

Another Fashion Is Possible: The Practice of Making Fashion as Experimenting, Enacting, and Crafting the New Social Worlds

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of the practice of ‘making fashion’ and its social value through an autoethnography describing how and what the author, a former practitioner of ‘making fashion’, experienced the social worlds of fashion over a period of 30 years from the early 1990s. In addition to generating shared emotions, social connections, and diverse ties, the practice of ‘making fashion’ challenges dominant social structures and assumptions about knowledge and experiments with, enacts, and crafts the different ways of being in society.

To emancipate fashion knowledge from dominant perspectives and fixed methodologies and to bring other realities of fashion to the foreground, I first critically examine the perspectives of consumption, designer myths, and objectifying and fragmenting ways of perceiving things that are at the root/premise of fashion knowledge. Subsequently, I suggest alternative perspectives, from consumption to ‘the practice of making’, from designer myths to ‘agency of making’, and from objectification and fragmentation to ‘the wholeness of life as an existential being’. This article focuses on the practice of ‘making fashion’, which has been hidden by the dominant concept of consumption, and on the people who are actors in making yet have been rendered invisible.

Referring to my personal autoethnography, which depicts the complexities of agency in making, how the state of society and the practice of making continuously reflect and erode each other in everyday life and how individuals’ lived experiences are reflected in the practice of making fashion, I attempt to show how the practice of ‘making fashion’ is embedded in the social, what it produces and how it performs in society. Finally, I discuss the potential of the practice of ‘making fashion’ and its social value.

Keywords: *Fashion; Practice; Making; Agency; Autoethnography*

Introduction

With the emergence of a consumer society, academia and the fashion industry have concentrated on theorising and analysing consumption. While transforming, capitalism accelerates the accumulation of capital and the acquisition of short-term economic gains. The ‘reason of economic rationality’ (1) that underpins it has transformed the practice of ‘making fashion’ (2) into a narrative that stimulates consumption and generates short-term economic profit, coupled with the development of information technology.

In the vortex of this narrative, we confront the limitations and problems posed by society based on the principle of unlimited consumption. While information technology works to stimulate consumption, it has also created visible problems, such as environmental issues, poor working conditions, and a widening gap between rich and poor. Consequently, people have responded

sensitively to the problems that have become visible, giving rise to movements to boycott the purchase of certain fashion items (3), to improve working conditions (4), and to build a sustainable production/consumption cycle (5). People are beginning to transform themselves from being unaware to consuming subjects by recognising the limits of a society based on endless material consumption and economic rationality. Thus, the fashion industry is confronted with demands for change.

Nevertheless, the dominant framework wherein the practice of ‘making fashion’ is commonly discussed is the conflict between creativity and economic value. I have worked in the fashion industry as a fashion practitioner for almost 30 years since the early 1990s. However, in May 2019, something happened that I did not expect at all: I left the company I had founded. This event is often described as a common story of conflict between founding designers and logic and power of capital. Is it useful, though, to interpret this event only within the framework of the oppositional relationship between creativity and economic value and to confine the practice of ‘making fashion’ to this framework? The perspectives and ways of perceiving fashion reproduce this framework and prevent us from imagining the other realities and social worlds of fashion.

How can we emancipate the notion of fashion from the fixed and narrow framework through which we perceive it? First, I critically examine the perspectives at the root/premise of fashion knowledge that reproduce fixed and narrow frameworks. These are consumption, designer myths, and objectifying and fragmenting ways of perceiving things. Subsequently, I suggest alternative perspectives, namely, ‘the practice of making’, ‘agency of making’, and ‘the wholeness of life as an existential being’. From these perspectives, new and alternative fashion realities can be imagined. Furthermore, I insist on the importance of viewing fashion as a social and cultural process and, simultaneously, as an activity of everyday life for the people who make it.

Then, referring to the autoethnography of myself, which depicts the complexities of makers’ subjectivity, how the state of society and the practice of making continuously reflect and erode each other in the everyday and how individuals’ lived experiences are reflected in the practice of making (6), I explore how the practice of making fashion is embedded in the social, what it produces, and what it performs in society. Finally, I discuss the potential of the practice of ‘making fashion’ and its social value.

This article begins by critically examining three assumptions of knowledge in fashion: consumption, designer myths, and objectification and fragmentation.

Production as a Subordinate to Consumption: The invisible people behind it

Fashion theory takes consumption as the main subject of analysis while providing historical insights (7). Ogata analyses that in classical sociology, fashion has been discussed in terms of a relational scheme of ‘clothing and consumption’ (8). Veblen theoretically analysed fashion as ‘conspicuous consumption’ (9), while Simmel posited it as that which simultaneously imitates and differentiates vis-à-vis social structure (10). Subsequently, the expansion of consumer society, which has developed rapidly with the spread of neoliberal ideology, has made consumption an important concept as it embodies the dominant cultural and social values of a particular time and place (11).

Along with consumption, the act of ‘wearing’ has been actively discussed. Entwistle proposed the conceptual framework of a ‘situated bodily practice’ arguing that clothes should not be seen as mere objects, but as beings embedded in human action and social relations (12). Drawing on the concept of the ‘body’, Entwistle attempts to link clothing and the act of ‘wearing’ and the personal everyday act of wearing to social relations. In Japan, Washida employed the concept of the ‘body’ to discuss fashion from a phenomenological perspective (13). In ‘Fashion Gaku no Mikata’, published in 1996, Washida identified two perspectives from which to explore fashion: ‘the making of the body image’ and ‘the social phenomenon of fashion’ (14). Specifically, Washida argued:

It has only recently begun to be understood that fashion studies is a new discipline that studies not only the forms and materials of clothing but also the people who wear them and all aspects of their lives (15).

Thus, the research perspective has expanded from the object of clothing to ‘the people who wear it and the interactions that occur through clothing’ (16). The discussion of fashion has developed from the perspective of agency that ‘wears’ it.

How then, has production been discussed? Production is merely a reflection of consumer and individual demands and has come to be treated as ‘passive’ in relation to consumption (17). Asper and Godard describe the complex dependency between production and consumption, stating that ‘fashion, strictly speaking, comes into being only when consumers make choices, their choices are framed by what is offered’ (18). Thus, while production and consumption are interdependent, production has come to be positioned as subordinate to consumption. The discussion of ‘making’ agency has not developed in the same multifaceted and pluralistic direction as that of ‘wearing’ agency. Furthermore, there has been a lack of awareness of the ‘complexities of subjectivity’ (19), the experiences of makers and subjective meanings in the process of making have not been adequately discussed. This has prevented attention from being paid to the nature of creation—how the practice of ‘making fashion’ comes about, what it produces, and what it performs—and to the potential and value of the practice of making itself. Today, it is not so much how it was made as it is how it looks.

Designer Myths and Creativity Supreme

The second dominant assumption of fashion knowledge is the existence of designer myths, in which fashion is created by the creative act of a single talented designer. While the makers are sent into the hinterland and are invisible, it is the objectified and fragmented image and discourse of star designers that is represented in the visible.

The widely circulated narrative of the designer premised on the myths, which can be described as supreme in creativity (20), remains dominant even today. The existence of this myth makes designers and their creativity autonomous and detached from other elements. Almost 50 years ago, Barthes criticised the author, perhaps a character of modernity created by our society, and stated that giving maximum importance to his personality is both a summary and a consequence of capitalist ideology (21). Nevertheless, ‘designer myths are still being spun in some quarters, authorship and artworkism are still being celebrated’ (22), and ‘the history of modern and contemporary fashion is being told as if it were a record of the creative acts of talented designers and the artistic works they produced’ (23). By reducing the practice to the talent and creativity of designers, it is easy to forget that fashion is a continuous process of ‘collective choice’ that emerges ‘from the diversity of experience that occurs in social interaction in a complex moving world’ (24).

What is represented is fixed and clipped information, such as the designer's personality; whether he is eccentric or not, his background; whether he was trained at a major fashion school or in a big *maison*, his upbringing; whether he comes from a wealthy family or not, his tastes; how he dresses and what kind of art he loves. The designer, who was also an artisan, craftsman, and couturier, eventually became an author and evolved into a star designer for branding and marketing purposes. Thus, the practice of ‘making fashion’ came to be reduced to autonomous star designers and their talents (25).

Objectification and Fragmentation: A Way of Perceiving Things

The third dominant premise of fashion knowledge is objectification and fragmentation, which are ways of perceiving things. Lehmann points to the ‘constant objectification in society’ as a characteristic of modernity, citing Marx’s ‘alienation/*Entfremdung*’, Simmel’s ‘reification/*Verdinglichung*’, and Weber’s ‘rationalization/*Rationalisierung*’, and explains that modern theorists have perceived the ‘object’ as representative of the grander of social structure and cultural fragment as representative of the totality of the historical processes to explain new sociocultural parameters in society (26). By collecting and deciphering the fragments that prominently represented culture, these theorists theorised about modern society.

Clothing, which envelops the human body, has also been objectified and cut out as an aspect of modern society, fragmented, given meaning, and theorised. This mode of perception remains strong today, and fashion is still being discussed in a way that collects and decodes visual fragments. In fashion discourse, for example, we are now exposed to phrases such as ‘a mature mood with oversized jackets and long boots’ (27) or ‘a sweet and spicy mix of styling with hard leather jackets and combat boots and sheer romantic dresses with bijoux’ (28). Completely covered by objectified and fragmented images, it is difficult to imagine that fashion is created through the practices of the people behind it. This objectification as a way of perceiving things is closely intertwined with designer myths and consumption to create the structure of current fashion.

‘Another Creation’

Why do I make fashion? What am I trying to achieve through making fashion? These are questions that I have asked myself as I have engaged in the practice of ‘making fashion’. What emerges through the descriptions of autoethnography is that the practice of ‘making fashion’ creates more than just material objects. I would describe it as ‘another creation’ that brings with it invisible but performative things for us, such as shared emotions, social connections, and diverse ties. The following quote is taken from an autoethnography:

In this process, I realise that it is not just the product of clothing that is created. It is a ‘community and connections’ that are created through empathy with women. It is also the ‘intimate dialogue’ with customers in the fitting rooms and the ‘cooperative relationships’ that interact with each other. And it is the solidarity of ‘we have to support each other by shopping’. We have created trust and networks with the people involved, and the response and joy that comes from such relationships. These are ‘another creation’ that do not fit into the capitalist paradigm of return to profit and economic rationality and are what I have been looking for in the practice of ‘making fashion’ (29).

From the quotes in my autoethnography, we can see what the practice of ‘making fashion’ has created and what I have gained from it. It is a relationship with the people and customers involved in the process of making. I would call it ‘another creation’, in which trust, joy, and a reason to live are created. For me, the practice of ‘making fashion’ is not just about making products and gaining economic value, nor is it just about self-expression as an author. Rather, the ‘richness’ that I have experienced lies in the connections with people.

Experimenting, Enacting, and Crafting New Ways of Being in Society

Autoethnographic accounts simultaneously reflect how dominant fashion knowledge and structures constrain the practice of ‘making fashion’. Does the practice of ‘making fashion’ continue to reproduce the assumptions of knowledge? Or does it have the potential to produce alternatives?

While I am caught up in the dominant, it also becomes clear that I have tried to enact different

realities by reflecting in my practice the discomfort I felt towards the dominant knowledge and structures. To take an example from autoethnography, the structural power of the Paris Fashion Week entails the value system that Western brands are superior; it is easily embedded in the process and skilfully creates our reality. However, 'encouraged by a sense of discomfort with Japanese belief in the superiority of Western brands', I launched a brand with the concept of made -in/made by Japan and sold it worldwide. These are my responses to the dominant ways of fashion, in addition to an attempt to experiment, enact, and craft other realities and a new state of society through the practice of 'making fashion'. In other words, the practice of 'making fashion' has the potential to challenge dominant knowledge, structures, and values, to enact and craft other forms of reality that have previously been peripheral and invisible, and to present a variety of options.

Conclusion

This article has discussed fashion with the aim of emancipating it from dominant perspectives and fixed methodologies to bring other realities of fashion to the foreground. I have critically examined the perspectives of consumption, designer myths, and objectifying and fragmenting ways of perception that underlie/presuppose knowledge of fashion. Subsequently, I suggested alternative perspectives: 'the practice of making', 'agency of making', and 'the wholeness of life as an existential being'. Employing these perspectives, I revealed what the practice of 'making fashion' creates and performs, through my autoethnography, which depicts the practice of making fashion as an everyday activity and the complexities of agency in making.

The practice of 'making fashion' creates new social ties, cultivating communities based on trust and empathy among those involved, networks for sharing information, close dialogue and cooperative interaction with customers, and a sense of solidarity exemplified by the notion that 'we must support each other by shopping together'. These social connections and ties give a sense of joy and a reason to live for a life of making. Furthermore, I reveal that the practice of 'making fashion' has a facet of responding to and challenging social norms.

Based on the preceding discussion, we can rethink fashion. The practice of 'making fashion', while embedded in the social, not only challenges it but also possesses the potential to experiment, enact, and craft alternative realities in which we want to live that have previously been peripheral and invisible. 'Another fashion' has the potential to transform dominant social structures and established knowledge assumptions. I argue that this is the social value and potential inherent in the practice of 'making fashion'.

Notes

1. David Harvey, 2019, *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason*, Trans. S. Oya et.al. (Tokyo: Sakuhinsha, 2019), 239-283.
2. To distinguish between the production of material clothing and the practice of 'making fashion', which is the focus of this study, I avoid the term 'producing fashion' and use the term 'making fashion'. For convenience, I define 'making fashion' as a series of actions that create shared emotions and relationships through the simultaneous 'material production' and 'production of meaning' of clothing and related accessories. Drawing on Yoshimi's account of cultural production, in which 'material production' and 'production of meaning' are not separate, I add a presentation in the public sphere to that to define what 'making fashion' is. Shunya Yoshimi,

- “Bunkayuibutsuron [Cultural Materialism]”, in *Gendai Shakaigaku Jiten*, ed. Munesuke Mita et al. (Tokyo: Kobundo, 2012), 1137.
3. #BOYCOTTFASHION, 2019/9/25, <https://wired.jp/2019/09/25/extinction-rebellion-collective-yearlong-boycott-buying-new-clothes/>.
 4. Changing the world of work for good, 2015, <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/watch-udita-arise-documentary-women-unionists-Bangladesh>.
 5. Many organisations such as the Fashion Revolution, the Clean Clothes Campaign, and the Centre for Sustainable Fashion are active, particularly through social networking sites.
 6. The autoethnography was written as part of an author’s master’s thesis in Academic Year 2021, at the Graduate School of Media and Governance, Keio University, entitled ‘Reflective Creation: Re-creating “My Story” and the Concept of Fashion’. It was published in June 2023 under the author's name, Keiko Onose, in the book *Fittingroom: <Watashi> to Fashion no Shakaitekisekai* [Fittingroom: ‘I’ and Social Worlds of Fashion], (Kyoto: Adachi Press, 2023).
 7. Ruby Hoette & Caroline Stevenson, *Modus* (Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2018).
 8. Michimasa Ogata, “Fashion wo Kataru Hōhō to Kadai: Shōhi • Karada • Media wo Koete [Methodologies and Problems of Discussing Fashion: Beyond Consumerism, Body, and Media]” in *Shakaigaku Hyōron* 63, no.4 (2013): 487-502.
 9. Thorstein Veblen, 1899 *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions*, trans. Murai (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2016).
 10. Georg Simmel, 1919, *Philosophische Kultur: Gesammelte Essays*. 2nd ed., trans. S. Maruko (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 2004), 31-33.
 11. Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 93.
 12. Joanne Entwistle, 2000, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*, Trans. N. Suzuki (Tokyo: Nihonkeizaihyoronsha, 2005).
 13. Kiyokazu Washida, *Mōdo no Meikyū* [The Labyrinth of Mode] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, [1989]1996).
———, *Chiguhagu na Karada: Fashion tte Nani?* [The Inconsistent Body: What is Fashion?] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, [1995]2005).
———, *Himei wo Ageru Karada* [The Screaming Body] (Tokyo: PHP Kenkyusho, 1998).
 14. Kiyokazu Washida, “Fashion Gaku eno Sasoi [Invitation to Fashion Studies]”, in *Fashion*

- Gaku no Mikata* [The Perspective of Fashion Studies] (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun, 1996), 4-8, 6.
15. Ibid., 5.
 16. Masato Kudo, "Fashion Kenkyū no Kenkyū Dōkō [Research Trends of Fashion Studies]", *The Japan Society of Home Economics* 72, no.3 (2021): 172-179.
 17. Joanne Entwistle, 2000, *Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*, Trans. N. Suzuki (Tokyo: Nihonkeizaihyoronsha, 2005), 2-3.
 18. Patrik Aspers and Frédéric Godart, "Sociology of Fashion: Order and Change," *Annual Review of Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2013): 171-192, 180.
 19. Georgina Born, "The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production," *Cultural Sociology* 2 (2010): 171-208, 181.
 20. Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016)
 21. Roland Barthes, 1968, "La mort de l'auteur," Manteia, V, trans. H. Hanawa (Tokyo: Misuzu, 1979), 79-89.
 22. Hiroko Hirayoshi, Hiroshi Ashida, Chinatsu Makiguchi, Tetsuya Miura, and Takeshi Kadowaki, "Kyōdōtougū 'Fashion Hihyō ha Kanou ka?' [DISCUSSION: Is Fashion Criticism Possible?]" *Hyōshō* 13 (Tokyo: The Association for Studies of Culture and Representation, 2019), 14-46, 14.
 23. Hiroko Hirayoshi, *Manazashi no Souchi: Fashion and Modern America* [The Apparatus of Gaze: Fashion and Modern America] (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2018), 14.
 24. Herbert Blumer, "Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection," *The Sociological Quarterly* 10 no. 3(1969): 275-291, 282.
 25. The exploitation of labour is not limited to factory workers. WWDJapan.com presents data on how long creative directors of brands have been in the job and reports that the positions of creative directors are becoming more short-lived as trends change more rapidly than ever before. www.wwdjapan.com, 2023/1/27, <https://www.wwdjapan.com/articles/1498118>.
 26. Ulich Lehmann, 2007, "Benjamin and the Revolution of Fashion in Modernity", in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, ed. B. Malcom, trans. K. Tanabe, *Hyōshō* 13 (Tokyo: The Association for Studies of Culture and Representation, 2019), 50-77, 50.
 27. Harpersbazaar.com, 2020/4/10, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/jp/fashion/how-to-wear/g32067485/how-to-wear-mini-skirt-200410-hb/>.
 28. www.wwdjapan.com, 2022/10/7, <https://www.wwdjapan.com/articles/1443901>

29. Keiko Onose, *Fittingroom: 〈Watashi〉 to Fashion no Shakaitekisekai* [Fittingroom: 'I' and Social Worlds of Fashion] (Kyoto: Adachi Press 2023), 143.

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