

QUIET RESISTANCE

THE FASHION TOILE AS MATERIAL LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper argues that the fashion toile, usually treated as a temporary prototype and discarded once its function has been fulfilled, can be reconsidered as a material and semiotic artefact with the capacity to generate new forms of fashion meaning. Grounded in *The Draft Archive* (thedraftarchive.com), an ongoing practice-led project collecting discarded toiles from fashion studios, the research explores how unfinished garments may be reassembled, worn and photographed to produce an alternative sartorial and visual language. Drawing on material culture theory, phenomenology and semiotics, the article proposes that the toile occupies a productive position at the edge of fashion's dominant system of meaning. Its unfinished state and neutrality resist the fixed identities, polished surfaces and rapid cycles of consumption that structure contemporary fashion. Through experimental styling and image making, the toile becomes a site through which value, desire and self-representation may be renegotiated. The paper ultimately suggests that the unfinished offers not only an alternative aesthetic, but also a different model for sustainability, one grounded in reinterpretation, continued use and altered practices of meaning-making.

Keywords: *Fashion toile; Material language; Semiotics; Sustainability; Resistance.*

INTRODUCTION -THE FASHION TOILE

If Fashion has been personified as the younger sister of Death, a daughter of Caducity (Fashion Highlight Journal, 2025), perhaps the fashion toile is Fashion's quiet and overlooked sibling, suspended between creation and disappearance yet embodying the possibility of meaning without a fixed reading. Typically understood as a garment-prototype, the toile is rarely afforded lasting aesthetic, cultural or semiotic value. Once its purpose has been fulfilled, it is discarded, its status shifting from design necessity to landfill waste. Yet, in this necessary act of dismissal lies an opportunity for rethinking. What is rendered surplus within one system of meaning may acquire

prime significance within another.

As the fashion industry is increasingly required to confront the environmental and cultural impact of overproduction, the toile matters because of its ubiquitous nature as garment waste and because it is uniquely positioned to reveal alternative ways of assigning meaning and value.

This paper asks whether the fashion toile might be reconsidered as a material and semiotic artefact that establishes a new language rooted in the unfinished, while exposing the limits of fashion's dominant structural frameworks (Miller, 2015; Lotman, 2000). The question is whether the toile can introduce another mode of fashion communication, one in which meaning is provisional rather than predetermined.

This article is based on a practice-led investigation grounded in *The Draft Archive*, an ongoing project that collects discarded fashion toiles from fashion studios to reposition them as sites of material inquiry.

The research essentially asks three questions:

1. How might the toile operate as a material language in its own right, generating a new clothing grammar rather than just serving as an intermediate stage within the design process?
2. What emerges when unfinished garments are reassembled, worn and photographed, particularly within the conventions of fashion image-making?
3. How might this approach challenge dominant assumptions around value, legibility and sustainability in fashion?

As a visual and material framework, *The Draft Archive* explores toiles through experimental assemblages, where unfinished or partial garments are reassigned, producing shapes and silhouettes that resist quick legibility, with styling and photography staging new relationships between material fragments, bodies and meanings. As a mode of expression that favours reconstruction, experimentation and the unfinished, the approach foregrounds the object (toile) before the subject (body).

The project opens a space for an alternative approach to personal styling. It also expands the question of function i.e. how a garment or a piece of fabric can be worn, whilst disrupting established social and sartorial conventions through which style is normally made readable. The aim is to introduce a fashion language where materiality, imperfection and the rudimentary are sites of agency (Smelik, 2018) and value.

FASHION AND AESTHETICS OF PERFECTION

Fashion can be defined as a socially shared form of physical presentation that relies on a set of styles and conventions recognised within society or particular cultural groups (d'Errico & Rigaud, 2025). While it allows some variation for individual expression, fashion typically communicates through stable codes.

A runway look, a campaign photograph present clothing as finished statements.

Whether articulated through luxury, experimentation or deconstruction, garments are expected to appear complete, bodies rendered legible and images stabilised into coherent

depictions. This notion of perfection is not just aesthetic but cultural, structuring how fashion communicates value, identity and desirability. In semiotic terms, fashion achieves authority through the smoothness of its own self-description, a closed system in which garment, image and text mutually reinforce legibility and coherence. Fashion produces meaning through norms whose stability depends on a controlled relationship between signifier and signified (Barthes, 2010b) e.g., where a suit signals gravitas and power, a dress, femininity, and so forth.

Yet, the proposition of an assemblage of toiles as an alternative way of dressing stands to unsettle this syntax. Unlike other wasteful fashion by-products, the fashion toile is key because it already contains the grammar of dress (seams, stitches, buttons, cuffs, etc) and marks of how it has been adjusted to fit the body.

This actively shapes how the body may wear, negotiate and interpret this draft garment. Rather than treating the toile as a silent intermediary in the design process, this research approaches it as a material language.

Language here is understood not only as a system of signs but as the interaction between shared conventions, sensorial experience, affective response and the agency of materials themselves (Smelik, 2018).

The practice-led method works through sourcing and combining toiles into modular sets.

The toiles are collected as prototypes that students no longer need, which would otherwise be discarded, either given to me by fashion technicians throughout the academic year or gathered from studio clear-outs during the summer break.

The styled assemblage aims to generate a new sartorial language, where fragments are reassigned and combined in ways that disrupt their expected function and meaning.

Meaning is no longer secured through established garment categories but created through reconfiguration, ambiguity and imagination.

Photography then produces a second visual syntax, a new way of seeing and interpreting the emerging styling language, where the image determines how those new relationships are framed, read and circulated. With the photographic process, my aim is to move away from established conventions of fashion image-making, instead beginning from an emotive position and leaning into my own sensibility as an image maker by paying attention

to moments of visual harmony and dissonance as they emerge between the toiles and the body.

THE TOILE AS LANGUAGE OF THE UNFINISHED

Alongside a practice-led and object-based methodology, the project adopts an embodied research method with a sensory ethnographic dimension, drawing on my practice as a fashion photographer. This informs the research as a situated and embodied enquiry into why these unfinished forms hold greater imaginative and affective potential than the finished garment. I am intrigued by the idea that toiles are never meant to circulate beyond their purpose and I am curious as to what kinds of material and visual meaning might emerge if they were to re-enter fashion's cultural space.

For me, the unbleached calico often appears more visually compelling than the completed garment as it allows structure, possibility and uncertainty to remain visible and speak without distraction.

This curiosity lies in its singular beauty. Unlike other forms of studio waste, the toile preserves the garment's underlying logic of seams, proportion and fit while withholding its intended commodified form. My appreciation of the toile is reminiscent of Aristotle's understanding of beauty as emerging through order, symmetry and the appropriate arrangement of parts (*In Our Time*, 2005).

Yet its irresistible pull is not just located within the object itself. Its beauty also emerges through my response as the beholder (*In Our Time*, 2005).

My fascination with toiles comes precisely from this encounter - stripped of colour, branding and retail intent, the toile offers a blank yet materially charged surface onto which individual taste, memory and imagination may be projected.

This perhaps also explains why the toile feels relevant within a wider cultural moment in which luxury fashion is stagnating while vintage and resale continue to grow (Marshall, 2026; Shoaib, 2025). As contemporary consumers become increasingly drawn to archive pieces, one-off garments and objects with visible histories, value appears to be shifting away from novelty and towards singularity, provenance and affective attachment. The toile radicalises this idea.

It is not old or second-hand but a unique object that never fully entered the fashion system in the first place (Brown, 2001).

In its inherent refusal to be final, the toile also

reveals the assumptions through which fashion usually produces meaning. And rather than treating the toile as a silent intermediary, this research approaches it as a rich semiotic object.

Material culture theory also offers a crucial framework here.

As Miller (2015), Gell (1998) and Woodward (2014) suggest, objects participate actively in the production of meaning, shaping behaviour and embodied experience rather than simply reflecting them. From these perspectives, the toile is far from being silent.

The toile communicates through unrefined shapes and layered alterations i.e. iterative traces of labour, intention, correction and re-working.

In this respect, the toile offers a material vocabulary that sits in complete contradiction of fashion's preference for aesthetically sanitised surfaces and coded silhouettes. So, if objects participate in the production of meaning, then the toile's material properties, fragility and imperfections can also speak through embodied interactions.

The toile's transient visibility within the fashion system exposes how fashion actively protects its language of perfection.

The research understands meaning production as emerging through embodied, sensory and material interaction. As an unfinished artefact, the toile's meaning does not solely reside in its visual appearance. The methodology privileges the observation of material qualities (Fig. 01), sensory feedback and interpretive speculation in a final attempt to disrupt and subvert the toile's relationship to the fashion system.

Discarded toiles are handled, worn and reconfigured around the body in improvised arrangements that attempt to deliberately resist resolution. Meaning is understood to arise not through detached visual study but through sensory engagement, bodily negotiation and a refusal to follow the conventional codes of dressing.

This echoes Martin Margiela's and Rei Kawakubo's *modus operandi*, both of whom have used incompleteness, displacement and silhouette disruption to unsettle conventional dress.

Margiela (2014) frequently exposed linings, seams and the hidden architecture of garments, allowing process and construction to remain visible rather than concealed.

Similarly, as introduced by Granata (MoMA, 2017-2018), Kawakubo's Spring/Summer 1997 collection, often referred to as *Lumps and Bumps*,



Fig. 01

disrupted the expected silhouette with padded distortions, producing bodies that appeared unresolved, excessive and outside normative ideals of beauty and fit.

Underpinning this approach, is phenomenology. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty (2023), dress is understood as an extension of bodily perception. When worn, the unfinished toile does not simply represent or confirm an identity, it produces a situation in which the body must adapt, adjust and respond. Sleeves may become wraps, collars unexpected accessories, fragments are reoriented entirely. This is when conventional garment typologies are discarded in favour of ambiguity as an active condition (Fig. 02). The distinctions that fashion grammar relies on such as top and bottom, skirt and trousers, masculine and feminine, are set aside (Fig. 03). Through wearing, the body encounters resistance, dissonance and constraint. Meaning is tested rather than assumed and remains provisional, negotiated through movement and sensation rather than fixed form.

This somatic negotiation aligns with phenomenological approaches that understand knowledge as situated, embodied and relational. Within this framework, photography functions as a tool mitigating my attempts not to fix the assemblage of toile into coherence, instead

attending to serendipitous moments where shape, fold (Deleuze, 1993, as cited in Smelik, 2018), body and material become materially charged and visually exciting through the viewfinder. Images are not intended to resolve toiles into typical recognisable garments or looks but aim to register a process of transformation and how the body may adapt to bring the material to life. In this way, image making becomes an extension of the practice itself. The refusal to fix the visual feedback into familiar tropes operates as a guiding principle. To resolve the toile would be to preclude the very condition under investigation. Incompletion is sustained to keep meaning open.

THE TOILE AT THE EDGE OF FASHION'S SEMIOSPHERE

The experiments staged through *The Draft Archive* project do not just aim to generate alternative looks and images. They also strive to expose the limits of the fashion system's existing language. When garments no longer align with stable categories or recognisable identities, meaning becomes less fixed and more contingent. Leaning into the tension between fashion's demand for resolved products and the toile's refusal of closure reveals its semiotic condition. Unlike finished garments, which operate



Fig. 03



Fig. 02

as resolved signs within fashion's language system, the toile functions as an open sign structure. It does not point toward a singular interpretation but holds multiple meanings simultaneously and may continually be reconfigured.

In Lotman's terms (2000), the toile occupies the periphery of the fashion semiosphere, a space where dominant norms are contradicted and where new languages can emerge.

The periphery is deeply generative. It is where translation, friction and change occur.

Akin to Bhabha's *third space* (2012), it is a liminal zone where different meanings meet and interact, resulting in novel and unexpected modes of personal and visual expression thus generating new fashion meanings and identities.

The toile's failure to conform to fashion's expectations of legibility becomes precisely what makes it semiotically productive and seductive. It also exposes the way fashion's dominant language depends on exclusions. If a system requires certain objects to remain invisible in order to preserve the appearance of perfection, then the boundary between what counts as fashion and what counts as waste is not natural, it is constructed.

The toile's return into circulation therefore has the potential to destabilise that threshold, revealing how value and visibility are actively produced

rather than a given (Lotman, 2000).

If permitted to circulate without being forced into perfection, the toile can potentially re-enter the fashion production system on its own terms. By remaining wearable, adaptable and open to intervention, it no longer needs to be discarded at the end of the design process.

Instead, it can persist as an artefact that resists seasonal cycles, trends and the logic of replication through mass production.

In doing so, it signals a different relationship between fashion and sustainability, one that is not solely grounded in efficiency or optimisation but is a rethink of what is allowed to count as fashion.

FIXATION OF MEANING, FASHION IMAGERY AND ALGORITHMS

The negotiation of what is accepted or not within fashion and more broadly within society is inherently connected to the notion of culture, understood as a set of socially shared beliefs, values, ideas, norms and assumptions that we internalised as individuals and which shape how we perceive and make sense of the world around us (Williams, 2013). In the context of fashion, these beliefs and ideas also come to shape how garments, bodies and appearances are interpreted.

In that sense, fashion garments do not arrive with stable meanings attached to them, their meanings become naturalised through repetition, socialisation and cultural reinforcement.

Norbert Elias's distinction between social and individual habitus is useful here.

Social habitus refers to the historically formed norms, values and behaviours shared within a society, while individual habitus describes the ways these collective expectations become internalised and come to shape how people perceive themselves and others (Elias, 2000).

Similarly, Bourdieu argues that taste (which also includes our understanding of visual aesthetics) is never simply personal but socially produced (Bourdieu, 2010; Bourdieu, 1993).

What appears to be an individual choice is shaped by class, education and repeated exposure to particular forms of dress and value.

Fashion therefore becomes readable because we learn, often unconsciously, which combinations, silhouettes and garments are considered appropriate, attractive or desirable and how and where these can be performed.

If the toile stands to disrupt fashion's dominant language, then fashion image-making is one of the other mechanisms through which that language can become fixed and circulated.

Positioning fashion image making as a critical framework through which the values and hierarchies of the fashion system are commonly produced and stabilised, is key.

While the toile resists resolution at the level of material form, it also creates space for disrupting the visual conventions through which fashion is typically rendered legible and desirable to become transactional.

Fashion imagery provides one of the most powerful sites of cultural closure within fashion.

Through editorial spread, campaigns and fashion media platforms, garments are routinely presented as resolved products and images, bodies stabilised into recognisable poses and meanings created for circulation and consumption.

Even when styled as experimental or critical, fashion images often perpetuate the same logics of coherence, polish and desirability associated with commercial fashion communication.

The image operates as a mechanism of completion, fixing garments into legible signs and restricting alternative readings.

The normative effects of fashion imagery are

further amplified by algorithmic echo chambers that privilege images that are immediately recognisable and easily categorised and consumed. The result is a visual ecosystem that drives and rewards predictability. Aesthetic difference is frequently simulated at surface level rather than through meaningful systemic change.

In contrast, unresolved approaches to image making seem more difficult to disseminate.

So in this context, the image becomes optimised for visibility rather than reflection.

The mainstream fashion image therefore functions as a regulating mechanism. By repeatedly presenting garments as fixed objects worn by disciplined bodies (Foucault, 2020), images reinforce normative ideas of how fashion should look, fit and function. Bodies are positioned as surfaces upon which meaning is displayed rather than sites of negotiation.

This, in turn, reinforces patterns of consumption that favour instant assimilation.

When unfinished garments enter this visual space, they inherently disrupt its conventions.

Their provisional state resists photographic coherence and exposes a visible refusal of visual balance that fashion imagery typically demands.

Image making shifts from representation towards interaction. The camera no longer resolves the garment into a finished look but registers moments of friction, hesitation and transformation.

Images may record gesture, material resistance and physical dissonance rather than an idealised form.

This affective trigger echoes Barthes' notion of *punctum* (2010a), where familiar but unexpected meaning emerges through observation and interruption rather than recognition.

By privileging bodily dissonance over visual legibility, image making offers scope to reposition the body as an active participant in meaning production rather than a passive display surface.

The body negotiates the garment rather than performing it. In this context, the toile becomes a means of rethinking how fashion images might operate beyond promotion, spectacle and finality, opening image making itself as a field of resistance, value negotiation and critical practice.

The fixation of meaning through culture, fashion imagery and algorithmic repetition does more than stabilise how garments are seen.

It also shapes how they are desired, worn and consumed. When particular looks are repeatedly presented as desirable, coherent and socially

intelligible, they begin to structure the terms through which we understand both ourselves and fashion. In resisting algorithmic optimisation and legibility, images of assembled toiles as fashion garments propose an alternative fashion visual language, one that invites lingering, interpretation and sustains a different relationship between viewer and garment.

Rather than resolving the object into commodity, the images aim to keep meaning open.

To date, the research has informed three test shoots, each revealing how visual reflexes of styling, framing and gesture remain deeply ingrained in ways of working and seeing, even when deliberately resisted. The effort to translate the inherent ambiguity of toile into image-making practice remains ongoing, with each shoot functioning less as a resolution than as the next step in exploring how the toile's visual language might continue to develop beyond the conventions of fashion imagery and visual perfection.

SEMIOTICS, DESIRE AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Reconsidered as a coded object, the toile opens alternative possibilities for fashion practice and value, operating as a counter-narrative to dominant systems of production and replication (Mazzarella, Storey, & Williams, 2019).

Its uncurated legibility affords forms of agency in wearing and consumption that resist trend following and prescribed meanings (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

The fashion system actively structures how clothes and accessories are desired, chosen and consumed. Within dominant fashion discourse, legibility functions as a form of reassurance.

Recognisable silhouettes, trends and stylistic cues reduce uncertainty for the consumer by signalling how a garment should be read and what it communicates socially.

In this sense, fashion semiotics operates as a behavioural system, guiding consumption by narrowing the range of acceptable meanings and appearances. Engaging with fashion as consumers is therefore rarely neutral but shaped by frameworks that define what is desirable, appropriate and valuable (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Fashion's obsession with perfection and visual coherence stimulates forms of consumption oriented towards instant recognition and low interpretive risk.

Meaning is delivered in advance, allowing consumers to identify, acquire and discard with minimal interpretive reflection. Desire becomes predictable, guided by repetition rather than exploration. Garments that are easily legible circulate more readily, while those that resist categorisation are often deemed too risky or reserved for moments of sensational spectacle within fashion's marketing toolkit (e.g., the fashion runway, The Met Gala). Within our neoliberal capitalist system, ambiguity is side-lined and often becomes reserved for the elite or *avant-garde* forms of dress. This also implies that full freedom of expression may only be achievable up to a point and that unbridled self-expression is commonly associated with affluence and risk-taking. Fashion houses such as Maison Martin Margiela or Comme des Garçons, have used ambiguity as a defining aesthetic strategy, enabling their brand to become culturally valuable precisely because it is unpredictable, rare, expensive and supported by economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 2010; Bourdieu, 1993). In contrast, the toile offers a thrilling counter-proposal in which uncertainty and expanded self-expression emerge through adaptation, reuse and reinterpretation rather than affluence. Any exclusivity derives from the singular, one-off nature of the objects rather than from luxury or status. Instead of reinforcing this dynamic, the fashion toile disrupts it by refusing immediate readability. As an unfinished object, it does not offer symbolic closure or stylistic instruction in advance. Meaning is generated through reflection, wearing, adjustment and adaptation rather than instant visual recognition. This interruption slows consumption and enables a counter-discursive mode of engagement in which value is produced through ongoing interaction rather than completion.

Across the collected toiles (Fig. 04) and within my own practice of photographing them and at times wearing them, I have observed that the toile offers a different engagement with desire. The excitement of being given or discovering a new piece or fragment, albeit an unwanted and imperfect version of a final garment that nonetheless exists as a singular object, often produces a stronger affective connection than the finished product itself.

The toile's neutrality invites tactile and imaginative engagement, suggesting possibilities for stitching, cinching, painting (cf. Margiela's Bianchetto)



Fig. 04

or reconfiguration. In this sense, the toile operates less through aspirational desire cultivated by fashion advertising.

Again, an affective pull that resonates with Roland Barthes' *punctum* (2010a) and highlights the object's ability to elicit or tap into one's affect.

The toile also presents a different kind of relationship to dress. As an open form, it affords the wearer the option to choose whether to make a statement or not.

The toile's understated appearance creates a space for self-representation that is not prescribed by trends or conformism. The toile may be worn quietly or loudly, it may be materially reworked. It can be assembled through iterative adaptation rather than stylistic coherence, allowing self-determined customisation.

As a site of resistance, the toile enables forms of self-expression grounded in what Tanver Ahmed (2025), inspired by the teaching of bell hooks, describes as '*wearing for love*', a way of dressing that is embodied and politically reclaiming, prioritising the self over social approval and dominant visual noise.

The ambiguity of the toile also challenges the link between desire and replacement.

Because it does not exhaust its meaning at the point of acquisition, value is produced through continued

engagement. Wearing becomes a process rather than an endpoint. In an industry driven by rapid turnover, such a shift suggests that sustainability might arise as a semiotic consequence rather than an operational fix.

Mazzarella, Storey & Williams (2019) describe counter-narratives towards sustainability that operate by shifting discourse and practice rather than just improving efficiency.

From this perspective, the toile's re-evaluation functions as a means of reconfiguring how fashion assigns meaning, use and worth.

THE TOILE, VALUE, SCARCITY AND ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES

If the toile potentially alters how fashion is desired and consumed, it also raises a further question of how value might be produced and circulated differently within the fashion system.

Reconsidered as an artefact designed to move, be encountered and produce meaning, the toile opens alternative possibilities for fashion value and exchange. Inherently non-replicable, each toile carries material singularity.

Unlike finished garments designed for scale and repetition, by definition, the toile resists replication.

Its unique attributes introduce a different logic of rarity, one that is not driven by manufactured scarcity but by material contingency and process. In this context, value is not derived from brand recognition or trend alignment, but from unique properties: modularity and embodied experience.

For fashion design students and emerging practitioners, particularly those whom I collect toiles from, this provocation offers an alternative pathway into independent fashion practice.

As young designers leave education to transition into industry, could a model that enables practitioners to work with existing artefacts instead of completing collections at speed, allow for the process itself to become a site of value?

The toile could circulate as a wearable object, a collectible artefact or a collaborative platform for ongoing modification.

This approach could enable slower transitions into the industry, in which experimentation and unfinished objects are legitimised as viable modes of work and monetisation rather than limitations to be overcome.

Such a model would also challenge a prevailing system that privileges the new, replication and seasonal turnover and contributes to cycles of

overproduction and waste.

It also raises ethical questions that extend beyond representation. If fashion assigns value through perfection and visual resolution, then the exclusion of the unfinished is not neutral but structural.

The relegation of toiles to waste can be perceived as an institutional decision about what is permitted to signify. Repositioning the toile as communicative therefore challenges notions of visibility, labour and value. What fashion chooses to circulate determines not only what is worn but what is discarded or erased.

By contrast, the toile's open-ended canvas, offers extended lifespans through reinterpretation and reworking. A toile may be reconfigured repeatedly, with meaning accruing through the trace of decisions and material interventions.

The object then becomes a living wearable record of process rather than a finished commodity.

This record is also pedagogical. Within fashion design education, toiles typically exist as transitional objects, made to be left behind.

Their rapid disposal mirrors the pressure to produce, progress and perfect. Treating the toile as an ongoing artefact interrupts this model. It signals that the unfinished can be valuable, that uncertainty can be productive and that a slower relationship to making may be ethically and creatively productive.

The toile further complicates consumption i.e. if a garment is intentionally unfinished, then the wearer is invited to either participate in completion or refuse it altogether. This creates space for agency, and the option to remain ambiguous. In a culture saturated with prescriptive looks and policed bodies, the toile offers a semi-blank surface that leaves room for individuality and self-representation without prescribed conformity.

THE TOILE, MEANING AND FASHION FUTURES

The unfinished nature of the toile does more than challenge what fashion preserves or displays. By resisting closure, the toile remains open to reinterpretation, allowing meaning to emerge through repeated acts of handling, wearing, styling and reconfiguration. Rather than functioning as a language in the strict semiotic sense, the toile offers a provisional visual and material vocabulary through which alternative possibilities can then be imagined.

Drawing on Yuri Lotman's understanding

of cultural systems as open and capable of transformation, this section considers how the toile's unfinished state and openness to meaning might generate new approaches to fashion, sustainability and value.

From this idea of openness to change, we can then examine how this relates to sustainability.

Lotman (2000) suggests that cultural systems depend upon a degree of unpredictability and internal difference. When systems become excessively rule-bound and meaning becomes fixed, they may remain efficient but become rigid and lose the openness necessary for change. Fashion increasingly appears caught within this dynamic. Debates around sustainability, ethics and responsibility circulate widely, yet they often remain embedded within the same visual and linguistic frameworks that sustain overproduction, repetition and short life cycles, or are only meaningfully embraced by a small minority. Even claims of innovation in sustainable practices frequently reproduce familiar forms of desirability and consumption.

In contrast, the toile matters precisely because it does not fit fashion's dominant systems of legibility. Excluded from the polished language of the finished garment, it retains uncertainty, incompleteness and openness. *The Draft Archive* therefore suggests that fashion futures need not resort to new slogans, branding strategies or increasingly curated claims of ethical consumption ("sustainable capsule collection", "responsible edit"), but might instead consider overlooked material already present within the design pipeline.

The fashion toile does invite reflection on how fashion futures might be imagined outside dominant models of progress, innovation and growth. Contemporary fashion discourse often associates innovation with acceleration, faster production cycles, rapid trend turnover and continuous visual stimulus, a point that resonates with Lars Svendsen's account of fashion's dependence on 'the new' and continual renewal (Svendsen, 2006).

Within this framework, change is understood primarily as replacement where the new is achieved by discarding what came before it.

The toile fundamentally unsettles this logic.

As an artefact that is designed to scaffold perfection, it proposes a model of fashion design that evolves through accumulation, revision and return rather than through replacement and which

is closer to process-based accounts of making (Ingold, 2013) than to fashion's usual rhetoric of resolved product.

This re-conceptualisation also speaks to broader debates around sustainability and responsibility in fashion. Much sustainability discourse remains focused on optimisation, better materials, improved efficiency and reduced waste within existing systems. While such measures are necessary (Fletcher & Grose, 2012), they leave the cultural logic that ties value to novelty and perfection, intact, along with the semiotic foundations of overproduction and overconsumption (Barthes, 2010b; Gaugele, 2014).

As long as garments are primarily valued for being new, they will continue to be replaced rather than reinterpreted. In this sense, the toile operates less like recycling and more like upcycling.

It does not simply extend the life of material but preserves and elevates its symbolic, aesthetic and functional value.

Instead, value may arise from longevity and a modular approach to dressing, as Kate Fletcher's advocacy for systems-level shifts in fashion culture beyond speed and throughput (Fletcher, 2014; Fletcher & Grose, 2012).

Sustainability here becomes a consequence of altered practices of meaning-making.

This also has implications for how fashion knowledge is produced and shared.

Rather than treating garments as final statements, the toile reframes fashion as an ongoing conversation between body, material and context. Meaning is provisional and contingent, shaped through use and reinterpretation rather than fixed at the point of design.

This understanding challenges linear models of authorship and expertise, opening space for collaborative and distributed forms of fashion practice (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1977).

The Draft Archive functions not only as a collection of artefacts but as a collaborative platform of dissemination (and by extension organic promotion) through which unfinished garments may be reinterpreted across creative disciplines.

A writer may translate assemblage into a fragmented narrative structure, a musician into repetition or looping, an image maker into visual reconstruction and reconfiguration.

This cross-disciplinary translation also aligns with new materialist accounts of agency emerging through assemblages rather than residing solely

in an authorial subject (Smelik, 2018).

Seen in this way, *The Draft Archive* also resembles emerging collaborative models of circular fashion in which value is generated collectively between education, material reuse and new forms of dissemination rather than through conventional production alone (Liberti & Chierchia, 2026).

While the toiles are recovered from materials otherwise destined for the landfill, their re-contextualisation is grounded in transparency, consent and respect for the designers who choose to release them knowingly or unknowingly.

By virtue of their very nature, the artefacts remain largely anonymous yet they are approached as traces of labour of love and creative intention that hold significant cultural and material value. Long before contemporary fashion began demanding traceability through digital product passports, the toile already carried its own visible record of revision, labour and transformation through markings, seams, annotations and repeated alteration.

In curatorial terms, the toile retains use value beyond its immediate life cycle.

When situated within an archive or exhibition context, it may be understood as a record of lived experience, individuality, pragmatism and creativity, a temporal marker and a testament to forms of sustainable practice that are realistic and educationally, economically, politically and socially impactful.

The toile thus expands the scope of what can be curated, shifting attention from finished objects toward the conditions and processes through which fashion knowledge is produced.

The educational ramifications of this shift are equally significant. Fashion education may reinforce dominant industry values by prioritising finished outcomes, professional finish and market readiness. Students may be trained to move quickly from prototype to product, with little room to dwell in the unknown or that liminal zone where experimentation and meaning-making occur. Repositioning the toile as an artefact worthy of attention disrupts this approach.

It legitimises experimentation, failure and the unfinished as integral to fashion thinking and making, aligning with critical pedagogies that resist outcome-only training in favour of reflective, inquiry-led practice (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994).

For emerging practitioners, this can foster alternative career trajectories that do not have

to depend on immediate assimilation into high-speed production cycles.

Culturally, the toile also complicates the relationship between fashion and identity. Finished garments frequently function as markers of gender, affiliation, status and belonging. Their meanings are socially agreed upon and readily recognised (Entwistle, 2000).

The toile, by contrast, resists such consolidation. Its ambiguity allows wearers to inhabit identities that are fluid, tentative or deliberately unresolved, reminiscent of Judith Butler's theories of identity as performative rather than fixed (Butler, 1990). In a cultural climate that often demands clarity and coherence, this refusal can itself be understood as a form of quiet resistance and an expression of self beyond prescribed heteronormative norms.

CONCLUSION – THE UNFINISHED AS METHOD, POSITION AND DISSEMINATION

Before concluding, it is worth briefly returning to the notion of the unfinished not only as a property of the toile, but as a methodological and political position.

Within contemporary fashion systems, the unfinished is typically framed as a deficit or a stage to be passed through, corrected or resolved. In contrast, this research treats the unfinished as an active condition that resists premature finality. By holding garments, images and meanings in suspension, the unfinished creates space for reflection, negotiation and care.

It slows the pace of fashion practice and disrupts the expectation that value must be immediately legible. Rather than treating incompleteness as a flaw to be overcome, the unfinished allows uncertainty and unresolved quality to remain active.

It operates as a form of quiet resistance, not through overt opposition, but through refusal to conform to dominant trend-driven aesthetic demands. As both method and position, the unfinished challenges conventional hierarchies of expertise. Rather than presenting garments, images or interpretations as final statements, it promotes uncertainty as a productive stage. Knowledge emerges through practice, encounter and revision rather than through definitive outcomes.

This reframing aligns with the logic of the toile itself, in which meaning is continually deferred and reworked through material

engagement. To work with the unfinished is not to abandon rigour, but to redefine it.

Rigour resides not in closure, but in sustained attention to process, to relational experience and to the conditions under which meaning is fixed or subverted. In this way, the unfinished becomes both an analytical tool and an ethical stance, one that values slowness, care and responsiveness within fashion practice and research.

This position underpins the ongoing development of *The Draft Archive*, which serves not only as a repository of objects but as a dissemination platform for an emerging language.

Like the toile itself, the project extends this refusal of finality through publication bringing together multiple perspectives across diverse media.

It proposes a collaborative model of sustainability, where value is generated through reinterpretation, circulation and shared authorship rather than through the production of new commodities. Text, image, digital and material documentation operate alongside one another to foreground process, contradiction and reworking.

In mirroring the iterative logic of working with a toile, *The Draft Archive* acknowledges that fashion knowledge is also produced through repetition, failure and return, which hold their own beauty rather than through perfected outcomes.

At a moment when fashion is increasingly called upon to address its social and environmental responsibilities, this project suggests that learning to mean differently may be as significant as learning to produce differently.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] The Draft Archive 1: Test Shoot # 1; Credits Michelle Marshall.

[Fig. 02] The Draft Archive 2: Test Shoot #1; Credits Michelle Marshall.

[Fig. 03] The Draft Archive 3: Test Shoot #1; Credits Michelle Marshall.

[Fig. 04] The Draft Archive 4: Test Shoot #2 - Toile Selection; Credits Michelle Marshall.

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