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What is the role of the designer/maker in the 21st century and how might this role change in the next 10 years?

Discuss your ideas with reference to two of the practitioners or designers from your lecture strand.

This essay will look at the role of the fashion designer in the 21st century and the expectations and requirements to be a successful designer. I will then look to the future at how this role will develop in the next 10 years and how fashion designers will need to evolve and adapt to this transform this profession. Taking into consideration the growing concerns of the environmental impact of the fashion world and how sustainability and ethics will become a prominent factor for the designer. Specifically at Stella McCartney's approach to this subject and Jonathan Chapman's extensive work referring to our 'throw away society'. Another prominent and fast-growing element to consider for the future of designers is the sudden explosion of the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and how designers could use artificial intelligence as a tool to aid their work rather than being replaced by it. Looking at how Norma Kamali adopts AI technology as her latest muse in her installation entitled 'Fashion Hallucinations'.

The role of the fashion designer is not merely to create aesthetically pleasing clothing to fulfil a client's desire. Designers shape trends and tastes; they are cultural influencers. A designer can have the ability to use their platform to influence their client, be that trend setting or 'persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care' (Papanek, 1971). A designer can use their persuasive talents to promote environmental or ethical ideologies. They are problem solvers, factoring in how their work will affect the world and society around them, considering the advancing social climates and inclusivity of their work. Aided by the popularity of social media, a designer can expand their reach worldwide; however, this brings with it a host of promotional skills that a designer must also obtain. 'Designers continually describe their profession as a way of organizing complexity or finding clarity in an overwhelming amount of data' (Kolko, 2006). The role of the designer is multifaceted and constantly evolving, formed by continual technological advancements and a heightened awareness of ethical and environmental issues. Collaborating with other parties when necessary to effectively approach these considerations.

Designers today must be able to work in various fields across cross-disciplinary environments, for example combining art and social and ethical understanding whilst

challenging complex issues in sustainability and technology. Therefore, it is questioned why design is not more readily available in education, where it is considered as 'a missing third area of education' (Cross, 1982, p.12) and that it should be taught alongside science and humanities with equal importance. The need for a cross-disciplinary designer will only grow in the future, whereby designers will need an ever-expanding multitude of skills, hopefully, the continuing expansion of the skills required to be a competent designer will lead to the subject being more readily available throughout mainstream education not just at specialist level. Thus, creating multiskilled designers with a tacit understanding of the complexities required to design in the 21st century.

Sustainability and Ethics are at the forefront of the design world, in particular the fashion industry. Designers today must appreciate the social and environmental impact of their work, taking into consideration sustainable materials, ethical labour and minimising waste. The global impact of the designer is now just as crucial as the creative outcome, Chapman states 'Designers could be pioneers of positive social change' (2015, p.15), this notion must be fully embraced by the 21st century designer, as this will only become more prominent in the future. 'The reality of global warming has gained currency not only among environmentalists but among industry leaders' (McDonough, 2009, p.31), forcing designers to seek out alternative sustainable materials and production methods. There are also financial benefits, 'Environmental sensitivity is becoming an increasingly cost-effective practice for today's future facing corporation, both in terms of avoiding legislation breach and landfill taxes' (Chapman, 2015, p.162), encouraging a greater environmentally aware mindset. Fast fashion and the 'throw away' attitude are prominent issues, forcing designers to consider making products with longer lifespans, and promoting a make do and mend ethos, an unfamiliar and possibly hard to sell perspective to sell to a consumer that is accustomed to a heavily materialistic frame of mind. One would wonder how effective this new business model would be, a model that encourages the customer to buy less and keep for longer, this 'grates harshly against the current model of western capitalism' (Chapman, 2015, p.162). However, Chapman believes that 'customers will develop a sense of empathy with products they own, nurturing a visceral empathy with a particular brand' (2015, p.162), thus creating a deeper loyalty towards a brand, 'the felt sense of empathy resonates deeply within the consumers perception of particular corporations core values' (Chapman, 2015, p.162), establishing more intense and steadfast relationships encouraging a returning customer. One successful example of a company with this ethos is Stokke, who developed a popular iconic item back in 1972, the "Tripp Trapp chair" (Stokke 1972 in Chapman, 2015, p.77), see figure one. A child's seat whereby the seat and footrest can

be adjusted to grow with the child, forging an emotional attachment, increasing the longevity of the product and reducing the want and need for a replacement.



Fig 1: Tripp Trapp Chair (1972) in Chapman (2015) (p.77)

Some companies are taking this notion a step further, designing and developing products that change somehow through use and wear. 'Reveal sneakers' (Whiting in Chapman, 2015), see fig 2, reveal a hidden pattern on the fabric that is only displayed when the shoes get dirty, so the more you wear and longer you own the product the better it becomes.



Fig 2: Reveal Sneakers (Whiting) in (Chapman 2015) (p163)

Another similar product is the 'underfull tablecloth' (Bjaaddal in Chapman, 2015, p.90) that turns spillages into patterns, your toppled red wine will display a beautiful butterfly pattern rather than a dirty stain. The idea behind this is to turn negative experiences into positive memories, again appealing to the emotional hold on items, thus increasing their longevity. These are excentric examples, but the premise of embracing flaws and keeping items that may no longer be perfect is the ethos of the future.

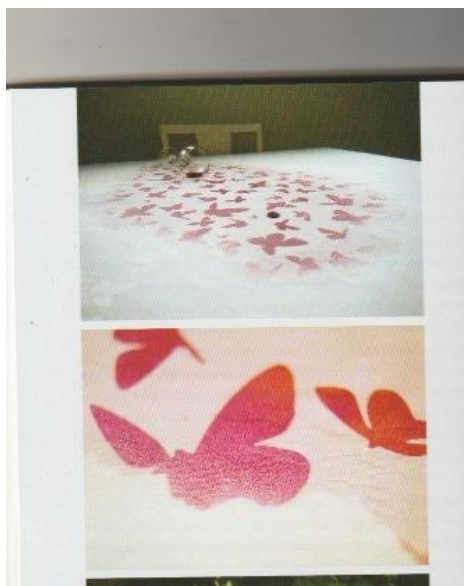


Fig 3: The Underfull tablecloth” (Bjaaddal in Chapman, 2015, p.90)

Taking the issue of sustainability into account I have chosen to focus on Stella McCartney, see fig 4. McCartney is a designer who exemplifies the culmination of creativity, innovation and sustainability factors crucial to the designer's role in the 21st century. McCartney uses her recognisable household name and platform to challenge the conventional ideas of fashion, in particular issues concerning ethical production and sustainability.

McCartneys 2024 mission statement states ‘we are on a conscious luxury mission to create fashion that does not compromise on desirability or sustainability and that holds us accountable to our targets’(2023), this declaration expresses that the McCartney brand deems sustainability and desirability are of equal importance, a noted difference to designers of the past who rarely considered the effect of their production. McCartney goes on to concede that ‘it is still a work in progress- we are not perfect, but we are making every action count’ (2023) cementing her promise to the consumer.



Fig 4: Stella McCartney (2023)

Sustainability has been a consideration since McCartney launched in 2001, whereby she pledges to be 'committed to a values-led ethos and being kinder to Mother Earth, our fellow creatures and each other' (2023). Stella McCartney is the 'only major fashion house to have ethics at its heart since day one' (Stella McCartney, 2023), being the first 'luxury brand' to use no leather, skins, feathers, or animal glues. Within 10 years the company began using organic cotton and went completely PVC free. From 2012 to present, McCartney has introduced several innovative and ethical bio-fabrications. Combining technological advancements in this fields and the desire to continually

improve the sustainability and environmental impact of the brand, McCartney has made groundbreaking materials and processes that could potentially change the face of fashion production. 'McCartney centres on collaboration and innovation- and more than ever, is passionate about showing how- with the right technology and partnerships- fashion can be fast in its move to more sustainable measures' (Stella McCartney, 2023), this sentiment has led to breakthroughs in bio-fabrication creating a portfolio of continually evolving planet friendly materials.



Fig 5: Kelsun seaweed fabric (2023)

An example of this is Kelsun, see fig 5, a seaweed fabric similar to yarn that made its debut at McCartneys Summer 2024 catwalk show. This product is not commercially viable yet, however illustrates an evolving sustainable product with a lower environmental footprint than conventional fabrics. Another breakthrough moment came from a collaboration with 'visionary scientist at Bolt threads', creating an animal leather alternative. 'Mylo', see fig 6, is 'crafted with renewable mycelium from fungi' (Stella McCartney 2023) under a strict monitored production process it is hoped that this sustainable material will replace animal leather, reducing the environmental and social impact of animal leather production.



Fig 6: Mylo (2023)

McCartneys mission statement is wide reaching, inspirational, innovative, and progressive and unfortunately is too vast to explore fully. McCartney is a pioneer in her field, refusing to compromise on desirability and sustainability, holding both of equal importance, ensuring her company is accountable for its actions and taking action to change for the better. Stella McCartney is ‘taking the industry lead on cruelty free alternative materials, process innovation, circular ambitions, regenerative practices, and community wellbeing’ (2023). Having always had an ethos to be ethical and protect the world around her, this mindset has been set in stone since the launch of the company in 2001. McCartneys progressive and determined purpose has ensured that this ideology has grown with the company absorbing technological advancements along the way. McCartney states ‘I’m here to provide sustainable solutions and also encourage leaders to wake up, change policy and bring in legislation’ (2023), the brand has also publicly set themselves a target to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040, pushing the boundaries of the fashion world and being a pioneer for others to follow. McCartney will continue to be at the forefront of new and exciting discoveries that will reshape the future fashion industry for the better.

Fashion designers must also be technologically adept, continually adapting to the new challenges of technological advancements. The newest and both most exciting and concerning of these is the explosion of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Computers and machines with the capability of imitating the human skills of decision making and problem-solving through learning algorithms. AI is vastly used within the fashion industry from design to trend prediction. This broad and relatively unknown subject is as daunting as it is intriguing and could remodel the way in which fashion is produced, marketed and consumed. Professor Kate Crawford, artist and author of *Atlas of AI* states, ‘I think we are at a crucial inflection point right now. I’ve been calling it the generative turn. It’s a moment where what we previously understood as how everything

from illustration to film directing to publishing works is all about to change very rapidly' (2023).

There are two main types of AI used within the fashion industry, these are: reactive AI, its uses include visual search and product recommendations and limited memory AI, which is used for chat bots, customer service and trend forecasting.

Forecasting is a particularly useful tool within the fashion industry as it has the power to predict customer behaviour in the forms of sales and trends. Using data from fashion blogs, runway, and social media among others to optimise production, therefore reducing the potential wastage of unsold items. The trend forecasting information can also give colour, fabric and style performance indicators, enabling the designer to produce trend-led designs at a far quicker and more accurate rate.

Whilst some designers will welcome AI as a new tool to aid their work there is also a degree of hesitation and concern as to whether AI could replace a substantial amount of the design process. Yet this collaboration's future is relatively unknown.



Fig 7: Norma Kamali (2012)

One designer who has embraced the use of AI is Norma Kamali, see fig 7. Kamali has been the sole designer of her own brand for 57 years, with a history of unusual and innovative designs using parachute silks, high heeled sneakers and a sleeping bag coat, Kamali was keen to use the futuristic tool of artificial intelligence to aid her design. Kamali collaborated with a 'creative-centric Gen Ai agency in New York' (Kamali, 2024), together they created an AI tool that only took its cues from Kamali's body of work, referencing her 57-year archive, therefore the programmed AI tool can only create new designs using Kamali's designs as inspiration. During this process Kamali quotes "I learned then that possibilities in the technology world would be beyond my imagination" (2024).



Fig 8: Fashion Hallucinations Installation (2012)

Entitled "Fashion Hallucinations", the event consisted of AI generated installations, produced from the commands Kamali had fed the tool she had created, she quoted "They all look like I designed them". This is mainly because the Ai could only produce designs from Kamali's repertoire.

Kamali created the collection to encourage other designers to be more accepting of AI, to eradicate any fears of an AI take over, to demonstrate how AI can be used as a tool and still be true to the artists designs. Kamali's use of AI as a tool composed of a lifetime of work is an innovative and reinventive way of designing, which I feel will be adopted in the future by many designers.

A designer of the future will be versatile with the ability to juggle a multitude of tasks. A hybrid of creator, collaborator, problem solver and innovator, whilst considering the ethical and environmental impact of their work. The advancements in technology will require the designer to be adaptable and innovative, evolving their practice alongside these advancements. Throughout her career Norma Kamali has welcomed change with her forward vision and original designs. Kamali is now pioneering a shift in the typical design process, encouraging a thoughtful and considered use of Artificial Intelligence to create an exciting branch to her brand, “using the archive to design indefinitely” (Kamali). The adoption of this design method could allow designers to create exponentially within their own personal style.

The designer of the future must continually evolve to meet the demands of this multifaceted role, the global issue of sustainability and ethical responsibility must be at the forefront of the designer's ideology. ‘The fashion industry accounts for 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions’ (Stella McCartney, 2023), which will be expected to grow in conjunction with levels of consumption. Ethically aware designers such as Stella McCartney are using their platform to pioneer a shift in the industry, promoting a movement towards a more sustainable and ethical future for the world of fashion. Future designers must utilize technological advancements and work collaboratively with biotech companies to develop sustainable plant-based textiles, which could potentially redefine how materials are sourced and processed. The principles promoted by Stella McCartney must be adopted by designers, manufacturers, and governments alike to ensure an environmentally friendly future for the world of fashion.

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