

Human and Design

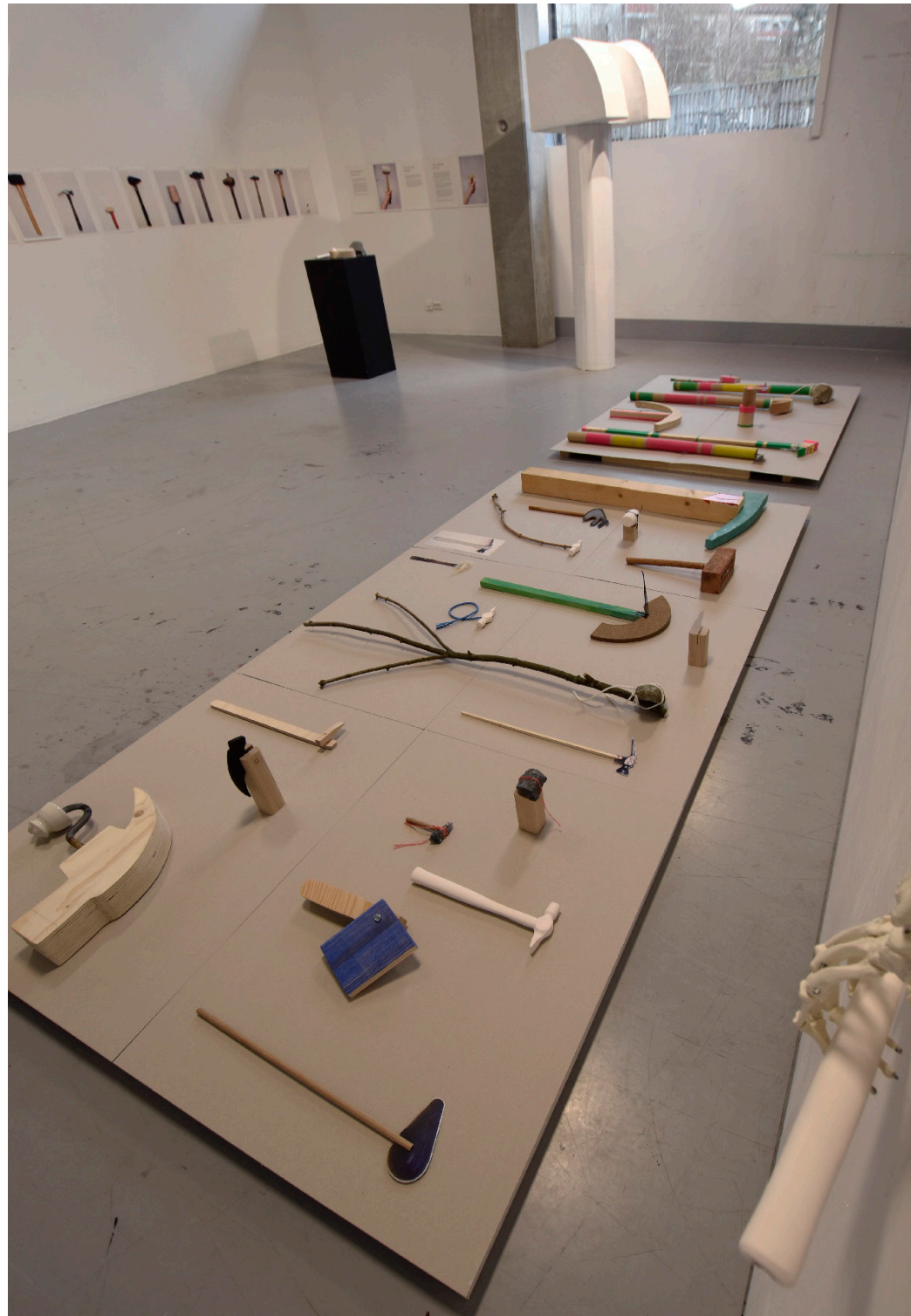
Designed objects¹ are all around us. Some of them make us happy, others make us sad, some cause frustration and anger, while others we hardly notice; they are just there, almost invisible to us in their obviousness. From the moment we are born to the day we die we are surrounded by and in contact with designed objects. Some of them shape us physically, like my wedding ring making a dent in my finger, or the scar my daughter still has on her forehead after the forceps used during giving birth to her. Some shape us mentally, like the omnipresent mobile phone providing endless entertainment and making us really bad at doing nothing and letting the mind flow freely. Other objects, like tools, are designed to design; we use them to shape, create and change our environment.

My Artistic Research PhD project *Human Object* is an exploration of the intimate and intertwined bond between human and designed objects. What are the objects we surround ourselves with and what kinds of relationships do we have with them? In what ways are we shaped by the objects we interact with and how is this affecting the world around us?

¹ *Object* can be defined in many ways. When I use the term I refer to the meaning of the word defined as *something material that may be perceived by the senses* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/object>).

Taking on the task of unfolding the human relationships to designed objects is impossible unless I specify and make some delineations. This is why I have been focusing on what I consider to be an archetypal design object; the hammer. The hammer invites the human body to connect and interact with it in a way that perfectly exemplifies entanglement between human and design. In contrast to several other designed objects where the use and interaction it invites is more fixed, the hammer, like other tools, has an intrinsic openness. It gives us the possibility for action and creation and, unfortunately; also for destruction and violence.

In what follows I will present to you the beginning of the hammer project through photos of an exposition I made in March 2020 at the Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design.



Human and Hammer

Archaeologists have discovered the first appearance of a tool used as a hammer dates to around 3.3 million years ago: The hammer stone was used by our ancestors to splinter other stones to make cutting and killing tools, suggesting that the hammer might be the oldest of all tools.² According to researchers in biology and anthropology, the use of hammer stones have influenced the evolution of the human hand.³ But the human species is not the only one that uses tools. Animals such as chimpanzees, our closest living relatives, apparently made tools long ago without human influence. Crows, elephants, dolphins and sea otters are some of the other animals that use tools.⁴

The hammer is an object that anchors us in our evolution and history and might tell us something about who we are. The hammer is a good example of how we make devices to extend our reach and shape our surroundings. Are we aware that the hammer, like other designed objects, is also shaping us? And; knowing animals also use tools and communicate, should we be so sure the human species is so very special and advanced?

2 <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature14464>

3 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047248417303597>

4 <https://www.livescience.com/9761-10-animals-tools.html>

In this exposition will explore the hammer. The hammer as function, form and meaning. The hammer is not inherently good nor bad, it is just there, ready for us to use for creation or destruction, repair or change, to put things together or tear them apart. The hammer; an object that can be found in many homes and so trivial that we hardly notice it. What is the essence of a hammer and at what point does an object start and stop being a hammer?

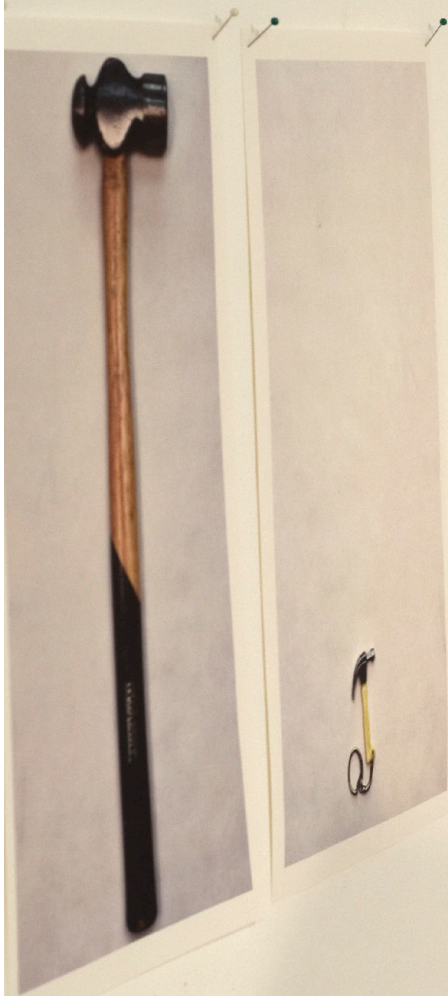


The boundaries of *hammerness*

The hammer is a tool for striking another object or substance, and is designed to fit the human hand with its size, shape and weight. Often times it is made of materials that do not break the thing that it is supposed to hit; a hammer breaking the nail is not a very functional nail-hitting-hammer (carpenters hammer). Other times breaking things is the whole point; a hammer failing to break the piggy bank when you are desperate for some coins to buy ice cream on a hot summer day, would be a disappointing hammer. Likewise; a hammer has to be made from materials that do not break in the act of hitting.

We expect the hammer to behave as we want it to, and do not have patience for hammers that do not obey. But what happens when the hammer stops being our slave and refuses to behave *hammer-like*? The Disobedient Hammers is a group of hammers that refuse to be the way we expect them to. They are not functional, and they are definitely not made from well suited materials. They may be made from waste or found materials, porcelain, cork, paper or feathers. They might have a shape that is dysfunctional and annoying to deal with; the handle might be too big or small, long or short for us to maneuver properly.

Changing scale, proportions, materials and form of the hammer, are design tactics that question functionality and challenge the purpose of designed objects, in this case the hammer. I have started exploring this landscape of hammers breaking with our expectations and will show you some examples; the porcelain hammers, the oversized hammer and the bricolage hammers.



The boundaries of hammerness

The hammer is a tool for striking another object or substance, and is designed to fit the human hand with its size, shape and weight. It is made of materials that do not break the thing that it is supposed to hit. Likewise it has to be made from materials that do not break in the act of hitting.

The claw hammer is the most common type of hammer: a basic tool found in many homes and that I think also you are familiar with. It provides us with the possibility to fix basic things at home, break a piggy bank to buy ice cream, hammer a nail in the wall to put up a painting and to open a coconut. We expect the hammer to behave as we want it to, and we do not have the patience for hammers that do not obey. But what happens when the hammers stop being our slaves and refuse to behave *hammer-like*? The Disobedient Hammers is a group of hammers that refuse to be the way we expect them to. They are not here to be functional, and they are definitely not made from well suited materials. They may be made from waste or found materials, porcelain, cork or feathers. They might have a shape that is annoying to deal with. The handle might be too big or small, long or short for us to maneuver properly.

By changing scale, proportions, materials and form of the hammer, functionality is questioned and the purpose of designed objects such as a hammer is challenged.

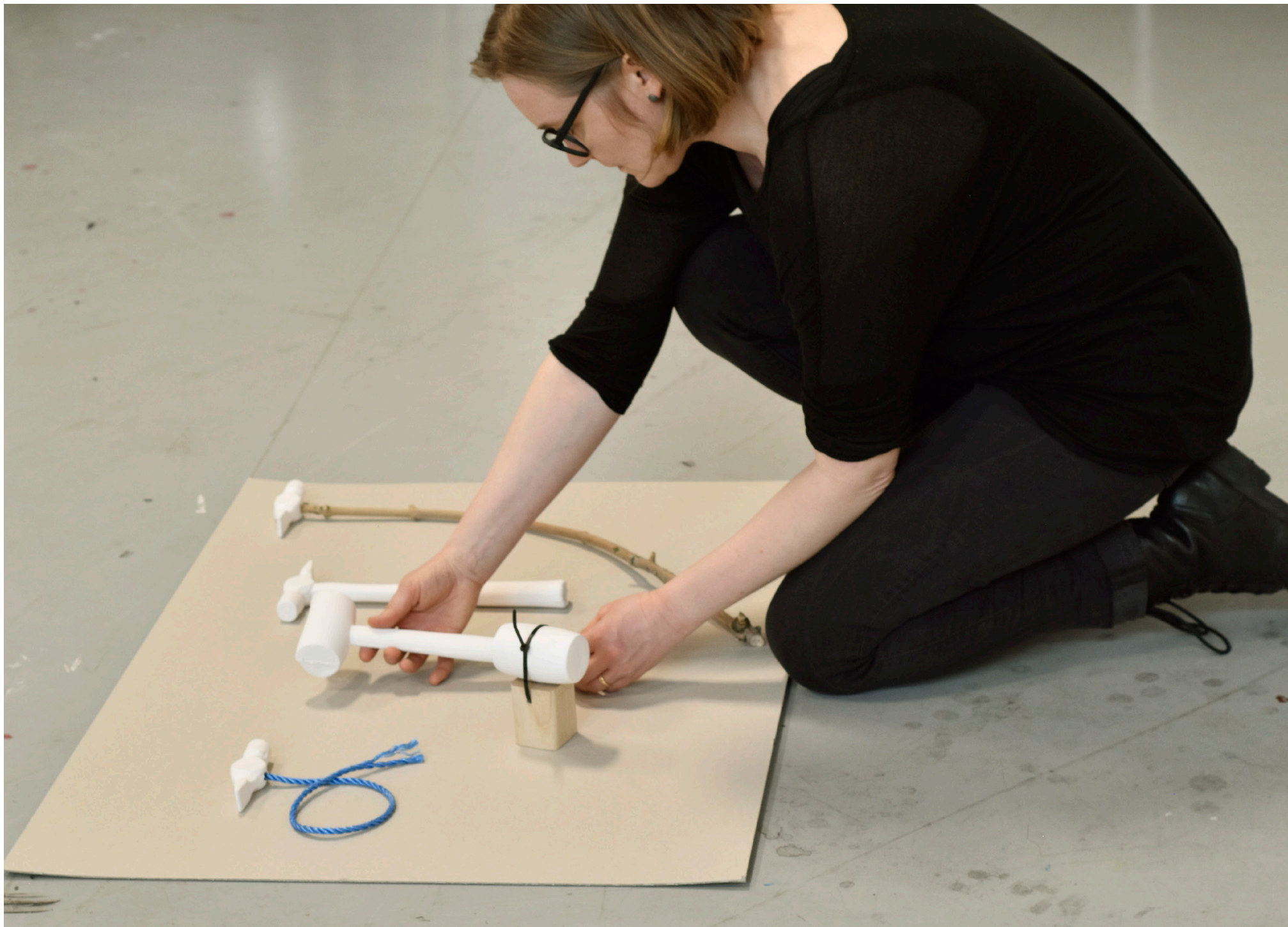


The porcelain hammer

I made a porcelain version of the type of hammer that is called a mallet. Mallets have striking faces that are softer than steel. They are often made of rubber or sometimes wood, and usually have a relatively large head. A mallet with rubber head gives a softer strike than a hammer with metal head. By recreating the rubber mallet in porcelain it becomes breakable and no longer functional. You might notice your movements become careful and slow while interacting with it; you are afraid you will break it. Because it is not made from the materials you expect, you become more aware of the shape of it and intuitively understand that it can not be used as a traditional hammer. What might be the purpose of a porcelain hammer? Is it functional at all or just a decorative object you are not supposed to touch?







The oversized hammer

A hammer is usually an object we can hold and control with one hand. But what happens when the hammer is so big that we no longer are able to maneuver it? Do we still perceive it as a tool that we can interact with it, or does it become a sculpture rather than a tool? Do we feel invited to use our entire body to try to lift it or even ask others to help us, or does the size tell us to leave it alone? And what would an oversized hammer be used for, anyway; to hit something equally oversized? Or is it just there to make us feel really small and unimportant? A hand tool so big that it no longer fits the hand creates a dissonance. The shape of it is still made to fit the hand, but the size contradicts. What is a hand tool when it can no longer be held and controlled by a hand?

The oversized hammer presented here has the shape of a wooden toy hammer; a playful, friendly representation of a hammer meant for children. By recreating this type of hammer in cardboard, scaling it up 14 times its original size and paint it white, a question emerges: is this still a hammer, or is it just the shape of a hammer recreated from another recreation of a hammer? How many transformations can we tolerate before we say; no, this is not a hammer?

An enormous hammer might take us to Alice's Wonderland or even give an air of the Alice in Wonderland Syndrome.⁵ To scale something up creates awareness, like raising your voice, painting in bright colors or directing a lot of light on something. Oversized is the visual equivalent of loud. As the hammer is often used to symbolize power, an oversized hammer might serve to illustrate the human hubris; exaggerated pride or self-confidence, or even of humans acting as gods. Is the oversized hammer a divine hammer?

⁵ Alice in Wonderland Syndrome (AIWS) is a rare hallucinatory disorder. The syndrome is named after Lewis Carroll's famous book because, like Alice, patients with AIWS experience changes in the perception of their body dimensions; the feeling of being bigger or smaller in relation to their environment. (<https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/920937>)

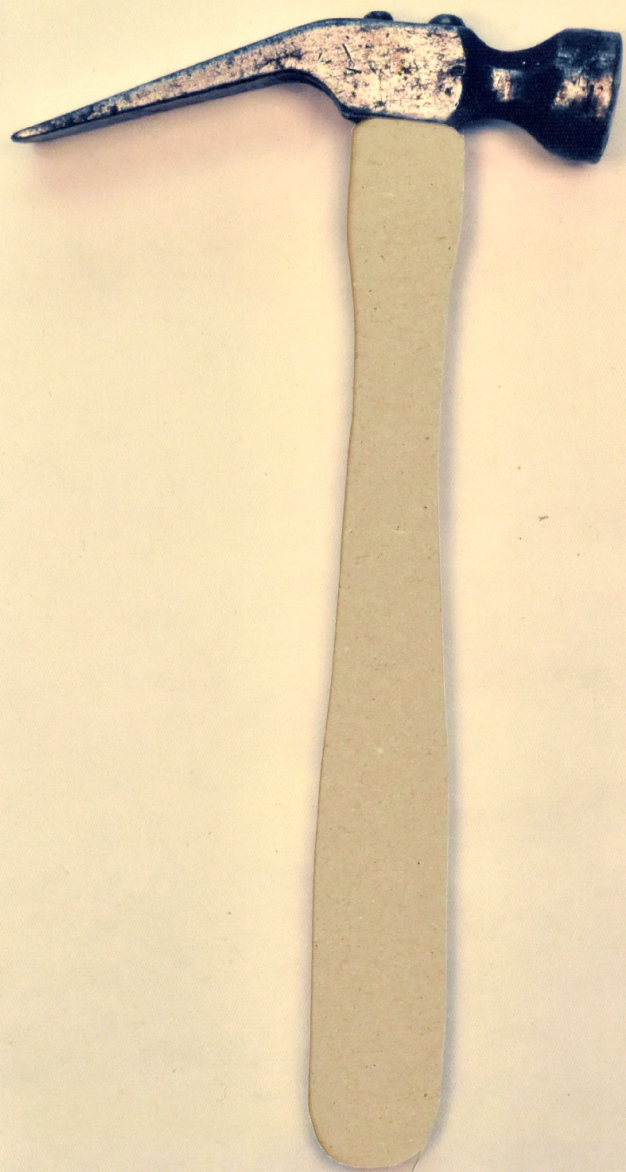


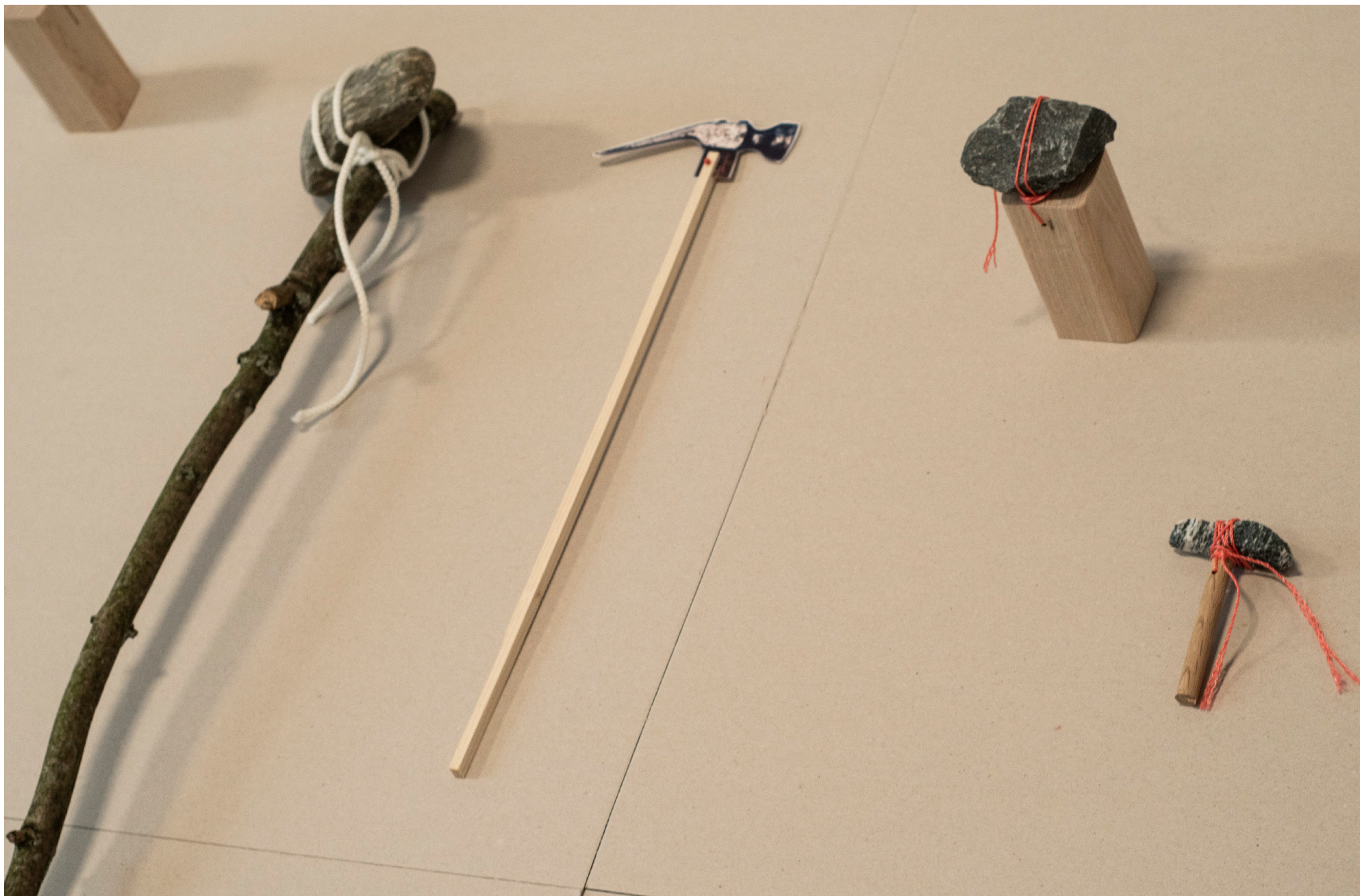
The bricolage hammers

In this part of the exhibition I make hammer shapes from mainly found and waste materials. They are three dimensional collages, also called bricolage. In some of them I let the materials be as when I found them, in others I change form and colour of the material, and even experiment with stripes and bright colours normally not associated with tools. I simply put together materials to look like hammers. While working on this collection I started seeing any oblong object resting horizontally on top of a vertical positioned stickshaped object as a hammer.





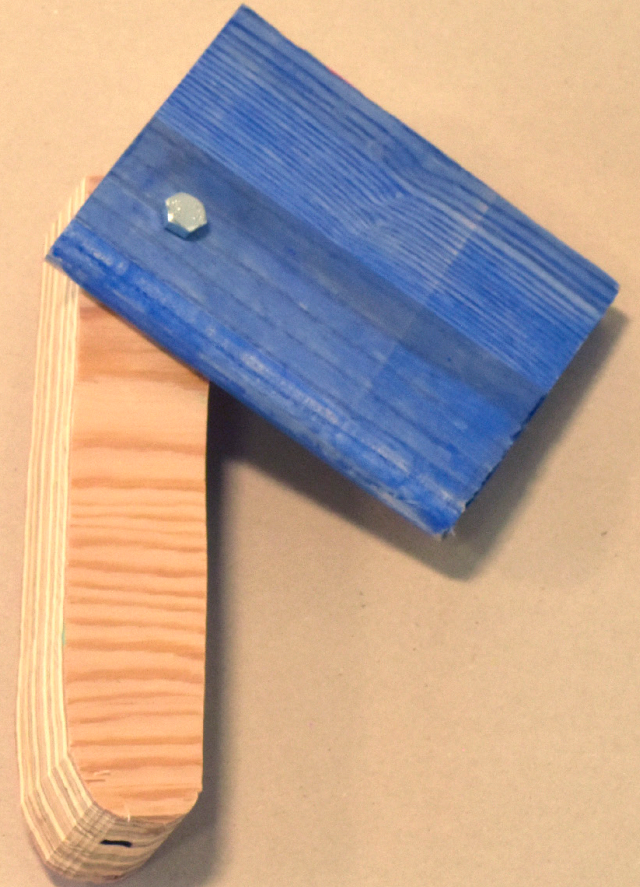
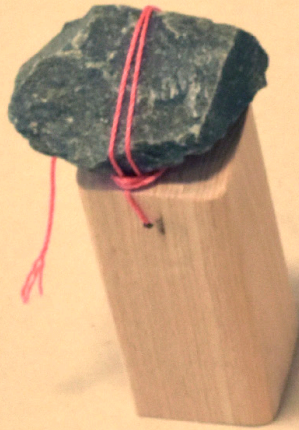












Reflections

I invited colleagues, students, friends and family to see the in process exposition of the hammer project. It was both scary and fruitful to expose my work in such an early stage of the process but it worked well as an experiment and learning device. I got a lot of different feed-back, ranging from critique on the artistic composition and aesthetics, exhibition format and how the human/hammer interaction could better be reflected in the exposition, to suggestions for books to read, people to talk to and ideas to pursue in connection to the hammer topic. The hammer project is definitely in progress and all the parts can be further developed. I want to continue with collecting stories; the doctor's relation to her reflex hammer, the judge with the powerful gavel, the carpenter's hammer and the meat hammer are just some examples of the spectrum of hammers. I could elaborate on the political implications of the different types of hammers as well as the aspects of power and violence in connection to hammers. I anticipate my further exploration of the hammer will reflect both a critical perspective and a playful celebration of the designing human and the role of design in contemporary society.