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Uncut: The Materiality of Textiles and the Politics of Sustainment in Fashionable Clothing

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As contemporary consumer society gives greater emphasis to signs and images as part of the branding of fashionable clothing and so many other consumables, the relationships between human beings and material objects becomes more transitory and detached.

We are, literally and figuratively, losing touch, as makers and wearers, with what has been referred to as a “vital materialism” (Bennett, 2010: 57) that infuses bodies, both human and non-human; this is, I argue, especially evident in our relationships to cloth/es. Textiles function as the material interface between ourselves as bodies and the world, so much so that they have been described “in countless world cultures [as] the convergence of the tangible and intangible.” (Martin, 1998: 292) They provide our first introduction to the experience of things, and sustain our engagement with materiality through our clothes.

Yet fashionable garments (a description that applies to most of what we wear, certainly nowadays) are promoted, sold and bought on the basis of their appearance, not on how they feel and what they are made of. This serves to emphasize the “look,” which discourages wearers from forming lasting relationships with their clothes, and to treat them as mere commodities to be discarded, rather than as vital and sustaining material objects. Such sensibilities only serve to encourage the excessive waste that surrounds fashion, and the relegation of clothes to the status of perishables. Much of the politics of sustainment in contemporary fashion has focused (quite rightly) on the post-consumer waste of clothing. Also, the excessive use of poorly paid human labor working in demanding physical conditions in factories to make fashionable clothing has been of great concern, not least by the international press. Less attention has been paid to the amount of waste involved in the design and production of clothing and the fact that an estimated 15-20% of the fabric used to create a piece of clothing ends up in a landfill. (Gwilt and Risanen, 2011: 88)

This paper draws attention to a small, but growing number of fashion designers who are aiming to incorporate the avoidance of waste into their design process, with the aim that there are no, or very few, pieces left on the cutting room floor. In doing so they are giving more credence and respect to clothes as cloth, that is as textiles, which have their own properties and material relationships to the human body, both physically and psychologically. In doing so they are [re]defining fashion beyond the ubiquitous attractions of the image to give greater consideration to the materiality and vitality of cloth/ing the human body.

Context

If we look for context at the history of fashion in the West over the last half century or so, it has not been one that has necessarily featured the sensorial qualities of textiles. In the European and American fashion industries clothes have been typically cut to fit the human body, without any regard for the substantial amounts of fabric that is unused in the process. In the post Second World War period more complex and changing relationships developed between clothing and to the textiles of which they are made. Perhaps the last great flourish of fabric in mass fashion came with the influence of Christian Dior's post-war Corolle line of 1947. As part of the first collection of a young couturier, the style was criticized for the inappropriateness of an unwarranted use of fabric in the long, full skirt during the austerity following World War II. Yet the fashion press lauded the "New Look," and its excess of fabric, facilitated by the financial assistance of Marcel Boussac the French king of cotton, as symbolizing a sense of freedom from the restrictions of war. What followed however, with the development of mass fashion, were much simpler and more minimal clothes for women. The shift, and then the mini dresses of the late 1960s and beyond, presented a pared down modern style that could be easily manufactured using "cut and sew" methods, rather than to have to acknowledge the detailed dimensions of the body. At the same time, the developing consumer culture of disposability also impacted fashionable clothes, with items such as paper dresses. These various and different changes in styles increasingly meant that fashionable clothing for women ceased to acknowledge the texture of cloth, its capacity to wrap, fold and drape and little, if any, attention was paid to the amounts of fabric wasted in the production process.

An interesting moment for textiles came in the 1980s when fashion designers originating from Japan began to develop an aesthetic, which acknowledged the affect and integrity of cloth. The work of the so-called "big three" designers Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, has been well documented.¹ While each developed distinctive individual aesthetics, they shared concerns about the relationship between the clothes and the wearer, and respected the touch and feel of cloth in their work. They drew variously on age-old techniques of wrapping and draping the body with cloth, derived from methods of construction and traditions of dressing more associated with Asia or Africa, and with traditionally rural rather than urban forms of dress, featuring cloth that hung from the shoulders, swathing the body beneath rather than revealing it. Traditions, that is, which not only valued the integrity of cloth, but also gave it preeminence in clothing the body. Miyake's concept of "A Piece of Cloth," for example, has been sustained in his work for over thirty years, much of it in collaboration with textile artist Dai Fujiwara. Their textile experiments utilized advanced technology and created innovations such as the commercially successful Pleats Please line, based on the technology of pleating and simple cutting of synthetic fabrics, which evokes Mariano Fortuny's pleated Delphos dresses from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Yohji Yamamoto has spoken of his preference for displaying the inherent characteristics of cloth, be it wrinkles in linen, puckers along a seam, or certain and particular textures. In his 2011 retrospective exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, Yamamoto was quoted as saying: "Fabric is everything. Often I tell my pattern makers, 'Just listen to the material. What is it going to say? Just wait. The material will probably teach you something'." (Salazar, 2011: 14) Rei Kawakubo has likewise experimented with fabrics and dyes since the 1980s, taking her reference from "different types of fabric she has seen in her lifetime - not necessarily clothing but perhaps a piece of paper or carpeting."

¹ One recent example in New York was the 2010 *Japan Fashion Now* exhibition at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

(Sidorsky, 1983: 18) Kawakubo's clothing became characterized by its asymmetry and imperfection; effects she reportedly translated into textiles by loosening a screw on a weaving loom in order to introduce imperfections and the sense of the handmade into the mechanical process. (Kondo, 1997: 64)

Harold Koda, chief curator at the Costume Institute, the Metropolitan Museum, New York, when curator at the Fashion Institute of Technology referred to "terse expression" (Kondo, 1997: 64) to describe all three designers' respect for the integrity of the material and aversion to cutting. We might also describe the affect of a garment, being asserted through the vitality of the cloth, which has retained its integrity by being whole, and in the piece, being "uncut." A simple skirt, by Issey Miyake for example, created using an entire piece of cloth achieved its effect through draping, rather than by the wasteful process of cutting multiple pieces on the bias to fit to the body. Typically made in just a few generic sizes, Issey Miyake's designs tend to fit a range of body shapes and sizes. The clothing concept, which utilizes the inherent qualities of fabric, can be one that demands the greater attention and the engagement of the wearer, not least because the actual clothes do not reveal their interesting forms until they are put onto the human body. Miyake's work was translated to a wide audience in the 1980s via *Vogue* patterns, some being quite easy to make at home. Such clothes that did not involve complex cutting made them much easier to make for those with limited expertise. This then was not just a new visual aesthetic, but for Western fashion a wholly different attitude to clothes; one that acknowledged the wearer as well as the veracity and "vibrancy," as Jane Bennett would have it, of cloth not just as fixed and lifeless, but as dynamic, with the potential for transformation in itself and of the wearer of the given garment.

More recently, Issey Miyake has looked to origami for sustainable design solutions.² His 132.5 collection using textiles made from recycled plastic bottles, is a logical extension of Miyake's work. He referred to the clothes in the collection as being "very light, like air, and are season-less," and has said "I hope people will keep them a long time, and not replace them every two months. That, for me, is the essence of sustainability."³ Retailing at less than \$300 an item they are priced accessibly for his followers. Based on the mathematical experiments of Japanese academic, Jun Mitani complex 3D computer generated forms are created from a single piece of flat paper, 132.5 references age-old techniques of paper folding. Such manipulation of textiles into garments by using long-established methods of folding, wrapping, twisting, and knotting is one of the strategies being utilized by fashion designers who prefer not to cut into or to discard cloth. Such references are clearly evident in the work of New York-based designer Yeohlee Teng.

Zero-Waste Design

From the time she established her business in the early 1980s, Yeohlee has aimed to craft her garments from a single piece of cloth, cut to include extra material for ties, knots or edges. Some have utilized the concept of the Mobius strip; others take the form of a one-piece coat produced with less than half a yard of fabric, or a sarong skirt referencing traditions of clothing in her native Malaysia. With designs that have been described as "leaving little or no scrap on the design-room floor," (Martin, 1998: 289) her

² "Issey Miyake Looks to Origami for Sustainable Design Solution"
<http://eccoeco.blogspot.com/2010/09/issey-miyake-looks-to-origami-for.html>
Accessed, September 14, 2012

³ <http://changeobserver.designobserver.com/feature/132-5-issey-miyake/15558/>
[Design Observer, Sept 15, 10] Access September 14, 2012.

one-size-fits-all principle of sizing can be compared to the strategies of Issey Miyake. Yeohlee's design strategy has gained greater attention in the context of sustainability, with her "zero waste" pattern cutting method, demonstrated so well in her Fall 2009 Collection. (Figures 1A & 1B) This collection in particular "was created with zero waste. Every inch of the fabric is used; not one scrap of material is wasted. Crafted from the most utilitarian of fabrics, the worker group propels the suit into fresh territory, equipping the worker with a modular and functional versatility, a necessity in today's environment."⁴

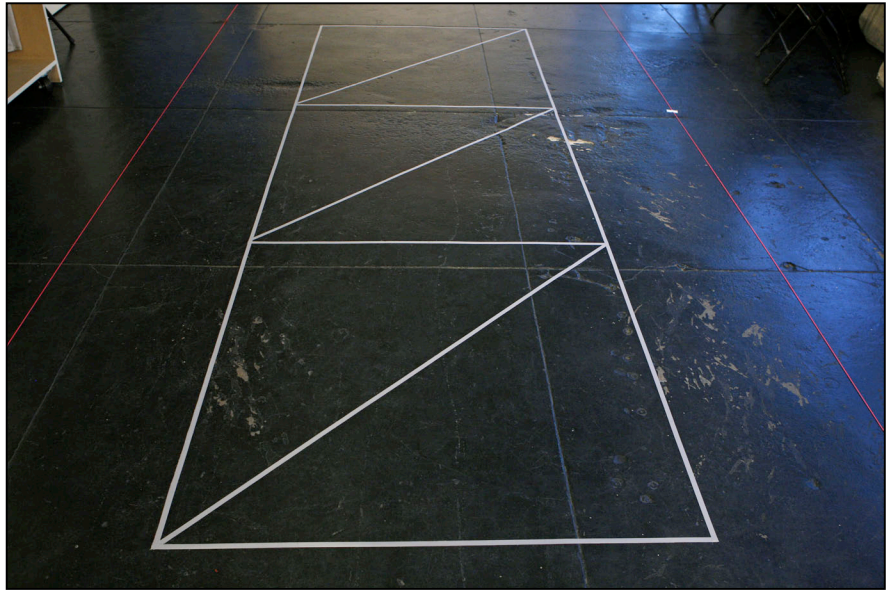


Figure 1A, left: YEOHLEE Look 21, Layer silk Vorlon, Fall 2009
Reproduced with the permission of Yeohlee.

Figure 1B, right: YEOHLEE Zero Waste pattern of Look 21 installed on the runway
Reproduced with the permission of Yeohlee.

Yeohlee's concept has been developed by New York based, Finnish designer Timo Rissanen who applies the method in his designs, teaching and consultancy, as a way of avoiding the waste on the cutting room floor and also inculcating new methods of design. His technique treats fabric as a vital three-dimensional tool, rather than as flat and lifeless to be cut into and destroyed. The process also breaks previously held conventions. The denim jacket featured here, for example, (Figure 2) disregards the norms regarding the typical direction of the fabric, while also retaining the selvedge of the denim as a visual feature on the fronts and the extended shoulder sleeve seam. This piece was featured in "Yield: Making Fashion Without Making Waste," an exhibition Rissanen co-curated in 2011, held at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand, and at the Textile Arts Center, Brooklyn, New York.⁵

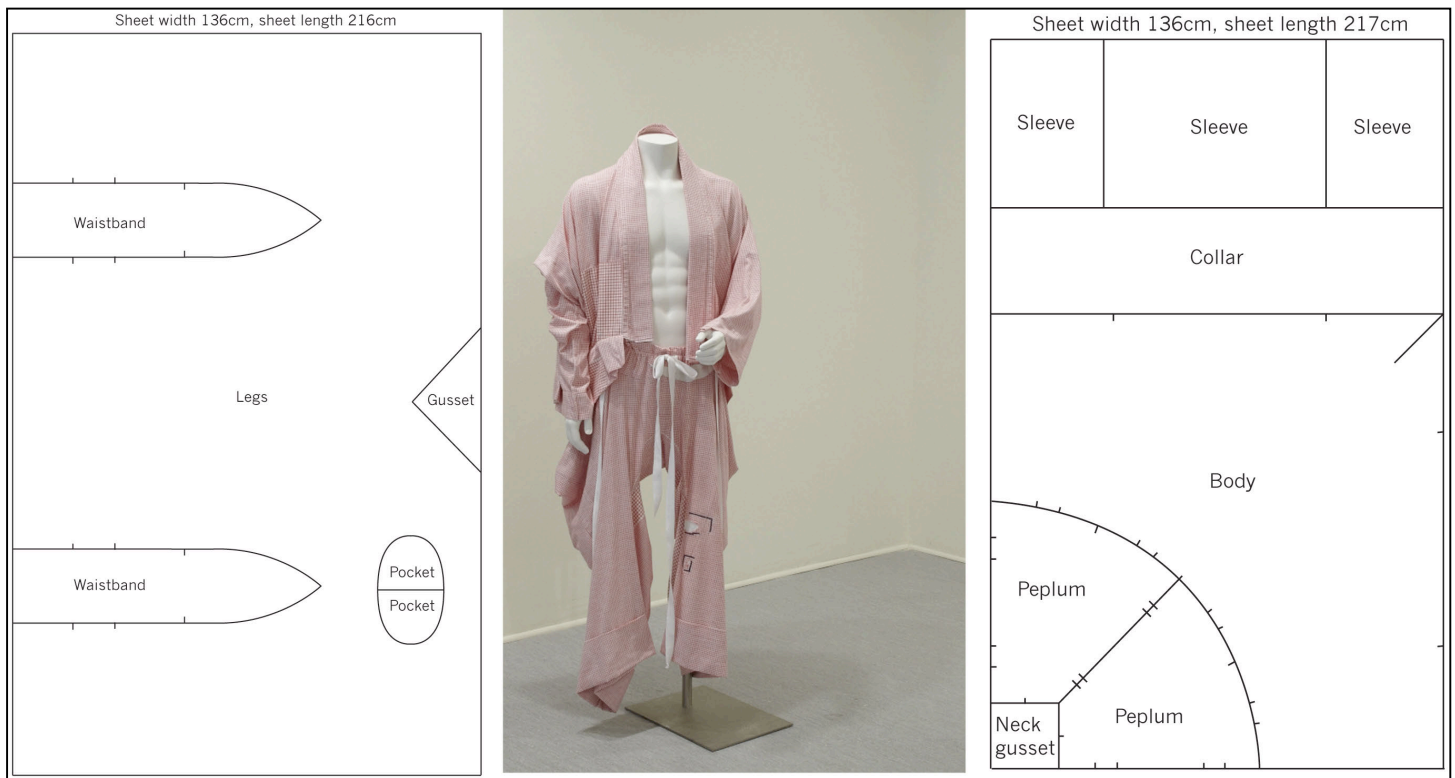
⁴ <http://yeohlee.com/archive/archive.html>

⁵ <http://www.yieldexhibition.com/yieldexhibition-catalogue.pdf>



***Figure 3: Timo Rissanen, Pyjamas, 2011
Reproduced with the permission of Timo Rissanen.***

Also included in the Yield exhibition was the work of British designer Julian Roberts, who developed a zero-waste method he refers to as “subtraction cutting.” Roberts’ technique works on the principle of negative space, extracting small areas from the cloth to provide shape to the resulting garment. Also a teacher, Roberts has demonstrated the technique all over the world. The process is a dynamic activity, which engages the performer, but also the spectator, who is intrigued and mystified as to the form of the resulting garment. The garments provide flexibility for the wearer to choose how they are worn, as is typically the case with zero-waste designs. The red and white Zero-Waste Sub-Cut Dress shown here, for example, (Figure 4) is made from seven meters of two contrasting colored fabrics and can be worn in at least five different ways; thereby further reducing waste by providing the wearer with multiple styles from a single purchase. While not quite 100% yield, the dress explores Roberts’ innovative pattern cutting process, which, as with all of these examples, drastically reduces the waste conventionally generated in garment production.



**Figure 4: Julian Roberts, Red and white, Zero-Waste Sub-Cut Dress, 2011.
Reproduced with the permission of Julian Roberts**

The zero-waste process has the advantage that it can be learned without sophisticated training and typically creates forms that can be individualized by the wearer, by manipulating the cloth on their own body. They are what Rissanen has called “celebrations of fabric,” which position patternmaking and textiles as an integral aspect of fashion design rather than something to be addressed after and in response to a sketch.⁶

Conclusion

In many ways the zero-waste method is not new. Throughout history, ordinary wearers have had to respect and save cloth, often in times of hardship and restraint, such as during rationing in wartime when women fashioned new outfits from old ones. Also traditional activities such as knitting and quilting have been zero-waste endeavors, which have used up scraps of yarn or cloth. The work of the designers presented here, and that of their non-professional forebears all deserve acknowledgement today when ways and means are being sought of revaluing textiles. In the context of the politics of sustainment in fashionable clothing they have a number of shared premises:

1. Paramount, is providing greater integrity to cloth and using it in its entirety (or as much as possible) to avoid waste and to encourage its longevity;

⁶ <http://fashion.parsons.edu/2010/06/13/jr-jr-cutprint/> (Timo) 13 June 2010

2. To redeem the vibrancy of cloth and the rethinking of “fashion” based around the sensorial relationship between wearers and their garments as material textiles, rather than as images;
3. The accessibility of the zero-waste method, which is based on ubiquitous and age-old practices such as folding, twisting, wrapping, origami, which are neither special or secret only to trained professionals within the fashion industry.

In understanding more about the potential of saving, not wasting, in the production process, the designer, producer and wearer can work together in the process of re-defining fashion to give greater respect to the materiality of fabric and in doing so to develop further the discourse surrounding the politics of sustainment in fashionable clothing.

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