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Transient Structures. Layers of Social Meaning in Conceptual Clothing

Lucian BROSCĂȚEAN¹
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Abstract

Within the conceptual framework of WLC 2016 we have chosen to explore a transdisciplinary approach of postmodern clothing. Fashion has always been a domain in which sociological, philosophical, political, cultural approaches have spoken about its contents and contexts. Recent sociological studies of fashion have revealed the deep meanings of conceptual clothing and the interwoven network of thoughts that is the starting point for such intellectual approaches. Fashion scholars such as Bradley Quinn, Caroline Evans, Valerie Steele or Malcolm Barnard have underlined the role of conceptual clothing in casting a light upon various social issues and symptoms. Through this paper we want to argue how layers of social meaning transform certain fashion projects in reflexions of the Zeitgeist. In the current socio-political context such investigations do not necessarily offer pertinent answers, but certainly raise more questions and awareness.

*By focusing on the works of Lucy and Jorge Orta, and Hussein Chalayan, our aim is to explore the different ways in which social changes, urban reconfigurations, and geographical dislocation question our notions of space, form, mobility, and identity. Our research will be a transdisciplinary one, analysing a consistent part of their work from different perspectives in order to reveal their influence on the way in which the design of clothing has taken the responsibility of becoming a shelter, a refuge, a mean of protection against the transient nature of contemporary societies. We will be analyzing Chalayan's three projects, *Afterwords* (2000), *Temporal Meditations* (2003), and *Absent Presence* (2005), and Orta's *Refugee Wear* (1992), *Modular Architecture* (1996), and *Nexus Architecture* (1993–2002). In investigating their works we shall focus on the character of artistic process,*

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employed by both Chalayan and Orta, by using the objects (garments) and the mechanisms of fashion (runway collection) for Chalayan, and the mechanism of performance for Orta.

Keywords:

Social meanings, postmodern clothing, exploration, mobility, transgression.

Introduction

Throughout the 20th century and in the first years of the 21st century fashion has been shaped and reshaped by major seismic movements that were an uncanny reflection of the social-political and cultural transformations. Scholars have argued that fashion is a mirror of the Zeitgeist, its paradigmatic shifts deeply influencing the identities and morphologies of clothing.

The transitory and volatile aspects of fashion inexorably change the problematic relations between body, clothes and social contexts. In his influential study *Tigersprung. Fashion in Modernity* Ulrich Lehmann underlines the fact that: “Fashion is the supreme expression of the contemporary spirit. It changes constantly and remains necessarily incomplete; it is transitory, mobile, and fragmentary. This quality ties it in with the pace and rhythm of modern life.” (Lehmann, 2000, p. XII) Thinking about the current context - it can only be described as a *transitory, mobile and fragmentary* environment in which one has to adapt to new lifestyles, in order to keep up with the intense and rapid change.

Clothing and shelter have an instrumental role in this equation and Marshall McLuhan has called them an “extension of the human biological mechanism” (McLuhan & Zingrone, 2006, p. 145) which adjust temperature and lead to comfort or discomfort. The main problem with such a changing context is that it is difficult to discuss about its identity, due to the fact that it’s so fragmented and dislocated. This problem can only lead to an identity crisis, which reflects the social-political crisis. Fashion, as its mirror, becomes even more puzzling and hard to define.

The main aim of this paper is to underline certain layers of social meaning in conceptual fashion. In the contemporary fashion landscape, conceptual projects have been the laboratory for ideas and the incubation for certain directions and perspectives on the clothed body.

Through brilliant and powerful conceptual collections fashion designers can make statements and say something about the “modern life”, about its problems or traumas. The comprehension of such projects requires a transdisciplinary investigation of postmodern clothing. Fashion has always been a domain in which sociological, philosophical, political, cultural approaches have spoken about its contents and contexts. Recent sociological studies of fashion have revealed the deep meanings of conceptual clothing and the interwoven network of thoughts that is the starting point for such intellectual approaches.

“Fashion is at the core of modernity, extending even to science and revolution, because the entire order of modernity, from sex to the media, from art to politics, is infiltrated by this logic” (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 465). Jean Baudrillard in the “Enchanting Spectacle of the Code” underlines the relevance and power of fashion’s philosophy and names it “aesthetics of transgression” (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 465). The transgressive aspects of fashion are explored through conceptual and intellectual projects that highlight certain symptoms of fragmentation and disorder.

Conceptual Fashion and Social Contexts

Conceptual fashion or fashion projects which have solid concepts as starting points are mostly based on layers of social meaning and try to say something new about the body, the articulation of clothing on the body and how it influences the wearer.

“The philosophical concerns of the twentieth century were largely pessimistic, those of alienation and nihilism. Many academics have identified the late twentieth century as a period of cultural drama and anxiety... If alienation produces deracinated modern subjects it also gives them a certain freedom to reinvent themselves” (Evans, 2003, pp. 308-309). Caroline Evans who has constantly and consistently written about the hidden meanings of conceptual fashion is also underlining its capacity of addressing problems specific for the contemporary society: from *political conflicts* to *ideological conflicts* and from *traumas* to *derelection*. This kind of a dark, gloomy and violent area has generated some of the most accomplished conceptual collections conceived by über-designers like: Maison Martin Margiela, Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan or Junya Watanabe.

Japanese avant-garde designers, who have been shaking the fashion system since the early 80s, have an instrumental role in defining fashion's contents and its layers of signification. Rei Kawakubo founder of the label *Comme des Garçons* has been, for more than 30 years, the leading figure of the intellectual paths within the fashion system. Her philosophical studies have been the background for the deeply moving concepts that generate *Comme des Garçons*' directional fashion. Each season she presents collections that are stories about various aspects of the social environment. Being an incredible storyteller, Rei Kawakubo manages to address sensible issues such as: body culture, mental illnesses, refugee crisis, urban agglomeration, imposed isolation, cultural dislocation and traumatic rituals... The revolutionary aspect of these elaborated projects is that they are not just extraordinary volumetric and textural experiments; they have the power to capture and transmit authentic emotions.

It is so difficult to try and create visual metaphors capable of being so brilliant, especially when a designer tries to say something about stringent problems. Many conceptual projects fall flat or become too sterile if the designer is not as talented, visionary and sensible as Kawakubo. Cuts, insertions, decorative elements, cacophonies of shapes, inverted details and strange volumes are some of the elements used in "translating" into cloth the issues which are starting points for the collections. This part of the creative process is very abstract and hard to define and that is why it's so special and rare. Her collections are real protests, yet she always manages to avoid a grotesque interpretation. The characters of her shows are powerful and vulnerable in the same time. Richard Martin, cited by Caroline Evans, has called one of her collections "perturbed beauty" (Evans, 2003, pp. 268-269).

Rei Kawakubo is by far the most influential conceptual designer; her ideas and techniques are highly respected. She has developed a very complex method of speaking, through conceptual items, about modern and postmodern lifestyles and how they change the perception of the body.

"Wearing clothing can also involve repetition that constructs an experience of the familiar and the habitual, an experience captured in the frequently cited but apt metaphor for clothing, 'like a second skin'. An experience of the familiar in clothing can be thought of as a 'habitus', as clothing becomes a space of everyday inhabitation, dwelling and self-

configuration” (Gill, 2007, p. 504). Clothing as ‘habitus’, as Alison Gill calls it, perfectly describes an area of conceptual fashion that is preoccupied with understanding and developing ways in which items can function as an ‘extension of the body’. From Kawakubo’s eerie volumes to Chalayan’s versatile constructs and from Rick Owens protective layers to Craig Green’s utilitarian clothes we can discover a diversity of interpretations of that ‘habitus’. In violent and harsh environments that characterize urban zones, clothes become, metaphorically, protective shields, which remind us of the complex costumes from post-apocalyptic books and movies.

These kind of strange experiences within the urban space speak about “fashion’s complicity in the concrete manufacture of alienation” (Emberley, 1987, p. 41). Julia Emberley underlines the dark contents and meanings of postmodern fashion and raises questions about traumas and psychoanalytical analyses.

When dealing with such issues conceptual designers create garments that are often too theoretical, become too complicated for their own good. Yet it is so important to experiment and to try to analyze, through clothing, the social meanings behind each path.

Conceptual designers have been very sensible to the big problems of contemporary life: financial crisis, the terrible impact of terrorism, constant attacks, massive immigration, and refugee crisis. Survivor kits, nomadism, versatile items, mobile homes, temporary shelters, hi-tech devices, heat transfer surfaces have become part of the conceptual methods of making clothing as ‘habitus’. These are extreme projects, which will be analyzed in the research part of our paper.

A different take to this kind of explorations, but equally powerful, is the complex universe of Miuccia Prada. In her philosophy clothing has strong concepts behind them but do not become conceptual abstract clothes as the ones created by Rei Kawakubo. Her Fall/Winter 2016/2017 menswear and womenswear collections, as always with Prada, were built on layers of symbolism and various references. Refugees, drifters, wonderers, sailors, travellers informed the identity of Prada’s mysterious characters. Some critical voices argued that, within the current European political context, these kinds of references are out of place and not politically correct. The messages of each Prada show spark controversy, but her intellectual and highly creative approach help her to make strong political statements. These collections, with all the social

references, are universal yet personal and in the same time they seem to be immersed in pure emotions.

The examples and projects that we are going to investigate go further than this and transform clothing in abstract shapes that have a strange and fascinating articulation on the body. They manage to tell stories about alienation, disintegration, mobility, and exploration. If they are not able to offer solutions for certain problems, they most definitely raise more questions and awareness.

Research Methods

For the methodological approach of our theoretical exploration of social meaning in conceptual clothing, we have chosen a cultural – based approach. This approach has drawn scholars from history, art history, visual culture and cultural studies, the interdisciplinary journal *Fashion Theory* being the leading publication where this method was consolidated.

As this approach is less focused on materiality, the object of study can be idea, object and image, if not all three at the same time. Typical for this approach is a conflation of the terms fashion and dress to mean something like a cultural constitution of the embodied identity. This is a highly inclusive approach that brings together processes of creative authorship, technological production, and cultural dissemination in an overall focus on cultural representation. (Skov & Melchior, 2009, p. 11)

We shall reference different sources from the fashion industry: written sources such as articles, reviews, visual sources, such as images, and video materials which will offer us an in-depth understanding of the way in which Chalayan and Orta's projects tackle transient contemporary structures. To ensure our research gives these sources weight and credibility, we shall adopt an approach inspired by bricolage methodology:

The researcher-as-bricoleur-theorist works between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms. The product of interpretive bricoleur's labour is a complex, quilt like bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage – a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations. This interpretive structure is like a quilt, a performance

text, a sequence of representations connecting the parts to the whole (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 4).

We will divide our analysis into two categories, one analyses the struggle of the individual to understand his/her identity, lost in the transient structures of a precarious contemporary society, and the other category presents a functional transient structure which offers shelter, but also a contemplative space for the displaced individual. In the first category we will analyse Hussein Chalayan's creative universe, which reflects the aforementioned struggle, and in the second part of our study we will discuss the experimental works of Lucy Orta, which combine architectural structure with textile innovations tackling the social implications of urban reconfigurations and geographical displacements.

Lost in Transition: Space and Identity

Hussein Chalayan is a British fashion designer, born in Cyprus, in 1970. At that time, the newly founded Republic of Cyprus (1960) was still the centre of conflict between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 reconfigured, through military force, the island of Cyprus where the Greek Cypriots from the northern part of the island were expelled to the south and the Turkish Cypriot population from the south was displaced to the north (Pericleous, 2009, p. 201). In such a confusing social and political environment, Hussein Chalayan was born, and even though he left his native country when he was very young, the mixed ethnicity of Cyprus influenced his work. That is why, many of his collections and artistic projects reflect a personal quest of finding out "what we really consist of" (Levin, 2009).

In probably his most referenced collection, *Afterwords*, Hussein Chalayan, designed a wearable solution for a context in which people are forced to evacuate their home during a time of war by using clothing as a mean to take their possessions with them. Presented at Sadler's Wells theatre in London, and combined with his Autumn/Winter Women's Collection of 2000, the show fused performance with fashion show on a white stage, delimited by asymmetrical walls, and a set of furniture covered in grey textile. The models that appeared on the stage used the grey textiles that covered the pieces of furniture and transformed them into versatile pieces of clothing, they folded the chairs, which turned into suitcases, and one of the models transformed a mahogany coffee table

into a geometrical and telescopic skirt. From a practical point of view, clothes function as a protection against the harshness of the environment in which the individual exists. Contemporary clothing, more than ever reflects changes in our environment and in our society. Thus, fashion designers, such as Chalayan, are rethinking the clothing's potential to address the needs of modern individuals and their dynamic and ever-changing spaces that they inhabit. Such a process expresses complex and provocative issues surrounding notions of identity. "Like the home, the body is the ultimate device that the modern individual uses to overcome risks, providing a protective, safe territory that belongs to the self" (Kipoz, 2007, p. 4). But besides the biological shelter that is the body, there is a psychological shelter, where all the memories that define us are deposited. Those memories are closely linked to our home, and our physical belongings. If we are forced to leave these material structures, it is not only the mind which feels dislocated, but it is also our body that feels exposed. *Afterwords* is Chalayan's introspective inquiry into his past. As an immigrant himself, he understands that a loss of private space means also an identity loss, so he designs his clothes as portable items which can be taken by the immigrants on their journey, becoming palpable reminders of whom they were, helping them figure out who they are now. The immigrant, a passive observer, and collateral victim of the system, has the opportunity to intervene, and save his own identity and belongings from a precarious social context.

With the home space, as architectural structure, transformed into conceptual clothing, the immigrant arrives in a new place where he/she is treated as an outsider, and implicitly, as a threat to the social and cultural structures of that place. In his art project entitled *The Absent Presence* (2005), Chalayan challenges the stereotypes against the "other" by using clothes as "providers" of true identity through DNA. The short fashion film, starring Tilda Swinton, was presented at the 51st Venice Biennale where the designer represented Turkey. *The Absent Presence* is an enigmatic story based on identity, geography, genetics, biology and anthropology. Chalayan opens the argument on how certain identities can or cannot adapt to new environments and generates a research based on narration for his cross – disciplined installation with filmic images and sculptures (Chalayan, 2005). These ideas are represented in the video through the perspective of a scientist, played by Tilda Swinton in what seems to be a dystopian future United Kingdom. The experiment

conducted by her character consists of the scanning of a DNA sample collected from the clothing items of three immigrant females living in London. After extracting the DNA, the biologist computes a series of hypotheses about the appearance, the social characteristics of the subjects, the way in which they interact with different environments. Exposed to a very futuristic process of analysis, the visual end result of the experiment consisted of sculpture – like 3D replicas of their original clothes. The result is something abstract that manages to raise doubt in the biologist's mind, as she ends up questioning her own experiment. The three immigrants are represented by three feminine figures whose physical traits reveal their genetically diverse background, their presence emanates warmth, and their inner feelings of puzzlement and surprise that they experience throughout the experiment, can be read on their facial expressions. The biologist, on the other hand, is expressionless, detached; her actions are as mechanical as the entire process of the experiment. Her physical traits bare all the characteristics of a pure race. The clinical environment in which the biological experiment takes place is Chalayan's critique on society's approach to immigrants. Instead of trying to understand them on a human level, the inhabitants of a society which proclaimed itself as being superior, develops an almost pathological fear towards the "otherness", and continuously tries to cure it. Ane Lyng-Jorlén, in her article entitled *Shameless Trespassing*, discusses the concept of "Other" stating that it is fundamental to the constitution of the self, and that one gains a concept of self through difference from others (Lyng-Jorlén, 2015). This is why Chalayan presented us the scientist's dilemma at the end of his short movie who, faced with the results of the experiment, questions her methods, and even her own identity, contemplating the possibility of reassessing her position towards the otherness.

Premiered in 2003, at the Pitti Immagine Uomo, *Temporal Meditations* is a short film, wrote and directed by the designer, as an alternative for a runway show, although he later used this video as background for his 2004 Spring/Summer collection. Due to a lack of visual support, we did not have access to the fashion film, but we relied on photographic and textual support provided by the online platform affiliated with Pitti Immagine Uomo, and we also focused on the ready to wear collection, which materialized, through garments, the narrative of the fashion film. The reason why, despite this technical impediment,

we chose this particular project is for its interesting rendering of the transient structures that are the main focus of our paper. The short film takes place in an airport, which can be identified as a heterotopia. As described by Michel Foucault, a heterotopia is a place outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate its location in reality (Foucault, 1967). From the point of view of social sciences, these are spaces of otherness, and Chalayan places his narrative in such a space due to its implications on the identity of his characters. In such a space, the anonymity of the individual prevails, social relations are blurred. But even so, when the characters from the short movie arrive at the customs office, they need to undergo a biological search. While working on this collection, Chalayan also collaborated with a genetic anthropologist who performed a DNA test on him and helped him trace not only his own genetic make-up, but also that of the different ethnic groups that inhabit the island of Cyprus (Robert, 2011, pp. 16-19). Thus the entire collection and the fashion film reflect the designer's personal struggle to find his roots. The airport where the characters meet is a place governed by otherness that the immigrant, preoccupied with the loss of his /her identity in his/her travels through different places wonders, as the designer does, about who they are, and whether their connections to geography and their definitions of identity are as set as they think they are (Robert, 2011, pp. 16-19). All of this anthropological meditation is disrupted on the catwalk equivalent of the *Temporal Meditations* fashion film: "And when it came to the girly summer-holiday dresses, with their ruffled peplums or stiff frills curling around the neckline, it paid to zoom in on exactly what was going on in that cherry "Hawaiian" print. Mixed up in the pattern is an ancient battle, fought around a modern-day hotel swimming pool, with a plane in the background" (Mower, 2003). The political and social undertone of Chalayan's discourse on identity is always present.

Sheltered on the Road

Lucy Orta is a former British knitwear designer who, since 1991 has begun practicing as a visual artist, together with her partner, Jorge Orta with whom she founded Studio Orta. Through their projects, they aim to provoke a social reaction to such contemporary issues as forced migration, homelessness, exclusion, social decay, oppression, fragmentation. Although the three projects that we will be discussing

next are attributed only to Lucy Orta, we chose to present them in the abstract of our paper as part of the collaboration between her and her husband, since one of the founding element of her body of work is the importance of collaboration in any type of endeavour.

When you're on a road you were forced to travel, what you need is: a shelter for your body, a shelter for yourself, and the possibility to communicate and connect with the other. If Chalayan analysed the journey through the eyes of the traveller/emigrant, Orta analyses such dislocating journeys from a more detached point of view, a researcher's view, and offers solutions through her conceptual installations that, beyond their ideological purpose, can function as real and practical objects, as temporary shelters.

Refugee Wear is Orta's first body of work, and was produced as a response to the Gulf War. The pieces that constitute her project are designed to provoke awareness of certain issues in society. They are designed in such a way that they work on many different levels "on a poetical level, on a metaphorical level, and on the level of social awareness" (Quinn, 2002, pp. 19-26). Lucy Orta is interested in the protective power of clothing, and the way it functions as intermediary layer between the individual and society. The form of the *Refugee Wear* pieces offers the wearer's body enough space for it to feel protected, but not claustrophobic. Thus, she used "a combination of microporous Rip Stop with a PU-coated polyamide which protects against abrasion during mobility" (Orta, 2011, p. 9). Some of the pieces from the *Refugee* series also incorporate carbon armatures that raise the fabric above the chest to eliminate the effects of claustrophobia (Orta, 2011, p. 9). The pieces of conceptual clothing have multiple purposes; they can function as weatherproof clothing, and they can easily be transformed into tent – like temporary shelters. Due to their proximity to the wearer's body, they can also create a personal environment, and to give their inhabitants some sense of privacy. They function as shelter and protective surface against the harshness of the outside world, but the space inside is a symbolic expression of intimate dwelling.

Whereas the concept of *Refugee Wear* is built around the body, and highlights the issue of social exclusion, in the case of *Nexus Architecture* Lucy Orta expands her artistic practice from the microcosm of the individual to the macrocosm of the community, from multifunctional clothing to modular textile architectural structures.

Focusing on a more symbolic level, than the functional *Refugee Wear*, *Nexus Architecture* takes its name from “Nexus”, meaning a link, or a tie. It encourages participation and collective activity. The basic form of *Nexus Architecture* is a worker’s overall. This form suggests uniform/uniformity and membership of a group. “It provides a shelter against individualism and reinforces the strength of the collective. To form part of a group is to feel empowered” (Bolton, 2001, p. 5), declares Orta in an interview conducted by Andrew Bolton. Throughout this project, conceptual clothes are used to convey powerful social statements of human connection that creates momentary collectives, questioning interdependence by being part of it. The individual pieces of clothing that constitute the *Nexus Architecture* project are intentionally chosen to resemble utilitarian clothing, so that the participants in Orta’s “social sculpture”, discarded from any visual affiliations to gender, social status, age, or aesthetical preferences, can be a part of an experimental social structure, transient due to its nature of performance. With this project, Orta also managed to organise public interventions, and participate in international events, such as the Venice Biennale in 1995, where she used the surface fabrics of the *Nexus* clothing to inscribe them with newspaper headlines reporting the genocide in Rwanda. Or in 2000, she intervened in the initially linear structure of the *Nexus Architecture* and transformed it into a crisscross of connections resembling the molecular structure of atoms. The end result was a clothing installation consisting of several hundred suites, which conveyed a powerful message against children manufacturing plants (Orta, 2011, p. 28).

Modular Architecture combines the protective functions of the *Refugee Wear* with the interdependency and community oriented *Nexus Architecture* project. It consists of temporary, portable shelters composed of individual sections that can be combined in different ways. Its main purpose is that of protective clothing. The *Modular Architecture* is based on multiple of fours, where groups of four individual units combine to become one single construction (Quinn, 2002, pp. 19-26). Every garment can be separated from the others, and can be worn and personalized by each person. Orta’s exploration of individual survival in solitude, as well as within a community, and the individual’s ability to attach and detach himself/herself from those communities was inspired by the cultural and social views of Paul Virilio. “The precarious nature of society is no longer that of the unemployed or the abandoned, but of that of

individuals socially alone” (Orta, 2011). In response to the dislocation of individuals from social structures, Orta uses conceptual clothing as means of connecting the individual with others. Orta’s projects and interventions make strong statements about clothing, humanity, individuality and communality by rethinking the traditional urban spaces and offering an alternative to the precarious nature of our present social surrounding by developing transient shelters.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore, through a transdisciplinary approach, the creative universe of leading conceptual fashion designers. All the mentioned designers are storytellers capable of saying something new about the complex relations between the body, the clothed body, and the identity of the wearer and the purpose of the clothing. In the current socio-political context such investigations are more than relevant because they speak about the hidden meanings behind conceptual garments. The fascinating part is how these “transient structures” function as a ‘habitus’ a kind of temporary home. Scholars have analyzed this kind of function and they concluded that it is a new kind of urban configuration, a temporary one, adapted to the new environment which is subjected to violence. Bradley Quinn or Caroline Evans has spoken about the nomadic and mobile aspects of these metaphoric structures and their psychoanalytical implications on the individuals that are confronted with dramatic situations.

Within the postmodern environment these conceptual approaches are more than relevant and influential. Their impact is visible not only in the fashion-art projects but even on the ready-to-wear clothing. Deeply meaningful clothes will always generate debate and will raise questions and awareness. Conceptual designers have the incredibly difficult task of addressing aforesaid issue and to find clever ways in which they can make socio-political statements, without sliding towards the sterile or the grotesque.

Writing this paper was a complex experience and we shall continue our research and try to find the new and exciting perspective on ‘transient structures’ with all their hidden layers of social meaning.

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Biodata



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