

Pre-empting loss through 'fashion memory': a 'postconservation' perspective

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Abstract | Caring for modern materials and technologies used in contemporary fashion can become an archival dilemma, especially for museums collecting the intentionally ephemeral. Degradation becomes a focus, which is often evaluated via scientific research, empirical investigation, and interventional (physical) conservation. Quickening material degradation can often heighten anxiety in conservation and curatorial practice because this can limit the potential use of the artefact. In addition to using traditional modern materials some fashion designers are following sustainable design strategies in textile manufacturing, ones that challenge the growth model. Biodegradable materials have characteristics favoured by some designers, who intend for their creations to remain stable in use and wear before organic disposal. 'Progressive fashion' such as this raises questions and the need for new interpretive practices within fashion conservation. This paper examines how modern material degradation can lead to new 'material relationships', thus enabling future uses and users and hence allowing different aesthetic views and 'fashion memories' to coexist. A 'postconservation' model is to extend the legacy and appreciation of fashion artefacts by moving from a representational conservation approach towards one that embraces documenting and preserving the performative, wearable, and renewable concepts. If a fashion item is designed to degrade, what are the archival implications in conserving, documenting processes and 'performance' of the applied characteristics of such artefacts? Methodological approaches using Material Engagement Theory and postphenomenology help to introduce temporal dynamic elements that postmodern materials often show during the transient process of degradation. Object studies of a wild rubber dress designed by Vivienne Westwood and Andreas Kronthaler c.2013, 'ECCO'-Leather dress by Iris van Herpen, c.2010 and Rootbound #2 dress by Diana Scherer c.2017, highlight notions of pre-empting loss as a collection care approach, illustrating the potential benefits in archiving of the temporal aspects of contemporary fashion. Outcomes indicate creative practices of fashion designers using modern materials cannot be represented as being stable nor neutral.

Keywords: postmodern materials, fashion memory, postconservation, postmodern fashion, post-growth fashion

1. Introduction: the emergence of postmodern materials

Reconceptualising aspects of degradation when considering postmodern fashion heritage may become crucial in rethinking archival practices which currently preference perpetuity when collecting artefacts. Acknowledging material changes in artefacts could support developing documentation procedures, including the recording of 'Designer Intent' as a future archival strategy (Schertel 2011, 7-24; Tonkin 2017, 152-167). New polymer, bio and electronic-based (e-textile) materials have emerged over the last few decades and caring for these materials in contemporary fashion collections has become an archival dilemma for museums, particularly within artefacts that are intentionally ephemeral. Postmodern materials, a term derived from the scope of this research, acknowledges the creation of new materials using progressive production methods developed from the late 20th century to the present. These methods may be influenced by advances in material engineering, digital technology and environmentally focused design that aligns with the ecosphere in a postmodern culture.

Intentional ephemerality is becoming inherent to some postmodern materials as part of design praxis. The physical representation of concepts and ideas embodied in the original design can be lost due to degradation meaning postmodern fashion such as this raises questions relating to the need for new interpretive practices in fashion conservation. In this research, object-based interviews and discussions with conservators and curators working with fashion collections in the UK, EU and US, have been used to evidence different approaches to examining, identifying and dealing with the effects of degradation and change in postmodern fashion artefacts. Analysis of these studies has resulted in considerations of how these new materials and artefacts might be conserved in ways that are empathic to their conceptualisation. Material Engagement Theory (MET) and postphenomenological theoretical approaches have been applied to support the hypothesis that acceptance of artefact degradation can lead to new understandings of material relationships within the conservation of textiles and dress, enabling alternative aesthetic views and disparate 'fashion memories' to co-exist.

2. Conserving (im)permanence in contemporary fashion artefacts

The value of decay has been explored in conservation, preservation and anthropological literature, which supports the notion of changing materiality of an artefact (Kopytoff 1986, 64-91, Muñoz Vinas 2005, 101-104, Ingold 2012, De Silvey 2017a, Sweetnam and Henderson 2021, 6). While most textile-based objects will biodegrade over time, items 'designed to biodegrade' introduce the notion of 'transmutability' (Pollard 2004, 55) which can create different contextual meanings, widening other relationships with the material whilst on display. For example, Rootbound #2 dress by Diana Scherer, the artist intended the materials to degrade, as a necessary condition that is characterised as being fast degrading by changing their physical and chemical states (DeSilvey 2017a, 11). If communicated through exhibition, as in 'Fashioned from Nature', V&A (April 2018 – Jan 2019), such material changes can increase the fashion cultural user(s) curiosity, in line with the 'Designer Intent' to develop a new form of material relationship, between wearer and culture.

Contemporary fashion culture co-exists with, and is the product of continual social, economic political and environmental influences. The impact of COVID19 and environmental disasters, for example, the Southeast Asia floods, Australian wildfires (2020) and East Africa droughts (2011-19) (Oxfam 2021) during the development of this research has exposed how global trauma and inequalities may lead to the reinvention of how cultural assets are viewed in the future. 'Fashion embodies this ambivalence' (Evans 2003, 307) where post cultural views could encourage the role of the museum as the broad conservation of artefacts where possible, with documentation embracing future interpretation within the historical context. The way fashion artefacts are currently selected is based on an established approach to conserving traditional and modern materials. This research

responds to, and evidences the identified inability to conserve postmodern, including sustainable biodegradable materials holistically within museum collections, by introducing new documentation of 'Designer Intent', to avoid the loss of transient and temporal forms of fashioning the body (Entwistle and Townsend 2020, 289-304).

2.1 Pre-empting loss: towards a postconservation approach

Understanding and measuring loss through degradation and damage in artefacts of cultural significance is traditionally known to be 'one of the cornerstones upon which conservation decisions are built' (Clavir 2002, 43). Established sustainable conservation practice relates to established protocols of reversing damage through repair to stabilise an artefact using minimum intervention. Recently the profession has acknowledged that artefacts can survive differently beyond the lifetimes of contemporary stakeholders (Henderson 2020, 195, 197, Muñoz Viñas 2020), implying that loss in the heritage sector could be understood from different cultural and societal positionings. Challenging the tradition of collecting and maintaining 'irreplaceable' artefacts for as long as possible (DeSilvey and Harrison 2020, 2) could lead to museums becoming more renewable resources supporting changing historical contexts. Greater appreciation of social, economic and environmental systems of production that give an artefact meaning could inform more sustainable and transformative models which accept that some materials survive, some partially and some are lost (DeSilvey 2017b, 185). Documentation and archival practice require to be adapted to reflect the various circumstances surrounding the materialisation of the artefact. Conservators working with postmodern materials could identify items from a 'postconservation' perspective, whereby processes of biological, chemical and physical breakdown are integral to balancing an items useful life and loss within material culture. The parameters of documentation could become multiple, evolving through practice-led conservation work that reconsiders patterns of material change. Devising an 'activity-centred' (Malafouris 2013, 149) documentation process, as opposed to a human-centred focus where archival stakeholders, conservators and curators, follow standardised procedures, could recognise a relational ontological approach to recording the designer's intent, material and degradation as inseparable, reinforcing that intentionality and material agency are not innate but emergent properties of material engagement.

2.2 Postconservation and temporary archives

Temporary archiving of changes in the artefact properties over time could be viewed as a more enactive approach to fashion acquisition and is a practice being adapted at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London. Fashion artefacts showing material innovation made from progressive manufacturing methods and which have a likelihood to degrade, can be acquired as a Non-Collection Object (NCOL). The term NCOL's comprise objects belonging to the V&A but are not part of the permanent collection, including mounts, handling, teaching items and packaging which are included in the Collection Management System (CMS) useful when planning for exhibition, research and other access. This archival system provides a solution that accepts degrading elements as being part of the material phenomena, working around museum policies of permanent acquisition (V&A 2019), where disposal is a complex and debatable process for museums in the UK (Museums Association 2021). NCOL opens up ethical options allowing for 'artefact-end-of-life' through the natural course of degradation eventually making the artefact no longer useful and ready 'to rehome' (Elisabeth Murray, conversation with author, October 21, 2019) or be legally disposed. The NCOL system presents a potential solution for approaching the conservation of postmodern fashion. For example, changes that occur to textiles through the passage of time may be viewed as 'dynamic attractors' (Malafouris 2013, 247) where conservators, curators and other museum stakeholders adopt variable societal, cultural and aesthetic values, accepting and emphasizing the 'notion of wear' associated with temporality and ephemerality, i.e. 'fashion memory' (Townsend 2011, 91-107).

Interpreting ideas of 'fashion memory' is demonstrated by fashion practitioners and researchers who are developing new design paradigms between archives and wearables (Townsend *et al* 2020, 89-110). In this work, material engagement with historical dress artefacts is used as a method for identifying past and generate new craft skills by drawing upon 'distributed cognition and memory' (Ibid, 93). Material engagement through the examination of postmodern fashion, like those collected as NCOLs, may shift conservation paradigms to allow for 'epistemological uncertainty' (Henderson 2018, 109) when accessing and viewing fragile objects. In the future,

degradation could be considered a key aspect of the condition of the object that is not solely connected to misinterpretation, disposal and loss, facilitating archives as temporal spaces for current and future cultural uses and users to have a more 'meaningful and reciprocal relationship with the material past' (DeSilvey 2017b, 179). These material relationships based on the appreciation of imperfection or wabi-sabi, may demonstrate conserving fashion heritage has similarities with human fragility itself, encouraging an affinity with natural ecology and its changing conditions, ongoing aging processes and inevitable decomposition. These types of material relationships between the viewer and the artefact could create a shared, relatable and positive material engagement with culture, one that is not inestimable, helping to increase diversity in cultural users. This reversal of a traditional conservation approach to retain artefacts in pristine and if possible, unworn condition, prioritises the degradation process and short-term lifespans of degradable materials, as a progressive, sustainable goal in interpretative fashion practice.

3. Material Engagement Theory, postphenomenology and conserving postmodern fashion

Material Engagement Theory (MET) (Malafouris 2013), defined as the 'in-between' space of the mind and the maker, combines cognitive science and phenomenology to help open material culture by bringing it into the cognitive fold (Ibid, 2). Malafouris (2014, 146) constructs the idea of a 'hylonoetic space' to identify the continual dialectical collision between the mental and physical through a process of 'creative thinging' (Ibid, 145). This conceptualisation is helpful when encouraging a less 'materiality dependent' approach to conserving garments intended to degrade because the material is not tied to a single moment nor temporal order. The material is part of a 'creative thinging' process whereby the designer, material and degradation, over time, show the skills of the designer through their material choices, the disintegration of the artefact being part of the creative process. Postphenomenology, a strand of the philosophy of technology introduced by Don Ihde (1995), is an emerging tool to analyse design research by examining the way fashion artefacts mediate relationships between humans and the environment (van Dongen et al., 2019, 2, van Dongen and Toussaint 2020, 113). This combined theoretical approach of MET and postphenomenology is adapted as a framework for artefact examination and employed to identify 'material relationships' as a consideration to support a more holistic approach to conservation, one where the breaking down of fashion is acknowledged. The following three object studies highlight notions of pre-empting loss as a collection care approach illustrating the potential benefits in the temporal archiving of contemporary fashion.

4. Object studies

Three object studies emerged through dialogues with professionals in fashion collection care that each evidence different types of degrading material. The studies provide different approaches to examining aspects of degradation that can occur in 21st century postmodern fashion. The objects comprise a wild rubber dress by Vivienne Westwood and Andreas Kronthaler, c.2013, an example of an NCOL collected by the V&A, the 'ECCO'-Leather dress by Iris van Herpen, Radiation Invasion Haute Couture collection, collected by the Palais Galliera, spring summer 2010 and the Rootbound #2 dress by Diana Scherer, c.2017 shown at the 'Fashioned from Nature' exhibition at the V&A. The artefacts question the current conservation paradigm in dress archives as practice-based artists and designers turn to nature and growth as potential source material and creative inspiration. These studies present new forms of postmodern materials and by combining MET and postphenomenological approaches to artefact-led analysis evidence how and why greater consideration of 'material relationships' between the museum user(s) and artefacts could support documentation of new conservation criteria based on 'Designer Intent', material and degradation.

4.1 Wild rubber dress by Vivienne Westwood and Andreas Kronthaler, c. 2013



Figure 1. Wild rubber dress by Vivienne Westwood and Andreas Kronthaler. V&A Museum, London. c.2013. (PROV.489-2019). Given by Lily Cole. Image: ©Vivienne Westwood/Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 2013.

A wild rubber dress with a tulle skirt designed by Vivienne Westwood and Andreas Kronthaler for Lily Cole to wear for the punk-themed Met Gala in 2013 was collected by the V&A as an example of fashion being naturally sourced and, in this case, relates to a social action project (Figure 1). The location of a dark brown stain is strikingly visible on the front of the bodice which creates discussion around material processes that represent environmental social action. Such representation is becoming part of fashion conservation and interpretive practice as museums begin to collect artefacts that show alternative approaches to material production, for example, fashion artefacts that show effective ways of utilising food waste products (Ehrman 2018, 171) which show the importance of naturally formed properties of postgrowth fashion. Examining the dress highlights other forms of material properties and qualities because the material is a product of sustainable rubber manufacturing processes demonstrating the wild rubber, harvested from Pará rubber trees native to the Amazon, is an 'intelligent material' (Entwistle and Townsend 2020, 294), for example, connecting natural material processes and developing socioeconomics with the body as fashion culture. The approach of archiving encouraged as part of this research, allows for and documents the biomaterials unpredictable change, for example, the occurrence of the dark brown staining. The dress signifies a design paradigm because of its biobased material and environmental stakeholders, including non-human actors, the Pará rubber trees, that contribute to the natural services that sustain the knowledge and culture of indigenous ethnic groups. It is supported by other bio-design initiatives. The Biological Atelier SS2082 by Amy Congdon, a speculative design project exploring tissue engineering, in design and production, reinforces the significance of fashion designers engaging with bio-based textiles to develop new 'tissue culture' (Congdon 2020, 138). This engagement explores high fashion possibilities that promote eco design-based approaches that reconsider the 'ultimate commodity' (Seed-London 2015). Another example of eco-fashion engagement is the concept of Biocouture (Kleiderly 2020), introduced by Suzanne Lee, which adopts the use of bacteria in the production and manufacturing of textiles for fashion, encouraging the value of composability as part of high fashion through societal and environmental change.

Degradation becomes interesting and useful when allowed to take its course, facilitating a more holistic approach to collecting and archiving bio-based fashion. Acknowledging stakeholders beyond the museum, for example, environmentalists, activists and social-action campaigners, has allowed the uncertainty of the condition of the dress to be managed and be reinterpreted. Henderson (2018, 109) introduces 'ontological uncertainty' as an approach in conservation to describe the benefits of the practice of not knowing to encourage an 'active uncertainty management' (Ibid) that avoids negative consequences by allowing for different stakeholders to critically assess the conservation of artefacts and the environments they are associated. This perspective helps with the practice of not knowing the continued disfiguration and the time the dress will take to fully degrade, making these aspects a feature of 'Designer Intent' and expertise. Embracing the hybridity of the ethical formulae of a postfashion system through material engagement and a 'postconservation' approach creates a more responsive (and creative) practice for conservation, where even though destruction is inevitable it is a valued part of sustainable design discourse and practice.



Figure 2. 'ECCO'-Leather dress by Iris van Herpen. Haute Couture, spring-summer 2010, Radiation Invasion collection. Palais Galliera, Paris. c.2014. (GAL2014.31.1). Image: ©Sylvie Brun, Palais Galliera, Paris.

Iris van Herpen collaborated with the company 'ECCO'-Leather to help create a dress made of natural coloured leather with semi-circle relief patterning made from boning for her Haute Couture, spring-summer 2010, Radiation Invasion collection (Figure 2). The object shows innovative use of 'ECCO'-Leather which is understood to derive from purely natural sources by following less toxic manufacturing processes, for example: reduction in chemical usage and wastewater production ('ECCO'-Leather 2021). Samson (Alexandre Samson, conversation with author, November 27, 2019), Haute Couture and contemporary design curator, Palais Galliera, reaffirms the sculptural forms associated with approaches taken by the designer combined with the organic use of 'ECCO'-Leather connects Haute Couture to sustainable, holistic design practices. The artefact creates an interesting

discussion because of its association with an eco-design system which focuses on the whole-life cycle of a product (Mora et al 2014, 139-147, Payne 2021, 114-116). Postmodern materials like the 'ECCO'-Leather are emerging from anthropogenic influences in fashion artefacts which seems to acknowledge the benefits of the earth's ecosystems. Environmental scientists (Hobbs et al 2006, Mascaro et al 2013) argue that there are benefits in humans contributing to the direction of the ecosphere by creating new 'novel ecosystems' which have become permanent evolving features, offering holistic and realistic modes for ecological relationships (Kidwell 2016, 246-47). They 'can result from deliberate and inadvertent human actions which are not dependent on human intervention for their maintenance' (Ibid, 244). Conserving the 'ECCO'-Leather may introduce ideas around transformative properties and qualities that supports the dispersion of the 'Designer Intent' for the designer that embraces the eco-system and environmental impact. These considerations offer a more holistic and realistic idea of ecological engagement of current and future fashion cultural users. The artefact creates a form of fashion 'eco-literacy' (St. Pierre 2015, 33) that identifies eco-material properties and qualities as aspects that co-exist with protecting natural environments that are not cultivated or purposed, they exist to encourage growth, variety and evolving native species. Munõz (2005, 92) states '(...) conservation can be viewed as a manifestation of the ethical imperative of not lying.' This enables the conservation field to acknowledge and embody wider environmental considerations in which materials are manufactured in ethical, natural systems, thus accepting different approaches in caring for artefacts that support eco-design systems.

'Nature is a big part of my work. It's an endless stream of beauty. I like creating my own versions of it, trying to translate the logic behind the system that works so perfectly.' Iris van Herpen, 2020. Interviewed by Sebastian Jordahn, Dezeen. 2020.

Iris van Herpen uses Haute Couture to heighten material engagement between herself, her collaborators and design team through developing new, unexplored ideas to create different material qualities which often cannot be characterised because they are meta-physical. For example, van Herpen worked with Dutch designer Jólán van der Wiel to design the Magnetic Moon dress (autumn-winter 2013-14) by developing a technique using magnetic force to manipulate and texture polyurethane embedded with iron particles. This example is indicative of the approach taken by van Herpen towards postmodern materials, and the properties and qualities they offer, where hand, movement and feeling mutual joy during material engagement is part of the 'collection process' (Jordahn 2020). The use of the ECCO leather, brings new materialities because of the wider scope of environmental stakeholders which relates to collective responsibility and shared ownership in the ecology of eco-materials. Rethinking archival ontologies may become necessary if this shared ownership in material engagement is to be acknowledged, where the ECCO leather embeds values of sustainability and renewability.



Figure 3 (left) Rootbound dress #2 by Diana Scherer. c.2017. Image: ©Leanne Tonkin.

Figure 4 (upper right) Detail of plant root material grown by Diana Scherer. Image: ©Diana Scherer.

Figure 5 (lower right) Upper back of Rootbound dress #2 by Diana Scherer. Image: ©Diana Scherer.

The Rootbound #2 dress by Dutch-based artist Diana Scherer in 2017 is grown from roots of plants to create a 3D textile and is an example of the potential of 'growing' fashion (Figures 3 and 4). Scherer (Diana Scherer, conversation with author, June 08, 2020) explains the interest in clothing and not fashion giving precedence to her harvesting process where she has developed a technique to control the growth of plant roots to make textiles. She uses a variety of plant seeds, for example corn, flax and beans, to create patterned materials with templates. When the roots are fully grown, Scherer removes them from the soil and cuts off the plant stems leaving behind an intricately patterned grass root material (Figures 3-5). There is an essence of 'true materialism' (Fletcher 2016, 141) where artefacts, like this object study, acknowledges the scope of a 'material society' (Ibid) where availability of materials is environment-centred supporting ideas for sustainable continuity in fashion practice. Postphenomenological thinking supports ideas that technologies cannot be understood as a priori, because of the continual shaping and reshaping by the designer through their practice (van Dongen et al 2019, 3). The Rootbound #2 dress demonstrates how fashion artefacts may introduce a less tangible fashion heritage because the designer engages with the complexity and changeability of ecosystems. This type of material engagement presents different considerations when documenting social and practical relationships between the designer, cultural user(s) and fashion artefact, therefore, creating different 'heritage-related emotions' (Vidal and Dias 2017, 27) by re-establishing historical values in caring for dress artefacts which have different contextual parameters. The Rootbound #2 dress may bring together shared values between the environment, human emotion (of the cultural user) and 'Designer Intent' for a common good that encourages diverse and continuous material engagement. 'The cognitive life' (Malafouris 2018, 8) of the Rootbound #2 dress enables a presence that is not reliant on past connections with people and realities formerly attached to the values of an artefact (Vidal and Dias 2017, 27), but values what it presently holds for the cultural user, and designer. Displaying the dress could create a sense of a sustainable, hopeful future through emotional experience which may be considered a renewable asset of dress archival use even if the material is substantially altered or degraded.

Naturally sourced materials are starting to become important for designers to share in their work, as a 'material acknowledgment' of sustainable hybrid creative practice. At the same time materialising the designer concepts satisfies their creative desires. Conserving naturally sourced materials presents many changeable variables and becomes a 'knowledge-generating activity' (Hölling 2017, 88), where rationalising and contextualising the likely destruction of the plant root construction may be documented as part of an object record. The result being an archive of naturally sourced fashion artefacts that can be transmitted, transformed (through degradation) and lost; enabling analysis of issues of practice and experience that acknowledges fabrication of eco-materials as part of fashion heritage, that are part of the human condition (Ihde and Malafouris 2018, 209).

5. Conclusions: towards a postconservation approach for postmodern fashion

Postfashion systems may present different paradigms of museum practice because of wider environmental stakeholders and the acceptance of active materials as part of the creative process. The growth in new forms of fashion, such as human-centred design, allows materials to take on many emotional and conceptual levels. Designer-use of multiple and decentralised processes is beginning to rethink design and material paradigms. For example, using film as a medium to (de)construct design ideas that exist as 'video-thought' (Torres 2020, 281), exploring biosystems and computational abilities to hack manufacturing process to create new expressive materials showing 'intelligent mobility' (Winters 2020, 230) and 'lived experiences' (Sadkowska 2020, 86) that through; practice-based research that embodies the complexities of wearer relationships. These outcomes from practice-based research support translation, readaptation and reconstruction as a fashion continuum and not as an 'end point' (Calefato 2019, 41), for example, an endpoint that many fashion artefacts arrive at when conserved, researched and exhibited. The ideas can live beyond the life of the material.

The three object studies explore the various types of material engagement with postmodern materials in fashion artefacts. They show different types of material properties and qualities that require 'postconservation' thinking and practice, which may avoid limiting accessibility and interpretation to some fashion artefacts in the museum system. For example, biodegradation in fashion artefacts could be

viewed as being a performative element of the material rather than an unwelcome property. Postmodern materials, as understood through the analysis of these objects, can be less reliant on traditional manufacturing techniques, they do not just exist as specific material types; they can environmentally decompose, be recycled and nurture creative design and artistic practice. This often means postmodern materials can be intentionally ephemeral supporting a circular fashion system. The objects show how designers and artists can design commitment to shared societal responsibility through material choices and creative practice, allowing the object to be part of advocating for more sustainable rights and provisions (Fletcher 2016, 241-2) of current and future cultural stakeholders of fashion artefacts. Documenting and conserving these artefacts do present different challenges for dress archives because there are no set protocols for these types of artefacts, therefore, 'epistemological uncertainty' becomes an asset when thinking about conserving material engagement of biodegradable, eco and plant grown materials. These materials do not have fixed properties and qualities, they are an emergent product from material engagement with the natural environment mediated by human and non-human factors, for example plantation growth, water systems and seed production.

A postphenomenological approach helps when examining and studying the objects because it introduces the ecology as a natural form of technology, whereby subjects and objects are the product of environmental and human relations (van Dongen et al 2019, 20). This means fashion artefacts can be environmentally and socially bound to other cultural uses and users, like the harvesting communities in the Amazon and designers like Scherer, who work with the eco-system as a natural landscape to build on their design and artistic practice. Conserving and interpreting eco-fashion practice and 'Designer Intent' extends outside of the standards of a dress archive and textile conservation studio. Environmental materiality has been the intentional background for each designer and artist from which their material engagement is enacted (Malafouris 2013, 149).

Utilising a postphenomenological and MET informed epistemology, allows for sustainable postmodern fashion conservation. In addition, it allows new forms of interaction with the objects and their study.

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