

A GUIDELINE FOR CONSCIOUS ENGAGEMENT WITH CRAFT ARTISANS

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Abstract

Southeast Asia is a rich and vibrant region where craft is very much alive and rapidly undergoing a transformation in the search for progress. This opens up a wealth of possibilities, collaborations and exchanges of knowledge to be shaped and defined. In recent years we have seen a growing practice of co-creation between designers and craft artisans from the region, where either culture revitalisation or identity seems to be the driving factor. However, balancing traditions from past perspectives layers the final outcome with a historical conversation. This fixes it in a time and place in the search for preservation. These complex cultural systems don't fully acknowledge all the driving forces and different roles from each stakeholder. The developments of these products, practices and processes are often layered with romanticised foreign views, industrial capitalist perspectives with complicated social interactions of exchange. Which brings within it loaded questions towards intention and designing for social good. Alongside this is the popular emergence of sustainability that clouds the importance of cultural intentions on borrowed practices and processes. This research aims to explore the terrain of Southeast Asia to advance knowledge and understanding of the synergistic relationship between designer, artisan and the cultural significance of textiles. There is little scholarly research surrounding this cultural ecology from the region that explores the relationship between designers, craft artisans for the cultural significance of practices, products and processes. Fewer still in the approaches and methods from fashion and textiles design. Therefore this research aims to provide new insights into this triadic relationship between designers, craft artisans and the products that generate culturally significant intentions being conscious of each perspective. Through which possibilities are explored and mapped out through a practice-led research endeavour surrounding the cultural ecology of exchanged methods. This research is underpinned by new materialist theories using embodied and material practice research methods, layered with a performative theory that triggers heightened reflections for practice. It will theorise on symbiotic relationships between designers, craft artisans and the systems they operate in. This will provide new insights into the role of a designer to help develop a guideline for designers to be conscious about their engagement with craft artisans.

Introduction

Southeast Asia and the larger ASEAN region is a rich and vibrant ecosystem where craft remains to be alive through the different rituals, behaviours and beliefs. Its culture is robust with diversity being layered with complicated histories and social-cultural interactions. As the region continues to develop and advance, we have seen a growing shift in crafted communities shrinking or changing their practices to stay relevant and commercially viable. Reducing their cultural practices to feed novelty-hungry tourists collecting authentic treasures of 'stuff.' This, in turn, is shifting the region's craft into Fordist homogenised method of making following 'big ego design' systems of the past twentieth century, depleting the local wealth and identity. (Manzini, E. 2018, Clarke, A. 2011) There is little research and documentation of this complex set of relationships from the region and this paper aims to probe the cultural ecology systems surrounding crafted textiles. There is a growing practice of co-creation within the region between designers and artisans which raises the questions towards the driving factors and design decisions connecting them. (Adamson, G. 2013). We need to acknowledge the different driving forces between these complex relationships to ensure a balanced design ecology. While understanding that, craft and culturally significant products need to adapt, innovate to remain relevant for a consumer society. This challenging relationship of cultural significant practices, products and processes need to create new emerging systems for them to exist. By exploring this design ecology and the triadic intentions at play, can we develop a guideline for researchers and designers that provides the criteria for conscious engagement with craft artisans offering a new future of products?

Cultural significance is rarely discussed in the practice of design and its importance towards the geographical and social-cultures systems that surround it. It seems today we are locked on a linear trajectory of homogenised design that needs to be questioned. We have whitewashed our design world following 'big ego design' that dilutes the local and relevant knowledge, skills and beliefs we have to offer. (Manzini, E. 2018, Walker, S. et al. 2018).

The 'big-ego design' refers to the last century's demiurgic vision through which design products or ideology that imprints itself as a singular way of thinking and doing. This is highly problematic when we consider how globalised design and culture is digitally connected today. (Manzini, E. p. 58 2016) Thus, our designed cultural actions, ways of making and thinking need to be more culturally relevant. With all of us recently going through a global pandemic that continues to disrupt our state of living, we should take advantage and redesign a conscious future. These acts of doing, thinking and the products are representations of the diversity that makes up the larger human species. (Dillon, P. 2015) We as designers, researchers and makers are compelled to socially understand and place this at the forefront of the design agenda. It is requiring a shift in our ways of doing design responding to the cultural subtleties that liberate us from this single path. Through understanding these design tools, methods, and transactions of culture we can allow a local sense of cultural identity, grass-root thinking to enter into the design thinking. Thus design culture needs to be redefined. The role of the designer needs to shift into a facilitator working with craft artisan to challenge the future practices for appropriate indigenous solutions.

We currently don't have any established frameworks to enable the conscious evaluation and measure of the balance of these interactions. This research aims to address these issues and provide guidelines for future practitioners. Rather than following globalised directions, market-driven relations of design culture can shift into an anti-design system of 'prototyping the social' and enter a new emergent design future. (Clarke., A. 2011)

Methodology

This research adopts a design anthropology observational techniques and thinking that will explore the different perspectives of designer and craft artisan involved in the making and theorising of contemporary textiles products from a regional perspective. (Clarke., A. 2011) As a designer, maker and educator, I also aim to develop products and materials by inserting myself into the research to understand the social phenomena through a qualitative collection of empirical materials questioning the designed cultural actions, ways of making and thinking in search for cultural significance. With the growing co-creation between designers and craft artisans from Southeast Asia, this data aims to allow for reflections and insights into the grassroots of indigenous workings and depth of social understanding for future emergent significant design systems. Liberating a local, regional voice through design and products.

This is a design ecology system approach that explores the complex implications and cultural transactions from a designer, craft artisan and product lens that maps relevance and emergence from a complicated and robust region that is under threat to big ego design thinking and ways of doing. The use of triangulation will be explored and developed as an approach to explore design, social-culture systems from three perspectives: designer, craft artisan, product. Allowing for depth of analysis and ensuring a rigorous approach to exploring the territory. This hopefully will allow the development of a guideline for researchers and designers that provides the criteria for conscious design engagement with craft artisans from other regions. (Sbordone., M. A. 2021)

Original Contribution

- Mapping the complex implications and cultural transactions from a designer, craft artisan and product
- Create a framework of engagement for future practitioners for the conscious engagement between designer and artisan
- Provide a framework for cultural significant design tools and methods for a contemporary artisan product
- Contribute to the wider debate around the need for the role of the designer to include cultural significant practises
- Contribute to the wider debate around design ecology and anti-design ideas

Respecting and Reflecting



Figure 1. Co-designed Ikat, Bonney., M. 2021

Throwing myself into this research process, juggling both my textiles and teaching practices led to an elective workshop for my students in early 2018 to explore ideas in and with Artisan Textiles Masters from Indonesia. Having done many different projects in the past and explored Indonesia's rich and evolving craft region I wanted to share its magnificence. With this in mind, I ran a three-hour workshop, where I introduced the Ikat process and brought my students some traditional Indonesian fabric as a reference. I had explained that we would be working with the master weaver Pacagusti from Bali Ubud, where he creates traditional ceremony fabrics and dresses and employs the local women to support the production process. We were free to explore any ideas but must keep in mind our culture and the culture of Ikat.



Figure 2. Co-designed Ikat Process Spinnin, Bonney 2018



Figure 3. Co-designed Ikat Process resist, Bonney,. M. 2018

Figure 4. Co-designed Ikat Process Weaving, Bonney,. M. 2018

The design process was fairly simple, from discussions and mind maps to ideation and sketched designs plans. It is a co-designed fabric filled with multiple designer intentions coming together exploring with slightly unknown outcomes. Not native to Ikat making students could only imagine the outcome. This raw process finished within a few hours gave way to a long making process. I was at this stage in communication only by WhatsApp to the neighbour of Pacagusti as he lives a relatively simple life. At this stage, I was happy to encourage students to venture out into the craft community commission and continue craft practises within the region with the only rule of respectfulness to craft and culture. Not really understanding the cultural significant exchanges and sensitive relationship and power struggles between designer and craft artisan.

The single Ikat woven fabric made in Indonesia Ubud during 2018 pictured in the images above was in many ways lacking the research and consideration of any significance but it embodies an emotional response to the designs process and crafting abilities of the weavers. It is this woven Ikat that gave joy to the designers when we received it back in Singapore 3 months after. Designs felt empowered, connected and wanting to do more. We had created a fabric filled with personal and intuitive developmental values wanting me to explore more between the cultural exchange of designers, craft artisans and the products, practises and processes they create. It highlighted the separations of each and my own driving forces.

Reflecting on this process and workshop triggered the intentions of the paper, we have lacked the to capture the knowledge of the master weaver Pacagusti and only employed his technical skills. We do not teach the importance of craft practice at this level with industrial artisans and consider the implications of developmental factors in cross-exchange. The few encounters and conversations with Pacagusti during the process were more client-maker than designer-artisan. This piloted workshop didn't bring his knowledge equally. The beautiful ikat fabric only embodies the designer perspective at this point but helped develop the need for greater awareness and research. Having spent over a decade in the region I have started to see and understand the social and cultural separations and thinking surrounding design and its imbalance.

Following up with Pacagusti, the excess dye and material was used by the craft artisan within his own practice as not to waste materials and supplies. A master weaver generating heritage fabric innovates patterns with bold and colourful fabrics. The surplus materials and thinking should be considered in the system moving forward. It is this exchange of design and cultural transactions that intrigue me to continue this research and approach post-pandemic as a practice-led PhD to map out ways of work and guidelines for significant exchange.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Co-designed Ikat, Bonney,. M. 2021

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