Sara Reinholtz 2013
MA Textile in the expanded field: essay

Essay mentor: Jonna Lappalainen
Project mentors: Bella Rune and Otto von Busch
Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design

MANTRAS FOR MIRACLES

Abstract

Design takes place within our lives, naturally and sometimes invisibly, but how can we become alert to its impact on our lives and wellbeing? How can we as designers elaborate our role in creating tools for people's lives? The notion of play is an important aspect of the creative process as well as to understand the origin of innovation. Daring to move outside of one's comfort zone, as one might do when playing, questions a linear process of work where the goal is predefined, but it might reward you with something much more valuable instead. In this text, the act of playing is investigated as method within a design process, as to understand how it affects our behaviour and collaboration, and how it could be used as a tool for altering perspectives on function and use of objects we design. Inspired by a metal wire toy called Mandala, an alternative approach to form is visualised, connecting our bodies and minds in closer relation to a playful and imaginative state of being, creating new mantras for our everyday lives.

Introduction

With this text, I try to encircle my own practice, and visualise themes and questions that are important in my work. I use previous projects as reference to draw a line of development in ideas and expression. I have tried to use the process of writing as a way of deepening the discussion around my chosen themes, and therefore it is part of my progress as designer simultaneously. The interrelation of writing and reading become a tool to shift perspectives within the process, which also put me as a writer and creator in the shoes of a spectator and reader.

Each new insight and experience offers a new concept of understanding the past. Inevitably, each reference in this text is therefore presented in the light of my current work. Later on I include some of the inspiration and parts of the process connected to my master degree project. Even though they introduce some, to me, new sources of inspiration and terminology, they are very much connected to subjects I have been working with before; designing for interaction and play as tools for enabling awareness and encouraging creativity. I aim for my text, as well as for my physical design work, to present my ideas and my references in an inspiring and understandable way, inviting you as a reader to a discussion around their purpose and further possibilities.

Let's play

An artistic process could be compared to play. When we play we are open for the unpredictable, searching for the different, and we might discover something new. In order to be successful in one's artistic process it is helpful to set off in a mode of playfulness and curiosity, unaware and slightly ignorant of any final outcome. Not unlike the experience of playing a game, you often start by defining the rules, and then let the play run its own course. Even though using the same instructions, one game is never identical to another.

In a workshop on artistic research I collaborated in a group of three, trying to find common themes and questions to develop in a research study. Since we all came from different backgrounds, investigating quite separate themes through our work, we decided to research the process rather than the expression. When an exquisite corpse drawing that had been passed around during the earlier lectures re-appeared, it inspired our group to use a random, collaborative technique in our project. We decided to translate children's games into methods of work, letting our process follow clear instructions. We translated the games Simon says, Exquisite corpse, Blind man's buff, and Chinese whispers[1] and later on also decided to use dice to explore chance as a method of decision making and inspiration. The methods would then be possible to adapt onto different forms of physical expression such as drawing, moving, draping or as methods for coming up with new ideas. We worked these methods in our own group, as well as inviting other people to do it together with us. We called the project *"Children's games as method in artistic process"*.

These are the original instructions for two of the games we used:

> Chinese whispers is a game played around the world, in which one person whispers a message to another, which is passed through a line of people until the last player announces the message to the entire group.

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[1]   In Swedish these games are called Simon Says, Vikgubbe, Blindbock and Viskleken.
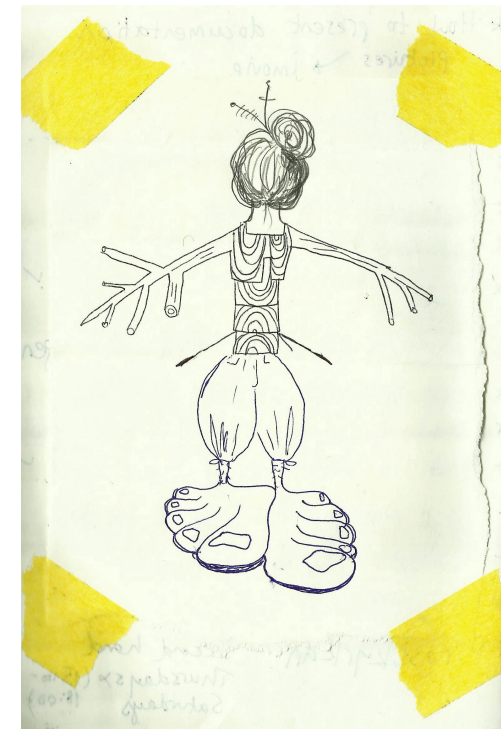
Errors typically accumulate in the retellings, so the statement announced by the last player differs significantly, and often amusingly, from the one uttered by the first. Some players also deliberately alter what is being said in order to guarantee a changed message by the end of it. [2]

Simon says is a children's game for three or more players where one player takes the role of 'Simon' and issues instructions, (usually physical actions such as 'jump in the air' or 'stick out your tongue') to the other players, which should only be followed if prefaced with the phrase 'Simon says', for example 'Simon says jump in the air'. Players are eliminated from the game by either following instructions that are not immediately preceded by the trigger phrase or by failing to follow an instruction, which does include 'Simon says'. It is the ability to distinguish between valid and invalid commands, rather than physical ability that usually matters in the game, and in most cases the action only needs to be attempted, rather than completed accurately. [3]

After translating the games to a new setting, the three of us played the games together. Each experiment led to further thoughts on how we could use the method in new and better ways. We analyzed the outcome and made improvements for the next try. A version of Simon says was for example adapted to work for draping. The instructions read as follows:

<u>*Simon says – draping*</u>
3 people. Material used: 20x20 cm fabric. Pins. Each person gives an instruction of what to do with the fabric.
When finished it continues to the next person. Instructions used:
1. Make an accordion pleat
2. Turn it into a cup
3. Wear it as a garment

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[2]   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_whispers 26-02-2013
[3]   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Says 26-02-2013

After trying out several translations of games, applying them to various techniques and materials, the group decided to use dice as a tool for giving instructions in a process. We used two dice as to enable more possible combinations. Onto all six sides of the dice, words describing random terms, objects and actions were written. Once the dice were thrown, what they said needed to be integrated into the creative process.

At first, we focused primarily on using our own bodies as medium, demonstrating the words through a short performance.. Many games therefore turned into a form of charade, acting out the instructions given. Since it was not a competition trying to win the game, our aim naturally became a quest for coming up with imaginative interpretations rather than literal ones. Randomly placed props in our near surrounding became tools for our interpretations. In many of these experiments two people would simultaneously interpret the same instructions, and therefore we generated multiple answers to each set of words. These first dice games helped us further into a state of playfulness and generous collaboration.


The instructions for these pictures read Dance/Hair and Banana/Hide, here interpreted by classmates and teachers when presenting and introducing our project to them. Games as method in artistic process, 2011.

Still, we felt a need to take the experimentation further and connect the techniques closer to our own practices in art and design. Our goal was to investigate alternative methods that could be applied onto our own work. There within we would find a more challenging task, turning these playful instructions into something we could integrate in our regular practice. We thought of a way to start using the randomly combined words as a starting point for brainstorming new ideas for designs, like a design briefWhen given a combination of words generated by the dice, we drew pictures of possible interpretations, as if they would have been titles or description of an object or a phenomena.

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Several ideas and design were visualised in sketches of which some were chosen for further development, building prototypes of their concept. Since there was limited time we had to find fast ways of large scale sketching, using materials and equipment available to us.

Some projects demanded more work, such as the Blow/Seat/Ear with its construction as a swing chair in wood and braided coco-nut fibres holding the seat. Others, like the Abstract/Blow/Cover or the Bounce/Floor/Pattern were produced collaboratively through a charade-like game. Looking back, this part of our research, using the dice to generate instructions and combinations to elaborate on, turned out to be the most rewarding. Generating ideas through dice took focus from individual achievements or personal taste in the origin of an idea, and focused collaborative work which let us all to step outside our regular paths. I believe that having started off in a playful manner without thinking of results, as we did when trying the games as charades and easy sketching techniques, we were helped in imagining new paths also in the part of our process that focused on producing objects to display. The games and the play helped us build up a mutual understanding of our working progress and opened up for us letting the games inspire all sorts of physical expression.
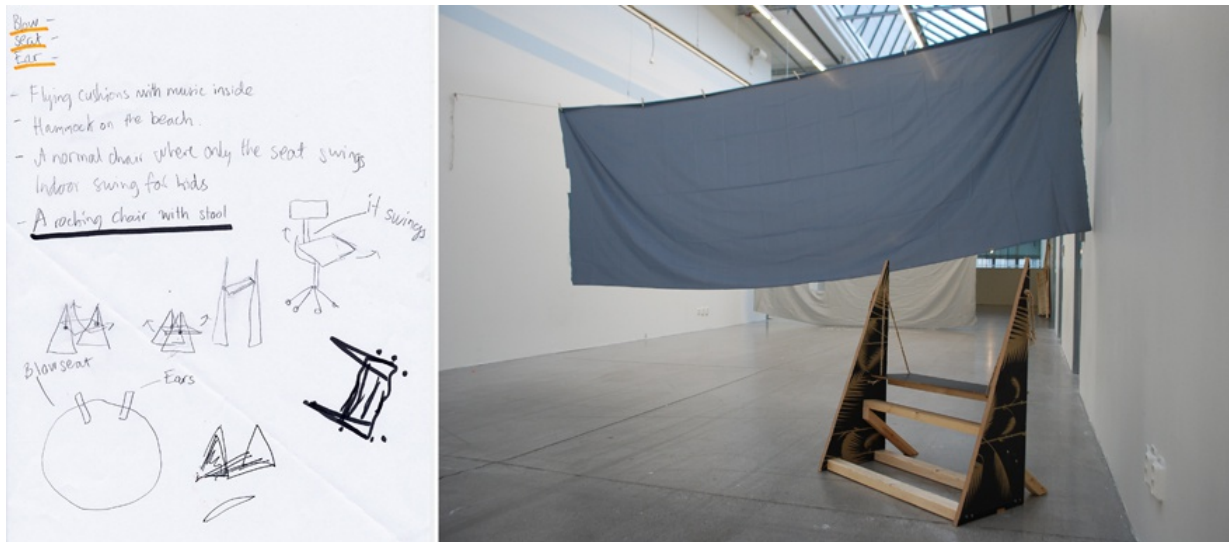
Drawn sketches of Blow/Seat/Ear to the left. To the right, an interpretation of the same in front of the installation of Abstract/Blow/Cover.

Establishing methods of playfulness

Set designer Ellinor Eklund and graphic designer Bodil Gustafsson Fürst lectured at Konstfack in 2011 on their collaborative work process, which they call "The Twoandahalfdimensional". In this lecture they presented their keys to successful collaboration. Seeing the experiences we gained from Games as method in artistic process, I can draw several parallels to the way they describe their method. Eklund and Gustafsson Fürst presented a list of steps through which they proceed in creative work. The first point is "Brief/Debrief". Brief is the part where you discuss the initial brief, what it contains and what it means. Debrief is the act of questioning the brief, opening up to alternative interpretations of the task. I believe that our process of encouraging several ways of interpreting the given instruction was a similar way of altering perspectives equal to their expression Brief/Debrief.

Working in team demand a clear communication of background, inspiration and useful vocabulary; you need to define common grounds. Gustafsson Fürst and Eklund call this "collective language". This means both drawing a line for the work, defining the steps themselves, but foremost using references and words describing a mutual point of departure. This is what our group did when translating the games – defining clear methods for the work we would perform and also testing our methods within the group, constantly sharing our feelings of progress and possibilities. The "Twoandahalfdimensional"-lecture nurtured my interest in researching methods. Their list is a definition of rules, not unlike the rules of the games we worked out in our collaborations. The rules can be inspired by children's games or developed through years of collaborative experience, but no matter which, it pinpoints the very core of an artistic process; you don't know in the beginning what you will end up with in the end, but the method you use will take you there. Each path has a destiny and you need to choose wisely before setting of in any direction. Important to any method is nonetheless, as Eklund and Gustafsson Fürst said: "Let go of control - move physically and mentally outside your comfort zone".[4]

A well-known back lash in any creative process often arrives when we start performing known behaviour, instead of trying new things. The methods of Twoandahalfdimensional as well as our experiments with children's games are ways to avoid those traps and keep on working in an imaginative way. Professor in experience design at Konstfack, Ronald Jones, uses similar terms discussing the foundation enabling breakthrough design and innovation. He talks of performance culture versus learning culture. Jones' recipe to creating nutritious context for innovation and culture is to "institutionalise imagination", and thereby creating a culture focused on learning

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[4]   Gustafsson Fürst and Eklund. *"The Twoandahalfdimensional",* lecture. Konstfack. 20-10-2011

new things, and not on performing what is already learnt.[5] I understand this not only as a way to use an artist's approach or method to her work in other contexts but more precisely as an encouragement to play. The key word, imagination, is fundamentally linked to the notion of play.

Addressing the world outside of art schools, Ronald Jones suggests us all to develop a learning culture that is promoting imagination and play. It is to be the formula for any smart business leader/politician/teacher to boost their company/community/students with the power to innovate. I agree with this ambition, but I believe that playing can generate so much more to people and to society as a whole, and that the narrow-sighted focus on its purpose, is paradoxically limiting the possibilities of play as method for innovation. Even though he might be just right, playing has then been spoken for only as means for attaining a very clear goal; create and sustain economic growth. If you decide before starting what you should end up with, wanting to control aspects of value, function and relation to economic parameters, the "creative process" is pinioned performing merely an assembly line putting together old concepts into products reproducing old ideas. It is ironic yet symptomatic for our time, how this has established as nearly the only way to speak about value of culture and artistic training. In public conversation, it has become the artist's lifeline to a raison d'être; we are entrepreneurs. Accordingly, as an implementation of the politics of "creative industries", art and design students are taught entrepreneurship. But is this really why we chose to do art? And was it really the artists that would need to be turned into businessmen, and not the other way around? The subversive power of playing, using our imagination to try stepping out of the boundaries of our existence, can serve purposes other than the ones we can possible imagine before even trying.

Another important aspect of a design process that arose during our experimentation in Games as method in artistic process is to question the origin of the initial brief. Using the dice as boss questions the designer's suggested role as working by the demands of an industry, using their creativity to maximise consumption. This origin has already in the genesis of the demanded artistic process, limited possible outcome enormously. Objects traditionally created by designers like furniture, household equipment, clothes or spatial installations, could originate from a more extensive imagination of possible outcomes. And perhaps the outcome will not even be possible to categorise using traditional terms. What is for example an abstract blow cover, or a touch banana seat? Perhaps they could be of great use to us if we only knew what they were.

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[5]   Jones, Ronald. *"Cultural asymmetry",* lecture. Konstfack. 16-11-2011

British designer and design researcher John Wood has founded the Metadesign network to discuss and elaborate on designers' role in creating what he calls *Micro-Utopias*. He claims that global injustices and economic imbalances are design-issues. Money and the economic system need to be re-designed. Wood points to our time's tendency to disregard visions of better life as naïve or idealistic, in contrast to what is by most politicians claimed to be a pragmatic and realistic view of our possibilities. This implies that dreaming is outdated. His point is thus, that since what is unthinkable is also regarded as impossible, it is of utter importance that we defy pragmatism to instead start dreaming of *Utopia*.

> Why do we seem unable to imagine how we would like to live? OK, at the level of cliché this is easy: castles in Spain, a private tropical island, country cottage in Shropshire, or a world cruise. But, in a world created by smart advertisers and clever spin doctors it is hard to be original. How can we decide what we want, when there are so many stock answers and off-the-shelf visions to fall back on? How can we avoid thinking like passive consumers when this is what we have been trained to become?
>
> (…)
>
> The first barrier to 'micro-utopias' is neither technological nor political; it is psychological. Ultimately, if we are to be ambitious there is no logical reason why we should not be able to design miracles, assuming we apply a probabilistic definition of miracles. If you search for a miracle you will reduce your chances of success by believing it to be impossible or unreachable.[6]

Something that struck me when reading the original explanation of the children's games we used was their accuracy as metaphors for other more serious and less playful phenomena. Chinese whispers seem to demonstrate an obvious aspect of human communication; that of information being distorted when passed on, even without some actors deliberately changing its content for their own amusement. The games we engage in as children are not so different from the challenges that we meet later on in life. In fact, it is not an unfamiliar concept that these innocent games are in fact mirroring the reality around us. From an early age, our perception of the world is therefore more and more narrowed down to what our society already offers us. As our ability to imagine life outside of present constitution diminishes the older we get, our need to play seem to grow increasingly urgent, using its power to change our perception and create anew.

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[6]   Wood, John. 2007. *"Designing for Micro−utopias; thinking beyond the possible"*, Ashgate, UK.

Physical environment is mantra

My yoga teacher encourages his students to meditate. He suggests five minutes in the morning and five minutes before going to bed. As a start. Just to spend time with yourself, practicing relaxation techniques, and being present in the moment. I think about meditation in comparison to physical work out; a few minutes every day and after a while you will notice the change. But what is the change created by meditating five minutes every morning and every evening? What will this repeated activity do with me? Is it perhaps just a reminder to take a break, to not let my thoughts carry me away? Or will something else be generated? Like a new experience, a totally different view of life? A six pack of great thoughts and spiritualism, ready to crunch at any given moment? Yes, perhaps.

The Sanskrit word mantra consists of the root man- "to think" (also in manas "mind") and the suffix -tra, designating tools or instruments, hence a literal translation would be *"instrument of thought"*. A mantra is a sound, syllable, word, or group of words that is considered capable of creating transformation.[7] With this in mind, I would like to compare the repetition of a verbal mantra to the repetition of happenings in our everyday life; our physical mantra that is made up of architecture, design, our own behavior with the use of our senses. While a verbal mantra is repeated intentionally, the mantras of everyday life will still affect us, but they do so on either a conscious or an unconscious level. Some of them we are aware of, we think of them consciously and we might even have intentions for them, as choosing comfortable shoes before going on a walk or enjoying a beautiful view each time we reach a certain place. Other, we might be aware of, but we have not intended them, like the noise on the subway. Perhaps these are things that we are disturbed by but we do not know how to change them. Some other things we are not even aware of, as for example how our posture when working will affect our health, or how the interior in our home or office might change our ability to be more creative and efficient. The difference to a verbal mantra is thus that the mantra of everyday life and what it generates to our lives, is not always obvious to us. It might be repeated unconsciously. Nonetheless, it is our instrument of life.

I believe that any space inhabited by people will have an influence on us; the rooms we live in, the air we breathe, the objects we use and the beds we sleep in - they will shape us, both unnoticeable and sometimes even violently. The conversations we engage in, the thoughts we carry, the work we perform, the food we eat, the chairs we sit in or the height of our heels – they are all part of designing our daily mantra. Learning meditation techniques, is amongst others a method to become aware of this mantra and how it affects us. By practicing the technique every day, we will actively create a new design for ourselves, a new mantra of thoughts and actions. In many ways, I think

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[7]   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mantra 14-02-2013

working with design is a possibility to render the invisible structures of life visible, similar to creating a mantra. Designing objects for people to use can be a way of highlighting behaviour or routines that we then can reflect upon and change to the better; changing the mantra.

In my bachelor degree project Pixtel Shapes, from 2011, I addressed the often plain and impersonal environments of modern office architecture, and aimed to create furniture that would enable people to rethink practical functions in their everyday life. I wanted to direct attention to how much time people spend in environments they have not designed themselves, and open their eyes to how this environment affect their lives, possibly in negative ways.

Playing with Pixtel Shapes, 2011.

Pixtel Shapes developed through my aim of creating an interactive and flexible furniture structure, which people could use to rebuild their office space, using some of their creativity as well as moving their body. I wanted to create something that visually could be integrated into a sleek office environment, but would functionally call for the use of abilities such as playfulness, creativity and physical interaction between people and between people and their environment. Offering users the chance to recreate their space out of building blocks that inherit no static function but many possibilities in use, would trigger the a discussion of actual needs and start a creative process to build new structures rather than adapting to what already exist. With open space office landscapes in mind, Pixtel Shapes could tun into room dividers and seating structures while being decorative and sound absorbing. When exhibited, I realised that whereas my work in the eyes of most people remained a physical visualisation of my ideas, there was not a kid who didn't take the invitation literally. They *saw* that Pixtel Shapes was just but a large toy, and could not help themselves diving into all the fun. When exhibiting my work I was trying to enable interaction. Since most people approach exhibitions with the idea of not touching, I tried to stay present as much as possible, encouraging people to indeed touch and play. I showed them the technique of building with the modules, and invited them to try themselves. Children often started immediately, playing around, changing the designs and creating new combinations. To my great joy, they understood my intention and seemed to enjoy the moment. Most grownups, on the other hand,

remained passive although they appreciated the visual expression of my work. This made me slightly disappointed, and I started to wonder if I had failed in my ambition; perhaps these people would never start playing even though they had the chance? But one late evening, after the exhibition had closed, I passed through on my way home when I saw two guys my age, joggling the large purple balls, while challenging each other in a game of 5 in a row. In the absence of children, these men could be children instead.

One of the souvenirs I brought from my bachelor project was the need and great use of flexible structures in design. There are many ways to design for reuse and recycling; of the materials, functions, or looks. Today there is a large focus on recycling of materials; plastic, metal, paper etcetera, and the development of biodegradable materials. Parallel to this, the market is exploding with gear to customise your gadgets in eternity. The consumption seems only to grow in relation to how much we can recycle our old purchases. In my work I would instead like to explore our own imagination as means for recycling.

The American artist Andrea Zittel is in her art often investigating needs of living. She has reflected on the issue in her list "These things I know for sure". She says "Ambiguity in visual design ultimately leads to a greater variety of functions than designs that are functionally fixed."[8] In her Raugh furniture, a series of furniture carved out of foam, she is borrowing the expression of natural rocks, creating a highly artificial product that refers to our notion of being at ease in nature. The soft grey coloured foam looks like indoor cliffs, several meters in width and height, and people can spread out with ease, leaning towards its walls for support. I think this piece successfully tricks us into behaviour unusual for furnished rooms, questioning function in design as well as their impact on our physical routines. In comparison with the Raugh furniture, I can see how Pixtel Shapes actually could be labelled as small size furniture, despite my attempt to grow each unit considerably in size. Their scale is probably more adapted to children, demanding all the length of their arms to conquer the act of building and engaging their entire field of vision, beneficial in my attempt to make the user indulge in interaction. Something that at first glance would be considered gigantic is in fact just the right size. Perhaps it has not so much to do with adult's inability to play, but to really adapt something into their size and context, to make playing more comfortable.

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[8]   Zittel, Andrea. 2005. *"Critical Space"*. Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY.

Also, Pixtel Shapes did not really meet the needs of typical office activities, such as putting a laptop on a flat surface or storing books and files. Rather, they encouraged activities that could be considered out of place, but still would offer solutions to spatial problems through continuous redesign reusing the same modules. Another quote delivered on Zittel's list is "What you own, owns you." What if I didn't have a comfortable table to put my laptop on? Then I would probably not spend so much time in front of the screen. Or rather, what if I had the required setting for other types of work, as handy and available as possible, limiting all obstacles to start sketching, painting, cutting and building. In order to produce the things I wish to produce, I need to arrange my space, and my life, in a pro-productive manner. Like the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who keeps his clothes in the kitchen cupboards to make room for his books. I think that Zittel and Žižek are two examples of how people might react to an environment that makes them uncomfortable, or that simply does not suit their needs. Zittel is using her practice as an artist to investigate structures of the home, on both a private and a public level, which turns out as art which resembles design. Žižek's lifestyle was apparently not the one imagined when someone designed and built the flat that he lives in. His reaction to this could perhaps be seen as a bit mischievously defiant, and rather playful too, but his garment-filled kitchen is nonetheless a very good illustration of the maladjusted expectations that are set for us from our environment. Anyhow, most people would not do as Žižek, but probably accept and adjust themselves. We have designed the world to suit our needs, but these designs will shape us in return.

I believe that we must engage in a continuous re-evaluation of our designs, our physical environment, and that playing is a very good tool for this. Both within the design process but also as an activity generated by the designs in the hands of a user. Using the subversive power of play, design could help us see the invisible structures of everyday life, and guide us towards imagining alternative ways. Each environment offers a method of use. If the method is play – only our imagination can stop us from defining its purpose. New interpretations of objects can emerge that lead to a different behaviour, which eventually will create a change of our physical mantras.

Mandalas - design for miracles

My first encounter with a "mandala" was through a metal wire toy I discovered in my parents' kitchen. Actually, I used to play with it when visiting them, enjoying the transformations and leaving it on the dinner table every time in a new shape. Suddenly, this piece triggered my imagination in a new way and I started thinking of using it in my work. Its shape is in constant flux, offering no original position. Its composition encourages interaction and seems to avoid any other explanation of its purpose; it is a toy made for play. I observe the construction and analyze the different shapes and their resemblance to other objects – a vase, a house, a table, a chair, a planet. I would like it to grow in size and put it in and as architectural context. Integrating textile materials, the construction could generate intriguing and shifting visual effects in shading, color and pattern. In my practice as designer, I often use found objects or shapes and transform what they can become in a new context. The mandala made by metal string and beads, foldable and possible to transform into various shapes, is a design with great potential for spatial applications and it possesses a magnetic almost enchanting expression. It appeals to me with many of the qualities I often search for; it is transformative, both possible and meant to interact with and beautiful in its repetitiveness.
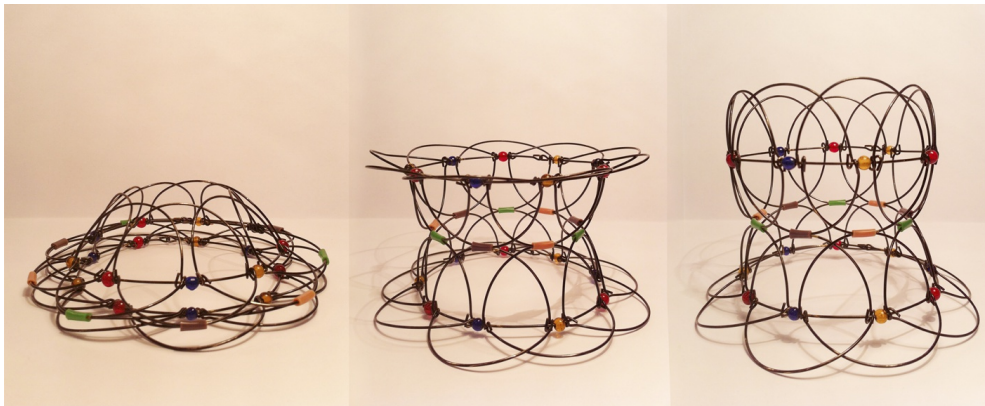
The mandala toy in three different positions.

There are many ways to experience, use and construct a mandala, and through researching its origin and meaning these have all become subject to my interest. It is not absolutely clear how the Mandala toy is connected to other forms of mandalas, such as the ones found in Buddhist tradition, if trying to look further than their mutual visual expressions and connection to spiritual practice. Through my research on the mandala toy, I have nonetheless found many examples of how it is often used. YouTube offers many clips showing the wire toy mandala, often presenting it as a tool for counting mantras while meditating. There are also various clips demonstrating how to make your own mandala out of metals wire and beads, suggesting the use of them for meditation, ornamentation or as jewelry. Following on these there are a great number of videos showing more complex structures of wire mandalas, building layers higher and higher, erupting like a growing plant. Almost endless variations are possible. Clicking the next and the next link or you tube clip, I am taken further and further into the digital world of spiritualism. I travel the world, from California, to Brazil and Switzerland further to Tibet and India

taking part of people's enthusiasm and pedagogic explanations connected to the mandala. For me, this toy is also very much an architectural object, and I imagine it large enough to make room for people inside it, rising over our heads in contrast to the toy that is placed comfortably in one's hands.

As a tool for counting the mantras while meditating, similar to rosaries. To tell "the story of the mandala, using the various forms of the mandala as illustrations to the story, often a creation story involving the Big Bang, human life and a holistic world view illustrating the balance of energies.[9]

In the Buddhist tradition, mandalas in sand, or those painted on textile, represent colours and shapes that are symbols referring to the balance of body and mind, micro- and macro cosmos and the cycle of life. They continuously carry four entrances referring to south, north, west and east connected through a centre figure. Geometrical shapes as the square, the triangle and the circle balance within each other. Mandalas are physical guides to spiritual enlightenment, enigmatic yet clear in its visualization of connecting forces. The wire toy mandala seems to embody the same ideas, but in a 3-dimensional form. Contraction in one end, leads to expansion in another. Its design is successfully illustrating what Buddhist philosophy is teaching; everything is connecting to everything.

Embodying Buddhist beliefs in physical designs used in everyday life, as the mandala is, I can also see a relation to the more familiar expressions of Shaker and Amish people, whose minimalistic architecture and austere design has had a large influence on modern design aesthetics. The daily physical practice and the objects that these people choose to be surrounded by are carefully designed and produced in order to aid spiritual guidance. I regard this as an advanced level of design awareness and their interpretation of design is casting a different light on the objects we are surrounded by also in more secular environments. Talking about spiritualism in a western Christian tradition, the body is traditionally excluded. Whereas Shaker and Amish might be the extreme form of Christian lifestyle, also secular Christian societies carry the tradition of

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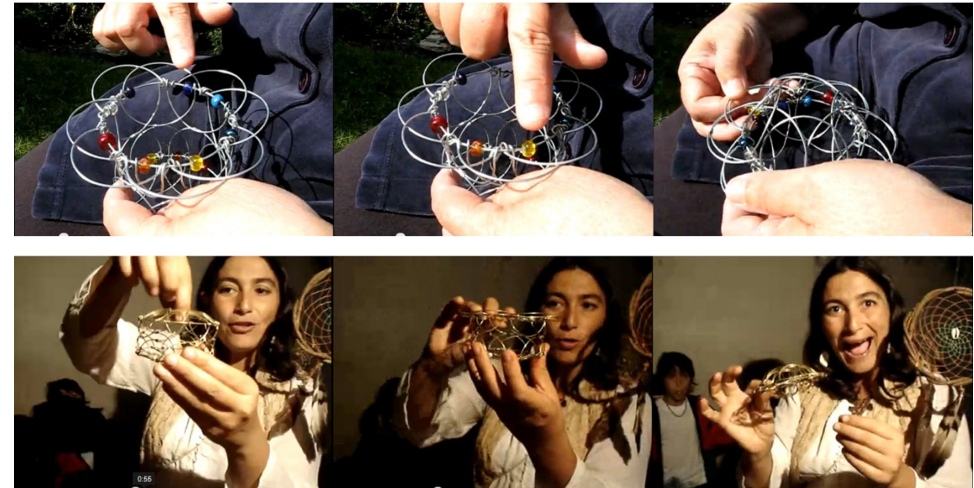
[9]   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MKR2opD0Uo / http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CXjHyl3YVM 13-02-2013

taming the body, through discipline and moral. What the body asks for is generally bad, and will not guide us to the soul. In Buddhism, understanding the body and developing balanced physical practices are on the contrary the most important way, if not the only way, to achieve enlightenment. The Buddhist tradition respect the impact the physical world has on our intellectual and spiritual development, for them there is no doubt *physical environment is mantra,* in a way I can relate to myself.

The mandala is a tool to point out other paths, paths that might lead you somewhere you did not expect but therefore also will reward you much more. This pulls me back to the notion of play. The route of playing, as the route of the mandala, is mysterious and veiled in the unknown. If you wish to unveil its purpose, exploit it and use it for your own good, its power gets lost.

The mandala is fundamentally something secret. If you are interested in it in order to acquire reputation, and feel pride in showing what you have worked out to others, you do not have the right attitude. If however your work springs from efforts to offer help to other people that is the right attitude of mind, which will contribute to the liberation of yourself and others.[10]

To the left, dismantling of a sand mandala by Tibetan monks at Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 1989.[11] To the right, "Mandala of Marichi", hand painted with colour and ink on silk. China, dated 1717.[12]

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[10]   Brauen, Martin. 1997.*" The Mandala Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism",* Serindia Publications. London.

[11]   Bryant, Barry, 1992. *"The wheel of time Sand mandala".* Harper, San Francisco.

[12]   A.F Thurman and Patry Leidy, 1997. *"Mandala The architecture of enlightenment".* Asia Society Galleries, Tibet House, Shambala. Boston and NY.

Simultaneously, my reaction to Jones' perspective on imagination as being tied up, selling it by a definition of its purpose, is confirmed by the Tibetan monk from Brauen's book, who kindly asks of us to step out into the mist. The toy is embracing the wisdom spread by the buddhist teaching. For me it has also come to symbolize those three aspects of my ambition in design; to actively experience the world through our bodies, to continuously research the needs and functions of our physical environment and to respect and nurture the power of play as to make miracles possible. In other words, it combines the act of play with the idea of physical environment as mantra, being a tool to create other forms of experiences. My ambition is to design with this in mind, making playful tools enabling new mantras to form in people lives, mantras for miracles.

Ideas for my master degree project

Inspired by these different forms of mandalas, I have been searching for an alternative approach to functional form, connecting our bodies and minds in closer relation to a playful and imaginative state of being. The qualities of the wire toy; its construction, aesthetics and transformative functions, made me want to use it in a different context; as a design object. Elaborating on the notion of our physical environment as a play ground I have used the structure of the wire mandala to design a larger construction that make room for people inside it, being in fact a giant toy disguised as architecture, or perhaps the other way around; architecture disguised as a giant toy. The idea is initially simple, but will put a lot of design aspects into play, concerning both its concept and physical realisation. Interaction and play with this space is vital to its concept, although it is also meant to be appreciated as an independent sculptural object. Being used as a room within a room my idea for it is to offer a space for other forms of meetings, close conversations, playing, reading a book, meditating or relaxing. I imagine this transformative space put in different environments such as libraries, schools and offices. It could also be placed outdoors, as a tent-like construction possible to transform.

Visualising and making possible its use in these different context, choice of material and production are important aspects of my work. I have researched many kinds of materials to build a large wire mandala, trying plastic cable, wood, coated fibre beams and metal wire of various dimensions. Finally, I decided to go for metal wire, just like in the model version, for its strength in smaller dimensions and ability to be manipulated into permanent forms. I consulted an industrial producer of metal wire products, designing the parts for them to produce. Meanwhile I have focused on developing the textiles to be integrated with this piece.

Adding some sort of shielding or cover felt natural, really turning this object into architecture. Not to make it a closed space, but rather to enhance the feeling of being inside or outside, elaborating on light, shadow and colour. The structure, made up of loops of wire connected to and relying on each others support, made me to think of it as a large knit. Knitting is basically made up of one single thread, creating loops interconnecting and forming an elastic surface. Knitting is also a technique with great abilities in building three-dimensional structures and controlling its outer form through direct manipulation of its structure. Hardly no waste material is generated. In the light of 3D printing technology being developed and commercialised, I think of knitting as being just an older form of 3D printing; a technique that let me produce the exact piece of textile that I need.

The textile pieces I have constructed use the technique of partial knitting, building circular shapes out of six triangular parts. This method leaves traces in the knit of six lines, like the spokes in a wheel. I like this trace, being a decorative reference to the view of the mandala as a "wheel of time" as well as it is visually enhancing its circular construction. Mandala in sanskrit is in fact the word for circle. For the knitting, nylon turned out to be a good choice of fibre, being strong, resistant to humidity unlike cotton or wool and possible to hand dye unlike polyester. The knits will be coloured and placed in the metal construction, forming the canvas of this tent.


Two different yet similar parts of the process: nylon thread and metal wire processes through machines.

The picture to the left show the last step of knitting a circle on a hand knitting machine; that of closing the piece by attaching the first triangle next to the last.

To the right is a picture from the factory in Anderstorp Småland, where metal wire from large spools are pulled into machines programmed for bending, cutting and welding.

The project has offered me many challenges in the design and production of all the components. So far I have come to know a lot more about knitting than I knew before, through trial and error in making the construction work with my idea as well as improving my abilities in the craft as well as changing the design as my idea has improved. It is also the first time I have worked with metal, a challenge in it self. I have come to understand more and more about the material, its possibilities and limits along the way and so far many of the most difficult aspects of my process has been concerned with the metal construction, being harder for me to imagine before hand and thus giving me more challenges in real life. My motivation to find all the solutions, is the image I have in my head.
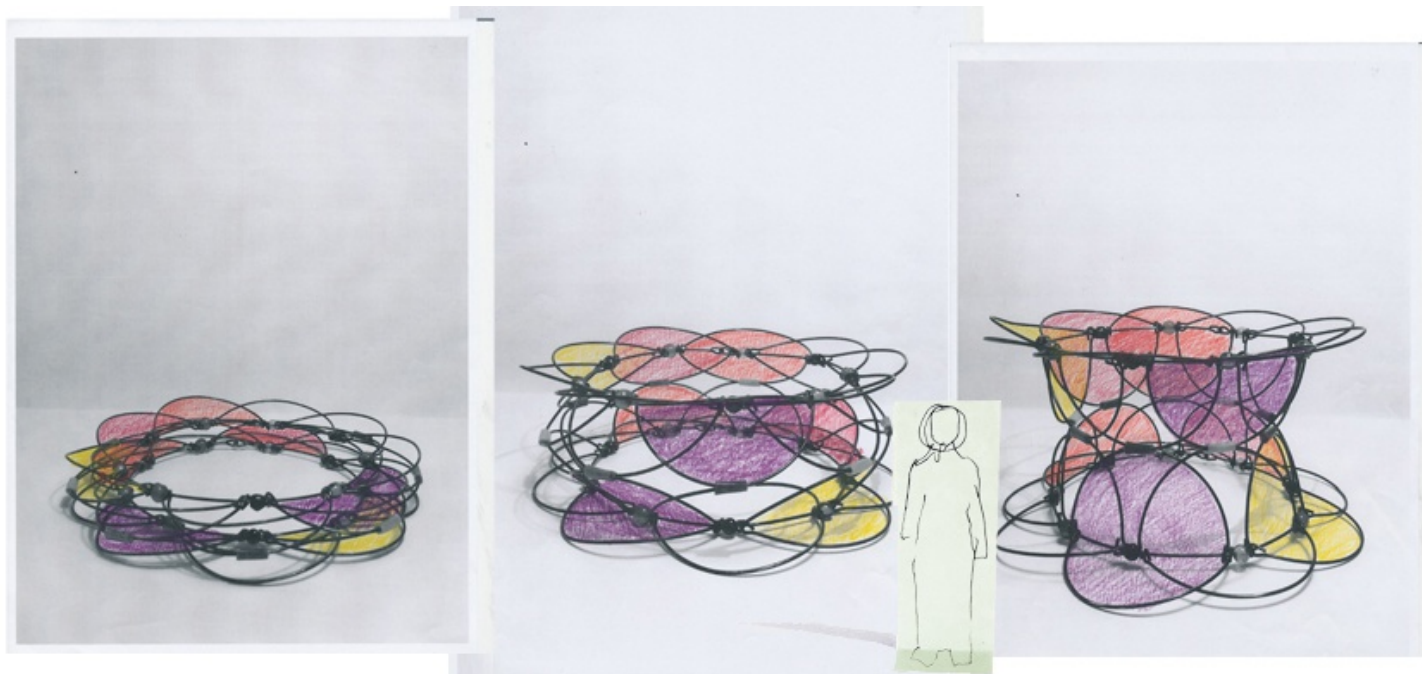
Sketches of the final piece; the mandala construction with circular textiles integrated, Approximate size in relation to a person with a height of 175 cm.

Colors and amount of textiles yet to be defined.

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Lectures

Gustafsson Fürst, Bodil and Eklund, Ellinor. *“The Twoandahalfdimensional”,* lecture. Konstfack. 20-10-2011

Jones, Ronald. *”Cultural asymmetry”,* lecture. Konstfack. 16-11-2011

Links

Chinese Whispers explained:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_whispers

Simon Says explained:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Says

Mantra explained;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mantra

Wire toy mandala as tool in meditation:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MKR2opD0Uo

Wire toy mandala illustrating a story:
 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CXjHyl3YVM