

UNI+FORM

CONSTRAINTS AND POSSIBILITIES IMPLICIT IN AN UNUSUAL CLOTHING FORM

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INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH BACKDROP

In the spring of 2013 an investigative exercise titled *Uni+form* was conducted at a Canadian University of Art + Design. This short-term research project is part of a broader research cluster, *made up of an* interdisciplinary team of designers, engineers, artists and weavers, titled *cloTHING(s) as conversation*. The *cloTHING(s) as conversation* initiative began in September 2011. It is based on the keen observation that existing systems of garment making and distribution are in flux and seeks to revise common assumptions about how we should and can interface with textile based products. In particular *cloTHING(s) as conversation* aims to address the challenges connected to contemporary design, fashion, nascent technology and the fashion industry's move toward sustainability. A series of explorations into the fabric of exchange that exists between the clothing we wear and the conversations we have are being developed. These are being used to trigger and illustrate the potential for clothing to affect it's own discrete origin within the fashion machine

From its inception, *cloTHING(s) as conversation* has been structured as an open creative research inquiry. The work explores exchange in terms of shared information - looking both at what is extant and potentially lost in our everyday conversations. It also taps into the sensorial, and conceptual associations that are made by individuals through acts of making, trying on, and modifying garments. Generative material studies, creative research methods and affiliated design activities with-in the studio have helped to externalize insight. As sites for internal conversations to be projected outward they have provided mechanisms to voice and share with colleagues, peers and friends. Serving as invites they have assured that experts with disparate working expertise and expectations have been able to touch and influence one another (Fraser 2014).

A "viable a research method?" SJ

"Oh awesome. Putting myself in a compromising position it forces me out of my assumptions - open to being vulnerable... involving ... discourse with other people who are not designers - getting recognition - opened a door - opened a new person - fun (for them) to see what I am doing here. Yal" LB

(extract from a *Uni+form* participant interview)

What has emerged is a dialogic inquiry that intentionally cross-examines, articulates and contextualizes a series of experiences. Similar approaches and precedents can be found in other design research efforts looking at the clothing industry (Busch, O.2008, Fletcher, 2013).

In the early phases of the *cloTHING(s) as conversation* inquiry, a plus (+) shaped template emerged as a mechanism of investigation. The template is the direct result of material explorations by one of the lead investigators in which articles of clothing were worn out of context. In this exercise, comprised of purposeful acts of wearing, a pair of pants were transformed and worn as a jacket, a skirt was modified and worn as a top, a skirt

was worn as scarf. On one occasion a cowl neck sweater was worn as an apron. The last example served as the original impetus for the plus (+) shaped pattern template (laid out flat the sweater could be seen to form either a + or an x shape). In a highly experimental and generative research space where there are multiple phases, layers, players, methods and mediums the plus (+) shape has become an object, a marker that anchors a research inquiry riddled with necessary deterritorialized settings (Semetsky, 2013). The plus (+) shape that is on one hand a pattern/a base form also serves to reveal and by chance provoke new design insights (Figure 1).

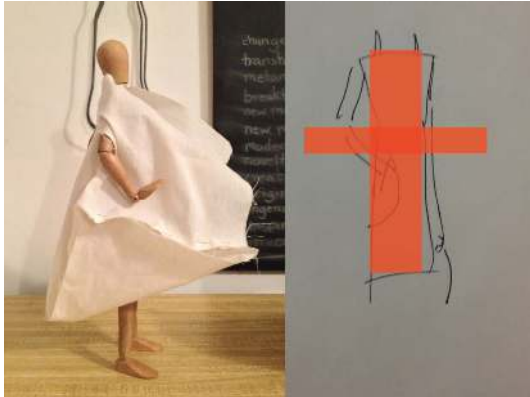


Figure 1. Exploration with the + shaped cloth

UNI + FORM: PLACING GUIDELINES FOR WORK IN SITU - HOLDING US STEADY

For several months during the Spring of 2013 eight participants worked explored the possibilities of the plus (+) shaped cloth pattern. This was done through folding and fastening strategies and iterative prototyping (Figure 2). Once a range of prototypes had been developed the *Uni+form* exercise was introduced.



Figure 2. Variations of folding and manipulation of the + shaped cloth

As a designed intervention that simulated scenarios of wearing *Uni+form* was intended as a strategic means of exploring felt experience and associative meaning. The plus (+) form was placed at the center of the exercise as a constraint. Part provocation, this unconventional pattern artifact (it does not fit into the norms of contemporary garment construction) was intentionally aimed at affecting change from the periphery. Klaus Krippendorff's insight that "Artifacts are not only instrumental to users (operational context) and constitutive of social realities (sociolinguistic context)" but "also created, produced, marketed, consumed, retired, or recycled, and experiences with them inform a subsequent generation of artifacts." (Krippendorff, 1989) is useful. Rather than concentrating on an object to be studied the method of inquiry intentionally forced the participants to gaze outwards and away

form the plus (+) form. Situated within a range of everyday settings and connected to the act of wearing the plus (+) form enabled participants to critically position themselves, their personal biases and experiences in context to cultural and socio-economical registers. This aligns with research in sociology, ethnology, psychology and design that points to the necessity of understanding objects function not only in terms of physical attributes but comprising equally of a psychological dimension: objects have a latent capacity to represent or mirror the identity of their owners (Brandes, Stich and Wender, 2008). Rather than treating clothing solely as a mechanism for self expression and identity projection, the *Uni+form* exercise aimed to align the participant experience externally – thereby eliciting a momentary shift in perspective and opportunity for the participant designers to critically engage with their internal self.



Figure 3. Exploring folding and fastening strategies

+ CLOTHING, IN THE DOING

The *Uni + form* exercise was arranged systematically, with a series of guidelines for the participant: a plus (+) shaped cloth template, a journal, and a day of wearing the unusual clothing template in any choice/self directed manner (Figure 3).

Two semi-structured interviews (an intro and an extro) framed the experience. The same sets of questions were posed to all participants. The researchers and participants wore a plus (+) shaped cloth for a day and were required to record their personal experience in a journal (Figure 4). Insights from their experiences allowed for lateral conversations.

Both the wearing scenario and the interview questions were constructed to encourage the participant's reflection around their own tacit knowledge, professional expertise, and personal experience of clothing.

"The creative process combines the designers' experience, their self-imposed constraints, their knowledge and information, as well the chains of thought created by the process. The information is not perfect, so that the pursuit of new solutions and models of thought requires that the designer gets a grip on his or her data, interpreting it and working it through." (Mattelmäki, 2006)

The investigation identified and uncovered insights applicable to further design iterations but also provided insight into the role of constraint within design inquiry.

FLUCTUATION OF EXPERIENCE AND MODES OF INTERVENTION

Participants were called on to work within boundaries noted above. Further, they were asked to reflect on their experience. It has become clear through the semi-structured interview process (consisting of set questions and affordances for lateral discussion), that the dynamic of constraint (the pattern and the documentation) and the ambiguity of the exercise (how they each created clothing and used it to reflect on their own design process) caused an uneasy tension for the participants. This was resolved in a variety of ways. The commonality being that each individual participant acted to stabilize the ambiguity for themselves through the application of additional rules and/or personal constraints.



Figure 4. Documenting the Experience

“Typically, the possible solutions are reduced by external constraints such as laws (Lawson 1990). The self-imposed constraints also affect the area of solutions. These constraints can be practical and flexible for problem-solving (Gedenryd 1998). Self-imposed constraints can be changed and circumvented, which is why a skilled designer should know how to look for new ways to circumvent and moderate the constraints.” (Mattelmäki, 2006).

Rather than circumvent or moderate self-imposed constraints The work initiated in the *Uni+form* exercise opened up new insight and opportunity for further design led investigations.

CONCLUSIVE? - THE DOCUMENTATION OF DOINGS:

The exercise shifted from an artifact-centered approach to an experience centered perspective. The + shaped form offered an inspiration and evocative value for the design process. A “great deal of design work is not associated with solving identified problems, but rather discovering new opportunities and ideas” (Mattelmäki, 2006). (Clothing) artifacts are like language insofar that they become a representation of ourself. The + shaped form emphasized the experience of the conversation between the wearer and the resulting artifact. The eight participants adopted a wide range of approaches to deal with the open, ambiguous nature of the research activity. Objects are after all constantly “speaking” to us; suggesting opportunities and connections that we in turn can chose to embrace retain and reuse (Bramston,2010).

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