



Beyond Wearable Art

Barbara Trout, University of Nebraska, USA

Design, experimental, research

A recent article by Jeff Selingo for “Linked In” calls upon college students to become more adept at risk taking in their college courses. He believes that little risk taking occurs on the job today because students are not called upon to do this in classes. This idea seems to support the idea of challenging students to do highly creative, risk taking work in the apparel design arena. Some might approach this challenge as encouraging the development of wearable art, a combination of clothing and fiber art as suggested by Phyllis Tortora. Others such as Susan Summa might suggest work in avant garde design calling this an area where apparel is developed by the most forward thinking designers. She describes this as using contemporary materials in contemporary ways or non-conventional materials in both contemporary and traditional ways. These are interesting distinctions that call for risk taking. In my classes I tend to place the focus on process and use the term experimental apparel design. Directing students in experimental design I encourage in the creative process to generate new approaches to apparel design and to understand how difficult this is to accomplish posing the question “what really, if anything, is new?”. It is important for students to gain awareness in experimenting with body coverings and to discover the real value of making visual statements on the body. Critical to engaging in this process is an awareness of what has been done before in the area of the avant garde or experimental design. Often I have had students or even active designers really believe they are the first to have invented a dress made out of neck ties or a shell made out of pop can tops. To know what has been done before, and to discover what really are new directions students must delve into the history of experimental apparel design. They need to know who these designers/artists were and why they pursued this end. Do we need to go back to Janet Lipkin’s crochet movement of the seventies, or Pat Oleszko’s political costume statements of the late seventies? Is the material the message that should be emphasized as in Gaza Bowen’s object shoes or Cat Chow’s currency dress? The last fifty years provide a plethora of designers to study yet this could require a course in history of experimental dress.

This investigation needs to occur within a single design class. And a class where I sometimes hear comments like, “why do we spend time on this outrageous stuff, it won’t sell?”. The solution is a research based design class where one studies seminal experimental work, learns about the career paths of designers who have pursued this strategy. Students research and share designs, philosophies and careers of established designers who have reputations for being highly risk taking in their work. They may have been focused on the development of high craft as Gaza Amer in her embroidered dresses or they may have focused on a stand alone piece to deliver a message such as Andy Warhol’s paper soup can dress. Some, such as Garath Pugh succeeded with a postmodern direction using black and white graphic uniforms topped with ruffs. Some were driven to pursue this work for exhibitions,

stage costuming, performance art, film or earning distinction from the fashion press. Career paths and derivative work are important topics that enter into the discussions. Designers the Rodarte sisters, Nicolas Ghesquire were highly experimental at early stages and this launched their careers. Students should note that these career paths contain both successes and failures. Also when looking at these designers one can examine derivations and links that exist to connect peoples work from the 90s to that of the 60s. Topics such as copying can be addressed. Analyzing work from the 60s, 70s, 80s and the turn of the 21st century can be daunting. How does one single out who to examine when time is limited.

One approach is to set course strategies early and begin student research immediately. Channel research efforts to process and direction rather than specific designers. Once the direction is set students search for designers whose work matches that area. For example, the approach could be experimenting with volume (the final student design outcome will be based on this); the students then seek out designers who experimented with volume in their work. For variety in the class I use five major concepts to build from: technique, directional approach, art movements, materials and historical interpretations. Focus on technique works well. I identify a technique such as quilting that was used by many designers in the past. Students define the technique and the functions connected to the technique and investigate designers who relied on quilting to inform their work. Crochet, piece work, embroidery also work, the only stipulation is that the work needed to be in apparel and the outcomes defined as cutting edge or avant garde for that time. Types of art work or art movements can be used as an approach such as deconstructionism, surrealism, pointillism or assemblage. The research task is about the hunt, the in depth investigation as to materials, techniques and methods of these designers. A distinct visual approach can be used to establish direction such as a linear approach to the body defined by either an additive or subtractive design techniques. Lace making, crochet could fall into this category or even Helmet Lang's work with bandages. Those who work with leather cutouts or laser work could provide examples of the subtractive method. A material approach can be taken such as transparency. Only transparent fabrics will be used in the project and the research is to find designers who focused on transparency in their work. In this area students researched couture designer Yves Saint Laurent in the period when he advocated see through dresses to expand women's freedom. Materials, meaning and function were part of the discussion. Moving to new methods with transparent cloth some studied Francisco Costa and his method of overlapping pieces of cloth that resulted in translucent garments. Books such as Melissa Leventon's *Artwear Fashion and Anti-fashion*, Caroline Evan's *Fashion at the Edge* or a book on Surrealism in Fashion by Richard Martin can be used as a starting point.. Students share power point presentations of findings with outlines, a bibliography and many You tube videos, blogs and websites. The quest for new work begins with an idea of how earlier designers created a foundation. Relevance of experimental work for career building is established. Students can discuss avante garde work in informed ways and form opinions on new work.

Leventon, Melissa. 2005. *Artwear fashion and anti-fashion*. New York : Thames and Hudson.