

Re-Forming Appearance: Subversive Strategies in the Fashion System - Reflections on Complementary Modes of Production

Abstract:

This research is based on a paradox: can the elitist system of fashion be distributed to small Do-It-Yourself (DIY) activities, be the product of smaller entities, subverted on low-level but still be fashionable?

The research examines a strategy of subversive fashion design. The strategy focus on emancipatory works and processes of the designer promoting methods to enhance the creative impetus and lower the thresholds to self organized do-it-yourself activities relating to the fashion system. The aim is not to overthrow the system, which in itself is a very powerful and magical side of our culture, but to fight the interpassivity and radical mediocrity that follows in the path of consumerism. What other modes of production are relevant within a system that is focused on elitist myth-production upon the cat walk altar in the urban lifestyle temple? Can low-level or local production summon the same aura as the exclusive visual fragrance of the haute-couture?

The research is combining critical academic questioning of the structure and mechanisms of the fashion system with the production of step-by-step manuals of re-forming of clothes as well as tools for self-organization into creative incubators and critical masses of low-level production. Re-forming here becomes a series of processes working both on physical as well as mythical levels; hands-on “hacking” as well as image and aura manipulation. The end result of the research will not be as much an in-depth study of where we are as a spanning and probing of a wide field of tension, not often recognized by fashion studies and practice.

Introduction:

As I started this research I wondered a lot how I came into this subject and I tried to track down some situations or periods in my childhood where I felt the presence of clothing as a social second skin. I guess our first conscious experiences with clothes effects our relation to this phenomenon somehow, but of course it also changes during our life.

When I grew up I inherited most of my clothes from my elder brother and this second skin of mine was really never in my thoughts, it was just something I had to wear, just like a listened to the music he liked. I sometimes got teased in school by the Salomon and Reebok boys but somehow managed to create an image of my own when I in the craft lessons followed a pattern to make my own anorak (it was in camouflage fabric) and back home even attached an AC/DC mark on the back. Of course this was not something spectacular but I immediately felt my relation to how others reacted had changed – this skin was mine and of my own creation. It was my armor. Even though I didn't come to use it very often just this feeling of having made it made me feel proud of something else than what the tough boys cherished.

During the summers I visited my father on the east coast and he always had very specific meaning concerning the styles or rules of dress. Some were considered fixed “laws” (like not having a hole on the sock) but even more were unwritten, just concerning taste and this intrigued me greatly but at the same time opened a world of everyday theatre where I came to play the role of myself.

As I later, when studying at university, attended an evening course in pattern making I started a process of remaking old clothes and slowly came to realize I held a powerful tool in my hands. Somehow the two childhood experiences melted together and the new playful armors all came up as costumes. But now when seeing these creations (most still in my wardrobe) I somehow think they all fit me quite well. They all have some common expression, some choice of fabric which all blends together into an image of myself, or at least as I appear – there in the mirror in my second skin.

Somehow it is this feeling I am looking for in the research, of feeling secure with this homemade skin....(?)

In this text I try to identify how a re-form practice might correspond to larger movements in society and fashion and I also propose a possible action plan of small changes. The reason I saw clothing and fashion as primary tools for this research is that they are a deep channel into society, capitalism and our position in these systems. Clothes are a second skin, not in a biological or a predetermined way but a social and flexible skin in a constant flow of change and flux. But it is also a skin close field of experimentation; an easy material to work with and that we usually have a surplus of (in time) but most important it is also a quick reacting litmus-paper where we can get an immediate social response to our hand-on experiments by wearing the clothes.

I will start with an introduction and background of the main ideas I have concerning the field of study and experimentation. It is framing some larger movements and theories in fashion but also stretching deeply into our social fabric and everyday life, and I try to identify re-form not as a short trend but as a more urgent response to some pacifying mechanisms in society. In the end of this chapter I propose a use of small change as a main tool in this response. The following chapter sums up some inspirational activities from adjacent fields where I see some similarities but also openings for collaborations. I finish with examples of my own projects and a last chapter of further possibilities.

1_BACKGROUND:

The fashion:

This is a project in the borders of the fashion system. A system of status and myth production in the very heart of capitalist society or maybe even represents the core of competitive material culture in western civilization. It is a belief system centered on identity production where the consumer today is offered a varied plate of expressions,

styles and products, but not free choice.¹ For many the relation to this system is similar to a serious game; we know we play, and our social status is our bet. This fashion-game has many similarities to the masquerade. We carry the masques not to widen the distance between us, but to come each other closer. The game offers us a never ending flow of new, blank appearances to constantly start fresh, and we shop these new second skins as a ritual of material amnesia, as a social snake discarding every social change with a new shiny skin.

The re-form project is a practical design research exploring the borders of a field Yuniya Kawamura calls *Fashion-ology*:

Fashion-ology is a study of fashion. It is neither the study of dress nor the study of clothing, which means that the two, fashion and dress/clothing, are different concepts and entities which can be or should be studied separately. Fashion-ology is a sociological investigation of fashion, and it treats fashion as a system of institutions that produces the concept as well as the phenomenon/practice of fashion.²

We should thus differentiate clothing from fashion: clothing is material production, fashion is symbolic production. A fashion system operates to convert clothing into fashion that has a symbolic value and is manifested through clothing.³ But we must not forget that the symbol carrier is still the physical garment; when we dress we slip into the symbol, become the symbol – an embodied semantic experience.

The fundamental drive in fashion as a system feeds on the basic human situation where we respond to the example set by others, thus creating a game of status and inequality:

He who sings or dances the best, he who is the most handsome, the strongest, and most adroit or the most elegant becomes the most highly regarded; and this is the first step towards inequality, and at the same time towards vice.⁴

At the same time we use these idols as inspiration, as a stepping stone for ourselves, to make a better performance in our daily tasks, but also socially. They become images and idols for us when we create our own self image – we try to be ourselves by being someone else. If we are not careful we at the same time give away our self-respect and participate in our own underdevelopment and inferiority.⁵

The interface/front:

Our second skin is a material social interface with heavy symbolic meaning. It is a surface, a front to the world and a border between the “I” and “other”, private and public, but it is also a front in the meaning of a battleground where systems and wills rage in furious battle over control.

¹ The transformation of contemporary belief systems are discussed in Zygmunt Bauman's: *Life in Fragments* (1995).

² Kawamura p.1

³ Kawamura p.44 – The myths and messages of the fashion system is an integrated part of the western belief system, and as such the phenomenon of fashion can be said to be the *meaning* of the fashion system. As fashion theorist Elisabeth Wilson notes: “Fashion *speaks* capitalism.” (Wilson p.14)

⁴ From Rousseau's “The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” cited in Hamdi p.43

⁵ Sennet: *Respect, the formulation of character in an age of inequality*. (2003) in Hamdi p.44

The field of control that is fought over stretches deep into our lives and experiences and has long traditions. Examples like the strict hierarchies in old China where only the emperor could wear yellow and have a specific amount of claws on the dragon images but also the control of purple dress in ancient Rome. During renaissance these hierarchies started to crack and the new rich merchants started breaking the old blood-inherited borders of dressing. And through these dynamics of dress different groups has tried to dress alike and apart, creating meaning in details and changed for newer and fresher difference into a time where we now see a total bricolage of styles and expressions. But still the borders exist, just in more refined details and complex settings.

This conflict does not only take place at the surface, in the semiotic sign of fashion. Just like we might be physically manipulated to act or walk in specific ways by shoes or other garments this also stretches deeper into our behavior and perception of the world.⁶ But user un-friendly attire like corsets or high heels have other connotations than just functional and as such may be double sided – between pain and aesthetic pleasure.⁷

On this front various forces use different strategies. Where the punk movement's leather jacket DIY and safety-pin subversion⁸ first was chocking most of its expression ended up at the Paris cat walk just a few seasons later. By appropriation and commercialization from the fashion system the punk style lost the tension in its revolting aesthetics.⁹

The activity/passivity conflict:

But the punk style DIY breaks the modernistic specialization and division of work by taking production and distribution in one's own hands, breaking the passivity society's organization of work proposes us. Passivity not only set by the division of labor or between producer and consumer but how we use tools in our interaction with the world.¹⁰ The system of consumption as we know it also makes things so much better than we could do ourselves (or at least that is how we perceive it). With ready made sauce for example I make a much better sauce for my pasta in one minute than I could do if I made it myself, but at the same time I withdraw from the possibility from learning how to make that sauce and become a better cook.¹¹ This is a position of passivity engulfing our whole position in society (almost like Marx's *alienation*).¹²

⁶ Umberto Eco puts it bluntly saying that a garment that squeezes your testicles [jeans in the 70s] makes you think different. "Lumbar thought" in *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986). (a very physical example of habitus, the conflict also involves culture and classes)

⁷ According to some post-feminists there is a certain "creative resistance" between the imprisoning concepts of beauty and the serious play with these where much of what has been condemned by feminists as oppression is also having performative nature and as such liberating. (Dwyer 2004)

⁸ To every tool is also a concept of its use connected – acting as both liberator and prisoner, As in Jose Ramirez' example of the parent saying to the child "that knife is not a toy", but it is...

⁹ This also characterizes the struggles within the fashion system between established and upcoming brands and designers. For more of this see Bourdieu (kultursociologiska texter) and Dick Hebdige (1979, 2002)

¹⁰ Robert Pfaller and Slavoy Zizek argue that we live in more *interpassive* than interactive times. This interpassivity gets noticed in canned laughter on TV or how we let the copymachine "read" books for us, or VCR "see" for us.

¹¹ Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling argues for similar ideas in his texts on *radical mediocrity*.

¹² In democracy we can see technification of words/concepts (we think we HAVE "freedom", "democracy", as nouns), instead as processes of competing ideas and distributed power in constant negotiation. We believe we practice democracy only in the situation of election, but this occasion is just the ritual of

Through these passifying structures of division of labor industrialism made society into a machine serving its needs. But as now industrialism seems to move to China and we are left in some “knowledge society” we still find our systems organized after the old models of industrial capitalism.

In the *Hackers Manifesto* Makenzie Wark describes a new class struggle taking place. Being driven from their livelihood of surplus the peasants seeks work in the cities where capital puts them to work in factories. Like the farmers they are not only dispossessed of the material surplus they produce, but also their culture. Ruling over them are feudal and bourgeois classes taking the surplus as rent for land or profit as the return on capital.

In today’s society we have a hacking class, creating and handling information, dispossessed of their production through various forms of private property, copyrights, trademarks and patents.

We are the hackers of abstraction. We produce new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out of raw data. Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colorings, we are the abstracters of new worlds.¹³

Over them rules a vectorialist class, controlling the vectors along which information is abstracted, appropriating what was once common. They own the means of reproducing the value of information, the vectors of communication.

As private property goes from land to capital to information the concept of property becomes more abstract. Where capital produces a surplus larger than the farming field it stood on, information is free from any particular object and its production limitless (with the help of lawyers). Or as Wark puts it: “The ruling class seeks always to control innovation and turn it into its own ends, depriving the hacker of control of her or his creation, and thereby denying the world as a whole the right to manage its own development.”¹⁴

If using this approach we might see design in another way. Where it once took a long time to create a new model or copy an object the “first mover” or the best production innovator could create a big advantage before competitors. Today copies can come out the next day and the lifecycles of products keeps decreasing. Thus the control of immaterial aspects becomes central to production. Closing products physically or through copyrights means better control and might be the only model for protection of the vector and investment.

We might see examples of this in Disney’s lobbying for longer copyrights, and trials on design originality or filesharing, but also physically in the inability to take mp3’s out of the iPod or specific shells for phones etc. Both on a material and immaterial level our interfaces, cultural as well as material, are being closed to us (the emergence of docu-soaps does not mean we have a larger say in media).

democracy (where we can almost touch it) – democracy is practiced in everyday life, in the small meetings, in how we interact with the social body. Thus in our everyday responses to consumer culture, private/public space and time, to ownership, copyrights and commons.

¹³ Wark, paragraph 002.

¹⁴ Wark, paragraph 012

At these fronts or interfaces of society there is a series of battles raging. We can see responses in the form of open source and free software in programming, weblogs or ebooks in micropublishing, podcasting, tactical media and telestreet in media, where people search for tools for an emergent radical democracy.¹⁵ This is a disruption of the “silence” we have been put to by the system of control and specialization. We should not only receive but also broadcast, not only consume but also produce. Every reader is a potential writer and the language shall not be controlled by the provider. Free speech has to be fought also in the fashion system! We have to share the passion, testimonies, and witnesses – but first develop communicative abilities – learn the tools for change.¹⁶ These practices are processes of small change; crafts of design, hands-on actions.

Perhaps it could be fruitful to compare the open source communities and the evolvement of Linux for understanding how a series of small change can occur in communities but not as a collective movement. In the distribution and co-location of design work Eric Raymond proposed that “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” and proposed that “bazaar” models of development (linux) was at least as powerful as the “cathedral” models (windows).¹⁷ This proposal could also bring some inspiration to the struggle between the street scene and haute couture in fashion where the DIY street fashion breaks the ruling operating system of fashion (of the “geniuses”) and subverts the channels and vectors, using a networked and flatter infrastructure for spreading their ideas. Maybe a “bazaar” model might explain better how DIY could be implemented further.

Some would argue that we already see this model in post-modern diversity of fashion (look at all small jeans brands now) but this diversity is not challenging the basic excluding issue of production/consumption division.

Perhaps could it be said that “given enough eyeballs, all expressions can be fashionable” and thus encourage a deeper DIY culture in fashion, also on the symbolic side of co-production.

Hacking/innovation:

Examples of hacking and co-design puts the light on distributed innovation or the re-emergence of user-innovators, breaking the traditional industrial models of production. The user-innovator is a hacker that has been unseen as promoter of change. According to economist Sonali Shah’s *Open Beyond Software* it is mainly for the following reasons:

In economic theory firms and entrepreneurs are usually seen as the promoters of product change and economic progress. Firms develop products because of potential profit, either through identifying consumer needs or educating the consumer to what they

¹⁵ *Emergent* in the meaning simple interactions of simple parts of a system that yield complex results over time. *Radical democratic* in the meaning not directed by systems of command or control but emerging from subtle complex interactions of idea negotiations under open critical debate. (maybe I could do more research on Critical Art Ensemble?)

¹⁶ Similar to the approach of Krzysztof Wodiczko in “Monumental Interruption” 2004 (p.65)

¹⁷ Raymond (1997) – In his text Raymond stresses a very neo-conservative and radical capitalistic approach which is not points I use this example. I instead try to focus on the breaking of hierarchical models and distributed co-design proposed in the text.

produce. The main role of the consumer is a passive one (of choosing between pre-fabricated goods).¹⁸

User-innovators have also been largely unseen because heavy promotion of larger firms through glossy advertising while the small users have been driven to the obscure pages of hobby magazines.

Finally the creation of consumer culture and closed products (to users that previously were used to produce much of what they consumed) to absorb and diffuse potential revolutionary energies. Thus the role of the consumer became a passive one, discouraged to work outside of ones profession and the world became divided between firms/manufacturers and consumers.

As another example of how these roles gets blended Eric von Hippel writes in *Democratizing Innovation* that “[o]pen, distributed innovation is ‘attacking’ a major structure of the social division of labor.”¹⁹ In his examples he shows how firms co-locate product and service development and innovation through various prototype toolkits to the users. In this situation both actors saves a lot of time and money as the innovation iteration does not have to move between user and manufacturer (user has an idea, manufacturer tries to fix it, user tests and wants changes, manufacturer fix again etc). Most people have some kind of toolkit at home, but usually focused on repair. Instead these “democratic” toolkits are distributed to the users to create *and* test the product or service. By shortening the trial-and-error cycles innovation is driven faster and more openly as well as design and solution space is exploded.²⁰

Another report looking into this field is by the British everyday democracy think tank Demos who in their *The Pro-Am Revolution* examines a social hybrid; the growing group of serious hobbyists or professional amateurs that are pushing innovation through advanced practice and networked development. As professional technology becomes cheaper and working hours more flexible many trained users push development as well as do new discoveries. Using the same recognized public standards forming self-regulating communities they compete with the professionals in a field that is not their official work. It is thus a more dynamic and fluid relationship between professional and amateur, blending the border of work and leisure.²¹ They also share their findings and designs openly and some also manage to make money on their hobbies through various forms of exchange.

Thus the re-form project can also be seen in relation to an everyday development sector, working in the depth of our contemporary western culture bringing together idealistic non-profit Do-It-Yourself methodology as well as the hyper capitalistic myth production

¹⁸ This is sometimes called “Schumpeter’s legacy” from J. Schumpeter’s *Theory of Economic Development* (1934) quoted from Shah 2005. A similar theory is “Fischer’s Separation Theorem” stating that specialization in markets will lead to the separate and distinct roles of both producers and consumers. In the realm of open source development this theorem appears to break down. (Frost 2005 p.15f)

¹⁹ von Hippel, p. xviii

²⁰ von Hippel, p.147ff

²¹ Howard Rheingold argues in *Smart Mobs* that much innovation in use comes from amateurs and communities, for example how SMS use changed the way we use mobile phones.

of the commercial market, trying somehow to bridge them. It involves experiments and collaboration working for social change, both material and image-bound. Deep into our sphere of culture these operations try to navigate the subconscious behaviors of our everyday life, orchestrate small change and encourage a re-thinking of the modernistic operation system and slightly shake the certainty we take for granted in relation to our dressed identity and the hidden structure of this apparatus.

The process of small change:

In response to the above named pacifying systems I propose a method mainly taken from development aid systems. By evaluating these processes of work and creating a practice of re-form research there might be a grounded approach to a DIY response in fashion.

The process of re-form research as I see it is a series of explorations on subversive and emancipatory DIY approach in design in relation to the fashion system.²² It is relating to other subversive strategies such as counter culture or culture jamming (as seen in *Adbuster*) but also hacking. (Another approach is the “reverse cultural engineering” performed by the artist group HeHe in Paris)

Some of the aims might blend into each other but could be something like:

- *reawakening a spirit*: inspiring and boosting the lust of exploration and emergence, expanding a field of action through simple examples.
- *giving voice to the silent*: encouraging experiments in visual expression, but also creating a language of practice, to understand what re-form can mean and be communicated.
- *building self-reliance*: teaching simple modular methods that can easily be expanded into other interventions and creations, developing a trust and courage in ones skills.
- *mobilizing resources*: opening the possibilities for old clothes and second-hand treasures (as potential style inspiration as well as raw-material), as well as re-organizing activities.
- *making micro-plans*: showing examples of how the single informal action might be turned into a stabilized activity and a sustainable project or business, at least resulting in richness of dignity and self-respect (maybe also that precious status).

All these aspects require a big portion of idealism as well as pragmatism, but mostly adaptive imagination looking into unknown fields. As development practitioner Nabeel Hamdi encouragingly says in *Small Change*: “not knowing [...] leaves space to think creatively, uncertainty gives room to think”²³.

²² Re-form has many similar activities as recycling, upcycling and freecycling, but what I want to stress with the term of re-form is it’s double activity – both on a material and symbolic level (as product as well as image or mythic image). The DIY practice is also the practice of the *bricoleur*: a “do-it-yourslefer, but also an improviser, especially with unlikely materials” (but also a popular chain of French hardware stores) Leslie p.4

²³ Hamdi p.39

The aim is also to investigate this small-change approach to production but it stretches into our political systems of today where we mostly expect change taking place within the structures of the government or administration (and the projects based on small change is more related to development or aid work).²⁴ But I see a small change approach on the fashion system as an emerging radical democracy providing transparency into some mechanisms shielded by elitism and “magic” rituals.

We should not resign to the greatness of the task but start with creating transparency and understanding of the small processes and create change from underneath, from the relation to our second skin.

The subversion:

I have before mentioned that I see the re-form and DIY approach as a subversive strategy to fashion (and the also the relation to the pacifying structures in society) and should also clarify some important points. By subversive strategies I mean a wide practice (an approach, a plan, a set of tactics and actions) that challenges the imposed passivity and opaque elitist rituals of the fashion system.²⁵ Creating a more nuanced language and attitude to our worn identity we might understand our relation and participation with the system. Not by overthrowing or negate the system but explore the possible responses to create a series of transparent platforms for action that still uses (some of) the infrastructure that makes fashion such powerful myth and expressive aspect of our culture.

These subversive strategies responds to:

- *Non-transparency in the production modes of fashion:* Turning clothing into fashion is a ritual familiar to practices of magic and alchemy, which all require a certain mystique to seduce its audience. The public/consumers should understand and intervene more in a system so influential on our everyday life.
- *Consumerisms quiet resignation to the current power distribution of the system:* The fashion belief system is very exclusive and prevents intervention from outside.²⁶
- *The system’s ready-made and closed products discouraging personal customization:* Encouraging instead the emergence of a more direct DIY approach to fashion (and especially support the image-side).
- *Fashion as a distraction from power:* Showing that DIY approach to the dressed identity creates a platform for change, turning fashion into a tool for emancipation and sociopolitical transformation.

²⁴ The concept of “small change” is in development projects relating to improvised and immediate small-scale actions, participation from below in limited issues (a bus stop, compost bin etc) that later grows into a large-scale and long term practice. The goal is not to create a massive movement, but more to encourage and “tip over” those who are close to act but lack courage or a working example. (The single small action can turn out big as in Buckminster Fuller example where he compared his practice to a “trim tab”; a small piece of the rudder that manages to turn a whole ship around. But then he also struggled to “dare to be naïve”.)

²⁵ I here use strategy/tactics concepts from Clausewitz. For a summary of fashion as institutionalized system see chapter three in Kawamura.

²⁶ But there are internal struggles as described in Bourdieu (*Kultursociologiska texter*).

Many groups works on changes, especially in material production. Anti-sweatshop organizations like *Clean Clothes Campaign* and *Sweatshop Watch* and union support groups on the production side, environmental issues like the organic clothes of *Katharine Hamnett* or *The Hemp Trade Company*, as well feministic groups on the concept of female beauty (*Loudmouth* for example) and more anarchistic groups on the culture of consumption (as *Adbusters*, *CrimethInc* etc).

The subversion in my research is more specifically the empowering DIY approach and its connection to the production of the fashion system.

One might argue that re-form is just another trend that right now is “accepted” in a time of very diverse fashion expressions and many re-cycling projects have seen the light the latest years such as the Swedish *Do-re-do* selling DIY kits at *Designtorget*, *Worn Again* and *Junky Styling* in London, but also in the haute couture with *Martin Margiela*, *Ann-Sofie Back* and *Jun Takahashi* as some examples.

But as I have argued before I see the re-form as a breaking with larger mechanisms than just aesthetics or changes in fashion. At some level I guess the expressions will change and re-cycling can be seen as a passing trend, but the in the form of re-organization of work and mechanism of co-production I think it has only started.

A small change activist:

In the work of small change a greater action plan might be formed and act as a subversive strategy, but in this action plan the designer’s role also changes. Not only in the sense of wanting to examine structures in society but also having to navigate a design process through deeper social responsibility.

The designer role in a re-form project is not the traditional elitist at the industry’s corridors of power or the artistic studio genius but more a street-level collaborative practical facilitator and creative teaser. The main process is creating the settings for action and aiming it to a potential for deeper understanding of a process and orchestrating the change in procedure as well as thinking in a project. By involving a group of people in collaboration the process (and knowledge) reaches deeper into the social organism and its situation. It requires a lot of negotiations, navigating between structure and chaos, organizing new channels for work and practice, nurturing creativity and hope through practical examples. This role is more complex than the traditional and often comes to social disappointment and also substandard design results (in regard to quality or product innovation), but the aim has to be the approach and attention and not the physical result (yet). To show concrete examples of alternatives or complementary designs for practice, in process, production and distribution but mainly in the approach to our surrounding systems.²⁷

²⁷ The designer is not a consultant or mediator just there to smooth up the group, but adds a specific knowledge and ideological will in the process, constructing alternatives through practical examples bringing forth a collection of hands-on proposals – “I see this possibility, perhaps you might see it too.” Where one practical opening of a field of action might open endless others.

The goal for this small change activist is to facilitate the process, provide an enabling framework in the shape of a transparent, inclusive and accessible modular platform for action that can work as a flexible model for future works. This might be a practical example, a manual or action plan, but also just experience for the participants to build further on. (I will try to give some examples further on..)

On a more political level small change is as approach is widely discussed. Since all problems can be traced back to more fundamental ones the small change becomes just a band aid on the problem.²⁸ A greater danger is that neither symptom nor their causes get treated at all (some ideologies propose that small steps delay the “overflooding” or “revolution” while others mean that the small change approach is powerless.) But every step contains a small wisdom and might not even be phrased as political, but it adds to the language and discussion and creates skillful practice, demonstrating complements to the current model. As such every small action multiplies in the support for larger sociopolitical change.

2_INSPIRATIONS:

Before coming into some of my own projects I would like to shortly discuss some inspirational practices and examples that might put my projects under another light, showing similarities and differences. Some are in the field of hacking while others are more self-organized practices and models of empowerment as well as fashion businesses.

Circuit bending:

The practice of circuit bending is the electronic art of creative audio short-circuit. The most common objects of this renegade path of electronics is usually second hand toys, guitar effects and small toy keyboards (often 6v battery toys).²⁹ It is usually performed by users and musicians without any advanced electronic training but is instead a totally improvised and experimental hacking with no clear goal except bringing new noise out of a circuit responding as an immediate canvas. The process started early with the development of syntherzisers and other electronic instruments (bringing new sounds out of instruments can be said to be a constant experimental tradition in music making), but what is special about circuit bending is the methodology of intended and uncontrolled short circuiting of toys and disrupting their tunes and output into (almost) controllable noise. By not knowing the construction of the circuit all instruments become unique through methodic probing (or else the cute circuits burn) and a new tonal palette is brought out of every mutilated toy.

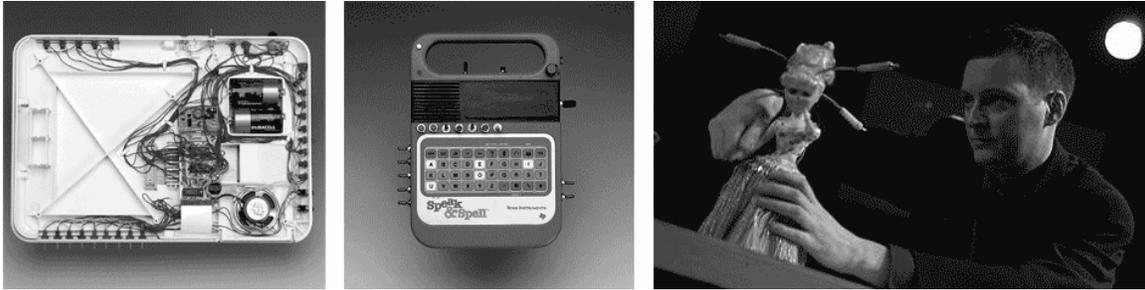
²⁸ But this, as in Krzysztof Wodiczko's "Interrogative design", might also be a sign of hope for recovery.

²⁹ Ghazala (2005)

The fantastic thing about circuit bending is you don't need to know anything about electronics. You just need a piece of wire stripped at either end and soldered, and after you've found connections inside the circuit, you can add switches and dials to control that surplus.³⁰

A part of the practice is to keep the shell of the toy and add switched and buttons for control on it, thus creating a kind of cyborg effect on pink keyboards and singing barbies (as in Brian Duffy's example from his "Modified Toy Orchestra").

There are various discussion forums, concerts and self-organized record labels (like *WarmCircuit*) supporting their practice.



Examples of Brian Duffy's Modified Toy Orchestra with the Hula Barbie (images from www.warmcircuit.com)

Telestreet:

Telestreet is an Italian movement of local pirate TV stations mainly powered by modified receiver equipment acting as transmitters. They are spread all over the country and span various groups (over 200 channels from grassroots immigrant groups and indymedia to local catholic masses) mixing low-fi tele broadcast equipment with internet and open source programs for editing. It is a low-cost independent media based on participatory models of work broadcasting polymedia productions. Using micro-transmitters broadcasting in the "shadow" of larger channels on unused frequencies and are operated by local communities (more proxy-vision than tele-vision since the range is only between a few hundred meters to three kilometers) as a neighborhood channel they explicitly challenge Berlusconi's media dominance and monoculture (just one example of media power concentration).

By making own programs they break the single sidedness and passivity of TV communication reversing the power-base of media control by simple transformation of the receiver into a transmitter through a simple hacking process. Much of these processes comes out of autonomous "hacklabs" deconstructing technology with hacker ethics and free software, providing space for various projects. The basic broadcasting equipment for a telestreet station is around 500 euros.

Pirate and resistant media (especially radio) has a long tradition spanning from illegal commercial broadcasts in the 60s sent from international waters to more subversive and underground anarchist stations, something common in Italy in the 70s but banned by the government monopoly. The main goal is to create a voice for the silent and distribute information that gets filtered (censored) by the power:

³⁰ Brian Duffy interviewed in Ideasfactory
<http://westmidlands.ideasfactory.com/performance/features/feature22.htm> (oct05)

Capital's program: communication within itself, neutralization of communication that is exterior to it. Its tactic: to disconnect communicative relationships from their objects, desire, power, truth... Communication is subversive: Power knows this... Our program: Subversion. Its means: Communication. Its content: Information. (Radio Alice, 1977)³¹



Stills from Telestreet mounting video (from www.archive.org)

Bicycle Kitchen:

Bicycle kitchen is a community workshop for bicycle enthusiasts in East Hollywood, Los Angeles. Founded in a kitchen where a couple of friends met to dismount and modify bikes they later organized and rented a small post-industrial space for establishing a more permanent workshop. It is a community centre for bicycle culture and as such an institutionalized toolkit for furthering transparency and experiments around bicycles (from kid-bikes to fixed-gear and other mutations).

Their philosophy is to create a safe place for all that want to repair or transform (re-form) their bikes and also provide the help and training (workshops from basic wrenching to wheel building) as well as sharing knowledge on tuning and remodeling.

In their workshop you can get all kinds of help but also hire a place for around 7 USD/hour for more advanced repair and also share and trade through their large library of various spare parts. One part of the workshop is booked every night for local kids and every second Monday is the “bitchen”, a ladies night with a slightly more feminist approach.

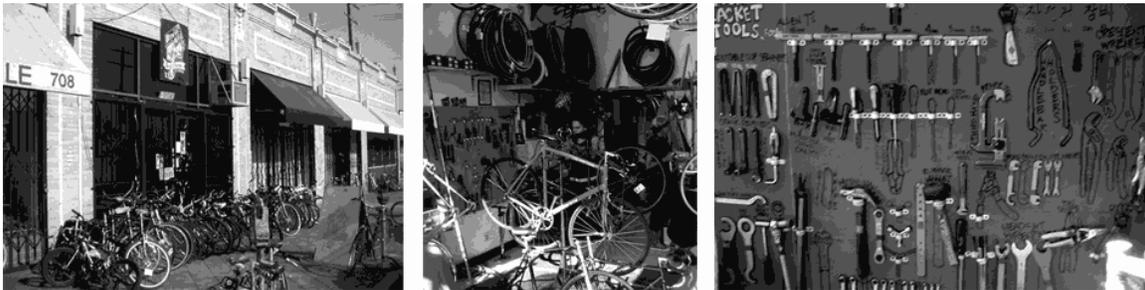
Fixed gear (a.k.a. track or velodrome bicycles) has grown into a special subculture in biking. It is a special tuning of a bike where the cog is fixed to the hub of the bike. Thus it cannot coast but whenever the back wheel is turning also the pedals must turn. Usually it has no brake but is stopped with the rider resisting the forward motion of the pedals.

The fixed gear subculture has a large DIY spirit since most bikes are transformed road- or freewheel bikes, with all from steady modifications from quality parts (special threaded locknuts) to home-made epoxy-glued versions (“suicide-fix”).

Connected to bicycle kitchen and bicycle culture in LA is also a series of events such as the one month program of “bike summer” with several daily events ranging from picnics, bike-polo tournaments to “Road Warrior Scavenger Hunt and Ride” or the various monthly Critical Masses. They also co-arrange the Midnight Ridaz with various themes every month.

³¹ Telestreet article at <http://affinityproject.org/practices/telestreet.html> (oct05) Franco Berardi (“Bifo”) was one of the activists behind Radio Alice and also co-founder of Telestreet station Orfeo in 2002.

Bicycle kitchen is thus a hub in the bicycle culture scene (which especially in California can be considered quite subversive) offering help to deeply understand the vehicles mechanics and also providing support, contacts and tactics for bikers of all walks. With the connection to movements like Critical Mass the bicycle activity grows from rider-and-bike relation to larger spontaneously organized activities and community works where the biker identifies as an actor within a larger group and the small scale repair gets firmly connected to society at large.



Bicycle Kitchen Workshop at Heliotrope

Matrushka Construction.

Matrushka is a fashion store and production place founded by two designers in Los Angeles. Their motto of “fashion for the people” is inspired by recycling with explicit early soviet constructivist style but also based on a philosophy of hands-on-tailoring processes and collaborative design processes.

They employ a special format of production every third month on T-construction nights where a special assembly line concept is mixed with DJ-battles, drinks and recreation. With various pre-printed T-shirt parts and applications on a special theme of the night the customers can order their own selection of parts to be sewn into a garment (t-shirt so far) and follow the process in the store when the parts relay between local designers, artists and seamstresses all volunteering for the evening to sew together the garments. Every product will be unique and coming together with a rather exciting process of re-combination according to the customers taste together with a nice party.

- 1) Browse our menu of patches, sizes and colors
- 2) Order a custom Tee from the menu
- 3) Grab a glass of wine and watch as your shirt is sewn before your eyes
- 4) Listen for your name to be called, grab your tee and try it on!³²

Their process is different from many other re-cycling stores and designers in the sense that the customers becomes co-designers in a very hands-on way (they can choose to assemble themselves too) as well as participating in the production process. The whole production becomes more of an event and as such the customers buy the T-shirt they also pay for the party and experience of co-construction.

³² From Matrushka website: <http://www.matrushka.com/whatisit.html> (oct05)



Matrushka T-construction evening (images from www.matrushka.com)

Anti-Apathy and Worn Again:

Anti-Apathy is a not-for-profit organization based in London which is having the aim of promoting awareness and action for positive social change appealing through culture and lifestyle issues creating a fairer, cleaner and more equitable world.³³ Anti-Apathy organize different events and social experiments and also co-arrange the *RE:fashion* catwalk and public seminars on environmental and labor issues connected to the clothing industry.

Their sub-project Worn Again started as a brand of recycled clothes but has turned into a shoe brand (in collaboration with Terra Plana shoes) with transparent settings for construction (on material, labor, environment and economic side, through ISO standards, code of conduct etc) making 99% recycled shoes out of everything from second-hand suit jackets, towels and parachutes combining it with soles from recycled rubber etc. They provide free full repair service on the shoes if they would break. Though the shoes are made in China and the labor cost is one of the lowest posts in the production, but they claim that all profit is invested back into Anti-Apathy for supporting sustainable projects. (Their approach is quite similar to the *Black spot sneaker*, Adbusters (anti-nike) shoe brand.)

Some of the projects discussed above have tangent points to the ideas I try to propose in my research, others are more examples of more conscious business models for “enterprise democracy”.³⁴

What I focus on in these examples is their approach to consumer culture and a spirit of transparency through their processes, for creating a depth and understanding of the material and working conditions as well as the culture they represent themselves. They are all in various degrees aimed at conscious communities and have found a way to maneuver on a hands-on basis as well as politically, idealistically and some even economically. This mix of different approaches could maybe all come under a re-form “umbrella practice” (I will have to work on that...).

³³ From their website at: <http://www.antiapathy.org> (oct05)

³⁴ A model proposed by Demos group in their report and proposal on the development of the Swedish model. (Tom Bentley et al: “Sweden World Class” report at www.demos.co.uk)

3_PROJECTS:

In the projects I have been working on I have tried to implement some of the ideas of the small change process and re-model them into subversive action plans and practices. They all respond to the ideas I mentioned before, working on both a very low personal level as well as stretching further into small scale social re-organization.

They *reawaken a spirit* by lowering the threshold to own activity and give immediate response in social situations. They *give voice to the silent* by breaking the pacifying system and might go further into creating an own language of expression. They *build self-reliance* by teaching basic skills, and improving an understanding of re-form. They *mobilize resources* by using re-cycled material often with personal connection. They *make micro-plans* by creating other forms of social organization in relation to the subversive strategies discussed. But the projects are also spread consciously over a larger field of practices (not only re-cycling of secondhand clothes) to offer more input on how there processes might evolve further.

The spread/program:

Through many experiments and actions, spread over a large field the method emphasizes transversal connections between practices and processes occupying different positions in a large field of possibilities and examples. These experiments create an approach of mutual resonance and exchange as a holistic perception of this field. It scans a way of thinking and a set of relations to various disparate cultural phenomena (as fashion, hacking, development work etc), but even more the modes of production in which they are formed as processes, signs and material objects.

This method of disperse actions can be read as various tactical operations (but all with the strategic goal of re-forming our relation to the fashion system and our dressed identity). Some have been investigated practically in projects while others are soon to come:

- *DIY manuals or “cookbooks”*: various small step-by-step transformations of old garments into new ones, aimed at a personal and very material level, but in relation to the symbolic (fashion) – something like “try-this-at-home”.
- *Fashion/symbolic “hacks”*: Projects working with the “pure” symbolic side of clothing – the image concept of fashion, as through magazines, TV and other popular culture media. (no examples yet)
- *Collaborative explorations in the modes of production*: involving the process of creation, production, consumption and appropriation of clothing. This involves all steps from design and production to use and re-form, from industry to retail or use situation.

These categories will surely be mixed up, but they frame a general view on the practical field I am interested in exploring.

Examples (some – so far):

I will here shortly present some of the projects and practical collaborative case studies I have done the last years and also add some notes on possible evolvement and tools for reflection (diffraction) on the experiments and subjects.

A set of DIY manuals:

A variety of step-by-step manuals has been made in different forms, both in a emancipatory “cookbook” form as well as in a closed “IKEA” format to see how the differences might turn out. These projects are presented on the internet as downloadable pdf-files as well as small DIY kits sold at various fashion stores. The manual structure is a basic format of turning the old clothes that are quietly decomposing in the back of the wardrobe into something more contemporary, also on an emotional side (by just doing something small it changes value, like a mended teddy-bear). These methods contain a paradox of creating unique style by following a uniform method for change, but since all garments will be different that pass through the method, and also the hands that transform them – the results will still be personal.

Lately I have also made some manuals equipped with the necessary tools for re-forming and sold together with the second-hand garment (the raw-material). Trying to relay a new perception on how the old might look as re-formed when seeing both material and potential change together. I have tried to make distribute these not in a gallery context but in specific fashion stores aimed at more open-minded consumers (and hopefully co-producers.)

The work with manuals will be carried on continuously throughout the research process, perhaps also in closer collaborations with other designers and in other forms.



Boot process manual.

Italyan Avlusu.

A brand in Istanbul of re-formed clothes, but focusing on the re-cycling of memories, experiences and stories that the clothes carry of their old owners. By collecting the old stories of the collected clothes on fill-in-forms the method centered on reversing the expectations, subverting of logic of change, and include memory instead of commercial myth the brand creates clothes that tells history and does not build imaginative future. The projects comments on the teddy-bear factor of specific old garments that mean things to us and tries to prolong their life and communicate this feeling to the next wearer. This is something the mass produced brands tries to do artificially through advertising and product placements. The approach also contains a

paradox; the more stories we find a garment has, the more unlikely we are to give it away for re-cycling. The participants comes to re-value their old garments.

With a similar background I have also made an embroidery kit for outlining memorable stains on clothes. As the stain later gets washed away the contours survive and encircles a specific moment chosen to be remembered. As a personal monument. The kit contains needle and thread but also a small booklet commenting on and discussing similarities with Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida* where he argues for two concepts of *stadium* and *punctum* in our reading of photography where the former is the logical, intended reading and the later a very personal reading (or even mis-reading). I argue that these embroidered stains might become something like a *textile punctum*, with the memory shooting out of the stain, piercing us at a deeper level (but only the ones present at the stain-moment).

The approach in Italian Avlusu might also be interesting in a other media like magazines or local TV, with complementary or parasite stories highlighting other sides than visual/aesthetic in fashion re-form (DIY fashion magazine in cut-out format or short animations or stories/interviews/podcasts with and about clothes).



Italian Avlusu project in Istanbul 2003

[RE-TALL]iation.

A project exploring collaborative processes of design at several levels of production (design, production and consumption) with transformable patterns and sizes and decorative elements. The production was made at a rehab center in Tallinn and was a search for other paths of production and social therapy for the patients in the sewing workshop. Instead of sweatshop, robot-like production, hidden inside the institution the aim was to make diverse manual interventions with the garments and also show the process to the consumers in the local fashion boutique by taking the fashion photos at the workshop with the participants as models. Putting a face on the production by adding labels with the fingerprint on all involved in the production and through transparency offer the consumers a conscious choice of local fashion.

But if the project becomes a big success the workplace might once again turn into a sweatshop, lose its local roots and therapy situation, and thus become counter productive.

Hopefully there will be another cycle of this project in Tallinn in spring/summer 2006 with a better implementation, with wider participation; hopefully also including therapists for a possible re-form of the working conditions in the workshop and also try to make the project sustainable through better collaboration with the fashion academy in

Tallinn. It might also include more PR work for the institution and its local shop, trying to make it appear on the local fashion map.



[RE_TALL]iation project in Tallinn 2004.

Adventures in Local Knowledge Production.

A mapping project trying to identify the low-level actors of knowledge production in a city (Innsbruck in this case) and produce a generative toolbox and method for exploring other places. By dividing the production into functions, such as archetypes (groups), hubs (nodes, energizing points) and channels (transmitters, amplifiers) this mapping process might bring up unexpected collaborations and create a wider understanding of various forms of hobbyist and Pro-Am development and hacking.

The end result is a workshop toolbox with a small introduction booklet and different cards for the actors with general and local examples. The box is formed in such a way that it might be updated with new cards and patches for having a better flexibility and longer lifespan.

Even though its focus was not on fashion a lot of local actors in this field were identified, from small recycling studios to more established collaborations between designers, rehabs and recycling institutions.

The hope is that as a tool it might provoke further collaborations and crossovers between these low-level practices. Perhaps small actors in various fields might collaborate in open-ended projects, thus adding unexpected values to clothes or reformulating fashion.

4_ONGOING PROJECTS AND POSSIBILITIES:

In this chapter follows some projects that are planned so far or might be interesting possibilities to try to work further on in the future. I start with some practical projects and follow up with a framework of how I see it in a larger framework of research.

Dale Shoe-hack.

A project planned for spring 2006 in Norway at a rural small shoe factory in threat of closing down where a workshop on “shoe-hacking” will take place with leading Norwegian fashion designers to re-form the existing models of the factory without changing the hardware of the factory, hacking the lines of production, changing materials and assembly order etc. An experiment in off-centre production and low-level change of

existing patterns, trying to challenge the logic of industrialism (moving to china) and instead see what unique possibilities can be offered with a highly skilled workforce. Can the design space be expanded to include more specific design activity by the worker in the factory? Can the designer create more open patterns for the worker to offer also more co-design at the floor (as Hella Jongerius' porcelain painter instructions, distributing parts of the design task to the workers).

The hope is also to create a toolkit for a factory to easier reach the designers and co-locate design and production, providing a tool for a better understanding and closeness between designer and manufacturer. Providing a small library of working methods and materials but also an insight in the production process itself (in "factory language" to enable non-specialist designers make high-quality producible custom products that are understood by the manufacturer)³⁵, thus opening for better understanding of what hacks can be made – offering transparency through the process, something like "open source shoe making". By finding local possibilities (such as post-purchase service/repair) and also a way to better use skilled labor there might still be hope for such small factories to keep production and attract customers through more open and collaborative modes of production.

Kitchen Konstruktivism.

Making a further iteration of the manuals to become a more open look-book for a specific DIY group, in this case bicycle messenger or fixed-gear enthusiasts who regularly involve in DIY activity and wants transparency in their working environment. Creating a mix of bicycle and clothing inspirational images and step-by-step re-forms, also mixing materials (second hand rain clothes with parts of tires etc).

The hope would be to introduce this practice to some fashion designers (as Matruschka fashion) and organize workshops for this mode of production, mixing the subculture of fixed-gear enthusiasts with clothes assembly (complex parts could be pre-fabricated).

There are many projects on functional bicycle clothing with the intricate collections of *Vexed Generation* in London as one main example. The focus in this project would be the DIY manual/look-book in combination with a specific subculture style and stressing re-form functionality in street environment.

Street Fashion TV.

In a world where fashion becomes global and also the expression of various subcultures are becoming homogenized it would be interesting to apply the Telestreet approach to media and produce extremely local programs on a station, establishing a Fashion TV not for a whole city but just for some blocks. Identifying the persons that could be seen as local "stars" and work closer with them on evolving a specific local fashion by hacking or jamming the larger trends into some specific expression, blended with site specific ideas.

The reason to use analogue TV instead of web is to stress the extremely local and try to work very closely with a group of people and try to explore the sustainability in low-level production.

³⁵ As described in von Hippel, chapter 11

Further theories?

The basis for my theory studies I see as a framing of larger movements and tendencies in society and what new models might evolve in the connection between design, society and the modes of (co-)production.

So far I have mainly focused my theoretical readings on fashion and lately also on open-source programming and innovation, but feel a certain thirst for exploring economic models that might support small scale re-form activities and services, organizing low-level markets and currencies (perhaps connected to open-source, open-content, open-money). Maybe also the texts of Manuel de Landa on Anti-markets and look into subjects like micro-credits and such in aid systems.

Another group of theory would be the large amount of text on tactical media to deepen the connections to the counter culture movements (maybe also contacting *Adbusters* sub-project *Antipreneur* for example). In this approach other examples of DIY media etc might be interesting like micropublishing etc to try to deepen the understanding of these tendencies in society.

Further on I also hope to improve the theoretical basis of the research on practical design approach, how to understand design research as a process and a certain form of attention to (in) the world. The basis for my research is being-in-the-process and a specific hands-on experimentalism, and the specificity of this approach has somehow to be communicated.

Timeplan?

During the next year I hope to further explore the connection of design co-production and toolkits (as in the Dale shoe-hack) and possible economic applications for this approach in society. The second approach is on more radical counter culture groups to see if there might be any connections and what they would look like.

Perhaps it would be possible to have a one term exchange with another university during the PhD years, maybe St Martins or London school of fashion to get more deeply involved in a very intense environment of fashion production?

The expected outcome:

The course of this project is to follow a line of thought on how the role of the (fashion) designer is changing and to examine the roles, models and toolkits that might be applied to the everyday practice. Trying to understand the relations of the designer in this expanded field where re-form is both a hands-on practice but also a subversive strategy stretching into society (even if on a micro- or small change scale). The relations are stretching in many directions and the point of contact should be examined, at least as much as to create a set of reference points that can frame an understanding of this role and praxis (relations to practice, technology, society, ideology, theory etc). Some perspectives might be:

- history of the designer role (in a broad sense, but also find specific fashion and re-form examples)
- designer role in social change (development aid work, therapy etc, as hands-on practitioner, but also as motivator, facilitator or change agent in social re-organizations)
- the expanded role and expanded design (innovation-product-service-myth)
- street-level management (bazaar-style? Looking at various street style movements, how they are or can be promoted and sustained)
- fashion!

(as I write these perspectives it seems more and more as desktop work in design theory or history, but I want to stress that the aim is to somehow implement all this into practical experiments)

In this process I also have to find my own position, find a level or tone of voice, for *diffraction* (as in Donna Haraway's work) as well as self-critique...

The research hopefully might frame a set of actions, experiments and toolkits and through these form an approach that might work as inspiration to others in fashion and design on how design theory can indeed be very practically applied.

I see the final PhD thesis not so much a theoretical book but more in the shape of a manual, a summary of ideas that might contribute to academics, fashion designers and user-innovators (the public as co-designer), in form of theory, practical examples (in a collection) and DIY methods.

The projects and outcomes will also continuously be published on www.selfpassage.tk (soon -.org)

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