Thematizing Change: Creativity, Dynamic Practices and Sustainability

Sustainable fashion seeks to bring about change in the way we carry out our practices. Such a change requires a reconsideration of what constitutes change. Creativity as understood in the field of design is commonly understood to be an object-focused activity with associations to innovation, aesthetic distinction and originality. Creative fashion is often viewed as the ability of fashion designers to produce fashion garments of distinction, originality and beauty. The extent to which those engaged in fashion design aspire to these forms of distinction means other possible courses of change-oriented action may remain unexamined. This paper brings into relief two contrasting notions of fashion creativity, one concerned primarily with the fashion garment, the other focussed on more exploratory and experimental fashion activity.

In outlining a framework from social theoretical accounts of organised human activity, namely Practice Theory, the paper considers how normatively prescribed activities and outcomes shapes how practices are elaborated. In this what goes on inside a practice is governed in part by what is acceptable or appropriate to do. Normativity shapes practices across a number of dimensions, ranging from the kind of activities a practitioner engages in, the ways in which these activities are carried out to the outcomes produced and the particular forms of innovation or novelty that are supported or encouraged.

In mapping these dimensions of change the paper positions fashion practices that engage in non-normative practice in relation to conventionalised design activities. This positioning of exploratory fashion practices thematizes sustainable fashion as part of a shift in practice away from commodity based and spectacular forms of fashion oriented activity towards more dynamic or change-oriented practices. A discussion of the fashion label Bless, examines an example of a design practice engaged in an extended field of design activity while considering the potential of such a practice to provide valuable insight into fashion as a complex domain of human activity

Introduction

Frameworks for theorising fashion focus on fashion as the product of systems and processes of production, signs within complex systems of representation or commodities that circulate within the global economic system. Less focus is placed on frameworks that consider fashion practices as open, temporally unfolding nexuses of oriented action.

Fashion is often characterised as a phenomenon of change. The paper will address current conceptions of fashion creativity in relation to accounts of change from recent social theory. Practice Theory suggests change in practices can be understood as new ways of undertaking existing tasks and projects or as combinations of existing and/or new activities deployed towards novel tasks and projects. The paper, in outlining the various dimensions of change within practices, addresses the extent to which current notions of fashion creativity may be incompatible with these notions of change. This discussion highlights fashion design as a relatively stable practice with differentiation in fashion practice ranging from conventional and stable practices to unconventional and dynamic practices.

Commonly held of notions of fashion creativity suggest creativity is understood as primarily a garment focussed activity encompassing the pursuit of novel garment ideas within an emergent set of fashion possibilities. Such understandings of fashion creativity fail to capture forms of fashion activity employed within more dynamic or change-oriented fashion practices. An outline of Practice theory suggests changes

in practices are in part determined by the teleoaffective structure running through a practice. These structures contain a range of normatively ordered ends, projects and tasks that comprise a practice. The paper considers dynamic forms of fashion practice in relation to the contents of these structures to account for practice change as well as considering how practices are elaborated through the pursuit of courses of action laid down in practical action. Reflection on how practices are elaborated highlights how normativity plays an important role in shaping what potential courses of action are available to a practitioner.

A discussion of fashion label Bless examines a dynamic fashion design practice employing an expanded set of strategies. These strategies challenge accepted notions of what designers do in terms of outcomes, as well as the contexts in which the work is presented and the strategies employed in making, presenting, displaying, marketing or distributing practice outcomes. This discussion points to novel fashion activity as the pursuit of novel courses of action while highlighting the potential for such action to open up previously unconsidered bases for change.

Fashion and Creativity

Sustainable design advocates argue design should promote social change as well as be a producer and shaper of things (Fletcher 2007). Krippendorf (2006) argues design can make an important contribution as a confluence of factors including technological and social change re-shape post-industrial society. These views reflect a change from design supporting industry, manufacturing and consumption to co-creating meaning and value in dialogue with individuals.

Fashion design is tied to conventions that deal with notions of the body and understandings of clothing within systems of production, consumption, presentation and display. Fashion design as an activity is primarily concerned with the following:

1) The production of form

2) The production of commodities to be bought and sold

3) The production of signs and symbols, to be read and interpreted

Taken together these understandings limit the potential role of the designer to one primarily concerned with production of form and symbolic values associated with material and representational products of fashion design. This leaves out a potentially critical and change oriented form of fashion design. Common understandings of fashion design tend to support the above contention. Ferrero-Regis (2008:1) identifies the discursive formation of 'fashion designer as artist' as a standard against which other notions of fashion design are measured. The author argues this notion dominates other characterisations of the designer, notably 'the invisible' designers who people the variegated creative workforce comprising the fashion system (2008:1). Studies of designer creativity tend to focus on biographical and celebratory accounts of designer activities or interpretations of their work as examples of artistic endeavour. These foreground a notion of creativity as an object focused activity with associations to innovation, aesthetic distinction and originality.

Few empirical studies have addressed fashion design creativity. Sinha (2002) examined the design process of fashion designers, conceptualising fashion creativity

as a problem solving ability. Eckert and Stacey (2001) examined fashion creativity as an ability to imaginatively visualise innovative understandings of fashion garments while evaluating their appropriateness. These studies construe creativity as a cognitive activity deployed in analysing and synthesising disparate sources of visual and qualitative information. Each similarly studied creativity as employed in commercial contexts, manifest as cognitive spatial and visual modelling abilities along with the visualisation and communication of design concepts. These approaches correlate with the view of Lawson (2004) that design thinking is cognitive activity.

Global fashion media, as a system whereby symbolic values are accrued and communicated through fashion imagery, is a source of creative inspiration for designers as well as a form of qualitative data to be interpreted. Designers look to fashion media to identify materials, themes, colours, prevalent and novel features with potential fashion value (Eckert & Stacey 2001: 8). Designers as interpreters of information, along with marketers seek to understand consumer behaviour with reference to symbolic values associated with fashion images and products. Sinha (2002) conceptualises this interpretive ability into a problem-solving model of design to account for the creative work of designers. Sinha argues that fashion garments as consumer products are a means by which individuals construct their identity. Designers in attempting to understand what to design (the design problem) seek to understand consumers who represent one side of the design solution (the other side being fashion product) yet consumers defy definition due to shifts in taste, attitudes and behaviour (2002:3)

Eckert and Stacey's (2001) empirical study of knitwear designers investigate the activity of fashion design whereby designers themselves form a context of fashion design. In this the designer creates a fashion context through the constructed garment, reproduced within global fashion media. They structure a designer's search for novel ideas into 2 dimensions: one is the understanding of the fashion context, meant as the emergent visuo-spatial properties of possible garments within an emergent fashion context; while the second dimension, the emergent structural features combined for aesthetic novel affect in acceptable ways. The study conceptualises fashion design creativity in terms of how designers are able to develop novel ideas as a form of 'rational adaptation' to environmental constraints and a range of appropriate design ideas within the emergent fashion context (2001:15). This formulation views designer creativity as the realisation of novel form through combinations of formal properties of garments.

The studies above support the construal of fashion innovation as the demonstration of novel aesthetic appeal of fashion garments within an emergent set of fashion possibilities. This highlights designer creativity as primarily a garment focused activity. In this creativity results in novel aesthetic combinations of formal elements. These may be the result of novel visual or spatial strategies or technological innovations in textile manufacture or application.

Practice Theory

In considering creativity, change and an emergent critical fashion design practice, Practice Theory provides a model to understand the stability of practices and also

the mechanisms by which practices change. In contending with Sustainability in environmental and social terms, as a paradigmatic issue this paper discusses a framework to enable a more extensive recognition of the role practical action plays in the constitution and elaboration of everyday life.

The term 'Practices' is employed by social theorists seeking to interpret the social and human agency as organised bundles of human activity. Schatzki (2002) points out theories of practice foreground embedment as opposed to social accounts that highlight individuals, mental conditions and actions or wholist accounts that focus on abstract structures, language and communication. Embedment refers to the way human coexistence, 'forms a context in which each proceeds individually ' (Schatzki 1996:14). Practices are the manifold human activities comprising social life including not exclusively political practices, religious practices, educational practices, making practices, parenting practices, and so on. Reckwitz (2002: 245-246) identifies a body of literature addressing organised human activity as Practice Theory. Theorists include Charles Taylor, Pierre Bordieu, Anthony Giddens and Hubert Dreyfus. Reckwitz defines a practice as, " a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things, their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge." The practitioner is understood to be the carrier of the practice and in the performance of the practice both sustains and elaborates it (Schatzki 2002).

Warde (2005:21) claims that, " The principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves ".

Practices change, evolve and mutate. Practices are also differentiated across performances of that practice. One individual will carry out a practice one way, while another, will carry it out quite differently. This is also the case for groups of practitioners. Practitioners though, are governed by commonly held understandings, conventions, procedures and expectations and although often unreflectively maintained these too are subject to change. Change can be incremental, shaping a practice over longer periods of time as various improvisations and adaptations are implemented, or change can be more emphatic when, for example, a technological innovation or legal regulation enforces changed practice. Warde points out a source of tension within practices can be when the orthodoxies of prior codes, 'are challenged by a new generation' (2005:141). Such tension highlights the importance of convention within practices to shape what goes on within it. Convention runs through practices, signifying particular courses of action as acceptable or unacceptable, appropriate or inappropriate. Schatzki's employs the notion of 'teleoaffectivity' to formulate how convention runs through practices.

Schatzki (2002:81) defines a teleoaffective structure as:

> A range of normativized and hierarchically ordered ends, projects and tasks, to varying degrees allied with normativized emotions, even moods…The indefinite range of end-project-task combinations contained in a practice's teleoaffective structure and realized in participants doings and sayings are either ones that participants ought to realize or ones that it is acceptable for them to do so.

It follows then the development and elaboration of a practice is shaped in part by a practitioner's understanding of what is acceptable or unacceptable. It should be noted this understanding could be embodied, tacit and unconscious

Considering fashion designing as a practice means it is to be understood as a largely unified yet differentiated whole, 'hanging' together as, " a temporally unfolding, spatially dispersed nexus of sayings and doings " (Schatzki 1996:89). Doings and sayings are meaningful to participants due to the way they link the principles, rules, procedures, general understandings and the orientation of practices towards particular ends or projects. Fashion designers are oriented towards a variety of ends, projects and tasks such as making profits, creating desire, designing a collection, sketching a garment, instructing a machinist, meeting a deadline, choosing a fabric, responding in email, evaluating a sample garment and so on. Comparing activities of a conventional practice against those of unconventional fashion practice would most likely show up more common activities than uncommon ones. Differentiation for an experimental practice would tend to show up in terms of outcomes, contexts, production and presentation strategies and potentially the rationales of the designer.

Normativity, Creativity and Change

Arguments for sustainable fashion call for a move beyond traditional ideas towards new directions and possibilities (Fletcher 2007, Hethorn & Ulasewicz 2007). This shift requires a new understanding of fashion creativity that goes beyond creativity as primarily a garment focused activity. This also requires a reconsideration of the

notion of change itself. Accounts of change from Practice theory suggest change in practices results from the following (Schatzki 2002:74):

1) New ways of undertaking existing tasks and projects, or

2) Combinations of existing and/or new activities deployed towards novel tasks and projects

Adopting this model, fashion practices can become more sustainable by developing different processes, materials or strategies to execute existing tasks or alternatively fashion practices can use existing methods or combinations of existing and new methods for novel tasks and projects. Similarly fashion practices can employ new ways of doing things for novel ends. The capacity to speculate on this third possibility is beyond the realm of this paper.

A body of literature on Sustainable Fashion has developed in relation to the first dimension of change: new ways of doing existing tasks. This literature emphasises the environmental impacts of fashion in terms of depletion of material resources, production of pollutants and toxic materials and carbon emissions associated with a global fashion manufacturing and distribution. In this current fashion practices can be supported by technological innovations, new production methods, new or alternate materials that limit the environmental impact of fashion production activity. This might be from less resources or limiting the pollutants produced through various production processes. It is conceivable that in considering this kind of change that a designer might envisage new ways of producing fashion that consume fewer resources. This might be an innovation in pattern cutting that results in less fabric

consumption per garment or sourcing textiles with less environmental impacts for example. These kinds of strategies and the insights they spring from cannot be fully explained in relation to existing notions of fashion creativity. Evidence of this kind of practice innovation would suggest the creative capacity of a designer is not exclusively directed towards the development of novel garments but may be directed toward establishing alternate working methods.

Change resulting from second dimension of change, which includes the employment of existing and new activities oriented towards novel tasks and projects, suggests a more complex and potentially extensive form of change. This kind of shift in fashion practice would mean the priorities, aspirations, goals, and desires that direct and shape the developmental path of a practice could change. As outlined in the previous section, normatively constrained activities and projects shape, at least in part, what practitioners do. What is appropriate or acceptable to do in any practice situation impacts the way a practitioner will carry out their practice. Conceiving of practice innovation as a change in priorities, goals, aspirations, desires refers to the way fashion practitioner's aspirations and goals are shaped by the teleoaffective structures running through practices outlined in the previous section. For this kind of practice innovation to occur the contents of the teleoaffective structure would change accordingly. This means activities, specific tasks or projects that were once inappropriate, unacceptable or not conceivable would begin to show up for practitioners as something to do.

Schatzki makes the claim, "typically participants carry out end-project-task combinations contained in a practice's teleological structure, that is to say,

normativized ends, projects and tasks determine what is signified to do (2002:80). Within a change-oriented fashion practice a range of unconventional fashion projects could logically appear to be entirely acceptable, appropriate, possibly even conventional, within the confines of their fashion practice. What becomes at issue here is the way in which change-oriented designers could pursue courses of action that elaborate and lay down changes through practical activity which are in part determined by those structures. A second issue is how existing notions of fashion creativity in conceptualising creativity as a problem solving and garment focused activity may not satisfactorily account for the sensitivity of practitioners to particular courses of action that show up as something to do. It is only by identifying and pursing courses of action that may not typically be the ones a conventional design practice would follow that a practice is likely to change. Change can be incidental or the result of more directed courses of exploratory activity. It would follow that design practices that explore a potentially a wider range (than conventional practice) of potential courses of action are able to identify and lay down courses of action which could lead to further change or the consolidation of emergent changes.

Fashion is often characterised as a phenomenon of change itself. Practice Theory would say that change in practices refer to shifts in the way practices are carried out and/or the ends towards which they are oriented. Change in fashion is commonly understood to be the stylistic and formal variation in fashion garments over time, with seasonal variations in clothing styles, with shifts in colour, silhouette, detailing etc. When change is considered in relation to the kinds of projects and activities pursued or even the way in which we carry out fashion practices these challenge our understanding of fashion as inherently changeable.

From the perspective of Practice Theory fashion appears a far more stable practice than what one would expect. This kind of stability is, according to Von Busch (2007:32), due to institutionalised fashion norms that determine, "what kinds of novelty are considered valuable." In this, the current arrays of fashion possibilities are governed by normatively prescribed activities and outcomes. This set of possibilities could refer to kinds of outcomes, as well as the contexts in which the work is presented and the strategies employed in making, presenting, displaying, marketing or distributing practice outcomes.

A reconsideration of fashion design practice in relation to theories of practice suggest fashion design is a relatively stable practice with a differentiation in fashion practice ranging from conventional and stable practices to unconventional and dynamic practices. Conventional fashion design supports current modes of practice and would affirm normatively proscribed activities and outcomes while pursuing normatively proscribed forms of fashion innovation. These would tend to focus on forms of garment focussed fashion innovation outlined above. A dynamic fashion practice would consciously or otherwise challenge normatively proscribed activities and outcomes while engaging in forms of fashion activity that challenge the notion of fashion creativity as primarily a garment focused activity.

An extended field of activity referred to as 'concept based' or 'context based' activity distinguishes dynamic practices within the domain of fashion. Bugg (2007) examines these the recent emergence of these fashion practices as interdisciplinary, located in proximity to a set of practices and contexts including, film, photography, animation,

performance, music videos, performance practices and contemporary art practice. She makes the claim that contemporary fashion needs to be understood in relation to these new contexts of fashion activity, suggesting, "a broader application and terminology for conceptual creative practices with the discipline of fashion design" (2007:11). In short fashion understood as a relatively generic activity dedicated solely toward commerce and garment focussed notions of innovation are challenged by these emergent fashion practices.

Dynamic Practice: Bless

Desiree Heiss and Ines Kagg, of Bless describe their work as 'design reflections in general ' (Bornhold 2003). Their work traverses garment, accessory, technology, image making, product design and spatial practices in ways that collapse boundaries between disciplines. Contrary to much fashion design the work of Bless is located within the everyday. Bless products are not presented on catwalks, but in ways which refer to contexts for which the design is intended. Contexts include domestic space and the home, travel, leisure time, technology, fashion, culturally significant, noteworthy or even marginalised practices. Bless employ novel application of fashion strategies to disparate domains that challenge domain boundaries and product categories.

Rather than pursue an explicitly critical or ideological position, Bless focus on an unconventional working method for fashion (4 new designs each year produced as limited edition), a constant shifting between disciplinary domains and strategies

(accessories, beauty, furniture, art exhibition, publication, performance) and a mode of permanent experimentation (Zahm 2006).

Conventional fashion practice focuses on the production of clothing to be taken up in use. Bless pursue an altogether different strategy that focuses on particular issues or problems. That outcomes are able to reflect upon situations or respond to problems in a way that is intelligible to an outsider is of note. These issues are those the designers choose to address or are developed from problems that evolve from outside their practice: " Our work thrives on tasks that come from outside or that we impose on ourselves and the subsequent search for solutions that we consider meaningful " (Winkleman 2006:19). This focus on issues, ideas or problems means that the form of the design is contingent on the particular examination of an issue and how the solution evolves. In this way the work is not delineated by any category of object but rather employs the object as a set of potentials. Zahm (2006:4) characterises this aspect: " Bless does not work on style, on the form given to a function (the article of clothing or accessory), but on the distributed functions of the form. Bless reverses the relationship to style. Instead of going from function towards new form, Bless goes from form to hypothetical functions or potentials ".

The practice outcomes of Bless respond to a range of contemporary issues and problems. These are generally related to fashion but not in ways that one would expect. For example Bless have addressed the inconveniences of Hotel stays (Bless N°20 o.kayers), the problematics of dressing for erratic weather conditions (Climate confusion assistance 2006 Bless N°28), the usefulness of individual items of clothing (Bless N°23 The bringer), or 'style neutralizing' impact of many products supporting our everyday care and maintenance activities (Bless N°17 Design Relativators).

These projects appear to spring from novel insights into issues or problems encountered in everyday life. They are noteworthy in that they bring to the fore aspects or dimensions of everyday life that might often go unnoticed. Other projects (Bless N° 13 Basics) examine contemporary fashion taboos including prohibition on 'unspectacular and banal' clothing. In this project Bless designed a collection to enhance people's 'real ' character stating: "normality is nothing to be ashamed of…" (Bless, 2002: 14). Bless N° 9 'Merchandising' addressed the pervasiveness of fashion marketing with a series of formless sweatshirts, t-shirts and scarves serving as advertising space for the embroidered Bless logos and digitized images of the designers, which were then worn by models into various Paris fashion week events in 1999.

The range of Bless projects are varied, both in the terms of the thematic content, the specific form the design may take, and the exhibition and display strategies. Outcomes have included publishing, accessories, furniture, objects, footwear, garments, photography, installation or public intervention. Often garment or accessory type designs will require a user to complete or interpret the design in some way for it to become usable. For example in Bless N°6. 'Customizable Footwear' the wearer is required to cut a shoe from an adhesive material that is then wrapped over the foot to create a finished form. In this BLESS products often involve the user to resolve the 'personal equation in your own way', (Zahm 2006:2). While Bless N°23 'The bringer' reflects on the experience of usefulness in our everyday engagement with things. The term 'The bringer' refers to spontaneous enthusiasm as response to a thing that is personally very useful. The design responses to this notion are clothing assemblages composed of individual pieces including jacket, shirt, scarf and shoes. The different designs that compose 'The bringer' it is claimed

can be interpreted to satisfy any clothing need (http://www.bless-service.de/ last viewed 27/11/2010).

Zahm characterises Bless's practice as a form of critique of contemporary fashion's association of style, individualism and personal identity, while distinguishing Bless from 'anti-fashion' strategies as they turn fashion into an, "unmarked subjective space that is non-stereotypical and outside the system of established codes" (2006:5).

In examples outlined above the question might be posed: To what extent are these designers drawing upon an expanded field in their practice of fashion? These understandings reflect a generally understood field of fashion including the wearing of clothes, satisfaction, attachments to things, notions of usefulness, desirability and notions of style. But for Bless outcomes are not pre-defined as categorical distinctions i.e. conventional fashion items, but rather in response to particular framing of issues or questions. These fashion designers appear to depart with normative fashion design by examining fashion as a meaningful field of and by moving in and out of different categories of objects and different contexts to reflect on fashion itself.

Dynamic fashion practices, such as Bless consciously or otherwise, highlight the normative convention of contemporary fashion design practice. They also provide a form of commentary and, through project documentation, contribute to discourse regarding contemporary fashion practice. These practices have the potential to uncover aspects of fashion usually concealed within the complex melange of contexts, practices, objects, ideas, knowledge and problems constituting contemporary fashion. Through practical action they enact design strategies that

challenge established fashion norms in relation to the kinds of objects produced, the contexts in which work is produced or displayed, and the specific strategies employed within the practice. These practices also reflect a set of conceptual, contextual or critical considerations that challenge conventional notions of fashion creativity.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper the discussion of normativity, change, creativity and practices has explored the potential for design to institute forms of change. Change here is the way design practices are carried out. The way practices are elaborated is of particular importance as are the ends, projects and tasks towards which practitioners may be oriented. These end-projects-task combinations contained in a practice's teleoaffective structure determine in part which courses of action are desirable, acceptable, appropriate or conceivable while shaping the developmental path a practice follows. The emergence of what I have termed 'dynamic' fashion practice in the field of fashion highlights design practices that engage in unconventional strategies that suggest a change in the contents of teleoaffective structures of some areas of fashion practice. This paper provided an example of this practice with reference to the fashion label Bless. Dynamic practices are characterized by an extended field of activity that challenge commonly understood boundaries delimiting fashion practice. Implied in this form of practice is a form of fashion creativity that challenges conventional understandings of fashion creativity as a pursuit of novel fashion garments set with within an emergent set of fashion possibilities. A consideration of the way change is laid down in practical action suggests the extent

to which practitioners may be sensitive to courses of action has a bearing on the direction and form of any change.

The field of sustainable design calls for new ways of carrying out our practices. Sustainable practices require new ways to understand what we do as well as how we can change. The emergence of dynamic practice in the field of fashion design highlights the possibility of change as well as identifying specific strategies that enact changes in the way practices are carried out. They also uncover dimensions of fashion concealed with complex arrangements of human practices, contexts, artefacts, knowledge and understandings. Dynamic fashion practices engage in a form of designing that has the potential not only to change the way we understand the field of fashion but also to provide concrete demonstration of change-focussed practical action.

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