



Fever

Patrick Allier

**Högskolan för Design och Konsthantverk, Göteborgs universitet
Göteborg, spring term 2010**

Exam project 15 hp, Konstnärligt Kandidatprogram i design 180 hp

patrickallier@gmail.com

+46 (0)709 32 13 81

Abstract

Working with the layering and scraping of paint on acoustic guitars, *Fever* draws parallels between painted layers and our image of the world around us.

Today's technology gives us access to a vast array of sources of information yet we are often force fed with one packaged and near-blindly accepted explanation of each particular event.

There is an obvious need to analyse situations from different perspectives but there is an equal necessity in scrutinising each and every picture we are presented with. Details fall away and narratives are coloured by the storyteller, intentionally or not. In the worst cases truths are painted over in favour of agendas or the governing politics of the day.

Using the guitar as a carrier, *Fever* attempts to encourage a clawing away at these painted layers to reveal other truths hidden beneath.

Key words: Media, information, guitar, scrutinise, layers and source.

Foreword

“If we are not careful and do not change our course,
we may actually arrive at where we are headed.”

Chinese proverb.

Thank you to my mother and father for teaching me
to question convention and of the importance of us-
ing my own judgment.

Thank you Ida, Philippe, Ribbe, Eva and Georges.
You are my rocks of Gibraltar.

Contents

Abstract	2
Foreword	3
Contents	4
Introduction	5
Purpose	5
Goal	5
Background	5
Problem formulation	5–6
Limitations	6
Method	6–11
Planning	6
Phase one	6–9
Phase two	9–11
Phase three	11
Result	12–13
Reflection over process	12
Analysis	12–13
Further development	13
Reference notes and figures	14

Introduction

Purpose: This project focused on trying to promote a critical attitude toward the information we are presented with on a daily basis. *Fever* intended to somehow communicate the importance of questioning the explanations we are fed with regarding events occurring in the world around us.

At the same time, *Fever* was an attempt to experiment with the use of practical objects to carry a message and to draw from the visual effect of worn surfaces to illustrate that message.

Goal: That the guitar retained its properties as a functional object was an important issue in this project. I wished to draw from the object's presence, a presence strongly connected to the object's properties, functions and associations as a tool. Because of this, that the project should result in a functioning musical instrument was a vital point from the start. I wished the project to result in an item that promoted further thought around the chosen issue and that the result could be developed into a commercial product.

Background: Working with everyday functional objects and trying to use these objects to tell a story has always held a fascination for me. During a project in 2008 I applied hand drawn sketches to the surface of an acoustic guitar using a transfer method. Composing the images to create a motif on the guitar front, I then varnished the surface, resulting in a functioning guitar.



fig.1 First experiment with transfer of print to guitar.

This short project inspired me to both work further with applying graphic images onto wooden surfaces and also to work with the surface of guitars. When I began to consider the form of my exam project, I wanted to work with an issue that I considered important and chose to use the guitar and application of images upon its surface to investigate the issue.

Problem formulation: Today, more than ever, we have access to large amounts of information and a vast array of sources from which to obtain it. This allows us to easily question the validity of statements yet we are posed with the problem of looking closely into each issue and comparing different versions of the truth.



fig.2 Every story told is coloured by the narrator.

If we do not actively sift through these layers of truths we find we are presented with pre-packaged explanations. It is important not to just accept these packages as they are often painted-over versions of the truth. Every story that is told is tainted by the narrator's own views or interests. Though one may try to remain impartial, pre-conceptions are hard to extinguish and in many cases personal agendas colour the resulting narrative.

I do not suggest that nothing should be believed or that every story is deceptive yet simply wish to stress the importance of a questioning of the validity of what we are told. I wish to promote a scratching through the surface to scrutinise the details.

This project set out to promote this mindset through the use of the guitar as a carrier for this information and with the visual effect of layered surfaces to illustrate it. These three elements would have to be fused into a final object in an attempt to communicate clearly.

An important aspect would be how to express the issue of our relationship to information in the result. I would have to consider what approach to use; that the desired statement be clearly communicated or that the statement remain inspiration yet take a placid role in the final form.

Limitations: To frame the project, I chose to work with existing classical Spanish guitars in order to hold problems related to composition and surface materials unified. I would need to experiment with numerous guitars and working with different kinds of guitars (folk, electric, etc.) would result in many new technical and compositional problems. Because of the guitar's role as a functional object, the resulting work needed to be a functioning guitar.

Method

Planning: At the beginning of this seven week project, I divided the project into three different stages that would chronologically deal with the different elements I believed the work covered. It felt to me that the project had two distinct elements or areas of focus. These two areas would be tackled separately and then fused in the final phase.

The first element was experimentation with materials and techniques to find a way to produce the desired visual result while taking into account the functional constraints applied.

The second element focused upon developing a visual language and illustrative approach with which to communicate through the object. Results from experimentation with materials would set many constraints upon this area and as yet I was unsure of what approach to take. I would study other works that in some way could represent methods of communication and hopefully find a language and approach that could be realistically applied despite the restraints imposed by technical limitations. Work with the first element, experimentation with materials, was dubbed *phase one* and work with the second element, communication, I called *phase two*.

A third phase would encompass combining the obtained results and producing a prototype. A period of analysis, report writing and presentation preparation would follow phase three. In order to achieve an efficient working process, I drew up a schedule and devoted each phase an allotted period of time.

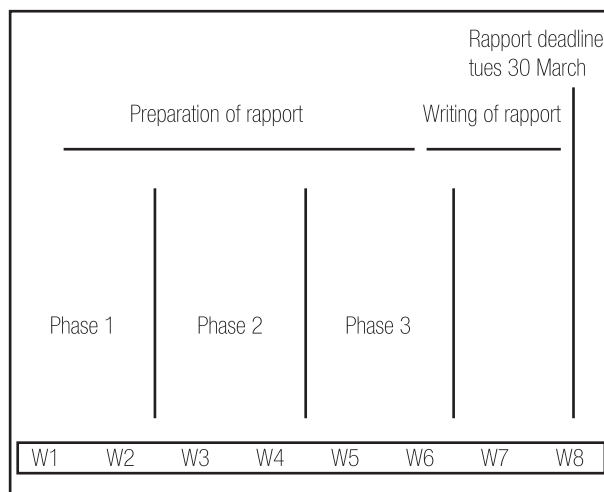


fig.3 Diagram over schedule.

Phase one: During this two week period I began collecting of inspirational images to ground the visual feeling I wished to achieve. I collected photos from surfaces, places and materials I found. These photos depicting worn furniture, brick walls, wood and urban scenes where put together in the form of a mood board. I was interested in the effects of outer layers being worn away to reveal underlying materials. The interest was not focused upon aging or patterns of usage but simply upon the visual effect itself. I wished to use this visual effect to represent how I saw there being hidden layers to the truth. A physical wearing down and clawing away at these layers is needed to uncover other sides to a story.

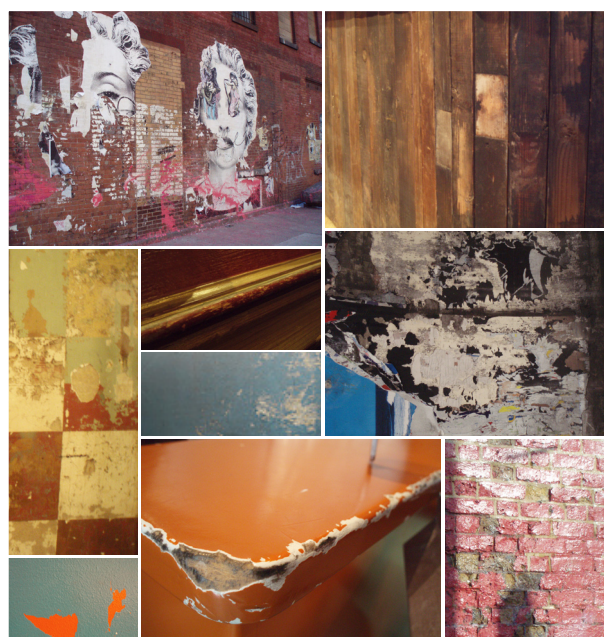


fig.4 Mood board of surfaces.

I then set to work experimenting directly on wood samples with a wide range of paints and materials. At this point I tried to work as freely as possible. Using scrap wood, I experimented with mixing different colours and types of paint to achieve both visual effects and to discern how durable the resulting surface would be.

With regards to the effects of reworking the guitar's surface upon its acoustic qualities, I made contact with local guitar retailers and technicians. All of the contacts I turned to were of the same opinion. They suggested that working with cheaper guitars would not pose serious problems or limitations on how I reworked the surfaces. With higher quality guitars, great focus is put upon the exact thickness, porosity, and density of both the wooden construction and finish. Guitars at the lower end of the market however were of a simpler less finite construction and when working with these models, I could remain somewhat free with regards to materials and techniques I used.

I was interested in using a brutal and vibrant physical process during both experimentation and production. I wished this violent process to leave its marks upon the final result. I wanted frustration to express itself and wished to keep a playful tempo during the project.



fig.5 Working directly with the materials was important.

Working directly and hands-on with the material was also of great importance. I hoped to keep the energy drive of the project alive through working as physically as possible. I did not intend to achieve the visual effect through working in other mediums such as paper or digitally and then applying it to wood.

I tried using both conventional materials such as acrylic and oil paints as well as more unconventional materials such as coffee and juice. I was especially interested in finding some kind of organic material or a form of paint that would do the least possible harm to the environment and user.

Sustainability has always been a subject of great importance for me. I see a great need in developing a civilisation-model that corresponds to our natural environment's needs and promotes healthy lifestyles for ourselves on both physical and psychological levels. Although I intended to pay attention to environmental factors concerning production and materials used, I did not wish to draw too much focus from the aim of the project.

Despite this decision, when I began working with the first phase, I found that the issue of the use of paints was a large and complicated one. I began reading into the environmental- and health-effects of paints and searched for an ideal material that I could use with a clear conscience. I took contact with furniture producer *Norrgevall*¹ and looked into the materials they used. Kristoffer Lundholm, involved in the project *Paint the Town Green*², a study over sustainability issues within the paint industry was of great help and my conclusion was to experiment with using organic egg-oil tempura paint. *Av Jord*³, in Örebro helped me with tips and advice over the use of tempura and I began experimenting with their products.

Paint as a product is an important environmental issue. Every stage from production to application and even destruction of paint and painted materials poses threats to both the natural environment and people involved. Conventional paints contain a cocktail of chemicals that are released both on application but also slowly into the surrounding atmosphere years afterwards. On dumping in landfills or burning, further more toxins are released. Tempura combined with organic linoleum oil and eggs can be thrown into the compost without negative effects. Tempura however demands a little more preparation and a longer drying time than many other types.

I also looked briefly into the effects of the guitar industry upon deforestation. I was pleased to discover that new ground was already being covered in this area. Both *Gibson* and *Martin*, two top market manufacturers have been working together with the *Forest Stewardship Council*⁴ to produce guitars with

sustainable methods. The guitar industry is hardly a major player with regards to deforestation but I believe that efforts to create a sustainable future must be applied on all fronts without exception.

My experimentation with materials first resulted in a collection of test pieces. I could then use these pieces as a reference bank later under the project as a form of extension to my mood board.



fig.6 Test pieces from experimentation with materials.

In the weeks leading up to this project, as a creative warm up exercise, I experimented with some concept furniture and decided to use these experimental pieces to test the effects of layering and scraping paint as well as transferring text directly onto their painted surfaces.

The first piece was a small stool made from random wood cut offs that was intended to combine production-line efficiency with the unique working of every piece individually and allowing each piece to carry the scars of its own unique history. Parts of the stool were left un-worked and bluntly showed how they were put together from different sources. Different woods with different finishes and of different sizes were laid side by side while the legs and frame of the stool were cut and formed uniformly and could be repeated to give a collection of these stools a common denominator.

The concept behind this work was highly relevant to my exam work, as here too I wished to land upon the fine line between serial production and a collection of unique one-off pieces. The legs and frames of these stools were painted with black acrylic paint and then gently sanded to reveal the bare wood beneath. The effect was something similar to what I wished to achieve with the guitars.



fig.7 Stool.

The second piece was a leaning shelf of pine. The shelf's form was unsophisticated and intended to be used as a test object for the application of printed text. One option available to communicate through an object would of course be through applied text. I used an environmentally friendly solvent to transfer a printed text onto the surface of the shelf after first staining the wood. The effect was interesting and it would be very easy to communicate clearly through text, but I was at the same time wary of being too clear. This kind of communication could completely take over the object and degenerate the object's position in the project to something entirely superficial.



fig.8 Shelf.

Achieving the desired visual effect was relatively problem free and using acrylic paint, I had created a desirable surface early on yet when I began using tempura paint, the process was slowed down due to the longer drying time needed by tempura. I was

looking at using up to ten layers of paint and each layer of tempura took two to three days to dry, a period that became even longer for every new layer.

I experimented with different quantities of oil, water and egg to speed the process but by the third week (already one week behind schedule) I decided that in such a short project I would have to produce the final prototype with acrylic paint. I had not yet begun experimenting with graphic form and would surely need to produce several test versions before I could begin the final model. I was still very interested in tempura and would certainly use it in coming projects and a further development of this project but was forced to compromise because of the short time frame.

Phase two: Three weeks into the project I began working on the visual language I would use. I considered various possibilities for how present and clear a message could be conveyed through an object. I looked into works by other designers and artists that interested me. One such work was Julia Lohmann's *Cow Benches* from 2004⁵. These works consisted of stylized full sized models of cow torsos clothed in real cow leather. Each bench used the skin of one individual cow.

The benches were elegant despite the somewhat brutal association they invoked. The benches forced awareness over the source of leather, something that conventional leather furniture does not do.

'You may well have sat on a similar type of leather on numerous sofas without thinking of where it came from, but not while perching on Lohmann's'

Alice Rawsthorn, *The New York Times*⁶.

Despite my interest in the *Cow Benches*, this work highlighted a problem within my own project. Leading into the project I had discussed the use of the guitar as a chosen object. Lohmann's reason for her choice of object was obvious. It drew immediate associations to conventional leather sofas and was an ideal carrier for her statement. She did not wish to condemn the use of leather outright but wanted to simply force a confrontation in the viewer's mind over the source of leather. With my project, this obvious link was nonexistent.

I chose the guitar for more personal reasons. Part of the project's driving force came from a desire

to work with guitars and I considered the guitar as a powerful object to work with yet it had no more connection with this particular subject than a chair or table. Together with my tutor I discussed this aspect and possible solutions.



fig. 9 My passion for the guitar was important to the project.

There was a danger that the object could simply confuse the issue and instead of acting as a carrier become a distraction. I saw the guitar as a canvass is to a painting or paper to a drawing. The guitar in effect worked as a material to work upon, a material that inspired me and set a framework with which to work within. Yet as the guitar was an unconventional choice of material, it would inevitably evoke question.

One solution was to allow the guitar hold this place in the project and attempt to let it be just that, an unconventional medium. Another option was to try to somehow link the subject to the guitar. I could focus upon an issue within the covering up of truth yet use a particular story that was associated to music.

One such story was that of the Chilean folk musician, Victor Jara. Under the Pinochet regime in the 1970's, Jara was imprisoned and murdered. Because of his conflicting political views, the regime attempted to destroy all trace of his music. His music survived however and Jara became an important socialist symbol in South America. I considered using Jara's story to weave the guitar into the project but at the same time was afraid that the story would steal the focus and the project would come to be a project about Victor Jara.

I decided to let the guitar work simply as a loaded surface and to focus upon a visual motif that could

convey the promotion of a critical approach to the information we are fed with in general. I hoped that by being clear enough I could take focus from the guitar and that it would remain simply a carrier.

My first attempts were with a motif depicting a rabbit and floral pattern as well as a fox motif. Using templates traced from the guitars I had to test upon, I made paper frames that matched the form of the guitars and then composed a motif that would be silkscreen printed onto the guitar's surface. First I would apply a layer of paint, followed by the fox motif. I would then cover the entire surface with a new layer of paint and finally apply the rabbit and floral motif. By then scraping away the layers to different degrees over the surface, the underlying colour and foxes would slowly appear.



fig. 10 Templates.

I hoped that the fox, placed directly beneath the rabbit would convey the message that one must scrape away the layers of what we see and hear in order to reveal another story beneath. On experimenting with this approach I found that the fox and rabbit in combination had too strong a relation. The image as a whole associated to something innocent and vulnerable, (the rabbit), and the fox as a threat lurking behind.

I had by this time settled upon silkscreen printing as a technique with which to apply the motif and created a mood board over the colour scheme I intended to use. I wanted the forms to have an aggressive rough feel and chose to use a more subtle washed out colour scheme in contrast. Taking photos of colours I saw around me, I compiled these abstract images as I had done with my mood board for surfaces.



fig. 11 Colour scheme.

Having decided against the use of the rabbit and the fox as symbols to represent other truths hidden beneath the layers, I still believed that I need some kind of symbol as an aid. I now realised that I could use a collage of cut out newspaper articles and headlines to represent the media and how we are presented with information.

To avoid the content of the texts taking over or drawing attention away from the motif as a whole, I kept the clipping short and chose from a wide range of subjects. I hoped that although the viewer would inevitably snatch up words and phrases, by avoiding any clear relation between the phrases, the image would be read abstractly and as a whole. Cutting and tearing out newspaper texts I built a composition using the paper templates.



fig.12 I built up a composition form cut and torn out texts.

As I was keen on the final result having a hap-hazard character, I kept the process random and built up the collage roughly with layers upon layers sculpting a form. Scanning the motif and reworking it digitally, I then divided it into nine parts that could be transferred onto silk screens. I built custom made screens that could fit between the obstructing elements on the guitar's front such as fret board and bridge.



fig.13 I built 9 custom made silk screens.

I produced a test model with the motif and colour scheme using different sides of the guitar to test different variations of colours. Achieving the correct shade was difficult as many different factors came into play. As I worked with layers that would then be scraped away, the appearing layers pierced through

and affected the layer above. I finally reached a satisfying result and after five weeks moved into the third phase to begin producing a prototype.

Phase three: I selected three identical guitars and began working on them simultaneously. I intended to treat them identically and then scrape back the paint to varying degrees to then choose the ideal degree. Sanding them down to bare wood, I then coated them with red acrylic. Lightly sanding them, and then applying a new coat I repeated this procedure four times to achieve a thin but all over covering. I then printed the text motif in white followed by four coats of faded blue acrylic. After printing the motif again in black I could finally begin scraping and sanding away at the layers. I used a range of tools and worked brutally with metal files and scrapers.



fig.14 I used all manor of tools to wear down the surface.

As the three versions took form it became apparent that too much scraping led to a visual confusion and the distinct order of the layers disappeared. That the surface had an abused feel was important but the blue had to remain dominant to show clearly how the surface was built up of different layers of paint. The colours had too strong a character when combined with the rough form and to de-saturate them I added a little ochre pigment to the varnish that would then cover the surface. This gave the colours a deeper quality while leaving the guitar with a glossy durable finish.

Result

The project resulted in a working model with aspects that worked well and could be elaborated upon though also had a number of details that would need further experimentation. The technique I developed gave satisfactory results from both functional and production perspectives as well with its aesthetic qualities.



fig.15 Prototype front.

Reflection over process: I am relatively pleased with my process and planning of the project. The project was divided into stages that, as the work unfolded, corresponded well to the project's separate elements both chronologically and in terms of focus. I consciously strived to work as physically as possible and although used digital techniques as a tool refused to let myself dwell too long on these phases. Rather than lingering in Photoshop or Illustrator, I printed the images as early on as possible and reworked them as needed by hand. Although the work with composition could have moved at a

faster pace if I had worked more with digital techniques, I believe that in the long run the process kept its vitality through constantly returning to the physical materials.

As I mentioned already at the start, I did not wish the project to focus or express sustainability yet see it as a must that environmental and health issues should take an important role in the design process. The process of studying different forms of paint was time consuming and delayed the schedule. Even after concluding that tempura was the ideal option, technical difficulties with its use further held up the process. Despite this, the planned schedule corresponded relatively well to the actual process.

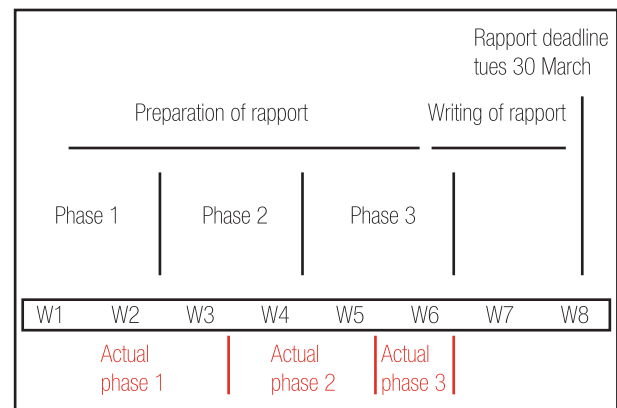


fig.16 Diagram over record of project's actual time frame.

Analysis: On discussing the result with both my examiner and tutor, I became aware that the guitar's overall visual language and surface could have been even rawer in their expression. The inspirational images leading into the project portrayed something far more aggressive and volatile than the result. I believe that this was a result of a hesitancy to let the project fully develop. I was eager to arrive at a finished model within the project's allotted time frame. I realize that I was constantly hesitating between letting the result develop freely and between steering it toward something that would still resemble a commercially viable product. This led to a somewhat dampened, tamed character compared to what I first set out to achieve.

Another detail is the final product's ability to communicate the issue. My attempt to establish the guitar as a canvass upon which to work and for it not to act as a distraction proved to be a hard task. In retrospect I see now how I tried to weave together too many components and would have achieved more if I had defined less parameters.



fig.17 Prototype back.

In effect I entered the project with the intention of using the guitar to convey a preconceived observation illustrated with a particular visual effect. The visual effect of worn layers had an obvious connection with my intended statement concerning our re-

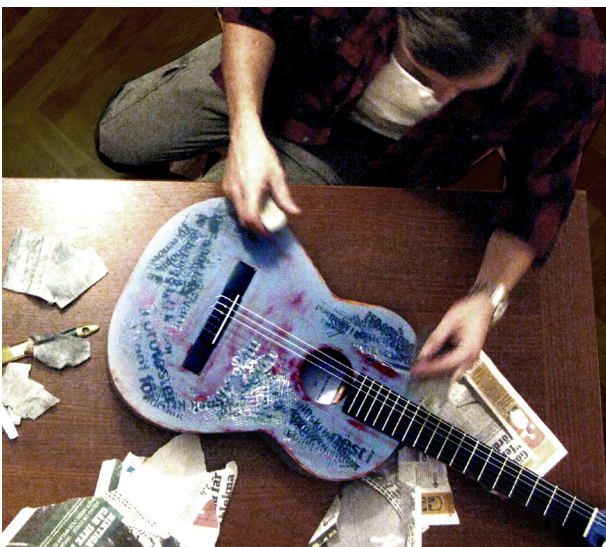


fig.18 Final prototype.

lationship to the many layers of truth found in the various forms of media, yet chaining these two elements to the guitar acted as a hinder. To express an observation using the chosen visual effect would have sufficed as a parameter for the project and allowed me to develop an effective method rather than have already forced upon it a method that was in fact an obstacle.



fig.19 Testing of prototype.

Further development: I see two possible paths with which I would like to develop this project further. Continuing to work with the subject of media, I would remove the guitar totally and think about an object with a strong natural link to the subject. This method is something I intend to investigate further, my exam project having been an important learning process in the weight of fully discussing the role of every element in a project. The question, 'what do I wish to say and how could I best say it?' should constantly be returned to during the project in order to avoid drifting from the point of focus.

The second path I wish to continue along is to experiment further with the surface of the guitar and try to develop a commercial application to focus upon. The effects of paint and printed motifs on wood was an inspiring area and to use the guitar as a base acted as an anchor. There are many technical aspects I have to fine tune and releasing the project from the subject matter of my exam project would allow me to fully investigate how best to develop these aspects.

Reference notes

1. For information on *Norrgavel* and their products, visit:
www.norrgavel.se
2. A report on Kristoffer Lundholm's project, *Paint the town green* can be read at: www.forumforthefuture.org/projects/paint-the-town-green
3. For information about *Av Jord* and their products, visit:
www.avjord.se
4. www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/life/green/6225640.html (17 feb, 2010)
5. From *The New York Times*'s article, *Confronting taboos with subtle humor* by Alice Rawsthorn. www.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/arts/27iht-design2.1.20486090.html (19 feb. 2010)

Figures

Cover photo: Ida Elisabet Liffner

fig 1–11. Patrick Allier

fig 12. Ida Elisabet Liffner

fig 13. Patrick Allier

fig 14–15. Ida Elisabet Liffner

fig 16. Patrick Allier

fig 17–19. Ida Elisabet Liffner