

Conceptual Fashion and Media Research as site-specific Narratives

Andrea Zapp, Manchester School of Arts, Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom, a.zapp@mmu.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper introduces academic research into conceptual apparel and fashion narratives that are inspired by diverse art and media aesthetics for unique collection stories. Distinct photography forms the design continuum with photo-real imagery carefully mapped onto patterns, creating fabric textures and garment shapes. They concentrate in their content on investigating place and space as a shared environment. The actual design practice is therefore embedded in a reflective discourse that is driven by exploring textiles as a social, factual or cultural platform for meaning and narrative. Fabric is treated as a screen and canvas for a collage of visual information, cultural environment, collective memory and association. In contextualizing this multi-disciplinary approach, wider theoretical implications and readings of narrative imagery in textile, fashion design and art are cross-referenced. A focus is on particular limited editions as a research model and case study within this practice. Bespoke ranges have been commissioned by partners in creative industries that explore site-specific histories and new insights for design outputs. They have been exhibited at international fashion weeks as well as in museum and gallery contexts. As a second outcome they have also played an important role by being commercialized in an academic spinout company and intersecting research strategy with academic enterprise. This is referenced in this context as an underlying support structure for dissemination of above experimentation.

Keywords: media fashion; design thinking; design semantics; collaboration; fashion and function

To fully understand the motivation of this design methodology that uses documentary site-specific photography for collection stories, it is necessary to look at the conceptual origins. They are rooted in research into digital media aesthetics and networking and subsequent installation art work that approached textile as a contextual medium from a more media-philosophical perspective. Vital research questions were dealing with the representation of the human body in the era of global networking, investigating an increasing and all-pervading symbiosis of virtual and real existences and platforms. As a key example, the installation *Third Skin* (2011) explored these allegories as a visual narrative for a dress collection. It was developed for the International Siggraph Exhibition for Digital Arts and Technology: *Tracing Home*, which took place in Vancouver. Playing with the idea of the virtual home, or in other words, the Internet as a parallel space of existence, the garments displayed imagery of virtual spatial environments such as Google Earth as *another* space we might reside in. By mapping those environments back onto the body through clothing, they aimed at merging the real body with the virtual one in an analogue-digital discourse. This metaphorical thought was

influenced by Marshall McLuhan's (1964) early understanding of media and technology as a direct augmentation that extends our human capacities, with clothing being an extension to our skin, in the way that media have become an extension, even prosthesis, to our bodies in general.



Figure 1: Third Skin installation.

Building on this initial metaphor of virtual place and space, a signature language and contemporary fashion design model has been developed since that now uses photo-real imagery as a conceptual layer. Focusing on the designer's own photography as an observation of architectural formations, landscapes or urban environments as contemporary narratives, it equally applies the shared place and space as an underlying design motif. This thought process is further influenced by aesthetics of locative media such as mapping techniques or Global Positioning Systems (GPS). To underline this spatial-analogical design philosophy, exhibitions of dress collections have been accompanied by a customised Google Map screen interface. It enabled visitors to travel virtually to the places and surroundings where the pictures featured on the garments were taken in.

Research Methods

General Design Methodology

Image research and garment pattern design are intertwined from the very beginning. Photos are taken with an understanding of needed structures, forms and detailing for a particular garment style and collection story in mind. They act as visual tableaux and mood boards, driven by factual as well as intuitive criteria, from which details are extracted and applied to a pattern panel. To comply with the visual-documentary design motivation, the photography remains

mostly unaltered apart from minor quality corrections. Diversification is achieved through extensive imagery footage rather than digital manipulation. Usually only one image is spread across a garment to compose a narrative of a particular place or subject in one piece. In parallel, garment shapes are designed, that are minimalist, linear and clear to allow for the photography to breathe and take center stage. Matching block colours are added to frame and emphasize the visuals.

The pattern is digitized and the imagery carefully mapped onto the pattern panels to further reinforce silhouette and form. The pattern parts are then arranged in lay plan files for placement print and fabric cut. Depending on the fabric properties, they are printed via digital inkjet (e.g. silk) or sublimation print (manmade fibers) to guarantee maximum quality in image resolution and print longevity.



Figure 2: Image-to-dress process. Design *Old Post Office in Liverpool* from *Captured around the World* collection.

The photo-real and non-distorted design focus builds direct references to the spatial backdrops and locations the pictures were taken in. However, the placement strategy and fabric print effects can also serve as a technique to blur those boundaries. In the collection *Bay of Naples* for instance, documentary imagery from the ruins of Pompeii was used deliberately to achieve results of image abstraction as another fabric pattern style and allowing for stronger fabric pattern effects. Photographic research on site was undertaken with the intend to give the delicate silk a fresco and painting-like quality, even tromp l'oeil in places, and in turn portraying the ephemeral and evanescent aura of this site.



Figure 2: Design *Lemonia* from *Bay of Naples* collection.

Research into Academic Enterprise

The broader, outwards facing and internationally recognized research background and academic trajectory has helped as a rationale to commercialize this design methodology in an academic enterprise model and to gain support from Manchester Metropolitan University. In 2014 a spinout company with university shareholding was launched - *AZandrea zapp/Media Textiles Limited*. In a proof-of-concept stage business plan, brand profile and marketing strategies were established, with samples being developed in-house but building on an external UK based manufacture chain for print and garment make-up. Being set up as an interdisciplinary platform and working cross-faculty, it enabled research assistances for graduates in design, patternmaking and fashion marketing. Collection outputs have since been showcased at the Saatchi Gallery during London Fashion Week, at Singapore and Paris Fashion Week, and at trade missions in Tokyo, followed by retail in Singapore, Japan and the UK at present. The profile, unique selling point and niche of this brand are distinctly hybrid in

its creative manifest. It bridges the gap between academic research, conceptual thinking and commercial output, balancing exposure in the creative exhibition sector with commercial ventures in the fashion industry.

“As a self employed fashion designer working within my own business structure and crafting my own vision throughout, it is important to note that my work has always been grounded in a strong and substantive research base. I have always believed in the pursuit of innovative methods of fabric development for structuring a personal design identity from within what is a very congested identity” (Dieffenbacher, 2013, p.7).

This conceptual diversity, the method of creating cultural analogies through photo-real fabric design – and last but not least - also the exposure on the international fashion market has attracted design commissions from creative and public industries over time. Since 2014 a range of limited garment editions have been developed with external partners; in a resourceful dialogue that investigates given histories and heritage to formulate a creative response in conceptual fashion. The design results were also made available for sale, either through the venue directly or through the AZ. company channels. They form another important strand of research output that is interlinked with commercial opportunity. External briefs did not only set new design inspirations but the commissioning infrastructure enabled to fund new production and sampling development.

Research through Location Method: Design in a museum context

Case study 1: Limited dress range for Manchester Art Gallery

Manchester Art Gallery and The Gallery of Costume are home to a world-class art collection of artefacts in fine arts, craft, design and costume and the collections include over 25,000 objects, developed over the course of 200 years. In this brief for a limited edition of three dresses, items from the craft and design collection were photographed to form a new pattern narrative. They were chosen for their visual distinctiveness and incorporated into a garment design that in turn aimed to interpret the particular aesthetics of the object through colours and forms.

The collection was also multiplied in external manufacture and offered for sale in the gallery shop.



Figure 3: Figure of a Girl, 1955-65, unknown. Made in Chodzież, Poland. Figures of a Donkey and a Dog, 1959. Designed by Lubomir Tomaszewski. Made in Ćmielów, Poland. Porcelain.



Figure 4: Dress Design *Figurine, Dog & Donkey*, limited edition.



Figure 5: Exhibition set-up.

The dresses were exhibited in the gallery space next to the objects that inspired them and with detailed information provided about their origin. Hence following an established model in museum collection work in that “these projects often result in temporary displays of contemporary work displayed alongside historic collections. Not only do they bring to

light contemporary responses to treasures that may have been overlooked by curators, but they also return to the museum's permanent collection a greater sense of dynamism and relevance to contemporary life” (Hemmings, 2006, p. 16).

Case study 2: Paradise Mill Silk Museum, Macclesfield, Cheshire

In a similar model of devising a limited garment and related public exhibition, this project focused on the actual museum environment for the fabric visuals. Paradise Mill is a manufacture heritage centre in a Grade II listed original mill building and takes the visitor back in time to Macclesfield of the early 20th century. The loom floor contains 26 restored Jacquard silk handlooms, along with designers’ and managers’ offices.

The exhibition showcased three bespoke dress patterns, purchased for the collection, and large- scale design prints of additional 10 garments of the same narrative. It further included a bespoke accessories range of five scarves and ties. They have since been retailed in the museum and the dress collection has been exhibited at international fashion weeks under the title *Paradise Mill*.



Figure 6: Paradise Mill Macclesfield, weaving shed.

The fabric patterns re-imagine the museum’s archive for the 21st century. Printed on silk and hence in line with the heritage, the photographic compositions and visual detailing document the preserved working methods and machinery focusing on manufacture techniques such as spinning and weaving. Other garments are illustrating the fabric archives and swatches on site, by reproducing their textures and historic patterns through photographing and reprinting them. In bringing back to life this rich but now inoperative working culture and history, the garments then hint furthermore at today’s omnipresent offshore production channels for apparel that have led to the subsequent death of a formerly thriving local industry.



Figure 7: Pattern and dress design *Yellow Weave* from *Paradise Mill* collection.

Work-in-Progress: Design with scientific data

Case study 3: British Antarctic Survey (BAS)

In this on-going collaboration with the British Antarctic Survey in Cambridge, the aforementioned location tracking and mapping interfaces are back in focus as an essential research question. BAS is an institute of the British Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) that delivers and enables world-leading interdisciplinary research in the Polar Regions. The project originated in the *Data as Art* initiative: Artists from various backgrounds were invited to collaborate with science partners on visualizing data in its widest definition; to create stunning and thought-provoking responses that are using real Antarctic data-sets to transmit science stories to a wider public audience.

In this context a garment design has been developed in a windbreaker and outdoor style, to align it with the climate specifics of this region. It also draws on inspiration from Inuit folklore costumes and early Antarctic explorer uniforms to complete this localised narrative. This time science photography footage from the image database at BAS was used as a visual resource, and a particular emphasis was given to the research field of seabirds. Imagery of penguins was applied to the pattern panels and the signature block colours in this case rounded out the utilitarian look.

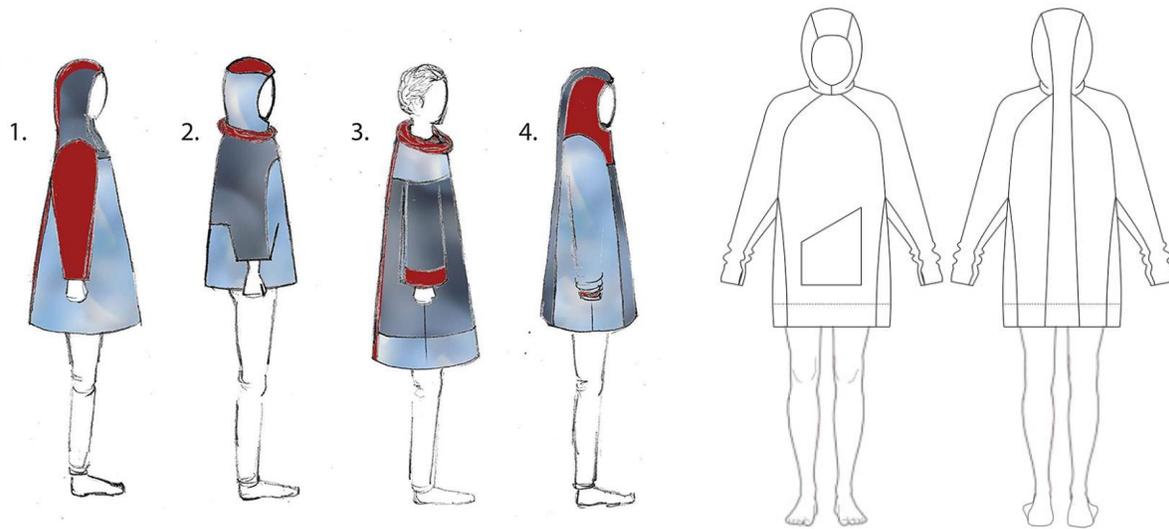


Figure 8: Windbreaker design sketches and final toile. (Emelia Erland)

The first impression of this design is a more picturesque one and almost endearing, due to the quirky appearance of the Macaroni penguin flock. This effect is enhanced through splitting and abstracting the image on the fabric pattern to achieve a more ornamental and de-constructed texture. But the actual image content references a research data pool that gathers evidence of the birds' habitats and whereabouts by continuously monitoring and tracking the colonies throughout the year in Antarctica. Decorative design and fashion thinking then meet with scientific documentation and environmental findings in a new and unusual setting. To mark this multi-disciplinary discourse, a current proposal for upcoming exhibitions intends to show this garment within an installation context that displays live tracking data maps of the birds in real-time.



Figure 9: Pattern design *Macaroni Penguins*.

3. Literature review and discussion

Consequently, this multi-layered design practice is influenced by a semantic and semiotic strategy in which textiles, as defined by Sonja Andrew (2008), “are being theorized and evaluated using interdisciplinary theoretical approaches, drawing on methodologies from other disciplines to inform their analysis of textile content, practice and contextualization” (p. 45).

With the site-specific collaborations leading to new outcomes of conceptual apparel in the process, they can be analysed as a particular model of communication in which meaning is constructed and transmitted through the medium of fashion. They offer an additional interpretation to Malcolm Barnard’s (2014) theory of fashion being fundamentally “an interaction between cultural values and the items of clothing” (p. 89).

They visualise in their semiotic underpinning that “communication through or by means of fashion is a social and cultural interaction that constitutes us as members of those societies and cultures. (...). We use the things we wear to represent, or stand for what we think of us,

or as ourselves” (Barnard, 2014, p. 79). A fact that was proved most recently when former director of Manchester Art Gallery, Maria Balshaw, took up her new position at the helm of the Tate Museums in the UK. On her first day, which included many press opportunities, she chose the *Figurine* dress from the above range as her outfit. This was only shortly after an atrocious terrorist attack at the Manchester Arena concert venue. Much more than just making just an artistic fashion statement, it gave her the chance to send a meaningful, personal and very public signal to express solidarity with her former hometown and working environment.



Figure 10: Tate Director Maria Balshaw and team. *The Guardian*, online version, July 2017.

Overall, the designs comply with the following semantic criteria, based on Andrew (2008), identifying a textile as a narrative or communicative carrier, if it:

- Contains imagery that creates a visual narrative.
- Contains symbols, images or decorative motifs that have a specific meaning (even if this meaning requires specific knowledge or cultural experience to understand.)
- Contains colors, textures or patterns, which evoke a mood or feeling in the viewer.
- Communicates meaning through its contextualization - i.e. what it is made into and how or where it is shown (p. 33).

The contextualisation of photography on fabric and its successive connotations, together with (media-) artistic references and exhibition installation environments, are categorizing these collections as art objects on the one hand. On the other, by being an item of clothing with an inherent practical value, they communicate such visual information or heritage back into a popular, external and urban context. The artefacts as ready-to-wear garments are now also a tangible reality, in an almost inverted process of the ready-made in art, and they are placed inside and outside their elevated and auratic art status all at once. This is underlined by the fact that the collections were multiplied in an industry setting and offered for sale in the gallery venues and so fulfilling additional purposes. Fashion becomes art and art becomes

fashion as a reciprocal method and reading in this case. As Sanda Miller (2007) explains, clothes keep us warm, adorn us, but we can “equally regard them as beautiful objects of aesthetic contemplation by disregarding the ‘concept’ under which they fall and therefore ignoring their functional dimension. They could be (as indeed they are) objects of admiration in a museum” (p. 39).

Ulrich Lehmann (2010) has compared historic and current models of consumption in fashion and art and identifies shared values in both “since the institution of fashion, as clothing that adheres to particular modes of production, representation, and consumption, was connected to the emergence of similar structures in the creation and dissemination of works of art” (p. 30). As the above garments are cross-referencing cultural languages with functional purposes, we can agree that “the dialectic (not binary pairing) of ephemerality and permanence shape the respective reception of modern art and modern fashion” (Lehmann, p. 34).

4. Conclusion

Models of appropriation in design and through collaborations have been highlighted that can form a base for similar future and interdisciplinary exchange. Design ideas that interpret fashion and apparel as a visual medium can be applied to various contexts and research sites. These production and research initiatives can equally enrich the creative vocabulary of the designer, as well as enhance the environment of the participating partner. Fashion is not seasonal but referential. Garments are investigated as wearable artefacts that can carry knowledge and message and transfer it to a wider audience on different and diverse levels. At the same time they can provide innovative strategies of research implementation into external industries together with new research income streams.

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Author Biography

Andrea Zapp

Born in Germany and currently Senior Research Fellow in Creative Technologies and Fashion at Manchester Metropolitan University. Internationally exhibiting media artist since the Mid Nineties and fashion designer with a strong artistic manifest. Multiple interactive networked installation work and lectures at international media festivals and conferences, such as Ars Electronica and Siggraph, and in museums and galleries across Europe, the USA, South America, Australia and Asia. Leadership in curation and production of international media arts and design exhibitions. Recent focus on narrative imagery for textile and fashion, further investigating the potential of future smart materials for new visual design concepts. Books published: *Networked Narrative Environments as imaginary spaces of being*. (2004). Liverpool/Manchester: FACT/ MMU; and *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*. (2002). London: British Film Institute.