The autoethnography of creative design: From Medium to Shift

Abstract

This article explores the potential of an autoethnographic method for academic reflection on processes of creative design. Inspired by work such as Livingston’s *Ethnographies of Reason*, the author uses this method to trace her own reasoning and decision-making when trying to design or ‘build’ garments in such a way as to establish a dialogue between fashion and architectural principles and practices. This is illustrated with a description of the steps that lead from an earlier collection, *Medium*, to the design of a new fashion collection, *Shift*. One important conclusion is that creative design is an emergent process rather than a linear path from concept to implementation. At the same time, it is shown that the process can be traced and accounted for.

**Key words**: Design, Fashion, Architecture, Autoethnography, Emergent process

Introduction

How does one combine an artistic project, specifically in fashion design, with academic reflection? That is the question I was confronted with when I started working, more than a year ago, towards a doctorate in the arts [In the context of Flemish higher education, the concept of a ‘doctorate in the arts’ was – and still is – entirely new. Expectations are unclear. There is only a very formal set of requirements, combined with the vague and mostly implicit suggestion that such a doctorate should be first and foremost a creative artistic project, to be combined with academic reflection (i.e. a text of an academic nature and quality)]. At first sight, there is a clear conflict between incompatible demands. Creative design, though it must follow its own rules and constraints, is a highly personal experience. Academic work, on the other hand, requires objectivity and distance. Fortunately, there are three sources of inspiration that help me along in the search for an answer.

My first source of inspiration is an innovative ethnography of creative processes. While I went through my second-year basic training as a fashion design student at the Antwerp Royal
Academy of Fine Arts, Todd Nicewonger, then a Ph.D. student in anthropology at Columbia University, spent 15 months doing fieldwork at the Academy (in 2006-2007). He firmly believed that fashion design as a cultural and social phenomenon could not be understood in terms of its material products alone. What he wanted to investigate was how a school that was internationally perceived as having produced its own brand of avant-garde fashion aesthetics, manages to educate or socialize its students into such a recognizable style. A detailed analysis of the social practices and the underlying concepts and attitudes involved is to be found in *Fashioning the Moral Aesthetic: An Ethnographic Study of the Socialization of Antwerp Trained Fashion Designers* (Nicewonger 2011). Nicewonger uses established ethnographic methods, primarily open-ended and structured interviews, (video- and audio-) recordings, observation and participant observation, paying special attention to face-to-face interaction between teachers and students as well as among students in simultaneous design activities, focusing not only on language, but also gesture and situated ways of looking/seeing. Subjectivity and social relations are central to his analysis, which innovatively turns the institutionally embedded transfer and acquisition of design norms and practices into an ethnographic field. This field consists of the interactive establishment of consensus, the social recognition of expert knowledge in an area involving individual creativity and authorship, or ‘the cultural politics of appropriation in design’.

At first sight, an ethnography of design pedagogy or transmission and learning from the position of an outside observer is very different thematically and methodologically from the task I was confronted with. However, one of the main contributions of Nicewonger’s research is the conclusion one may draw that design processes, from the first sketches onwards, are akin to forms of reasoning and that they illustrate how emotions and involvement can affect critical thought processes. Therefore, what must be understood is the work in progress, the steps taken in the exploration of possibilities, and the concepts in terms of which the experience is organized. Though he focuses strongly on interactional aspects, this connects his work, which is at a certain point labelled a ‘biography of innovation’, directly with my second source of inspiration, a book entitled *Ethnographies of Reason* (Livingston 2008). Livingston’s main claim is that the abstract and universally valid reasoning we all know from logic (of the type “All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal”) is not the only, and maybe not the most important, type of reasoning in human life. There are also types of reasoning that are completely specific to domains of action. You may, for instance, have complete command over your logical reasoning capabilities, and you may still not be able to think in a way suitable to a game of checkers, even if you have been explained all the rules. Livingston illustrates this with a wide range of practical activities, from playing checkers to an attempt to reconstruct a square from the pieces of a broken tile (the tangram problem), to solving jigsaw puzzles, folding origami figures, or driving across a four-way stop intersection. He shows that an ethnographic approach enables a researcher to trace the steps in the practical and creative reasoning processes underlying such activities. A successful analysis, however, requires that we “continually pursue ever more closely what we ourselves are doing, seeing, and experiencing” (Livingston 2008, p. 39). Livingston adds:

“In a sense, these studies require that we be faithful to ourselves but without yet knowing the selves to which we seek to be faithful.” (Livingston 2008, p. 39)

This last formulation shows that an ethnography of reason is by definition a form of autoethnography, a tradition which is my third source of inspiration and the solution to my problem. Autoethnography starts from the assumption that close scrutiny of an individual’s own experiences can be relevant for the analysis of corresponding wider contexts and practices. Some work that bears the label is more like autobiography (as when Ellis 2009 looks back on ‘life and work’), sometimes even fictional (as in *The Ethnographic I* by the same author, 2004), and often more literary than anthropological (e.g. Deck 1990). The term is not an extremely recent one, as it was already used by Goldschmidt (1977) in the title of a lecture reflecting on the practice of anthropology. Later, autoethnography as a method in its own right – though it is
not always given that name – has been applied to experiences of many different types, from life as a stuttering academic (Weinreb 2008) to pregnancy (Papen 2008) and to teaching (Dressman 2006). Recently, even a methodological textbook was published (Chang 2008). In essence, autoethnography as a method combines narrative detail with cultural analysis and interpretation. Some would want to define it as a typically postmodern type of research:

“Autoethnography shares with other postmodern forms of qualitative research this turning away from the certainties (and arrogance) of the 'grand narratives' of modernist social science.” (Papen 2008: 397)

Though this may provide theoretical justification, my own reason for turning to autoethnography is much less lofty, far more practical. The process of designing a collection of clothes leaves a trail: the original research data, sketches functioning as visual thought experiments, scribbled notes and observations, a selection from the sketches that are turned into drawings, trial pieces, patterns, and prototypes. In other words, all the data are available to tell a story of design as a creative and material production process, analyzed and interpreted in ways very similar to Livingston’s ethnographic account of domain-specific reasoning. This is exactly what I will try to do by accounting for the transition from one collection (“Medium”) to the next (“Shift”). This can be seen as a complement to Nicewonger’s research: to his outside perspective an inside view is added; and his focus on the transmission and acquisition of skills and aesthetic norms is followed naturally by an account of later independent design practices.

**Building garments: the formulation of a project**

The problem as stated in the first paragraph of this text must be put into the context of the doctoral design and research project I started out from. As already indicated, the project was aimed at a doctorate in the arts, in the field of fashion design. Its outcome was intended to be aninnovative experimental collection based on research, experimentation, and creative design, and an academic report on the principles and processes involved. The specific orientation was conceived as an integration of creative processes at the point of overlap between the practices of architecture and fashion design. The research would involve looking at past and present forms of mutual influence and collaboration between these two artistic and technical domains; this would also require depth-interviews with prominent practitioners. Experiments would be conducted with fabrics, colors and shapes, starting from up-to-date technologies which already blur the traditional borders, and contributing to their further development. The collection to be designed and created (from drawing via try-outs to production) would experiment with the tension between innovative aesthetics, rational principles of construction, and wearability; it would make use of architectural principles adapted to clothing, and of advanced technologies, while seeking a balance with traditional materials and techniques.

This was, somehow, a natural continuation of my work as a fashion design student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, which had already been clearly influenced by a way of looking at architecture. My bachelor collection (supervised by Walter Van Beirendonck), ‘In the room of another’, drew inspiration from a visit to Huis Sonneveld (by Brinkman and van der Vlugt) in Rotterdam. For my master collection (supervised by Dirk Van Saene), “Medium” (which will be the starting point for the account below), I wanted to use paper as a medium to lay bare the artificiality of normal life, and in order to translate the idea of paper into garments, I integrated Japanese origami folding techniques as used in origamic architecture (Masahiro Chatani 1983). While the emphasis for those projects was on artistic creation, the experience taught me that, like in architecture, a delicate balance must be reached between art and technology in order to create an end product that is not only aesthetically innovative but also well-made, usable, and – important from an ecological perspective – durable and sustainable.

Of course, areas of overlap between fashion and architecture had already been explored before. The search for a good balance between artistic creativity and technical innovation was
central to such efforts. In that respect, strong beacons had been set by designers such as Azzedine Alaia, Comme des Garçons (especially with their patterns),

Charles James, Cristobal Balenciaga, Madeleine Vionnet, and many others. With in-depth research and experimentation, I hoped to contribute to the further exploration of the specific relationship of cross-fertilization between fashion and architecture, because it seemed to me that thus far mainly visible parallels had been focused on. I was convinced that fashion design would only move forward in this specific direction if the area of overlap was included in the design and thought process of a collection.

It is clear that fashion and architecture have a number of things in common. The main function of both is to protect and shelter the human body, while providing a means of expressing identity, whether personal, political, religious or cultural. This is why both are constantly torn between practical (technical) demands and symbolic and aesthetic (artistic) demands of expression. Fashion and architecture are both important anthropological artifacts that mark cultural, social, and economic conditions, stylistic preferences and new developments in technology and materials. Also the creative process shows similarities. Both fashion designers and architects start with a flat 2D sketch and have to shape their ideas into complex 3D forms, whether garments or buildings [Today, the process may be facilitated by 3D printers using so-called ‘rapid prototype technology’, but the conceptual processes remain the same].

There are, however, also important differences. There is a difference in scale and in the relation to the human body. Fashion is designed for the individual human body to move around with; architecture designs spaces large enough for multiple bodies to move around in or to move in and out of. This makes the two fields of practice clearly complementary. The difference in scale is responsible for different ways of working. Fashion designers can make try-outs directly on the human body, while an architect has to make smaller-scale models, as there is no room for error when the building is actually constructed. At first sight it would also seem that fashion is a more ephemeral phenomenon, making use of soft and flowing fabrics to materialize an idea, while architecture tends towards the monumental, making use of less flexible and highly durable materials. Moreover, garments (even for lesser known designers) are usually made in larger quantities; though building patterns can also be repetitive, if a renowned architect designs a building there is often only one example of it in the world.

The relation between fashion and architecture had been a point of interest for many years. Much earlier than “Skin+Bones” (Los Angeles/London, 2006-2008), with an exhibition in 1982 called “Intimate Architecture: Contemporary Clothing Design”, curator Susan Sidlaukas (MIT) examined the formal aspects of the work of eight fashion designers from an architectural point of view. There are good reasons for this interest, as there has indeed been considerable mutual influence (e.g., Hussein Chalayan, Shigeru Ban). Thus fashion methods such as draping, wrapping, weaving and pleating have entered the practice of architecture, while a number of ways to describe fashion techniques and shapes go back to an architectural frame of reference, such as ‘structured or constructed garments,’ ‘sculptural’, or, indeed, ‘architectural design.’ Yet, a systematic in-depth study of the relationships had not yet been made. (For some exceptions, see Fausch et al. eds. 1994, Kinney 1999, Wigley 1995.)

Both fashion and architecture have long been topics of debate with respect to their status as art. Not surprisingly, the emergence of the discussion (from Charles Baudelaire, Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel, all the way to Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project and beyond) coincides with the intellectual debate on modernity (see also Evans & Breward eds. 2005, Vinken 2005). While industrial production and capitalist merchandizing were responsible for the phenomenon of fashion as a fast-changing ‘product’, architects, designers, and other artists (E.W. Godwin, William Morris, Oscar Wilde, Henry van de Velde, Adolf Loos, Frank Lloyd Wright – see Stern 1992) emphasized the need to think about design as a continuum of aesthetics and rationality. Architecture and fashion were regarded as equals by this cultural
elite, which stressed the importance of the creative process. But studies aimed at an integration of these creative processes were rare [For a brief exploration of the relationship between fashion and modernity, see Verschueren (2011)].

As inventories of available technologies showed (e.g. Braddock & O’Mahoney 1998, Brossard 1997, Udale 2008), there are many ways in which the development and use of materials allows for mutual influences and parallel developments of techniques in fashion and architecture. New products, strengthening this tendency, emerge all the time. Technological innovation is a driving force behind the blurring of traditional borders, to the point where clothing technologies can be said to incorporate properties for which only buildings used to be designed: e.g. Uniqlo’s heat tech fabrics, Schoeller’s self-cleaning ‘Nanosphere’ fabrics, UV-repellent ‘ColdBlack’ fabrics, and the like.

It was against this background that I situated my design and research plans. The goal of my project, therefore, was a well-researched fashion design experiment (a new collection) which would further explore the tension between artistic and technical/technological demands, drawing inspiration from architectural methods/principles, and converting those to the specific functionality of clothing. With this collection and the research project, I hoped to achieve a new approach to fashion design, one that would be more theoretically based and inspired, one that would also help me as a designer to create my own body of work. The central task before me was the drawing and developing of a collection that would experiment with the tension between innovative aesthetics, rational principles of construction, and wearability, making creative use of architectural principles (adapted to the functionality of clothing) and advanced technologies (without radically abandoning traditional methods). The collection should evoke the parallel between the making of clothes around the human body and the architect’s construction of a mantle around the (albeit self-constructed) skeleton of a building, using the naked body as a starting point. It should re-invent the idea of a ‘garment’ from an architectural point of view; i.e., patterns, colors, materials should be architecturally conceived. That is why the project was given the title \textit{Building garments}.

\textbf{“Medium”}

The starting point was my master collection, a quite typical product of the processes described in great detail by Nicewonger (2011) as characteristic for the educational and aesthetic principles and practices of the Antwerp Academy. One of the basic principles is that inspiration can be found anywhere, in a variety of aesthetic forms that may seem to be completely unrelated, images that can be put together in a personal composition that can serve as the basis for a design concept. It does not really matter whether the concept comes first and the ‘research’ follows, or the other way around. But the task is to find one concept which can be given a form by creating a collection of pieces around it. The purpose is not to interpret or reproduce current trends in a market-oriented way, but to invent new ones that may both capture the spirit of the moment and carry a relevant message. The outcome is not just the product of individual thought processes, but of collaborative reasoning (in the Academy context: with the instructor and to a certain extent with fellow students). Such collaboration requires a common expert discourse with (usually quite vague) key notions such as volume (referring to a set of formal properties that embody and communicate the design concept – often in exaggerated shapes, but also through cuts and patterns), atmosphere (expressing what the imagined world that is being created looks and feels like), and balance (the necessary bridge from the design idea to the functionality of clothes – an aspect that tends to recede into the background in the Academy context). The key to evaluation is the even more intangible notion of authenticity, i.e. the personal – and if at all possible, socially relevant – search for newness which tries to find an equilibrium between the designer’s subject position and intersubjective readings of beauty. And the site for all of this is the body, around which aesthetic material forms have to be produced.
The basic concept for my master collection was, as already mentioned above, paper. The idea did not come to me by looking at earlier examples of experimenting with paper in fashion design [It was a lucky coincidence that during the second half of my master year, the Antwerp Fashion Museum (MoMu) organized an exhibition around “Paper Fashion”, which served as further encouragement], but rather by focusing on the prominent role that paper has in the design process. There are the initial sketches, the drawings, the color studies, the patterns. How far could one take this relation? The formulation of this question was reinforced and transformed by inspiration taken from different sources. One was the art of Thomas Demand, who plays around with interpretations of reality by photographing objects that he first makes out of paper. The perfection of the objects, strangely enough, produces a sense of alienation in the viewer. The pictures are slightly off. Their realism is fake, but not obviously so (see e.g. Figure 1). What I wanted to do was also to use the flexibility and fragility of paper to introduce slight impurities, laying bare not only the artificiality of the garments, but to a certain extent the artificiality of normal life. Another source supporting the same atmosphere for the collection was a YouTube film by Armando Iannucci in which a couple visits a house for sale and discovers step by step that everything in it has been made of paper.

Translating this idea of ‘paper’ into my garments did not only require the use of paper (of different kinds, including tyvek) as such, but also a treatment of fabrics as if they were paper. I pleated, cut, folded, and made manual drawings. Moreover, I integrated Japanese origamic folding techniques as used in Masahiro Chatani’s origamic architecture to create unusual shapes and patterns. For print-like effects I was inspired by the crude first strokes of a child’s drawings, as well as ink on blotting paper and unwashed chalkboards. (See Figures 2, 3, and 4.)
Figures 2.

Figures 3.
**Figures 2 and 3.** Examples of manual drawing and blotting, as used in *Medium*

![Figures 2 and 3](image)

**Figure 4.** Some of the origami folding techniques, as used in *Medium*

While both materials and techniques/processes were constitutive for the collection, materials took center stage. That is why the collection was called *Medium* [*The collection won the Grand Prix du Jury L’Oréal Professionnel 2010 at the Festival International de Mode et de Photographie à Hyères*]. It did not only use paper as a medium, but it also used fashion as a medium to explore ways of looking at a garment-filled world.
Figure 5. A typical Medium silhouette: Black woolen blazer with cotton pop-up vest attached; dark grey cotton shirt with chalkboard print tucked into light grey cotton trousers with white square pencil print, belted; nude pleated leather shoes. (Picture courtesy Shoji Fujii.)
Figure 6.

Figure 7
Design, Style and Fashion

The autoethnography of creat... http://fashion.semiotix.org/2013/02/the-autoethnography-...

Figure 9.

Figure 8.
Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9. More Medium silhouettes. (Pictures courtesy Shoji Fujii.)

Figures 10.
“Shift”

With “Medium” behind me, I started to develop the project described above, relating fashion to architecture, which seemed like a natural continuation of the path I had already entered when importing techniques from origamic architecture. In the search for a proper angle to start from, I was first looking for inspiration in modernist architecture (à la Corbusier and Bauhaus), an art form which plays around with simple structural elements to create interesting new forms without aiming at ornament. In a way, an architect has more freedom in the sense that the spaces around which a building is erected is as it were created by that very structure, so that in principle unlimited variation is possible, within the sole constraints of the availability of open space and specific materials. It seemed like an interesting question, therefore, to look for ways of translating the same general principle to a different art form, fashion, which must ‘build’ structures (i) with the restrictions of a ‘space’ that is already given in advance, namely the human body, that must be enwrapped, enveloped, enrobed, bedraped – or, simply, clothed, but (ii) also with the extra possibilities that arise from the use of more flexible materials.

I started to look for specific aspects of architectural structure or construction that would lend themselves for such a ‘translation’. This required a shift in perspective (a first reason for calling the new collection “Shift”):
I would have to give center stage to structure and technique rather than materials, which had been the focus for “Medium”. The structural principle that I decided to work with as a theme for the new collection was layering. What would be carried over from “Medium” were the folding techniques, but in more subtle ways. The question was, then, how to realize forms of layering technically in prints, pleats, folds, and shapes in general. This concept itself, to be given an aesthetic form with flexible materials, evoked an atmosphere of dynamics: layering around a human body in motion involves shifts and changes, sometimes resulting in overlaps, but always carrying the seeds of transformation. Once this concept had taken shape, the label “Shift” was firmly established.

As had been the case for the collections designed during my earlier years as a student, the development of the basic idea for the collection went hand in hand with the construction of seemingly unrelated images derived from various sources of inspiration. Here are just a few:

- Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s 1987 art film “Der Lauf der Dinge”, representing a causal chain of events with everyday objects.
- Ellsworth Kelly’s art, which is an endless world of ideas, colors, images, details, solutions.
- Katja Mater’s density drawings, a layering of multiple moments in time.
- The folded structure of a type of Japanese water bottle.
- The work of Kees Goudzwaard, which typically results from a twofold procedure where first models are made in paper, which are then translated into oil on canvas, with pieces of paper and tape as stand-ins for color patches and lines, as building blocks for the composition; often a layering of bits of tape and sheets of transparent paper create new color nuances; when looking at this, the layering causes certain shapes to appear and disappear, so that the paintings are constantly in motion even after having been completed.
- The work of Jesus Rafael Soto, with striped backgrounds which partly absorb the superimposed images.

All of these sources of inspiration have in common that processes are emphasized rather than products.

Figure 12 and 13.
Figures 12 and 13. Katja Mater, density drawings

Figure 14.

Figure 15.
Once the label had been established and the general concept for the collection had taken further shape through the images assembled from a variety of sources, the semantics of the word ‘shift’ provided even more substance for what it was I was trying to do. The word itself refers to

- transformations and changes of place, position, direction, or form (in a very general sense, and applicable in many very specific areas, such as a phonetic shift in language change, a change of gear in a motor vehicle, a change of the position of the hand on the finger-board in violin playing, etc.)
- successive time periods (as when one group of workers, e.g. a night shift, continues the work of another group)
- slight faults, dislocations, or cracks in the earth’s crust

A strong visual impression that was recalled by this last meaning of ‘shift’ and that would play a decisive role in the shaping of the new collection, was Doris Salcedo’s long crack across the turbine hall of the Tate Modern in London [The collection won the Grand Prix du Jury L’Oréal Professionnel 2010 at the Festival International de Mode et de Photographie à Hyères]. Strangely enough, the meanings of ‘shift’ related to clothing (a straight loose dress, or women’s sleeveless undergarment) played hardly any role at all.

What is described in the foregoing paragraphs went hand in hand, of course, with sketching
and experimentation. The more firmly the idea took shape, however, the more I was confronted with technical difficulties. Not all textiles lend themselves to the creation of layered and folded structures that fit around a human body and that keep their shape when actually used. Such had not been my worries when working on “Medium”. Within the Academy context, it did not matter for me as a student whether a silhouette survived more than a few shows and photo sessions. I could use paper. I could use cotton, wool, and linen. And if a fabric did not naturally submit to whatever shape I wanted to give it, a good dose of starch would do the trick. I knew the clothes would never have to be washed anyway. Even though my new designs would have to fit into a doctoral project, I did not want to keep designing unusable garments. The real challenge was to combine artistically innovative design with wearability and durability. Or to quote Steve Jobs: “Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works.”

The technical problems I ran into resulted from my attempt to think too strictly in terms of architectural principles. I gradually realized that I was not an architect, that perhaps I did not fully understand the principles I wanted to apply, and that maybe they were not so simply transferrable to fashion. The solution came during my first confrontations with the world and perspective of real architects. First there was a chance encounter with an architect working for OMA in Rotterdam [One of the leading partners of OMA is world-famous architect Rem Koolhaas]. A few weeks later I was an invited speaker at the F(AA)shion Research Lab [Organized on 21-31 March 2011 in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, by the London-based Architectural Association (AA) School of Architecture]. in Paris where, on the initiative of Jorge Ayala, the relationship between fashion and architecture was explored for architects in order to find out to what extent architecture itself could be inspired by fashion, rather than – what seems to be more common – the other way around. Both encounters taught me that, indeed, between the two disciplines a very interesting dialogue was possible, but that the fruitfulness of the interaction did not depend very much on attempts to compare or attempts to use each other’s materials, aesthetic forms, or techniques. Rather, the key seemed to be to think of complementarity, thus leaving the essence of each discipline completely intact, respecting their specificity as art forms with their own functionality as added value.

Figure 17.
Once I understood this, the translation of the idea of layering into the collection “Shift” became easy. I no longer had to think about layering as an architectural principle, but as a fashion principle. The consequence was that I could freely develop a material aesthetic form for the dynamics and mobility that had already become such a central part of the concept I had been developing; that would have been much harder if I had kept working within the contraints of an idea associated with more static structures such as buildings – even those that evoke motion (as in figures 17 and 18). I could also start sculpting close to the body, letting my clothes hug it rather than to move expansively outward. And I realized that I had to incorporate that other aspect of the functionality of fashion, namely that clothes have to be adapted to seasons. So I had to choose a season for the new collection. The choice for a Spring/Summer collection then followed naturally from the basic characteristics of the concept: freely moving dynamic bodies are more readily associated with warm than with cold weather. Now I could also define some other fashion-specific design goals: I wanted to create innovative high-quality daywear, comfortable to move around in, stylish enough for more fancy occasions as well, clean and sober, but also with a touch of the hand, the kind of fine craftsmanship that also distinguishes fashion.
Figure 19. Inspiration for *Shift*

Figure 20.
Though the design became easier once this reframing had taken place, this did not mean all problems were solved. Fashion is not only art with functionality as added value. Fashion is also a highly technical field. The search for a company, for instance, that could actually produce the types of pleats and folds that I wanted to be part of my collection, was not simple. After trying several European specialized companies, I ended up with a Japanese company that was both able and willing to approximate what I wanted. For the folded pieces in the collection, it was necessary to use 100% polyester of a certain weight, and the actual folding requires hand-made paper molds (which take three days to make) that can only be used for a limited number of pieces (about ten) because of the heat-pressing technique. The technique has other restrictions as well: seams are hard to conceal, and the molds cannot be made very wide.
(maximum 60×90 cm, so that producing the desired shapes requires inventive design). Another property is the transparency of the fabric, which could be seen as a limitation, but which is actually very suitable for the collection, as overlaps and structure become very visible.

Figure 22.

Figure 23.
Figure 24.

Figure 25.
Figures 22, 23, 24, and 25. Clockwise from upper left: close-up of polyester folds; hand-folding; resulting paper molds; heat-pressing installation

Figure 26
The resulting collection, “Shift” [The collection was shown during the 26th Festival de Mode et de Photographie à Hyères, 29 April-1 May 2011], is entirely made of 100% Japanese organic cotton fabrics (except for the folded polyester pieces). One of the pieces is called the ‘Shift dress’, with overlapping (i.e. layered) pleats. The fabric is vegetable dyed. As a result, the color will fade in time – another manifestation of the “Shift” concept. The dress comes in two colors, persimmon and indigo (Japanese ai). Another piece, the ‘Trails dress’, is made of a cotton that feels like wool, and it uses inverted pleats oriented towards the body and coming alive when the body moves. The ‘Line dress’ combines the techniques of the first two.

Figures 26 and 27. Two Shift silhouettes with folded polyester. (Pictures courtesy Shoji Fujii.)
By way of conclusion

The main conclusion to be drawn from the experiences reflected in the above narrative account is that design is a truly ‘emergent’ process. It does not move in a linear way from concept to implementation. Rather, design as a creative process moves ahead (or sometimes in circles) in a self-organizing and unpredictable way from (sometimes even purely formal) concepts and
sources of inspiration, in interaction with material possibilities and limitations, and with an end result that is more than the sum of its component parts.

Another conclusion is that the metaphor of ‘building garments’, central as it was to the original formulation of my project, may be a misleading metaphor. One cannot get a direct translation from a design idea to the production of the garment. The first trials in coarse cotton (‘toile’ in the jargon) is not like the architect’s maquette, which allows for a precise calculation of needed materials (in terms of type, quantity, and strength). What intervenes all the time is the material itself, the thread, the fabric, the coloring, the technical equipment itself. A conclusion to this effect was also reached by Nicewonger (2011) after studying design processes in the education setting of the Antwerp Academy. While the dialogue between practitioners of architecture and of fashion design is demonstrably useful and fruitful, taking the first as a model for the second overshoots the potential of a true form of interaction between the two.

Finally, just as Nicewonger (2011) could point out that anthropologists should not restrict their involvement with fashion to the importing of ethnographic techniques for a better understanding of consumer desires and needs (a very instrumental use to which the techniques indeed tend to be put), and that instead ethnography can be used for a deeper understanding of design processes as such and of the wider human and social context they fit into, I hope to have shown that a form of autoethnography may also contribute to such understanding. The task is to carefully trace the steps that we take, whether as a result of careful reasoning and planning, or in an improvised way under the influence of impressions and influences that guide our insights and aesthetic visions. The outcome is unpredictable, much like the design process itself. But Arthur Koestler already told us that this is what science and art have in common: the merging of influences and ideas, with unpredictable results.

References


About the author

Alexandra Verschueren is a fashion designer educated at the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Arts, now preparing a Doctorate in the Arts in the field of fashion design at the University of Antwerp. In 2010 she won the Grand Prix du Jury L’Oréal Professionnel at the Festival International de Mode et de Photographie à Hyères. She recently published “Fast forward? Reflections on fashion and modernity” (The Public Journal of Semiotics III:2).

Areas of inquiry: Design, Autoethnography

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