Temporal Abstraction

Creating the means for inducing reflection

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The research development of this work is initially based on implementing an artistic subjective approach to our mental well-being, designing a device with the intention of inducing an experience, specifically towards that of reflection.

In the age of technological dominance that we find ourselves in, a speculative outlook is taken on how we might want to interact with our devices and surroundings in the future, as the digital influence ever increases in our lives, having a stronger impact on mediating human emotions and how we experience the world around us.

I’ll point to Abstract Art as a significant source of inspiration, influencing the process of engagement with the viewer, referencing recognised notions of emotional connection that Abstract Art evokes, based on the composition of colour, geometry and scale.

Data is explored as a medium translated and displayed through colour and light, testing and comparing how this affects the experience and personal bestowal of meaning onto the piece.

One of the main interests throughout the process has been in re-adopting a methodology that had been personally lost through the demands of working as a designer under a large corporate studio - Designing by making, experimenting and exploring, using my intuition to guide a more artistic process, letting the material communicate and inspire the next steps, which naturally opened up different applications, contexts and interpretations.

The end result is embodied in an interactive workshop installation for visitors at the Konstfack Spring Exhibition to experience. Providing the means for their interactive contribution to the development of the body of research of the project, adopting a co-design orientated approach, keeping the discussion open around the topic of the value of inducing a state of reflection, its ‘practical function’ and its context.

“I never have a fixed final product in my mind when I start a project. The design takes shape along the way, once the material starts showing its characteristics. The final product is a logical result of the research. It’s never the other way around. I let the process take me by the hand and that usually brings me to a surprising result, also for myself.” - Lex Pott
Reflective Experience

“...in an age of acceleration, nothing can be more exhilarating than going slow. And in an age of distraction, nothing is so luxurious as paying attention. And in an age of constant movement, nothing is so urgent as sitting still...”

An extract from a talk by Pico Iyer, a travel journalist for various newspapers, starts to point towards the relevance of reflection in today’s society. He goes on to describe how our life is experienced and interpreted inside our heads, and that by being still and reflecting about past experiences, we can begin to make sense of them, turning “sights into lasting insights” (Iyer, 2014). This point steered my attention towards the practicality of reflecting, its usefulness and its potential in design. Mental health becomes an obvious choice with the beneficial aspects that personal reflection could have, however the beginnings of this thread of thought came from another project during the first year at Konstfack, rooted in personal experience of suffering from stress and anxiety myself from overworking in an office environment.

The project looked at creating haptic instruments that stimulated different senses, in order to flip the stigma of stress as a weakness and highlighting it as currently a natural state in such environments. The hope was that instead of, as is usual, suppressing stress, the act of playing with the instruments would become a stepping stone to having a conversation with a passer-by about your feelings.

Looking back on this, I was falling into what I perceive now as a design trap around the topic. I don’t entirely agree that having objects designed to disrupt your mental state with a repetitive physical action is a fruitful method of approaching an emotionally complex and abstract phenomenon, as it becomes more of a temporary distraction, like a fidget or a stress ball. This doesn’t provide the space, physical or mental, to personally address possible underlying issues - an opportunity to reflect.

Other design projects around this topic also tend to go down the path of creating aid ‘tools’ that require the physical interactive relationship with the user, during the moment of stress or a panic attack. There also seems to be a level of novelty in the appearance of some of these examples, creating an aesthetic disruption rather than peaceful integration. If we are to design artefacts for emotional tranquillity, it would seem reasonable to say that this feeling should be embodied in the design’s gestalt.

In order to distance myself from creating more physical tools of distraction, I considered referencing relatable experiences that we encounter through our lives, which invite us through the door of reflective thought. Seeing that reflection can be a subjective and individual experience, gathering stories and conversations with people was a method to gain some insight, to start tapping into these moments of meditative harmony/understanding.
Silent Crystals

"... I was with a group of friends visiting the Yorkshire moors and we had set off in a small convoy along a single track road over the moor. As we gained height the snow seemed thicker and undisturbed except by the odd sheep whose fleece seemed dirty and dull against the bright white of the snow that surrounded it. Gradually the road became more and more difficult to drive up and the cars began to slither and stall. We stopped and got out of the cars to assess the situation. I walked along the road to see if things looked easier ahead. The air was cold and crisp against my skin and fresh and clean as I took a deep breath and surveyed the scene. The sky was a clear blue, the sun was low but shining brightly and reflecting on the snow all around me. It seemed to me that I was standing amidst a field of glistening diamonds with light dancing and playing on each individual crystal and there in the pure silence I reflected for some moments that I knew I would never forget on how beautiful and precious life can be..."

Carole Young - Mum

Bored of Boredom

"... I have always found it difficult to relax, both in my professional and personal lives. Over the years different things have helped me unwind, I have always found lying on the ground (sandy or grassy) in the sun, a calming experience. The warming effect of the sun and texture beneath me. But this is not an easily available situation in my life. I have tried mindfulness CDs, which guide you through breathing exercises. They work for me because I need that guidance to help me do it, forcing me to lie there for the full 8 minutes. But after a few days of the exercises, I tend to get bored and stop doing it for a while. It's always easy for me to find the next task that needs doing. And the problem is those mindfulness exercises then become a chore themselves..."

Amy Parr-Young - Sister - Dentist
Drifting

“Early morning, just before dawn, drifting between sleep and awareness, comfortable, with cold air from an open window, and the pure, clear notes of a blackbird’s song start, pouring out into the quiet space, endlessly unfolding without repetition, and I am lucky to be alive with my senses alert to notice this fresh moment of the new day.”

Jim Rose - Writer

The Power of Art

“I had seen much of what Western art had on offer, having done grand tours of Europe and America when I was young. Those experiences were mostly about me admiring the great artists I had studied and the history they reflected.

In 1967 I went to the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and saw a large painting which was totally black that I really couldn’t understand, but then I noticed a shaft of light in yellow and orange, shooting up from the bottom. It pierced me with what I felt was a message of hope…I wasn’t in a good place at the time and the experience struck me so much that I even started to cry a little. My interaction with the painting also made me realise that I had become an active part of the creative process and was not just viewing someone else’s genius because I had made the meaning of the painting my own.”

Marsha Smith - Retired shop keeper
Sun Tunnels

"On a road trip in the Western US, I went to the Desert Basin in Utah to look for a 1970s’ land art installation called Sun Tunnels by Nancy Holt. It's way off road and not well signposted - as remote as anywhere I've ever been. I'd seen pictures of the work, so I was prepared for the starkness of 4 huge concrete pipes placed at right angles to each other. I was struck by the emptiness of the site, apart from an abandoned settlement (Lucin) there was nothing for miles in any direction. Walking around the site, the sky and landscape is framed by the tunnels, drawing you into the view with far more intensity than just looking around a panorama. In the many hours I spent there, as the sky changed, I experienced a very powerful sense of my own body in relation to the space around me. The artwork literally framing the space presented the opportunity to reflect on and contemplate the land without distraction. I felt an intense connection to the place as well as a profound sense of space and lightness - something maybe akin to what is sometimes called 'the sublime'..."

Chris Rose - Art Teacher
Can reflection be induced by a beautiful distraction? Can distractions have the same ability to disrupt inner reflection? Life is full of distractions. Every time we see something new it distracts us from our daily routine. They exist in all scales of perception and interpretations. They can be as peaceful as listening to branches dancing in the wind, watching the landscape from your window being carefully covered by the gentle, mesmerizing snow, as annoying as unintentionally overhearing somebody’s conversation or as disruptive as receiving constant text messages. They exist in both the positive and negative spectrum of our daily lives.

An interesting observation illustrated in the stories mentioned before is that none of the experiences had direct interaction with technology. The moment of reflection for them happened in the absence of the most growing source of distraction of our modern time. There seems to be two theories around the growth of distraction, one being material based and the other spiritual. The material distraction is in relation to technology’s rapid growth and ease of usability. Most of us now possess a tiny micro-computer in our pockets, opening up the opportunity at any moment of the day to interact and engage with almost anything that we please (Rothman, 2015). Online platforms such as Facebook and Netflix fight over grabbing our attention, robbing us of our time. Large investments are made in finding ways to keep us hooked, designing sophisticated algorithms that fine tune the immense selection to our specific viewing tastes and needs.

We’ve become dependent, a new paradigm has emerged that we are addicted to like a drug abuser. Research has even shown that internet addiction isn’t all too dissimilar to alcohol and cocaine addiction after trials with teenagers in China, some suffering from a type of withdrawal when this engaging ‘distraction’ is taken away, with “…symptoms including tremors, obsessive thoughts, and involuntary typing movements of the fingers” (Unknown, 2012). Technological distraction is present in most things that we do during any given day in the urban environment. Some are self-induced while others grab our attention. Advertising is an inescapable consequence, becoming more and more tailored to us as individuals, designed in its very nature to capture our attention. All together this of course has had an impact on our lives - how we make decisions, even interact with one another, which in turn influences the current state and future role of the Designer within this technological landscape. Apart from the obvious dystopian outlook that might come to mind when learning about material distraction, if we know that technological growth is a non-stopping phenomena/entity, then perhaps it should be embraced and manipulated to the advantage of the Designer. One could say it’s our duty and responsibility to engage with the question of controlling how the influence of technology will impact on and mediate human emotions. - A direct influence rather than indirect.

Designers James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau explore this notion in a speculative, future looking level through their work. The project ‘Real Prediction Machines’ comments on predictive algorithms and data storing, creating a domestic lamp with a built-in microphone which listens to certain keywords in conversations. By analysing the words, it can start to predict if the conversation steers towards an argument. If so then light is emitted and distracts people in the room from their possible argument. This example seems to imagine a world where we’ve accepted the direct influence that technology can have towards controlling our behaviours, rather than the more consequential indirect influence that exists today. This designed relationship was an interesting departure point for an artefact and its users, using technology to influence our behaviour and potentially the way we live our lives.
In regard to the project at hand, creating moments of reflection could be seen as inducing thoughtful distraction. If distraction is to be seen as something that breaks our everyday routine, then this notion starts to point towards an interactive relationship on some level, with an element of randomness which technology could provide. Joshua Rothman, an archive editor for the New Yorker, states in his article about distraction that “It may be that, with our mobile games and Twitter feeds and YouTube playlists, we’ve allowed distraction to become predictable and repetitive, manageable and organized, dull and boring—too much, in short, like work.”

The spiritual distraction theory in regard to today’s society to me is a consequence of the material, even though its beginnings go further back, as Pascal stated, “all men’s miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone” (Rothman, Joshua). It suggests that we endeavour to look for distraction as we can not deal with being left with our own thoughts, scared of coming to terms with our inner worries or concerns, yearning instead for temporary distraction for that immediate dose of temporary pleasure. This I feel can be seen in the symptoms from the trial mentioned before, with people ‘suffering’ from obsessive thoughts after been pulled away from their internet. In one of the stories, Amy struggled with her mindfulness exercises, to keep up with doing nothing, boredom arose as this distraction wasn’t as stimulating as the alternatives.

Technology’s progression is an unstoppable force, becoming in some sense autonomous and as great a force in our world as nature. (Kelly 2016). To me, the more we accept its influence, the better we can yield and steer it to our greater good.
Abstractions

We’re curious. We have an inherent need, a built-in mechanism of wanting to understand, to make sense of things. We question our world around us, seeking answers. We like to solve, to be challenged, to complete things. We search for clarity. When we’re able to make sense of something, we learn, we appreciate, we ‘progress’.

But some say ignorance is bliss.

This is a popular expression. ‘What you don’t know can’t hurt you’. The less you know about the truth, the reality of a problem, the less it can affect you. Life would seem less complicated. How many of us have looked upon our pet animals with a certain jealousy of their lifestyle, free, ignorant and seemingly uncomplicated. Do we really appreciate the vague? The not knowing. Do we respect it? Is it an exciting challenge? Do we long for this less defined space?

The idea of Abstraction might fight against our natural instincts of knowledge building. However it can create a different type of understanding. It keeps us in a constant state of guessing and rationalising. It doesn’t preoccupy itself with presenting fixed parameters - beginning, middle and end of story. It’s challenging on another level. It can be annoying on the practical side, but it can also be curious, inviting, releasing us of the need to know and opening the door to reflection.

It’s not a new experience. We’re exposed to it when watching a film or reading a book with no defined ending. We, as the viewer, fill in the blanks, connect the dots and create our own ending, our own meaning. As a designer, I’m interested in the way we appreciate and interpret things, how it’s very much dependant on how it’s framed and how the story or information is told and conveyed. In this sense, meaning can be packaged for us, affecting us like a placebo would.

The extreme end of this type of placebo is clearly visible through the power of advertising agencies. Take the fashion industry as an example which the design industry has closely mimicked. Depicting models which the industry portrays as the epitome of beauty, setting a standard for society to follow which it has traditionally tried to. All this to sell a packaged dream of the unreal, a lifestyle, a slice of perceived perfection, of the sublime which we want to emulate and experience, all conveyed through a photograph. Perhaps design (the type which concerns itself with the domestic environment and furnishings) has followed a similar route in the glossy magazines as it can no longer compete on the practicality basis alone in the midst of a saturated industry.

And so design in the commercial sphere is more commonly first experienced through carefully choreographed imagery, building on a narrative to increase an influence, impacting on our sense of value and appreciation.

The use and value of Abstraction in regard to the project would suggest giving freedom of interpretation back to the viewer. The opportunity to reflect and bestow a deeper sense of personal meaning. Marsha Smith’s story emulates this feeling when admiring a painting in Chicago, commenting on having an active part in the creative process of the art piece, making the meaning her own. To explore inducing reflection through abstraction in my process, I refer to Art and more specifically Abstract Art with its rich history in this field.

“Velvet Dreams” by &Tradition, illustrating the fashion orientated furniture photo shoot
“A work of Art must carry within itself its complete significance and impose that upon the beholder even before he recognizes the subject matter... What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue”. (Matisse, notes of a painter)

A quote by Henri Matisse sheds light on the possible function of Art, which at times I feel is still an overlooked and unappreciated idea by the Industrial Designer of today, with the education concerned still with traditional values of practical functionality. As a Designer, to have the skills to create a better quality of life, one must also appreciate and take into account this other landscape of thought and methodology.

Italian Industrial Designer Bruno Munari understood the relevance of these qualities in his book Design as Art. Recalling a story where his admired peers laughed at the “absurd and practically worthless” mobiles he designed, inspired by materialising geometry seen in the emerging Abstract painting in Italy by Giorgio Morandi, yet referencing Kandinsky’s geometry. Munari wanted to bring the static nature of these exciting compositions to life in three dimensions, by carefully creating harmonic relationships of colour and shape, intricately balancing from the ceiling, where a 4th dimension would emerge, that of Time, bringing a degree of randomness to the experience.

The pieces were named “useless machines”, if they had been named something more poetic, perhaps the interpretation at the time from his peers wouldn’t have been so comically received (Munari, 1966).

Munari’s peers did own these mobiles, however they were placed in their children’s bedrooms, even though they owned and displayed Marino Marini sculptures in their living rooms - known for their absurdness. This story relates back to the view of how the way we label things affects the meaning bestowed onto them, which is why I wish to strip all unnecessary mechanisms that might actively influence the viewer’s experience in regard to someone’s personal reflection, to instead solely provide the means to passively do so.
"...communication and ideas emerge from emptiness. Mental activities like “pondering” and “ideating” do not emerge from a conscious process of “thinking” that begins at ground zero; rather, I believe that they stem from our unconscious impulse to “inquire”. To “inquire” is predicated on “I think” - it establishes that emptiness that sets our brains to work." (Hara, 2010)
Unlike the purely geometric compositions and colour explorations of western Abstract Art, Japanese emptiness embodied in their pictorial imagery evokes relatable language in its content normally borrowed from nature, just enough of a hint which triggers the mind into imagining and rationalising the rest. Paintings from the likes of Hilma af Klint in the West, who’s been proclaimed for creating representations of abstraction before her male pioneers, seeking a deeper level of spirituality in her work. (Searle, 2016)

With the wish to surpass “the restrictions of the physical world”, this quest to evoke a spiritual reality through her work points towards an expression aimed at triggering an emotional response rather than a rational one. Similar to Hilma af Klint, painters such as Mark Rothko and his counterparts from the 40s/50s aimed to create an ‘encounter’ for the viewer which would be immersive and transcend everyday experience based solely on the composition of geometry and colour.

To this end, I see reflection as partly a rational phenomenon, which has been seen to be triggered by an emotional response to visual expressions with different degrees of abstraction. As Marsha Smith pointed out in her memory of experiencing the painting, abstraction connected her with the art piece, involving her in the creative process by allowing and arguably forcing her to find personal meaning for herself, reacting emotionally, not rationally.
The intention so far would be to create an experience, induced through an artefact, that attempts to evoke a response of reflection and emotional connection with the viewer. As spoken about in earlier chapters, the main driving source of inspiration where this type of experience has been explored in great lengths already has been through Abstract Art. I’ve referenced the Arts more than I have Design thus far, as I don’t intend for the desired interaction with the piece to be physical, nor reference existing product typologies that could influence the interpretation of the piece. Hence why abstraction and a sense of conveyed emptiness are tools to aid the intended reflective experience.

"The psychological power of colour becomes apparent, calling forth a vibration from the soul... since in general the soul is closely connected to the body, it is possible that one emotional response may conjure up another, corresponding form of emotion by means of association..." (Kandinsky)

We know that light has an effect on our emotional condition, it connects with us directly yet indirectly at the same time. This can be naturally seen in SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) or Winter Depression as some put it, where the lack of natural light causes problems with serotonin levels in the brain, affecting the mood of sufferers deeply.

There’s a treatment called Light Therapy, where sufferers are placed near a light therapy box (a full spectrum bright white light panel which mimics natural sunlight) for a prescribed amount of time per day. Amongst other things, it’s been used to attempt to re-balance our circadian rhythm, helping insomnia sufferers. Although some critiques have challenged the results of the therapy as merely a placebo effect.
Colour can be discussed and interpreted in many forms and disciplines, from the arts, to physiology, to psychology, philosophy etc. Colour is light of different wavelengths and frequencies, light is electromagnetic radiation, therefore light and colour is energy. This is the beginning of an introduction to a centuries-old method of treatment that I've come across called Chromotherapy, or colour medicine. We are surrounded by colour, having a deep psychological and physiological effect on us. Many studies have been done into looking at the effect of colour on humans, with some ambiguous and contradictory results, as there seem to be many environmental and individual factors to take into account, such as personal bestowal of meaning, memories and feelings to a colour. Apart from the different effects it can have on an individual, we know that colour does indeed at least have an effect on a psychological level, the specificity of which we can't concretely all agree on. Chromotherapy states that each colour with its specific wavelength, frequency and thus energy, can cure physical diseases and mental health problems. It's a type of holistic healing conducted by a "colour therapist" which is still in practice today, using different types of devices to shine specific colour to specific areas of the body. (Azemi, 2005)

Based on this, I look to light and therefore colour, as a medium and material to explore this reflective engagement with. They would seem to be core ingredients of this project, which have been continually referenced via stories, the Arts and research as elements that we connect with emotionally, whether it's via man-made representations like a painting or natural phenomena seen in Nature.
In reference to Kenya Hara, emptiness can be seen as a stimulus for reflection, evoking a transitional process from nothing into something, by means of our own personal interpretation. This with the ability that colour possesses to evoke an emotional reaction, a specific smart material comes to light which could convey these characteristics. Photochromic and Thermochromic paints are coatings that react to heat or uv-light (sunlight) accordingly. They’re available in powder form or ready to use liquid form. Their applications are mostly seen in either mass-produced products such as beer bottles (turning blue when cold enough to drink), frisbies (glowing colour while playing in the sun) or in hobby craft projects at home (mugs changing colour when exposed to hot liquid). Only recently have designers been discovering the potential of these materials on a wider scope.

As a starting point for materialising, I look at trying to convey and embody this transitional effect, evoking the delicate and the faint. A subtle distraction with a mesmerising tone. With inspiration from the stories I try capturing relatable yet abstracted moments from nature.
Thermochromic pigment test-rig, using a battery powered heat element from behind the fabric, creating a transitional painting 'device'.

Print screening test, thermochromic dotted pattern reacting to ambient temperature changes.

Exploring conductive thread as a heat element, using the element as decorative feature on the fabric, rather than being hidden.
Experiments with thermochromic pigment on glass, using a bulb as the heat element, creating a slow transitional effect for a meditative pause, mimicking a sun-set.
Thermochromic gradient on thin glass experiments, with the intention of capturing the essence of an empty blue sky that would slowly fade to clear.
Photochromic pigment experiments, reacting to UV LEDs, fading from smoky clear to sky blue.
I’d like to briefly touch upon our general notion of emotional understanding and interpretation, looking at certain assumptions that we hardly question. Today we live in an age where the pressure of being happy has never been so great. We celebrate happiness, it supposedly makes us better people, with winning positive attitudes, always looking forward, hiding what people deem as signs of emotional weakness. Psychologist Susan David speaks in a lecture on how society has deemed emotions like sadness, anger and even grief as “bad emotions” when in fact these are natural emotions that we’ve categorised into good or bad. Because of this, we’ve embraced false positivity by suppressing the bad emotions and so “we lose our capacity to develop skills to deal with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.” Parents can naturally do this to their children, categorising feelings and finding solutions rather than accepting natural emotions as “inherently valuable”. Bottling up our emotions, casting them aside can also result in their amplification. Ultimately to Susan David, “Being positive has become a new form of moral correctness”.

Our understanding of emotions has changed historically and has depended on cultural interpretation. Feeling sad today might make you feel ashamed, however in the 16th century in Europe, sadness was encouraged and one could even read self-help guides towards feeling this emotion, by reading reasons to be disappointed (Smith, 2017). In China, there was no word for depression, as the closest cultural interpretation of that feeling was a diagnosis for “a man who had not found a wife yet” (Smith, 2017).

In a design perspective, critical designers Anthony Dunne, Fiona Raby and Michael Anastassiades present a speculative approach towards what our emotional desires in the future could be through a project called Dark Design, which starts to echo this lost appreciation of negative associated emotions. They speculate on how design could engage with our negative feelings, as a reaction against the influence of consumerism, commenting on how it has naturally limited the emotional scope that we experience, through the things that are being made available for us to purchase. (Dunne&Raby, 2013). In “Dark Design”, Dunne and Raby look at what could be our interactions and relationships with our objects and social surroundings, proposing items that provoke thought, embracing that as a challenging yet strangely pleasurable experience in the future. As an example taken from the range, Statistical Clock is suggested as a domestic product which when switched on, starts speaking a reverse countdown from zero, counting fatalities that have been reported in the news only specifically caused from different modes of transport. The interest here is not so much the product itself or its abstracted purpose, but rather it’s passive and subtle interaction, caused by provocative information. What effect is this having on the individual, on the dynamics of a social group or family? What could be the positive end use of such negativity?

Being provided with negative facts would perhaps create a sense of perspective on our emotional state, being provoked into a state of personal reflection. Abstract Art’s inducing reflection differs in the sense that at face value, it might not be as directed towards a particular subject-matter like the Statistical Clock, however there’s still some degree of information being translated through abstracted forms and colours which stimulates thought. In this case, the statistical clock device and abstract art share a type of abstraction in its communication, providing enough hints, whether visual or auditory to stimulate reflection.
In wanting to take a more speculative approach to the project, the person who I may be speaking to might come from the future. With the increasing dependency on technology, one wonders what the emotional stimulus might be for the generation of tomorrow. Today we already see parents providing ipads to their infants as a source of peace and quiet. One can’t be too judgemental of such an act for it does work, but what might be the ramifications and consequences on the child’s future cognitive awareness? What will their desires, expectations and emotional needs from their surroundings and artefacts be when they’re adults? Perhaps there will be a need for another type of detachment. A detachment from technology as a sort of therapy, a desire for the analogue, or a hybrid of both, an experience of rest and reflection.

With the complexities of human nature, reflection might not need to come from a positive standpoint. Could reflection be designed and experienced in such a way that it becomes an exciting emotional craving for the future person that I’m speaking to?

The worrying yet common sight, questions the future impact of technology for the next generation...
The act of inducing a sense of deep thought, suggests communicating with the viewer a message of some description. Previous trials of creating moments borrowed from nature using light and colour, created merely admiration for a peaceful distraction with their transitional effect. This experience would inevitably become habitual, becoming part of the background in a domestic setting and therefore eventually forgotten. To create a balance of a faint and delicate object which subtly communicates, the idea of visualising data (inspired by Dunne & Raby), could add an element of randomness to each moment of interaction and another layer of information behind the visual affect.

With this in mind, a prototype was made, referencing the different layers of the journey so far. A type of device which starts to suggest a hybrid between the analogue and the digital, with a blank canvas connotation of a painting, yet with a circular shape and a bevelled edge detail suggesting another type of display more commonly seen in the semiotics of a smart device or even a mere watch. This hybridity is not only seen in the material combination and aesthetics but also in the effect, visualising this relationship clearly - Photochromic Colour being stimulated by uv LEDs.

Careful consideration was taken in embodying a sense of emptiness, with an abstracted aesthetic that hints towards certain connotations but doesn’t become them, only refers to them, with the hope of merely creating the means for the viewer to interpret, imagine and bestow their own meaning.

The type of information to be displayed and communicated would be the challenging obstacle. An idea was trialled to provoke people into a sense of perspective on their own situation. The first example tested was the global suicide rate, with an LED fading on and slowly off, once every 40 seconds, leaving a colour trace behind which would symbolise someone taking their own life. The reason for this choice was a starting point to visualise something that could create a possible disruptive impact to your own thoughts, not with the intention of feeling grateful, but more to become aware of the tragedy and thus opening up emotionally to that fact.

In parallel to this, this type of interaction starts to comment on whether we actually engage with the bombardment of news and facts that is so easily available through our technological devices.

One can be walking down the street, glance at a breaking news flash on our phone, stating a number of death casualties in a natural disaster or a terrorist explosion - do we actually connect with this number? Have our technological devices made us lose the ability to connect with such news? Have we built up a tolerance to this? Has this impacted on our empathy?

Without being able to answer those questions directly, what we know is that the constant exposure to the news has been linked to having a detrimental impact on our mental health, contributing to “the development of stress, anxiety, depression and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)” (Gregoire, 2015). Due to the creation of the 24h news-cycle, broadcasters
have been known to prioritise negative news, emphasising the potential impact of the story to our local lives, in a bid to 'emotionalise' the impact to keep people engaged (Gregoire, 2015). This is also a result of news bulletins having to compete with entertainment shows during prime-time television, shifting the news towards being a source of entertainment in its own right.

Even though on a speculative level, the idea of provoking reflection is an interesting concept, (getting in touch with our perceived darker emotional scope) perhaps stimulating this through a negative statistic is nothing new, a mere continuation of our times, embodied though another device, a new gateway for the news to intrude and be ever more present in the comfort of our home life. On a more realistic level, the participants who experienced the device found it hard to relate to the negativity through an artefact visualising emerging pastel colour patterns, lacking a darker expression, a juxtaposition of aesthetics with the underlying message. Also with the suicide statistic example, it seemed too generic and non relatable for many. The mesmerising affect was enough to stimulate a connection of mere curiosity behind the patterns.

The project opened up to endless possibilities of displaying data, becoming an integral part of the material pallet to explore. With today’s resources of creating and storing personal data through free applications, mobile phones and online services, data has become a future currency of high value for companies to learn from potential customers, searching for patterns in the data to create more accurate targeted predictions.

The potential for the intended design could explore how we value our personal data, generating patterns in our databank (the cloud) and what we can learn from that about ourselves. In terms of value in a literal sense, it could also be a method of materialising the future perceived value of money, an educational tool for children growing up as money becomes more and more electronic, number orientated transactions rather than the more relatable yet diminishing exchange of physical artefacts in the shape of coins and notes.

To keep in mind the initial purpose of creating the means, a condition for bestowing individual interpretation, meaning and reflection, a workshop was had to explore whether there would be any relevance in being able to choose the type of information / data on display and to imagine whether it could be personal, local or even generic.
Anything, I’d prefer to explore data that generated nice patterns. A random data source that can be explored after aesthetic preference or data relating example could be a happening relating to my cloud data...

I’d like to emphasise the material of the background, maybe a bleeding or flaring effect through the fabric.

A pattern that constantly changed and that is abstract so that you don’t know what will come next, almost like clouds - coloured clouds, irregularities

The info sharing doesn’t seem relevant to me. It’s the display that is interesting - but maybe it could show health info? A logging system of how family members feel - anonymous of course. Or statistics of how many times people’s voices were raised to highlight frustration?

Meteorological data (existing data) of spring indicators when new ... happen in the city that I care about, when a person I care about wakes up

I would like to have a bleeding appearance growing cloud like

Happy information, global progress

TIME
Not light dots

Show how much time I have in the morning before I need to go to my job/school

The colour could start subtle and increase, as the time gets closer to when it’s time to go. This could help people like me in perceiving time better, it’s a condition that some people have in not being able to track time.
Context & Proposal

Apart from the workshop providing insights into people’s personal aesthetic and content preference, the desire for the patterns to have a practical end use was split, with some wanting a clear meaning behind the patterns, linked to a function of providing meteorological data, or a device which could communicate your mental well-being to your loved ones or even merely something that tells the time. There was a consistent desire to make it personal. Others preferred keeping a filter of abstraction to the experience, valuing more the type of presence and ambience that it creates rather than what message was communicated through data.

This demonstrates the complexities of trying to design something which opens up to such varied possibilities and that starts to try to cater for all. By conveying a blank canvas and abstracted aesthetic, this provided a platform for imagining countless possibilities of its practical value. This to me is something that should remain partly intentionally ‘un-resolved’, so as not to impose too many parameters onto such an experience. Since reflection is indeed a subjective and individual moment, then it’s safe to state that the intended design should serve that purpose and offer the individual their own expression of use. What’s provided is the freedom to decide on whether one would like randomised effects or a translation of something more specific that is of particular interest, instead of giving that role to the designer - letting the user foster their own relationship with the device over time, discovering its potential and creating their own ‘function’ for it.

With such an artefact and experience that doesn’t quite exist on the market, apart from a future generation of device-led society, who this speaks to in particular isn’t a concern, as this has not driven or inspired the process and development of the project. The type of experience is to be referenced to that of Art, which doesn’t have a preselected audience.

My personal intention and interpretation of this project would be directed to a future scenario for the home environment, as it’s the space where one is more open to and has the time to accept these more personal reflective experiences.

However, for the Konstfack Spring Exhibition, I intend to create an installation which would not be so focused on perceiving the item as a domestic product, but rather present the work as a product of research into the topic, to convey the experience and generate a discussion around it, inviting the viewer to reflect on the relevance of what a device like this would mean to them by showing contrasting effects and scales to experience.

Simon’s interpretation (desired reaction for exhibition)

It feels like a product, like something that you’d have in your home. It has a speaker language to it, like a particular product by Bang&Olufsen that I’ve seen. It reminds me of the feeling of something drying in the sun, the way a wet patch slowly disappears in the heat. I feel calm while looking at it, but curious about the dots...the more I stare at it the more it looks like a radar system, or that there’s some kind of information coming through…”

1. Waiting room experience
2. Home domestic context
3. Public outdoor environment
To generate interest and to activate the viewer in being a part of the process, a display frame will be presented in front of 3 disks on a wall, with tools (UV torches) hanging from the frame to explore the material with. This interaction is intended to engage the participant with the special pigment and therefore the project, by visualising illustrations and text displayed on the disks in front of them. The desired effects are yet to be tested for the exhibition. There will be 3 contrasting methods and scales to display patterns through the Photochromic impregnated fabric. The contrasting scales correspond to potential different contexts and display information in 3 individual levels of abstraction, differing also in speed/rhythm and intensity. They will be activated individually, visualising stored patterns without the ability to update them live.

This is to demonstrate and test various points:

- The potential of the material’s properties in creating a new device typology - ANALOGUE+DIGITAL.

- To test and question the different levels of engagement with light and colour - emotional/rational perceived reaction with each effect and corresponding scale.

- To allow the viewer to participate and thus contribute to the development of the body of research around the topic, adopting a co-design orientated approach, a type of workshop installation, using the context of the exhibition to its full potential. Reactions and feedback will be gathered and posted by the visitor through an online platform (yet to be established) which will be indicated on the interactive frame in front of the disks.
Disk 1: Largest size (1.5m), opening up to be used in a public environment where the effect can be seen and shared by many. As a contextual example, it would provide the possibility for it to be updated by a viewer in a waiting room through a smart device. By using UV lasers, this offers the ability to cover large surface areas efficiently and cheaply in comparison to creating an LED grid. By having a high degree of accuracy in creating visuals, mimicking the brush stroke of a painter, this can provide the least abstracted level of the three examples, by depicting imagery, symbols, graphs etc. For the exhibition the pattern will be showing comparisons of good versus negative statistics simultaneously and a new way of illustrating the passing of time.

Disk 2: Medium sized (1m), will visualise gradient patterns to convey quantity, differing in levels of filling the circle with colour. Partly abstracted in its representation through gradients, the reference of filling is a universally accepted notion across cultures, and so the engagement could provide a balance of an emotional/rational response. The examples will mainly be stimulated by positive news.

Disk 3: Domestic size (750mm), grid of LEDs broken up by mesh to distort hot spots. The most abstracted of the three, creating randomised patterns without being linked to Data. In reference to a few comments made in a previous workshop of not being concerned on the informative side with the underlying message, but rather interested by the mesmerising colour patterns and the purely emotional presence and ambience that that stimulates.
The bespoke made torches become a type of key element to unlock the information hidden on the fabric. This playful interaction invites the visitor to take part in discovering the material’s properties. It will also serve as a type of storyboard, providing illustrations and descriptions to learn about the project and concepts behind the disks. This interaction would be experienced after observing the disks on the wall as they approach the piece.
Final Reflections

Exhibition

The spring exhibition seemed an appropriate platform to communicate the project, as it was ultimately designed to become an installation that would convey the concept through the experience. The intention was to engage the viewer with the topic by allowing them to initially explore the material and messages, indicating what might be happening on the disks. This intended behaviour became harder to evoke than anticipated. Half the visitors had high technological expectations of the interactivity, assuming that they were in control of the patterns on the disks with their physical interaction with the provided torches. The direct interaction with the linear frame was more engaging for the viewer than the disks, apart from it being fun, one becomes part of the creative process, being able to control and play with the emerging images and text. Certain indicative messages were printed on the panel, to get the visitor into a state of reflection as to what the disks could be translating and to start a discussion. Without my intervention, visitors assumed that the frame was the core of the project, rather than the disks.

In hindsight, without the presence of the frame, the attention would have been directed towards the disks, which would’ve generated a more focused curiosity and dialogue about the general concept. Otherwise, the subject of the questions revolved around the nature of the colour pigments rather than the concept itself. The playfulness of interacting with the material, created a type of friction between conveying the concept and the experience of playing with the material.

The installation required more of an active role from myself in communicating the intention. Even though I didn’t want my intervention to influence people’s interpretation of the piece, within the busy context of an exhibition a degree of clarity and guidance from my part could have been developed further in order to ignite people’s interest and a more relevant dialogue in regard to the topic. This seemed true when personally engaging with visitors and explaining the project further.

Abstraction can create un-clarity, albeit intentional for this experience, to create a platform to induce self-reflection, the un-clarity and thus confusion is counter-intuitive to the experience that a visitor wishes to go through in a graduate exhibition, therefore perhaps not so valued nor appreciated. The room provided for the pieces wasn’t the most appropriate of spaces due to the mix of other projects. A plain white corner wall was created to define and frame the space, creating a neutral platform that stood out from the rest.
Outcomes
With the goal of creating a workshop installation, to listen and speak with visitors on their views on
the project, there were some productive conversations that helped expand my initial framing. With
the largest disk with embedded lasers as an example, there were suggestions that it could monitor
your loved one's online activity or mobile use, calculating the emotional state that they might be
in, which would then be translated through the patterns, by speed of movement and complexity
of shapes. My outlook had been conservative in comparison, without taking into account that
this project could be a speculation into giving a possible future gestalt to Artificial Intelligence,
reminiscent yet less imposing than the algorithmic sentient computer HAL 9000 in Stanley
Kubrick's 2001 Space Odyssey. Some correlations were also made with a possibly less invasive
version of Amazon's Alexa product. This path would be a different project altogether, yet it's an
interesting layer that hadn't been considered before the exhibition.

Abstraction
I believe still in the opportunity for abstraction in design, as a more challenging experience for the
viewer. Inviting creative thought and interpretation, it starts to depart from the more consumerist
thread of packaging a narrative into a commercial product with a clear function. Design according
to Dune & Raby has been shaped by this process, limiting the available experiences that design
could offer. With the fast paced progression of technology, an entity becoming more present and
influential in our daily lives, to speculate on how to yield it towards possible future desires, seems to
me a required responsibility for the Designer to consider.

The project has also sought to challenge our perceived traditionalist notions of practicalities in
design, to not only solve problems but to cater to other desires and emotions that might be lacking
due again to a consumer led society. The Arts has a long history of tapping into, challenging and
catering for our emotions - a field known to have methods and expressions in which this paper has
suggested that Designers should consider in their own process.

As a final reflection, a quote by Maria Foerlev of art gallery Etage Projects, resonates with my final
steps and thoughts of this journey:

“I believe there’s a need for functional, utilitarian design, just as much as I believe in
art for its poetic psychology. But there’s also a need for them combined. The world really
doesn’t need another chair, but it will always need ideas, emotions and engagement”

From the project, what I intend to take forward is a continuation on exploring how to embody this
sense of poetic psychology through Design. Creating moments that captivate people's imagination
and curiosity, an experience of the unexpected. In an already over saturated market of practical
objects, I believe there's another form of functional value to be experienced - one which could be
emotionally driven, giving space for interpretation and reflection, allowing the user to be part of the
creative process.
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