The Dark Room Fashion Show

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This note describes and discusses experimental work on the border between experimental fashion design and sonic art. The particular experiment discussed here was done in a project group where, besides the author, the following people participated:

Marcus Bergman, The Swedish School of Textiles, University College of Borås; voice and presentations,  
Hanna Landin, Department of Computing Science, Chalmers University of Technology; fashion- and interaction design, performance,  
Riika Townsend, The Swedish School of Textiles, University College of Borås; fashion- and interaction design, performance,  
Clemens Thomquist, The Swedish School of Textiles, University College of Borås; fashion- and interaction design, performance.

Basic experimental work was done during winter and spring 2004. The show was staged and recorded during EXIT2004 at the Swedish School of Textiles.

1 Experimental fashion design research

We find research about fashion and fashion phenomenon in sociology, art history, cultural studies etc and critical work in the areas of fashion aesthetics and fashion theory (Cf. [Breward], [Carter], [Lehmann]). Fashion design research is, in contrast, an area that is less developed – this is in particular true for fashion design aesthetics.

There are lots of reasons for this; in one sense fashion design is close to art and in another sense it relates to more technical issues of functional clothing which leaves design aesthetics in a no mans land somewhere in between, not to mention its relation to market analysis, branding issues etc. (Cf. [McRobbie]). To further develop the area there is a need for a combination of foundational reflections and experimental work to open up for the formulation of research issues and research programs.
Experimental work is needed to map out the terrain by examples and foundational reflections are needed to build the conceptual framework through which we may classify and describe what we see in our experiments. Methodwise there is really nothing that different from what we are used to do in science in general. The basic difference with respect to empirical science is that experiments do not concern the systematic study of what there is, but the exposure and development of design practice as such. We try to understand what we are doing, how we can develop practice etc. It is a matter of deepening our understanding about practice through practice itself. Practice based fashion design research has on one hand its foundation in experimental fashion design practice and on the other hand it rely on the development of a systematic fashion design aesthetic.

2 Zero Expression Fashion

Expressional issues are in focus in fashion design in a very strong sense. What does this mean? This question, in one form or another, is somehow the basic aesthetical question with respect to fashion design. To explain what expressions are all about in fashion design is to lay out the aesthetical foundations for fashion design practice.

Zero Expression Fashion is a conceptual framework for experimental work with focus on methods for exposing basic expressional aspects of fashion design. The idea is to expose expressional properties of fashion design through experiments where we, in one way or another, try to negate given basic notions; the no-color fashion design, the no-silhouette fashion design, the no-material fashion design, the no-form fashion design etc. It is of course difficult to negate the obvious and necessary and perhaps it looks a bit silly even trying, but it is from a methodological point of view rather natural to investigate what we take for granted on basis of its negation; we look for that point where a certain phenomenon seems to appear or disappear, the thin line where the duality between this and that becomes visible, nightfall-dawn, nervous-calm etc. There are of course close inspirational links here to various forms of experimental design practice where “anti fashion” is in focus.

3 The Dark Room Fashion Shows

Visual expressions are dominant in fashion aesthetics. The fashion show is visual, we show fashion in magazines, we show our new garment, we see the beautiful clothes of others etc. The basic design aesthetics we learn within the regular fashion design curriculum is all about spatial form and visual expression. It seems somehow natural to train our perception of forgotten aesthetical issues by bracketing these dominant perspectives. Garment sounds in use, this is not a focal issue but nevertheless basic to the way in which garment present themselves in use.

The Dark Room Fashion Shows is a program for fashion shows presenting fashion with a total focus on the sounds of garment in use; expose the sound of fashion in use, show nothing, let a cat-speaker, in some way or another, substitute the catwalk.

Methodological issues:
- consider some type of garment (defined with respect to wearing expressions),
- focus on some fragment, some small detail of the given garment,
- try to describe the sound characteristics of the fragment, the detail in question,
- design such a fragment, such a detail as fashion with total focus on wearing expressions as something we hear.

Performances issues:
- “show” a given collection of fashion garment fragments through a sound installation,
- expose distinctly fashion as a matter of sound gestalt,
- refrain from all references to visual expressions,
- work with live performances where the sound installation performances substitute the visual acting of models in a traditional “visual” fashion show.
The Dark Room Fashion Show, staged during EXIT 2004 at the Swedish School of Textiles, was based on a series of workshops where we experimented with the "near field" acoustics of various details of garment and different ways to capture and amplify the micro world of fashion sounds. On basis of these workshops a collection of “fashion” items where constructed with reference to a context of conceptual garment.

A “traditional” fashion show is based on a composition of visual and temporal expressions. A Dark Room Fashion Show is in a similar manner based on a sound installation composition. In the particular experiment discussed here the sound installation is realized through a computer program that records the different “fashion” items in a large number of layers. This in combination with a standard sound card that is not designed to handle more than an ordinary stereo output, results in conflicts that creates complex rhythmic patterns when the layers of different channels are played back with a slight time delay. We expose fragments of garment through their “fashion” sounds and we only hear fragments of these sounds in a complex context that exposes the collection as a whole; this is the way we frame the show as a sound installation. Live performance will, just as it does in the “visual” shows, guarantee a certain authenticity and directness; a matter of exposing the actual exploration.

There is a thin line between this type of design “research” and pure art. The experiment in question exposes a certain expressional property of fashion design in terms of a sound installation and thus represents an open presentation of an investigation. It is at the same time a methodological exercise; what does it mean, from a methodological perspective, to focus on sound expressions in the fashion design process?

The important thing here is to open up for systematic research, not to perform the well planned experiment testing a precise question or hypothesis. What comes out is raw material for conceptual analysis and perhaps suggestions for further design experiments.

4 References


