

WALKING FAST
by Bror August Vestbø

In this text, I will be exploring the feeling of being unable to express oneself properly through clothes, and how a desire for change in representing identity can lead to exhaustion through confrontation with endless possibilities.

I. "Sigmund Freud, Analyze This"

II. Changeable Clothes

III. Literally

IV. Open Minded Friends

V. "Boris Lermontov: You can't alter human nature.

Ivan Boleslawsky: No? I think you can do even better than that. I think you can ignore it."

I. "Sigmund Freud, Analyze This"¹

As a thirteen and fourteen year old, I would often spend my evenings after finishing my homework creating looks in my room. I would wrap huge blankets around my head to mimic a giant cocoon, cover my platform heels in cellophane, wear rings shaped like skulls and leaves on all of my fingers and pair it all off with a giant pair of mosquito sunglasses. Creating these outfits made me feel happy and free in the safe space of my bed room, but the thought of wearing these outfits at school made my stomach turn. I invented a system to help me be brave enough to dress this way out in the real world – “The Dress Book.” I would write down detailed descriptions of all the outfits I made up in the evenings in a blue notebook, visualized with an illustration and assigned with a number. The looks included different combinations of everything I had in my closet, some of our home decor, and items from mothers closet. There were close to seventy looks in the book, as wearing something different everyday was of the utmost importance. Each morning, I would pick out a random number and whatever outfit was assigned to that number I had to wear. The rules were strict and there was no going back.

This tool made me dare to wear what I had imagined in my room but it did not get rid of my anxiety at school. I never discussed my feelings of insecurity about what I was wearing; part of the deal was to act as if I was completely sure of what I was doing. I thought the style would lose some of its cool if I were to express my insecurity about what I was wearing. My second tool to handle my nervous feeling became walking fast. When walking fast no one had time to properly review what I was wearing, and I would only become a glimpse. A movement I have come to associate fashion with as a whole.

Since then, I have visited many different styles. Changing style has taken up a large portion of my life, both through the time I have spent shopping and looking for clothes, getting dressed in the mornings, and trying on different outfits – not to mention all the hours I have had to work to earn enough money to buy all of these clothes. I have enjoyed parts of the walk, but no matter how fast I walk in one identity or how fast I walk away from one, I never seem to get to a final destination.

‘Alice looked round her in great surprise. ‘Why, I do believe we’ve been under this tree the whole time! Everything’s just as it was!’

‘Of course it is,’ said the Queen, ‘what would you have it?’

‘Well, in our country,’ said Alice, still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.’

‘A slow sort of country!’ said the Queen. ‘Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.’²

We have generally, if not encouraged teenagers to experiment with style, at least accepted it, as we view teenagers as individuals in constant identity crises, who are always trying on different personas. Indie one month and punk the next. We think it is normal for them to want to change style rapidly as they discover new ways of being. More recently, society seems to have opened up to the idea that adults can also be in a constant state of identity crisis. If not in crisis, at least in need of expressing that they have changed through their clothes. That there is nothing “inauthentic” about being dressed very differently from day to day, or from year to year. Today, the “authentic self” might be described less as internal and

¹ Madonna, 2002, Die Another Day

² Lewis Carrol, 1871, 32 &33

stable and more as something that is performed and constructed continually throughout time. Authenticity can be synonymous with multiplicity. As Professor Efrat Tseëlon explains in her text “The Multiple Self”:

“Analysis of the detailed questionnaires and interviews with a cross section of women in a range of ages in 1978-1989 and in 2012, revealed that self consciousness, anxiety with certain types of unfamiliar or judgmental audiences, situational norms and a desire to represent themselves best but not falsely, explained women’s use of clothes both in everyday situations and on special occasions. While motivation to improve their appearance involved elements of fun, fantasy and playfulness as well as a desire to present a nonverbal summary of themselves, and to navigate awareness of social norms and situational expectations, they drew a clear line between deception and expression. This is summarized by reinterpreting Goffman’s model of the presentation of self to mean that while dishonest behavior is managed, not every managed conduct is dishonest.

Managing appearance is not a question of having a ‘real self’ and covering it up with multiple masks, but rather of having multiplicity of selves, all genuine, which are dependent on context, audience and purpose. Consequently, the notion of a ‘real me’ is a fiction that cultural narratives make us believe.”³

Clothes can be described as either truthful or deceitful, but since our identity consists of so many selves and none of them more true than the other, what is it then that clothing says about us? Does every outfit tell different parts of our truth that collectively is an entire truth?

We have all become so sophisticated about performance that no style can simply appear “natural”. Not only can we be a different version of ourselves from day to day, but the amount of variation has become enormous. Before the internet, the way one dressed said something about where you were positioned in the world, because one only had access to what was around them physically. You had to be inside a culture to know about it. Globalization and mass production of clothes has made a larger range of clothing available to us, but it is the democratic flatness of the internet that has made us able to identify with many different cultures simultaneously. We don’t necessarily feel connected to just one culture because we are part of many fluctuating cultures online. Now there are endless places to shop and get inspired – like a kid in an infinite candy store. This has left us with many options to choose between.

One could imagine that because of this free for all attitude, we could all wear anything without a worry and that we could be liberated from attempting to properly express ourselves. But as anyone who has felt like they were improperly dressed at a party will tell you, this is not the case. Even though we cannot pinpoint one specific item of clothing to one truthful description in a dictionary or assign anyone complete ownership of any style, clothes are still loaded with meaning and echoes from the past. They mean one thing to one person and another thing to the next.

Many people are still hunting for the perfect wardrobe with both lust and panic. As a result we continue to buy endless amounts of clothing to properly express the feeling that we change, either by getting enough garments to alternate between, or to completely change out our wardrobe from time to time.

³ Professor Efrat Tseëlon, 2018, 159

Concepts of the “timeless” or “basic” could be interpreted as attempts towards the liberation of expressing individuality and to make us buy fewer clothes, but at the end of the day, superficial simplicity in style is just the denial of complexity, not its resolution.⁴

The term “Normcore” was coined by a parodic trend forecasting company called “K-HOLE” who in 2013 described the style of an individual who resists the idea of individuality and that true freedom comes from accepting their normality.

“Individuality was once the path to personal freedom – a way to lead life on your own terms. But the terms keep getting more and more specific, making us more and more isolated. Normcore seeks the freedom that comes with non-exclusivity. It finds liberation in being nothing special, and realizes that adaptability leads to belonging. Normcore is a path to a more peaceful life.”⁵

The thought of dressing normcore sounds liberating, but is hard to live by. As a short term follower of the trend, I can say that it evidently felt just as performative as any other style, and that to “act normal” was not any more liberating.

My “The Dress Book” method in retrospect reminds me of the computerized closet from the 1995 film *Clueless*. Each morning, the protagonist Cher consults her computer which presents different options for what she can wear that day, letting her know if the look is a “match!” or a “miss-match!”⁶ “The Dress Book” could be considered a tool for dressing, similar to a fashion magazine, only that I acted as both the editor and the consumer. The method is not really different from that of commercial fashion magazines in general, a publication put together by “professionals” who can tell you what to wear and what not to wear. They categorize your body and your identity and “help” you dress the part. In *Adorned in Dreams*, Elisabeth Wilson draws out this example:

“In 1945, an American self-help manual aimed to help women to dress to type, each type exemplified by a film star. Again, there are six major types:

The Exotic Woman - Ilona Massey
 The Outdoor Woman - Katherine Hepburn
 The Sophisticated - Merle Oberon
 The Womanly Woman - Greer Garson
 The Aristocrat - Joan Fontaine
 The Gamine - Betty Hutton

Throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s, popular women’s magazines regularly ran quizzes to help the reader decide her type, together with advice on how to enhance it.”⁷

⁴ K-HOLE, 2013, 25

⁵ K-HOLE, 2013, 25

⁶ Amy Heckerling, 1995

⁷ Elisabeth Wilson, 1985, 124

Now there is something clearly oppressive about fashion magazines categorizing women and “helping” them be the way they are expected to behave and look. Many feminists wrote about the bondage of fashion during the early part of the post-war epoch, including Simone de Beauvoir:

“Elegance is really just like housework: by means of it the woman who is deprived of *doing* anything feels that she expresses what she *is*. To care for her beauty, to dress up, is a kind of work that enables her to take possession of her person as she takes possession of her home through housework; her ego then seems chosen and recreated by herself.”⁸

However, there is also something weirdly appealing and liberating sounding about the idea that someone could just tell you how to be. Especially because we might feel like we know how we don't want to be, like when you open up your closet full of clothes and say to yourself “I have nothing to wear,” but how we want to be on the other hand remains a question mark. The appeal of this kind of categorizing of identity is rather like that of astrology, as Elisabeth Wilson also points out in *Adorned In Dreams*:

“There's a strange psychological reassurance in the idea that one *can* be categorized, the thrill of self-recognition in saying ‘I'm a typical Leo,’ or ‘I'm the Artistic Type.’”⁹

If fashion magazines and self-help books are tools to handle the act of dressing, then what are clothes? A problem that needs to be solved? Or if clothes are tools, are fashion magazines instruction manuals? Most things we consider tools are possessions we acquire so that they can keep solving the same issue over time. It seems as if clothing is not a tool at all, as it is something that is constantly losing its function. Of course people have completely different relationships to clothes, but as we can see from walking around flea markets or vintage shops, people are not only throwing out fast fashion but also designer labels and good quality clothing.

There might be endless options, but none of them seem to fit, so we keep trying on things that don't stick. If we don't know what clothing says about us, how do we choose them? Would it be better if we were able to just decide on one style? Would we feel better if we simply found one skin to call our own? Obviously it would be better for the environment. But “how will I know”¹⁰ which is right? Is it we who need to change or is it our tools? In the words of the great Carrie Bradshaw, “I couldn't help but wonder: *Why do we keep investing?*”¹¹

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, 1953, 505

⁹ Elisabeth Wilson, 1985, 125

¹⁰ Whitney Houston, 1985, How Will I Know

¹¹ Michael Patrick King, 2003



'All Suits Rainbow Version' by Sylvie Zijlmans & Hewald Jongenelis. 2013.

II. Changeable Clothes

Over the past year and a half, I have been trying to make clothes that reflect the feeling that we change and that we have multiple selves. I have attempted this by constructing garments that have a changeable element built into them, either by being able to change form, function, or size. I sometimes perform this for the purpose of making something that the wearer can play with to create different looks, and sometimes to communicate the idea of how choosing can be exhausting. However, I don't feel like I have succeeded in this pursuit. My "Panel Dress" for example is a dress built out of a simple tank top. The wearer can button off and on a pair of sleeves and three different lengths to make it into a dress. The wearer can dissect the garment into a different version of itself, but the overall expression remains the same. It is perceived very similarly no matter how it's put together. It is still lacking the ability to change what it is saying.

To be exhausted from having too many options to choose from is obviously not the case for everyone. Different cultures have different relationships to dress as well as individuals. I recently read the chapter "Why Clothing is Not Superficial" in Daniel Miller's book *Stuff*. Here he compares the way women dress in Trinidad, India, Madrid and London. I was especially fascinated to learn about Indian women's relationship to the sari. The following text is based on Miller's writing on the sari.

A sari is a piece of unstitched cloth varying from four to nine meters in length and six-hundred to one-thousand and two-hundred millimeters in width, that is commonly draped around the body of women in the Indian subcontinent. It is not uncommon that an Indian woman will wear a sari every day. This does not mean that the sari wearing woman is wearing something that remains the same every day, quite the opposite; the sari's function and meaning changes from birth until death, and from one moment to the next. Over eighty variations in which the sari can be worn have been documented. The most common way to drape the sari is the *Nivi* style, where it is draped from right to left, wrapped around the waist, with the loose end of the drape (the *pallu*, an often more decorated end of fabric) to be worn over the shoulder. A sari is considerably difficult to use, the draping and tucking around the body is something that the wearer needs to master. Unlike most stitched clothing that can be put on in the morning and requires no further interaction until it is taken off again, the sari demands constant interaction. Depending on how the woman is standing, walking, sitting or how the weather is, she changes her sari to be more comfortable, but also to symbolize the right thing at the right moment. The most multi-purpose part of the sari is the *pallu*. The *pallu* almost functions as an extension of the body, beyond comparison to any Western item of clothing. A woman will use it in the kitchen to lift hot pots and clean surfaces, as a knotted bag to keep her belongings in, or to protect her face from smoke from a car driving by. The *pallu* almost takes on a "prostatic quality," as it is taken for granted as something that is always there. The *pallu* is introduced as a part of the body almost at birth, as women will use it as a "multi-purpose nursing tool." It can often take time for children to realize that the *pallu* is in fact not a part of their mother.

In adulthood, the *sari* takes on an ambiguous role of symbolizing sexuality. Women are supposed to express modesty by always covering their breasts with the *pallu*, but the constant re-covering of the breasts can also work as a tool for drawing attention to them. There are also various draping techniques that accentuate the waist and female figure, leaving parts of the body covered by fewer layers of fabric, creating a more sheer appearance. Physical contact between men and women in public remains frowned upon in India, so to pull on someone's *pallu* can become the nearest experience to being able to touch each other when out on a walk. The *pallu* is not only connected with birth and sexuality, but

also death, as it is a typical item to assist in committing suicide by hanging from the ceiling with the end of one's *pallu*.

As Daniel Miller points out in his text, it's not to be taken for granted that a woman knows how to use her *sari*:

“As an outsider entering a village where all women wear a sari one just assumes that this has become natural as something obvious and straightforward. But this is not at all the case. One meets women who have worn a sari for forty years and still never feel that they are really in command of the garment.

Some, having had the misfortune to fail the test of driving or by tripping over their school farewell, never achieve real mastery and acquire a new and unwelcome identity as ‘poor woman driver/sari wearer’ that will burden them the rest of their lives.”¹²

But once it is mastered, it can become an instrument of power:

“Just as the sari starts off as a far more oppressive than most Western garments, it now has the capacity to be far more powerful. Men working in offices complained that they could not compete with some women, simply because men don't wear a sari. A woman at on with her sari knows exactly how to place her *pallu*. While everyone else looking at her thinks it is just about to fall from her shoulder, she knows it isn't. She has command of a tool that allows her to express a variety of subtle emotions and claims, manipulating the saris' particular capacity for ambiguity especially with respect to eroticism. The sari by this stage becomes an instrument of power.”¹³

What seems to be so unique about this is that there is a tipping point, a light at the end of the tunnel. It is of course hard to learn how to use such a simple tool to make complex variations, similar to how writing is hard at first, but once it is mastered it becomes an extremely useful tool. Western dress and Western tools can execute many of the same functions that the sari can, but what really differentiates the sari is how all of these functions exist in one simple strip of cloth. In theory, that same piece of cloth could be used countless other ways as well. So why don't we have any of this logic in Western dress? Perhaps we do. The iPhone almost functions as an extension of our bodies, both for solving many practical tasks and in representing our identities online. The way some use Instagram accounts is similar to how some dress, each post representing one outfit, that collectively creates an impression of your style as a whole: another type of constructed and performed self. But the use of Instagram produces new things, as opposed to the re-using and re-seeing of the same thing. It might be that Western culture does have something that is as multi-functioning as the sari, but that we are not able to see it.

¹² Daniel Miller, 2010, 29

¹³ Danile Miller, 2010, 30



"Page Closet" from Bror August Vestbø Research Portfolio.
Drawing on a Helmut Newton photograph. Oslo. 2020.

III. Literally

When talking, we can say one thing in one moment and the opposite in the next. Expressing ourselves in speech is always changeable in that moment. Sometimes, there is no going back from what we said, but we can at least express if we have changed our mind in the moment the change happened; it is immediate.

When one gets dressed in the morning, they represent who they are for the day, unless one changes clothes for a different situation or mentality. Surely I am not the only one who has walked one block from my house only to realize the outfit I have picked out is a disaster that I need to go home and fix.

I have made two-hundred and twenty four-by four centimeter white velvet pillows with white velvet ribbons coming out of each corner. The pillows are blank on one side and have a letter or symbol on the other. There are seven of each letter in the alphabet, from A to Å. In addition to these letters, there are two quotation marks, one question mark, one exclamation point, one ampersand, and two pillows with the number twenty on them. The thought behind this set of pillows was for it to be tied together as a garment that can always be changed in size, function, shape, and in what it communicates. In theory, this set of letters could be reassembled after leaving the house so that one could walk out the door in the morning with "SUCCESS" written across their chest, only to change it into "I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THAT" after lunch. The wearer could change the garment all day to say whatever is possible within the two-hundred and twenty squares.

The squares were made in white velvet because I already had four hundred meters of double faced white velvet ribbon at hand and it would eliminate the work of making ribbons to match the fabric. I wanted the squares to be as small as possible to open up for as much writing space within the garment as possible. The squares are white with black writing to imitate a standard style of writing. The letters on the squares are made with wood blocks from the publishing workshop at my school, usually used for printing books. The set took seven full days to make. Each day would consist of only one action: one day for cutting, another for stamping, another for ironing, another for needling, another for machine sewing, and two days for hand sewing. I felt like I was an employee at a doll house interiors factory. Is the set of squares handcrafted or mass produced? Both handcrafted and mass produced clothes are made with human hands, just that one hand is considered more valuable than the other. The definition of a handcrafted object is something that is made using non-tech related tools, like scissors. Which would mean the use of an ironing board and a sewing machine would make something not handcrafted. In this situation, my hands produce a mass of squares, but because it is me, and because I collect them into one thing, they might be perceived as handcrafted. Would they be considered mass produced if I sold each square separately?

The first experiment I wanted to do with the set of squares was to wear them myself. I laid out a plan to wear a garment made from the squares every day from the day I finished making them until the day I had to hand in my final thesis, which would be approximately three weeks. The aim of the experiment was to try to express myself properly through one item of clothing, every day and every minute, by constantly expressing words and sentences written out with these squares. To follow the progression of the experiment, I would write a journal and answer a set of fixed questions for each day. The experiment lasted for two days before I gave up.

The panic of not knowing what to wear was multiplied by a hundred when trying to wear this set of squares. Choosing what shape the garment would take and what the writing would express was not that hard – this part was actually quite fun and reminded me of my joy creating clothes in general. The difficulty came from combining the finished tied garment with my other clothes in a way that felt natural to wear. I started treating myself as one of my own models, where the most important thing is what I see, not how it feels to wear.

In my first internship, I was taught that you should never try on your own samples in progress, because then your judgment on how the garment itself looks would be confused with wondering how it looks on you. I have always since believed this to be true, but this experiment has put into question if this is in fact a good way to design.

The process of tying a garment which would be big enough to cover my entire body was so time consuming that I never had time to do so before having to leave the house. For example, it took me about two hours to form a skirt. Even then, the skirt wouldn't cover my body entirely because of all the tiny gaps between the ties. I would spend a lot of time figuring out what to wear in combination with the garment I made to feel covered up in a nice way. The garment's function was consequently not much different from my other clothes – it just demanded more time. The garment created a more honest and vulnerable look as it quite literally gave me very little to hide behind other than my messages. This made me long for the opposite – a garment that felt safe and comforting, covered up and stable.

The need for security reminded me of Cristóbal Balenciaga's iconic sculptural designs, most of which he made toward the end of his career, between the 1950s and 60s. At this time, there were many fashion designers making incredible work with structuring voluminous shapes out of the body, including Christian Dior, Pierre Balmain, Hubert de Givenchy, and Charles James. What made Balenciaga's work stand out from the crowd was how he worked with creating space in between the body and the garment, in contrast to many designers of the time who would build their structures out of a small waist and tight bodice. The thought of wearing one of his spacious designs sounds so comforting; to not have to worry about how your body looks, because the shape of your body is hidden inside a beautiful dress. When wearing tight clothing, I am always reminded of my body, conscious of how it moves in and out when I breathe. I can imagine that wearing a Balenciaga "sack dress" might feel comparable to being naked in your house: safe and free, like being in a little room perfectly fitted for your body.

Instead of comparing clothes to writing or talking, as a tool to express oneself, we could perhaps compare it to a home. A home is something that is often bought as an investment. It stays the same, apart from acquiring slight wear, and is big enough to fill with many physical and emotional things. Perhaps clothes could be something one acquires as an investment as well, somewhere one will live for a while, where many versions of oneself will proliferate.



Terry Hayes (Helmet) photographed by Bob Mizer. Los Angeles. 1974.

IV. Open Minded Friends

After two days of wearing the set, I realized I needed to view it in another way. I therefore invited eight friends to test out the set of squares: Julie, Ida, Karine, Dina, Tonje, Tiril, Victoria, and Lotte. The group consisted of two fashion designers, three graphic designers, one artist, and two professionals outside of art or design with an interest in both. I gave all participants no information beforehand on what they were going to do. Half of the group was invited to my home, where I would lay out the set of squares on a white sheet on the floor of my one-room apartment. The other half were all school mates of mine, so they were invited to the theory room at school, which is a room with big windows where bypassers could see us. In each place, I would roll out the set on the same sheet to a table. One person did the experiment in the library group room, which felt like a very fitting place to be. Even though none of them were informed on what they were going to do, there was a difference in how much I had talked to each of them about the project beforehand. They all entered in different head spaces, some calm in the morning, others quickly stopping by before another appointment.

As each person sat down and got ready, I would tell them that they were to imagine that they had received the set as a gift from me. They were told to imagine being at home, about to meet me for the first time since receiving the set in one hour and thirty minutes. It would therefore be appropriate to let me know how they had used the gift. I expressed that it was completely up to them what they wanted to do with the set, that they could either do something with it before they left or bring it with them in some way. I said they should spend approximately one hour because it takes about thirty minutes to get to the bar where we are hypothetically meeting. I also told them that they can imagine that I am a friend or partner who lives with them and that I can help them tie if necessary but that they have to decide on what to do with it themselves. I also show them two very simple tying techniques.

The results were the following:

Julie made a top with the alphabet spelled out in almost correct order. Her intention was for it to be in the correct order. She also wanted to make a skirt but did not have time to do so.

Ida made a patch where she wrote "LITERATUR" on one side of it, meaning "literature," but not spelled out in a line, the letters were scattered around. On the other side, she wrote a combination of "ØHH," "ØØØ," "ØØHÅH," "H," "WÆ," "Å," "ÆEWÅ," "WÆÆEÆH," "W," "W," "W" to mimic sounds. She also wrote "MAKE A LIST" on the side without tying it together.

Karine made a word association game where different words she ties together create a random shape. It is up to the person who sees someone wearing the game to find the words. She wrote "DUST," "DEAR," "TEAR," "DAWN," "LAW," "ARM," "MARKE," "RULES," "LIAR," "BROR," "LOVE," "SAVE," "BAD," "BLOW," "NO," "WOW," "OK," "HO." She put it on as a top.

Dina made a shawl that says "DINA" on one side and "! 2020 BYE TRUMP DONALD" on the other.

Tonje made a belt with straps that go above the shoulder from the front to the back. She placed the letters "W," "X," "Y," and "Z" across it, making sure that the same letter is never placed next to each other.

Tiril made a rescue vest. She wrote the last names of the four safest and warmest references she had. The emotionally most important to her. “SKRAM,” “HOLTH,” “AKHMATOVA,” “TOKLAS.” She also wrote “JEG,” which means “me” in Norwegian.

Victoria made a thought map, she has written, “ASTERISK,” “SNØFNUGG,” “RO,” “GLIMT,” “KROPP.” This means the “asterisk” symbol, “snowflake,” “calm,” “glimpse,” and “body,” respectively.

Lotte made a tube top with the writing “DRUNK CHICKS THINK IM PHILANTHROPIC” and an “LMFO” headband.

After they finished, I would ask them a series of questions. First, I asked them to describe the experience of doing this experiment. Some found it hard because they felt as if their creativity was being tested, others because it was difficult for them to control the tying or challenging to understand how to give it shape, while others thought it was fun, calming, comforting, and even meditative.

When asked to define what the set of squares was, it was referred to as a toy, game, sartorial riddle, tool, puzzle, or interactive design object. No one said it was clothing, though when talking about it in other responses, would commonly refer to it as a garment. When questioned about this discrepancy, many said it was because I had made it, and that they think what I make is clothing. Some of my questions would also refer to it as something that could be worn, which probably played a part in shaping the participants view as well. Especially when asked about why they wrote what they did or the absence of writing, the fact that it was viewed as clothing was crucial. Everyone could agree that there is something tricky about wearing words on clothes. Tiril pointed out that there is a strange unclarity about someone wearing words on clothes, as to who it is that is saying what’s written on the garment, is it the creator of the garment or the wearer? While some of them maybe could have worn or even purchased a slogan t-shirt, it became extremely difficult to be the creator of that slogan. There was no ambiguity to hide behind. They would become too self aware of what they were communicating and uncomfortable with having full ownership of it. Lotte felt like there was something so “pure” about the garment that it had the possibility of being overly sincere and she needed to make it “dirty” by being ironic with her writing. Many said that they most likely would use it in a comedic way, not to look silly, but to write an internal joke, an homage to friends, or as an ice breaker on a date – at least if they were to use the set out in public.

Femke de Vries points out in her text, “SELF HELP SHIRTS,” some of the same difficulty of being sincere with writing on clothes. She specifically refers to the type of writing that is supposed to be about the inner self, like a sweatshirt that says “LOVE” or “HURTING” on it. Not very long ago, writing on clothes would usually reflect something from the outer world, like cities you have travelled to or bands you have listened to, but today they are also used to say something about our state of mind, thus attempting to make the inner and emotional self into an outer layer that can be worn:

“And yes, when I look at my collection of garments with words on them proclaiming that ‘Smiling makes your day better’ I have difficulty taking it seriously. We can surely also question the impact of these texts, as they are descriptions of an emotion, impossibly really being an emotion. Despite all of this, when I wear my shirt with the word ‘emotional’ on it, I am very self-aware. I become conscious of my emotional state, of

being a woman and how women are seen as emotional beings, irrational and frivolous. Language after all has the power to instigate feelings and give shape to the intangible – it shapes our culture. The importance of these verbal garments in our contemporary society therefore cannot be underestimated. On good days, I like to think that they are a valuable acknowledgement of our feelings or a positive ironic outlet that helps us deal with our fluctuating states of mind.”¹⁴

Tonje used the letters “W,” “X,” “Y,” and “Z” as a way to play with shapes rather than trying to communicate a message, while Ida tried to write sounds out of resistance to making a slogan, pointing out how sounds have some of that same ambiguity which clothes possess, particularly in relation to words.

Karine and Victoria both created a type of word game out of it – to both of them, this had a calming effect. They were not concerned with what their writing communicated, perhaps because they didn't treat it immediately as a garment. Although Karine said that this was her initial thought, when she suddenly wrote “BROR” after she had written “LIAR” in her word association game, she felt like she needed to even it out by writing “LOVE” after. Even though it was supposed to be read as an unclear collection of words and she felt like it was up to the viewer to determine what they see in the garment, there was some part of her that was concerned about how it would be perceived.

Tiri was able to make the set into a tool of comfort. She described what she had made as a “little hug”, something she could wear in her personal space to keep her spirits up while writing. She was also not concerned with how her writing would be seen from the outer world because she knew that she was doing her writing for only her to see and feel. Originally, the t-shirt was used as an undergarment, something that was hidden. Today it is quite the opposite, as the t-shirt is the most common item of clothing for expressing an opinion to the outer world. Similarly, feelings used to be something we were meant to suppress, but today they are proudly commodified and worn in the shape of slogan t-shirts like “Feelings Are Facts.” Tiri's “little hug” was almost like a “taking back” of the slogan t-shirt, making it into something for the private and not the public. She commented in her interview that if she had this set of squares, she would keep it a secret because she likes secrets, even though she is very bad at keeping them.

Whether kept as a secret or not, everyone agreed that they would keep the set forever and that they would like it just as much, if not more over time. This did not however mean that they would necessarily use it a lot. Although there were many good suggestions as to how the set of squares could be used in addition to being a garment (as a blanket, curtain, flag, poster, protest sign, or frame), it seemed as if the design was too impractical, time consuming, or difficult to use often. Some said that they could maybe wear it actively in certain periods of time for generating ideas or while writing, but no one thought it could be worn several days a week. It was not considered to be something that fulfilled a need they had, it would not replace another buy, but rather be an extra treat. Which makes the set into a very fashionable thing, an *Obscure Object of Desire*.¹⁵

¹⁴ Femke de Vries, 2019, 3

¹⁵ Luis Buñuel, 1977



"This used to be my playground" by Lucia Dovicakova. Košice. 2015

IV. "Boris Lermontov: You can't alter human nature.

Ivan Boleslawsky: No? I think you can do even better than that. I think you can ignore it."¹⁶

I was disappointed but not surprised to hear that it did not seem possible to use the kit in the same way as the sari, a uniform one can wear every day, transcending from meaning to meaning. The downfall of the garment was not its inability to change meaning, but rather its impracticality and lack of ambiguity. If the set was more practical in its change of function and more subtle in its change of symbolism, would this change the group's view? Could they then have worn it every day? At this moment, it's not possible to know for sure, but my first guess would be no. This is because I don't believe that our difficulty with wearing the same garment every day lies within the garment itself, but how one views it. No matter how changeable a design is, it is up to us to see it in a new way.

Fashion designers respond to change in the world by constantly creating new portraits – at best, portraits that have never been depicted in such a way before, so that they become unplaceable. Simultaneously as we present these portraits, we describe them with words and expose them in images, so that there are only a matter of months, days, hours, or moments before that very portrait is considered understood. We don't allow our clothes to take on a new meaning before they become tainted with a definition that makes us discard them; we identify in them an old version of ourselves, no longer accurate. But what if instead of creating new portraits with new clothing, we tried to create them with old clothing? This new practice could be centered around describing and depicting existing clothing in new ways.

What does a white cotton shirt read like after countless re-inventions? Did we have to pick, spin, weave, sew, and sell the cotton all over again for the new meaning to reveal itself? Or has the new portrait always existed, they've just been waiting in a garment for the right moment.¹⁷ Maybe a garment, like a person, has no final way of being – clothing, like people, contain multiple selves.

So what does this set of squares do? As Tonje pointed out, its core quality is that it can be many things, and this is only possible when we don't define what that is, when we allow this object the natural beauty of change.

Bror August Vestbø
December, 2020

¹⁶ Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, 1948

¹⁷ Björk, 1995, *The Modern Things*.



“Alphabet set” by Bror August Vestbø. Oslo. 2020.

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