

# The body within the clothes: A case study on clothing design practice from a practitioner viewpoint.

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## Abstract

Observing dress practices as a field of research is a recent phenomena in exponential growth in which the voice of the designer is often left aside. Aware of this gap, this study dives into the experience of dressing and wearing in search for understanding the ways in which the body materiality is involved in the designer's creative processes. It explores this inquiry through two path-dependent projects investigated as case studies, namely Dress(v.) and Wear\Wear. The projects make use of auto-ethnographic notations about my personal routine of dressing and wearing to inform the creation of flat patterns for clothes via creative pattern-cutting method. Adopting of practice-led research stream via a phenomenological approach to data, the interpretation leads to a further understanding on how the designer's subjective body is manifest in the design processes and outcomes. The work contributes to the design community by presenting ways in which research methods can inspire design methods, investigated from a practitioner viewpoint. It concludes with suggestions for future collaborations between academic research and design practice in the context of fashion design.

**KEYWORDS:** creative pattern cutting, autoethnography, practice-led research, fashion practice.

## Introduction

The clothes we wear are an intrinsic part of who we are, or who we want to be before the eyes of our beholders, as we embody them through different wearing practices (Entwistle, 2015). Despite recent, endeavours in understanding the way we dress/wear our clothes have been the source of investigation for researchers in various domains that explores fashion. Starting from contributions that looked into psychological aspects of dressing, such as the consistent and foundational work of Susan Kaiser (1990), who discussed clothing and fashion in regards to material and symbolic values to the self and the society.

The societal and cultural aspects of this investigation were made plural in the following decades through the voices of anthropology and cultural studies (Hansen, 2004).

In the last fifteen years, a new field of knowledge emerges that develops biographical inquiries on individuals' wearing routines. They reflect the expansion of research in fashion in a more general sense, and especially the rapid expansion of sustainability discourses in the field (Fletcher and Klepp, 2017). Such studies, that follow individuals longitudinally through time in their everyday wearing endeavours, have been addressed as 'wardrobe studies' as they dive into individuals' wardrobes for investigations into wearing practices. Ingun Klepp & Mari Bjerck (2014), Else Skjold (2015) and Kirsi Laitala (2014) are prominent examples of research in the field. Klepp and Bjerck (2014) are behind the coining of the term 'wardrobe studies' and suggest the materiality of clothes as active in the construction of dress practices. Skjold (2015) looks into the wardrobes and daily choices of Danish men to propose the wardrobe and dress practices as informative space to clothing design production and consumption. Laitala (2014), on the other hand, focuses on the moments of disposal of garments and textile waste to further understand the reasonings behind it. Despite all of them bringing clear contributions not only to the research but also to the practice in fashion design, the possibilities brought to the practice have not yet been executed and investigated from a practitioner's viewpoint.

In resonance with these studies, though not under the 'wardrobe studies' umbrella, other works take a more artistic and philosophical approach to the topic. They are practice-led research developed through self-observations or basic research. Some examples include combining inquiries into the notion of 'cleaves' embedded in the experiences of creating and wearing shoes (Sampson, 2016) or proposing 'wear' as an essential concept in the overcoming of fashion as a sphere of overconsumption (Gill and Lopes, 2011). On the other hand, academic activity on investigating how fashion designers work and think (LaBat & Sokolowski, 1999; Ræbild 2015) been developed. They scrutinize the creative process of fashion designers and enlighten the understanding of how clothing pieces are created.

More specifically to the field of pattern cutting, while many practitioners have contributed to the academic discussion through their own practice, most of the attention is given to the development of the methods and the final outcomes, often leaving aside a

more situated perspective on the designer. High quality examples in the field are the works of Timo Rissanen (2013), who proposes a zero-waste pattern cutting, Rickard Lindqvist (2015), with his investigation on the moving body and Townsend & Mills (2013), with a practice-led investigation on mastering the zero waste pattern technique. The researchers give a thorough overview on how pattern cutting has historically developed, to which they consistently add their voices. Diary notes are present in some of these works, mostly in the introductions, but are not used as a source for investigation.

These three streams of investigation (wardrobe studies, practice-led research done through self-observations and investigations on the creative process of fashion designers) help understanding fashion design from the creative process to the use phase. Expanding the knowledge on the field can bring fruitful insights not only to fashion practitioners that envision producing more ethical clothes but also for researchers in regards to suitable methods to approach the field. By investigating the creative process of making clothes informed by autoethnographic notations on daily wearing practices, this study can be situated in the intersection between these three streams of works. It aims at discussing the entailments of the situated designer's body (non dissociable to its mind) in the designing process when visually inspired by these wearing practices. In order to do that, it asks; what if fashion designers are more aware of the agencies their body holds and express on the making of flat patterns during the construction process? Would this agency be manifest throughout the processes and in the final pieces? By questioning this mainstream mode of designing clothes, this study dives into the experience of wearing in search for understanding the ways in which the materiality of the designer's body is involved in the creating and making processes. It is hoped that the process can enlighten fashion designers and researchers in fashion to expand the inquiries into alternative creative methods and a further understanding of the embodied presence of the designer in designed clothes.

In the following section, the question on if and how the personal experience of wearing clothes can be reflected on the making of new clothes is posited and discussed in regards to methods of inquiry. In sequence, the two projects investigated as case studies are presented, namely Dress (v.) and Wear\Wear. Following, data interpretation is opened up together with its findings, and to conclude, a discussion and possible future directions are introduced.

## From the authorial body to the communal discussion

*"[...] autoethnographic methods recognize the reflections and refractions of multiple selves in contexts that arguably transform the authorial "I" to an existential "we"."*  
(Spry, 2001 p. 711)

For the fashion practitioner, the encounter with a unique pattern cutting practice can change the route of the day, can even put to question or enlighten your own practices. This is the case with the pair of trousers I wear now as I write. When I first tried it, I knew not much more than the feeling of having my balance shifted, whilst keeping me embraced. The wide folds around the waist, the one narrowing leg and the overall movement of the fabric were built with unexpected experimentalism. It made me curious about who was that designer and pattern cutter and in which ways she or he has gotten to that. I was wondering that even more than a highly experienced designer, that (embodied) mind would certainly have interesting life experiences to share. That thought made me wonder how much of us, clothes designers, is left on the things we make. In other words, how our work is affected by our general experiences in the world.

And even though, since Haraway (1988), much has been discussed on the fact that our doings/makings reflect our situated experiences of the world, this paper sheds light in a less explored field; the creative process in making patterns for clothes, in order to further understand the question above. More specifically to the field of fashion, whilst the presence of the designer body has been reflected upon in the testing stage of the design phase (Ræbild, 2015), little has been discussed on the stage of sketching and development.

The practice, on the other hand, is observed from a phenomenological perspective, in which diaries, photos and videos were kept to collect longitudinal data about the experience of creating and making clothes. This study is also aligned with streams that understand the different factors in the research (the designer's intent, methods, etc.) as entangled and mutually affecting each other (Griffiths 2010, p 169). In order to collect data, the work of Pedgley (2007) on collecting design process on making a musical instrument was used to help defining what to describe and when. Despite not following the guidelines suggested by Pedgley as closely due to impediments it brought to the design flow, indications on how to systematically collect notations on the self in the design process were extremely valuable. The nature of the data collected through a phenomenological approach to the experience, generating more descriptive than analytic

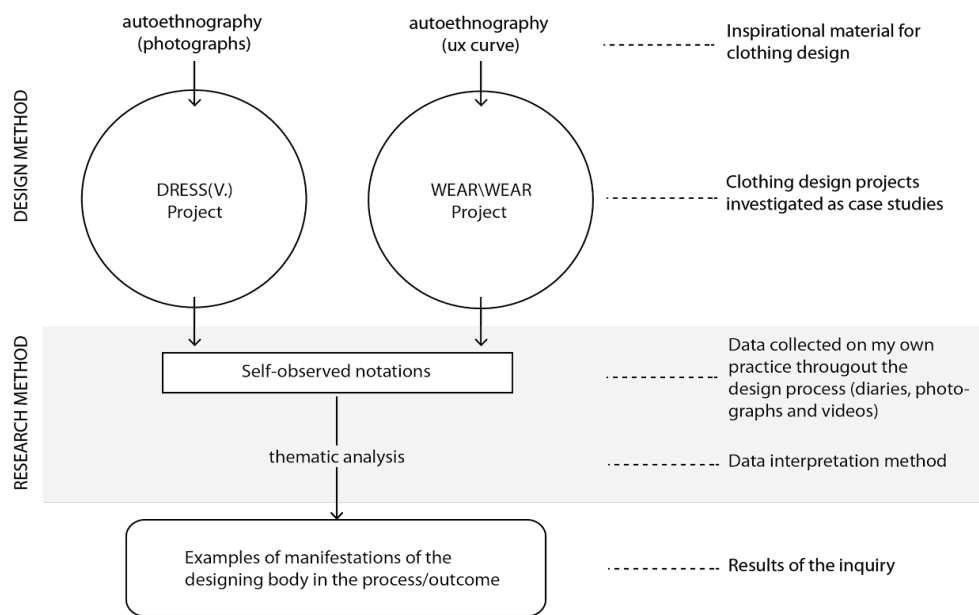
data (Merleau Ponty, 2012), demands a more interpretative than analytic approach. The diaries were later examined via a thematic interpretation, in which concepts of situatedness and embodiment are sought within the data, and the photographs and videos served as a visual support to the findings. The results of the inquiry draw examples of manifestations of the designing body in the process and outcomes of making garments. Despite being only one single proposal in the broad field of experimental fashion and creative pattern cutting (as defined by Almond, 2010), it is believed that the reflections and observations from this study can potentiate, as Spry (2001) suggests, the authorial voice of the designer into a collective discussion on the matter of the designing bodies.

## Auto-ethnography informed design methods

As shown below, this investigation looks into two projects to scrutinize the situated entailments of the designer's body in the practice of making clothes, focused especially on the pattern cutting activity<sup>1</sup>. The projects make use of autoethnographic research methods that serve as visual input to design methods in clothes making. The production presented here is done under a 'creative pattern cutting' approach (Almond, 2010). Already established in the field, the naming addresses alternative ways of creating flat patterns for clothing instead of the usual block pattern or moulage.

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<sup>1</sup> Pattern making, or pattern cutting, refers to the activity of creating flat, bi-dimensional templates for producing clothes. These patterns are usually drawn (or printed – if digital) into paper and include all the parts it takes to construct a garment. The methods to create patterns vary greatly and can be used individually or in mixed-methods approach. In this paper I choose to use the word 'pattern cutting' following previous literature, even though the words 'pattern cutting' and 'pattern making' mean basically the same and can be used interchangeably.



**Figure 1. Diagram of the design and research methods. Credits: the author**

In mainstream methods for constructing garments, such as moulage and flat-patterns, a sketch is usually the starting point, having the human body as a tri-dimensional reference, for what the designer wants to achieve (Bye et al., 2006). Later, she develops a flat pattern with instructions aiming at an outcome the most similar possible to the initial sketch and fits the garment on the human body until the piece is finally approved for production.

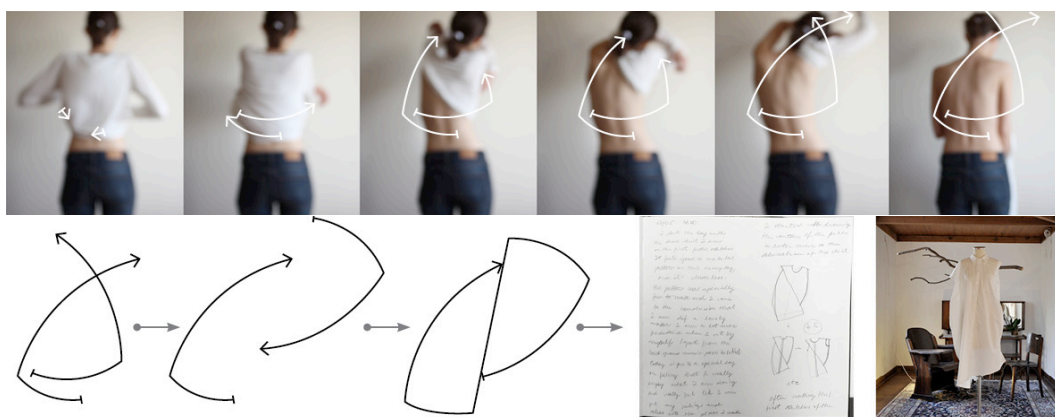
The two projects exposed suggest a different procedure, eliminating the primary sketch from the process. Dress (v.) and Wear\Wear explore the use of research methods applied to the creative process in fashion design via longitudinal collection of experiences inspired by autoethnographic studies. In ethnography literature, autoethnography is defined as a research method to describe and investigate personal experiences aiming at further understanding a culture (Holman Jones, 2005). Commonly supported by ethnography and autobiography methods (Ellis et al., 2011), the data is systematically collected and analysed in order to produce knowledge. The projects take inspiration from the quotidian actions of dressing and wearing clothes through different approaches to autoethnographic methods. Through that, this study aims at answering an overarching question on the implications of the designers' body (which is understood here as

interwoven with mind, thus non dissociable) on the process and outcomes of designing clothes. The projects draw attention to the dialogues set between design processes and designer's body as they negotiate spaces of interaction and personal dimensions.

In both cases scrutinized here, the experiences collected are explored in regards to the visuals they provide, instead of the insights into understanding cultural experiences. Despite differing from autoethnography research especially in regards to the object of study, the projects make use of the method for collecting data on personal experiences. Influenced by an essentially subjective research method (Ellis et al., 2011; Bochner, 2002), as previously discussed, the two projects provide insights on personal mannerisms, taste and values which are translated as forms and visuals to the designed pieces. They highlight the situatedness of design processes taking into consideration the designer's bodily experience as inspirational material and informative source. The following subsections introduce how the subjective experiences unfolded as the design process.

## Dress(v.)

For understanding the complexity and relevance of the action of dressing, Dress(v.) investigates the intimate, though undoubtedly culturally constructed, action of wearing clothes. In the project, daily movements performed while changing clothes serve as material for creating patterns for clothing design. The designer's body, highlighted as a body that also wears, becomes not only materialized in forms but also as resourceful visual information to feed the creative practice.



**Figure 2. Step by step of the creative process behind Dress (v.). Credits: the author**

During one month I recorded the daily action of getting dressed by placing a photographic camera in my bedroom, programmed to shoot 64 images in a 1-minute interval when triggered. Image 2 presents an example of the process, covering the different steps in the practice up to the finalized piece. After a selection of movements, twelve dressing experiences were chosen. These 12 movements were then vectored, and later transformed into shapes by free-hand drawing on paper. The intention of utilizing the shapes as clothing patterns set the scale of the drawings in approximation to the human body. I used my hands and body parts or placed the drawing near a mannequin to measure the distances in the drawings.

After the final shapes were drawn, they were cut in paper for pattern cutting use. I played with the shapes, re-positioning them in different configurations as in order to create a third shape. This experimental activity was developed with each of the twelve movements selected. Some of them resulted in various combinations and some were discarded after a few attempts, based on my personal evaluation of the feasibility of working with the pieces on the tridimensionality of the human body. Once shapes that seemed to offer quality material for experimentation were achieved, they were cut into fabric. But since no initial sketch served as a reference to the final forms, reworking them in a tri-dimensional body was necessary. In order to do that, cut fabric was laid over a dummy or on my own body and pinned as to create wearable garments. The final pieces reflect, thus, the researcher's movements and body dimensions, and propose offering the wearers a closer dialogue with the maker through active experience.

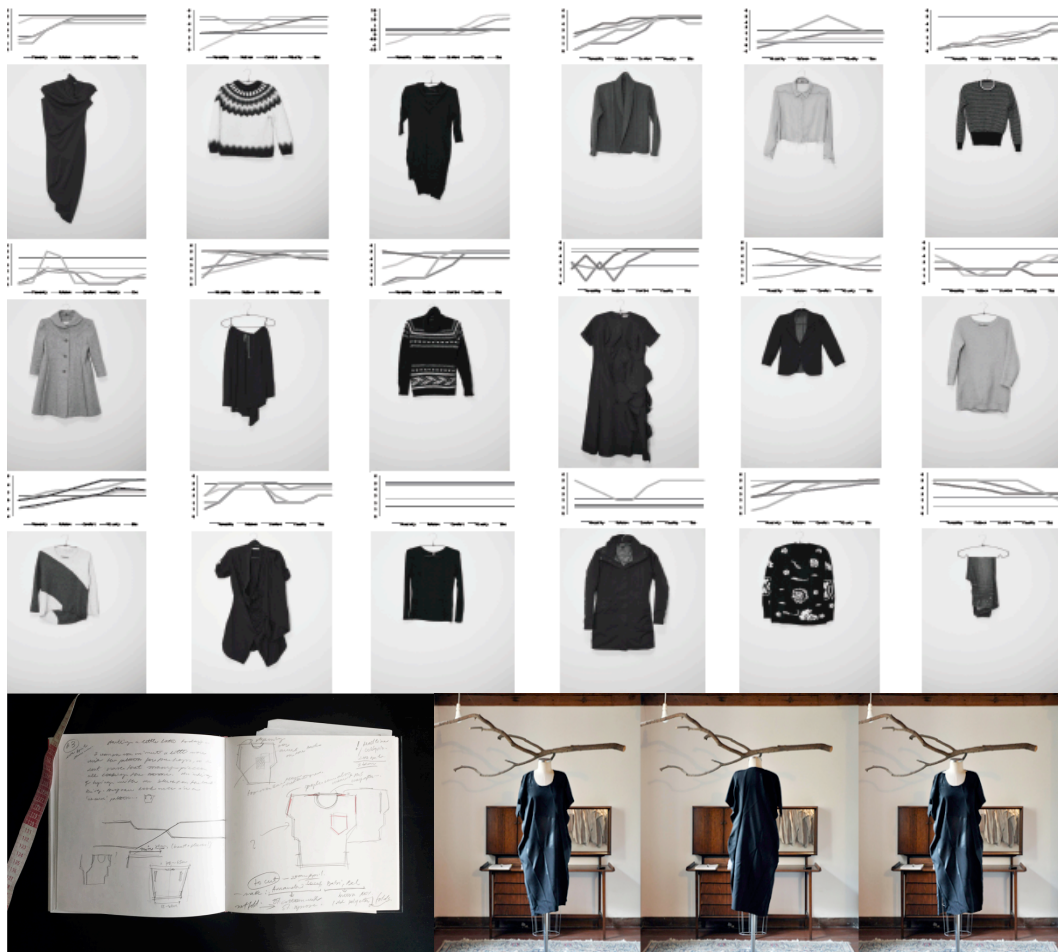
## **Wear\Wear**

Following the first project Dress (v.), which investigated the moments of getting dressed, Wear\Wear focused on both experiencing garments and the expression of time and use on an object. The project proposes changes through maintenance and experience by looking at time as a design space (Valle Noronha, 2017) contributing to a more engaging interaction. This project, thus, is interested in relationships between wearers and clothes happening in a longer timeframe and has as visual information source the relationships I set along time with garments in my own wardrobe. In order to investigate these relationships, that occurred in an extended time frame varying from 1 to 5 years, I made use of a user experience method (ux curve) (Kujala et al., 2011). The ux curve was



initially created in the human computer interaction community to investigate long-term user experiences to electronic interactive objects. They allow reconstruction of experiences simulating a longitudinal recollection of them. Here the aspects investigated were: frequency of use, comfort, versatility, visuality and overall relationship.

Every garment I wore in a 30-day period was represented in an ux curve. In total, 26 pieces were described in regards to the aspects mentioned above. All the experience curves were digitized and generated charts. In the digital form, the curves became lines, which was the first translation of the hand drawn curves into digital charts, and were used as such. The study suggested that strong attachment to pieces were disconnected from frequency of use and to essentially positive experiences to clothes. Fluctuating curves were more often associated with special pieces than constant, straight, curves. That finding led to the choice of the most fluctuating curves in order to create new patterns for clothes. After the selection of the charts, a total of five, I started working with rearranging the lines present in each of them in order to generate patterns for two blouses and three dresses. The image below illustrates completed curves and the creative process behind the project, from the ux curves (on top) to the sketched patterns (on the bottom left) and the final piece (bottom right).



**Figure 3. The creative process behind WEAR\WEAR project**

After completed the patterns, the clothes received interventions from materials that would manifest in time with maintenance (wash) and environment (sun and heat). The materials chosen were polyvinyllic (PVA) thread and fabric, which melts into water, and thermocromic and UVA sensitive dyes. The PVA allowed pieces in the garments to disassemble or disappear after being washed as permanent changes, and the dyes brought temporary changes in colour when exposed to heat or sunlight. The changes can be seen in the finalized pieces below:



**Figure 3. On top, t-shirt with UV sensitive dye and on the bottom, dress which changes shape after being washed.**

## Findings

The investigation on the diaries aimed at understanding ways in which the situated body of the designer is manifest in both the processes and the outcomes of the projects investigated as case studies. In the first study, Dress(v.), videos and pictures were made during the entire process, along with the diaries. On the second project, only the diaries were kept due to the perception of the imagetic reports as impediments to a fruitful flow of the design process.

After going through the data a couple of times, to get acquainted with the material, the points of relevance in regards to the situatedness of the designer's body and the embodiment of feelings or values to the pieces emerged as findings and were categorized as below:

- External Influences (weather, light, noise - relate to influences happening in the present)
- Personal Influences (physical body, mood - relate to influences happening in the present)
- Previous Experiences (as a designer or wearer - relate to learnings and experiences that happened in the past)

### External Influences

In both projects it was clearly perceived that my experience of the environment played a relevant part in the overall mood and even shaping of the pieces. As such, weather, sound and other events directly influenced the creation of the patterns. The quotes below, all extracted from the diaries, illustrate this finding:

“I have finally started the first patterns for the project. It’s a rainy day, which might influence a little bit on the pieces’ lengths, [...] how much space is left between the body and the garment. I start with the simplest of the forms [...]” (diary note, 02.05.2015)

“I start the day with the dress-shirt I drew [...]. It feels good to make this pattern on this sunny day, since it’s sleeveless.” (diary note, 17.05.2015)

“It's Saturday and quite cloudy and rainy. I will work on some jersey patterns [...]. Jersey and home wear [...]” (diary note, 06.06.2015)

As noted from the quotations, differences in my personal experience of the weather led the decisions of materials and forms, such as the rainy day suggesting the production of home-wear in comfortable knitted fabric, or the length of the sleeves and dresses. Such influences could be more perceived in the diary notes of the first project than in the second. This could be due to the fact that the first project was developed in Helsinki, Finland, a new environment to me, whilst the second project was developed in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, my hometown and where I am already very familiar to the weather - which has very similar weather throughout the year in comparison to Finland.

## Personal Influence

The designer body was made present through different channels. Personal bodily experiences and mood also had a voice in the creative process decision stages. Different than personal previous experiences, the personal influences were more related to events happening in the present time of the creative work. They relate mostly to feelings directing the final mood of the pieces and to the use of the body used as a measuring tool instead of rulers or measuring tapes and on testing the draft versions of the pieces.

“This pattern was especially fun to make [resulting in a playful dress form]” (diary note, 17.05.2015)



[Images above from process pictures - free hand drawn shapes show many obliterations of the trace until the right shapes were achieved by ‘feeling’ that the shape was right] (process pictures, 17.04.2015)



[stills from the video - using my hands to measure the width of a shirt] (video diaries, 04.06.2015)

“After I try the cut piece on myself [...] I decide to make a fold on the back and also add the alcohol thread there.” (diary note, 27.04.2016)

“[After testing the piece on my own body] I have to make the arms [sleeves] because only leaving openings doesn’t seem to work so well.” (diary note, 06.06.2015)

In accordance to the notations, the interaction with the paper, table or dummy lead to conclusions and perceptions about the pattern forms. The designer body was mostly used to test shapes and delineate dimensions and forms. While being frequently informed by the different materials at hand (e.g. the cut piece over the body, the pencil traces on paper), decisions could be made to progress in the making.

### Previous Experiences

It was very clear that previous experiences in designing clothes embodied on myself came to surface while creating new pieces. At many stages on the diaries I refer to previous works or projects, to previous lessons learned in both commercial and experimental works in clothing design, to details that have become embedded on my design practice.

“I should consider that many people don’t like showing their knees” (diary note, 14.05.2015)

“I did not want to have them [the ux curves] so literal [in the pattern], but it seems that it would be an interesting way to have the users perceiving it more physically than just in an abstract way. In the previous project they did mention that while taking care of the piece they could see some of the pattern [outline].” (diary note, 22.04.2016)

“[about a dress being cut with only one side seam, part of my designer repertoire] Never did [this kind of dress] in a woven fabric, but I think it is worth trying” (diary note, 27.04.2016)

“Now I will start working with the curves shapes and they reminded me of another project, so I automatically start thinking of similar shapes. [...] I have to explore more the experience curves.” (diary note, 21.04.2016)

“[...] I also make a dart on the shoulder that I always make, so the fabric falls better on the body” (diary note, 21.04.2016)

“[After being frustrated with the outcomes of experimenting with the ux curve lines, I try an approach, familiar to me, of making a list of instructions and sticking to it as a support to the creative process] - use only ONE curve for each piece - keep it simple - make the curves clear on the piece - surprise, surprise. [...] make at least one [surprise] happening on each piece” (diary note, 22.04.2016)

As can be seen from the quotations, sometimes these previous experiences drove me to positive designs and experiences (diary note, 22.04.2016), to allow myself to experiment a new design based on something that was previously successful (diary note 27.04.2016), but also to frustrating repetition of similar shapes (diary note, 21.04.2016). These previous experiences include not only the practice in itself but must also consider how different fabrics took different shapes when relating to the human body. These ‘successful’ or ‘unsuccessful’ test garments, thus, were relevant in shaping my experience through what can be understood as another process of embodiment – while me as a designer give shape to the fabric, the finished pieces are embodied in my own considerations of the experience.

In general, the findings clarify in which aspects the designer’s body is made present in the patterns within these two projects. Despite Verbeek (2012) making it extremely clear how we interact with the things we make by stating that ‘humans shape things, and things shape humans’ (p. 163), this study gives the quotation empirical examples. Notes around design decisions provide these examples, which make clear that the intertwining of designer and different matters (be it the designed matter or the rain outside) is precisely what shapes the designed object. In other words, while the patterns embody my experiences, these experiences (within myself as a design) also embody whichever expression captured from the materials with which I interact. In that sense, we can perceive the embodiment within this pattern cutting activity as a movement of mutual ‘incorporations’ (Ingold 1993, p. 157) between the designer and the patterns (and more generally, the world).

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper brings the discussion on routinely dress practices to the perspective of the fashion designer, supporting and expanding the field of research into fashion practice. From the reading of the collected data, personal influences were not always so easy to put into words when manifested in the process, being caught often only by cameras and not always in text. For instance, even though my body is frequently used in the process to measure distances, the fact that the forms in Dress(v.) came from my own movements of dressing was not mentioned one single time in the diaries. These mentions came exclusively from bodily actions. On the other hand, the autoethnographic approach to the phenomena of creating patterns for clothes through different data collections (text, video, photos), allows the identification these specific moments of decision making due, especially, to the diary notations. They proved to be rich source of information without which the recollection of feelings and perceptions about the surroundings would not be possible.

It must be noted that these projects comprise an experimental practice in clothing design, where personal drives and expressions can be taken into account in the final pieces, unlike most of the mainstream clothing and fashion production. The central aspects differentiating these two practices are (1) the monetary and commercial intents and (2) the role cultural and social norms play in the final decisions. This brings me to the question if a creative process in commercial clothing design would suppress these expressions along the process. The experimental aspect of the practice must, then, be seen as a limitation of this study, as it covers only one practice within such a vast field. But despite this limitation, and in consonance with the limitations that autoethnographic researches may offer, it is believed that others can use the findings presented here in order to expand the field of fashion research and practice. Consequently, this paper invites professionals in the field to further experimentations on research and design methods and propose projects that support the interweaving of research and design.

The contributions of this paper are achieved in two dimensions, those of practice and theory. While making use of ethnographic research methods, the projects presented here showed how research can inform and catalyse new expressions in fashion design. In this way, it contributes to the field of creative pattern cutting as an alternative to mainstream methods. On the other hand, it also adds to calls for a fashion research that still lacks the



practitioner viewpoint, as suggested by Finn (2014) who advocates for the fact that practitioners hold knowledge essential to a successful interpretation and analysis of fashion design research data.

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