



Becoming with Clothes. Activating wearer-worn attachments through design

Research Through Design Case Study

Julia VALLE NORONHA

Aalto University

School of Arts, Design and Architecture

Year of completion:	2019
Discipline/field:	Design / Fashion Design
Type of Doctorate (e.g. PhD, DDes, ArtD)	Doctor of Arts (DA)
Supervisor(s)	Kirsi Niinimäki Danielle Wilde

Abstract

Frequently associated with the superficial and the frivolous, fashion has been treated as a subject of lowly relevance in both practice and research. Not exclusive to fashion, this overvaluation of the superficial and the visual has deemed the relationships between individuals and designed artefacts as weak and unengaged. In order to shift this state of affairs, this research asks about paths towards more active engagements between wearer and worn. More specifically, it is interested in understanding how fashion designers can support this change through practice. In



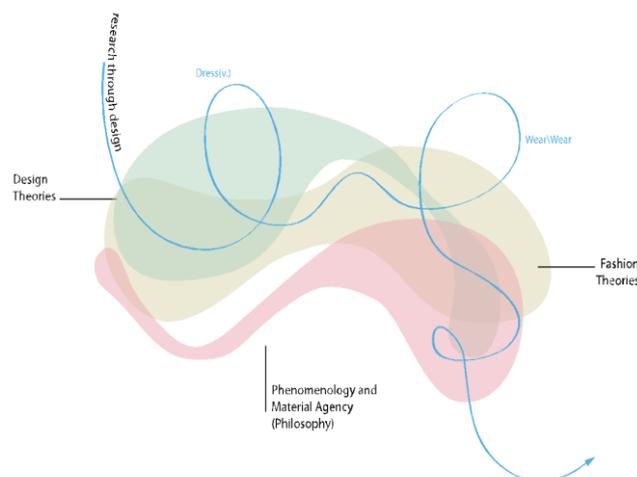
order to answer this question, the experiences between wearer and worn and the ways these two entities interact become a central matter of concern. The realm of experience has been marginalised in the considerations of fashion studies as they have privileged investigations on fashion as a system of signification. Through a literature review, this research confirms that the few considerations on the experience between wearer and worn are articulated at a theoretical level with little applications to practice.



This doctoral research is situated between the fields of fashion, design and philosophy, and unfolds as two iterative experiments in fashion design, developed under a research through design approach. Within the experiments, the design process is exposed, and its outcomes are investigated through the experiences of the participants. Against the lack of previously developed methods to investigate experience between individuals and their clothes, the research engages in crafting a methodology able to embrace this study subject. Named ‘wardrobe interventions’,

this method inspired by Cultural Probes collects data longitudinally on long-term relationships via deployed kits containing a garment and a diary. In the project, the importance of the interaction between wearer and worn is made visible in the theoretical framework, as it prioritises experience and agency over culture and visibility. Here, the data collected is interpreted under the light of a revised phenomenological approach, strongly grounded on theories of material agency.

The first experiment, Dress(v.), explores dress in an active form and asks about ways to enhance the wearer’s reflectiveness on wearing practices. The findings from this first experiment suggest care, wardrobe novelty and time as spaces to be explored further towards more engaged relationships. The second experiment, Wear \Wear, builds on these findings. It explores answers to the question of time as a space for design and proposes surprise as a catalyst to active engagements between people and clothes. The results reveal that open-endedness can be used as a tool to motivate stronger engagements and make visible the agency of clothes. The findings expose how knowledge on clothing is constructed through embodied experiences and mutual affects — or in other words, through becomings. Once open to such becomings, wearers are aware of clothing’s ability to act, and more engaged relationships may emerge.





This doctoral thesis expects to share with its readers an urgent need to make visible the agency of clothes. It contributes to previous fashion studies by broadening understanding of the ways humans and clothing interact and presents a methodology to support this endeavour. In the field of practice, the investigation suggests ways of entangling research and practice, highlighting the relevance of wearing as a matter of great concern to designers in the field of fashion.

Summary of research through design activity

In the thesis, research through design refers to a research approach where design practice is used as a means to produce knowledge about a phenomenon: the relationship between people and the clothes they wear. Via design, such an approach seeks to both make sense of the world as well as transform it, a particularity that allows the research to achieve its goals.

Within the framework of the doctoral thesis two projects were carried, namely Dress (v.) and Wear\Wear, using auto-ethnography research methods that visually informed the projects. The projects were used as tools to experiment around the research questions. The findings of the first project inform the second project as an iteration of the design concept. The projects are shortly described below:

Dress(v.) explores the relationship between individuals and garments designed with experimental design processes. During the course of a month, the action of getting dressed and undressed were recorded via still images. The movements were used as visual inspiration to create a series of white shirts with subtle idiosyncrasies. The shirts were deployed to 10 participants via wardrobe interventions.

Wear\Wear: Starting from an auto-ethnography on the author's wearing routines the project unfolds into a series of garments based on personal attachment to clothing objects. Reflecting on the temporal nature of our engagements with designed things, it suggests time as a space for designing more active relationships between wearer and worn. The produced garments respond to time, wear and the environment by altering themselves in answer to, for example, water, heat and sun.

Underpinning research, context and summary of methodology

Context

The doctoral thesis explores recent discussions in fashion studies that have evidenced the problem of weak attachments between individuals and the things they wear. It assesses that despite the emergence (and emergency) of the topic, few practical contributions exist.

In order to shift this state of affairs, alternative modes of making, commercialising, consuming and experiencing clothes are needed. Via a research through design approach, and grounded on theories of material agency, the thesis looks into the wearer-worn experiences in the search for modes of designing that can incite stronger engagements between the parts.

At the outset of the research the issue with suitable methodologies emerged. A literature review identified that the great majority of research including practice in the field of fashion and clothing design paid little to no attention to the experience individuals carry with the things they wear. This issue was overcome with the crafting of a methodology that considers the needs around human-material experiences in fashion and clothing.

Methodology

The research methodology included a complex combination of research, ethnography and design methods. The diagram below explains the main research methods and how they informed each other.

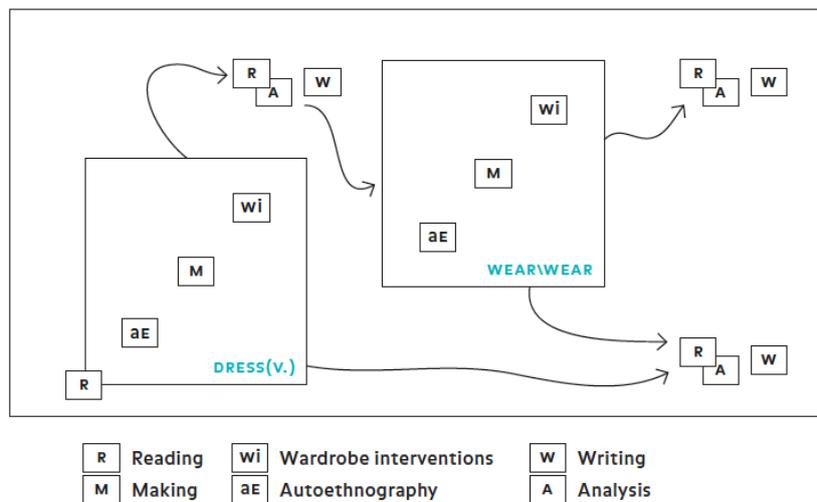


FIGURE 6
 The development of the research. The image shows how each different activity took place in time. The large area represents the broad research question and the smaller ones the questions specific to each experiment.



Methodologically, however, it is believed that the main contribution of the work lies on the 'wardrobe interventions' method, inspired by Cultural Probes and crafted specifically for the field of fashion and clothing design. The wardrobe interventions method is summarised below:

The wardrobe intervention method uses experimental design practice to collect insights and promote more active engagements between wearers and worn by leveraging the notion of

material agency. The deployed kit contains a made to measure garment designed by the designer-researcher, an informative leaflet with information on the design process, a diary with pre-set questions and blank pages for open ended entries, a consent of participation and the designer-researcher's contact details. It unfolds over four stages:

- (1) intervention deployment – pieces are fitted and deployed to participants
- (2) Interaction phase – participants wear the garment and make entries on the diary provided during the period of 3 months
- (3) Group Discussion – research participants gather to share experiences and insights and return the completed diaries
- (4) Reassessment Interview – the designer-researcher visits participants at home and carries an interview around the wardrobe and the garment 1 year after its deployment

References produced by researcher from/during doctoral research

Publications (selected)

Valle-Noronha, Julia (2021) On wearing diaries and scaling practices. Exploring wardrobe studies in fashion education. Nordes Conference. Matter of Scale. Kolding, Designskolen Kolding, 15-18 August 2021, pp. 54-57.

Valle-Noronha, J. (2019) The Body within the Clothes. RUUKKU Nr.10.

Valle-Noronha, J., Niinimäki, K. & Kujala, S. (2018). Notes on Wearer-Worn Attachments: Learning to Wear. Clothing Cultures v. 5 n. 2.



Valle-Noronha, J. & Wilde, D. (2018) The intervened wardrobe: Making visible the agency of clothes. *dObra[s] – the Journal of the Brazilian Association in Fashion Research*, v. 11 n. 23, p. 197-217

Artifact

Dress(v.) - Clothing project

Wear\Wear - Clothing project

Becoming with Clothes – Video



This Case Study is an outcome of the D.Doc Project, funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

For more information on D.Doc visit <https://d-doc.eu/>