

minions of immediacy and physicality. The same might be said for objective reality—clothes and rooms—in Struth's and perhaps every photograph: what is ultimately captured is an arresting sense of incorporeality, the continuous loss of the moment. In the catalogue accompanying Struth's MET Museum retrospective, the effect of his work was described as "a remarkable feeling of stepping into one's own skin again, while alienation from others and from history—the curse of the modern—is dissolved in the image. Thomas Ruff has similarly characterised his work as giving value to the ordinary; to "rescue it." What is rescued is not only mundanity, but complexity, weight, ambivalence.

At such an idea, witness the smile on Anna Wintour's face fade like a polaroid in reverse. Fashion thrives on alienation. Its mandate is the production of the extraordinary; the possibility of other skins than one's own. It must project power, sex-as-adjective, confidence. But these are fragile, fragile notions. Say almost anything at all and they evaporate like dew under the sun of the real. And here perhaps is the cause of fashion's pull towards photography, and its silent garments; that it leaves room for the bodies that are not yet there. This would suggest that it is photography's very inability to capture presence that is the more profound reason for its crucial role in the promotion of fashion. Like fashion itself, photography is about desire—in a Freudian sense, lack. That photography leaves so much to be desired is the source of its magnetism. In Witz's painting, the dress is already there; fashion, of course, needs us to *want* it. Fashion's challenge to photography is to prevent what is lacking from evoking anything too rich, and thereby stirring the subconscious of the viewer, distracting them from the fantasy at hand. The lack must remain concrete, and here is the source of what is understood to be fashion's superficiality. As Bruce Hainley wrote in *Artforum* in 1996, "Fashion exists because of now, fashion exists to mediate now—the quick succession of now on the body." The body, Hainley strongly asserts, "with its frisson of the immediate," is what fashion cannot do without. When fashion stubbornly and relentlessly collides with photography, it does so with the intention to create energy out of total incompatibility; to deny us both object and subject—body, dress and psyche—and offer in their place a spectacular void.

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Fashion in the Desert of the Real

When Marty McFly, the main character in the movie *Back To The Future II* arrives from 1985 in 2015, Doc Brown, the scientist who invented the time machine, gives him some clothes to help him blend in: an automatically size-adjusting jacket and the legendary Nikes with power laces (that tie automatically). But Doc also tells him to "pull out his pants pockets, because all kids of the future wear their pants inside out."¹ To Marty as well as to the viewer, these pockets turned inside-out look weird and silly, but that's mainly because we don't know this habit; what it means, and how it came about. But even in real life, as Jeppe Ugelvig points out elsewhere in this issue, "it's a near-impossible task to decipher fashion's signifiers, as they exist in a constant state of flux, rapidly morphing and inverting between personal, material, political, historical, and cultural signification."

Relations

These rich and layered signifiers come about through relationships between people, materials, and other beings in various times and places. The garment functions as a material vehicle, portal, source, or tool that makes meaning and value visible. These relationships lie at the heart of fashion as a form of value/symbolic production and are numerous and endless. In *When Species Meet*, biologist and philosopher Donna Haraway addresses the value of general patterns of relationability, pointing out how we are all interconnected and entangled, "constituted through intra- and interaction, a subject and object-shaping dance of encounters."² In fashion, subject-object intra-actions and relations take various shapes: from intergenerational stories of hand-me-downs and day-to-day body-fabric interactions through use to industrial garment production and vast supply chains, as well as countless symbolic relations that are artificially constructed to conjure the consumer's desire. All these relations need attention, if only to respect those involved, or to rearrange them.

Amputations

The most dominant form of fashion today is the all-encompassing neoliberal capitalist fashion industry. One of the reasons the industry is such a strong value-producer is because it selectively de-

All images:
De Vries, F. (2016).
Dictionary Dressings.
Eindhoven: Onomatopee

Rudofsky, R. (1971).
*The Unfashionable Human
Body*. New York: Doubleday
& Company, Inc.

¹ *Back To The Future II*.
(1989). Film. Directed by
Robert Zemeckis. US:
Universal Pictures.

² Haraway, D. (2008). *When
Species Meet*. Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota
Press. p.4.



Pull out your pants pockets.

nies, cuts through, and veils existing material and cultural relationships, while at the same time fabricating symbolic connections that produce desirable myths, values, and meanings. For example, an inherent part of promoting fashion's newness is veiling and cutting off the cultural, production, and material histories of a garment. Similarly, connecting the concept of craftsmanship to a garment often happens by disconnecting the object from the factory worker that made it. This links to the concept of amputations, as proposed by Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System* (1967).³ Famously, Barthes emphasized the role and qualities of text in the production of fashion by drawing apart the *real garment*, the *image garment*, and the *written (described) garment*.⁴ He pointed out how the described garment, in the shape of captions in fashion media, is "a fragmentary garment" because it is the result of a series of choices, of *amputations*. He gives the example of the caption "the soft Shetland dress with a belt worn high and with a rose stuck in it," observing how "we are told certain parts (the material, the belt, the detail) and spared others (the sleeves, the collar, the shape, the color), as if the woman wearing this garment went about dressed only in a rose and softness."⁵ The fashion industry and its media apparatuses work by amputating the production reality of a garment, its cultural history, its relation to a body, its daily use, and the exploitation and waste that came about in its creation. It's an alienating process of fragmentation and selection in which some relationships and values are valued while others are not.

Industrial Fashion Realism

Due to its all-encompassing nature, it is easy to see the global fashion industry as the true, real, or only form of fashion. This logic is committed to a certain kind of "Industrial Fashion Realism," if I may refer to Mark Fisher who, in his book *Capitalist Realism* explains how we've come to believe that capitalism is the only realistic political-economic system and lived ideological framework.⁶ He points out that, under this belief, what matters most is how things register at the level of PR—perceptions and beliefs—as opposed to reality. In the *Death of Truth*, Michiko Kakutani explains that the acceptance of capitalism as a natural fact is inherently linked to the concept of hyperreality, in which people have come to prefer the hyperreal—that is, simulated or fabricated realities—above the boring, everyday "desert of the real."⁷ The same is to say for fashion: we have come to believe that the artificially constructed values and meanings created by the fashion industry is the real and only form of fashion; we prefer its life full of dreams and desires and constant better versions of ourselves above the boring daily garment interactions of/in the "desert of the real."



3 Barthes, R. (1967). *The Fashion System*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p.15.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism*, London: John Hunt Publishing

7 Kakutani, M. (2018). *The Death of Truth, Notes on Falsehood in the age of Trump*. New York: Tim Duggan Books. p.104.

Zero conditions

Although the fashion industry forcibly amputates and cuts through existing relations in order to create a hyperreality, the idea of amputation might actually help to question exactly this dominant form of fashion. Amputations and gaps open up space and uncover other relations, relations from the “desert of the real,” that is to say our daily interaction with garments.

In my project *Dictionary Dressings*, I looked up garments in the Dutch dictionary and encountered descriptions such as “covering of the hand,”⁸ for glove, “elongated piece of cloth worn/carried around the neck”⁹ for scarf, or “piece of clothing only worn/carried outdoors”¹⁰ for coat.¹¹ These descriptions bring to the fore the material and construction of clothes, its relation to the body and/or the location, and ignore connections to style, symbolism, experience, emotion (or let’s say, what we know as *fashion*). By amputating hyperrealist and cultural notions about fashion and garments, these definitions present a kind of zero-condition of the garment, undone and undressed of fashion. Although it is important to acknowledge all relations and the idea of a zero-condition sounds rigid, the gaps left by amputations create new focus points and invites a reassessment of preconceived notions of garments, fashion, and the underlying relations. In her text *Dictionary Dressings*,¹² fashion scholar Barbara Brownie describes how these definitions are “unhelpfully broad” but simultaneously provocative, challenging and inviting us to reconsider assumptions and move beyond given notions. She uses the definition of sweater as a starting point, which the Van Dale dictionary describes it as a “knitted piece of clothing for/in front of the upper body.”¹³ Brownie points out that this rigid description permits us to free ourselves of a commonly understood concept of a sweater that assumes the presence of sleeves, a neck hole, side seams, solid front and back, and permits the freedom to consider any kind of “number of sleeves and holes (if any at all)” and “seams that may be located anywhere.”¹⁴ Liberated from common conceptions, the definition opens up new ways to design as well as interact with a sweater.

Trousers as Gloves, Sweaters as Towels

These zero conditions of garments can actively help to re-configure and reposition our focus and interaction with them. If a description of a glove says “covering of the hand,” and nothing more, it leaves out familiar notions on shape and material (five fingers, made of leather, with some contrasting stitches) and directly begs to question the ways a hand can be covered in general. When it’s cold we might sit on our hands, put them in our pockets, or place them under our armpits. Is a pocket covering your hand technically a glove?



8 Van Dale. Handschoen [Online]. Available from vandale.nl

9 Van Dale. “Sjaal” [Online]. Available from vandale.nl

10 Van Dale. “Jas” [Online]. Available from vandale.nl

11 De Vries, F. (2016). *Dictionary Dressings*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

12 Brownie, B. (2016) *Dictionary Dressings in Dictionary Dressings* (F.de Vries, ed.). Eindhoven: Onomatopee

13 Van Dale. “Trui” [Online]. Available from vandale.nl

14 Brownie, B. (2016). *Dictionary Dressings in Dictionary Dressings* (F.de Vries, ed.). Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

In many daily interactions, we already defy expectations of fashion and garments. Going back to the example of a sweater; we might wear it as we are supposed to, with our head through the neck hole and arms through the sleeves, but we also occasionally use the sleeves to tie it around our neck (essentially becoming a cape), around our waist, or diagonally across our torso, shoulder-waist. These are sometimes style decisions, but sometimes they are decisions based on the climate and body temperature. Like many, I’ve used my sweater as a pillow, a blanket, or as a towel when I forgot one at the swimming pool. These interactions changed the relationship between my sweater and my body; while sitting on it, it moves from the upper body to the lower body, by using it as a towel I rub it on my body instead of wearing or hanging it on my body. And with this repurposing, other things start to appear and matter. Using it as a towel, I was happy to be wearing a sweater made of cotton because other materials might not have absorbed water. These kinds of sartorial experiences, in which we use the garment as we see fit, are exactly fashions and (definitions of) garments from the “desert of the real,” our daily practice of wearing, sweating, using, folding, sleeping, rubbing, washing, sitting, mending etcetera. These acts might seem trivial, but they are essential in understanding and building relationships.

What to cut and what to stick?

The desert of the real thus offers a way to actively explore, acknowledge, and question our alienated positions brought about by industrial fashion. They can help us think about non-commercial, non-industrial relations of clothing—old, present, and emerging ones. Relations that stem from daily subject-object interactions; from embodied, collective, intersectional, and intergenerational relations. The desert of the real exists of and facilitates relationships between makers (from factory workers, people who sew at home, to farmers), acts of production (harvesting, tanning, weaving, sewing, folding, ironing, distributing), between materials and beings (from cotton crops to cows) and wearers (class, background, gender, body type), the act of wearing (embodied, intergenerational, intersectional) and caring and discarding (mending, hand-me-downs, shredding). It can help us acknowledge fashion’s hyperreality, while, in my opinion, not blindly complying with it or enabling it further.

Summing up relations

The value of relationability that Haraway addresses is made explicit not only in her subject matter but also linguistically through the extensively formulated “names” (by using nouns as adjectives).



tives) that try to do justice to relations. In one example, she explains the relation between a livestock guardian dog, his human, his breeder, and her peers in “dogland” and how they are all participants in this relation. She describes it as follows: “dog-wolf-rancher-herbivore-environmentalist-hunter nature cultures of the contemporary U.S. northern Rocky Mountain region.”¹⁵ Her descriptions make me think of the many overtly long and complex fashion descriptions. Take, for example, the caption “[t]he ultimate in laid-back luxury, Reserved’s supersized leather trousers sum up the season’s easy allure.”¹⁶ In contrast to Haraway’s description, besides “leather” and “trousers,” the words and relations in this fashion caption are ambiguous, hyperbolic, and vague. The understanding of relations will of course always be fragmentary, and amputations will always be made, but the question is, which ones do we make and why? If I take other relations into consideration and pay more respect to the beings involved, I might make the following fashion caption for this pair of leather trousers: *cow-herbivore-carnivore-human-skinner-skin-wearers’ luxury cultures of the contemporary fashion industry*. Because our use of language affects behavior, naming is one place to start acknowledging relations.

In the *Dictionary Dressings* book, the French-German brand BLESS shared a selection of their products with names that combine functions from daily use in surprising constellations. These at first might seem random, but bring forth not uncommon daily experiences with garments; “*Towel Bag*; towel, upgraded with zippers at the corners combined with a handle that allows usage as a bag before turning into a beach towel at its destination” or “*Flipflopbag*: upgraded flip flops contain a small storage part to carry purses, keys and other small objects” and “*Towel Scarf*; prolonged towel that therefore can be worn around the neck.”¹⁷ With these names, and products that activate and embody these relations, BLESS gestures to a kind of fashion that celebrates the reality of use.

It is in the desert of the real that we encounter valuable existing relations and create a multiplicity of new ones that go far beyond the hyperreality of the industry. By actively engaging with, and acknowledging relations in the shape of garments, names, behaviors (of use and consumption), we can change how we value (fashion) relations and the stories that we tell. The desert of the real is not one of poor soil.

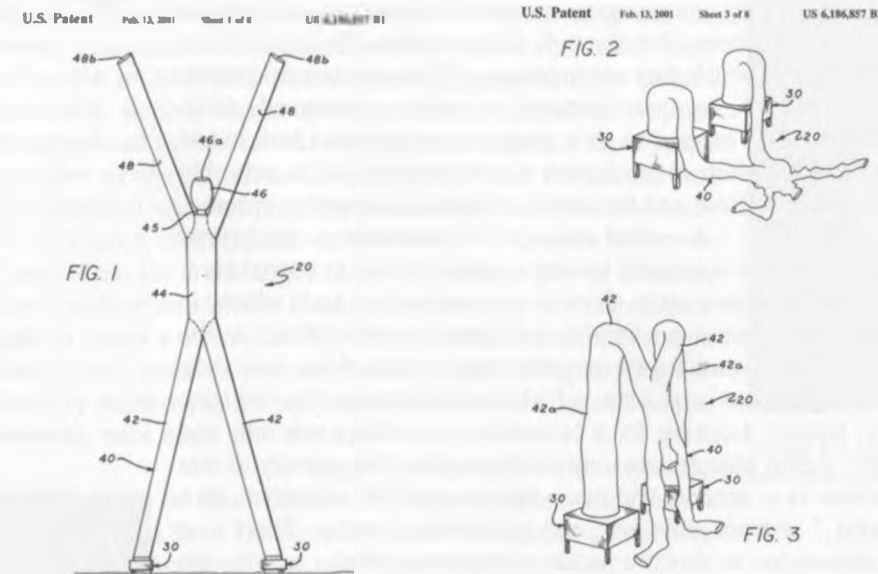


15 Haraway, D. (2008). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p.39.

16 *Vogue*, (UK) September 2018, Conde Nast. p.241.

17 Bless (2016). in *Dictionary Dressings* (F.de Vries, ed.). Eindhoven: Onomatopée.

All those stuffed shirts



Il vento soffiava le mie vesti
Di veramente stabile
erano le mie scarpe
alle cavaliere ortopediche

—Alice¹

In very recent times, the notion of “peak screen” has been coined.² The stage of screen saturation was reached sometime before 2020, and the subsequent screen fatigue has since become evident, as demonstrated by the plateauing of profits from TVs and smartphones, leading tech companies to increasingly investment in audio services and forms of entertainment. The reflection on the peak screen moment, and the consequent fatigue of digital visuality, has prompted some artists to reconsider their practices and poetics with regards to moving image-production and display. However, the measures of social distancing, altered working conditions, and forced mediatized socialization caused by the COVID pandemic of 2020-1, have only amplified and prolonged our stay in front of remove our screens. The pandemic captivity coincided, in my

1 The wind blew my clothes / Really stable / they were my shoes / to orthopedic anklets.

2 Cfr. F. Manjoo, “We Have Reached Peak Screen. Now Revolution Is in the Air,” *The New York Times*, 27th June 2018

3 Cfr. P. Levi, *Cinema by Other Means*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.