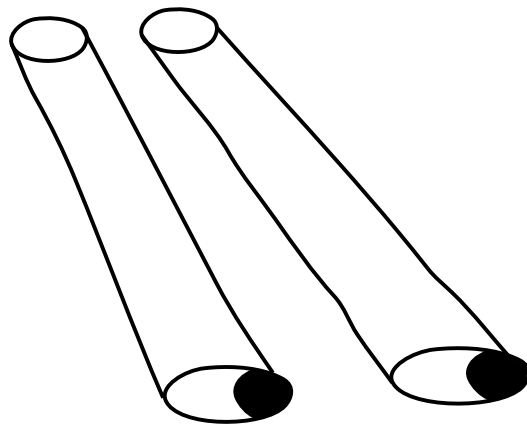


# *I, the Designer*

exploring the designer's  
first-person perspective



COVER

a design diploma project  
by Meike Huisman

for the Oslo School of Architecture and Design

Spring 2024

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Institute of Design:  
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Carvalho  
& Source Code Pro by Paul D. Hunt

I, the Designer



*fig. 1 Dynamics between me & the context of Rotterdam Central Station*



How can designers' subjectivity intentionally be employed in the design process?

'I, the Designer' is an experimental design diploma exploring possibilities through which designers are enabled to respond sensibly to the design context while integrating their first-person perspective. With a focus on the relationship between designer and participant, particularly where the designer relates to and responds to them as the other, making explicit the differences in worldviews.

To explore this topic, I adopted a research through design approach and was guided dynamic research sketching and autoethnographic research.

Based on my research, I propose a methodological and practical contribution to auto-ethnographic design, that encourages designers to make their subjectiveness explicit during interaction with others, not only in worlds but through material.

The outcome of this project is a workshop in which designers can practice to make their assumptions explicit, through noticing exercises, embodiment practices, and interaction with materials; in doing so designers can train their muscle memory to respond from their first-person perspective.

Additionally, I created a set of booklets with hands-on examples of how to integrate the first-person perspective of the designer in a design project. The booklets capture experiments and learnings, together with reflections.

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MYSELF AS SUBJECT

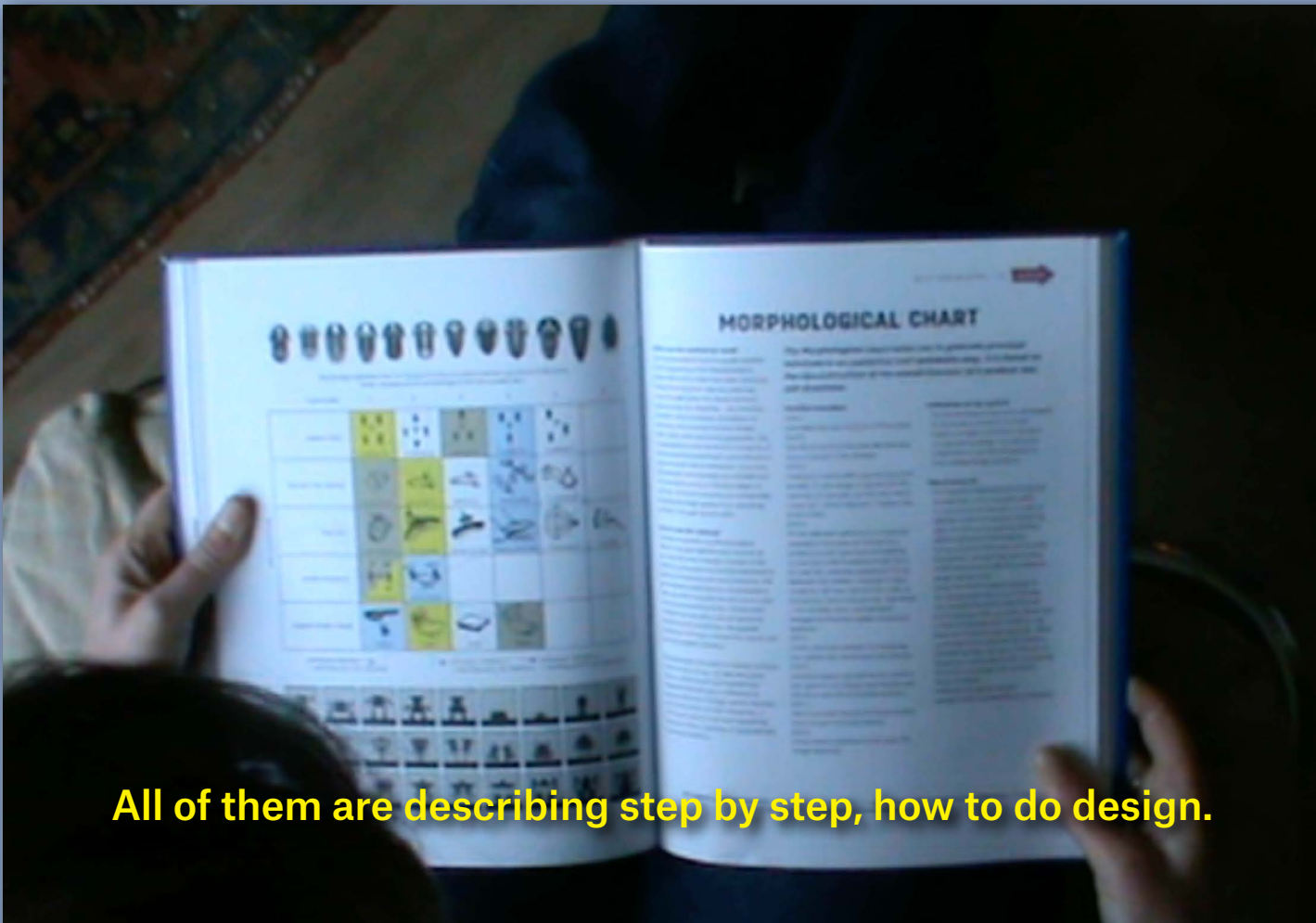


**When I started my studies in design at Delft University of Technology, I had to buy these books:**

## MOTIVATION



....and more books follow during my studies.



All of them are describing step by step, how to do design.



## MOTIVATION



**A know-how without know-who,  
the designer is deleted from the equation.**

**2 years ago, I came to AHO. In the courses I followed here one message came back in different varieties:**

"YOU ARE PART OF THE SYSTEM"

"SEE YOURSELF IN THE SYSTEM"

"BE AWARE OF YOURSELF"



## MOTIVATION



**.. and with these lines, the designer is brought back into the equation.**

For me, these lines also raised many questions:

- WHY SHOULD I BE THE DESIGNER IN THIS PROJECT?
- IS THERE SOMEONE WHO COULD DO IT BETTER?
- IN WHICH POSITION SHOULD YOU SAY NO TO A PROJECT?
- CAN I (INTENTIONALLY) SHAPE MYSELF TO BE THE 'RIGHT' DESIGNER FOR THE DESIGN CONTEXT?

MOTIVATION



Can I design myself?



# *Introduction*

This first section aims to guide you through the structure of this project and report by introducing you to the positioning and terminology of the project, defining the aim of the design research, and discussing the contribution and structure of the report.

Throughout this report, you will find auto-ethnographic snippets, telling you more about my personal experience connected to this research. Additionally you come across program booklets that show my design experiments, learnings and reflections as the results of my research.



*fig. 2 me through my handycam*

## STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report is made of subsequent sections that showcase the work in my design research. The process of my design research has been iterative and reflective. While the report presents the process in different sections, the activities and thought development are intertwined and thus not necessarily separate.

The structure of the report has been designed to make it easier to read and to do justice to each of its parts.

This section (*Introduction*) introduces you to the project through its positioning, terminology, aim and contribution.

In '*The Self in Design*', I will discuss the theoretical framework.

The '*Methodology*' section describes my research approach and methods.

Followed by booklets presenting the design research, which contains four design research programs (*Experiments*).

Throughout this report, you will find auto-ethnographic snippets (*Myself as Subject*), telling you more about my personal experience connected to this research. I have adopted a first-person perspective in my writing to provide a more personal and authentic account. And you will see footage taken with my handycam. This device has a special meaning to me as I got it when I moved to Oslo, since then I have been capturing my daily life through the tiny, grainy screen.

The section (*Designer-Participant Collaboration*) elaborates on the workshop proposal.

The report will end with the *Discussion* of this project.

## POSITIONING

Why should I be the designer in this project? Is there someone who could do it better? In which position should you say no to a project? Can I (intentionally) shape myself to be the 'right' designer for the design context?

Can I design myself?

These personal questions are the motivation for this project. These types of questions have been on my mind since the very beginning of my design education, but they became more present when I started to do projects that were situated in 'the real world'; when the people I designed for became involved in my projects.

What qualifies me to come into their lives? Who am I to try to influence what is there and then to leave?



These questions brought me to look into self-reflection for design, which is about processing your own thoughts, feelings, experiences, and actions. My questions evolved and became more specific during my exploratory and open process. I realised that reflections do not necessary influence behaviour. Through the book: *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design* [1], I was introduced to the field of auto-ethnography which I was not yet familiar with. This book helped me navigate the transition from self-reflection to auto-ethnographic design.

Auto-ethnography is a research method where the researcher uses writing or reporting of their own experiences as the primary datasource to understand the sociocultural meanings embedded within those experiences [2]. In other words, making sense of culture through the self.

This research project is situated in the emerging field of the auto-ethnographic (or first-person) design.

Auto-ethnographic design can be described as a design practice in which designers enter the design process from their own unique perspectives. Like auto-ethnographic research, it bridges the self with the broader cultural realm, but instead of reporting, designers embrace creative production. Rather than just producing thoughts, they actively change the world by interacting with its physical aspects [1].

[1] Schouwenberg, L., & Kaethler, M. (2022). *The Auto-Ethnographic turn in design*.

[2] Chang, H. (2016). *Autoethnography in health research: growing pains?*. *Qualitative health research*, 26(4), 443-451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315627432>.

To respond to a design question with social relevance, the designer no longer exists solely in the roles of researcher and creative [3] but, in dealing with social structures, must now adopt roles such as philosopher and facilitator.

These roles ask the designer to position themselves and their designs within society, which auto-ethnographic design is focussed on. In their attempt to answer a design question, they “must address all other related questions about values, perceptions, and worldviews” [3]. Therefore, designer’s ability to make meaningful societal change is intrinsically related to the values, perceptions and worldviews they hold and bring into the design process.

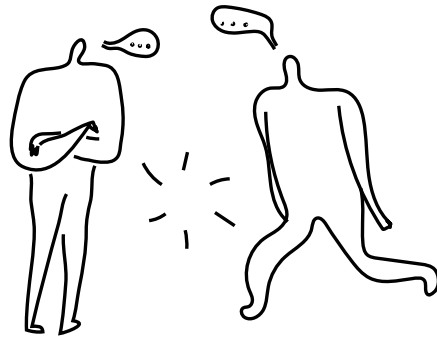
By actively involving others with their own values, perceptions and worldviews in the design process, designers can broaden and challenge their understanding of a specific context. The response of dealing with multiple worldviews can be captured in participatory and co-design practices [4].

My project focusses on the dynamics between the designer and the participant in the design context. Specifically on how the designer relates and responds to them as the other, thereby making explicit the differences in worldviews.

I aim to contribute to the field of auto-ethnographic design in combination with participatory practice, exploring the designer-participant collaboration with an emphasis on how they experience the world from their own point of view (first-person perspective).

[3] Golsby-Smith, T. (1996). *Fourth order design: A practical perspective* Tony Golsby-Smith. *Design Issues*, 12(1), 5-25.. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1511742>

[4] Tomasini Giannini, F., & Mulder, I. (2022, August). *Towards a Power-Balanced Participatory Design Process*. In *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference 2022-Volume 2* (pp. 111-117). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3537797.3537819>



*fig. 3 designer and participant*

## TERMINOLOGY

Before you start reading this report, I would like to introduce you to some of the terms used in this work, which sometimes require additional clarification and nuance to understand [5].

### *First-person perspective*

Experiencing the world from one's own point of view. The first-person perspective is:

- based on personal experiences and observations
- reflected in the individual's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and perceptions
- influenced by factors such as personal biases, cultural background, and past experiences.

With the first-person perspective of the designer, I mean experiencing through the individual designers point of view.

### *Designer*

Someone with design skills and artistry. In the realm of participatory design this means experimentation, learning by doing and facilitating the involvement of others in the process. However in this work, I consider everyone who calls themselves a designer a designer.

### *Participant*

Someone who takes part in or becomes involved in a particular activity of a design project, and whom the designer considers of value to the design.

### *The Self*

The individual's sense of identity, which encompasses their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of themselves as distinct and separate from others.

### *The Other*

Something or someone else. The Other is a concept often used in philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies to describe the perception of someone or something as different

[5] I have written this with help of chatGPT 3.5 using the prompt: "What does [term] mean?" I have evaluated the answer with my own knowledge, made a selection of the answer and adjusting it where necessary.

<b><i>Self-reflection</i></b>	The process of examining one's own thoughts, feelings, experiences, and actions with the intention of gaining understanding, and personal growth. Self-reflection begins with self-awareness—the ability to observe and recognize one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors
<b><i>Noticing</i></b>	The act of becoming aware of something. It means more than just glancing at an object or person. Instead, it denotes paying attention to, truly registering something or someone.
<b><i>Material engagement</i></b>	Interacting with physical objects or materials in a meaningful way, often to achieve a specific purpose or to enhance one's understanding or experience.
<b><i>Language</i></b>	A system of communication that uses symbols, such as words, gestures, and sounds, to convey meaning and express thoughts, ideas, emotions, and information.
<b><i>Vocabulary</i></b>	Means of communication, known and used by a group in a particular language or field of study.

There are a few terms that recur frequently and look very similar but slightly differ in meaning, here I describe these differences [6].

***Position/ Positionality:***

“Position” and “positionality” are related concepts, but they have different meanings:

“*Position*” refers to someone’s standpoint or stance on a particular issue, topic, or situation. It can include their opinions, beliefs, perspectives, or attitudes regarding that subject.

“*Positionality*” refers to the particular social, cultural, historical, and personal context that shapes an individual’s position or viewpoint. It acknowledges that our perspectives are not formed in a vacuum but are influenced by various factors such as our race, gender, socio-economic status, nationality, education, and personal experiences.

***Subjectivity/ Subjectiveness:***

“Subjectivity” and “subjectiveness” are related terms that both pertain to aspects of personal perspective, but they have slightly different meanings:

“*Subjectivity*” refers to the quality of being influenced by individual feelings, personal experiences, biases, or interpretations.

“*Subjectiveness*” specifically emphasizes the subjective nature of something, such as a perspective, interpretation, or evaluation.

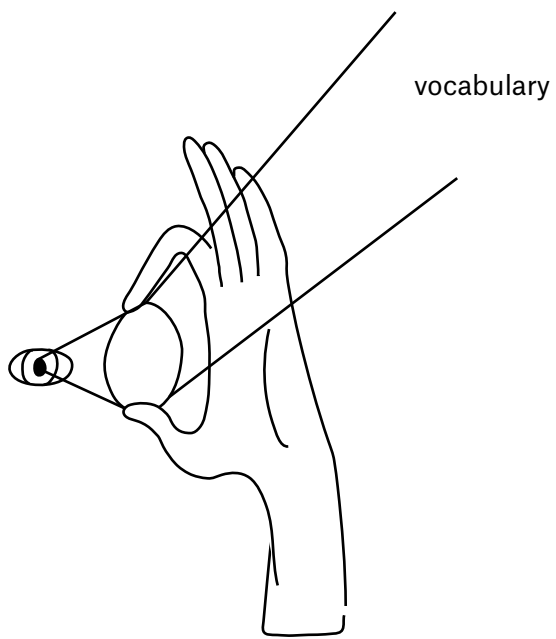
[6] I have written this with help of chatGPT 3.5 using the prompt: "Can you also explain the difference between [term 1] and [term 2]?" I have evaluated the answer with my own knowledge, made a selection of the answer and adjusting it where necessary.

***Introspection/ Reflection:***

Introspection and reflection are both cognitive processes that involve examining one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, but they differ in focus and scope:

***"Introspection"*** is the process of looking inward and examining one's own mental processes, thoughts, and emotions. Note that introspection is similar to self-reflection but that it differs in the intention.

***"Reflection"*** is a broader process that involves thinking critically about past experiences, actions, or events, and considering their implications for one's beliefs, values, and behavior.



*fig. 4 aim and goal*



## AIM

In this project, I am investigating the dynamics between the designer and the design context, specifically while engaging in participatory and co-design practices. As these practices prioritise the direct interaction between the designer and the other in the design context.

The main ambition is to explore possibilities through which designers are enabled to respond sensibly to the design context while integrating their first-person perspective.

In doing so, designers can test out their biases, making them intentionally part of the design process and creating space for subjectiveness.

Since this project is a design research project, the goal differs from industry-driven design work as it focuses on enhancing the understanding of a concept through research. In order to explore the possible ways in which designers can respond to the design context, I want to create a means of expression of their first-person perspective.

I will do so in expanding the vocabulary to express the subjectiveness of the designer and inform discussion in the design community.

The following two questions have continuously helped me to review my work and can be considered as my main research questions:

- How do we put self-reflection into practice?
- How can designers' subjectivity intentionally be employed in the design process?

These questions are based on the current understanding of taking into account a designer's bias. Current tools are mostly focused on self-reflection before the design process and produce word-based thoughts. In my understanding, to fully integrate a designer's subjectiveness, the practice should create actions and behaviour not solely thoughts, and it should be applicable within the context of a design project.

## CONTRIBUTION

The outcome is a methodological and practical contribution to auto-ethnographic design, that encourages designers to make their subjectiveness explicit during interaction with others, not only in worlds but through material.

To integrate self-reflection as an activity during the design process, rather than before or after, I propose four shifts that empower the designer to continually and sensibly learn through their first-person perspective in relation to (1) the design context, (2) participatory collaboration, (3) the participant and (4) the way they communicate their understanding of the world:

- (1) from detached  
to entangled
- (2) from taking a third person perspective  
to a shared first person perspective
- (3) from extracting knowledge  
to mutual learning
- (4) using material instead of solely  
communicating through language

I designed a workshop in which designers can engage with these shifts. Through noticing exercises, embodiment practices, and interaction with materials, designers can practice to make their assumptions explicit; exploring the designer-participant collaboration from their first-person perspective.

This contribution is based on the learnings from my design research programs, these learnings are further discussed in the 'Experiments' section.



*fig. 5 engaging with the 4 shifts*



# *The Self in Design*

This section offers a theoretical framework  
on the self in design.

## THE ABSENT OBSERVER

Before coming to AHO, I was taught a design practice that is heavily influenced by the idea of an absent observer.

Design education at the Delft University of Technology started with the goal to educate engineers to become product developers for industry [7]. The designs are characterised by an “orientation towards client and used needs, rather than focused on personal expression”. This has led to a rational reliance on methodology that is still present in the education today [7].

Moreover, the Delft methodology is well known beyond the university through for example the Delft Design Guide [8]. This contributes to the predominant view of design as a technical function, an instrumental approach to make the world better.

The designer becomes an instrument; the benevolent technician that is subjugated to something bigger. Placing design at the service of big money, quality of life, or society [1]. In this position, there is often little room for personal doubt, questioning or ideals, the designer’s self is detached from the designs they create.

The only way to maintain this absence of normativity is to render the designer invisible. The subjectivity of the designer is of little to no importance, if it must be a matter of following instructions.

However, even the absent observer is not invisible. The world responds to us. Shaped by our worldviews, our positions are never neutral.

[7] Voûte, E., Stappers, P. J., Giaccardi, E., Mooij, S., & van Boeijen, A. (2020). *Innovating a large design education program at a University of Technology*. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 6(1), 50-66. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2019.12.001>

[8] *Delft Design Guide 2.0 hits international book shelves*. (n.d.). TU Delft. <https://www.tudelft.nl/2020/10/maart/delft-design-guide-20-hits-international-book-shelves>

[1] Schouwenberg, L., & Kaethler, M. (2022). *The Auto-Ethnographic turn in design*.



THE SELF IN DESIGN

[9] FUTURE. (2009, September 22). LIFT | FUTURE [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJNAvyLCTik>

fig. 6 screenshots from 'Lift' as an illustration of the absent observer in the short film 'Lift' by Marc Isaacs [9]

## BEING EXPLICIT

My project started with the idea that since we cannot be invisible, we should be explicit about our presence.

Instead of trying to detach ourselves, we could make room for self-knowledge like intuition and gut feelings. Acknowledging that we bring our own positionality and cannot put ourselves in someone else's shoes.

## THE DESIGNER AND THE OTHER

We cannot assume someone else. Each person's viewpoint is shaped by unique circumstances in a certain time, place, and space. We make sense of the world via our own experiences, which influence our perspectives.

While engaging in participatory or co-design practices, designers try to understand how everyone is embedded in the (design) context. And yet, in revealing everyone's non-neutral position, the neutrality of the position of the designer is still presupposed.

“To give space to someone else,  
you have to step back yourself.”

In this distance, we focus on the other and tend to neglect our presence in the observations and interpretations (program 1). We think that we can understand each other by listening very well, but that might still leave room for misinterpretation or misunderstanding (program 2).

The designer is empowered to take the interpretations further in the design process. Our interpretations, our frame of reference and our personal styles are reflected in the designs we create, influencing the lives of others. As such, design is an act of power.



## FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

That design is an act of power has not gone unnoticed. As we navigate the intended and unintended consequences of design, tools and frameworks are developed to be more aware of your bias, privilege, and responsibility. Think of the Do No Harm framework [10] or the matrix of domination [11].

I have been filling out worksheets related to these frameworks, and while doing that a feeling creeps up on me that I have to do this all over again because I am afraid that I am forgetting something that is important.

What do these instructions really mean? Often, they ask you to self-reflect. But how do you enact that? (program 1).

These frameworks produce self-awareness using language, resulting in rational thoughts. The produced reflections still need to be put into actions by the designer while interacting with the design context.

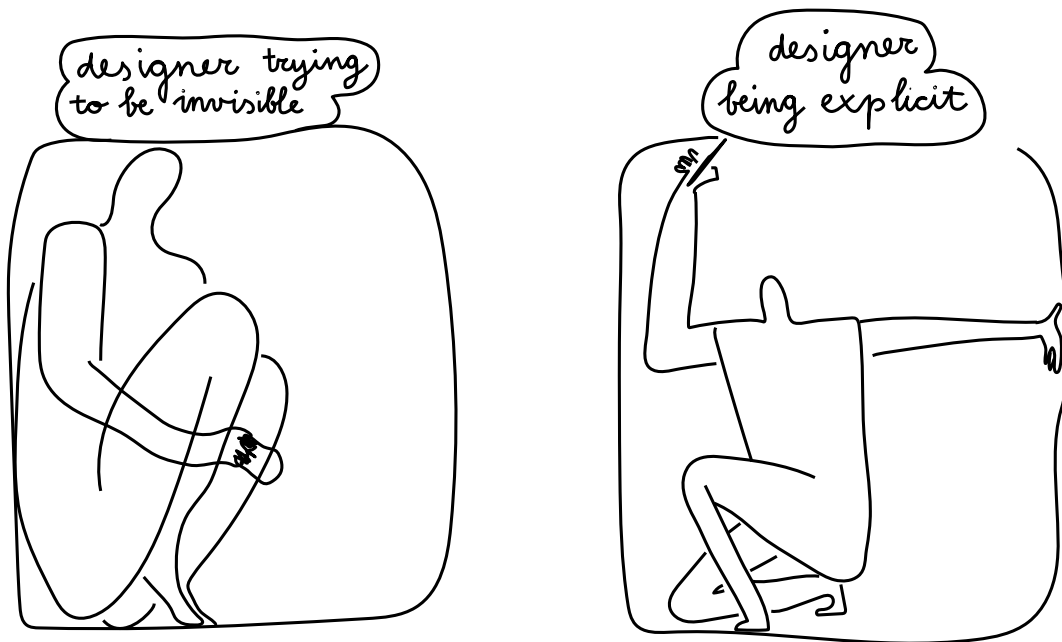
Material-oriented and embodied practices that include self-awareness help us bridge the gap between thoughts and action as they use the same medium to create understanding as they do to express.

“The acts of auto-ethnographic design are both communicating an understanding of the world and try to change it at the same time” [1].

[10] Do no harm framework in design: a valuable business consideration. (2023, 11 april). <https://www.designit.com/stories/point-of-view/do-no-harm-in-design-part-two>

[11] Collins, P. H. (2022). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. routledge. 132. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2074808>

[1] Schouwenberg, L., & Kaethler, M. (2022). *The Auto-Ethnographic turn in design*.



*fig. 7 problematised versus proposed situation*

# *Methodology*

This section describes the approach I took and gives an overview of the methods I used.

## APPROACH

I want to explore the positionality of the designer. This is an ambiguous topic. To deal with this ambiguity, I have used Research through Design as an approach.

Research through Design is an umbrella term for design practices to generate knowledge [12]. This approach, characterised by iteration and reflection, allows for experimentation to better understand complex matters in design [13].

I am not focused on solving a problem or creating a solution, but I am using design to learn, ask questions and spark reflection around the positionality of the designer within a design project.

My design research holds its value in the knowledge generated as insights and embedded in designed experiments as 'products' [14].

The generation of new questions develops the inquiry, exploring possibilities and consequences. The ambiguous topic of the positionality of the designer, asks for such an approach to discover the right questions to ask.

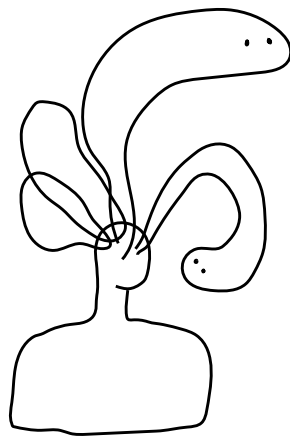
Be surprised, learn what can be learned.

[12] Markussen, T., Bang, A. L., Pedersen, P., & Knutz, E. (2012). *Dynamic Research Sketching—A new explanatory tool for understanding theory construction in design research*. <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2445&context=drs-conference-papers>

[13] Godin, D., & Zahedi, M. (2014). *Aspects of research through design: a literature review*. <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conferencepapers/drs2014/researchpapers/85>

I have used three methods to explore the designer's first-person perspective: auto-ethnographic research, conversations with experts and design research programs.

While my auto-ethnographic research delves inward into my first-person perspective, the design research programs extend outward, focusing more on the interaction with the design context. It is important to note, however, that these approaches are not separate in their activities.



*fig. 8 inwards & outwards*

[14] Stappers, P. J., & Giaccardi, E. (n.d.). *Research through Design. The Interaction Design Foundation*. <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/research-through-design>

## AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

My project revolves around the personal in the design process. When you want to engage with the personal, it is impossible to do that without openly putting yourself in your work. Through auto-ethnographic research I could gain experiential knowledge, that I could not get access to in other approaches [15].

In a typical sense, ethnography is mapping a social practice, but because this project is about the designer. It means that in my project it is about me and my design practice.

Throughout the process I have been challenging myself and my own practice, looking for automatic, unconscious and (often) unquestionable behaviour, resulting in more self-awareness. In other words, I was researching myself while designing and researching a design context through me (see booklet 'Myself as Subject').

I have done this, for example, in my diploma log: I took a moment every day to summarize what I had done and what thoughts I was having at the end of the day in a digital logbook (fig. 9).

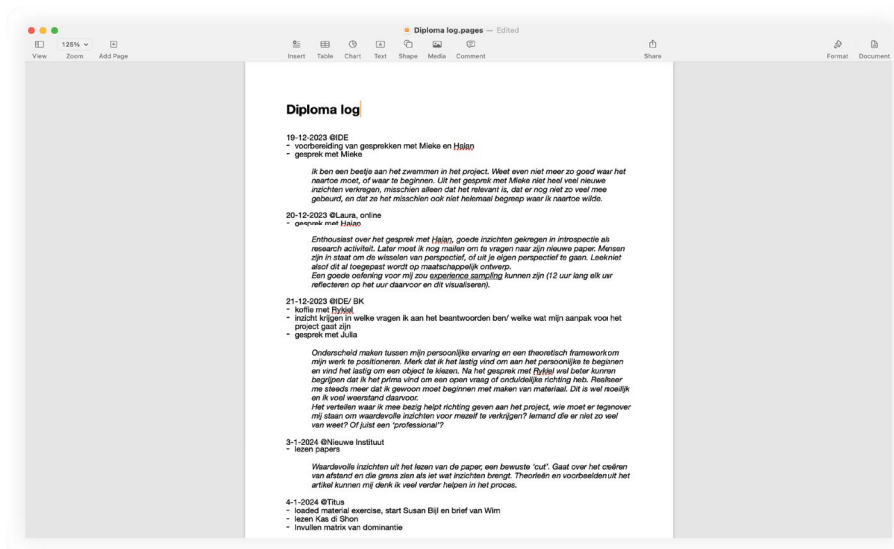
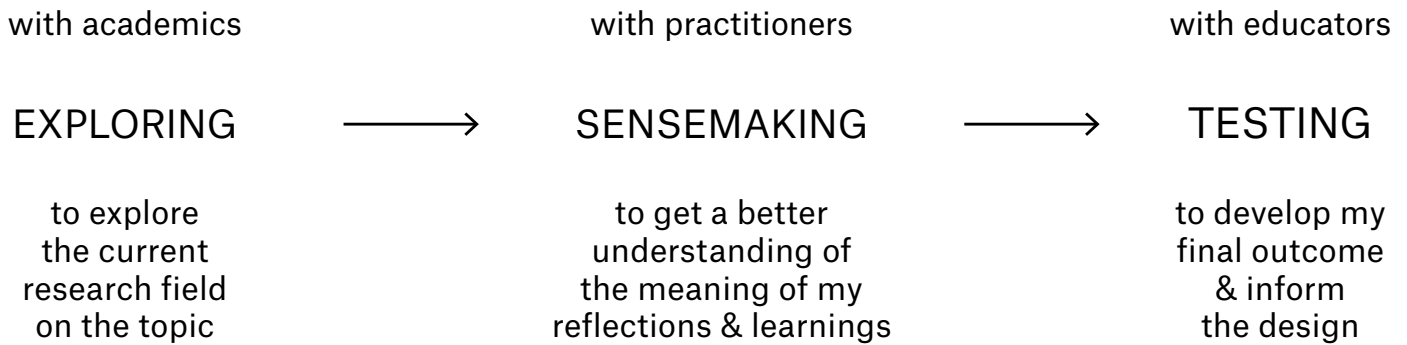


fig. 9 my digital logbook

## CONVERSATIONS WITH EXPERTS

Throughout my project I have spoken to a number of experts in order to understand what is currently happening in the field of design at an academic level, as well as bringing in experiences from practice. These conversations have informed and sometimes driven my experiments.

As the conversations took place at different phases of my process, their purposes vary. Their contribution can be roughly described as 'exploring', 'sensemaking' and 'testing' (fig. 10).



*fig. 10 purposes of conversations*





## MIEKE VAN DER BIJL-BROUWER

*Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer is a researcher, designer and educator in transdisciplinarity and human-centred & systemic design [16].*

*She is connected to the research project 'Resilient Designers' which aims to provide guidance and support to designers in their journey towards resilience and greater well-being literacy [17].*

*photo from [16]*

19-12-2023 | In our conversation we talked about the future designer, and what qualities this designer should have. Besides, we discussed limitations of one designer and how design needs a scope of practice.



## HAIAN XUE

*Haian Xue is an assistant professor at Delft University of Technology, where, among other thing, he teaches a course in introspective design. [18].*

*photo from [18]*

20-12-2023 | Haiyan Xue told me about the use of introspection in the design field and the introspective methods that are currently used by designers. He gave me some concrete examples in how you can train your self-awareness and develop your capability to disclose. We also shortly discussed how/if you can introspect over something that is 'bigger' than you, like a system.

[16] Mieke. (2015, June 14). Mieke Van Der Bijl Brouwer. <https://miekevanderbijl.com/>

[18] Dr. Xue, H. (n.d.). TU Delft. <https://www.tudelft.nl/en/ide/about-ide/people/xue-h/>

[17] Resilient Designers. (2023, September 13). Forging Resilience as Designer with Ten Guiding Principles. <https://resilientdesigners.com/>



## EVA OOSTERLAKEN

*Eva Oosterlaken is the co-founder of Futurall [19], a creative studio active in the Netherlands and the UK. With Futurall, she designs experiences that give space for people to (co)imagine alternative futures.*

*Currently she is following the Raise Your Voice program initiated by Baltan Laboratories [20].  
photo from [19]*

*photo from [19]*

19-03-2024 | Eva Oosterlaken and I talked about self-reflection and the personal in design. Eva introduced me to Baltan Laboratories and helped to give direction to the possible outcome of this project.



## HANNEKE STENFERT

*Hanneke Stenfert is an architect and co-founder of Open Kaart. Open Kaart is a design studio for architecture and urban design that is specialized in design questions with multiple stakeholders [21].*

*I got in touch with Hanneke through a podcast episode [22] about feminist architecture in which she talked about making yourself explicit in co-design, something that resonated with me.*

*photo from [21]*

03-04-2024 | Hanneke Stenfert told me how she sees co-creation and what it means on a personal level. She also explained to me how they design the co-creation process at Open Kaart. We discussed the differences in involving participants in service design compared to urban development. And ended our conversation with a reflection that when making yourself explicit, it helps to 'bounce' assumptions via physical spaces and objects to the other, and so test your assumptions.

[19] Futurall. (n.d.). <https://www.studiofuturall.com/>

[20] Raise your Voice: Trajectory & participants. (2024, 3 april). Baltan Laboratories. <https://www.baltanlaboratories.org/library/raise-your-voice-trajectory-participants>

[21] Open kaart. (n.d.). <https://deopenkaart.nl/>

[22] Afl. 3 - Hoe doe je dat dan? (episode 3). (2021, May). <https://open.spotify.com/show/332pY39efUz3H0p7979mhp?si=61bfe59341e2413f>



## LORENZO GERBI

*Lorenzo Gerbi is an art director, curator and educator based in Eindhoven. He is the co-director of Baltan Laboratories, a cultural interdisciplinary lab that focusses on societal issues through a relational approach, creating spaces to rehearse living otherwise [23].*

*photo from [23]*

01-05-2024 | Lorenzo Gerbi told me about rehearsing for change; doing things differently takes time. It is like training muscles, repetition is the key. Through repetition, this new way of doing becomes more natural. We also talked about how to create a space where people can leave their usual ways of doing behind. And spoke about the learning and unlearning process.



## EVA HUISMAN

*Eva Huisman is a music teacher and conductor. Next to her work, she is currently pursuing a Master in Art Education, developing her pedagogical, didactic and artistic skills.*

*photo from [24]*

01-05-2024 | Eva Huisman gave me advice on how I could approach the learning process in my workshop and how to prepare participants for a final exercise in which previous learnings come together. We discussed the general build-up in my workshop proposal and how to transition between exercises. She gave me practical instructions on how I could best introduce an exercise to participants.

[23] Baltan (n.d.). Baltan Laboratories. <https://www.baltanlaboratories.org/>

[24] Muziekschool Amsterdam Noord. (n.d.). <https://www.muziekschoolnoord.nl/cursussen/kleuters-spelen-met-muziek/>

## DESIGN RESEARCH PROGRAM

The design process is by nature unpredictable. Unlike the structured, predefined approach of traditional research, I used design research programs to navigate this unpredictability.

The concept 'design research program' is based on the idea that theory construction is a dynamic interplay between the research question, program, and experiment [12]. I used a technique that is called dynamic research sketching to understand the relations between these three elements [25] (fig. 11) and how knowledge emerges from experimentation. This means I use sketching to visualise the relations between the research components.

This technique allowed me to adapt to unexpected insights along the way, and have the opportunity to push the research into new directions by defining different programs (fig. 13).

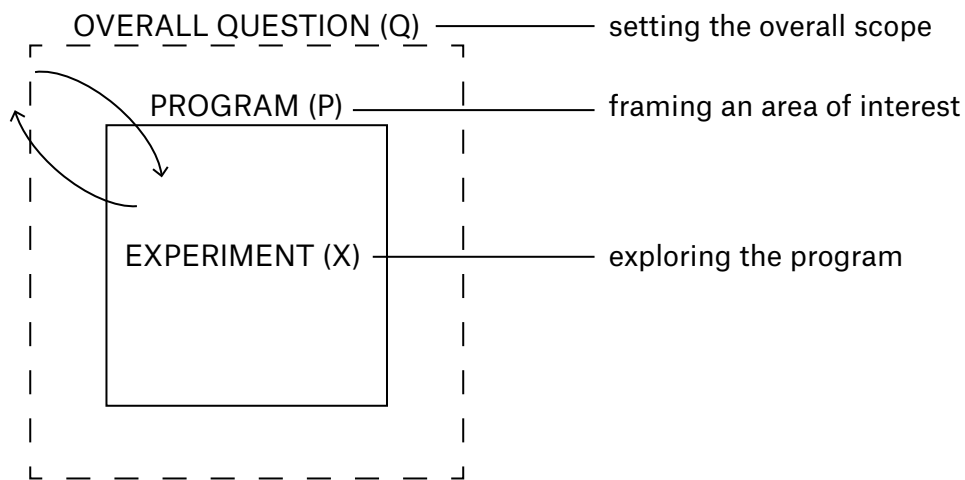


fig. 11 design research program, adapted from  
(Brandt & Binder, 2007)

[12] Markussen, T., Bang, A. L., Pedersen, P., & Knutz, E. (2012). *Dynamic Research Sketching—A new explanatory tool for understanding theory construction in design research*. <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2445&context=drs-conference-papers>

[25] Brandt, E., & Binder, T. (2007). *Experimental design research: genealogy, intervention, argument*. *International Association of Societies of Design Research, Hong Kong, 10, 2007*. <https://adk.elsevierpure.com/da/publications/experimental-design-research-genealogy-intervention-argument>

In my process of developing my design research programs (fig. 12), I iterated around an question related to the program. This question was evolving over time to find the right fit for the program, the iterations of the questions are presented in the design research program booklets as the subquestions (SQ).

I reacted to the questions with (designed) experiments, varying from noticing exercises to workshops. I used design research sketching to bring coherence into these experiments to get an understanding of the overall question.

The insights generated from the experiments led me to new questions. Following these questions, I took a step back and revised the scope and aim of this project to decide on my position and perspective on the topic.

By following this iterative and reflective process, I was able to create design research programs that reflect my position on the project topic and focus on exploring the questions that relate to the topic.

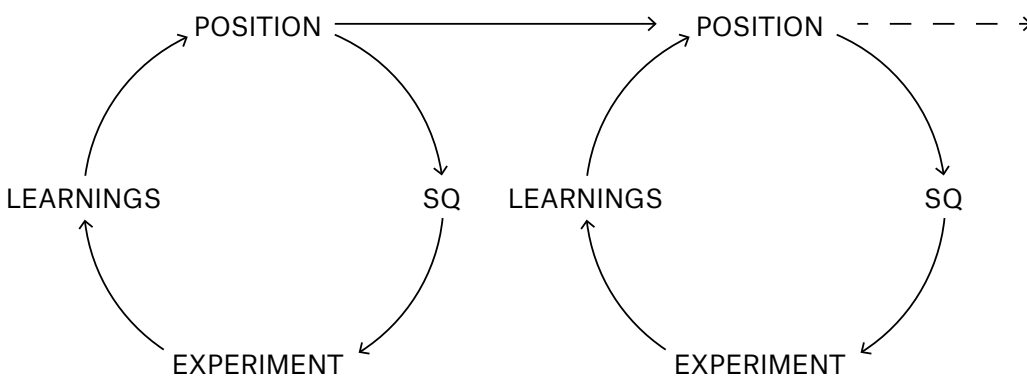


fig. 12 design process of my design research programs

The overall questions (Q) are:

- Q1: How do we put self-reflection into practice?
- Q2: How can designers' subjectivity intentionally be employed in the design process?

The following four design research programs emerged through the process of experimentation (fig. 13).

Meaning the position based on the learnings from the experiments led to the next program (fig. 12):

- P1: How do you enact self-reflection?
- P2: How do we express subjective experience through material?
- P3: What are subjective materials?
- P4: How can we rehearse to design otherwise?

The experiments (X) within these programs strongly relate. For example, the experiment in program 2 are iterations of the same format.

Q1: HOW DO WE PUT SELF-REFLECTION INTO PRACTICE?  
Q2: HOW CAN DESIGNER'S SUBJECTIVITY INTENTIONALLY  
BE EMPLOYED IN THE DESIGN PROCESS?

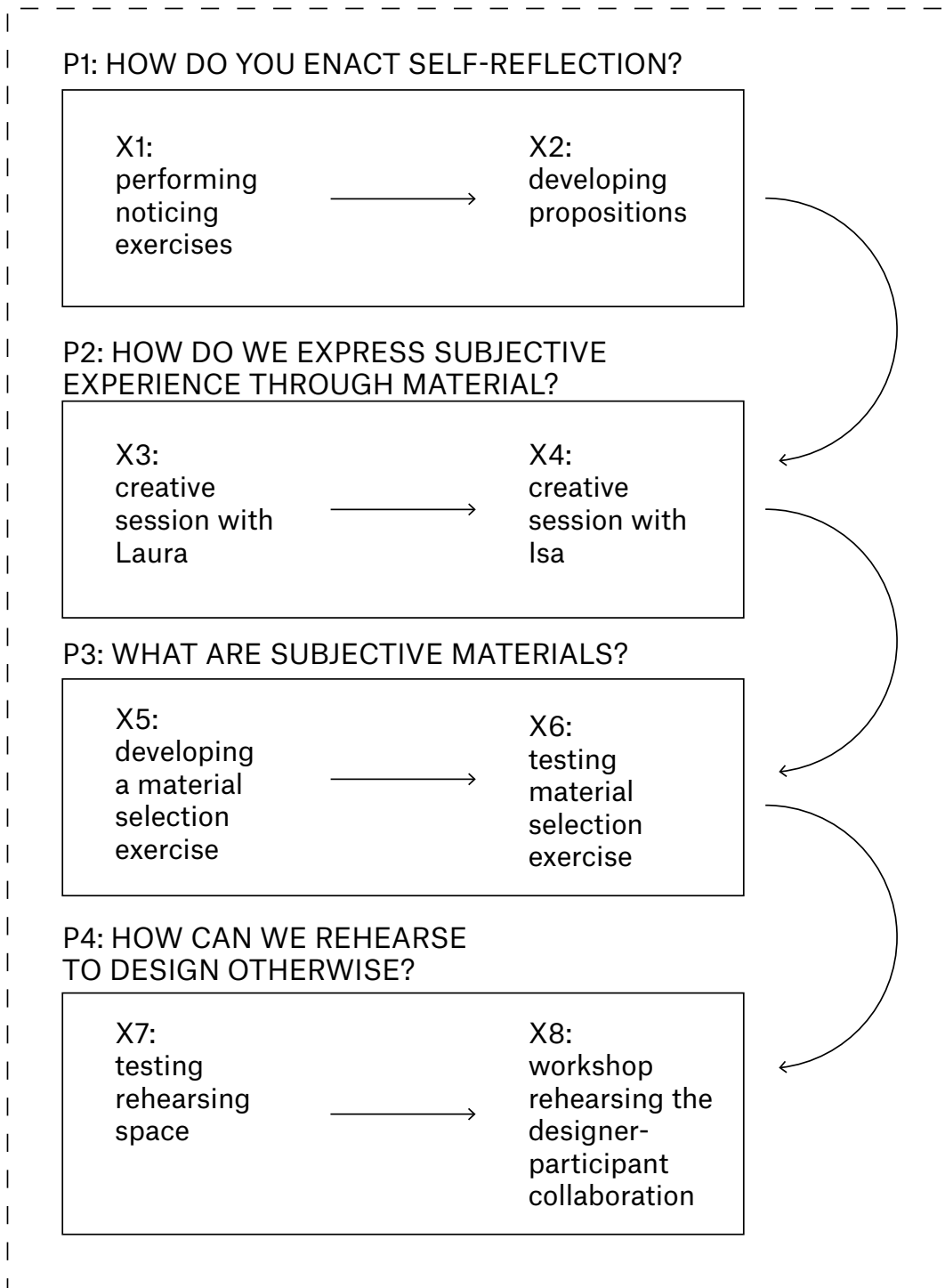


fig. 13 sketched design research program showing relations between experiments





# *Experiments*

This section starts with a part of my auto-ethnographic research, which is elaborating on the context of my research. Followed by four design research program booklets that capture the content of my design research programs, and the proposal of four fundamental shifts that are derived from the programs 1, 2, 3.

In the next section contains the content of the design research programs. Each program has a different booklet with:

- PROGRAM: interest area
- WHY: introduction
- WHAT: subresearch questions
- HOW: list of experiments
- DESIGN: a description on what the experiment looked like, what conditions I designed and what happend
- ANALYSIS: my learnings from reflection on the experiments
- POSITION: a reflection on the learnings
- LOOSE ENDS: discussing unanswered questions resulting from the experiments, opening up for possible future improvements

## ***ESTABLISHING A CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH***

Because auto-ethnography investigates the context in which I engage myself, it invites to choose a specific context that means something to me.

In the first week of this project, my supervisor challenged me to identify a context for my research. They gave me the loaded material exercise: “bring an object/material/thing that relates to you, your practice, or an urgency you are particularly concerned with” [26].

This exercise helped me to bring in something personal from the start of the research and allowed me to identify where my learnings have meaning, and where in the world I can place my contribution.

In this booklet you will find how I defined a context and how I engaged with that context during my project.

Lecture 01\_A23\_Living Systems Material Flows.pdf

Living Systems & Material Flows

Elective Course — Design Institute of Design, AHO

## Loaded Materials Exercise

Start defining the materiality of this “thing” that you brought

- What is it made of? How is it made? (source materials, crafts, techniques, etc.)
- Who makes it? How are the materials accessed? (economics)
- How is it used, and by whom? (cultural, social, spiritual significance)
- What are the ecological concerns surrounding it? (environmental)
- What are the social justice concerns surrounding it? (political)
- What is it about this thing that fascinates you? (personal motivation)
- Why is it important to you, and what is its relevance to others? (social relevance)
- What issue does this thing hide or reveal? (loaded materiality)

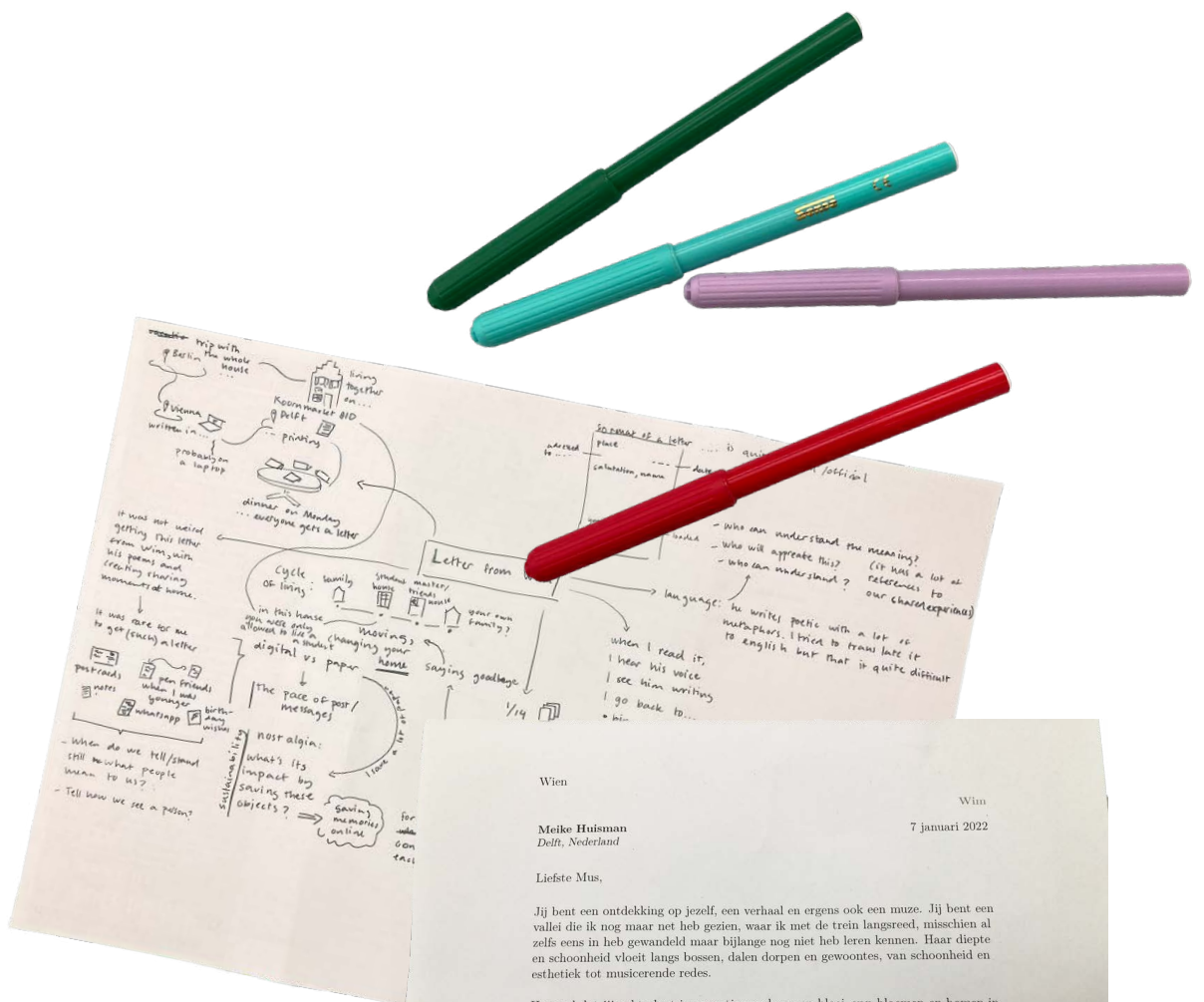
Format

- You are free to choose the format of how you will present your findings.
- 3 minutes to present.
- Not about giving feedback. More about seeing the many ways materiality can be explored.

Course Responsible — Serina Tarkhanian

*instruction for the loaded material exercise [26]*

# MYSELF AS SUBJECT



Wien

Wien

Meike Huisman  
Delft, Nederland

7 januari 2022

Liefste Mus,

Jij bent een ontdekking op jezelf, een verhaal en ergens ook een muze. Jij bent een vallei die ik nog maar net heb gezien, waar ik met de trein langreed, misschien al zelfs eens in heb gewandeld maar bijlange nog niet heb leren kennen. Haar diepte en schoonheid vloeit langs bossen, dalen dorpen en gewoontes, van schoonheid en esthetiek tot musicerende redes.

Het pad dat jij achterlaat is er eentje van leven en bloei, van bloemen en bomen in groei. Alles wat jij aanraakt verandert in kleur, voor mij is door jouw ogen kijken één groot kleurenpalet, en ik ben kleurenblind. Ik apprecieer kundes heel veel, vakmannen en vrouwen, gepassioneerd door doelen en geleid door hun gaves en hun werk. Jij bent zo iemand. Iemand die goed is in wat ze doet en dat graag deelt, iemand die open staat om mensen mee te nemen in haar kunst, niet de hunkering voor begrip maar de liefde voor de passie.

Ik heb al veel van je geleerd, maar ben bereid nog veel meer te leren. Op een speciale manier leng je me aan met het zicht dat ik nooit zien kon. Jij geeft weer wat ik niet eens wist wat er lag, dankje daarvoor.

Als een eenzame vreedzaam zwevende verschijning zie ik je zweven door de bossen, als een nymf of een elf, verwonderd door alles rondom haar, met ogen die dwars door me heen kijken. Ik ben hooguit een deel van een beeld, een beeld dat jij schept. Ik kruip onder het mos en ik kijk naar een mooie verschijning die zichzelf

Based on the mapping of the loaded material exercise, I identified five possible contexts in which I could place my work: communal living, gentrification, light pollution, green houses for food production, and urban green.

I choose for the context of gentrification as I moved to a neighbourhood in Rotterdam Zuid in the Netherlands during this project, known to be dealing with this issue [27].

The change in environment gave me an interesting opportunity to research how this was effecting me and this context.

[27] *Gentrificatie- wie mag er wonen in de vernieuwde stad? (n.d.). Erasmus University Rotterdam. <https://www.eur.nl/over-de-eur/strategie-2024/van-strategie-naar-praktijk/erasmus-verbindt/stadswandelingen/s1e1-gentrificatie>*

MYSELF AS SUBJECT



15:51, 12-01-2024

Oslo,  
Norway



17:52, 26-02-2024

Rotterdam,  
The Netherlands

# Join me on my bike

through Rotterdam Zuid



Rotterdam  
centrum



Erasmus Bridge

Afrika



Kop van Zuid





OBSERVATIONS FROM/TO HOME

onderwijk



I live here!

Hilleshuis



Bloemhof

Hilleliet 90



These were some of the observations I did  
from routes I take on my way home

## open ground

During my walks I came across  
multiple places where there was  
construction, I saw them as  
wounds of the streets.  
They made the neighbourhood  
look vulnerable, with their fences  
and ribbons as band-aids.





## Waste = food

Waste separation and collection has a playful character, but till you see quite a lot of waste on the streets.



## cultural meeting places

The places where I am drawn to often turn out to be cultural meeting places. Here, activities are being organised during the week, often supported by buildings with bright colours and the slogan; everyone is welcome.





MYSELF AS SUBJECT



For a few hours a week, I became a volunteer at the neighbourhood kitchen Mensa Mensa, an organisation working on food justice. I was helping with the preparations of schoollunches for a school in Rotterdam Zuid.

By being involved in the schoollunches project I got to learn more about the livingstyles of the children and their parents in the neighbourhood. And via Mensa Mensa, I talked to a lot of people living at Rotterdam Zuid as there were always people walking in and out or joining us for lunch.

Through engaging with the context of Rotterdam Zuid, I learned that taking a first-person perspective means to be surprised of what can emerge from just being around. Having the opportunity to experience the everyday relations and interactions, without a specific purpose.

***P1***

***How do you enact  
self-reflection?***

## HOW DO YOU ENACT SELF-REFLECTION?

Factors such as bias, cultural background and past experiences influence the first-person perspective. In the section “The Self in Design” I introduced that the current way to deal with biases and privileges in design is through self-reflection, supported by frameworks.

Self-reflection is a process similar to introspection, both involve examining one’s own thoughts, feelings, and experiences, but in self-reflection the intention is to gain insights.

### **What**

SQ1: How do you enact self-reflection?  
SQ2: How can we use self-reflection in design?

### **How**

- Performing noticing exercises
- Propositions of how to use self-reflection in design

To give you a better understanding of the character of the experiment, put on headphones and listen to this audio file: <https://bit.ly/P1selfreflection>



PROGRAM 1:

just sit still and breath, can you name...

5 things you see:  
 - not the book with a nice  
 - the blue bag with one small  
 - ee a light switch  
 - a stain on a book in cro  
 - (nice) trees with sunshine

4 things you hear:  
 - Norwegian conversation by  
 - Tianjee talking (in eng)  
 - my pen on writing o  
 - typing left in front

3 things you feel:  
 - my arm laying  
 - my feet in my  
 - a pressure bet

2 things you smell:  
 - inside air  
 - the warmid

1 thing you taste:  
 - a taste of

location: dipt

any thoughts?

1 thing you taste:  
 - my breath / saliva

location: AHO diploma studio

any thoughts?  
 There are many things around us when I  
 consciously observe and use my senses. And  
 it's things that are small and too, very present but  
 a bit of dust maybe?

date: 15-01-2024 time: 11:50

just sit still and breath, can you name...

5 things you see:  
 - trees  
 - snow  
 - tables  
 - Great designers  
 - a lot of orange

4 things you hear:  
 - Norwegian  
 - door closing  
 - drrrrrrr - from  
 - English

3 things you feel:  
 - Calmness  
 - Excitement  
 - joy

2 things you smell:  
 - food from chair  
 - dry air

1 thing you taste:  
 - coffee - the last H

location: AHO diploma class 518

any thoughts?  
 I have an intuitive personality so I always focus on  
 multiple things around. I think it's great to be able  
 to focus on things that on regular basis are distructed  
 to you. But FOR me they are part of my world.

just sit still and breath, can you name...

5 things you see:  
 - my writing paper  
 - my laptop  
 - the blue bag with one small  
 - ee a light switch  
 - a stain on a book in cro  
 - (nice) trees with sunshine

4 things you hear:  
 - Norwegian conversation by  
 - Tianjee talking (in eng)  
 - my pen on writing o  
 - typing left in front

3 things you feel:  
 - my arm laying  
 - my feet in my  
 - a pressure bet

2 things you smell:  
 - inside air  
 - the warmid

1 thing you taste:  
 - a taste of

location: dipt

any thoughts?

5 things you see:  
 - my laptop  
 - students in the studio  
 - my hair ties on my wrist  
 - park over the windows  
 - marker in use to write this

4 things you hear:  
 - Simon and Ewa speaking Norwegian  
 - radiator  
 - the felt of this markers I write  
 - mumbliis / concentration behind me

3 things you feel:  
 - dryness in my nose and hands  
 - cold feet  
 - hunger - growling stomach

2 things you smell:  
 - anything

1 thing you taste:  
 - a bit of dust maybe?

location: AHO diploma studio

any thoughts?  
 There are many things around us when I  
 consciously observe and use my senses. And  
 it's things that are small and too, very present but  
 a bit of dust maybe?

date: 15-01-2024 time: 11:50

just sit still and breath, can you name...

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 - inside air  
 - the warmid

1 thing you taste:  
 - a taste of

location: dipt

any thoughts?

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 - a taste of

location: dipt

any thoughts?

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 - my arm laying  
 - my feet in my  
 - a pressure bet

2 things you smell:  
 - inside air  
 - the warmid

1 thing you taste:  
 - a taste of

location: dipt

any thoughts?



## HOW DO YOU ENACT SELF-REFLECTION?

To start with looking inward and exploring my perceptions,  
I tried out a easy noticing exercise:

Name 5 things you see,

4 things you hear,

3 things you feel,

2 things you smell

1 thing you taste.

I did this a few times, by myself and with three other designers, to discover how they would describe their sensorial experience and to see how subjectivity comes into play.

When I spoke to Haian Xue, he recommended me the technique 'experience sampling', a tool that is mainly used in healthcare. For 12 hours long I reflected every hour on what I did the hour before, answering the questions:

What did I do?

Where have I been?

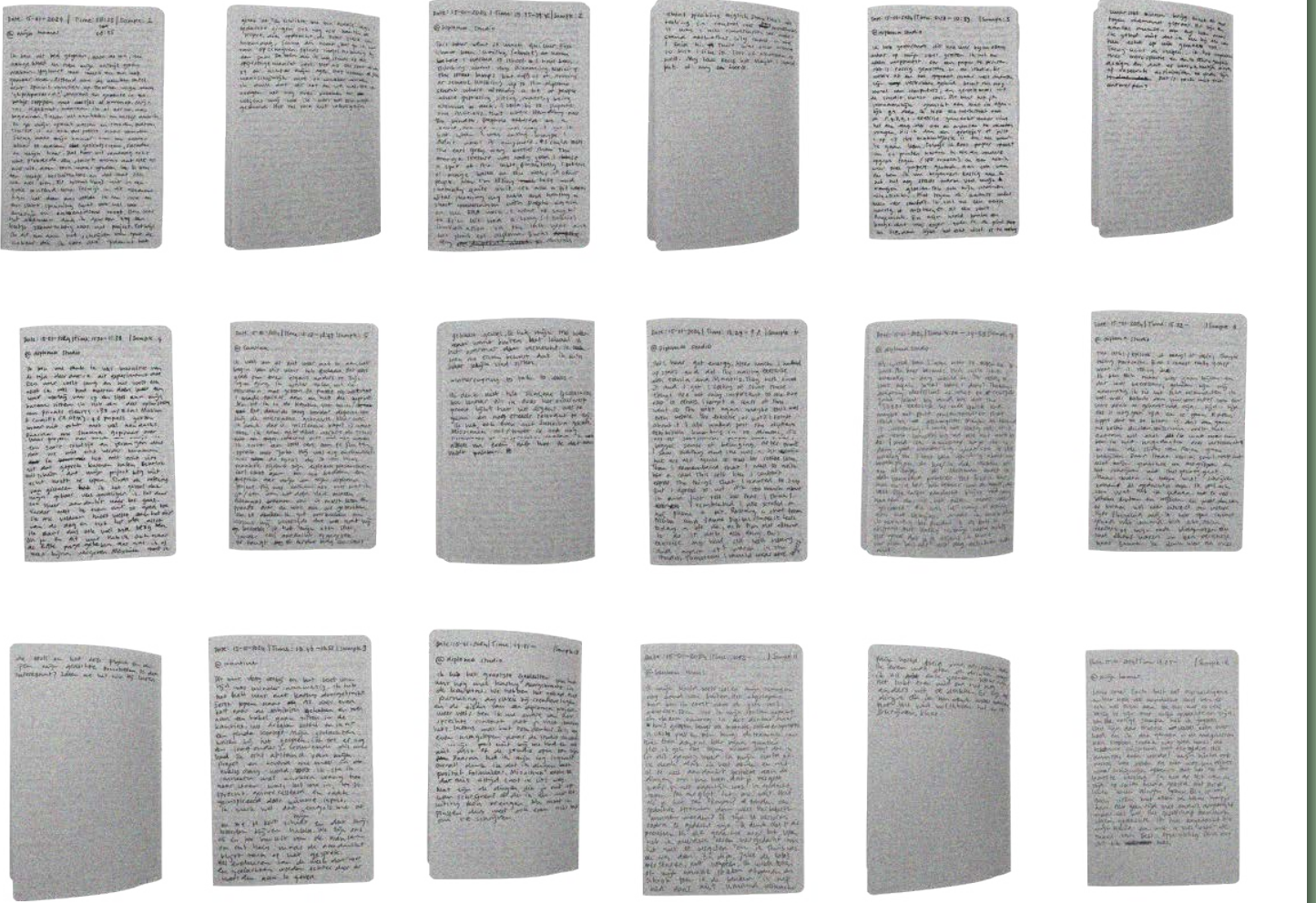
Who did I spend time with?

What did I feel?

How did I feel?

What did I think about?

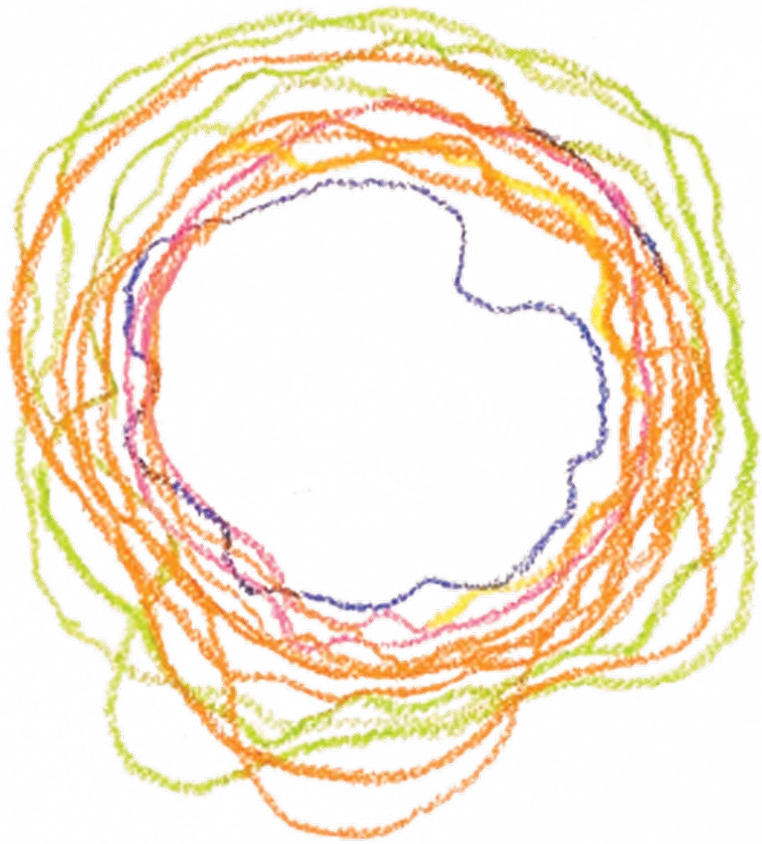
# HOW DO YOU ENACT SELF-REFLECTION?



## PROGRAM 1:

The whole day I carried a small notebook with me to document my reflections, and the day after I visualized my experience:

HOW DO YOU ENACT SELF-REFLECTION?



Filling out frameworks does not automatically mean we are able to apply the reflections in our actions. This made me wonder:

Where do reflections go? If we are aware of our subjectivity, how do we put that into practice?

These are big and complex questions. As an attempt to explore its meaning, I developed 10 propositions on how to make subjectivity intentionally part of the design process:

# HOW DO YOU ENACT SELF-REFLECTION?

**1. Auditor for during fieldwork**  
The auditor is a role for people who observe and reflect on their own actions. It is a role that is played out in a workshop or a meeting. The auditor is a role that is played out in a workshop or a meeting. The auditor is a role that is played out in a workshop or a meeting.

**2. Character description for facilitating a workshop**  
When organizing a workshop to prepare a planning, think like, think of a kind of or of a character.

**3. Socratic self dialogue**  
What if we checked our reflection on the reflection? It's a process of asking questions and finding answers.

**4. Re-set**  
During the reflection process, a person's reflection can be set to a new state. This is a process of setting a new state of reflection.

**5. Holding a rock**  
This is a process of holding a rock. It is a process of holding a rock. It is a process of holding a rock.

**6. Dictionary of gut feeling**  
This is a process of creating a dictionary of gut feeling. It is a process of creating a dictionary of gut feeling.

**7. Designer oracle**  
This is a process of using a designer oracle. It is a process of using a designer oracle.

**8. Tell it to the wall**  
This is a process of telling it to the wall. It is a process of telling it to the wall.

**9. Role playing systems**  
This is a process of role playing systems. It is a process of role playing systems.

**10. Using thing-ethnography**  
This is a process of using thing-ethnography. It is a process of using thing-ethnography.



# *Learnings*

Throughout these activities I developed insights and thoughts on the process of self-reflection:

## **(1) Quality of noticing**

All designers introspect, but there is a difference in how open they can do this. It is not a question whether they introspect, but how well we can introspect, and how well we can communicate this.

The good news is you can train your ability to notice and disclose, people who have developed this capacity in a specific field are winetasters or wood craftsmen. There is tacit knowledge in their self-awareness.



By experiencing and paying more attention to my self-awareness, I was confronted with its limitations:

## **(2) Observation= Power**

When we observe, we direct our attention towards specific elements. In doing so we select and isolate. This means that during observation, we are actively including and excluding.

## **(3) Tools for reflection**

It can be difficult to describe your own thoughts, mental images, feelings and sensations. We mostly use words to reflect. However, the tools we use are also shaping our reflections. For example, during the experience sampling, the size of the paper was influencing how much I was writing.

Besides learning about self-awareness internally, I also understood that context affects this:

## **(4) Multiple perspectives**

I am a designer, but I am also a friend, a sister, a neighbour, someone that goes to the supermarket. We are all having multiple roles, that come with different dynamics. In these perspectives lies an opportunity for multiple first-person narratives.

## *Position*

When we usually think about reflection we think about doing that with words. Using this tool, whether it is for interpretation or reflection, is a creative act.

Since designing is about creatively making interpretations tangible, with material as the tool, I will consider material as the vocabulary of the designer.

## *Loose ends*

The insights from these activities clearly guide me towards an exploration of materiality, especially keeping in mind the limitations I experienced by using only words. However, in this booklet, almost all of my propositions are text-based. I noticed that putting them in a context was very difficult, leading me to revert back to words. Reflecting back on this exercise, I do not think I fully understood the context yet.

*How do we express  
subjective experience  
through material?*

*P2*

As I progressed, I realised the need to put self-reflection into practice. The first experiment was at an individual level, mainly about myself. Participation, on the other hand, is about engaging with others. I knew I had to involve other people.

At this stage, I wondered how other designers experienced designing. Recognising material as the designer's vocabulary, I sought to communicate with them accordingly.

## What

SQ1: How do designers express their subjective experience through material?

SQ2: How can we come to a collective understanding through material?

## How

- creative session with Laura
- creative session with Isa

You will read a conversation between me (M), Laura (L) and Isa (I) about these experimental sessions. The dialogue form reflects how these activities were experienced by us. In this dialogue, we discuss the format of the session and what decisions were made.

The dialogue is written in collaboration with Laura and Isa. We agreed that what we have done during these sessions is almost impossible to describe.

## PROGRAM 2:

M: Hey Laura, I've been wanting to revisit our session where we explored how you experience designing. Shall we walk through what we did that afternoon?

L: Of course, I'd love to. Where should we start?

M: Well, let's begin with how we met at your house. I wanted to meet there to have a more balanced power dynamic. I invited you into a conversation, and you invited me into a personal space. Do you remember what I my idea for this session was?

L: You told me that you wanted to explore an experience I had, but then through making. I think you were a bit unsure were to go and you wanted to try something with communicating through material, but you did not exactly know what would happen.

M: That's true! We know each other very well, so I believed we could improvise and remain open to wherever the process took us.

L: Maybe you wanted us to both have ownership over the conversation?

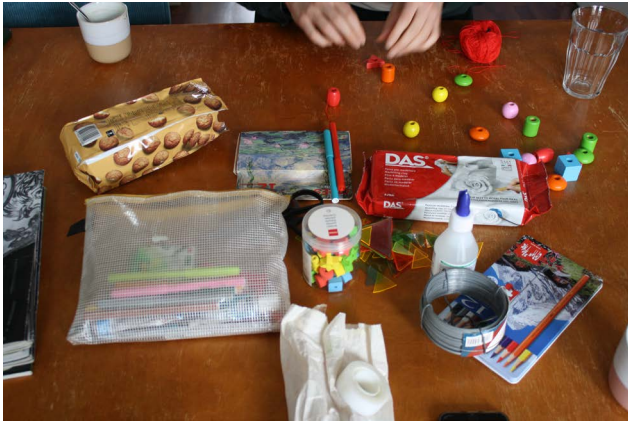
M: Yes, I wanted us to do this together. I proposed that if you had any ideas, you could propose something different. Could you recall what happened?

L: After an introduction you suggested to do a mindful eating exercise.

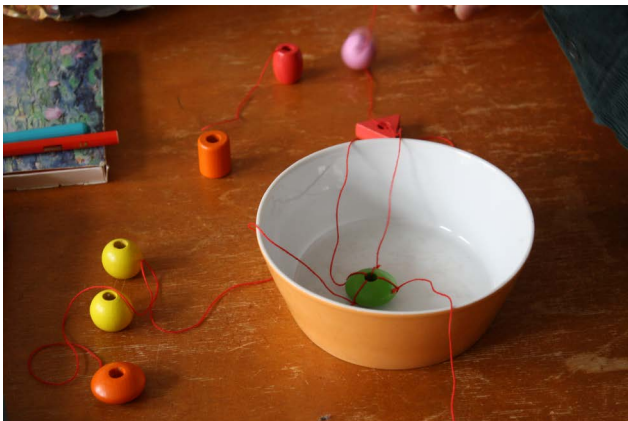
M: My idea with this was that it would be helpful to be more present in our bodies and attentive to our senses.

L: Yeah that was fun to do, I remember we both noticed different aspects during the exercise. I was surprised at how much it made me more aware of the space around me.

M: After that noticing exercise, I think the rest of the time we did more or less the same. We explored a memory of an experience of you during a design project that you felt a connection with. I brought materials with me, that I put on the table and I asked you to make a sort of reflection of that experience with material.



L: Oh yes! I started with visualising the situation with beads and threads.



At some point you showed me how you experienced designing through stirring in a glass of water. Thereby you tried to explain me how the design process could feel to you like something you cannot stop. How did you come up with that, actually?

M: Well, I was thinking about how I would express my experience of design through material myself, and then I thought of the water.

L: Hmm I think it worked for me it triggered me to focus more on the inner feelings of my memory.

## PROGRAM 2:

M: Can you describe what happened when you made that switch?

L: Sure. For the material, I needed some kind of heaviness, and it came to me that I could use soil.

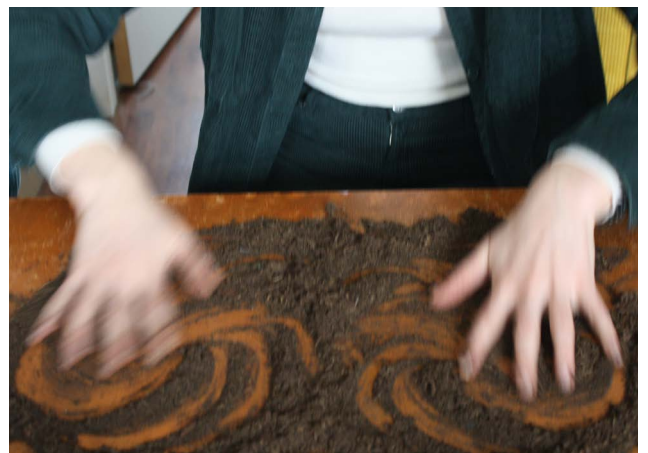
M: You went looking for it in your house and we tried different interactions with it.

L: First, we tried to do something with the combination of the beads, thread and soil. But we started with sensing the soil more to discuss the characteristics of the material in combination with my experience.



M: Quickly the soil ended up at the table and you went through it with your hands.

L: Yes, that was so much more fitting than what we tried before. The interaction with the material was the embodiment of my memory and a static configuration of objects could not achieve that.





M: This dynamic interaction made that we both brought in examples of what it could be.

L: Yes, I remember that at some point you suggested to let the soil fall. In this suggestion I felt that we were collaborating in looking for the right embodiment. And that you were on the right track in understanding my experience.



M: This taught me that it brings a lot to the collaboration to give suggestions as a way to react in the conversation.

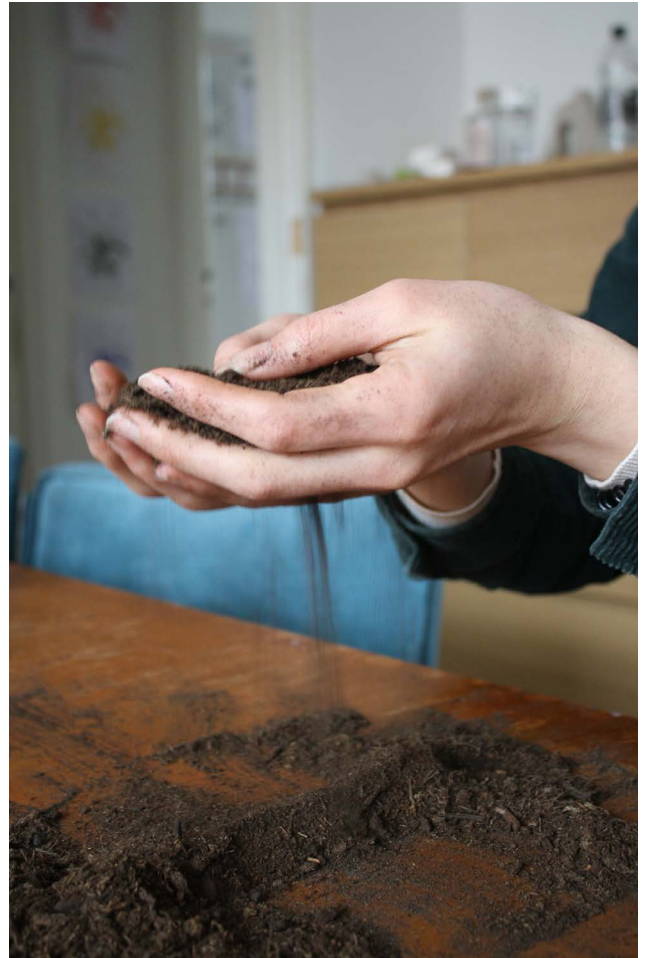
L: Because before, when you were more passive, I had the feeling that I had to endow you with an answer. That moment made me feel that defining the embodiment was a collaborative act. Not only me providing an answer to your question.

M: I think that the power dynamics at play became more equal.

L: More and more I felt that a collective understanding emerged.

M: You also said "I think you understand what I mean" and for me that was a really special moment.

L: I understand, for me that moment felt like a relief, also because I felt that I could not describe what I captured in the soil in words.



M: After that moment of fulfilment, we reflected on the set-up of the activity. There were a few practical points that I could easily adopt, like breaking up the process in steps.

L: But also some bigger themes like the pressure of gifting an answer and the focus on experiencing the material arised.

M: With this I iterated on the set-up of the activity. A second time I engaged in a conversation with a designer, this time with Isa!

M: Hi Isa, Nice you come to join this dialogue.

I: Hello!

M: Compared to my conversation with Laura I was more proactive. How did you experience this?

I: I thought it was really nice, because it gave me the feeling I didn't need to do this on my own. What were the other things you changed?

M: We started the same, but now took smaller steps. My first question to you was to describe your experience shortly. With the information you told me, I guided you back to your memory. Can you tell a bit more about the memory you choose?

I: I choose a moment in which I experienced eco-anxiety, something I am currently doing a design project about. In that project I wanted to use introspective methods.

M: Was it easy to recall that memory of eco-anxiety?

I: The guided meditation helped. I think I was more in contact with my feelings afterwards than when we talked about it before.

M: And then we started to explore the texture of the materials I had brought with me, this time choosing materials based on their sensory aspects.



I: I remember being very clear about which materials did not fit my experience.

M: But still through what it was not we could learn about your experience!

PROGRAM 2:

I: Yeah, I think discovering what it was not helped us to come to the thread.



M: Pretty quick we came to a fitting embodiment, which was a thread wrapped around your torso.

I: When the thread was wrapped around me, I just knew the certain feeling fit the memory well, although it was hard to explain in words. I felt amazed that I found a similar feeling while I was in a totally different room in a different moment!





M: When we found that, I started to ask you questions about what it would mean to you if, for example, I were to pull the thread. To understand your answer better, I decided that I also wanted to experience this thread around me.

I: That was funny, we were imitating each other.



M: How was it for you to see me emerged in the tread experience?

I: It made me feel that you understood what I meant, and because I also saw how you reacted to the thread, I started to understand more about my experience myself.

M: Has this understanding of your own experience had an impact on your project in the end?

I: At that moment I could bring back the feeling I experienced before, which helped me to feel more empathy when I talked with the target group of my project

M: As for of you Laura, what did it bring you?

L: The realisation that you can capture something in material. And how it feels of truly understand eachother.

M: Thank you both!

# ***Learnings***

## **(1) Embodying collective understanding**

I learned that involving other people in design projects can be about more than transferring knowledge; but learning from each other, and embodying collective understanding. In this collaboration, the designer brings in as much knowledge as the participant and the participants also learn from their experiences.

## **(2) Not static, dynamic!**

The expression of subjective experience is not reflected in a static object but in interaction with material. You can consider the designer's body as material.

## **(3) From 3rd to 1st**

In a shared experience, the designer goes from taking a third-person perspective to a shared first-person perspective, this can be a result of participatory collaboration, which can be taken on in the rest of a design process.

## **(4) No words needed**

Material allowed us to come to this understanding, because we could go back and forth between our subjective interpretations, and openly test our assumptions.

# *Position*



In giving examples through the material, the designer brings in experiences that are their own. Compared to asking questions in words, this asks the designer and participant to be in a more dynamic role and to actively participate in the conversation. Enabling a sensibility towards dynamics in which multiple actors are active.

With actors, I also mean the material or objects that are involved. Through this design research program, I realised that matter is not something passive. Matter is capable of interacting with its environment, undergo changes and influence others. How this interaction comes about is influenced by the specifics of the material and the relationship the participant and designer have with the material.

# *Loose ends*

## Subjective experience

In these sessions we have explored subjective experiences of a specific moment. Should our collective understanding go beyond the past? Can we delve into future-oriented ideas? When and how do these shared experiences influence cooperation?

## Number of people

I found it difficult to imagine to come to collective understanding with more than one person around. How would this work?

## Relation to the people

So far I have asked designers I personally know. If I did not know the people involved, what would I have to change?

## (Un)safety

Being in the conversation is vulnerable. How do I/we handle the conversation when it becomes unsafe?

## Accessibility

I have started volunteering at Mensa. Mensa, the introduction to the organisation and the actual volunteering work itself, have confronted me with a thought about the potential context of my project. I am questioning whether the processes I am developing are accessible to those outside of design and creative fields.

*P3*

*What are  
subjective  
materials?*

In the previous design research program, I learned that bringing in material can help facilitate our agreement on collective understanding. But I do not know anything about these materials: Which materials are suitable for this collaboration? What relation should the participants have with a material? What exactly do materials bring to the conversation?

In this program I zoomed in on the qualities of material in relation to a person. I am looking for situated materials. Materials which meaning, properties, and significance are connected to the specific context in which they are situated.

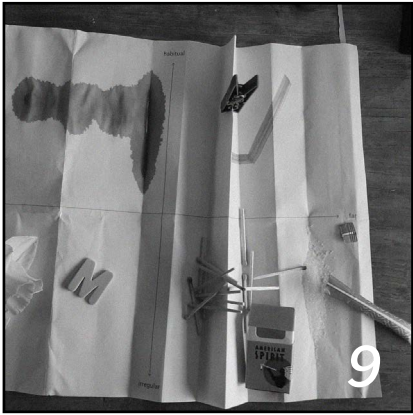
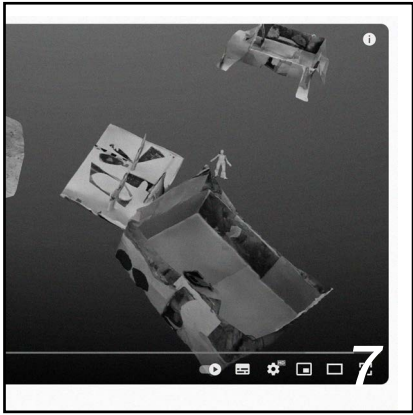
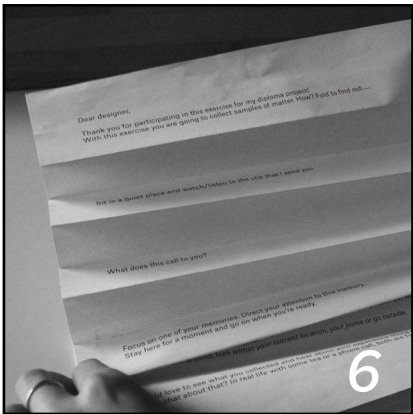
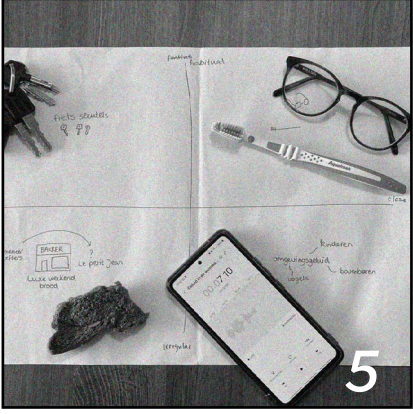
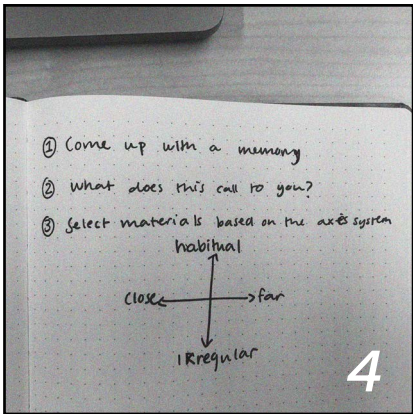
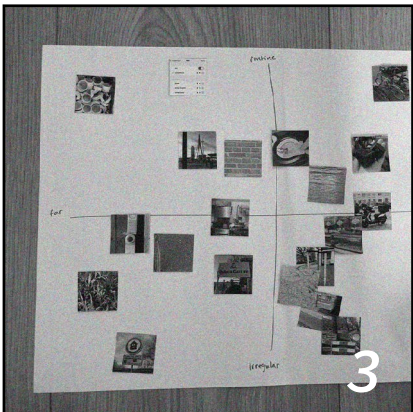
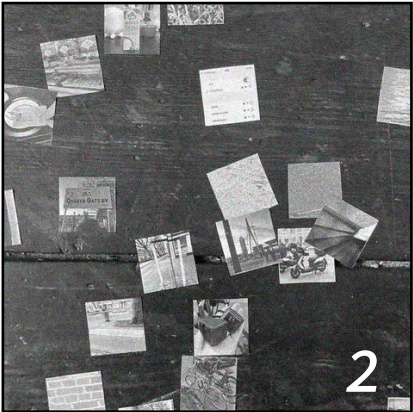
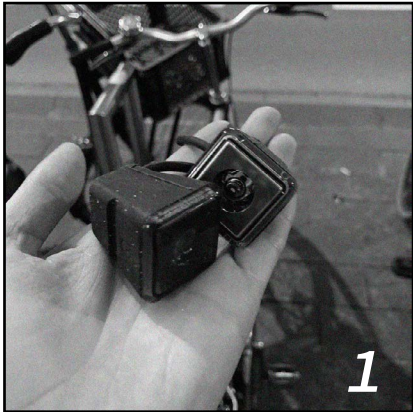
## What

SQ1: How can we discover materials that hold meaning to us?

## How

- Creating a material selection exercise
- Prototype the material selection exercise

PROGRAM 3:



## ***MAKING AN MATERIAL SELECTION EXERCISE***

1. I started with collecting material samples from a day in my life. I collected things that I knew were specific for the place I went that day; materials and objects that caught my attention in the moment I experienced them.
2. I developed different strategies to categorize these materials.
3. The framework that worked best for me, I choose for others to start their material selection.
4. I made an exercise out of the framework I choose. I decided to focus on one memory and to keep the words in the axes guiding, but also free for interpretation.
5. I tested this exercise quickly, improvised in the moment, where I gave verbal instructions to see what would happen.
6. I translated the test into a letter that I would send to participants of. Even though I left open the 'meaning' of the types of samples of matter I asked them to collect, the letter provides the participants with some guidance on how to go about collecting samples.
7. I tested the exercise with multiple 'sparks' that I thought would give an emotional response. All of the selected clips have to do something with my experience of living in Oslo. I knew the people I gave the exercise to and did not want them to come up with a memory in which we could easily find a communal meaning.
8. I handed the exercise out to 7 people
9. I got answers back!



Dear designer,

Sit in a quiet place and watch/listen to the clip that I send you:

*Jenny Hval - Year of Lover (Official Video)*



Jenny Hval - Year of Love (Official Video)

Jenny Hval  
7,19K abonnees

Abonneren

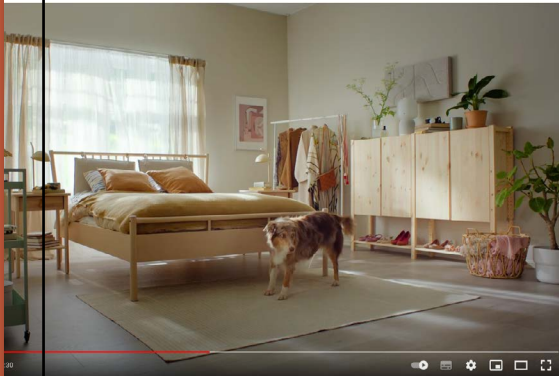
2,8K

Delen

Downloaden

...

*IKEA, Life is not an IKEA catalogue - Pee*



EA Catalogue - Pee

Abonneren

12

Delen

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Opslaan

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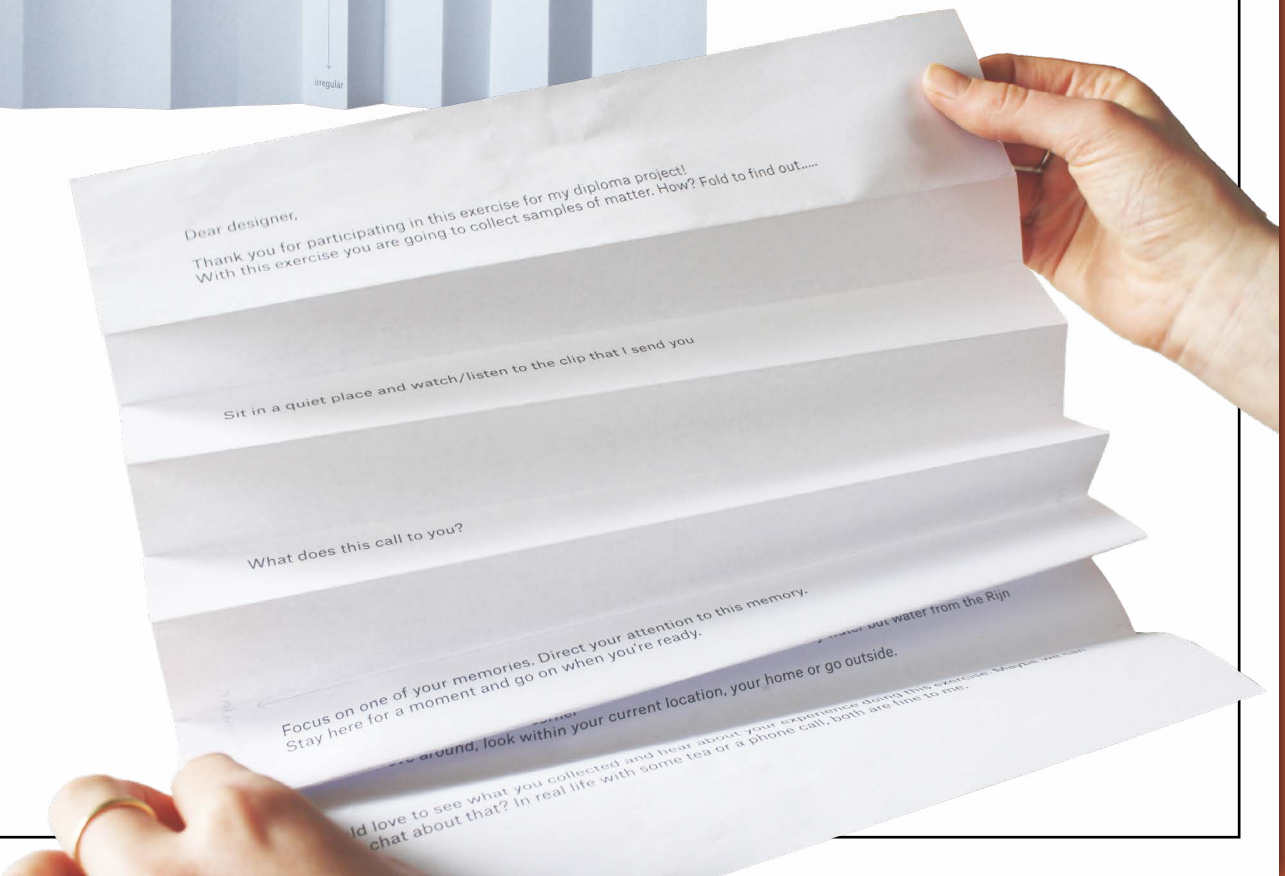
*The Worst Person In The World (Verdens Verste Menneske) new clip official from Cannes 2021 - 1/2*



THE  
WORLD  
IS  
A  
MIRACLES



# WHAT ARE SUBJECTIVE MATERIALS?





A CHILDHOOD MEMORY  
OF A HOLIDAY

*picture made by Nils de Vrijer*

WHAT ARE SUBJECTIVE MATERIALS?

A cup of coffee  
on the camping



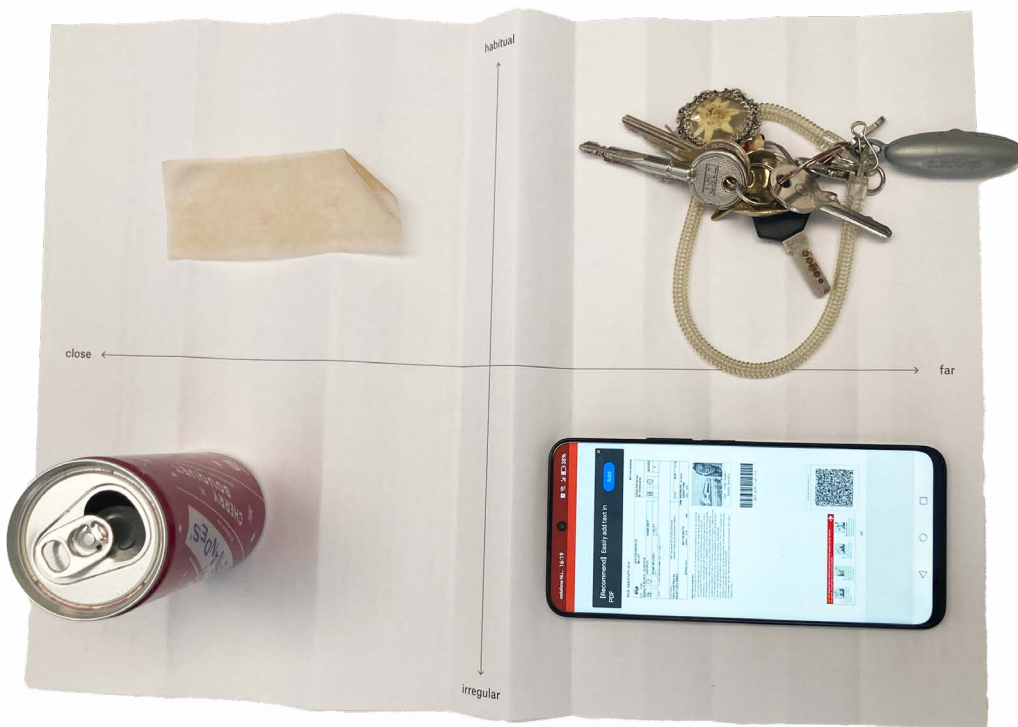
picture made by Maartje Roggeveen

# SEARCHING FOR BALANCE



*pictures made by Rykiel Fijn*

WHAT ARE SUBJECTIVE MATERIALS?



summer nights

# *Learnings*

## **(1) Carriers of stories**

While I asked for samples, I got stories back. Memories that were forgotten but spontaneously, as an impulse, came up again. The confrontation and attention to a seemingly simple object can bring up such a complex response. This response is hard to contain, so the material is disarming. Moreover, the content of this response is something fleeting, that somehow got a tangible location. In short, you can say that material is a carrier of stories.

## **(2) Entangled in meaning**

One story is not the same as another, for example the matches. The participant collected these, because they reminded her of how her grandma lit her cigarettes with them. Notably, there can be many more stories from her and others in these matches. At the same time, the story of her grandma is contained in many other material carriers. layered meaning, stories on top of stories on top of stories, you cannot isolate.





fig. X common matches you can buy in the Netherlands

# *Position*

Just as language, material is a way of communication that constructs our experience of the world. The interesting part to me is that through interaction with materials, we can get confronted with assumptions we unconsciously make and we can test those. Something I experienced earlier in my conversations with Isa and Laura (program 2), but could not pin what it was about, at that point.

Words can clarify but also conceal. Communicating through material makes things concrete, in the tangibility we can become aware of the distance between you and someone else. Between the designer and participant. Often we say the same but mean something else. Or we say something different but mean the same.

We are so used to explaining everything in words, that it becomes a comfortable way of communicating. How do we get out of this comfortability to enter into the experience of what can be found beyond words?



# *Loose ends*

As a result of the exercise you will have personal stories. What can we do with them? This was an individual exercise, but I experienced that people really wanted to tell and share these stories. What role can this play in our interactions with others?

Of all the sparks, the most free one (Jenny Hval's music video) worked best to evoke a vivid memory, but other ways to evoke a personal experience can still be explored.

## SYNTHESIS OF LEARNINGS FROM DESIGN RESEARCH PROGRAMS P1, P2, P3

Our primary tool to communicate our understanding of the world is words (program 1). Simultaneously, material appears to be a powerful means of communication, as revealed in program 3. Material can confront us with the assumptions we unconsciously make. In doing so, we can become aware of how our perspectives might differ.

When the designer brings in their own experiences and makes their own perspectives explicit, possible differences with others have to be dealt with. This enables working towards a sensibility of collaboration dynamics (program 2).

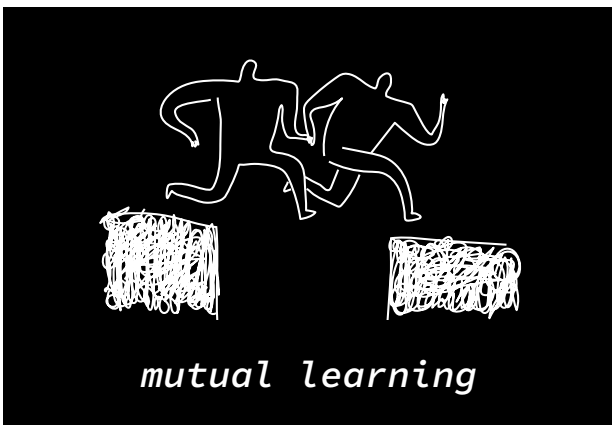
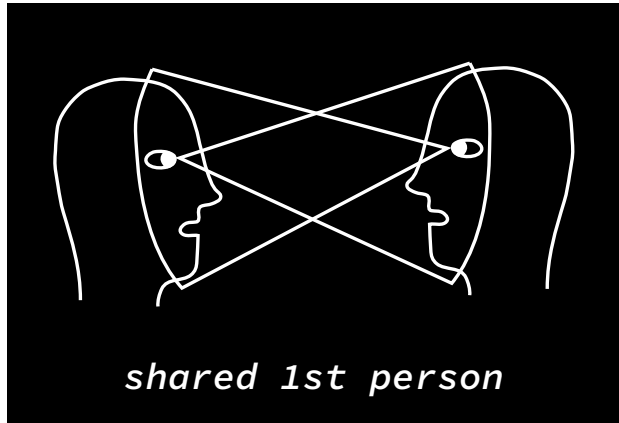
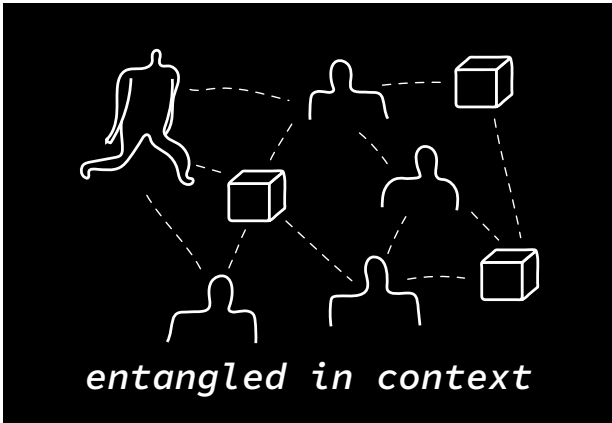
Reflecting on the meaning of my learnings, I went back to the aim of my project. Consequently, I propose four fundamental shifts in the dynamics the designer encounters (fig. 14).

These shifts have fundamental implications for how we interpret experiences, make (design) decisions and interact with each other and our environment. Remember they are not mutually exclusive.

When materials make words,  
and we can materialise words,  
shall we agree together on what  
our collective understanding is?

In the next and final design research program I explore how designers can engage with these shifts.

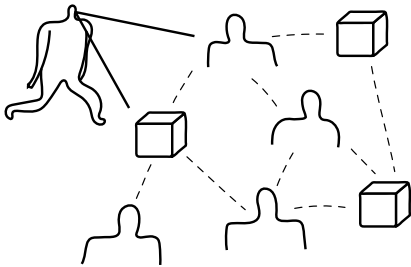
*Integrating the Designer's  
firstperson perspective*



*fig. 14 proposed way to relate to the design context, participatory collaboration,  
the relation with the participant & the way they communicate*

THE POSITION OF THE DESIGNER  
IN THE DESIGN CONTEXT

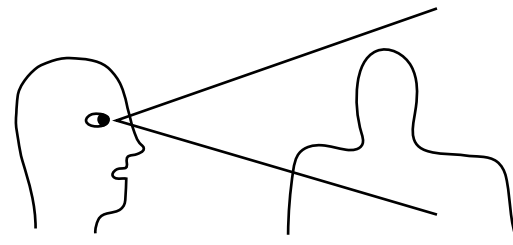
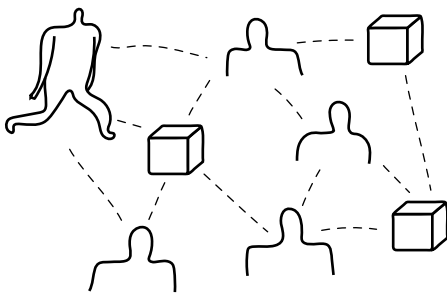
PERSPECTIVE IN  
PARTICIPATORY COLLABORATION



*detached*



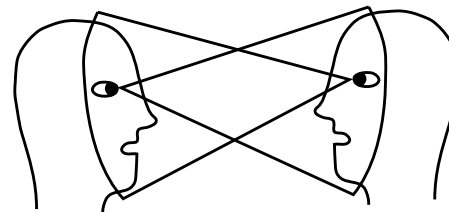
*entangled*



*3rd person*



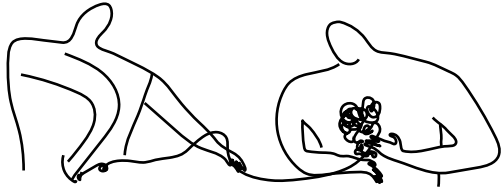
*1st person*



My involvement with Mensa  
Mensa allowed me to provide  
the location for the test  
workshop (program 4), not only  
professionally but also personally.

Like Isa, I experienced the  
tension of the tread during our  
conversation (program 2).

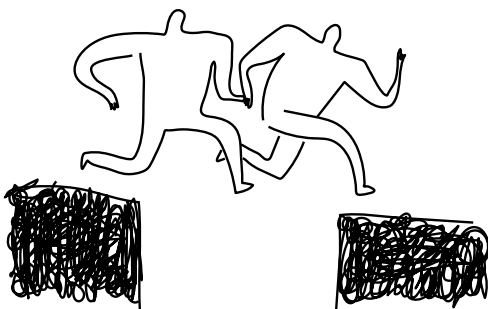
RELATION BETWEEN  
DESIGNER AND PARTICIPANT



*extracting knowledge*

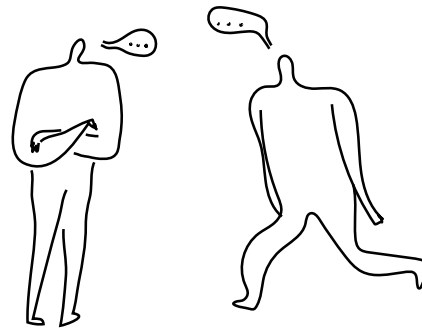


*mutual learning*



In the soil, Laura came to discoveries about how she designs that she had not realised before, this could not be put into words (program 2).

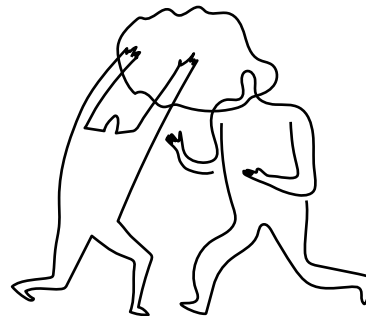
MEANS OF COMMUNICATION



*language*



*material*



The samples of matter in program 3 revealed many insights, touching upon tacit knowledge compared to talking.

*fig. 15-18  
detaching  
first-person  
perspective  
of the  
designer*

*fig. 19-22  
integrating  
first-person  
perspective  
of the  
designer*

EXPERIMENTS

***P4***

***How can we  
rehearse  
to design  
otherwise?***

I concluded my research with a proposal of four fundamental shifts, as continuation I explore how we can engage with these shifts in the format of a workshop. This format will make it suitable to share within the design community, also contributing in a practical way to the auto-ethnographic design field.

Inspired by the Raise Your Voice program after the conversation with Eva Oosterlaken, I decided that rehearsing was a suitable way to test how we could engage with the shifts. This experiment is about setting up this rehearsing space. What do we need to step out of our usual way of doing things?

## What

SQ1: How can we create a rehearsing space?

SQ2: How does the use of material enhance the designer's ability to understand their first-person perspective?\*

SQ3: How does the use of material help make the designer's first-person perspective explicit in relation to a participant? \*\*

\*Corresponding with the shift detached to entangled

\*\* Corresponding with the shift 3rd PP to 1st PP & the shift extracting knowledge to mutual learning

## How

- experimenting with the creation of a rehearsing space for designers
- workshop with a sequence of exercises touching upon the design-participant collaboration

## ***EXPERIMENTING WITH A REHEARSING SPACE (12-04-2024)***

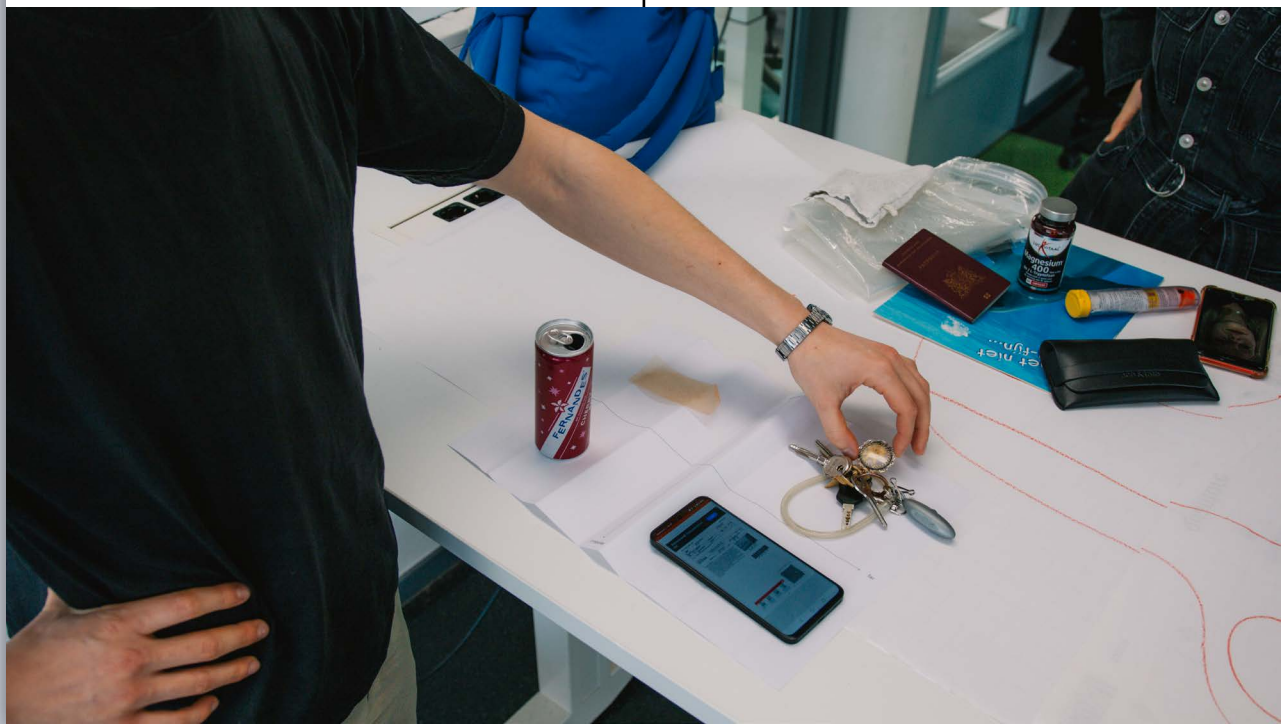


### ***setting***

- taking place at a design faculty
- with 4 design students, me being one of them
- for the duration of 2 hours amidst their other duties.

### ***phase 1: preworkshop***

As preparation for the activity, the participants had to do the material selection exercise from P3.





*pictures by Rykiel Fijn*

***phase 2: setting  
the stage***

We performed two guided meditations to activate our senses and our sensibility towards the space. During the meditation duo's were formed.



***phase 3: memory***

Through a letter with a script, instructions were given to share our experiences of the previous exercises and to divide 2 roles are. One person took the role of designer, the other of participant. The participant was the owner of a memory that was going to be explored.

Following the instructions in the script, this memory is being introduced to the designer by the participant.



## PROGRAM 4:

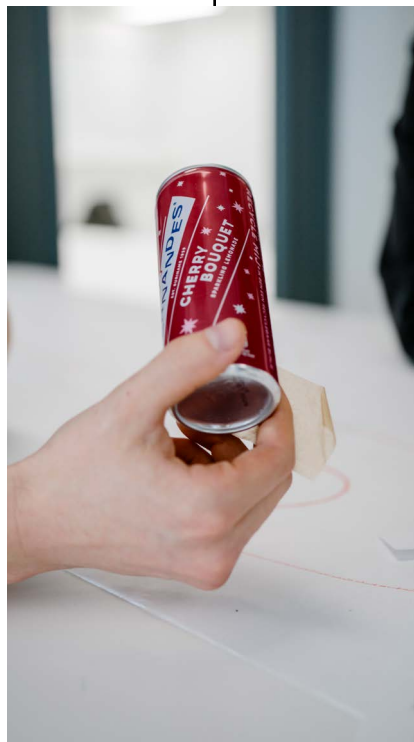


### *phase 4: materials*

After getting to know about the memory, together the designer and participant explored the materials that are brought to the session. In this exploration they tried to find a shared experience in the interaction with material.

### *phase 5: closure*

As a closing activity the duo exhibited how they interacted with the material to the other duo.



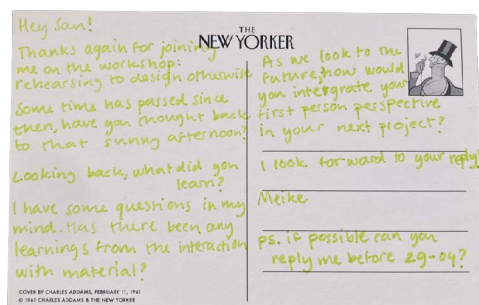
## HOW CAN WE REHEARSE TO DESIGN OTHERWISE?



### *phase 6: reflection*

After the closing activity we reflected together on what happened, what it did to us and what we learned.

A week later the design students received a handwritten post-card with reflection question, they send me a personal reply with their new learnings.





# **WORKSHOP REHEARSING THE DESIGNER-PARTICIPANT COLLABORATION (07-05-2024)**



## ***Setting***

- taking place at the courtyard at the location of Mensa Mensa
- with 4 designers
- from 10:30-16:30, excluding the preparation and reflection exercise





**Exercise 1**

As preparation for the activity, the participants did an updated version of the exercise from Program 3, selecting personal, situated materials



**Starting the day**

We started the day with a introduction of my project and the 4 shifts.





**MORNING:  
MATERIALS AS A WAY OF COMMUNICATION**

***Exercise 2: Discovering the direct communication of materials***

All participant brought at least eight samples of matter to the workshop. All these objects and materials were placed on tiles on the table.

They wrote what meaning the materials had to them on cards, both for their own materials as well as for the others. The cards were placed with the sample on the tile.

***Exercise 3: Discovering the indirect communication of materials***

Beig finished with the writing the participants had to make a map to explore how the materials are connected to each other and how they are connected to them.

After these exercises we reflected as a group.





***Exercise 4: Interacting with material***

To practice with material engagement, we mindfully prepared our lunch. Paying close attention to what information the food communicated to us when we were interacting with it.



**AFTERNOON:  
REHEARSING THE DESIGNER-PARTICIPANT COLLABORATION**



***Exercise 5: Moving exercises***

They performed multiple theater improvisation exercises guided by me, these exercises were focussed on:

- the presence of the other
- reacting on the other
- interpreting the other

These exercises were done to get in the right mindset for the next exercise: communicating with each other without relying words. During these exercises duos were formed for the rest of the afternoon.



***Reflection***

We ended the day with reflection and evaluation. All participants were given an envelope containing a postcard with reflection questions and instructions to open it after two days.



***Exercise 6: Embodying Collective Understanding***

As the last exercise of the day, the participants had time to search together for a sensory experience that captures a personal experience of a participant.

The duos divided the role of participant and designer and decided on a memory to embody. They chose one of the memories written on the cards of the second exercise, especially one that was easy to recall. The participant then briefly described their memory. They did not sit facing each other, but with their backs to each other. After that, the designer role would make a first suggestion for the material that came to mind while listening.

After 45 minutes, 15 minutes less than I had planned. We decided together to end the exercise with the performance of the embodiment and let the other duo also try out the embodiment they had found.



# *Learnings*

## **Deeper meaning**

Material as a means of communication enabled the participants to tell personal stories, by using material as an interpretation of an experience with a deeper meaning. The use of material enabled the participants to use different ways of communicating without being held back by or getting stuck in uncomfortable or difficult use of language. This allows the essence of an experience to be captured in an easier and simpler way.

One of the participants expressed that after the workshop they told others how special it was to get to know the other participants, as strangers, through objects quite deeply in one day. Another participant expressed a similar reflection of the getting to know each other in a meaningful way through the use of material or embodiment practices.

## **Ownership of a memory**

By putting their objects on a tile, the participants share their memories. In doing so, they create a vulnerability around the objects that other participants notice and acknowledge. This could be seen when participants handled the objects extra carefully, asked for permission if they could sense the object or when they did not want to move the objects at all.

On the other hand, when a material was already familiar to a participant they felt a sense of shared ownership that they wanted to share.

# *Loose ends*

All these students reside within a similar 'bubble'. During the workshop, we discussed that the differences in their experiences, of for example holidays, are not immense. What would happen if these people's environments were further apart? And what if they had not known me?

Rehearsing takes time. It was important that the space was disconnected from the normal way of doing things, not only in terms of location, but also in terms of the planning of their daily lives. Preferably, the space has situated materials that can be explored in the moment, such as a garden. This is difficult to control; how do you guarantee the value of the experiment?



# *Designer- Participant Collaboration*

In this section I will present the evaluation of the workshop test (experiment 8) and a finalised workshop proposal.





*fig. 23 during the 'embodying collective understanding exercise'*

## EVALUATION OF THE WORKSHOP

Evaluation of the workshop proposal is based on the results obtained from the performance of the workshop (program 4).

All four participants expressed that they found it a moving and valuable experience. They recognised the four shifts I had introduced them to and came to understand the importance of continuing to listen to each other, asking questions, experimenting with material. Switching between words and material; feeling the value of this process. Putting in effort until you truly understand a memory and the feeling that goes with it. We concluded that even though we know that this is important, it can still be very difficult to test your assumptions and genuinely try to understand another person at such a deep level. The workshop exercises empowered the participants to familiarise themselves with making their assumptions explicit.

Additionally, some exercises inspired the participants to use material/embodiment practices in future co-design practices because it demonstrated to them a profound way to build a connection.

In the afternoon, the participants either took on the role of designer or the role of participant. The assumed roles influenced the experiences and learning insights gained. Particularly, the assumed role of the participant proved to be enriching due to the feeling of being truly understood. Furthermore, it enriched the designer that the participant could communicate this, explicitly addressing something that is usually left unspoken.

Notably, the participants found it to be a fun day and were grateful for the opportunity to participate.

## WORKSHOP PROPOSAL

As a practical outcome of my design research project, I have created a workshop proposal that I can share in the design community (with a focus on the Netherlands). This workshop can be done for example at places like Baltan Laboratories [24], design school, or the program 'De Publieke Ontwerppraktijk' (PONT), which is bridging the creative sector and the public domain to strengthen cooperation between designers and the Dutch government [28].

The workshop 'Rehearsing the Designer-Participant Collaboration' emphasises the relationship between the designer and the participant, and is intended for designers with experience in participatory practices. During the workshop designers rehearse (with other designers) how they can make assumptions explicit in interaction with the other through material. The designers practise skills related to bringing out their first-person perspective and experience how communicating from their first-person perspective can help to truly understand the other. With the idea that in future participatory collaborations we can be honest and transparent about the assumptions we make from our own subjectivity in order to respond to the design context sensibly.

The workshop proposal is based on the workshop from experiment 8 in program 4 'How can we rehearse to design otherwise?'.

The workshop proposal document contains:

- Aim of the workshop
- Learning outcomes
- Planning of the workshop
- Descriptions of 7 exercises.

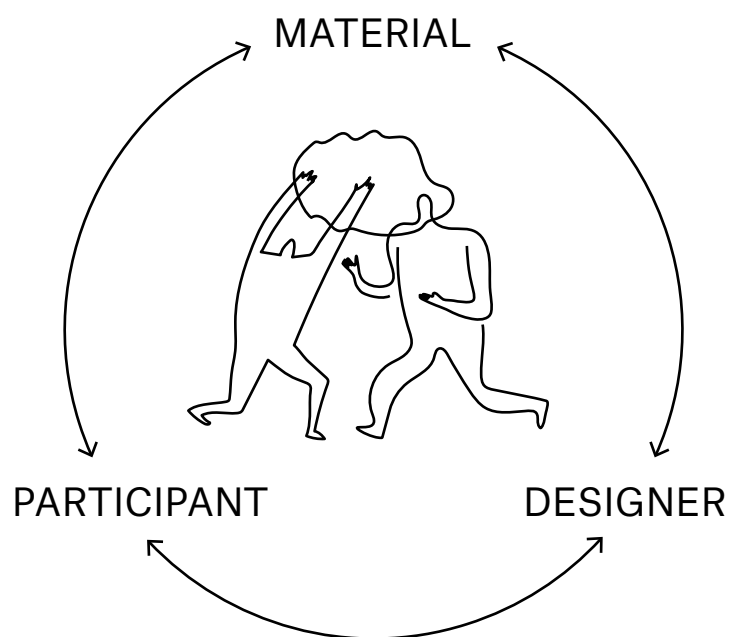
The full workshop proposal can be found as Appendix.

The workshop needs to be adapted based on the space the workshop is hosted in and the relations between the participant.

[23] Baltan (n.d.). Baltan Laboratories. <https://www.baltanlaboratories.org/>

[28] Home - PONT. (2024, April 11). PONT. <https://www.depubliekeontwerppraktijk.nl/>





*fig.24 rehearsing to make your first-person perspective explicit*



# *Discussion*

This section discusses the key take aways of my project, the limitations and a personal reflection. To discuss my practice and methodological contribution, I spoke to four designers from three perspectives: research, practice and student.

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS

The main ambition of this project was to explore possibilities through which designers are enabled to respond sensibly to the design context while integrating their first-person perspective.

To achieve this ambition I explored the topic through auto-ethnography and four design research programs, containing experiments. From this design research I gained three main takeaways

## 1. FROM WHY TO HOW

Testing personal bias through material prevents misunderstandings in the interpretation of language and meaning. The use of material empowers participants to actively engage with a first-person perspective and to both interpret and express meaning together. In doing so, the direct need for translation is less necessary as a collective understanding is reached through the material. The proposed material engagement and embodied practices enable designers to train their muscle memory to respond from their first-person perspective.

## 2. EMBRACING THE PERSONAL

The embodiment of collective understanding is rooted in personal stories. With this focus on storytelling and communicating personal experiences of the world around us, the designer-participant collaboration embraces their first-person perspectives. These perspectives are personal, and making them explicit requires a certain vulnerability. Interaction with material can empower designers to address this vulnerability sensibly.

The materials allowed participants to convey complexities while also controlling which vulnerabilities to make explicit. Practicing with explicitness ensures that the personal is not avoided but helps us to come closer together.

## 3. MAKING SPACE TO REHEARSE

We have the ability to recognise the importance of something, and to figure out how to do that important thing. However, actually implementing this and creating the desired impact is something much more difficult.

This project created an opportunity for me and the involved designers to deliberately move from intentions to actions. Thereby, my experiments and for most the workshop proposal created a rehearsal space in which it is allowed and encouraged to experiment with adopting changes in your design practice. Rehearsing adaptation is the first step in putting self-reflection into action. In addition, the activities were perceived as exciting to do, which motivates to continue learning.

## LIMITATIONS

These limitations highlight aspects that were either beyond the scope of this project or emerged as areas that need further exploration.

## THE FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE OF ONE DESIGNER

This project is focused on the first-person perspective of designers and making them explicit within designer-participant interactions. However, in participatory or co-design practices, this relation will probably not be as simple as an interaction between two people. A design team working within a design context ultimately encompasses a multitude of relations and first-person perspectives. This complexity was not explored in this project, but is definitely a critical point that could be further reflected upon to develop the designer's ability of explicitness.

## A PARADOX

Although this research project aims to explore the integration of first-person perspectives into participatory and co-design practices, the design contexts of the design research programs were not situated in these contexts. However, the experiments were strongly focused on rehearsing with design practice. I am curious to see what these collaboration moments could evolve into when put into the context of a complex design project.

## DUTCH OR DELFT DESIGN

This project is situated in the Dutch design context, therefore there is a socio-cultural norm embedded within my research. As the Dutch are known to be direct in their communication, the 'Dutch' definition of explicitness may differ from other cultural interpretations.

In addition, I am strongly influenced by the Delft design education, because this is how I 'grew up' in design, but also because many of the participants who contributed to my research study or have studied in Delft. The background of this education is engineering, and during this project I came into contact with forms of learning that started from a different base. It would be interesting to see how someone with a different background deals with the experiments.



## REFLECTION

Not everything can be expressed in words. This is something I am again reminded of as I write this final reflection; I have learnt a lot, but articulating these insights remains a challenge.

While I was writing this report, I revisited the auto-ethnographic turn in design after a long time without looking at it. I read the same pieces as I did at the beginning of my project, but now in a completely different way. Knowing is not the same as experiencing.

Still, I want to share some of my learnings in writing with you here:

## MY POSITION

It was a challenging project, questioning the things I have learned in my 7 years in educational institutions. Questioning the things I would naturally do. Logically, this came with self-doubt, but it also gave me the opportunity to be critical and develop my own position on who I am, who I want to be and in what way I want to develop. And I am excited to see if I can put what I have learned about integrating my first-person perspective into practice in close collaboration with other designers.

## DESIGNING ON MY OWN

I have found it difficult to design on my own, it has blocked me in a lot of situations from being creative. This experience has shown me how important it is to surround myself with people that inspire me and that I feel connected to. Because I was working alone, I was not always actively articulating decisions or reflections to communicate their meaning. When I involved others, I had to say things out loud. Then things had to make sense, and they could also evolve in the synergy of the conversation. Looking back, the most meaningful moments always involved someone else who was responding to me and to whom I could respond.

## ON THINKING AND DOING

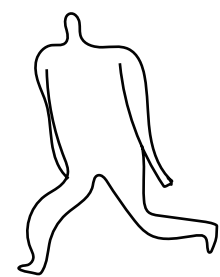
Articulating my thoughts took a lot of time, which also meant that I was 'in my head' a lot. As a result, you get caught up in your own questions (you have a lot of questions in my report), which can prevent you from meeting your own expectations. It becomes more and more frightening to create. The only way out is to start doing, and it does not matter what. Let go of the questions and thoughts and simply do. Looking back, I would have liked more doing, because I have learnt that doing always gives you new ideas, motivation and inspiration.

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