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The Transformative Power of Practice-Based Fashion Research

José Teunissen

Introduction

The advent of the twenty-first century ushered in a new generation of fashion designers who merge design, artistic practice and research in a natural way. They use artistic and activist interventions to revision fashion as a cultural and symbolic value-adding component integral to post-industrial restructuring and repositioning it as a much broader and more significant role than as an industry that makes and sells apparel (Craik 2019: 133). This generation is not necessarily operating from fashion capitals such as London or Paris, but quite often based in the outskirts of the fashion areas (such as Australia, the Netherlands, Sweden or Austria). Being aware of the social and environmental issues and the failures of the current fashion system, they are fundamentally rethinking and redefining the fashion system by implementing new values and new imaginations approaching fashion design as an embodied practice and as an activist tool (Bourriaud 2009: 51–52; Teunissen 2005: 8–23; Teunissen 2014: 12–72). Based on the research for the exhibitions *The Future of Fashion in Now* (2014) and *State of Fashion* (2018) – where I showcased these ground-breaking designers – I would like to draw and define this ‘new hybrid designer’ and highlight how they as activists and practitioners effectively contribute to some of the fundamental changes of the current fashion system (Teunissen 2018).

The era of ‘altermodern’ fashion

The relation between fashion agency and political power is not new. In the twentieth century, punk and youth culture of the 1960s have been successful

1 anti-fashion movements in addressing and changing hierarchical social structures,
2 opening more spaces for subgroups to express different social and political ideas in
3 a specific clothing style. These so-called street cultures symbolized a new moment
4 in democratization, according to Gilles Lipovetsky (1994). However, they gener-
5 ally did not really affect the system of fashion and the way designers produced their
6 work. Both Vivienne Westwood and Katherine Hammett are interesting examples
7 of designers who took (and take) a critical approach to the fashion system as well
8 as to our current social and political system whilst executing a classical fashion
9 brand. The same applies to critical designers that emerged in the 1990s as, for
10 example, the Belgian designer Martin Margiela and the Dutch designers Viktor
11 & Rolf (Teunissen 2011: 157–77). In their oeuvre, they playfully reference the
12 restraints of the traditional fashion system. Taking an artistic-practice approach,
13 they are interrogating the discipline's conventional meanings and practices with,
14 for example, an upside-down store, alternatives for the conventional catwalk show
15 and printing styles from workman clothes onto luxurious silk fabrics. Especially
16 this new artistic approach with a focus on creating knowledge and placemaking –
17 foregrounding the process and storytelling – has influenced the twenty-first-centu-
18 ry generation of fashion designers (Skov 2011: 144).

19 However, this new generation takes a more radical approach. They are criti-
20 cizing the system by proposing a system change, defining actively more ethical
21 and inclusive values and imaginations whilst trying to avoid the conventional,
22 glamorous luxury-dream of fashion. Also, quite a few of these designers are
23 not part of classical fashion system – they do not hold a commercial brand – but
24 instead they operate as hybrid designers merging an artistic and research approach
25 in so-called practice-based research.

26 Art curator and scholar Nicolas Bourriaud describes this new approach as
27 'altermodern'. Different from postmodernism, altermodernism does not concern
28 itself with the past, origins and 'authentic' identity (as streetwear punk did before),
29 but with the future: premised on the destination rather than the source (Bourriaud
30 2009: 40). Applying this notion to this new generation of practice-based fashion
31 designers, one could state that they actively try to rethink and reshape our notions
32 of identity: the ones explored by the fashion system as well as those referring to
33 our cultural and social origins addressing issues such as globalization, decolon-
34 ization, political, social and economical systems. From an anthropological lens,
35 Arjun Appadurai states in *Modernity at Large* (1996) that media and migration
36 as its two major, and interconnected, diacritics have had their joint effect on the
37 *work of imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity (1996: 3).

38
39 The imagination is no longer being employed in our contemporary globalised cul-
40 ture as a materialised fantasy, as a form of escapism or as a reflection of another

world [as fashion used to do, JT], but/yet the imagination has become an organized field of social practices. As such it is a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.

(Appadurai 1996: 31)

Patricia Calefato defines this more fluent concept of identity in a different context, claiming that the 'end of fashion' rests on four fundamental changes in the fashion system. First, digitization and the internet have changed modes of production, consumption and communication and, therefore, the relation of fashion and time. Second, boundaries between global and local are being collapsed. Third, the increasing permeability of fashion and art and finally the increasing fluidity of the idea of identity are related to clothing (Calefato 2019: 33). Exactly here, the new generation of practice-based fashion researchers are operating: exploring new and engaged definitions of fashion and of identity using the tool of a more socially engaged imagination.

New imagination in fashion (brands): Questioning identities

Since the start of their collaborative practice, researcher and designer Ricarda Bigolin and curator Nella Themelios (Australia) have taken a clear interest in the social and political power of fashion and clothing. They critically explore the fashion system in order to highlight and extrapolate the more fundamental cultural values of the way we dress – something completely forgotten in current neo-liberal capitalism. By using their practice of performance and curation, they address primarily the branding of fashion whilst merging the tools of art and fashion practice and by using a design-driven research approach. For example, in their project *All or Nothing* (2019), the duo explored the Lookbook – the ultimate marketing tool to promote the brand's new collection using clear product photography, garment details, prices, sizes and mystifying descriptions. The constant commingling of brands, with collaborations between product types, categories and market levels in and around luxury fashion, was taken as an inspiration to critically explore a potential evolution of the transactions of collaboration to new and unexplored dimensions. D&K reveal the discrepancies between the expectations aroused by the brand, the Lookbook and the actual garment, thereby showing that new values are needed. As such, D&K's practice sits perfectly within a new global generation of designers who develop and execute critical research through a design practice.

The *11" × 17"* project (2014) of Elisa van Joolen, showcased at *The Future of Fashion Is Now 2014*, addresses how to create a unique, authentic and original

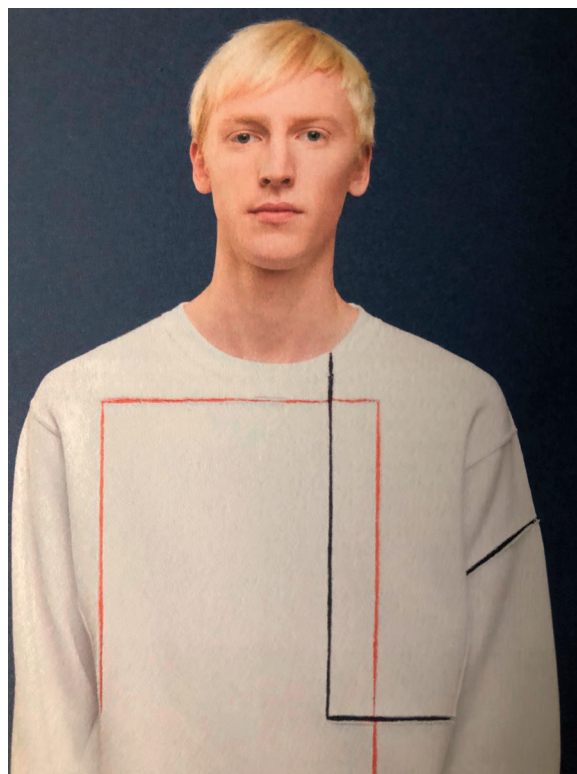


FIGURE 1.1: *11" × 17"*, Russell Athletic x Rockwell by Parra x G-Star RAW, by Elisa van Joolen, 2014. Photography: Bommers/Schumm.

crew neck sweater when in fact every brand is making the same garment. She asked various brands to donate a sweater, which she had cut into A3-shaped pieces and then framed as a painting. Placed side by side, the differences and similarities in material and stitch became apparent, thereby demonstrating that every brand – in the end – is different at a materialistic micro level. Every brand has a unique stitch, or a different quality of the fabric. In this way, she played with fragments of brand identity, exploring critically the way brands are creating their image. The final installation – the framed parts of the sweaters – is important not as an artefact but as the process that it sets in motion: the search for differences. The *11" × 17"* project plays with brand identities and brand characteristics by isolating them and placing them next to each other, so different layers of information become visible. The correspondence Van Joolen carried on with the brands' marketing departments, which is also part of the work, shows how a fashion brand guards the label's identity.

1 In different words, D&K and Elisa van Joolen take the spectator/consumers
 2 on a journey by giving them new insights in how brands are operating by making
 3 stories and imaginations visible that brands are normally hiding or not paying
 4 attention to. In doing so they produce a new aesthetic and a new design language
 5 that is no longer searching for an authentic style or an artefact.

6 Instead, they are bringing together a collection of heterogeneous elements –
 7 some of them, for example, refer to emotional or tactical values of clothing
 8 that a brand usually does not highlight – to which they impart meaning. As
 9 practice-based designers, they make us aware that meaning and values of
 10 clothes need an approach from very different viewpoints. In their work, they
 11 are surfacing how fragments of (brand) identity acquire meaning in the con-
 12 text of the *project*, in which the focus is not on the product, the outcome or
 13 the artefact, but on the process. *11" × 17"* (2014) as well as *All or Nothing*
 14 (2017) explore the characteristic marks of a brand's identity and build a story
 15 around it 'as a construction or a montage, or as a work born of endless nego-
 16 tiation' (Bourriaud 2009: 55).

17 18 19 *Imagination as social practice* 20

21 Other fashion practitioners are relating new concepts of identity to the social and
 22 political impact of fashion and clothing because it is a vital way of focusing atten-
 23 tion on the fundamental values that fashion and the fashion industry play in our
 24 social life. For the project *La Constancia Dormida* (2006), Tania Candiani moved
 25 her studio to a bankrupt textile factory for a period of 30 days. She set herself
 26 the goal there of making one dress a day. Each dress functioned as a sort of page
 27 from a diary in which anecdotes were embroidered from the time that the factory
 28 was still active, mixed with stories from visitors who dropped in to see Candiani.
 29 Thus, by means of the dresses, Candiani not only made the history of this factory
 30 tangible, with its harsh working conditions, but she also exposed the nostalgia of
 31 the former workers and those who lived nearby.

32
33 Textiles have been present in my work as tailoring, as a narrative resource and as
 34 labour, socially embedded with meaning. Tailoring as design is a contact point with
 35 architecture, where the space distribution of the plans as sewing patterns re-signify
 36 the idea of inhabited space or the utopia of a space that could be inhabited.

37 (Candiani 2021)
38

39 In this project, the clothing refers to a social network, on the one hand, but it also
 40 makes the daily practice of life in this factory more tangible. The specific place

acts as a fragmented identity: a junction where life takes place, a network in which social ties reveal themselves.

Exercises on Health (EOH) proposes that fashion can serve as an instrument for the interpretation and transformation of social reality. This work construes fashion design as critical methodology, crafting a series of garments as navigational devices that carry forth an epistemology and a politics for social cognition, one that stands and odds with fashion as a cultural manifestation of late capitalism. The work aims to reclaim design as humanistic and emancipatory practice and garments as media for the symbolic dispute of the body and its experience.

(Cuba 2014, original emphasis)

For *Exercises on Health* (2014), the project that was commissioned for *The Future of Fashion Is Now*, she examined the theme of 'health'. Cuba believes too much is being said in terms of 'patient' and 'victim', and that too little attention is paid to the experience of health and illness. Because health can sometimes be elusive, hidden behind the mind or a body and silenced by uncertainty, she used garments to explore the felt but unsaid: the affective surplus of a diagnosis that



FIGURE 1.2: *Exercises on Health* by Lucia Cuba 2014. Commissioned for *The Future of Fashion Is Now*. Photography: Lucia Cuba.

does not withstand the complexity of human emotions and representations. With *Exercises on Health*, she tried by means of clothing to clarify and embody how human beings relate to health and life. *Exercises on Health* are garment-based approaches to human encounters with health and life, as seen from the hardships that a place and experience of health can bring forth.

Both fashion practitioners start from a political approach that takes the fashion imagination from a glamorous fantasy towards an imagination that foregrounds social and embodied practices of current (fashion) culture and highlights concepts of neighbourhood, nationhood and moral economies (Appadurai 1996: 7).

Searching for the new luxury: Exploring new values

With a manifesto of nine hashtags, the exhibition *State of Fashion: Searching for the New Luxury* (2018) tried to capture in more detail and depth what new definitions and imaginations are driving the concepts of luxury in fashion. The hashtags highlighted a series of concrete drivers and values that current fashion brands, practice-based fashion researchers as well as consumers are currently exploring to gain a more ethical, purposeful and new engagement with fashion. Besides the strong attempt for *new imaginations* and *agency* already explored above and addressed in *The Future of Fashion Is Now* (2014), drivers such as *essential*, *tech*, *care*, *reuse*, *fairness* and *no waste* became apparent. The exhibition tried to answer the question of how these new and explorative concepts affect the fashion system and society as well as how these translate into new aesthetics and new practices.

The campaigns of Stella McCartney, owner of a commercial brand as well as a pioneer of sustainable fashion, try to explore a new visual identity and concept imagined for her work in sustainability. The film made by Viviane Sassen in 2018 and showcased at *State of Fashion: Searching for the New Luxury* conveyed the symbiotic nature of humans, nature and animals; it explored the idea that to fully protect and care for ourselves, we must also nurture the world we live in, as we are one and the same. The words of Maria Barnas's poem 'To Nurture, To Nature' – specially conceived for the project – recited over the film.

Through Sassen's abstract visual language, demonstrating ideas about abstraction and objects in relation to their often-incongruous surroundings, Stella McCartney finds a new way to engage in the conversation with surroundings that perfectly illustrate this cutting-edge sense and original imagination and avoid references to classical fashion dreams of elegance whilst trying to build purpose and ethics around sustainability. On her website, she states: 'We are agents of change. We challenge and push boundaries to make luxurious projects in a way that is fit for the world we live in today and the future: beautiful and sustainable.'



FIGURE 1.3: The Whataboutery debate/event space at *State of Fashion: Searching for the New Luxury* (Arnhem, 2018) with the manifesto on the left side. @Eva Broekema.

No compromises' (McCartney 2021: n.pag.). Eco-fashion designers VIN + OMI (2004) present their brand with a conventional catwalk show at London Fashion Week, but they call themselves an ideology instead of a brand, because they primarily focus on the development of a range of unique-to-market sustainable textiles made out of wasted plastics and unused fibres. The origins of each fabric have a social programme built around it. For example, areas of river or ocean in need of clean-up from plastic waste have been identified first, and VIN + OMI initiated a clean-up project to collect the plastic that is then turned into rPET fabric. Until now, they have produced and patented twelve unique fabrics using their company primarily as a driver of sustainable change and an activist tool. Their attendance at the London Fashion Week – where they are not on the official programme because they do not sell clothes – primarily functions as a promotion tool. VIN + OMI as well as Stella McCartney are (partly) operating within the classical conventions of the fashion system, but they are creating attractive and original imaginations shaping new stories and innovative products adding purpose, ethics and political agendas. As such, they are perfectly illustrating a new hybrid, activist approach whilst defining *Fashion New Luxury* in new terms, imparting fashion with a fresh set of values.

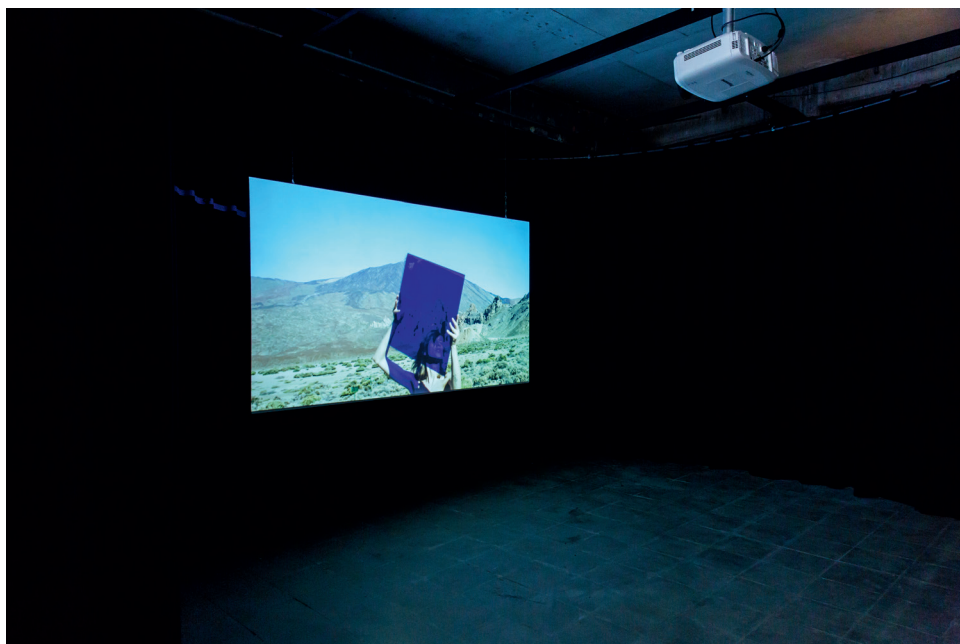


FIGURE 1.4: *Stella's World of Sustainability*, 2017, by Viviane Sassen. Installation commissioned for *State of Fashion* (2018). Still from film by Viviane Sassen.

Practice-based fashion designers and the focus on the vernacular and purpose

In her project *Made by Rain* (2012), Aliko van der Kruijs (the Netherlands) lets the material speak for itself. She designs shawls from indigo that she lays outside on her roof, where she lets the rain showers determine the design. Each shawl comes with a folder that tells when the rain fell and how heavy it was. Here comes to mind what Appadurai describes as

often punctuated, interrogated, and domesticated by the micronarratives of film, television, music, and other expressive forms [fashion, JT], which allows modernity to be rewritten as vernacular globalization and less as a concession to a large-scale national and international policies [cq brands, JT]. (1996: 31)

According to Jennifer Craik, in our current globalized fashion system, micro-fashion cultures have an important role to play to underpin cultural identity promoting diversity and differences through visible and tangible dress codes (2019: 139).



FIGURE 1.5: *Made by Rain*, print of the Dutch rain on 100 per cent silk, 2013, by Aliki van der Kruijs, location: 52°21' 11.13"N/4°53'21.78.21"E. Photography: Pim Leenen.

Van der Kruijs is an excellent example of a practice-based designer focusing on the tangible, concrete dimension of fashion, emphasizing its artisanal power and embracing its timeless, sustainable aspects. She is able to define the here and now in emotional values and an embodied experience using a very Dutch conceptual approach. As such, she shapes and redefines cultural values to humanize technology and other changes in our current culture. Finally, she is trying to engage the consumer/spectator in the processes where she embraces and analyses the complexity of meaning in a comparable way as D&K and Elisa van Joolen are illustrating too. They are keeping the process open and ambiguous where both the problem and the outcome mutually evolve. They make us aware that fashion's potential is not only in problem-solving but also in questioning, redefining and reinventing the fashion system as well as our current social and political culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the new generation of practice-based fashion research is radically rethinking the values and meaning of fashion, via what Appadurai states as *work of imagination* (1996: 31). This is an imagination broken out of the special expressive space of glamour fashion and has become part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people. The twenty-first-century designers



FIGURE 1.6: *Made by Rain* production process, print of Dutch rain on cotton, 2013, by Alik van der Kruijs, location: 52°21'34.13"N/4°4'55.39"E. Photography: Alik van der Kruijs.

are exploring engaged imaginations that foreground societal issues, questioning the existing fashion system and exploring the future. In doing so they uphold the importance of the design process and the story above the artefact. Novel expressive forms – such as performances, installations, interventions, films and exhibitions – are employed to replace the classic fashion representations such as the catwalk, the fashion magazine and the fashion campaign.

Moreover, this generation is no longer reimagining the conventional western fashion history and the idea of an authentic identity (as, e.g., explored by Jean Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood). Instead, they are exploring concepts of identity

whether it is surfacing the artificial constructions of brands or foregrounding fragments of culturally and socially embedded identities related to political, social, cultural and economical systems. In different words, these practice-based fashion designers are rewriting fashion in a more vernacular globalization thriving as a more 'polycentric' fashion system (Craik 2019: 139).

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