

CRAFTING POST-DIGITAL FASHION IN HONG KONG

Patricia Flanagan

The name Hong Kong, of Cantonese origin, means 'fragrant harbour', a name earned from the scent of sandalwood incense stock piles that merchant seamen could smell from their ships when entering the harbour. Between 1841–1997, Hong Kong was ruled by the British, then returned to the People's Republic of China. It has long been renowned as a gateway between East and West, where shipping lanes, railway lines and road networks converge. In the past when China's borders were closed, goods came in and out of Hong Kong through this gateway.

In the fashion industry Hong Kong is particularly well suited for international designers because of easy access to manufacturing in Shenzhen, now the largest electronics producer in the world. An ideal location to blend fashion and technology, I set up a Wearables Lab in 2009 at the Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University to explore future fashion.

Drawing inspiration from this flow of goods, in 2009 I mapped the flow of eight artists around Hong Kong in a project called Transit Textiles (<http://triciaflanagan.com/work/transit-textiles/>). At weekly meetings they described their movements around the city which were plotted over a digital map using a different coloured line for each participant for each day. After 21 days the underlying map was deleted and the lines were stitched onto a T-shirt and gifted to them.

The resulting designs, like info-graphics, represented participants' activities and reflected their personalities: busy, calm, ordered or chaotic. Major transport corridors - the Mass Transit Railway and highways - emerged, as did two nodes common to many of the artists, all recently employed by the Academy of Visual Arts, HKBU: the Campus in Kai Tak and the Staff Quarters in Fo Tan. The latter was situated halfway up a mountain and the curving line that twisted up the hill was recognisable across a number of the shirts. The design process indicates future modes of production that are generative and engage participants in design.

The future of fashion lies in the confluence of technological innovation, nanotechnology, functional materials, information technology, biosciences and electronics. Design is being reimagined in terms of what can be made

LATE SUMMER 'CALLING SONG' (NUMBER 1), CRICKET SONGS SERIES BY TRICIA FLANAGAN, FASHION + PAPER, SCISSORS AND ROCK EXHIBITION, HONG KONG HERITAGE MUSEUM 2016. CANE AND BAMBOO CRICKET CAGES, LASER ETCHED MERINO WOOL, JAPANESE POLYESTER, BRASS, MOTION SENSOR AND SOUND ACTUATOR. PHOTO CREDIT: SCOTTY SO



and how it can be made with new generation technologies and materials. Yet the current generation of digital tools are geared to mass production and do little to reflect human cultural capacity. The adoption of technology not only affects the way we move through the city, it becomes ingrained in our behaviour. This is part of our ongoing technogenesis, as we evolve from hand to digital tools.

In 2012, I began documenting artisan *sei foo* (masters), looking closely at their gestures as they work by hand with materials and tools (a cart-maker, shoemaker, calligrapher, brass-inlay worker, qipao tailor, copper worker, metal-wire worker and paper artisan). The research outcome was a collection of stories and objects and a sculptural installation *Social Anthropology* (Smith 2012).

EARLY AUTUMN 'COURTING SONG' (NUMBER 1), CRICKET

SONGS SERIES BY TRICIA FLANAGAN, FASHION + PAPER, SCISSORS AND ROCK EXHIBITION, HONG KONG HERITAGE MUSEUM 2016. HAND STITCHED AND STEAM PLEATED JAPANESE POLYESTER, DIGITAL PRINT, BAMBOO CAGE, MOTION SENSOR AND SOUND ACTUATOR.

PHOTO CREDIT: SCOTTY SO



The question underlying the research was how these gestures could inform digital modes of making. A key difference between digital tools designed for mass production and traditional hand-tools is their relationship to the body. How can post-digital crafting embody reciprocity between maker and materials to evolve new hybrid post-digital practices? In the work of the artisan *sei foo*, good design is not an imposition of the will of the maker over material but a collaboration between the will of the maker and the will of the material. Good design comes through an evolution of practice that tests the limitations of materials and techniques to discover a delicate balance.

As the Wearables Lab in Hong Kong grew, students developed knowledge of materials and techniques to produce speculative wearable artworks that fostered their creativity to imagine the future. These skills were taken to the streets in radical political fashion in the September 2014 Umbrella Movement. Riot police used tear-gas against protesters after tens of thousands of people blocked the central financial district.

University classes were boycotted and the Wearables Lab became a 24/7 workshop for the creation of activist art works. Students collected broken umbrellas and constructed a canopy outside government offices that made international news (BBC 2014). Artists Chan Lok Heng, Li Tak and Kwok Tsz Lam created *Without Fear, The Umbrella Movement 2015* a yellow and black dress that converted to a tent. The work reflects the autonomy and

UMBRELLA MOVEMENT CANOPY, HONG KONG. PHOTO: MAN WAI CHI



self-sufficiency of the student protesters who camped on the streets for months. Photos of the dress shows the model in the context of the blockaded streets (Purden 2015).

The resulting failure of the movement to bring democracy has acted as a catalyst for a renewed interest in identity. Umbrella Movement activists are engaging in dialogue, sharing cultural traditions that have a long continuous past uninterrupted by the Cultural Revolution in mainland China. In this context, cultural artefacts become social objects and the process of making becomes a critical and reflective practice.

Traditional artisans may seem to use estranged gestures in the eyes of today's digitally native generation of artists. Yet, post Umbrella Movement, cultural traditions in Hong Kong are undergoing a revival as a way of holding onto a unique sense of identity without offending mainland China. In the existing capitalist form of communism, embracing cultural traditions pays homage to the greatness of mother China and the innovation it is renowned for, whilst fostering local identity and tourism.

The Creative China campaign, the Creative Century Plan, and the slogan change from 'Made in China' to 'Created in China' launched ten years ago are coming into fruition. But there is an underlying ambiguity in the push for creative clusters and cities under the current system where media is monitored and where the culture emphasises collectivism, restraint and uncertainty avoidance (Asialink

2016). This ambiguity is intensified with the rise of user-created content and computer-based social networks.

The revival of craft traditions brings people together and connects people to place through materials. The result is a contemporary mash-up of craft traditions and digital fabrication in Hong Kong fashion, and it is my hope that alternative perspectives and modes of creation can be fostered, drawing on the Asian traits of caring for the collective and thinking long term (Asialink 2016). Such alternative modes align too with the need to address the environmental sustainability crisis of the fashion industry.

Social Anthropology generated discussion with curators of the Hong Kong Heritage Museum and led to an exhibition of wearable works created by five collaborative teams of designers and artisans. The exhibition *Fashion + Paper, Scissors and Rock* was seen by an audience of 170,137 (Guo 2016). For my part, I worked with rattan weavers Chan Chor-kiu & Chow Yin-wen. The result was *Cricket Songs*. Inspired by the Chinese fascination with these insects, the objective was to exhibit examples of unique high-quality craftsmanship combining traditional and contemporary practices, whilst paying homage to the ancient cultural practices surrounding cricket collecting (Wang 2016: 7).

Over history, a variety of artefacts such as cages, pots and ticklers in a range of materials were used for different seasons, providing a rich palette for the collection. A sound scape

of singing crickets is triggered by audience interaction and the resonance of the materials used - ceramic, natural gourd or woven bamboo - creates a signature sound for each wearable work.

The fashion industry is undergoing radical changes: agile manufacturing enables ideas to be realised without massive overheads, while the ability to iterate designs quickly through prototyping, additive manufacturing and advanced robotic manufacturing accelerates the evolutionary process of creative design.

However, the current challenge is to design machines that can be customised across a range of scales and processes. We must focus on sustainable and smart textiles and hybrid approaches, for example drawing on 2 & 3D print, weave, knit, dye, cultured materials

such as Kombucha, micro encapsulation, micro electronic technologies and biotech approaches with sustainable materials like chitosan and *Ascophyllum nodosum*. We must consider our relationship with tools, and design interfaces between our bodies, machines and materials that enable good design to emerge in the slippage between the three. Like the master craftspeople of old, design must be imagined and produced through a conversation that leverages the affordances and agency of materials. The challenge is to design digital tools that enable empathetic relationships in holistic ecosystems, and in this way, maintain the humanity of craft.

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POSTSCRIPT: ENVISAGING THE FUTURE SELF THROUGH WEARABLE TECHNOLOGY

Twenty four Australian artists and designers, students from the University of New South Wales, took part in the HIF Cloud workshop that ran in Sydney, Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangdong and Hong Kong in late 2017. HIF (Haptic InterFace) Cloud workshop is an immersive, interactive, interdisciplinary, intercultural and international initiative that involves hands-on design processes (<http://triciaflanagan.com/hif-cloud>).

The students travelled to China to develop five futuristic prototypes around key themes and produced a range of wearables including a power-generating leg brace. They benefited from direct access to electronics and tech manufacturers in the fast-growing Chinese market.

Program Co-ordinator Patricia Flanagan commented that the current generation of wearables does little to reflect our human capacity. Beyond products like activity trackers, the future involves hybrid forms of mobile technology that infuse new technologies with older traditions and clothing.

Wearables are not only functional artefacts but constitute an interface between individual bodies and the world. Smart textiles reach out beyond the boundaries of the physical body, connecting us with digital data clouds, at the same time as they reach in under the skin connecting our clothing with our body's bio-data. The projects cast

future scenarios for wearables that harness the power of cloud computing to enrich and transcend human interactions. The projects cast future scenarios for wearables that harness the power of cloud computing to enrich and transcend human interactions.

The *FUTUREself* exhibition was launched at the Australian Wool Innovation, Woolmark Wool Resource Centre in Hong Kong in December 2017. The prototypes will be on show at the University of New South Wales, Art and Design campus in Sydney in March as part of the Sydney Design Festival:

Origarment can be folded in differing ways and worn as a skirt or a shirt. Its surface design changes in reaction to the wearers' mood by way of thermochromatic inks and conductive thread. The design is a reaction to consumer culture and the high-waste generated by the fashion industry.

Techno Adaption proposes that the natural systems of human evolution are too slow to develop with environmental degradation. It suggests that technology will need to be harnessed to augment evolution. In this work a smart scarf alerts the wearer to dangerous pollution levels and automatically covers the wearer's nose and mouth.

Future Primal uses a pneumatic system to mimic the deimatic behaviour of animals: behaviour used to intimidate

predators such as adopting conspicuous colour or structural change. This prototype changes form by inflating appendages; it perceives danger to the wearer by mining the digital data trace of others.

Cocoon is a portable pod used for mindful meditation. Inside the pod, the wearer - and visitors to the exhibition - will experience its magical ability to cleanse visual pollution from our urban environment. A micro camera on the outside and a screen inside the hood create an interface that filters incoming visual information and blurs logos and advertising.

Wanderer enables us to get off the grid while remaining tech-savvy, harnessing energy from the body's movement. A knee worn brace contains a reverse friction motor which powers Electro Luminescent (EL) wire that lights running tights to enhance visibility and safety for runners.

The HIF cloud workshop will continue to foster creative alliances with Asia for three years, funded by the Australian Government's New Colombo Mobility Program that supports Australian undergraduate students to participate in short-term study across the Indo-Pacific region.

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