

# tinsel-o-matic

## an Artifact of Understanding

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### ABSTRACT

The tinsel-o-matic was originated within the parameters of my Master Thesis project, titled "Design Hermeneutics". The purpose of Design Hermeneutics was to explore hermeneutics as a possible theoretical approach to participatory design. Design Hermeneutics resulted in a process that could be described as following a few "steps":

- Interviews/conversations
- Hermeneutic telly – A mode for understanding
- Production of an interactive artifact
- Adoption by a "user" of the artifact
- Exit interview with the user.
- Possible new process

This paper describes the process, the artifact produced and the use of it.

### 1. Keywords

Participatory design, Philosophical Hermeneutics, Artifact of Understanding

### 2. INTRODUCTION

I wanted to explore what objects mean to people. The art "experience" bridges the very personal, even interior experience of the participants and the technology making the experience possible.

I also wanted to address questions related to Participatory Design considering preconception and our ability as designers to understand the participants. For that reason I studied the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Gadamer advocates that a person is shaped by personal preconceptions, thus unable to stand outside her cultural situation as the tools engaged when thinking are provided by culture.

Reading is hence the work of an "insider" whose personal set of preconceptions forms the horizon. This limits what is

graspable at the moment, simultaneously suggesting other horizons if we employ a genuine desire for understanding postulating sensitivity towards the text and recognizing its difference from our own preconceptions.

### Selecting Participants

The project began with observing collectors. This deliberate choice came from a hypothesis that people who, whether by impulse, urge, passion or just hobby, give importance to objects as a fundamental part of their life and identity, would in fact be able to provide qualitative data for the structural development and rules of the artifact itself.

### THE INTERVIEWS

For the interviews I used video. To begin with I wanted to record the interviews on tape as I stressed upon the role of language, but the use of video showed to be very useful for the latter work as gestures and expressions strengthened and supported the story.

After a series of interviews with several collectors three collectors were chosen: Charlotte, a photographer who collects old photos; Isabele, a professional model who collects small boxes; and Morgan, an artist who collects Christmas ornaments.

It was however never important for me to register spatial activities why the interviews mainly took place on one or a few spots in the homes of the interviewed collectors. At Charlotte's and Isabel's apartments in the kitchen and at Morgan's in the bedroom and the living room.

I chose not to cut the videos why they mainly consists of one long shot of the conversation/interview. This gives an extra feature to the material as the interviewees are being able to talk uninterrupted by activity.

### Hermeneutic Telly

Gadamer's notions particularly played an important role in the continuing work with the interviews. During this time i

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was occupied in patiently and attentively listening, watching, replaying and reflectioning upon what was said and how it could be understood.

To begin with I had decided to work in a non-methodological manner. However, without any graspable strategy, the material tended to be impenetrable. I therefore urged to find a model and began to identify key elements that could be used as rules for the conceptual design.

Although Charlotte, Isabel and Morgan are very different from one another, it was possible to identify similarities related to their collections, the act and purpose of collecting, and the perception of their collected objects. For instance, Morgan and Isabel envisioned their collection as creating a flow of objects, a movement of objects continually changing places through time. Both Morgan and Isabel showed particular interest in what could be described as the beauty of the fractured. To Isabel this was developed almost as a criterion. The crack in an object would give her an evidence of the past life of the object, a place to fill with fantasy or history. Among Charlotte's collected photographs the one's showing private situations from Germany during the Nazi occupation where particularly challenging. Everyday snapshots of daily life containing, often hidden in the image and difficult to discern, symbolic references to another perception of the time in history, left the observer affected once the meaning behind the image was reconstructed. This juxtaposition was, for instance, represented in an image of a family birthday party, and the symbolic presence of a swastika on a birthday-cake.

The idea of juxtaposing objects and symbolic meanings into a new artifact was at the base of my research after having worked with the interviews of Isabel and Charlotte, yet it wasn't until I started to work with Morgan that the artifact's concept solidified and began to take form. Morgan's story about Christmas ornaments, love, friendship and beauty are formally and conceptually represented in the

Fig 1. Morgan showing and telling about his collection of Christmas ornaments.



## THE ARTIFACT OF UNDERSTANDING

The tinsel-o-matic represents what I call an artifact of understanding - a result of a participatory design process that has had it's focus towards a dialogical reader-text interaction to accomplish what Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons. Fusion of horizons ascends when the limited horizon of the text and the limited horizon of the reader generates a new, intermediary creation attributed to either of them.

tinsel-o-matic is programmed to react to contact and to symbolically represent it. The meanings captured in the objects of the different collectors and reinforced by their relationship to those objects, revealed that the nature of the objects and their appropriation was intrinsic to human experience and the artifacts' ability to evoke memory or emotions. From this observation, the design process of the artifact/machine was informed and found its focus in operating on human experience, rather than investigating material qualities and properties alone. In this specific case, the artifact is designed to operate as a telephone answering machine yet differs in the fact that it can't record messages and it doesn't look like an answering machine. Instead of recording messages it cracks Christmas-ornaments, and these ornaments become evidence of someone's attempt at contact.

### Helena's Adoption

During a period of twelve days Helena, a design-student, charged with testing the artifact adopted and used the tinsel-o-matic at home. In an exit interview, which took place at the time of collection of the artifact/machine, she gave examples on how its presence had influenced her everyday life. She reported to having being disappointed if the ornaments fell without breaking, as they "didn't feel like real messages." From the beginning Helena decided to use the ornaments to display presence of contact by hanging them onto the surface of the machine.



Fig. 2. Helena turned the tinsel-o-matic into a display of presence.

The tinsel-o-matic became a source for everyday rituals. Helena would reflect on who had made a call, or perhaps why the ornament had not broken in the fall. She would also fantasize on what the person might have wanted to tell her. She said the messages (ornaments) inspired her to make up stories about wonderful things she wanted to happen. She would have to sweep shards of ornament-glass from the floor and to make sure it did not become dangerous for her cat.

During Helenas twelve days adoption of the tinsel-o-matic several new activities were initiated by the presence and interaction with the artifact, activities and rituals that she filled with meaning, a provoking and powerful metaphor of our relationship with everyday technology.

## SUMMARY

To work with collectors was a deliberate choice originating from the assumption that "to find out how an object is endowed with importance, find people for whom objects are already endowed with importance and ask them about it".

Even in a process that has its focus on language rather than activity, I have found that working with video is productive as the moving image strengthens and sometimes elucidates the story.

My own skill in interviewing grew as I went along. In the last interview I had found comfort in my role, leaving more space to the interviewees own expression. This is an important reflection and a possible explanation to why the tinsel-o-matic is more clearly a result of my work with Morgan than with Isabel and Charlotte.

The vegetative work following the interviews claimed a great deal of time but was stimulating and fun as I simultaneously was able to draw sketches, and try out different concepts and ideas instantly.

The concepts of constant flow; movement of objects continually changing places through time, the beauty of the fractured, the crack in an object as a place to fill with fantasy or history and the idea of juxtaposing became important for my understanding of the text and central to me for the construction of the artifact.

The production of an artifact was very important for the process. In this specific case, the artifact is designed to operate as a telephone answering machine. The answering machine is a well-known concept, an everyday action, easy to comprehend – a possible explanation to why the tinsel-o-matic has showed ability to engage people in a particularly compelling way. The tinsel-o-matic does not address known problems but instead "confounds" routine

interactions, bringing a new level of awareness of what it means to "miss" an opportunity for intimacy and connection in a particularly novel, even subversive, way... Hermeneutics suggests a cyclical process of moving forward through revising and amplifying understanding. This exploration has adopted the circularity in practice and consequently suggests a never ending design process.

Design Hermeneutics has been an educative project to me. However, I now consider the project lacking in a few respects. A workshop with the participating collectors would likely have had a considerable impact on the process and presumably a vitalizing effect. In the recently restarted process, made possible by engineer and designer Ivan Oxelkrantz interest in the project, we will employ a larger user involvement. The artifacts character as a probe will also be better taken care of.

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