The all-important difference… concepts of creativity in the fashion design process

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We all know how important methods and systematic work is in the creative processes of design and artistic work. In the beginning there is an idea, a concept, a simple fragment of something. Turning this into a film, a piece of music, an installation, a building etc. involves systematic composition one way or another. This relates to a basic axiom of creative work; expressions derive their inherent strength from the strength of systematic work.

It is an axiom you might like or dislike, trust or distrust, but it is there – and has always been – as an underlying theme in the practice of design and artistic work. It is also a demarcation line between practice itself and the history and theory about the resulting design and art works.

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Compositional methods and techniques help us in directing the magical turn from analysis to design, from impression to expression. These methods and techniques rest on a foundation that models – implicitly or explicitly – the creative process; what does it mean to compose a piece of music, what does it mean to make a film etc.? Such a foundation also serves as a basic framework for the discourse.

That is where we find the basic concepts we use to frame the creative process. The development of general methods and techniques is consequently a basic issue in design research as well as in artistic research; it serves the double purpose of strengthening the foundations for practical work both with respects to tools and with respect to discourse.

There has been extensive development of design methodology and theories about the design process in the context of industrial design. Attempts has also been made to transfer this type of methodology to the area of fashion design, but very little is done to build a specific methodological foundation for the fashion design process except for explicitly business oriented models.

Central to models and methodology in industrial design is the idea that we handle a problem in the design process; we solve a problem given in the brief. Creativity is basically about solving a problem and expressing a solution. This does simply not make sense in fashion design. What is the basic creative turn in fashion design all about?
In continuation to a pedagogical development project on fashion design teaching, we started in 2006 a project at The Swedish School of Textiles to explore and investigate this question – a project funded by The Knowledge Foundation and The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Berglin L., Cederwall S. L., Hallnäs L., Jönsson B., Kvall A.-K., Lundstedt L., Nordström M., Peterson B., Thornquist C., Interaction Design Methods in Fashion Design Teaching, *The Nordic Textile Journal* 2006-07). Also published at www.nshu.se.

Methodologically the project is a combination of theoretical reflection and practical design work; concept formation on basis of exploration of different kinds of fashion design processes, from very commercial design to very experimental and critical design.

This work led to the suggestion of replacing “solving a problem” by “introducing a difference” as a basic notion for defining the creative turn in fashion design.

To make this more precise we formulated a theoretical model – the fashion design diagrams – as a foundation for explaining what the notion of “difference” means here.
In product design, or industrial design in general, we so to speak solve a problem by introducing a construction of some sort — a thing, a system. One way to look at the fashion design process is to say that we introduce a difference to express people. What is this difference all about?

In fashion design there is never any question about what it is we design; there are no obvious problems to solve; we express people by dressing them. The basic thing is the difference the garment introduce; it is a skirt, a pair of trousers, but still a bit different in some sense, from the mere copy to the truly original.

To dress people is something that resides within a duality between wearing intentions and wearing expressions:

- Wearing intentions (WI); generally what we do wearing the garment,
- Wearing expression (WE); generally what the garment does as we wear it.

The fashion design diagram builds on explaining fashion design as introducing a relation between wearing intentions and wearing expressions.

Both wearing intentions and wearing expressions refer to some given garment X. We may then view fashion design as a process of defining “that” garment which wearing intentions and wearing expressions refers to an thereby relate wearing intentions and wearing expressions to each other. We, so to speak, express a relation between wearing intentions and wearing expressions in the process of designing.
WI and WE can be an abstraction or something concretely given and it is the garment X that relates the abstract and the concrete instance to each other. Given abstractions WI and WE we define in the process of designing the garment X that WI and WE refer to and given a garment X we can by use derive concrete WI’ and WE’ by wearing X.

Viewing basic possibilities in this we can draw a diagram over different ways in which the garment X relates WI and WE to each other.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
 WI \quad WI' \\
 X \\
 WE' \\
\end{array}
\]

In the diagram we find eight different triangles that we can use as a conceptual framework for different basic aspects of the fashion design process.

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To each diagram triangle we associate an equation.

\[ WI = WI'(X) \Rightarrow WI' = X(WE') \]

We read the expression WE(WI) as “what the garment does with us” and similarly WI(WE) as “what we do with the garment” which means we think of wearing expressions as defining the garment in some sense and wearing intentions as defining “us” in some sense.
We dress people to make a difference. This difference is a duality we introduce in the process of designing. The fashion diagram is a suggestion how to model this.

We design a garment X for given WI, W'I and W'E' that solves the equation W'I= WI(X)&W'I= X(W'E'). The dualities (WI',WI), (WI', W'E') are the differences we introduce. We all know what walking is, but walking wearing this garment introduces that all-important difference.

So what we say is that to be creative in fashion design is to introduce a difference by relating wearing intentions to wearing expressions.

Dressing people can be seen as the process of relating wearing intentions and wearing expressions through a garment.

This is what such models do; they provide us with tools to talk about the directions of creativity.

This is what such models do; they introduce a foundation for training creativity in a systematic way.
II Experimental design discourse – the dual nature of design methods, Sensuous Knowledge 2006

1 The missing result.

What is all this as research?

Where is the discourse that communicates this as research? It seems to me that the notion of a “result” is a key issue here, the knowledge that is supposed to come out of true research. You present your experiment and people ask; so what is the result?

2 Experimental design as research.

We perform design experiments to critically explore design, but what and where is the result? Where is the knowledge that is supposed to come out of the experiment?

Something is wrong with these questions. It is as if they ask for a conclusion that is still missing. It is difficult to accept the experiment itself as the “result” – it is somehow not talking directly to us in terms of propositional knowledge.

Where is the result; what did we learn, what do we know now?

3 Experimental fashion design.

The haute couture tradition, for example, represent research, a more or less systematic exploration of fashion form.

What is the experimental garment? What is the result of the haute couture experiment? It seems to me that the notion of a “result” is a key issue here, the knowledge that is supposed to come out of true research. You present your experiment and people ask; so what is the result?

4 Common practice.

This is of course common practice in all forms of art. But there is still a basic difference between critical analysis of a given piece of art, a given design example and explanations of the results of a design experiment, of an artistic experiment.

This is also where we continuously have to further develop the systematics and conceptual precision of an experimental design discourse, an experimental art discourse.

In some sense this is what foundational theory is all about in practice based design research and experimental art practice.

It is always somewhat easier to do this with respect to matters of craft and techniques and a lot harder when it comes to issues of aesthetics.

5 Analytical knowledge – design knowledge.

Given X, the analysis of X is a construction K proving a proposition P about X – we then know P. This means we have propositional knowledge about X. That we know P about X is a derived conclusion – what we normally call a result.

Design of X is a construction K defining some P which is a X – we then see P. This means we have definitional knowledge about X. That we see X through P is a given axiom.

6 What is the conclusion?

In defining P we explore X through design. What is the conclusion you might ask? This is an irritating question in the sense that it doesn’t seem to make sense. It is as if we think of something else, trying to answer the question as if what we are doing is something else.

To answer the question you could take P and just use it to demonstrate what it is – take the car and drive away, use the mathematical definition to introduce rigour in practice etc. But this is an answer that begs the question.

That it is a car is given.

7 Not forwards – but backwards.

The research content lies rather in the way in which the construction explores X – not that it is a car, but what it says about construction of a car.

Not forwards to draw a conclusion, but backwards to tell about the construction.

We explore a notion, a concept through a construction. The definitional knowledge resides in the logic inherent in the definition that presents the construction.

The traces this type of research leaves behind are not propositions, but design methods and design programs.

8 A research discourse.

Methods are the rules and frameworks we use to systematize our work, but methods can also be a discourse through which we explain and discuss the “result”.

As such design methods explains what the design experiment is, i.e. what the definitional knowledge is all about.

Design methods are in this sense both a guiding force and the foundation for a discourse through which we see the design example itself as the result of the experiment. Design methods traces the way in which we build things, the way in which we explore a given concept.

Basic methodological notions provide the foundation for a research discourse.

9 Conclusions – introductions.

A proposition P sums up and presents a conclusion while a definition P opens up and presents an introduction. Design methods as foundations for design research is just that; a discourse for research as exploration through the introduction of things and concepts.

What is the result? I don’t know, I was defining things not drawing conclusions about things already there.

All photos were taken by the author at the international fashion student competition Concours international des Jeunes Créateurs de Mode in Paris 2005. That year 160 students from 16 countries participated in the competition and we were very happy to see one student from our school – Maria Nordström – winning the prize for the best Swedish contribution. The photos tell stories about creativity, and basic decisions, in the fashion design process. But they also tell catwalk stories.