



**mistra
future
fashion**

Black Hack Chat (April 2013) Rebecca Earley¹ and Jen Ballie²

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Introduction

This workshop was part of the design research by TED for MISTRA Future Fashion, a Swedish consortium concerned with creating sustainable, systemic and profitable change for the fashion industry. When organisations put design at the heart of product and service development, they are triggered to ask the fundamental question about what they make, how they make it, and who for (Thackara, 2008). The approaches included within TED's TEN (Earley & Politowicz, 2010) promote design thinking and demonstrate how textile designers can play a more strategic role to instigate social and environmental change. The workshop combines 3 of the 10 by applying design to replace the need to consume in order to 'upcycle' discarded garments (Earley, 2009). Design activism influenced the agency within this workshop and combined insights from two existing projects 'Black Hack' (Earley, 2012) and 'Old is the New Black' (von Busch & Ballie, 2011).

The 'Black Hack Chat' (BHC) explored a new role for the professional textile designer (the authors), which enabled them to exchange their skills and experience through facilitation of this design intervention. The aim was to push the boundaries of textile design practice through co-design to identify how it can be used as a tool for citizen engagement.

Pre Workshop

The textile techniques within this workshop addressed the need for designers to aid consumers and retailers in recycling polyester, which is the most recyclable of fibres (Mutha et al, 2012), yet as the largest volume of fibre globally produced – representing 80% of the global chemical fibre output - it is the most common type to be found in landfilled clothing (Aizenshtein, 2012; Dawson, 2012).

In the run up to the Black Hack Chat workshop Earley filmed a how-to guide, demonstrating the transformation of a shirt within three minutes using a domestic iron, scissors, and black transfer paper. 'Shirt Film' (2013) was published online for people who wanted to take part in the EAD workshop session, wherever they might be located. Social media - mainly Pinterest and Twitter - was integrated to curate inspirational content, promote agency and support consumer participation.

Workshop

Through transformation methods the workshop focused on overprinting discarded clothing to offer new modes of collective agency. The participants operated as design activists – for themselves as individual consumers and as customers to a producer - and were provided with the necessary tools and methods to transform a garment in a short space of time.

The participants were firstly invited to select a polyester shirt from a selection the researchers had sourced from UK charity shops. Then they sat in pairs at tables – most sitting with participants that they had not met before. Von Busch and Ballie – along with Earley on a Skype screen - briefly introduced the workshop. The 'Shirt Film' was shown to help the participants visualize and understand the process they were being asked to engage with. The pairs were asked to work collaboratively to transform each shirt.

Post Workshop & Outcomes

During the making process a series of provocations sparked debate from both perspectives of the retailer and consumer, this was captured, along with the redesigned items, in the workshop space: photographs; video interviews; screen capture via the Skype conversation; and post-it note ideas all captured the experience and the discourse. The event was filmed and the team documented the discourse and the making with the participants. Participants published updates on the outcomes of the session on Twitter during the day (#blackhackchat).

Workshop insights for the researchers to take forward also stemmed from the post-it note comments wall, which suggested that retailers could:

- Release patterns every year for consumers to over print with
- Design shirt prints at the outset to gradually become blacker through 'updating'
- Run competitions for the best over print design
- Sell 'Print Your Own' kits – for celebrations and events like hen parties
- Provide over-print toolkits for consumers, sold with garments and separately

Consumers could:

- Host BHC parties for their friends within their own home
- Use existing garments within their wardrobes as stencils to create new variations
- Contribute to an online gallery or social network
- Recreate on trend patterns and styles to update garments within their existing wardrobe

Working with ready-mades, the old shirts; the dry transfer process (where no further fixing is required); and domestic irons meant that the garments were quickly adapted and immediately wearable. This seemed to add a level of engagement from the participants that perhaps had not been found in previous workshops by the authors.

Future Direction

The professional textile designer embodies a varied skill set through their tacit knowledge and understanding of materials, techniques and processes. Within every textile designer there is a specialised skill set, this workshop preparation, design and delivery demonstrates the value of exchanging skills from the designers' personal toolbox to develop an alternative way of working. 'Black Hack Chat' explored how a selection of skills traditionally embodied within the textile designer might be exchanged to demonstrate a new mode of material engagement for the fashion consumer and industry.

To support outside intervention through textile design, we need to develop a deeper understanding of the consumer 'sweet spot' being the optimum point or combinations of factors and qualities for promoting engagement. It is possible that we are not fully satisfied with fashion because we have not set the right social structure to engage with our clothing (Jackson, 2009). This could be especially valuable within the use-phase of a garment lifecycle to support longer-term engagement. The consumer is supported only to the point of purchase with no infrastructure to support garment care, repair, alteration or even adaptation and transformation.

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Finally, for retailers, the volume of polyester in their ranges demand that they invest in how this resource can be reused time and time again. New technically driven recycling processes are being trialed (Worn Again, 2013), but it could also be that their customers can contribute to this extended lifespan in a way that brings multiple, 'lo-fi' benefits, "It actually makes polyester more attractive again... This makes it much more interesting" (Diaz & Vuletich, 2013).



Image: Earley (2013) Top Right; Ballie (2013) Selection of Images from the Black Hack Workshop

Author's Online Links

Ballie, J. and von Busch, O (2011) *Old is the New Black*, www.oldisthenewblack.tumblr.com
Ballie, J. (2013) Black Hack Chat Digital mood board, <http://www.pinterest.com/jenballie/black-hack-chat-blackhackchat/>
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