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Practicing what we preach

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### Practicing what we preach:

Negotiating the delicate balance between practice and theory provides for tricky ground as time constraints and definitions of what constitutes research impact upon our ability to practice our craft and how it may be viewed within an academic setting. This paper will take the viewer on a journey of a design practice that was initially dismissed as a hobby but which later came to define what it meant to be a sustainable fashion designer and educator. In particular it will explore the practice of recycling and how thoughts and theories derived from an academic setting have been translated into practical applications. These have included a number of outputs including a collection made from recycled clothes, the establishment of a social enterprise and a series of workshops aimed at community development initiatives and means of social inclusion. It will illustrate the difficulties in holding down a full time job in HE and a design studio in the inner city and the problems that arise with justifying and qualifying academic rigor and research methodologies. Transcending the space between formal and informal education the research will demonstrate commonalities of practice as well as raising questions relating to the need for educators to practice what they preach especially as it relates to design, manufacture and consumption practices. It will draw on approximately 20 years of both education and manufacturing practice and will provide a critique of specific academic contexts that have sought to belittle the practice and push it off course. At its root will be the contention that to fully explore how fashion theory and practice may be changing within a contemporary setting there is a need for engagement with the realities of daily life and a rethinking of what constitutes fashion theory. Images of the authors design work and personal reflections will form the background to the discussion and will be contextualized within the lens of relevant academic theories and methodologies.

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#### Introduction.

This paper has been inspired by frustrations felt in trying to achieve a balance between teaching and research particularly within the context of HE fashion design programmes of learning. It is an exploration of the value of bringing the concept of 'practice' into our research and methods for fostering an environment in which we are able to practice what we preach. It recognises that there are many routes to the attainment of higher knowledge in our subject areas but that the narrow confines of what constitutes 'academic' research can sometimes stymie and downgrade efforts and make the experience all the more onerous and complex. As a Senior Lecturer in Fashion Design and as someone who is called upon to supervise research activities at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, experience has shown the difficulties that can be encountered in converting fashion design activities into highlevel research<sup>1</sup>. The questions this paper hopes to address through reflection on specific case study material and discussion into research frameworks are the extent to which textile and fashion based outputs are still seen as just 'hobbies' and the extent to which there has been a change in perceptions of fashion design research and practice.

#### what constitutes research

It is now recognized that there are several methods of research that have resonance to us as design practitioners, the most traditional amongst them being practice-led/based/focused research and grounded theory. These are gradually becoming subsumed within the academic research cannon and have led to interesting outputs and a reframing of what may constitute research<sup>2</sup> (Fig: 1). Within the realm of fashion, key publications have led to the embedding of fashion theory and practice within a deeper academic context and given rise to a wealth of investigation and deep thought (Kamamura, 2005; Harvey, 2008; von Busch, 2008a; Bruzzi & Gibson, 2013).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> On one occasion my research was dismissed as a hobby, despite me holding an academic position within a redbrick university, I was then disheartened when all my practice-based outputs were graded as a zero based on REF criteria as I progressed through my academic career.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See for example the growth of practice based PhDs that deviate from the written dissertation norm to include exhibitions and artefacts as viable research outputs.

In its abstract form it has been discussed how fashion provides a link to forces of development and activism (Wallace, 2012; von Busch, 2013) and how, as a production process, feeds into notions of social equity and empowerment (Fletcher, 2008; Curwen, Park & Sarkar, 2013).

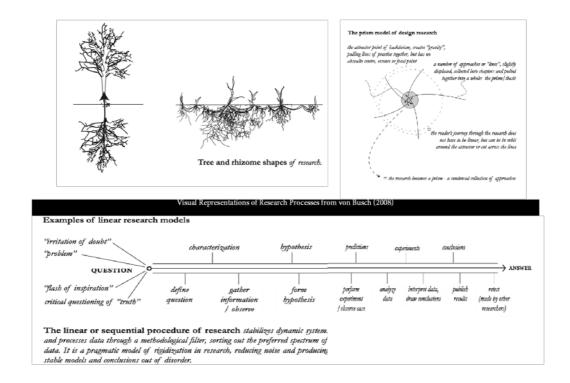


Figure 1: Visual representations of Fashion Research Processes (von Busch, 2008b)

Thus there has been a deeper contextualisation of both fashion theory and practice and a repositioning of fashion within the academic cannon. The following outlines the journey of a design practice as a way of showing how this may be conceived as 'research' and the value of the design and manufacturing processes in the attainment of 'new' knowledge, particularly as it relates to the practice of recycling.

## journey of a design practice

I've been recycling clothes in a commercial sense since the early 1990's. This practice was borne out of childhood passions but also from a politicisation of

my beliefs as a result of education and travel. Throughout the 1990's I helped set up and run NoLoGo, an Oxfam initiative in both London and Leeds and this saw the conversion of donated and 'waste' items into saleable garments (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Images of items made from recycled clothes and textiles, NoLoGo, Oxfam, 1993

A workroom set up with donated industrial equipment become a hive of activity for volunteers keen to learn and improve their design and clothes manufacturing skills and a high street shop become a creative hub for the communication of both developmental and environmental messages. It was a great success that benefitted a number of parties. Oxfam saw increased sales, a widening demographic of customer and also added value to their resources, which at the time were being sold off to secondhand and vintage traders for a fraction of the market price. Volunteers benefitted from valuable experience and the aesthetic showed that refashioned items could be trendy and relevant to the zeitgeist of the time.

Doing this at the same time as a degree in Textile Design I reached a crux in my career when I was offered the opportunity to either continue NoLoGo as a fulltime 'job' with Oxfam or undertake a PhD with attached scholarship based on my undergraduate research into tailors in South India<sup>3</sup>. The recognised 'academic' context of the PhD brought with it an increased validity to research endeavours but to fully extend the research enquiry I soon wanted to develop practical solutions in order to test out my theories and position myself as a designer within an environmental and political context. This I attempted to do by embedding myself more fully in the process of the design and manufacture of clothing made from recycled materials by establishing a studio from which to work and drafting up plans for a social enterprise in order to test out ideas of design activism and social inclusion<sup>4</sup>.

The problem came though when I attempted to incorporate this within an academic position within a red brick university and was informed that as a 'hobby' it could not be considered research. I was therefore left with no other option than to relinquish my position and go it alone. For the following 8 years I worked part-time in a number of HE institutions and forged ahead with Ketchup Clothes (Fig.3), an initiative that took found and discarded clothing, made it new, engaged in fashion shows and photoshoots (Fig. 4), sold outputs on to the public via shops and market stalls and conducted all manner of recycling workshops (Denis, 2011b) (Fig. 5). Much of this was centred upon the ideas developed under NoLoGo and seemed a logical route in understanding more about what it took to become a sustainably focused designer.

This enterprise continues to this day but has been through many peaks and troughs. One thing that is certain though is that it has provided a vital focus for reflection on 'fashion' and in turn has been inspiration in teaching and research. The studio space fosters a loci for research endeavours from which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> I chose the PhD but often wonder whether to fully understand my subject area I wouldn't have been better taking the other route.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Space to undertake practice was and is still very much compromised within an academic setting where it is recognized as a valuable space from which to work and generate ideas but which is sorely as a facility for staff.

more academic outputs can be created and hopefully have resonance to us as designers and makers, and ultimately our teaching.



Figure 3: Early images of clothes made under the auspices of Ketchup (Images: Author's Own)



Figure 4: Fashion shows and Fashion Shoots (Images: Author's Own)



Figure 5. Spaces of make and consumption (Images: Author's Own)

The insight and experience that comes from still making clothes validates me within the eyes of students and keeps me engaged in the subject (Dennis, 2011a). It has also made reflection on academic discourse more relevant as attempts are made to contextualise the study and practice of recycling, discussion of which is provided below.

# recycling thoughts and theories

Otto von Busch (2008) encouraged us to hack into systems that aren't quite working. McDonough and Braugart (2002) suggested that we needed to design as if waste did not exit. Papanek (1976) highlighted how design should not just be about the elites and Schumacher (1978) that our technology should be appropriate with small being beautiful. Fletcher (2008) advocated five ways to making the clothes on our backs more sustainable and Klein (2001) exposed the horrors behind the 'branded, globalized world'. These authors are just a few of those who have been inspirational in their quest to

set a framework for sustainable fashion and design and have informed subsequent research motivations, intentions and outcomes.

All I suppose I have wanted to know is can the fashion industry be a force for good and if so what action is needed to turn this from rhetoric into reality? I love my sewing machine, I love being at it, I love the idea of it yet I know for many around the globe it represents an instrument of oppression rather than pleasure and creativity. Experience has shown how we can draft up commonalities of practice with producers across the globe through the use of the sewing machine and pattern cutting techniques and this can give us insight into how they may be assisted by development initiatives (Dennis, 2011b, 2011c) (Fig. 8).



Figure 8: Commonalities of Practice (Images: Author's Own)

The fact that as an industry 'fashion' has been subjected to all manner of change all in the name of development draws us into theories concerned with aspects of activism, globalization and modernity. Key to the conversion of theory into practice thus needs to focus on how our fashion practice may have

a detrimental/beneficial impact on the environment and human life (Dennis, 2011c), key tenants of which are discussed below:

## design activism:

The logic behind clothes recycling is to get a sustainable loop working where waste is increasingly incorporated into manufacturing and consumption systems. This can be problematic however, especially when distances between production and disposal are often so far apart and stopping clothes falling out of the loop can be so hard (Fig 9).



Figure 9: Discarded clothes on the streets of Leeds, 6, UK. 2015 (Images: Author's own)

Recycling is one way of entering this loop and for many is viewed as an activist activity (von Busch, 2008; Fuad-Luke, 2009; Julier, 2013;). It is often undertaken as an alternative to conventional modes of consuming new clothes and also a way of producing pieces that can be brought to the market place in new forms thus prolonging the natural life of the original piece<sup>5</sup>. At the root of this activism is often the desire to investigate anti-consumption

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See for example AntiForm, Good One, Junky Styling, von Busch, Redmuttha etc.

approaches to clothing design, social enterprise and ways in which people are able to have without buying, make rather than consuming. This approach to design and production is often chosen over more conventional forms of make due to a concern with overconsumption and a desire to tackle sustainability at a local level but for a global necessity (Fig. 10).



Figure 10: The Impetus for Design Activsim? (Images: Author's Own)

As such a conscious effort is often made to source only found or discarded materials and to practice local production by the establishment of design studios equipped with appropriate machinery. This form of redirective practice also appears consistent with notions of design activism and social entreprise, advocated by writers such as Julier (2013), Fry (2009), von Busch (2008a) and Fuad-Luke (2008), who saw value in a reorientation of design practice and the embedding of design thinking as a way of solving wicked problems in this case landfill, air miles and unethical practices in global clothing production. For many it is done out of love for the industry and for the creative potential (and relatively low costs) that such design and production entails. Von Busch(2008a), terming his approach to clothing production as 'hacktivism,' put this succinctly when he stated that:

"Hacking is a matter of dedicated and systematic curiosity of understanding a system, reverse engineering it, finding a suitable place for intervention, plugging in and keeping the power on. Hacking is to modify and advance a system because you love it, not because you hate it." (von Busch, 2008a, p20)

Initiating change thus appears at the root of many activist definitions. Fuad-Luke, for example, defined activism as "...taking actions to catalyse, encourage or bring about change, in order to elicit social, cultural and/or political transformations." (Fuad-Luke, 2009, p6). The change here being the way in which we consume, produce and design. As a designer this has always been part of the game. As we adapt to innovations in textiles and modes of manufacture we change the shape and form of things. We mix up references to give a 'new' take on things and present these to an ever-hungry public. This, of course, in itself is not strictly activism since whilst the catalyst may be to encourage people to wear shorter skirts, for example, in many cases it is not going to be significant to bring about deeper social, cultural and political change. This is because we are changing the outputs of our endeavours but not altering the underlying implicit system of production and consumption. To do this means to radically change our opinions and structures of design to turn them from things of horror into things of beauty.

#### globalisation.

Thoughts on globalization by writers such as Ritzer (2005) and Bauman (2011) have provided a compelling discussion into ways of viewing fashion and items made under the guise of globalization. Citing two dependent but very distinct processes namely 'glocalisation' and 'grobalisation' in his publication *The Globalisation of Nothing* Ritzer he argued how these gave way to the production of 'something' and 'nothing' respectively. The 'something' borne out of 'glocalisation' being 'generally indigenously conceived, controlled and comparatively rich in distinctive, substantive content' whereas the 'nothing' from 'grobalisation' was 'generally centrally conceived, controlled and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content' (Ritzer, 2005).

We all encounter the 'nothings' from globalization. They are the drinks container bought to hold our morning coffee only to be discarded 15 minutes later. They are the high street bought dress discarded after a few wears due to changes in body, identity or just to keep 'on trend'. They are the many products designed with inbuilt obsolescence in mind shorting their life and condemning them on some distant scrap heap (BAN, 2002). They are the things that those concerned with sustainability bemoan and despair against and they are becoming globally more freely available. Writers such as Braungart and McDonough (2009) were right in their contention that waste needs to be eliminated from the design process and that more needs to be done to tackle issues to do with waste, particularly as they apply to clothing and its production and disposal (Fletcher, 2008). Many interested in sustainability within the clothing industry advocated a 'closed loop approach' as the only way to address the vast environmental problems associated with inbuilt obsolescence (Reiley, K., & DeLong, M., 2011).

#### modernity

Bauman (2005) proposed that to live in the world today is to exist within a state of liquidity in which nothing is permanent and our identity, in particular, is subject to extreme 'fluid' forces. In viewing clothing within this context he argued that:

"you must 'lose the ponchos' which were so much en vogue last year, since if you wear a poncho now, 'you look like a camel.' Donning pinstripe jackets and T-shirts is over, simply because 'nobody' wears them. And so it goes, if you don't wish to sink, keep surfing; and that means changing your wardrobe, your furnishings, your wallpapers, your look, your habits—in short, yourself—quickly, and as often as you can manage." (Bauman, 2005, p 56)

This reflection on modern life proposed that we are now living in an age of liquid modernity. In this context identity has moved from a fixed to a fluid state and old stereotypes have become, if not obsolete, then challenged. Artists and designers, seeing the body as a canvas, have distorted old preconceptions of gender, race and class and proposed alternative visual

spectacles of the self<sup>6</sup>. These visions can provide us with inspiration as fashion designers as we consider the extent to which clothing can distort the body and add to the debate over western vs nonwestern, traditional vs modern, hegemonic vs non-hegemonic dress (Shah, 2014). These debates are relevant to the study of clothes made from recycled materials since the basis on which they are created would not exist if it weren't for the effect of fashion on the perception of a garments quality, value, relevance and usefulness. This discarding of the old for the new has come at a price though. The manufacture of fashionable items has generated mountains of waste, the export of which has displaced indigenous modes of manufacture and raised serious environmental concerns over the sustainability of such practices ((Sinha et al., 2010). As stated by Pickup (2007):

The detrimental effect of our lifestyles on our natural environment and the widening poverty gap across the globe is causing great consternation in mainstream society...we are beginning to assess with increasing concern the damage we are inflicting on our environment and the disastrous implications of our lifestyle choices for future generations. (Pickup, 2007, p. 2)

The purchase and use of second hand clothes has long been seen as a lifestyle choice in the western world and a signifier of beliefs centred upon thrift, make do and mend and a desire not to waste (Reily & de Long, 2011). The sense of projecting a retro look is also of importance. Thus second hand clothes have provided the focus for a number of research projects and analysis has been made concerning their environmental benefits (Farrant, Olsen & Wangel, 2010; Dissanayake & Sinha, 2011), their appropriation amongst younger consumers (Reiley, & De Long, M., 2011) and the impact of their export on economies such as Africa (Sinha, Beverley, Day & Tipi, 2012). As stated by Song and van Dyke (2013):

It was estimated that the purchase of 100 second-hand clothes would save between 60 and 85 new garments dependent of the place of reuse, The LCA showed that the collection, processing and transport of second hand clothing have significant impacts on the environment in comparison to the savings that are achieved by replacing virgin clothing. The reduction of impacts resulting from the collection of 100 used garments ranges from 14% decrease in global warming for the cotton T-shirt to 45% reduction of human toxicity for the polyester/cotton trousers. The results of the study thus show that clothes reuse can significantly contribute to reducing the environmental burden of clothing. (Song & van Dyke, 2013)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See for example, the work of artists such as Orlan, Sherman, Bowery, Wear, Shonibare etc..

Studies similarly concerned with the environmental impact of using second hand clothes in turn have highlighted ways in which they have been used, in the process proposing models for the incorporation of second hand clothes into existing global fashion systems (Sinha et. al., 2012; Song & van Dyke, 2013). In the main these have led to the conclusion that current rates of overconsumption are unsustainable and to seriously reincorporate waste materials back into the fashion system requires a restructuring of present manufacture and consumption practices.

#### **Discussion**

Methods of taking on board this research discourse and the associated actions that are needed has meant that engagement with research are been focused upon the application of theory to practice in order to generate critical design thinking. This process could be termed research led practice. As such the design practice has been embedded within an urban, inner city space as a way of reflecting upon processes of development and draws on the surrounding environment for its resources and inspiration. Since a lacuna exists within the literature, relating to knowledge concerning design processes and methods for making second hand clothes assessable within the mainstream and making them fashionable again, investigation into pattern cutting techniques and methods of production and consumption has also formed the basis for research endeavours (Shah, 2008; 2015). The overall aim of this being to assess the extent to which the reuse of second hand clothes can contribute to environmental, social and economic sustainability (Brown, 2013). Stronger academic contextualisation has also been achieved through involvement in the Global Denim Project (Fig. 6) and a discussion of my work as a response to Yinka Shonibare's work (Fig. 7).



Figure 6: Outputs developed under auspices of the Global Denim Project (Dennis, 2011d) (Images: Authors Own)



Figure 7: Work conducted as a response to Yinka Shonibare (Shah, 2013) (Images: Authors own)

This has afforded the opportunity to present work within the context of different disciplines, namely sociological, political and art based contexts (Shah).

However there still appears to be difficulties in justifying and qualifying this approach in terms of academic rigor and research methodologies. Research frameworks may have moved on in terms of accepting and indeed encouraging practice led research activities but the norm is still in the production of academic papers, book chapters etc. We may be able to submit an exhibition as a valid research output but if enquiry is centered around design, then where is the opportunity to submit a market stall? Personally I gain more information about how my work may be perceived by the general public from engagement in 'selling' than I feel I would from a gallery space. The impetus for my research is underpinned by notions of democratic design and not about making couture pieces, thus the desire to investigate recycled items from the sense of how they can become 'normal' rather than extraordinary.

#### Conclusions.

This paper has looked at the difficulties of balancing identities as an educator, practitioner and researcher in sustainable fashion design and has extended the debate surrounding practice-led research. Value has been seen in the adoption of this approach, particularly where it uncovers real-life scenarios that may impact upon ways in which we teach, conduct research and ultimately position ourselves within the fashion design cannon. Discussion surrounding personal design journeys highlighted the difficulties encountered in contextualising the practice within an academic context and also showed the progression of ideas and outputs. This outlined the transition from the practice of recycling being viewed in a derogatory manner to it being supported and valued. The environment in HE has changed and methods for expressing and communicating fashion based research outputs are now much more common. Miller (2010) in his book *Stuff* put forward the proposition that "the problem with viewing clothing as the surface that represents, or fails to represent, the inner core of true being is that we are then inclined to consider

people who take clothes seriously as themselves superficial." (Miller, 2010, p.13). Thankfully there have been significant shifts in the way in which fashion has been viewed within an academic setting and its overall value as a relevant academic discourse.

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