

Futuring Fashion from Everyday Life

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Abstract

Sustainable design and wearable technology, two very different but emerging fields in fashion, share the ability to fundamentally change the way in which we consume, use and dispose of clothing. Whilst much of the new knowledge generated in these fields focuses on materials and technology developments in order to create long lasting significant 'change' through changing behavior or rethinking the entire fashion system, a more holistic understanding of how garments live will be essential. *The everyday*, an often overlooked but fundamental part of fashion practice, could therefore be considered an action space for practice-based researchers to explore constructing positive futures. We define the everyday as personal, daily interactions with garments over long periods of time. Drawing on three diverse fashion experiments that explore daily clothing practices and rituals we consider how the everyday can be utilised to enact change and create future visions.

Introduction

The apparel industry is continually reinventing itself aesthetically while keeping up with advancements in technology, production processes, and legislation. In 2015 it was globally worth \$3,000 billion accounting for 2% of the world's GDP (Fashion United 2016) and employing 75 million people worldwide (Stotz et al 2015). The future visions channeled by this industry have significant impacts on people, economics and the environment. Sustainable design and wearable technology, two very different but emerging fields in fashion, share the ability to fundamentally change the way in which we consume, use and dispose of clothing. In order to enact positive and preferable visions for the future of fashion, we discuss the value of explorations into everyday clothing wearing practices. We propose *the everyday* as an under-explored space within fashion innovation that is rich with information about people, their behaviour and rates of stability and change. We argue that this space can offer valuable insights about the opportunities and challenges of speculations within the field, just as important as their technological and systematic development.

Futuring and Fashion

Futuring, a broad term that describes the activities used to identify and evaluate future events (Cornish, 2004), is an important tool of the fashion industry. Behind mainstream fashion is a complex and developed industry of fashion forecasting and futuring led by organisations such as WGSN, which follow socio-economic trends to supply the industry with probable future visions (Tham 2015). Consumer studies supply data on changes within the system feeding back information on consumption habits to retailers (Klepp 2015). But the way in which we interact with our clothing on a daily basis – the garment's life with us – are activities far removed from the boardrooms of multinational companies and have thus become under-studied and over-simplified.

Clothing consumption studies look at fast changes within the system that do not focus on the slow process happening everyday within the home (Klepp et al 2015). Trend forecasting and consumption studies also neglect to take into account the phase during which the item of clothing is actually being used. This 'use phase' is documented as being the phase that has the largest energy and water impact on the lifecycle of clothing (Fletcher 2008, Allwood 2006). Such studies also fail to take into account the daily clothing practices such as dressing and assimilating novel outfits which take place within the home on an ongoing basis (Woodward 2015) or the complexity of the acquisition, use and disposal of clothing within the home (Fashion Ecologies 2016). Put simply, we lack a lot of knowledge about what people actually do with their

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clothing (Klepp et al 2015). As a result, mainstream trends and associated future visions are focused on the object, the garment, rather than on understanding the complex relationships between the garment, people and place.

Within the field of sustainable design, this lack of understanding of everyday clothing practices can lead to a focus on incremental improvements and often short-sighted solutions leading to limited systems change (Meadows 1999). With a few exceptions, most industry-related sustainability focuses on the making of products – their materials and production – and not on how they will perform over time and ‘live’. How long a wearer will wear or keep their garment, for example, is not accounted for.

Similarly, within smart garment and wearable technology disciplines – fields that propose the integration of electronics and computational abilities directly into clothing fabrics or worn accessories – a narrow focus on technological development has led to relatively few developments making it to the mainstream consumer market in the last decade (Dunne 2010). If the ambition of both the sustainability and wearable technology agenda is going to create long lasting significant ‘change’ through changing behavior or rethinking the entire fashion system, a more holistic understanding of how garments live will be essential. In this essay we ask whether understanding the practices and rituals of clothing within the everyday give researchers and designers an action space in which to build stronger visions for the future.

Action space of ‘The Everyday’ in Fashion

We propose *the everyday* as an action space for practice-based researchers, which we define as those conducting research through the activities of their fashion practice, to explore constructing positive futures within fashion. In this context, we define the everyday as personal, daily interactions with garments over long periods of time. By collecting data, probing and experimenting in this area we aim to deepen understandings of the nuances of personal expression through clothes, the life of garments through their wearers, and life of garments beyond their wearers. We see fashion as dynamic in its nature – often fluid, messy, personal and always changing at a rapid or slow pace. Through studying clothing in an everyday context we can observe the interactions of wearer and garments in their ‘natural habitat’ – moving through time and different contexts.

Sustainable futures aim to offer visions that mean living within our ecological means (Rockstrom 2009). Looking at the global impact of the apparel industry this feels like we need to radically rethink the way in which we wear and interact with our clothing. However, the limited studies that do look at the everyday practices of clothing use in detail, such as KRUS (KRUS 2016) and Craft of Use (Fletcher 2016) uncover many sustainable practices already happening within the home. Woodward suggests that rather than viewing everyday actions as problematic, they may shine light on existing, more preferable behaviours (Woodward 2015), which gives space to develop preferable future visions. Building on this notion we argue that a garment unworn is a static object. Solutions for producing eco-friendly textiles or improving industrial garment production methods are two kinds of approaches meant to improve the environmental impact of these objects, but concentrate on them as objects alone. Clothing touched, worn, styled, mended, washed and shared by their wearers holds information that can inspire sustainability solutions in the form of action-based systems and services for future interactions of clothes.

Similarly within the context of smart garments and wearable technology, there is a tension between the rapid technological developments of smart materials and understandings of what it might mean to wear them. Producing prototypes and garment samples for ‘intelligent’ clothing meant for mainstream consumption has been relatively straight-forward compared to the struggle to find early adopters to wear them, or gain consumer acceptance (Dunne 2010). Even less is known about the proposed garments’ ‘worn’ life compared to what is known about experiences of traditional clothing in daily life. It could be argued that despite the small, soft or flexible form factors of wearable technologies, they do not merit the label of being ‘wearable’ until they are truly worn – until they become part of an individual’s wardrobe and are seen by a

community of people around them. Through these activities the garment can begin to situate itself, with its wearer, within the language of fashion and dress. In both sustainability and wearable technology contexts for clothing, we see the need for deeper understandings of daily clothing practices and socio-cultural contexts to achieve the futures that are envisioned.

Explorations of ‘The Everyday’ Within Fashion

In order to enact change there is a need to develop a detailed understanding of how we already wear and use our clothing, or experiment by inserting new ideas into this space. The everyday provides a fertile action space to cultivate this understanding allowing fashion to be observed as a time based practice. Below, we briefly describe three recent studies led by the authors of this paper within sustainable design and wearable technology that have used the everyday as an action space for exploring future visions for fashion. We list themes that have emerged from each study, and elaborate on their meanings in the discussion.

Fashion Ecologies

Fashion Ecologies is a research project that aims to find novel relationships between people, clothing and place within a narrowly defined geographical location in order to understand current local fashion practices. The methods employed by the study explore the space of the wardrobe within local homes using experimental approaches to understand the everyday use of clothing (Fashion Ecologies 2016). One of the methods being employed is a holistic wardrobe audit of an individual’s material and social clothing assets which includes a full audit of all categories of clothing, resources for caring and washing clothing, resources for making and repairing clothing and other related items. Accompanying the audit is an interview aiming to uncover the daily journeys of clothing through the wardrobe and the home covering acquisition, care, use and disposal aiming to map the flow of clothing through the household. Within Fashion Ecologies the audits are being completed in a single town in the UK in order to build up a picture of the complexity and interconnectivity of the local fashion system. The study is being repeated in a location in Norway to gain insights about the particular relationships between people, clothing and place.



Figure 1: Local clothing example from Fashion Ecologies Project

The data collected through these household visits covers both the scale of resources available in individual households as well as the daily practices of the individuals. The researchers work with the participant to calculate the perceived quantity of clothing they own and then count the actual quantity of clothing owned. In addition to quantifying the household resources, the method also uncovers the flow of textiles around the

home and what external services are used to maintain the clothing over time. Working closely at a household level to uncover small, perhaps 'insignificant' insights into clothing use the research team are able to probe the balance between the quantity of clothing owned and the capacity to maintain and care for that clothing during the use phase.

By focusing on the space of *the everyday*, this study collected data and insights about clothing related to themes of *repetition* and *change and evolution* in various homes, and mapping of *complex systems* and *scale*.

ReMade in Leeds

'ReMade in Leeds' is a research project and social enterprise based in Leeds, UK which aimed to uncover local clothing practices within a community, thereby particularly focusing on repair and reuse activities (Whitson-Smith et al 2012). The project created a community based clothing repair studio located within an unused retail unit in an inner city suburb of Leeds and was open daily from 2011-2013. Members of the public could drop into the studio with clothing or other household textiles that needed repairing and book the item in for a repair, alteration or modification. This process involved a one-to-one discussion about the nature of what needed to be done and often required the garment to be tried on. A member of the ReMade in Leeds team then completed the sewing work, after which the owner would return to collect the garment and pay a fee for the service. The service was priced to cover the cost of the machines and the rent of the space. Throughout the project, data was collected on types of repairs undertaken, which ranged from trivial and simple repairs such as replacing a button to more large-scale clothing 'crisis' including a last minute bridal dress repair.

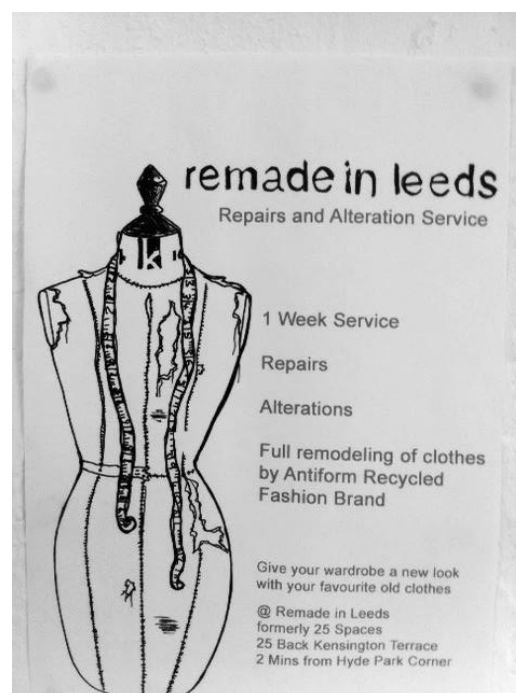


Figure 2: ReMade in Leeds Repair poster.

The study recorded the types of repairs commonly required as a result of both wear and tear and manufacturing faults. It also gained insights into the types of skills available and those lacking in the participants around clothing care. Through the one-to-one discussions, expectations of clothing use and the value placed on repairs were explored and micro insights of daily clothing wear as well as unforeseen clothing crises were generated. For example, identifying the simple repairs, which, due to a lack of basic skills and without intervention would have resulted in a garments disposal.

By focusing on the space of *the everyday*, this study collected data and insights about clothing related to themes of *mundane and extraordinary crises* and *co-production*.

Greenscreen Dress

In this study, future notions of wearing dynamic display clothing or *dynamic fabric*, is explored in everyday life. If the textiles making up a garment can act like a computer screen – being able to display colour, pattern, text or video through computational input – what might this experience be like in everyday life? What might be the challenges and opportunities for introducing this kind of fabric into our garment systems? The very possibility of integrating dynamic fabric into clothing challenges many of the norms of fashion. For example, it introduced the notion of one garment functioning as multiple garments (Devendorf et al. 2016; Dunne 2010). In theory, this breed of ‘ultimate garment’ could potentially mitigate the waste and unsustainability of ‘fast-fashion’, i.e. the cyclical change of fashion based on trends and seasonal changes of spring and autumn collections (Dunne 2010).

Using auto-ethnography, the researcher in *Greenscreen Dress* wears green clothing every day for six months and captures videos and images of her garments with changing digital content on them through a chroma-key mobile application. She then posts the pictures of herself wearing the garments daily on Instagram as a way for them to exist within a social ecosystem and fashion dialogue. The study focuses on exploring dynamic fabric from the perspective of what it might mean to wear it in everyday life, as opposed to offering technological or prototypical innovations towards the concept.

Reflections from the study include, but are not limited to, insights into the expressive possibilities of dynamic fabric, challenges of integrating a new ‘hyper-functional’ textile into an individual’s wardrobe, and the social reception of dynamic fabric within contemporary fashion dialogue. For example, in the study the researcher began by wearing one green dress, assuming that if periodically washed and dried overnight the dress would meet all of her personal style needs. However, after two weeks she discovered that even though she could change the façade of her dress, she still desired new silhouettes, textures and combinations of clothes to fit the social norms. Over the period of the study she collected 20 new green garments and accessories. This questions the promise that a garment with dynamic fabric would lead to less consumption of clothing, and at minimum, highlights the complexity of the language of fashion as it exists today, and can help dynamic fabric developers foresee challenges and opportunities in the future.

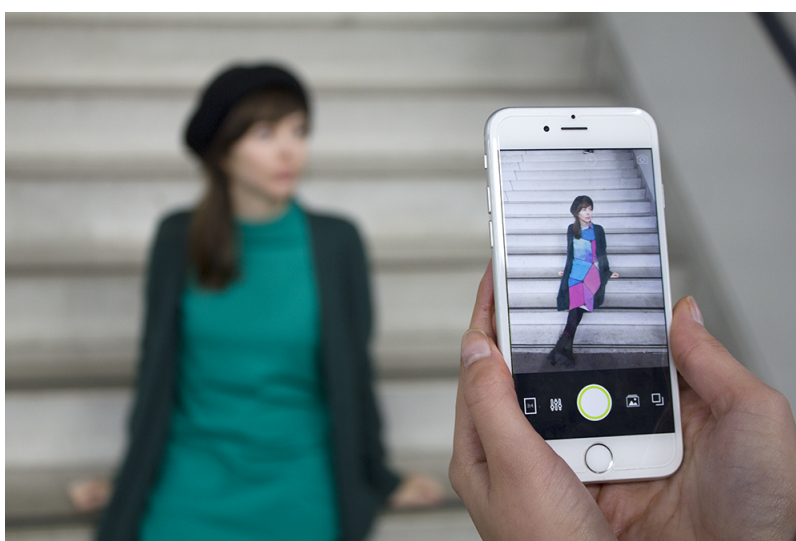


Figure 3: Greenscreen Dress App

By focusing on the space of *the everyday*, this study collected data and insights about clothing with dynamic fabric related to themes of *mundane and extraordinary crisis*, *the introduction of new materials*, *repetition*, *personal expression*, *situated audience* and *change and evolution* over long periods of time.

Discussion

In using *the everyday* as an action space, the studies *Fashion Ecologies*, *ReMade in Leeds* and *Greenscreen Dress* were able to draw out information related to everyday clothing practice that contribute to future visions within the fashion field. The kinds of information gained and resulting themes varied from study to study, but were consistent in terms of drawing on *the everyday* to generate new insights.

The following three themes were consistent: *change and evolution*, *repetition*, and *mundane and extraordinary crisis*. These themes within the domestic everyday offer novel approaches to understanding perspectives on the complex relations between user and garment as it develops over time. In order to obtain rich data, the studies ran longitudinally from six months to three years or spanned numerous participants in a focused location. In essence, the nature of the studies allowed the unfolding stories of wear to be documented (Spivack 2014) as they evolved in the present. For example, through wearing the green garments daily in *Greenscreen Dress*, the researcher was able to observe specific moments throughout the six-month period for when and why things changed or remained consistent. Related to a range of issues like weather, emotion, personal tastes, audience input, audience interaction, and availability of green clothing and materials around her, we can see a genuine personal context affecting the outcome.

Each study has also developed novel methods in order to get inside *the everyday* of fashion practice, and in all cases this was done with the public or within the public domain. The methods range from an auto-ethnographic approach to participatory action research, but use the nexus of the wardrobe as a starting point. Finally, whether using physical places like the shop for *ReMade in Leeds*, or social media platforms for the *Greenscreen Dress*, the methods all develop in the present, allowing the public to engage in real time.

Conclusion

In order to generate positive future visions, whether around creating a fashion system which is viable and in sync with our natural world and planetary boundaries, or developing a new generation of smart clothing which will transform our daily lives we need to expand our knowledge of how clothing is lived with and used. This means understanding the nuanced dialogue between wearer and garment in order to gain a deep appreciation of the daily rituals and behaviours, which govern the interactions of wearing clothes. Using *the everyday* as an action space gives designers and researchers a space to develop methods to observe, explore and interrogate fashion in new ways. Through sharing our fashion experiments we hope to inspire other researchers in our field and beyond to find a new starting point for exploring everyday practices and hope that building a body of work on this space will provide future discussion.

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