

# WAYS OF TALKING WITH (AND ABOUT) MATERIALS

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## ABSTRACT

In this workshop we are occupied with materials as a means to relate to objects and our environments.

We introduce the Repertory Grid technique as a dialogue tool, based on sensorial perception of soft and hard materials.

Thus, the aim of the workshop is twofold: firstly, it encourages engagement and conversations *about materials* on themes such as perception of material qualities. Secondly, it discusses the potential of talking *with materials*, that is: using the material world as a resource for conversation.

The workshop is based on previous research conducted within the field of fashion and textiles where we have identified a need to develop and introduce tools and techniques that can support designers in embracing environmental challenges through dialogue with users and consumers.

At the Nordes Conference 2015 we seek to attract researchers from a wide variety of design disciplines encouraging them to contribute to further development of the dialogue tool.

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that the way we relate to objects and our environment is not just dependent on our visual and cognitive understanding, but also on our sensorial perception. Materials, being the first thing we perceive in an object through their texture, temperature, softness etc., play an enormous role in the way we relate to things, as well as how we perceive interior spaces and architecture by the way they feel, sound, or smell.

Designers have always been very aware of this influence of the senses, and the importance of material choices as mediators of our relationship with objects, eliciting different sensations, emotions, and attachment to products. However, it is a challenge to find systematic ways to explore what is beyond materials' technical specifications that can serve as communication tools linking users and designers during a design process.

As we encounter materials aesthetically, how can we investigate and account for how we perceive them? Is it possible to provide tools that allow to work and verbalize the subjective perception of materials? Are there meeting points between perceptions of individuals?

## DIALOGUE TOOLS AND MATERIALS

In our research we seek to develop an alternative transformational strategy that may further the design of products and services for a more sustainable future.

In the Awareness Project we developed and used dialogue tools to challenge tactile competencies (Riisberg et al. 2015). Our aim was to support the development of Fashion and Textile Design in a sustainable direction creating awareness among users and thereby prolonging the lifetime of garments. We used the dialogue tools to discuss experiences of tactile sensibility as a means to create increased awareness about the material quality of textiles and garments.

For the Nordes Conference we invite the participants to further investigate one of the dialogue tools from other design perspectives than fashion and textile design, and we encourage participants from all design disciplines to sign up for investigation and discussion.

## THE REPERTORY GRID: A TOOL TO TALK ABOUT MATERIALS, WITH THE USE OF MATERIALS

In our view, one first step into investigating the aesthetic qualities of materials is first and foremost to engage the senses with the materials themselves, and verbalize these sensorial experiences. With this workshop, our aim is to present a method for enabling conversations about materials, where the sense of touch is the main "tool" for investigating our perception of everyday artifacts.

In this half day workshop we will run a number of sessions using the Repertory Grid technique (RG), which is an interview technique originating from psychotherapy (Kelly 1955; Fransella et al. 2004).

The RG technique is developed to establish a dialogue with 'selected elements'. In the field of design the 'elements' can be a selection of materials, objects and other items deemed relevant for the purpose of the dialogue. The procedure of the RG is also structured in a specific way. The use of triads in particular has proved to be useful when the focus is on verbalising different types of sensory experiences (Bang 2013; Moody et al. 2001). The 'triadic difference' is structured so the participant, from a selection of three elements, answers the question: How do two of these elements resemble each other as opposed to the third element?

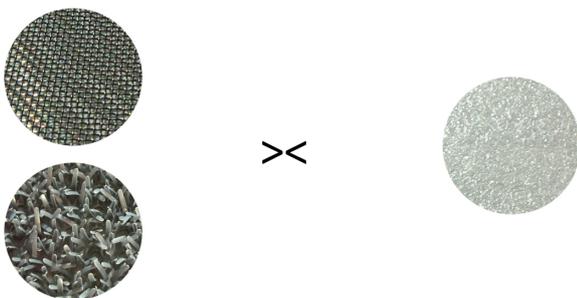


Figure 1: The triadic difference where similarities between two elements are identified, as opposed to a third element.

We invite the workshop participants to actively engage with a broad range of materials: from soft to hard materials, synthetic and natural, new or modified by the passing of time. Participants will be invited to touch them, sort them and discuss about them.

Through this activity our aim is twofold:

1) Encourage engagement and conversations *about materials* on themes such as perception of material qualities (hard, soft, cold, warm, rough, smooth and so on), emotional value, weariness and age, sustainability, memory and imagination.

2) Discuss the potential of talking *with materials*, that is: using the material world as a resource for conversation, enabling communication beyond speech, but with senses and body.

## WORKSHOP CONTRIBUTION

In the workshop, we will demonstrate cases from our own research and in combination with the hands on activities, encourage the participants to reflect on how these engagements with the senses could be brought further. Through these discussions we aim at providing insight into how do we relate to things, not just cognitively but bodily.

The contribution of this workshop lies in introducing a number of ways that researchers engage with this kind of enquiry. Furthermore to create a dialogue about the challenges and opportunities in this approach, and ultimately start reflecting on how these techniques might be adapted, extended or expanded in view of the complex ecological challenges we face today.

## PROGRAM

- 14.00-14.15: Welcome and brief presentation round
- 14.15-15.00: Introduction of the research tool
- 15.00-16.30: Repertory Grid activity in groups
- 16.30-17.00: Group presentation of results
- 17.00-18.00: General discussion: what emerges?

## APPLICATION FOR THE WORKSHOP

The workshop is open for 12 participants on a first come first served basis. Sign up by Doodle, following this link: <http://doodle.com/bhfzgrf3gubawan>. Additionally to the doodle, please send a notice to Anne Louise Bang at [alb@dskd.dk](mailto:alb@dskd.dk). There are no preparations required for participation in this workshop.

## REFERENCES

- Bang, A. (2013). *Emotional Value of Applied Textiles: Dialogue-oriented and participatory approaches to textile design* (PhD). Design School Kolding.
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