

Aneta Genova

Draft I

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Interview with Otto von Busch

Aneta Genova: You are a craftsman, researcher and an activist. You completed your PhD, “Fashion-able: Hactivism and Engaged Fashion Design,” at the School of Design and Crafts at the University of Gothenburg in 2008. How did you arrive at that topic?

Otto Von Busch: I wrote my master thesis about fashion theory while studying patternmaking and sewing in addition to material and interface design. That was a mix of interaction design and industrial design, so I gradually connected more and more with the idea of New Media and hacking and how this could come together with fashion design. If we imagine that fashion is an operating system, then I ask myself: “What is new media approach to this operating system?” I am interested in the merger of the fashion system and the fashion logistics of material production with the myth production of fashion, instead of how that comes together. How can a designer work with both of these “software approaches”, how to hack into that system. Since I had the craft background, I felt that this was a hacker movement I was interested in. You go into the process and manipulate or “hack” the system, just like in craft you can manipulate the materials, rather than design them top down.

AG: Do you consider yourself a fashion designer or a hactivist and disrupter, who happens to work in the fashion domain?

OVB: It is always tricky when you have a mixed background. Are you a fashion designer if you are not established in the system? Are you an artist if you are not presenting in a gallery? To me I am definitely a fashion designer, but I work more with the system. I try to re-design how fashion designers work with the system. Rather than being a fashion designer who produces clothing, which is on the hanger in a store, I try to redesign or imagine and work with other ways to be a designer, and work in relation to the fashion system.

AG: You started working on this approach years ago, but it seems that the rest of the design society is catching up with your ideas now, a few years after you.

OVB: It made sense to me at the point when I was making this progress, now it simply makes sense to more people.

AG: You have been using recycling as an ideology well before sustainability was in trend. Do you consider yourself a sustainability designer or is this desire to “save the dying garments” rooted in a different philosophy?

OVB: Yes, I never really put any emphasis on sustainability. I put more emphasis on social sustainability. So much of sustainability especially when I started this 10-years ago was about materials: organic cotton, working conditions in factories, but I felt what was an important part of my work was what skills do we acquire? How do they change our social relationships here and within society? How can we work with our feelings, skills rather than look at the material contents and material production of clothes. It’s much more about how do we produce a sustainable user, sustainable consumer, rather than sustainable production, which has been the main narrative in sustainability. And of course that is really important, but I look at sustainable practices that people do, rather than sustainable production. I was looking at skills and craft interventions, that was really the sphere I was working in. And these days the concept of sustainability is growing in this direction.

AG: Was there any resistance to your ideology and concepts?

OVB: The main resistance has come from designers themselves. They are the ones asking: “What are these amateurs doing? Why are not my design skills worth it, and why wouldn’t people pay for my professional skills, and buy my garments?”

I think the more you learn about the process, the more you appreciate the workmanship and designer clothes. The more trained and skilled I am, the more I appreciate the workmanship of professionals.

AG: You’ve been described as a hacker and a subversive, and much of your work in fashion is about questioning the system. How does that position translate into teaching fashion related courses? How do you fit in a traditional fashion design driven educational system?

OVB: I am mostly “labeled” as an alternative and most of the teaching I do is about other values. But it is still about making garments. I teach about the role of the garment and how can that be

different. It's about garments in an expanded sense in time and social engagement. I don't want to teach fashion designers to be consultants. I want them to be something more, to know the value of their skills and to consider garment production in an expanded sense in other realms.

AG: Do you feel that your students need to be at a certain level of craftsmanship in order to transition to hacktivism, or even take your courses?

OVB: Students without skills sometimes have an expanded mind. Since they don't know the processes yet, they can be more creative. The main problem is that society is so saturated by fashion designers. Fashion is everywhere: on TV, in daily publications and news outlets. It is such a common phenomenon that students come preprogrammed knowing what fashion already is, and that is the tricky part. Fashion does not have to be exactly like the garments you see in the store. There are other types of fashion, and the tricky part is teaching that fashion does not have to be glamorous. There are very few designers who want to challenge what works. Most people do not challenge the system, and the whole system is not sustainable. It is built on a social and environmental unsustainability.

AG: In your forward to the Artist Clothing catalogue 2004/2005 you say: "The fashion system is a metaphysic system closely guarded by sects and hermeneutic schools. These are all ruled by a small elite guard of professional mystics and interpreters – a leading group of cardinals and priests, following the directions and rules of a higher ideal." Now almost ten years later with fashion collections presented online to a global audience and fashion bloggers sitting front row right next to the elite magazine editors, do you feel that the fashion system is finally open, or is it still ruled by an elite of select few?

OVB: The open system is an illusion. There are bloggers who acquired a huge following and got famous, but who is inviting them? There is still the power of the one inviting them! There is an asymmetry in this process. As soon as a famous blogger loses their following, they won't be invited any more. Part of this democratization is an illusion. Very few of them are knowledgeable and educated on the craft of fashion and design. I think that this democratization has actually backfired. If you look at LookBook, there were so many different looks, but the popular ones are the ones that update their looks every day, so they are either wealthy or they have a connection to the stores and designers. It turns people into small magazines. So not

everyone can be found, it's the people who have invested in the media scene, not necessarily invested in building a character. It's about building an internet popular persona. That feeds into the capitalist traditional fashion system.

AG: In your workshop Fashion Fianchettos - draped maneuvers and fashion functions participants explored how fashion could be a set of mathematical functions, minimal codes of new drapings, which could even be sent between fashionistas as secret codes? Do you suggest that any part of the traditional fashion design process can become, a set of mathematical rules, and how would that help the creative process?

OVB: The process for this workshop came out of frustration with fashion and technology being discussed mainly as technology integrated into the garment. I disagree with the idea that fashion and technology is just a combination of LEDs and wires, and I felt that there have to be other ways to look at technology outside the garment. The garment does not have to be a smart garment, but it can have a smart relationship with technology. Draping exercises can be creative exercises in coding the process. You can write down the steps or "coordinates" of how you draped a garment and then you can tweet or Facebook that code to other people, so they can program their own garment. A user could wear an oversized t-shirt, and there would be coordinates on the t-shirt of how to drape that t-shirt and maybe even just safety pin it. We all have the hardware at home, which is the t-shirt. Now we can receive the "software", which is easily followed, and can be executed by anyone.

What I really tried to push in this workshop is the relationship of a technological societal system and "non-smart" garments and the opportunity to look at the technology outside the garment. What is interesting to me is a garment, which is technologically enhanced and amplified by a technological system. This garment is not in production, and does not contain smart fibers. You may even say it is a stupid garment, but it has a smart connection with social media, and that is what's fascinating me! To me this is the expanded sense of fashion and technology. The garment reaches into the user and the global system. I want us to become smarter about our relationship with the garments, instead of only focus on garments with sensors.

For me there is a problem with the type of fashion and technology, which responds to sensors measuring inner heartbeat or outside temperatures. It has a market but it brings out the worst of the internet. It brings out surveillance, control, etc. Is this really what we want? I buy fashion to transform. Fashion has a higher mythical purpose for me. It has magic. And I was really frustrated. How do we raise out thinking. What is the magic of fashion and how do we reach that magic with technology?

AG: In your latest paper "*Zen and the Abstract Machine of Knitting*" you draw a parallel between "Knitting and Protocols", arguing that "even though protocols have an everyday connotation to software, they are ubiquitously present. Are you satisfying the needs of the disrupter in you to hack the "Machine of Knitting", or is this a philosophy of creative process combined with new media, which any designer should look into?

OVB: This was more of a philosophy. I wanted to look at these micro skills! The making of a loop and purl. I'm not interested in the machines, but what are the basic skills we learn from them. How can we really rethink how we can use these micro skills not to reshape a silhouette, but how these micro skills connect to other micro skills. How protocols shape emergent behaviors, which connect to something else. It starts to mutate into something else and something totally different grows out. And that's what's interesting about coming back to social media and draping garments. That t-shirt and the code we wrote about it can connect to larger system and just transform and mutate to something new and different. Rather than focus on the shape of a garment, that little micro behavior or protocol can actually shape that t-shirt and open a whole new world of thinking and applying fashion together with technology.

Fashion designers are thinking in an extremely limited sense and are stuck on the body and where to move the seams. If we apply these protocols and shift a little the way we connect practices, then totally different things can happen and that's what I wanted to pinpoint with this idea.

AG: When someone says "Fashion and Technology" what does that phrase mean to you?

OVB: Unfortunately it most often evokes a frustration about a singular view of integrating smart circuits into a garment, which I support, because there are really smart people working in that area, but we are most often stuck in this techno fetishism about the garment themselves and I

would like to see it in a much more expanded sense. When people say fashion and technology I want us to think about programming in a larger sense too. Garments are programmed with certain behavior, certain rituals and I'm thinking how do I reprogram this ritual and this use of the garment, and my relationship with our value system of garments. I think that if we connect the smartness of garments and the garment itself with the other societal programs, that's when it becomes really interesting.