

Paperness in Finnish Textile Art

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Table of Contents:

	Page
1. Background	1
2. Aims	1
3. Materials and Methods	3
4. Schedule	5
5. Bibliography	6

1. Background:

The starting point of this research is from my own interest as a textile artist in creating artistic textiles through a process of material experimentation, investigating how materials assist me, a textile artist, to express my concept through my works of textile art.

In general, materials play a crucial role in all kinds of the arts as a tool for artists to exhibit aesthetics and to expressively communicate their thoughts through their works. Moreover, during the creative production, there is a dialogue between the artists; the material being used; and the work in process. Though the material cannot directly express itself through the work without the artist, the dialogue between the artist and the material is transmitted to the artist's intuition and hands, proceeding to the execution of the work. A suitable material that is used in a work of art can convey the content of the work, or the message from the artist contained in the work to society meaningfully.

The significant role of materials can also be seen in textile art. Since textile artists typically make very personal statements about their experiences and lives in their works, textile art is considered an extremely subjective area of expertise. In addition, the perception and the interpretation of works in the field depend very much on artists and/or viewers' feelings, backgrounds and cultures in which they live. Though an artist originates the concept of his/her work and has his/her own interpretation of the work, a viewer also creates his/her own personal interpretation of the work. As a result, detailed documents in this field are somewhat limited by the rather personal and subjective context of the works. There have been only very few literatures of Finnish textile art even though Finnish textile art has strong and long traditional roots in Finnish culture.

2. Aims:

The major aim of this study is *to examine the relation between materials and artistic expressions in textile art*. However, to study all existing materials within the field of textile art is impossible. The study, therefore, focuses on Finnish textile art from 1980 to 2000 as the case to be investigated. Paper is the choice to be taken into consideration in this research because of two reasons – firstly, paper is a non-traditional material for textile art yet it is one of the most widely used materials today in Finnish textile art and it has appeared in the field for no longer than two decades; and secondly, paper is somehow perceived as a Finnish cultural identity since it is ubiquitous in Finland and surrounds lives of Finnish people from everyday bases to special events.

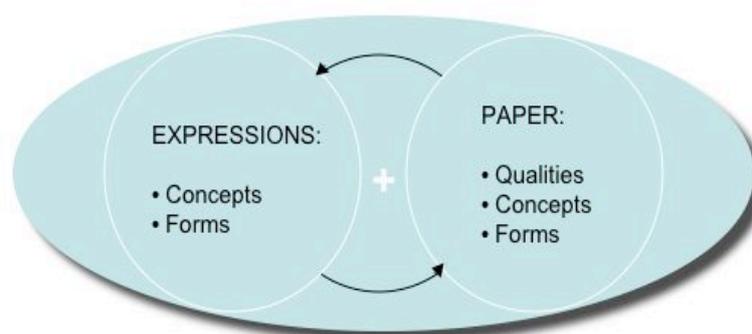


Diagram 1: the relation between different aspects of paper and expressions

In order to understand the relation between paper (a material) and artistic expressions, there are two sub-aims emerged within the main aim as follows:

- *To investigate why textile artists use paper as a material and how they perceive and apply this material to their works in order to express their ideas through their works to communicate with viewers.*

Material is one of the most important choices an artist makes in his/her profession. It is evident that in a time period (from twenty years to lifetime), a Finnish textile artist tends to use only one material or a set of materials and one technique in every work. A passion for materials can lead to the processing of an artist's own material and new means of expression (Poutasuo, 2001: 61). In the other word, a specific material becomes the identity of the artist.

Textile art is a problematic field – the field between art and design that has its origin in design (i.e. applied art) not in fine art. Though textile art has its root and place in national history, its present importance and acceptance is lessened, e.g. the difficulty in finding occupancy of gallery or museum spaces, and the reducing commission for public buildings. A non-traditional material like paper when playing its role as the identity of an artist or means of the artist's expression may contribute to the shifting status of textile art from the traditional/historical practice to contemporary art. Moreover, when paper somehow exhibits Finnish cultural identity, a work that uses a material associated with the nation like paper may be accepted or appreciated more easily.

- *To analyse the effect of paperiness that contributes to the meaning contained in a work of textile art and the expression of the artist who create the work.*

Among textile artists who use paper as the material, their approaches taken toward paper and the degrees of paperiness, however, are different. One artist may transform paper so that it becomes somewhat unperceivable as paper, e.g. paper becomes similar to wood, and then use the transformed paper as the material. On the other hand, the other artist may perceive and apply paper to his/her works as paper in which the paperiness still remains high. Though a textile artist tends to use only one kind of paper and one technique with the certain degree of paperiness in every work, each work seems to possess a specific meaning and the expression of the artist. From this point of view, expression of the artist and the meaning of an artistic work rely solely upon the form of the work while paper and its application are only means of executing the works. Conversely, if paper is considered as a means of expression, different kinds of paper and their different degrees of paperiness should contribute to the variation of expressions of the artist.

However, artists are likely to express themselves through their works rather than to verbally describe their works. Artists create and interpret the meanings of their own works that may change through time. The completion of the works seems unlikely to end the creation of meanings; i.e. the creation of meanings is somewhat continuous, even beyond the completion of the works (Mäkelä, 2003: 544). A question about how an artist could express his/her thoughts or convey different messages through works of art with one material and one technique without any verbal or textual explanation arises. Since works of art are created for not only the artist but also viewers, the viewers' interpreting of the works should be taken into consideration. I, as an artist, would like the viewers to freely interpret my works without my explanation and also would like to see how the interpretations of viewers are different from each other.

In addition, the other aim of this research is *to bring a new dimension to research by combining the two different forms of dissertation: written thesis and artistic works*. Artistic research through experimentation is practical work and should be documented so that textile artists (and others) can apply the results and, e.g. use the research document for their works. Scrivener S. (2002) claims that the artistic work does not embody a form of knowledge but it is a form of knowledge since it is located as a central and fundamental component of the knowledge acquisition process¹. Though the field of practice-based research has already been explored in Finland, most of them are in Finnish². In addition, there is no practice-based dissertation in the field of textile art and design that is already done³.

3. Materials and Methods:

There are two approaches to reach the goal in finding the relation between paper (as a material) and artistic expressions, as can be seen in the diagram below:

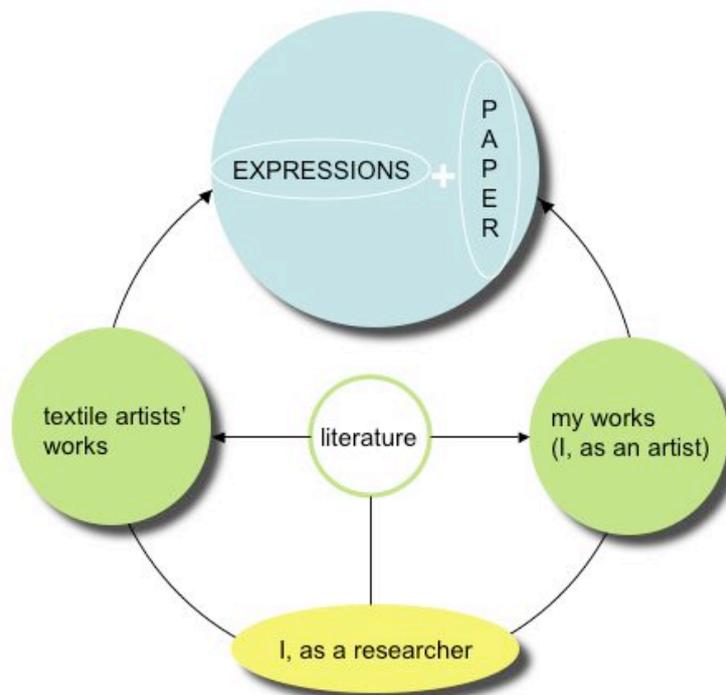


Diagram 2: the approaches to reach the goal in finding the relation between paper and artistic expressions

Since this research is a dialog between research and art, it applies methods from different scientific disciplines:

- *The artistic method*: exhibitions and creative processes

Materials for analysing include:

- *Material experimentation*: It is the experimentation of my own works of art that creates a dialogue between paper (the material), the works and me (the artist).

¹ Scrivener, S. (2002). "The art object does not embody a form of knowledge". <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/paper/wpades/vol2/scrivener.html>.

² Among dissertations carried out at the University of Art and Design Helsinki, only Eskola's and Albrecht's dissertations are written in English.

³ The ongoing practice-based dissertations in the field of textile art are Leena Lukkarinen's and Leea Pienimäki's projects.

There are two series of works (4-6 for each series). The creative process will be documented in a form of diary.

- *Exhibitions:* The works created will be publicly exhibited to (expert and non-expert) viewers. The viewer can perceive and interpret them according to their own backgrounds and feelings. There are two exhibitions included in the study.
- *Comments:* In each exhibition, the viewers will be requested to express their personal interpretations of the works and the associations between their interpretations and the materials they see in the works.

There are three questions to be answered, as follows:

1. How can paperiness of paper influence the works?
2. What are viewers' interpretations and perceptions of the work?
3. What are the subtle communications between the material, works and me during the creative production compared to those between the material, works and viewers in the exhibition?
4. How do the viewers' interpretations correspond to the contents of the works I intend to convey?

- *The research method:* retroactive gaze, case studies and interviews

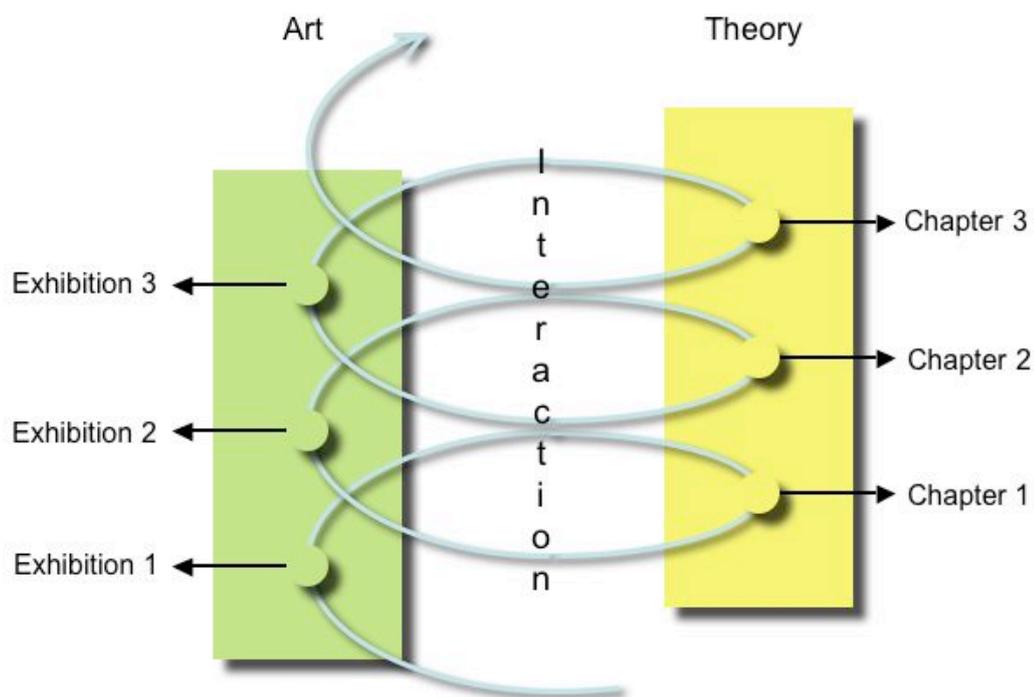


Diagram 3: the retroactive gaze constructed during the research process is based on interaction between art and theory

Materials for analysing include:

- *Diary:* It is the diary that is written during the creative process, reflecting my own professional experience as a practitioner of the field of textile art.
- *Interviews:* This part will be performed in two different ways: first, by interviewing three Finnish textile artists who have actively worked with paper in

their works of art between 1980s and 2000s and whose works have been internationally known and respected⁴; and second, by a pilot study in which experts in textile or art field⁵ will be invited to the interviewed artists' exhibitions to express their opinions⁶.

- *Information and images:* These can be acquired from literature (e.g. books, magazines and exhibition catalogues) in textile field and other related fields and from the Internet.

It is to reply three different queries as follows:

1. Why do the interviewed artists select paper as their material?
2. How is the approach that each interviewed artist taken toward paper?
3. How do their material perception and application contribute to the expression of their ideas through their works?

4. Schedule: The expected year of completion is 2008.

⁴ Merja Winqwist, Ritva Puotila and Jaana Syvänoja have been approached for interviews.

⁵ The experts can be textile artists, textile designers, visual artists or art historians.

⁶ This pilot study depends on the occurrence of the interviewed artists' exhibitions.

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