

Otto Von Busch:

REMAKING ROADS TO AGENCY

By Kamala Murali

IN A FASHIONABLE WORLD THAT RESERVES BEING FASHIONABLE FOR THE FEW LUCKY ONES, OTTO VON BUSCH IS PUSHING THE ENVELOPE OF DESIGN FROM WITHIN, AND FROM THE BOTTOM-UP, TO FIRMLY ASK THAT THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING FASHION-ABLE BE TAKEN BACK. There is an optimistic quality to his practice that sees design as having innumerable possibilities, and fashion as having enough room to allow him to critically examine its political nature. The same expansiveness is reflected in his persona, for Otto Von Busch is many things — fashion artist, designer, crafter, theorist, post-doctoral researcher at the Business and Design Lab at the School of Design & Craft at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, as well as Assistant Professor in Integrated Design at Parsons The New School for Design in New York.

That said von Busch has chosen to situate his practice very much in the midst of fashion. His research approaches fashion

from a myriad of perspectives — some which grew out of personal experiences, and others that expose fashion and its practices for having the potential to expand and incorporate a sense of the everyday. His work stems from a critical engagement with and questioning of current fashion practices, delving into fashion's close proximity to the political. There is an underlying thread that runs through von Busch's design practice that is crucial for what design's role can be for the future and this is it: to fight for some, and in his case, many kinds of social justice. The themes he traverses through in his doctoral thesis, his research and his projects speak of fashion design's ability to be critical, political, accessible, hack-able, situated in the everyday, just and ultimately to make people *able*.

This article explores von Busch's framing of his design practice as an open, explorative platform that understands fashion to remain a celebration of identity by including the abilities of individuals in shaping their

identity on their own terms, and thereby rearranging power relations between those that produce and those that consume. Von Busch's practice can be seen as facilitating instances of "dissensus," as defined by Keshavarz and Maze, by opening up spaces in which individuals can reclaim their sense of agency.¹ Thus, his practice can be regarded as a model within the emerging understanding of design as a practice that shapes the future of human relationships. Its engagement with social injustices in the fashion realm is insightful, critical and more importantly, possible.

THE EMERGENCE OF A PRACTICE

In school, von Busch learnt that sewing his own clothes gave him a sense of personal identity. He quickly learnt that what one wore could solicit judgment from peers. The experience of using his abilities to create something that had meaning in his world grew out of his inability to purchase clothing. He saw that in his ability to make his own clothing lay the power to create a position in the world of his own making. During his time in the military service after school, von Busch became engaged with the writings and political work of Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. The civil disobedience movements led by Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King in the United States, as facets of their political practices, helped shape von Busch's idea of acting *in* design, as opposed to on or about design.²

The political movements of both Gandhi and Martin Luther King taught von Busch that here was an approach that could facilitate a dialogue and negotiation

between the power relations in fashion to take place. Challenging the constructs of fashion from within was a way to go beyond simply undermining the power hierarchies and to open up a debate that stemmed from the bottom up, and from within.

In addition to studying civil disobedience, von Busch began to study craft as an individualistic way of making — one largely limited to the domestic environment within the everyday. He followed this education with a year of carpentry and finally textile design. Years later at university, he found that this understanding of craft as being linked to the everyday would clash with his study of art history which focused on the larger contexts of art. This duality between the everyday and the larger realm presented themselves as opposites.

While these ideas about civil disobedience and the value of the everyday were formulating in von Busch's mind, he encountered a new media would spark off what would come to form the basis of his practice.³ During the dot-com boom in 1999, von Busch began a Bachelors degree in programming. He speaks of a particular course that introduced him to the Internet, open-source programming and information sharing; the class was called "Physical and Virtual Design."⁴ He was also still sewing and remaking his own clothes. Suddenly, he was able to translate the concept of information sharing into an idea about sharing ways to remake clothes. And so, around 2000, he started to compile a series of PDFs on how to transform, step by step,

a pair of pants. He recounts, “I think that was my craft encounter with new media... [that] opened up exactly what I wanted to do with civil disobedience. This was the tool for me to educate my user. And that was really [when] the *hacktivist* framing... just came together.”⁵

As his microcosm of craft and fashion remaking met the possibilities within the macrocosm of information sharing, and combined with the notion of civil disobedience as a tactic of political protest against injustice, von Busch’s idea of being *inside* design emerged. He questioned the passive nature of fashion consumers and began to explore the idea of independence in a world that dictates fashion: what does it mean for a designer to empower their user rather than disenfranchise them by dictating fashion? This question directed his research to the abilities and skills of fashion consumers that would encourage appropriations of fashion and allow them to become “fashion-able.”⁶

Acting *in* design for von Busch means tapping into the stream of fashion, using one’s abilities to craft and make one’s own fashion, thus fostering independence. He also refers to this as ‘hacktivism.’ Acting *in* design or being fashion-able allows you to construct your everyday though your own abilities, and thereby further enriching your world.

ON HACKTIVISM

In von Busch’s thesis, “Fashion-able: Hacktivism and Engaged Fashion Design,” a prism becomes emblematic of his research practice.⁷ This prismatic research model

offered a variety of approaches that could enable fashion consumers to adopt an active role within the realm of fashion. The concept of “hacktivism” became the center of the prism. Just as a ray of light that hits a prism is refracted in numerous directions, a single approach to “hacking” into the fashion system can also project a variety of possibilities. This is also what makes the idea of hacktivism appropriate as a tool for activism within fashion as it allows for active interpretation and transformation according to the participant. There is never a right answer.⁸

How does design activism differ from von Busch’s hacktivism? In *Abstract Hacktivism*, he explores the politics of emergent computer network technologies and its relation to contemporary strategies of activism. He defines hacktivism, in the context of fashion as concerning “construction rather than deconstruction or destruction.”⁹ On the other hand, “design activism” as Markussen writes “has a political potential to disrupt or subvert existing systems of power and authority, thereby raising critical awareness of ways of living, working and consuming.”¹⁰ The two are complementary but different. While design activism rests on the act of disruption, von Busch’s hacktivism takes the opposite course, which is that it does not undermine the system but constructively challenges it from within.

In his research on design, von Busch emphasizes wanting to deepen design through engagement and participation, discarding the academic tradition that encourages “detached criticality” and

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“analytical distance.”¹¹ In terms of re-contextualizing the power relations in fashion, his research enables new possibilities for engaging with fashion design on a local, self-driven scale. It encourages the nurturing of one’s own capability in fashion that further emancipates the individual from top-down institutions of power.

In relation to the passive consumer, von Busch’s research investigates a self-instituting approach in order to question how autonomous one can be within fashion. He builds on philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis’ concepts of “autonomy” and “heteronomy” as ideas that can be applied to this approach to fashion.¹² Castoriadis relates fashion to a regime of “instituted heteronomy” in which consumers attribute “imaginaries to some extra-social authority” (such as God, tradition, ancestors). In contrast, “autonomy is the act of explicit self-institution.”¹³ As this concept underlies democracy, von Busch calls for fashion to be democratically autonomous as well, for a break with the established “dictations” of the industry to allow fashion to be an effective freedom that results in self-reflection.¹⁴

The economist Amartya Sen’s “capabilities approach” provides the framework through which von Busch constructs the possibility

of allowing a consumer to go beyond the commodity and look at what he or she can do or be.¹⁵ Sen argues that we ourselves are commodities because of our belief that commodities transfer their meanings onto us, allowing us to be fashionable. Yet, what is of more interest, he argues, is “what the person succeeds in *doing* with the commodities and characteristics at his or her command.”¹⁶ This creates a fashionability that opens up possibilities to be self-reflective and socially engaged giving the user the freedom and capability “to do and be something.”¹⁷ It also confronts social injustices of the fashion system by undermining its undemocratic character and allowing autonomy from within.

THE DALE SKO HACK PROJECT

In April 2006, von Busch began a hacktivist project in a local shoe factory called Dale Skofabrikk in Dale, Norway. The Dale Sko Hack project was an experiment to negotiate new processes and relationships through the exploration of collaborative interventions - or hacks - into the post-industrial processes of shoe production. The aim of the project was to open up the linear machine processes of production, thus “hacking the “software” of the production line, through choice of designs, materials, processes,

as six Norwegian fashion designers, created new dialogues within design that were spontaneous and explorative. The idea of the shoe hack was to “challenge the technical innovation through operational misuse.”¹⁹ In the Dale Sko Hack Booklet, produced after the workshop, von Busch asks if the role of the designer can be reorganized to enable them to work with production at the local scale. This could “outline the foundation for social change in production.”²⁰ He argues that this reorganization could result in a new mode of production for fashion that would allow designers to exist within their global markets yet utilize the craft skills at the local level in collaboration with producers. The re-appropriation of the fashion process through hacking created new ways of production and new social relations that reversed the role of the designer from creator to facilitator. It brought the local producer, in the factory, closer to their consumer. In addition to facilitating new interactions through hacking into the production process, it is also important to note that this project focused on the spontaneous development of a new aesthetic within fashion — a renewed sense of autonomy that reexamines the idea of time involved in production. This project showed that self-production could result in greater agency and this has the potential to be a new aesthetic of fashion.

In light of von Busch’s idea of hacktivism, the Dale Sko Hack project argued for a re-negotiation of the aesthetics of fashion production and consumption that is new, exciting and intended to make one self-aware. In this manner, von Busch’s work seeks to negotiate these power relations so as to empower the fabricator, designer and consumer through ways that create new exclusivities. He asks: “...how do we plug into the aesthetics of our time and make that type of aesthetic accessible, or possible for people, participants to engage with in a sense, except buying?”²¹

Von Busch subscribes to Ranciere’s view of aesthetics as “what is sensible to our senses, what our senses are trained to perceive.”²² This then is political as aesthetics is determined by class structure. For example, the bourgeoisie are trained aesthetically to opera while the lower classes are not. The idea of aesthetics is located very much in the political and social milieu, exactly where fashion itself plays out. Hacktivism is then a political intervention into the existing system of fashion in order to create new exclusivities, new relations for allowing fashion and design to be socially inclusive and politically just.²³ The potential for new political formations within fashion resurfaces in von Busch’s

projects, especially in his engagement with a process (shoe production) in fashion. Otto von Busch is building a new politics of fashion at the very heart of his practice, in keeping with the ideas of political theorist Chantal Mouffe. She writes, “the political cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society that determines our very ontological condition. Such a view of the political is profoundly at odds with liberal thought...this is particularly evident in its incomprehension of political movements, which is seen as the expression of the so-called ‘masses’. Since they cannot be apprehended in individualistic terms, these movements are usually relegated to the pathological or deemed to be the expression of irrational forces.”²⁴

This idea of the individual as a political entity within fashion is an interesting approach to take to challenge social injustice. Von Busch’s workshops and research stem from the understanding that the way forward for a just society is through the creation of spaces in which voices of dissensus are aired and become valuable opportunities to challenge social inequity in fashion. Not only does von Busch address fashion’s proximity to the self, but he also re-examines the passivity that disallows fashion to be a vehicle of social change. Otto von Busch is in accord with Keshavarz and Maze, who explain dissensus as “allow[ing] for “actively redistributing the sensible order, those participating in dissensus-oriented design could thereby also intervene in the political order. An intervention,

interruption or break in the realm of materiality and sensibility can thus institute a new aesthetical regime, other forms of politics to come.”²⁵ In Markussen’s interview with Mouffe, she says, “For me, there is democracy as long as there is conflict, and if existing arrangements can be contested.”²⁶

Hactivism is articulated through spaces that contest the hierarchical systems of power in fashion. Although advocating that these spaces have the potential to make one fashion-able, they also promote the idea that dissensus can foster the creation of new ways of making, living and consuming. Von Busch supports the notion that situating oneself within a system to change it is beneficial to bringing fashion closer to society instead of it being locked into the “funnel of consumerism.”²⁷ As Keshavarz and Maze argue, “...other approaches, such as those oriented around dissensus, could intervene within an existing or established sensible order.”²⁸ Von Busch says: “If power in fashion is still powerful in our society how can it address injustices? Or how can it address issues of power or exclusion? And the intervention itself is about finding the power of fashion and then re-circuiting it to address issues about society, about politics, about justice... critical issues of our time.”²⁹

DESIGN AS...

What then does von Busch advocate as the role of the designer? He sees designers as expanding their roles within the fashion discipline. He argues for an abandonment of the traditional method of fashion design that positions the designer as creator only for the elite circles. He asks designers

to act as translators who disseminate design knowledge to consumers, facilitate workshops and events that remodel the social and political relations as well as re-appropriate systems of fashion production through making.

He believes that traditional practice of fashion has to be changed to make for new ways for fashion to interact with all levels of society. He says of traditional design that, “It is extremely narrow. I think we really need to challenge that and find other ways for fashion designers to help people with their dressed identity than what we are doing right now. To me, design then is an expansion of what traditional fashion design is and how it can be applied in other things and what we can learn from other design disciplines in that sense.”³⁰

The beauty of von Busch’s practice is that it explores various ideas, disciplines and experiences and thus remains open ended. It can be approached from a variety of different angles and read in different lights. It picks up sociological ideas and drops them into the sphere of fashion practices. It highlights ideas of social sustainability and filters them through the gaps of consumerism. It delves into the realm of the mythical to extract ideas on materiality. It even resurfaces ideas on craft and making, and posits them into the contemporary scene of production and consumption. In this manner, von Busch builds his practice from a critical engagement and questioning of the dynamics of fashion, informing the current stream of its practices through non-traditional approaches to fashion such as his idea of hacktivism. The emphasis is a

re-examination of how we can start to be socially, ethically and humanely just – as von Busch himself writes, “Turn passive believers into engaged users; leave no hands idle.”³¹

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