

THE GLEANING STUDIO: A SPACE FOR REDIRECTION AND REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

There is a difficult challenge for design practitioners when establishing ways of applying Fry's (2009) strategy of redirection. Redirection is complex and multifaceted and requires an expansive view of the requirements for future sustainment alongside ways of interpreting these understandings within design process. When redirection demands so much of practitioners, the task can seem insurmountable and a starting point difficult to find.

Within this paper, I suggest that reflective practice can aid in this pursuit, and through my own practice-based research, offer insights when applying reflective techniques to assist my own redirection.

This relational thinking generated the development of an experimental studio structure, situated within my existing fashion design practice. This expanded situation serves to cultivate my bases of knowledge and knowing, and is influential in achieving the objectives of redirection.

The research findings suggest the emergence of a potential template for executing redirective practice. Could fashion design in the future be

practiced in this way?

INTRODUCTION

Awareness of sustainability is becoming a prerequisite for designers across all disciplines and market levels. Within the field of fashion design, a dialogue centred on sustainability and ethical issues has been initiated through the endeavours of researchers and early adopters of sustainable design practices. Amidst these conditions, an emergent paradigm is challenging the role of design and designers to move beyond the considerations of material selection and waste management. Fry (2009) advocates the remaking of design practice to meet the demands of the future. His theories and methodologies of redirective practice¹ force designers to question design's purpose and effects, and therefore its process. The challenge for practitioners of fashion design is to develop ways of practicing design which will facilitate redirection.

Redirection demands the appraisal of what exists within a design practice. So how do designers uncover their provenance in order to practice in a future appropriate way? A potential methodology in assisting this pursuit is reflective practice. A heightened awareness of the "conversation with the materials of the situation" (Schön 1983, p. 78) will impart tools to designers to reveal what they do and how they might change if deemed necessary.

Through practice-based research I have fused the concepts of redirection and reflection, resulting in the redefinition of my design space as a gleaning studio, and a series of exploratory design works emanating

¹ 'For design, 'redirective practice' has three areas of focus: adaptation in the face of what has to change to counter the unsustainable; the elimination of what threatens sustainment by designing 'things' away; and prefiguration, which is designing in order to redirectively deal with what is coming' (Fry 2007, para. 1).

from this space. Within this exploratory paper, these manifestations raise questions regarding future fashion design praxis, whilst presenting a potential template for redirection. The presentation of a selected design work invites the discussion of the agency of designed objects, pertaining to the objectives of futuring.

REDIRECTION & REFLECTION

At its most basic level, sustainability has been concerned with material selection. However, as part of the future sustainment of our structured world, Fry (2009) suggests that, “fundamentally, design has to serve the creation of futures within which humanity, in its independent condition of being, has to be redirected toward sustain-ability.” (Fry 2009, p.118) Note here that sustain-ability is differentiated from sustainability, as it is “a means to secure and maintain a qualitative condition of being over time” (Fry 2009, p. 43), thus is a process rather than an endpoint. Fry makes a poignant point that without sustain-ability, we have no future, we are lost, we have nothing. The central core of design futuring² is the pressing necessity to enact design practice which will create a future. As the named strategy to implement futuring, redirective practice is complex and multifaceted. Essentially it has the characteristics of:

- Remaking how we think, as opposed to only rethinking
- Identifying and changing our processes and outcomes which defuture
- Rematerializing valuable existing knowledge and ways which are compatible with a self sustaining future
- Developing new knowledge and actions which have sustain-ability

As a fashion design practitioner, engagement with the methodologies of reflective practice is effective in meeting the challenges presented by the demands of redirection. Maintaining reflective conversations within the design situation fosters the perception and progression of what a designer knows. I found that insightful probing results through Schön's (1983) reflective techniques of frame analysis (discovering my own strategies of attention), and seeing-as (where analogy and metaphor connect the familiar and unfamiliar).

GLEANING AND DESIGN PRACTICE

The reuse of material and waste, both post production and post consumer, is well established within art and design practice, and was documented substantially by Agnes Varda in *The gleaners and I* (2000) and the

² Defuturing is ‘the essence of any material condition of unsustainability, where the actions of today take futures away from ourselves and other living species’ (Fry 2009, p.1). Therefore, futuring, by default is defined as actions that will create a future.

follow up in 2002. This documentary served as inspiration for a generative metaphor within my research – the concept of gleaning. Gleaning is the gathering of the leftovers of production or society, commonly rejected due to non-conformity to mainstream standards. The act of gleaning is traditionally part of the agricultural system, where the poor were given the right to gather the leftovers from harvest.

In relation to design practice, gleaning as a metaphor transcends the reuse of materials alone. It achieves the aims of redirective practice by uncovering valuable existing knowledge, and revealing inconspicuous aspects of knowing in practice³. Within the situation of design, gleaning opportunity lies within the physical/material leftovers from previous projects, alongside the skill set and knowing of the practitioner. These leftovers are picked over and scrutinized to ascertain their value and potential contribution to the redirective practice. This reflective process must be applied in-action, which necessitates the consideration of other attributes of the practice.

THE GLEANING STUDIO

Redirection forces a comprehensive overhaul of all aspects of practice, with particular focus on the sustaining abilities of the practitioner her/himself. Within my own fashion practice, it was clear that the place of my design activity required development in correspondence with the expansion of my designerly thinking and knowing. In *Design Futuring*, one of the strategies of a redirected architectural practice is the establishment of an urban farm (Fry 2009, p.230). Taking influence from this example, the growing of food and the positive actioning through nurturing, nourishment and environmental flow on effects could be called upon as a personal and existing contribution towards sustainment.

Just outside the scope of my home based workroom was a redirective opportunity in the form of a small adjoining vegetable patch which I have tended for approximately three years.

Figure 1 depicts a bird's eye plan of my property, the house highlighted, and the expanded studio circled. On the right, is a close up of the space comprising the workroom (a converted garage) and the patch.

Combined, they form the studio, where as part of daily habitual work I tend to the patch alongside activities of design and make. This new design space, as well as situating the research in terms of redirection, extends the insights into my fashion practice through additional gleaning opportunities.

The studio is a place, but also becomes a tool within the reflective conversation. The conversation occurs between the happenings within the patch and the workroom, and the window between the two places

³ Knowing is distinct from knowledge in that it is “the realm of skills...part of thinking and doing” (Downton 2003, p. 93)

becomes the mechanism which allows this conversation within the studio (Figure 2). The window then becomes a reflective space, which can be viewed from both perspectives, as well as offering an experience of the other from within (Figure 3).

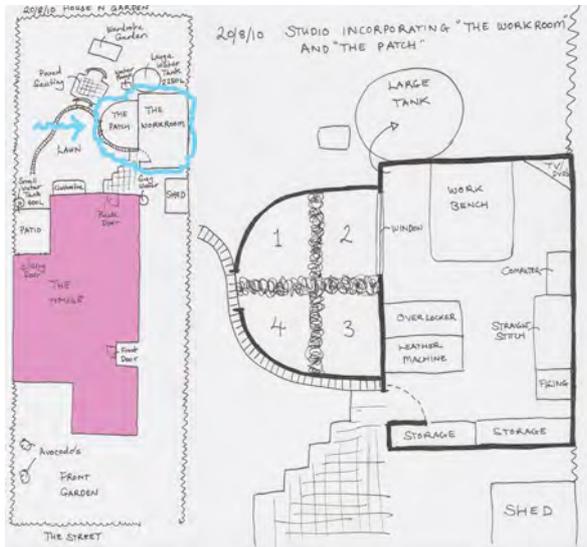


Figure 1 – The proposed gleaming studio

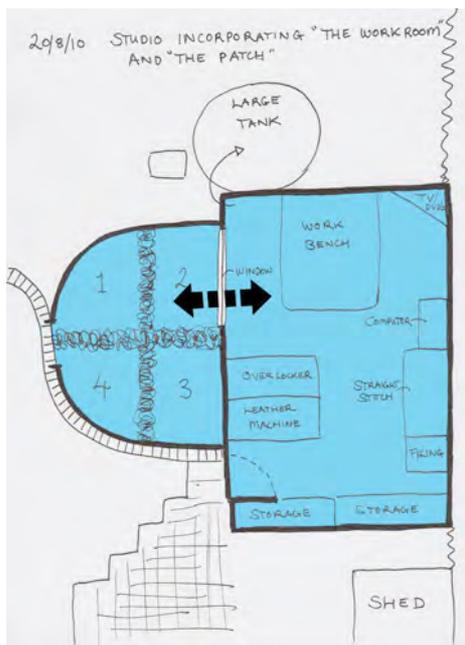


Figure 2 – The reflective conversation forms a reflective space



Figure 3 – An experience of the patch from within the workroom

The design potential emanating from this studio proposition raises questions as to what sort of design and designed product could come from this space, however the critical question is, what *should* come from this space?

WHAT DOES DESIGN GATHER?

The dilemma of what designers should be designing is real when attempting redirection, with one of the first line strategies being elimination - to design nothing. The recognition of the linkage between design and time, and the key understanding of what design designs is essential. Anne-Marie Willis (2006) offers a philosophical perspective on the agency of designed objects through the comparison of a tetra pack juice box with Heidegger's thinging jug. In the essay *The Thing* Heidegger's jug gathers, holds and outpours a drink that gifts a shared experience (Heidegger & Hofstadter 2001). Conversely, the "juice box gathers fruit juices and packaging materials from different parts of the world...it quenches thirst and nourishes, but...it is not part of giving or sharing...it designs individual consumption on the move...and drinking as an individualised, rather than communal activity" (Willis 2006, para. 42).

As well as giving a perspective on consumed objects, Heidegger's jug also gives a way of thinking about the implications which gathering actions have for design. What is gathered by objects defines how they presence⁴ themselves in the world through the creation of a mesh of meaning which we then relate to. In the example of Heidegger's jug, its gathering action in holding and outpouring is its presencing. This becomes part of the gleaned information which, as in the example of the tetra pack juice box, can be used to give clues as to the wider implications of what is designed.

GLEAMING APRONS

What do we really need? What *should* I design? In responding to these challenges, I envisioned a simple idea of a garment to wear within the expanded studio, which could also reflect the lifestyle choice of growing your own food. With reference to overspecialised products, my tongue in cheek response is 'an apron for picking broadbeans' and ultimately, a series of aprons for various purposes and degrees of usefulness and unusefulness.

A gleaner of bygone times in *The gleaners and I* (Varda 2000), says that she "wore a large apron", triggering my recollection that when gleaned, the actual apron is used to gather. An apron for gleaned has a commonality with Heidegger's thinging jug. They both act as vessels which presence themselves through their ability to gather, hold, and then release their contents as a gift or

⁴ Presencing is a thing's essential nature.

something for others to use. With this in mind, I examined the essence of a broad bean when generating design ideas. The pod of the broadbean acts as a vessel for the bean or the seed inside. It gathers and holds the bean as it grows, but also performs an act of nurturing and protection, until the bean, like the liquid in the jug, is gifted outwards as something to be consumed (Figure 4). The apron used for gathering the broadbeans, can be seen to presence itself as a vessel through the same kind of actions.



Figure 4 – Broadbeans gathered by its pod

These vessels – the pod and the apron also share another similarity in that they are shaped through what they gather. Every bean pod is made of the same stuff, but the shaping unique to each individual pod is reliant on the beans which are gathered and grow inside it. The bean makes the pod, and the broadbeans make the shape of the gathering apron. All of these thoughts in regard to the possible actions of the resulting apron are gleaned and utilised in developing its design.

Other gleaned information was formative in shaping the broadbean apron. A survey of vintage, domestic style aprons in my personal collection, with which I have an aesthetic affinity, was influential. As a garment, aprons may be seen as purely functional items of clothing, however there are many different styles and versions, even within this small sample. Here there are various markers of what aprons represent. Domesticity is visually coded in many ways through the fabric, patterning, print, or motifs, and suggestive of what may be gathered, eaten, experienced, thought about and ultimately gifted when wearing the apron.

The completed apron is viewed within the reflective space, from the perspectives of both the workroom and the patch (Figure 5).

The varied viewpoints, and different lighting conditions within the gleaning studio, facilitate reflection and emphasize the diverse acts of gleaning that shaped the apron, being:

- The use of material waste – the leather from previous projects and the lace from my mother-in-law's toilet window curtain.
- The style/shape of the apron and the motif design, both influenced by vintage examples.

- The techniques of utilising small pieces of leather waste, developed through earlier projects.
- My experience of picking, preparing and eating broadbeans.
- The actual gleaning of broadbeans using the apron as a vessel (Figure 6)



Figure 5 – The apron for picking broadbeans, viewed from the patch (left), and from inside the workroom (right)



Figure 6 – The apron full of broadbeans (left) and the beans inside (right)

The apron evokes the gleaning activities that shaped it, and it is hoped that the essence of this gleaning will be transmitted to the eventual user of the object. At this stage of the research, it is difficult to predict how this will play out. An awareness of redirection could be incited, but at the very least, the growing and picking of broadbeans will be encouraged.

DISCUSSION

The research to this point raises questions regarding future practice, the agency of designed objects and a potential redirective template. I have suggested that in meeting the challenges of redirection, there is a need for reflection within design's process, in which inward and outward expansion are both essential. By utilising the generative metaphor of gleaning, useful attributes, both inside and outside of the practice are discovered. This suggests that future fashion practices will be influenced and have influences within a broader sphere in relation to issues of sustain-ability.

The metaphor of gleaning, in relation to the designed object, also imparts an insight into its design and make. Furthermore, considering the continuing agency of the object - what it will glean, what it will gather, gives a sense of how it presences itself through time. Within my practice-based research, the design output hopes to offer experiential engagement for the eventual user,

connecting them with design's process alongside its aims of redirection. My selected design work, the broadbean apron, attempts to embody these ideas, potentially giving its user means for performing actions which are compatible with sustainability.

In summary, the developing template for this fashion practice achieved the following:

- Expanded the design space to include another sphere of being, in both physical and cerebral ways for the designer.
- Developed unique reflective conversations within design process which emerged from the expanded space
- Speculated on the agency of design outputs, and what these designed objects should be.

Could fashion design in the future be practiced in this way?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The design outcomes within this research are mechanisms of reification which embody fulfilled aims of redirection and reflection. Although the research is continuing and in its formative stages, the results to this point suggest that an effective template for redirection is in development.

In meeting the challenges presented through Fry's (2009) strategies of redirection, Schön's (1983) methodologies of reflective practice have been applied and proven to be a good fit. The generative metaphor of gleaning, derived through reflection within design's

situation, is an overarching and fruitful concept which permeates all aspects of the research.

This hypothesis of redirection/reflection/gleaning requires further testing through practice-based research to realise its full potential and prove its worth to future fashion design praxis. Work in the gleaning studio will build on this foundation and the emergent design situation will continue to unfold.

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