

Learning through Disruptive Interactions

Circe Henestrosa^a, Harah Chon^b

^aSchool of Fashion, LASALLE College of the Arts

^bSchool of Design Communication, LASALLE College of the Arts

*Corresponding author e-mail: circe.henestrosa@lasalle.edu.sg

Abstract: Fashion education has evolved to meet the changing needs of the industry and train creative individuals to become effective storytellers, image-makers, curators and producers. The role of fashion is becoming an increasingly important medium to communicate unique narratives, develop ways of portraying, reimagine museum and retail spaces, and explore innovative ideas, processes and business solutions. This paper examines the unique positioning of fashion education in Southeast Asia and the significance of redefining the impact of fashion through experiences of disruption, displacement and discomfort. As the field of fashion continues to extend into neighbouring disciplines of design and related industries, the student learning experience needs to respond with rigorous enquiries that confront existing notions of fashion as both a system and means for innovation. The case-studies included in this paper reconcile the challenges of developing an Asian design language in Southeast Asia against a retail landscape dominated by Western fashion.

Keywords: Fashion Curriculum, Future of Fashion, Disruptive Learning, Fashion Curation

1. Introduction

The past decade has witnessed various shifts in fashion from the rise of retail empires such as H&M, ZARA and Uniqlo producing collaborations with designer brands such as Karl Lagerfeld, Balenciaga and Lemaire to fashion exhibitions being shown in museum spaces and the use of social media to communicate fashion and identity in its maximum splendour. In response, the industry is changing and so are its consumers. This material avalanche has over-satisfied consumers' needs to reshape consumer psychology and the relationship to design (Faerm, 2012). According to Pink (2005):

“Material abundance has made designers realise that the only way to differentiate their products in today's overstocked marketplace, is to make their offerings aesthetically appealing and emotionally compelling.”

In order to create products that resonate emotionally with their targeted audiences, designers must become empathisers, pattern recognisers and meaning-makers (Pink 2005). While the creative economy demands designers to respond and engage with social, environmental and sustainability

issues, educational institutions are desperately attempting to re-invent their fashion programmes by providing students with curricula that allow opportunities to experiment, explore and contemplate the role of design and the positioning of designers as agents of change.

This paper discusses the fashion programmes at LASALLE College of the Arts through a series of strategic projects to break existing pedagogical frameworks of fashion education. The following areas underpin the design of the flexible curriculum: fashion theory leading into practice, multi-disciplinary research and collaborations between students and lecturers, and strong links to the local industry. Through a review of case-studies, this paper will address how fashion education can lead through innovative models for thinking while inherently responding to the changing landscape of design.

Herbert Blumer (1969) studied social interactions formed by the fashion system to conclude that fashion, as a cyclical network, exists because of the actors involved – innovators, leaders, followers and participants. Fashion conceptualises the symbolic values of material culture (Crane & Bovone, 2006) within a circular process of social interaction as an indication for the present (Nedelmann, 1990). However, students in Singapore and the neighbouring region of Southeast Asia readily accept the general perception that fashion is an imported concept that can only be locally interpreted. In response to this misaligned positioning of the role of fashion within the local context, students struggle to identify the relationship between meaning and meaningfulness within the creative process of design. This has produced the following questions, leading to the design of the following case-study examples:

1. How can we encourage students to begin imagining the possibilities of what fashion could mean against the Southeast Asian context?
2. How do we train them to become “agents of change” (Faern, 2012) who are environmentally responsible, socially conscious, and theoretically and technically knowledgeable?
3. How do we teach students to articulate and translate their creative perspectives into a unique design language?

2. Background & Context

The fashion programmes at LASALLE College of the Arts position fashion as a “cultural phenomenon in a social and historical context” (Skjold, 2008). Through this approach, students are able to contextualise and translate socio-historical progression and theory into contemporary fashion outcomes. We develop our students’ abilities to observe, analyse and evaluate objects of material culture through different lenses, in order to further interpret these objects within coherent and unique narratives that communicate to wider audiences. Against the fast-changing nature of fashion, the experiential process of design is emphasised to ensure that students learn to slow down and appreciate the local conditions within which they exist. Research and practice converge to give precedence to the value of the design process.

Table 1. Example of Case-Studies

Repositioning the Role of Design within a Local Context			
THEME	PROJECT TITLE	DESCRIPTION	OBJECTIVE
Tracing	<i>Tales from the Wardrobe</i>	Examining the past to understand the present	Developing strong <i>narratives in fashion</i>
Upcycling	<i>UNSEEN: Vintage Redefined</i>	Appreciating the materiality of things	Understanding the <i>ephemeral nature of fashion</i>
Translating	<i>Shanghai 3.0</i>	“Easternising” the West	Building an <i>Asian language of fashion</i>
Reinterpreting	<i>Kimono Intangible</i>	Transferring intangible culture	Extracting the <i>knowledge of fashion</i>

Singapore is a culturally diverse environment that attracts an international, multiethnic student body. Taking into consideration this unique positioning of Singapore, it was imperative that the educational approaches not follow the more established Western examples but cultivate a learning environment beginning with an appreciation for the local history, culture and creative economy. By establishing new narratives and perspectives for communicating the language of fashion, a series of projects and collaborations were designed to foster a multidisciplinary environment. The projects explore themes of Tracing, Upcycling, Translating and Reinterpreting.

“Tales from the Wardrobe”

Tracing back into local Singaporean history, students were given the task to create window displays to fulfill the studio and visual merchandising component. The brief consisted of retelling an aspect of Singapore’s history through the visual display of fashion and dress. Students engaged in historical research to accumulate facts, information and memories to imagine and contextualise a Singaporean wardrobe from the past. Each window display acted as a vignette or snapshot into the past, creating strong visual narratives of how objects and the particular grouping of objects communicate meaning and significance.



Figure 1. *Tales from the Wardrobe*

“UNSEEN: Vintage Redefined”

This project was devised in response to issues of sustainability affecting the system of fashion. Fashion perpetuates a vast amount of wastage, not only in consumption, but throughout all stages of its development. Furthermore, the appreciation for vintage fashion is a Western concept that does not necessarily appeal to Asian consumer culture. This project focused on taking vintage items or articles and redesigning them into new fashion objects in an upcycling exercise. To display the temporality of fashion, the objects were showcased at a pop-up exhibition for a single evening. The ephemeral element was introduced to reinforce the nature of time that governs the immediate and instant gratification of fashion.



Figure 2. UNSEEN: Vintage Redefined

“Shanghai 3.0”

Due to the effects of globalisation, fashion is often equated as being a Western influence to be applied as an inspiration for Asian design. To break this pattern of thinking and producing, this project looked at Asian design elements that could be applied to contemporary fashion norms. 1930s Shanghai was looked at as an historical example of a rich, diverse mixing of cultures. The objectives of the project were to translate traditional to contemporary using an Asian eye for colour, materials, silhouettes, shapes and gestures to develop an Asian language of fashion.



Figure 3. Shanghai 3.0

“Kimono intangible”

This project revisited the notion of vintage but within the specific context of Japanese kimonos. Students examined surviving garments and the values that could be transferred through the materiality of pure form, embodied by the vintage kimonos, to reinterpret traditional knowledge into

a contemporary outcome. The project was process-oriented, requiring students to deconstruct the original kimonos in order for them to be reconstructed with new meanings, applications and knowledge. Students were able to undergo the loss of meaning, while physically unpicking the seams of the original kimonos, and reassign new significance when reconstructing and reviving the materials into a new form.

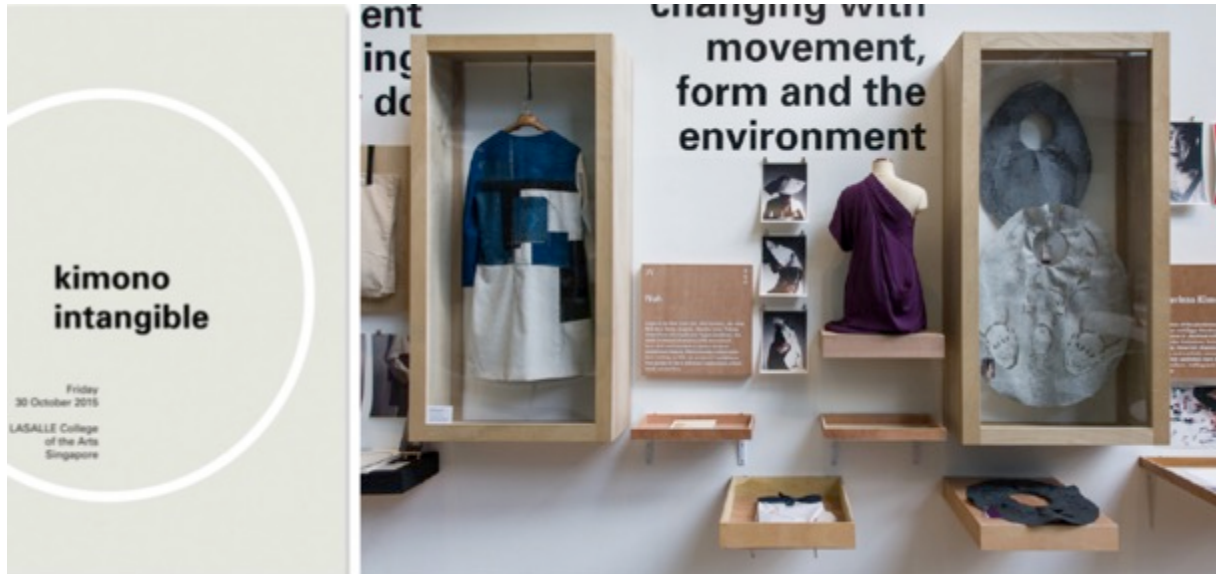


Figure 4. *Kimono Intangible*

3. Introducing Disruptive Learning

The fashion curriculum has always focused on specialist knowledge and skills, yet there is a shift in the current fashion industry requiring a broader and more versatile knowledge base. Each of the former projects was instrumental in breaking down misconceptions and predisposed understandings that fashion must always follow a set of norms set by global industry standards and institutions, innovative leaders and the media. A need was quickly identified to allow students the experience of assuming more control and responsibility over their learning experiences, by breaking with the traditional model of fashion education. Instead, a new framework of research was introduced to disrupt student learning and reinstate the importance of research-led practice.

A new project, 1°17'N – the White Shirt, was established to take students through a journey of discomfort, displacement and disruption. This project focused on the geographical location of Singapore, using the natural climate to set the main parameters of research. Singapore is located 1°17'N from the equator, resulting in a condition of “eternal summer” where seasons are largely absent and daylight patterns are very specific. Within this regional focus, a sustainable design agenda was introduced and students were able to challenge existing fashion norms through collaborative approaches in design. Students from varying disciplines of Fashion (Womenswear, Menswear, Textiles, Creative Pattern Cutting, Media, Industries) explored the possibility of fashion without seasons through their different research interests.

Students were invited to establish and generate different design outcomes, by means of dialogue between disciplines and experiences, through new visual and interdisciplinary approaches. These explorations reviewed the weather conditions of Singapore in relation to relevant issues to produce collective bodies of work. Fashion relies on seasonal shifts, perpetuating the need to continually innovate and drive market competition. However, this project placed students within strict boundaries to design without the conventional understanding of seasons and reimagine how fashion

could break away from global trends by cultivating a language unique to the physical constraints set by climate and weather.

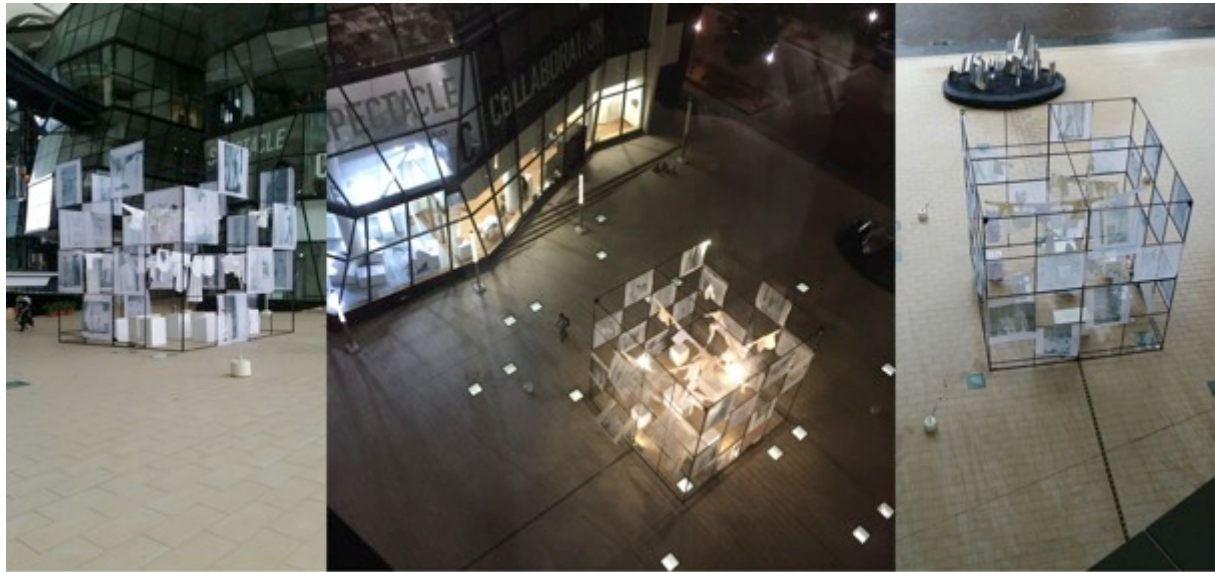


Figure 5. The White Shirt

The project culminated with an exhibition showcasing the research outcomes through either physical and/or virtual spaces. This disruptive approach to interactive learning imposed uncertainty upon the students, as they were confronted by many unknown variables, but the outcomes suggest that they were better equipped to apply theory to practice through an emphasis on research. The open nature of the new curriculum allowed students to develop new ways of thinking and interacting to frame complex design problems into viable solutions.

Table 2. Pedagogical Approach

How do we REDO Design?		
RESEARCH	INTO	PRACTICE
<i>Method</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Articulation</i>
Exegesis	Discomfort	Temporality & Ephemera
Hermeneutics	Displacement	Interpretation & Meanings
Knowledge	Disruption	Interventions & Innovations

Table 2. provides a framework for how each of the projects have incrementally introduced students to research-led practice through modes of discomfort, displacement and disruption. As students are presented with new project briefs, they are immediately challenged with the discomfort of exploring the unknown through uncertain methods of enquiry. This is a necessary precondition of the design process, as it reiterates the importance of time within individual experience and the fashion cycle. Exegetic approaches to research provide a foundation and historical understanding of how to situate design practice against present conditions. The hermeneutic approach, requiring a state of displacement in which the researcher is relieved of all fixed truths, allows for new interpretations to be established by forming significant meanings. Finally, the search for knowledge requires a state of disruption through which interventions and innovations are made possible. Disruptive learning is discussed through the 1°17'N project, which reviews how a physical disruption fosters disruptive thinking to produce new knowledge for breaking down existing barriers and imagining future interventions for design.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shared how fashion programmes in Singapore and the larger Asia region can remain current and updated through more flexible pedagogical models. As demonstrated through the discussion of the case-studies, providing students with multidisciplinary environments and collaborative research projects produces more independent thinkers and influencers of design. The pedagogical approach provides a framework that can be applied across all disciplines of design, to bring the importance of research to the forefront of design practice as a means for producing new knowledge, interventions and innovations.

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About the Authors:

Circe Henestrosa is a curator based in Singapore. She curated the exhibition *Appearances Can Be Deceiving: The Dresses of Frida Kahlo* and co-wrote and co-edited the book *Frida* by Ishiuchi published by Editorial RM in 2013. She currently is the Head of Fashion at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore and has presented research papers on *Collections, Fashion Curating, and the Rise of Fashion Exhibitions* in museums across Mexico, South Korea, and Singapore.

Dr. Harah Chon is a fashion designer, design researcher and lecturer. She is currently Designer in Residence at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore. Her research interests include design theory and philosophy, specifically within the study of design epistemologies.