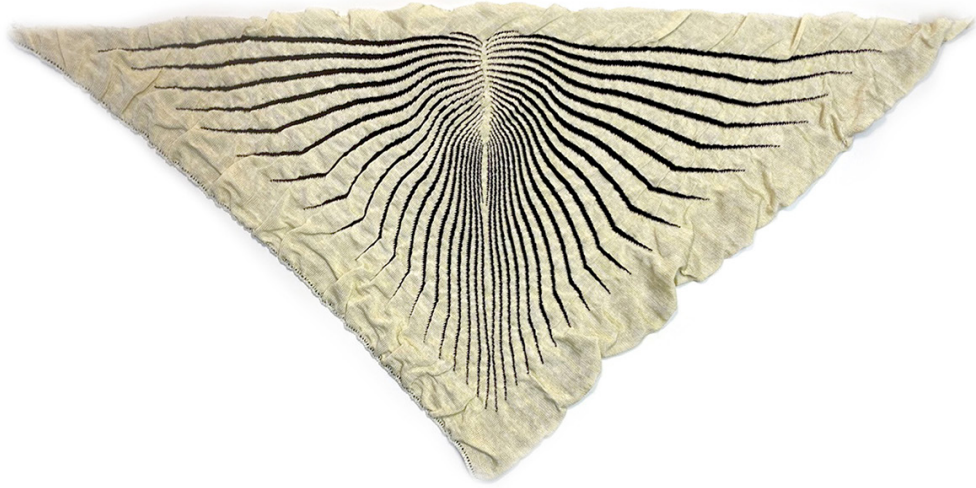Morteza Vaseghi

Why do I do what I do

Prelude

The shape and material of the item above suggest that this is a scarf; upon wearing it, the lines start to find their place, and the arrangement offers a similarity to having long hair with a middle parting. Therefore we can loosely assume it is a headscarf that carries abstract motives resembling hair. An item covers what is underneath whilst revealing what it is hiding. This could have been an even clearer sign if the said headscarf was made of actual hair. Now, if this hair was from the same person that uses this specific headscarf, then we add another layer, and, moreover, if it is worn in a context where showing one's hair is not permitted, then this scarf can start to symbolise something else. However, what exactly does it represent?

How would this headscarf be perceived in an Orthodox Jewish setting compared to a strict Muslim setting? For one, I may suggest it is a hybrid Sheitel, and for the other, it may be a protest art (but for which side of the fight remains to be another question). With an item like this, we have a metalepsis (a term which will be explained later), but again, for some observers, this can come across as a bad joke, an immature pun only to provoke for the sake of provocation. If done well and within a proper context, an item like this headscarf or, to give another example, a pocket with no dead-end, can reside in a threshold of in-between things. This headscarf and what it provokes have a liminal nature. Carefully put, it can be a discursive item, unfolding its meaning, and describing a whole narrative. It can be a metaphor. Semiotics and recontextualisation are in play. There is something surreal about it. I have introspectively observed a clear pattern of wanting to create things that fall in the category similar to what I described here, as many others artists and designers have done so before me. Sometimes the work brings all those aspects to the surface, and sometimes only one of those topics manages to rise from the fog. The clear intention of where the work is on the axiom – *literal versus abstract*– creates different results that serve different purposes. Can this comparison be relative to the relation between ideas versus aesthetics as well?

First encounters of the third kind

Trying to think about both ends of a spectrum in a matching situation has been an obsession of mine for as long as I can remember. I have been fascinated by the idea of juxtaposing elements in close proximity to one another. Through mixing two opposing things, we can create two different meanings for one single thing. This is magical to me.

A critical situation that illustrated this notion must have happened during my earliest journey travelling abroad from my native hometown. It is daytime, and my family and I are on the beach. Suddenly I start wondering why all these topless women are relaxing on the sand! Where I come from women are covered head to toe in public, and generally with black fabric! Then at night, there were fireworks, and people happily celebrated. I felt terrified and started crying. The last time I had heard the sound of explosions or even witnessed some flashing lights like this in the dark sky, we had to run to the basement. Later I understood that at the peak of the war in my home country, we had a three-week trip to Europe, and spent a couple of days in the south of France.

What dominated my head was not about which of these states were better or worse, but how remarkably different the same thing could be by being placed in different contexts. During this trip and its contrasting experiences I began to understand that nothing is absolute, and that there is not only one condition for things. Similar things having two highly different outcomes felt strange and became a dilemma. But surely there must be a third condition in between or beyond these two ends of an extreme, where they can coexist. So, unaware at the time, I started to look for that third state.

A chance encounter (and we shall get back to whether there is such a thing as

chance) of a series of events started to present a domain that matched the terrain where I could see a possibility of everything together. I was visiting my aunt. We had just finished watching *Star Wars*, I went to her room and went through some big art books that I could reach from the lower shelves. As I started to flip through the pages of these books, I found myself highly immersed in these images as portals to a different place. These were works of artists such as René Magritte and Salvador Dalí, plus other strange seeds like (Abdul) Mati Klarwein, and so on. It is notable to say that during this whole time, Pink Floyd's *Animals* album was playing in the background. The total sensory impression must have been strong as it created an immersive flow state. This was when I was only five years old.

What happens in this world

It was only later on that I understood this genre – that had the capacity to contain the said various juxtapositional elements – was called Surrealism. This was the third state of being, that in-between world that I was looking for. Since then, I wanted to see what could fit and exist within that universe, as well as creating works myself to contribute to the space. Although it can be argued that it was just a series of random events that gave me this impression, yet it is well fitting to consider André Breton and Paul Eluard's survey on *Coincidence*. They do indeed attempt to question whether the role of *chance* and random events in one's life become the extra push in bringing pre-existing important notions out from the subconsciousness of oneself and to surface onto one's surroundings.

When one considers a work of surrealist nature it might be worth considering that an arena of fictional narrative is more accurate than reality itself. It is the metaphorical and archetypal structure of reality that has the capability to be modelled for and applied to different situations. It is worth quoting Professor Theodor Barth comment on the headscarf that I mentioned at the start of this essay: "In some aspects, I think the scarf may act as a dream-catcher of realities that are not dreamt but are historical and real. Thereby using Surrealism as a method: the pathways of historical reality moving through desire and dream life to manifest itself as coincidence. Definition by Breton and Eluard, in a survey on coincidence (Minotaure magazine)."

Surrealism presented a method early on in my life that could speak and communicate what was not present otherwise. However, my next encounter with this world happened almost 15 years later through the work of the Iranian artist, Ali Akbar Sadeghi. This *chance* encounter reignited the childhood episWodes mentioned earlier. This time around, it was even more tangible and graspable for me seeing as the Surreal visual language was appropriated through his (and my) cultural lens. Sadeghi's work was loaded with references from the realm where I lived my day-to-day life.

Soon I could observe some patterns of creative manoeuvres being repeated, not only through Sadeghi's works, but through works of other masters of the past that grabbed my attention. Artists and Surrealists like Magritte and Dalí used methods

such as *Double Imaging*, *Optical Illusion*, *Morphology*, *Pareidolia*, *Semiotics*, *Displacements*, and *Recontextualisation*.
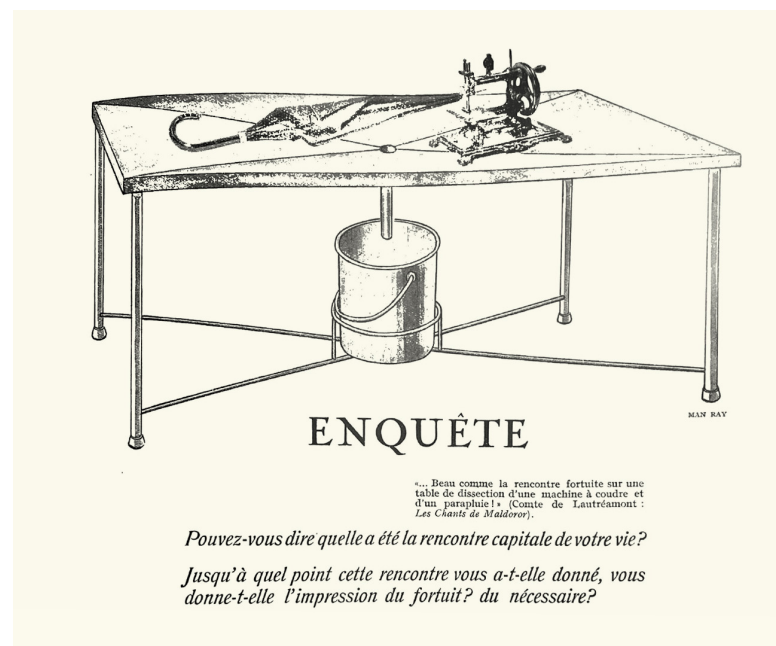
Fashion and Surrealism
Surrealism and Fashion

&

After some years, I became aware of Sadeghi's attention to fashion; costume and clothing details of the characters in his paintings, thanks to a comment from one of his sons. His ornaments carried deep meanings, as coded and subtle elements. His background in graphic design might have made him aware of the symbolism of elements that he carefully included. His interest in fashion had become even more evident in the later years, first by painting straight on pieces of clothing, and later by collaborating with a fashion designer to create garments.

Surrealists' attention to fashion was nothing new, and fashion itself has played a significant role in that movement. Although the movement started on the backbone of the spoken and written word – giving signs of a movement based on theoretical grounds and mainly verbal basis – it quickly moved to an obsession with objects. Soon, these objects were partnered up with fine arts. It was later in the 1930's in Paris that fashion entered the movement, and it did so wholeheartedly. The union of these two artistic disciplines was so strong that even today, we could see that Surrealism has never left fashion. Innumerable aspects within the world of fashion have changed over the years – from conceptual development to material, immaterial production to presentation and mediation – but not its favourite ties with Surrealism.

3

ENQUÊTE

MAN RAY

«... Beau comme la rencontre fortuite sur une
table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et
d'un parapluie !» (Comte de Lautréamont :
Les Chants de Maldoror).

Pouvez-vous dire quelle a été la rencontre capitale de votre vie?

*Jusqu'à quel point cette rencontre vous a-t-elle donné, vous
donne-t-elle l'impression du fortuit? du nécessaire?*

Fashion and Surrealism interaction is a two-way street, but initially, it was fashion and its equipment that started to be present in surrealist imagery. They

were used metaphorically to symbolise women, men, social interactions, and so forth. The first-generation Surrealists used fashion items as symbolising tools to convey their messages in the making of images. To go back to the image that was on top of the aforementioned Breton and Eluard's survey on *Coincidence* (Minotaure magazine): *The Chance Encounter of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella on a Dissecting Table*. This image was accompanied by a line from Comte de Lautréamont's poem, *Les Chants de Maldoror* which is dependent on the existence of those three items and their juxtaposing relations.

I insist we also look in the other direction of exchanges between the two worlds of fashion and Surrealism, by looking at how Surrealism entered fashion. I would suggest examining the work of designer Elsa Schiaparelli here as essential. She single-handedly promoted fashion as art, and she collaborated heavily with the Surrealists. Schiaparelli entered new creative realms due to her vivid imagination and participation in the Surrealist art movements and her intuitive senses immediately helped to set her work apart from that of her main competitor Coco Chanel, who called her "that Italian artist who makes clothes".

Many of Schiaparelli's most iconic designs were created in collaboration with artists of her time; most notably Dalí. He praised her workshops as the "beating heart" of Surrealist Paris during the end of the 1930s, and they created the first genuine fusions of fashion and art. Her tragicomic surrealist fashion is grotesque and humorous, and well-fitting the genre of which predates by six decades the deformed visions of Alexander McQueen and Martin Margiela. She created a collection of exquisite cocktail hats in the form of lamb chops, high heels, vaginas, as well as a pair of boots with monkey fur that Magritte had influenced. Her embroideries were drawn by Jean Cocteau, who hired her to create the costumes for his movies and plays. However, Dalí was her main helper. They created a suit with *Bureau Drawer* pockets and the *Skeleton Dress* with cushioned ribs. On another occasion, he added a red lobster that matched a bow tie to the white evening gown's skirt as decoration (or vandalism). There are numerous examples of works that, with the help of semiotics and recontextualisation, managed to bring Surrealism into the fashion and mark its place eternally. Clothes of this nature are items more than basic clothing.

4

Becoming what?

Nevertheless, what happens to the wearer when they wear such successful items with depth? What do they offer? Perhaps it can be very beneficial to point out Gilles Deleuze and look into the idea of *Becoming*. And to better understand this notion I would like to quote two separate paragraphs from the *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorist book*:

"'Becoming' is a practice of change and of 'repetitions with a difference', to refer to the title of one of Deleuze's most important books (Deleuze, 1994 [1968]). With each repetition - of a gesture, a thought, a desire, a way of dressing - one can make little changes and hence differ from what one was before. The continuous process of creative transformations is what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) understand by 'becoming-other'. Becoming implies a different way of thinking about human identity: not rigid and fixed from cradle to grave, but fluid and flexible throughout life. Human identity is capable of morphing into new directions, participating in movement, crossing a threshold, finding a line of flight, or jumping to the next plateau." ("Thinking Through Fashion," 2015. P. 167)

"'Becoming is a verb', writes Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 239). But who or what does one become? To put it in a Nietzschean way, you become who you are.? However, in Deleuze and Guattari's view 'you' is an ego-centred, self-aggrandizing, narcissistic entity that is 'organised, signified, subjected' (1987: 161). This is the fixed and confined self that one should leave behind, if only temporarily, by experimenting and looking for new ways of becoming. In one of their most beautiful sentences, which also serves as the epigram for this chapter, they write: 'in fact, the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 249). The self is a node in a network of multiple relations, and to set its desires flowing, one has to create connections with others - animals, plants, machines, molecules. They want 'you' to stretch your boundaries and 'become-woman', 'become-animal', 'become-machine','become-molecular' and even 'become-imperceptible'." ("Thinking Through Fashion," 2015. P. 169)

It is my understanding that Deleuze is not that interested in what *becoming* means, but primarily interested in what this *becoming* does. I can carefully recognise this notion through my experience of creating a particular piece earlier this year.

It was clear what ignited this piece for me. In order to create, one has to relate. We all have a collection of various elements in our minds, and assemble networks between them to create more complex compartments of ideas. Particularly as creatives, we tend to find alternative yet familiar connections between some elements and pair things differently. Some might argue that nothing is ever unique, but there are unique combinations and ways of pairing elements. With this piece, I wanted to look into different female body parts, and accentuate what other forms I can see. The immediate result was a practice in *Pareidolia* through the medium of fashion and clothing. When considering the frontal area of the body, I could see breasts forming a pair of eyes staring back at me. I could also see two lines

coming down from the centre of each breast, down to the crotch, which formed a triangle shape, resembling the beak of a bird. Here we had it – two eyes and a beak, fundamental and essential elements in drawing a bird's head, in our case a heron. The piece was initially called *Heron on Her*. But soon I was challenged with questions from my peers: What does this piece mean? Why would you make such a thing? Who would even wear it?

I assumed it was fair because of the sexual undertone that a piece like this could carry for some. At this point, the piece's name changed for me, it was now called *Angry Bird*. I could sense some sort of humorous undertone entering the work. It might have been because the figure of the bird had a comical gaze, and the angle of the eyelids suggested an act of frowning towards the viewer (which was also dictated by the construction structure of the top part of the bra and its shoulder straps). However, this piece moved to a different domain when Leonard Lundback modelled with this. A transgender woman posing with the piece transformed this work, and the photograph became the final piece rather than the body suit garment itself. Later on, when I presented this photograph printed on an aluminium sheet in an exhibition, I titled it *Angry Birds 2*.

5

This work, through all the processes mentioned above, went through a notion of *becoming* that somehow I can recognise in my introductory understanding of Deleuze's theory. Firstly, there was territorialisation, followed by de-territorialisation, but was there any of that third stage re-territorialisation? Whilst I struggle to let alone pronounce these words, I must confess that understanding a possible arrival to the third stage has proven to be beyond my pay grade.

Welcome to the Desert

This idea of *becoming* and transformation is crucial when considering the terrain of the myths and ancient tales. In our archetypal narratives and metaphors, forms are continuously transformed, and every fantasy story has elements of a human becoming an animal or a machine. Nevertheless, generally speaking, this metamorphosis is a process that began long before us, and will continue well beyond our existence. Some rituals and ceremonies emphasise or, at times, initiate these transitions, and they are conducted in a variety of ways, but typically, a general topic is separated into three stages: before, after, and in-betweens.

The in-between stage, or *becoming*, is where the magic happens; it is where one feels lost and wonders "Where did I come from?", or "Where am I going?" Liminality is the uncertainty or confusion in the centre stage of a rite of passage when participants have lost their pre-ritual status, but have yet to shift to the position they will take once the ritual is completed. To recognise the liminal region, we must zoom in and clip the portion that we wish to record, as well as the chosen in and out locations in order to analyse the journey. These points are generally opposites to each other, with different natures; this binary transformative route marks our liminal space. In architecture, we use the word "liminal" to define spaces such as corridors, bridges, and so on.

This notion is especially interesting in the field of fashion since garments can move between the world of imagination and material objects. I have always believed that garments can act like transportation vehicles within the liminal territory, and we, who are involved in this field, are running a travel agency. On a day-to-day basis, you can put on a piece of clothing and transport yourself from one mood to another. Sometimes a piece of clothing even hijacks you to a long-forgotten memory. When we consider the roles of costumes that the actors wear in a play or a movie, we can gain a more tangible understanding of their transformative nature. Every piece of garment can be a metaphor for something else, but it can also contain a whole metaphor itself. But how can that be?

Tighten up

Can only one piece of garment contain an archetypal narrative? Can one object, a shirt, a hat, a pair of shoes, or glasses bring forward a whole story? Can a sign symbolise metaphors? And can a whole story be communicated through a

sentence or, even better, through a couple of words? We can go back to the start of Surrealism again and see how words – and playing with words – introduced the idea of puns.

The definition of pun is: the humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest different meanings or of words having the same sound but different meanings (Webster, n.d.). Duchamp, friend of Dadaists and helper of Surrealists, played with verbality, and especially puns, from the titling of his works to the application of the wordplays on the ready-made objects and so on and in one notable occasion, at the opening of the Bill Copley's 1953 Parisian show, in which he covered each piece of candy with a tin foil wrapper that was printed with the phrase: A Guest + A Host = A Ghost.

6

Although a pun usually is considered a low-level humour or even what we can call a "dad joke", this pun is considered one of Duchamp's richest plays on words since it offers meaning on many different levels. The word Ghost starts with the initials of the two previous words in the phrase in the same order (G+H) and ends with ST, which all words share in their ending. This gives a lovely poetic rhyme and creates a beautiful ensemble. Meaning-wise there are interpretations to be considered; the combination of the Guest the receiver, and the Host the giver, resulted in a mysterious invisible entity such as a Ghost, and perhaps it is well fitting because I believe people must have left the place with an afterthought of "What happened?" ergo the ghost of the work followed them. The mirror nature of the foil, and the fact that the cover ends up being empty after consumption of the candy also play on the idea that highlights the absence of an item.

Now, I am going to make a general assumption and consider puns and Surrealism both, verbally and involved with a twisted sense of humour. So, for the sake of argument, let us assume they have some commonalities. As we have understood earlier with how Surrealism moved from its word-based roots to a rather visual

and physical world, I cannot help, but to consider that there can be a category such as visual puns, which naturally can be followed by a greater expression in three dimensions. A sort of physical manifestation as object puns. I suggest we call this category *Punjects*.

And whilst we are in this neighbourhood, it is worth mentioning the term, metalepsis. The definition of metalepsis is: a figure of speech consisting of the substitution by metonymy of one figurative sense for another (Webster, n.d.)

From a functional point of view, metalepsis can be defined as the shift of a figure within a text (usually a character or a narrator) from one narrative level to another, marking a transgression of ontological borders. This procedure makes the reader or *addressee* aware of the fictional status of a text and ensures the maintenance of a specifically aesthetic distance, thereby counteracting any experience of immersion in the literary work. At the same time, it can be used as an effective instrument for producing enargeia (vividness), and through its sudden and surprising character it can also create strong effects of pathos as well as comedic effects. (Möllendorff, 2018)

In modern criticism, the term metalepsis is used primarily to indicate shifts between narrative levels: that is, between the world of the narrator and the world that she or he describes. (Möllendorff, 2018)

Without getting so deep and philosophical that we get lost in the terrains, I can sense a sort of comradery between puns and metalepsis. It could be jumping to a conclusion, but let us jump and see where we land. It does feel like they are from the same family, and this family can reside in the surreal landscape. The relation between these family members is similar to relations of semiotics and recontextualisation, with puns having a direct bloodline to semiotics and metalepsis having its bloodline related to recontextualisation.

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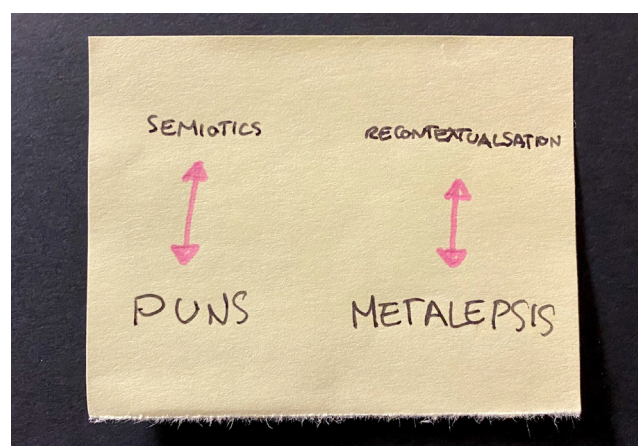
Considering that all these relations are in the abstract territory, it can be easy to lose track of what is what. To make matters a little bit more tangible; let us bring back to the physical realm and territory of objects that could be fitting for this essay. But what would be the application of these sorts of objects, these punjects and, in our case, within the field of fashion? What is the purpose of a clothing item that goes beyond essential practicality and utility? Considering this industry's issues

with overproduction, consumerism, global warming and all other topics leading to fashion depression– why even attempt to produce anything beyond the basic standard needs?

When two pockets get intimate, they form a tunnel...

As these different types of objects can serve another purpose, these objects act as goods for thinking. Just as objects act as physical prostheses, they can also be deliberately designed as intellectual prostheses (Tharp & Tharp, 2019, p. 7).

Imagine a cup or a bowl. Surely this is a much better way of holding liquids and drinking with your hands (which we do in the absence of a cup). So, in this case, the cup is a physical prosthesis, it is a fantastic helper. Similar to this, now imagine objects that can be helpful in an intellectual way, to ignite and to spark a series of ideas. The exciting part is that things can be designed willingly in this manner. For example, imagine a cup with a small hole that leaks water; this defies the whole concept of a cup, but by leaking water, it can reveal a message related to a social catastrophe in regards to lack of enough drinking water in a certain situation and therefore bring awareness to that cause. In this manner, it serves a different purpose rather than being a functional object for drinking. Its function is to bring awareness.

At times, I can relate to this manner of thinking as a creative person. However, I am very well aware that every single piece of my work is not bringing awareness to a noble cause, and not prompting everyone else to think about the most critical challenges of our lives. But early on, I understood that I needed to create pieces that at least act as intellectual prostheses for myself in order to process my observations and intakes. Again, even towards myself, I have failed on many occasions. But isn't this the nature of the trial and error of working in a laboratory? On this basis, the volume and the number of ideas to try can be notable. Considering numerous failures, the sooner we get them out of the way the better. My hope has always been that by starting from myself as a testing ground, I could reach better levels of quality of outcome that could have broader implications. These ideas are all dependent on reality checks with others, and the feedback is essential for the next iteration of the ideas.

In the *Discursive Design: Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things* book by Bruce and Stephanie M. Tharp, there are handy outlines for what can be helpful towards making things successful in the bigger picture, and it also points out the pitfalls of this way of practice. It has been deeply interesting to observe some of these points. As to how these guidelines would be applied to my work remains unclear, but it can serve as a good starting point as I have found myself, especially in dilemmas when thinking about why I do what I do. It can be frustrating since my inquiries sometimes tend to be too binary, and I can usually start by asking whether it is "this" or "that"? Perhaps it is much more helpful to think about what happens if one thing moves between "this" or "that"? To nod back towards the earlier part of

this essay, maybe the liminal space between the two sides is more attractive than the two ends. The third in-between territory is fascinating because the landscape's location can reveal conditions, and because of that a snapshot in different parts of that axiom can form very different pictures.

For example, in the context of one of my works, let us see what happens when we place it on an axiom of *Literal* versus *Abstract*. We started this essay with an example of a headscarf and its relation to the hair it covers. If that headscarf was made of the actual hair, it could have been placed closer to the *literal* end, and when the graphical motives loosely resembling hair are incorporated in the knitting, it can be placed on the *abstract* end. At this point, I would like to suddenly replace the ending of this axiom and try to change the landscape; what if we replace *Literal* with *Idea* and *Abstract* instead of *Aesthetic*? Then we have the headscarf made of actual hair in the *idea* end and the knitted one with graphical motives closer to the *aesthetics*. The first surface observation is that although these two items can convey the same message, they land in very different locations. It results in one being more suitable as an art piece exhibited in a gallery, and the other as a designer object sold in a fancy shop.

To test this again, I would like to replace this work with another work. This work, *The Liminal Pocket*, presented itself to me in a dream; I remember waking up and cautiously making my way to a piece of paper (making sure nothing was distracting me since I was worried about losing the idea) and made a basic model that worked. Was it a year of thinking about liminality, and what is considered a liminal space within a garment (pockets being one)? Or was it experimenting with Tubular knitting techniques that created open hanging spaces on both sides of the fabric while they have joined connections that the yarn travels to the other side? Or was it simply being in the airport and passing my passport through the tiny opening in the bottom of the protective glass to the border control officer? But before getting lost in why I had a dream about this design, let us introduce another item (which at this moment only lives in the form of a sketch); a trouser whose front pockets form a long hanging tunnel to their back pockets. A *Tunnel Pocket Trouser*.

8

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What happens if we put these two on our axioms from the previous example of the headscarf? I would automatically place the *Tunnel Pocket Trouser* on the *Literal/Idea* end and *The Liminal Pocket* on the *Abstract/Aesthetics* end. A similar observation to the headscarf can be extracted that implies that their languages change remarkably by their location in different places of this landscape. This somehow reminds me of what my father told me once: "*Would you like to have a seat*, and *sit the fuck down* says the same thing, but it is *critical* to know when and where to use which."

Postlude

Can making more conscious choices of what sits on the both ends of a line while engaging in this axiom-ing result in having a solid body of work that introduces a new language within my field of practice? And if so, what should that language speak of? Or is it best to form a circular (∞) notion that encompasses the whole territory instead?

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