

ENGAGING IN FASHION

**ANTHEA VAN KOPPLEN,
LAURENE VAUGHAN**

Abstract

It can be argued that designers, by providing consumers with goods that cause choking pollution, poisoned waterways and mountains of solid waste should be held responsible for the manner in which people are consuming today (Papanek 1995; Datschefski, 2001). The contemporary fashion designer, as clothing designer, is faced with this global industry challenge: lessening the social, economic and ecological impacts of fashion products. This paper will discuss the role of engagement as a means by which this challenge can be addressed. Drawing on the definition of engagement as "a term to specify the symmetry that links humanity and reality" (Buchanan and Margolin 1995 p15). This will be explored in relation to two themes: firstly, engagement with the fashion design process and the garment; secondly, through the design of a professional practice.

Introduction

Due to the complexity that is fashion and the fashion industry, in this paper the term fashion and fashion designer refers to those that are garment designers, who are drawn to the industry out of a desire to design and manufacture garments and who are versed in the language of design as it relates to the body and garment.

Within this discussion we focus on those involved in the design of the garment and subsequently the design of their professional practice. The design of professional practice can be observed in many forms, for this paper we will concentrate on the independent atelier making all design decisions based on a personal design signature and the industry position of the designer as the creator of the design concept within a team, including the pattern maker, product developer, production, marketing and sales. In both cases design is often considered 'life's work' defining the practitioner, what they do and who they are.

Ironically it is the two key themes of this conference that have been lost within the industry of fashion, poesis and technē: the poetics of the garment in design and, the technical exploration (engineering) of the garment through textile technology and structure through pattern design and manufacturing.

Engaging in fashion is something, which the fashion design and manufacturing companies along with the 'media' aim to do everyday. In this context the term

engagement means sales - drawing the potential wearer in, gaining their interest and playing with their fears and aspirations as they go through the process of deciding what to purchase. Under these conditions, engagement is often based on desire and change, the disposable, faddish aspects of fashion 'more for less, now!' We propose to look beyond this interpretation of engaging in fashion as the temporary spectacle and instead explore a more sustainable approach to the relationship between fashion and engagement through a re-acquaintance with depth of design through the use of aesthetics as well as engineering. Embracing the perspectives of the reinvigoration of design as voiced by Buchanan and Margolin;

"If we are concerned to revive engagement, we must try to recover the depth of design, that is, the kind of design that once more fuses engineering and aesthetics and provides a material setting that provokes and rewards engagement." (Buchanan and Margolin 1995 p.16)

Sustainability

A general definition of sustainability is defined as economic development designed to meet present needs while also taking into account future costs, including costs to the environment and depletion of natural resources. To the fashion designer whose task it is to solve design problems this definition means little. Sustainability in the world of fashion must be defined in the form of design parameters. To fashion practitioners, the challenge of linking sustainability and fashion comes in the form of the word 'engagement'.

What does sustainability mean for the fashion industry? A sustainable fashion industry contributes to the well being of the eco-systems that make up our natural environment as well as the well being of the artificial environment of our metropolitan lifestyles (Fry 1995). Fashion and garments have become essentials within our modern way of living supporting us physically, emotionally and psychologically, intrinsically linked to how we live and see ourselves within the world community.

Sustainable designs are explored using three design pathways: political, philosophical and technological. The responses in the form of garment design using these pathways are not definitive. Instead these approaches are conducive to creating a diverse range of engaging products addressing a range of sustainable design issues. The political approach raises awareness of such issues as cultural injustices, labor inequities and poverty. The philosophical approach explores concepts around the creation of meaning within the context of how we live and work in the world. However, it is the technological approach that has the greatest capacity for engagement. This approach considers many of the generic sustainable parameters that are implemented during the development of the textile through to the pattern design and manufacturing stage. The technical approach is a complex pathway with many potential solutions guided by the will to create processes and garments that engage the wearer. The new millennium is a technical age and the use of non-traditional manufacturing techniques in an industry steeped in traditions is alluring to the designer as well as the wearer.

Within these pathways there are further guides for the sustainable designer to explore during the fashion process:

- * Master Craftsmanship, which is the art and expertise of a master craftsman, such as the Japanese craft of Shibori, applied to fashion that transforms an otherwise ordinary item into an individual and desirable product.
- * Allure - the physical and emotional attributes of the fashion product that engage the viewer - sexy, glamorous, enchanting, fascinating and seductive.
- * Customization - the approach used to design garments in response to a particular user need or desire, the redesigning of current fashion products and the development of new products that are in line with sustainable parameters.

The goal of the sustainable designer is to inspire the wearer to engage with the garment through depth of design.

Engaging in fashion as design

"...when it comes to the 'dribble-down effect' of designs there's a fine line between being inspired and being a thieving bastard." (Buttolph 1994 p.97)

Too often within the fashion industry a true commitment to design has been lost. Design has been over-ridden by questionable product development processes, driven by cost, items are bought or 'looks' are plagiarized. All of these processes pay lip service to design and the wearer of its outcome, and as the state of the industry shows, they are not sustainable. The process is distinctly disengaged: in design, product and user (Vaughan 2002).

Modern production strategies recognize the need for change and recognize the need for engagement across the usual boundaries of control (Eckert and Demaid 1998). From a design perspective engaging in design, in so much as immersing in design that is sustainable, means immersing creatively in every part of the extensive process that creates the garment from the raw material to the method of sales and merchandising. A sustainable designer, an engaged designer, embraces all boundaries and has an understanding of every area in the fashion process.

Vexed Generation, the designers of the one shoulder rucksack have had an eye for sustainability since 1994. A British duo, the pair only makes their bags in Britain, "so we can have a relationship with the people who work for us" (Buttolph 1994 p.98) They are also inspired by political issues, their Wrap Liberation was born out of the juxtaposition between the elegance of Dior's Normandie jacket and by the desolation of street people wrapped in blankets. The Wrap Liberation is a length of cloth that can be interpreted by the wearer. Wearers participate in this design through emotional and pragmatic desires. The desire to identify with the desolation perhaps and the desire to have a flexible functional piece of clothing that can protect them from desolation.

Vexed Generation took on the political with their Wrap Liberation by raising the awareness of the condition of the homeless and with their statement on their

general approach to outworkers. Companies such as Cargill and Dow take on the technological sustainable design solutions in the development of materials like Natureworks a PLA (polylactic acid) based fabric made from the processing of natural plant sugars (Braddock and O'Mahoney 1998). At the garment concept and design stage the use of sustainable design parameters such as, waste minimization, minimum number of parts, using materials that were either recyclable or biodegradable and minimizing the number of fasteners has created Anthea Van Kopplen's, The Envelope. This multifunctional garment, that engages the wearer through the ability to use the garment according to a range of needs, from protective waterproof tarp to dress.

Figure 1

The Envelope, 2001, is a multifunctional design made from Tyvek(r) which has a 25% recycled content.

Another technological response is the use of highly technological weft and warp knits, such as Issey Miyake's 1998 A_POC collection whereby the wearer participates in the action of garment creation by purchasing a length of A-POC and cutting out the desired pieces by hand along purpose built weft knit lines (Blanchard 1999). This design embraces the richness of the relationship between the designer, the manufacture, the end user, technology and tradition.

Engaging in practice

Professional practice is defined by frequently repeated actions, habit and custom and may be founded on education. To engage in practice as a fashion designer, is to be attentive and attracted by the allure of practicing design as it relates to garments. This allure needs to be taken across into the reality of the user of the product whereby the design then attracts and engages them through aesthetic as well as engineered design solutions.

The function of fashion designers can in many ways be described as problem seeking, problem solving and decision-making. The fashion designer as a problem solver responds to many kinds of problems. Usually posed by themselves or by industry; a problem cleverly created to be solved. Who ideally is the originator of this problem? - the consumer. Needs arise from people not from the heads of designers or corporate decision makers. The determinant of the problem is the consumer and if the problem is posed in such a way as the solution is not well thought through, the result can be dehumanizing, demeaning and highly mechanized. These solutions often 'lack a human face' (Papanek 1983). An engaging product has a 'human face'.

The humanization of design depends on four things: consultation with people, rigorous but sensitive simplification, minimal intervention and sturdy common sense (Papanek 1983). Ours is a world full of machines to the extent that we can make clothing without touching the cloth at any point during the pre-production

and manufacturing cycle. Placed on the shelves in a boutique it may be the first time the object has interacted with humans since its inception. For some designers removing the human element of production and designing in a virtual context is an exciting design problem that requires a solution. In this context the design challenge is designing an engaging solution within these virtual parameters.

The designer preoccupied in the realization of engagement also considers the integrity of their product. For a designer in a smaller wholly owned business the adoption of 'principle' is a simple design parameter. For the designer within a conglomerate it is more complex process. It requires management to understand and be committed to, the value of integrity in the context of adding value to the product for the consumer. No matter what the structure, when designing from principle essentially there will be the same outcome, that being a more desirable product for the consumer.

It is the integrity of the depth of design, combined with the aesthetic and, the engineered or technical skills embodied in the product, that create the meaning for the wearer of the future; the wearer as a user rather than a consumer (Fry 1995; Borgman 1995). Imagine a design industry so engaged in practice and outcome that they are in a constant state of learning: making space for true innovation.

Engaging in practice in order to create a sustainable industry based on depth of understanding requires focus and commitment towards knowledge and understanding. Engagement in practice requires engagement with the relationship between the theory of practice and the act of creating and producing. It is the observation and reflection in/on action and the context within which the outcome of the action exists (Schön 1983; Kemmis 1998).

Such an approach that embraces sustainability, takes the practitioner beyond reflective practice as expressed by Schön, to expand towards a process of critical reflection; "It emerges when people want to think 'realistically' about where they are now, how things came to be that way, and, from these starting points, how, in practice, things might be changed." (Kemmis & McTaggart 1994 p 573).

Engaging in practice entails the expansion of knowing and understanding. Fashion designers pride themselves on their ability to be forward thinking, trend forecasters, consumer readers, yet their focus is often limited, molded by regularity and systems, time lines, sales and completions.

But what is practice? This is a broad question for any discipline to attempt to answer and particularly difficult within a fashion context. Unlike other design practitioners or design disciplines, fashion does not have a unified voice around the practice of design and exploration. Most industry organizations are based on trade, or information related to market analysis and sales. A unified voice or a community of discourse and consideration rarely exists outside of the Academy.

Kemmis & McTaggart (1988, p.574) have identified five different classifications of practice in response to the confusion that exists across disciplines and traditions. These are:

1. The individual performances, events and effects that constitute practice as it is viewed from the 'objective,' external perspective of an outsider;
2. The wider social and material conditions and interactions that constitute practice as it is viewed from the 'objective,' external perspective of an outsider;
3. The intentions, meanings and values that constitute practice as it is viewed from the 'subjective,' internal perspective of individual practitioners themselves;
4. The language, discourses and traditions that constitute practice as it is viewed from the 'subjective,' internal social perspective of members of the participants' own discourse community who must represent (describe, interpret, evaluate) practice in order to talk about and develop them;
5. The change and evolution of practice - taking into account all four of the aspects of practice just mentioned - that comes into view when it is understood as reflexively restructured and transformed over time, in its historical dimension.

As we consider the above classifications it is apparent that although some may see it as an either/or categorization, this is not the intent nor would it be appropriate for this discussion of engagement in practice. In fact true engagement in practice that contributes to a sustainable practice and industry would require the amalgamation of one to four with an ideal outcome for industry being number five.

1. The individual performances, events and effects that constitute practice as it is viewed from the 'objective,' external perspective of an outsider; This approach to practice calls for accountability and credibility by the practitioner and the industry to the end user and the greater community. The practitioner is called upon to work in a transparent manner that can be objectively evaluated and questioned; thus requiring awareness of practice - actions and outcomes - that can be articulated objectively according to the expectations of the viewer/outside. This would involve all aspects of design, manufacture and promotion.
2. The wider social and material conditions and interactions that constitute practice as it is viewed from the 'objective,' external perspective of an outsider; Building on the first the practitioner must be able to view themselves within the broader context. Sustainability requires a big picture, long-term perspective, which is not a contemporary understanding of fashion and the faddish spectacle that it has become. In this context the practitioner engages with the implications of their practice and its relationship to the wider world of industry, work, community and the natural environment.
3. The intentions, meanings and values that constitute practice as it is viewed from the 'subjective,' internal perspective of individual practitioners themselves; Such a perspective demands awareness (engagement) by the practitioner with their own practice and particularly process. Being able to answer questions such how do I work? Why do I do what I do? What drives my decisions and what are the implications of these? This is the reflective space of practice.
4. The language, discourses and traditions that constitute practice as it is viewed from the 'subjective,' internal social perspective of members of the participants' own discourse community who must represent (describe, interpret, evaluate) practice in order to talk about and develop them; For the fashion industry this would demand major developments in the understanding of practice, design and product outcomes. It would require an expansion of what takes place within the Academy and broadening the discourse to the everyday practice of the industry it supports. This expansion to a community engaged in practice could support a

shift in understanding, resulting in informed practice with sustainable and innovative outcomes.

5. The change and evolution of practice - taking into account all four of the aspects of practice just mentioned - that comes into view when it is understood as reflexively restructured and transformed over time, in its historical dimension. An evolutionary community/industry based on the pursuit of informed practice that pursues excellence and diversity (not excellence in the sense of TQM which has gotten lost in numbers and paper and not in thinking and exploration), and is reflective of its place in time. For fashion designers and the fashion industry this is essential, fashion in the form of dress and decoration is as old as humankind, it marks and reflects the evolutionary nature of our cultures from rich diversity to current global homogeneity. A call for a sustainable understanding of fashion and its industry, does not ask for or expect that fashion will remove itself from these fundamentals, rather believes that we must engage with them, pursue them with insight and design as our tool and focus, not the short term dollar and derivative (plagiarist) outcomes that currently drive much of the industry globally.

To engage practitioners with their practice requires introspection. There needs to be a space within practice, for awareness where it is possible to challenge the habits of current workplace actions and product outcomes. A process of introspection and questioning would be required, for example: How did the designer come to be who they are, do what they do? This is a process of confronting or even just opening to the assumptions that build with years of workplace realities, or media/industry falsehoods. Such questioning will bring the practitioner face to face with their subjective reality of what their work means and can mean for them (Roth 1990; Whyte 2002).

How can there be design without engagement? How can one be a designer without conceiving that one has a practice? Questions pertinent within the context of fashion, the fashion designer and engagement. Unlike other design industries the notion of 'a practice' is foreign. The tradition of the studio or the atelier exists but only for a few. The majority of the industry is driven by large corporations with design and production teams working to constraints that remove the notion of 'practice' to one of 'doing' - meeting deadlines, reaching quantities. Heavily driven by price much of a designer's practice can be spent balancing costs and writing specifications. But this is not the future of fashion, this is its death, this is what is creating and supporting an unsustainable industry and irrelevant product outcomes.

Engagement in practice and engaging in design requires change and this change can be viewed as a form of social and transformative learning and development. The individual practitioner through reflection draws on their strengths, knowledge and experience (Mezirow 1990). Many designers understand their work as being their 'life work' - it is a conviction and a passion, and yet many are unaware of what it means for them. The rigors of work, and industry and deadlines, disengage from the practice that defines them.

A sustainable industry is comprised of sustainable designers committed to 'quality' product. The changes begin with individuals engaging with their own practice and like all significant social movements, snowballs on to become clusters which unite to become an industry norm (Heaney and Horton 1990).

For design practitioners, to have a practice is to have a greater understanding of who we are and what we do within our life's context. To embrace our practice is to embrace our 'work' and it is to move beyond the safe boundaries. It is to question and it is to look forward, perhaps a little further forward than others can immediately see (Whyte 2001).

But how do we do this? Many have questioned how it is that we as practitioners can embrace practice with the level of engagement that the term practice implies.

To engage in practice is to question habit. It is to stand back and consider that which is done routinely, without thinking or consideration. When the actions of our work have become removed from our conscious awareness. As designers we no longer seek the new or different solution we repeat what we have done before, in process, aesthetics and outcome.

Reflection as a process is an effective tool to use when questioning the notion of practice and action: a means for making space for consideration of issues and actions and outcomes. Engaging in practice and confronting habit within our work is a form of learning, professional learning and ideally transformative learning (Mezirow 1990). It is more than the acquisition of new knowledge or facts from an external source; rather it is an engagement with self-knowledge through depth rather than quantity. Such engagement in practice is applicable to the individual, an organization and even an industry.

Critical reflective practice can provide the practitioner with an opportunity and a vehicle through which they can further explore and improve their practice. Consciously or not, there are many influences on our working lives, things are added and subtracted. Engagement involves conscious awareness of this.

"Much of what we learn involves making new interpretations that enable us to elaborate, further differentiate, and reinforce our long-established frames of reference or to create new meaning schemes." (Mezirow 1990, p. 5)

Engaging in practice is to establish a methodology of practice: a reflexive understanding of actions and outcomes.

Engaging in the wearer

"the only way to design properly is to have the user in mind; and the role of marketing (a new marketing) is to have in mind the true project of the consumer, which, paradoxically, is not to consume but to be put in a position to use properly." (Morello 1995, p.70)

Within a fashion context we refer to the user as the wearer, with the product outcome relating directly to the body.

Fashion is integral to the construction of identity by the wearer (Finklestein 1991; Davis 1992; Hollander 1993; Craik 1994; Byrdon & Niessen 1998). Beyond

gender and physical protection, garments provide a language for communicating our roles and aspirations, the way that we live and desire to live within the world. This language is complex and requires a shared meaning by both wearer and viewer, it is culturally contextual and no longer defined by national borders (Byrdon & Niessen 1998).

Engagement means the act of engaging where to engage refers to occupying oneself; to become involved; to obtain the attention or efforts of; to attract and hold fast, all of these defining phrases imply commitment and emotion or passion. Words and/or terms, that describes the kind of design that is attractive and relevant to the wearer who is often referred to as the consumer. We avoid the use of the word consumer to describe the kind of person that purchases an engaging product we advocate that designers think of the needs of the wearer.

David Chalke of the Australian Marketing Federation said the consumer of the new millennium is selective about what is important.

"Fashion is more how it makes them feel about themselves and deciding what style or commodity means something to them - it is not about slavishly following a fashion style because a magazine or retailer tells you it's 'in'." (Ragtrader 1999 p.15)

An industry that produces irrelevant product is not sustainable, one that holds the needs and desires of its end user, the wearer, core to the development of product engages with the entire lifecycle of its product from concept to application.

As fashion practitioners we argue that engagement with design and fashion, refers to the exploration of the many creative possibilities of providing a meaningful experience for the wearer that enables them to engage with the garment that is the outcome of the design process. This user (wearer) is the consumer of the future who does not so much consume a product as "chooses the use" of the product (Borgman 1995 p.69). The project of the user in this context is a micro project where the use of the product is for very particular applications. The user would not so much purchase the product for the product itself but for how it makes them feel and how it relates to the greater aspects of their lives. The product provokes the user into a dialogue about engagement around their reasons for preferring and choosing one product over another.

Conclusion

Sustainable design is a vision of the future.

"even when designers follow sustainable design parameters, sustainable production and products cannot exist without sustainable consumption. This means a relocation of value, a reframing of desire and a new project for design and business." (Ryan 2002) 1

Engaged designers and engagement with design is a means towards the realization of this vision.

Engaging in fashion is to engage in every aspect of the fashion products' development. It requires fashion designers to engage with what they do, to see and understand themselves as design practitioners, who's practice not only gives meaning to their own lives but also to the reality of those that they design for.

Footnotes:

1. Quote drawn from a proposal for an international Sustainable Design Studio at RMIT University, UTS and Rotterdam written by Professor Chris Ryan, BSc, PhD (Melbourne) director of Ecodesign Australia. Professor and Chair of Design and Environmental Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne; Board Member, the ICIS Foundation (The International Centre for Creativity and Innovation for Sustainability) Denmark; Professor of the International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics, Lund University, Sweden.

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BIOGRAPHY:

Anthea Van Kopplen

Researcher, Designer, Lecturer
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia
panda@alphalink.com.au

As a researcher and practicing designer Anthea Van Kopplen's passion for sustainability within the fashion industry and the community has led her to look for ways to stimulate public awareness on the subject of sustainability and to make pathways for designers to get involved. Her current doctorate by project explores the relationships between sustainable design, consumer behaviour and fashion products as part of a growing interest in sustainability as it relates to the fashion design process. Anthea's vision recognizes the role of the designer and the consumer in a sustainable economy and they are considered pivotal in introducing sustainable designs into the marketplace.

Laurene Vaughan

Researcher, Lecturer, Artist, Consultant
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia
laurene@lookseehear.com

Laurene Vaughan is passionately committed to the integrity of design, creativity and the quality of human existence. She has a diverse background of work and interests and currently has her own consulting business and art/design practice whilst working as a research supervisor and lecturer at RMIT University. Laurene's areas of interest are: creativity, professional practice and the methodologies of working/living, the application of reflection and the experience of labyrinthine space. She is currently completing her PhD, which explores these diverse elements of creative practice.