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More more more - can digital practice be an antidote for affluenza?

Abstract

Consumers consume, designers design, and we as designers are advancing this consumption. Hamilton and Denniss, 2005, p100 stated that 'there is only so much we can eat, wear and watch'. Digital technologies used in the fashion industry have primarily been developed as tools to increase productivity and therefore promote consumption and fast fashion (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Birtwistle and Moore, 2007). The recent global economic downturn and drop in retail spending points the way to the accelerating consumption moving into a decline.

This paper discusses how digital technologies were redeployed with the aim of slowing down the design process and therefore reducing wasteful consumption, and assisting in decelerating the fashion production overload. The interactions with digital technologies were experienced and communicated from my point of view as a milliner / designer / maker. Drawing on the methodology of action research, a cyclical process of problem

diagnosis, action intervention and reflective learning, has encompassed new discoveries and directions of both process and product.

Slow fashion designing within a digital environment gives the designer the time to reflect on process and product. Digital designing practice is viewed as a sustainable and mindful way of engaging with designing and making in the age of excess.

Introduction

Af-flu-en-za (n). 1. The bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses. 2. An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the Australian dream. 3. An unsustainable addiction to economic growth. (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005: i)

Hamilton and Denniss coined the word Affluenza as a reflection of the Australian obsession with economic growth. This obsession is ubiquitous in many first world countries at this point in time, and it is more extensive than Australia alone, having significant global consequences. I am a milliner and fashion designer, not an economist; I have a need for regular creative outlets, as this is an essential factor in my personal wellbeing. Sense number three from the Affluenza definition above was used as the focal point to reflect on my individual design practice. What was sustainable growth in

my practice and what strategies could I explore to remedy Affluenza in my practice. I surveyed the process and product of a millinery making project, Artificial Elegance which was originally undertaken in 2003, and used the distance of time and fresh eyes to create new meaning from a past project.

As time advanced since writing the abstract for this paper, economic growth in most first world countries has been in flux, with the ebb and flow changing often. I continued to work and rework the analysis of the project in this mercurial light, and while doing so my position on the designer's wellbeing and my input into and relationship with making also went through changes. Through the investigation I asked myself if the individual practitioner could make a difference to the affliction of Affluenza in the area of millinery design, and thereby afford a practice which advocates healthy design and creative wellbeing for both the individual designer and more widely. This paper discusses a project which casts a light on a possible modest and personal way forward for a millinery practice by considering my interactions with digital technologies and other alternative strategies, as a complementary method for making millinery.

Context - Millinery, out of time and out of place.
In the area of fashion, what could be more marginal than millinery, it is on the margins, in every sense of the word, millinery materials are difficult to access; millinery wearers are in the minority. Millinery is the other, the bygone object, the misunderstood, the

unloved and as discussed by Baudrillard (1990, p36) 'The bygone object always gives the appearance of being a wallflower. Beautiful though it may be, it remains 'eccentric'.' Millinery survived two world wars and a depression only to be killed by hairspray, wigs and new cultural attitudes starting in the 1950's. The wearer of millinery stands out in a crowd, looks exotic, the hat has gone out of fashion in the casualisation of lifestyles and has been relegated to special occasion wear (Adler, 1995; Black et al; 2003; Todd, 2003).

It is the nature of fashion design to have time signified by an artifact, millinery has lost its function as a social political signifier, and in doing so it has gained the status of a signifier of time, of time stood still, an exotic being. The nature of contemporary high fashion is to exploit the exotic and quirky and therefore, millinery and the milliner benefits from being the bygone object. Millinery's symbolic value in the present day in a fashion context draws on this exoticism, and my millinery sits within this framework.

I use the opportunity of millinery sitting on the margins to continue to engage with and redefine the practice of millinery without the pressure to conform to market expectations. I am a designer maker milliner, I love to make things, making satisfies a craving to be creative and to engage in the discipline of fashion design, but making has become unsustainable within my practice as there are not enough millinery wearing people deep in the southern hemisphere and there isn't enough room to store all the

things I can make. Digital millinery practice offered challenging new ways to continue to engage with designing and making millinery which did not clutter up the world with possessions and which still satisfied the designers need to design and make.

The advancement and redefinition of my millinery practice highlighted the notion that in this project designing and making was not completed to satisfy needs of the wearer or consumer, but was undertaken solely to assuage the creative yearnings of the designer milliner maker. Breaking the link between the final product and the process of designing and making millinery was in opposition to traditional notions of the design process and to millinery and fashion practice in general where the product reigns supreme.

Computer software designed for fashion is skewed towards the technical processes of pattern making, replicating two-dimensional paper based methods. Due to commercial necessities, fast production is the key objective for many designers, with time for creativity rated as secondary. Making for the sake of making, without the pressures of commercial success, has afforded me the opportunity to test and reflect on untraditional methods that may not be accommodated by industry at present.

This project established alternative ways of working which amplified the creative opportunities for millinery practice. Ultimately the final millinery product was not important to this project or to the designer.

Methods

I am a designer, and I approach my research in a designerly way. Utilizing the concept of 'Wicked Problems' as coined by Horst Rittel, the designing is not in response to a clearly defined problem, but is an opportunity to explore freely without the end point clearly defined. The process of exploration is not linear, continued reflection and modification is beneficial to the development of new and engaging millinery ideas; and the cyclical process of analysis, synthesis and evaluation is inline with the design theorist Archer (Lawson, 2006). This has allowed me to encompass new discoveries and directions in process and product and consider the implications these may have on the world around me.

I used the design process as a reflective tool, exploring past projects, and asking the question:

- Could the reconsideration of a discarded project in a new light, offer me the opportunity to answer my maker's needs to keep making millinery and therefore offer me a sense of well being in my daily creative life.

The discovery of whether this could occur was undertaken by overlaying the original design process with my reconsideration undertaken with fresh eyes. Layering the new ideas over the old discoveries gave me the opportunity to give my prior experience new meaning and therefore create new knowledge in this area.

Steps

The design process as harnessed in this project had three fundamental steps:

Stage 1: Analysis; reflection on past practices.

Within my practice I prefer to commence a new design experience by surveying past visual diaries and assorted inspirations to find a design idea which offered me an inspiration for new design thinking or a suggestion of where the project could be developed further. In this particular reflective process I looked at projects undertaken over the period of seven years, from 2000 to 2007 and focused on those which utilised digital technologies in some way.

After consideration of several projects, the one chosen for analysis under the new framework was Artificial Elegance from 2002 -2003, and it was chosen for two key reasons. Firstly it offered me considerable frustration and technical challenges as a maker, as I struggled to bring the immaterial digital millinery to a material reality; and secondly this project gave me the opportunity to consider the meaning of an object in the making process, and the fine line between the making and the made.

Stage 2: Synthesis; reconsideration of the project with fresh eyes.

Several years have passed since I undertook Artificial Elegance. Within this time the world has changed, as has my understanding and knowledge of millinery, design, designing and my contribution to these areas. Reconsidering with the aim of reworking the ideas opens up new possibilities.

Stage 3: Evaluation; formulation of an alternative practice for designing and making millinery.

By using the reconsideration and reworking, and my new understanding of millinery making several years later, a way forward was devised that would both satisfy my needs for a creative outlet and making, an essential part of my well being, and would contribute to slowing down consumption in my own practice.

Reliability and validity

As with many practitioner based research projects, this study has posed the problem that reliability and validity, in the traditional sense was difficult. However an individual voice is the corner stone of creative endeavors, and therefore I welcomed my personal experiences as essential elements in this research. I viewed it as the factor that offered significance to the contribution to millinery design practitioners and had internal validity.

This research possesses internal validity as it is:

• an intervention in a specific context;

• relevant for a unique setting;

• impossible to repeat the research.

Internal validation was determined by the changes of the situation showing an improvement, enriching and advancing personal practice. While these factors were useful in my reflective practice, if wider validity was sought other studies would need to demonstrate their relevance.

Discussion and findings

Stage 1: Analysis; reflection on past practices.

Four iterations of Artificial Elegance –

i. Sketching and modeling within the digital environment.

This process worked like a three-dimensional visual diary, making many options in the computer environment, watching the millinery models develop from the privilege of multiple viewpoints. The inspiration behind the digital bonnets was the framed structures which acted as the base on traditional bonnets. The physical space of making was replicated in the digital space; frames that were formerly made from wood, whale bone or wire were now constructed in a three dimensional computer programme with interpolated curves or splines. See the image below.
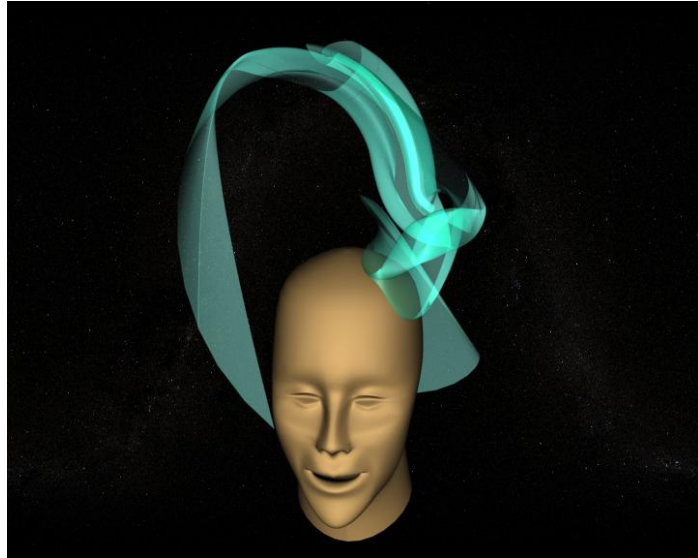
Figure 1, Artificial Elegance bonnet: three-dimensional digital bonnet, 2002; the author.

ii. Sketching on paper

Chalk pastels were used as a medium to allow me to sketch several views of the model. The purpose of this was to provide a contemplative space which allowed time and occasion to understand how the model could possibly work within the real world. See the image below.

Figure 2, Artificial Elegance bonnet: pastel sketch, 2002; the author.

   iii. Physical installation 1 – fragmented three dimensional representation

An installation using mannequins, drawing and crinoline hats, which attempted to

replicate the digital space in a real world situation. Fragments of millinery were

suspended within a studio space, these physical fragments mirrored the representations

of the sketching and modeling in the digital environment, these were complimented by

two dimensional sketches placed strategically on the studio walls. See the image below.

Figure 3, Artificial Elegance disruption: Still image from film footage, crinoline hats, mannequins, charcoal drawings. 2002 / 2003; the author.

iv. Physical installation 2 – three dimensional drawing machine

X, Y and Z axis were represented in the real environment by anchoring long threads of nylon to a plinth in a gallery space. Crinoline with straw embroidery, a millinery material, was utilized as a sketching media, creating a piece of millinery which replicated the digital millinery in the physical gallery space. See the image below.

Figure 4, Artificial Elegance: three-dimensional drawing machine installation. Nylon thread and crinoline. 2003; the author.

Stage 2: Synthesis; reconsideration of the project with fresh eyes.

Iterations of Artificial Elegance reconsidered -

i. Sketching and modeling within the digital environment.

Through the use of digital technologies as a three-dimensional visual diary I was able to sketch and develop designs and watch the millinery models progress from the privilege of multiple viewpoints, and this was a satisfying and successful process to a point. Enamored with the technology, I chose the software on the basis that it could represent reality and was a three dimensional animation tool. The software was not designed as a making tool and because of this there were inaccuracies and vagaries that were frustrating.

Previously the interaction between designer and material (Schon, 1983) was relished as an important element in the designing process; however interactions in the digital world posed problems and challenges with unresponsive material and environment. The lack of physical laws of nature in the digital space was eventually accepted and embraced as a valid way of working. However, a major issue was presented when I wanted to give the digital model life in the real world, the design was difficult to read or understand in a traditional millinery making manner. The next iteration was in response to this problem.

ii. Sketching on paper

The medium of chalk pastels were easy to manipulate and the action of sketching helped me understand how the model could work in the real world. Being relaxed and confident with this medium assisted in the process, I was able to have more understanding of the nature of this millinery piece. Consideration of the four views and the two dimensional representations of three dimensional millinery in both digital and on paper prompted the next iteration.

iii. Physical installation 1

I used a room as the symbol for a computer screen, at the time of undertaking this series of projects the computer screen used was a large box, this depth added to the

illusion of three dimensions. I could be tricked into believing that the shapes created did indeed travel back into the screen and weren't merely two dimensional representations of numeric instructions. In both the two previous iterations it was noted that there was an element of absurdity in the representations of physical millinery, and in answer to these, the idea of creating a digital space in the real world situation was formulated. This experience was multilayered and extremely satisfying; my movement in the room gave me the opportunity to experience millinery possibilities in a concentrated and meaningful way; but could the idea be fine tuned as a useful millinery design method? I discovered that the need for a three dimensional view was essential in my designing experience.

iv. Physical installation 2

This physical iteration of the process was very successful as a design tool, with a real material as the sketching material in a simulated computer situation; however the wastage of a precious millinery material was disappointing. It was noted that the enjoyment of the physical experience sketching to develop a design in the digital and physical spaces was essential for my designers well being.

Conclusion

Stage 3: Evaluation; formulation of an alternative practice for designing and making millinery.

I was replicating the physical world practice and product in the digital world and digital world practice in the physical world. When I reflected on installing the physical replications of the digital millinery into a physical space, it confirmed to me that the illusion of three-dimensions was all that was needed to satisfy my need to make millinery. My dialogue with making millinery continues to travel backwards and forwards between the digital and the real world practice, and time has shown that it is not the where I am making that is important, all that matters is that I am making. The realization that my desires to design and make millinery are soothed just as easily in the digital world or as an installation, as they are reaching a final physical product has now liberated me from being tied to any one environment.

Slowing down the product outputs without slowing down the creative act of designing and making by using digital technology and other methods gave me the designer the time to reflect on process and product. Slowing down physical production could lessen the throwaway fashion attitude (Birtwistle and Moore; 2007) and I acknowledge that this could create some tension with economic endeavors of the fashion industry, as it is in conflict to traditional objectives of making fashion and millinery. However this wish to slow down production and rampant fashion consumerism and commit to high quality well thought out products is in line with my personal commitment to sustainable design practice and my designers well being.

While it is apparent that in traditional millinery and fashion practice, the product and process are completely tied together, in the digital age it is possible to have a process without the clutter of the product. Originally in my practice creating a product from the process was essential and was the main direction / aim / objective, but as clarity with the process evolved it became clear that the act of making was more important than the made, and that other techniques such as installations could also be used as a designing environment. When designing is undertaken with the specific intention to quell the creative desires, and when a finished physical product is not the aim, then an immaterial product is a valid outcome, as the physical or complete product has become extraneous.

This project was a journey of discovery where I lost the very physical thing I was investigating, millinery. The question, 'why do I need to make', has not yet been answered, it is still a work in progress. However the question 'why do I want to make in the digital world' has been answered, as it is my belief that the digital world could offer a solution to accelerated physical production and growth in my practice and to some extent in more widely. I suggest that the designer has the power to determine the effect Affluenza has on both personal designing wellbeing and has potential further implications.

Following undertaking this project and the first reflection it appeared that the making iterations were a mere side show, a trivial fancy, I was disillusioned with it and dismissed it. However several years and projects later I reflected on this project and realized it was a key moment in understanding what elements are essential for my design well being. The satisfaction of creation was a real need that had to be fulfilled, this experience and project kept me in touch with the millinery practice, and with designing and making in general.

The experience of reconsidering a designing experience in a new light reinforced my commitment to advancing millinery design practice by sustaining both designers wellbeing and curing Affluenza within my millinery design practice. I focused on the sustainability of the non material, to combat an unsustainable need for economic growth and the use of digital technology and installations assisted in this quest. I used these methods and environments as thinking devices, as tools, materials and environments. Designing and making in any environment, using installations and digital environments improved my feeling of design wellbeing, the process has lessened the importance of the product.

The use of these techniques allowed me to continue to practice designing and making millinery and at the same time gave me the opportunity to cease to contribute unnecessary material products to an already cluttered world.

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