Some notes on photography as fashion design

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Fashion, in its modernistic guise, is intricately linked to visual stimuli brought about by photography. Fashion and photography influence each other; what is fashionable in clothes is visualised through the use of photography, and what is fashionable in photography is influenced by expressions of clothes. One might also argue that fashion photography today is impossible to distinguish from other types of photography – documentary photography, still-life photography and so forth – which means that we find yet another example of the pervasive nature of fashion. The image as such becomes questioned – not because of manipulation – but because of intent. A photograph that is intended to promote clothes can just as well take on the same guise as a photograph intended to document an event. What distinguishes one photograph from another is therefore not the actual image, but that which goes into the image. Photography becomes a matter of information and of context; why is the photograph taken, and where is it displayed? This, of course, is as most interesting when the image is spectacular in some sense, as is the case with the photographs of Oliviero Toscani, but the discussion can be directed at a wide array of photographs. When images of suffering are used to promote luxury goods, morality seems to be missing. But the same goes when photographs of suffering are used exclusively to further the photographer’s career, and only that.

Photography much resembles working with clothes, in that the photographer makes choices in the same way as the fashion designer does. Primarily, clothes are about dressing the body, and in order for the body to be dressed and not merely covered, fabric needs to be sculpted. In essence, fabric must first be chosen, then reduced in scale and drape. Photography means – and this is where it is similar to clothes-making – to choose what goes into the picture and what does not. This choice is primarily made at the moment of exposure. In clothes-making, decisions of what parts of the fabric to choose and what parts to omit are made at the cutting stage. Thereby, photography and clothes-making both contain a crucial moment – and the values that influence this moment are what dictates the outcome. Everything else is ornament.
When Henri Cartier-Bresson spoke of a “decisive moment”, he did not only mean that the photographer should wait for some perfect moment; he included the photographers’ ability to include himself/herself in the context of the photograph. By being within the photograph, the photographer can identify the moment among moments, in which the motif becomes itself. This implies participation, but only participation to the extent of the camera. Motif and photographer join forces in creating the photograph; this takes place inside the laterna magica.

This is a powerful analogy to fashion design. As the decisive moment is present also in fashion design, one can argue that the garment and the designer join forces in identifying the moment in which a crucial decision must be made; to include or to omit becomes a matter of the designer being present in the situation in which the decision takes place. The designer should therefore be a part of the moment of the decision and also be the one making the decision; just as the photographer is present in the situation he/she is documenting. There is, thus, a fine line to be respected here – the one between empathy and narcissism. The emphatic photographer/designer is able to be present at the same time as the decisive moment, without ruining it by influencing it. The narcissistic photographer/designer steps out of the camera/the design and is left with only the option of documenting himself/herself. This immorality is certainly worse than the one that permits photographs of suffering being used to promote luxury goods.

The widespread use of digital imagery has left photographic practice in a state where the very image can be questioned as such. A photograph, once an evidence of this or that, is now little more than a representation of something that might be real, or might as well belong be construed in the digital realm. There are many desirable things in regard to this development; advanced image making is no longer reserved for professionals and new ways of creating images are therefore likely to emerge. Similar development occurred when hand-held cameras became goods that ordinary people could buy and use; not to mention the obvious joys of letting children playing with brushes and paint, once the tools of skilled painters only. But at the same time, the digital does mean the introduction of programming into the system of bringing about a photograph. These programs are present in the camera that processes the information in order to create an image file, the computer that handles the file that is the realm in which the image exists and the tools used to display the image file in a format that is recognisable to us a photograph. In the semantic meaning of the word, the file is of course a photograph, in essence a painting in light. But in our understanding of what the photograph essentially is, I dare to say that we do not include such things as image bank programming for the determination of aperture and shutter ratios, nor do we include the algorithms used to determine colour and shade in computer representation of imagery. And – foremost – we tend to think of the photograph as a singular being, the print being a copy of the original negative, meaning that there exists, somewhere, an original file to each photograph, one that is also evidence of what really happened inside the magic box.

When American photographers in the 1910s and 20s fought to make photography accepted by the public as an art form on its own, it became apparent that photography would always be considered inferior to painting if it could not remain true to its own system of making images. Up until then, photographers had generally tried to make photographs appear as close to paintings as possible. The work carried out by individual photographers and in groups brought about a new status for photography, and greatly contributed to the way people at the time looked on social phenomena (as is the case with the photographs by Paul Strand) and at nature (the photographs by Ansel Adams). The explosive power of the photograph in this regard could probably be attributed to the view of it as being an image originating in something actually existing, in essence a true art form and to the photographs themselves becoming of radically higher technical quality due to exposure and development methods developed by the likes of Ansel Adams and utilised in contexts such as the f64 group. This way, the photograph as such went from an inferior artistic object to one that was considered true art.
In this, there are similarities in reference to reforming fashion design. If a garment is to be accepted in the same category as art, it needs to come into being on its own terms and not as merely some comment or critique. Still, it needs to withhold some trueness in regard to its conception, meaning that if it is meant to be a comment or some critique, it should retain these qualities. Therefore, critical fashion design can not be a case of either/or. It should be a question of this/and. This poses a great design challenge; that of retaining – throughout the production of an object – some values that are linked to its conception.

One way of coming to terms with this challenge is to use photography as a design method, rather than relying on design by drawing, the preferred modus operandi in orthodox design. Since photography – as referred to above – deals with bringing the photographer and the motif together in some decisive moment, the designer of clothes would be able to use photographic documentation to obtain an artefact that not only depicts a garment, but depicts the decisive moment that represents the basis for decisions taken in the – likewise – decisive moment of cutting the fabric. The photograph, then, becomes a way of sketching that is goes beyond the trial of ideas and moves towards documenting ideas. In order for this to become meaningful, the photographs should retain narrative aspects in relation to their motifs, meaning that photography as a design tool becomes something very different from photography as a way of showing clothes.

A great advantage of using photography as a design method is that it contains an undeniable element of time; the photograph is exposed in a specific fragment of time, meaning that the decisive moment is specifically one moment, and not several, as is the case in for example painting or sketching. This brings the time factor into the design process, meaning that the photographic sketch or photographic design brief can serve as a manifest object that transcends the gaps between sketch, prototype and product that is apparent in fields like clothing design and architecture, for example, due to the problems associated with translating two-dimensional sketches into three-dimensional objects. Naturally, these problems are treated in the use of a wide plethora of design methods, originating in the art of drawing. But there is very little done on the subject of providing alternative notions to design by drawing. Still, this prevailing method of design can be questioned by thinking of, for example, a writer that imagines a scene taking place in a house. If he, or she, is able to imagine the house in sufficient detail, has he or she then not in fact designed the house? By this, one can argue that the poetic impulse is just as much design as is the pen put to paper.

In orthodox design, this or that product relates conceptually to a system of choices in relation only to representations – a sketch, a model or any other visual mean of presenting a design. These choices are based on questions; should one do this or that, meaning that choice gives way to dichotomy early on in the standard design process. These dichotomies often form the base of debates on design – meaning that design debate is often about design process rather than about the actual objects. Maybe this is the reason why so many design conferences end up in meaningless chatter on how to define the word “design”.

This is a serious problem. If the dichotomies prevailing in orthodox design by drawing are allowed to remain the basis of debate on actual objects, we run the risk of letting representations become foundational elements in in the process of materialising the societal systems that stem from design/objects, meaning that no true basis of debate or critique can be found. This also means that designers can continue to influence their clients to produce objects that are of certain qualities because of concepts based on representations rather than ideas. Since a representation can never be clear or simple enough, design as an influence on society is running a risk of becoming increasingly simplistic. This especially so in the age of mechanised design within computerised systems. This needs to be addressed – and indeed questioned. The way to do this, I believe, is through examples of design that is thoughtful, complex and narrative as opposed to mechanised, simple and representative. Including photography in the design process is one example
of thoughtful and complex design practice. Today, there is much talk of “excellent objects”. It is worth to bear in mind, then, that the mystery of excellence remains mysterious only as long as quantifiable qualities are allowed to reign supreme in the process of generating ideas and designs at the foundation of a project resulting in a ready product. When story-telling is added after the product is produced, then matters get even worse, as the product enters the realm of one-sided mythology, where marketers and designers join hands in creating products that seldom invite to great concern. The poetic nature of the photograph can easily serve as an introduction of complexity in design practice – the very antidote to the grave and macabre condition many designers suffer from – that which results in the killing of darlings.