World of desire
Project report by Benedetta Crippa

Project Summary

My degree project is a celebration of plurality and visual democracy. Starting with identifying different norms pervading the graphic design discipline in the Western world today, both in terms of aesthetic values and systems of thinking, I have worked to propose and visualize alternative possible futures.

Drawing has been my main carrier through an intense journey of un-learning and re-learning resulting in an artist’s book in unique copy.

With this book, I want to problematize the dominant discourses around objectivity as a utopian ideal with a suppressive agenda, while visualizing a world I can recognize myself in. I have used decoration as a method, emotion and femininity as explorative standpoints, giving space to the metaphorical, the ambiguous and the spiritual to challenge current visual norms.

This book emerges as an affirmation of my own quest for visual belonging as a graphic designer and a woman; a testimony of the practice of drawing as actualized power.
Search

My project began as a reaction to the frustration I feel towards the established rules and judgmental attitude within the graphic design field; what has been taught me; and the false dichotomies that dominate the discipline. Through the acceptance of a plurality of voices, both within and outside us, I believe designers would create room for themselves to develop a more interesting, rich and engaging visual world.

Throughout this process it has been very hard to put my questions into focus and put words to them, but somewhere inside, the questions are very clear. I know that I have come to feel, more and more, that I don’t recognize myself in the way our world looks.

It all started with a very simple question: I was looking at this book, called *The grammar of Ornament*, and found myself wondering: what happened to all this? Why does our world not look like this anymore? I soon found out that this seemingly simple question had a very complex answer. It has to do with economical, societal and cultural structures in our western society; and it has a lot to do with power.
I started to see a connection between the ideals of reduction, neutrality and “modernity” and how they especially affected the fields of architecture and design. Throughout history, we have formulated style guidelines such as ‘less is more’, or ‘decoration is crime’; we have promoted ‘neutrality’ and ‘invisibility’ as desirable goals, efficiency and logic as the ultimate guiding principles to form. The way our world looks today is mostly a byproduct of these principles.

And I realized that neutrality bothers me; not only because I think it doesn’t exist, but especially because, in the “developed world”, it almost always coincides with “taking away”. Is this what being civilized looks like?

It didn’t take much to realize that even my greatest love of all, graphic design, was affected by the same structures. Similarly to architecture, graphic design is a highly canonized field that needs a wider acceptance of plurality within the discipline: plurality of approaches, values, ways of working, and visual outputs.

And here my project was born, as an exploration on how we can bring a greater plurality within graphic design. It is an investigation of how we can develop our own voices, so that there can be more of them. On how we can disrupt the judgmental attitude within the field, and the false dichotomies that guide it, so we can contribute to a visual world that is more diverse, rich and engaging. It is a celebration of the particular, of the individual, a fight against the illusion of universality as an utopian ideal with the hidden agenda of erasing differences instead of celebrating them.

There are a few things I have been looking into throughout my investigation. One of them is the relationship between
graphic design and feminism, and between graphic design and ethics. And one of them is decoration.

**Memories of complexity**

Where I come from, everything is decorated. My memories are filled with complex configurations of marbles, paintings, architectures, costumes, pavements. They are memories of complexity, but also of deep, raw humanity. I have been amazed by noticing how many of us put countless hours and enormous energy into decorating something that would have also worked without it: how the most humble person can create something that holds us prisoners of wonder for centuries. I have asked myself which kinds of needs does decoration serve, and why they have become expendable.

In her essay *Ornament and the Feminine*, Llewellyn Negrin writes how, in its original meaning, to ‘ornament’ something meant to honor it, to make it something special. It served to present the things that it adorned as culturally significant. It fulfilled the need for identification, and served to contextualize the objects in time and space, while at the same time imparting them meanings that went beyond their immediate time, place or purpose. She goes on:

“With the advent of modernism, particularly within the field of architecture and design, ornament came to be dismissed as a superficial embellishment devoid of meaning. All that did not contribute to or enhance the practical utility of an object was regarded as an unnecessary excrescence.

Ornament was maligned as that which was impractical, irrational and superfluous, being clearly distinguished from, and opposed to, the realm of the functional, the essential and the rational, which was coded as masculine. Indeed, coupled with the denigration of ornament was its association with the feminine. As a number of theorists have pointed out, ornament was
considered an intrinsically feminine domain. The devaluation of ornament
meant at the same time, a dismissal of the feminine as inferior.”

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I was working in Denmark once, and one day when I was presenting a design to my art director, he commented: “It is a bit feminine”. Not much else. Without any further explanation, we both knew the design needed to be changed – I wasn’t sure in which direction: after all a clear definition of feminine aesthetics is nowhere to be found. Darker colors, I assumed? Less soft, bright imagery? I remember going back to my desk confused and with a weird feeling to my stomach. How is my design feminine? And why does it need to be changed because of that? I felt panic and shame in realizing that I did a feminine design, instead of making something more neutral. I revealed myself through the design. In fact, the most awful feeling came from somewhere deep inside where I knew that it was not only my design he was referring to, but that he must have obviously been talking about me, too. Because I am also feminine. I am female, and as it seems, I make feminine designs. Does that mean I should be changed too?
The funny thing is that, as he commented, one of the designers I admire the most, Alexander Girard – a greatly celebrated American designer – came to my mind. I thought about how many of his designs, if shown without mentioning the author, could definitely be seen as “feminine” by today’s standards. And yet, I have never read of his designs being described as “feminine”. This has made me realize how the feminine, in the hands of a man, can still have authority. What are we left with, then?

It took me a while to realize it, but eventually I understood that my project is interested in the future. Eventually I also understood that the focus on the future is for me a form of resistance to authority.

Graphic design is a discipline that rarely looks at its future self. Indeed it is a place where history and the authority that comes with it are overwhelmingly present. Despite being very young, it is a field where formulating new theories, applying new ideas, propose different methods, revisiting old concepts can be very difficult since we are constantly reminded that there is someone that already said that, did that, discussed
that before, as everything has already been said and done. As interior designer Andreas Nobel writes:

“There is a kind of paradox in which research is defined as the creation of ‘new knowledge’, at the same time that it equally often cultivates a conservatism which is activated if a student happens to express new, personal ideas. As a student, one quickly learns that is not expected to produce new knowledge, but is informed that in principle everything has already been written and completed by other authorities in the field [...] The student’s curiosity is met by suggestions of books on the subject in question. In this seemingly generous act, there is sometimes also a hidden agenda with repressive aspects. References to literature can act as an effective way of staying in command”.

In a field where everything has seemingly already been said and done, searching for and working with one’s own voice and looking for possible futures is one of the hardest journeys to undertake. It has taken me all my energy, and long time, to believe or at least allow for the possibility that I also had something to say and to give.

Making

So I understood that in order to work with my questions, I had to work on myself first. I realized I had to set up a process of un-learning and re-learning for myself, through which I would work to un-learn certain things, and learn and develop others.

Un-learning is an important word in feminist theory. It refers to an active, at times painful, long, hard-work process of revisiting one’s internalized teachings and power structures, making visible what we take for granted, and look into how it could be different. It is a necessary step towards the liberation of the mind.
For the first presentation I gave here at Konstfack, I identified a few core points of my design education that I wish to un-learn. They are these:

★ you should be invisible
★ everything needs a reason
★ decoration is crime
★ clean and b&w is the best
★ you should be neutral

And I defined some things that I wished to re-learn and re-define through my project instead:
★ start with yourself
  (which means in practice: write your own stories, and bring yourself into the work)
★ welcome uncertainty
  (in practice: bring the unjustified, metaphorical and ambiguous into the work)
★ dirty and decorated is good
  (in practice: work boldly with diversity of colors, typography and visual elements)
★ you should take a stand
  (in practice: bring your own values, politics and voice into the work)

So my main theoretical method has been this un-learning and re-learning process. On the practical side, I chose drawing as my method.
Drawing

Until high school, I was drawing while listening all the time. Drawing was a way of listening and understanding what the teachers said; a behavior that I recognize in many of the people that are with me at Konstfack. But I lost drawing completely when I got into design education: digital work and a lot of formal knowledge took over, a knowledge that drawing was not part of. I lost the connection with my hands, with the bodily act of drawing and its intimate, meditative dimension. So drawing for me is a tribute to that person that was lost when I began my design education, and a way to stay closely in touch with the work.

At the end of the first year, I started a quite painful process of translating my theories around plurality into practice, following my methods through drawing. This slideshow was the first result of this process.


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At the beginning of the second year, I started drawing regularly. To work, I have used something that my teacher Daniel Eatock told me a few years ago: “Don’t look outside, look inside”. Meaning: don’t try to find yourself in the work of others, find yourself in your own work.

Visual references and sources of inspiration are still there; I have systematically looked at folk art, decoration, craftsmanship, elements related to the spiritual as my main sources, as well as theoretical references. However, forgetting about everything that everybody else has done or written
before me is a crucial part of my process. I realized that if I spent time thinking about the amazing work other painters, artists and writers had done before me, I would have felt crushed and not started anything at all. So the first step was to bring in kindness to myself and trust into my process, draw and write as if no great master came before.

I have kept it simple for myself. Throughout the second year, I have adopted a similar routine every day, getting to school quite early and leave in the afternoon. I have stopped working on most things other than my project, and have tried to create a kind of life for myself where, first of all, my mind can feel comfortable for making, every day, a journey inwards. I made an effort to keep myself in situations that can make me feel good and not worse.

I haven’t gotten any artistic foundation in my education, so I kept it simple by limiting my choice of tools: I mainly use gouache for my drawings, watercolors and sometimes pastels so that I can focus on my subjects rather than getting lost in
the technique. I draw from my imagination combined with my references, but mostly I draw a world that I wish existed.

When I work, I get easily distracted by sounds and people moving around, so I adopted the very simple strategy of having headphones on and having my desk facing a wall, a solution I can recommend for those who, like me, can feel overwhelmed in the open-space setting. I tried to keep drawing as my main activity during the day and get lost in it, writing if I feel like it, and taking a break if I feel I need it. I take my time to draw and write and explore complexities. I see everything I am doing as sketches, not final works.

I kept the pressure of perfection away from myself by starting from the assumption that what I make I would not use in the exhibition, and seeing this whole process as an ongoing exploration. A way to find and develop my visual language, an affirmation of a way of working while searching for it at the same time.

The months between September and December of the second year were the most emotionally intense of all my life. I think many will recognize the feeling when I say that I have been living in a bubble, and my work became like a substance permanently sitting into my brain, fading in and out, being very present. I reached the point where my project was quite in control of my perceptions, sometimes it bothered me to have to do normal things like taking a shower or cooking, because the
feeling of being immersed in this world would be enough to make me happy forever.

There is of course a dark side to this: for example a state of anxiety and self-doubt became a constant presence, and the act of digging inwards every day meant that many dark things came out of very dark places. I have been unraveling into my work, and this project has meant getting to know who I am, what I need, as well as the darkness in me. I have been keeping my emotions under control by spending a lot of time with people in my class and other people I love, and avoiding working at home by myself.

Keeping a logbook documenting my process has also been of great help. At the end of each day, I wrote a few lines (or many) about what I worked on during the day, attaching some pictures. At this moment, the logbook has reached several hundred pages that document in detail every step of the work. It has helped me to keep an objective eye on how I spend my time and what I’ve done, because I tend to doubt myself a lot. I often go back to it and read it again.
A world is starting to form

Drawing is the sweet thread that holds all visual arts together. Things are born as ideas, then we draw them, and after that they can become a reality. So everything we see around us has been drawn before coming into being. And yet, drawing is the great absent in the field of graphic design. By entering graphic design education, it is very easy to lose one’s drawing practice as a result. Drawing is seldom included, nor encouraged, and it quickly becomes a faint memory, a relic of a distant past – a naif one.

There are of course some graphic design courses that include drawing in their curricula: we learn to copy, illustrate, build things visually, we learn drawing formally. But I have rarely heard of drawing being taught as practice of hope, or systematically encouraged as a tool for empowerment, for the transformation of consciousness.
I draw as a way of switching from object, to subject: to affirm my existence and give form to the world beyond the way it was presented to me. If I can work to build a visual vocabulary that is meaningful to me, I can speak about my own reality, visualize it.

“When we women offer our experience as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There are new mountains”, novelist Ursula Le Guin once said. I visualize my reality, I give it existence. I add a new story, I change the map.

I see a connection between the absence of drawing in graphic design education and the overall lack of subjectivity that characterizes the field. I see it as a manifestation of the erasure of the active practice of imagination and self expression: a way to suppress agency. Through this project I wanted to reflect on drawing, and me, and us. I have brought drawing into my process as practice of hope, as a tool for liberation. And drawing has transformed me in return.

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Artists have talked extensively about how they approach drawing. Matisse talks about how he drew not the object
itself, but rather the emotion that object arouses in him. Others have talked about drawing as a tool for invention and exploration.

I have found myself drawing things the way I wish they looked like. I put in my drawings what I can’t find in the world around me. Combining my imagination and my references, I draw a world that I wish existed.

In his book Jazz, Matisse says:

“If I have confidence in my hand that draws, it is because when I was training it to serve me I resolved never to let it overshadow my feelings”.

Practicing my drawing, the greatest challenge for me has been to eliminate any friction between what I feel and what I put on the paper. Things had to come straight from the heart.

And from the heart countless waves have emerged. Among many thoughtful things she mentioned at the final examination, my opponent Cajsa Unnbom was reflecting on the amount of roundness in my work, and whether this
challenges or perhaps reinforces stereotypical ideas around femininity. This oddly brought me back to the many times when what was perceived as a “feminine” aesthetic was discouraged by my art directors. So it seems that what is perceived, and let me stress perceived, as over-flowingly feminine according to patriarchal standards is on one hand discouraged because feminine and therefore inferior, and on the other hand it is questioned as confirming those same standards, which are also created by patriarchy. And at this point I am wondering, who wins in this game?

I don’t have an answer to that question; all I know is that, the way I see it, roundness is everywhere and yet it is rare. We have silently elevated straightness and squareness as our ultimate aspirations, as visual weapons of the oppressive thinking. My heart was so longing for shapes that could embrace me, rather than elevate me, that could translate my inner complexity, rather than representing me in a straight line, that I have filled my visual world with them.

In February I had an exhibition here at Konstfack where I showed my work in progress, mostly drawings, and I had to
sit in the space all the time for a few days. I wish I could describe to you the moment when, physically surrounded by my drawings, I felt mirrored for the first time, and felt I was in a place I belonged.

I also force myself to bring decoration into the work. It does not come naturally; it is an active effort to be aware of and go beyond what I have been taught to perceive as beautiful or pleasant, or “enough”. I force myself to decorate every detail. It has quickly become a method of working for me, one that entails letting things out.

To me, decoration is about generosity and identity. I have been amazed by how many of us put countless hours and enormous energy into decorating something that would have also worked without it. By decorating every detail, I put care and love in something that will ultimately be given to others. It is a gift we give each other.

Through decoration I also define myself. As Llewellyn Negrin points out in her essay *Ornament and the Feminine*, among other things ornament fulfills the need for identification, and serves to contextualize objects in time and space. By speaking
about our own identity, we drop the pretense of neutrality, and contribute to a plurality of voices.

Presenting my drawings through the different feedback sessions, they were described as “painted drawings”, “world of desire”, “handcrafted design”, “archeological work”, “food for thought”, something aimed at diminishing dichotomies and showing “care and compassion”. I could see that a world was starting to form, and I felt very comfortable in it, I felt I belonged to it, and recognized myself in it. I want to paint scenarios of possible futures that can raise questions and create visual memories.

This is a comment that my classmate Monika Vaicenavičienė wrote me after our feedback session in November:

“I have some associations when I look into your drawings. Ears and mouths near more abstract shapes speak to me about a wish to make those shapes to be listened to, to think of them as characters, as human-like, as something having a personality. Then I start to think, maybe you are implying that design in general is a human thing, something that is shaped as we humans want.

Those more oval shapes with blank space in the middle are interesting. I think of several things – of how the usual relation between the frame and the text it holds is reversed here, picture place being empty, and the frame extravagant and ornamented. Also, of mirrors – maybe because of the general feeling of festivity, extravagance I feel here, I think of some fairy tale, and I wonder, what do these mirrors might reflect.

I realize that these are only my interpretations, but I feel encouraged by your drawings, because they are so layered somehow with meanings and symbols. I would like to see even more different motives, because it’s so interesting to decipher them. They encourage me to imagine things, to wonder, to dream. I notice little signatures on your drawings. Do they have any meaning besides your name, do they show some sequence of making? Will they have it in the book? Have you thought about structuring your book, about its dramaturgy, about how your content is put in your book, in what place? Thanks, Bene’
Private reflection and broad communication

At the end of the first year, before I decided what the practical output of my project would be, I was completely at loss. I had no idea of how to translate my theoretical questions and my intuitions into practice, and I was feeling overwhelmed by them. I didn’t see a way out of the jungle of thoughts. But eventually, after the holidays, I met the idea of making an artist’s book combining my mix of drawings, visual works and collected thoughts.

An artist’s book is a bit of a mysterious object that hasn’t been given a unanimous definition. What I mean by artist’s book is a collection of personal words and images in the form of a book, that follows this description by Stephen Bury:

‘Artists’ books are books or book-like objects over the final appearance of which an artist has had a high degree of control; where the book is intended as a work of art in itself.’
I also immediately decided two things. One, that the content of the book would be painted completely by hand, with both words and visual works drawn by hand. And second, that in the exhibition I would present the original, not a reproduction or a printed version.

I am not sure how the idea of an artist’s book came about, but after taking this decision, everything else fell into place very quickly. What I was doing, why and how became all of a sudden clear; there was a “something” to translate everything into, and the circle felt complete.

A simple idea of a free and open medium like the artist’s book allows me to focus and direct my efforts without the pressure of complying with set requirements. Something done by hand allows me to explore a more analogue side of my practice, which is usually digital-based, and go in the opposite direction of what “design” normally implies: mass production, automated printing, and standardization.
It is a way to focus on the intimate, and allow for mistakes and imperfections: a metaphor of the imperfection in each of us. A handmade book that combines my work and feelings around my questions seemed like the right place to collect my emotions.

The book would be the material manifestation of the “school” I have set up for myself. I planned to collect in the book reflections around different topics, for example: how feminism can be applied to different levels of our practice; the cultural meaning of decoration; the idea of “compassionate design” and the relevance of an ethical practice; ideas around design and femininity; explorations around how graphic design and emotion can meet.

I wanted my book to be a sort of magical object. A place of strangeness, something visually and emotionally intense, open to interpretation, circular rather than linear. A space for feeling safe, where no one misses out. I wanted to make it
keeping in mind to show rather than explain, and focus on solutions rather than problems, on the future rather than the present. Bringing the original in the exhibition would mean that the materiality of the visual works and my hand would be preserved there, and the visitors would be able to hold and look through the very same paper I have worked on.

I have never particularly enjoyed making books, and I have certainly never worked on an artist’s book, so I thought it would be useful to do a bit of research about it. I wanted to keep the research consciously limited, though, keeping in mind the importance for me, in this process, to look inwards rather than outwards. But, what I did do was setting up a meeting at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, which has a discreet collection.

I looked there at different examples, and what was most helpful was getting aware of the different decisions I would have to make for my book.

An artist’s book is a limitless medium that does not suffer the same constraints of the traditional tools of design; everything
can literally be everything. So after presenting my work in progress in December, I knew I had several decisions to make.

Even though it is an unusual medium for graphic design, I knew all along that I was not the first graphic designer to make an artist’s book: there are plenty of examples. The true meaning of my making, however, became clear when during my research I found this quote by visual theorist Johanna Drucker:

"The space of a book is intimate and public at the same time. It mediates between private reflection and broad communication in a way that matches many women's lived experience. Women create authority in the world by structuring a relation between enclosure and exposure. The women who make books out of the materials of their lives and imaginations establish a balance that gives voice to their own issues in their own terms. [...]"

To find the reasons why women artists are drawn to the book form – a complex format that is difficult to exhibit and laborious to produce – one must consider the power of books to confer authority upon their makers. For the woman artist, the paradoxical private-public nature of books serves dual desires – for self-protection and recognition, for the preservation of modesty and the display of competence.”

This quote helped me to position myself into a tradition, and understand myself as part of a wider context: a bigger family of women that felt my same need of bringing our intimate world into the public, on our own terms.
Writing

During this process I have been thinking about what is the decorative beyond the visual. Writing is an important part of my practice and I have been reflecting around how I could apply decoration to writing.

Something else that characterizes the graphic design field is how writing is not part of it. Compared to other neighboring fields, graphic design suffers an impressive lack of practitioners that also write, and thoughtful critical writing on graphic design is rare. Although I am still trying to figure out why that is, I believe it is somehow related to our idea of a strict separation between disciplines, and also related to the fact that this field basically lacks of, and actually discourages, any practice of self-reflection.

I have always felt passionate about writing, but also very insecure. I have missed some mentoring and guidance with it. When it came the time to make the book, I was struggling to write a coherent story, something that could connect together all the research, the thoughts and the intuitions I gathered along the way.
I felt very worried and uninspired about writing, until I read Marlene Dumas’ book *Sweet Nothings* that my classmate Channa had showed me. After browsing through this book, I felt my consciousness about writing awakened.

I usually write by noting down short pieces here and there – titles, captions, short or longer sentences, in a very similar way to how Marlene Dumas works. Until then I had been concerned about putting them together in a single, long piece of writing, which was not coming. I was wondering how I would connect it through the different pages, and was worried about the fact that I was making paintings without taking care of the written. But reading Marlene Dumas gave me back the confidence to believe in and use the many short texts I already collected during the previous months (sometimes a few paragraphs, sometimes just a few words). It felt as if I had woken from a deep sleep, a sleep of lack of confidence that, I know, is caused by the learnt stereotypes about how a text “should” be. How we “should” write. About what “writing” is. I realized I needed the courage to rely on and believe in my own artistic process and way of producing text. Abandon the false dichotomies of right and wrong.

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Something else I have been working with is the relationship between text and image.

As a graphic designer, drawing has become for me a crucial tool to subvert the hierarchy between content and form, or images and text. Graphic designers are often encouraged to be informed by the “content” in order to give form. Indeed, “form should follow function”. I am interested in disrupting such hierarchy and work in ways where images can be inspired by text, but also words can be inspired by images. Through drawing I have learnt to start from my visual
references and mental imaginaries, and create narratives from the visual rather than the written.

Video: sketches for the book I have made in February. Click here: https://vimeo.com/207764963 password: feedback_marzo

For these sketches, which turned out to be a visual index for my book, I have used a method where I first draw anything that comes to mind. Then I ask myself: what is this, or what could it be? I attach small captions, words and short sentences to each drawing.

Trying to define images in this way, something very interesting happens. Instead of the images having a mere descriptive or illustrative function in relation to text, here the image comes first and the words make an effort to make sense of it. Once words are attached to it, the image also changes its meaning as a result, the circle is complete. Working in this
way, it seemed to me that I could produce text with a much more poetic quality to it, and I could create a deeper relationship between image and words.

**Final result**

It was an immense joy to finally present my book, the result of a two years long process of research, visual soul searching, and passionate making. With this book I want to encourage my field to some needed self-reflection around the norms dominating it. I visualize my search for visual belonging, as a graphic designer and a woman, reflecting around emotion, femininity and social ethics, as well as processes of un-learning and re-learning through drawing today. Drawing and decoration have been my main tools to problematize the dominant discourses around objectivity as a utopian ideal with a suppressive agenda.
With the curator, we decided that my work in the exhibition would be positioned in front of the library, a very busy spot where a lot of people pass by. So I have been thinking around the question of how to create a sense of intimacy and contemplation without building walls, only by modifying the perception of the space. I decided to have a bookstand and a floor painting, with the aim of embracing the visitor, and create a safe space for the body and the mind while reading the book. It was essential to me to attempt to suspend time. Both the painting and the bookstand, in a similar manner of the book, are made completely by hand.

For the painting I made a sketch and then went on with layers of paint directly on the floor. The head of the flower was the most demanding part, is decorated with about 150 circles with several layers of paint each. The bookstand is made of a mix of wood, tape, aluminum foil and paper mache and I wanted it to be also accessible to kids and people that cannot stand so I decided carefully about its height.
As for the book, in order to preserve the sense of intimacy, the vibrancy of the colors, and to give the visitors a chance to look at and interact with the original works, I presented the original, in unique copy, using only natural sunlight from the ceiling. I wanted it to lay on the bookstand as a naked body: vulnerable, honest, generous, uncompromising. My mind, my heart, my body were all here in this installation.

People have described the installation as giving a sense of joy, and spirituality. They pointed out how it creates a one-to-one relationship with the book, giving a sense of being chosen: they have described that it is like stepping into a dream where time stands still, and one can let the mind float in wonder.

Reflections around my final examination

During my final examination on May 19, my opponent Cajsa Unnbom – who had previously seen the sketches for the book in a feedback session, but not the final work – showed an uncommon thoughtfulness by giving a complex, full-bodied reading of my work which pretty much summarized all my intents and hopes with it.

In line with her role, I think she made a conscious effort to find aspects of the work she could problematize. Besides the issue around femininity that I addressed earlier on in this text, she mentioned the danger of cultural appropriation that she pointed out in our past feedback session, and declared to my joy that she could not see any in the final result. Treating my cultural references with sensitivity and respect, pay tribute to things without mocking or simplifying them, has been one of my dearest priorities. I should also mention that we discussed wether there are any “dark sides” to the work, since the final piece seems, in Cajsa’s interpretation, readable as joyful and without shadows.
I am a very private person, but I decided that in that occasion I had a responsibility to clarify this point and I did that by sharing some thoughts on my struggles with mental health throughout this process. As mental health is still an overlooked subject in the academic world as well as outside of it, one which can be particularly impactful in a creative environment, I felt it was important to address it in order for other students that might be struggling in the same way, to feel less alone. It was also a way of responding to my frustration to the general attitude of our society to tell single stories about things and people; to see the final work as the only work; and to see things on the surface and assume that what is not visible does not exist. I mentioned that I ultimately decided that the final work would not bring my shadows with it, but rather be for me a way to overcome them; to thrive on them. And I mentioned a quote by Matisse that has been very important for me in this process: “One creates not in hate, but in love”. And this is the way I want to live and work.

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In line with these thoughts, the following day, on May 20, I gave a second open lecture about my work. Giving lectures and sharing openly about my process is for me a conscious choice in a field where cooperation and sharing of knowledge are scarce to say the least, and where the final result is valued above all else. Titled “Things I Had No Words For”, in the lecture I mainly addressed and highlighted what have been important conditions for me at Konstfack in order to do my work. I talked about the art school as a place for the transformation of consciousness, one that can help us to build our resilience, and of what I wish for the graphic design field of the future: emotional sustainability.
Beauty Coming Out of Mouth

This is a drawing I made as part of my research. I am born and raised in Italy, and I have grown up hearing repeated jokes on how women first of all talk too much, and on how whenever we do, we are boring. Party poopers and troublemakers. The jokes imply that our ideas are not valuable or relevant, that our speaking up is an inconvenience.

Eventually, I realized, I have become hyper-aware and conscious of the way I speak and what I say. I always start from the assumption that what I say is not that interesting, that it will not be taken seriously, and I expect people, especially men, to lose their interest within a few moments. I often apologize for speaking, and when I do I am very much aware of the passing of time, rushing through what I want to say to take as little space as possible, because I feel that space is not mine to take. All this requires an enormous amount of energy, on top of being painful.

This drawing, called “Beauty coming out of mouth”, is a tribute to those feelings, and a reminder that our words are beautiful, that they deserve to be put out there.
I believe we live in an era of visual silence. There is something violent in the way our world is polished, in our categories of “beautiful”, “ugly” and “neutral”, in the way our Western society calls for visual homogenization. This categories are directly reinforced by design education, a field still dominated by clear hierarchies between visual expressions. In such a context, countless forms of expressions are discouraged, and visual languages marginalized. How many of us have been taught to be visually quiet?

“I found I could say things with colors and shapes that I could not say in any other way – things I had no words for”. says artist Georgia O’Keeffe.

Doing this work has been for me the most transforming experience of my life so far, one through which I have built my resilience, and broken my visual silence. It has been a way of expressing what I could not, what was pushed down,
trivialized, diminished, held back, dismissed. All the things I had no words for emerged back as images.

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In his philosophical work, Richard Rorty stresses the importance of hope as a tool for the development of society. We can use knowledge as a tool for what is already out there, but hope and imagination are our only tools for what is yet to come. One of the most important things about my book, is that I wanted it to be a place of hope. Not in theory or in knowledge, but in practice: I call it “materialized hope”. A hope that a world shaped in the way we imagine it, has a right to exist.

When I made the sketch for this drawing, I attached the caption: “Two torches of visual hope guarding the text”. Turns out I did not put any text; but the visual hope is still there. I guess what I really want to say through my work, is that I believe that an authentic, uncompromising acceptance of a plurality of visual languages is a crucial step towards the acceptance of one another. We live in a world where our
visual literacy is central to the way we interact with each other and look at one another; and I see a direct correlation between the construction of visual hierarchies and the construction of hierarchies between people. And I would suggest that a feminist design practice must ultimately be concerned with disrupting such hierarchies, and celebrate multiple visual expressions as carriers of meaning of a plurality of stories that, together, reflect the complexity of our individual and collective identities.

I am concluding this report with a slideshow of the spreads of my book that I made for my second, and last lecture at Konstfack in May 2017.

Video: final animation of the book.
Click here: https://vimeo.com/218921318
password: animation_may
Thank you

No process of transformation happens in a vacuum, and in fact the support of a number of people has been crucial for me to keep on with my exploration. To me, listing these people in detail is a political act, one that problematizes the too common idea, especially when it comes to graphic design, of the self-sufficient maker. It is also important for me to stress how relevant a supportive environment can be and what a huge impact this can have on the work.

To my supervisor and professor Johanna Lewengard goes a gratefulness that quite simply goes beyond words. Among countless things, I wish to thank her for supporting and believing in me from my first application to Konstfack, throughout these two years and beyond, completely and uncompromisingly.

I wish to thank my wonderful class for being a space where I could feel safe. The atmosphere of deep friendship, care and compassion we have developed together for the past two years has probably been the most important element of my experience at Konstfack. The second class I wish to thank is the M1 who in different moments in time made things easier for me, and the wonderful students at the gfi/vk department, that have always made me feel supported.

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World of Desire – the finished book in spreads

you can build towers of power

or you can build a universe through drawing
there is a difference between what I like and what speaks to me.

I can like something that does not look like me, and I don't recognize myself in, and the other way around.

trough decoration, I become

a magical person, a hybrid.
decoration adds layers of meaning, and the cultural significance of objects is in their detail.

an eye sitting on layers of meaning ~ lingering
letter to a maker

dear maker,

define a spirit before words are put on it; shatter the hierarchy; confuse it.

a presence
look here, and never look back

What is a field?

first...

...and then...

...and more

"My field? What is my field, I wonder."  ( Ursula K. Le Guin)

someone defines it...
then someone reshapes it...
then someone expands it...
What is, after all, decoration, to me?

a strange dress

on the regular woman I am.

grande-grande
Can graphic design be a mean to communicate deep emotions? How can I tremble, cry, laugh... how can graphic design scare you? How can graphic design make you look inside?
the Temple of all Visualities

I dream of a Temple of all Visualities where every visual expression receives equal dignity.

A place for visual comfort and self-recognition, where the spirit can slip through endless cracks, passages, openings.
The Temple collects past visual expressions, compiles present ones, and somewhere in the Temple, someone imagines and researches the visual expressions of the future.

nobody works at the Temple.

it is a place for visitors, and it is always open.
This report was completed on June 15th, 2017 at Konstfack, Stockholm.

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