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Conversation

DICTIONARY
DRESSINGS

*Re-reading clothing
definitions towards
alternative fashion
perspectives*

Dictionary definitions are constructed to be factual and rational and as a consequence the entries for items of clothing show no reference to the ephemeral or immaterial character of fashion. They describe the characteristics of the items, their use and their relation to the body but never mention fashion or style. Take the Dutch definition of a glove for example: “*Handschoen: bekleiding van de hand*”¹ (literally translated to English as *Glove: covering of the hand*). Since a hand can be covered by putting it in a pocket, by bandaging it or by sitting on it, the definition allows a pair of trousers or a bandage to be interpreted as a glove – they cover the hand and so adhere to the definition. It is exactly this particular nature of the definitions of clothing that forms the foundation and very structure of *Dictionary Dressings* as a research project and an emerging design approach.

Dictionary Dressings is an ongoing research project in which the nature of the dictionary definition as a “zero condition”² of a piece of clothing is used to re-read clothes and to explore an alternative fashion vocabulary. The experiments, references, materialisations and translations of these formal definitions by the various people involved throughout the project have contributed to the development of an open space for experiment. The approach has emerged as a playfield without any hierarchy between experienced and amateur makers, no set outcomes or conclusions, that, most importantly, generates inclusive modes of production. Overlapping and interlinking theory with hands-on making, it pushes beyond trends and accepted social and design codes offering a fundamental shift in perspective that contributes valuable insights to the broader cultural discourse of fashion and dress.

The process began with a list of definitions derived from www.vandale.nl, the online edition of the most widely used Dutch dictionary. Subsequently, newspaper images were collected of situations, objects and actions that adhere to these definitions without any references to fashion or style. The images are complemented by text fragments from novels describing a certain object or mode of use. In the composition of this image and text archive, gaps that exist within the definitions play a leading role. By focussing on essential elements that describe clothing rather than fashion, the variety of possible re-readings of the definitions becomes evident. The archive, ordered according to the dictionary definitions in alphabetical order, is followed by a categorization of the newspaper images that begins to reveal recurring questions of placement, size, material and relation to the body. These categories demonstrate the potential of *Dictionary Dressings* as an activating and experimental design approach that forms the basis for collaborations. In this

essential part of the project designers and workshop participants engage with the approach, either by directly exploring a dictionary definition of their choice or by interlinking the *Dictionary Dressings* approach with their own current work processes and products, showing possible re-readings and translations. The broader implications and potential of this design approach are examined from a theoretical perspective in contributions by fashion researchers. By interlinking theory and practice the project brings together reflective and conceptual thought processes with making.

GAPS – AMPUTATIONS

*“The terms fashion and clothing tend to be used synonymously, but while fashion conveys a number of different social meanings, clothing is the raw generic materials of what a person wears.”*³

In *Fashion-ology* Kawamura makes a distinction between fashion and clothing by stressing the difference between the social meaning of fashion and the actual piece of clothing in relation to a body. If “[fashion] encompasses the value added to clothing”⁴, as Kawamura writes, could this process be reversed to strip clothing of fashion – decoded and de-commodified?

In order to understand the value and meaning produced by fashion Roland Barthes explores the relationship between real clothing, image clothing and written clothing.⁵ In *The Fashion System* he describes the role of language in the construction of fashion or meaning:

“(...) the described garment is a fragmentary garment; in relation to the photograph, it is the result of a series of choices, of amputations; in the soft Shetland dress with a belt worn high and with a rose stuck in it, we are told certain parts (the material, the belt, the detail) and spared others (the sleeves, the collar, the shape, the color), as if the woman wearing this garment went about dressed only in a rose and softness. This is because, in fact, the limits of written clothing are no longer material limits, but limits of value: if the magazine tells us that this belt is made of leather, it is because leather has an absolute value (and not its shape for example); if it tells us of a rose on a dress, it is because the rose is worth as much as the dress; a neckline, a pleat, if put into words, become clothing with

1 VAN DALE *Handschoen* [Online]. Available from <http://www.vandale.nl/opzoeken?pattern=handschoen&lang=nn#.V10WQleiW8o>. [Accessed on 26/05/2015]

2 ROBAARD, JOKE (2016) *More Burning Than Words*. In: F de Vries, ed. *Dictionary Dressings*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

3 KAWAMURA, YUNIYA (2005) *Fashion-ology*. New York: Berg. p.3.

4 KAWAMURA, YUNIYA (2005) *Fashion-ology*. New York: Berg. p.5.

5 BARTHES, ROLAND (2010) *The Fashion System*. London: Vintage.

*full status, with the same “standing” as a whole coat. Applied to clothing, the order of language decides between the essential and the accessory; but it is a Spartan order: it relegates the accessory to the nothingness of the unnamed.”*⁶

The focus on the rose and softness make these elements essential (or most valuable) in this particular fashion description. “As if the woman wearing this garment went about dressed only in a rose and softness”.⁷ Are the “sleeves, the collar, the shape, the color” that are left out of the description the accessory – nothingness – the unnamed? They are amputated from the description and turned into gaps through a Spartan order of rearrangement.

Just like in the fashion description of Barthes, the order of language in the dictionary leads to decisions on the ‘absolute values’ and the ‘accessory’ affecting the way we read clothes.

However, in these dictionary descriptions of clothes additional amputations are made, and gaps occur in different places. If, as Kawamura argues, fashion is an addition, it is this extra layer or accessory that is amputated leaving gaps in places where ‘non-essentials’ like style, symbolism, sphere and experience were previously found. Again it is a Spartan order of rearrangement but this time it leaves the reader with an unfulfilling, almost rigid description. With this division between the essential and the accessory we end up with reduced vestimentary words that focus on the object, the body and the relation between the two. The absolute values in this case could be considered to be: what it does (the act or practical function), where it does this (context or moment), its relation to the body (activation or placement), its relation to another piece of clothing (over or under) and/or its crude form or materiality. Take again the example handschoen/*glove: covering of the hand*. Covering – hand: what is omitted or amputated and what remains as the essential is insisted upon by the order of language, creating a distinction between fashion and clothing.

In *De Geknipte Stof* Dirk Lauwaert writes; “Clothing, on the other hand, begins where fashion crumbles away (...)”⁸ This quote reiterates Kawamura’s argument. However, it also brings to our attention the fact that despite the differentiation brought forward in the examples of Kawamura and Barthes there is never a clear distinction between clothing and fashion. Clearly there is a constant interaction, interplay and thus tension between the two – a rich and multi-layered ‘grey area’.

In her contribution Joke Robaard questions how one should actually deal with the ambivalence between the generalised, basic vestimentary words described in the dictionary and the more saturated

words seen in fashion rhetoric or personal stories. By examining these particular vestimentary words over and over again, the notion of an amputation or gap between the basic and saturated vestimentary words can change the way we look at contemporary clothing.

However fashion and style are not the only elements omitted from the clothing definitions on www.vandale.nl. In the process of reduction other elements that we would find self-evident are also left out. For example, the sleeves of a sweater are omitted in the definition of trui/sweater (*a ‘knitted piece of clothing for/in front of the upper body’*) effectively creating space for new interpretations.

*“Take, for example, Van Dale’s definition of ‘trui’/‘sweater’, a ‘knitted piece of clothing for/in front of the upper body’. While a commonly understood concept of ‘sweater’ might assume the presence of sleeves, a neck hole, side seams, solid front and back, these characteristics are not found in Van Dale’s definition. This definition therefore permits greater freedom and creativity. Once given permission to free ourselves of the assumption that a sweater must possess certain common characteristics, designers are liberated to produce something different. That is, when asked to design a ‘sweater’, they may produce anything that conforms to Van Dale’s definition, without adhering to common conceptions. For Van Dale, a sweater may have any number of sleeves and holes (if any at all) and seams may be located anywhere. There is freedom to defy expectations”.*⁹

DIALOGUE - CONNECTING

In her contribution to this project Joke Robaard describes how actions and behaviour can shape the meaning of a word, object or garment and refers to Gilles Deleuze when she observes that the coupling of object and action creates new functions and relations: “What happens when you couple different objects and try to create a multiplicity of relations between them? As soon as they function together, they work as new operators or machines.”¹⁰ Robaard explains this further by adhering to an example by Claire Colebrook: “Think of a bicycle, which obviously has no “end” or intention. It only works when it is connected with another machine such as the human body.’ (...) ‘The bicycle is composed of a series of connections among its parts and it is their connections that create the machine that is a bicycle.

6 BARTHES, ROLAND (2010) *The Fashion System*. London: Vintage. p.15.

7 BARTHES, ROLAND (2010) *The Fashion System*. London: Vintage.

8 LAUWAERT, DIRK. (2013) *De Geknipte Stof*. Tiel: Lannoo. p.058

9 BROWNIE, BARBARA (2016) *Dictionary Dressings*. In: F de Vries, ed. *Dictionary Dressings*. Eindhoven: Onomatopée.

10 Robaard referring to Gilles Deleuze: *Dialogues*, Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 1977 and 2002).

*The bicycle-body is another machine, formed from another set of connections: foot-to-pedal, hand-to-handlebar, rear-end-to-seat.*¹¹

Garment dialogues between object, body and action or object, context and action embed explicit meaning and workings and are present in some dictionary definitions. *“Piece of clothing only worn/carried outdoors”* (coat) for instance, or *“elongated piece of clothing worn/carried around the neck”* (scarf): constitute dialogues between *outdoors – clothing – wearing/carrying*, and *elongated piece of cloth – neck – wearing/carrying*. Although these dialogues create new explicit meanings there is still space to imagine how the dialogue between *outdoors* and *clothing* or *elongated piece of cloth* and *neck* might evolve.

Ruby Hoette’s contribution expands on object – body relations as ‘conversations’ by unpicking the definitions of scarf (*“elongated piece of cloth worn/carried around the neck”*) and sleeve (*“part of a garment that fits around the arm”*). In her practice she often uses the process of dissecting existing garments along original seam lines, reducing them to separate elements, which in this context mirrors the reduction in function and detail of a piece of clothing evident in its dictionary definition. This dissection allows for the resulting elements to be repurposed as accessories or appropriated to contribute to a dialogue, in this case between elongated piece of cloth – arm – sleeve – neck. Here the dialogue presents an alternative mode of use, an alternative fashion or, referring to Robaard “new operators or machines”¹². Her contribution also explores the flexibility of the definition itself to create a conversation between two meanings of the same word (scarf meaning both an elongated piece of cloth and a joint connecting two pieces of timber).

Fashion/design studio BLESS often name their designs after combinations of various familiar pieces of clothing or items. *Towelscarf, trenchbox, footballbag, carpetsweater, ringgloves, flipflopbags*. These hybrid names couple elements that can be easily recognised individually, for example, a carpet and a sweater, but the new and unfamiliar combinations allude to an ‘object’ that does not yet exist and therefore has no fixed form in our memories. As a consequence, these combinations are more than the sum of their parts; they enable a state of imagination or speculation in which we are open to multiple new associations, forms and functions. In this way BLESS’s definitions liberate us from common pre-conceptions and assumptions that surround clothing and its usage. In other words, through assemblage and unfamiliar coupling of recognisable objects/words BLESS also constructs *“new operators or machines”*.

As the relationship between the body and a piece of clothing, a garment’s placement on the body is in many definitions an absolute value; ‘around the neck’, ‘for/in front of leg and foot’, ‘around the arm’. The position or placement presents nuances between wearing, holding and other ways of positioning a piece of clothing in relation to the body. A corresponding dialogue can be found in Elisa van Joolen’s contribution. In this work, *One - to - One*, which is part of her on-going project *11”x17”*, Van Joolen places a print of a pair of trousers on another pair of trousers by literally using a pair of trousers as a stamp. Referring to ‘wearing one over or under another’ van Joolen presents a repositioned piece of clothing that alludes to the definition of *onderbroek/underpants* as *“pair of trousers that are worn/carried under another pair of trousers”*. This definition is not about the placement of a piece of clothing in relation to the body but details its relation to another piece of clothing. The underpants need ‘overpants’ to be legitimised.

INSIDER AS OUTSIDER – OUTSIDER AS INSIDER

According to Barbara Brownie, the dictionary does not offer sufficient specificity to be used by specialists in the fashion field. She refers to Barnes (2005) who writes in *Successful Study for Degrees: “Specialists in the field favour more complex and specialist understandings that are in common use by members of their own disciplinary community (...). Compared to more specialist analyses, a dictionary definition has limited authority when compared with definitions that appear within their appropriate context.”*¹³

As a design approach *Dictionary Dressings* uses this characteristic of the dictionary definition to shift the focus to other values than the ones that might be highlighted from a fashion perspective. In doing so it questions the difference and hierarchy between ‘the specialist’ and ‘the amateur’ – the insider who understands ‘the code’ versus the outsider, who does not. In this case the definitions enable a view of garments beyond a fashion context, blurring the lines between the insider and outsider and setting the amateur on equal footing with the specialist.

The openness of a dictionary definition effectively translates to room for interpretation. This means that the approach is intrinsically democratic, recognising the perspectives of the specialist and amateur as equally valuable. This positioning beyond the outsider or insider that happens when using the approach, is not necessarily chosen or performed deliberately; it comes about rather gradually, through questioning the definition, its meaning and possible translations. On the one hand the approach can

11 ROBAARD, JOKE (2016) *More Burning Than Words*. In: F de Vries, ed. *Dictionary Dressings*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

12 ROBAARD, JOKE (2016) *More Burning Than Words*. In: F de Vries, ed. *Dictionary Dressings*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

13 BROWNIE, BARBARA (2016) *Dictionary Dressings*. In: F de Vries, ed. *Dictionary Dressings*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

enable an outsider to subvert or overthrow the dense value construction of an insider's language. On the other hand, as Barbara Brownie suggests, "*the limited engagement of the dictionary definitions with the culture of fashion can be liberating for designers*"¹⁴ or for fashion specialists.

In her contribution Conny Groenewegen explores the definition of trui/sweater as a "*knitted piece of clothing for/in front of the upper body*" by positioning herself in the role of the outsider. She experiments with existing knitted pieces of clothing and their relation to the upper body followed by a reconfiguration of these items through deconstruction, re-construction and re-positioning. This eventually leads to various options of knitted pieces of clothing for/in front of the upper body that meet the definition and simultaneously question shape, type of knit, placement and ways of wearing. This approach enables a questioning of the garment in relation to the body where this relation would have been predetermined from the perspective of the fashion specialist. "*Once given permission to free ourselves of the assumption that a sweater must possess certain common characteristics, designers are liberated to produce something different. That is, when asked to design a 'sweater', they may produce anything that conforms to Van Dale's definition, without adhering to common conceptions*".¹⁵

The *Dictionary Dressings* workshops apply the approach in a similar way. Participants are stimulated to critically engage with questions and assumptions about fashion and garments by liberating them from having to directly "*locate garments within a fashion system*".¹⁶ In the workshop a reduced vestimentary description from the dictionary leads to the exploration of shape, material, relation to a body and context, and, to its re-reading and translation.

In this way fashion students are able to position themselves in the role of the outsider, with all the challenges and contradictions associated with the amateur, as opposed to a fashion specialist testing ideas confined to a fashion context. Parallel to this the decoded definition renders the outsider equally knowledgeable as the insider and so the workshops can also be relevant and productive for participants with no prior fashion training. The outcomes and processes from both perspectives that are explored in each workshop will be brought together in a catalogue. This evolving series of workshop catalogues creates a library of re-readings.

In fashion, text is mostly implemented *after* the piece of clothing is created or produced, as a tool to reflect upon, describe and construct the value of a fashion or fashioned object (in fashion magazines for example). In *Dictionary Dressings* text is used as a starting point, not to describe or reflect but to initiate and activate. As such the act of reading is directly implemented as a form of production. It is re-positioned to initiate a design process that encourages the investigation of unknown materialities, forms and relations towards clothes and fashion.

The contributions collected in this publication are either directly activated by the design approach emerging from the *Dictionary Dressings* project or by processes and products associated with this approach. Together they reveal a diverse range of explorations, interpretations and dialogues addressing the relationships between the body, an item of clothing, actions and their context.

*"The New Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles published in 1901 defines the word 'fashion' primarily as the action/process of making, manner, a prevailing custom, a current usage, conventional usage in dress and mode of life."*¹⁷

By proposing re-reading of a dictionary definition - a "zero condition" - as a process of 'making' *Dictionary Dressings* initiates a shift in perspective from design as a result of trends and style towards an inclusive and emancipated space that is open to experiment. This kind of playfield in fashion and design provides the possibility to move beyond the hierarchical and re-define approaches to fashion production in the future. By interlinking theory and practice, generating hybrid, fluid ways of reading, seeing, defining and making *Dictionary Dressings* begins to facilitate this process. It acts as a catalyst for the exploration of alternative fashion(s), opens up new possibilities for the understanding of clothing and dress and allows for unexpected processes of design and modes of use to be articulated in and beyond the field of fashion.

— Femke de Vries in conversation with Ruby Hoette. 2016

14 BROWNIE, BARBARA (2016) Dictionary Dressings. In: F de Vries, ed. Dictionary Dressings. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

15 BROWNIE, BARBARA (2016) Dictionary Dressings. In: F de Vries, ed. Dictionary Dressings. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

16 BROWNIE, BARBARA (2016) Dictionary Dressings. In: F de Vries, ed. Dictionary Dressings. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

17 KAWAMURA, YUNIYA (2005) Fashion-ology. New York: Berg. p.3.