Digital Configurations, Physical Intersections

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DESCRIPTION

This proposed 60-minute workshop will take small groups of participants through some simple tasks using different digital tools for fashion in artificial intelligence image generation tool Midjourney and prefabricated Snapchat augmented reality filters, while prompting critical discussion into consequences of technology use for future fashion practice across the utopian-dystopian divide.

AIMS

The aim of this workshop is to examine the conference theme of ”Forming Futures” with a specific focus on emerging digital technologies such as artificial intelligence AI, and augmented reality (AR), which offer alternative approaches for design and wearing, amongst a cohort of fashion educators, academics, professionals, students etc. attending the Forming Futures IFFTI who have a strong stake in and position in the future on the fashion industry. Bringing my experience of these technologies within my own creative practice, this proposed one-hour workshop will take small groups of participants through some simple tasks using AI image generation and AR fashion filters, while prompting critical discussion into consequences of technology use for future fashion practice across the utopian-dystopian divide.

Workshop Plan

Activity	**Interaction Configuration**	**Time Allowance**
Self-introduction/ Introduction to Practice	Workshop leader to participants, whole room configuration	10
Demonstration of practice tasks using AI	Workshop leader to participants, whole room configuration	10
Practice time	Participants in small groups, workshop leader monitoring and guiding	20
Presentation of results and discussion of discussion prompts	Participants share results and thoughts	20

Participants will be invited to engage with one or more of the following discussion prompts after being demonstrated and having an opportunity to practice simple tasks in AI.

Prompt 1:
Infinite Wants, Finite Resources. To what extent do we become more sustainable and to what extent do we merely feed the beast of spiritual deficit with newfound digital efficiencies?

Corresponding Activity: Participants reflect on the wider fashion industry context and share views in pairs, small groups or with the whole room.

Research Context: In economic theory of scarcity and choice, humans are posited as living in an environment of infinite wants and limited resources (Robbins, 1932), hence the need for a system of resource distribution that is efficient and effective. In the global fashion system, desires for increased fashion consumption and waste have become particularly relevant to the current climate crisis, fueling questions around how human desires expressed through fashion can be satisfied sustainably.

Within this complex landscape comprising of small-scale makers, luxury conglomerates, fast fashion companies which are becoming economically powerful, a scene of fading haute couture skills and so on, innovative solutions become ever more pressing. The digital fashion experience, as it has emerged through practitioners such as the Fabricant and their VR dresses, Dress X and AR fashion filters, and Nick Knight's Ikon 1 NFT fashion image series, as well as Roblox outfits for avatars and Nike/RTFKTs phygital sneakers, has been touted as a way to be economically sustainable and environmentally conservative, without relying as heavily on physical production using raw materials and saving carbon miles by avoiding international shipping procedures common in physical supply chains.

What's more, without gravitational and other earthly physics constraints in the digital space, almost anything becomes possible, which is creatively alluring and spells obvious benefits for the expansion of fashion into digital materialities (Bennett, 2010).

However, the rapid ideation capabilities of digital programs like AI Midjourney and CLO3D, bring themes of speed and time into traditional fashion production workflows, which begs the question of scale and balance in fashion production and consumption. In the search for an ultimate picture of sustainable equilibrium, what would that even look like?

Prompt 2
Seaming the seamless: Seamlessness in a digital space, naivete within artificial intelligence and the blurring of boundaries between skin and cloth, object and space.

Corresponding Activity: Participants will be shown how to blend two disparate images together in Midjourney, then are given time to practice in small groups, selecting two images, uploading them and generating a blended set of four images. From there, the groups will be asked to analyze and select which image was the 'best' and why, reflecting on the process of curation and meaning making.

Research Context/Rationale: The concept of fashion as a situated and embodied experience (Entwistle, 2015) has extended fashion thinking beyond the mere physical garment. Lines blur even further when artificial intelligence tries to compose a fashion image without any intuitive knowledge of a physical sensory environment. From my experiments, I have found that skin sometimes becomes cloth, limbs merge into objects, environments merge onto garments in ways that have borne a whole body of surreal style imagery. Through image blending functionality in Midjourney it is simple to upload two images and ask the program to combine them equally together. Like a rose breeder with superpowers, we are no longer restricted to same species crossbreeding, but can blend a body into an object, a flower, a piece of furniture, or clash abstract sculptures onto the body raising questions of what sociocultural meanings and responsibilities (Braidotti, 2022; von Busch, 2022) we have as designers forming new identities in a posthuman context. From my own experiments, some images can be fascinating and creative, some images unsettling towards the uncanny valley, while some images can even tend towards themes of body dysmorphia and fashion imagery, as unanticipated and unintentional byproducts of the algorithm's stochastic mechanism, which gives limited control to the designer over the image output. By what criteria shall we value or devalue such images within a fashion context?

Prompt 3:
Mixed Technology Approaches: Intersections and configurations using artificial intelligence image generation tools and their relationships with traditional design methods.

Corresponding Activity: Participants reflect, share, compare their own fashion practice with my expanded practice.

Research Context/Rationale: In the world of artificial intelligence image generation, images and text, which are elements fed into the prompt, are materials of play, which can ideate a new design in the style of a fashion magazine editorial image, complete with realistic models, fabric, sumptuous backdrops, studio lighting and more, all without

any real production. Within seconds, hours and days of image generation at the start of the design process, we find ourselves where we would ordinarily expect to be end the end of many weeks and months of conceptualization, drawing, collaging, draping, flat pattern, toileing, making, fitting, embellishing, modelling and photography. Does this discount the input of the designer, and how does the making and materialization process proceed after the AI fashion image, if necessary, at all?

Sharing my own experiences, certain aspects of design, such as concept development and narratives become enhanced through AI, but there is still a deep engagement by the designer in the images, and ways to move into traditional fabric and garment design and construction in ways that are complementary. There is also the option of digital materialization, and the absence of further materialization, valuing the image as a form of fashion consumption in and of itself (Fletcher) or one of speculative value for a future time where technology is assumed to have evolved to such a point to make materialization possible and necessary.

Prompt 4
Craft and Critical Approaches: How do we sustain a craft-first and critical practice with new technologies?

Research Context/Rationale: Physical craftsmanship in fashion couture has a long and varied history, delving into drape from Roman times to flat pattern, dye techniques spanning global cultures, embroidery and embellishment, print, knit and felting, but to name a few. Although the digital is a relative newcomer to the stage of human civilization, aspects of digital craft such as coding, simulated fabric mesh cutting and sewing, image texturing, digital illustration and animation techniques, photogrammetry expressed through new virtual reality and augmented reality mediums, in anticipation of further rapid hardware development, has spawned a generation of digital savvy artists and creatives, engaged in rigorous and complex creative thinking and practice within the digital medium. As automation shows us how we can superpower certain functions within fashion production, how do we sustain a deep engagement with the stories and materials of new fashion experiences, either physical or digital? If the goal of much of the fashion industry is corporate profit, how do designers push back and reclaim human involvement in artistic production? My own experiments show that it is possible to engage deeply on a material level in the physical and digital, but there needs to be a balance between efficiency and labour.

Corresponding Activity: Participants reflect on their own experience of physical and digital craft (asking questions if necessary).

(Optional time allowing) Texturing the Void: Intuitive sensorial and material knowledge and its translation into digital materials and spaces.

Research Context/Rationale: How does it feel to be wearing an enormous silhouette in an augmented reality fashion setting that has no weight? To what extent does the experience qualify as fashion in any meaningful context if you cannot touch it? Where twinning real environments in the virtual is becoming more and more commonplace in scientific fields, in fashion, the pure twinning of garments on virtual or real bodies arguably constrains the full potential of digital creativity (Edelkoort, 2017), where digital materials can animate and mimic textures and materials incompatible with a physical body in a physical setting.

From one perspective, digital and mixed reality fashion experiences still lag behind a true meaningful fashion as situated and embodied experience, and from another, the experiences can be seen as fragmented manifestations that transverse a broader material spectrum including the digital (as a subset of the physical) and the more tangible physical world of earthly physics (Haraway, 2016; Hayles, 2008). If digital layers are 'real', then what does it mean to be able to hijack someone else's outfit and dress them through a mobile device?

Corresponding Activity: Participants will activate an augmented reality fashion filter from a QR code, try it on and dress a partner in an AR fashion filter.

Figure 1: Rosanna Li 2024, Body Meets Quilt, AI generated image, MidJourney

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