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Bodily ways of knowing in fashion: Connectedness between clothing and the body

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Classic design virtues such as empathy and user centricity are challenged by climate change, ecological fragility, and an increasing focus on the limitations of human-centred design approaches in more-than-human worlds. In a world affected by scarcer resources yet defined by increasing overconsumption that pushes "us" fast towards meeting and crossing ever more of the planetary boundaries, there is a persistent need to re-think and –do not only how consumption and resources are understood and used but also how all of "us" together intra-connect and –act in the entanglements of the world's continuous becoming. This calls for new orientations towards care and connectedness that reach beyond the question of environmental sustainability. Exploring methodological approaches that might help us in developing new ways of designing, in this video article, we present and discuss some of our learnings from the project *Touch(ing) Grounds*, a research- and design-based exploration formulated at the Lab of Sustainability and Design at Design School Kolding in Denmark. Initially, the project explored the potential of "touch" as a counterpole to the overtly visually-centric focus in fashion. Curious about how we can (re-)think and do the relational entanglements between designers, uses of and knowledge about material resources and the human body, our exploration was guided by the question of how we might study embodied knowledge in relation to garments and thereby find spaces for bodily ways of knowing to explore our relationships with resources and garments in new ways. In our research, we have dived into use-abilities by combining a concrete garment with a more abstract yet personal reference, creating a space to recognise the attachments connected to embodied knowledge. Analysing our exploration, we developed a diagram to further understand and thicken the seemingly mundane encounters between clothing and the body, based on the three levels of product, use-abilities and connectedness. We understand bodily ways of knowing as approaches toward knowledge production that emphasize and explore the body and its sensual capacities. We argue that designers and design researchers could become engaged with bodily ways of knowing by embracing more than human worlds in their design practice, approaching alternative and anarchistic design methodologies. With the learnings brought forward in this video article, we want to challenge the human exceptionalism dominating the existing fashion system and explore



which methodologies might help us come closer to an understanding of relational entanglements – whether it's the larger picture of care for resources and the planet or the closer relations of care for the garments in our wardrobe.

Keywords: Experimental design research; Embodied knowledge; Clothing experience; Connectedness; Sustainability; Fashion; Design methodology

VIDEO ARTICLE

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[0:10]

Bodily ways of knowing in fashion: Connectedness between clothing and the body

By L. Ravnløkke, L. Permiin & A-M.S. Wehlitz

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[Voiceover:]

How might we study embodied knowledge in relation to garments to find space for bodily ways of knowing in fashion? This question guides the exploration of this video article, drawing on our insights from the design research project *Touch(ing) Grounds*.

Our exploration started from a curiosity to explore alternative ways to orient ourselves, shifting the focus towards embodied knowledge, experimenting with bodily ways of knowing.

We understand embodied knowledge as “a form of knowledge that is learned through the body’s knowledge of how to act, instinctively” (Fletcher et al., 2019, p. 15) for example, the internalized experiences of getting dressed, the performances of habitual movements and gestures without having to think about them.

Bodily ways of knowing are approaches towards knowledge production that emphasize and explore the body and its sensual capacities. Here we explore for example dance as a way to disseminate knowledge as well as open to new experiences in our research practice.

We are intrigued by the idea that emphasising embodied knowledge of materials, garments and wearing clothes can help us build more sustainable relations in consumption: moving our attention from ownership to use, and from ‘having’ to ‘being’, as a part of another materialism. To us, this idea doesn’t mean to ban fashion. Instead, we propose new orientations towards care and connectedness

that reach beyond the question of sustainability as environmental, socio-cultural, and economic concerns — as a whole, where all units are connected.

[01:31]

design

school kolding

WHO

In this video article, we present and discuss some of our reflections from the research project *Touch(ing) Grounds*, formulated at the Lab of Sustainability and Design at Design School Kolding in Denmark. The experimental project was set out to collectively explore the potential of touch as an entry point to (re-)thinking and -doing textile design and fashion in relation to the use of material resources and wearing clothes.

WHY

With the rise of phenomenological approaches, the body as knowledge producing tool in itself has gained increasing interest. This has led to a context where a strong mind-body dualism might be dismissed as being reductionist in many contemporary design research projects. Yet, we argue, our bodies and the knowledge that rests within them as well as gets produced through them still holds a lesser position when it comes to knowledge production than the mind.

In our exploration, we are interested in experimenting with methodologies that help us in approaching embodied knowledge as means to find bodily ways of knowing in fashion.

DIAGRAM

We visualized some of our key insights in the diagram *Connectedness between clothing and the body*. The diagram, while organizing our ideas, is also a heuristic tool for thinking through different levels of abstraction. The levels are a three-step orientation, moving from concrete towards more abstract explorations.

Throughout the article we will refer to the diagram, deepening our explanation of its various elements, using it as a framework to explore and thicken the seemingly mundane encounters between clothing and the body, based on the three levels of product, use-ability, and connectedness.

Product

Use-ability

Connectedness

[03:33]

In this project, we used an experimental and practice-based approach to design research, applying design skills and methods to be able to work with and navigate within complex issues.

In a traditional design process, prototyping is one of the designer's tools to make ideas more tangible for further study and development. Likewise, designers use experimental approaches to explore scenarios (Binder, 2016).

We are interested in prototyping embodied knowledge – going from the physical object to a bodily experience by using body movements to centre a creative, embodied multi-sensory process. Furthermore, we use the narrative of a well-known clothing item to create a common ground for user dialogue in the design experiments.

The exploration took its point of departure in cotton, a material we chose based on its long-standing historical yet ambiguous position within the contemporary fashion industry. In the here-mentioned design experiment, we focused on socks, a garment category relatively neutral in terms of gender association and age. The sock has a long history of development and improvement, being made bespoke and optimised for industrial production. Yet, it is also a garment category that seems understudied.

[04:46]

The design experiment was conducted as an online workshop in April 2020, taking place via Zoom. In total, 22 researchers and a few students participated.

The design experiment was set up as a workshop to explore how bodily ways of knowing might open discussions on use, embodied knowledge, and relationships of connectedness emerging from here. We were interested in learning more about the entanglements of clothing use.

The workshop was built in three steps, investigating several levels of embodied knowledge and material experiences – exploring the emerging encounters between clothing, materials, and the body.

To investigate bodily way of knowing, we developed a performative, embodied practice, using movement, sound and figurative expressions, which we translated

into a choreography. The movements were inspired by the industrial processing of a cotton plant becoming a sock: from growing, being harvested, spun, and knitted into being ready for use.

All participants had to stand up. They were then asked to follow one of the facilitator's movements, which was accompanied by background sounds of the manufacturing process from growing cotton seed to a sock. By emphasising movement and sound, we aimed to push for an embodied reflection, becoming bodily aware of the process of a rather mundane and daily-used object.

After the choreography, the participants watched a video revealing the story behind the movements they had just danced, with both visuals and sounds. All participants were further invited to reflect on the experiences and bodily sensations that the choreography afforded.

Afterwards, we randomly divided all participants into three smaller groups. Within these groups they were asked to tell about the socks they were wearing (or choose not to wear): what they liked or did not like about them, the materiality as well as sensations of wearing them. This part of the workshop centred around using a finished product and experiences related hereto.

Within these smaller groups, the socks functioned as tangible tools to initiate discussions about multiple uses and experiences, opening up for explorations of embodied knowledge and many other experiences related to use.

The third step of the workshop further explored the relationship between the body and clothes, by guiding the discussions towards themes of transformation and transition. We were particularly interested in the participants reflection upon the questions: What is it that gives life to what? Is it clothes that give life to the body, or the body that gives life to clothes? Or maybe something in between?

We initiated the discussion with a short section from the book *Look: Readings*, by the Danish author Luka Holmegaard, which was read out loud. The book, in general, centres on matters of identity in relationship to clothing. In the passage we chose, Holmegaard discusses and analyses Elfriede Jelinek's work, "Shadow".

With the reading, we aimed at opening up for broader discussions on the relationships between clothes and the body and to explore connectedness in a wider sense.

"Jelinek writes the clothes together with the snakeskin, that which is left behind, that which is both living and dead. Dresses and jackets, made from sheep fur and plants, from cow hide and silkworm pupae. The clothes are both a body and not, therefore,

the clothes are a ghost, and the ghost is a piece of clothes. A dress on the floor, a voice without a body” (Holmegaard 2020: p. 129, our translation)

The focus on movement and bodily experience was an attempt to bring careful and embodied attention to engagements with resources and mechanical labor that are brought into a relatively simple piece of clothing, asking for new relationships with more-than-human worlds to inspire potential future design relations.

[08:39]

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we had to move the workshop online.

Initially, we developed the workshop with two aims in mind. Firstly, we wanted to create a common activity that would involve every participant, even though we were remote. And secondly, we wanted to give centre stage to the body, not only in a verbal manner, but precisely by focusing on bodily sensations and experiences — compared to the primarily used vision. Here we took inspiration from designer Vivian Tauchmann and developed a choreography, with the intention to create awareness to the materials products are made from and to get a closer relation with them.

Rather, we understood the method as “a movement exploration, /.../ an investigation into knowledge that can be accessed or discovered through the moving body” (Farnell & Wood, 2017, p. 72).

Without any previous experience in using dance or performance as part of a research methodology, we didn’t have a clear idea of where the choreography would lead us.

The choreography created an intimate space-time for us to come together even though separated from each other, keeping us all focused and drawn into doing the same thing at the same time. This experience resonates well with anthropological theories that understand “dance (as being) used to create intimate relations between individuals and to enhance the solidarity of a group.” To stabilize a common ground of our insights, we will draw on our diagram: Connectedness between body and clothes, starting at the level of product.

[10:09]

DIAGRAM

Product

PRODUCT relates to our body and physical senses of touch, smell and sight related to garments, its materials and the aesthetics of it.

Shaping the movements in the choreography, we aimed to build a story that could draw a connection to what a garment, understood as product, can hold. A journey of becoming: from being a cotton plant to the manufacturing of fibres, threads, and finally becoming a sock. This connection was drawn with the specific purpose of bringing attention to product qualities and various shades of touching encounters.

Developing the choreography made us even more aware of the many touching encounters coming together within a product. Our curiosity was triggered and we started wondering how these encounters with mundane products might connect to the embodied knowledge of culture, history, and everyday experiences of wearing. Studies in material science and design research show how touch is for example connected to materials and textile construction.

Feeling the movement of the body and the heat that is generated between body and worn garments. Participants expressed how certain garments limited their movements or how they could feel their body heat would make their garments damp, which could give a chill feeling afterwards when sitting still. In this way, the participants' expressions described some physical phenomenon of wearing specific materials and styles of garments, and how these experiences relate to bodily movements.

[11:49]

DIAGRAM

Use-ability

This level is called USE-ABILITY. This level connects the embodied knowledge of wearing with personal experiences, of using clothes, that we carry with us. At this level, we look closer into the embodied knowledge related to wearing and using clothes that may further unfold the connectedness between clothes and the body.

The conversations that emerged during the breakout sessions were intimate and highly personal, revealing surprisingly rich networks of relationships that evolved out of the participants' engagements with their socks. These relationships were often grounded in embodied knowledge and sensual experiences that became verbalized during the conversations. The reflections revealed that in their mundanity socks afford complex entanglements within people's lives: a running sock put on in preparation for an anticipated task in the nearby future; or a mother's knitted sock, designed to fulfil the daughter's specific preferences of warm feet and free ankles.

During the discussion, it became clear how individual an item can be – from one to another, and how a simple framework for dialogue can create awareness to these gestures. The conversations led to reflections and verbalizations which translated embodied knowledge into stories of bodily engagements. This moved our explorations further toward the interrelated connections in such manifestations.

[13:32]

DIAGRAM

Connectedness

The third level of our diagram called CONNECTEDNESS holds (new) understandings of care and connectedness, which underline the importance of taking time to unfold the complexity of the many encounters between clothing and the body which we touched upon and discussed during the design experiment.

Further unfolding this level, we will explain the relationship between the three levels of the diagram as a part of discussing bodily ways of knowing.

Use-ability

Product

Starting the discussion, we will draw on the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold as he urges us to take seriously the distinction between object and thing.

Thing

Object

Drawing on Heidegger, Ingold argues that an object confronts its viewer as already made and defined.

“any further changes it may undergo, beyond the point of completion, consequently, belong to the phase of use or consumption” (Ingold, 2012, p. 435)

It is, in itself, complete and “any further changes it may undergo, beyond the point of completion, consequently, belong to the phase of use or consumption”. Shifting our understanding of the same object towards seeing it as a thing affords by contrast an understanding of that thing “as a potential – for further making, growth, and transformation.” Things then are not stable but are rather becoming through our engagements with them as well as we are becoming through these engagements with things. This idea is interesting in relation to our experimentation with choreography as a methodological entry point on several grounds.

Firstly, on the level of product, experimenting with the cotton sock choreography, opened for an understanding of different potentialities of the thing that is a sock, drawing us into bodily ways of experiencing its journey of becoming.

Secondly, relating to use-abilities, the cotton sock choreography created new potentialities to be explored in relationship to using socks. Apart from guiding us towards the ways we functionally use our socks, we became more aware of the use-fulness of thinking with socks in embodied and bodily ways.

On the third level, connectedness, the choreography opened potentialities to think about and experience, in an embodied way, how we are connected to resources, how life and death, making and destruction are interrelatedly unfolding.

Using the cotton sock choreography in the beginning of our workshop thus opened for potentialities to think and act with socks in new ways, shifting our engagements from an object- or product-centred approach towards their “thingness”.

[16:22]

In furthering our exploration, we are drawing on more speculative ways of thinking as we are interested in relating care and commitment.

CARE AND COMMITMENT

Inspired by current debates on the notion of care as knowledge / political commitment, we are wondering how our bodily engagements and bodily ways of knowing contribute to shifting the focus from visual towards other sensual experiences; how touch can become a means, literally as well as metaphorically, to think through and live with our clothing engagements. We have been inspired by Puig de la Bellacassa’s thought-provoking question, asking: “We can see without being seen, but can we touch without being touched?”

During our investigation, our interest has rested on the designer’s role and the potentialities in drawing methodological focus toward our bodies. From a design methodology perspective, the choreography thus was an attempt to bring us in touch with the resources as well as labour that goes into making garments. We wonder whether bodily ways of knowing as exemplified in our cotton sock choreography can help to further our commitments toward clothes by creating potentialities that reach beyond the direct touch of clothes on our bodies towards letting them *touch us*.

“To think with touch has a potential to inspire a sense of connectedness that can further problematize abstractions and disengagements of (epistemological) distance” (Puig de la Bellacassa, 2017, p. 97)

Drawing again on Bellacassa, who argues, that “to think with touch has a potential to inspire a sense of connectedness that can further problematize abstractions and disengagements of (epistemological) distance,” we wonder:

Can an increased focus on bodily ways of knowing in design processes shift our ways of approaching our design practices?

Can they help in turning our attention further away from the visual-centric approaches so often found in fashion toward, sensuously more holistic ones?

Can this in turn shift our caring commitments in ways that emphasize the duality between touch and being touched?

Might these engagements and commitments during the design process translate into the things we create, thereby creating new potentialities for care and commitment to emerge?

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Might these engagements and commitments during the design process translate into the things we create, thereby creating new potentialities for care and commitment to emerge?

We don't seek to answer these questions here but rather let them inspire us in further experimentation and investigations.

[19:03]

In our research, we have dived into use-abilities by combining a concrete garment with a more abstract yet personal reference, creating a space to recognise the attachments connected to embodied knowledge.

We understand bodily ways of knowing as approaches toward knowledge production that emphasize and explore the body and its sensual capacities. We argue that designers and design researchers could become engaged with bodily ways of knowing by embracing more than human worlds in their design practice, approaching alternative, anarchistic design methodologies.

With the learnings brought forward in this video article, we want to challenge the human exceptionalism dominating the existing fashion system and explore which methodologies might help us come closer to an understanding of relational entanglements — whether it's the larger picture of care for resources and the planet or the closer relations of care for the garments in our wardrobe.

Studying this further requires moving into unknown territory, to explore new design practices that acknowledge space for bodily ways of knowing. Our experimentation with the cotton sock choreography demonstrates an attempt to shift our methodological focus away from static objects and materials, towards movement and process, opening for new ways of engagement: bodily ways of knowing.

A special and warm thanks to all the participants taking part in this video article. The recordings was collected from both online and physical participation; hence from a symposium called Living with others, by three distinct and complementary design research environments between Design School Kolding, Linneaus University, and Alto University, spring 2020, and design students from Design School Kolding, fall 2020.

[20:55]

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