163 Shadowear: a new way of re-(a)dressing the body

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Abstract:

Shadowear is a practice-based research that challenges the conventional approaches to the body in the process of fashion design. The prevailing methods in fashion design approach the body as a subject to be dressed, and attempt to translate its three-dimensionality into garments. Yet, such approaches overlook the multiple existences and extensions of one's body. This project explores the body from a new perspective: through the body's shadow projections onto various surfaces and in different contexts. Expanding the borders of the body and implicitly the garments, into the territory of the shadows, their flat appearance has the potential to dissolve perceptions of race, size, individuality, gender and identity.

Under the influence of light, transient features that the body produces onto surrounding surfaces – shadows – can be considered as impalpable extensions which trace our existence and continuously accompany us. Aiming to decipher the visual information hidden within the silhouette of the shadow and translate it into garment-making, the designer has freedom for innovation and play. This method entails both a rigorous approach to the shadow silhouette in the process of pattern making, but also an imaginative methodology to make the ephemeral and impalpable, permanent and tangible.

This research proposes a new method in fashion design by shifting the focus of the process of creation from the three-dimensionality of the body, to the flatness of one's shadow. This method is an attempt to redefine and challenge existing fashion conventions, and to explore new approaches to the body, investing the designer with a range of new roles, exemplified through *Shadowear*, a new method for designing and making garments from and for one's shadows.

Introduction

For centuries, the physical body stands as the central denominator for garment construction and design. A three-dimensional entity with curves and slopes, under a continuous state of change and new standards, the body has always challenged our creativity to reinvent and reinterpret season by season the same old fashions and styles. Blinded by its three-dimensionality, designers dealing with dressing, covering, protecting and embellishing it have always looked into its immediate corporeal features and functions. Conventional approaches to garment making have focussed on what is real and physical about a body, overlooking other features that the body is producing while interacting with the environment in which exists. I call these features extensions (from physical traces like droppings, odours and vapours up to imprints onto surfaces, impalpable shadows, sounds, etc.) and I am interested in exploring how these extensions are influencing our understanding of what a body actually is and what it involves.

It is noticeable to mention that some forward-thinking artists have tackled the concept of expanding the body, in both the analogue and digital fields. Artists such as Rebecca Horn and Ann Hamilton have proposed a range of dress artefacts and extensions to enhance the body both physically and sensorially (Schwartzman, 2011). Orlan's practice of modifying the body in order to challenge norms of beauty proposes a body in a continuous change, able to be stretched to unexpected limits. This body is actively living and organically responding to the society it lives in (Zylinska, 2002; Schwartzman, 2011). Taking a sculptural approach Caroline Broadhead shifts the attention from the body to the garment. Her early works like *Ready to Wear* (1998), *Shadow dress* and *Over My Shoulder (Yellow)* (1996) are attempts to give life to garments' shadows.

Similarly, in the field of fashion, some designers have re-interpreted and challenged the body in various ways (Granata, 2017), questioning what garments are and how they can be worn, how garments are constructed and what they mean at a symbolic level, as well as examining notions of beauty and perfection. For Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, the garment does not obey the volumes of the body, it actually challenges this body through distortions and volume shifts almost like in a continuous search for a new physical identity. In Georgina Godfrey's designs the body becomes an object to be re-considered in the attempt to critically challenge norms of beauty and aesthetic, while for Martin Margiela the garment, and implicitly the body are becoming the subject of dissection-like approaches in a search for the hidden social and cultural connotative data embedded within (Granata, 2017). In the above-mentioned examples where the garments have a double role: to dress a body and also to modify it while being dressed, the wearer becomes what Tarryn Handcock (2014) defines as a *skin that wears.* These attempts belong to the field of speculation, where established notions of dress are invested with new semiotic values, challenging us to imagine matching garments for various situations, contingencies and contexts into which a body could operate.

I will further briefly discuss two existing fashion practices developed by labels such as Maison Martin Margiela (SS2011) and Comme des Garçons (FW2012) where an attempt to imbue a flattened look to the three-dimensional body has been attempted through intricate construction approaches. Maison Martin Margiela's Spring/Summer

2011 collection is an attempt to flatten the human body at least at a first glance. By using engineered panelling and construction support materials the designers have pushed most of the garment details to the front of the body onto the flattened textile surface which becomes the only visible side of the garment when the subject is seen from the front. This attempt seems to challenge the perception of the body by generating a split between the head and limbs, which are left uncovered as three-dimensional appendices of a torso which was reduced to a geometric flat surface while being depleted by any traces of organic nature (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Maison Martin Margiela, Spring/Summer 2011. Photograph by Giovanni Gianonni. *The Fashion Design Directory*, Thames & Hudson, 2011

The Fall/Winter 2012 collection by Japanese brand Comme des Garçons was proposing an exaggerated silhouette in the attempt to tackle canons about body size and proportions (Granata, 2016). The main fabric of each garment was transformed into a 'canvas' on which stylised silhouettes of the same design, but in a smaller scale, were pasted on, investing the entire look with a flat-like quality. While the flattened silhouette was producing an oversized appearance, a vibrant colour palette was used to instil a buffoon-like appearance accentuated by the exaggerated disproportion between the augmented garments and small human parts appearing from behind them (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Comme des Garcons, Autumn/Winter 2012. Photograph by Inez and Vinoodh. *Rey Kawakubo/Comme des Garcons: Art of the In-Between*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2017

Albeit in both examples the three-dimensionality of the body has been considerably toned down and the resulted designs permeate a flat-like appearance, none of the approaches was aiming to propose a new method for challenging the body and its' extensions in the process of garment design. This design process still follows the rules of established fashion making paradigms, for instance consideration of construction, shape, fit and sizing. It is essential to note that in both examples the body as a physical entity still remains the reference for the entire garment construction and design process.

Through the method articulated in this paper, I propose the expansion of the borders of identification of the body, and implicitly the garments beyond the physical dimension, into the territory of shadows, where the flatness of the projected body dissolves perceptions of race, size, individuality, gender and identity. Through the shadow, the identity of the individual is reduced to an *index* (Stoichita, 1997) where the mark of the body becomes a trace of its existence only as a species. Taking this consideration as a premise, this research aims to render a new method for garment making which shifts the existing paradigms of benchmarking bodies into standards and stereotypes together with offering an alternative to current fashion design practices. This method is an attempt to stretch the boundaries of fashion beyond the confines of culturally and socially accepted approaches towards the body. It proposes instead a posthumanist perspective (Braidotti, 2013) by shifting the focus from the body to a more complex field of representation that takes into account the interaction between the body and environment.

Methodology & Outcomes

Although the anthropological apparatus conferring value and meaning to the shadow varies in cultures and times, some indisputable traits could be attributed when considering an overall understanding of what shadows represent at a symbolic level. In order to clarify the reason for which the shadow plays such an important role in instigating this design method, I will shortly comment on some distinct cultural aspects and connotations which have historically marked the construction of human representation in the visual field. After formulating the semiotic dimensions of the shadow I will introduce the working process for the *Shadowear* method and reflect on its potential values for fashion design practice.

Pliny's story in *Natural History*, *XXXV* which recounts how Butades's daughter captured her lover's shadow by marking its outline on the wall, is the first record to document the origin of visual representation; the shadow becomes 'the other' of the physical body, reducing its identity to an appearance (Stoichita, 1997). Furthermore, the story tells us that Butades used the shadow's outline to sculpt the semblance of his daughter's loved one after the young man's death and that this sculpture was later kept in the temple at Corinth (Stoichita, 1997). With the help of this story we learn about the potential value of the shadow to be understood as the soul of the individual, and once with the disappearance of the physical body the soul (the double) could be kept alive through the sculpted representations (a double).

Later on, the Platonic scenario of the cave, similar to oriental shadow puppetry (Chen, 2003; Korsovitis, 2003) becomes a new order of representation and exegesis whereby the realm of the shadow becomes alterity, reinforced and supported by the addition of sound (Stoichita, 1997). Strongly embedded in Plato's philosophy, '*the shadow represents the stage that is furthest away from the truth*' (Stoichita, 1997), but also gains a fundamental semiotic charge, which prevails in the history of visual representation, being the semblance produced by the lack of light.

Piaget's work in setting up the framework for human cognitive development introduces the concept of the *shadow stage* (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956), which is further developed by Lacan in relation to the differentiation of the 'self' to the 'other'. As Lacan states, the *mirror stage* involves the identification of the *'I'* while the *shadow stage* involves the identification of the '*other'* (Lacan, 2006). Based on these considerations I would like to outline the important role played by the shadow as a mediator in the cognitive apparatus of identification. Taking this rationale further, the shadow could be seen as a conversion agent from particular (the *I*, the individual) to general (the *other*, the common), preserving the confines of the species but lacking details about race, size, identity and even gender. The shadow becomes the *Index* (Stoichita, 1997) of the species, a territory which has been cleared of any traces of individuality. Bringing the subject to this level of abstraction (a shadow) will allow the receptor (the designer) to imagine features beyond the confines of reality, thus becoming a new tool for ideation and an alternative space yet to be explored for fashion design.

Based on these considerations I am proposing the following speculative design approach (Dunne & Raby, 2013) as an innovative conceptualisation process,

illustrated below (Fig. 3), which delineates the thought process used as an instigator of a practical design methodology. The translation of the three-dimensional data of a body into the flat surface of its cast shadow could be seen as a process of *abstraction* in which individual features of the subject have disappeared. The shadow becomes an intermediary state, as a converter, whereby only a set of basic information about the body has been kept, and will be further used for the process of *ideation* of new elements of dress.
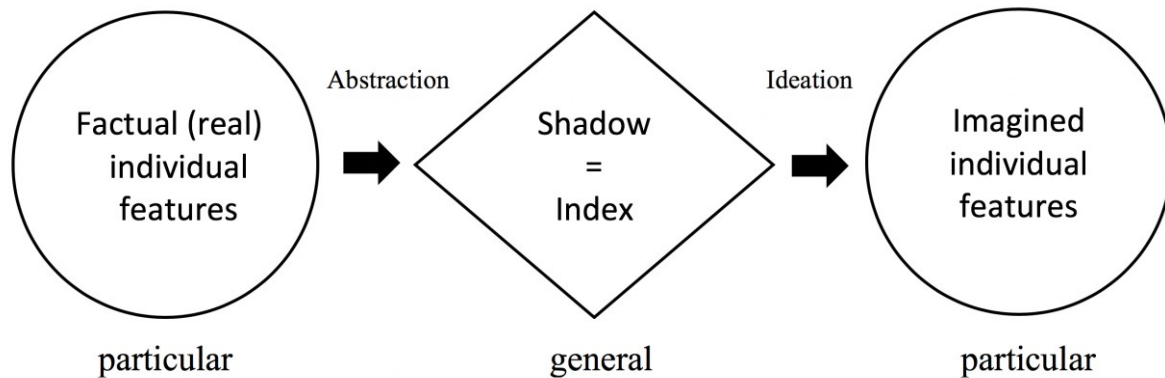

Fig.3 Diagram illustrating the conceptualisation process which grounds the S*hadowear* design method

I will further detail the practical methodology of addressing the shadow from the perspective of garment design and production, which entails the following stages:

    Abstraction
    Translation - Ideation
    Make

By shifting the focus of the designer/garment maker from the three-dimensionality of the body (which brings forth considerations about measurements) to the flatness of the shadow, this method simplifies and replaces the entire set of data as required by traditional methods of garment production. For a clear understanding of the proposed method a series of illustrations and visual documentation gathered during my own practice will be further used.

    Abstraction (Production and recording of the shadow)

The first stage in the process, with utmost importance in capturing the body as a subject for the subsequent stages, is the documentation of the shadow. As a transient extension of the body, and in continuous change, the shadow is always influenced by some physical and optical parameters: the source of light, the distance between the source of light and the subject, the surface where the shadow is projected on, and the angle of projection. The combination of these parameters is influencing the shadows' shape, size, proportions and distortion ratio, thus influencing the process of abstraction of the body.

There are two main sources of light, natural (sun, moon, fire) or artificial (incandescent light, fluorescent light) each one producing a particular type of

shadow. Although the source of light is the most important factor in the production of the shadow, and with technological developments, the types of artificial light have strongly diversified, this paper will focus only on the factors detailed below as being relevant for the shape and quality of the shadow.

The distance between the source of light and the body is the factor responsible for the size of the shadow. There is a simple rule, which has been used since the 14ᵗʰ century and documented by artists such as Alberti, Leonardo or Durer (Stoichita, 1997), namely that the size of the projected shadow is inversely proportional with the distance between the source of light and the subject. For shadows cast under the light originating from astral bodies like the Sun and the Moon (Fig. 4a), the size of the shadow is close to the actual size of the body (not considering yet the angle of projection which will be further detailed) whereas if the shadow is produced by an artificial source like a candle or a lightbulb, positioned close to the body, the shadow will become augmented in size (Fig. 4b).
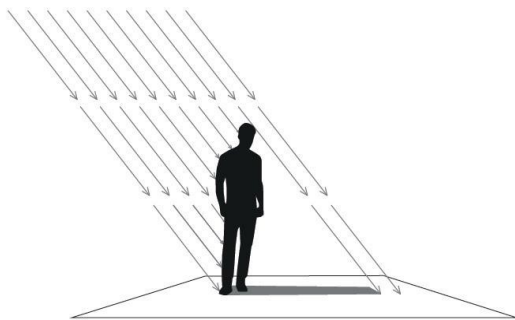

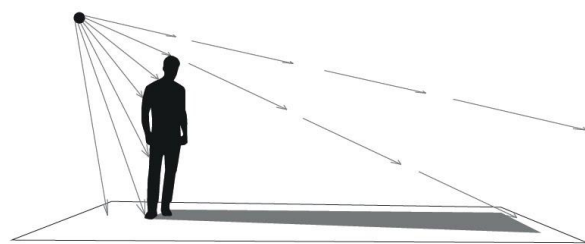Fig. 4a.   Fig. 4b
Fig. 4a Shadow produced by astral bodies
Fig. 4b Shadow produced by artificial light

The third aspect is the angle of projection which influences the proportions of the shadow, specifically the harmony between length and width. The wider the angle between the source of light and the shadows' projection surface, the bigger the proportion between the length and the width of the shadow will be. This angle could range from 90 to 180 degrees (see below figures 5a and 5b which showcase this relation).
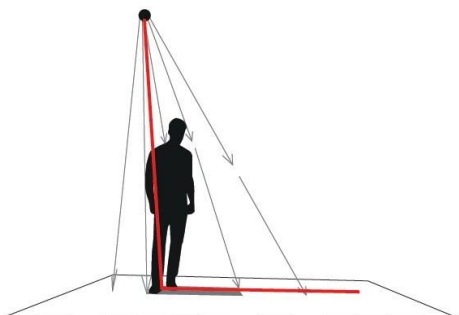

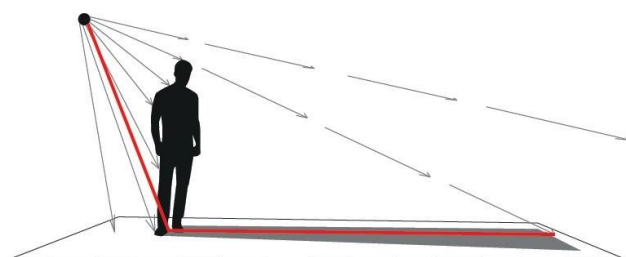Fig. 5a.   Fig. 5b

Fig. 5a Shadow produced at an angle of 93 degrees
Fig. 5b Shadow produced at an angle of 115 degrees

The Surface of projection is the fourth aspect to be considered in generating a shadow. Together with the angle of projection, this aspect is responsible for the distortion of the shadow. If the projection is produced on a flat surface, the outline of the shadow will be smooth in contrast with a more textured projection surface (objects, shapes) where the shadow will be distorted (Fig. 6).
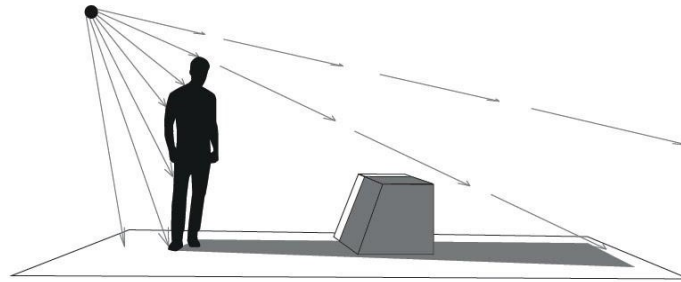

Fig. 6 Illustration showcasing the distortion of the shadow when projected on textured surfaces

Utilising the interrelation between these four parameters, the resulted shadow could be strongly controlled and anticipated in order to serve as a suitable starting point for this design method.

Translation - Ideation

Once the desired shadow has been achieved and photographed, through the process of translation – ideation - a new item of dress will be generated. The photographed shadow, although lacking most of the details of the subject which has produced it, as earlier discussed, it still keeps certain traces of spatiality and body posture. Similar to an investigator, the designer will further proceed with a reconstruction of the original three-dimensionality of the body which produced the shadow. This process of reconstruction could be addressed as two-fold: in a rigorous manner, a process which I will name *translation*, when traces of dress recorded in the outline of the shadow are regenerated by the designer into new garments; or in a creative manner, a process which I will name *ideation*, when the silhouette of the shadow stands as a canvas, and the designer has the liberty to design garments beyond the confines of the shadow and without any reference to the garments worn by the subject which generated the shadow.

By approaching the process of *translation,* the designer will act as an *investigator* (Fig. 9), trying to elucidate elements of dress worn by the subject when the shadow was documented. Through *translation*, the surface of the shadow is the confinement where the designer can creatively express by tracing details of construction and features for the new garment. Although this process seems quite restrictive there still remains a wide area of exploration which allows the design process to cross beyond the reiteration of archetypal garment details and features (Fig. 7a-7c).

Fig. 7a   Fig. 7b   Fig. 7c

Fig. 7a-7c Translation approach illustrated as shadow (Fig. 7a), intermediary pattern (Fig. 7b) and final garment (Fig. 7c)

Compared with *translation*, the second approach, *ideation* (Fig. 8a-8d)*,* imposes no restrictions, allowing the designer to manifest freely as a *creator* (Fig. 9) while addressing the shadow only as a reference for the pose or spatiality for the newly designed garment and as a source of data regarding fit and wear. This approach challenges the designer to reconcile established notions and knowledge about garment construction and detailing in contrast with innovative, accidental and progressive interpretations of what elements of dress and fashion could become.
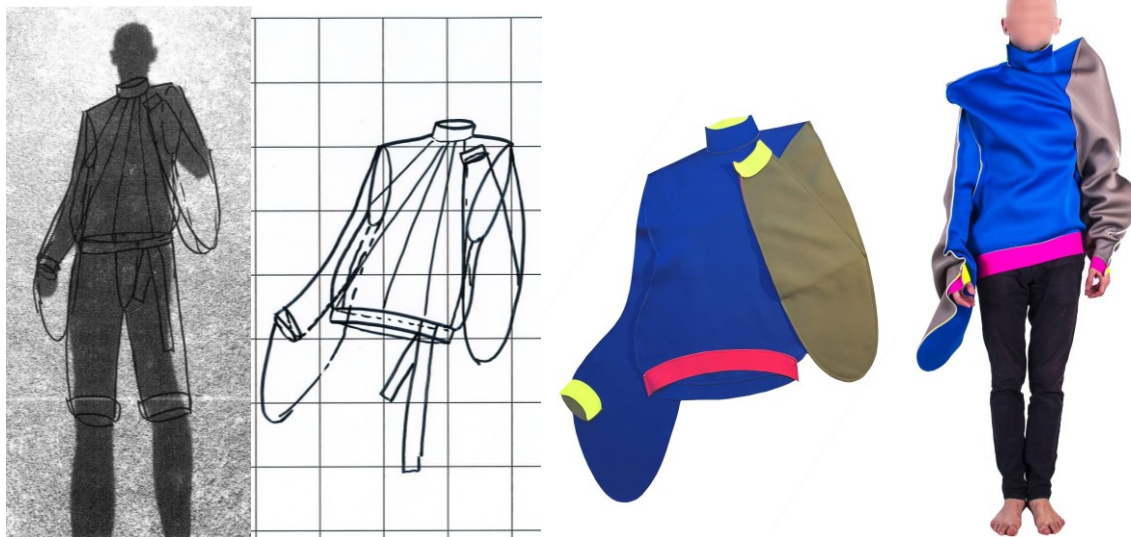

Fig. 8a   Fig. 8b   Fig. 8c   Fig. 8d

Fig. 8a-8d Ideation approach illustrated as shadow (Fig. 8a), the intermediary design on a grid (Fig. 8b) and final garment as flat (Fig. 8c) and on a three-dimensional body (Fig. 8d)

Regardless of approach (translation or ideation) this stage requires a strong understanding of spatiality and flat tri-dimensional representation. As both

approaches open up a boundless territory where speculation and experimentation could be exercised this is the most important stage of this process.

Make

Once the new design has been completed, the sketch will be brought through scaling to the size suitable for the body. Although in my practice I have used a grid (Fig. 8b) as the technical tool for rendering the designed garment to body size, a wide range of analogue and digital scaling methods could be used. The scaled design will be further drafted and cut in the desired material. There is only one rule about measurements when scaling the design to the human-size: the narrowest section of the shadow (of the newly designed garment) has to fit the body area to which it corresponds. If this rule is followed the garment will always fit well.

It is important to outline that from the drafting stage each piece of a pattern is different from the other, unlike for traditional garment making processes, where most of the time the majority of the panels are cut in pairs, given the symmetric nature of the body. For this method the pattern pieces and the assembling process become similar to a puzzle game, instigating the maker's attention and logic. As this design method does not cater to mass production or a fast fashion practice, a consideration about fabric waste and longer assembly times is required.

A strong consideration of fabric properties is required in order to achieve the desired level of novelty for the final outcome. For example, when making a traditional jacket, next to the main fabrics a whole range of construction materials like interfacing, canvas, felt, padding and assembly knowledge is required, whilst in our case, all this knowledge is challenged, even more, could be fully eradicated. The accidental ways in which the garment will drape on the body as a result of these material considerations is the utmost important outcome of this method, positioning the designer in a new role, the one of a s*pectator* (Fig. 9), discovering unexpected features of his own work. Given that this method renders a new approach for design, the choice and combination of materials and production methods could also be subject for further consideration as it opens new territory for design investigation.
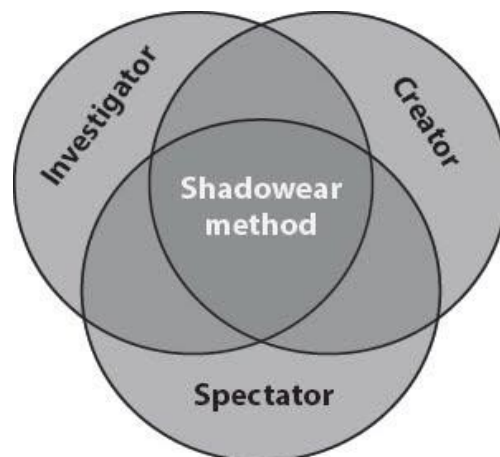
Fig. 9 A diagram which illustrates how the combination of the three roles played by the designer as an investigator, creator, and spectator contribute together when undertaking the Shadowear method.

The final outcome - the new 'shadow' garment - carries a series of features investing the design with intangible values in contrast with traditionally produced garments, such as some characteristic features of the original subject, from pose to body attitude and setting context. These features, together with details added through the design process confer the new garment with an aura of complexity which invites the receptor to decode the design language and its aims in a completely new light, by shifting the paradigm of knowledge on the relation between body and the garment into a new territory (Fig. 10a-10e). This new territory can be articulated based on the post-structuralist concept of 'line-of-flight' proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Thus, I take the new relationship between the body and the garments designed through this new method, as articulating a line of flight, that is, a system and process of semiosis which reaches a maximum of centrifugal energy and escapes a given territory of traditional garment knowledge and representation to rearticulate itself in the territory of significance of the *Shadowear*. Through this process, *Shadowear* will open new meanings in relation to concepts of dress as a cultural construct, and of the relation between the body and the garment, as new territories to be populated with semiotic content.

Fig. 10a   Fig. 10b   Fig. 10c   Fig. 10d   Fig. 10e

Fig. 10a-e Illustrations of the entire *Shadowear* method, from abstraction through translation/ideation and the making of the new garment (Fig. 10a the original shadow; Fig. 10b the translation of the garment using the grid; Fig. 10c the scaled design; Fig. 10d the final garment on a flat surface; Fig. 10e the final garment on a three-dimensional body)

Conclusion

The above detailed *Shadowear* method opens up new strands for fashion design practice. By shifting the designer's attention from the physical subject to the shadow as the *index,* the entire process of design and construction of garments becomes filtered through an apparatus similar to a process of 'unknowing' (Hara, 2015).

This method casts a new light for understanding the body and identity while giving substance to the quotidian and daily existence and bringing forth awareness about what we are as entities beyond the confines of a physical body. Stretching the body past the boundaries of familiar human representation set by traditional fashion design and production practices obscures the prototypical model of the Vitruvian man towards a posthumanist framework.

The innovative side of this method could be articulated as a three-pronged approach with benefits for both the designer and the wearer as direct participants in this process, as well as for the enrichment of the design language at a cultural level.

From the perspective of the designer/maker, the method broadens the complexity of roles invested by the designer, from creator to investigator and spectator. By handling a wider range of roles, the designer becomes an agile and versatile player when developing a practice and conveying a message.

On the wearer side, this method challenges archetypal notions about garments and dress codes. The wearer is faced with products which are carrying clear and recognisable traces of known elements of dress while not worn. The minute these garments are worn, the expected appearance is shifted to a distorted reality which pushes the subject into an uncomfortable and disruptive angle, allowing a wider field for play, exploration and a re-evaluation of what 'being dressed' could entail.

Finally, *Shadowear* could be considered as a teaching approach for fashion design, instigating critical thinking, and combining in a fluid and dynamic manner creative and technical processes, together with investing a thorough knowledge of fashion history and construction, while simultaneously challenging it.

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