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Image credit: Julia Valle-Noronha.



On the agency of clothes: surprise as a tool towards stronger engagements

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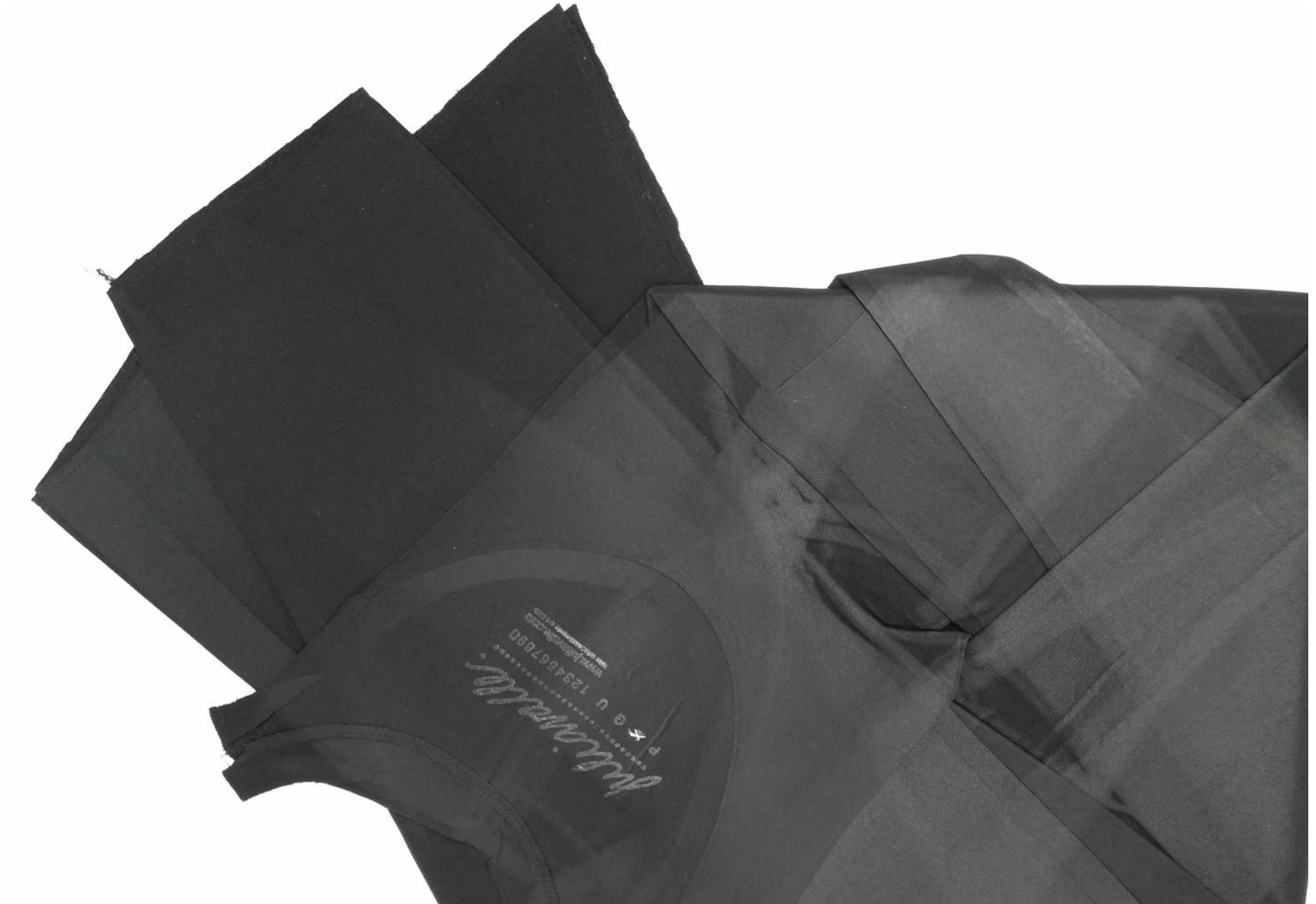
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Keywords: fashion design probes; fashion design practice; surprise; research through design

Abstract: Previous studies in fashion design reveal that a new garment in individuals' wardrobes can play various roles, such as causing excitement, keeping up with trends and feelings of belonging. But a new garment also raises other issues, such as the shortened lifecycles of clothes and loose bonds between wearer and the worn. Motivated by these previous findings, this study proposes clothes as agents as a means to sustain deeper engagements between the wearer and the worn. In the project investigated here, 'surprise' is suggested as a provocative method for promoting wearer-worn relationships and raising awareness of the agency of clothes. To gain understanding of these

engagements, artefacts were handed out to 23 individuals and were then discussed in a group. How can surprise, embedded in designed objects, contribute to the building of stronger and more reflexive dialogues? In this research-through-design, hints towards how to build more meaningful relationships with clothes are provided together with narrated experiences from users which aim at enlightening the research question. The paper concludes with findings on qualitative aspects of the dialogues developed between wearer-worn. It intends to contribute to methods in design research and addresses both practitioners and researchers in the field.





Introduction

'I love the shirt just the way it is. [...] And I believe I wouldn't change anything about it at the moment. Maybe in about 2 months' time I would like to do something. To get this feeling of a new piece in my wardrobe again!'

The quotation above was drawn from a pilot version of this study in 2015 (Valle Noronha, 2016). In the study, all participants agreed that new clothes bring excitement to their wardrobes; thus alterations in a piece would be welcome some time after the use phase has begun. But why do people love new clothes so much? According to studies on person-product attachment, they bring feelings that old clothes cannot offer. Interested in further understanding how attachment is formed with the things we wear, recent studies (Niinimäki 2014, Pan et al. 2015) have investigated the everyday action and experience of choosing, wearing, maintaining and disposing of clothes through investigative questionnaires. These studies in fashion design reveal roles that new clothes play in an individual's wardrobe. For example, excitement, keeping up with trends and feelings of belonging are some of the responses articulated by individuals in questionnaires. Niinimäki (2014) points out that the newness of the materials is highly relevant in the excitement and interest in new clothes. Pan et al. (2015), on the other hand, emphasize the role of newness in fashion in a broader sense.

They agree that the constant quest for the new in the fashion industry is reflected in consumption behaviour, differing broadly from other materialistic approaches in life.

On the commercial side, this excitement about 'feeling fresh' drives the need for new pieces on a regular basis, fulfilling basic human needs for constant stimulation (Hassenzahl and Tractinsky 2006). On the one hand, strongly motivated by the tight connection between fashion and the passing of time, the economic interest in promoting financial growth has led to a shortening of intervals between collection releases (Cronberg 2014, Svendsen 2006). On the other hand, aggressive advertising promoting consumption based on 'wants' rather than 'needs' for new things (Campbell 2004) and a depreciation of the past (Cronberg 2014) guarantees the constant turn of the fashion wheel. But the outcomes of such phenomena are troublesome (Chapman 2005). The unceasing quest for the new in the making of commercial clothes embeds undesired affordances, such as the promotion of shortened lifecycles and the loss of bonds between wearer and the worn (Mugge et al. 2005). If the feeling associated with new pieces is something so cherished, perhaps replicating or mimicking it in not-so-new clothes could work as a design brief towards longer lasting engagements.

Studies in sustainability and wearing indicate that stronger bonds between clothes and users can extend the use-phase of these objects, thus leaving less need (and room) for new acquisitions (Niinimäki



2011, Gill and Lopes 2011). The studies emphasise the relevance of understanding such relationships and design strategies aiming at intensifying these bonds. An investigation on person-product attachment by Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim (2008) observes that the main element responsible for a strong relationship with new products is enjoyment, while memory sets the bonds with old products. As time passes, the present and future-driven matters relevant at the first encounter between wearer and worn start encompassing also the memories attached to that object. But if clothes can spark feelings and even take part in transforming our consumption habits, could we look at them as active objects?

Binder et al. (2011) suggest designed objects as invitations for new perspectives on the user's side, which brings about the notion of objects having agencies. From this perspective, clothes would engage with their users beyond sheer use, in a true participatory relationship, also supporting stronger engagements. This view of agency is addressed especially in visual and electronics arts communities (Edmonds and Candy 2011), but studies in design have also addressed these capabilities, tracing back to the notion of affordance (Gibson [1979] 2014, Norman 1988), to more recent notions of thing-power (Bennett 2010) and specific lines of research on design anthropology (Cila et al. 2015).

The questions and discussions presented above inspired the development of a project that embeds surprise in clothes. WEAR\WEAR, which will be

described in the next section, questions the pragmatics of the joyfulness associated with new clothes through a provocative approach towards a more reflexive wearing. In the project, 'surprise' is suggested as a method for promoting conversational wearer-worn relationships and raising awareness of the agency of clothes. Whilst different surprises can promote different experiences (Desmet 2002), Ludden et al. (2012) discuss the possibility of 'discovery surprises' (in contrast to first-encounter surprises) being longer retained and more rewarding to users. Additionally, 'surprise' has been suggested as a relevant factor in novelty emotions (Scherer 1988) that can lead to strengthening and weakening of relationships between humans and designed objects.

The primary aim of this study is to build understanding on such matters by scrutinizing if new clothes do hold such a special place in people's wardrobes. As the second objective, and the one that lies at the core of this study, the intent is to discern if designers can contribute to the building of stronger and less passive relationships between wearers and the worn, such as those suggested by von Busch (2008). The project problematises and provokes the question through the author's own creative practice in experimental fashion design by embedding programmed alterations in clothes, thus generating surprise in the use phase of dresses and blouses. In order to harvest information on the engagements, the clothes produced were handed to 23 women, based in Belo Horizonte (BH), Brazil, and Helsinki, Finland, as deployments inspired



Figure 1. Blouse with UV sensitive print turns blue when exposed to sun. Photo: N. Chun.

by self-documented design probes (Gaver et al. 1999, Mattelmäki 2006). The participants were invited to take part in a three-month experience. These deployments are referred to as fashion design probes, bridging design and fashion design studies. Lastly, suggesting to wearers the creation of a reflexive design space (Binder et al. 2011) between them and the things they wear is also an interest that extends beyond the timeframe of this study. It could allow a shift from viewing clothes as mere objects to understanding them as powerful actors in our everyday lives. This text presents the design concept of the project and its objectives, the research methods behind the study and its main findings, followed by discussion and conclusions.

Methods

A mixed-method approach was applied to the construction and the collection of information in this research through design, for it embraces both practice and empirical observations. The methods are divided into two parts, one being that of practice, which led to the creation of the pieces, and the other of the fashion design probes, further explained in

the two following sub-sections.

Project WEAR\WEAR

Motivated by previous studies on clothing consumption and the relationship individuals hold with new additions to their wardrobe (Niinimäki 2014, Chapman 2009), the WEAR\WEAR project sought forms of inserting newness during the clothes' use phase. The starting question for the design was, 'How can a designer embed future changes in clothes?' WEAR\WEAR used a provocative approach and borrowed from the idea of programmed obsolescence to propose programmed alterations in clothes. Research on already existing materials and processes raised an array of options. While the chosen materials were thermo and ultra-violet (UV) reactive dyes and polyvinyl alcohol (PVA), creative pattern cutting (Almond 2010) and permanent folding under high temperature and pressure (see Figure 6) were chosen as methods. These materials and processes would allow changes in the use phase in different ways. On the one hand, while the dyes would change colour temporarily under specific conditions during use and return to the initial state, PVA thread and fabric would cause permanent changes in the piece with washing by disappearing or undoing seams. On the other hand, the creative pattern cutting associated with the folding process allowed



Figure 2. Clothes in initial stages and after use and/or wash. Top to bottom: Dress 1 in black, Dress 1 in grey, Dress 2 in black; Blouse 2. WEAR\WEAR. Photo: Namkyu Chun.

surprise at the first encounter with the clothes, setting the tone of the experience from its very beginning. In total, four clothing patterns were developed (2 blouses and 2 dresses) and 24 pieces produced (see Figure 7). The pieces and their changes are described below and illustrated in Figure 2.

Blouse 1: Short-sleeve blouse made in 100% cotton poplin, with applications of non-woven PVA pockets, 5 cm side seam and 2 cm shoulder seam sewn with PVA thread near the edges. U.V. reactive dye on shoulder.

Blouse 2: Sleeveless blouse made in 100% polyester crepe, with double pockets (outer and inner sides). Outside pocket made of non-woven PVA, inner pocket in polyester crepe, U.V. reactive dye print on shoulder. On brown colour variation, U.V. reactive dye was substituted by black thermo-chromic ink. Folded and pressed at 300° C.

Dress 1: Long asymmetric sleeveless dress made in 100% polyester heavy crepe. Application on hemline, 12 cm left side seam and 2 cm shoulder seams sewn with PVA thread. Folded and pressed at 300° C.

Dress 2: Knee-length short-sleeve dress made in 100% polyester heavy crepe. Pleat on back, 12 cm side seam and 2 cm shoulder sewn with PVA thread. Folded and pressed at 300° C.

Participant	Age	Profession	Location
P1	66	Urbanist	BH
P2	28	Fashion Designer	BH
P3	29	Stylist	BH
P4	43	Musician	BH
P5	40	Architect	BH
P6	33	Translator	BH
P7	32	Visual Artist	BH
P8	36	Journalist	BH
P9	51	Fashion Designer	BH
P10	30	Communicator	BH
P11	33	Psychologist	BH
P12	35	Artist	BH
P13	33	Producer	BH
P14	31	Graphic Designer	BH
P15	83	Retired	BH
P16	28	Musician	Helsinki
P17	28	Graphic Designer	Helsinki
P18	35	Historian	Helsinki
P19	44	Researcher	Helsinki
P20	39	Ind. Designer	Helsinki
P21	29	Researcher	Helsinki

Table 1. Fashion Design Probes Participants Chart.

Fashion Design Probes: Accessing the wearer

The project WEAR\WEAR is part of a series of projects investigating the wearing experience of experimental clothes. The previous and first project of the series, namely Dress(v.), aimed at retrieving inspirational inputs from participants to inform future projects (Valle-Noronha 2016). Accessing individuals' personal experiences was at the heart of the Dress(v.) study, which demanded a methodology meeting both academic and ethical standards while providing resourceful material.

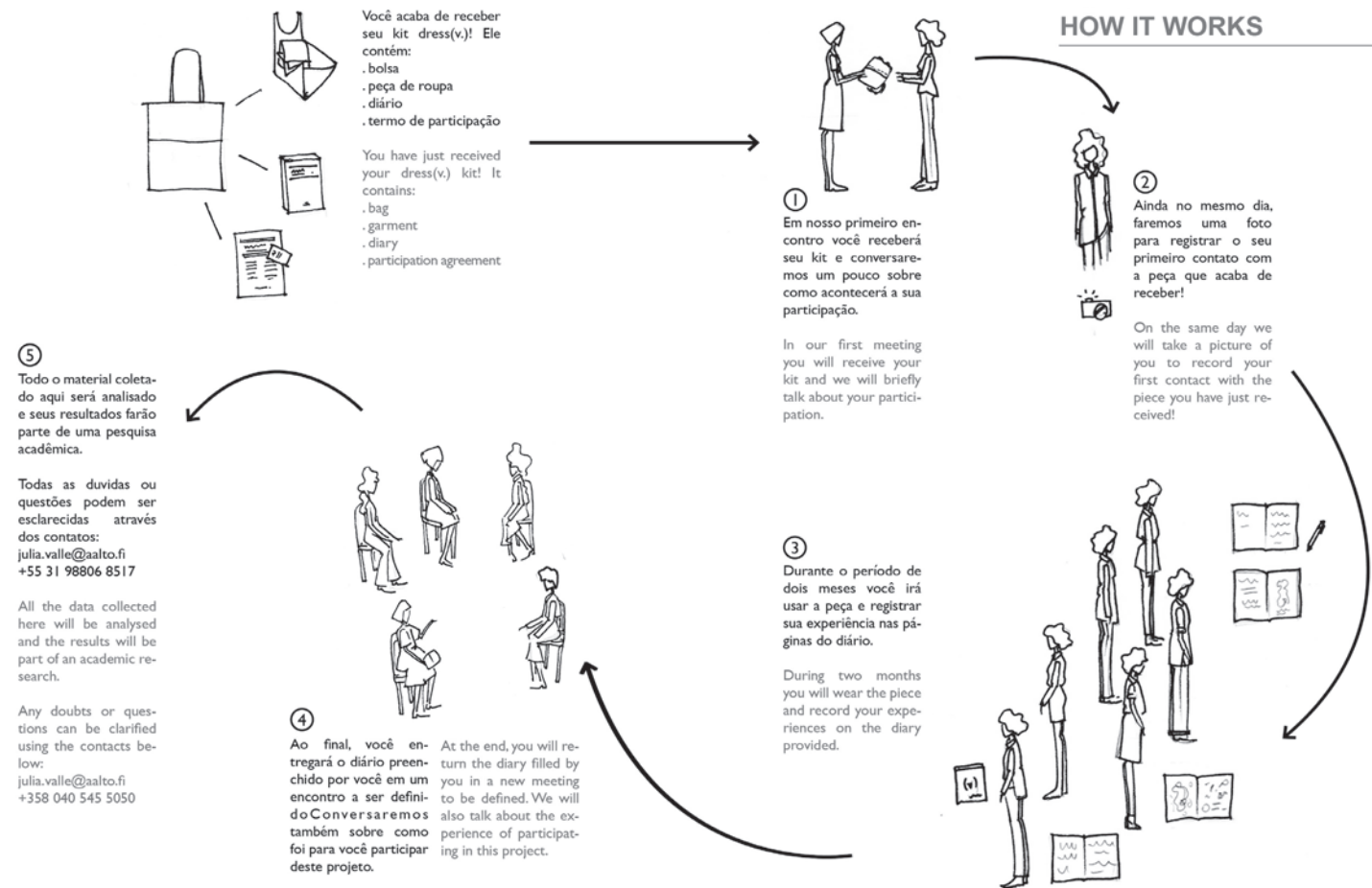


Figure 3. Step by step of probes, as featured on the probes diary.

This demand included accessibility to the wearer's daily routines and to the intimate events of dressing, with respect to the individual's time and pace in wearing and caring for clothes, collection of information in an extended timeframe, a timely record of the events and openness in the collection of information. Interviews or narrative methods and assisted manipulation were therefore less suitable, while self-documented design probes (Gaver et al. 1999, Mattelmäki 2006) perfectly fit the demands of the project and its expected outcomes. WEAR\WEAR followed as a project informed by the findings from Dress(v.), and the probes



method applied to the first study was redesigned with adaptations. The adapted method is therefore still addressed as ‘fashion design probes’ despite the difference in expected outcomes. In the study scrutinized here, particularly, the probes do not primarily aim at retrieving design-enhancing hints or artistic inspiration from the participants (Mattelmäki 2006), despite it being arguably part of the information collected. Instead, it aims at sparking and grasping users’ reactions to surprise-embedded clothes and promoting what Binder et al. (2011) address as a reflective design space. In WEAR\WEAR the fashion design probes work as disruptive artefacts offering material for reflection (Graham et al. 2007). The study intends to answer whether surprise can contribute to strengthening bonds individuals have with clothes. By asking the participants to collect experiences in a diary, they are invited to take a closer look at these events in a reflexive way.

An open call in social media invited female participants to take part in an experience with clothes, to which 43 responded via digital forms. The first 24 were selected and contacted with information on how the project would unfold. To this contact 23 (aged between 28–83) responded positively, out of which 15 were located in BH and 8 in Helsinki. Two of the participants did not fully complete the tasks given and are thus left out of the study. Most of the participants were either familiar with the designer’s work (3) or have previously met the designer personally (16). Two of them had no previous contact with either the work or the

designer. They resembled the designer’s clientele in age and social-cultural background (Table 1). The choice of the cities was due to ease of access, as the designer works in both cities. It also brought variety in cultural background and verification of the findings by comparison. The fashion design probes included a made-to-measure dress or blouse (chosen by the participant), a diary, consent of participation and informative leaflet. Participants were informed at the first individual meeting that they would wear the piece during a period of three months and report each use in the diary. The fact that the piece would change with time was also informed to each user, and care instructions were given. A precise description of the change was left open, so the changes would still come as surprises. An average of five uses was expected from each participant, and completing the diary included answering pre-determined questions and free space for any kind of expression (drawings, pictures, audio, etc.). Subsequently, a group discussion served as a platform for sharing and expanding their understandings of the experience. Researchers in the field of arts and design mediated this discussion, to which 11 participants were present in BH and 6 in Helsinki. This was done to minimize any influences the author could have on the participants as the designer/researcher. It is understood, however, that fully erasing the image of the designer from or in connection to the clothes was not possible. Figure 3 illustrates the steps in the deployment process.



The deployments and group discussion resulted in rich research material, including not only their textual inputs but also images and voice recordings. Going through the material was a real immersion into the participants' lives as guided by this one piece. For relating directly to people and their personal lives, all information must be understood as socio-culturally situated and constructed, thus resulting in an inevitable interpretative analysis of the material collected. Interpretation of the material aimed at grasping themes and new concepts that could emerge from experiences and provide hints to the question asked in this study. The group discussion resourcefully helped this task by leading to topics of common interest among participants. All audio material (group discussion and voice recordings) was transcribed and investigated using ATLAS software. The interpretation of the material was done through inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2014), where 'themes' were pre-informed from the previous study (Valle-Noronha 2016) and the question raised here, in two phases. The first phase aimed at clarifying concepts and/or encountering new ones and the second phase focused on clarifying the findings retrieved from the first stage. The results of these interpretations are described in the next section.

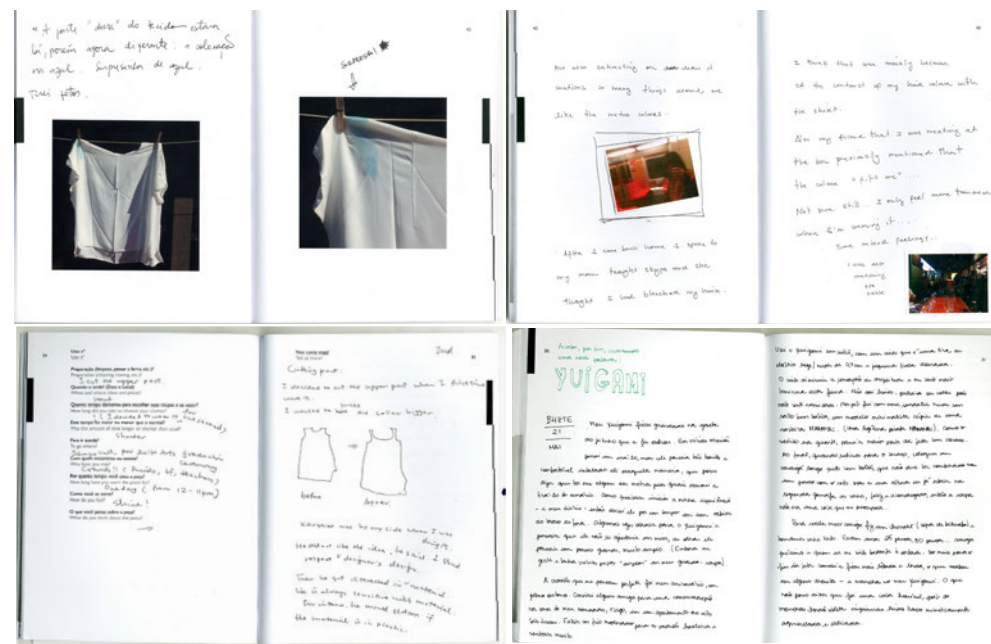


Figure 4 . Fashion Design Probes Diaries - Spreads scans.



Figure 5 . Group Discussion - Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Photo: Marina RB.



Findings

Before presenting the findings, relevant aspects must be taken into consideration. Despite choosing from a blouse, a short or long dress, the participants did not see the pieces beforehand and did not choose colours, materials and shape. This caused an initial difficulty for 10 out of the 21 participants. In most cases this difficulty led to an exploratory engagement towards a consensus on the preferred form of wearing, broadly discussed in the BH discussion group. It is also relevant to state that, as a part of the project, the participants had to wear the pieces, thus the use frequency factor is not taken into consideration here.

The focus on the investigation was set on the qualitative aspects of the relationship between wearer and worn. Due to this choice of scope, aspects relating specifically to the garment are not thoroughly discussed here but simply mentioned at the end of this section. The reading of the combined information retrieved from the 21 diaries and the 2 discussion groups suggested the most relevant or widely discussed concepts to be grouped into two main categories: agency of clothes and co-authorship. They are defined, discussed and illustrated below with quotes selected from the diaries and group discussions.

Agency of Clothes

This concept emerged from the wearers' perceptions of the clothes during the use-phase. They included what can be understood as 'thing power', as suggested by Jane Bennett (2004), translated here as the apparent liveliness and capabilities that the clothes may deliver to wearers. In other words, they are the powers clothes may have beyond merely dressing the body, especially those that emerge from the interaction between wearer and worn. By this change in perspective, from perceiving clothes as inactive to active objects, it is believed that a relationship and behavioural changes can follow. The concept adds body to the core interest of this study, which investigates if designers can design objects that promote reflexion towards a more active wearer-worn engagement.

The topics that constituted the concept 'agency of clothes' mentioned by the participants were anthropomorphization, agency, liveliness, surprise and change; they all relate directly to the understanding of the pieces as something holding further agency than that of dressing. The following examples, extracted from both the diaries and group discussion, suggest that the piece has agencies or is perceived as a living being, being associated to even a gender and name.

'What this piece brought me was the opposite of the ephemeral. It was a rescue [of the 80s' liveliness of fashion] and perceiving that this [piece]



can be alive. The experience I had with this was a sensorial rescue, and it says: “It’s alive!” (P9)

‘The piece starts conversations [...], it’s a conversation starter.’ (P22)

‘[The dress is] like a friend, or part of family. You get emotionally attached. I wouldn’t change it, do something to her’. (P19)

In some cases the surprise suggested the affordance of interest in how the piece was constructed or intensified reflection:

‘The bottom piece dropped! It dropped! I didn’t expect this at all. I studied it a bit trying to find out how she did it.’ (P22)

‘[...] when I saw it in the sun I thought, “Oh my god, it became blue!” and I saw that, like, I took it out of the sun and it became white again. So I started reflecting on this mutation thing’. (P8)

‘So I soaked it and when I took it off it was all in pieces! [...] And today I was looking at it and I saw that the stitches are well made, so only today I realised that it was something intentional’. (P12)

The need to give the piece a name also arose in one of the experiences, and the new addition to the wardrobe gained a new word as a name.

‘I felt the need of a name to call my object. [...] I ended up making up a new word: yuigami’. (P7)

The statements given by the participants above suggest that the surprises invited participants into a more investigative gaze while at the same time building relationships motivated by the experience of wearing an experimental piece and being part of a research project.

Co-Authorship

Another problematized topic by most participants was that of authorship, relating it to the maker, the wearer or in general. During both group discussions the participants realised that they were speaking of the clothes as ‘Julia’s dress/blouse’ and found it intriguing. After all, the pieces were their own to wear and make use of as they liked. The realisation raised questions such as, ‘When is it that a garment stops being the creator’s and starts being the wearer’s?’ (P3) answered, for example, thus: ‘[after cutting the piece to change its length] And then I liked it. And at that point I thought this is not Julia’s dress anymore, it’s my dress’ (P4). Other valuable forms of co-creation, or co-authorship, performed by the participants were improvised mending and adaptations, such as gluing (P4), cutting (P4 and P21) and sewing without any previous experience (P13 and P14). One quote exemplifies well how both authorships are entangled in the piece and the difficulty of setting them entirely apart: ‘[while talking about authorship] In the end I really ‘owned’ the dress,



it was me there [...], for my birthday party I didn't even think, I thought I will wear Julia's dress!' (P20). Such a finding is in accordance with previous studies on alternative fashion (Fletcher & Grose 2012, von Busch 2008) that state that stronger bonds can be built through a more active participation of the user in the shaping of a final design and a closer connection to the maker.

Three other aspects highlighted in the data were affection (mentioned by 12 participants), adaptation (14 participants) and external impressions (13 participants) towards the clothes. Regarding affection, it is understood that being part of a research project, receiving a unique piece (resembling to some the experience of receiving a gift) and getting to know the designer were relevant in the setting of bonds in the relationship. Moreover, it was clear that keeping a diary of the wearing experience gave room for unprecedented or special engagements: 'And with this dress I created some kind of relation that, for a very long time, I hadn't had with a garment. To think about the piece, to create a relationship of affection with it, pay attention to what is happening to the piece, pay attention to the touch...' (P10). The statement confirms an intensification of reflexion on wearing in a very positive response to the study.

Adaptation was mentioned in two different directions, the most frequent being that of the participants adapting to the piece (8 mentions) and the other of participants adapting the piece to their taste (7 mentions). This is understood as connected to the fact that the participants did not

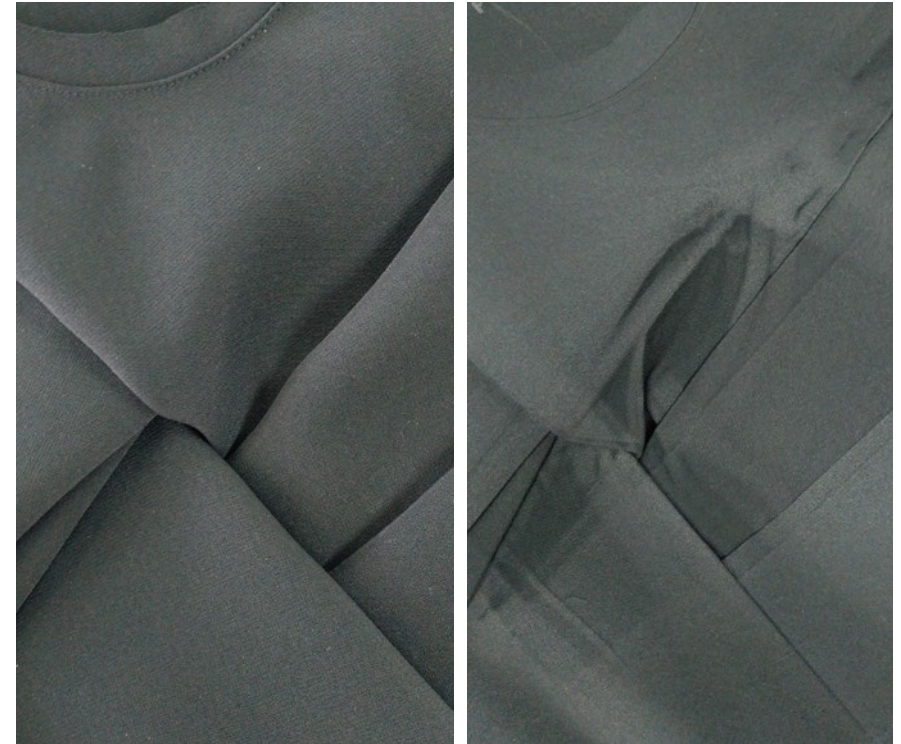


Figure 6. Dress before and after heat press. Photo by the author.

choose the pieces, making choices only in regards to the kind of clothing (blouse or dress) and length (short, medium, long). Another often-mentioned factor that altered how the participants perceived the pieces were the comments and compliments given by others, mentioned by 13 participants. This factor appears seldom in studies of person-product attachment to clothes but is broadly discussed in psychology- and sociology-rooted fashion studies (Entwistle 2015). This might be due to the conversational and longitudinal aspects of the study, in contrast with questionnaire-informed studies on person-product attachment.



Three participants did not perceive some (2) or any (1) of the changes that occurred in their pieces, suggesting that we might pay little attention to the affordances and agencies offered by the designed objects with which we engage on a daily basis. Nevertheless, participants showed general interest in taking a more attentive gaze in the relationships they have with their pieces and suggested having expanded the exercise to other clothes too. The following qualitative aspects of the clothes were mentioned by the participants (respective number in parentheses): comfortable (11), elegant (6), beautiful (5), versatile (5), fun (1), non-disposable (1) and ritualistic (1).

Discussion and Conclusion

The artefacts discussed in this paper were designed with embedded elements of surprise, revealed to participants in a deployment experiment inspired by design probes. This study aimed at further understanding if the concept of surprise, when applied to the design of clothes, could promote more reflexive and active interactions between wearers and the worn, as those suggested by Binder et al. (2011). The findings confirmed that most individuals value the feeling of having new clothes in their wardrobes, as discussed in the introduction of this paper, but also stress the fact that newness alone does not guarantee strong relationships, which is in accordance with previous studies in

person-product attachment (Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim 2008, Niinimäki 2011). The findings also show that a more attentive look at clothes can grasp affordances that invite wearers to look at them from a different perspective, such as that of liveliness or of shared authorship. Moreover, the study indicates that communicating fashion collections as projects, by providing not only the final outcomes but also information on the background and motivations behind the pieces, helps bring wearers and clothes closer together. Whilst the word 'collection' suggests accumulation and highlights the outcomes (Altschuler 2005), 'projects' may suggest a more investigative activity and pieces more open to conforming themselves to the wearers.

The limitations of this study are clear in regards to mode of production, participant sampling and how the deployment was designed. If different modes of making can suggest different affordances is a question raised by the study that still cannot be answered, as it focused solely on one experimental fashion production. Comparative studies, thus, would be needed. In regards to the participant sampling (a narrow 23 total), it must be noted that while the WEAR\WEAR artefacts seemed to be responsible for triggering feelings and actions, cultural constructs have a great relevance in their formation and must be taken into consideration. Each individual experience is very particular and rich, making it challenging to identify a clear and concise pattern across all participants. The fact that most participants were familiar with the designer or her work is not



seen as a problematic issue, as closer engagements between makers and wearers is also a proposal of such production. As a suggestion for the future application of the method, if participants could choose the pieces in a similar way as the experience of acquiring them in a shop, instead of being given something unfamiliar, the initial difficulties with the design mentioned in the findings could be avoided.

This paper expects to contribute to research, practice and the combination of both in the field of fashion design. On the one hand, it discusses modes of using deployments and applying design probes to the field of fashion in constructive and user-centred design practices. It thereby also contributes to efforts in fashion design studies (Skjold 2014, Lundgard and Larsen 2007) that have previously employed the method. On the other hand, the study proposes 'discovery surprises' as a design strategy to be further explored with regard to longer-lasting relationships between wearer and worn. The paper also calls for joint efforts on further understanding the agency of clothes through practice-led research.

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Figure 7. WEAR\WEAR Project Pieces. Photo: Namkyu Chun.