The Life of a Dress
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An introduction
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Amanda Ericsson

The Life Of a Dress is an odyssey featuring dresses of multiple ownership from distant corners of the world. Through photography, film, fact and fiction, the concepts and definitions on clothing, textile production, redesign and fashion are being shared, together with the vision and strong conviction that everything old may be reinvigorated and redefined into something new.
Why? *The quest for beauty*

Through our culture, history and tradition we judge each other by the clothes we wear. And sometimes the lack of them. The quest for beauty shapes a language of its own with signals and symbols telling stories about the clothing user’s origin, status, interests and occupation. We form opinions through the expressions of clothing. Clothes styles that rapidly change in colour or shape have become a lure for the world’s “impossible to fill” wishes and demands. Clothes travel far to be as accessible as they are to consumers. Through a global production process which covers each and every continent, raw material is extracted in one country and transported to another to be further processed in yet another. From earth to grain, fibre to thread, thread to yarn, yarn to fabric and from fabric to fashion. Happiness, fulfillment and luxury for a few. Diseases and lack of water for others. The dream is created, packaged, sold and sent on for further traveling. And then what happens with a garment after it has been used by its first user? What are the possibilities for it in the future? Is the textile fibre too weak and worn out or are there possibilities for this garment to live on in one shape or another? Could it be used as raw material for a new product?

By definition fashion means something in constant change. Something that is in phase with
the rhythm of the present. So, when yesterday’s fashion of tomorrow is out-of-date it will move on. A big part of it will go to landfill, a smaller part will be collected or donated to charity or given to commercial agents. Charitable contributions are appreciated and the garments will be further divided by volunteers and resold locally. Due to a high volume of incoming materials and not enough demand, not everything collected by the charities will be sold locally and will instead be sold in bales by international companies who will divide, repack and resell the clothes to developing countries which in most cases have little or none of their own textile and clothing production. To what extent these countries are affected in the long term from an economical, social, environmental and cultural perspective is a widely discussed matter. Some countries have chosen to ban the import of second-hand clothes to protect their local textile and clothing production. This ban may contribute to

increased smuggling business and illegal import and turns the second-hand clothes into even more valuable commodities. At the same time as trade has grown more and more global, information and knowledge have been made easily accessible for a multitude of nations through images and local languages. Local communities have grown into large ones, shaping global inter-linked societies through the use of revolutionary computer systems, software, interfaces and the internet. Ideas are visualised and communicated quickly. This has made new business development possible where ideas may be realised in a short time, affecting both the local and global community.

With rapid changes in the perception of what is modern and what is not, fashion production and consumption has created a growing mountain of used materials. Collectors pile up fashion from different eras hedging their bets that one day soon these styles will come back into fashion,
perhaps helped by a style icon who may or may not come from within the fashion system itself. At the same time the term *sustainability* has become popular. But sustainable for whom? And can fashion be sustainable, when it by definition means constant change? Is sustainable fashion a contradiction in itself? Or is it just a word for something that has been going on for centuries and that is for some people already an evident way of living and making? Most importantly, might it be a possibility for the future? Could it be that the problems associated with a growing waste (or material) mountain, high carbon footprints and polluted waters will push us all into the next revolution? Can we learn from history as well as present ways of living and use current skills, knowledge and science in order not to repeat old mistakes? And by doing this close the loop to transform and refine waste into gold?

**What? Travelling exhibition**

*The Life of a Dress* is a travelling exhibition and series of workshops. In the light of the global trade of second-hand clothing the project aims to investigate how value-adding activities in participatory handicraft workshops in local communities may engage a population from different generations and nationalities in an exercise in reappropriating these materials. It is a further aim of the project to observe and induce aspects of developing, influencing and reconstructing sustainable patterns of consumption and production. The project explores models for fashion remanufacturing and creates opportunities for further development. The exhibition features
collaborations with celebrated photographers and presents a world of dresses and artworks that have been produced or found along the way. In its centre, an open workshop developing shared ideas and skills from its participants takes place.

How? Experimental workshops
The Life of a Dress explores possible ways to use, improve and reconfigure the current system of fashion through reclaiming what the system itself is creating and wasting. The concept of sustainable design is explored as an approach which is here defined as being sensitive to the local and global context. The exhibition and workshop has since 2009 visited different continents and countries to share its content and learn from local projects and people about ways of how to rethink the use of materials. It is exploring how second-hand dresses found in local markets and streets may be used as assets for further transformation. Craft workshops and prototyping labs are created around the collected materials and people are invited to join in. During these workshops participants are encouraged to challenge current structures and ways of thinking around materials and making. The BIG MAMA, a mini-dress similar to an oversized t-shirt is one example of a product which is made in most of the workshops. It is a catalyst element normally brought in to the making process to see how the participants interact with the given materials and each other and how this may vary between different countries. The exhibitions are normally built up around the map dress which rests like a symbol for the global nature of textiles, clothing and fashion. Imagination is used and regarded as the main renewable resource in and outside this project. Creativity and its various forms of expressions is further explored and used to drive to project forward.

The beginning
The Life of a Dress was born in 2009 in Sweden with the goal to explore ideas around production, design and dresses that have come out of fashion. This with a vision of a sharp future of fashion where the beauty of a garment would lie in the eye and heart of the curious and conscious beholder. It started out with an exhibition in a small gallery in a bookshop in Paris in 2009. Second-hand dresses that had been collected, redesigned and put together in the archive and fashion brand dreamandawake were sold. They were presented together with photographs that had been created in collaboration with different photographers in different places around the world.
A rather abstract visual installation shared the story of a woman and her dress’s journey around the world with the aim to give the audience a hint of how clothes travel. The exhibition was named *La Vie d’une Robe*. The concept was soon further developed and in 2010 it was presented as an installation in a cultural center in Gothenburg, Sweden. The audience, young and old, were invited to watch films and photographs showing reconstructed and revived dresses. At that time, no dresses were for sale, instead the space invited conversations around the consumption and production of clothing and fashion. A few months later the Swedish Embassy in Mozambique invited the project to Maputo. This visit changed the direction of the exhibition after strong influence from the local art and craft scene and visits to the local markets which were flooded with second-hand clothes from high-consumption countries. The gallery space had been filled with dresses and photographs and two sewing machines were set up to create a workshop. This was a new chapter for the project adding the act of making into the visual story which was sharing thoughts on textile production, environmental issues and reconstruction of clothes. Collaborating with a local art school, the students were encouraged to bring handicraft techniques which could be applied on textiles. During a full week visitors came to watch, talk, discuss and make. Local artists, passing-by tourists, art students, local designers and groups of children came to learn, share or curiously investigate the space. More ideas developed through the crafting and the workshop became a permanent chapter of the story.

One year later the project was invited to give a three month long workshop in Hong Kong where more than 100 dresses were collected and placed in the classroom of *Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity*. This time a new character called SHE was born. SHE is someone with the super power to transform old into new. 30 students participated in making clothes, sounds and visuals for *The Universe of SHE*. In October 2012 the project was invited to visit Mexico City to give a workshop for three weeks at the cultural center *El Faro de Oriente*. The workshop finalised a collaboratively produced collection called *Hecho en Faro* which was shown at a catwalk show on the main square Zócalo at the end of October. This time the Mexican photographer Roberto Rubalcava participated and together we visited the south of Mexico to document and learn more about the rich handicraft areas of Chiapas. This added another dimension to the project as we
now were documenting our experiences through photography and film.

In March 2013 we revisited Mozambique, this time to further investigate the current climate of design and fashion and to produce a second exhibition and workshop. We were also to document the progress and process of the local fashion brand Mima-te which in 2010 had started a business redesigning dresses. At this point, the project itself had developed into several new projects. Brazilian puppeteer Karol da Silva also came along and set up workshops using left-over materials from second-hand clothes, dressing old plastic bottles and by doing so created an even greater combined system of reuse and repurposing.

The Life of a Dress is continuously developing through the places and people it visits. Out of necessity, knowledge, wisdom, imagination, local and global culture and dreams give the project different shades. Shades which might contribute to create new interpretations and solutions to the problems of our time.

Market with second-hand clothing in the countryside, Morocco, February 2012
The Map Dress was found in Hong Kong in 2006. It has since then been used in *The Life of a Dress* exhibitions as a symbol of the global nature of trading patterns of textile, clothing and fashion. It has been photographed in various places and countries. It has been out for walks in Swaziland, bike rides through the English countryside, waterfall-swims in Brazil, sleeping on the train from Shanghai to Moscow, diving into the sand dunes in the desert of Morocco and sunbathing in Mexico.
Countryside, Swaziland, April 2013

Marrakech, Morocco, February 2012
Along the Transmongolian Railway, Mongolia, July 2007

Waterfalls close to Paraty, Brazil, May 2012
Sahara Desert, Morocco, February 2012

El Castillo de Tulum, Mexico, November 2012
Buenos Aires, Argentina, June 2012

Maputo, Mozambique, April 2013
Amanda Margareta Ericsson, textile engineer, dress collector and artist. Born in Sweden, based in London. Currently working on her PhD in Upcycling Textile Management at the Swedish School of Textiles, Borås. She is investigating how reconstruction of second-hand clothing and fashion may be used as tools for capacity building and business development. By the age of ten Amanda had already begun to amass a collection of second-hand clothes picked up from local charity shops. Her search soon focused on dresses and the search grew worldwide. Initially triggered by a curiosity in other countries, soon fueled by a career in modelling, Amanda started to travel extensively continuously expanding her dress and photographic archive and her knowledge of the textile industry in different territories. As a result of living in Hong Kong during 2005 she changed the way in which she wanted to be involved in the fashion system. Exploring a direction of redesign and rethink of materials and current structures Amanda started to learn more about a world where concern for environment and social conditions were taken and where fashion was use as a means of communication rather than as an excuse for production. Since 2007 she has been working with her concept brand dreamandawake where old dresses are collected and revived through design and photography. From 2009 Amanda has curated and developed The Life of a Dress.
Thank You

All family and friends, loved and beloved.
Dear Lina, Moosie, Roberto and Yin John.
Everyone who has been engaged in
this project in one way or another,
Tekostipendier, The Swedish School of
Textiles, University of Borås, The Swedish
Embassies of Mexico and Mozambique.

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Publisher
The Swedish School of Textiles,
University of Borås

Printed by
Responstryck AB, Borås, Sweden, April 2014