

# THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF CREATIVE DESIGN

There are three sources of inspiration that helped me along in the search for an answer to my dilemmas.

## **Ethnography**

My *first* source of inspiration is an innovative ethnography of creative processes. While I went through my second-year basic training as a fashion design student at the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Todd Nicewonger, then a Ph.D. student in anthropology at Columbia University, spent 15 months doing fieldwork at the Academy (in 2006-2007). He firmly believed that fashion design as a cultural and social phenomenon could not be understood in terms of its material products alone. What he wanted to investigate was how a school that was internationally perceived as having produced its own brand of avant-garde fashion aesthetics, manages to educate or socialize its students into such a recognizable style. A detailed analysis of the social practices and the underlying concepts and attitudes involved is to be found in *Fashioning the Moral Aesthetic: An Ethnographic Study of the Socialization of Antwerp Trained Fashion Designers* (Nicewonger 2011). Nicewonger uses established ethnographic methods, primarily open-ended and structured interviews, (video- and audio-) recordings, observation and participant observation, paying special attention to face-to-face interaction between teachers and students as well as among students in simultaneous design activities, focusing not only on language, but also gesture and situated ways of looking/seeing. Subjectivity and social relations are central to his analysis, which innovatively turns the institutionally embedded transfer and acquisition of design norms and practices into an ethnographic field. This field consists of the interactive establishment of consensus, the social recognition of expert knowledge in an area involving individual creativity and authorship, or 'the cultural politics of appropriation in design'.

At first sight, an ethnography of design pedagogy or transmission and learning from the position of an outside observer is very different thematically and methodologically from the task I was confronted with. However, one of the main contributions of Nicewonger's research is the conclusion one may draw that design processes, from the first sketches onwards, are akin to forms of reasoning and that they illustrate how emotions and involvement can affect critical thought processes. Therefore, what must be understood is the work in progress, the steps taken in the exploration of possibilities, and the concepts in terms

of which the experience is organized. Though he focuses strongly on interactional aspects, this connects his work, which is at a certain point labelled a 'biography of innovation,' directly with my *second* source of inspiration, a book entitled *Ethnographies of Reason* (Livingston 2008). Livingston's main claim is that the abstract and universally valid reasoning we all know from logic (of the type "All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal") is not the only, and maybe not the most important, type of reasoning in human life. There are also types of reasoning that are completely specific to domains of action. You may, for instance, have complete command over your logical reasoning capabilities, and you may still not be able to think in a way suitable to a game of checkers, even if you have been explained all the rules. Livingston illustrates this with a wide range of practical activities, from playing checkers to an attempt to reconstruct a square from the pieces of a broken tile (the tangram problem), to solving jigsaw puzzles, folding origami figures, or driving across a four-way stop intersection. He shows that an ethnographic approach enables a researcher to trace the steps in the practical and creative reasoning processes underlying such activities. A successful analysis, however, requires that we "continually pursue ever more closely what we ourselves are doing, seeing, and experiencing" (Livingston 2008, p. 39). Livingston adds:

"In a sense, these studies require that we be faithful to ourselves but without yet knowing the selves to which we seek to be faithful." (Livingston 2008, p. 39)

### **Autoethnography**

This last formulation shows that an ethnography of reason is by definition a form of autoethnography, a tradition which is my *third* source of inspiration and the solution to my problem. Autoethnography starts from the assumption that close scrutiny of an individual's own experiences can be relevant for the analysis of corresponding wider contexts and practices. Some work that bears the label is more like autobiography (as when Ellis 2009 looks back on 'life and work'), sometimes even fictional (as in *The Ethnographic I* by the same author, 2004), and often more literary than anthropological (e.g. Deck 1990). The term is not an extremely recent one, as it was already used by Goldschmidt (1977) in the title of a lecture reflecting on the practice of anthropology. Later, autoethnography as a method in its own right – though it is not always given that name – has been applied to experiences of many different types, from life as a stuttering academic (Weinreb 2008) to pregnancy (Papen 2008) and to teaching (Dressman 2006). Recently, even a methodological textbook was published (Chang

2008). In essence, autoethnography as a method combines narrative detail with cultural analysis and interpretation. Some would want to define it as a typically postmodern type of research:

“Autoethnography shares with other postmodern forms of qualitative research this turning away from the certainties (and arrogance) of the ‘grand narratives’ of modernist social science.” (Papen 2008, p. 397)

Though this may provide theoretical justification, my own reason for turning to autoethnography is much less lofty, far more practical. The process of designing a collection of clothes leaves a trail: the original research data, sketches functioning as visual thought experiments, scribbled notes and observations, a selection from the sketches that are turned into drawings, trial pieces, patterns, and prototypes. In other words, all the data are available to tell a story of design as a creative and material production process, analyzed and interpreted in ways very similar to Livingston’s ethnographic account of domain-specific reasoning. This is exactly what I will try to do by accounting for the transition from one collection to the next in what eventually became a series of five collections rather than just one. This can be seen as a complement to Nicewonger’s research: to his outside perspective an inside view is added; and his focus on the transmission and acquisition of skills and aesthetic norms is followed naturally by an account of later independent design practices.

### **The challenge**

It is a potentially controversial assumption that an autoethnographic approach could shed light on creative design processes in an innovative way. Such a claim is easily challenged. There are, indeed, many examples of quite successful analyses of the production of art and other cultural artefacts from an outside rather than process-internal perspective (e.g. Becker 1982, Bourdieu 1993, Crane 1992, Crane & Bovone 2006, Entwistle 2009). And it is true that much of this work emphasizes important social aspects that influence the creative process, such as the collective nature of creative work, the interaction and negotiation that is involved, the habits and conventions, the specializations and careers in the production of art, as well as the commercial and economic dimension. By contrast, an autoethnographic account may look like a post-hoc narrative of individual achievement, falsely emphasizing the myth of the individual creator. I would like to argue that an autoethnography of creative design, written reflexively from inside

the search for artistic innovation, does not at all have to support this myth and can open perspectives that may be complementary to the work of an ethnographer or social scientist.

### **The outside look and its limitations**

It is true that forms of art and material culture have been seriously studied by anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociologists. For art and material culture in general, relevant references have already been given in the preceding paragraph. This observation also counts for fashion. Sometimes, as in the work of the cultural anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, fashion seemed like an attractive subject because, in contrast to other fluctuating aspects of civilization, it seemed like an easily measurable cultural phenomenon. Indeed, Kroeber (1919), though acknowledging that material fashion objects left over from the past were probably not numerous enough for accurate calculations, believed that ideals of dress could be traced with great precision. But his own delineation of his topic is immediately a sign of the limitations one is confronted with when looking at fashion from the outside:

“Twenty years ago the project of inquiring into the principles that guide fashion arose in my mind, and I went so far as to turn the leaves of volume after volume of a Parisian journal devoted to dress. But the difficulties were discouraging. Pivotal points seemed hard to find in the eternal flux. One might measure collars or sleeves or ruffles for some years, and then collars and sleeves and ruffles disappeared.” (Kroeber 1919, p. 239)

In order to rescue the project years later, severe restrictions had to be imposed:

“I decided to attempt only eight measurements, four of length and four of width, all referring to the figure or dress as a whole, and to disregard all superficial parts or trimmings. Strict comparability of data being essential, it was necessary to confine observations to clothing of a single type. Women’s full evening toilette was selected. This has served the same definite occasions for more than a century; does not therefore vary in purpose as does day dress, nor seasonally like street clothing.” (Kroeber 1919, p. 239)

He then goes on to present changes (over a period of 75 years) in the width of skirts, the length of skirts, the diameter of the waist, the 'length' of waist (defined as the distance from the mouth to the middle of the minimum diameter of the waist), the décolletage, the width of the décolletage. His main observation was that changes in these basic measurements, though they are clearly visible, are usually gradual and slow, in contrast to "all the conspicuous externalities of dress" which create "a blurred but overwhelming impression of incalculably chaotic fluctuations, of reversals that are at once bewildering and meaningless, of a sort of lightning-like prestidigitation to which we bow in dumb recognition of its uncontrollability" (Kroeber 1919, p. 258). From this he concludes that the role of individual designers is rather restricted, as they simply contribute to more collective civilizational tendencies that go beyond their individual biographies. Put differently, a designer "might have possessed ten times the genius of a Poiret or Worth: he would yet have been compelled to curb it into the channels which they followed, or waste it on unworn and unregarded creations." (Kroeber 1919, p. 261) Therefore, while Kroeber's work illustrates how limited a look from the outside must be, he still manages to identify with great accuracy some of the restrictions to which a designer's creative work is subjected. How a designer copes with such restrictions, however, cannot become clear from a strictly formal study of longer-term patterns of development.

Attempts to get closer to the creative processes themselves, have been undertaken by sociologists. But the editors of a recent issue of *Sociologie et Sociétés* (Lévy & Quemain eds. 2011) complain that the work of early pioneers (such as Veblen in 1899, Simmel in 1905, and Bell in 1947) did not lead to a true tradition of 'sociology of fashion,' i.e. the study of not only patterns of consumption but also of work processes and structures underlying the genesis of innovation in a cultural industry of clothing. In their terminology, we only find an expanding field of 'fashion studies' with loosely defined goals and methodologies. Since the sociologists' focus on production (albeit in response to market forces) comes closest to the goals of an autoethnographic approach to creative design, it is worth reviewing briefly a few of the studies that take this perspective.

A first study to look at is Bourdieu & Delsaut (1975), which approaches the Parisian world of haute couture as a 'field of cultural production.' As in much of Bourdieu's work on other cultural phenomena, fashion is seen as a form of 'symbolic capital' which is used by consumers to mark their social position and which leads to hierarchies among producers. Thus Bourdieu & Delsaut concentrate on the relationship between dominant houses and their challengers, and they show that it is usually the challengers (those aspiring to a dominant position, and with the possibility of eventually attaining that goal) who set changes in motion

(or, in their terms, “font le jeu”). They describe this dynamic as a change in continuity, since challengers are very often themselves the products of dominant houses:

“[...] c’est le cas de Christian Dior et de Pierre Balmain quittant ensemble la maison Lelong – qui fermera en 1948 –, de Saint-Laurent qui part de chez Dior en 1962 ou de Laroche qui abandonne Dessès en 1958. D’autres précèdent en plusieurs étapes, comme Cardin qui passe en 1946 de Paquin à Dior, pour quitter celui-ci en 1949 ou Givenchy qui va de Lelong à Piguet (1946), puis à Jacques Fath (1948), enfin à Schiaparelli (1949), qu’il abandonne en 1952 pour fonder sa propre maison.” (Bourdieu & Delsaut 1975, p. 16)

More recent examples could easily be substituted for this list. Another aspect of the field of fashion which they present is the need for permanent innovation, which sets fashion apart from the other arts. In fact, the creation of seasonal products is the exact opposite of the work of a writer or other artist aspiring to the ever-lasting relevance of their products. Creating fashion is a constant struggle to avoid being ‘out of fashion,’ and the designer must regularly reinvent him/herself; the only ones who can afford standing still (for a while, and not too long) are those who have reached the pinnacle of dominance in the symbolic market of high fashion. The establishment of a brand, according to Bourdieu & Delsaut, is a form of magic in which the designer takes center stage, often as head of a company, not only responsible for the design of clothes, but also for their material production and for promotion. This “alchimie symbolique” requires that all aspects of the process are handled “à la façon de l’artiste” (Bourdieu & Delsaut 1975, p. 19), which is why the replacement of a designer, the problem of succession, is so tricky. Almost forty years have passed since Bourdieu & Delsaut’s analysis, but the processes have remained largely the same.

Very different types of sociological study were collected by Crane & Bovone (eds) (2006) in a special issue of the journal *Poetics*. One particularly relevant contribution is Bovone’s (2006) analysis of the relation between clothes and identity, looked at from the perspective of consumption and fashion production, specifically in the city of Milan. According to Bovone, clothes are produced for dressing identity. Rather than being ‘given,’ identity is something to be achieved, and ways of dressing contribute to that process. Bovone clearly shows the paradox that is involved: the fashion industry, pursuing its own economic interests (clearly related to the struggle for dominance described by Bourdieu & Delsaut), must put forward proposals for identity construction that are in tune with expectations, while

consumers, pursuing their own interests (in terms of what Bourdieu would call symbolic capital), must appropriate those proposals.

How the fashion industry's 'proposals' are creatively produced, then, is further explored by Mora (2006), also with the Italian fashion system as example. Mora's focus is on the collective nature of creative production, involving continuous negotiation at all levels that influence the creative process: the level of strategy (decisions pertaining to positioning in relation to a market or assumed consumer preferences), the technical level (involving materials and skilled labor), and the level of procedures (i.e. the level at which the intertwining of design, production, and marketing must be decided). Thus she applies to fashion what Becker (1982) ascribed to art in general, namely its being the product of collective action, formed through the coordination of different (groups of) individuals. It is shown that the overall process is very much determined by a structural uncertainty arising from the fact that the goal and content of the product is innovation and that its ultimate value depends on the extent to which consumers' volatile and unpredictable desire for novelty and change can be satisfied – an uncertainty that we can understand best by remembering Kroeber's description of the limited confines within which innovation must take place. Mora provides us with a lucid account of the complex system of relationships between the many different agents involved: industrial companies (producers of textiles and clothes manufacturers), service providers (various types of professionals, from pattern makers to marketing specialists), and mass media. Creativity is shown to play a very ambiguous role in this complex system.

Perhaps the sociological study that comes closest to a description of creative processes involved, is Giusti's (2011) detailed analysis of fashion design in terms of "travail en atelier." On the basis of interviews and participant observation in a number of companies situated in the field of luxury fashion (in opposition to both ready-to-wear and haute couture), Giusti describes the ingredients of what she calls the genesis of innovation (sketches, fabrics and accessories, colors, so-called mood boards, toiles, patterns, technical drawings and fiches, prototypes, silhouettes, archives) and the ways in which these ingredients enter complex processes of interaction (such as try-outs, stylings, photo sessions, shows, press releases). Like Mora (2006), she stresses the negotiated and collective nature of creative fashion work, leading to what she calls 'diffuse creativity.' And she identifies three basic properties of "travail en atelier." First of all, the overall coordination of the fashion design process is driven by concrete objects (the 'ingredients' mentioned above) and by deadlines. Timing is extremely important, probably more than for other forms of art (though it has been said that any artist's

response to the question “When will your next collection be finished?” would be “The day of the exhibit”). Second, fashion has a weak technological basis in the sense that available products and techniques do not have a direct relationship with the desired results, and designers constantly struggle with technical possibilities, requiring a serious amount of artistic workmanship. This is also related to the problem of aesthetic norms which show a form of conventionality (pointed out by Kroeber) which the designer must be able to deviate from in ways that can still meet approval, and to the important personal authority of the designer (pointed out by Bourdieu & Delsaut) which directly influences evaluation. Third, the technical core of the design process is at the same time systematically closed (as protection against the competition) and intrinsically open (dependent at the production end on wider tendencies reflected in textile markets and public tastes, and at the sales end on carefully planned openings to the wider world of potential buyers). Thus the point is to successfully integrate elements of the environment and to transform them into innovative design products.

In spite of their extremely interesting contributions to an understanding of how fashion design works, these examples of looking at fashion from the outside do not really penetrate creative design as such, which consists in processes of artistic reasoning within the constraints imposed by the phenomena described so accurately by Bourdieu & Delsaut, Crane & Bovone, Mora, Giusti, and many others. Such reasoning can only be described from inside the design experience, though the work of ethnographers who partially go through the motions themselves comes very close (as in the case on Nicewonger’s 2011 investigation of the institutionally embedded transfer and acquisition of design norms and practices inside a design school). That is why autoethnographic descriptions are not simply fragmentary snippets of autobiography, but necessary input for an understanding of what it means to design fashion. There are enough examples in other domains of the arts to illustrate the non-trivial nature of this contribution. Just think of O’Connor’s (2007) account of experiences as a glassblowing apprentice, or articles by artists or sociologists practicing art in Becker et al.’s (2006) book organized around the question of when an artistic work is finished. An even stronger example may be Sudnow’s (1978, 2001) ethnographic – and indeed autoethnographic – analysis of processes of acquiring and using the highly complex skills of a jazz pianist.

So let me continue the account I started earlier of work as a fashion designer. What follows, therefore, will be a tale of *Doing Fashion Design*.