

MAKING AS USING: DESIGN RESEARCH THAT DECIPHERS VALUE

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ABSTRACT

The cultivation of sustainable fashion praxis is challenging when design activity is implemented through the making of objects. Whilst scrutinising the use value of objects yields solutions, framing making as design research positions this process as research enquiry, with inherent usefulness in its own right. Sited within an emergent fashion practice that integrates professional skills with everyday and domestic customs, transformation is explored, via the method of gleaning, to reframe waste as remnants. This affords comprehension of the embedded life within objects and materials as they move into and out of my hands, post and prior to making. I propose that making is useful as a method for discovery; to nurture deep thinking regarding the use of made objects, to conceive of divergent systems for fashion creation and dissemination, and to critique the originating design practice.

INTRODUCTION

The development of strategies for sustainability, through design, is an exigent concern within practice-led research. One of the key theorists within this sphere, Tony Fry (2009), advocates redirective practice as the principal initiative to incite crucially needed change through design action. Redirection demands systemic change, constructed around the recognition that design has ontological implications. Decision-making must be driven by "...the imperative of taking responsibility for what will be brought into being by 'the designed designing'..." (Fry 2009, p. 34).

The redirection of my existing fashion design practice is being formed through project based, doctoral research activities. The grounding for this practice is my past employment as a designer for a small fetish-wear business, where I designed and hand-made leather garments and accessories, mostly within the realm of underwear, corsetry and biker apparel. Around the time of the inception of the research, I had set up a home based studio in a converted garage, and dispensed with any intention to continue as a fetish-wear designer; however, my embedded skills and approaches procured through this former mode, provide arable ground from which to cultivate a differently framed practice. One proposed step towards redirection recognises that there is potential in existing states. As described by Fry: "the rematerialization of the culture by making new forms, knowledge and values from the old that...recreate a sustaining social ecology as a foundation of change" (Fry 2009, p. 102). This has been a befitting strategy for shifting the emphasis of my practice, generating a core principle to drive activity - the gleaning of remnants. My working definition of gleaning: *the gathering of the leftovers of production or society, commonly rejected due to non-conformity to mainstream standards*, is expanded to include the gleaning of knowledge and skills, as well as the physical gleaning of materials. Remnants are conceived as redefined waste; it is through gleaning that remnants become useful.

Fry's theories can be limiting for practice based designers and researchers, due to their intrinsic abstraction, therefore seeming incongruous with the quotidian pragmatics of design. Within the fashion design discipline, the movement towards design thinking and systemic change, beyond the LCA (life cycle analysis) of materials used, as approaches towards sustainability, is clearly supported by the recent publication, *Fashion & Sustainability: Design for Change* (Fletcher & Grose 2012). Concepts particularly compatible with my approach towards redirection are:

- Taking a localised approach that "emerges through the skills and resources of a particular region" (ibid., p. 110)
- "Designing business and manufacturing systems to mimic nature" (ibid., p. 118)
- The movement away from "business models based on material consumption" (ibid., p. 137)

- “Restoring the relationship between fashion and social and ecological systems that support it” (ibid., p. 143)
- The expansion of the designer’s role “to support consumers in interrogating the underpinning structures that shape our society” (ibid., p. 157)

Given these goals for the research, it seems discordant that my practice is characterised by making. My knowing is of the type that “is *in* the doing of the designer” (Downton 2003, p. 96). This is knowledge-how, “practical knowledge of ‘how to’ do something” (ibid., p. 62). The outcomes from my activities are objects and the research enquiry is through the making of these objects, prompting a dilemma that I have found personally very challenging. How can I justify the creation of more stuff? Is it possible to use the making of objects, as a method for thinking deeply about the use value of these objects? Can the making of more objects tell us about what we should make?

TO MAKE?

Fletcher & Grose (2012) recognise the difficulty that fashion practitioners face in grappling “with the conundrum of...dependency on business models based on material consumption” (ibid., p. 137). The fashion industry is one where success, and therefore value, is determined by economic growth (ibid., p. 136), simply put, the making and selling of more products. The dubiousness of creation motivated by consumption is echoed by Fry’s basic question to ask of oneself: “if what I am doing is actually useful or needed, and if so to whom and why?” (2009, p. 174). I have at times deemed the prospective and constructed objects emanating from my research activity unworthy of being made, and particularly, as fashion items, somewhat frivolous and superfluous. However, objects can have extraordinary potency, they evoke by “reaching out to us to form active partnerships” (Turkle 2007, p. 308). Those that are fashion relatable specifically shape us and our relationships to the society that we form: they “provide us with a visual language - through a series of signs and codes - that we use to communicate social status, identity, aspirations, and the way we feel about one another” (Fletcher & Grose 2012, p. 138), as well as a sense of belonging. An object’s scope of use therefore moves beyond the most basic utility and, particularly, the allurements afforded by fashion mechanisms can be realised as a positive device for change.

Willis offers assistance for thinking about value, through the concept “horizons of use” (Willis 2006, para. 12), providing insights as to an object’s ontological reach. For example, an object’s influence might be seen as a pervasion, as its reshaping of thoughts and associated behaviours pervades our life. This is comparable to an untended garden being present within you, calling for action, you sense yourself weeding, even when away on holiday (ibid., para. 31).

These insights reconcile object production with

redirective aims, but additionally, it has been through my own trust and persistence in making, even when unconvinced by what I was intending to create, that I have discovered value in the making process. At times, making served as a pragmatic use of gleaned remnants, at other times making has opened into a critique of parts of my practice, and more broadly the fashion discipline. Within the framework of higher degree research, making may simply be a tool of enquiry for design research, and within the tradition of knowledge creation, will proceed to fuel further enquiry.

WHAT TO MAKE?

A number of strategies have been explored to alleviate my concerns that the objects generated by my making, at times seem useless. I have trialled making items that have a specific use, which I personally need; making within a garment genre that has an inherent use value; and making using waste material, which through a process of gleaning is re-interpreted as remnants, and its potential revealed.

Designing for sustained usage demands conceptualisation of what might make an object pervasive (Willis 2006). Chapman (2005) suggests that “objects that evolve slowly over time build up layers of narrative by reflecting traces of the user’s invested care” (ibid., p. 134). Making objects that fulfil personal requirements can test design experiments against this criteria - does the object have the ability to carry my own narrative and convert action into invested care? Gleaning invests care through attentively finding value in remnants that are often scarce and unique, and naturally contain their own narrative. The careful process of gleaning bestows further narrative. It links the leftovers from production and consumption, making as use, and a resulting object imbued with what came before and what is yet to come; iterations that create a continuum of use and will extend towards future potentials.

WHERE TO MAKE?

Taking an approach of “I dig where I stand” (Fry 2009, p. 224), embraces personal “redirective opportunities” (ibid., p. 229), typified by potential that is amenable but untapped in ones immediate environment. With this aim, I have expanded the scope of my fashion practice, by integrating my existing practice of vegetable gardening, alongside everyday craft practices (such as knitting and crochet), emanating from the home setting. These additions are complementary in their inherent thriftiness, but offer a divergence that nurtures cross-pollination. This occurs through what Sennet (2009) describes as “domain shifts” (ibid., p. 127), as the tools for one task are applied to another, or through what Schön (1983) describes as “thinking from exemplars” (Kuhn, cited in Schön 1983, p. 183), where dissimilar is seen as similar as a driver of innovation.

Objects designed and made in this diversified place have narratives intensified through the richness of the

location. While acting as a physical site for design actions, the pervasiveness (Willis 2006) of this place affords imagining that both prefigures and forecasts, separate to the physicality of the object itself. Consequently, “where” describes a philosophical as well as a physical positioning.

HOW TO MAKE?

My making practice has much in common with craft. It emerges from skills reliant on tacit knowing, of which I can only prove my claim to through a demonstration of doing; an at oneness with material, described by Sennet as “focal awareness” (Polanyi, cited in Sennett 2009, p. 174); and “the desire to do a job well for its own sake” (Sennett 2009, p. 9). The material consciousness that all craftsmen possess (ibid., p. 119) is heightened by seeing virtue in the material (ibid., p. 135), a capability that is also essential for gleaning. Gleaning imparts an awareness of the time, life and associated living that supervenes upon the current presence of remnants, as well as a perception of the life that might project outwards from that point.

These approaches demand an obligatory slowness, distancing the practice from fashion systems that are categorised by fast production and consumption (Fletcher & Grose 2012, p. 124). This positions my design activities as serving “goals broader than commerce” (ibid., p. 155), and sees my making as an agent for “systemic innovation” (Macy & Brown, cited by Fletcher & Grose 2012, p. 174).

USE KNOWN

When a gleaner of bygone times in Varda’s *The Gleaners and I* (2003) re-enacts the gleaning from long ago, utility and efficiency are concurrently inherent in her actions and the garment she wears. Nothing is wasted within her movements and the frugal lines of the simply cut apron. The apron supports gleaning, but furthermore, embodies and holds this potentiality within its fabric, both literally, and figuratively. The apron is function made tangible.

I have used the garment genre of the apron as a precedent known to be useful. When imagining a



Figure 1: Some of the many aprons

garment that might be worn and used in the expanded space of the garden, an apron was the obvious choice. Subsequently, I have made many aprons using various gleaned materials and techniques, mostly based on a basic pinafore (1/2 apron) style. I have also used the apron as a starting point to develop other garments that feature elements of the apron, and are therefore permeated with apron like qualities.

This making of many aprons and apron relatable objects calls into question whether something that is inherently useful, loses its efficacy if repeated too often. Could lots of aprons, regardless of how useful they are, or how well crafted, be too much? Would one ultimate apron of the perfect function to meet a desired purpose be ideal? Berry is cited as saying: “You never know what is enough, unless you know what is more than enough” (cited in Fletcher & Grose 2012, p. 136). This experiment enquires, through making, as to what might be more than enough.

USE FORETOLD

My husband has an inclination to wear out jeans on the insides of the legs, rendering them useless and unworthy of repair, since the degraded and stressed area will not easily support mending or patching. The useless jeans are cycled through my practice, whereby they are gleaned and redefined as remnant. As elucidated by Chapman (2005, p. 116), denim jeans are a powerful carrier of narrative, and so are a potent material for further use through supplementary making. I had been intending to make a cover for our BBQ (barbecue) for sometime, for aesthetic purposes, since the BBQ is quite worn and ugly. This was an opportunity to make something that I personally needed, that I would use. The use value in this case, was a predicted use that was anticipated to result from making. This is a use that I could foretell, but with details I could not be sure of due to the process of design through making. The outcome was to be a BBQ cover, and I also envisioned the capacity for this to be worn by a person.

My approach was to maintain the integrity of the remnant jeans, by reconfiguring, but changing them as little as possible. I unpicked the inner leg and side



Figure 2: BBQ cover and apron, worn by BBQ and when barbequing

seams, and through trial and error, arranged the pieces to fit the BBQ. I was fortunate that my husband is of similar proportions to the BBQ; exactly the same height waist down, and half the width, so two pairs of jeans were required. The possibility to wear the cover was preserved by retaining openings for the head and arms, conveniently provided by the voids of the open waistbands. A third pair of jeans was used to fashion an apron, including a pocket for tongs, which both the BBQ and barbecuer can wear. The multifunctional aspect of these objects forms new narratives, but significantly, this experiment demonstrated use that was foretold, but actualised through the making process.

USE UNKNOWN

A form inspired by the garden, the lettuce, is the model for objects made using the traditional craft technique of crochet. The material gleaned for this purpose is waste from my own consumption: everyday plastic shopping bags and bags from other products such as bread and packaged supermarket lettuce. The technique used to achieve the shape is hyperbolic crochet, where the number of stitches is exponentially increased. This repetitive process cultivates a deep understanding of, and affinity with the material, owing to the long time spent in its company.

Making technique drives this inquiry and affects a predictable outcome in terms of shape. However, due to the variability of the gleaned plastic, the end result is not predictable. Each different plastic produces unexpected and sometimes astonishing textures, as the process of stripping and reconfiguring reveals hidden properties.

The use of these lettuce objects is not known; neither at the commencement of making, nor when the making is completed. They have no value related to a clear function, but perhaps an appreciation of the workmanship employed in their creation, and the “strange beauty” (Fuad-Luke, cited in Fletcher & Grose 2012, p. 135) that they possess, may afford an expanded idea of use.



Figure 3: The process of making lettuce from lettuce bag

MAKING CRITIQUE

During the early phases of the research, I felt a constant shadow of unease that I was merely making purposeless stuff. This has been alleviated by persevering with making, but a *making* that is vindicated through mindfulness of what is being truly created; regarding both the objects themselves and their agency.

Besides the usefulness, or uselessness of objects, making, as discussed, is useful as a research tool, regardless of what is made. The making experiments discussed initiate an analysis of: over production (many aprons), design with limited appeal (BBQ cover), and making for the sake of technique (lettuce make). The function of the apron is impaired by making many, however, opportunity exists for: diversification - different kinds of aprons or garment types; or specialisation - aprons with specific purposes. Whilst the BBQ cover solves my personal design problem and satisfies my aesthetic desires, it exemplifies design that interacts with different parts of the product lifecycle, the users life and other products in use; insights that might be applied to broader design challenges. The lettuce making, though it creates objects devoid of use, reveals unique ways of discovering value. When making from a plastic/foil chip packet, the extraordinary, sparkly lettuce generated reminded me so strongly of a friend, that I was compelled to give it to her. Through making, a gift emerged, engendering the notion that value might be founded through status as a gift. Could a gifting economy be a viable, sustainable strategy as an alternative to a fashion system based on monetary exchange?

Making affords a critique of my practice whilst in the process of redirection. The outcomes are a work in progress, giving fuel for continued reflection through further making.

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