

A Hand, a Bowl, and a Dancing Woman

On Softness

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THE COMFORTABLE

Softness as an everyday phenomenon

One of the softest things I know is skin. It is something I immediately notice and remember. As if I have this little list in my head of people I know with really soft skin.

Often it feels as if other people's skin is softer than your own, or, to put it the other way around, you may not be able to enjoy the softness of your own skin to the same extent as someone else might when touching you.

Softness and smoothness stimulate parts of the brain that are associated with emotion and reward, so that especially in close and more intimate relationships the "social softness illusion" can occur: Soft is a state of in-between, not hard, not fluid, but formable and perishable. Softness calls to mind something natural. Softness is a phenomenon that we encounter everywhere and all the time, it wants to be touched and we want to be touched by it, too. We are constantly reaching out for soft materials to surround ourselves with or products that will transform our own bodies into pure softness. Soft seems to be a wished for condition.

it leads to the strong impression that other people's skin is softer than one's own. With the right circumstances of a social touch, such that it happens voluntarily and with the right intensity, the social softness illusion creates a strong notion of bonding. It ensures that people reach out and touch each other in a way the touch-giver as well as the receiver benefit from (for example parents carressing their baby). Touching someone's skin most of the time also means that one's own skin is touched and it is nearly impossible to not notice when someone is touching you.

Gentsch, Fotopoulou and Panagiotopoulou
"Interpersonal Touch Gives Rise to the
Social Softness Illusion", US National
Library of Medicine, National Institutes
of Health, 2015.

The feeling of softness is subjective, it cannot be measured or described with scientific terms. Mostly it is explained with the comparison to hardness or the measuring of soft-related characteristics, such as flexibility or density. However, softness does combine different attributes and is not limited to touch. Also sound, smell, and vision define our experience of what is soft: I do not even have to touch certain things to determine them as soft, I can already see that they are.

This subjective impression of softness seems to relate to both its representation in materials as well as in character traits that are described as soft. What is desirable for some is avoided by others. It feels that even though softness is something we all long for, there is always a certain time and place for it. Is softness (as suggested by Google image search) always

related to nature, women and children? Is softness always delicate and vulnerable? And do I have to give up softness for power and success? To what extent can softness be a part of my practice as a graphic designer?

I understand softness as a concept. As something that is experienced individually and in various contexts with different relevance. Maybe an attitude of softness within a professional practice can change work and interaction and allow for kindness and awareness. Maybe it is something we try to stay away from but actually really need.

I am writing about this from the perspective of a privileged western white young woman. I grew up in a society that has enough money and time to aspire to an ideal of beauty based on soft, hairless skin and shiny hair and to buy products that make them feel warm and comfortable. The whole concept of softness, both in relation to physicality as well as character seems to come from a certain position of privilege, but that doesn't mean it is reserved to people holding these privileges. I would hope for it to be something for everyone.

As I am writing I feel like I'm touching upon a lot of topics that are new to me. There are a lot of aspects I feel ambiguous about, ideas and opinions I am not yet sure I agree with or understand completely, but also examples that excite me immediately. This is my personal approach to the topic. I am trying to find out what softness means and in what ways it comes up in different contexts. To what extent it is related to women and further on, how the idea of softness can be relevant within a graphic design practice.

THE MOVING

Softness as form

One of the first things you learn when practising ballet and gymnastics is how to land softly. How to jump high and energetically, but then land without any sound. How to put all of your strength and energy into the most demanding jumps and turns, but then, as soon as your feet touch the ground again, make it seem like nothing happened. When landing you have to keep your strength and let go at the same time, channel the gravity through all muscles and decelerate the power from the tips of your toes through the foot, your heel, and the bending of the knee. On one hand this protects your joints and tendons, but more so it makes the movements seem easy. This illusion of effortlessness is what you practise for.

I feel like there are few art forms that are as closely related to femininity as classical ballet. Ballet is based on grace, on strong executions combined with permanent softness, all presented with perfect ease. The dancing woman is a pleasure to watch, she is supposed to be light and beautiful. Not only the movements, but also the costumes, stage design, even the stories that are told through ballet are based on this idea of femininity. It does not come as surprise that most ballets have been and are still choreographed by men. Even though in very early ballets most parts were danced by young men, it shifted in the 19th century and it was then the female dancer and the female body that became the figurehead of ballet.

One of the ballet stars of that time was Marie Taglioni, "whose technique was so novel that the ballet and femininity conflated; Taglioni was the ballet, but she also was femininity; according to the laws of logic, the ballet then was femininity".

by Jeanne Allen:
"The Gender Divide in Ballet Leaderships and Choreography"
Nonprofit Quarterly, 2015.
Molly Engelhardt: "Marie Taglioni, Ballerina Extraordinaire:
In the Company of Women", Nineteenth Century Gender Studies,
Issue 6.3, 2010.

At first, women were also performing male roles within the choreography, but later the

male dancer became more apparent again, mostly to “frame” the woman, to lift her and hold her. Only in the beginning of the 20th century did the male dancer return to the center stage. Especially modern Russian choreographers focused on masculine characters in their *Ballets Russes*, challenging the traditional ballet with different music, colours and male-centric stories. Just since then the male body, its muscularity, strength and athleticism became a persisting idea in modern ballet. But still, even today, ballet and the whole world around it, whether it be tights or strict buns, seems to be specifically applicable to girls and with it the expectation of the female body moving gracefully but controlled, pleasing but still reserved.

cf. Sarah Kaufman: “Ballets Russes, and the enduring dancing man”, *The Washington Post*, 2013.

Already in antiquity women have been regarded as moving. In her text “*Dirt and Desire: An Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity*”, Anne Carson describes the woman as the “mobile unit”. While men had a fixed place in a house and a city, women were expected to move: towards him, around him, away from him. Closely linked to the idea of the woman as moving is her formlessness and boundlessness. Carson points out, how ancient philosophers and scientists often describe women in close relation to water. They, naturally, are wetter, colder and softer than men, with wetness being boundless in its natural state. Therefore men and women do not only differ in wetness and dryness but also in form and formlessness, one bounded, the other unbound. “Man determines the form, woman contributes the matter”. This female formlessness is also a reoccurring theme in Greek myths, in which female characters are losing their shape: they extend, shrink and leak. Furthermore, not only can they not constrain a certain bound shape themselves, they are also “notorious adaptors of the form and boundaries of other’s [...] and repeatedly open containers they are told not to open or destroy something placed in a container in their keeping”. All this results in a certain unreliability and mistrust of

on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity, p. 186.
cf. in: *Men in the Off Hours*, 2000, p. 183.

the women of myth, they are perceived as not being able (or not willing) to stay within certain boundaries or leave the form of others untouched. They, like water, are moving and able to transform in their state and that of others.

Another important characteristic in the depiction of women in antiquity Carson writes about is the pollutability of women, one more trait they share with water. Due to their boundlessness, they can easily take on and spread pollution. Therefore their wetness is not only a weakness, something that puts them down or devalues them, but also comes with great strength.

cf. Carson, pp. 194–202.

A big part of ancient Greek theory comes to the conclusion that “a dry soul is wisest and best” and “the chest of a good man does not soften”, but rather maintains a stable and steady form. Emotions are regarded as “liquid or liquefying substance that pours into a person and dissolves him” with the most danger being given to emotions of love and desire. As women (due to their natural state of wetness) will never fully attain the dry stability that is the masculine prerogative, they are also much more prone to be affected by the liquefying emotion.

“That the female is softer than the male and much more easily moved to tears, pity, jealousy, despondency, fear, rash impulses and sexual desire is a communis opinio of ancient literature, voiced by such widely differing temperaments as Aristotle, Empedokles and Semonides of Amorgos.” *ibid.*, p. 191.

THE TENDER Softness as attitude

Ancient theory often devalues emotionality, therefore the idea that women can use it as something empowering, something through which they can spread ideas, strength, and “pollution” is interesting, since also today, women are still often the ones expected to deal with emotions, the “soft ones”.

Softness does not only make you feel good when it comes with materiality, but may also when it comes with character. A soft person

is expected to be understanding and comforting, mediating, patient, kind and convenient. And maybe even more importantly to be flexible, available and also pushing back their own emotions if necessary or to bend them to someone else's needs. All this emotional management, all the care-taking, reassuring, remembering, placating still is closely related to women. Women are trained to make everything go well and often that is taken for granted, as something that just comes with being a woman. Jess Zimmermann writes: "We are told frequently that women are more intuitive, more empathetic, more innately willing and able to offer succor and advice. How convenient that it casts feelings-based work as 'an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depths of our female character'" ^{Jess Zimmermann, "Where's my cut?", The Toast, 2015}.

I do understand the problematic of unacknowledged emotional labour and it is something I want to learn more about and discuss, as I still find myself indecisive when reading about it. But for this context I think it is more relevant to think about how being soft, caring and tender can become a power. In her essay "*Sick Woman Theory*" Johanna Hedva writes:

The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. To take seriously each other's vulnerability and fragility and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it. To protect each other, to enact and practice community. A radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care. ^{Johanna Hedva: "Sick Woman Theory", Milk Magazine, 2016}

Can I be tender and caring with my design? Or with the design world that surrounds me? I am not sure yet what that would exactly mean, but maybe one way of being tender would be to allow different positions and approaches within one design. Or to try to not force the given

content into existing structures, ideas, and visual prototypes, but adapt to it and also allow a personal style or way of working to change and evolve over time. But I also think it relates to a way of encountering the whole work field. As design is based on working together, also interdisciplinarity, an "interdependent sociality" as Hedva puts it, could be a powerful way of creating a community and using the variety that everyone within this community naturally brings up. A community that is about acting and formulating expectations towards each other that are within this understanding of softness and that challenges (and supports) each other's work and understanding of design.

Maybe I can also be tender by allowing myself the liberty to move away from known concepts and to come back to them if it feels necessary. To take freedom when designing, but also treat ideas (my own and those of other's) tenderly and allow them to develop, without immediately devalueing them. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, John Berger says about tenderness: "One of the essential elements of tenderness is that it is a free act, a gratuitous act. It has an enormous amount to do with liberty, with freedom, because one chooses to be tender. And in a certain sense, in the face of what is so often surrounding us, it is an almost defiant act of freedom" ^{John Berger: "John Berger on tenderness, the dead, freedom, bikes (with Michael Silverblatt) 2002, min. 8:16-8:48}

THE FLEXIBLE Softness as methodology

Archeological eras have been described with the materials that were most representative for a specific time span: All of them were hard, such as stone, iron and bronze; scientific and technological progress was often defined by hardness. However soft materials such as leather or rubber have been known and used for as long, if not longer; softness has therefore

always been around. What if there would be an era of softness? An era that is defined by a

politic of softness and care and by scientific research into soft materials and the emotional-ity and real sensations they could add to new technological inventions? Where work and progress is approached with softness rather than ineffective force? How can softness be used as a tool and become relevant within a design practice? Does it even have to become relevant?

Vilém Flusser picks up on this notion of the technical as scientific and hard in his essay *"About the Word Design"*. He describes the relation between the world of technics and that of art as follows:

The words design, machine, technology, ars and art are closely related to one another, one term being unthinkable without the others, and they all derive from the same existential view of the world. However, this internal connection has been denied for centuries (at least since the Renaissance). Modern bourgeois culture made a sharp division between the world of the arts and that of technology and machines; hence culture was split into two mutually exclusive branches: one scientific, quantifiable, and "hard", the other aesthetic, evaluative, and "soft". This unfortunate split started to become irreversible toward the end of the nineteenth century. In the gap, the word design formed a bridge between the two. It could do this since it was an expression of the internal connection between art and technology. Hence in contemporary life, design more or less indicates the site where art and technology (along with their respective evaluative and scientific ways of thinking) come together as equals, making a new form of culture possible.

Vilém Flusser: "About the Word Design", in: *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, 1999, pp.18–19.

He continues this explanation by evaluating the importance of the deceiving qualities design includes, but for me the idea of thinking of design as a bridge between both hard (technological) and soft (artistic) parts of our culture is relevant to this subject. That design can be the in-between and the designer someone who can make use of both the hard and the soft. Who can rely on practicality and functionality, but also leave room for evaluation and emotionality. Not only regarding the visual outcome but more so in relation to the way of approaching design.

During my research I came across the word "wabi-sabi". It describes a Japanese concept of aesthetic, but maybe even more a way of life, and is closely linked to Zen Buddhism. Some of the main characteristics of the wabi-sabi aesthetic are asymmetry, roughness, simplicity, austerity, modesty, intimacy, and appreciation of the ingenuous integrity of natural objects and processes.

cf. Leonard Koren, "Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers", 1994, pp.15–18
"Wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is a beauty of things modest and humble. It is a beauty of things unconventional." (ibid., p.7)

The wabi-sabi concept shares some of its characteristics with modernism (as another example of a strong aesthetic idea), for example that both concepts apply to all different fields of production, art and design and value abstraction and not decoration. But differently from modernism wabi-sabi gives importance to the relative, the personal and intuitive. It supports organic forms, forms that are rooted in the present, not the future or the past and that are open to ambiguity and contradiction.

Ambiguity and contradictions are words that often come with negative connotations. Especially in the design world, when one of design's main tasks is supposedly to convey information or ideas in an easy and understandable way. But to understand something it does not necessarily have to be black or white, or black on white. By allowing subjectivity and vulnerability in a design process it also gains strength and becomes approachable. Sheila Levrant de

Bretteville argues against a simplification of design. Simplification, the constant wish for visual and contextual clarity and also the idea that the designer has to “reduce ideas to their essence”, may result in a design, that not only is supporting repressive attitudes and the wish to control, but also becomes closed and exclusive. Reduction in ideas and visual material also hinders a more inclusive and personal dispute within the design. Through ambiguity and subjectivity control can be opposed as it invites participation. The viewer is not just shown what to see (believe/think), but can find a way to enter the discussion, develop individual ideas, and feels entitled to do so. Arguably, not every design has to ensure this complexity, as there are times and places where design is also used to quickly tell the reader where to go, what to do or not to do, etc. But to me a soft and ambiguous design approach does not primarily relate to the aesthetic, more importantly it relates to a way of working.

One designer for whom ambiguity and experimentation is an important part of the graphic design practice is Jan van Toorn. “It’s all about making it open and free from convention” he says about his way of dealing with images and arranging compositions. To him a design practice as a form of visual journalism becomes interesting when it is evolving, not fixed. When the designer has something to say and can play with different levels and ways of communication. This is what makes a design approachable, not a “bite-sized image”. His work can be seen as an opposition to the tradition of modernism, as he strives for a design that is not self-contained and closed within its own content, but goes behind the obligatory and expected. This is also where softness comes in. Softness by practicing awareness and unconventionality: design should be critical of current situations and aware of the effect it has on the viewer. Instead of reducing, taking for granted and flattening out information, we as designers should accept the dissonances and

make it part of the process. By staying in touch with the social reality and not taking established structures and concepts for granted, a design can oppose elitism and social consensus.

cf. Jan van Toorn: “A Passion for the Real”, in: *MIT Press Journals, Design Issues*, Volume 26, Number 4, 2010, pp. 46–51.

According to van Toorn’s ideas design gains power by opening up to alternatives. There is not one exemplary style that results in good design, the variety and experimentation within styles and media (the softness throughout the work process) is what creates a dialogue between the designer and the viewer. This approach to design respects the viewer and their individual interpretation of a work. It is important that the motives of the designer remain visible within the outcome so that the viewer can make sense of it on their own, compare it with what has been seen and experienced before, and put it within an own context. It starts from a shared solidarity with the audience and the notion of the artificial, constructed, narrative nature of the message. It is an attitude rooted in integrated behavior and an empirical vision of the social and symbolic conditions, aware of the values it produces.

Through all of this, I also find myself questioning what it means to speak for and advocate softness in a society where women are finally allowed to be bold and hard and valued for these qualities. I don’t mean to devalue their work. Not at all. I admire it. But still, softness is often regarded as weak or as too easy. As if by being soft one would take away one’s own power. “As if our softness has to be the price we pay out for power, rather than simply the one that’s paid most easily and most often”, Audre Lorde writes. But an approach of softness does not mean being submissive or easily persuaded. It does not mean negating hardness or boldness within one’s work. Van Toorn’s work for example contains many qualities that might let it appear hard visually, as his formal language is often rough and the compositions contradictory, but it is his way of working that makes his design “soft” to me. Maybe being soft and ad-

I am aware of the fact that Audre Lorde writes about the struggles of showing emotionality as a black woman, but I think her work is relevant and inspiring for everyone.)

vocating softness is, in its own way, being bold as well. In that sense, one does not exclude the other. It is important to create room for both, without forcing either.

Véronique Vienne wrote a text called “*Graphic Fantasies: Reflections in the Glass Ceiling*.” In one paragraph she writes about a design meeting on a product for women she took part in. She describes her frustration with all the women designers showcasing designs that were broadly based on stereotypical female visuals regarding colours and forms. I was reading through this and thought “This is not what I want”. And this is not what I mean when I talk about softness. It is not about colours, shapes and following feminine clichés. And it is also not about trying to not be feminine (whatever that is). Talking about the designers of her generation, Vienne says: “Because they do not want to be labeled as “women”, these accomplished practitioners are reluctant to affirm their uniquely feminine perspective”. Further on she believes that the next generation of designers will challenge this status quo as voiced in the opinion of her students:

“Feminine means subtle, not obvious.”
 “Feminine means less goal-oriented – more open-ended.”
 “Feminine means more complex, and more insightful.”
 “Feminine means ‘Don’t tell me what to think’.” ^{ibid., p.171.}

I think a uniquely feminine perspective sounds like something great. And I would be happy to be part of the generation that claims and uses it.

In the beginning of this year the poet Lora Mathis coined the term “Radical Softness”. They describe this concept as “the idea that being unapologetically emotional is a way to combat the societal shaming of feelings. This is an attempt to embrace emotions, rather than label them as a sign of weakness. There is strength

in healing. There is power in vulnerability”. ^{Lora Mathis, “On Radical Softness”, 2016.}
 Being open to vulnerability also derives from a position of great confidence and simply being aware of your feelings. Moreso this does not only mean that emotions such as compassion, love, and kindness should be used as powers, but also for example confusion, mistrust or anger. That there lies power in allowing your emotions to affect your work itself or the way you work. ^{cf. ibid.} As a response to Lora Mathis, Sarah Bruno describes being soft “as a political act in a society that negates emotion”. ^{Sarah Bruno, “Reimagining Softness: A Conversation”, Multicultural Student Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2016} To her, being “radical means being conscious of what you are doing and being intentional about it. If I am going to be radically soft I am going to educate myself about it and then be soft as hell without caring about the social consequences of it”. ^{ibid.}

This idea of radicality is similar to the way the poet and writer Fanny Howe deals with bewilderment in her poem of the same name. Throughout the poem she elaborates on bewilderment as something fruitful, as a “way of entering the day as much as the work”. ^{Fanny Howe, “Bewilderment”, HOW2, Vol.1, No.1 A Translation of Spaces, 1999} She depicts how usually, in literary writing, ideas of weakness, fluidity, randomness, and uncertainty often only appear in the dream world of the characters. The main story is still reserved for discipline and success. She suggests to use bewilderment as an approach against this and also as a way to break through language barriers that might stop one from “being lost by choice”. ^{ibid.} In the same light, all of the earlier mentioned aspects of softness, emotionality, ambiguity, and indecisiveness are not something that has to be defeated for a good design, but something that can be seen as a source, something that empowers and pushes forward.

I am not sure about how to find a straightforward conclusion to this. I still feel like there is so much more that I should have written about. I am afraid that I am missing out on ideas, but I know, that I will probably never be able to exhaust a topic to its complete extent. Also, I see this text more as a way to contextualize

the idea of softness, a starting point. I wrote two conclusions and I've left both in here. Basically they say the same, but they say it through different words.

1.

There are a lot of things I do not have full knowledge about or that I just cannot form a strong decisive opinion on yet. Or maybe I just don't want to. And I think there should also be ways, that I can show this in my design. I hope to be able to work in a profession that has a place for kindness and flexibility. That does not make me take on hard behaviour as a way to be successful, but offers me a place to show indecisiveness and movement. When allowing oneself this space for emotionality and vulnerability, for movement and flexibility, a part of it should also be to create the same room for others. To give those around you the same respect and awareness and also combine these powers. I don't know yet if that is the right way all the time and for everyone, it is definitely not the only possible one. But I do believe that an attitude of softness can help to create a different way of productivity and dealing with possible conflicts as well as a visual language that does not negate femininity, but also doesn't make it the only thing visible. Softness should not be a concept that is reserved for women, but something that goes beyond gender^{cf. Mathis}, but of course my perspective on this is that of a young woman. Also a woman who is a student, only part-time freelance graphic designer without a full-on work experience. Maybe all of my ideas will change drastically when I start working. Maybe they won't. But until then I think it should be a radical and political gesture to let my indecisiveness, my emotionality, my softness affect my design and the way I work to whatever extent it has to.

2.

Maybe I/my design practice can be three things: a hand, a Japanese bowl, and a dancing woman.

The hand can touch, it can create comfort and care. It can point out or give space to others, reach out and be a gesture to invite to participate. Through moving the hands in a certain way, one can be kind and aware. The hand can be soft and caressing, but also strong and firm. Hands learn, they adapt to materiality and techniques while adjusting their grip.

Contrary to a box, the bowl is an open form, it is open for content. The bowl can (and should) be filled with a variety of substances (hard, soft, or fluid), but not endlessly, as there comes a time when the bowl overflows. Its way of creation enables variety and contradictions in the form and through this it tries to stay personal, intuitive and closely related to the present.

To the viewer it might look as if the movements come easy, but the dancer knows about her strength, about her muscles and what they are capable of. She is able to recall practiced movements that are completely internalized in every part of her body. She knows how to perform within a structure, on a stage, and in combination with others. But she also knows how to improvise and that something that starts off as a way of walking can turn into a way of jumping, that movements can evolve and change and that the body does not always follow the same path. And she knows that there are days when certain muscles have to rest, so that they gain even more power the day after. The most beautiful ballets are the ones where the choreography leaves room for personality. Where the dancers do not only fulfill the movements arranged by the choreographer, even if it is with the most possible perfection, but where there can be change and confusion, spontaneity and individuality. And also mistakes.

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