

ON THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

A STEP BACK TOWARD PROSPERITY FASHION

NUNO NOGUEIRA

Universidade de Lisboa - Lisbon School of Architecture
nunonogueira@fa.ulisboa.pt
Orcid 0000-0002-4763-2596

INES SIMOES

Universidade de Lisboa - Lisbon School of Architecture
isimoes@fa.ulisboa.pt
Orcid 0000-0002-6353-6799

Abstract

To approach prosperity fashion holistically, conventional constructs about fashion design processes and the interpersonal relations they lead to should be questioned and reoriented. To set this viewpoint in context, this article begins by reviewing the current state of fashion and its implications for production and consumption (both of which have expanded significantly), triggering a fluidity of identity focused on image and performance. Next, the article assumes an ontological perspective of fashion as art and/or design, examining to what degree each category emphasizes the esthetic, functional and use aspects; each paragraph is followed by our perceptions and appreciation for specific designs and designers, writing in the first-person plural and intentionally indenting these inserts. The third section highlights the significance of processes that emphasize the representation of the phenomenological body; by drawing on our sensory, bodily knowledge, backgrounds, and research practices, we utilize an autoethnographic format to describe our individual explorations in pattern design, both grounded on intuition as a creative force. To conclude, the extracted meaning from the two self-narratives conveys the concept of prosperity fashion as a meaningful and multidimensional (i.e., non-consumerist) understanding of the relationship between body[maker]—process—body[user].

Keywords: *Phenomenological body, Representation of the body, Art and design processes, Pattern design, Autoethnography*

‘I SHOP THEREFORE I AM’¹

“The ornate mahogany door of the wardrobe swung open soundlessly to reveal a row of tightly packed clothes. They were expensive but unexciting. (...) There were well-cut skirts of indeterminate colour, heavy coats tailored to last through a dozen English winters, woollen dresses which could offend no one. Once the wardrobe was closed it was impossible accurately to recall a single garment” (James, 1963/2002, p. 160).

The above quote from P.D. James’s *A Mind to Murder* not only hints at a time when fashion products were designed to last longer than just a few seasons but also the character’s indifference to fashion trends, which contrasts with the innate human drive for novelty.

In fact, from immemorial times, trends keep surfacing, each embodying a specific view on dress and the dressed body, each replacing the previous trend more or less hastily depending on the time in history. Many theories attempted to understand why users are drawn to the ephemeral. The art and dress historian Anne Hollander (1994), for example, upheld that “[t]edium in fashion is much more unbearable than any sort of physical discomfort, [therefore] a certain amount of trouble

¹ Phrase overlaying a found photo by the American conceptual artist Barbara Kruger, 1987.

and effort is a defining element of dress, as it is of all art” (p. 48).

Regardless of its factual cause, the frantic consumption of new trends in the twenty-first century has been dominated by a powerful stimulant, i.e., the wish, a feeling so insincere and childish that has nothing underlying it (Bauman, 2000, p. 76). Concurrently, the emphasis on economic prosperity led to a global and highly globalized industry, allowing consumers – particularly the young – to continually evolve temporary identities (Joy et al., 2012, p. 276).

One of the problems underlying the present framework of overproduction and overconsumption is today’s quest for an authentic self in an age where the fluidity of identity requires individual performance – an age of liquid modernity, a metaphor introduced by philosopher Zygmunt Bauman to refer to the present-day situation “of the radical melting of the fetters and manacles rightly or wrongly suspected of limiting the individual freedom to choose and act” (Bauman, 2000, p. 5).

Following the lines of fashion theorist Anneke Smelik (2011), the loss of distinctive social dimensions of class, gender, age, and etiquette, gave way to the ideology of individualism and the pursuit of authenticity – epitomized in the performance of one’s own distinctive identity through the consumption of fashion products. The paradox, according to Smelik, is that authenticity is nowadays constructed and performed in a ‘society of spectacles’, inevitably becoming an illusion that is no longer true or genuine: “Like the Prada and Louis Vuitton bags on the street markets, it is an ‘authentic fake’” (p. 77).

Today, social media is omnipresent. Aspirational imagery is fed to a large number of users through (apparently amateur) photographs and short videos that cause “a profound impact on the way we behave” (Brown, 2022). Simultaneously, fast-fashion brands employing industrial manufacturing models of ‘just in time’ or ‘real-time fashion’ quickly deliver cheap versions of must-have items arising in the social media context. Think about the micro-trends phenomenon, where specific ways of dressing or items of clothing ascend rapidly to popularity in social media apps, being made available by fast-fashion brands as fast as a few weeks, only to be discarded in a couple of months (Zhou, 2022; Schulz, 2024).

Back in 1987, conceptual artist Barbara Kruger converted the philosopher René Descartes’

1637 principle ‘I think therefore I am’ into the provocative sentence ‘I shop therefore I am’ (adopted as the title of this section) to highlight “that shopping can dull the mind” (Hubbard, 2024). The reality is that, almost four decades later, Kruger’s credo still stands.

WE ARE NOT IMMUNE TO FASHION

It is known that the fashion industry (now more than ever) is a major contributor to world GDP (Lee, 2016), and fashion (now more than ever) feeds on our cravings for authenticity – however illusory (Smelik, 2011). This cause-and-effect relationship determines that the present condition of fashion, epitomized by incessant change based on apparent superficial discourses on the body, perpetuates the notion of fashion as an insincere practice. That’s why philosophy professor Karen Hanson (1990) proposes that this simplistic notion contributes to philosophy’s ongoing antagonism toward “those wrappings of the wrappings of the mind” (p. 109)².

Nonetheless, fashion undeniably holds significant power as an art form. In this capacity, its functional aspect is (primarily) to provide a pleasurable aesthetic experience that stimulates the senses. This condition alone is insufficient for philosophers to classify fashion as a genre within the arts: for fashion to be an art form, its creations must be intellectually challenging, exhibit an individual point of view, and convey complex meanings, among other properties. In fact, before some fashion manifestations, it is implausible to persist in being unresponsive when faced with an intelligently crafted relationship between body and garment. How else would we interpret some garments designed, for example, by Rei Kawakubo?

When we stare at the collection Body Meets Dress – Dress Meets Body by the Japanese fashion label Comme des Garçons for SS 1997, with garments with peculiar stuffed protuberances covered in stretchy gingham, we are compelled to evaluate our preconceptions of body-dress. Simultaneously, we cannot but sense that Kawakubo’s work intended to explore the postural balance of the body when dressed in a garment.³

² Philosophical reflections in the Western tradition, from Plato to Descartes, typically support the dualism of mind and body.

³ The use of the cursive font to write part of the text in this section highlights distinct catalysts that guided the reflection on our own research explorations.

Despite the legitimacy of whimsical or unfunctional dress manifestations, fashion is concerned with creating tangible products for everyday life, ranging from workwear to leisure-wear, from streetwear to formal wear. Thus, its functional aspect is (or should be) primarily focused on the dressed body experience, whatever the situation is. How else would we interpret the garments designed, for example, by Madeleine Vionnet?

When we gaze at the free-flowing quality (reminiscent of Classical Greek dress) imprinted in the French designer's creations from 1920s-1930s, we are mesmerized by the idea that Vionnet pieced squares, circles, quadrants and triangles together to reveal the beauty of the body, i.e., to represent the body as a living, deformable entity, not a rigid, motionless object. In doing so, body and dress become one entity.

In any case, the quest of fashion, and also of all other design disciplines, has always been to “[change] existing situations into preferred ones” (Simon, 1996, p. 111) by improving the esthetic and/or functional, the us(age) and/or – the recently added – sustainable aspects of existing objects or systems, or to engender new, (un)necessary, ones, to satisfy the user. How else would we interpret the emergence and evolution of pants since ancient times?

When we try a pair of engineered jeans on, developed by the Danish designer Rikke Korff in 1999 (under Levi Strauss and Co), our skin, muscles and brain instinctively sense that the vertical seams (of the paired front and back panels that became the prevailing form since the late 18th century) were twisted to follow all body movements and positions.

The pledge of fashion and pattern design to divide the body with orthogonal planes at right angles to each other, each pattern piece and garment part contouring a specific body part – e.g., torso, arms and legs – is grounded in a metaphorical, technical and conceptual representation of the body standing still (Simoes, 2012). Although this long-lasting paradigm is associated with the “promise of success” (Kuhn, 1962/1996, p. 23), the quest for industrial efficiency is at the expense of processual approaches to body-dress in unique, nonconformist ways. How else would we interpret the work, for example, of Geneviève Sevin-Doering?

When we behold the one-piece patterns designed by the French costume designer from

the 1960s to the 2010s, we cannot help but think of Hermann Rorschach's 1921 inkblots: both are beautifully symmetrical and abstract. In a time that seeks to reduce textile waste (remember that Sevin-Doering did not work in the industry or on commercial commissions), the implicit beauty of la coupe en un seul morceau,⁴ with its unorthodox seam placements, reveals the designer's intuitive explorations of the balance of a garment on the body.

Whether fashion is art or design – whether fashion walks the line between art and design – it is easy to get aroused, for example, by a silhouette, a play of proportion, a color (or color combinations), a pattern shape, or a process. The connection between the designers mentioned in this section is that they all surpass(ed) and set us free from predetermined conceptions of beauty.

As a result, we experience the beauty of their creations and processes as “sensitive emotional indicator[s]” (Bohm, 1996/2006, p. 45) of a truth established between body-dress.

Thus, our interest in fashion overtakes a consumerist stance or view: on the one hand, it varies between assuming the roles of the viewer, user and maker,⁵ conscious that we play the triple role using our bodily knowledge as dressed bodies; on the other hand, our backgrounds, one in performing art and the other in fine art, naturally play a part in the way we see fashion at large and pattern design in particular.

TOUCHING AND TOUCHED, SEEING AND SEEN

Inspired by artists and designers who challenged external preconceptions and poured out their true selves in their work, this section focuses on two individual explorations in pattern design that place(d) the phenomenological body – and its representation – at the center. As mentioned before, our backgrounds serve as keys to interpret each perspective on pattern design – and fashion, for that matter –, besides guiding the decisions throughout each process. Despite the differences, both explorations reflect an honest admiration for the (living) body and its representation in pattern design, and they share a nonconformist attitude toward inflexible processes.

The following accounts adopt an autoethnographic format that involves the self-reflec-

⁴ Freely translated into ‘the cut in one piece’.

⁵ The decision to use the noun ‘maker’ has the sole purpose of facilitating the distinction of ourselves (authors) from all other designers mentioned in the text.

tive narrations of the processes by interlacing the makers and user(s) actions of “touching and touched, seeing and seen” (Landes, 2017).

None of them should be seen as unequivocal solutions for shifting the fashion design and fashion production paradigms; rather, they serve as an earnest plea to consider fashion’s true *raison d’être* – “the living, breathing, moving body it adorns” (Entwistle, 2000, p. 9).

THE BODY AND THE MAP

My research interest stems from the awareness that when I create a clothing pattern, I am designing a surface that will come into direct contact with the skin of the wearer or, at the very least, planning an object that serves as a boundary between intimate and external spaces. I have always been fascinated by the tactile sensations induced by wearing a garment and the possibility of connecting with another body through the design of a pattern.

I attribute this motivation to connect with the body of the wearer to my background in dance before transitioning to the study of fashion. After all, dance and fashion practices primarily focus on the human body, exploring multiple ways to represent it.

Because I interpret patterns as representations of a body, created by a body (the maker) and dressed by another body (the wearer), my research evolved into a new analogical approach that dwelled in the interpersonal potential of alternative processes in pattern design.

I was inspired by the performative qualities of the works of choreographer Trisha Brown, particularly *It’s a Draw* (1999-2008), and action artist Yves Klein, *Les Anthropométries* (1958-1960). Both works assumed the body as their generative force, using simple analogical processes for collecting its traces. And what is pattern design if not the articulation of traces of the body, gathered through direct or indirect processes?

The rationale of the process was simple: to allow the body to produce its traces on a two-dimensional surface to generate a functional pattern materialized in a tridimensional prototype.

I asked my friend H to help me with my first experiments. The traces were produced by painting H’s torso and arms with ink and having him leaning against or turning around on paper sheets that were 1) hanging on the wall, 2) or lying flat on a smoother surface, or 3) pressing the paper sheets with my hands directly on H’s body.

At first, I thought of asking more than one person to participate in this process. But as the experiments went by, the difficulty of finding an optimal compromise between the unmediated relation between the tridimensional body and two-dimensional surface – that of the imprints left by H’s body on paper – and the accuracy required to draft a functional pattern – the certainty of having collected all the information of the body and the ability to articulate it –, lead me to the decision of continuing the explorations with just one participant. I understand any argument against this decision: after all, the systemization of pattern drafting emerged from the ambition of transforming intuitive practices into efficient, repetitive procedures – as asserted by costume historian Claudia Kidwell (1979).

However, I interpreted the relationship established between H and me as that of a model with an artist. Experiencing this process with only one person throughout numerous experiment sessions, allowed for an empathetic relationship to develop and to cultivate in both of us a commitment to the exploration process.

It is hard to describe the sensations of frustration and amazement I experienced throughout this process. My inability to efficiently articulate the traces of H’s body, constituted by imprints somewhat vague and diffuse and impossible to match accurately with precise delimitations of his body, was counteracted by their stunning plastic qualities and the authenticity of the vestiges they displayed – the contour of the belly-button or the nipple, body hair flattened in a single or in multiple directions, small protuberances of the skin emphasized. The imprints allowed for the lingering of H’s presence, even when he was long gone from the studio.

Early in the process, I started to outline the imprints of the body on other sheets of paper. I remember thinking that it was probably a waste of time. Later, I realized that these drawings permitted me to take possession of information that was not yet mine. I associated them with maps that chart unknown territory to make it comprehensible and adaptable to foreign intentions. But isn’t that what incites fashion and pattern design practices? To conceptualize multiple representations of the same territory (i.e., the body)?

I eventually had an epiphany about how to operationalize the process – I mapped the limits of contact between H’s body and the sheet of paper



Fig. 01

directly *on his body*, using this information to make the imprints with ink (Fig. 01). The solution was so obvious but so challenging for me to grasp. After all, I needed to put aside pre-established divisions of the body and search instead for how the body naturally related to the flat surface.

MY BODY: ANYBODY: EVERYBODY

All my life I wanted to wear garments that feel comfortable throughout body movement. Not that I was ever a tomboy...

In the 1960s and 70s, my clothes were mostly custom-made; however, I complained about their fit around the joints, and so, every time I had a choice, I wore knits because they adapted more easily to my body while running, biking, or playing hopscotch...

In the 1980s, fashion design became one of my professional activities. Depending on seamstress-es to translate my ideas into tangible clothes I despaired about their inability to do so. Not that my designs were ever fussy...

In the early 1990s, I learned pattern design at New York's F.I.T. and there I became enraptured by this practice. Perhaps because of my former training and unending interest in painting, I

realized that patterns are not merely technical drawings, as they are typically viewed; instead, they are representations of the body.

This fact becomes obvious when we see that the history of Western pattern design shows, time and time again, its restless vow to understand the entity without whom it would not exist: if, in ancient times, the representation of the body resulted in garments that were purely two-dimensional and only acquired the shape of the body once dressed, from medieval times on garments do not have to be donned to appear three-dimensional.

Regardless of my emotional responsiveness toward the achievements in the representation of the body by past and present known or unknown pattern designers, I realized that both *nonfigurative* and *figurative* patterns always represent the body as a rigid, unvarying object.

Like architectural elevation drawings, patterns impart the designers persisting decision to position the object of representation at a distance and at right angles to their plane to capture each view in full scale.

By doing that, pattern design stumbled into a paradox... The more I researched and practiced, the more it didn't make sense to deprive the

object of representation of the vital force rooted in movement that characterizes a body as a body. I found it illogical to fail to acknowledge the relationship between the designers' own body and the body before them.

So, in the 2010s, I began exploring ways to represent the deformable, mobile body in two dimensions and chose to address the challenge by creating a set of woven slopers as they are the frame of reference of the body par excellence.

Instantly, I thought of Marcel Duchamp's 1912 painting *Nu Descendant un Escalier* where several images of the same body are linked one after the other to represent the action of walking down a staircase, and Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies of motion done at the end of the 19th century.

Besides my feelings of admiration for the mentioned works, I intuitively understood that the solution lay in amalgamating all movements that anybody and everybody performs day-to-day. Unlike the conventional method that represents each part of the body to be clothed "on the basis of objective and quantifiable properties" (De Boeck, 2003, p. 103), I devised an approach akin to self-portraiture, in which others and myself played the roles of the portrayer(maker) and portrayed(user) all at once.

Inspired by the performance artists Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series (1973-1981) and Esther Ferrer's *Autorretrato en el tiempo* (1981-2014), the process of making the self-portraits involved (1) projecting the body on the inner surface of the nonwoven textile (2) without controlling the degree of deformation acquired – and retained – progressively by the close-fitting one-piece garments (3) for a week of wear.

When I got the finished self-portraits back, I noticed that they resembled sculptures, possessing the residual quality of the bodies' absence being sensed as their presence. In amazement, I observed that they all displayed the same surface deformations: the forward inclination acquired by the torso and the curved/angled shape acquired by both sleeves and trouser legs (Fig. 02).

The evidence was before me: the finished self-portraits reflect(ed) a reality shaped by all the routine movements and body positions performed every day, a reality that discloses the amalgamation of the routine movements and body positions that anybody and everybody living in a similar milieu performs day after day.

At this point, I used photos that captured each self-portrait from four orthogonal views to mark the contour lines and merge them into a composite portrait. This new portrait (reflecting the effect of movement on our outward appearance) was converted into a tangible mannequin (representing the deformable, mobile body) on which I designed the torso, sleeve and pants slopers with a woven textile.

To be fair to myself, through a process of alternating 3D and 2D information, each stage seemed right. However, it was only when others and myself experienced the long-sleeved top and pants (made from the slopers) that my exploration, grounded on intuition, proved to be right.

TAKING A STEP BACK

How can prosperity fashion be imagined? Can fashion's drive to produce novelty for novelty's sake, (un)wittingly responding to the market's compulsion for unjustified consumption, be rerouted?

Returning to Anneke Smelik's (2011) reflection on the ideology of individualism being one of the forces driving the contemporary fashion industry, redemption is nowhere to be found, "Any quest for authenticity, either by fashion designers, or by individual subjects, will always be revoked by the spectacle of fashion, because it is embedded in the liquid modernity in which we live" (p. 82).

Let's not be naïve: the power of images will always be paramount in fashion – as well as in other fields of Western culture. Anne Hollander (1975/1993) emphasizes the obvious significance of idealized images of the human body in Western dress tradition. Social critic and feminist Camille Paglia (1990) reiterates the dominance of the eye (vision) in Western culture – materialized in visually appealing art objects –, linking this hegemony of beautiful images to the development of Western concepts of individualism and personality. Fashion's allure will always be centered on producing ideal images of the body.

The problem, though, does not lie in the production of ideal images per se. Situationist theorist Guy Debord emphasizes in *Society of the Spectacle* (1970) that today's social relations are mediated by images, and tangible experiences are exchanged for abstract representations.

Society, in general, continues to experience the compulsory breaching of the link between images and their real, authentic referents. How



Fig. 02

can this connection be restored? How can the production of idealized images of the human body be reconciled with the material and sensorial qualities imbued in fashion products?

We believe these questions can be answered, at least partially, if fashion would pay (some) attention to the phenomenological body, decentralizing (some of) its focus on the idealized body. By ‘phenomenological body,’ we do not mean just the other body. After all, garments are envisaged, designed, and constructed by bodies. To be aware of this sensitive loop – a dressed body designing dresses for bodies (Nogueira e Simoes, 2019) – should encourage richer reflections about the practice of designing and constructing garments.

In defense of designers, they are trained to think they are problem solvers, which presupposes that they must stand outside a situation to “diagnose what’s ‘wrong,’ and prescribe the ‘right’ therapy” (Dubberly, p. 274). One misconception of this belief, however exciting it sounds, is that designers “respond to problems” (Salituri, 2017) by always starting from past forms to derive new, provisional ones, as architect and design theorist Christopher Alexander implied in 1964 (Michl,

2009, p. 285). Another misconception is that “most issues facing the world (and designers) are not isolated, not static, and not clear; they are ‘systemic,’ connected in networks of cause and effect, ever changing, and defined largely by one’s point of view” (Dubberly, 2022).

Sure, it takes a village to overcome economic prosperity in fashion. Which means that designers also have a responsibility to take a step back.

By accepting the challenge, we deem prosperity fashion as encompassing a threefold pledge that intertwines (1) a profound admiration for the sensorial body – from who and for whom fashion products are designed –; (2) the multitude of possibilities to generate its representation – resulting in one whole image or one that is separated into distinct parts –; and (3) the deep connection designers/makers have with the creative process – which arises from their/our sensory, bodily knowledge and personal reflections.

It is clear that the explorations presented in section 3 assume prosperity in fashion as being based on processes that deal with personal and interpersonal relations and not with solutions for industrial production: (1) by reflecting on our sensory experiences as dressed bodies, we were able to grasp what motivates our exploratory researches, and try to summon these experiences to inform alternative representations of the body; (2) by letting go of pre-determined methods for representing the body in pattern design, we ventured in trying to reveal truthful/other dimensions of the body; (3) by delving in our backgrounds, we engendered alternative processes rooted in our dressed bodies’ intuition.

The self-narrative format aimed at disclosing the subjective and emotional dimensions within our explorations in pattern design. It should be noted that we do not intend to provide a *fit-all* solution for a complex, multifactorial problem – either in pattern design or in fashion as a whole.

Nonetheless, our explorations embody an honest consideration of what it means to represent a body, in and for pattern design, while expressing the commitment between body[maker]—process—body[user].

As makers, we advocate favoring processes instead of products, embracing self-reflection instead of prescribed ways of thinking and making.

To prevent a tendency for quick, do-goodism solutions, one potential path toward prosper-

ity fashion – among other conceivable ones – is to open up “the space for a sincere, poetic, sensible, and subtle form of design to emerge” (Schouwenberg and Kaethler, 2021, p. 19).

The designers we revisited in section 2, whose work was the result of a self-probing and introspective mindset, which enabled them to challenge external preconceptions and to pour out their true selves in their work, corroborate the feasibility of such an approach.

At the risk of sounding pompous, our own explorations in pattern design and the explorations by the revisited fashion and costume designers share an earnest interest in one's work that reflects the aim to find ourselves in the reality in which we live, a willingness to touch and to be touched, to see and to be seen, motivated by “[our] fundamental need to discover and create something new that is whole and total, harmonious and beautiful,” as stated by theoretical physicist David Bohm (1996/2006, p. 3).

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] An imprint left by the body on paper + the body and the map.

[Fig. 02] One-piece garment (or the blank canvas) + Self-portrait (or the absent presence). Photos by Francisca Manuel with highlighted seams.

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