Article

RE:RE:RE: SUPERMODERN FASHION –
FASHION DESIGN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Anessa Starker

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One of the major problems with fashion today is waste. According to Tearfund's 2021 research (Keegan et al., 2021, p. 55), people now consume approximately 80 million items of clothing per year, which is 400 per cent more than they did two decades ago. People also only retain clothing for half as long as they did 15 years ago, and some reports suggest that the cheapest apparel is treated as if it was disposable – worn once and then discarded. These are some of the reasons that the fashion industry is identified as a significant factor in current environmental problems.

Knowing all this, I began a research project as part of a Master of Design at Otago Polytechnic in July 2021.

My research is an attempt to understand the global fashion system as it operates today. I initially set out only to explore the idea of "non-places" (see below) through the medium of a fashion collection. I ended up discovering a way to explain the prevalence of 'fast fashion.' Supermodernity is a theory developed by Marc Augé in 1992 to describe the modern urban landscape. Supermodernity has four significant aspects:

1. It is a process whereby the factors which drove modernity (e.g., new methods of transportation and modes of communication) are accelerated to achieve a hypermodern condition. This is seen in faster and farther methods of transportation and communication which lead to increased access to information.

2. Supermodernity is singularly concerned with the 'now' – the narrowest possible present. This 'now' is expressed in three ways: through time, space and individuality. 'Time' refers to the feeling of time getting faster; the increased speed of the news cycle and communication methods means that new information is always available. 'Space' refers to the shrinking of spatial divides due to transportation innovations and the internet, which allows you to see any place you want, wherever and whenever you want. 'Individuality' refers to the hyper-focus on the individual, defining people by passport or credit card number rather than by family or relationships.

3. All these elements are found in "non-places" – Augé's term for the type of transient spaces that define cities (e.g., malls, airports, bus stops).

4. Lastly and most importantly, supermodernity is defined by consumption – you must consume in order to enter or participate in contemporary society.

Because non-places are the ultimate manifestation of supermodernity, they are an excellent place to begin exploring what supermodernity is. Augé (2009) provides the following checklist to help identify non-places. They:

1. always contain signage to aid navigation through the space

2. reduce individuals to an 'average' person at whom all instructions are targetted

3. default to a temporary spectacle.

Figure 1. The Dunedin railway station is a classic example of a non-space – transient, everyone's and yet no-one's.

In this article I would like to propose that **the issue in fashion is not that it is unsustainable – the issue in fashion is that it is supermodern.** Supermodernity defaults to practices that are unsustainable. The need for newness and speed defaults to a production process that is unsustainable. Treating the fashion industry exclusively as a problem with sustainability, rather than taking a more holistic view that investigates the whole fashion system, we are treating the symptoms, but not the problem.

My aim was to discover how the condition of supermodernity affects the design, consumption and conceptualising of fashion. For the purposes of this project I have defined contemporary fashion as the business of creating and selling clothing. Fashion is the intertwining of economic and social phenomena – fashion practice naturally reflects the trends of a given era and provides a way for us to analyse the present.

Alongside my discussion of supermodernity, I would also like to explain how making can be used as a research tool, and how I used making as a form of research in this project. Developing my own understanding of supermodernity took a long time, though this was not my initial interest. Initially, I was very interested in the experience of being in non-places. The loneliness and isolation in these places spoke to me of a kind of modern experience. I developed a fashion collection at the start of my Master of Design project to experiment with these ideas. After completing the first collection, I realised that I had not been critical enough with respect to both non-places and loneliness. I realised that was because I had set out with a too specific vision of what I wanted to make. To quote from my initial proposal: "I will create ethereal pieces of clothing that explore the transitory nature of non-places. These garments will be very light, possibly even translucent to convey the alienation of these environments."

I decided to reassess the methods I was using to design. I recognised that focusing on the outcomes I wanted wasn't going to give me an understanding of what supermodern fashion actually is.

During this research, I used the scribble method described by Damien Newman in the early 1990s (Newman, 2015). Figure 2 is my own interpretation of Newman's squiggle. In Newman's methodology, design research has three phases: research, concept and outcome. However, these are not sequential and often involve looping between activities, something I sometimes describe as the circular nature of research.

Figure 2. Design research using Damien Newman's squiggle methodology.

In my research I used both design and traditional research methods. Design methods include sketching and making. The use of sketching is described by Nigel Cross (2006, pp. 34-38) as a kind of dialogue with oneself. My dialogue with myself became a way to analyse my ideas and to visualise the concepts I was talking about. Specifically, this involved mapping my ideas in relation to each other and asking new and deeper questions. Using sketching as a tool for inquiry forced me to ground very conceptual ideas in reality by asking what they would actually look like. This method of research is an example of the way in which making can inform critical thinking.

After adopting this new research methodology, I shifted my goal and instead of attempting to design fashion that captured the loneliness and isolation of non-spaces, I sought to design fashion that could speak to some kind of modern experience. So I delved deeper into what others had said about modern fashion. My next experiments began after reading two works, Andrew Bolton's *The Supermodern Wardrobe* (2002) and Bernard Rudofsky's *Are Clothes Modern? An Essay on Contemporary Apparel* (1947). Both authors were looking to the future of fashion from their own vantage point in history. Both Bolton and Rudofsky used the ideas of modernism to create a series of rules for clothing that set out what was required for fashion to be 'modern.'

Using these rules, I created a series of drawings and from there I theorised a modular system of clothing consisting of various objects that can be worn by the individual in multiple ways (Figure 3).

However, in creating these objects I realised they were futuristic, in the sense that they look to the future. But Augé's supermodernity is not about speculating on the future – supermodernity is singularly concerned with the now. While the term supermodernity may sound like it is all about the future, it took me three experiments to realise that in fact supermodernity has nothing to do with the future. My experiment in fashion design revealed that supermodernity is only interested in the present. I also realised that nostalgia is supermodern because it is only concerned with spectacle and evoking an idealised past. To explore more about what supermodernity actually looks like in fashion design, I drew on theories of junkspace (Koolhaas, 2006), non-places (Augé, 2006) and hyperreality.

OBJECT SYSTEMS AND SUPERMODERNITY

Figure 3. Modular garments and flexible use.

Figure 4 illustrates the overlapping areas of the theories or concepts that are used to describe our contemporary surroundings and culture. Modernity sits on the periphery of supermodernity, within which the three inner circles of junkspace, consumerism and the hyperreal all share some elements in common.

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Before going further, however, I want to explain how I identified these ideas, discovered how they were connected, and what this means for fashion design.

After my initial investigations I wrote a thesis brief and began in earnest to use sketching to explore the ideas I was reading about. After writing a draft, I felt I needed to discover more about how the ideas I was working with were interconnected and how these ideas could be used in fashion. I pasted my draft thesis at the top of a strip of patternmaking paper and set out to draw out visually everything I was discovering in my reading.
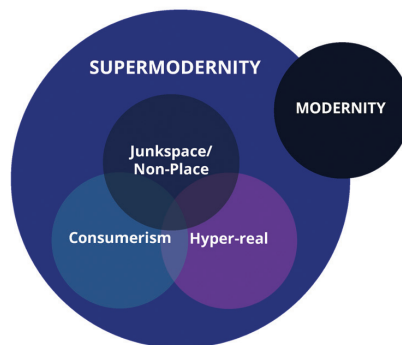

Figure 4. Venn diagram illustrating the shared theoretical foundations of supermodernity, junkspace, modernity, consumerism, and the hyperreal.

Using this method forced me to ask new and more specific questions about supermodernity and fashion. This approach through drawing grounded supermodernity in reality by constantly asking me, "What does this idea look like?"

In visualising the theory in drawing I discovered more about each of these ideas, along with how each one connected with the others. This process helped me to critique my own ideas. This is the point at which I realised that supermodernity is really about reproduction and banality. This understanding marked a critical turning point in my research journey.

Through drawing out what the theories I was reading about looked like, I discovered synergies between Koolhaas's junkspace and Augé's supermodernity. The spaces described by these two theories, non-places and junkspaces, are similar ideas described by different theorists. Beyond that, junkspaces and non-places together create a comprehensive visual code for supermodernity. Junkspace is also where the title for this thesis, "re:re:re," is drawn from. Koolhaas describes junkspace thus: "Restore, rearrange, reassemble, revamp, renovate, revise, recover, redesign, return – the Parthenon marbles – redo, respect, rent: verbs that start with re- produce Junkspace" (Koolhaas, 2002, p. 183).
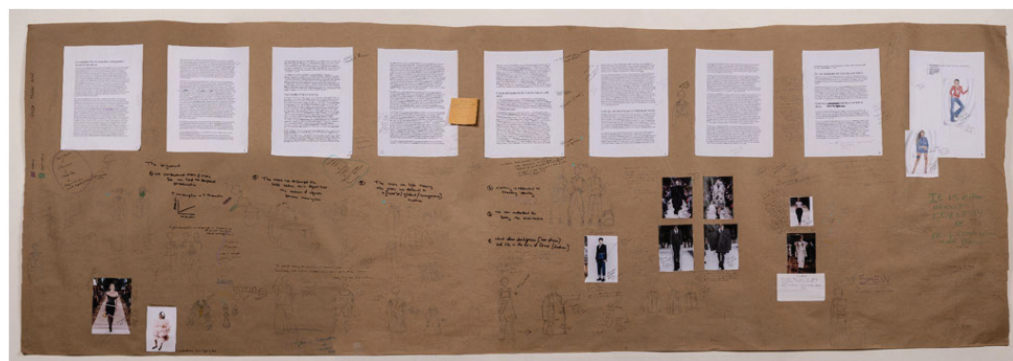

Figure 5. Connecting theory to practise – writing, visual research and drawing.

The third theory or concept I was trying to understand through drawing and sketching was hyperreality, which provides a way to think about supermodernity in terms of clothing. Hyperreality is the third order of simulation created by Jean Baudrillard (Lane, 2008) to explain how symbols can create meaning. Baudrillard suggests that a first-order object presents reality; a second-order object masks reality; and a third-order object invents reality.

In the larger fashion system, hyperreality functions to create clothing for the sake of having something, or perhaps more accurately, selling something.

No brand is more representative of this method of design than global fashion chain Shein. In 2022 Shein was the world's biggest online fast fashion retailer. Based in Guangzhou, China, Shein ships direct to customers in more than 150 countries through its dedicated mobile app, which in May 2022 was in the top 50 app downloads worldwide. Shein has no physical stores – they only sell online, and most people over 22 have never heard of them. Shein targets female customers using social media ads and works closely with social media influencers to promote the brand to their audience.

Shein has managed to achieve what fashion giant Zara set out to do in 1989 – developing a ruthlessly streamlined production process. Shein market strategy is to sell incredibly cheap, very trendy clothing to a very fashion-conscious audience (Ma, 2022).

Shein fashion is what Koolhaas (2002) described as "junk-dress" or "universal dress reconfigured." For Koolhaas, universal dress is "Junkspace: shorts, sneakers, sandals, shell suit, fleece, jeans, parka, backpack" (Figure 6). Junk-dress is a kind of default dressing. If you imagine yourself in a mall anywhere in the world, what is worn there is very probably universal dress. This style of dress functions as a supermodern uniform which gets endlessly repeated and reconfigured over and over as 'fast fashion.'

To investigate these ideas of reproduction and banality through design, I wanted to reconsider my process and create a fashion collection that interprets and reinterprets the same base set of elements over and over again. My aim here was to design clothing that creates momentary spectacle, but is ultimately meaningless – to distil the ideas that are the basis for supermodern fashion.

I embarked on a long process of deciding what elements to use and, ultimately, I concluded that I needed to identify the most basic elements of supermodern dress and design versions of those. I chose blue jeans, t-shirt and backpack. I repeated elements of these items over and over again in a series of drawings to see what they might look like.

Figure 6. An interpretation of Koolhaas's junk-dress – fashion for junkspace. Author's own drawing.

The purpose of designing this collection was to exaggerate the arbitrary to the point of banality, to repeat fashion elements simply for the sake of repeating them. To create junk-fashion and, in so doing, to create supermodern fashion. I recognised that supermodern fashion is characterised by consuming the 'now' over and over again until it becomes banal. Supermodern fashion is making simply for the sake of newness.
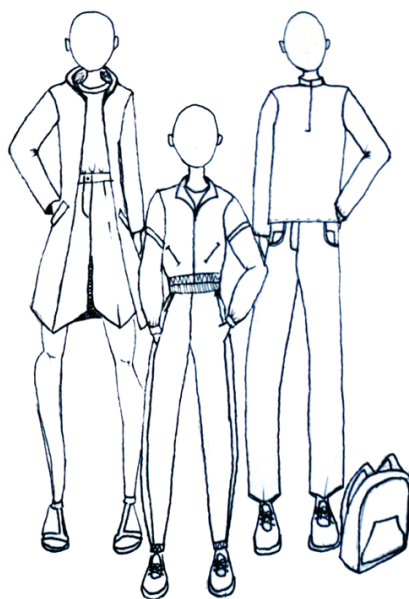
Figure 7. Re Re Re designing – junk fashion with junkspace in mind. Author's own drawing.

My drawing developed my thinking and understanding and yet, after drawing out the collection, I was at an impasse. Although I liked the collection, I knew it wasn't able to communicate all I had to say on supermodernity. At this point, I had to decide how to complete this project for my Master of Design (Fashion).

RE RE RE REFLECTION

In discovering the intricacies of Augé's supermodern, connecting his theory to others, particularly in relation to the development of junk fashion and supermodern fashion, I had created a dilemma for myself as a fashion designer. I had provided a theoretical means of explaining and conceptualising contemporary fast fashion practices – practices I abhor and had not wanted to actively participate in – and my exploration of theory had led to understandings that explain the rise of fast fashion and how and why it is so ubiquitous and successful today.

Now I had to choose between designing and making something using a theory that would result in non-fashion, junk fashion and banal fashion *or* refusing to contribute yet more work to an overloaded fast fashion system. My alternative seemed to be not designing at all – and yet … I felt that the outcome of my Master of Design (Fashion) research needed to be a physical collection of some kind.

I think this personal struggle is perhaps something that other designers have felt before me. In design practice there can often be a great emphasis on making artefacts – especially in communities of makers. It is difficult to choose *not* to make artefacts – even when making isn't necessarily the best choice for a project.

ITEM	SHEIN
Multinational Supply Chain	Relies on third-party suppliers also based in Guangzhou China, but ships to more than 150 countries. (Williams, 2022)
Prioritizes Speed-Economically Driven	SHEIN is dependent on a very flexible supply chain, which allows them to produce very small batches (50-100 items). Just 6% of this inventory remains for longer than 90 days. It takes nine days or less to get a product manufactured and another 8 days for shipping means a product can be on a customer's door in 17 days (Matsakis et al., 2021; Williams, 2022)
Wants to produce as much as possible	SHEIN produces 10,000 new products a day and the idea that SHEIN can produce as many styles as possible is key to their sales strategy. (Ma, 2022; Williams, 2022)
Prioritizes seasonal novelty	The business model is dependent on having new items constantly. (Ma, 2022; Matsakis et al., 2021)
Rapid design process	The design process is completely reliant on duplicating found images and creating only a few items at a time (Ma, 2022). This indicates that the design process is very quick
High Design output	Though it isn't clear exactly how many new garments styles get produced we do know that the company is capable of producing thousands of items simultaneously and it added between 2,000 and 10,000 individual styles to its app between July and December 2021. It is also clear that the design process encourages the creation of as many new styles as possible. (Ma, 2022)
Engages in social media	SHEIN topped the top 50 app downloads on both Android and iOS in May of 2022 (Matsakis et al., 2021). A key part of its business strategy is to send large quantities of clothing to influencers to show off to their followers (Monroe, 2021).
Sells mainly online	Shein doesn't have any brick-and-mortar stores, their clothes can only be purchased online (Deeley, 2021)
Gets reported on, or is in popular media	Shein only gets reported on to say they are unsustainable. However, they use targeted advertising to make their brand seem big to young consumers (Matsakis et al., 2021)
The brand gives cultural recognition.	No, SHEIN isn't a hype fashion brand. There is no cultural recognition in wearing SHEIN.

My conflict was resolved when I began to understand that I had used making as an analysis tool alongside and in dialogue with my design research. I realised that the insights and understandings gained through my making had enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of my topic. The key here was to recognise that my making was not a response to research – or a reaction to it – but rather an integral part of the discovery process. I had done enough making in this project.

As for supermodernity – the world is supermodern – we have to acknowledge that in order to create meaningful work within this system we need to change not only what we make, but how it is informed.

Glossary (for the purposes of this work)

Dress: Any and all adornments made for or worn on the body

Garments: The textile elements of fashion, also called clothes

Fast fashion: A term coined in 1989 to describe fashion label Zara's new accelerated business model. It describes a fashion production and distribution model which has very short turnaround times and is highly responsive to change.

Anessa Starker recently completed a Master of Design, specialising in fashion. Anessa drew on theory – specifically Marc Augé's supermodernity, Rem Koolhaas's junkspace and Adolf Loos' take on modernism – to inform her research project: conceptualising fast fashion practices in a contemporary context. Anessa is based Ōtepoti/Dunedin, Aotearoa, New Zealand.

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