

I live at the edge of a cliff, right by the seashore. It's a grey, cold, harsh, isolated place. Behind me is just vegetation that survives more than it lives. Before me are just grey rocks, grey waves, grey sky. The building is a cube made of concrete and glass. The windows are huge, there are no curtains - there is no one to look inside, no one to hide from. The windows expose me to the harshness of the elements, even as I sit in my living space. The interior is clean and minimal. There are a few elements - wood, colours, textiles - that give warmth. But they don't disturb the clinical air of functionality. No one knows I live here. No one even knows of this building, this place. I come and go by air or by sea, there is no road. I mostly keep to myself. I'm connected to the networks of the world; every now and then, I come up with a plan, a target. Then I leave - for a week, a month, a year - and I hunt, and I kill. I am moving, I am feral. But when I'm here, I am completely calm. This is my stronghold, this is where I come to be safe, to stop existing for a while. I always come back.

I live out of my backpack, I live on the back of my horse. There isn't much I'm carrying with me. A tent, some clothes, some tools. A bow and a quiver with arrows. A sword, a knife. I'm deft of all of these weapons, I rely on my skills. Since I left the army, I have been a potential target for both sides of the great war. I steal from both sides, I scavenge, I work for hire. But I'm not important enough in the grand scheme of things. So I get by, slipping through the cracks. I have many secret stashes, where I keep things. None of these places are truly safe, none of the things are truly important. What is important I keep on myself. Mostly protective garments made from leather and chain mail. A dark cloak for warmth. A ring, a pendant, both with inscriptions.

I have built this house. Well, not really, but... It used to be an industrial building, a part of a factory or something. I have completely transformed it, and now it's the house of my dreams. A large hall, divided in three parts. If you enter, you are in the "public space". It includes a sofa and a coffee table, a dining table, and the kitchen. Walk past the toilet and broom closet, and you enter the "private space". It contains my bed, my desk, my clothes, my books, all my belongings. Walk further and you enter my atelier, the "working space". Stacks of yarns and fabrics, large tables, machines. My house is perfect, built after my design, built for me. And now there's you, and you dare entering my life like that, and you dare making me think about falling asleep in your arms and growing old together. You dare making me see children as something other than obnoxious little monsters. But my house has no rooms, just one large hall, and that hall is mine. You can't live here, there is no space for you in my house... how dare you! Will you marry me?

What if making your own clothes was really easy?

There are so many products, so many things, there isn't really a need for more. I would like to design not things, but a way of dealing with things, a way of thinking, an attitude, a perspective, a system.

A fashion collection that you sew yourself.

To trigger creativity by providing a framework. Not a pure democracy, not total anarchy, not a dictatorship, but a friendly system.^{a)}

A person that operates from a perspective that has a certain independence towards the commercial aspects of mainstream fashion. A fashion-cycle that adapts to your individual, subjective flow of time. Opening up the clock and examining the wheels; the satisfaction of understanding, the confidence of knowledge, the pride of achievement. The joy of copying.^{c)}

To speed up, to slow down. To be spontaneous, to make things with your hands,^{b)} to abandon them quickly like ripping off a band-aid. To value craft, to value speed. "I'm in a hurry, I'm going out tonight, and I still need to make my trousers."

a)

Peter Cook's "Plug-In City" is a design for a city based on the system the shipping industry uses to deal with containers in harbours. In his design, the containers are living spaces. But unlike in a traditional architectural structure, the living spaces can move within the city, thanks to the infrastructure built into it.

"Plug-In City" is an architectural system that encourages its inhabitants to take a new perspective on the subject of living in urban areas. By changing one significant parameter, in this case the fact that living spaces are usually stationary, the system opens up a completely new perspective, with consequences in thinking, behaving, and living. Notions like neighbour, neighbourhood, slum, real estate value, commuting, public transport, rent, and interior design take on different meanings. Now imagine every major city in the world having at least one neighbourhood built as a "Plug-In City"...

We are talking about a system here, but it's a friendly system. It enables and encourages independence and flexibility. It adapts to its inhabitants, instead of forcing its inhabitants to adapt. This system is not restricting, but liberating.

These are qualities that are key to my own work. *rené shiro* is a menswear fashion brand; it's also a friendly system.

The parameter my friendly system changes is the fact that we all buy the clothes we wear, thereby getting involved in a huge system that reaches from Chanel to H&M to child labour in China. I want to provide an alternative system to the one we are almost forced to be part of.

I design garments, but unlike conventional brands, I don't have a production, and I don't sell. I design garments that you make yourself. You are not only the consumer, but also the manufacturer, and to an extent, the designer.

I want to trigger the making of your own garments by providing both a system and concrete designs that are accessible, simple, and quick to make, even for people with only moderate sewing skills.

My designs are open source, the "code of the garment" is accessible, it's possible to see exactly how the pieces are made. They consist only of a few pattern parts that are easy and quick to sew. A particular focus is pockets and closures, because they are usually the most complicated parts. I offer my patterns free of charge, and in various standard sizes. They can be printed with a home printer and are accessible to anybody who is connected to the Internet. You download it, you print it on A4 paper, you tape it together and get a pattern. You buy fabrics, you cut and sew. Done.

"[...] the structuring of a large 'plug-in' conglomeration, with its large, regular structure and its movement-tubes (which were to be combined in the 'city' megastructure), [...] such a conglomeration does not need to have the dreariness that is normally associated with regularised systems. [...] whatever else it was to be, this city was not going to be a deadly piece of built mathematics." - Cook

"But still others thought in a different way about this model, and not as traditionalists refusing the new: rather, the comparison of man and machine caused them to think about man. [...] People so minded had a particular interest in craftsmanship: it seemed to mediate between machined abundance and the modestly humane." - Sennet

The friendly system makes you *independent* from the existing fashion system. You can make creative decisions instead of settling for what happens to be available and affordable. You can still use the existing system, of course, but you don't have to; *I don't want to fight the existing system, but provide an alternative*, break the monopoly, give a perspective of autonomy, shift the balance of power, reintroduce some democracy.

To break the tedious cycle of spring/fall/spring/fall and new/new/new/new. I think of time as a subjective rhythm that speeds up and slows down. A rigid calendar can work against our creative impulses, whereas the friendly system adapts to our own personal cycles and rhythms.

By making garments easily and quickly available, I also make them more *disposable*. It's easier to let go if you know you can always just remake it again. It allows you to travel light, to own only a few things. I like the idea of being liberated from what you think you need. You think you need to carry a handbag but if you manage not to carry one, you are liberated. It also lowers the threshold to sometimes wear something daring. It's alright to wear something only once, since making it wasn't that much of an investment. Disposability brings fluidity to your way of thinking about fashion.

(Disposability of course stands opposed to the idea of sustainability and green thinking. Calm down: the friendly system can as easily be utilised by the green-minded as it can by the fashionably frivolous. You already know for sure that there isn't any child labour involved, since you're making the pieces yourself. Now it's up to you to choose organic fabrics, and finish the garments properly, so they endure. It's literally in your hands. I have no intentions of fighting systems; my thinking is not aggressive towards the existing, but additive.)

The friendly system not only has consequences for the wearer, but also for me as a designer. I don't have to worry about production or sales. In a way, it establishes a direct link between designer and wearer, cutting out the middle man. And not only is it a link, but a dialogue, blurring the lines between maker and consumer.

b)

A downside to modern, consumerist life is that we understand only very little of what surrounds us in our every-day lives. Whether it's the garments I wear, the food I eat, the computer I use: what exactly are they, the objects that I use every day and take for granted? I stay on the surface of things, estranged in a way from my own life.

It becomes obvious how dependant my lack of understanding makes me whenever an object stops working. What, what, what do I do now? My life derails, it's humiliating.

(I specifically feel humiliated in my manhood when I fail to fix my bicycle/washing-machine/whatever; and I feel 'like a real man' when I succeed.)

What is the sweater made of? How does the farmer harvest the cotton, shear the sheep? How does the chemist create polyester? How is the thread spun and dyed? How is the fabric knitted? How is the garment finished? Reading up on those subjects will fill me with dry, abstract information. It will only take me so far.

I think the life of a farmer tends to be romanticised because they are directly involved in the creation of things that are essential to our lives. They have both intellectual and practical/manual knowledge of food on a very fundamental level. I imagine that gives their lives a 'realness' that urban life tends to lack. I think what is sometimes (half-wistfully, half-condescendingly) described as the 'simple life' would be more aptly described as 'fundamental life' or 'a life closer to the essence of things'.

Understanding the things that surround us by making them with my own hands. Attempting to get closer to the essence of things by touching them, by being directly involved in their creation. Getting closer to the essence of things by copying them.

And I find there is a real joy in that engagement. It's thrilling to make something, to discover how it works, to acquire a skill. Having a deeper understanding of things enables us to fix them when they break, tell good quality from bad quality, and truly appreciate the former. Skills and knowledge: the joy of acquiring them, the confidence and pride of having them, the independence that comes with it.

A common presumption is that sensuality makes us stupid: the gluttonous dullard, the slutty and vacant bimbo. But I think sensuality gives us access to knowledge that is impossible to reach by reading and thinking alone. The understanding we gain by doing things is different than the knowledge we gain by reading or thinking about them. On the ski-slope, my snowboard reacts to the tiniest shifts in the balance of

my body, changing its course and speed. There is no way I could grasp in thoughts how exactly I control my snowboard, let alone articulate it in words. The knowledge is in my body, it comes from action and experience, and expresses itself in the same way. A friend says something similar when she talks about horseback riding. After a while, she only needs to think of changing the direction, and the horse immediately senses the thought and changes its direction accordingly. The communication goes through the bodies in a way that is far too subtle and sophisticated for our rational minds, let alone language, to grasp.

Reading about craft, about techniques, is often dry and boring. Craft and technique are not primarily meant to be written, read, or even talked about; they are meant to be executed. The academic approach is contrary to their nature (which, by the way, is why it's so difficult to write craft instructions, and mostly impossible to do without the aid of visuals.)

You acquire a skill first by watching someone else do it, then by doing it yourself, most probably clumsily copying something that already exists at first. But as you overcome the initial frustrations and start to understand the technique, it can unlock doors in your thinking and become an endless source of inspiration. Can it not be done more elegantly, more cleverly, with more sophistication? What if I take this technique to its extremes? How big, how small, how intricate, how fast can it become? If this is possible, why is that impossible? Is it really? Becoming engaged, becoming obsessed. Crafting a piece that makes fellow craftsmen stop and think, "wait, what, how?": pure pride.

Robert Oppenheimer, "father of the atomic bomb", once said: "When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it." This can be read as an apology or defence, and usually sparks some ethical debate about the responsibility of science. But taken out of its harrowing context, it also illustrates the seductive power of the technique. And seduction (again, lets try to ignore the sombre background) is a sensuality the maker (artist?) can (should?) strive for. Not the intellect being the master over the material, but being seduced by the material in your hands, technique and craft as a way of flirting with it, a playful back and forth.

*"Engaging in the process of craft labour to inform himself, Diderot discovered a further limit, that of talent; he could not understand intellectually work he could not do well practically." **

"The painter Edgar Degas is once supposed to have remarked to Stéphane Mallarmé. 'I have a wonderful Idea for a poem but can't seem to work it out,' whereupon Mallarmé replied, 'My dear Edgar, poems are not made with ideas, they are made with words.'"

"Inarticulate does not mean stupid; indeed, what we can say in words may be more limited than what we can do with things. Craftwork establishes a realm of skill and knowledge perhaps beyond human verbal capacities to explain; [...]"

*"The good craftsman is a poor salesman, absorbed in doing something well, unable to explain the value of what he or she is doing." ***

"Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking; [...] a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding."

- Sennet (referencing Denis Diderot and Thorstein Veblen**)*

"[I ask] what the process of making concrete things reveals to us about ourselves. Learning from things requires us to care about the qualities of cloth or the right way to poach fish; fine cloth or food cooked well enables us to imagine larger categories of 'good.' Friendly to the senses, the cultural materialist wants to map out where pleasure is to be found and how it is organized. Curious about the things in themselves, he or she wants to understand how they might generate religious, social, or political values."

"Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake."

"The Craftsman represents the special human condition of being engaged."

c)

User Generated Content & Authorship

YouTube, Deviant Art, Blogspot, even Wikipedia or Linux. The Internet with its wide-open concepts like user generated content and open source has changed the way we create and publish artistic work fundamentally, the way the invention of the printing press and the photo-camera have. Old rules about authorship, authenticity, originality, or copyright have to be reassessed. Which notions still make sense in the digital age?

Generosity & Fearlessness

We don't own the ideas we create the way we own a physical object (and in the digital age, aren't all artistic works ideas rather than objects?) Share an object, and you have less of it; share an idea, and you still have the same "amount", but the recipient of your idea now has it, too. The world has been enriched.

Copyright is a notion created a long time ago for a very different environment, and while it still has its place, especially when the exchange of money is involved, it's a concept on the brink of becoming outdated. Its stingy mentality springs from the fear that we might not have another idea tomorrow, which is why we must claim the one we have today as ours and only ours. But I believe that artistic expression comes naturally to all human beings, and our creativity is a well that will never run dry, especially when we free ourselves from the pressure of being original. There will always be another idea. Let's be generous with our intellectual property, allowing others to copy us, and copying others ourselves, not worrying about whether we're original enough.

Very interesting things happen when we attempt to copy. We start looking at the work differently, from a more specific, precise perspective. We need to understand how exactly things look and work to be able to make a copy. We alter the original work, whether consciously or by mistake. Our subjective perspectives and hand-writings are added, as are mistakes or improvements. The copy is always an interpretation.

If 30 girls make the same dress, there will be 30 different dresses. If every soldier makes his own uniform, the army will have a fashion collection.

Dialogue & Community

By copying each-other, we not only trigger others and set free our own creativity, but also enter a dialogue with each other. I offer a space for

all these copies and interpretations to be showcased and discussed, creating a community. As important as it is to define our own individuality faced with the ever-changing cloud of the collective, there is also a lot to be gained by giving up our ego a little bit, accepting that we are just a tiny part of a large culture. Our collective, cultural memory is a bottomless treasure chest, and we should be proud to be building upon and adding to it. If we are interested in making good work for its own sake (as opposed to getting recognition for having done good work), we might benefit by putting our egos on the back burner and using the power of the collective to fuel our endeavour.

Copying, Covering, & Remixing

There are different, new, exciting ways of publishing in the art world. Can the same be said in the world of fashion?

People who like to cook have no problem with the fluid attitude towards authorship that the internet now brings to almost every discipline. Very few people claim to have invented a certain dish, the author of a recipe is usually unknown or unimportant. The chef typically has a loose, intuitive attitude that includes drawing from knowledge that exists in the collective mind, improvising and inventing new dishes, following other people's recipes, and often altering them to his own liking. He doesn't bother with copyright, he doesn't feel guilty about it, he just does what comes naturally to him, and he feels flattered if other people start copying his dish. (Counter-example: In an episode of 'Kitchen Nightmares', Gordon Ramsey is bothered that an owner of a restaurant is using his cookbooks. He says those recipes are not for commercial use. Gordon Ramsey, as the face of a brand and spearhead of a large business, brings up questions of authorship, originality, and copyright. Note how these things come up in relation to money, not artistic values or other qualities.)

The world of music has a long history of copying, covering, and remixing. Vocalists have always interpreted songs written by other people; it has always been clear that each vocalist brings something new (or something less) to the song. The oldest known songs aren't attributed to an author at all; they simply exist in the collective mind, and were likely generated by it, too. It's somewhat ironic, then, that the music industry is currently in such a crisis because of the changes brought by the Internet. Maybe that's because while music always has been interpreted, it hasn't been so long since the first cassette tapes have made exact copying possible for the general public.

The world of visual art has had more than a hundred years to slowly cope with the invention of photography (and later Xerox, various printing techniques, and scanners). Using mass copying techniques, artists like Duchamp and Warhol have incorporated the changes

"The making of the mobile telephone tells an illuminating story about the superiority of cooperation to competition in getting good work done. [...] Motorola, a success story, developed what it called a 'technology shelf,' created by a small group of engineers, on which were placed possible technical solutions that other teams might use in the future; rather than trying to solve the problem outright, it developed tools whose immediate value was not clear. [...] By contrast, companies like Ericsson proceeded with more seeming clarity and discipline, dividing the problem into its parts. [...] Rigidly organized, Ericsson fell away. [...] In any organization, individuals or teams that compete and are rewarded for doing better than others will hoard information. In technology firms, hoarding information particularly disables good work."
- Sennet, referencing Richard Lester and Michael Piore

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." - Picasso

"Though 'What is art?' is a serious and endless question, lurking in this particular definitional worry may be something else: we are trying to figure out what autonomy means - autonomy as a drive from within that impels us to work in an expressive way, by ourselves."
- Sennet, referencing Margot and Rudolf Wittkower

"The best art and writing is almost like an assignment; it is so vibrant that you feel compelled to make something in response. Suddenly it is clear what you have to do. For a brief moment it seems wonderfully easy to live and love and create breathtaking things [...] in the same way that the ocean gives the assignment of breathing deeply, and kissing instructs us to stop thinking."
- Miranda July

"[...] knowledge is additive and accumulative; it builds up in time as people stand on giants' shoulders, like those human pillars in the circus." - Sennet, referencing Robert K. Merton

brought by those technologies in their art in a way that shattered their inherited framework. The Internet has cranked up the speed, but the systems built around visual art in the last century seem to mostly be able to withstand the acceleration.

The world of fashion is only just beginning to be touched by the Internet as directly as music and visual art have. Sure, the trend-cycles have been accelerated to a point where most of them stop existing. And low-to-medium budget chain stores like H&M and Zara are able to copy the works of the couturiers almost instantly. But home computers can't copy a garment the way they can copy text, music, and visual material.

What if they could? Wouldn't that be great? Imagine a world where your personal computer can make a garment. You press a button, *whirrrrrr*; you open a hatch, and out comes the garment you had selected on your screen. *"Oh no, my silk cartridge is empty!"*

Companies that work as the middle man between the creatives and the consumers will become obsolete and fall into a deep crisis (e.g. H&M, analogous to the labels of the music industry, when the designers and couturiers of the big fashion houses are analogous to the musicians). Violations of copyright will go through the roof, leaving some fashion designers feeling robbed. User generated content will skyrocket. I want to live in that world.

But I need to make sure not to lose my individual artistic identity in a world of high-speed copying and remixing. Where do I draw the line around the cloud? I need to be able to point at something and say: that's my work. That's me, as a designer. This is what I do. For practical reasons (resumé, income), and for narcissistic reasons. But most importantly, for artistic reasons. My work needs to be precise, it needs to have sharp edges to cut.

Regarding my brand, my intention is to make sharp decisions on all parameters, but allow, even encourage, change. All parameters are carefully and clearly set by me, but my work is open source, so you can see the 'code'. You can copy it one to one, or you can change the parameters. Either way, it's still 'my work' in the sense that it was created within the framework I provide, and I agree with my name being attached to it; but it's also 'your work' because you actually made the piece, with or without modifications. That's where I draw my line.

Closing thoughts: how far

The pretension of being unpretentious: I like the idea of practical clothing. The minimum amount of belongings. Travel light, be on the move all the time. A sense of sufficiency, a sense of masculinity.

To be radical: to get rid of all the clothes I own, and replace my entire wardrobe by pieces I made myself. I think of the minimum amount of clothes I feel comfortable with. I think about how much variety I need and want. I think about what pieces I currently wear most, and why. I like the idea of having complete control over what I am wearing.

I tailor everything myself. I make the patterns myself. I make all the knits and prints myself. The patterns I make mimic my favourite pieces I already have.

*For the apocalypse, she put on a lavish gown, like a Victorian socialite at the ball, inexplicably certain that she will meet *him* tonight. Mostly black, of course, appropriate for the occasion. But it wasn't depressing; she never liked it when people took taking things seriously as an excuse to be depressing. Layers of delicate lace, making her look like a smoky vision in the dusk. The jewellery intricate and baroque. Only a few patches of pink and red tartan around the frays, setting a few cheeky accents amongst all the gothic drama. Her lips played perfectly off the blood-red sky.*

That was quite some time ago. Between scavenging for food and lost technology and hunting cannibalistic mutant raiders, she hasn't really had the opportunity to dress up that way since. Not that she's complaining; I mean, who doesn't look good with a battle axe? The sturdy, well fitting denim pants and partly armoured leather jacket are worn out now, more grey than indigo or black; but that makes them even more gorgeous, imbued with adventure. The only thing she really misses are the books. They have all been burned in the firestorm, of course, and the tapes have all been erased. Paper is scarce these days and hard to store, given it's delicate nature, impractical weight and volume, and decidedly minor importance when it comes to raw survival.

But she had always put great importance on archiving the words that she felt were relevant. The library had been the largest room in her estate back then. That place is gone now, and the nomadic nature of her current life has forced her to come up with other ways of archiving information. She has found that words are much easier to remember if they rhyme, and easier even if they are set to a melody; in a way, her tiny harp stores as many stories as all those large, heavy shelves together.

This is the story of the warrior bard.

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