

# Vital materialism design methodologies for social change

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## **ABSTRACT**

Socially responsible design education is often grounded in case-based approaches. The problem with these approaches to socially responsible design is that they are usually based on a given set of design methods. Such methods respond to conditions of practice that are outmoded and don't respond to the contemporary presence of the image, and it's affect on materiality and the body in design practice. This is a problem in relation to evolving ecologies where new methods are needed to tackle problems that arise because of the change. In response, this work tries to develop alternative design methods for social change, particularly by exploring the relationships between image and vital material as a key variable. Through a series of experiments the work argues for the potential of material as foundational for creating changing within a system. This proposes engagement with material, body, space & image as a precursor to the linear and formalistic version of the design process.

## **Design methods and evolving ecologies**

Design research in different aspects of socially responsible design aims to propose and give form to alternative ways of living (cf. Manzini 1994). More particularly in design education these endeavours may be conceptualized in the way Flemming does by emphasises "an ethically infused design brief a co-creative design process on-going value engineering pre-emptive engineering design validation through simulation on-line enabled integrated learning the use of well vetted rating systems" (Flemming, 2013). Typical examples are models for design to contribute to policy making, support working conditions, minimise environmental impact, reduce discrimination by promotional activism, storytelling, interventions and alternative products (cf. Davey et al, 2006).

Following these strategies, socially responsible design, is often grounded in case-based approach where scenarios and situations are re-considered, subsequent to the equally often taken for granted applied character of design as a field. However, the problem with these applied approaches is that they are based on traditional set of design methods (cf. Koskinen, 2011), which does not respond to the contemporary presence of the image, and it's affect on materiality and the body in design practice.

## **Image, body and vital materialism**

Instead of developing skills in socially responsible design through e.g. integrative studies and participatory projects on a range of certain issues or to solve a series of particular problems from different sustainable perspective this work aims to develop an alternative methodology based on theoretical implications of the material itself. (Bennett, 2010) which in turn lays the ground for applied design works on pressing social issues. Its focus therefore demonstrates, in Kantian terms, purposiveness without purpose – pure abstraction without concepts of utility or morality (Kant, 2000), but with the potential of its theoretical proposition to be applied.

## **Image and fashion design ecology**

In fashion design there is mainly one kind of design process outlined in the literature, and although presented with differences emphasis when it comes to the extent and timing of particular steps within the process (cf. Jarnow, 2013; McKelvey and Munslow, 2002; Au et al., 2003; Dieffenbacher, 2013), all of these takes their point of origin in form and based on symbolic expression and social rituals. As such the materiality of garments is not at the heart in developing new expressions and functions in dress, not the least in terms of finding new sustainable expression and forms of "wearing". In addition, as Teunissen argues, (2014), until quite recently, fashion designers rarely took these physical, tactile and intimate aspects of clothing account in their design process. Instead materiality is a considered exterior to garment from, this type of design process considers materiality as only a decision to be encountered after/in combination with specifics and parameters predetermined by a technical annotation/sketch, a pattern or a toile or

prototype. This is problematic as the use of new materials opens up for new sustainable opportunities in fashion design as in other design disciplines, presenting fashion design with the vast challenge to develop a deeper relationship to materiality.

This research explores this category of material as product and within the context of practical experiments treating the material as readymade to expose a set of construction principles and suggestions of wear that are embodied in contemporary fashion materials. In addition the research propose active engagement with used, old, surplus and abandoned materials as a foundation – expression of material itself – for the design process; and avoids the integration of virgin materials (unused materials) in acts of developing design. For this reason we have selected a number of different materials to explore. The materials are all abstract from an element (fashion design school) within a particular ecology (fashion design system) (cf. Bourdieu, 1986) and manipulated with the aim to develop a more engaged conscious of materials, constantly questioning its meaning and structure, its intended use and the role of design to create propositions for encountering products of readymade.

### Results

As a consequence of the above, instead of suggesting a prop or a prototype (wearable), being faced with the vitality of materiality in and for itself, the results presents a very different kind of prototype exploring the potentiality of each materials in relation to a particular artefact abstracted from different sub-ecologies within the fashion system. These prototypes aim to express the gestures and poetics of a photographic crop; an image often produced from performative strategies used in the design process. These too relate to strategies that disrupt the design process; bringing the live body, the act, into the design process as a precursor to other types of depiction of form. In this way, vital materials are explored. These types of images are proposed as valid functions in privileging vital materials and compliment the role of this new type of prototype that acts like a 3D image from performative studies.

### Conclusion

The results shows how the poetics of materials presents new potential as a variable in design methodologies for social change and more sustainable ways of living. The material abstraction (theorization) reveal the importance of understanding the functional imperative of textile materials, that are inbuilt with meaning and predetermined outcomes. Demonstrated in the series

of installations the exhibition shows how materiality can override formal prototypes. It shows the trajectory of how a construction of materials also has nothing to do with known finishing of particular garments, but whose form is about remaining logical to a material and able to produce new types and new meanings for a different and more sustainable way of wearing, and thereby living. Thus the material itself demonstrates its potential as an intermediary in the form of itself as a material vignette of action that performs as a function within a situation or system.

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