

THE SENSORIAL POETICS OF *PULSE*

Two observations are central to the design logic I seemed to be developing while working on *Shift*, *Howl*, *Vacuum*, and *Lowride*. The first relates to the metaphor of ‘translation’ which I handled extensively in earlier chapters when talking about the relationship between architecture and fashion. The second builds on remarks I made about the distinction between outside and inside, or between landscape and intimacy. The two combined will lead to an attempt to define what I currently feel to be the essence of fashion – at least in relation to my experience of doing fashion design.

The quality of translation

When I thought about my design project as a way of translating architectural principles and structures into garments (to such an extent that I truly thought about ‘building garments’ as an accurate characterization of what I was about to do) I overlooked one crucial fact: while a translation is an attempt to preserve meaning, the formal changes are such that if the source language can be recognized in the target, the translation is not a very good one. In other words, the more literally an architectural principle or form appears in clothes, the less convincing the clothes may be as clothes. Put differently still, it is important to carefully balance the explicit and the implicit. For the sake of illustration: when Jean-Paul Gaultier uses actual film strips to evoke a connection with the world of movies, this is an extremely literal and explicit reference; on the other hand, when Azzedine Alaïa introduces impressions of Africa, the visual details may remain suggestive and largely implicit. It suffices to have visited the *Alaïa* exhibit in Paris (Palais Galliera, September 2013 to January 2014) and *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* (Brooklyn Museum, October 2013 to February 2014) to understand that the terminology makes sense and that the question of what can possibly be implicit vs. explicit about design hardly needs to be asked. I would be inclined to say that Alaïa is a better translator than Gaultier.

The dimension of explicitness can of course also be used independent of the metaphor of ‘translation.’ It is used, for instance, in work about architecture dating back to 1973, Bryan & Sauer’s *Structures Implicit and Explicit*. This volume includes articles by Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes. Both talk about buildings as carriers of meaning. Eco (1973) emphasizes, amongst other things, that what he calls ‘architectural discourse’ is usually experienced ‘

inattentively': while other pieces of art do not normally serve merely as background and require one's full responsiveness, buildings are much more easily passed by (or passed through) without attracting special attention; in other words, except for specific monuments, the meaning they provide is not very outspoken and remains largely implicit. Except for *haute couture* pieces, the same could be said about most garments. Barthes (1973) focuses on a change of meaning that may be involved. His example is the Eiffel Tower: explicitly intended as a symbol of modernity, thus placing itself in contrast with Parisian history and tradition (to such an extent that it attracted a serious amount of protest), it gradually acquired a new meaning as symbol for the city of Paris itself, a meaning that is now very explicit (witness the souvenir shops and street vendors) but that arose surreptitiously.

Returning to the issue of translation, this may be the moment to take stock of my design experiences so far in the dialogue with architecture. I would like to do so with reference to a few basic texts about architecture that I consulted as I was going along: Colin Davies' *Thinking about Architecture*, Ruth Slavid's *10 Architecture Principles*, and Pete Silver & Will McLean's *Introduction to Architectural Technology*. Taking all three together, the following concepts are the most important ones adduced as relevant for architecture:

- (a) Place (Slavid) / Space (Davies) / The City (Davies)
- (b) Form (Davies / Silver & McLean) / Structure (Slavid / Silver & McLean)
- (c) Surface (Slavid)
- (d) Detail (Slavid)
- (e) Light (Slavid / Silver & McLean)
- (f) Sound (Slavid / Silver & McLean)
- (g) Function & Flexibility (Slavid)
- (h) Comfort (Slavid / Silver & McLean)
- (i) Sustainability (Slavid)
- (j) Language (Davies) / Legibility (Slavid)
- (k) Representation (Davies)
- (l) Nature (Davies)
- (m) Truth (Davies)
- (n) History (Davies)

Clearly, the widest net is cast by Davies (2011), the more theoretical of the three books, with his excursions into representation, nature, truth, and history, while the most technical one,

Silver & McLean (2013), focuses entirely on form and structure as well as specific properties (such as light and sound) contributing to comfort or the sheltering function of buildings. The only concepts which all three share, inevitably one could say, are those of form or structure ((b) above). When reading about these notions, it appears very soon that the structural demands of architecture and those of fashion have little in common. Admittedly, there is the common fact that both architects and fashion designers, to a certain extent, must be able to separate form from materials, which is what they do when making drawings to visualize an as yet unrealized physical object. But once materials are brought in, completely different constraints are imposed on buildings and on clothes. Fashion designers do not have to worry about foundations or anchorage, the principles of static and dynamic load, or centers of gravity. Reinforcement is rarely – or only very subtly – called for, and fire safety only becomes an issue for specific professional garments. But for clothes, flexibility in relation to the specific shape of the human body in motion is of the utmost importance. The difference is so fundamental that in fact structures in the field of architecture can only hint at fashion, and the other way around. Only the most abstract dimensions of form and structure, as formulated in terms of basic visual properties (see Chapter 6) can be said to be really shared.

There is more potential similarity when it comes to (a) above: place and space, or more specifically (in Davies' account) the city environment. Both buildings and clothes must fit into an environment. This is rarely a purely natural environment. More often, a building becomes part of a setting already occupied by neighboring structures (often in a complex cityscape), just as the clothes one wears are usually seen in relation to those of other people moving through the same visual field. It is important to note that fitting in can be done by way of contrast as well as by means of harmonization. It is the experience of this tension and how to cope with it, that I tried to describe towards the end of chapter 6. In addition to accommodating outside space, buildings and clothes also create space themselves. For buildings we think of rooms, cellars, and attics – all entities that are closely connected with specific functions. When designing clothes, there is a lot of room for playing around with closeness to the body or looseness, even expansiveness.

With point (c), 'surface', we come to a serious difference again between architecture and fashion. Earlier (in chapter 4), I discussed the importance of texture, which is obviously an aspect of surface. As a visual element, it may play a similar role for both types of design. Functionally, however, the difference is vast. First of all, there is the role of touch, so crucial for fashion that I will have to come back to it later in this chapter, but virtually negligible for architecture. Moreover, while the surface of textiles has an immediate impact on choices of

clothes because of their feel and the sensorial effect of wearing them, especially present-day buildings tend to have surfaces that are no more than the 'cladding' of a building: a covering that may serve aesthetic functions, but that is of little real use (except, sometimes, for extra insulation), let alone that it would have an effect on functions served by the building and the experience of living or working in them.

A footnote must immediately be added to this final observation: of course there are parts of a building that we constantly touch, and this physical contact does add to our architectural experience. That is what Slavid's chapter on 'detail' (see (d) in my list above), which comes in almost as an afterthought in her book, is devoted to:

"We don't actually touch very much of a building. [...] we may run a hand over the occasional piece of polished wood or concrete and we may, of course, walk barefoot. But most of our contact is confined to the occasional door handle, banister or tap. We have a closer relationship to the moving parts of the building, and many of our judgements on the quality of the whole will depend on the smoothness of the hinges on the lavatory door or the ease of shutting a window." (Slavid 2012, p. 171)

Even this experience is of course diminished in much modern design, especially of larger structures, with doors opening and closing automatically, and windows one cannot open at all. Visual details, on the other hand, function in comparable ways for architecture and fashion: door handles and buttons, decorative fixtures, the way in which cladding panels or pieces of cloth meet or overlap.

The optimal use of artificial and natural light, the acoustic enhancement of sound, as well as sound proofing (points (e) and (f)), are only architectural concerns. When experimental textiles play around with light or sound this is indeed just 'playing around' and hardly essential to the design of clothes. Points (g), (h), and (i), on the other hand, are at first sight common concerns, but the specific content of the notions of function and flexibility, comfort, and sustainability, vary a great deal. As far as functionality is concerned, at the most elementary level, all buildings must be able to withstand the weather; for clothes, this only counts for what is worn outside. Also the longevity of buildings poses a functional problem that is not shared by garments. The clothes one wears are chosen for the occasion: everyday daywear, a walk in the woods, a formal dinner party, etc. Buildings are also designed for specific purposes, but since they are supposed to last for at least several decades, it is hard to predict the specific changes in the functional demands it will have to meet during its lifetime. That is why buildings

must be flexible or adaptable to new needs, counting on only the longest-lasting structural elements to remain more or less as originally designed. Also in terms of comfort, architects face challenges that have no parallel in fashion design: controlling air temperature and humidity, ventilation, and managing light and sound. As to sustainability, the desire for environmentally friendly and non-exploitative production techniques concerns both architecture and fashion, but buildings keep requiring energy so that measures must be taken – without parallels for garments – to keep carbon emissions under control.

This brings us to a long series of more abstract notions and principles ((j) through (n) above). When Eco (1973) refers to ‘architectural discourse’, he refers to the fact that buildings incorporate sign systems that somehow give them ‘meaning’. This is what Davies (2011) calls the ‘language’ of an architectural structure. A train station, for instance, has properties, not always easy to describe, that indicate that it is a train station, rather than a palace, an apartment building, or an industrial complex, much like there are basic properties that will make it hard to confuse a bathing suit and a wedding dress. Beyond this match between aspects of structure and function, there are meanings related to the three semiotic notions of symbol (a signifier that is purely conventionally related to a certain meaning), index (a signifier that ‘points’ to what it means, such as a road sign indicating a destination), and icon (a signifier that somehow resembles what it signifies, or shares some of its structural properties). Thus entire buildings can be symbols (such as triumphal arches), or some structures may be symbolic (such as the floor plan of a church in the form of a cross). More important for architecture is its indexical quality: good architecture is constructed in such a way that the building is easily ‘legible’, i.e. the form, scale, and juxtaposition of halls, corridors, staircases, and rooms is such that it becomes easy to find one’s way around, even with minimal explicit signage. As to iconicity, all buildings have characteristics which structurally match people’s activities: doors are openings that ‘naturally’ lend themselves to walking in and out, and staircases are constructed in such a way as to match average human steps when moving up and down. Much the same can be said of fashion products. Pieces of clothing may be symbolic; this is the case of ritual garments, but also with colors (black suggesting mourning in some parts of the world), or with non-functional attributes (such as neckties). They are usually legible in the sense that the shapes themselves point at ways of wearing them. And they are more iconic than buildings in the sense that actual shapes come close to resembling body structures (e.g. arms or legs).

In terms of representation ((k) above), just like parts of buildings can tell or evoke entire stories, so can prints and other types of figurative details in the case of garments.

Buildings and clothes can also be representational by referring to earlier versions of the design: renaissance buildings re-enacting antiquity, or present-day dress hinting at an earlier period in fashion. But for neither architecture nor fashion does this seem to be an essential feature. Another non-essential feature of buildings and clothes is reference to nature ((l) above). There is such a thing as ‘organic architecture’, with (often superficial) resemblance to animals or plants; similarly, a dress can e.g. be given a ‘flowery’ look, and fashion students’ experiments often contain quite explicit references to plants and animals. In the case of architecture, an attempt can also be made to use shapes that are somehow more ‘natural’ than the traditional straight lines, squares, or oval and round figures; this is the case, e.g., with Gaudí-type architecture. But clothes, if they fit the body, by definition have natural shapes, and attempts to play around with references to nature tend to result in rather unnatural effects.

The two remaining concepts or principles, truth and history ((m) and (n)) are brought in by Davies for a discussion of disputes between schools of architects: How ‘honest’ should a structure be? Do structures have to be shown or hidden? How much ornament is allowed? The main dividing line on these issues is that between twentieth-century modernists and earlier traditions. Davies’ chapter on history, finally, does not only mention the essential connection between a design and the historical period in which it is realized (functioning in much the same way as the physical ‘environment’ of a building), but also the controversy surrounding ‘authorship’. To what extent can the canonical architects (those who set the standards for comparison at any given historical period) be regarded as the single authors of (usually elaborate sets of) buildings? Even more than fashion, architecture is always the product of large-scale collaboration embedded in an industrial setting. But these are all issues related to modernity, which I will be able to come back to in my concluding chapter.

Fashion and intimacy

All the above had entered my dialogue with architecture by the time I started designing my fifth seasonal collection, the Spring/Summer collection *Pulse*. Gradually, all points of comparison had started to reveal more difference than similarity. True comparability was getting confined to rather abstract levels, such as the visual codes discussed in chapter 6, and the more abstract interpretations of some of the dimensions reviewed in the previous paragraphs. Probably, the most tangible area of overlap is in the relationship between design product, whether building or garment, with its surroundings. But also in that area, as I already pointed at in chapter 6, there is a significant difference: whether outside landscapes form the

environment or small inside and intimate spaces, clothes carry an essential ingredient of intimacy which they cannot shed – they hug the body, and their quality depends on how comfortably (or unnoticeably) they massage the skin from the inside and how pleasant a caress feels to the hands from the outside.

Sensorial poetics, or the touch of *Pulse*

If asked about the essence of fashion in my experience as a designer, I would now say it is the quality of touch. The main task in designing a new collection, therefore, I saw as a challenge to consciously develop an allround sensorial poetics, a poetics of touch, only further emphasized by visual and other sensory means.

This idea is not entirely new. There have been attempts to introduce it into thinking about architecture as well. Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin* is a good example:

“Touch is the sensory mode which integrates our experiences of the world and of ourselves. [...] All the senses, including vision, are extensions of the tactile sense; the senses are specialisations of skin tissue, and all sensory experiences are modes of touching, and thus related to tactility. Our contact with the world takes place at the boundary line of the self through specialised parts of our enveloping membrane.”
(Pallasmaa 2012, p. 12)

Pallasmaa contrasts this view to the dominant emphasis on visual properties in architectural theory. And he approvingly quotes Hall (1969) who describes the ‘hidden dimension’ of (proximal) space which, usually unnoticed, strongly determines relations between people (as well as between people and things) by activating not only a visual experience, but also an olfactory, an acoustic, and a tactile one. Ignoring all those sensory dimensions also leads architects, according to Pallasmaa, to forget about the dimension of time which should be ‘felt’ in wear and ageing. He concludes that architecture is too much concerned with itself, rather than the human experience, thus suffering from a form of ‘artistic autism’.

Such observations are all the more important for the field of fashion, where touch is demonstrably of primordial importance. For fashion, the body *is* the true center; it does not have to be made into the center, as Pallasmaa recommends for architecture. And hence a multi-sensory experience is inevitable. Recognizing this calls for an appropriate aesthetic, a truly sensorial one.

Saying this is easy. In order to turn the ideas into design I had to find a way of harmonizing the look with the feel. I tried to do this by integrating a clash of styles from the past with current shapes and textiles in such a way to get images that evoke a sense of touch – or invite touching. Let me first present a few images for the sake of illustration.





Images 76 to 84. *Pulse* silhouettes.

The clash of styles which was my source of inspiration was found in a video covering the London Rock and Roll Show in 1972, in which the 50's to 70's Rockabilly, Rockers, and early Punk styles met, as it were, in the same 'pulse'. I tried to capture the atmosphere, with its mixed references of drape jackets, bikers' jackets, 60's denim, tailored jackets with velvet

collars, and flat shoes, which I combined with pieces that had always inspired me, such as authentic workwear, American sportswear, classic evening wear. This was clearly looking back while trying to go forward. *Pulse*, therefore, was an exercise in synchronization. It was not an attempt to be the future, but simply to adjust references to the past to my work now, placing them in a modern context, making them true to the moment – without nostalgia.

This collection was about easy, basic, relaxed shapes that would not draw too much attention to the purely visual. Yet I worked on the construction, trying to keep some sort of cool, to make garments with an attitude. And in order to enhance the sense of touch – also through aspects of the visual – I worked with beautiful blended cotton wool, high density cotton twills, the finest stretch corduroy, organic dyed Japanese denim, thin two-way stretch denim, soft mixed cotton-silks, thin stripe cotton shirtings, vintage-like slow woven sweat, and striped jerseys. The garments were meant to breathe authenticity, getting more beautiful with age and wear. It was the intention to give a clear intimacy to the collection. You have to get closer, not only looking but also touching, to understand what you see.

Pulse garments :

- hand tailored coat & jacket, denim look, stretch (dress, top, skirt and trousers),
- tailor made shirts,
- bikers jacket,
- sweat shirts,
- rugby shirts,
- stripe T shirts.

Pulse fabrics :

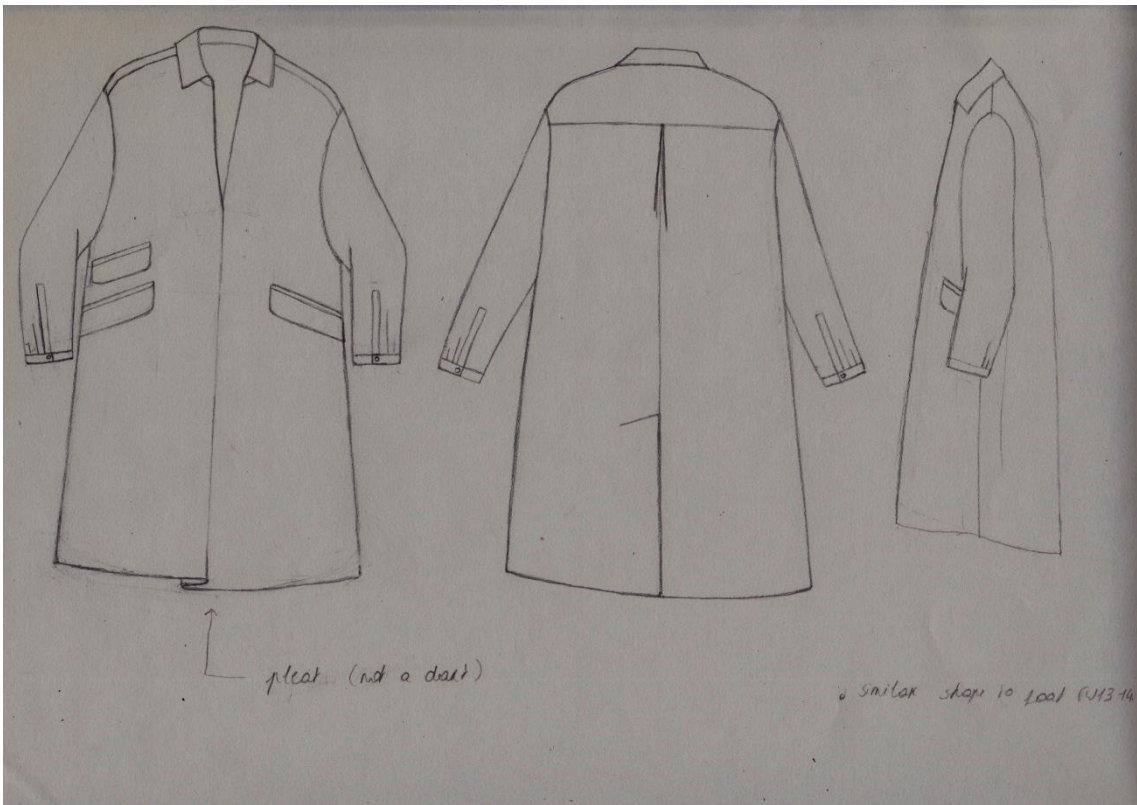
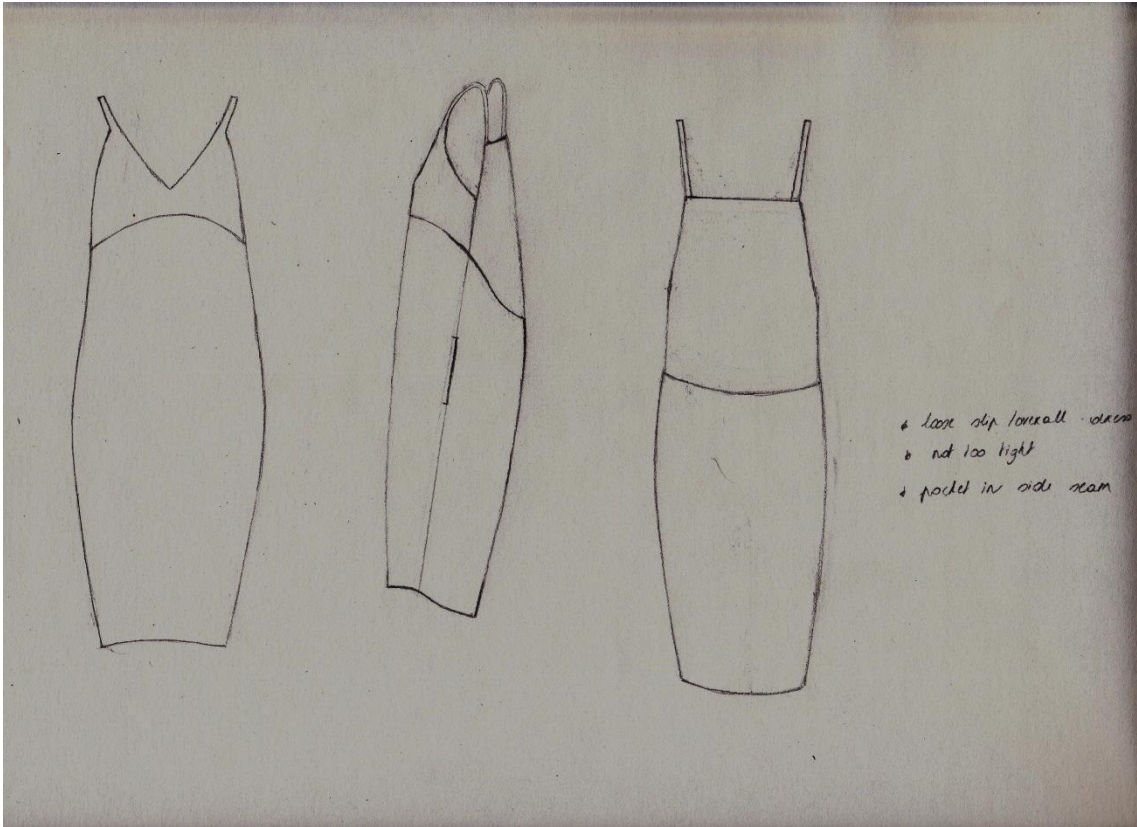
extra light cotton/wool, high density cotton twills, fine stretch corduroy, organic dyed Japanese denim, two-way stretch denim, soft cotton-silks, vintage-like slow knitted sweat and striped jerseys.

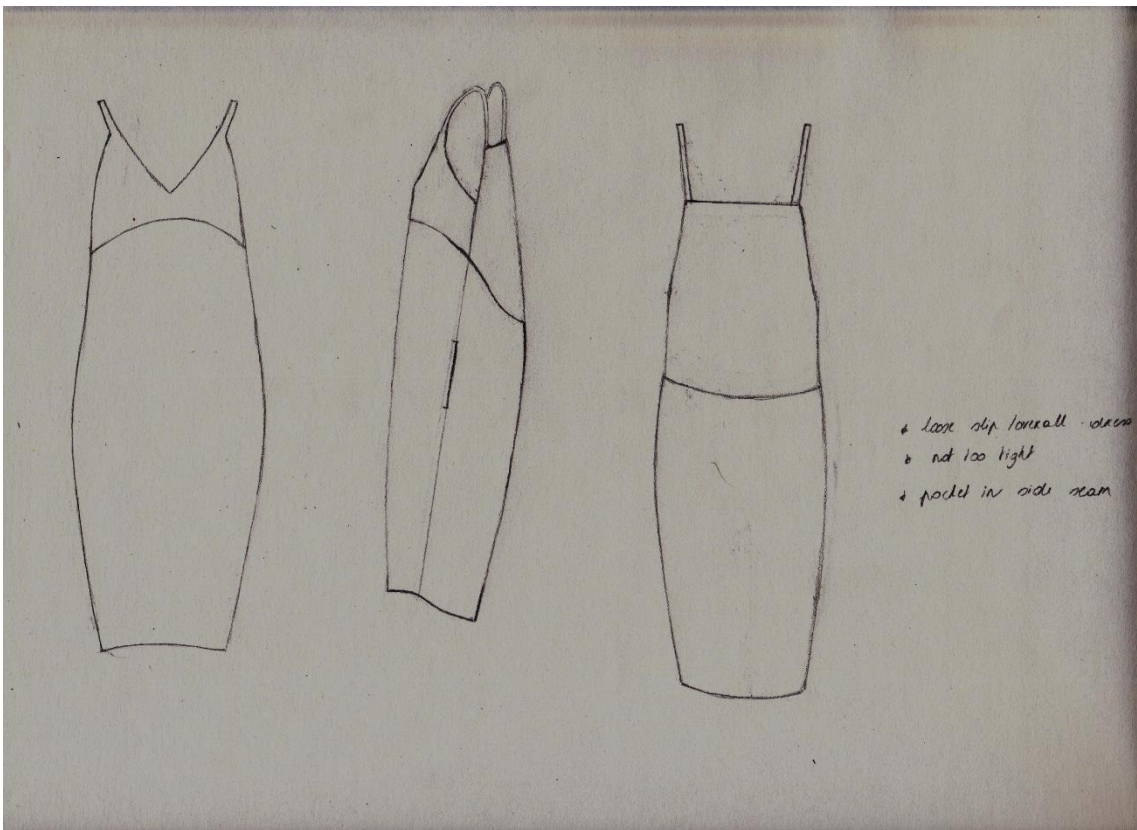
Pulse colors :

ink, beige, dark navy, olive, indigo, black, white, light grey, mint melange, stripes

Sketchings for *Pulse*



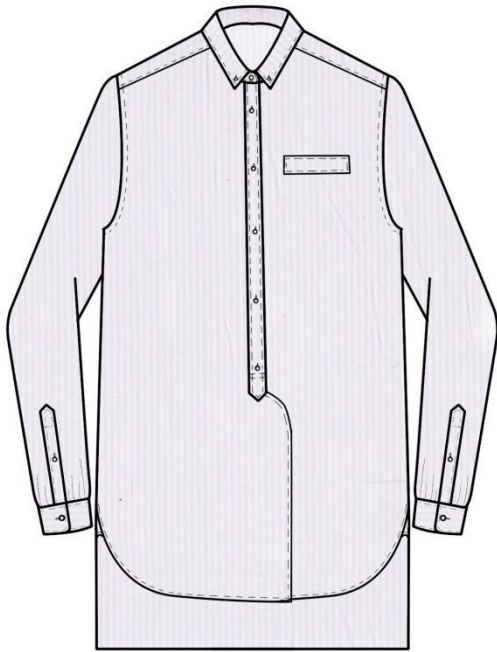
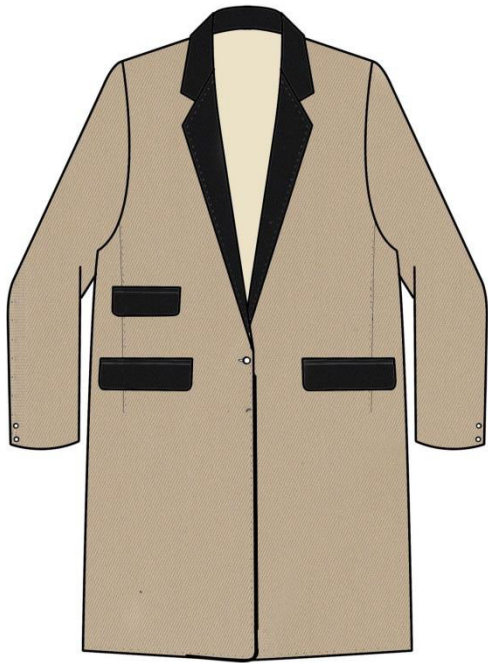





Pulse try-outs



Some technical drawings for *Pulse*





Alexandra Verschueren

SHOWROOM PARIS

SPRING SUMMER 2014

“ PULSE ”

11 RUE SAINTE ANASTASE
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from 26/09/2013 - 02/10/2013
from 10 am - 6 pm

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Pulse showroom



A Pulse dress



Interludium: *Waves*

The momentum that had been reached with *Pulse* was continued with a F/W 2014 - 2015 collection that I called *Waves*. Continuation itself, a progressing movement, was meant to be the theme. A wave of the pulse, a bit more relaxed than the seasons before, and a bit more seductive. I looked for inspiration in workwear – peacoats, coveralls, overalls, denim – and the uniforms of sailors at sea, but with hybrid forms and relaxed volumes and proportions, preserving intimacy.

Garments : peacoat, classic suit (blazer + trousers), denim coverall jacket, overall inspired dress, silky shirtdress, tailor made shirts, skirt with patch pockets, chino trousers, jeans, sweatjacket, sweatdress, sweatskirt, sweatshirt, sweatvest, sweatscarf, and custom made caps.

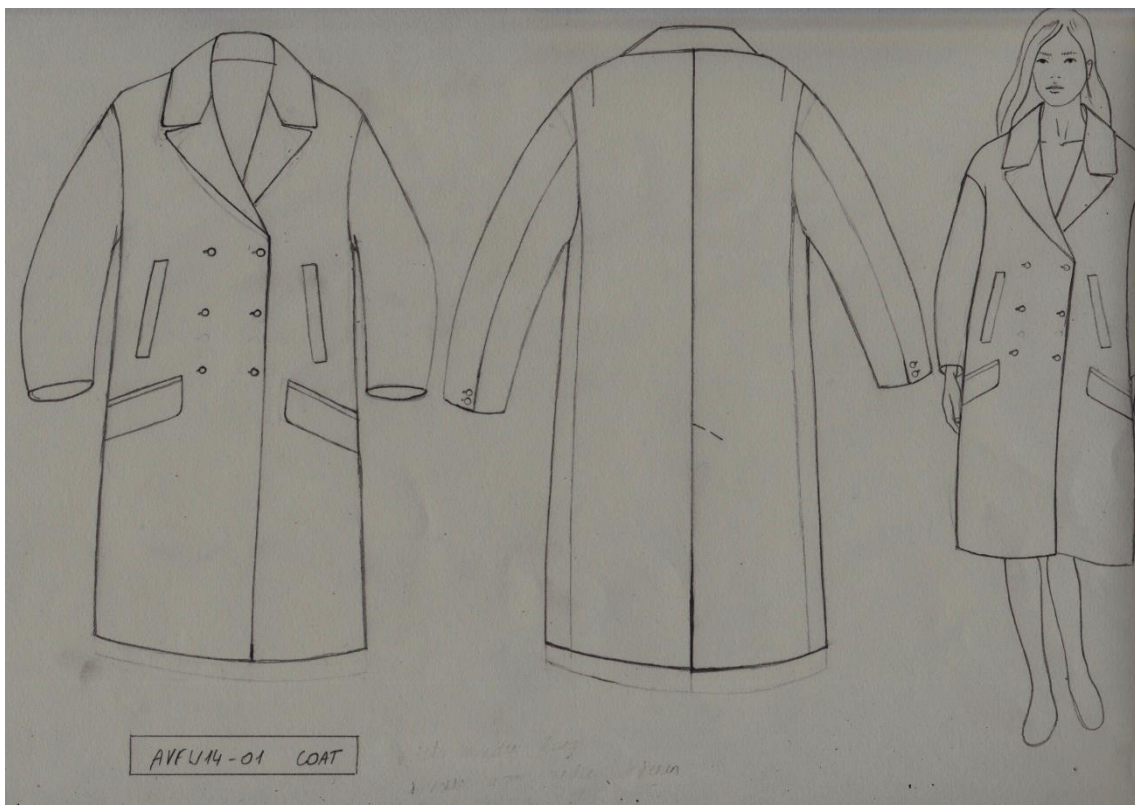
Fabrics : angora doobby melton, woolen light flannel, fine stretch corduroy, high density stretch twill, back brushed selvage denim, soft denim twills, cotton shirting, soft cotton silks, textured sweatshirting, vintage-like slow knitted sweat

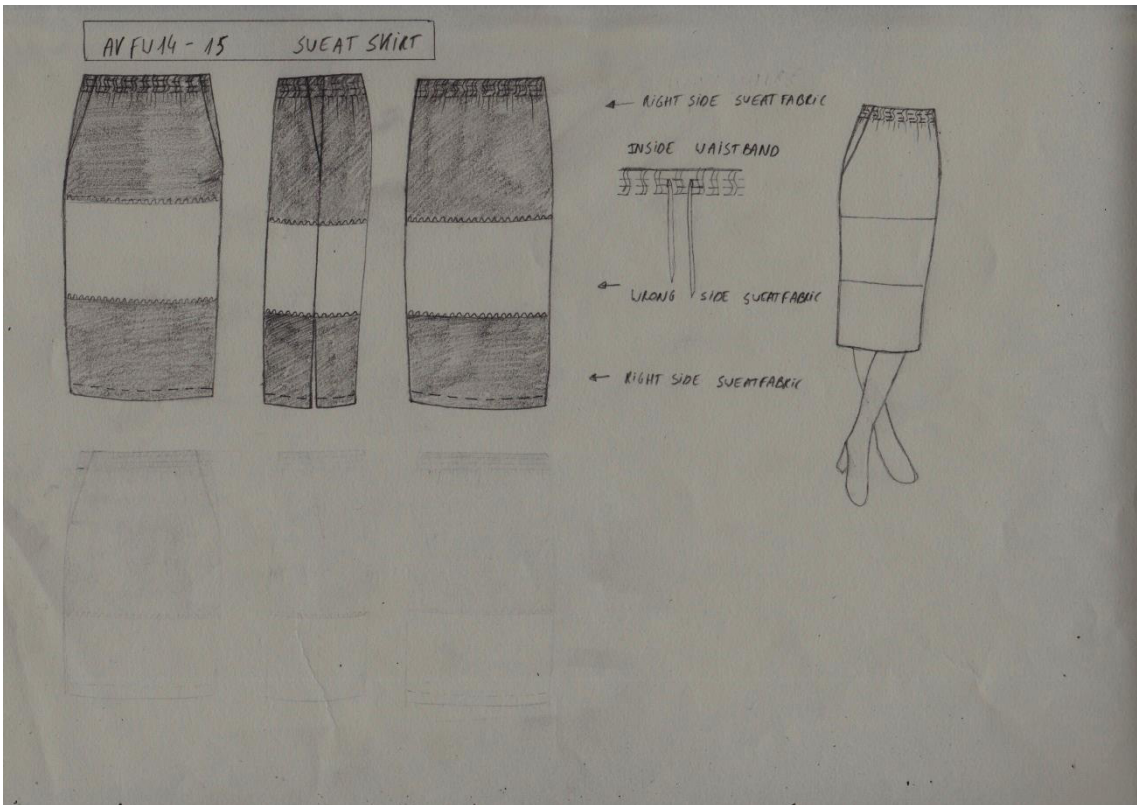
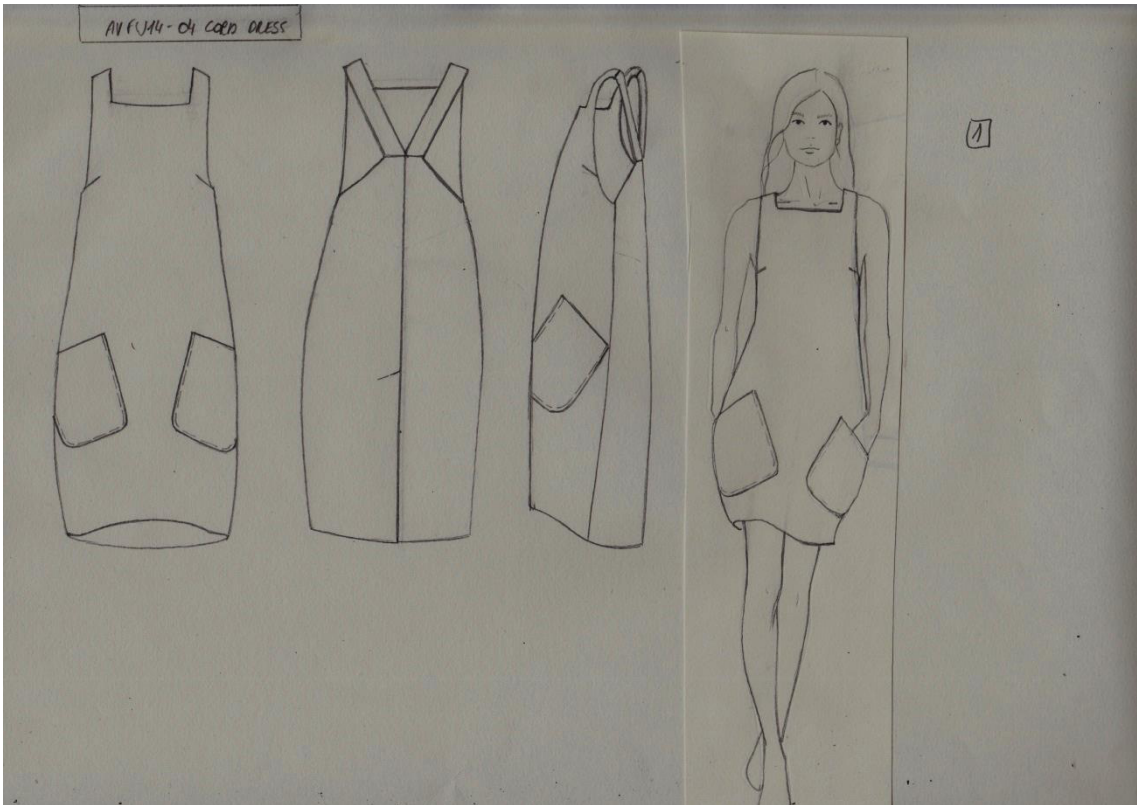
Colors : black, dark navy, indigo, camel, greige, light grey, light blue, forest green, olive, petrol green, burgundy, poppy, soft pink, white.

Selected *Waves* looks:



Waves sketches





Technical drawing for a *Waves* coat



From the *Waves* backstage lookbook



Waves showroom invitation



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WAVES

27.02.2014 - 05.03.2014
10 am to 6 pm
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Showroom Paris
Fall Winter 2014/2015