what cultural values we have in common and do share with other cultures and how and in what way values do not match with ours. In this context one can speak about "un métissage culturel", as to use an expression by the writer J.M.G. Le Clézio. (Léger, 2012)

"Cultural liaisons" thus approaches design choreography as a personal and explorative way to gain insight in the complexities behind rituals, stepping out from rational thinking and taking on an embodiment perspective. To be further underlined is the importance of intensive fieldwork in the Brussels vicinity. Being integrated into the family of the young man who married, having the opportunity of close collaboration with the family throughout the process and gaining continuous feedback on the development of the designed artifact, greatly improved this auto-ethnographic and choreographic design exploration.

Is there a conflict between embodied exploration and symbolic cultural values?

When describing culture, Geert Hofstede made a distinction into four layers. Culture is drawn as a "Cultural Onion" -as he calls it- with a core and three layers. (Hofstede, 2010) The core stands for the values of a culture, which are

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slow to change and are heavily influenced by the history of a country or culture. Even if something seems to be outdated, it still can subconsciously play a role in modern society. The first layer that comes closest to the core is described as rituals. The second layer is that of heroes. A hero can be a fictitious person, national heroes, photo-models or scientists – all people, who have been a role model in that society. Third layer is about symbols. Nowadays most symbols appear as brands and easily change with the trends. Hofstede thus makes a valuable distinction between symbols and values. Symbols lay on the surface of culture. On its deepest level we find values. The outer ring, representing symbols, can be changed most easily. On the other hand, changing values will cost the biggest effort.

During the exploration process of differences in marriage rituals, performed in the Brussels vicinity of Schaerbeek, Sietske Klooster made several design explorations that did not convince her at all because too explicit in their symbolism and distracting her from the essence of design as a meaning making process. She finally decided to peel away and thus neglect the symbolic level (by the use and addition of pearls, extra needlework, more strips of textile, wax...) and look at the artifact as a carrier of cultural values. When making a novel ritual object, she mentioned, there is the danger of becoming enticed by known symbolism and of the object as such. Klooster specifically tried to feel the delicate difference between the object as carrier of symbolism and the factual experience of a ritual movement and its inherent meaning, facilitated by a ritual object. By material retrenchment and embodied investigation, the designer escapes the existing 'frozen' symbolism and finds what lies underneath it and felt in the physical experience of the ritual movement. From this bodily basis it is possible to investigate the experience of shared values, or at least values that are mutually understood. This is where contemporary living and thus dynamic tradition can arise, in close connection with a mutual embodied understanding of ritual meaning and values between cultures.

Can this approach contribute to design?

This research-through-design contributes to acquiring insight through designing, building and evaluating in context experiential artifacts. It is therefore an approach of research based on the practice of design. It gives to making a role of insight and knowledge creation, and to artifact a role of integrated and contextualized knowledge carrier. The contribution is not on the theoretical level of cultural studies. The contribution is to better understand and bridge the gap between cultures and their rituals through the medium of design. Design can bring the social and anthropological field into reality. Design can create a link between theory and everyday life, move away from words and dive into action. Design looks very intensely at small details, which in a theoretical context normally are lost or not taken into account. Small details make the difference, especially in relation to culture. By way of emphasizing them, design can teach other people to look at these social values differently in order to appreciate them and find what they can learn from them. This is the big value of design: to go out of the theoretical level and into the physical reality by means of the action of designing.

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Current developments towards embodied design enables to recognize intangible social cultural values in the tangible. Not by observing, but by moving into interaction. By engaging with each other's ritual objects and the social cultural values behind them, we can build a basis for bodily interaction between different social cultural structures and thus build a common ground for rituals to migrate and exchange values.

The design approach taken to deal with these challenges is based on phenomenology and choreography as a starting point. The design opportunity is how to create value for migrated and Western society. It is not to merge rituals specifically, though this might be part of the result. It is also to emphasize differences and to build mutual understanding of the differences that may be. As Klooster mentions on her website: "I love the way we can become a moving whole with the things we meet in the world around us. The way we are, and are enabled by relative movement. In my work I cross-pollinate my knowledge and experience in the field of dance and industrial design engineering. I am a design-choreographer; I design "things" (artifacts and installations) that enable meaningful movement with them, through them. I design for daily life movements and activities on the one hand and theatrical movement on the other. My way of designing also involves movement: My designs evolve through experiments and iterations of moving, making and reflection on action. I understand my designs through movement. My body is my instrument to design (for) movement."

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