

Observing Objects, Observing Self: from intervention to immersion

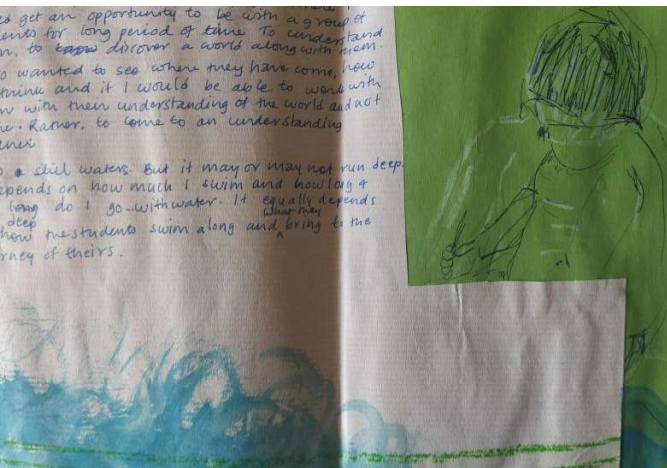
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'When I visited the weaver's home, I saw that his wife was bending down for hours to thread the loom. She was also untangling thousands of threads and knotting them one by one. I thought about redesigning the loom that has a quick and easy mechanism for threading. This way, the family can save time and weave more sarees to economically better themselves.' - from a student proposal



The above proposal sounds convincing as it is well meaning, it helps economic growth and it is an intervention into the object of enquiry—the loom. However, it tends to assume that what looks tedious for an outsider may mean something else for the hands that are working or an invention by an ‘untrained’ community would obviously need a correction by a ‘trained’ person. When I read the proposal I wondered what makes this assumption take hold? I understand that the designer’s gaze is often a privileged one. But the urgency of a solution to what looks like a problem is something that is closely connected to how one views objects and their functions. Design as a discipline too examines the functions and forms of the objects in order to create meaningful interactions between humans and their material world. The intention here is to not hold a student guilty for her/his/their perception but to attempt to understand what encounters with objects evoke in the journey of observation, research and intervention in the context of design practice. In this case, the objects were many—the loom, the saree, the threads and also, the home of the weaver.

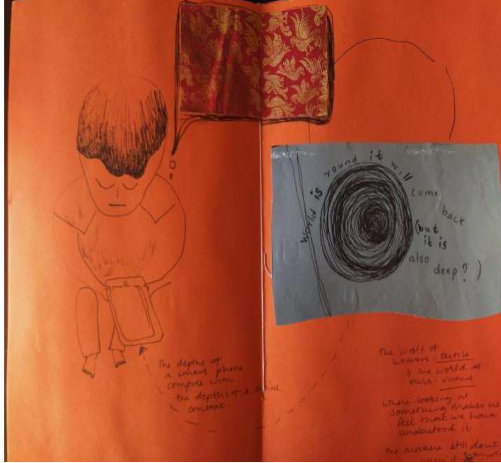


This essay is based on my experience of working with design students on a project, Thread Stories, that explored the narratives of handmade textiles and a community of weavers. The project also had a context of a small textile museum, Vimor¹, that displays objects such as handwoven sarees, the loom, the threads, spindles, yarns and tools from the past and provided a much needed perspective to the present observations. The myriad physical placements of the objects from this context in different spaces—the museum, the weaver’s colony, a silk farm and a classroom invoked a variety of interpretations and perceptions. In this essay, I will draw from field work in the weavers colony in Yelahanka, the creative processes explored by the students in the framework of design pedagogy and the incidences of various objects that came under study during this project. I would also like to use my personal journal as a parallel narrative that intermittently documents the moments from the classroom while facilitating the project for the aspiring practitioners.

Object 1: The phone

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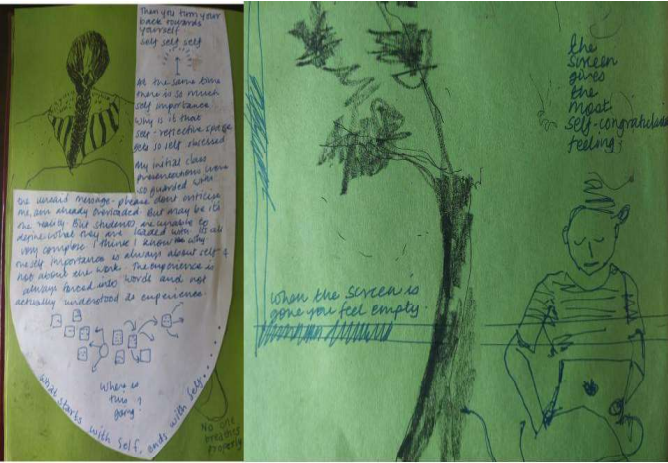
The phone



The smartphone, in nearly everyone's hands, often acts as a device to document, store, take note or to remember certain observations apart from it being a device inducing obsessive compulsive usage. The presence of this object in the field makes apparent certain dimensions of observation-practices that are otherwise invisible. A phone is more discreet than a camera. The discretion allows it to be used to document information in the form of images, almost similar to note-taking in the field. However the device creates a possibility for it to happen very fast creating an illusion that one has completed the act of seeing by clicking a photograph. Apart from the efficiency and amount of image accuracy, the object's presence gives an impression that this is the one and only method to look, see and observe, sometimes not even allowing the bare eye to see. The phone itself becomes an eye, a way of looking at other objects. In times where almost everything can be done on the phone, the hoard of information in the form of pictures, as objects, lay themselves on the screen as data and as observational research.



When we enter the small homes of the weavers or the crowded lanes of power loom factories, the onlookers' stretched arms holding phones over objects seem like tentacles searching for prey, often assuming that the act of looking is over and that the photographs and videos would somehow come together as evidence of that looking, safe and saved on the phone. The smartphone, an already personal/private device, makes the process and outcome of observation rather complex as it offers a certain psychological and sociocultural dimension of a technologically superior object such as smartphone and its privileged owners, to the images it makes. The method and process of image making and of collecting information combined with the actual content and aesthetic of the visual information perhaps affects the interpretation and meaning making methods. Susan Sontag² writes about photography as a control mechanism we use upon what we see to appropriate the object that is seen. The object offers a frame and technology to see the reality but are we then ignoring the depth and lateral aspects of the reality that exists and if taking place in and out of the frame that the device readily provides? Is the convenience of the recording device (or an object) affecting our capacity to actually see?



Something that is so every day, obvious and efficient seems to have replaced the whole act of looking. Looking 'inside' the phone too is a private act of gazing at this personal collection gleaned from reality, leaving behind the experience and holding on to the stored outcome, an information. However when it comes out into the domain of meaning-making, it lives a life of its own with the people who see it and form a certain image of the act of looking that reflects through the collection. So the phone, as a presence, function and storage space of information plays an important role in the interpretation and any processing that comes thereafter.



Drawing with the looms
At the Weaver's co-operative
society, Yelahanka



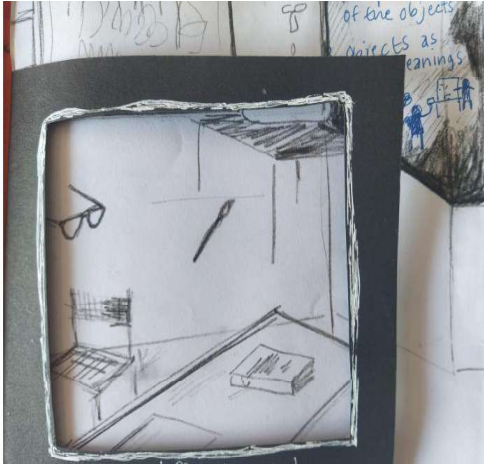
I often imposed constraints on the students to see without a device, hoping that the content of observation might turn out different. Sometimes they used sketchbooks and sometimes they remembered details through their notes. This gave some space and opportunities for experiencing the reality of the lanes and homes differently, as drawing or writing took more time than a simple click. Would this information be quite different from a phone image? Therefore how will it contribute to one's research and design processes? It was interesting to see such questions playing out in some individual journeys of the students.

I would like to describe some of the processes that I, as a facilitator, made the students go through with the hope that the observation of the objects they encounter expands beyond the current function and location of the object to create a differentiation between what is seen and what it may mean.



What do objects do?

What do objects do?
A small exercise

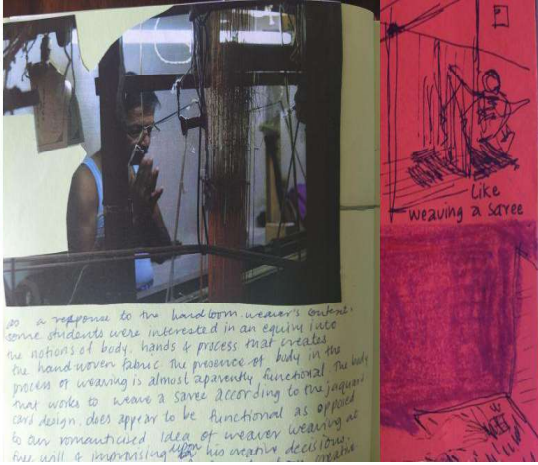


As a classroom exercise the students had built a pretend museum of objects from the present, imagining them to be the objects from the past, fifty years from now. The time travel into the future gave rise to the question of an object becoming obsolete. Various objects were brought together such as a phone charger, an aspirin, a toy duck, a pair of glasses and a paintbrush. The display of these objects involved research about the material, the function and cultural complexities.

Why would an object go obsolete while another would not? When objects from the context of weaving were observed, this projection into the future was somewhat useful to locate and understand the life of an object and its relationship with the human body - as a medium and an object in itself. The parts of the body that were connected to the various processes of weaving, came under observation, especially because of the deep connection between the skillful actions of the fingers to knot, slide and apply pressure, in a rhythm and repetitively. Some questions that came up by the end of the exercise are pertinent for the observation of objects include What does it take for something that has existed for a long time to suddenly become obsolete? What makes some objects timeless? Do things with a longer history have a longer future? Are we moving towards less objects and more experiences? Are all objects somehow connected? The questions sparked during the classroom exercise carried themselves in the field to view the material and objects with an awareness about their past, present and future.

Object 2: The loom

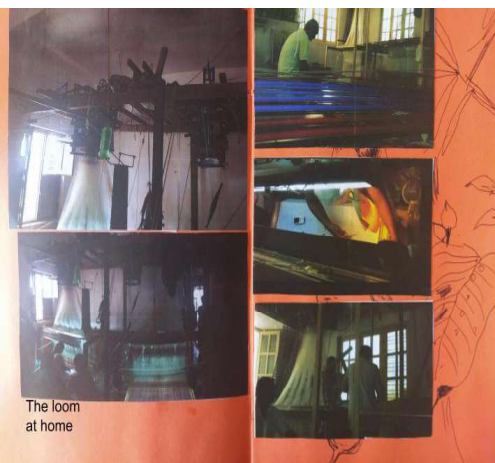
Object 2
The loom



The sheer structure and the mechanism of this ancient machine is an overwhelming sight. During the project, we saw the loom often in three spaces/physical contexts. Inside the weaver's home, four pit-looms³ stood at the centre as the rest of the household lived in and around them. In the weaver's co-operative, there were only the looms and the weavers in the space. At the Vimor museum, there was a handloom installed with a saree being woven with ancient hand woven pieces of textile displayed around it. In all the three contexts, the loom as an object stood for specific purposes other than its function. The home and the loom are literally intertwined together with the threads, people and objects- sometimes seeming like all of them are living each other's lives. The sounds of the household and the lane outside merge and unmerge from the sound of the weaving shuttle. When the electricity goes off, the powerloom sounds from the surrounding small factories stop and the handloom sounds stay on. The life of the handloom is literally lonely in the mad rush of mechanical production. In this context, the handloom seems to also acquire a private space but yet so central to the context of the home in which it lives.

Inside the co-operative, there are only two entities, the weavers and the handlooms. The conversations, functions and rhythms of sounds are clear and focused. An occasional sound of a phone call and the temple at times ruffle this working soundscape. Around the looms there are traces of personal objects such as a phone, a wrist watch, various spindles, a newspaper and a lunch box. These objects seem to define the role of the loom and the weavers and evoke the relationship these objects and individuals share with each other.

The museum accentuates the beauty and ingenuity of the loom. Here, the loom as an object converses with the woven pieces that are displayed in glass cases. The act of protection and preservation brings out an otherwise invisible dimension of the object as something that is frozen in time and vulnerable, in a present context of fast production and machine made garments. Without the weaver, it often personifies the age old and intricate art and craft of weaving, drawing our attention to its fragile future.



The loom at home

The loom at the weaver's co-operative in Yelahanka

Photographs by Renuka Pohnerkar

At this point, some students were already intrigued by the mechanism of the loom and had begun to study it in detail. The observation, analysis and documentation led them to make connections between the body, the hands of the weaver and the loom as a machine that interacts with the corporeal. A couple of projects emerged from these aspects of the object giving rise to questions about information creation, craft and technology. The woven object, the saree, as a carrier of this information and knowledge became an inspiration to some more narratives of the projects.

The loom also became a very central part of our imagination, as an overpowering presence, slowly affecting the understanding of the context we were witnessing. The presence of this object was also a reminder of the role, notion and function of design and technology that aids it. The physical complexity of the object stood as a metaphor for complex social, economic and cultural patterns reminding us of this age-old technology as an example of superior engineering. This object became a pedagogical tool that would hold and connect several ideas together such as construction, repetition and role of human body in the process of craft. The initial determination for 'changing' the loom was fizzling out as fascination took over through multiple observations of this object and tactile interactions with it. It was interesting to see that an object so intimately connected to the everyday life of a weaver, stood for complexity for us while the weavers could easily take down the complex into parts and nonchalantly put it together.

As we were hanging between this tension of the functional and the metaphorical, the parts of this object appeared as individual objects themselves. The spindle, the jacquard cards, the warps and wefts, the tools, wheels, threads and their interconnections with each other and the body of the weaver, all began to appear as objects from one large object. It was interesting how the weaver's body that interacted with the objects was perceived like an object, observed in parts such as hands, feet, eyes and fingers. Was it the act of observation that provoked this? Or the mere interaction of the body with the objects made the body an extension of the objects and objects as extensions of the body?

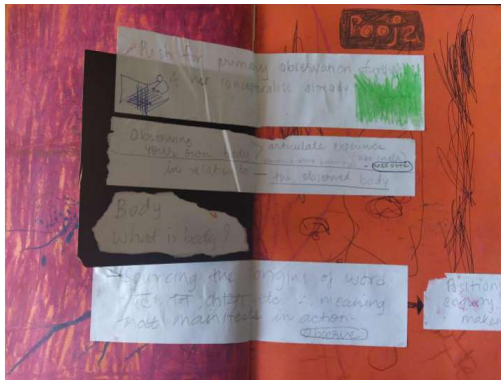
Object 3: The Body



A mind map of objects observed by Sucharita Premchander

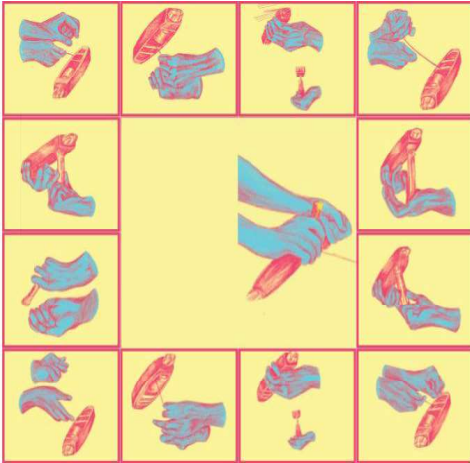
The observation of the loom and the body together as a machine, pointed towards the idea of the body - as anatomy, as labour, as a mechanism and as a human presence. I think their limitation of conversing in Kannada, compelled some students to spend time observing the weavers, their routines and the details of their interactions with the loom and with each other in the co-operative. In a master class by Pooja Kaul- Basu⁴ the students were taken through self-reflective exercises that pointed towards their own body, movement, pain, frictions and presence in the context of their personal spaces. The idea of the body and what it holds expanded the perception beyond the idea of function and an outcome. The specific focus on the weaver's body, especially the hands, took some students towards the experience of the subtle, gentle and intuitive practice of creating an object that is cloth.

Object 3
The Body

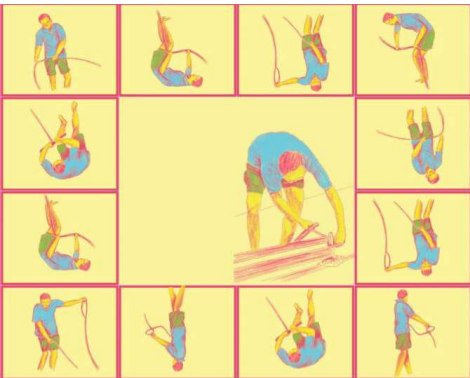


The observation of anatomy in relation to the physical and social context of weaving as a practice was an essential connection to make as it probed into the invisible capacities of seemingly ordinary human beings and into the invasive forces of the market that have pushed handloom weavers into oblivion. Some students did an extensive observation of the body. The process took them towards further insights that built their creative outcome. They worked through similarities and differences in a journey that went back and forth between the field and the studio, validating their observations with their interpretations. The idea of making and the idea of the body as a medium gave rise to the outcomes that made the connections visible.

Object 3: The Body



Panel from a spread created by Sucharita Premchander



Panel from a spread created by Sucharita Premchander

The philosophy (and the plight) and practice of the craft, as a way of life, resonates through the poetry of the 15th century weaver poet Kabir. The body, the cloth and the loom as objects are considered connected, not as extensions of each other but complementing, living entities. They live and work as a whole in his poetry. I pose this against the gaze of an upper class, privileged outsider who often reduces this relationship into discrete entities and objects that are analysed and appreciated by taking them further apart, as an aesthetic material, function and actions. The entire act of ‘studying’, ‘documenting’ or ‘observing’ can stimulate this alienation further even without any intentions to do so. As scrutiny is an informative exercise, it can change the perception of the object away from what it actually means to the maker. A student’s work tries to observe this binary as it points at the idea of absence through presence. Another work observes the movement of every joint and muscle that gives rise to the woven object with tools as extensions of the body that is central to the process of production.

While it is obvious that the binary is visible to the observer, it seems delightfully mysterious that the enquiries come from the self-reflective space that the act of quiet observation creates. The objects, the gaze and the self together make a combination that in turn affects and influences the representation. Often misunderstood as limiting and self-centred, self-reflection can open doors of enquiries that enter the place of the ‘the other’ in the process of design research with a deep impact on representations and creative choices.

We came a long way from the initial idea of redesigning the loom. I realised that throwing students and myself into the world of the unknown and acknowledging the uncertainty has immensely helped to understand the lives of the objects we observed in the complex context of handloom. This emergent process allowed many enquiries to shape through making which was in turn influenced by the practices students observed. The tools used by the students found connections with the tools used by the weavers. This understanding had been experiential and embodied at times-both by being present in the field and being present in the making of their own objects through making meaning of the many observed objects in this emergent process.

I would like to say that perhaps the process of observation distracted students from finding solutions to the obvious and visible problems. However it attracted them towards the subtle and invisible entities outside of their lived experience and social world. In a world full of objects and mass production⁵ where the designers contribute by adding products they make, the juxtaposition of these enquiries against an established, mainstream and expected role of design helped us reach a point where the students were engaged in information in various forms, and a creative outcome was a by-product of this engagement if not an end-product. The project was a part of the School of Information Arts and Information Design at Srishti where the idea is to work with information to identify and communicate narratives rooted in their contexts and purposes. The enquiries that came out of the project hence moved away from the classical design process, sometimes questioning it, sometimes working around it.

Notes

¹ Vimor Museum of Living Textiles, is founded by Vimor Foundation's Pavithra Muddayya. The foundation works with the weavers across the country. The museum houses antique textile works and heirlooms owned by people and donated for display. More can be found out here :<https://vimorfoundation.org/the-living-museum/>

² 'Photographs really are experiences captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood. To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power.' from Susan Sontag, 1977, 'In Plato's Cave', On Photography, New York: Rosetta Books LLC

³ A pit- loom is a traditional handloom that is partially fixed inside a pit in a floor, where the weaver sits. The warp and weft are therefore close to the floor. The weaver's body below the waist and leg shuttle of the loom are inside the pit.

⁴ Pooja Kaul- Basu, is an artist and faculty at Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore

⁵ Victor Papanek, in the preface of his book, Design for the real world, criticises mass production and designers who constantly contribute to it by designing products. He demands moral and social responsibility