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The Future i Now and the Making of Things

Elizabeth Fischer

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SPIRIT OF LUXURY AND DESIGN

A Perspective
from
Contemporary Fashion
and Jewellery

Edited by
Jie SUN Elizabeth FISCHER

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Fashion, accessories, and jewellery are inscribed in the cultural and industrial fabric of society at various levels and scales: from a collective industry, producing huge amounts of goods that travel all over the world, to regional brands and small-scale workshops, and makers who produce on a reduced scale. There is the scandal of fast fashion on the one hand, with the necessary steps to take on a global level to change the pollution and misery generated by this industry.¹ On the other hand, there is the joy offered by a beautiful item, handcrafted or manufactured, that has been kept over time and handed down to the next generations, whether in the family circle or sold at auction. The panel of lecturers who spoke at the 2018 WoSoF symposium more often than not focused on what lies at the core of the design of garments, accessories, and jewellery: the human being and the human body. Design is about conceiving and making things for someone else, for the other. At one end of the spectrum stand the designers and makers, at the stage of ideation and production. At the other end are the consumers, who will buy and wear the items, keep them and cherish them or discard them after a while.

Most of the essays in the symposium's proceedings highlight the fact that human beings hold on to the things that shape their identity and everyday life—some, who live on the poorer side of society, out of sheer necessity. In a 2017 campaign report on fashion, Greenpeace argued that “design for longer life and promoting extended use of clothing are the most important interventions to slow down the material flow,” emphasizing the importance of the technical and emotional durability of clothing.² As Chiara Scarpitti points out in her essay in this publication: “We should not forget that a jewel is a device with a strong symbolic power that binds the wearer to his/her emotional and perceptive sphere and amplifies it. Jewel, subject, and thought are connected when there is an exchange of energy...According to this research perspective...technology is not only used for an aesthetic or functional optimization, but it becomes itself a tool for an envisioning and the establishment of a new relationship—corporeal and intellectual—with the human being.” Several of the lecturers underlined how a design-driven approach is needed to create emotional value and a vital relationship between design, product, and user. Volker Koch, founder of the sustainable leatherware brand Silentgoods, conveys the same idea from the designer's perspective: “While the material choices have a significant

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1. “Fashion at the Crossroads.” Greenpeace, 18 Sept. 2017. <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/publications/Campaign-reports/Toxics-reports/Fashion-at-the-Crossroads/>

2. Ibid.

effect on the environment, we are however aware that the biggest impact we as a designer-manufacturer have, is dependent on the relationship formed between the product and the wearer.” By essence, in an ideal world, design is about making things of good quality, which benefit the user and stand the test of time—as recently advocated by Lucie and Luke Meier, current co-creative directors of Jil Sander.³

This echoes what Richard Sennett wrote in 2008: “we can achieve a more humane material life, if only we better understand the making of things” (Sennett, 2008). Designers and users can both benefit from this knowledge about “the making of things.” During the recent COVID-19 pandemic that halted the world economy, many people rediscovered the act of making things, whether food, clothes, domestic objects, or simply taking time to do mending and repairs. This kind of activity is often undervalued because it is not “profitable” in capitalistic terms. However, it is an indication of something precious in that it shows how much care we actually bestow on our material surroundings if given the time and leisure to do so. Making things also brings us back to a more humane level and gets us back in touch with the materiality of the business of living: the total sensory experience of making things provides grounding and reassurance in times of uncertainty. It also reminds us of the consideration we need for the makers and producers and that the garment workers or gold miners in poor economies need our active support to earn a decent living wage. Doing justice to the human component of fashion, from the designer via the production means to the consumer, in an inclusive and multidisciplinary way, is what the lectures gathered here have touched upon. Now, more than ever, it is time to step back and take stock. Li Edelkoort has hailed this crisis as a moment for rethinking and rebooting. “Therefore, if we are wise—which sadly we now know we aren’t—we will start up again with new rules and regulations, allowing countries to get back to their knowhow and specific qualities, introducing cottage industries that would flourish and grow into an arts-and-crafts century, where manual labor is cherished above everything else. A regulated shut down of production plants for two months a year could be part of this concept, as are collective creative studios that would produce ideas for several brands at a time, bringing about an economy of scale with a much lighter environmental footprint. Local industries and activities would gain momentum and people-

3. Lucie and Luke Meier. “Human Nature/Mother Nature.” A Magazine Curated by xxx issue 21, 2020 <https://amagazinecuratedby.com/collection/lucie-and-luke-meier/>

4. Li Edelkoort interviewed by Marcus Faires for Dezeen 9 March 2020. <https://www.dezeen.com/2020/03/09/li-edelkoort-coronavirus-reset/>

based initiatives will take over with bartering systems and open tables, farmers markets, and street events, dance and singing contests and a very dominant DIY aesthetic. My future forecast for the Age of the Amateur seems to come much faster than I anticipated.”⁴ Are we able to take this holistic and more humane approach? In “Lessons we should learn” during the symposium, Elizabeth Shaw highlights the tailor-made production of prosthetics by the Australian engineer Mat Bowtell with 3D printers, under creative commons license that allows people to download the designs but not sell or make a profit from them. Bowtell is a prime example of the “Age of the Amateur” Edelkoort has predicted, in which home makers are able to answer pressing needs, for specific parts of the population, from their own studio—albeit on a small scale—in this case using electronics and computer science. Thanks to the internet the goods can be shown worldwide yet produced in a regional framework.

As Maarten Versteeg advocates, it is time to approach artifacts and wearables on the human body with a multidisciplinary approach. This involves combining the design process of fashion and the engineering of products, as well as the social and personal perspectives of these disciplines, doing away with the ideal Westernized fashion body that has ruled the field for far too long, rather opening up to the variety of morphologies and cultural contexts in the world. Alternative practices, sharing knowledge and skills, as well as accessibility to open source data, with collective and inclusive teams at the helm of design and production units, are key factors in a forward-thinking process. The contributions to the symposium provide insight into the issues that we, as a global society, have to deal with now in order to provide more resilience, inclusivity, and equity, not for the future, but for the populations living in today’s world. Design, ideation, and making—the mind and the hand—have a part to play in offering more agency to human beings in more user-centered processes. We are facing major challenges. Other than impending pandemics, most importantly climate change and migratory movements already have a deep impact on our way of living and entail an unavoidable mixing of cultures and societies. In other words, we will necessarily encounter the “other,”—a human being—right on our doorstep. Design, just like art, provides experiences of otherness. By thinking through otherness and the making of things for the other, we can prepare for the challenges lying ahead.

Reference

Sennett, R. 2008. *The Craftsman*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.