<u>Harmony and Connection</u>

<u>MA project thesis analysis</u>

Eusun Pak

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ABSTRACT

This project addresses the negative effect of increased individualism in modern societies and how it is interrelated with increased loss of human connectedness. By examining psychological theories of individualism and connectedness I found that making contact with others is an essential and fundamental human need, as well as one that makes our lives valuable as a human being. I also examined how design thinking and ideas of social design can encourage connectedness and how perceptions of nature can be an important part of creating human connectedness. The aim of this project thus became to encourage more human connectedness through shared experiences and perceptions of nature. The perception of nature is a good way to make people reflect upon their own life in terms of connectedness since nature directs people to reflect upon the meaning of living together. When we experience nature, we feel that we exist as a part of it. It is important in my design project because my design concept is to share our emotions from nature.

By designing a series of abstract objects I have created a vehicle to facilitate communication and the sharing of emotions among people. The objects reflect my personal experiences and emotions that I have felt with nature. The objects are media to help people to get connected to their own feelings, and to lead people to feel connectedness with others. As an artist and a designer, who sees the disconnectedness in society, I decided to use the abstract objects as a metaphorical medium based on human emotions and connectedness.

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1. Introduction

The starting point for my research was experience of individualism in South Korea. I have lived in South Korea in a very competitive social atmosphere and as a teenager I experienced the pressure of this atmosphere. Competition can be good for growth and development, but on the flip side of it, competition can also become the main reason for increased individualism to emerge. This can cause many kinds of problematic social issues, such as people becoming increasingly self-focused, consumer-oriented, and more apathetic. This leads to increased egotism and selfishness, as well as lack of empathy, social alienation and a sense of relative deprivation.

Likewise, in our consumeristic and individualistic society, it seems evident that people are more and more concerned about 'what they have' instead of 'what they are'.[1] This phenomenon leads people to constantly chase money, and consequently loose the meaning and value of human connectedness. Connectedness is defined by the measure of how people come together and contact with others in a society. In other words, it means relationships with other people and engagement in the communal. Making contact with others is an essential and fundamental human need, as well as one that makes our lives valuable as a human being.

As I mentioned before, South Korea is a very competitive and individualistic society. For example, children and young adults will cite the stress of living in a hyper-competitive society, or the pressure of high expectations for exam results or college entrance testing. Unfortunately, these are the main reasons why South Korea has had the highest suicide rates in the industrialized world for the last eight years, and now suicide is the number one cause of death for people between the ages of 10 and 30.[2] For this reason, I have been naturally concerned with the social issues raised by the negative aspects of individualism. Moreover, I have realized that it is not a concern only in Korea, for this sort of social problem has become a global issue for concern.

From this background, my question is: How can I encourage people to rethink and remember human connection? Then, I thought sharing emotion and perception of nature provide a possible solution. The concept of nature thus became important in my design project, as nature directs people to reflect upon the meaning of living together. When we experience nature, we feel that we exist as a part of it. The perception of nature thus provides the opportunity for people to reflect upon their own life in terms of connectedness. For instance, according to Dacher Keltner, social psychologist, awe is the ultimate "collective" emotion,

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[1] Erich Fromm, *To have or to be?* (A&C Black, 2013.), 6.
[2] Lucy Williamson, "South Korea: Suicide Nation," *BBC*, November 8, 2011, accessed November 7, 2015,
[2] Lucy Williamson, "South Korea: Suicide Nation," *BBC*, November 8, 2011, accessed November 7, 2015;
http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15331921

for it motivates people to do things that enhance the greater good. Awe might help shift our focus from our narrow self-interest to the interests of the group to which we belong.

In this context, I also examined traditional East Asian landscape painting and how its implicit sense of awe represents a non-anthropocentric view of nature in perception. This is also characteristic of a particular emphasis of Eastern philosophy, where nature is seen from the overview, like a bird's eye-view. This view of nature in art and philosophy gives us a chance to rethink human connections and relationships. From my thesis research, I thus reached some conclusions about how I could approach my design project. Through the design process my aim for the project became to find a way to make objects that would encourage people to feel connection while sharing their own emotions, as well as providing a chance to rethink human connectedness. By designing a series of abstract objects I have thus created a vehicle to facilitate communication and the sharing of emotions among people. The objects reflect my personal experiences and emotions that I have felt with nature. The objects are media to help people to get connected to their own feelings, and to lead people feel to connectedness with others. As an artist and a designer, who sees the disconnectedness in society, I decided to use the abstract objects as a metaphorical medium based on human emotions and connectedness. Through this thesis analysis I will explain my field of research, methodology and process of my design work, as well as its final result.

2. Theoretical context

As already mentioned in the introduction I started my research with examining psychological and social theories of Individualism and human connectedness, as well as aesthetic theories of perception of nature.

First, human connectedness and individualism are interrelated in many ways. To be specific, capitalism results in negative effects of individualism such as selfishness, egotism, and a sense of deprivation. Moreover, economic strength is a dominant factor of the social hierarchies found in capitalist societies. Erich Fromm, who was a German social psychologist, in his book *To have or to be*, explains how eighteenth-century capitalism underwent quite radical changes in which economic behavior became separated from ethics and human values.[3] Unfortunately, the result of this is that selfishness is assumed to be a reasonable behavior these days, and preferred over altruism. Many people are habitually looking, more or less, only after their own interests. People tend to obsess over riches and money in

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[3] Erich Fromm, *To have or to be?* (London: Continuum, 2008.), 6.

consumeristic societies. They consider personal gain a high priority, and it causes greed that leads to self–centered individualism. According to Fromm, there are two dominant ways of being human; a "being" mode and a "having" mode. He contends that the being mode not only makes us avoid strife but also creates one of the deepest forms of human happiness: shared enjoyment. The experience of sharing makes and keeps the relation between two individuals alive.[4] On the other hand, the having mode makes us very focused on material gains, and while in it people tend to judge each other by looking at what they have. Therefore, the being mode offers a good alternative to what has become a problematic society. If we perceive ourselves as human beings within the being mode, we can understand that we do not exist alone but are living together.

Fromm thus emphasizes the importance of sharing among people. He said, "The experience of sharing makes and keeps the relation between two individuals alive."

An important part of experiencing beauty is to feel the need to share.

When people share their feelings and emotions together they can feel the connection to each other. It is valuable because sharing leads to communicating with others in an emotional way. Even though they do not have exactly the same kinds of feelings about one object.

According to environmental philosopher Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir, experiencing beauty gives chance to open people's mind to the thought that there is a world beyond the self, and we share this world with others. As well as the ability of sharing beauty represents how our "subjective world is in fact inter-subjective." [5] Guðbjörg explained sharing aesthetic experiences in her discussion on the concept of beauty:

> Beauty is what we experience when we perceive only to perceive, when we look to the sky in admiration but not to ascertain the weather, when we behold a waterfall to let ourselves be captured by it, not to estimate the size of the dam needed to capture its power. Beauty is a call; it draws our consciousness to it, creates a longing to remain in its presence, to behold it and share it with others. [6]

She claimed that beauty is not only pleasure but also it could help people to improve as ethical beings and encourage them to build better communities

[4] Ibid, 93.

[5] Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir, "Thoughts on beauty", *HA Magazine on Icelandic design and architecture*, accessed April 1, 2016, http://ha-mag.is/2015/08/27/thoughts-on-beauty-gudbjorg-r-johannesdottir/?lang=en

[6] Ibid.

> Beauty does not only increase our sense of pleasure and well-being; it makes
> us human, for it helps us to understand ourselves and what it is to be a person
> connected with one's environment and other beings.[7]

Sharing is deeply connected to empathy, which is an important factor in modern society as well. Empathy is understanding and connecting with others feelings and ways of thinking. So when people have empathy with someone they connect and feel with others.

Sharing our emotional experiences, like experiences of beauty in nature, creates possibilities for training ourselves in empathy, it creates an opportunity for what Guðbjörg describes as "de-centering the self" and "opening up to the other".[8] I decided to focus more on the concept of sharing emotion and it becomes my theme as well as aim of design work.

Second, perception of nature is another main thread in my work, since in my thesis I suggested a conception of nature, which implies human co-existence and connection.

People have different points of view and, different ways of thinking. These things lead to each one's behavior or attitude towards their own life. Perceptions of nature sometimes shows us a new side and gives a chance to re-evaluate what we've already known. For this reason, I have applied perception of nature as an alternative to re-establish connections between people. In this context, I explained two examples of representations of perception of nature; East Asian landscape painting[9] and the overview effect[10].

I referred to traditional East Asian landscape painting and its implicit sense of awe, in order to explain the relationship between this kind of perception of nature, and perception of human connection. Traditional East Asian landscape painting shows two important aspects; 'a portrayal of nature itself' and 'a codified illustration of the human perspective of nature and the world.'[11] The painting represents a strong viewpoint of awe-inspiring landscape. Thus, the human figure is depicted in diminutive form, or not present at all.[12] This perspective means their view of nature is not anthropocentric in perception. At the same time, it is characteristic of a particular emphasis of Eastern philosophy, where nature is seen from the overview, like a bird's eye-view. In addition, I mentioned one more perspective, the 'Overview effect'.

The Overview effect is an experience, which transforms an astronauts' perspective of the planet and mankind's place upon it. Author Frank White described it in 1987, and the way he explained it the overview effect is defined, among astronauts, as a sensation that astronauts

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Soyoung Lee, "Mountain and Water: Korean Landscape Painting", The metropolitan museum of art, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mowa/hd_mowa.htm
[10] The overview institute, http://www.overviewinstitute.org/
[11] Soyoung Lee, "Mountain and Water: Korean Landscape Painting", The metropolitan museum of art, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mowa/hd_mowa.htm
[12] Ibid.

experience when they look back at the Earth from space. Some astronauts report having an overwhelming feeling of the connectivity of space. They also talk about having undergone a common experience of immense awe and overwhelming feeling of love for the planet, as well as suddenly having been able to understand more profoundly the interconnection of all life on earth.

The Overview effect forces us to understand our own existence as a part of the whole universe. When we think of life, normally, and at first, we tend to focus only on our own. The Overview effect enables us to see we share this planet, a limited space, and that we cannot but live together.

In conclusion, my research field shows social problems with alternatives. Through my research I examined the social problem of individualism and disconnection, and possible ideas that can contribute to solving this problem. In the next chapter I will discuss how I tried to find my own solutions through my design process.

3. Methodology of design

As discussed above, I focused my research on social problems, particularly the effects of individualism, and the resulting loss of human connectedness. At first, I had a plan to create a project based on ideas of social design and participatory art. Thus, a part of my thesis research was to include a case study about social design and participatory art/design installations in public spaces. However, when I thought about public installations I encountered a problem both with limited time and lack of skill.

I also felt great pressure to satisfy the ultimate goal of the project. Therefore, I had to follow different approaches based on the core of my research.

3.1. Design thinking process

As mentioned above, my design thinking process was changed while proceeding to find ideas and brainstorming. At the beginning of the process, my plan was to create a participatory art or a design installation. I also wanted to depart from my usual skills and methods of working and find a new approach. However, I had difficulties with that form of thinking, which made it confusing to me to make a decision about design ideas. So, again, I started from the beginning with the process of design thinking. At this point, I started to re-think about my T-shape to find a way of designing.
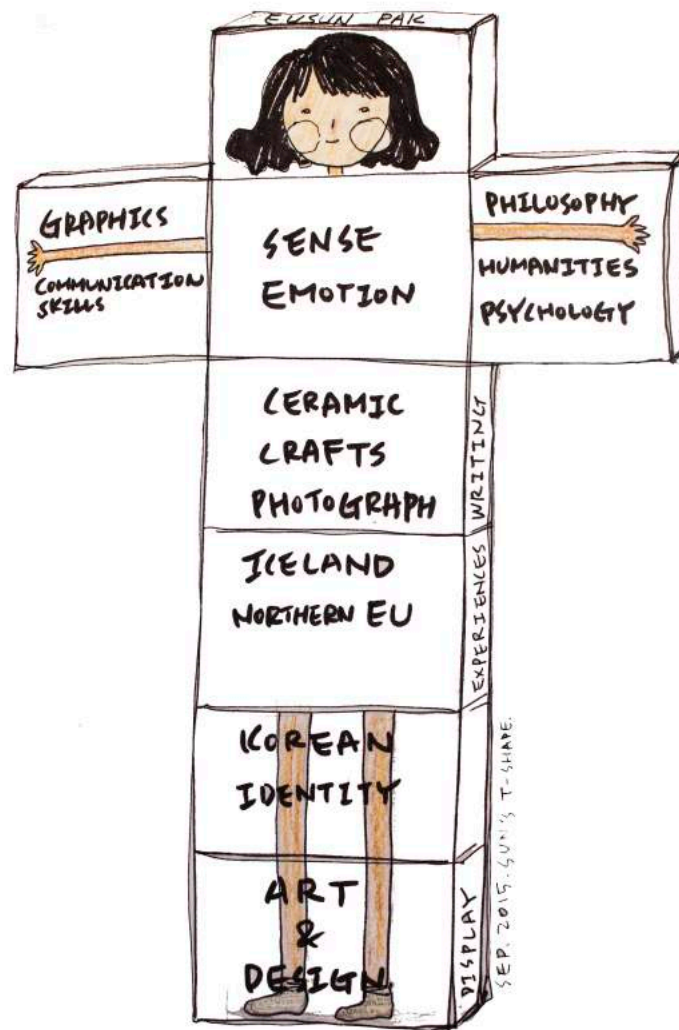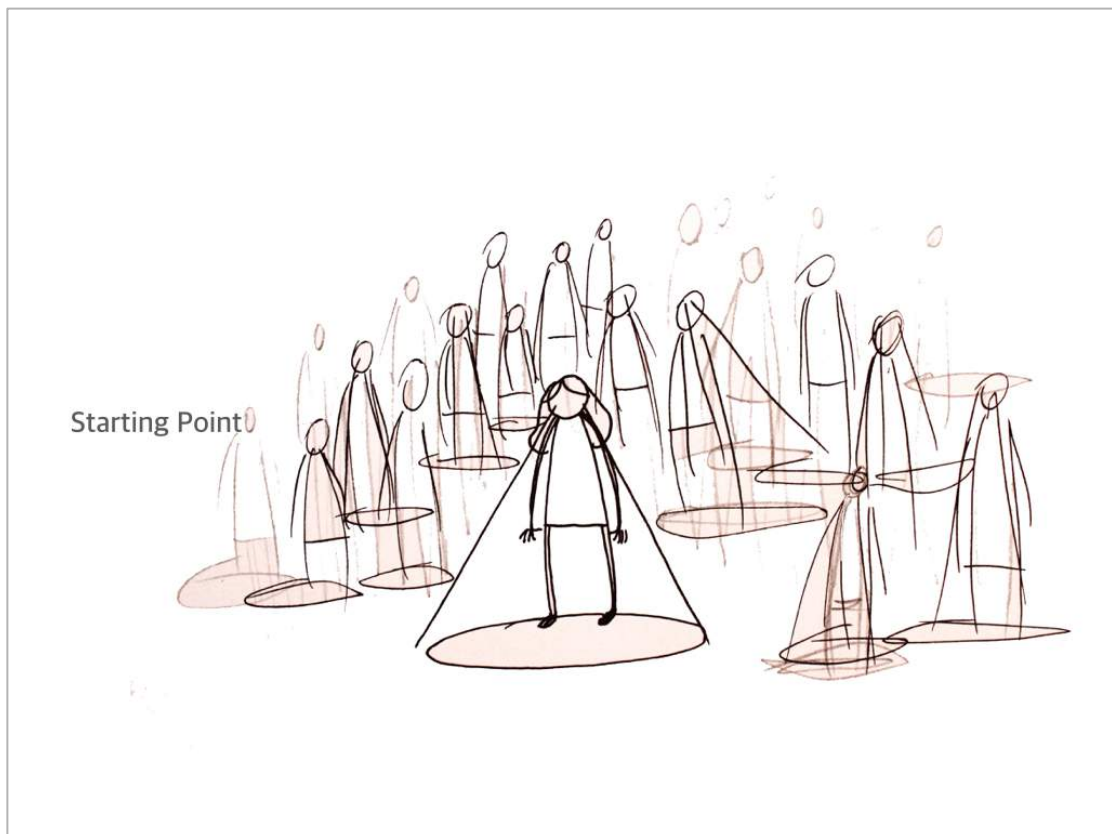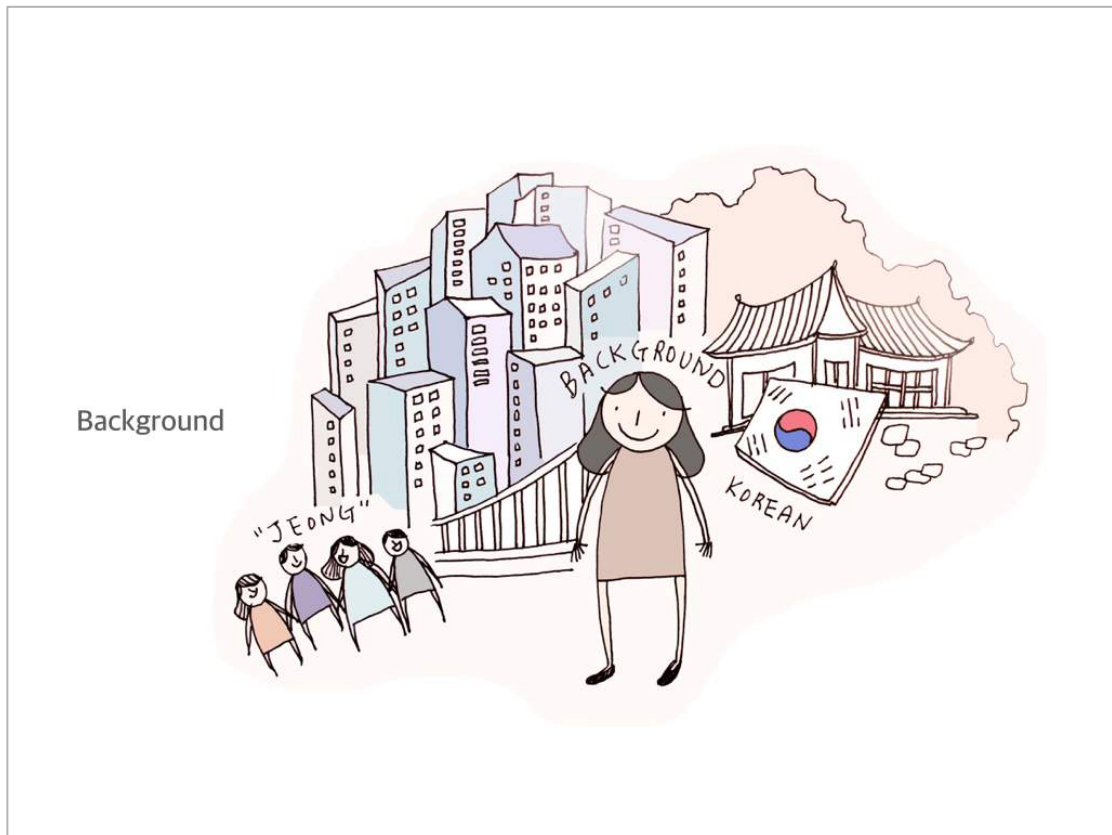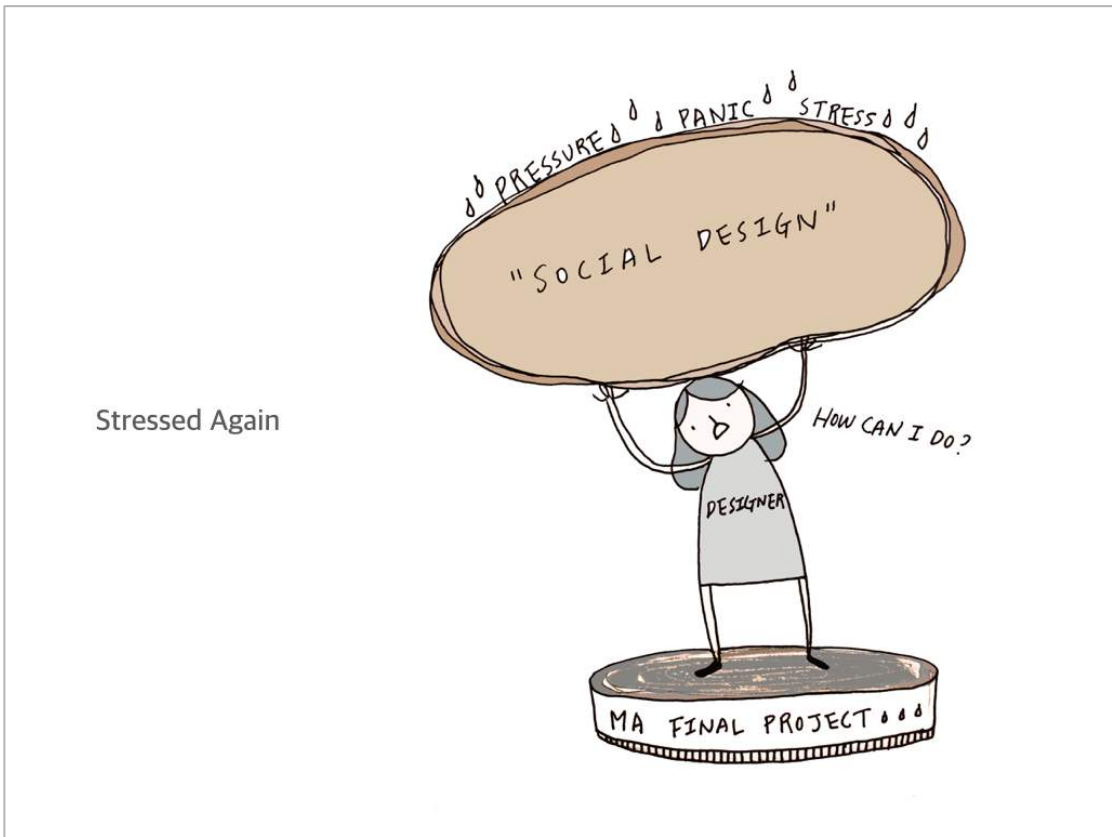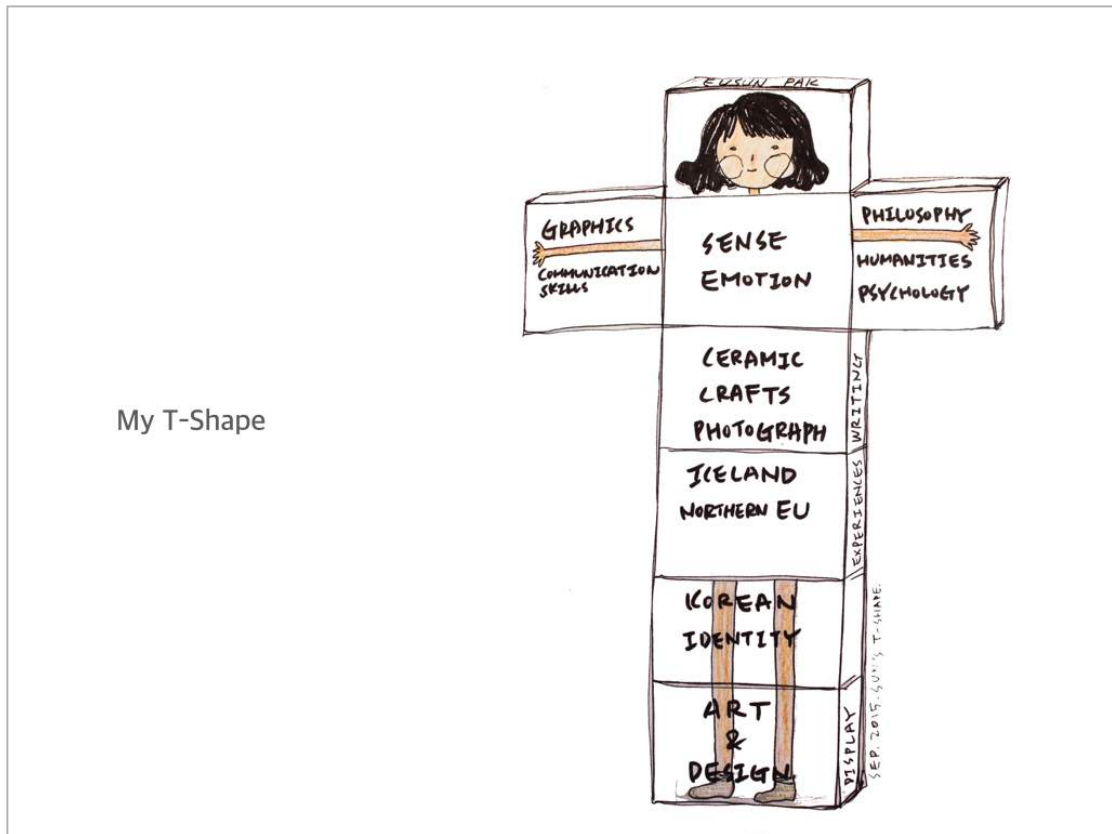
Figure 1 T-Shape

In the course of design thinking, I learned about T-shape. The concept of T-shape describes the abilities of persons in their field. The vertical bar represents the depth of expertise in specific fields, it means core of one's ability as well. The horizontal bar is breadth of experience and knowledge skills. It shows the ability to collaborate cross disciplinarily with experts in other areas. I tried to look deep into myself, and I decided to use my professional ceramic skill after self-analysis. T-shape proofed to be a helpful way to understand myself as a designer and as an artist. After this, I started to think more about how to make people rethink and feel connected to each other, as well as understand when do people actually feel connected to others. I asked my acquaintances and I was able to realize that their answers had something in common. It was "sharing".

3.1.1. Illustration of design thinking process

Background

Starting Point

Stressed Again

Figure 2 Design Thinking

3.2. Visual research

Visual research is a methodology of research by visualizing. It includes visual thinking and visualization of the research process as a kind of research methodologies.

Keywords from my research are connection, nature, and connectedness. With these key words in mind, I started my project.

(1) Observing people

I observed people in Reykjavik as a way of inspiration. It was the first step of my visual research. The reason for observing people was to take a leap into the real world beyond the world of theories and concepts. It was a good starting point for developing my design work ideas. I caught some images related with human connectedness. First, I focused on how people communicate with each other such as gestures, facial expressions, and voices. These were ordinary and daily life moments, but very related to my research topic. Later, I was able to contemplate these interactions more deeply.

Figure 3 Observing people

(2) Collecting images of Icelandic nature

I collected Icelandic nature images. These are two types of images, nature landscapes and nature objects. This process gave me the opportunity to be reminded of my feelings and emotions experienced when I had met Icelandic nature. The feelings became a good source for making abstract objects.

Figure 4 Icelandic nature landscape

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Figure 5 Nature objects

(3) Experimental visual work

I did several experimental works as a tool to find an idea for the final design project; making mood board, sketching, prototyping, and video.

- Mood board -

I gathered images related to connection. It was helpful to inspire my theme both visually and conceptually. These pictures represent a range from simple meaning of connection to human connection.

Figure 6 Connection - Mood board

When I immediately thought about connection, these kinds of images came to my mind such as knot, connected line, connected people and nature. This shows simple meaning of connection for me.
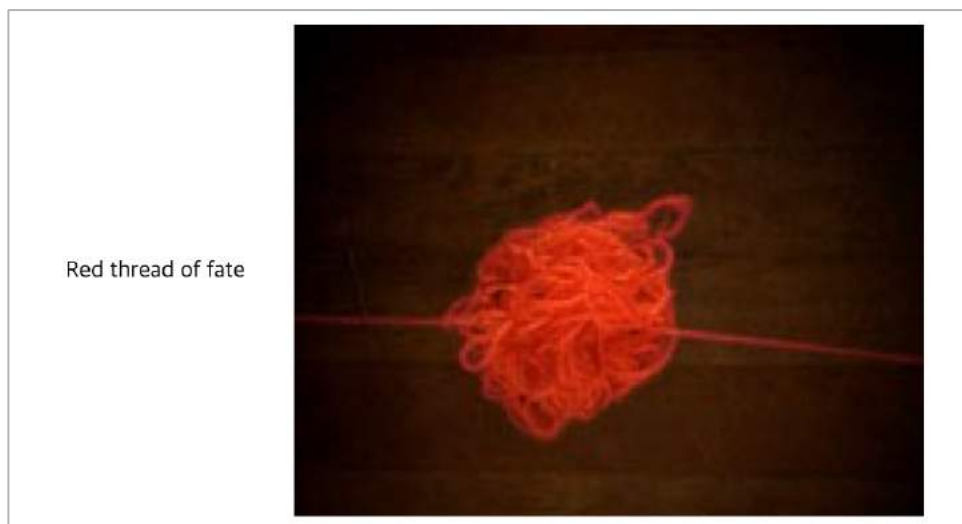
"Red thread of fate is an East Asian belief originating from Chinese legend. According to this myth, the gods tie an invisible red cord around the ankles of those that are destined to meet one another in a certain situation or help each other in a certain way." [13]

We are connected to some one and it also means we are all connected somehow. This meaning of invisible red thread brings me new perspectives about human connection.

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[13] "Red string of fate", *Wikipedia* accessed April 11, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_string_of_fate

Jogakbo

" 'Jogakbo' is Korean traditional patchwork design. Originally 'Jogakbo' was a household item created to attach leftover cloth to make a one-big-half-recycled cloth. Even the smallest pieces of leftover cloth after making clothes and accessories would be gathered up and hand sewed together. "[14]

I chose Jogakbo as a metaphorical meaning. I thought each patch seemed like an individual, and whole piece represented togetherness or harmony.

Participatory art

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[14] Soomin Cho, "Patchwork Jogakbo", *Korean essentials,* Accessed April 11, 2016, http://www.koreanessentials.com/blogs/blog-archive/9936460-patchwork-jogakbo
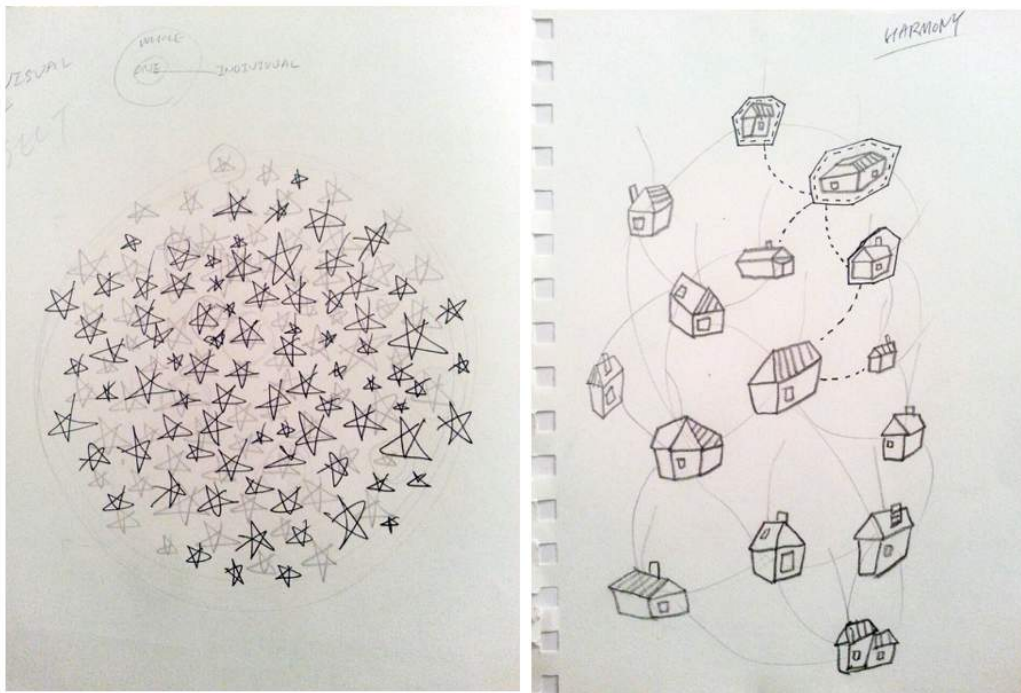
Human connection
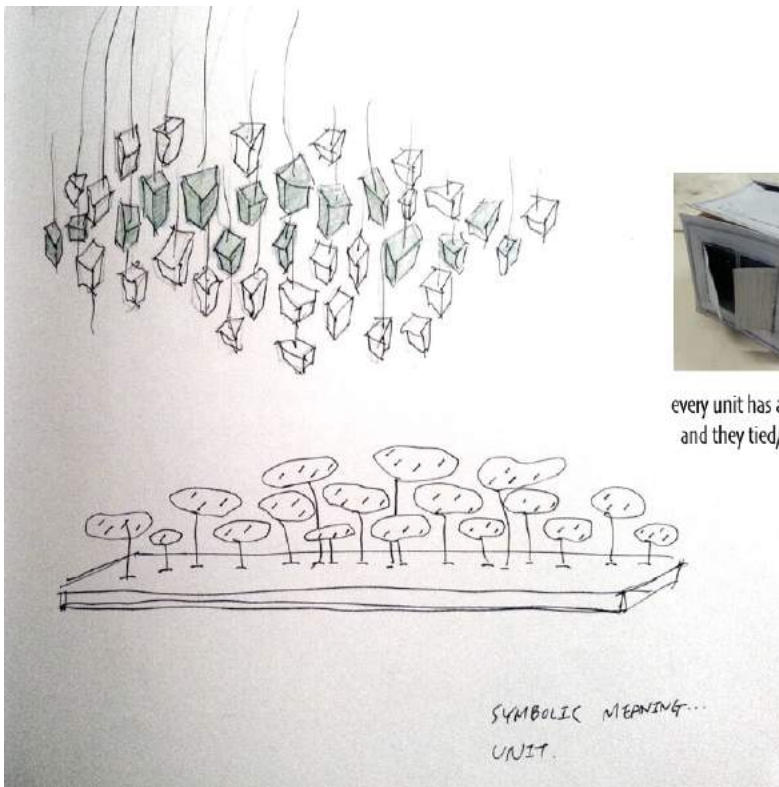
- **Idea sketching –**

I approached mainly the way of expression in terms of symbolic meaning. I wanted to show one big shape consisted of small pieces. The small pieces represent an individual, and they have different shapes, sizes or colors.

symbolic installation

FACES
(EYES)   CERAMIC?

HARMONY

example
(cardboard
or ceramics)

every unit has a bit different shape
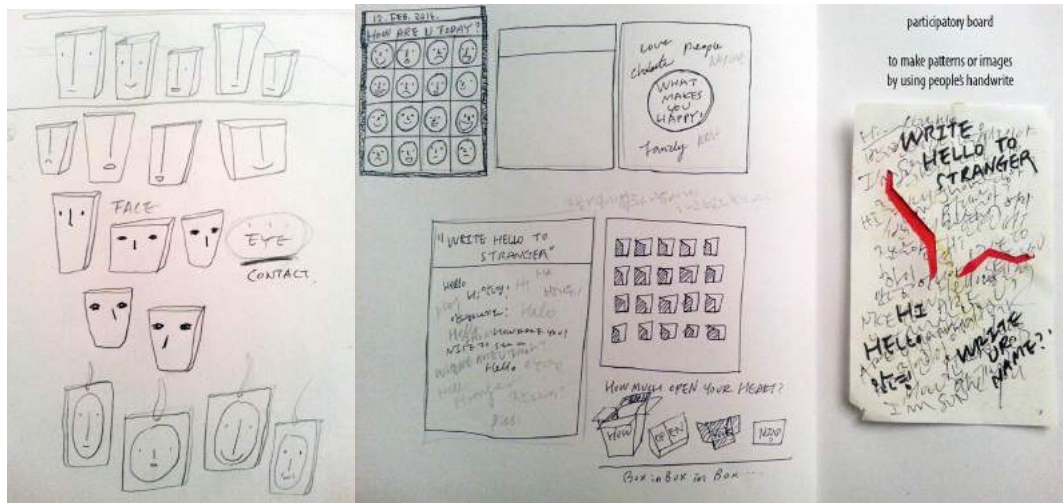and they tied/clustered together

SYMBOLIC MEANING...
UNIT.

Figure 7 Connection - Idea sketches
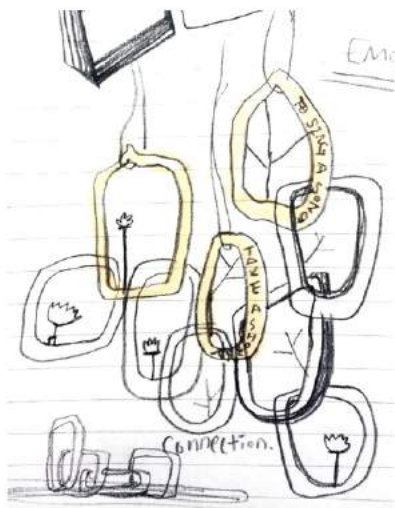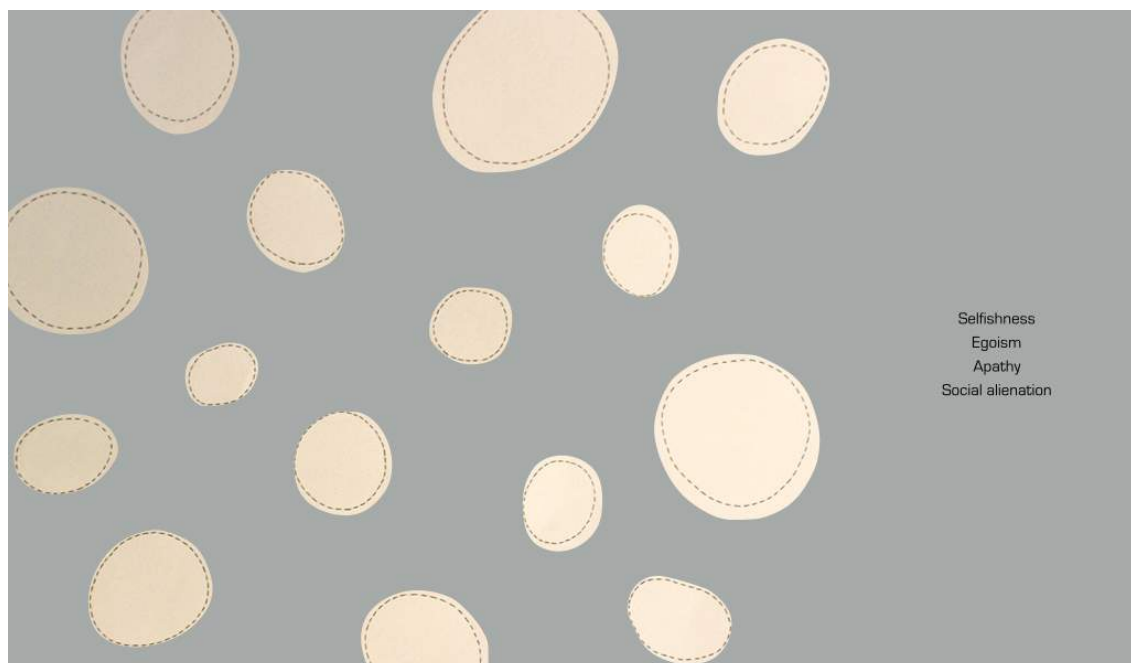
- Prototyping –

Figure 8 Connection - Sketching and prototyping

- 15" video work -

This 15second video work represents the visualizing of human connection. It is a form of conceptual teaser. I made various shape of circles to describe each of us as individuals.
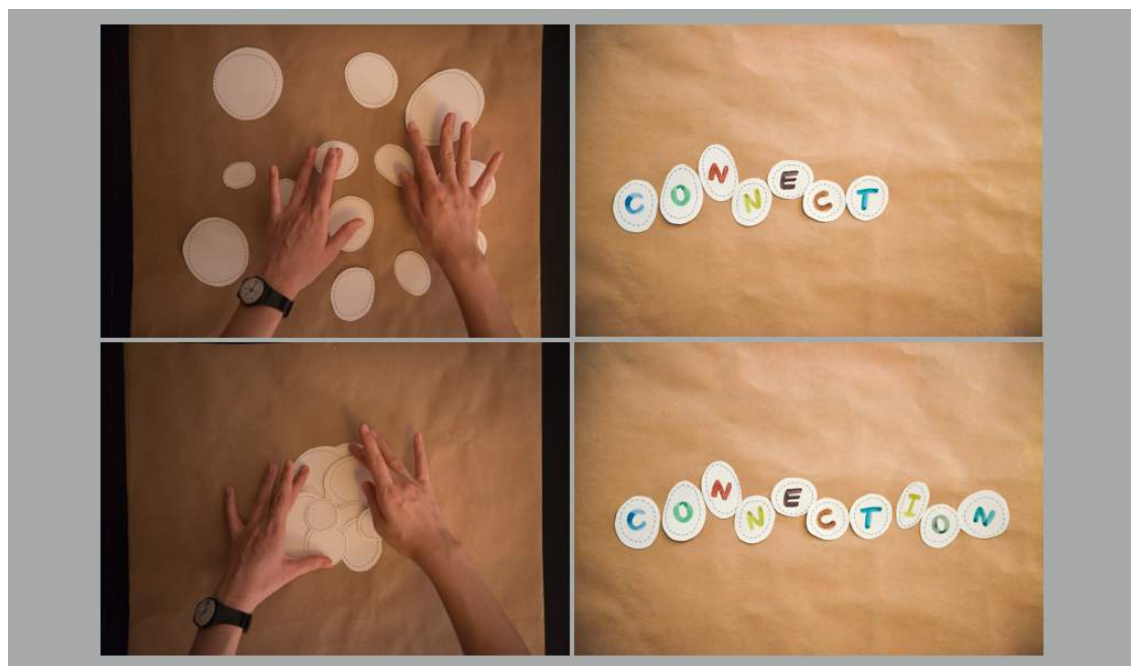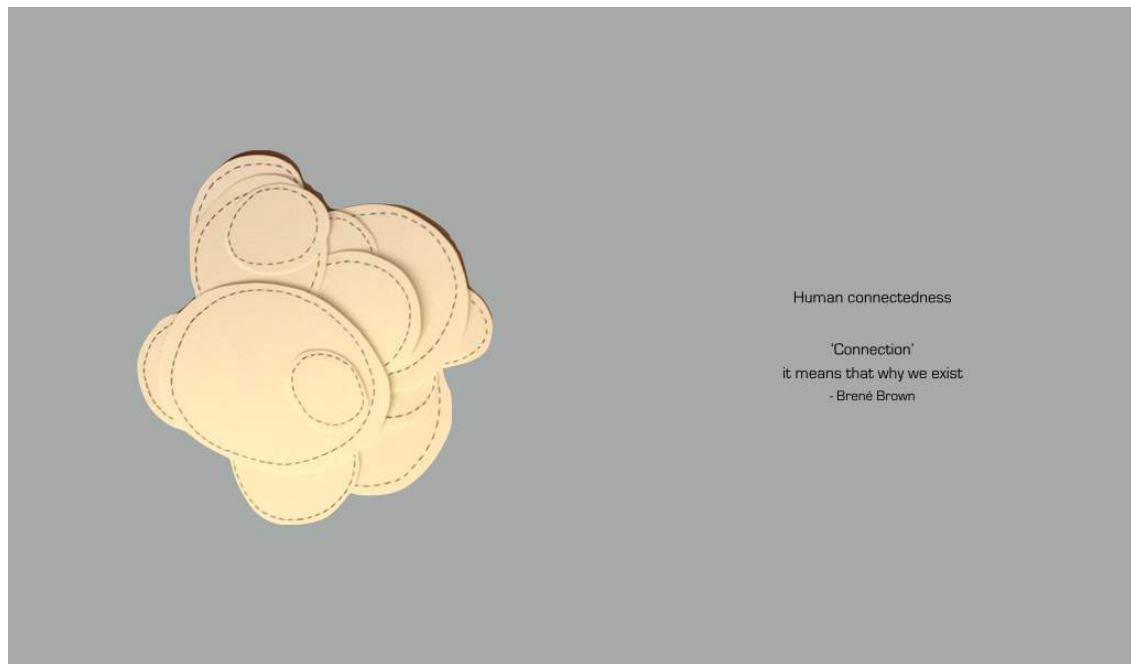

Selfishness
Egoism
Apathy
Social alienation

Human connectedness

'Connection'
it means that why we exist
- Brené Brown

Figure 9 15 seconds video

3.3. Process of art/design work

There are two main aspects to my design project; Connectedness, and Perception of nature. In terms of method of expression, Connectedness represents the core message of my project, and Perception of Landscape plays a role of metaphor, and alternative. As mentioned above, through the process of design thinking and visual research, I decided to share my emotions with people by using abstract ceramic objects. At first, I sketched my ideas, and then made ceramic objects. Each object embeds a specific story about my emotions.

- **Project concept:** Sharing Emotion
- **Expression method:** Series of ceramic objects, Illustration.
- **Series of ceramic objects**

Series 1) Emotion: Wonder, Gratitude, Peaceful, My heart was pierced, Fear, Part of it

Series 2) Part of nature

Series 3) Nature object

Series1: Emotion

1) Wonder
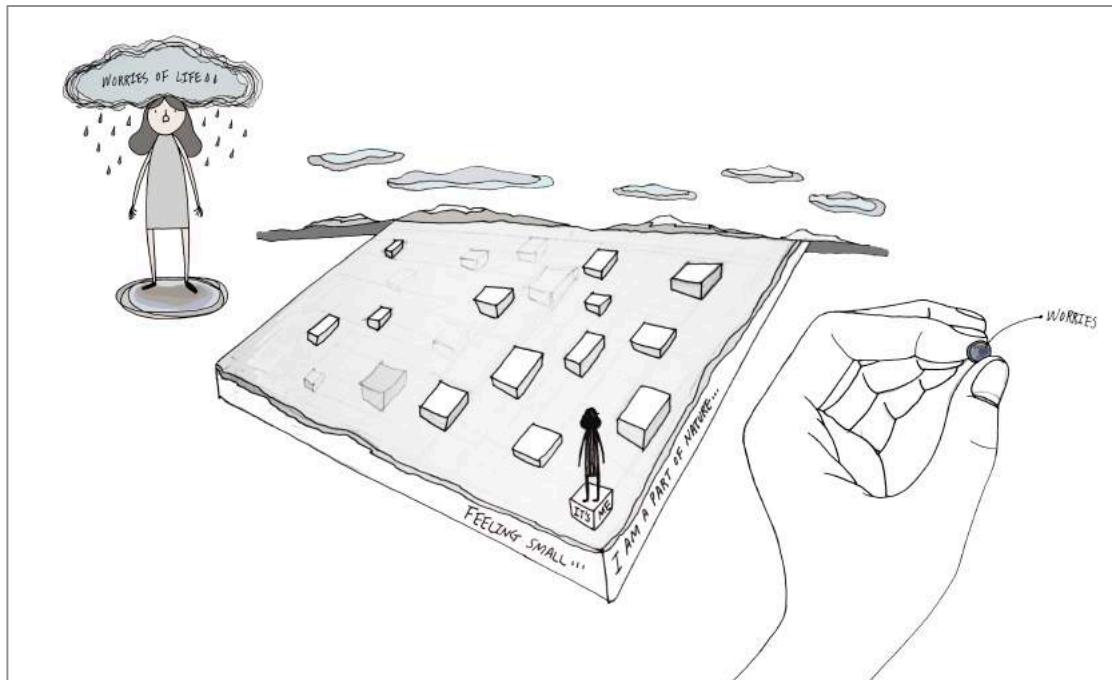
2) Gratitude

3) Peaceful

4) My heart was pierced

5) Fear

6) Part of it

I thought of Icelandic nature mainly as wild nature. Especially, unobstructed landscapes lead me to think of my very small existence in nature and the universe. I had a revelation from this thought. In the process of experiencing the vastness of nature, my own problems and worries also paled in relation to the surroundings. Eventually, they were not longer serious.

Series2: Part of nature

This feelings and experiences are very closely related to my theory research about perception of nature.
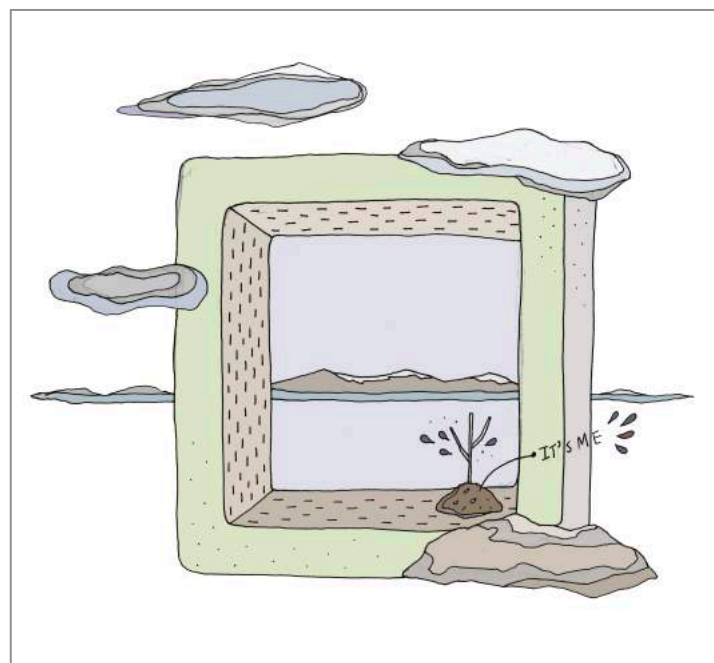
Series3: Nature object

I recreated shapes of ice using ceramics as metaphorical objects. They are inspired by pieces of glacier ice. Real pieces of glacier ice have all different shapes and reflect bits of different colors when exposed to light. It is the same with a human. When we look at each other we all display different traits such as gender, age, voice, nationality, etc. but we are all human beings living together. Each ice represents an individual.
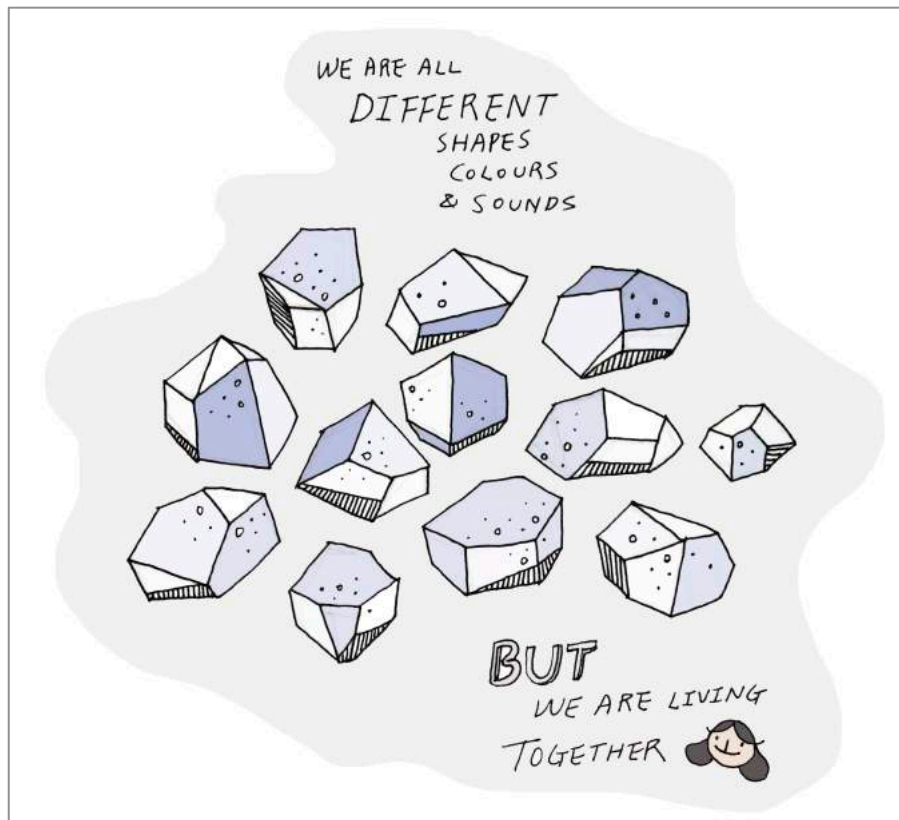
4. Conclusion

Individualism has become a big issue in modern society because it brings about a variety of social problems. I have experienced this in South Korean society. And this is not only an issue in South Korea but also in other countries that are already facing problems related to individualism.

My project started from personal experience and interest in the field. Thus, at first, I could enjoy my research process. However, when I started to work on the design project it led me to problems. It was a big challenge to make people feel connected to each other through my work.

At the beginning of this project, I tended to approach it objectively in terms of social design. However, that put too much pressure on me as well as to many limitations. But, when I started to think subjectively about the project, I was able to think flexibly. 'Connectedness, connection and nature' the three key words in my project are quite broad. Therefore, I decided to share my personal story as a first step for this vast topic. Although it was a small step, it had the potential to be developed in many ways of art/design area.

After many complications, I decided to make abstract ceramic objects as a tool to communicate with people, and in the process I turned my project into a medium to aid people to connect to their own feelings, as well as to lead people to feel connected each other. Each ceramic objects has a metaphorical and conceptual meaning. I tried to figure out a solution in a border between art and design.

Sharing emotions and feelings with others is an important source for our problematic individualistic modern society. No matter how much society develops and changes, emotions are the most humane element that cannot be replaced artificially. As a future designer and artist, I think it is valuable to awaken people's emotions and feelings.

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