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Unravelling the Power of Knitting

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About the research

My research explores design activism in the context of my practice as a designer-maker of knitwear. Motivated by the prospect of a more sustainable and satisfying fashion system, I am investigating the idea of 'openness' within my practice.

At a macro level, I have constructed a metaphor of fashion as a commons, which has been subject to gradual enclosure through industrialisation and professionalisation. I see a lack of making knowledge as one element of this enclosure, and suggest that an open fashion system would see a greater role for individuals making and maintaining their own clothes.

On a more practical level, I have investigated ways of 'opening' existing knitted garments, using knitting skills to remake, alter and embellish them. Altering existing pieces enables renewal, and my research shows that it has the potential to change the wearer's relationship with fashion more broadly. However, the ability to open and reconfigure a garment depends on its physical properties and what is perceived to be possible. Although knitting has an inherently open and 'tinkerable' structure, we tend to perceive mass-produced garments as closed and inviolable. As Fletcher (2008: 187) argues, 'the products themselves are presented to us as complete or 'closed', with an almost untouchable or sacrosanct status. This dissuades us from personalizing them in order to make them our own.'

About the workshop

In my conference workshop, I aimed to discuss what we perceive we can do to existing knitted garments, whether we see them as open or closed, and what factors affect those perceptions.

The main reason for proposing a workshop on this topic, rather than a conventional conference presentation, was to integrate the process of making into the discussion. This was a continuation of my research methodology, which focused on the feelings of makers *during* the making process. I worked with a group of amateur knitters, exploring ways of opening existing knitwear and discussing the emotions involved. The project culminated in the participants using re-knitting techniques to alter items from their own wardrobes.

The conference workshop activity was essentially a knitting circle: we knitted and talked, as I shared stories from the group of amateur knitters. By participating in the craft activity being discussed, the workshop participants gained an insider perspective from which to consider the experiences of others and discover their own opinions.

Having set up the practical activity, I described the re-knitting project and read out quotes from the research participants relating to their initial feelings about unravelling, cutting and altering:

I'm always scared, I mean if you drop a stitch or something, I'm always scared it's going to run right down to the bottom.

Cutting knitting? It's sacrilege!

I demonstrated methods of opening knitted fabric, and described how the amateur knitters' feelings changed as they experimented. They discovered qualities within the fabric that they had not previously considered, and this changed their attitude to alteration:

It's liberating because it's not all just disappeared.

It's that expectation that it would all fray, and it just hasn't.

During the conference workshop, we were not knitting using new balls of yarn in a conventional way. Instead, generic knitted garment panels were gradually unravelled and re-knitted, with one piece disintegrating as another was created. This meant that the workshop

participants were experiencing at first hand the emotions involved in deconstruction. While the quotes from the research project offered a starting point for discussion, the workshop participants readily shared their own thoughts and feelings, offering alternative perspectives which enriched my understanding of the issues in question.

Later in the workshop, I shared descriptions of a number of fictional knitted garments, which I had discussed with the research group as a way of interrogating the factors affecting their inclination to make alterations. The workshop participants contributed their own thoughts about each garment, which in many cases were different to those of the amateur knitters. Finally, I showed images of the amateur knitters' re-knitted garments, before and after their alterations, and shared some of their reflections on the experience as a whole:

We've done things I would never have dreamt of.

It's made me a bit braver.

Reflections

The conference workshop took place during the analysis phase of my research. I found it valuable to talk about my tentative findings, and respond to questions, at this formative stage. The atmosphere in the room was convivial and reflective, with all participants contributing to the discussion. Each act of unravelling involved at least two people – one holding the disappearing panel, and one knitting a new piece from the same yarn. The threads stretching between these collaborators created physical connections which visually reflected the shared experience. Although I had planned a way of including participants who were unable to knit, all those who attended could knit; it is a drawback that the activity may have put off those who did not already have this skill.

Having now completed my analysis, I am able to briefly share my conclusions on the issue of garments being perceived as open or closed. I discovered a general assumption that complete, finished items would not be altered, which applies to both shop-bought and homemade clothes. However, it seemed easier for the research participants to perceive items as open and suitable for modification if there was a recognisable problem to be solved. While all knitted garments have the capacity for alteration, it is when they become damaged and the structure starts to degrade that this property becomes more obvious. It was surprisingly straightforward to create a situation in which it was acceptable to modify items of knitwear; through playing with knitted fabrics, the research participants quickly extended their ideas about what could be done.

Overall, I have found that the process of deconstruction can be a valuable research tool, prompting reflection on the item itself – its construction, age and conditions of manufacture – and much broader issues, such as workers' rights and waste. I intend to develop this methodology in future research.

References

Fletcher, K. (2008). *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles*. London: Earthscan.