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Clothing Landscapes: Interdisciplinary mapmaking methods for a relational understanding of fashion behaviours and place

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, 'Residencies' is described; a suite of research methods designed to meet the urgent methodological needs of a new wave of fashion and sustainability discourse focused on societal and structural change. An interdisciplinary approach drawn from cultural geography, art and design aims to chart complex and often overlooked dynamics of clothing behaviours as they take place in everyday life, intricately linked to the context they take place in.

Effective transformation towards sustainability in fashion has been limited by the dominance of technocentric approaches, disconnected from the social context of people's lives or the realities of planetary boundaries. In line with a growing international move to re-prioritise social and human concerns in sustainable development work, Residencies offers potential new ways to identify and visualise social patterns, material flows and interactions. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss applications and findings, but rather to share methods to enable future research outcomes identifying potentials for systemic transformation.

Keywords: design research methods, fashion, behaviour change, sustainability

1. BACKGROUND

Fashion’s role in the unfolding environmental and human crisis is increasingly acknowledged. Mass-produced garments negatively impact the environment as part of ever growing industrial and sociocultural systems reliant on the overuse of resources, energy, pollution and waste (Fletcher & Tham, 2015). And while there has been a significant increase in activity to try to address this, it has been dominated by eco-efficient or technocentric approaches, such as replacing less environmentally friendly fabrics with better ones, or reducing waste and pollution in the production or disposal of clothing.

However, there is an emergent movement in the area of fashion sustainability which strongly critiques such approaches, finding that they have only succeeded in making *individual* products less damaging, not in reversing overall impacts (Ehrenfeld 2015; Fletcher, 2017; Greenpeace 2017; Grose, 2015; Klepp & Tobiasson, 2017; Thackara, 2015; Thorpe, 2012). They find that such measures ultimately fail elements because they do not seek to alter the systems they are built into –of unchecked growth, waste and inequity. What is required is a radical restructuring towards systems that embrace planetary limits. This indicates a need for a methodology targeted towards greater understanding of how to better satisfy physical and psychological needs through a sustainable (smaller) social metabolism (Ehrenfeld, 2004; Prádanos, 2018, Thorpe, 2015).

This opens up a large territory of required research, drawing on perspectives of economics, cultural studies, sociology and psychology which have so far been largely outside or on the margins of academic work on sustainable fashion. In this way fashion follows critical movements in other design disciplines oriented towards society and the public realm. This ‘social turn’ has been characterised by design researchers adapting methods from the social sciences which are useful for building relational rather than reductive knowledge. These are methods adept at investigating complex organic systems of society and culture (Keshavarz & Mazé, 2013; Sangiorgi & Scott, 2015). Because design offers great capacity as a creative platform for a convergence of science, technology and the arts, it has shown to be well suited to sustainability investigations that call for such an interdisciplinary approach. (McMahon and Bhamra, 2015). However, currently the overlap between such approaches and fashion sustainability is a small emergent area in need of development (Fletcher & Klepp, 2017). Examples that do exist includes Emma Rigby’s research into laundering habits (2016), Amy Twigger-Holroyd’s study of amateur fashion making and re-working (2013), Jonnet Middleton’s on mending (2015), Kate Fletcher’s emphasis on *use* (2016a), Dilys Williams’ work on design thinking and community engagement (Williams, 2018), as well as more established studies from anthropology into consumption clothing habits (Klepp & Laitala, 2015). These projects all share a relational perspective and more specifically, they all use ethnographic approaches to make detailed and nuanced observations contextualised within the locations and relationships where clothing activities take place.

Activity	Type of Data	Documentation
1. Make a basic geographic description	Statistical Historical Geologic Other	Notes
2. Walking observation including ethnographic observation and field notes	Observational (mix of qualitative and counting)	Field notes Smartphone photographs Sketches Map collages
3. Additional ‘slow noticing’: observations made using manual focus film camera, life drawing and ambiance collections using all 5 senses	Observational (visual, sensory and explicitly subjective)	Analogue photographs Drawings Notes Audio recordings
4. Informal interviews with the public using design probe: ‘Clothing Practice Cards’	Hybrid questionnaire/hybrid casual interview	Field notes Clothing practice card responses
5. Place-based wardrobe audits and interviews	Counting	Audio recording and transcription

	In-depth interview	Schematic (filled in) Photographs of selected garments
6. Creative drawing and mapmaking including participative workshops	Creative Participative	Sketches, collages, drawings Final drawings, maps Maps made at workshops

[Table 1] *Six methods used in conjunction to document the fashion activities and behaviours of a place*

This paper describes my contribution to the development of methods in this area with specific inclusion of observational drawing and mapping practices used to map relational activity. The original Residencies methods were developed in collaboration with Eleanor Snare (Toth-Fejel & Snare, forthcoming) and are part of my ongoing doctoral research project, Fashion-in-Residence¹. They have been tested in a number of locations in the UK but most recently in an area 2 km² in Shoreditch, East London. It is outside the scope of this paper to describe how they have been applied or subsequent outcomes.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF METHODS FOR DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS

The Residencies methods listed in Table 1 are designed to be used in combination as a ‘bricoleur’; an investigation made from different angles using interlinked methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this section I describe a number of ways these methods are designed to foster different perceptions of fashion, useful for countering dominant (and incomplete) perceptions of fashion activity where it is defined as industrial, globalized, commercial, inherently unsustainable (Fletcher, 2016).

These methods gather data using a mixture of observations, interviews and creative activities conducted within a small area. This is modelled on the approach, developed by Kate Fletcher’s Fashion Ecology project, of laying a quadrat to make detailed fashion observations within a tightly-bound geographic area (2018). In ecology and geography this method is used to measure the populations of species within a delineated place, from which the findings about the larger system may be extrapolated (Montello & Sutton, 2013). In the context of fashion, it is useful for supporting a shift in perception –away from the dominance of globalised viewpoints. Identifying local social or relational aspects of fashion (rather than for instance commercial activities which are far more visible), requires devices for ‘seeing’ differently. Sociologists François Dépelteau and Christopher Powell note that relational analysis always requires the ‘re-casting’ of perception through the use of different modes of observation and orientation in this world (Eacott, 2018: 33). I have found that the task of documenting the full spectrum of fashion behaviours, at close range within a given area, makes seemingly marginal or inconsequential activities more visible. It is therefore potentially a useful tool for the identifying emergent patterns and potential seeds of sustainable social change present in already existing behaviours (Shove, 2010).

The interdisciplinary mix of art and science methods built into Residencies is another way of responding to the difficulty of working with everyday behaviours. By its nature, information about the social dynamics and relationships which underlie clothing activities exists below the surface and is difficult to identify. In sociology this has been described as the difficulty of accounting for the richness of real-life experience and ‘the complex ways in which the senses are tangled with other forms of experience or ways of knowing’ (Mason & Davies, 2009: 587 in Heath et al., 2018: 715). This also makes a challenge for the communication of findings; potentials for social change, disconnected actions and emergent patterns are not simple occurrences to communicate (Alberti, et al., 2003). To address these issues, the strengths of art and design to make sense of difficult to describe dimensions of the human condition and surrounding world are called on; things like nuance, empathy and others not reducible to language (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Specifically, visual drawing and other observational art processes are included in Residencies, in conjunction with methods from ethnography (i.e. wardrobe audits) and design (i.e. cultural probes). These methods share an aptitude for an investigation of fashion tuned to the relational landscape of social patterns, material flows and interactions.

3. ART AND DESIGN MAPPING

Everyday lived experiences can be described as fluid, embodied and improvisatory in nature (Given, 2008: 536) and the challenge of observing, analyzing and communicating fashion in ways which stay true to these qualities is central to this research. The final and most experimental item on the list of

¹ See more at <http://www.katelyntothfejel.com/#/fashioninresidence/>

Residencies methods is the use of creative drawing and mapmaking.² The remainder of this paper is a discussion of this component, informed by a range of disciplinary perspectives. Creative mapmaking activities assist at 3 different stages of the research process: observation, analysis and culmination of findings. For example, a slowed down form of visual observations is achieved in the fieldwork by photographing the area using a manual focus film camera. Detailed maps of the clothing resources of an area aid in the analysis of the fashion landscape. And maps made in cooperation with local residents communicate a social understanding of the area in a way that no written description could. In this way, visual outputs also speak in a language not restricted to academic audiences (Bjerck, 2017).

Following movements for post-discipline research in the arts (Eisner, 2008) and non-textual approaches in the social sciences (Heath et al, 2018), drawing is one of many creative practices being re-examined as a useful research tool. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Even so, Sue Heath et al. note that drawing methods are only sparsely used by contemporary social scientists, despite the fact that many academic disciplines (such as anthropology) 'have illustrious histories of observational sketching as a tool for investigation in the field' (2018: 714). They describe the year-long collaboration between an observational artist and researchers from the Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives which led them to conclude that observational sketching generates 'a refreshingly different form of visual data which has considerable potential to be used as a complement to other methods, including as a participatory method and as a useful tool for thinking' (2018: 718).

In seeking to document a 'landscape' of behaviours taking place within an area, mapping from the traditions of cultural geography and art maps are important reference points. In these disciplines, conventional conceptions of maps as neutral scientific records have given way to understanding all maps as a form of language, imbued with representations of power and narrative (Barnes, 2011; Harley, 1989). And since early in the last century maps made by the likes of the Situationists as well as cultural geographers have been given the capacity to communicate marginal and more nuanced subject matter including social behaviours and everyday practice (Barnes, 2011). Graphic designer Alison Barnes uses maps in her work and notes that maps are a potent medium because they are not simply fixed representations of places, but something to be used –so the map represents also a practice, or multiple ways of interacting with place (Barnes, 2011: 42). It also means that the making and using of maps offer many possibilities for participative research methods. Mapping and drawing offer ways to document and experiment with conceptions of human activity linked to places that goes beyond textual or objective representations (Banis & Shobe, 2015).



[Figure 1] *Three Shirts from One Wardrobe*

² See the paper, 'Residencies': mixed methods research investigating fashion through place' for detailed description the rest of the Residencies methods (Toth-Fejel and Snare, forthcoming).

In developing a method for mapping the everyday, Social Practice Theory offers this research a further way of identifying and understanding social change through its emphasis on *practice* (Shove et al, 2012). Many of the same authors making the case for systems level change in fashion also call on practice theory to research patterns of culture and behaviour (see Fletcher, 2017; Thackara, 2015; Klepp & Tobiasson, 2017). In seeking to effectively merge ethnographic and arts based investigations over the last year, practice theory (particularly by Reckwitz, 2002; Giddens, 1984; Shove et al., 2012) have proved to have great potential for guiding the way that content for the maps is identified and analysed. This guidance further addresses the challenge already discussed, of identifying and documenting difficult to see clothing activities and dynamics. For instance Reckwitz's descriptions of practices as constellations of elements including the body, mind, things and knowledge, have provided a framework for interrogating what little evidence there is of alternative fashion practices. Multi-layered design questions and conversation prompts based on Reckwitz's reconceptions of these different categories have helped to overcome the common problem that participants in this research rarely have the language to readily to talk about clothing practices and sustainability in relation to everyday rituals and place. They have helped support a systematic way of digging deeper into people's motivations and consequently provided rich content for the maps.

Figure 1 is an image of work in progress, created using the methods described in this section. It has been made using words recorded during a wardrobe audit and interview of one individual in Shoreditch. This is not a final output but included here to give one visual for what one of the Fashion-in-Residence drawings look like so far.³

3.1. CONCLUSION

The 'Residencies' methods described in this paper function as suite of creative and ethnographic research methods designed to better understand relational fashion behaviours in specific geographic locations. These interdisciplinary methods have been developed to help populate the new territory marked out by a new wave of fashion and sustainability discourse oriented towards radical change and social contexts (Ehrenfeld, 2008; Fletcher & Klepp, 2017; Thorpe, 2012). They build on others' development of hybrid methods from the social sciences, art and design; enabling simultaneous, different ways of perceiving and interpreting social landscapes including that of fashion (Barnes, 2011; Fletcher, 2018; Heath et al., 2018). They explore the potential for novel forms of drawing and mapping practices informed by ethnography and social practice theory to better understand and communicate certain difficult to describe dimensions of the human condition and surrounding world. Residencies will be of interest to those seeking new methods for a building a relational understanding fashion and sustainability or ways to integrate creative and socially engaged practices.

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³ To see additional drawings and maps from this project, including maps of fashion practices and participatively made maps, see <http://www.katelynthfejel.com/#/mapping/>

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