

CONTESTING MEANING AND INFRASTRUCTURES OF AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION

THE CASE OF A SEWING MACHINE OF ONE'S OWN

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Abstract

This paper examines how fashion design practices operate not only as systems of representation, but as material and semiotic infrastructures that shape the production and circulation of meaning. While vernacular aesthetics and subcultural codes are increasingly mobilised within contemporary fashion, their incorporation into broader circuits of visibility often transforms their symbolic charge. Rather than framing this process through oppositions such as authenticity versus co-optation, the study approaches meaning as an unstable and negotiated outcome.

The research adopts a practice-based, situated methodology, combining co-design, participant observation, and material analysis. It focuses on the case study *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*, developed within a social tailoring atelier in Scampia (Naples), involving designers, seamstresses, and students in a collaborative production process.

Through the analysis of garments, design decisions, and exhibition practices, the paper identifies specific operations—such as juxtaposition, citation, and visible construction—that foreground the instability of signs and prevent their naturalisation. These are interpreted through cultural studies and camp sensibility to examine how fashion practices can both engage with and destabilise processes of incorporation.

The study argues that fashion can assume a critical role not by representing contexts “authentically”, but by intervening in the material and relational conditions that enable forms of agency and ongoing renegotiation of meaning.

Keywords: *Fashion activism; Cultural studies; Camp sensibility; Infrastructures of agency; Social design.*

INTRODUCTION

The questions shaping contemporary critical discourse on fashion concern not only what fashion produces, but how it produces meaning: which regimes of visibility render certain bodies, places, practices, and values desirable, legitimate, or even “natural”, and through which discursive devices such configurations are stabilised and made replicable. In this sense, fashion can be understood as a site of ongoing meaning production, where situated signs are translated into socially shared forms of signification that may appear self-evident while remaining historically contingent (Calefato, 2008).

This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the circulation of vernacular aesthetics, urban

peripheries, and marginal or subaltern codes within the contemporary fashion system. Such elements are increasingly mobilised as markers of intensity, authenticity, and “reality”, yet their incorporation into broader circuits of visibility entails significant semiotic transformations.

What is at stake is not simply the access of the “popular” to the fashion system, but the processes through which situated signs are detached from their original relations, reformatted, and rearticulated within new regimes of value. Rather than framing these dynamics through oppositions such as authentic versus co-opted, this paper approaches them as processes of ongoing negotiation, in which meaning is neither fixed nor fully controllable. This perspective resonates with

a cultural studies approach informed by Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, where common sense is understood as a contradictory terrain shaped by hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces, and where the “popular” emerges as a relational field structured by power.

Within this framework, style operates as a critical site of signification, capable of generating disruption while remaining exposed to processes of incorporation and normalisation, as articulated by Dick Hebdige and Massimiliano Gualleschi (2023).

To engage with these dynamics without reverting to a moralistic discourse of authenticity, the paper adopts camp sensibility as a critical device. Following Susan Sontag, camp is not treated as a stylistic category but as a perceptual and analytical mode that foregrounds artifice, citation, and theatricality, maintaining the constructedness of the sign in view and suspending its naturalization (Sontag, 1964, p. 515).

In this sense, authenticity is not approached as an origin or essence, but as an unstable and negotiated value, continually redefined through circulation. Alongside this semiotic axis, the paper develops a second perspective grounded in design research. Rather than considering fashion as a representational medium, it examines how situated design practices can function as material and relational infrastructures of agency. Drawing on social design and craft-based approaches, this perspective foregrounds the role of tools, skills, and collaborative processes in enabling forms of action, participation, and visibility, particularly in contexts marked by asymmetries.

On this basis, the paper addresses the following research question: how can fashion design practices operate not only as systems of representation, but as material and semiotic infrastructures that shape the production, circulation, and transformation of meaning and agency? More specifically, the study investigates how situated design practices can intervene in processes of signification by mobilising strategies that both engage with and destabilise mechanisms of incorporation, and how these dynamics can be empirically observed within a concrete case.

These questions are explored through the case study *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*, developed within a social tailoring atelier in Scampia (Naples). The project is analysed as a situated practice

in which garments, processes, and interactions function as sites of meaning production and transformation. By combining a cultural studies framework with a practice-based design approach, the paper proposes to read fashion not only as a system of signs, but as a field in which semiotic contestation and material conditions of agency are co-constructed.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This research adopts a practice-based and situated methodological approach, combining elements of co-design, participant observation, and material analysis. The case study, *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*, was developed between July and November 2025 within the social tailoring atelier Fatto a Scampia (Naples), with intensive fieldwork conducted from September to November.

The project involved multiple actors operating within a shared production and learning environment: two PhD researchers with a background in fashion design, three senior seamstresses, four junior seamstresses, and a group of students (aged 15–17) participating in school–work programmes.

The atelier functions as both a productive hub and an educational space, supporting the transmission of tailoring skills within the local community. The research process unfolded through a series of interconnected phases. Initial workshops focused on eliciting situated perceptions of Scampia through drawing and discussion, allowing participants to articulate symbols, experiences, and imaginaries associated with their context. These exploratory sessions were followed by collaborative design development, in which garments were progressively defined through ongoing negotiation between researchers and participants. The production phase involved collective decision-making regarding patterns, materials, and aesthetic elements, combining technical expertise with situated knowledge. The analysis focuses on garments, design decisions, and exhibition practices as primary empirical material. Rather than treating the collection as a finished outcome, it considers it as the visible trace of a process involving interaction, negotiation, and transformation. Particular attention is given to how specific visual and material elements are produced, staged, and circulated, and how they operate within broader regimes of meaning.

Analytically, the study identifies a set of operations through which meaning is constructed and transformed, including the juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials and symbolic references, the use of excess, citation, and surface emphasis to foreground the constructedness of the sign, and the recontextualisation of situated elements within broader circuits of visibility.

These operations are interpreted through the combined lenses of cultural studies (Hall, Hebdige) and camp sensibility, allowing the study to examine how signs are both incorporated and destabilised within contemporary fashion systems.

POPULAR SIGNS AND THE CONTESTATION OF MEANING

THE “POPULAR” AS A RELATIONAL FIELD

Within the lexicon of Cultural Studies, “the popular” does not designate a stable domain or an identifiable set of cultural objects; rather, it is a relational field structured by power relations. As Stuart Hall argues, what makes something popular is not its media visibility or its belonging to specific genres, but its position within a struggle over meaning, in which practices, texts, and styles are continuously negotiated between domination and resistance (Hall, 2006). The popular does not simply coincide with what “comes from below”. Following Hall, it emerges as a space of negotiation between dominant and subordinate cultures (Gencarella, 2010), enabling forms of agency while remaining exposed to processes of incorporation and neutralisation. From a Gramscian perspective, this field is traversed by tensions between hegemonic sedimentations and the possibility of their rearticulation, making the popular a key site where meaning is continuously contested.

SUBCULTURE AS A CONDENSATION OF THE POPULAR AND THE ROLE OF STYLE

Subcultures can be understood as condensed formations within this field, where tensions of class, generation, and belonging become visible through configurations of signs (Hall & Jefferson, 2017). Rather than autonomous domains, they operate within dominant culture by reworking its materials. In this sense, style functions as a critical hinge: a mode of signification capable of producing difference while remaining structurally exposed to incorporation (Hebdige, 2002).

INCORPORATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY RE-ACTUALISATION OF STRUGGLE

Subcultural signs are structurally exposed to incorporation, as they can be reabsorbed by the market and transformed into consumable forms. This process does not simply neutralise meaning but rearticulates it within new regimes of value. From this perspective, authenticity is not an original property but a discursive effect, continuously produced and renegotiated through circulation (Gaugele & Titton, 2019).

CAMP, FASHION, AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING

Camp can be understood not as a codifiable style but as a critical sensibility that foregrounds artifice, excess, and citation. As outlined by Susan Sontag (1964), it does not oppose myth with truth, but suspends naturalisation by insisting on surface and constructedness.

In this sense, camp operates immanently within dominant culture, producing a form of internal distance that makes signs perceptible as constructed rather than given (Monti, 2016). In this paper, camp is mobilised as an analytical method. Rather than treating garments as expressions of identity or authenticity, the analysis focuses on how design operations—such as juxtaposition, excess, and visible construction—produce forms that resist stabilisation. This allows the study to examine how fashion practices can maintain the visibility of appropriation and prevent signs from solidifying into fixed or marketable meanings.

CASE STUDY — A SEWING MACHINE OF ONE’S OWN AS A SITUATED PRACTICE BETWEEN CONTESTATION AND AGENCY

A Sewing Machine of One’s Own is a research and co-design project developed within Fatto a Scampia, a social tailoring atelier operating in the Scampia district (Naples). Rather than treating fashion as a representational device, the project approaches it as a situated practice that intervenes in the material and symbolic conditions through which meaning is produced. Garments are therefore considered not as final outputs, but as traces of a process involving learning, labour, and social relations. The project was presented at the Fashion Clash Festival (Maastricht, 2025) and

subsequently discussed in an interview published by *33 Magazine* (Postolache, 2026).

The setting is marked by intense symbolic exposure. For decades, media narratives have compressed Scampia into a narrow repertoire of signs, producing a recognisable—yet reductive—public image. The project does not attempt to “correct” that image or replace it with a single counter-story. Instead, it shifts attention to the production of fashion language itself: who participates, how decisions are made, what resources are available, and what forms of endurance can be sustained over time (Fig. 01).

PROJECT RELATIONS AND LEARNING: THE DESIGNER'S DELICATE POSITION

Methodologically, the work is organised through co-design, suspending the authorial hierarchy typical of the fashion system. Seamstresses, volunteers, and young participants are not treated as labour inputs nor as “witnesses” whose identity must be translated into form; they are engaged as competent subjects, carrying technical knowledge,

memories, and embodied routines.

Tailoring becomes a space of reciprocal learning and of rebalancing expertise, rather than a route to a signature aesthetic (Greer, 2014).

This makes the designer's position structurally complex. The task is neither to deliver skills top-down nor to steer a pre-scripted creative trajectory, but to hold a relational space in which design responses can arise through negotiation. Formal choices are inseparable from the human dynamics that enable them: uneven timings, limited materials, expectations, asymmetries, and the slow work of trust.

Within this relational field, the project's guiding questions operate as prompts rather than extractive instruments. Asking, for example, “What do you call your neighbourhood?” or “What is the 167 for you?” does not generate ready-made symbolic content; it produces reaction, attention, and curiosity. That attentiveness, in turn, supports commitment to making: finishing a task, moving beyond the constraints of everyday life, and converting private experience into something



Fig. 01

shareable. In design-activism terms, the approach does not rely on overt mobilisation or a declared militant look. Instead, it proceeds through “stealth” interventions aimed at altering arrangements from within: design as the construction of enabling conditions rather than the issuing of statements (Mazzarella *et al.*, 2019). This relational work can be understood as an affective micropolitics, where social change is organized through the ‘minor gesture’ of shared practice (Vachhani *et al.*, 2024). From this angle, the designer’s role can resemble that of a host—setting the scene so co-creation becomes possible, and so capacity develops through learning, repetition, and relation (Manzini, 2014).

COLLECTION ELEMENTS AS PROCESS-GENERATED OUTCOMES: 167, THE VELE DI SCAMPIA, MATERIALS, TEMPORALITIES

A particularly relevant example concerns the reinterpretation of the Vele, an architectural complex that has become a highly recognisable—yet heavily mediated—symbol of Scampia, often associated with narratives of marginality and criminality. Within the project, this reference was not translated into a direct visual reproduction; rather, it was rearticulated through a process of stylisation using decorative trimmings sourced from the historic silk manufacture of San Leucio, traditionally associated with aristocratic interiors and “high” cultural production.

These trimmings, typically used for upholstery and interior decoration, were applied onto sportswear garments made from regenerated wool supplied by the Italian textile company Manteco.

The operation introduced a deliberate semiotic tension: a material historically linked to elite decorative traditions was used to construct a visual reference to a form of popular housing that carries an almost opposite symbolic value. This juxtaposition does not aim at reconciliation; instead, it produces a visible disjunction between different regimes of value, making the constructedness of the sign perceptible.

From an analytical perspective, this operation can be read as a “camp” intervention, not in terms of stylistic excess alone, but as a strategy that foregrounds artifice, citation, and incongruity. The layering of heterogeneous trimmings, the emphasis on surface, and the technical visibility of their application contribute to suspending the naturalisation of the reference.

Rather than presenting the Vele as an “authentic” or transparent symbol of place, the garments stage their own constructedness, preventing the sign from stabilising into a fixed identity marker. The number “167” operates through a similar logic. Commonly used by residents as a colloquial way to refer to the neighbourhood—derived from the Italian law regulating public housing—the term carries strong local and social connotations. In the garments, “167” is constructed through the same San Leucio trimmings and integrated into sportswear silhouettes that typically display numerical identifiers. This recontextualisation introduces multiple layers of meaning: the number shifts from a situated expression of belonging to a stylised element within fashion language, while simultaneously retaining traces of its original context (Fig. 02).

Importantly, these design decisions did not emerge as top-down impositions but through an extended process of negotiation involving researchers and participants.

The inclusion of locally meaningful symbols increased participants’ engagement, as it allowed them to recognise their own experiences within the garments. At the same time, tensions emerged around authorship and representation, particularly between senior and junior seamstresses, reflecting different expectations and degrees of familiarity with fashion design practices.

These frictions were not resolved by eliminating difference, but through ongoing negotiation, resulting in forms that embody both technical constraints and social dynamics.

From this perspective, garments can be understood as sites where meaning is not simply expressed but actively produced through interaction, conflict, and material experimentation.

The combination of symbolic references, technical constraints, and collaborative decision-making processes makes visible how signs are constructed, circulated, and rearticulated within specific conditions. This allows the case study to move beyond description and function as a testing ground for analysing how fashion practices can both engage with and destabilise processes of incorporation.

THE SEWING MACHINE: CONCRETE MEANS, NOT A FIGURATIVE EMBLEM

Here, the sewing machine is not deployed as a symbolic token of emancipation; it operates as



Fig. 02

a concrete means that makes making possible. Counter-narrative is produced less through oppositional storytelling than through the establishment of workable conditions—skills, tools, and the practical ability to sustain activity across time (Fuad-Luke, 2009).

In this shift from value-signalling to operative capacity, fashion becomes a means for people to act, not merely a surface for representing social themes (Manzini, 2014). Revisiting the demand for *a room of one's own* (Woolf, 1929), the sewing machine is treated as a material precondition that links technical competence, economic possibility, and a form of symbolic voice.

In contexts where production is not guaranteed, devoting time and attention to a process already constitutes a significant form of action.

The project, however, avoids any salvific rhetoric: it does not promise linear transformation.

It foregrounds effort, learning, responsibility, and the slow accumulation of practice.

Woolf's reference matters here because it insists that clothes do more than cover bodies: they shape

how subjects inhabit the world and how they are recognised within it, modelling “the heart, the brain, the tongue” (Woolf, 1929).

In this case study, that intuition is grounded materially: garments remain as traces of a process that produces not only forms, but practical conditions for doing (Fig. 04).

A further moment of analysis emerges in the exhibition phase, where the project was presented at the Fashion Clash Festival (Maastricht, 2025). Rather than treating the exhibition as a final display, it was approached as an extension of the co-design process. Three of the junior seamstresses involved in the project participated directly in the exhibition, working alongside the researchers in the installation, mediation, and interaction with the public. Their presence was not symbolic but operational, allowing the collaborative dimension of the project to continue beyond the production phase. At the centre of the exhibition, an unfinished prototype of one of the sportswear garments was placed on a table and activated as an open surface for intervention. The seamstresses engaged with



Fig. 04

the garment using markers, drawing and writing directly onto it, while visitors were invited to participate by adding comments, words, and visual elements. This process transformed the garment into a site of ongoing inscription, where meaning remained open and continuously renegotiated through interaction.

From an analytical perspective, this operation extends the logic of circulation discussed in the theoretical framework.

The garment, initially developed within a highly situated context, was exposed to a new audience unfamiliar with the social and symbolic conditions of Scampia. The resulting inscriptions—produced by visitors—introduced external interpretations, displacements, and reinterpretations, making visible how meaning shifts when signs enter different circuits of reception.

This process can also be read through a camp lens, insofar as it foregrounds the instability and constructedness of the sign. The garment does not present itself as a finished or authoritative object; instead, it remains open, provisional, and visibly

altered. The accumulation of heterogeneous marks, styles, and contributions disrupts any possibility of a unified or “authentic” representation, maintaining the sign in a state of exposure and negotiation.

The exhibition was further supported by a set of curatorial choices that reinforced this dynamic. A large-scale photographic image of the Vele by photographer Mario Spada—known for his stark black-and-white documentation of Scampia—provided a strong visual anchor, while a short fashion film offered contextual insight into the project’s development.

These elements did not function as explanatory devices in a didactic sense; rather, they contributed to staging a layered visual environment in which different narratives and visual regimes coexisted without being fully reconciled (Fig. 03).

Importantly, the exhibition phase generated a new form of material output: the annotated prototype, carrying traces of audience interaction. This object operates as a record of reception and reinterpretation, demonstrating how fashion artefacts can function not only as carriers of meaning but as platforms for its ongoing production. In this sense, the exhibition does not conclude the project but extends its analytical field, allowing the study to capture how agency and signification unfold across different contexts and audiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has argued that when fashion mobilises situated signs, what matters is not only what they “say”, but how they endure circulation.

Political charge may intensify, yet it can also become unmoored and re-semantised within external regimes of value. Under these conditions, design practice is not an ethical supplement to form, but what provides material consistency to meaning-making, shifting counter-narrative from image to enabling arrangement.

The case of *A Sewing Machine of One’s Own* shows that critical efficacy is not secured by the “purity” of a message, nor by promises of a linear or salvific outcome. Rather, it depends on the construction of durable supports—time, skills, relations, and access to resources—that make making practicable and allow everyday renegotiations of roles and expectations. In this sense, the designer does more than facilitate existing dynamics: they may act as a catalyst by activating conditions, enabling



Fig. 03

transitions, and opening trajectories (Manzini, 2014). From this perspective, the “activist” dimension does not coincide with slogan production or with the aesthetic display of marginality.

It resides in a project’s capacity to generate operative counter-narratives—practices that simultaneously affect social, institutional, and economic planes (Fuad-Luke, 2009).

Accordingly, design is not limited to problem-solving, but involves problem re-framing and the creation of new possibilities, up to producing responses that effectively “change the questions” by shifting the criteria through which value, labour, autonomy, and fashion are assessed (Mazzarella *et al.*, 2019). At the same time, treating transformation as a situated practice requires acknowledging that every intervention introduces new vulnerabilities. What the project makes visible is not a resolved outcome, but a contested space in which agency and incorporation remain in tension. In this sense, “denunciation” is not an additional layer applied to form; it is a practice that

reorganises what can be done, said, and sustained over time. Ultimately, the paper suggests that fashion assumes a critical role not when it claims to represent a context “correctly”, but when it intervenes in the conditions that make a sign and a practice socially operative: who speaks, with which tools, through which relations, and with what continuity.

From this standpoint, fashion is not merely a vehicle for images; it can function as a device that holds together semiotic contestation and material infrastructures of possibility.

The open question this research advances is therefore not what fashion says about the social, but how fashion design can produce forms of agency without reducing difference to a consumable surface.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Workshop space at *Fatto a Scampia* during the co-design phase of *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*. The image documents the atelier as a situated environment of learning, production, and relational exchange, where tailoring functions as a shared practice rather than as individual authorship.

[Fig. 02] Detail of the sign "167" integrated into a garment developed within *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*. The element appears as a relational trace emerging from the co-design process, retaining ambiguity and remaining open to multiple interpretations rather than functioning as a fixed identity marker. Courtesy of Fashion Clash Festival 2025.

[Fig. 03] Installation view of *A Sewing Machine of One's Own* presented at the Fashion Clash Festival 2025. The exhibition foregrounds the project as a situated practice, translating its process-based approach into a spatial arrangement that emphasises making, material presence, and continuity rather than narrative representation. Courtesy of Fashion Clash Festival.

[Fig. 04] Final outfit from *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*, worn and contextualised. The image foregrounds the garment as the visible trace of a longer process involving co-design, material choices, and shared labour, rather than as an isolated aesthetic outcome.

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