



DIALOGICAL BODIES

EVERYTHING
AND
EVERYBODY
AS MATERIAL

ELÍN MARGOT ARMANSDOTTIR / HANNAH BERRY / RICARDA BIGOLIN
/ DANIELLE BRUGGEMAN / CHET BUGTER / REMIE CIBIS / VANESSA
DUQUE CAMACHO / KASIA ZOFIA GORNIK / ZOË HILLYARD /
HSUAN-HSIU HUNG / KRISTI KUUSK / SABINE LETTMANN / JULIANA
LUNA MORA / TIMO RISSANEN / JAN TEPE / CLEMENS THORNQUIST /
SANTIAGO ÚTIMA LOAIZA / HANKA VAN DER VOET / BETH WHITE

CONTENTS

- 3 DIALOGICAL BODIES:
EVERYTHING AND
EVERYBODY AS MATERIAL**
— RICARDA BIGOLIN, CHET
BUGTER, JAN TEPE, HANKA
VAN DER VOET, CLEMENS
THORNQUIST AND
DANIELLE BRUGGEMAN
- 11 INTERSPECIES MOTHERING**
— ELÍN MARGOT
ARMANSDOTTIR
- 21 FEELING MOVED:**
A CRITICAL MEDITATION ON
FASHION AS EMBODIED
SENSORY KNOWLEDGE
— HANNAH BERRY, JULIANA
LUNA MORA AND
VANESSA DUQUE
CAMACHO
- 33 WHAT MAKES CLOTHES
MEANINGFUL TO YOU?**
CONVERSATIONS ABOUT
CLOTHES, ON CLOTHES, AS A
TOOL FOR MEANING CREATION
IN FASHION DESIGN
— KASIA ZOFIA GORNIAK
- 40 DESIGNING FOR EMBODIED
CARE THROUGH
WEARABLES:**
ENHANCING RELATIONAL
AWARENESS WITH MULTI-
SENSORIAL TEXTILES
— KRISTI KUUSK, HSUAN-
HSIU HUNG
- 47 TREND REPORT: [RE]CODE
[A]NEW**
— REMIE CIBIS
- 57 CONSTRUCTIVE DISRUPTION
1.0:**
A SENSORY INTERVENTION TO
EXPLORE FASHION FUTURING.
THE ROLE OF HUMAN WASTE
STREAMS FOR ALTERNATIVE
TEXTILE MATERIAL FEEDSTOCK
— SABINE LETTMANN, BETH
WHITE AND ZOË HILLYARD
- 71 PUNTADAS POR PULGADA:
TALLER**
— SANTIAGO ÚTIMA LOAIZA
- 82 GEAR MAKETH THE
LEATHERMAN?**
A PERSPECTIVE ON LEATHER
CULTURES AND
MASCULINITIES
— TIMO RISSANEN

DIALOGICAL BODIES: EVERYTHING AND EVERYBODY AS MATERIAL

— RICARDA BIGOLIN, CHET BUGTER, JAN TEPE, HANKA VAN DER VOET, CLEMENS THORNQUIST AND DANIELLE BRUGGEMAN

Abstract

'Dialogical Bodies: Everything and Everybody as Material' explores how artistic research in the field of fashion (design) practice can negotiate the relationship between bodies and materials. It explores what bodies and materials are—and could be(come)—in fashion design and practice. In doing so, it focuses on different kinds of fashion matter and materiality, including the physical materiality of dressed bodies and identities, to highlight fashion's

sensorial, embodied and affective potential. Through artistic and creative practice research, it underlines the experiential dimensions of fashion, fashion design and fashion practice, opening up alternative ways of making, designing and engaging with fashion.

KEYWORDS: BODIES, FASHION MATTER, MATERIALITY, EMBODIED EXPERIENCES, FASHION DESIGN, FASHION PRACTICE

This special issue of APRIA Journal explores what bodies and materials are—and could be(come)—in fashion design and practice. It focuses on different kinds of fashion matter and materiality, including the physical materiality of dressed bodies and identities, to highlight fashion's sensorial, embodied and affective potential. Through artistic and creative practice research, it underlines the experiential dimensions of fashion, fashion design and fashion practice, opening up alternative ways of making, designing and engaging with fashion.

In doing so, our aim is to reveal the capacities and agencies of (living) matter in fashion practice, unlocking novel ways of thinking, being, wearing and designing with matter, including more-than-human matter. Material garments,

here, are not final products, but serve as objects of dialogue and conversation, pieces to collectively think through, re-imagine and co-author new narratives and practices of what fashion is or could be. Participatory acts of making and wearing become practices of (un)learning and help open up new meanings, ways of living, as well as alternative approaches to fashion practice.

The issue is born out of the conference ‘Dialogical Bodies: Everything and Everybody as Material,’ held in April 2024, which explored how artistic research in the field of fashion (design) practice can negotiate the relationship between bodies and materials within different socio-cultural and ecological systems. Organised by the Swedish School of Textiles, RMIT University, and ArtEZ University of the Arts, the conference addressed the shift in practice research to be more attentive to how these provocations of creative practice surface key political and societal issues, and how these research methods offer potential in real life impact. Eight contributions from the conference were selected for publication in this special issue of APRIA.

The first suggests a speculative design framework of ‘interspecies mothering,’ which emerged from Elín Margot Armansdottir’s care-based practice with SCOBY (Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast). Through fermentation workshops and adoption rituals of microbial ‘daughters,’ Armansdottir reimagines production as an ecology of mutual care between human and more-than-human bodies. Her work

challenges anthropocentric paradigms by situating fashion materials as living collaborators, offering a poetic and scientific redefinition of the designer as caretaker, co-creator and holobiont.

In the second contribution, Hannah Berry, Juliana Luna Mora and Vanessa Duque Camacho transform yoga-like movement and AI-guided voice into a reflective practice on fashion's sensory, ethical, and emotional dimensions. Participants were invited to feel, question and laugh through embodied awareness of their clothing and its material histories. The intervention critiques fashion's visual dominance and fast-paced, market-driven demands by cultivating introspection, humour and somatic connection, proposing an embodied, affective mode of fashion knowledge that foregrounds care, criticality and collective reflection.

The third contribution asks how meaning can be designed into garments and whether dialogue itself can become design material. Kasia Zofia Gorniak invited people in participatory workshops to write and draw directly on second-hand garments, transforming shirts into canvases for collective reflection on clothing's emotional and social meaning. By translating participants' handwritten reflections into creative matter, she proposes an alternative approach to fashion design grounded in empathy, emotional durability and co-authored narratives where conversation becomes both process and product.

Kristi Kuusk and Hsuan-Hsiu Hung explore how somatic design and e-textiles can foster embodied care and relational awareness through Moving Awareables in the fourth contribution. Developed in collaboration between a design researcher and a movement artist, their iterative textile prototypes engage the body through vibration, touch and movement. The research foregrounds sensorial clothing as an active co-creator of experience, revealing how tactile artefacts can support self-reflection, mental well-being and sustainable relationships with materials and bodies. It proposes a model of design as embodied care that is responsive, reflective and deeply material.

For the fifth contribution, Remie Cibis rewrites Vogue Australia's 'Code New' into a critical meditation on agency, fashion imagery and wearing-as-collage by reimagining the format of a commercial trend report through collagic reflection. Emerging from the 'Collaged Clothes' workshop, the piece blurs boundaries between fashion media, design and personal expression, proposing that the act of wearing itself is a creative and subversive form of collage. Through this playful yet incisive textual remix, Cibis foregrounds how everyday wearers re-code fashion imagery and meaning, remaking representation through embodied, participatory acts.

Sabine Lettmann, Beth White and Zoë Hillyard present a pedagogical and sensory intervention in the sixth contribution that repositions human waste streams, such as hair and nails, as regenerative textile feedstock.

Situated within their ‘Constructive Disruption’ framework, the project invites audiences to see, touch and reflect on alternative material systems that challenge extractive industrial logics. By weaving sensory experience with educational reflection, the authors call for an earth-centred design curriculum that redefines the relationship between body, material, and ecological systems, proposing ‘business as unusual’ as a model for transformative fashion learning.

In the seventh contribution, Santiago Última Loaiza revisits Colombia’s tailoring traditions through performative research, applying intertwined lenses of memory, craft and neoliberal transformation. Drawing from his family’s fashion house archive, Última Loaiza contrasts artisanal garment-making with mass production, revealing how economic liberalisation reshaped personal and collective identities. The performance, ‘Puntadas por pulgada: Taller,’ stitches together nostalgia and critique, transforming sewing into an act of temporal dialogue: between generations, between hand and machine, between the past and the globalised present of fashion production.

For the eighth and final contribution, Timo Rissanen examines how masculinities are constructed, performed and diversified within the subcultural world of leather culture via autoethnographic exploration. Through personal narrative and a gender-bending photo-shoot, Rissanen reflects on the legacy of Tom of Finland and the evolving inclusivity of leather communities by intertwining self-reflection, queer history and intersectional critique,

calling for plural and fluid understandings of gender and identity. The piece situates leather as both material and metaphor—a surface for negotiating power, pleasure and belonging.

RICARDA BIGOLIN

Ricarda Bigolin is a practice-based researcher and educator and the Associate Dean of Fashion and Textiles Design at RMIT University. Her research explores critical tactics and interventions to challenge how fashion is produced, used and consumed. This extends to practice, arts-based and material methods, critical tactics of wearing and performing to reveal relationships between fashion, value and use. Current research investigates alternate historical clothing practices in Australia offering insight into material circularity, product use and performance as part of the project Wear out Fashion. Her research and practice work as part of D&K has won international awards and acquisitive prizes and Ricarda maintains ongoing teaching and research collaborations with education and industry partners worldwide.

CHET BUGTER

Chet Bugter utters a cry of resistance against a fashion system which denies the power and importance of the body at its centre. He moves within this system as an artistic and embodied researcher, writer and educator. Through (participatory) performance, written and visual essays, manifestos and film, Chet proposes new perspectives on the fashion system and sets out to making this system more embodied, diverse, and inclusive.

JAN TEPE

Jan Tepe is a Senior Lecturer and researcher in Design at the Swedish School of Textiles – University of Borås. Holding a PhD in Fine Arts in Design, his practice-led research is situated at the intersections of fashion design, human-computer interactions (HCI), and media arts. Informed by theory and concepts commonly acknowledged within HCI and new materialism, he develops methods for engaging with entangled and dynamic material systems along a digital-physical spectrum that unfold in their function and relations through performance-based configurations involving the human body, textiles, and space. He is involved in research projects focusing on developing digital and AI-driven design

processes in collaboration with Swedish industry partners and is a member of international networks to advance digital transformations in fashion. Alongside his research practice, he is the programme coordinator for the BFA Fashion Design programme at the Swedish School of Textiles and lectures on both BFA and MFA levels on digital design practices in the fashion and textile field.

HANKA VAN DER VOET

Hanka van der Voet works as a researcher, writer, publisher and educator in the field of fashion. Her main focus is fashion media and fashion language, and the power structures involved. Van der Voet is founder and editor-in-chief of the magazine *Press & Fold / Notes on making and doing fashion*, where she collaboratively explores alternative fashion forms and narratives. The magazine provides a platform for critical fashion practitioners who actively seek out the cracks and fissures in the current fashion system to propose new opportunities for making and doing fashion. She is also a founding member of Warehouse, a collective consisting of Elisa van Joolen, Femke de Vries and Hanka van der Voet, which aims to provide a platform for critical fashion practitioners through organising expert meetings, reading groups and exhibitions among other things. Van der Voet is senior lecturer on the MA Fashion Strategy at ArtEZ University of the Arts, Arnhem, and a researcher at the ArtEZ Fashion Professorship.

CLEMENS THORNQUIST

Clemens Thornquist is Professor in Fashion Design at The Swedish School of Textiles, University of Borås, Sweden. His research spans fashion, art and philosophy with the aim to develop design foundations through experimental research. The main focus of the research is on the methodological developments and explorations of foundational definitions at the intersection between body, dress and space.

DANIËLLE BRUGGEMAN

Daniëlle Bruggeman is a cultural theorist and Professor of Fashion at ArtEZ University of the Arts in Arnhem, the Netherlands. She also teaches at the MA Critical Fashion Practices at ArtEZ. Bruggeman holds a PhD in Cultural Studies and has published on topics like the fluid, performative and embodied dimensions of identity, and fashion as a new materialist aesthetics. Her current research focuses on alternative systemic approaches, an emerging practice-based critical fashion discourse, and thinking through the issues of human agency and material agency from a post-anthropocentric perspective. In 2024 she was also appointed Professor by special appointment Fashion & Sustainability at Radboud University in Nijmegen.

INTERSPECIES MOTHERING

— ELÍN MARGOT ARMANSDOTTIR

Abstract

In recent years, Kombucha fermentation has gained popularity in the design world — not as a drink but as a process to produce SCOBY (Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast), a biofilm potentially usable as fabric or ‘vegan leather.’¹ This process, which is rather fast, needs little resources, which challenges conventional fabric manufacturing. SCOBY seems like a perfect solution to the fashion industry’s environmental and ethical challenges,² but could it be more?

This article draws upon my creative practice, in which I cultivate and engage with SCOBY as part of an exploration of care-based production systems, interspecies relationships and a plural notion of self. Through this work, I introduce the concept of ‘Interspecies Mothering,’ which emerges from my direct experience in nurturing SCOBY. The aim of this article is to bridge theoretical insights with the tangible processes of SCOBY cultivation, proposing a framework for reimagining production systems as care-centred networks.

KEYWORDS: CARE, RESEARCH-CREATION, MORE-THAN-HUMAN, BIOMATERIAL, SPECULATIVE DESIGN

*Cells from my body, bacteria from my body,
yeast from my body.
When inside human-me, we are one body.*

Having evolved alongside the human species, most of the microorganisms that live in and on us are helping us to keep healthy, just as our well-being promotes theirs.³ The collective genome, or metagenome, of the enteric microbiota contains over 100 times the number of genes in the human genome, and there are approximately 10-fold more

genes in each of our microbiomes than in each of us.⁴ Our microbiome is somehow even more unique than our DNA sequence. We are not a single being but are, in fact, a *holobiont*, an assemblage composed of innumerable beings that Donna Haraway defines as holoents.⁵ Multiple holoents are the active agents composing a holobiont.

Fermentation is used as a transformation process that requires the action and co-operation of different species. It acknowledges and nurtures microorganisms because in order to transform raw ingredients like sugar into desired meals or drinks, it is necessary to create a favourable environment for microorganisms to thrive in. When the human holobiont cooks (and especially when it uses fermentation techniques), it transmits a part of its microbiome to the food. Some bacteria and yeast from the human caretaker will leave the body-environment and thrive within the new colony-environment and vice-versa. The symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast is intrinsically related to its caretaker and, like DNA, it passes down its specific traits.⁶

As essential, and perhaps the most significant, part of my work centres around a workshop. Its description begins as follows: ‘I invite you to take part in an interspecies relationship. I invite you to become the Mother of my more-than-human daughters [...]’ and continues with similar information to what has been outlined above. While seemingly provocative and playful, treating the subject of adoption lightly, the underlying premise is profoundly serious. In order to create another colony or a new kombucha or different type of bacterial cellulose, pieces of a ‘mother’ SCOBY are clipped and introduced to a new environment. The clipped bit becomes a ‘daughter’ that in time will grow and will be able to engender its own ‘daughters,’ always keeping traces of its original ‘mother.’ SCOBY is the acronym

for ‘Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast.’ It designates a cluster of microorganisms brought together by mutual beneficence from their metabolic activity also known as fermentation.⁷ It is important to specify that the terminology ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ is not coined by me but originates from the established language used in kombucha production; it is also used by the scientific community.⁸ When I teach another human how to make bacterial cellulose and give them the essentials to start their own, what we are in fact doing is facilitating the birth of a new SCOBY. This part of the process is underscored during the workshop through the props used, such as medically graded instruments and the final adoption certificate that each participant must sign that commits them to taking good care of their new daughter.

Through playful references to Western human systems surrounding the birth of another human, the workshop gently invites participants to adopt the idea of being the mother of other living beings that would otherwise have been considered inanimate products. The terminology employed, aspects of the process and even the skin-like material reinforce the likeness to human bodies and social structure and calls for an alternative model of production of kombucha or SCOBY. In return, it could transform our ways to relate to ourselves and one another.

Outside of human-me, in artificial wombs they become their own body.

Microorganisms consume carbohydrates such as sugar for their survival, while at the same time releasing organic acids, alcohols and gases. These byproducts are consumed by other microorganisms, which in turn release substances such as bacterial cellulose that are useful to humans.⁹ In the case of SCOBY, yeast, often *saccharomyces cerevisiae*, acetic acid bacteria (AAB) and humans live in symbiosis. When introduced to a sweet liquid, yeast will consume simple sugars and produce ethanol and carbon dioxide. The cohabiting AAB then utilise the

oxygen present in the environment to oxidise the ethanol into acetic acid. In addition, the ethanol produced by yeast stimulates the bacterial cellulose-synthase mechanism to produce a visible film on the surface of the liquid.¹⁰ This film is a protective barrier that shields the underlying liquid from external contaminants while still allowing AAB to access oxygen.¹¹ Porous, it behaves like a skin, maintaining an optimal intra-environment for the SCOBY. Haraway writes:

Critters interpenetrate one another, loop around and through one another, eat each another, get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages.¹²

For human perception, only what has a definite beginning and end—borders, skins—is one. Often, only the film of bacterial cellulose is referred to as the ‘mother SCOBY’ as it is the only tangible manifestation of the actual ‘mother SCOBY’ or mother holobiont. To be able to see all the holoents composing a SCOBY, one would need a microscope, and through this microscopic lens, one would see the burgeoning, multispecies happenings making the tangible body of bacterial cellulose commonly referred to as ‘mother SCOBY.’ However, the overall liquid is the SCOBY and all the different bacteria and yeast present in and on the jar are the SCOBY. All the bacteria and yeast present on my skin might become the SCOBY, and the bacteria and yeast present in the SCOBY might become part of my microbiome—so part of me. SCOBY, as Haraway’s quote points out, challenges the notion of single permeable self. SCOBY is an assemblage, a composite composed of many things, very similar to our bodies. If we were to look at my body through the microscopic lens, then we would see the burgeoning, multispecies happenings making the tangible body, or me.

The relationship between the microorganisms within a SCOBY is symbiotic,

though the term ‘symbiosis’ encompasses a range of interactions, from mutualistic to commensal to parasitic. In the case of the SCOBY, yeast and AAB engage in a commensal relationship; AAB benefit more directly from the yeast’s metabolic byproducts, but yeast is not harmed by this interaction.¹³ The human caretaker also benefits from this relationship by obtaining a fermented product, such as bacterial cellulose, and is vital because they provide the necessary nutrients and environment for the SCOBY to thrive. The human caretaker engages in a mutualistic symbiosis. Despite its essential participation, the human caretaker has not been included in this symbiotic culture it is SCOBY (Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast), not SCOBYH (Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria, Yeast and Humans).

For the purpose of keeping this article short, I will not delve into why humans tend to extract themselves from natural happenings. Writers like Bruno Latour¹⁴ or Timothy Morton¹⁵ have written great accounts of why the binary construct between nature and culture is so damaging for our planet. Instead, I will argue why the human holobiont, the human caretaker, should be included in the nomination of the symbiotic cultures and why I think that this ecological assemblage can be considered a holobiont.

In her work, Lynn Margulis challenges traditional evolutionary theory by highlighting the role of symbiosis in evolution. She argues that cooperation between different species drives major evolutionary changes, rather than competition and random mutations alone.¹⁶ For example, ancient symbiotic events led to the development of eukaryotic cells, where once-independent bacteria became essential components like mitochondria. She even describes this as a form of neo-Lamarckianism, where organisms acquire whole sets of genes from their symbiotic partners, rather than inheriting traits in a gradual, mutation-based process. Through symbiogenesis, entire organisms merge to form new, more complex life forms. But when does a holobiont become a holobiont,

and when does the long-lasting relationship between different species create a new lifeform?

The creation of a new SCOBY, or engendering a ‘daughter,’ is a process that can be compared to biological inheritance. As mentioned above, a piece of the mother is clipped and some of the liquid is back-slopped (poured into a new jar with the clipped bit) in order to create a daughter. The daughter is then a sort of clone of its mother that will inherently bear her characteristics. Yet, the specific composition of microorganisms within a SCOBY is also influenced by the environment in which it is cultivated, meaning that each daughter SCOBY will in time become unique.¹⁷ Some of the microorganisms in the air where the new daughter is kept will infiltrate and change the original composition from the mother. More importantly for this article, microorganisms from the human caretaker’s skin and breath will also integrate into the daughter SCOBY, becoming part of its unique microbial composition. When participants in my workshop adopt one of my daughters, it initially retains microorganisms from both its mother and from me. Over time, however, it acquires microbial traits from its new caretaker, gradually becoming microbially related to them. This process can be likened to the transmission of traits within human social structures, where offspring inherit genetic material from their parents but also develop distinct characteristics influenced by their environment.

A long-lasting relationship between different species creates a new life form through the process of symbiogenesis¹⁸ when the partnership becomes so integral that the organisms function as a single, unified entity. First, there is integration at the genetic level, where symbiotic partners exchange or integrate genetic material, resulting in the inheritance of new traits or capabilities that neither species possessed individually. For example, the ability to produce bacterial cellulose is something humans cannot achieve on their own. Additionally, reproductive integration is needed,

which occurs when the symbiotic relationship is passed down through generations. This often results in the merged organisms reproducing as a single new entity, as seen when the SCOBY mother transmits its characteristics to its daughters. Finally, permanent dependence, where the organisms become so intertwined that they rely on each other for survival, making independent life impossible. This is evident in the relationship between yeast and Acetic Acid Bacteria (AAB), though the same may not necessarily apply to the human caretaker involved in such systems.

The main obstacle to SCOBYH is the fact that the human agent can leave the relationship. They do not depend on yeast and AAB for their survival. The Interspecies Mothering concept falls short when it comes to addressing the biological aspect of SCOBY today. This aspect relies on the significance of dependence. Most of the microorganisms in our guts are vital for us to digest certain food, for example, or to absorb vital nutrients that we cannot break down on our own. In turn, our bodies are vital for them as an environment to live within. We could argue that we could skip eating those foods, but how much can we skip? How about vegetables, beans and fruits, can we skip them? How about materials like silk, wool or cotton? We can probably avoid those and only use an artificial material like polyester. But then again, what actually is polyester unless it is derived from petroleum, which is itself a fossilised organic material made of zooplankton and algae (microorganisms!). I have a hard time believing that we could solely survive on rocks. Why go to such lengths when it is sufficient to recognise our interdependence with other species, and why not, then, consider those ecological assemblages as holobiont, as part or extension of ourselves. I am the sheep whose wool covers my body. I am the bread I ate while writing this paragraph. I am the SCOBYH on my shelves. Even if it is not vital for me today, given the enthusiasm of the fashion world for the material it creates, I might find myself dependent on it tomorrow.

Interdependence is not only biological or even natural. It is also systematic and artificial. My well-being also depends on ideological ethics, hoping that other humans will respect commonly agreed morals toward what is considered my freedom and my rights. It depends on the healthcare system — on how long it will take me to see a doctor and access medicine if I get infected by parasitic microorganisms, for example. It depends on the people close to me, how they care for me and how I care for them.



Figure 1. *I care for them, feed them, protect them, feel them grow.*

In a SCOBYH, I suggest that the human caretaker is not merely an external operator but an integral part of a broader familial network. The caretaker needs to provide a favourable environment and regularly 'feed' the SCOBYH for it to be healthy,¹⁹ suggesting that the caretaker bears the responsibility of the SCOBYH's well-being. SCOBYHs are threatened by numerous scourges, poisoned by garlic or metal, infection by enemy microorganisms or starvation through carelessness. 'Abuse and neglect are, by definition, the opposites of nurturance and care.'²⁰ The human caretaker is not physiologically dependent on the SCOBYH for its survival; however, the human caretaker is responsible for the SCOBYH's well-being. They bear a potential moral responsibility towards the yeast and bacteria they use to create bacterial cellulose. A few SCOBYH are now waiting on my shelves for me to feed them and they have been already waiting for a few weeks already at the time of writing. Knowing about them, writing about my

responsibility toward them is not enough for me to take action. Most of us know that cheap wool probably comes from animals that are treated poorly, but knowing is no longer enough. A more radical change needs to happen.

Tronto gives a generic definition of care that attempts to encompass all the shapes that care can take. She describes care as:

‘[...] a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.’²¹

Tronto’s definition of care also acknowledges that it is an across species practice. It is not solely a human activity but a species activity, indicating that other-than humans also practice care. Furthermore, Tronto highlights the interconnection and interdependence aspect of care, weaving several worlds together. This definition challenges the anthropocentric view that caregiving is an exclusively human activity, opening new possibilities for understanding how care and responsibility might be distributed across species.

According to this definition, activities with the purpose of maintaining, continuing or repairing ‘our world’ are defined as care. The actions involved in maintaining the SCOBYH — continuing or repairing the symbiogenesis — are acts of care. This stands in contrast to, and even challenges, the prevailing direction of most research and projects surrounding SCOBYH, which focus on scaling up bacterial cellulose production by replicating exploitative industrial models.

At the beginning of her book, Tronto declares that:

‘[...] care requires that one start from the standpoint of the one needing care or attention. It requires that we meet the other morally, adopt that person’s, or group’s, perspective and look at the world in those terms.’²²

While it might be impossible to think like a Symbiotic Culture of Yeast and

Bacteria, one might as well try. The human concept of well-being might not be perceived the same way by a SCOBY, and what is essential for a good human life does not necessarily apply to yeast and bacteria. However, all living creatures seem to possess a drive to live and reproduce. Therefore, caring for a SCOBY starts with supporting those fundamentals — helping it thrive, live longer and reproduce.

For the exhibition *Fallandi trjám liggur margt á hjarta* (Yes, a falling tree makes a sound (and it has a lot to say)),²³ I created a speculative nursery/kitchen for a SCOBYH. The first attempt at the work was to design objects that meet the SCOBYH’s needs. Drawing on both theory and my personal experimental knowledge of kombucha and bacterial cellulose making, I set out to meet the SCOBYH’s basic needs: a container that could hold liquid and protect against contaminating agents (flies); an opening that would allow the air circulate freely; and access points for feeding and manual interaction when necessary. It could not be made of metal. It became quickly evident that I was redesigning existing bioreactors and that the traditional mason jar was already a great tool. The challenge was in how to communicate the human-microorganisms symbiosis, the notion of plural self, more-than-human kinship and finally care.

The biological and familial metaphors of ‘mother/daughter’ inspired me to create hybrid objects, drawing from the familiar setting of the kitchen and the contrasting environment of the nursery. The latter one is originally a space designed for young children, animals or plants to be taken care of until they reach a certain level of independence. It is a place associated with care practice — the materials, soft colours and shape fit the conventional visual archetype we imagine a nursery to be. The objects still respond to the needs of SCOBYH, but they embody a different underlying ideology. I wanted it to feel like an organ or set of organs that belong to a body, maybe mine, maybe yours. It needed to be big, not something you can forget in a cupboard, but instead excessive in scale, allowing the



Figure 2. Speculative nursery/kitchen presented at the gallery Kling & Bang, Reykjavík, 2021.

human body to navigate within it. Instead of the microorganisms slipping into our humongous (for them) body, it would be the human care-taker entering theirs. The objects and installation ask the audience to think about considering SCOBYH as our kin — as our actual mothers and daughters — and pose this question: why would we ever keep them in a mason jar?

When interviewed for the book *Radical Matter: Rethinking Materials for a Sustainable Future*, Maurizio Montalti explains that living materials are more unpredictable than static matter. Even though his company is also focusing on scaling-up production, he recognises that we need to question '[...] this attitude that everything has to be perfect, which is fundamentally unnatural.'²⁴ He highlights the need to engage with microorganisms and work with their capacity, even if it requires adjusting our expectations about materials. I would add that we need to reconsider the tools and machinery we use with living organisms to make materials and take into account their needs. Moreover, we need to imbue those tools and machines with a human sense of care, so that the behaviour of the human caretaker naturally follows suit.

The language and metaphors surrounding the production of SCOBYHs are imbued with deep symbolic resonance, drawing upon the language of human relationships and kinship. Terms such as 'mother' and 'daughter' are not merely functional descriptions within the production of bacterial cellulose; they evoke a powerful imagery that connects the biological processes of microorganisms to human experiences of care, inheritance and social bonding. Care-based production asks for more.

They are part of human-me that become their more-than-human-me selves.

What if you could shed parts of your skin's outer layer and instead of leaving it behind on the floor, you introduced it to a culture medium and it continued to grow on its own. So much so that you could actually make things with it — materials, objects, clothes, more skins, more extensions of one's self. Perhaps contrasting with what has been written so far, I believe that one would not hesitate to commercialise products of one's self. The commercialisation of bodies, parts of bodies and extension of bodies is not a

new practice. Think about hair toenails left in the bathtub drain, hair that we leave at the hairdresser, which is sometimes given away or even sold. The bacteria and yeast in a SCOBYH, even if they come from the human body, remain holoents in this symbiogenesis; they are distinct bodies whose collective entity form one larger body or holobiont. While there is no question about your right to sell your hair, there is a much bigger ethical problem when you sell someone else's. All holoents need to be given agency in the care-based production system. We are one in the network we form, but we are still separate beings with separate feelings, desires and needs. The 'mother/daughter' terminology and kinship aspect of the network makes sense and is vital for a care-based approach. One needs to be alert to the other's well-being.

When we make something like polyester, the process is clean, precise and detached. The material is inert, manufactured in environments designed to keep everything sterile and controlled. But material derived from living organisms invites a different dynamic. Wool, for instance, comes from sheep, animals that communicate their well-being in clear ways. They bleat in pain if mishandled, they grow anxious when hungry or cold. Bacteria and yeast in a SCOBYH communicate, though their language is more subtle; shifting smells, colours or textures can signal when something in their environment is wrong.

Care-based production calls for a different mindset. It requires us to tune into these signals, to notice when the SCOBY begins to smell vinegary, indicating that it needs more sugar, or when a sheep's wool feels coarse, suggesting that it may not be receiving proper nutrition. This attunement to living systems asks us to mother, rather than to dominate or control. The SCOBY that grows on our shelves may be a byproduct of our environment, shaped by our microbiome, but it becomes its own being. It takes on an agency separate from us, a unique life with its own needs. The relationship is not one of ownership but of care, a mutual exchange in which the

human caretaker has to involve both mind and body in the process.

The act of creating bacterial cellulose, of tending to a SCOBYH, is inherently embodied. It engages the body and the senses, demanding that we smell, feel and even hear the subtle signals from the materials we are working with. This is not an abstract or distant process but something that requires us to be present. The nursery/kitchen for the Kling & Bang gallery needed to be big so that the signals the SCOBYH transmitted, however small, could not be ignored. This dramatic scaling-up of a microscopic process allows for both holoents to 'hear' one another and interact accordingly. The transparency of the glass used and the porous characteristic of the containers allow the human eye to see and the human nose to smell, and therefore notice, changes. Facilitating inter-species attunement is an essential design principle for the making of tools and systems within a care-based production approach.

To redesign production systems based on care, we need to shift from systems that rely on detachment to ones that require active, embodied participation. María Puig de la Bellacasa emphasises in her book *Matters of Care* that '[...] a politics of care engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence.'²⁵ Therefore, these systems would not only focus on efficiency or scale but also on how they feel to create, how they engage the body and emotions. The tools and infrastructure we use would need to reflect and enhance this. Rather than machines designed to control and sanitise, these systems might resemble environments that support growth and change, spaces where the human body and senses are fully engaged in the creation process. Tools and infrastructure could borrow from well-established care practices: self-care, nursing, mothering, etc. They would use technology not just to monitor and *maintain* the holoent in its production but to care for all the participants in the holobionts. The outcomes of such systems would embody



Figure 3. Speculative action of creating in a care-based production model.

and express the multi-layered nature of care and being — material traces of shared agency and interdependence. Such models would prioritise listening to the materials, allowing for the unpredictable nature of living systems. It challenges the separation between maker and material, encouraging a partnership that is rooted in care and respect for the agency of all involved, whether they are human, animal, plants or microbial.

They are my daughters. I am their mother. I care for them. I am mothering them. And then I'll eat them.

Interspecies mothering becomes a more fluid and inclusive concept of kinship and creation-with, encompassing a wider array of life forms that are interconnected through processes of co-evolution and mutual care-based ways of interacting. This reimagining of kinship has the potential to reshape our understanding of what it means to make with other beings, encouraging a more holistic and integrated approach to production that recognises the interdependence of all life forms.

While Tronto's notion that care is a species activity which interweaves bodies, selves, and environments is foundational to understanding the ethics

of production,²⁶ her position that care cannot occur in a work of art overlooks the profound, embodied interactions that the action of creating often demands. The act of tending to living materials, such as SCOBYH, challenges this boundary. Care should be an integral part of the work of creation — not restricted to human-to-human or human-to-microorganisms interactions but encompassing all the relations between every holobiont involved in the holobiont or creative network.

Additionally, current discussions on care or animal ethics often avoid discussing death, decay or failure, but their natural concept is integral to any living system. Instead of viewing these processes as interruptions or failures in production, we must acknowledge them as natural, cyclical events in the network of relationships in a holobiont. Death and decomposition are integral aspects of fermentation, SCOBYH creation, and the lifecycle of the materials we nurture. Rather than hiding these realities, we should embrace them, allowing death and decay to shape the aesthetics and ethics of care-based production.

This approach not only redefines our relationship to materials and production but also has the potential to transform how we understand mothering within human social structures. Just as a human caretaker

nurtures a SCOBYH with attentive care, acknowledging its agency and needs, we might begin to rethink human kinship and parenthood as interdependent networks grounded in mutual care and attentiveness, rather than hierarchical dominance. In this broader understanding of mothering, the act of creation and care goes beyond biology and includes the nurturing of diverse forms of life. Together, they contribute to an interconnected, holistic system of co-existence.

ELÍN MARGOT ARMANSDOTTIR

Elin Margot Armansdottir is designer researcher and educator, currently an instructor in the BA Product Design programme at the Iceland University of the Arts. Her design work is characterised by a strong advocacy and constant research into involving the public-user in the design of our near-future day-to-day lives. Through the design of objects, events or experiences, she creates situations that challenge the current status quo and offer glimpses into potential futures. Leveraging the narrative power of objects, she confronts users with disruptive ideologies and immerses them in prospective tomorrows.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bishop, Peyton, Eric R. Pitts, Drew Budner, and Katherine A. Thompson-Witrick, 'Kombucha: Biochemical and Microbiological Impacts on the Chemical and Flavor Profile.' *Food Chemistry Advances* 1 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.focha.2022.100025>.
- Franklin, Kate, and Caroline Till, *Radical Matter: Rethinking Materials for a Sustainable Future*. Thames & Hudson, 2018.
- Galdino Jr., C. J., A. D. Medeiros, J. D. Amorim, et al., 'The Future of Sustainable Fashion: Bacterial Cellulose Biotextile Naturally Dyed.' *Chemical Engineering Transactions* 86 (2021): pp. 1333–38. <https://doi.org/10.3303/CET2186223>.
- Haraway, Donna J., *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- hooks, bell, *All About Love: New Visions*. Harper Perennial, 2000.
- Katz, Sandor E., *The Art of Fermentation: An In-Depth Exploration of Essential Concepts and Processes from Around the World*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012.
- Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Laavanya, D., Shivanand Shirkole, and P. Balasubramanian, 'Current Challenges, Applications and Future Perspectives of SCOBY Cellulose of Kombucha Fermentation.' *Journal of Cleaner Production* 284 (2021): 124703. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.124703>.
- Marco, Maria L., 'Defining How Microorganisms Benefit Human Health.' *Microbial Biotechnology* 14, no. 1 (2020): pp. 35–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1751-7915.13685>.
- Margulis, Lynn, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*. Basic Books, 1998.
- May, Alexander, Shrinath Narayanan, Joe Alcock, Arvind Varsani, Carlo Maley, and Athena Aktipis, 'Kombucha: A Novel Model System for Cooperation and Conflict in a Complex Multi-Species Microbial Ecosystem.' *PeerJ* 7 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.7565>.
- Maynard, Christopher L., Charles O. Elson, Robin D. Hatton, and Casey T. Weaver, 'Reciprocal Interactions of the Intestinal Microbiota and Immune System.' *Nature* 489 (2012): pp. 231–41.

- Morton, Timothy, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Nayak, Rajkishore, Donna Cleveland, Giang Tran, and Frances Joseph, 'Potential of Bacterial Cellulose for Sustainable Fashion and Textile Applications: A Review.' *Journal of Materials Science* 59 (2024): pp. 6685–6710. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10853-024-09577-6>.
- Ogunrinola, Grace A., John O. Oyewale, Oyewumi O. Oshamika, and Grace I. Olasehinde, 'The Human Microbiome and Its Impacts on Health.' *International Journal of Microbiology* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1155/2020/8045646>.
- Ojo, Abidemi Oluranti, and Olga De Smidt, 'Microbial Composition, Bioactive Compounds, Potential Benefits and Risks Associated with Kombucha: A Concise Review.' *Fermentation* 9 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.3390/fermentation9050472>.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, María, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Tronto, Joan C., *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge, 1993.

- 1 C. J. Galdino Jr., A. D. Medeiros, J. D. Amorim, et al., 'The Future of Sustainable Fashion: Bacterial Cellulose Biotextile Naturally Dyed,' *Chemical Engineering Transactions* 86 (2021): pp. 1333–38, <https://doi.org/10.3303/CET2186223>.
- 2 Rajkishore Nayak, Donna Cleveland, Giang Tran, and Frances Joseph, 'Potential of Bacterial Cellulose for Sustainable Fashion and Textile Applications: A Review,' *Journal of Materials Science* 59 (2024): pp. 6685–6710, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10853-024-09577-6>.
- 3 Maria L. Marco, 'Defining How Microorganisms Benefit Human Health,' *Microbial Biotechnology* 14, no. 1 (2020): pp. 35–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1751-7915.13685>.
- 4 Christopher L. Maynard, Charles O. Elson, Robin D. Hatton, and Casey T. Weaver, 'Reciprocal Interactions of the Intestinal Microbiota and Immune System,' *Nature* 489 (2012): pp. 231–41.
- 5 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 164.
- 6 Alexander May, Shrinath Narayanan, Joe Alcock, Arvind Varsani, Carlo Maley, and Athena Aktipis, 'Kombucha: A Novel Model System for Cooperation and Conflict in a Complex Multi-Species Microbial Ecosystem,' *PeerJ* 7 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.7565>.
- 7 D. Laavanya, Shivanand Shirkole, and P. Balasubramanian, 'Current Challenges, Applications and Future Perspectives of SCOBY Cellulose of Kombucha Fermentation,' *Journal of Cleaner Production* 284 (2021): 124703, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.124703>.
- 8 Peyton Bishop, Eric R. Pitts, Drew Budner, and Katherine A. Thompson-Witrick, 'Kombucha: Biochemical and Microbiological Impacts on the Chemical and Flavor Profile,' *Food Chemistry Advances* 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.focha.2022.100025>.
- 9 Abidemi Oluranti Ojo and Olga De Smidt, 'Microbial Composition, Bioactive Compounds, Potential Benefits and Risks Associated with Kombucha: A Concise Review,' *Fermentation* 9 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3390/fermentation9050472>.
- 10 Laavanya et al. 2021.
- 11 May et al. 2019.
- 12 Haraway 2016, p. 164.
- 13 Oluranti Ojo et al. 2023, p. 472.
- 14 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 15 Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 16 Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (Basic Books, 1998), p. 12.
- 17 May et al. 2019.
- 18 Margulis 1998, p. 43.
- 19 Sandor E. Katz, *The Art of Fermentation: An In-Depth Exploration of Essential Concepts and Processes from Around the World* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012), p. 106.
- 20 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (Harper Perennial, 2000), p. 6.
- 21 Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Routledge, 1993), p. 103.
- 22 Tronto 1993, p. 19.
- 23 *Fallandi trjám liggur margt á hjarta (Yes, a falling tree makes a sound (and it has a lot to say))*, curated by Helena Aðalsteinsdóttir (Reykjavík, Kling & Bang, 2021).
- 24 Kate Franklin and Caroline Till, *Radical Matter: Rethinking Materials for a Sustainable Future* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), p. 196.
- 25 María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 4.
- 26 Tronto 1993, p. 103.

FEELING MOVED: A CRITICAL MEDITATION ON FASHION AS EMBODIED SENSORY KNOWLEDGE — HANNAH BERRY, JULIANA LUNA MORA AND VANESSA DUQUE CAMACHO

Abstract

The fashion industry is accelerating at an unprecedented pace, driven by neoliberal consumption and production methods, which often leads to the exploitation of people and the planet. Western-centric paradigms function and thrive through a visual dominance framework that drives fast fashion and mass consumption. In response to these harsh realities, *Moving Garments Meditations* provides a counter-narrative emphasising emotional durability and sensory connection by using somaesthetics, humour and introspective practices, such as yoga and meditation as artistic practice research tools, to pause and critically reflect on these issues. This paper demonstrates how embodied practices can foster deeper personal connection with clothing and have the potential to inspire more sustainable and ethical consumption and production practices at individual, collective and industry levels. 'Feeling Moved: A Critical Meditation on Fashion as Embodied Sensory Knowledge' contributes to the discourse on fashion's practices of care by highlighting the sensory, emotional and introspective dialogue between the fashion industry, our bodies and the natural and built environments that fashion readily exploits.

KEYWORDS: EMBODIED MEDITATION, CRITICAL FASHION, SOMAESTHETICS, HUMOUR, EMOTIONAL DURABILITY

Introduction

'*Moving Garments Meditations: Exercises for Reimagining Fashion Through Sound and Touch*' is a creative practice project presented for the first time at the Dialogical Bodies Conference at The Swedish School of Textiles in Borås in 2024. At this conference, sixteen participants, including fashion design students and lecturers, artists and academics, engaged in a 30-minute-long participatory performance in which they were encouraged to actively reflect on the Western-centric fashion industry through an embodied meditation practice, similar to a yoga class. The session consisted of a sequence of rhythmic and precise body and breath instructions guided by the voice of an artificial intelligence (AI) model emulating Gwyneth Paltrow, a Hollywood actress and lifestyle influencer known as a symbol of wellness in Western popular culture. Her voice was accessible as voiceover technology through an AI text-to-speech application,¹ prompting participants to develop a relationship with their bodies through i) the slow and sensory exploration of the haptic differences noticed on their garments and ii) intimate and collective provocations on the different environmental and social issues that underpin fast fashion supply chains, gendered labour and material lifecycles. The choreography of *Moving Garments Meditation*, designed by the project's research lead (also a yoga and meditation teacher), ensured consistency and accuracy with the energetic and somatic guidelines of the practice of yoga. The script, written by the research team and read by AI Gwyneth Paltrow using a text-to-speech app, followed the narrative arc of a

yoga class; however, it also explored critical themes and common narratives of fast fashion and neoliberal culture. The session was documented through video and photography, and once the moving meditation was finished, participants were invited to write down their reflections of the experience in quiet contemplation.

Historically, fashion, driven by consumer capitalism, has been built upon exploitation, racism and imperialism.² *Moving Garments Meditations* develops a counter-narrative on the relationship between mass-produced garments, bodies and the environment. It moves away from the visually dominant discourse of fashion, which generally conceals exploitative and harmful neoliberal means of production, toward an expanded understanding of fashion as an embodied practice of care.³ Practising care allows us to move beyond neoliberal authoritarianism to 'a new politics, where care is central at every level.'⁴ This is key to promoting more ethical engagement and understanding of the fashion industry's complexities.

This creative work uses a mixed artistic practice methods approach, grounded in embodied knowledge and somaesthetics,⁵ emotional durability⁶ and humour,⁷ allowing for meaning to move between body and mind, for thinking to transform into feeling. Embodied practices such as yoga have the potential to challenge Western-centric paradigms that often separate personal consumption from the global ecosystem in which we exist by positioning the body as an interconnected agent of change. There is extensive scientific research that evidences the benefits of yoga and meditation on psychological and physical wellbeing.⁸ Laughter is an emotional experience that connects people and can reduce negative emotions.⁹ Humour can be used as a 'form of resistance that decentres power and upsets the status quo in a disguised or seemingly benign manner.'¹⁰ And somaesthetics takes the material body seriously as a valuable dimension of human experience and knowledge through the engagement of perception, consciousness and feeling.¹¹

The meditation text was projected onto a wall, and the audio guided by AI Gwyneth Paltrow allowed participants to follow instructions by actively listening and/or reading. By removing the image of fashion and focusing on the body's intimate, tangible and intangible relationship with garments and materials, participants were able to foster new meaningful sensory connections and emotional durability through the intimate dialogue between the wearer and its garments in everyday contexts. Throughout the practice, participants were asked to reflect upon and physically move and breathe through the inequalities, injustices and concealed means of production of fashion, questioning their individual and collective agency. This can be noted in the following edited excerpts of the meditation's script in conversation with participants' post-performance written reflections:

Welcome to *Moving Garments Meditations*: Exercises for Reimagining Fashion Through Sound and Touch. I am an AI-generated Gwyneth Paltrow and will be your guide for the next twenty minutes...

'Laughing at "Gwenyth [sic]."

'Laugh at AI instructions.'

'Funny... which is unusual for yoga practice.'

'I like the humour.'

Please stand in a comfortable position. We will begin by closing our eyes, standing in mountain pose, opening our feet hip width apart, and grounding through the four corners of the feet.

Lift through the crown of your head to find length through your spine. With arms gently resting by your side and palms facing forward, roll your shoulders back a couple of times, releasing tension through the upper back...

'Not dressed for yoga.'

'I felt comfortable, tired but relaxed sometimes insecure, not knowing what to do but then just relaxing was the best option.'

... Soften your face, soften the shoulders away from your ears, and allow yourself to

relax into your body. Bring your attention to your breath, breathing in and out through the nose.

... Inhale, lift your arms up to shoulder height and stretch your arms forward.

Exhale, soften the shoulders away from your ears.

Inhale, turn the palms up towards the sky as if you were holding a pile of textiles.

Exhale, hold this pose and keep the wrists straight. Imagine that the pile of textiles is growing.

Slowly feel the weight increase, the textiles feeling heavier and heavier against your palms.

Inhale, rotate your palms down towards the floor. Exhale, let the pile go. Bring your arms by your side.

Inhale, gently reach your arms all the way up over your head.

Exhale, release them by your side.

Inhale, cross your arms and bring your hands to opposite elbows...

Long, soft exhale. Can you notice how much space exists between your elbow and the sleeve's fabric?...

... Take a moment here as you continue to gently glide your fingertips across and along your elbows. Bring your attention to the space between your fingertips skin, your elbow's skin, and the fabric's skin. Can you feel, listen and touch the subtle changes in their surfaces?

Can you notice their differences? Can you feel your fingertips adapting to the fabric? Can you feel the fabric adapting to your elbow? Stretching its fibres, thinning, breathing, opening and closing as it moulds to your elbow's shape.

Notice if you are touching the fabric or if the fabric is touching you. Feel the intimate relationship between your elbow and the fabric that covers it—the warmth of their skins, the sharing of space...

'Body felt warm, nice room, wondering what the "audience" were there for.'



Figure 1. Participants standing in front of a text projection and feeling the sensations in their elbows. Photo from author's personal collection. Moving Garments Meditations at the Dialogical Bodies Conference, Borås, 2024.



Figure 2. Eight participants standing holding their arms towards the sky. Photo from author's personal collection. Moving Garments Meditations at the Dialogical Bodies Conference, Borås, 2024.

... Exhale, feel your hands against your jumper's fabric. Gently massage your elbows with your hands. Can you feel the friction of the fabric's fibres against the skin of your elbow?

Take a deep inhale through the nose and feel the subtle friction of your elbow skin touching the material.

... Keeping your eyes closed, bring your attention to your breath.

Notice that the breath travels all the way up to your fingertips on the inhale.

Feel the breath travel down your arms on the exhale.

Inhale, bring your attention to the blood flow down your arms.

Exhale, do you feel your shoulders getting tired? Do you feel numbness and discomfort? A feeling of weakness and instability in the arms?

Take your time to slowly release the arms all the way down. Allow this sensation to gradually fade away...

'Being led by AI with its glitches and issues gave the practice a lightness and a bit of humour that may not have been possible if led by a person.'

... Keep your eyes closed. Do you feel numb when you make, produce, consume and wear fashion?

Focus on the painful sensation that lingers in your elbow as a reminder of how we are connected, resulting from a series of choices and relationships in the rush of wearing, making, consuming and producing fashion...

Gently bring your hands to the floor or to your shins and bend your knees as much as you need to...

... Take a deep, long inhale as you continue to gently rub your toes.

Soft exhale and feel the textures of your socks in friction with your feet.

Open your eyes.

Take a moment here. Notice the different fibres of your socks, feel the fibres through your fingertips...



Figure 3. Participants are in a forward fold position exploring their big toes as activation sites for deep reflection on the materiality of their socks and who made them. Photo from author's personal collection. Moving Garments Meditations at the Dialogical Bodies Conference, Borås, 2024.

... Close your eyes as you come back to your breath.

Inhale through the nose. Do you know what your socks are made of?

Exhale through the nose. Can you tell if they are a cotton-polyester blend? Are they Merino wool? Acrylic? Alpaca? Nylon? Spandex? Bamboo?

Inhale, halfway lift, lift your chest, hands to thighs or shins.

Exhale, forward fold your hands to the floor, bend your knees if you need. Can you feel the different textures and fibres from your socks?

Inhale, are they soft?

Exhale, are they silky?...

'Socks is good thing to mention 'cause even conscious consumer (like me) don't know where to get good ones.'

'Socks make the body feel smooth, the hand glides, but skin creates resistance.'

'I felt a deep sensation between the body and the fibres of my clothing.'

'I'm aware of how the garment mutes the proprioceptive sense.'

... Inhale to rise, slowly stacking up your spine. Reach your arms towards the sky, straighten your legs, exhale, bend your knees forward, and fold your hands to the floor or to your shins.

Inhale halfway, lift, exhale, refold and bend through the knees as much as you need.

Soften in this pose.

Notice the subtle differences as the fibres get smaller and smaller and smaller to your touch. Can you notice the microfibers in your socks? Can you notice the microplastics from the elastane in your socks?...

'Fashion in this moment is limited to smell choice of material and sensory qualities of garment that gives me comfort and becomes kind of invisible to the user.'

... Inhale, rise to stand, reach your arms to the sky, active through the fingertips, exhale, chair pose, bend your knees as you move your hips back like you were sitting on a chair.



Figure 4. Participants in chair pose reaching their arms towards the sky, imagining where the microfibrils from their socks have travelled. Photo from author's personal collection. *Moving Garments Meditations* at the Dialogical Bodies Conference, Borås, 2024.

... Listen closely to the sounds around you. Listen closely to the sounds inside you. Can you hear your heartbeat? Can you hear your breath travelling in and out your nose? Down your spine, down your legs, all the way down to your feet and your big toes?...

... Can you hear the microplastics from your socks?

Exhale, re-fold, listen to the microplastics from your socks.

Take a moment here. Can you feel them as they are released into the air, entering

your body through your nose? Can you feel them brushing gently against the hairs inside your nostrils?...

... Inhale, return to the chair pose, bend your knees, and raise your arms. Feel the cold air filled with microplastics go in your nose.

Exhale, forward fold, hands to the floor, and feel the warm breath as you release all the air.

Inhale, back to chair pose, arms up or to prayer position.

Stay here for the exhale.

Sit deeper in your chair, feeling the microplastics from your socks release into the environment, accumulating in the bodies of the people around you and travelling to nearby cities, forests, rivers and lakes.

Deep breath in...

'The exercise made me super aware of the uncomfortable dimensions of the garments I'm currently wearing.'

'It felt very vivid and as if I could feel them enter through my nose.'

'I found this very disturbing!'

... Exhale, forward fold, hands to the floor, feel the microplastics accumulating in multiple bodies of water and wildlife...

'The movement and questions about my perception of smell, sensation touch and political aspects related to it (polluted particles) made me even more aware of choices I make every day as a maker, a designer, a human.'

... Inhale, keeping your eyes closed, and slowly rise up, stacking vertebrae by vertebrae into standing; the neck comes last. Bring your arms by your side as you roll your shoulders back a few times, softening through your face and softening your shoulders away from your ears. Feel your body supported by your feet, balanced and anchored to the ground.

How does this make you feel? Does it make you feel angry? Sad?

Hopeless? Does it make you feel guilty?

Take a long, deep breath, filling your whole body with air.

Big exhale, sighing it all out.

Release all negative individual feelings of shame, guilt and fear.

Come back to your natural breath...

'Even though I do this very often it is interesting to breathe things in and out making it much more close and visual.'

... Step your feet wide apart, three to four feet in parallel, toes slightly facing inwards.

Bring your attention to the memory of when you last bought socks. Did you buy them at a global, fast-fashion corporation such as H&M, Adidas, Nike, or New Balance? Did you buy a pack of seven pairs for the price of one? How much did you spend?

Open your eyes to place your left hand underneath your head...

'I felt moments of "good" fashion citizen as well, knowing my garments and buying patterns.'

... Inhale, twisting from your torso, reach your right arm to the sky. How transparent do you think these corporations are with their supply chains?

How responsible are they for the levels of toxic chemicals being released into the air?

Release your right hand to the ground and bring it underneath your head.

Inhale, reach your left arm to the sky.

Exhale, how responsible are they for the microplastics released into the sweatshops where your socks were manufactured? How responsible are they for the levels of toxic chemicals entering the lungs of the women who work here?...

'It makes me think about the really shallow relationship we have with materials.'

... Release both hands to the mat, bend through your knees, and bring your hips to the floor.

Sit on the floor, closing your eyes and bringing your feet together in a diamond shape, opening through the knees and the hips.

Keeping your eyes closed, gently remove your socks, one by one, gently removing your feelings of anger, guilt and despair.

Put them to the side and return to your big toes using only your index fingers.

Take a moment here to come back to the present moment.

Take a deep inhale, glide your fingertips through your toenails, feeling the smooth texture of your nails, your nail polish, or the subtle chips of your two-month-old pedicure...



Figure 5. Participants sitting on the floor, reconnecting with their bare big toe after removing their socks, and their frustration towards global corporations. Photo from author's personal collection. Moving Garments Meditations at the Dialogical Bodies Conference, Borås, 2024.

Bring your attention to the last time that you visited a nail salon.

Can you remember the women who carefully trimmed, polished, buffed and shaped your toenails? Can you remember their names, what they looked like, what you spoke about? Can you remember the nail salon's atmosphere, the scents coming from the fumes, the nail polishes, the flame retardants, and the harmful chemicals inhaled by your underpaid nail technician?

Take a moment to reflect on the long hours of low pay, few or no breaks, no benefits, and a lack of proper protection from the hazardous chemicals your nail technician endures...

'An oscillation between the body, feeling calm, and a repellent sense of harm being constantly caused.'

... Come back to your breath.

Inhale, leading with the chest, bend your body forward bringing your head as close to your feet as possible. Exhale, take in the scents coming from your big toes.

Inhale, smell the wool, cotton or polyester blend from your socks still lingering on your skin.

Exhale, can you smell your sweat?

Deep inhale, can you smell the nail polish?

Soft exhale, can you smell the nail polish remover? The foot and heel balm? The moisturising foot therapy cream? The sugar scrub exfoliant?

Can you smell your skincare regime?...

'The context cues kept bringing the quiet HORROR!'

Inhale, lift your chest and head up, hands to knees, straighten through the arms, and roll your shoulders back.

Exhale, lead with an open chest, forward fold. Head to your feet, release all the air out. Release all negative feelings, release the hard truths of neoliberalism.

Inhale, come back to the gentle stroking of your fingers against your toes, glide your fingertips along, around and across your big toes. Feel the hair on its shaft; the underneath creases where the toe meets the foot. Feel the immensity of its landscapes, the moulded shape it has taken after your favourite shoes. Feel your feet, keeping you connected to the earth, grounding, balancing, and anchoring you.

Take your time to gently come to lay on your back...



Figure 6. Participants lying on the floor, breathing deeply as they notice the smells of the room and imagine the microfibres from their socks travelling into their lungs. Photo from author's personal collection. Moving Garments Meditations at the Dialogical Bodies Conference, Borås, 2024.

... Come back to your breath.

Take a deep inhale through your nose, softening your body against the floor.

Long exhale as you release the tension through your body

Deep inhale. What can you smell?

Are there any body odours lingering in the air? Is your scent embodied in the clothes you are wearing? Do you think other people can smell you? Can you notice other people's scents?

Keeping your eyes closed, notice the different fabrics you are wearing against the floor. You might also notice the different scents they have absorbed. Notice your sweat, captured in the fibres that have been held hostage through washing.

Take a deep inhale, fill your lungs with air. Gently run your hands over the surface you are lying on.

Long exhale. Can you feel the microfiber dust from everyone's socks sprinkled over the ground?

Inhale, imagine these microfibres being sucked through your airways, tumbling down the back of your throat. Exhale, imagine they have reached their resting place in your lungs, where they will stay forever and ever, and ever...

'I could feel them enter through my nose.'

... Continue with this breathing.

Notice the weight of your body heavy against the surface below. Are there any gaps between your body and the floor? Feel your body melting into the floor, filling the gaps like water from an iceberg seeping into the ocean under the hot sun.

Inhale, feel your sweat, your tears, your moisturiser expelling from your pores, melting into the ground below you.

Soft exhale, completely melt into the ground. Imagine yourself washing your clothing. Imagine the microfibre shedding into the waterways, spreading into the environment, and circling back into your body with every breath.

Inhale as you feel your skin begin to shed from your body and fuse into the surface below you, unable to escape.

Exhale, bring your hands to rest on your stomach. If you can, move them under your clothing to rest on your belly button.

Inhale as you circle your fingertips around, inside, across and along your belly button.

Exhale, what does it feel like?

Inhale, can you feel the presence of any tiny hairs?

... Inhale as you feel the fabric that sits between your belly and your fingers.

Exhale, what does it feel like? How does it feel different to your belly button skin?

Start to pinch the fabric. Can you hear it? What does it sound like? How many kilograms of material was extracted from the earth to make the fabric? How much herbicide and pesticide were sprayed onto the growing fibres? Choking farmers, disrupting micro-communities, and exposing ecosystems to toxic materials during the process...

... Exhale as you notice how this makes you feel. How many hundreds of litres of water and chemicals have run through the fibres? How many hands do you think this garment has passed through before it got to you? How would you feel if you were processed across the other side of the world, meeting hundreds of people only fleetingly? One of ten thousand replicas. Transported to

hang in a shop, tried on by multiple people, stretched over bodies, dropped onto floors, and wedged back onto racks with your replicas. Purchased to be worn without being truly understood, without awareness of the skill and craft involved in production and manufacturing...

'It is different to reflect through this many-medium, directly reflecting/touching your own garments. It is less abstract, more personal.'

... Inhale. What will you do once you no longer wear this garment?

Exhale. Why would you no longer wear this garment?

Notice how you are feeling as you rest in this pose, nothing to do, nowhere to go, like the piles of fashion that are clogging landfill sites.

Imagine your belly button melting through your clothing, extruding through the weave or knit like millions of worms. What does this sound like? Like a stampede of feet toward a sale rack? Your clothes are completely saturated, and you no longer exist as a human being.

All that remains are your clothes draped over the floor.

Empty.

Alone.

Imagine looking down at them from above.

What do you notice? Can you see the elements of wear on your clothes? Will they be worn again? Your body without your body? Your material body?

Open your eyes...

'It was so nice to move my body... thank you!'



Figure 7. Participants reflecting and documenting their embodied meditation experience. Photo from author's personal collection. Moving Garments Meditations at the Dialogical Bodies Conference, Borås, 2024.

Conclusion

'I think it could be an effective way to make people think about clothing industry, issues, embodied and in a "relaxed" situation rather than being lectured to.'

'It would be amazing if these kind of guided meditations were used in offices, schools, hospitals.'

Moving Garments Meditations engaged participants with the broader political and environmental issues interconnected with wearing, purchasing and producing fashion.

This was done through a novel artistic research methodology grounded in somaesthetics, humour and embodied practices, such as yoga and meditation. As noted in the written reflections, moving, breathing and feeling through the critical fashion industry issues allows for more meaningful connections and a deeper appreciation of the relationship between bodies, materials and the natural and built environments. As such, this creative work holds the potential to shift individual and collective patterns of consumption, foster emotional durability and inspire more mindful and responsible ways of engaging with the clothes we wear every day. Through future iterations of this project, we aim to promote emotional durability through embodied practices to achieve long-term social and environmental well-being because somaesthetics engages with not only the body's rhythms and playfulness but also meaning-making processes, social values, self-care and empathy with others.¹² It must also be acknowledged that the participants' experiences of *Moving Garments Meditations* are intrinsically personal and subjective. Therefore, the project would benefit from further testing to evaluate its long-term impact on individuals or whether the practice is fostering a temporary sense of relief.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alsadir, Nuar, *Animal Joy*. Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022.
- Baier, Annette C., 'Caring about Caring: A Reply to Frankfurt.' *Synthese* 53, no. 2 (1982): pp. 273-90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20115803>.
- Burcikova, Michaela, 'I Like It Because It's Been Worn Before: The Sensory Longevity of Worn Clothing.' In *Recycling and Lifetime Management in the Textile and Fashion Sector*, pp. 48-65. CRC Press, 2024.
- , 'Mundane Durability: The Everyday Practice of Allowing Clothes to Last.' *PLATE: Product Lifetimes and the Environment* (2021): pp. 1-7.
- Chatzidakis, Andreas, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*. Verso, 2020.
- Entwistle, Joanne, 'Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice.' *Fashion Theory* 4, no. 3 (2000): pp. 323-47. <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270400778995471>.
- Fletcher, Kate, 'Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Systems Change.' *Fashion Practice* 2, no. 2 (2010): pp. 259-65. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175693810X12774625387594>.
- Franzo, Paolo, 'Fashion as a Practice of Care.' *Fashion Highlight* 1, no. 1 (2023): pp. 20-27.
- Gardetti, Miguel Angel, Rosa Patricia Larios-Francia, and Miguel Ángel Gardetti, *Sustainability Challenges in the Fashion Industry: Civilization Crisis, Decolonization, Cultural Legacy, and Transitions*. 1st ed. Springer Nature Singapore, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-0349-8>.
- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano, 'Creating a Caring Society.' *Contemporary Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2000): pp. 84-94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2654934>.
- Harper, Kathryn H., *Aesthetic Sustainability: Product Design and Sustainable Usage*. Routledge, 2018.
- Höök, Kristina (ed.), 'Soma Design Theory.' In *Designing with the Body*, MIT Press, 2018.
- Nugent, Nicole R., Leslie Brick, Michael F. Arme, Audrey R. Tyrka, Kathryn K. Ridout, and Lisa A. Uebelacker, 'Benefits of Yoga on IL-6: Findings from a Randomized Controlled Trial of Yoga for Depression.' *Behavioral Medicine* 47, no. 1 (2021): pp. 21-30.
- Payne, Alice, and Judith Hickson, 'Subtropical Fashioning: Examples of Care and Community in Twentieth Century Fashion Systems.' In *Fashioning Sustainment*, special issue of *Fashion Studies* 3, no. 1 (2024): pp. 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.38055/FST030106>.
- Shusterman, Richard, *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139094030>.
- , 'FITS OF FASHION: THE SOMAESTHETICS OF STYLE.' In *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion* (2016): pp. 91-106.
- Speechify*, version 2023. iOS app.
- Stringer, Toija, Adrian R. Payne, and Gary Mortimer, 'As Cheap as Humanly Possible: Why Consumers Care Less about Worker Welfare.' *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 27, no. 4 (2022): pp. 717-37. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-06-2021-0158>.
- Wainwright, Noreen, 'The Benefits of Yoga.' *Mental Health Practice* 15, no. 10 (2012): p. 9.
- Weinberg, Matthew, Tove Hammond, and Richard Cummins, 'The Impact of Laughter Yoga on Subjective Well-being: A Pilot Study.' *Humour Research* (2013): pp. 24-34.

HANNAH BERRY

Hannah Berry is a multidisciplinary fashion practitioner whose material-led creative practice explores the realms of wearable, sculptural, installation and immaterial experiences. Hannah is primarily interested in social engagement art and how this can drive social change through human interaction with materials, using humour to foster a sense of belonging. Passionate about community connections, Hannah aims to encourage a shift in thinking and care practices by drawing attention to environmental and social issues that exist in material eco-systems. Hannah holds a BA (Hons) in Fashion Design and is currently completing a MA in Cultural Material Conservation at the University of Melbourne.

hannahberry@rmit.edu.au

<https://www.hannahberry.com.au/>

JULIANA LUNA MORA

Dr. Juliana Luna Mora is an early career researcher and lecturer at the RMIT School of Fashion and Textiles. Juliana works at the intersection of critical luxury and fashion, wellness and consumer culture. Juliana specifically looks into ethical luxury consumption products, body-mind practices and spiritual lifestyles and experiences. Through her research, Juliana aims to support a more just and inclusive society. Juliana has published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Luxury, Fashion, Film & Consumption*, *International Journal of Fashion Studies* and *Art Monthly Australasia*. Juliana's currently working on the monograph *The Commodification of Wellness: Conscious Luxury, Western Yoga and Fashion*, to be published by Routledge in 2026.

Juliana.luna@rmit.edu.au

<https://academics.rmit.edu.au/juliana-luna>

VANESSA DUQUE CAMACHO

Vanessa Duque Camacho is a fashion practitioner and Associate Lecturer at the RMIT University School of Fashion and Textiles. Her practice-led research explores how industrialisation and consumption affect garment conception and definition. Vanessa's work delves into the collective imaginary of denim, experimenting with its materiality, traditional use, and aesthetic deviations. She aims to challenge conventional perspectives on denim and garment production, fostering dialogue and alternative frames of reference. Vanessa holds an MA in Fashion Design from RMIT University and a BA (Hons) in Fashion Design from Colegiatura Colombiana in South America. She has six years of industry experience in artisanal and denim design.

Vanessa.duque.camacho@rmit.edu.au

<https://vanessaduque.studio/>

Social Media (Instagram)

@han_nah_ber_ry

@vaduque

@jlunamora

Research Project:

@movinggarmentsmeditation

- 1 Speechify, version 2023, iOS app.
- 2 Miguel Ángel Gardetti, 'Sustainability Challenges in the Fashion Industry: The "Other" Fashion: Civilisation Crisis, Decolonisation, Cultural Legacy, and Transitions,' in *Sustainable Textiles: Production, Processing, Manufacturing & Chemistry* (2023): p. 1.
- 3 Andreas Chatzidakis, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (Verso, 2020); Alice Payne and Judith Hickson, 'Subtropical Fashioning: Examples of Care and Community in Twentieth Century Fashion Systems,' in *Fashioning Sustainment, special issue of Fashion Studies* 3, no. 1 (2024): pp. 1-29; Annette C. Baier, 'Caring about Caring: A Reply to Frankfurt,' *Synthese* 53, no. 2 (1982): pp. 273-90, <http://www.istor.org/stable/20115803>; Evelyn Nakano Glenn, 'Creating a Caring Society,' *Contemporary Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2000): pp. 84-94, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2654934>.
- 4 Chatzidakis 2020, pp. 50-52.
- 5 Richard Shusterman, 'FITS OF FASHION: THE SOMAESTHETICS OF STYLE,' in *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion* (2016): pp. 91-106; Kristina Höök, 'Why We Need Soma Design,' in *Designing with the Body* (MIT Press, 2018), pp. 3-26; Kristina Höök, 'Soma Design Theory,' in *Designing with the Body* (MIT Press, 2018), pp. 1-26; Kristina Höök, 'Politics of the Body,' in *Designing with the Body* (MIT Press, 2018), chapter 8.
- 6 Michaela Burcikova, 'I Like It Because It's Been Worn Before: The Sensory Longevity of Worn Clothing,' in *Recycling and Lifetime Management in the Textile and Fashion Sector* (CRC Press, 2024), pp. 48-65; Michaela Burcikova, 'Mundane Durability: The Everyday Practice of Allowing Clothes to Last,' *PLATE: Product Lifetimes and the Environment* (2021): pp. 1-7; Toija Stringer, Adrian R. Payne and Gary Mortimer, 'As Cheap as Humanly Possible: Why Consumers Care Less About Worker Welfare,' *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 27, no. 4 (2022): pp. 717-37, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-06-2021-0158>.
- 7 Matthew Weinberg, Tove Hammond and Richard Cummins, 'The Impact of Laughter Yoga on Subjective Well-being: A Pilot Study,' *Humour Research* (2013): pp. 24-34; Nuair Alsadir, *Animal Joy* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022).
- 8 Nicole R. Nugent, Leslie Brick, Michael F. Armey, Audrey R. Tyrka, Kathryn K. Ridout and Lisa A. Uebelacker, 'Benefits of Yoga on IL-6: Findings from a Randomized Controlled Trial of Yoga for Depression,' *Behavioral Medicine* 47, no. 1 (2021): pp. 21-30.
- 9 Matthew Weinberg, Tove Hammond and Richard Cummins, 'The Impact of Laughter Yoga on Subjective Well-being: A Pilot Study,' *Humour Research* (2013): p. 24.
- 10 Alsadir 2022, p. 116.
- 11 Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 12 Kristina Höök, 'Soma Design Theory,' in *Designing with the Body* (The MIT Press, 2018), p. 11.

WHAT MAKES CLOTHES MEANINGFUL TO YOU?

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CLOTHES, ON CLOTHES, AS A TOOL FOR MEANING CREATION IN FASHION DESIGN

— KASIA ZOFIA GORNIAK

Abstract

As the functional necessity for new clothing decreases, or even disappears completely, there is a need for experimentation with alternative ways of instilling meaning and purpose in fashion design. The workshop series 'What Makes Clothes Meaningful to You?', which was part of my doctoral research 'Dialogical Narratives as Method and Matter for Meaning Creation in Fashion Design Practice,' aims to generate intimate and critical discussions around clothing and fashion design, production, acquisition, use and disposal. Subsequently, participants' hand-written and drawn insights on the use phase of clothes will be translated into matter for meaning creation in the design phase. The research draws from and builds on existing garment-wearer attachment theories through practice.

KEYWORDS: MEANING CREATION, DIALOGUE, COLLECTIVE, PARTICIPATORY FASHION DESIGN, EMOTIONAL DURABILITY

'What Makes Clothes Meaningful to You?' is an on-going workshop series carried out as part of my practice-led doctoral research, 'Dialogical Narratives as Method and Matter for Meaning Creation in Fashion Design Practice.' The workshops invite reflective responses and discussions from participants on personal meanings, experiences and challenges related to clothes, through writing and drawing, on the surfaces of some actual clothes. The first round of five workshops took place from January to May



Figure 1. Participant at Workshop #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.

2024, with workshop number four taking place at the Dialogical Bodies conference.¹

My research is situated in the fields of expanded and sustainable fashion design. It aims to generate findings around meaning creation to support transitions towards greater garment-wearer attachment and longevity. My main research question is: how can meaning be designed into garments? And more specifically, how can dialogical narratives be utilised to create a meaningful fashion design process and outcomes?

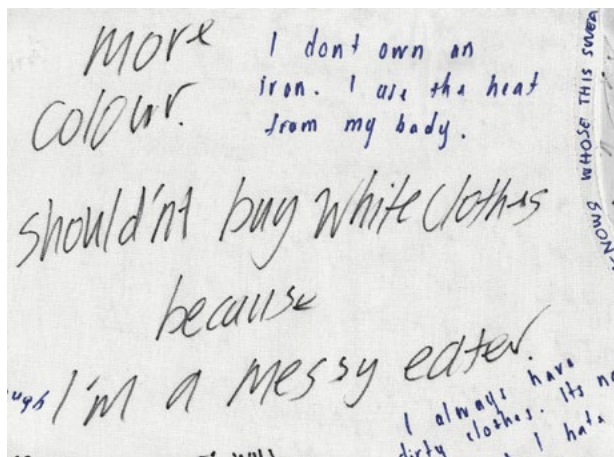
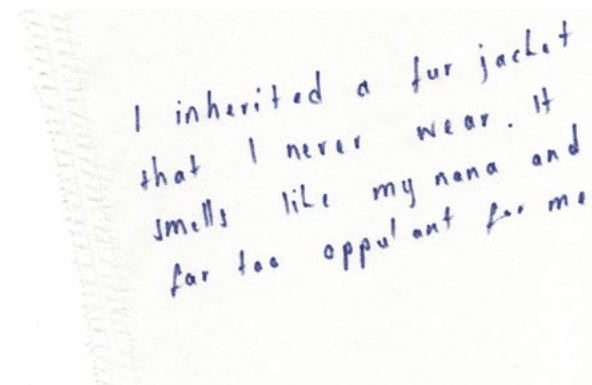


Figure 2. Detail, contribution from Workshop #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.



Detail, contributions from Workshops #2, POUH art centre & #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.

Most clothing produced industrially today lacks emotional meaning or purpose. Given the existing and projected negative impacts of the industry on the world's resources,² as well as the excessive amount of clothing already in existence, stronger justification is needed to produce anything more. Aesthetic novelty or even utility

are no longer reason enough. While technologies, infrastructure and policies are emerging that will help steer future garment design and manufacturing towards de-growth, longevity and circularity, these alone will not necessarily solve the problem. According to Hall, Hasling and Ræbild,³ designers lack 'knowledge and know-how' around consumers' perspectives. Sakaue, Mizuno and Tsuda⁴ suggest that 'the design of consumer-inclusive experiences are needed to develop models that challenge the fashion system paradigm.' I argue that participatory practice that involves wearers in the research and design stages can lead to a better understanding of how to navigate and account for their tendencies and aid in positive shifts in both the design and use phases.

My research attempts to reassess what actually makes clothes worth producing through the development of an experiential, participatory design process. The task of designing meaning into garments is difficult to undertake, as, ultimately, meaning is something that is ascribed by the wearer.⁵ Collecting insights from individuals about their emotional connection to their clothes is well established in design and anthropological fields, often framed under user studies or wardrobe studies. Falck Øien⁶ defines both the mode of acquisition and the aftercare of garments as the main generators of meaning, while Kohtala, Hyysalo and Whalen⁷ link the de-commodification of market goods to an increase in their meaning, as their status shifts from good to possession. Errázuriz and Müller⁸ define sixteen attributes that describe their study's six hundred participants' most cherished garments. The design attribute, 'associated with the shape, colour, details of clothing, patterns or motifs, etc.,' occurred most frequently, across 47.1% of responses. Neto and Ferreira⁹ speculate about the creation of emotional durability being in wearers' abilities to treat their garments as they would treat friends.

I am building on these theories and studies in practice, with the main difference being that I am also treating the generated insights as creative or artistic

design matter, that is, visual or tactile content which can be fed through a design process. This way there is the possibility for meaning and purpose to emerge hand-in-hand with design and form, all rooted in and created through collective social experiences. The act of having a conversation can be a vulnerable position to put oneself in.¹⁰ The workshop series explores if the emotional weight of a conversation can be transferred into a garment, instilling a new kind of meaning or purpose.



Figure 3. Participants at Workshop #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.

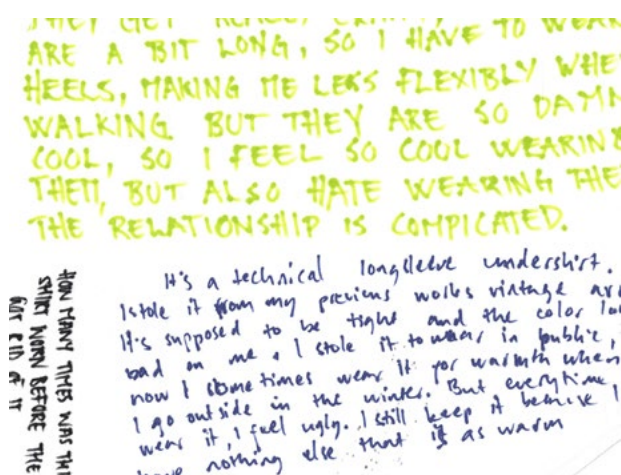


Figure 4. Detail, contributions from Workshops #2, POUISH art centre, #3, OsloMet & #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.

The premise of the workshops is to gather participants and facilitate hand-written and/or drawn dialogues, based around pre-formed prompts, on the surfaces of some second-hand shirts. The prompts include, for example:

What makes clothes meaningful to you?

Describe a garment you don't like but still wear. Why don't you like it, and why do you still wear it?

If you were a piece of clothing, describe what you would be like.

If you could promote something on this shirt, what would it be?

Participants begin by reading through these and any contributions from previous workshops before proceeding to add their own. They can try on the shirts and move around the space to free up the flow of thought. They can rotate from shirt to shirt, or focus on just one. They can also leave their own questions, enabling dialogues between participants across different workshops. At the end of each workshop, a short collective reading session takes place, in which some of the newly generated input is shared aloud. The exercise aims to give participants pause to reflect on what makes clothes meaningful to them — why they hold on to certain things, dispose of others, wear some things more than others and acquire certain things in the first place. It also opens up discussions about the positives and negatives of the current state of clothing and fashion in general. Each iteration differs slightly, depending on the setting and on what did or did not work in the preceding workshop.

The workshop method allows me to engage in a personal way with many voices, rather than deep diving into a single person's point-of-view or those of a select few. Inviting participants to write and draw on a garment surface is a way to record and preserve meaning from a dynamic social experience in a tangible way. The garment as a canvas also acts as an additional trigger for responses. Button-up shirts were

chosen for the first round of workshops for purely functional reasons; their flat, woven structure is easier to write on than a knitted one, and the 'menswear' cut means larger, uninterrupted surface areas to write on. I consider everything that occurs within the workshops as data, alongside the accumulated layers of content on the surfaces of the shirts.



Figure 5. Participants at Workshop #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.



Figure 6. Participants at Workshop #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.

I am analysing the data through two lenses: experience-oriented and design-oriented. The experiential lens focuses on developing the workshoping method as mutually fulfilling and beneficial for participants and facilitator. Some participants have described the experience as meditative or therapeutic; they enjoy the shared silence that comes when communicating through writing or drawing rather than talking. The design lens focuses on the viability of the workshops as a meaningful fashion design process which can generate meaningful design outcomes.



Figure 7. Detail, contribution from Workshop #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.



Figure 8. Participant at Workshop #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.

The content from workshops one to four has been transcribed, and eight categories emerged from an initial thematic analysis:

1 'If There Were No Others'

Descriptions of dressing habits for the home in comparison to dressing for public or social spheres. It also includes ways participants imagine they would dress if they were the last person on Earth.

2 'Sinon Rien Ne Compte' (Otherwise Nothing Matters)

The importance or lack of importance of discussing the meaning of clothes and fashion against the backdrop the world's vast issues.

3 'Underwear Which Was Made of Holes'

Descriptions or drawings of garments participants have given away or thrown away.

4 'Clothes Mean Stains'
Meanings of clothes.

5 'Fashion Is What Other People Do'
Meanings of fashion.

6 'Would I Be a Base Layer, Always Covered Up?'
What participants imagine themselves to be like if they were a garment.

7 'It Smells Like My Nana'
Narratives on inherited clothes.

8 'I Don't Own an Iron. I Use the Heat From My Body.'
Descriptions from the use phase of clothes, including care and repair.



Figure 9. Participant (Madeleine) at Workshop #4, Dialogical Bodies conference, 2024.

The first round of workshops took place mainly in academic, artistic or design-related settings, as these offered a safe space to test out and refine the method, albeit with a limitation on the quantity and diversity of participants. A second round of workshops is scheduled to take place during 2025, narrowing in scope to build on the eight categories but broadening and diversifying in participant demographics and settings. Following this, I plan to develop a series of design artefacts which test the use of the data in practice. Each artefact will represent one of the eight categories. For example, the 'If There Were No Others' artefact will be designed based on the accumulated insights on dressing for the home rather than dressing public or social spheres and the ways participants imagine they would dress if they were the last person on Earth. The materiality of the artefact would reflect the findings in its cut, fit and in the textile techniques used. The handwritten and drawn markings could be incorporated in some cases as artworks in the artefacts, through, for example, jacquard or embroidery. With this series, I can then pose the question, are these clothes meaningful? Are these worthy of being produced today?

At this early stage, I can speculate that working with a methodology that combines participatory design and user studies may offer a new way to create meaning in fashion practice, positively impacting emotional durability and garment-wearer attachment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 101060343, Textile Recycling EXcellence (T-REX project).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dissanayake, Kanchana, 'Does Mass Customization Enable Sustainability in the Fashion Industry?' In *Fashion Industry – An Itinerary Between Feelings and Technology*, edited by Riccardo Beltramo, Annalisa Romani and Paolo Cantore. London: IntechOpen, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.88281>.
- Errázuriz, Tomás, and Emilia Müller, 'My Cherished Garment: Rethinking Fashion, Attachment and Durability.' In *Fashion Theory* 27, no. 3 (2022): pp. 327-354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2022.2100481>.
- Falck Øien, Ida, 'Transactional Aesthetics—And So Can You.' PhD diss., Oslo National Academy of the Arts, 2022. <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/3000221>.
- Hall, Cathryn Anneka, Karen Marie Hasling and Ulla Ræbild, 'Learning Circular Design from Within the Fashion Industry: A ReSuit Project Case Study.' In *Proceedings of the 5th PLATE Conference*, edited by Kirsi Niinimäki and Kirsti Cura, 31 May–2 June 2023, Helsinki, Finland, pp. 380–385.
- Hayashi, Nakako, personal communication. November 11, 2022.
- Kohtala, Cindy, Sampsa Hyysalo, and Jack Whalen, 'A Taxonomy of Users' Active Design Engagement in the 21st Century.' *Design Studies* (2020): pp. 27–54, at p. 67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2019.11.008>.
- Neto, Ana, and João Ferreira, 'Lasting Bonds: Understanding Wearer–Clothing Relationships Through Interpersonal Love-Theory.' *Fashion Theory* 27, no. 5 (2023): pp. 677–707. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2023.2170706>.
- Niinimäki, Kirsi, and Ilpo Koskinen, 'I Love this Dress, It Makes Me Feel Beautiful! Empathic Knowledge in Sustainable Design.' In *Design Journal* 14, no. 2 (2011): pp. 165–186.
- Sakaue, Moe, Daijiro Mizuno, and Kazutoshi Tsuda, 'The Designer's Role in Fashion

System Transitions: A Critical Review of Transition Design.' In *Proceedings of IASDR 2023: Life-Changing Design*, edited by Daniela De Sainz Molestina, Laura Galluzzo, Francesca Rizzo, and Davide Spallazzo, pp. 9–13. October 2023, Milan, Italy. <https://doi.org/10.21606/iasdr.2023.826>.

KASIA ZOFIA GORNIK

Kasia Zofia Gorniak is a fashion designer and doctoral researcher from Melbourne, who has been based in Helsinki since 2014. Her research commenced in 2023 at Aalto University. Her topic, 'Dialogical Narratives as Method and Matter for Meaningful Fashion Design Practice,' deals with participation in the design process as a means towards longevity and de-growth in the fields of fashion and textile. In 2018, Kasia established the knitwear practice 'talking through our bodies,' creating garments through performative and participatory design processes. The practice explores the notion of clothing, when worn, being a facilitator of communication between bodies.

- 1 The Dialogical Bodies conference took place at The Swedish School of Textiles, April 19 and 20, 2024.
- 2 Kanchana Dissanayake, 'Does Mass Customization Enable Sustainability in the Fashion Industry?' in *Fashion Industry-An Itinerary Between Feelings and Technology*, ed. Riccardo Beltramo, Annalisa Romani, and Paolo Cantore (London: IntechOpen, 2019), p. 2, <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.88281>.
- 3 Cathryn Anneka Hall, Karen Marie Hasling, and Ulla Ræbild, 'Learning Circular Design from Within the Fashion Industry: A ReSuit Project Case Study,' in *Proceedings of the 5th PLATE Conference*, ed. Kirsi Niinimäki and Kirsti Cura, 31 May–2 June 2023, Helsinki, Finland (2023): p. 384.
- 4 Moe Sakaue, Daijiro Mizuno, and Kazutoshi Tsuda, 'The Designer's Role in Fashion System Transitions: A Critical Review of Transition Design,' in *Proceedings of IASDR 2023: Life-Changing Design*, ed. Daniela De Sainz Molestina, Laura Galluzzo, Francesca Rizzo, and Davide Spallazzo, 9–13 October 2023, Milan, Italy (2023), p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.21606/iasdr.2023.826>.
- 5 Kirsi Niinimäki and Ilpo Koskinen, 'I Love This Dress, It Makes Me Feel Beautiful! Empathic Knowledge in Sustainable Design,' *Design Journal* 14, no. 2 (2011): pp. 165–186.
- 6 Ida Falck Øien, 'Transactional Aesthetics–And So Can You' (PhD diss., Oslo National Academy of the Arts, 2022), <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/3000221>.
- 7 Cindy Kohtala, Sampsa Hyysalo, and Jack Whalen, 'A Taxonomy of Users' Active Design Engagement in the 21st Century,' *Design Studies* (2020): p. 67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2019.11.008>.
- 8 Tomás Errázuriz and Emilia Müller, 'My Cherished Garment: Rethinking Fashion, Attachment and Durability,' *Fashion Theory* 27, no. 3 (2022): p. 336, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2022.2100481>.
- 9 Ana Neto and João Ferreira, 'Lasting Bonds: Understanding Wearer–Clothing Relationships Through Interpersonal Love-Theory,' *Fashion Theory* 27, no. 5 (2023): pp. 677–707, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2023.2170706>.
- 10 Nakako Hayashi, personal communication, November 11, 2022.

DESIGNING FOR EMBODIED CARE THROUGH WEARABLES: ENHANCING RELATIONAL AWARENESS WITH MULTI-SENSORIAL TEXTILES — KRISTI KUUSK, HSUAN-HSIU HUNG

Abstract

This paper explores how to design for embodied care through somatic interactions with multi-sensorial textile wearables. It investigates how interactive textile artefacts can nurture relational awareness and enhance sensorimotor engagement, fostering physical and mental well-being.

Using a Research Through Design approach, the study involved collaboration between a design researcher and a movement artist and iterative engagements with participants. Through three design iterations, a series of soft, close-to-body prototypes were developed to support micro-movements, sensations and emotions through touch.

Findings suggest that these artefacts function as active agents co-creating experiences with the wearer. This research contributes to the understanding of sensorial clothing by highlighting its potential to promote care, connection and sustainable design practices.

KEYWORDS: SENSORIAL DESIGN, E-TEXTILES, MOVEMENT ART, SOMA DESIGN

Introduction

With challenges like isolation (exacerbated by COVID-19), global conflicts and crises of humanity, mental health has become increasingly more important. Preventing mental health issues is a priority set by the European Commission,¹ which bases its work on mental health on international policy frameworks, such as the UN Sustainable Goals² and the nine voluntary global targets to be attained by 2025.³

Contemplative movement practices are a way of becoming aware of one's present experience through bodily sensations in conscious movement, a practice of moving consciously with interoceptive information. They offer agency for choice and affect change, which is foundational to a person's sense of well-being.⁴ Movement-based contemplative practices have been shown to elicit measurable changes in physiological stress parameters, cognitive and physical functioning, and emotional states experienced in healthy individuals.⁵

From a phenomenological perspective, humans create meaning for themselves and the world through movement and embodied experience.⁶ Sheets-Johnstone suggests that enhancing kinaesthetic awareness can deepen one's sense of self.⁷ In the design field, engaging with unfamiliar interactions with environments⁸ or unhabitual movements⁹ has been explored to heighten bodily awareness and sensitivity to physical experiences.

This project explores the multi-sensorial affordances of materials, particularly e-textiles, in the context of the movement to support mental well-being. Building on the extensive and evolving knowledge of Soma design,¹⁰ which emphasises first-person perspectives in research and design,¹¹ the study investigates how embodied interactions¹² can inform the iterative development of design artefacts.

The research followed a continuous loop of embodied practice, design, and reflection between a movement artist and a designer-researcher. This multi-disciplinary approach examined the role of a movement artist using touch in

enhancing self-awareness, emphasising first-person, lived experiences in the process of Research Through Design. Sensorial artefacts *Moving Awareables* explores how to design interactive textiles that can deepen our connection to self, providing an innovative tool for nurturing embodied awareness and care through multi-sensorial artefacts. Expanding on the notion of sensorial clothing,¹³ the project aims to develop multi-sensorial artefacts that foster self-awareness and relational awareness. The design research addresses how to design tactile, multi-sensorial artefacts that could foster moments of reflection and self-care, responding to modern life's mental and physical tensions.

DESIGNING EMBODIED CARE: MOVING AWAREABLES

In the context of designing the *Moving Awareables*, embodied care points to the ability of self-regulation triggered by touch sensations. At the beginning of the process, the design researcher and the movement artist explored their surroundings for daily tactile experiences, things they touched. They reflected on how the objects felt on

their bodies and what sensations they invited. The impressions of the movement artist led the team to look deeper into the shape and function of a blanket — what it offers to the body and the wearer. This exploration gave a design input for the design researcher to create an artefact for upper-body comfort. Throughout the process, the prototypes were evaluated and developed further through a design approach that relied on contemplative movement practices.¹⁴

EVOLUTION OF THE PROTOTYPES

The first prototype of *Moving Awareables* was a wearable form with twelve vibrating motors on a felt surface. It could be placed on the upper back and shoulder and fit various body types. The second prototype aimed to bring the vibration sensation closer to the body. An elastic material wrapped the felt module close to the wearer's upper back and shoulder area. In addition, the team created a set of soft textile tubes made of the same elastic textile material. The movement artist had been playing around with one of the tubes while the design researcher was stitching the primary wearable, and the



Figure 1. Movement artist moving with the final artefacts. Photo: Mari Rostfeldt.

team realised that those additions could help to intensify the otherwise relatively mild vibration sensation on the body and direct it to more specific locations on each body. While using the second prototype, the movement artist felt restrained by the upper body wearable, and the team chose to continue with the tubes only. The third and last iteration of the prototype consisted of soft tubes of various textile surfaces and fillings. Half of the tubes had electronics to enhance the interaction beyond normal textile and movement properties. The material characteristics of the *Moving Awareables* invite the wearer to touch, bend, wrap, shake, hold and squeeze the Awareables, making exploratory movements that expand their kinaesthetic awareness to enhance the experience of the self.¹⁵

Moving Awareables is a set of artefacts worn around the body. The artefacts have different surfaces, inviting a diverse range of tactile experiences when touched or placed in contact with the body. They also hide electronically enhanced interactive properties that the wearer can discover when moving or resting with the artefacts. *Moving Awareables* aims to nurture the embodied awareness of the wearer. Using elements of somatic design, they invite for physical movement and emotional engagement. *Moving Awareables* offers a moment of care and reflection for the person interacting with it through investigating the meeting of materials, body and touch.

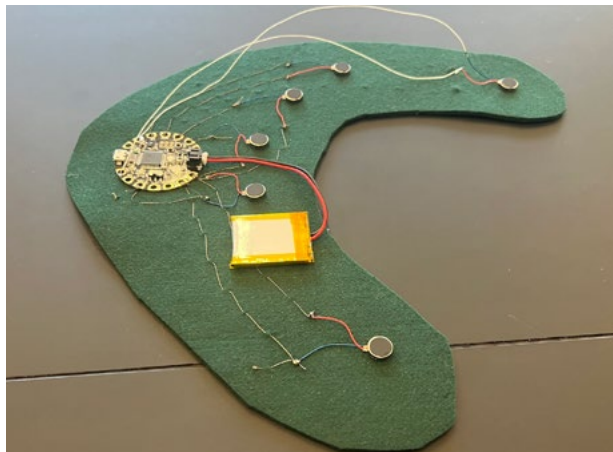


Figure 2. First prototype: vibration motors imitating movement on the body, placed on felt.

SOMA DESIGN INFORMING THE DESIGN PROCESS

The design process used the somatic experience as a playground to explore feelings of rest and ease by investigating the felt senses of the body and the associated emotions and spontaneous movements while interacting with materials. Between body and material, they explored contacts that bring embodied self-awareness. This touch enables slowing down for sensing and feeling and touch with materials that invite spontaneous movement of care.

The movement artist's bodily experience and articulation helped shape the form of the second prototype. For example, the impulse to lean against the embedded motors to feel the buzzing sensations more and the desire to free the arms outside the wrapping shape of the second prototype led the team to design the third prototype.

The third prototype's surface materials were smooth, soft or furry. They invited gentle touch and provoked feelings of calm or rest. The embedded motors inside the tube-shaped prototype invited movements of play and stillness for listening and holding. The team explored embodied interactions,¹⁶ with materials as a design resource.

INVOLVING PARTICIPANTS

In addition to the exchange between the design researcher and the movement artist investigating her somatic experience, participants were invited to engage with the study in its different stages. At the beginning of the process, the movement artist drew inspiration from offering touch to people and hearing about their somatic experiences. Later, different participants were invited to freely play with the prototypes and engage in guided sessions with *Moving Awareables*.

The combined embodied experience of the participants, the movement artist, and the design researcher guided the development of the prototypes during the research process. Moving between the first-, second-, and third-person perspectives in design

and research¹⁷ allowed the team to envision, try and validate the idea of enhancing relational awareness with multi-sensorial textiles in the context of various body and mind experiences. Building on somatic and embodied experiences, *Moving Awareables* invites embodied care through touch and movement.

DISCUSSION

Designing for embodied care through somatic interactions with multi-sensorial textile wearables requires attention to how the body engages with materials. Through developing *Moving Awareables*, we found that in order to encourage self-awareness and foster a sense of well-being, we had to create textile artefacts that invited touch and responded to it in some way. This established a reciprocal relationship between the person and the material artefact.

First, the materials we chose were soft, warm and flexible. We hoped they would support the sense of comfort and care. The invited participants intuitively wished to bring the artefacts close to their bodies, wrapping them around the neck or stroking them with hands to feel their textures. We found that these textures encouraged gentle, instinctive movements, allowing the wearer to relax physically. By focusing on these subtle micro-movements, designers can offer moments of pause and reflection, where the body intuitively responds to the tactile stimuli. The sensation of touch was

central to this project. Experimenting with different textile surfaces and the sensations created by small vibrating motors embedded in the wearables helped us to add a surprise element to the traditional material. We saw that with this combination of familiar textile softness and unexpected interactivity users connected with their bodies and became aware of subtle physical sensations. This heightened awareness extended beyond the physical, allowing the wearers to access and acknowledge their inner experiences, such as thoughts, emotions, and memories. For example, when interacting with one of the wearables, one of the participants shared that it reminded her of resting next to her partner on the couch, their bodies only touching in small areas but feeling the presence of another *body* brought a lot of comfort.

Next, the mentioned emotional responses created an interaction beyond the physical body. We saw that when the people came into contact with the material, their sensory experience invited a deeper, more mindful engagement, bringing awareness to feelings and emotions that might otherwise go unnoticed. The research team found that the *Moving Awareables*' ability to evoke somatic experiences and the body-mind responses to tactile stimulations led to a shift in perception. They were no longer seen as objects but as active participants in shaping the user's experience. The researchers began to view the Awareables as 'non-human bodies' that co-designed the

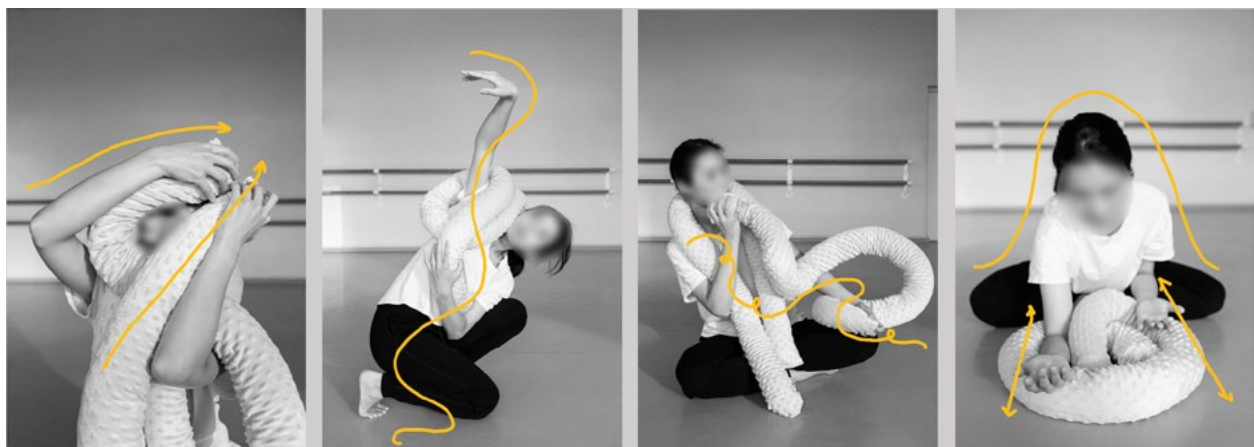


Figure 3. Movement artist moving and being moved by the final artefacts. Photo: Mari Rostfeldt.



Figure 4. Movement artist moving with the final artefact. Photo: Mari Rostfeldt.

experience with the wearers. This perspective was further reinforced by participant feedback, with some people feeling a strong sense of connection and reluctance to separate from their chosen *Awareable* by the end of the session.

Finally, our aim was to create a dynamic, two-way interaction allowing the body to move and be moved by the wearable. We found that through embedded sensors and responsive textiles, the materials can invite specific movements—such as stretching or shifting posture—that enhance comfort and contribute to physical and emotional well-being. The *Moving Awareables* invited users to explore movement in response to the tactile sensations they experienced. The wearables' design encouraged bending, wrapping, holding and squeezing, which expanded the users' kinaesthetic awareness and deepened their experience of self. The gentle vibrations and soft textures often triggered micro-movements and reflexes, leading to more extensive movements and postures that provided comfort and relaxation. In this way, users were actively moving and being moved by the *Moving Awareables*.

The paper illustrates how multisensorial artefacts could be active agents that engage with the wearer, shaping and enhancing their experiences. This research expands the understanding of sensorial clothing¹⁸ by demonstrating how such garments can encourage emotional and

physical well-being,¹⁹ ultimately promoting care and connection on both personal and societal levels. Additionally, the study underscores the potential of sensorial clothing for enhancing embodied experiences²⁰ in fashion. Through these insights, the research highlights the transformative role of clothing beyond aesthetics, positioning it as a medium for care.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the *Moving Awareables* project highlights the potential for wearable technology to transcend its functional role and become a medium for embodied care through multi-sensorial interactions. By focusing on materiality, emotional engagement and reciprocal interaction, these wearables foster deep connections with oneself and others. This research demonstrates how the design of soft, close-to-body artefacts can evoke care, awareness and connection in both individual and relational settings. Ultimately, the project suggests that embodied interactions facilitated by these artefacts can significantly reshape our relationships with ourselves and our surroundings, promoting emotional and physical well-being. These findings underscore the importance of considering care and relational awareness as central elements in the future development of wearable technologies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- European Commission, 'Mental Health.' https://ec.europa.eu/health/non-communicable-diseases/mental-health_en.
- Farb, Norman, Jennifer Daubenmier, Cynthia J. Price, Tim Gard, Catherine Kerr, Barnaby D. Dunn, Anne Carolyn Klein, Martin P. Paulus, and Wolf E. Mehling, 'Interoception, Contemplative Practice, and Health.' *Frontiers in Psychology* no. 6 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00763>.
- Fouad, Heba, Nisreen A. Latif, Rachel A. Ingram et al., 'Scaling Up Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region.' *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal* 24, no. 1 (2018): pp. 52–62. <https://doi.org/10.26719/2018.24.1.52>.
- Höök, Kristina, *Designing with the Body: Somaesthetic Interaction Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018.
- Hung, Hsuan-Hsiu, and Kristi Kuusk, 'Moving Awareables: Multi-Sensorial Artefacts That Care for Us.' *Leida* 4, no. 1 (2024).
- Kuusk, Kristi, Ana Tajadura-Jiménez, and Aleksander Väljamäe, 'A Transdisciplinary Collaborative Journey Leading to Sensorial Clothing.' *CoDesign* 16, no. 4 (2020): pp. 311–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2020.1833934>.
- Loke, Lian, and Toni Robertson, 'Moving and Making Strange: An Embodied Approach to Movement-Based Interaction Design.' *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 20, no. 1 (2013): pp. 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2442106.2442113>.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2013.
- Schmalzl, Laura, and Catherine E. Kerr, 'Editorial: Neural Mechanisms Underlying Movement-Based Embodied Contemplative Practices.' *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, no. 10 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2016.00169>.
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine, 'Kinesthetic Experience: Understanding Movement Inside and Out.' *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy* 5, no. 2 (2010): pp. 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432979.2010.496221>.
- Tomico, Oscar, Vincent O. Winthagen, and Maaïke M. G. van Heist, 'Designing For, With or Within: 1st, 2nd and 3rd Person Points of View on Designing for Systems.' In *Proceedings of the 7th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction: Making Sense Through Design* (2012), pp. 180–188. New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2012.
- UN, 'Sustainable Development Goals.' Accessed on June 15, 2022. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals>.
- Wilde, Danielle, 'Extending Body and Imagination: Moving to Move.' *International Journal on Disability and Human Development* 10, no. 1 (2011): pp. 31–36. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijdh.2011.004>.
- Wilde, Danielle, Anna Vallgård, and Oscar Tomico, 'Embodied Design Ideation Methods: Analysing the Power of Estrangement.' In *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp. 5158–5170. Denver, CO: ACM, 2017.

KRISTI KUUSK

Kristi Kuusk is an Estonian designer and researcher specialising in the intersection of smart textiles, sustainability and design innovation. She holds a PhD in design from Eindhoven University of Technology, where her research focused on crafting sustainable smart textile services. Kuusk is a faculty member at the Estonian Academy of Arts (EKA), where she leads the Sensorial Design research group. Her work explores how smart textiles can promote environmental responsibility and well-being by combining traditional craft with modern technologies.

HSUAN-HSIU HUNG

Hsuan-Hsiu Hung is a dance and movement artist, whose creative practice weaves together somatics, visual art, dance and contemplative practices. Her work explores the unfolding experience of self in relation to others through somatic movements in performative, therapeutic and research contexts. Currently, she facilitates regular Qigong lessons and contemplative movement practices that support sustainable self-care in everyday life. dancinginart.com

- 1 European Commission, 'Mental Health,' accessed June 15, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/health/non-communicable-diseases/mental-health_en.
- 2 United Nations, 'Sustainable Development Goals,' accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals>.
- 3 Heba Fouad, Nisreen A. Latif, Rachel A. Ingram et al., 'Scaling Up Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region,' *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal* 24, no. 1 (2018): pp. 52–62, <https://doi.org/10.26719/2018.24.1.52>.
- 4 Norman Farb et al., 'Interoception, Contemplative Practice, and Health,' *Frontiers in Psychology*, no. 6 (2015): p. 763, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00763>.
- 5 Laura Schmalzl and Catherine E. Kerr, 'Editorial: Neural Mechanisms Underlying Movement-Based Embodied Contemplative Practices,' *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, no. 10 (2016): p. 169, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2016.00169>.
- 6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Taylor & Francis, 2013).
- 7 Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, 'Kinesthetic Experience: Understanding Movement Inside and Out,' *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy* 5, no. 2 (2010): pp. 111–127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432979.2010.496221>.
- 8 Lian Loke and Toni Robertson, 'Moving and Making Strange: An Embodied Approach to Movement-Based Interaction Design,' *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 20, no. 1 (2013): pp. 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2442106.2442113>.
- 9 Danielle Wilde, 'Extending Body and Imagination: Moving to Move,' *International Journal on Disability and Human Development* 10, no. 1 (2011): pp. 31–36, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijdhhd.2011.004>.
- 10 Kristina Höök, *Designing with the Body: Somaesthetic Interaction Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).
- 11 Oscar Tomico, Vincent O. Winthagen and Maaïke M. G. van Heist, 'Designing For, With or Within: 1st, 2nd and 3rd Person Points of View on Designing for Systems,' in *Proceedings of the 7th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction: Making Sense Through Design* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2012), pp. 180–188.
- 12 Danielle Wilde, Anna Vallgård and Oscar Tomico, 'Embodied Design Ideation Methods: Analysing the Power of Estrangement,' in *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Denver, CO: ACM, 2017), pp. 5158–5170.
- 13 Kristi Kuusk, Ana Tajadura-Jiménez, and Aleksander Väljamäe, 'A Transdisciplinary Collaborative Journey Leading to Sensorial Clothing,' *CoDesign* 16, no. 4 (2020): pp. 311–327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2020.1833934>.
- 14 Hsuan-Hsiu Hung and Kristi Kuusk, 'Moving Awareables: Multi-Sensorial Artefacts That Care for Us,' *Leida* 4, no. 1 (2024).
- 15 Sheets-Johnstone 2010, pp. 111–127.
- 16 Wilde et al. 2017, pp. 5158–5170.
- 17 Tomico et al. 2012, pp. 180–188.
- 18 Kuusk et al. 2020, pp. 311–327.
- 19 Farb et al. 2015, p. 763.
- 20 Merleau-Ponty 2013.

TREND REPORT

[Re]Code [A]new

‘In the background of the autumn/winter ’24/’25 runway shows turned an unsteady world.’¹ In a small studio space, at the Swedish School of Textiles in Borås, a group of eight practice-based researchers ‘grabbed at [fashion’s] codes of the familiar and real, then got busy reimagining them.’² in an attempt to, ‘Meet the wardrobe, reborn.’³

WORD COLLAGE Remie Cibis

These researchers had gathered for a workshop I was running as part of the Dialogical Bodies Conference that April. The workshop was called *Collaged Clothes* (2024) and sought to investigate whether the ways in which everyday people integrate commercial fashion images into their wardrobes can be understood as a creative, and potentially subversive, image making practice akin to collage. I had been motivated to run this workshop, in response to the commercial nature of most fashion images and their growing influence on how we see ourselves within an increasingly ocularcentric world. As visual theorists Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas have written, in general, ‘fashion-photography is a way to sell clothes,’⁴ and as philosopher Iris Marion Young puts it, ‘in the mirror we see not the “bare facts” but a clothed image reverberating the dominant magazine and film images.’⁵

During the workshop I invited participants to collage together a wearable fashion look by remixing and reimagining a range of existing fashion photographs and second-hand t-shirts. After applying their chosen photographs to their t-shirts, I also asked the participants to try them on and to reflect upon their experience by composing a swing tag outlining their process and representational intent. By physically collaging together both clothing and visual representations of clothing – and then testing the resulting outcomes using their own bodies – I hoped that those who took part in the workshop would be able to question and expand upon both what and who a mass-produced fashion images might represent.

As Santiago Útima Loaiza wrote on his swing tag, ‘the t-shirt I transformed made me think about the human layers that brands don’t want us to recognise,’ and of ‘what we choose and how we use it represents how we symbolically relate to things.’⁶

In this text, I have employed a similarly collagic approach to reflect upon the workshop and its outcomes myself. That is, that rather than writing this piece of text upon a blank page, I have instead written it by selecting, arranging and intervening within an existing text. Like the looks created by the workshop participants this article began its life as part of a commercial fashion magazine; as a trend report titled *Code New* (2024) written by Alice Birrell for *Vogue Australia*.⁷ I chose to work with this text because I wanted to intervene within the discourse of the fashion industry, but also because I recognised in Birrell’s summation of these trends a perspective on fashion not dissimilar to my own.

As Birrell writes, this season, ‘Wearable, recognisable clothes became rock-solid guardrails within which designers brought to bear their creativity. Innovation and novel ideas came in the foil of existing style tropes. The familiar, remixed.’⁸ According to Birrell, this collagic appearance of the 2024 runway season was a specific



Figure 01

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring a wearable fashion image by Melanie Bower.



response to 'a year that proliferated with consequential elections for major global powers and held instability and economic slowdown, major... A level of impermanency and insecurity that has made itself uncomfortably present in our lives [writes Birrell] is powering a new craving, and it's making its way into our wardrobes.'⁹ 'Life', she explains, 'is confusing, but choosing our clothes need not be as chaotic... In questioning existing codes, forensically examining them and casting them anew, we might create something we recognise, just better.'¹⁰

Though I agree with Birrell, that we live in uncertain times and that such times can lead us to process change through the familiar and reassuring, I would also argue that remixing pre-existing styles of clothing is how wearers process fashion every season. When a person buys what the industry has defined as the 'signifiers of comfort dressing - face-swaddling scarves and cocooning knits, concealing and reassuring layers',¹¹ the way they restyle these pieces within their existing wardrobe and upon their own body constitutes a personalised renegotiation and a reimagining these tropes and what they signify. So, while Birrell observes that *this* season 'Old ideas of elegance and formality... were notions designers traced then overwrote with contemporary twists, altering silhouettes, experimenting with proportion and texture, all the while flipping and reforming motifs',¹² so too are they overwritten, flipped and reformed every season by those who wear them. As sociologist Dick Hebdige has observed, the various manners in which individuals style and wear clothes are ways, 'in which prominent forms of discourse (particularly fashion) are radically adapted, subverted and extended.'¹³ That is to say, that while the fashion industry may indeed direct how fashion is represented to us, and prescribe its latest trends, we can and indeed do, like the designers of 2024's runway looks, grab at these codes and reimagine them ourselves.

Fellow practice-based researcher Jane Morley shares similar thinking, and goes so far as to describe wearing clothing as a form of 'performative collage'.¹⁴ She argues that how we select and arrange garments on our bodies is comparable to the selection and arrangement of images that occurs in two-dimensional collage practices.¹⁵ As with two-dimensional collage, I would also argue that, how we wear clothes is a practice in which existing representational forms are not merely re-presented, but re-imagined. In the case of fashion and dress they can become personalised self-images that represent their wearer and express their wearer's own unique perspective on fashion and identity. Indeed, Birrell's article also gestures to this through its imagery: a series of collages by mixed-media artist Ania Augustynowicz-Akardaş that remix and reimagine the season's looks into a series of new images and outfits of her own.

In my *Collaged Clothes* (2024) workshop this collagic understanding of the wearer's relationship to fashion was likewise explored by taking existing fashion-based representations which the researchers, 'deployed and recast in new ways'.¹⁶ In contrast to Morley and Augustynowicz-Akardaş, however, I encouraged my workshop participants to collage together *both* physical garments and visual images. This was done in order to emphasise the representational interplays that exist between fashion images and fashion garments, and to highlight the collagic potential of both forms to produce new fashion-based representations.¹⁷

Furthermore, my workshop also sought to explore how approaching fashion through collage, has the potential to not only reconfigure but also to *critique* the images and garments presented to us by the fashion industry. Not only to remix these images, but to put them into question. By seeing dress as a form of collage, I would argue, that we are also reminded that there are always other ways of imaging and imagining ourselves through our fashion and dress. 'Collage,' as Gioia Chilton and Victoria Scotti write, can 'jar us into new insights, tear apart and reconfigure ideas, and rework old patterns of thought.'¹⁸ Or as feminist collage artist Martha Rosler expresses it, 'in every photomontage [is] the implicit message that photography



Figure 02

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring a wearable fashion image by Chinouk de Miranda.

TREND REPORT



Figure 03

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring a wearable fashion image by Melanie Bower.



Figure 04

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring Ingvild Rømo Grand and a wearable fashion image by Ingvild Rømo Grand.

alone cannot "tell the truth," and also the reminder that fact itself is a social construction.¹⁹

I now invite you to "Meet the new coordinates, [as questioned and reimagined by the workshop participants and to] set [your own] style course."²⁰

"Enter the familiar and the recognisable for autumn/winter '24/'25. Style codes we are already acquainted with hold a new comforting appeal, providing a framework for the path forward. "Antecedents literally fashion the present," Prada's show notes read.

But dispense with any expectation of ho-hum sameness."²¹



Smoke signal

*'Healing by reclaiming these usually distant worlds.'*²² Melanie Bower

'Is there a purer distillation of chic than the tuxedo? An apogee of style, its traditional association with masculinity was a notion dissolved with vigour this season – from [Melanie Bower] to [Ingvild Rømo Grand]. The latter splicing, cropping and notching their way into nipped, lopped and skin-baring renditions of the silk-lapel, after-dark archetype. Yves Saint Laurent began liberating it from men's grasp through his lean Le Smoking version in 1966. Today [Bower and Rømo Grand] finished the job,²³ by transforming it into easy-wear t-shirts.

TREND REPORT



Figure 05

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring Ingvild Rømo Grand and a wearable fashion image by Ingvild Rømo Grand.

Working ways

*'Hacking sneakers, or the other way round, hacking the suit with the sneakers. ... "Jordan" t-shirt for businessmen.'*²⁴ Ingvild Rømo Grand

²⁵ 'The suit is old news. The way it emerged, metamorphosed, [in the hands of Ingvild Rømo Grand] wasn't. Take the pair of Air Jordan sneakers casually slung over the shoulder, 'It heralded a rethink of corporate uniforms. Nothing was sacred. Post-pandemic, we don't work the way we used to. We shouldn't dress it either,'²⁶ Rømo Grand's t-shirt seemed to say.



Figure 06

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring Anna Lidström and a wearable fashion image by Anna Lidström.

The women

*'Working very flat but with depth, all at once, made me think a lot about the t-shirt as canvas. As a standard format, as well as layout plan. What to cover and what to highlight? Whose DNA are put on display?'*²⁷— Anna Lidström

'Bows, strings of pearls, gloves, handbags, the little black dress. The "recognised signifiers of propriety and chic", as Prada described, formed a 2024 take on ladylike mid-century propriety. Not a purist's redux though; subversion bled into [Anna Lidström's] architecturally askew rumpled take on cocktail dresses, the goal being to transcend what Jacobs defined as "absurd conservatism and societal norms". Polite codes for impolite times.'²⁸ A new DNA that anyone was welcome to try out or try on.

Figure 07

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring Santiago Útima Loaiza and a wearable fashion image by Santiago Útima Loaiza.

Great outdoors

*'When you don't depend on the [ready-made] and instead you make your own clothes... "looking good" depend[s] on how well somebody from the family knows [how] to make them, and not on how much you can spend on expensive products...'*²⁹— Santiago Útima Loaiza

'The rain that fell on [Santiago Útima Loaiza's t-shirt] told of a preoccupation with element-repelling clothing...³⁰ Waxed coats, hunter greens and worn-in Aran knits could have been lifted from an Alan Hollinghurst novel. [Útima Loaiza's]-shirt could do double duty as a picnic blanket. Some might spot a metaphor between braving the elements and bracing for the changing winds of the world. Either way, they're pieces with solid, practical grit.'³¹



Figure 08

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring an anonymous workshop participant and their wearable fashion image.



High touch

*'I'm looking for gestures that give me a feeling of the body. New meanings that emerge by placing words and images together.'*³² - Anonymous

³²In a manner not seen for seasons, texture played a principal role this time around. Looping and fringing all over (Stella McCartney), beast-like shaggy coats (Marni), dense mille-feuille layers exploding on chubby jackets (Alaïa) or jumbo [flowers (anonymous)] were at turns dramatic and, surprisingly, a touch glamorous. Take them as the new way to create volume while making an impression. The bonus is in their reassuring softness, a human warmth that is an antidote for our coldly tech-governed world.³³

TREND REPORT

Figure 09

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring Ingvild Rømo Grand, Remie Cibis and a wearable fashion image by Ingvild Rømo Grand.



Sensual healing

*'The skin colour blends into the beige background. Hanging loose, it kind of plays along the lightweight mesh and [washed-out] colours.'*³⁴

– Ingvild Rømo Grand

'Lean, tight shapes, structured and sculpting; the sheer trend that previously overwhelmed runways got an upgrade,' from Rømo Grand, 'who committed the show's entire [one look] to a transparent, tightly nipped sensuality in dusty hosiery shades, then, borrowing from the construction of I [a nude]: Gucci [t-shirt], Rømo Grand took this, took his smouldering brand of body-con to a new exquisite level of sheer-panelled sculpting.'³⁵



Figure 10

Remie Cibis, *Collaged Clothes* (2024), workshop, Swedish School of Textile: Borås, photographed by Andrés Rehbein. Featuring Chinouk de Miranda and wearable fashion image by Chinouk de Miranda.

Cover story

*'I was attracted to the 'For Free?' signage on the shirt showing through the very, very expensive Gucci (?) bag. While attaching these two layers together I was thinking to myself how bizarre it is that images and editorials are often branded as 'staple' or 'must-have' but are so out of reach for most.'*³⁶

— Chinouk de Miranda

*'From exaggerated funnel necks to wraps, thick knits and scarves as wide as hall runners – all were thrown over coats around the neck, looped around heads or totally enveloping both. The feeling is protecting everything from the shoulders up. Luxury is privacy, so why not take it with you? That was the question [Chinouk de Miranda] seemed to ask.'*³⁷

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anonymous, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- Barnard, Malcolm, ed. *Fashion Theory: A Reader*. Routledge Student Press, 2007.
- Birrell, Alice, 'Trend Report: Code New,' *Vogue Australia*, September 2024.
- Bower, Melanie, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- Brooks, Rosetta, 'Fashion-Photography: The Double-Page Spread: Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdin and Deborah Turbeville,' In *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, edited by Malcolm Barnard, pp. 517–526. Routledge Student Press, 2007.
- Chilton, Gioia, & Victoria Scotti, 'Snipping, Gluing, Writing: The Properties of Collage as an Arts-Based Research Practice in Art Therapy,' *Art Therapy* 31, no. 4 (December 2014): pp. 163–171.
- de Miranda, Chinouk, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- Geczy, Adam, and Vicki Karaminas, *Fashion's Double: Representations of Fashion in Painting, Photography and Film*. Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Grand, Ingvild Rømo, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Routledge, 1979.
- Lidström, Anna, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- Loaiza, Santiago Útima, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- Morley, Jane, 'Intra-Active Fashion,' PhD diss., RMIT University, 2022.
- Rosler, Martha, 'Image Simulations Computer Manipulations: Some Ethical Considerations,' In *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001*, pp. 275–284. MIT Press in association with International Center of Photography, 2004.
- Young, Iris Marion, 'Women Recovering Our Clothes,' In *On Fashion*, edited by Shari Benstock & Suzanne Ferriss, pp. 197–210. Rutgers University Press, 1994.

REMIE CIBIS

Remie Cibis is a critical and expanded fashion practitioner and Lecturer in Fashion & Textiles at RMIT University, Melbourne. Her research explores how clothes can be understood as images and what this means for wearers. Combining garment-making, performance, photography and interactive workshops, Cibis seeks to understand how fashion-images are produced and to design new opportunities for wearers to fashion their own representations. Recent projects include *The Ideal Tee*, University of New South Wales (Sydney/Eora), *Less is More. More or Less*, Sarah Scout Presents (Melbourne/Naarm), *The Fashion Edit*, The University of Auckland (Auckland/Tāmaki Makaurau) and *Ready-To-Wear*, KINGS Artist Run (Melbourne/Naarm).

Image Credit: Photograph by Sanja Pahoki (2022)

Social Media Profiles:

Instagram: @remiecibis / <https://www.instagram.com/remiecibis/>

Website: remiecibis.com

- 1 Alice Birrell, 'Trend Report: Code New,' *Vogue Australia*, September 2024, p. 54.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Fashion's Double: Representations of Fashion in Painting, Photography and Film* (Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 66.
- 5 Iris Marion Young, 'Women Recovering Our Clothes,' in *On Fashion*, eds. Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss (Rutgers University Press, 1994), p. 13.
- 6 Santiago Útima Loaiza, *Collaged Clothes Swing Tag*, Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- 7 The choice of this text–*Vogue Australia*–can be justified because Australia is the specific part of the fashion industry in which I both work and live. It groups, thus, a fair number of statements developed to describe my current fashion milieu that I shall in fact be referring to.
- 8 Birrell 2024, p. 54.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 1979), p. 104.
- 14 Jane Morley, 'Intra-Active Fashion' (PhD diss., RMIT University, 2022), p. 110.
- 15 Morley 2022, p. 115.
- 16 Birrell 2024, p. 54.
- 17 As visual theorist Rosetta Brooks argues, 'in mass-produced fashion advertising the image is not simply something we see; it is also something we 'wear.' Rosetta Brooks, 'Fashion-Photography: The Double-Page Spread: Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdin and Deborah Turbeville,' in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed. Malcolm Barnard (Routledge Student Press, 2007), p. 521.
- 18 Gioia Chilton & Victoria Scotti, 'Snipping, Gluing, Writing: The Properties of Collage as an Arts-Based Research Practice in Art Therapy,' *Art Therapy* 31, no. 4 (2014): p. 170.
- 19 Martha Rosler, 'Image Simulations Computer Manipulations: Some Ethical Considerations,' in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001*, by Martha Rosler (MIT Press in association with International Centre of Photography, 2004), p. 279.
- 20 Birrell 2024, p. 54.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Melanie Bower, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- 23 Birrell 2024, p. 56.
- 24 Ingvild Rømo Grand, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- 25 Birrell 2024, p. 58.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Anna Lidström, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- 28 Birrell 2024, p. 54.
- 29 Útima Loaiza, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag.'
- 30 Birrell 2024, p. 59.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Some participants in the workshop reserved the right to withhold their names and as such any swing tag statements written by them remain anonymous. Anonymous, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- 33 Birrell 2024, p. 57.
- 34 Rømo Grand, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag.'
- 35 Birrell 2024, p. 60.
- 36 Chinouk de Miranda, 'Collaged Clothes Swing Tag,' Dialogical Bodies Conference, Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles, Borås, April 19, 2024.
- 37 Birrell 2024, p. 61.

CONSTRUCTIVE DISRUPTION 1.0: A SENSORY INTERVENTION TO EXPLORE FASH- ION FUTURING. THE ROLE OF HUMAN WASTE STREAMS FOR ALTERNATIVE TEXTILE MATERIAL FEEDSTOCK — SABINE LETTMANN, BETH WHITE AND ZOË HILLYARD

Abstract

Many design curricula fail to embed humans sufficiently within Earth's systems, resulting in education that does not reflect ecological worldviews. This paper reflects on a sensory intervention presented at the Dialogical Bodies conference in April 2024, which explored *Nurture*, the foundational layer of *Constructive Disruption*, an Earth-centred curriculum framework published by the authors. Exploring the nexus between human waste streams (hair and nails) as an abundant matter different to common textile fibres and design practice, we observed and captured the audience's wide sensory engagement with the artefacts presented and the conversations generated. This contextualised a subsequent reflective discussion between the authors in relation to their own experiences of working with these materials. The findings reveal a range of aesthetic, cultural and ethical challenges and opportunities for stakeholders such as educators, designers and end users in embracing these materials as alternative textile material feedstock for regenerative design.

KEYWORDS: EARTH-CENTRED CURRICULUM, REGENERATIVE DESIGN, HUMAN WASTE STREAMS, MORE-THAN-HUMAN PERSPECTIVES, MATERIAL ENCOUNTERS.

THE NEED FOR A CHANGE IN HOW WE EDUCATE FASHION AND TEXTILES DESIGN

The ideological separation of humans from nature in Western-centric societies has resulted in our understanding of humans as superior to nature, and in nature becoming a simple resource linked but not limited to the many practices in the fashion industry.¹ Derived from a worldview that promotes the neoliberal goal of economic growth, this stands in contrast to an ecological worldview, which instead values the 'unity of human beings with all other living beings' as an expression of balanced 'human rights and the rights of nature.'² Despite the drastic increase in environmental and societal challenges faced by humans and the planet, the recognition of our human position in alignment with Earth's systems is currently lacking in many curricula. And while there are individual movements emerging to embed alternative practices into design courses, their underpinning pedagogical structures often represent an 'education of disengagement, or in error' as Tony Fry argues.³ Given that six of the nine planetary boundaries have been crossed, as highlighted in the first Planetary Health Check recently conducted by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, the imperative for radically shifting the role of universities is now framed by the urgency of ecological survival.⁴ Therefore, acknowledging the tremendous and fundamental shift that is needed to provide a flexible

and future-oriented learning environment cannot be achieved with either small adjustments or with ‘business as usual.’⁵

In response, the curriculum framework *Constructive Disruption* (fig. 1), developed and disseminated by us in 2021 and 2023, proposes a constructive yet disruptive approach to dismantling existing course structures by providing an Earth-centred experience that allows students to engage with more-than-human interactions. It offers new value systems in tune with seasonal cycles that reflect changing societal needs.⁶ Moreover, it anchors institutionalised learning at higher education level *within a real world* and is not created as a distinct entity *separate to the real world* that only begins after graduation and therefore is discussed as ‘unworldliness.’⁷

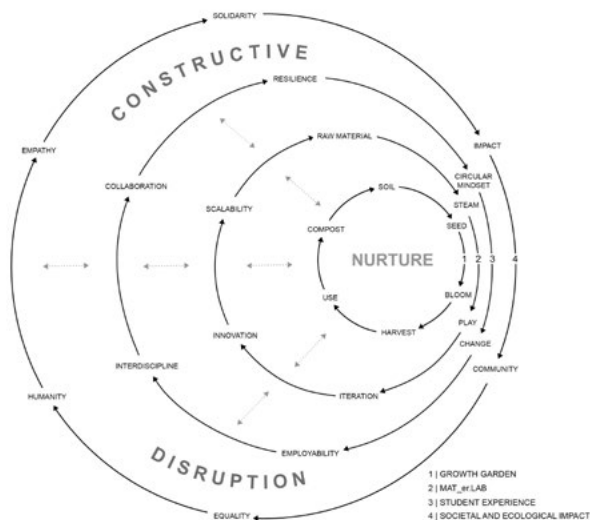


Figure 1. *Constructive Disruption* curriculum framework (diagram by the authors, 2021).

In this paper, we focus on *Constructive Disruption 1.0: A Sensory Intervention to Explore Fashion Futuring* developed for the Dialogical Bodies conference at The Swedish School of Fashion and Textiles in Borås in April 2024. It is titled 1:0 because of its focus on the first transformative layer of the curriculum framework. At its core sits *Nurture*, which aims to develop and investigate the

foundational phases of all living systems’ wellbeing and existence: Soil, Seed, Bloom, Harvest, Use and Compost. These six key stages of life inform how fashion and textile design can be un- and re-learned when nature becomes the role model. *Nurture* offers a non-hierarchical fashion narrative that does not distinguish between humans, plants or animals as natural raw material resources. To understand the potential of existing yet unidentified, and therefore underutilised, raw material streams, the *Constructive Disruption 1.0* intervention (fig. 2) sought to explore the legitimisation of matter becoming material through the lens of practice, experience and culture shift.



Figure 2. Sensory intervention display (photograph by the authors, 2024).

Moving beyond perceptions of what is commonly evaluated as a suitable and socially accepted fashion material requires a transformation of mental models, which currently contribute to hindering an identification of what could be. In developing the intervention, donated nails and hair were transformed through grinding and blending with other bio substances to achieve new



Figure 3. Biomaterial and human waste stream materials (photographs by the authors, 2024).

physical properties shaping an alternative design culture. Traditional textile methods were experimentally combined with science-based approaches to generate new material concepts for lace, knitted and fur-like fabrics (fig. 3).

These were complemented by abstract pieces to embody the stages of *Nurture*, such as audio sequences reflecting value assigned to a living raw material; nutrients that nourish human systems; and a 'Hair and Nail Donor Card' (fig. 4) proposing a mechanism for individuals to donate their human waste streams, blurring the boundaries between body and material.



Figure 4. Hair and nail donor card (photographs by the authors, 2024).

Thierry et al. discuss the necessity to shift away from 'business as usual' to achieve transformative change in educational settings. As stakeholders in instigating 'business as *unusual*,' educators hold a significant role in supporting this seismic change.⁸ Coming together for the conference, we saw an opportunity to explore

educators' openness to business as *unusual* through a curated intervention. It invited the audience to investigate sensory experiences of seeing, listening, touching and smelling that aimed to confront, to open a dialogue and to challenge existing understandings of material as a starting point for the consideration of a potentially regenerative alternative for fashion design.

In the following, new and established literature contextualises the rationale for proposing new material feedstock which inevitably requires new ways of being in the [fashion] world and developing new [fashion] worldviews, which is the foundation for regenerative design, as Wahl argues.⁹ In this context, sensory experiences are discussed below through the lens of Western and Indigenous practices to explore their role in ways of knowing and design education. Following this, we reflect on *Constructive Disruption 1.0*, observing the audiences' interaction with the artefacts as well as capturing our own experiences and perceptions of hair and nail waste streams to discuss its impacts on our individual practice as designers and educators.

THE NEED FOR ENGAGING WITH NEW MATERIAL FEEDSTOCK

The fashion industry's constantly growing fibre production, 124 million tonnes in 2023, is highly dependent on specific fibres such as polyester as well as other synthetics and man-made materials.¹⁰ These materials are commonly used in education where the focus is often on aesthetics instead of systems—a design education that therefore represents 'unworldly' realities.¹¹ This demands a rethink of material feedstock choices not only for the industry but also for education. As the market share of textile-to-textile recycled fibres has decreased from 7.9% in 2022 to 7.7% in 2023 and the infrastructure to close material loops is widely lacking, finding alternative biomass feedstock that can be sourced and processed locally is high on the agenda of textile innovators across the world.¹²

This is complemented by our deep concern related to the increasingly linear patterns of oversupply and overconsumption, both of which have a significant impact on material extraction, circulation and inevitable (non-)progression into new material systems. In opposition to the extractive practices of the fashion industry aligned with economic growth, Fritz Schumacher advocated for small scale economies, which, alongside cherishing smallness, can also comprise regional fibre systems as promoted by organisations like Fibershed to 'build soil and protect the health of our biosphere.'¹³ As stakeholders of the educational system, by not distinguishing between natural, animal or human material resources, we must imagine how working with abundant material resources such as hair and nails might challenge our perception of potentially relevant matter when, according to von Busch, they become relational to 'human agency and intentions.'¹⁴

To support this transition, understanding how experience and senses can inform human perception is a key element in facilitating design agency and intention. The connection between mind and body are central to educational experiences and reflect the students' and educators' 'mode

of being in the world.'¹⁵ Being multidimensional, experiences include to position the self in relation to objects to make sense of the *world that is*, which is additionally informed by one's behaviours, interests and values.¹⁶ In a modernist-colonialist logic, beliefs are based on a single world and universal solutions.¹⁷ This contrasts Indigenous societies, where the intrinsic connection between Earth and sky, air and water, plants and animals, as well as humans to spirits forms the complexity of their cosmological worldviews.¹⁸ As noted in context of Australian Indigenous communities, their 'methods of knowing focus on bodily sensory connections to transmit ideas and values inherent to culture.'¹⁹ And while humans share the same basic sensory capacities, these are culturally understood in different ways, aligned with customs and traditions as well as values and practices including gender, class and ethnicity.

Expanding on this, to make sense of a *world that could be*, encounters with hair and nail matter for design 'offer scope for [...] expansion of the horizons of being an embodied self in the world.'²⁰ Such mindset shifting processes express what is evaluated as a fundamental unity of the body and the world.²¹ This way of being with the world illuminates the pathway for addressing the prevailing disconnect between humans and nature to enable more sustainable lifestyles and recognise the mutual roles of humans and nature for survival.²²

Our positionality as white, female, middle-class academics in the Global North places us in between envisioning how the design education paradigm could change to reflect pluralistic worldviews and our awareness that we do not hold the knowledge that emerges from lived Indigenous experience and other peoples' perception of hair and nails. The way new material understanding emerges and finds cultural acceptance will determine the future ecological and societal development and subsequent impact of fashion and textile education.

METHODOLOGY

This research represents reflective practice, a method to ‘absorb, apply and think’ about everyday activities—in this case, our practice as educators.²³ In preparation for our conference contribution, we developed a series of artefacts made from collected hair and nail waste. Our aim was to explore how our experience of an abundant matter different to common textile fibres might be affected through experimenting with hair and nails. Emerging from these practice-based sensual experiences, we designed an intervention to counter more traditional conference presentations such as talks or posters. Instead, we focused on using senses to engage with human waste streams in alignment with Todd et al., who understand the connection of body and mind as central to educational experiences.²⁴ We sought to create encounters which could expand our audience’s horizons with regards to their

relation to materials and to understand in reverse how our curriculum development can evolve based on our peers’ engagement.²⁵

The attending group of 25-30 academics and students were invited to engage with the artefacts through touching, smelling, seeing, and listening to instigate multidimensional experiences. Accompanying conversations followed an organic dynamic to capture the audience’s experience in a natural free flowing format. Additionally, participants contributed to Threads of Thought (fig. 5), which provided a tactile and sensory method of responding to five pre-defined questions to document their age, location, values and material preferences. Some of the responses are included within the discussion below.

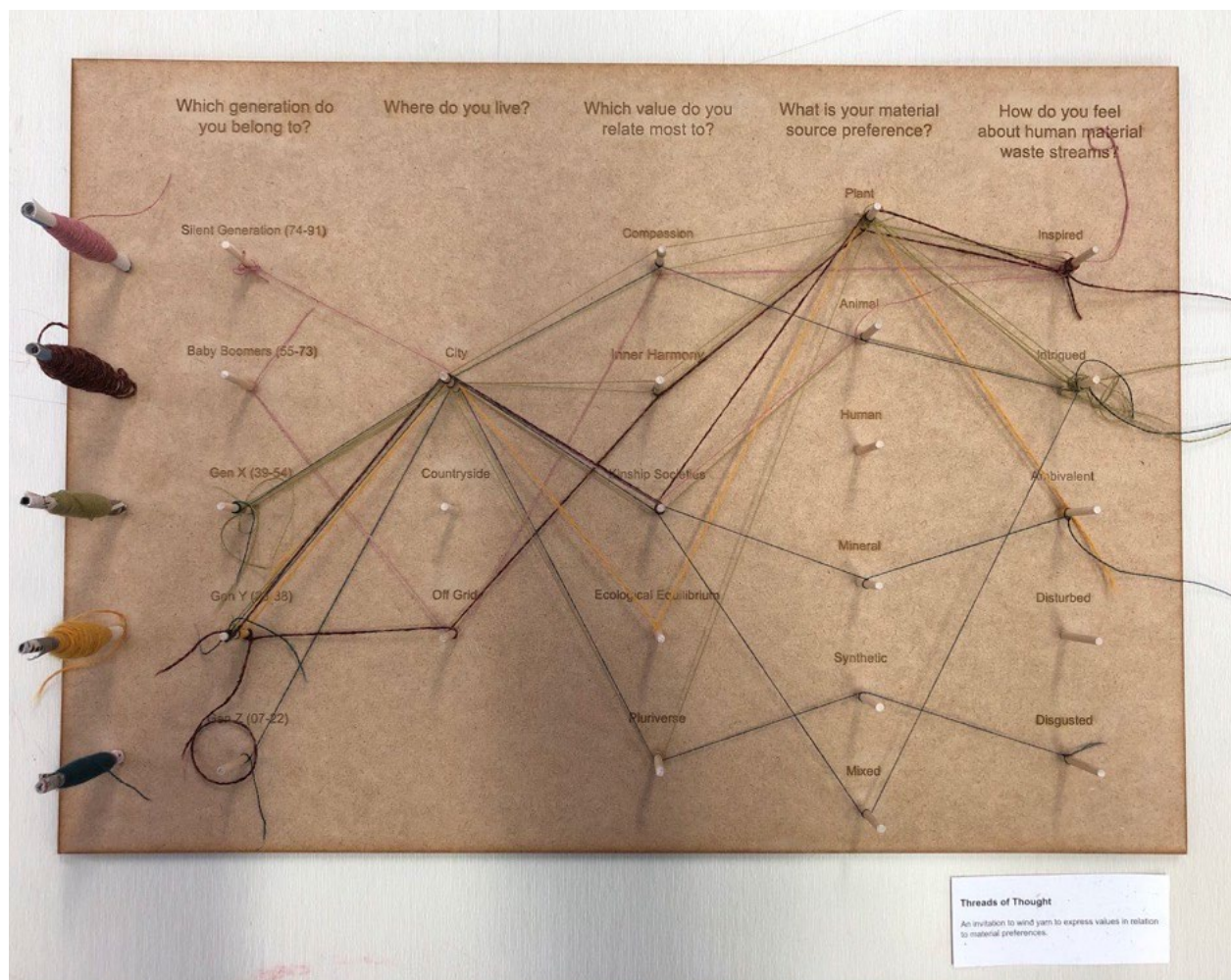


Figure 5. Threads of Thought (photograph by the authors, 2024).

Findings from Threads of Thought reflected fifteen responses from diverse age groups with Gen X and Gen Y comprising 12 participants (23–54 years). Two were above 55 and one below 22 years old. Thirteen participants indicated they live in *Cities*, another two live *Off Grid*. Asked about the value they relate most to, *Compassion* received three, *Inner Harmony* two, *Kinship Societies* four, *Ecological Equilibrium* one and *Pluriverse* two answers. We selected these values to understand whether there was a connection between living environments and ecologically linked values and preferred material sources. The latter received one reply each for *Mixed*, *Synthetic* and *Mineral* sources, two for *Animal* and ten for *Plant* fibre sources. Asked how they felt about human material waste streams, one was *Disgusted*, two felt *Ambivalent*, six *Inspired* and another six *Intrigued*. Interestingly, nine out of ten participants with a preference for plant material sources plus one other who preferred mixed fibres related positively to human waste streams.

Both our observation and Threads of Thought enabled us to reflect on the audience's responses from engaging with the sensorial experience. Results might be influenced by their greater awareness for the need to change, a higher openness for innovative material streams as well as already visible responses and thus might entail biased homogeneity.

Following the conference, we discussed how the shift in education we advocate for effects being stakeholders of business as *unusual*.²⁶ As the phenomenological element of this study, we sought to construct knowledge through the interpretation of our own experiences with using human waste in our creative practice.²⁷ This documented conversation was partly edited and restructured for clarity.

PERSPECTIVES ON HAIR AND NAILS AS MATERIAL FEEDSTOCK: A CONVERSATION

What is emerging from the need to educate students for ecological survival is an

engagement with alternative material streams too.²⁸ Subsequently, they stimulate our senses in many ways, from tactility to scents, potentially challenging our culturally developed perception of fashion appropriate materials, inviting us to review our and nature's mutual roles for survival.²⁹

Bett White [BW]: What was your experience of working with material derived from human waste?

Zoë Hillyard [ZH]: For the biomaterial applications I used my own hair, my family's, and hair that I collected from hairdressers. There wasn't a difference for me when working with those sources (fig. 6). There's definitely a disconnect, though, between when things are attached and not attached to your body.



Figure 6. Hair and nail vessels (photograph by the authors, 2024).

Sabine Lettmann [SL]: I'm probably quite the opposite although I'm curious about these resources and how they translate into becoming material. I'm fine with your hair and nails, but that's because we've got a deep connection with each other. As soon as I don't know the person it makes me cringe.

BW: Would you wear an item of clothing that was made from hair because it would most likely come from more than one individual?

SL: Ideally, I would need a clear disconnect between what I envision the source to be and the final product.

BW: If hair is embedded into the material, or it looks similar to existing materials, individuals would become familiar with

the material as opposed to considering it as a human waste stream. This might also help the two out of fifteen who felt ambivalent about human waste streams.

ZH: To integrate these new materials into wider production streams, maybe it's materials that you can't obviously see the hair or nails that should be produced first (fig. 7)? And then gradually introduce materials where they are more apparent, filtering it into a wider kind of acceptance.



Figure 7. Woven textile (photograph by the authors, 2024).

BW: Do we have time for people to adopt it slowly, to become accustomed to alternative materials?

ZH: Well, this comes back to the idea of abundance or scarcity. We're still awash with materials that are more accepted, less confrontational. Circumstances might have to become less comfortable for new materials to be adopted. Maybe we've got to explore ways to really make these desirable, so we overcome our aversion to the origins of the materials.

BW: But should we be designing products for desirability, rather than necessity?

ZH: There is still a long way to go before people are only owning things that they need.

BW: Yes, but we need to pick up the pace in terms of transitioning to these alternative materials and shifting mindsets.

SL: We know about the links between the fashion industry and climate breakdown, yet fibre production still increases year

by year. I think the cultural shift that needs to happen is so tremendous. We need to aim high, but changing mindsets is a slow process because it's entangled into so many different layers of beliefs or value systems that we can only adjust if the alternative is desirable.

ZH: This is where education is fundamental, because it's making sure we're moving things as quickly as is feasibly possible. People tend to stay with what's known, familiar and easy, yet brave difficult choices are needed. We recognise how strongly aesthetics are influencing us in relation to our perceptions.

BW: Is that where our so-called lower senses, including life, balance, movement and touch, comes in?

SL: I think so. We learn through experience; we need to understand with our whole body. Senses can help to trigger an interest as much as a counter reaction. That's where they can help us to understand what we are doing and who we are, even though maybe an initial response is a challenging one.

BW: I agree and by stimulating multiple senses through the intervention including audio, visual, scent and touch with sight and sound we were able to reinforce each sensation allowing participants to engage with one another, creating an integrated web of experiences rather than a singular interaction.

ZH: If we can bring all the senses together to build positive stories around these materials, it will hopefully drive mindset change and fuel societal transformation.

The different emotional and physical experiences revealed the need to educate about handling materials for the future with regards to their properties and application opportunities. But more so, design processes that utilise materials derived from human waste streams might challenge the designer as well as a potential user beyond understanding the need for change.

DEVELOPING NEW MATERIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The abundance of human waste streams can complement regional fibre systems helping to mitigate current extractive and linear practices.³⁰ While cutting hair and nails is part of humans' regular activities, feeding them into fashion cycles might propose challenges to donating what forms part of our identity. A new kind of relationship between humans and fashion materials will need to be developed.

ZH: Twelve out of fifteen participants felt they were either *Inspired* or *Intrigued* by human waste streams. What did you think of their reaction to being asked to donate nails and hair?

SL: Some participants said, 'I'm not going to do this,' while others were open to using the hairbrush after someone else. I think there are different levels of openness, or levels of curiosity that drives people to touch an artefact that might be initially perceived as awkward or to participate in donating (fig. 8).



Figure 8. Audience donating nail clippings (photographs by the authors, 2024).

ZH: With the woven fabric, the hair is on the surface and so is touched when picked up. Within the biomaterials, the hair is encased. However, people were more willing to touch the woven piece. It is a more traditional fabric, so maybe less controversial.

BW: I also noticed that when people were donating hair, some participants were ambivalent and wanted to just run their hands through their hair and donate what had naturally come loose, rather than using the brush. Now, obviously there's certain reasons why they might not want to use the brush after somebody else.

ZH: Was it your hair as well as donated hair in the woven piece?

BW: Just my hair. Towards the end of the piece, I incorporated some donated hair. I didn't feel that I was working with a material derived from human waste, it felt very similar to using existing fibres.

ZH: When you collected the donated hair, did you meet the people that it had come from?

BW: It was a waste product brushed from the floor of the hairdresser. It's interesting to consider at what point something becomes waste, as hair is so closely tied to our identity. For some people more than others and for different cultures more than others.

ZH: I met the person whose hair I collected from the hairdressers, so there was more of a story linked to that material for me.

BW: Do you think it impacted on what you created?

ZH: Not specifically, as I'm mostly intrigued by the potential of the material properties. The piece where I stitched into a biomaterial to make hairy loops, that was about the potential of different shrinkages. The hair that was being stitched into that biomaterial was yours, Sabine, you had cut a very long strand out for me (fig. 9). When you look at that piece, knowing that it is your hair, does that help, or not?



Figure 9. Biomaterial sample with hair (photograph by the authors, 2024).

SL: I am all in for natural resources, which was also highlighted by twelve respondents, but I need to recondition myself and accept hair as a legitimate matter. It's a process of engaging with our intervention, then stepping back to reflect how would I, as an educator, be able to encourage my students in working with hair? We're having to unlearn our relationships with materials and what has socially been acceptable.

BW: In our upbringing, we are being told 'that's gross, that you shouldn't touch, that's unhygienic, that's unhealthy, that's too intimate or personal.' Different cultures have different associations with hair. In Western culture, we are really conditioned and accustomed to discard it as waste rather than reuse it. We need to start investigating how we could use these waste streams, only one respondent evaluated human waste streams as disgusting!

ZH: Think about how developed the beauty industry is: there's a lot of expectation on our hair being clean and being looked after. So, we should have a positive relationship, and yet we've still got these real deep-rooted hang-ups about these materials. Do you think nails are more disgusting than hair?

BW: I'm very uncomfortable with nails, but when we grind them down and dry them in the dehydrator, we have created a new substance or a potential material source.

SL: It's interesting how we experience children's fingernails or toenails as less disgusting than adults' nails. At some point, this starts to switch.

ZH: I think it's something about the colour, because maybe we expect nails to be white, and clearly, they're not. This has associations with hygiene and nutrition. There were discussions in Borås about whether fingernails were okay, but toenails were a step too far. So, what is acceptable or not has got lots of subtleties.

SL: The same applies to hair. We had conversations with individuals about whether head hair is acceptable and pubic hair isn't, although essentially, the substance is the same. It's just our association, and the handling of it.

ZH: Similar materials have a long history of use — horsehair for upholstery, or keratin from hooves was used in glues.

BW: It's also based on hierarchy. When we think of multi-species, it is okay to use waste materials from animals, but when it comes to using human waste, humans feel superior.

Working with human waste streams as a legitimate matter can create a different relationship between product design and use. Our responsibility and opportunity to create greater mindfulness within our student cohorts can help shape a new identity around waste to balance the 'unity of human beings with all other living beings.'³¹ For curricula development, the educational model must be driven by more-than-human perspectives, where humans become an ally to nature.³²

ALIGNING ETHICS WITH HUMAN MATERIAL FEEDSTOCK

While the ethical perspective of fashion is currently predominantly aligned with working conditions across the value chain, introducing material feedstock from human waste streams comes with the requirement to reassess what is ethically acceptable or not.

SL: Working with human hair and nails comes with quite particular opportunities to collect DNA. We need to review our design ethics too?

ZH: I suppose it's the nature of identity and individualism that humans have developed to protect the idea of the individual self.

BW: But we need to think of a more-than-human perspective.

ZH: It's maybe the fear of losing control over your identity as a human.

SL: The historical context of taking people's hair for the sake of domination is quite a relevant one to discuss when we explore what kind of biomass feedstock we can utilise as a replacement for existing material streams.

ZH: The whole idea of hair as identity and pride is quite a powerful part of this. The dehumanising aspect of shaving someone's head or depriving them of that form of self-expression is caught up in people's relationship to hair. As a waste stream, hair has got maybe the greater potential in many ways, for design and communication.

To lower hierarchies between humans and nature therefore demands applying a different metric to discussing ethical value chains. One in which humans are not seen as superior to other resources, one that is multidimensional and based on holistic, cosmological worldviews.³³ The foundation for the curriculum model must take the cultural discourse of socially critical knowledge and new ways of being ethical into consideration.³⁴

Conclusion

This research is contextualised by the fashion and textile design curriculum framework *Constructive Disruption*. Mirroring the first layer of the framework, the intervention presented in Borås served as a research method utilising sensorial artefacts as a means of understanding individuals' acceptance and aversions to materials derived from human hair and nail waste. In understanding the significance of our role as educators through providing business as *unusual* rather than making small adjustments only, it feeds into a curriculum that explores radical worldviews and more-than-human practices and beliefs.³⁵

Our observations highlighted the need to expand our horizon as educators and practitioners to reflect an 'embodied self in the world' encompassing the acceptance of new material feedstock.³⁶ Related to curriculum development, findings emphasised our responsibility to instigate greater mindfulness to create new identities around and with human waste streams. Human waste streams as a legitimate matter might create a different relationship between design and product use aiming to unify more-than-human beings by diminishing the common dualistic worldview of Western societies that separates nature and humans.³⁷

The Thread of Thoughts method provided further evidence of how individuals were inspired and intrigued when engaging with alternative matter highlighting potential challenges for integrating this into design practice. Participants' openness but also their preference for natural material feedstock offered an outlook into the opportunities to educate for alternative material futures. However, the different emotional and physical experiences also revealed the need to learn about handling materials from human waste streams with regards to their properties and potential applications. This includes considering their influence on the design process challenging the designer and the user with regards to expectations on aesthetics, tactility and knowledge about material origin alike.

Centred around an emerging cultural discourse of socially critical knowledge, an exploration of new worldviews and new ways of being, *Constructive Disruption* supports the emergence of alternative design practices that extend beyond modern knowledge and the modern mind.³⁸ Common to Indigenous cosmological worldviews and underpinned by culturally and traditionally informed ways of sensing, approaches to human waste streams therefore inform our understanding of the *world that is* but furthermore one *that could be*.³⁹ One where our perception of material aligns with holistic worldviews that acknowledge humans' interconnectedness with all living beings.⁴⁰

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Biswas, Tanu, 'Who Needs Sensory Education?' *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 40, no 3 (2021): pp. 287–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-021-09763-y>.
- Bushell, Simon, Géraldine Satre Buisson, Mark Workman, Thomas and Colley, 'Strategic Narratives in Climate Change: Towards a Unifying Narrative to Address the Action Gap on Climate Change.' *Energy Research & Social Science* 28 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.04.001>.
- Cameron, Liz, 'Australian Indigenous Sensory Knowledge Systems in Creative Practices.' *Creative Arts in Education and Therapy* 7, no. 2 (2021): pp. 114–127. <https://doi.org/10.15212/CAET/2021/7/4>.
- Candy, Linda, *The Creative Reflective Practitioner: Research Through Making and Practice*. Routledge, 2020.
- Deloria, Vine, 'Power and Place: Equal Personality.' In *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*, edited by Vine Deloria and Daniel Wildcat, pp. 21–28 (Fulcrum Resources, 2001).
- Eisenstein, Charles, 'Worldly Education.' In *Regenerative Learning. Nurturing People and Caring for the Planet*, edited by Satish Kumar and Lorna Howarth, pp. 117–122. Global Resilience Publishing, 2022.
- Fibershed, 'Homepage.' <https://fibershed.org/>. Accessed September 27, 2024.
- Fry, Tony, *The Urmadic University*. Design Philosophy Provocation Press, 2020.
- Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. SUNY Press, 1996.
- Hil, Richard, Kristen Lyons, and Fern Thompsett, *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis: A University for the Common Good*. Routledge, 2022.
- Maureen P. Hogan and Sean A. Topkok, 'Teaching Indigenous Methodology and an Inupiaq Example.' *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 4, no. 2 (2015): pp. 50–75. <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22152>.
- Howes, David, *The Sensory Studies Manifesto. Tracking the Sensorial Revolution in the Arts and Human Science*. University of Toronto Press, 2022.
- Kumar, Satish, 'The True Meaning of Education.' In *Regenerative Learning. Nurturing People and Caring for the Planet*, edited by Satish Kumar and Lorna Howarth, pp. 55–64. Global Resilience Publishing, 2022.
- Lettmann, Sabine, Zoë Hillyard, and Beth White, 'Constructive Disruption: A Proposal for a Planet-Centred Curriculum to Enable Circular Systems Thinking in Fashion and Textiles Education.' *International Journal of Sustainable Fashion and Textiles* 2, no. 1 (2023): pp. 63–82. <https://doi.org/10.1386/sft.00021.1>.
- Mignolo, Walter D., and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Molthan-Hill, Petra, Nicholas Worsfold, Gustavo J. Nagy, Walter Leal Filho, and Mark Mifsud, 'Climate Change Education for Universities: A Conceptual Framework from an International Study.' *Journal of Cleaner Production* 226 (2019): pp. 1092–1101. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.04.053>.
- Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, 'Earth Exceeds Safe Limits: First Planetary Health Check Issues Red Alert.' September 24, 2024. <https://www.pik-potsdam.de/en/news/latest-news/earth-exceed-safe-limits-first-planetary-health-check-issues-red-alert>.
- Salmon, Enrique, 'Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship.' *Ecological Applications* 10, no. 5 (2000): pp. 1327–1332. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2641288>.
- Schumacher, Fritz, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. Harper and Row, 1973.
- Textile Exchange, *Materials Market Report*. Lamesa: Textile Exchange, 2024. <https://textileexchange.org/knowledge-center/reports/materials-market-report-2024/>.
- Thierry, Aaron, Laura Horn, Pauline von Hellermann, and Charlie J. Gardner, 'No Research on a Dead Planet: Preserving the Socio-Ecological Conditions for Academia.' *Frontiers in Education* 8 (2023): 1237076. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1237076>.
- Todd, Sharon, Marit Honerød Hoveid, and Elisabet Langmann, 'Educating Senses: Explorations in Aesthetics, Embodiment and Sensory Pedagogy.' *Studies in*

Philosophy and Education 40, no. 3 (2021): pp. 243–248. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-021-09776-7>.

Von Busch, Otto, *Making Trouble. Design, Material and Activism*. Bloomsbury, 2022.

Wahl, Daniel Christian, 2020. 'Design Follows Worldview and Worldview Follows Design.' *Age of Awareness*. January 23, 2020. <https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/design-follows-worldview-and-worldview-follows-design-dfb0f4c12fd2>.

Accessed December 12, 2023.

Wildcat, David, *Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge*. Fulcrum Publishing, 2009.

SABINE LETTMANN

Sabine Lettmann works as a Senior Lecturer at Birmingham City University as well as a Lecturer on the MA Sustainable Fashion at Falmouth University. She teaches systems thinking and circular fashion design internationally. In her research, she explores circular fashion, system thinking and playful learning, both in practice and in design education.

BETH WHITE

Beth White is a Senior Lecturer in Fashion Business and Promotion at Birmingham City University. Beth has published widely on the impact of participatory democracy, collective decision making and the social construction of knowledge, both within the education sector and the wider business environment.

ZOË HILLYARD

Zoë Hillyard is Senior Lecturer in Textile Design at Birmingham City University with a background in embroidery and knitwear design. She is an established craft practitioner working with waste streams and seeks to build circular design competencies and resilience through pedagogy, community engagement and material transformation.

- 1 Satish Kumar, 'The True Meaning of Education,' in *Regenerative Learning: Nurturing People and Caring for the Planet*, ed. Satish Kumar and Lorna Howarth (Global Resilience Publishing, 2022), p. 62f.
- 2 Kumar 2022, p. 63.
- 3 Tony Fry, *The Urmadic University* (Design Philosophy Provocation Press, 2020), p. 2.
- 4 Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, 'Earth Exceeds Safe Limits: First Planetary Health Check Issues Red Alert,' September 24, 2024, <https://www.pik-potsdam.de/en/news/latest-news/earth-exceed-safe-limits-first-planetary-health-check-issues-red-alert>; Simon Bushell, Géraldine Satre Buisson, Mark Workman, Thomas and Colley, 'Strategic Narratives in Climate Change: Towards a Unifying Narrative to Address the Action Gap on Climate Change,' *Energy Research & Social Science* 28 (2017): p. 13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.04.001>; Petra Molthan-Hill et al., 'Climate Change Education for Universities: A Conceptual Framework from an International Study,' *Journal of Cleaner Production* 226 (2019): pp. 1092–1101, <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.04.053>.
- 5 Aaron Thierry et al., 'No Research on a Dead Planet: Preserving the Socio-Ecological Conditions for Academia,' *Frontiers in Education* 8 (2023): p. 6, <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1237076>.
- 6 Sabine Lettmann, Zoë Hillyard, and Beth White, 'Constructive Disruption: A Proposal for a Planet-Centred Curriculum to Enable Circular Systems Thinking in Fashion and Textiles Education,' *International Journal of Sustainable Fashion and Textiles* 2, no. 1 (2023): p. 77, <https://doi.org/10.1386/sft.00021.1>.
- 7 Lettmann, Hillyard, and White 2023, p. 78; Charles Eisenstein, 'Worldly Education,' in *Regenerative Learning: Nurturing People and Caring for the Planet*, ed. Satish Kumar and Lorna Howarth (Global Resilience Publishing, 2022), p. 118.
- 8 Aaron Thierry, Laura Horn, Pauline von Hellermann, and Charlie J. Gardner, 'No Research on a Dead Planet: Preserving the Socio-Ecological Conditions for Academia,' *Frontiers in Education* 8 (2023): p. 4, <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1237076>.
- 9 Daniel Christian Wahl, 'Design Follows Worldview and Worldview Follows Design,' *Age of Awareness*, January 23, 2020, <https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/design-follows-worldview-and-worldview-follows-design-dfb0f4c12fd2>, accessed December 12, 2023.
- 10 Textile Exchange, *Materials Market Report* (Lamesa: Textile Exchange, 2024), p. 8, <https://textileexchange.org/knowledge-center/reports/materials-market-report-2024/>.
- 11 Eisenstein 2022, p. 118.
- 12 Textile Exchange 2024, p. 11.
- 13 Fritz Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (Harper and Row, 1973), p. 5; Fibershed, 'Homepage,' <https://fibershed.org/>. Accessed September 27, 2024.
- 14 Otto Von Busch, *Making Trouble: Design, Material and Activism* (Bloomsbury, 2022), p. 8.
- 15 Sharon Todd, Marit Honerød Hoveid, and Elisabet Langmann, 'Educating Senses: Explorations in Aesthetics, Embodiment and Sensory Pedagogy,' *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 40 no. 3 (2021): p. 246, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-021-09776-7>.
- 16 See Tanu Biswas, 'Who Needs Sensory Education?,' *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 40, no. 3 (2021): p. 298f, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-021-09763-y>.
- 17 See Maureen P. Hogan, Sean A. and Topkok, 'Teaching Indigenous Methodology and an Iñupiaq Example,' *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 4, no. 2 (2015): p. 54, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22152/19322>; Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018), p. 3.
- 18 Vine Deloria, 'Power and Place: Equal Personality,' in *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*, ed. Vine Deloria and Daniel Wildcat (Fulcrum Resources, 2001), p. 23f; Wildcat 2009, p. 18; Liz Cameron, 'Australian Indigenous Sensory Knowledge Systems in Creative Practices,' *Creative Arts in Education and Therapy* 7, no 2 (2021): p. 115, <https://doi.org/10.15212/CAET/2021/7/4>.
- 19 Cameron 2021, p. 115.
- 20 Biswas 2021, p. 292.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Enrique Salmón, 'Kincentric Ecology: Indigenous Perceptions of the Human-Nature Relationship,' *Ecological Applications* 10, no 5 (2000): p. 1327,

- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2641288>.
- 23 Linda Candy, *The Creative Reflective Practitioner: Research Through Making and Practice* (Routledge, 2020), p. 39.
 - 24 Todd, Honerød Hoveid, and Langmann 2021, p. 246.
 - 25 Biswas 2021, p. 292.
 - 26 Thierry, Horn, von Hellermann, and Gardner 2023.
 - 27 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (SUNY Press, 1996), p. 215.
 - 28 Molthan-Hill et al. 2019, p. 1100.
 - 29 David Howes, *The Sensory Studies Manifesto. Tracking the Sensorial Revolution in the Arts and Human Science* (University of Toronto Press, 2022), p. 68f; Salmón 2000, p. 1327.
 - 30 Fibershed, 'Homepage,' <https://fibershed.org/>. Accessed September 27, 2024.
 - 31 Kumar 2022.
 - 32 Lettmann, Hillyard and White 2023.
 - 33 Cameron 2021, p. 116.
 - 34 See Todd, Honerød Hoveid, and Langmann 2021, p. 246.
 - 35 Thierry, Horn, von Hellermann, and Gardner, *ibid*; Richard Hil, Kristen Lyons, and Fern Thompsett, *Transforming Universities in the Midst of Global Crisis: A University for the Common Good* (Routledge, 2022), p. 28f.
 - 36 Biswas 2021, p. 292.
 - 37 See Kumar 2022, p. 63.
 - 38 see Todd, Honerød Hoveid, and Langmann 2021, p. 246; Lettmann, Hillyard, and White 2023, p. 71.
 - 39 Cameron 2021, p. 115.
 - 40 Kumar 2022, p. 63.

PUNTADAS POR PULGADA: TALLER

— SANTIAGO ÚTIMA LOAIZA

Abstract

This paper explores the transformation of garment production in Manizales and Medellín, Colombia, through a personal and creative lens. Grounded in the family archive and personal experiences, the study examines the impact of economic liberalisation policies introduced in the nineties on traditional craftsmanship, highlighting the tensions between nostalgia for traditional bespoke garment making and the progress of mass production. The creative practice research compares artisanal and serial production models, focusing on the alienation of workers and the decline of tailoring traditions. The work also reflects on memory, craft and the symbolic role of sewing in preserving personal and collective histories. Ultimately, this research offers a critical perspective on how neoliberal economic shifts reshaped the garment industry, culminating in a participatory performance — *Puntadas por pulgada: Taller* — that explores these dynamics.

KEYWORDS: PERFORMANCE, GARMENT PRODUCTION, ECONOMIC LIBERALISATION, FAMILY ARCHIVE, FASHION DESIGN.

1. Introduction

I am obsessed with the passage of time. I feel nostalgic about both myself and my mother, particularly for the childhood memories surrounding her fashion house. I long to return to that time, yet I feel frustrated by the present we've had to adapt to. As a fashion designer, I've inherited my mother's passion for tailored garment making. Unknowingly, I have translated her designs into my own, and I possess the same skill for crafting a dress, jacket or coat. Unexpectedly, we both share a deep yearning for the traditional systems of garment production, which were sidelined by the transformation of the fashion industry in Manizales and Medellín, Colombia.

The economic liberalisation promoted by César Gaviria's government opened Colombia to textiles and garments produced



Figure 1. My mother in her office, where she used to attend to her clients.

in Asian countries, such as India and China. As a consequence, this created a need within the national industry to lower production costs by adopting precarious, outsourced and deregulated labour practices in the garment sector.

It was between the late 1990s and the end of the 2010s that small enterprises, like my mother's, began to face crises due to the drastic changes the sector underwent within the framework of global capital. Competing with imported products from Asia and brands from transnational mass-production companies forced my mother to transition towards a more cost-effective supply chain. This inevitably meant abandoning the tradition of the style of garments she had once made because she had to adopt mass-production processes, entering a marketplace where competition was driven by price.

This research critically examines how neoliberal economic policies have reshaped traditional craftsmanship, exploring the intersections of personal memory and the transformation of garment production. By adopting a practice-based perspective, I reflect on the impact of these shifts through performative means.

1.1 Nostalgia and Progress

It is important to define, within the context of this work, the concepts of nostalgia and progress. Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as a longing for an idealised past, distinguishing between restorative nostalgia, which seeks to reconstruct a lost past, and reflective nostalgia, which recognises the impossibility of return and instead critically explores the experience of time and memory.¹ In this sense, my nostalgia does not attempt to restore something completely lost or absent but instead engages with fragments of the past as a way of understanding their transformation. However, this act of remembering is not passive; rather, it leads me to question the very nature of those memories and how they have evolved over time.

Fred Davis notes that nostalgia carries an emotional duality, oscillating between

happiness and sadness. While it is often described as a *bittersweet* experience, this sadness does not overwhelm but rather heightens the sense of recaptured joy or contentment.² In my own experience, nostalgia brings both joy and an awareness of the unattainability of the past. This fluctuation, rather than being paralysing, allows me to recognise and appreciate history in its proper context, honour my family's tradition, and simultaneously engage in a process of critical reflection on its legacy.

Progress is approached as a broadly accepted advancement, yet one that simultaneously warrants critique. While technological progress is often framed as a pathway to improved living conditions, it is necessary to acknowledge that its implementation has frequently prioritised efficiency and economic expansion at the expense of craftsmanship and human agency. It is through technological advancement that certain crafts, processes and techniques, which were unable to adapt to evolving trends, have disappeared over time.

This transformation aligns with Giorgio Agamben's distinction between *poiesis*—the act of making—and *praxis*—an approach to action detached from material production. As industrialisation and technological innovation advanced, emphasis shifted away from hands-on craftsmanship (*poiesis*) towards fragmented and automated production processes, where workers became increasingly disconnected from the full cycle of garment-making, further contributing to the erosion of traditional knowledge. Meanwhile, *praxis* became more dominant, with designers and production managers operating from a strategic and administrative distance rather than engaging with the material act of making.³

The relationship between nostalgia and progress could be framed by the word *retrotraer* (to go back), which the Royal Spanish Academy defines as 'returning to a past time as a reference or starting point for a narrative.'⁴ This concept resonates with my constant search through the past: I move backwards, gathering memories that propel me forward, like a kind of time

travel, a meeting of my childhood self and my adult self.

This tension between nostalgia and progress is also reflected in the contrast between Manizales and Medellín. These two cities are mentioned in this work because Manizales symbolises tradition; it is a mid-sized city historically focused on commerce, allowing a slower pace of life. Medellín, by contrast, represents industrial development, being the second most important city in Colombia and historically centred on production. Many garments imported from Asia began to be sold in Manizales, which prompted my mother to seek alternatives in production and commerce, eventually leading her to fully relocate to Medellín. Although this move promised greater success for her business, it almost completely erased our past.

1.2 Creative Practice Research Objectives

The primary objective was to identify the key elements in the transformation of garment production processes between 1990 and 2020, in order to capture the tensions between nostalgia and progress through the development of a series of artworks. This involved appropriating my family archive, considering its context, my memories and the information gathered from the region. The process was structured around three aspects.

Firstly, it explores how my mother's company, Creaciones Patricia, significantly reduced the production of bespoke garments and implemented a standardised sizing system. The business focus shifted from a house in a residential area of Manizales to several commercial stores in other cities, particularly Medellín. It was therefore important to acknowledge the interaction between my mother and her clients, in order to identify its influence on the technical development of the garments. This reveals the differences in the transition from personalisation to standardisation, in relation to the traditional production rituals that were excluded from the new processes. This aspect is referred to as: 'The origin of dialogues' through introspection.



Figure 2. The privacy and exclusivity of the fashion house in the Belén neighbourhood in Manizales are evident.



Figure 3. The accessible nature of the store in a shopping mall in Pereira is clear.

Secondly, the research addresses how the garment production processes became fragmented; practice of having the same worker make a garment from start to finish was abandoned. It thus becomes relevant to compare artisanal production models with mass production models of clothing. This highlights the differences between craftsmanship and labour force, as well as between workshops and assembly lines, within the framework of neoliberal work rhythms. This aspect is termed 'production as dialogue,' which guides the actions to be performed.

Thirdly, the research findings are addressed by exploring creative possibilities. An autobiographical visual narrative is constructed from fragments of memory. This culminates in *Puntadas por pulgada: Taller*, in which I reflect through performance on the passage of time, the rhythms of production, and the symbolic value and



Figure 4. My mother and her employees working, as they did every day. You can see that each employee is responsible for a single garment.



Figure 5. The employees sewing in an assembly line process. You can see how the fabric pieces pile up, indicating that the garments are reproduced and the operations are repeated.

evocative power of photographs, objects and documents, using sewing as a means to narrate the craft. This aspect is referred to as 'memory as dialogue,' illustrating the development and outcome of the performance.

2. The Origin of Dialogues

My mother began offering her dressmaking services door-to-door, visiting clients in their homes. She later set up her workshop at home, and eventually, the workshop evolved into a fashion house in Manizales, specialising in bespoke women's tailoring and some made-to-measure evening gowns. With the shift in feminine aesthetics during the era of economic liberalisation, she decided to launch a youthful brand with

standardised sizing in Medellín. However, this gradually overshadowed her traditional work, and even then, it wasn't enough to face the new challenges of the industry, as mass fashion quickly took over.



Figure 6. Tailored garments featured details that required greater precision in pattern-making, with darts and essential cuts to achieve the silhouette.

The entrepreneurial spirit behind the business was rooted in technical expertise, including pattern drafting, sewing, workshop management and teaching. These experiences cultivated a deep awareness of the production process. While my mother lacked a strong business acumen, she had an empathetic attitude towards her workers. Nevertheless, she attempted to adapt her company's production processes without compromising her principles. Perhaps she wasn't fully aware of how the capitalist system influenced her decisions. As a result, the tradition of the making ritual faded, altering the dynamics of interaction with her clients. Over time, the made-to-measure service was discouraged, and it remained

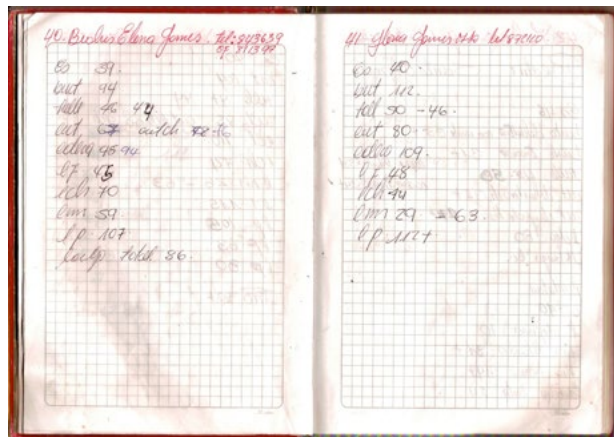


Figure 7. A dress made of knitted fabric, which represented how the types of fabric also changed during the shift in production models, and also the pattern-making method.

only for special orders from friends or clients who had been with her for many years.

Evidence of the personalised service — where clients had the chance to interact with the person making the product, seeing how it was crafted up close, and getting to know a little about the person and their craft — still remains. The process, the time it took and the implications can still be found in the notebook where my mother kept and updated each of her clients' measurements.

These transformations in garment production not only altered the technical processes but also reshaped the dynamics of interaction between artisans and their clients. As the made-to-measure service diminished, the connection between the maker and the wearer gradually faded, giving way to impersonal and standardised production models. This shift highlights the broader consequences of economic liberalisation,



where traditional craftsmanship struggles to maintain its place within an increasingly industrialised and profit-driven system.

3. Production as Dialogue

What has been presented so far leads to a comparison between artisanal production models and mass-production models. This comparison explores the experiences of a tailor or dressmaker versus an assembly line worker, as well as the contrast between craftsmanship and labour in their respective processes. It also examines the conditions of the workshop versus the factory, acknowledging that these production models are shaped by socio-economic and cultural phenomena, which drove the transformation of the garment industry.

The discussion will initially focus on the context of Medellín, where the most critical changes in production systems occurred. By contrast, the context of Manizales has already been addressed, much of which can be understood through the visual records included in this research. These materials — ranging from photographs to archival documents — document key aspects of the transformation in garment production: the shift from a personalised, client-focused fashion house to a more standardised retail setting; the transition from artisanal, small-scale tailoring to serial production in assembly lines; and the evolving aesthetics in branding and garment construction. These records, alongside the examination of my family archive, offer direct insight into how industrialisation reshaped both production methods

and the relationships between makers and their craft.

The references cited throughout this text highlight the global issues of industrialisation, particularly in relation to its impact on labour structures, craftsmanship and production models. While Gartner Vinasco and Camacho Reyes examine these transformations within the specific context of Medellín, Singer and Mumford provide a broader perspective on the effects of industrialisation and mechanisation on labour and production systems. These perspectives frame the analysis in this creative practice research, which explores such transformations through an examination of my family archive.

3.1 Context

The fashion system in Medellín was organised and rapidly expanded, solidifying its productivity from the 1950s and eventually evolving into what can now be considered a fashion industry with a global language. This trend has become evident over the past twenty years, as the economic liberalisation initiated by César Gaviria's government led national brands to strengthen their production systems and strategies in order to compete with imported products. From the 1990s to the present, the involvement of Inexmoda has been crucial in the process of industrial transformation. This institution emerged as an organisational response to tackle the economic crisis of that decade, proposing '[...] a strategy framed within the globalisation of a liberal development model [...].'⁵

As a result, the power given by technical expertise once held by tailors and dressmakers gradually shifted to the industrialists. With the financial means to invest in machinery and facilities, the business magnates replaced the artisans, meeting the population's clothing demands faster and at a lower cost. Many artisans were forced to join factories as workers, thereby losing control over their time, means of production and creativity. In *Las confesiones de las confecciones*, Camacho explores the implications that globalisation, neoliberalism

and technical changes, as well as new business organisation paradigms, have on production units and their workers. This research delves into how globally oriented economic policies have contributed to precarious working conditions of factories in Medellín.⁶

3.2 Work Rhythms in the Neoliberal Framework

It is important to clarify that the difference between artisanal and serial production is not strictly limited to the fact that the former is done manually, and the latter is industrial. The distinction also lies in the fact that artisanal production, regardless of the use of machinery, is a complete process carried out by a single person — the artisan. In contrast, serial production splits the process among several individuals — workers — each assigned a specific task that must be repeated continuously.

Based on this difference between artisanal and serial production, it is essential to address the concept of alienated labour that Marx developed in his writings. Under conditions of alienated work, workers must produce objects over which they have no control, as these belong to their employers, who sell them to increase their wealth and power. Thus, workers become alienated from the products of their labour. They are further alienated from their activity, because they have sold their working time to capitalists who control them, forcing them to work long hours performing repetitive and mechanical tasks. As they can no longer produce freely according to their imagination, workers are alienated from their human essence, which triggers a sense of discomfort and dissatisfaction because they cannot complete the full cycle of material transformation that allows them to feel ownership of their work.⁷

Similarly, in connection with the concept of alienation, the chapter 'From Craftsmanship to Mechanical Art' in Lewis Mumford's *Arte y técnica (Art and Technique)* mentions that the artisan '[...] took the necessary time for their work, obeying the rhythm of their own body, resting

when fatigued, reflecting and projecting as they advanced in their work, lingering on the parts that most interested them [...].⁸ However, with industrialisation, '[...] men become mechanised, transformed into mechanical, uniform, and replaceable parts, or else they learn to carry out standardised and repeatable acts with precision [...].'⁹ In this way, the body becomes instrumental in serial production, and the process is broken down into fragmented operations, excluding a significant part of human personality from the technique: its imprint.

3.3 From Production Shifts to Embodied Experience

The concepts developed above are reflected in the performance *Puntadas por pulgada: Taller* when I lose control over what I am sewing. Initially, I decide what and how to sew, but as the participants intervene, I lose autonomy — they place various elements on the table for me to sew, and they also instruct me on how to do it. This is where I begin to embody the physical and emotional experience of a worker. I lose decision-making power, my rhythm becomes disrupted, and thus, both the workshop and the factory are subverted as they coexist in ambiguity. I become mechanised through the intervention of others, generating tension between nostalgia and progress, and in that tension, I revisit sewing as an unrepeatable experience of time.

4. Memory as Dialogue

Despite how intrusive the intervention of others may feel in the performance, my memory begins to be reconstructed through a dialogue that shifts from the personal to the collective. The fragments of the family archive (particularly the photos) act as ruins. The thread of nostalgia ties them together, ultimately leaving everything subject to chance and imperfection, as evidence of the unfinished.

In *Álbum de familia*, Silva presents the necessary conditions for the existence of an album, conditions that I adopt to reconstruct a timeline. These conditions are: the family as the represented subject, the photo

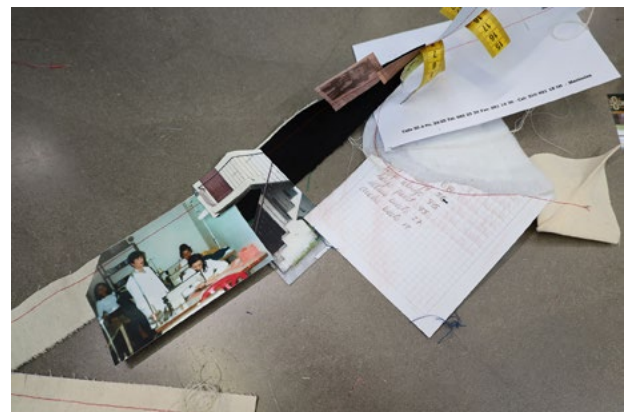


Figure 8, 9, 10.

as the visual medium of record, and the album as the archival technique. The combination of these three conditions creates the possibility of narration — in this case, family stories based on moments deemed worthy of being archived as images. However, it must be noted that the memory of the album also relates to forgetting, as it does not store every life event, 'only those that passed through the selective process over time.'¹⁰

This is why Silva asserts that 'the archive is a way of classifying, and it is through its technique that it produces a

visible order, after the time when the photos were collected.’¹¹ In this way, I appropriate the family album’s archival system as a means of spontaneously or intentionally reconstructing the significant moments of life history centred around my mother’s fashion house.

In this effort to complete our history, the performance also incorporated elements beyond photographs: documents, press clippings, catalogues, pages from diaries and notebooks, among others. These provide additional context or offer more information about the photos. Furthermore, when Silva defines different types of albums, he mentions one he calls the *Business Owner* album, which combines work and personal elements, thus recreating parallel stories where family life intersects with business life.

4.1 Construction of the

Autobiographical Visual Narrative

Starting from the idea of the family album as a system or archival method, it becomes necessary to refer to sources that discuss the construction of visual autobiographies, bearing in mind that what the album ultimately narrates is life itself, and that within it, various people, events, and situations converge through images.

Although my work is not conceived as a diary nor does it adopt its methods, I find Catalina Cortés’ approach to composing a diary through her works particularly important. Her method resonates with the logic of a family album, even though applying that logic is not its primary purpose, similar to what I did in my performance. Cortés speaks of ‘[...] an intuitive assemblage of images and memories through temporal layers [...],’¹² a poetic juxtaposition of time where the diary, as a narrative and visual practice, allows for the creation of an image by collecting and assembling other images. This juxtaposition links connected and disconnected biographies, creating a family biography that ties into the story of the broader context, thus also becoming a narrative about memory.

For Cortés Severino, the creation of new images takes place ‘amidst memories, forgetfulness, and fantasies,’ eventually becoming a way to ‘heal and deal with temporal and spatial distances, as well as a way to live amid that fragmentation.’¹³ I believe the question she posed during her work process also found its way into mine: how do we make visible the absences and silences that shape the present? How can we reveal and expose memories amid their discontinuities and ambiguities? To address these questions, I turned to the writings of art historian and critic Anna Maria Guasch, who has focused much of her research on archives, memory and contemporary art. Guasch makes a statement that I consider a guiding principle for reaffirming the reasons why I approach the archive and create from and with it:

‘[...] what connects written autobiography (the written self) and the visual self (the photographic, cinematic self) is the desire for trace, for inscription on a lasting medium, and the desire to build series over time. They also share a desire to recover and construct the gaze of the other upon oneself.’¹⁴

For this reason, I needed sewing in my creative process as a form of trace and inscription. The mediums were fabrics, garments either made or yet to be made, and the archive itself, all coming together to create a timeline. This timeline, constructed from the fragments of memory, seeks to recover moments where the self—both past and present—reflect upon and constitute each other through introspection.

4.2 Sewing as Metaphorical and Poetic Narration

Sewing is metaphorically seen as a possibility to repair beyond the functional. The act of stitching speaks to the desire to correct a situation or emotion. Stitches can be considered a symbolic gesture, ensuring that things do not come undone, do not separate, or do not break again. There is a desire on my part to reconstruct the past as a way to reclaim traditional production dynamics.



Figure 11. In the front photo was my mother; I cut her out. In the back photo, I remained.



Figure 12.

At the end of the performance, the construct of a lifeline emerges through sewing, containing the most cherished memories, passing before the audience like a chronology that alludes to an assembly line. The workshop transforms into a small-scale factory, reaching an intimate connection with the participants, while the objects related to the workshop are subverted within the logic of serial production. This is why the materialisation in this performance is approached as a possibility for reflective thinking, accepting it as an unfinished dialogue



Figure 13.

suspended in time by questioning conventional methods of fashion creation.

5. Conclusion

One of the greatest achievements in creating this performance was the ability to detach from the garment as the primary focus. This allowed me to delve deeper into an element as seemingly simple as thread: its relationship with fabric and other materials through the sewing machine, giving the work a meaning tied to key factors such as rhythm, time, and duration, while recognising that the body in the industry becomes a resource. The chance that I experienced helped me appreciate the value of not having complete control over the process. The sensation of incompleteness, of reaching only part of the process, and the visibility of imperfection were embraced throughout the performance.

The installation served as a medium that evoked garment production spaces, thus transcending mere technical exploration and positioning the work in an ambiguous space between the factory and the workshop, drawing on their echoes. Through the arrangement of specific elements, I was able to create an image that told a story without words, acknowledging the value of the symbolic. The same occurred with the family archive as it appeared throughout the work, recognising that sewing not only gives me the power or the ability to create but also to reflect.

This is why I defend the technique as knowledge that granted tailors and dress-makers a special power: the ability to create personalised garments without sacrificing quality. From their home workshops, they served people, their advertising was word of mouth in the local community, and they earned their reputation through technical diligence, charging a fair price that allowed them to sustain themselves while offering this type of experience to ordinary people. This reflection suggested that the performance I developed should focus on the process of connecting with the audience, thereby fostering an exchange of actions through sewing. In this way, the act of



Figure 14. This is the workshop of The Swedish School of Textiles. This is where the performance took place, and its appearance closely resembles that of a factory. By setting some artifacts as though in a workshop, the ambiguity between both workspaces was created.

making becomes an act of reconstruction of my family bond, where the dialogue of production and the dialogue of memory coexist.

The performance revealed an even greater achievement: transcending the autobiographical or self-referential nature of the work. This allowed the audience to connect emotionally, as they recognised that what they saw also related to something about themselves or a member of their families. By intertwining personal history with broader socio-economic changes, this work not only offers an autobiographical reflection but also raises questions about how traditional craftsmanship can be reclaimed and reinterpreted within contemporary production frameworks. Future research might explore how these dialogues between past and present continue to evolve in response to globalisation, and how performative and creative practices can contribute to sustaining craft knowledge in the face of industrialisation and economic shifts.

SANTIAGO ÚTIMA LOAIZA

Santiago Útima Loaiza is a Fashion Design graduate from Colegiatura Colombiana (2013) and holds an MFA from the University of Antioquia (2022). His profile as a creator and educator was shaped through his MFA thesis, 'Puntadas por pulgada: The Transformation of Garment Production in Manizales and Medellín Seen Through the Family Archive,' which received the highest honours. This research, characterised by its nostalgic yet critical approach to creative practice, drew on his experience in fashion design.

His artworks and research have been presented internationally at events such as the Dialogical Bodies Conference (Boras), the State of Fashion Biennale (Arnhem), and the Responsible Fashion Series (Antwerp). He previously taught for nine years in Medellín at various schools and universities, and is now a full-time lecturer in the Fashion Design programme at Universidad de Monterrey, Mexico.

Instagram: @santiago.utima

Website: www.santiagoutima.com

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agamben, Giorgio, *El hombre sin contenido*. Translated by Eduardo Margareto Kohrmann. Altera, 2005.
- Boym, Svetlana, *The Origins of Nostalgia: Memories and Reflections*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.
- Camacho Reyes, Karina, *Las confesiones de las confecciones: Condiciones laborales y de vida de las confeccionistas de Medellín*. Escuela Nacional Sindical, 2007.
- Cortés Severino, Catalina, 'El diario como práctica narrativa y visual.' *Corpografías* 1, no. 1 (2014): pp. 44–58. <https://doi.org/10.14483/cp.v1i1.8798>.
- Davis, Fred, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. The Free Press, 1979.
- Gartner Vinasco, Paulo A., 'El vestir como referente de transformaciones sociales en Medellín.' BA thesis, 2012.
- Guasch, Ana Maria, *Autobiografías visuales: Del archivo al índice*. Siruela, 2009.
- Mumford, Lewis, *Arte y técnica*. Translated by Federico Corriente Basús. Pepitas de calabaza, 2014.
- Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la lengua española*. 23rd ed. Espasa, 2014.
- Silva, Armando, *Álbum de familia: La imagen de nosotros mismos*. Universidad de Medellín, 2012.
- Singer, Peter, *Marx: Una breve introducción*. Antoni Bosch Editor, 2022.
- Útima Loaiza, Santiago, 'Puntadas por pulgada: La transformación de la confección en Manizales y Medellín vista en el archivo familiar.' MFA thesis, Universidad de Antioquia, 2021. <https://bibliotecadigital.udea.edu.co/handle/10495/30981>.
- 1 Svetlana Boym, *The Origins of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2022), p. 144.
- 2 Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (The Free Press, 1979), p. 14.
- 3 Giorgio Agamben, *El hombre sin contenido*, trans. Eduardo Margareto Kohrmann (Altera, 2005), p. 111.
- 4 Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 23rd ed. (Espasa, 2014), s.v. 'retrotraer.'
- 5 Paulo A. Gartner Vinasco, 'El vestir como referente de transformaciones sociales en Medellín' (BA thesis, 2012), p. 12.
- 6 Karina Camacho Reyes, *Las confesiones de las confecciones: condiciones laborales y de vida de las confeccionistas de Medellín* (Escuela Nacional Sindical, 2007), p. 15.
- 7 Peter Singer, *Marx: Una breve introducción* (Antoni Bosch Editor, 2022), p. 58.
- 8 Lewis Mumford, *Arte y técnica*, trans. Federico Corriente Basús (Pepitas de calabaza, 2014), p. 52.
- 9 Mumford 2014, p. 54.
- 10 Armando Silva, *Álbum de familia: la imagen de nosotros mismos* (Universidad de Medellín, 2012), p. 38.
- 11 Silva 2012, p. 22.
- 12 Catalina Cortés Severino, 'El diario como práctica narrativa y visual,' *Corpografías* 1, no. 1 (2014): p. 46.
- 13 Cortés Severino 2014, p. 48.
- 14 Ana Maria Guasch, *Autobiografías visuales: del archivo al índice* (Siruela, 2009), p. 17.

GEAR MAKETH THE LEATHERMAN?

A PERSPECTIVE ON LEATHER CULTURES AND MASCULINITIES

— TIMO RISSANEN

Abstract

This article explores masculinities within leatherculture through an autoethnographic approach. This includes a discussion of a photoshoot titled *What Makes a Leatherman?*, created in collaboration with photographer Thomas Evans, to problematise and play with notions of gender within leatherculture. The article pays tribute to the critical importance of Tom of Finland's work to leatherculture, while acknowledging valid critiques of the artist's work. In addition to autoethnography, it draws from research on leatherculture, acknowledging that such scholarship is scarce and precarious. The article underscores the importance of storytelling from within the community and suggests some paths for future research, including leather's intersections with cultures of sustainability. It concludes with a call to embrace the diversity and fluidity of leather identities, demanding unity and openness.

KEYWORDS: LEATHERCULTURE, LEATHER, MASCULINITIES, GENDER

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

I begin by acknowledging the Gadigal and the Kamaygal clans of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands I live and work. I pay my respects to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands. Sovereignty of these lands has never been ceded; these are stolen lands. This always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

GRATITUDE

I am deeply grateful to the workshop participants at the Dialogical Bodies conference; the generous discussion enriched my view of leatherculture. I thank research assistant Safwan for his support with preparing this article. Leatherfolk: thank you for the world you are.

'No, I have no regrets. I will die from this disease that I may have caught in a place like the Slot. It will consume me. Unfortunate, maybe. But I have no regrets. I loved my world.'

From an essay by leatherman Geoff Mains,¹ written shortly before he died from AIDS in 1989.

Introduction

This article examines notions of masculinity among leathermen through an autoethnographic approach: I am a leatherman. A selective review of literature is followed by a discussion of *What Makes a Leatherman?*, a gender-bending leather photoshoot I did with New York-based photographer Thomas Evans in October 2023. The photographs were presented and discussed in a workshop at the Dialogical Bodies conference in Borås, Sweden, in April 2024. The workshop discussion, which ranged from construction of gender to issues of voice and power within subcultures, guides the thinking in this article. The article contributes to decades of fragmented scholarship on leatherculture by leatherfolk at a moment when that culture is increasingly divergent, acknowledging that it does so from a white and privileged position. The article concludes by pointing to potential research paths within leatherculture.

Background

Touko Laaksonen, also known as the artist Tom of Finland, died in November 1991. Until his death, his work was not widely known in his native Finland outside of the gay community. Suddenly Finnish newspapers were flooded with his art. I was a wide-eyed sixteen-year-old and saw in his artworks men who were deliriously happy with being gay. Living in a quiet Finnish country town, I wanted to find these men and inhabit their world. In the three decades since, I have found many of them, and I cherish the world I am now a part of. Yet, it is a world that on occasions struggles to accommodate genderqueer leathermen like me—and even more so many others who do not fit the narrow physical ideals of the visual iconography of leatherculture. This paper argues that to thrive, leatherculture (or perhaps more accurately the plural, leathercultures) should embrace diversity and its own, queer contradictions.

Leatherculture

Although fetish is probably as old as human culture: adorning ourselves in leather goes back to the dawn of humanity. However, leatherculture as we recognise it today emerged after the Second World War.² *Leatherfolk* (1991), edited by leatherman Mark Thompson³ and comprising essays from diverse leatherfolk, provides an excellent insight into the emergence of leatherculture in the US. Disillusioned, disenfranchised veterans made up the core group of the first generations of leathermen. As essays in *Leatherfolk* vividly demonstrate, BDSM was inseparable from leatherculture in the early decades, unlike in today's divergent leathercultures. Equally embedded was a kind of uncompromising masculinity: hard, hairy, muscular. Laaksonen was one of a handful of gay artists shaping the culture from its earliest days. That form—the artworks of Tom of Finland—can rightly be critiqued today as narrow.

Hunter Scott productively problematises Tom's work in the context of intersectional queer politics, while noting that we should simultaneously 'insist

on our rights to joy and solidarity.'⁴ Scott demands that Tom's work not be sanitised from its fascist origins because such erasure ultimately harms all of us by reinforcing structures of normativity. A critique like Scott's does not invalidate the pleasure and affirmation many leathermen, me included, receive from Tom's work. Instead, it potentially opens his work up to a broader range of queer folk, including leathermen who may have previously felt alienated by it. Leatherculture today is wonderfully diverse. On social media, I am connected to a geographically and culturally divergent leather community ranging from Japan to Indonesia to Sri Lanka to Guyana to Ecuador. It is beyond the scope of the present study to investigate if and how leatherculture permeates non-Western cultures as a colonising entity, or if and how it is 'absorbed' without an asymmetry of power and cultural hegemony. Applying Arturo Escobar's concept of pluriversality⁵ into such an investigation could be a future project to better understand how leathercultures emerge, exist and commingle across diverse worldviews. The fetish for leather transcends cultures, languages and worldviews: people from vastly different backgrounds



Figure 1.



Figure 2. *What Makes a Leatherman?*
Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans.
Hair and makeup by Wesley.

have a reason for an immediate bond and subcultural connection. I have come to love my global siblinghood deeply.

Masculinities

Despite some media discourse suggesting otherwise through (deliberate) misinterpretations of ‘toxic masculinity,’ there is nothing inherently wrong with masculinity. Problems can arise when notions of masculinity become narrow and singular, and when masculinity is overtly associated with aggression, force, brutality: a hardness. And yet suggestions of a ‘soft’ masculinity are often mocked in memes harking back to a time when men allegedly were men. The fear of softness can become pathological. In my worldview, masculinity and femininity, and more broadly gender, exist on a non-binary, non-linear multidimensional spectrum. Humanity has a long history when it comes to accepting and honouring the diversity of gender beyond the binary construct of male/female. The colonialist attempts to erase

this diversity are futile because gender is inherently biologically diverse and often fluid. In *Evolution’s Rainbow* (2004), biologist and trans woman Joan Roughgarden provides a rich account of the diversity and fluidity of gender across animals, the kingdom of life that we humans are part of. The book is a liberating read: diversity and fluidity are inherent to any notions of ‘biological’ gender.

Leatherculture emerged at a time and in a context — the US and Europe in the 1940s and 1950s — where binary gender roles were fixed to an extreme extent. This has likely shaped ideas of masculinity among leathermen. Yet even BLUF, a leather organisation at the traditional end of leathermen’s organisations, has advocated for self-identification for many years: if you identify as a man, you are a man, and you are welcome to join the organisation.⁶ This is important to acknowledge at a time when the hashtag #gaynotqueer is gaining traction, concurrent with the emergence of trans-exclusionary organisations like the LGB Alliance and increasingly hostile anti-trans legislation in the US and elsewhere. In my home of Warrang/Sydney, almost all events for leathermen are inclusive of people who identify as men. It does not mean our work in this regard is done. One of the competitors for a leather title in Sydney in 2024 identified as non-binary and became a target of online trolling ahead of the competition. Commendably, the community dealt with the incident decisively and swiftly in support of the competitor. Van Doorn notes⁷ the long histories of trans men and trans-masculine folk within leatherculture, including as bootblacks, who clean, maintain and repair boots and other leather items at events. Ideas of masculinities within our communities have perhaps always been more diverse and fluid than we acknowledge.



Figure 3. *What Makes a Leatherman?*
Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans.
Hair and makeup by Wesley.

Whose Voice? Situating Leather Culture Discourse

At Dialogical Bodies, a workshop participant — who was, notably, not from leatherculture — stressed the importance of protecting the subculture: it should not be accessible to everyone. The subsequent discussion on whether it was even appropriate for me to discuss the culture with people not belonging to it was tender and generous. Discourse on a subculture needs to acknowledge whether the voice comes from within or outside of the subculture. Why? By definition, a subculture is in a subservient, even antagonistic, position to the dominant culture surrounding it. Locating the voice acknowledges its inherent power and agency as much as its limitations. For example, the previous reflections on masculinities in this paper are coloured by my own genderqueer identity. I am a privileged, white cisgender man, yet sometimes my geared-up expression as a leatherman includes elements traditionally considered ‘feminine.’ The connection for me is to do with BDSM rather than drag or

transvestism: high-heeled shoes and tightly laced corsets are primarily a pain kink for me. Managing the self-inflicted, slowly accumulating pain that heels and corset wreak requires a particular focus that reinforces and amplifies the dominant side of my sexual identity. Both heels and corsets have an appearance that we understand as ‘feminine,’ yet I would not describe the sensations they create for me as feminine. Heels force one to walk in a somewhat ‘feminine’ way, perhaps, but what matters to me is that within half an hour a persistent, slowly increasing pain sets in. Meanwhile, a corset severely restricts the way the torso moves and affects how one breathes. Both restrictions can be interpreted as one becoming an object, a notion also sometimes viewed as ‘feminine,’ yet I don’t see it that way. The brutal pain of heels and the relentless constriction of a corset with steel bones, both self-inflicted, bring out my unrelenting dominant side. I am in control of my pain, and I will be in control of yours.

Why share this, a facet of sexuality and sexual behaviour, in a professional context? In addition to unapologetically jettisoning any shame I previously carried relating to my sexuality, it has taken me a long time to realise that we cannot leave the



Figure 4. *What Makes a Leatherman?*
Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans.
Hair and makeup by Wesley.

telling of our stories, whether with words, images or our bodies, to people outside of our communities. They are our stories to tell, about ourselves, for ourselves. This paper is in part a response to the call by Wagner for the ‘recentering of subjectivity within queer historiography led by queer-identified scholars.’⁸ I first read the passage on leathermen in groundbreaking fashion theorist Valerie Steele’s seminal book *Fetish* (1996) as a fashion student more than 25 years ago. Rereading it now as a leatherman feels like politely listening to a tourist account of a place and a people Steele didn’t quite try to understand. Steele’s sources on leather are mostly secondary, some of which are texts by leathermen while others are not. Oddly, Steele cites the British fashion writer Colin McDowell — instead of speaking with a leatherman, for example — who claims that the origin of leather’s appeal lies in the fact that ‘the unaroused male penis [is] pink and pathetic.’⁹ According to McDowell leather reasserts masculine virility. A leather jacket ‘disguises’ the body’s ‘inadequacies,’ ‘but it also functions as an icon of butch,

raunchy, even brutal, masculinity — and raw power.’¹⁰ Brutal masculinity. Yes, we leathermen can look brutally masculine and be brutally masculine, but I argue we are not only that. In my experience, we leathermen are also loving, tender, funny, and yes, soft. Softness does not in any way compromise our masculinity. In fact, it can amplify it. This critique does not mean people from outside the leather community, including Steele, cannot write about us. When doing so, please speak to us and ask us how accurately your writing reflects who we are. Positive examples of leather scholarship by ‘outsiders’ already exist: Van Doorn¹¹ is not a leatherman yet his careful engagement with his research subjects is embodied in the writing cited throughout this article.

A single voice from within a community does not represent that community: leatherfolk and leathermen are not a monolith. As a leatherman, I do not speak on behalf of all my fellow leathermen. Here, I point to authors in the field, in addition to those already mentioned. *Urban Aborigines* (1984) by the late Geoff Mains remains a pioneering text by a leatherman. Mains held a doctorate in biochemistry but relished in broad scholarship that intersected with his life in leather. For *Urban Aborigines*, he

drew from diverse sources on physiology and psychology to build understanding of BDSM within leatherculture. Shortly before dying from AIDS in 1989, Mains wrote an essay for *Leatherfolk*, a love letter to us; a quote from that essay opened this article. *Urban Aborigines* remains a gift and a blueprint to leathermen scholars: Mains was unapologetic about who he was as a leatherman while critical, thorough and imaginative in his scholarship. This paper does not attempt to build a comprehensive review of scholarship on leatherculture by leatherfolk, but I acknowledge here two other scholars. I welcome communications regarding others. Andrew Childs is a geographer from within the leather community exploring notions of masculinity and place.¹² Kyle Kingsbury is a leatherman scholar who has written a history of leather at Pride events.¹³ I should note I am aware of the two authors being leathermen because they explicitly state so in their texts; this is partly why I do, too.

Collaboration with Thomas Evans

As Tom of Finland's work shows, visual storytelling is vital to subcultures in creating, maintaining and evolving the visible facets of subcultural identities. The notions of 'soft masculinity' discussed above informed the photoshoot with photographer Thomas Evans. Evans has had a long career in photographing a diversity of gender expressions. His ongoing series, *Femme the Man*, explores this in depth. Conventionally 'masculine' men — muscular, hairy — are made up, laced in corsets, donning wigs, and posing 'effeminately.' The work may be initially disorienting but ultimately it is alluring. Rather than diminished, the masculinity of the men in the series is amplified: perhaps it takes a 'real' man to sit in hair and makeup for two hours, to put on a corset, and to walk around in heels. These acts are physically uncomfortable and potentially psychologically confronting: it requires a strength of character to undergo this transformation and to allow another document it. The vulnerability one needs to participate in such a shoot requires a robust sense of self.



Figure 5. *What Makes a Leatherman?*
Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans.
Hair and makeup by Wesley.

A recent event inspired the shoot. In June 2022, my husband and I attended a fetish dance party in Sydney. I wore a leather jock, a bulldog harness, Muir cap or a cover, and stilettos with fishnet stockings. It is worth acknowledging here that a Muir cap is an object with deep traditions and beliefs: it often signifies dominance within the community. Within parts of the community referred to as Old Guard, the right to wear it is earned. On the dance floor, another leatherman in a Muir cap looked me in the eye, raised his index finger, and shook it side to side in disapproval. The same night, my husband in leather and sporting fierce eyeshadow was told by another leatherman: 'Men don't wear makeup.' After an hour we left. It is thankfully my sole negative experience in person, yet it hurt at the time as this was a community I had only recently begun to reconnect with. Maybe I didn't belong after all? That uncertainty continues to shape me. In leather, I modulate my body postures more than I do out of leather. I mostly don't cross my legs when sitting. I avoid 'effeminate' hand and arm movements. I lower my voice when I speak. Why do I care so much about appearing masculine? At times, I fear that my presentation in heels and a corset may be seen as a mockery,



Figure 6. *What Makes a Leatherman?*
Timo Rissanen photographed by Thomas Evans.
Hair and makeup by Wesley.

as disrespectful; I certainly felt it that night. Yet, no aspect of what I wore was accidental. I have always endeavoured to learn as much about the leather traditions as possible, so that I understand when I break with tradition, for reasons that are valid to me. I always strive for respect, though I know I may not always be perceived as respectful. Thinking back to that evening, I wish I'd had the confidence to engage the leatherman in conversation: how did I offend him so much that he would wag his finger at me?

The photoshoot with Thomas Evans is a playful yet serious exploration of what it means to be a leatherman when the construction of gender — what it means to be a man — is deliberately and humorously destabilised. We began the shoot with a classic Tom of Finland biker look, one I wear somewhat regularly: quilted jeans and jacket, shirt with tie, boots, gloves and a Muir cap. Look by look, I took on more feminine elements, from a corset to hosiery to heels. Halfway through the day, I shaved my beard off and spent two hours having my face made up in drag by Wesley, a brilliant New

York drag queen. We did some photos with just a wig cap and the shoot culminated me donning a platinum Marilyn wig. Getting cat-called while near-naked on a Brooklyn rooftop was unexpected. Reflecting on the shoot reminds me of some of my queer heroes who were not afraid of humorous play with gender: Andy Warhol in Marilyn drag and a moustached Freddie Mercury in drag for the video of 'I Want to Break Free.' Yes, gender is a very serious matter and yet we can play with it. I hope this 'serious playfulness' comes through in our shoot.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper concludes with a consideration of opportunities for future research regarding leatherculture, by people within it. As this paper has indicated, scholarly voices from the community are still scarce but not non-existent. While excessive subjectivity may be a risk, scholarship from within leather communities should be encouraged. Our cultures and communities are often precarious and somewhat invisible to mainstream discourse, yet even as a subculture within a highly heterogeneous sexual minority, leatherculture is worthy of study and documentation, especially for future generation of leatherfolk. Our histories

have at times been deliberately erased, and our cultures seriously destabilised by the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. We ought to tell our stories about ourselves for us and for future generations of leatherfolk.

Some readers likely know me as a fashion and sustainability scholar; it has been my work for two decades. I do not intend to keep these streams of scholarship entirely separate in my future work. Within fashion and sustainability research, leather raises many valid questions about animal welfare, our relationships with the more-than-human more broadly, and about the use of toxic tanning chemicals in leather production, and more. When discussed inseparably from leatherculture, the questions are productively problematised. For example, as Van Doorn discusses,¹⁴ there exists a deep culture of care and maintenance of leather within the community. At many leather events, bootblacks are present and they will clean and condition any leather item requiring care, in addition to cleaning and polishing boots. The lifespan of many items is thus extended to years, sometimes decades. Furthermore, there are long-established traditions of passing items on from one member of the community to the other; this sharing economy existed before the term did. It seems that there is rich ground to explore the notion of emotionally durable design¹⁵ beyond individual products in the context of a specific material culture that includes fetishising a material. Such research would not be a silver bullet to give leather the moniker of 'sustainable,' but the approach would shed light on the grey areas within a topic that is often presented in bluntly black and white terms. Two decades working in fashion and sustainability research has taught me that often the greatest insights reside in those grey areas. The current overproduction and overconsumption of fashion by an industry hellbent on growth even at the risk of our own annihilation could perhaps learn something from fetishising a material and the cultures of care and reciprocity around that material.

Just as Geoff Mains proclaimed his love for this world in the quote at the start of this article, I love the world I inhabit. Yet

leather is contentious in many contexts. As Kingsbury discusses,¹⁶ the debate continues within LGBTQIA+ communities: does kink, and alongside it leather, belong at Pride? My response to the debate continues to be turning up to Pride marches in leather. We may not fit comfortably within the wider LGBTQIA+ communities, but we are an integral part of them. And we are less monolithic than our physical appearance sometimes suggests. More than thirty years ago in closing his essay 'Black Leather Wings' for *Leatherfolk*, Mark Thompson¹⁷ pondered on his existence as both a leatherman and a radical faerie:

'Somehow, I reflected, definitions of leather and faerie would never be quite the same. The fusion of the two had produced a third, and possibly unknown, quantity. Whatever it was, whatever it would grow to be, it had created a state of satisfaction I had never felt before. It was here that one journey ended and — by crossing time and cultures — another would begin.'

In trying to make sense of two sub-cultural identities that seemed at odds, Thompson reminds us that a 'leatherman' is not some fixed, immutable entity. Three decades later Scott echoes Thompson: 'we cannot be fixed: we embrace fluidity.'¹⁸ Our humanity — ourselves as constantly evolving biological, spiritual and social entities — means that we are forever in flux, responding to and commingling with the world around us. Over dinner, a friend recently said: 'Aren't we all non-binary?' Of course, they are right: when we ditch the binary thinking about gender, we all emerge as non-binary, even when many of us, myself included, continue identifying as men. Yet the statement is liberatory: gender identity becomes a personal creation, which it arguably has always been anyway. Even when we have tried to be 'men' or 'women,' none of us have ended up exactly alike. How dreadfully boring would that have been anyway?

My call to my fellow leathermen is for us to continue exercising care and love for our community and its diversity. This applies especially when we encounter

a member who we might not yet fully understand. Simply trust that they know themselves better than we ever can. There is ample prejudice coming our way from outside the community for us to inflict it upon ourselves. We must stand united in all our differences. Our diversity is our strength, one of the greatest gifts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

-
- BLUF blog, 'What Makes a Man?' <https://bluf.com/b/477>, 2018. Accessed August 4, 2024.
- Chapman, Jonathan, *Emotionally Durable Design: Objects, Experiences and Empathy*. Routledge, 2005.
- Childs, Andrew, "'Where You Are Is What You Wear': The Leather Community, International Mr Leather and Hyper-Masculinity.' In *Masculinities and Place*, pp. 109–124. Routledge, 2014.
- Escobar, Arturo, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Kingsbury, Kyle, 'A History of Leather at Pride,' 2021. <https://aphyr.com/data/posts/358/leather-pride.pdf>.
- Mains, Geoff, *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersexuality*. Daedalus Publishing, 1984.
- , 'The View from a Sling.' In *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by Mark Thompson, pp. 233–242. Daedalus Publishing Company, 1991.
- Roughgarden, Joan, *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*. University of California Press, 2013.
- Thompson, Mark, '1990s. Black Leather Wings.' In *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by Mark Thompson, pp. 157–165. Daedalus Publishing Company, 1991.
- Scott, Hunter, 'Facing Sameness: Reconsidering the Radicality of Tom of Finland.' *InVisible Culture* 36 (2024).
- Steele, Valerie, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power*. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Van Doorn, Niels, 'The Fabric of Our Memories: Leather, Kinship, and Queer Material History.' *Memory Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): pp. 85–98.
- Wagner, Travis L., "'We Are Openly, Proudly Subjective... This History Is Important to Our Contemporary Survival": Queer Embodied Knowledge and the Curatorial Work of ICT-Based LGBTQIA+ History Content Creators.' *Journal of Documentation* (2024).
-

TIMO RISSANEN

Dr. Timo Rissanen is Associate Professor in Fashion and Textiles in the School of Design at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). His research focuses on design-led approaches to sustainability and social justice in fashion and textile systems. He is a leatherman and a queer artist working in cross-stitch and installations. He has published two books on fashion and sustainability: *Zero Waste Fashion Design* (2016, second edition in 2023), co-authored with Holly McQuillan, and *Shaping Sustainable Fashion* (2011), co-edited with Alison Gwilt. He is a founding member of the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion.

Social media profiles:

Bluesky: @timorissanen@bsky.social

- 1 Geoff Mains, 'The View from a Sling,' in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by Geoff Mains (Daedalus Publishing Company, 1991), p. 238.
- 2 Niels Van Doorn, 'The Fabric of Our Memories: Leather, Kinship, and Queer Material History,' *Memory Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): p. 89; Kyle Kingsbury, 'A History of Leather at Pride,' 2021, p. 10, <https://aphyr.com/data/posts/358/leather-pride.pdf>.
- 3 Mark Thompson, '1990s. Black Leather Wings,' in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, edited by Mark Thompson, pp. 157–165 (Daedalus Publishing Company, 1991).
- 4 Hunter Scott, 'Facing Sameness: Reconsidering the Radicality of Tom of Finland,' *InVisible Culture* 36 (2024): p. 14.
- 5 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2018).
- 6 BLUF blog, 'What Makes a Man?' <https://bluf.com/b/477>, 2018, accessed 4 August 2024.
- 7 Van Doorn 2016, p. 93–96.
- 8 Travis L. Wagner, "'We Are Openly, Proudly Subjective... This History Is Important to Our Contemporary Survival": Queer Embodied Knowledge and the Curatorial Work of ICT-Based LGBTQIA+ History Content Creators,' *Journal of Documentation* (2024), p. 1380.
- 9 Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, and Power* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 158.
- 10 Steele 1996, p. 160.
- 11 Van Doorn 2016.
- 12 Andrew Childs, "'Where You Are Is What You Wear": The Leather Community, International Mr Leather and Hyper-Masculinity,' in *Masculinities and Place*, pp. 109–124 (Routledge, 2014).
- 13 Kingsbury 2021.
- 14 Van Doorn 2016, p. 94.
- 15 Jonathan Chapman, *Emotionally Durable Design: Objects, Experiences and Empathy* (Routledge, 2005).
- 16 Kingsbury 2021.
- 17 Mark Thompson, '1990s. Black Leather Wings,' in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, ed. Mark Thompson (Daedalus Publishing Company, 1991), p. 165.
- 18 Scott 2024, p. 15.

COLOPHON

ISSN: 2589-9007

©2026 ArtEZ University of the Arts and the authors/contributors

APRIA (ArtEZ Platform for Research Interventions of the Arts) is an idea, initiative and production by ArtEZ University of the Arts / ArtEZ Research Centre / ArtEZ Press / ArtEZ Studium Generale

PO Box 49
6800 AA Arnhem
Netherlands
www.apria.artez.nl

APRIA Journal Advisory Board 2020-2026:
Ciano Aydin, Daniëlle Bruggeman,
Fabiola Camuti, Elke Aus Dem Moore,
Arthur Steiner, Kathryn Weir

Each APRIA Journal issue is curated by a team of editors specialised in the issue's theme.

Editorial Team APRIA:
ArtEZ Press and ArtEZ Research Centre.

APRIA Platform Advisory Board 2023-2027:
Kim Jäger, Wendy Janssen, Jochem Naafs, AnnaMaria Pinaka, Vi Reichel, Kasia Zarzycka

See also www.apria.artez.nl/about/

Dialogical Bodies: Everything and Everybody as Material Editorial Board: Ricarda Bigolin, Chet Bugter, Jan Tepe, Hanka van der Voet, Clemens Thornquist and Daniëlle Bruggeman

Production and content management:
ArtEZ Press, publisher of ArtEZ University of the Arts / www.artezpress.artez.nl

Design: Catalogtree, Arnhem

APRIA uses the principle of open access. ArtEZ University of the Arts is based on the principle that sharing knowledge freely contributes to the advancement of the exchange of knowledge between researchers and students, and that this contributes to the social debate.

All contributions published in APRIA are available in open access under the following Creative Commons license: CC BY-NC 4.0. This license means that you can download and share contributions, provided that APRIA and the author/creator of the contribution are stated and that the contribution is not used commercially. If a contribution is published in APRIA, the author/creator agrees with the aforementioned license and associated conditions. If another Creative Commons license is used for a specific article/contribution published in APRIA, this information is provided with the specific article/contribution.

When submitting his/her contribution to the editorial board of APRIA, every author/creator guarantees that third parties cannot assert rights to his/her contribution.

Copying and republishing contributions from APRIA is only permitted with the written permission of the editorial board of APRIA and the author/creator. The editorial board of APRIA has endeavoured to regulate the rights with regard to images in accordance with the legal provisions. Those who nevertheless believe that they can assert certain rights can write to the editorial board of APRIA.

All contributions published in APRIA are digitally archived at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in the Netherlands and in the Ingenta Connect database.

ArtEZ University of the Arts

ArtEZ Press

ArtEZ studium generale

