

DISARTICULATING ‘FATNESS’: DESIGN ACTIVISM AND THE COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PRACTICES OF CO-DESIGNING CLOTHING WITH PLUS-SIZE WOMEN

ARTICULATIONS, IDENTITIES, DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides analysis from a participatory design project wherein an intersectional group of women co-designed clothing intended to meet the aesthetic, functional, emotional, and symbolic needs of plus-size bodies (20+). The work of the collective is as much an exercise in fashion co-design as it is a defiant act of activism intended to dissolve, displace, and contest normative categories used to articulate some bodies as beautiful, desirable, and accepted, and others as failed, ugly, and/or sick. We build upon the concept of articulation to consider how co-design, in the spirit of activism, might be taken up as a counter-hegemonic practice used to disarticulate the boundaries that demarcate categories of Other-ness, giving way to space(s) where individuals can try on alternative subjectivities.

Clothing is a cultural resource used in the performance of identity. Design gives form to these fashion objects and thus has an important role to play in this identity work. The connection between self, body, and designed clothing objects is indivisible: “the body constitutes the environment of the self, to be inseparable from the self” (Entwistle 2015: 273). As such, clothing becomes an “extension of the body and acts as a second skin in establishing the physical boundaries of the self” (Horn & Gurel 1981: 138).

As the participants of this research study have described, bodies that exist outside the normalized representation of society’s cultural beauty ideal (Rudd & Lennon 1994) are regularly denied access to the requisite cultural materials needed for identity work. The lack of options and availability in plus-size clothing limits the potential for plus-size consumers to feel good about their “portable environment” (Watkins 1995). Downing Peters (2014) has noted that this causes them to feel “alienated” from their average-size peers and defensive about their own larger bodies (pp.58-59).

In this paper, we situate our analysis within a critical theory framework that contests articulations of plus-size bodies as failed subjects in need of remediation according to the medicalized discourses of weight loss and obesity. These discourses obscure the moral and

aesthetic objections that fuel the demonization of fat bodies (LeBesco 2009). Instead, we locate our analysis in fat studies scholarship, which recognizes that regardless of one's body size, individual wishes, desires, and voices need to be made part of public discourse. Throughout this analysis we use the term "fat" to refer to persons with plus-size bodies. This is an intentional act of political resistance as the majority of our participants self-identified as fat.

We draw upon Carl DiSalvo's (2010) argument that design, particularly when carried out in co-presence of other bodies, does important affective work of rendering visible hegemonic relations of power. Design is a "hegemonic practice" that gives order to things by excluding other possible social or cultural arrangements (Mouffe 2014: 47-48). These articulations are intended to inscribe and fix the meaning of institutions, such as the meaning of beauty as constituted through the practices, discourses, and objects of the fashion industry. However, every set of social and political arrangements are only ever as durable as the time it takes for them to be disrupted by "counter-hegemonic practices." Design, we argue, can be used to "disarticulate" established forms, and their entrenched meanings, in order to advance counter-discursive proposals, wherein alternate subjectivities might be imagined and enacted. In taking up this work, design takes on a decidedly activist character.

A burgeoning group of scholars focused on design activism (cf. DiSalvo et al. 2011; Fuad-Luke 2009; Julier 2013; Le Dantec 2016; Markussen 2013) are drawing design theory and practice into decidedly more social territory. These nascent forms of "social design" draw upon and are situated within the broader discourses of participatory design and act as a counterbalance to mainstream design practices and discourses that aid in the promotion of neoliberal ideals and values (Julier 2013). Design activism does not purport to solve social problems, but instead operates within the structures and hegemonic regimes of extant systems intended to reproduce the status quo. Design activists co-opt the very same design practices intended for commercial purposes to make speculative, plausible, and radical proposals for "other ways of managing our economic lives and the relationship among state, market, citizens, and consumer" (Dunne & Raby 2013: 9).

Participants of this study not only co-designed fashion objects that stood in opposition to mainstream discourses of "fatness" but also designed-back-in material representations of their subjectivities that have been neglected, or intentionally erased, by the fashion industry. Our participants take aim at the category of Other to which they have been positioned according to the logics and discourses of mainstream designerly practices and objects.

FASHION OBJECTS AS HEGEMONIC MARKERS OF DIFFERENCE

Clothes are potent discursive objects. In materially instantiating these forms, designers put forth arguments intended to persuade: this fabric is beautiful, that size is desirable, these seams are durable. Each decision, trade-off, and compromise made by the designer is an exercise in rhetoric. As Richard Buchanan (1985) argues, "instead of simply making an object or thing, [the designer] is actually creating a persuasive argument that comes to life whenever a user considers or uses a product as a means to some end" (pp.8-9). Therefore, decisions made in crafting an object are rhetorical statements, reflecting the sensibilities, desires, and values of its maker that are enacted through social practice, such as shopping for clothing. Each time individuals encounter a designed object, they confront not only its aesthetic and functional logics, its so-called form and function, but also the ideological proposition put forward by the designer that by extension *hails* its viewer into a particular subject position. For instance, consider a rack of dresses intended for a plus-size consumer audience that make up the inventory of a standard department store: When consumers come into relation with these objects – in other words they see them in the store, desire them, try them on – they are positioned as people who are "plus-size" according to the sizing regime inscribed by the garment's design. It is a discursive category inasmuch as it is marked by its difference in relation to non-plus size bodies, materially manifested by the clothing tags that indicate the size of each garment.

As participants of our study indicated, there are many bodies that go unrepresented in the fashion industry, particularly those that exceed size 20. This act of exclusion delimits the possibility that fat bodies could, or should, be considered subjects worthy of the resources, time, and designerly know-how needed to produce fashionable objects that are beautiful, desirable, and symbolically rich.

These garments, or lack thereof, are discursive markers that position plus-size consumers as existing outside the normative categories circumscribed by discourses of the fashion industry. The work of designing and fabricating objects according to the values and logics of the designer is what Mouffe (2014) characterizes as articulation, a set of hegemonic practices, "through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed" (p.45). These hegemonic practices bracket off other possible articulations, privileging what is given in this moment as "natural" and "invariably expressing a particular configuration of power relations" (Mouffe 2014: 45). This is evident in our work with individuals whose bodies exceed the normative categories articulated by the hegemonic practices of fashion design.

Fat bodies are deemed as undesirable representations of the designer's vision and are not considered as representative body shapes and sizes expressed through the practices and objects of fashion design. Therefore, fat bodies are relegated to the category of Other, out of sight and subject to the dictates of mainstream fashion discourses.

DESIGN AS AN ARTICULATORY PRACTICE

Design objects, then, play an essential role in the practice of articulation. By this we mean discrete objects, when drawn together and enacted through social practice such as designing, buying, or trying on clothing, form articulatory joints or "the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions" (Grossberg 1986: 53). This unity forms a "a structure in which things are related, as much through their differences as through their similarities" (Hall 1980: 325). This is evident, for instance, in relation to bodies that are articulated as fat or thin through the practices and objects of design. The unity comes from how people purchase fashion objects, which are deemed to be "in-style" by cultural intermediaries on the one hand, but also through the different sizes of clothing that are on offer, or not, in the marketplace. Bodies that are articulated as Other, play an essential role in reaffirming the discursive boundaries between fat and thin. If, for instance, the boundaries between these categories were dissolved then bodies would no longer be classified in this way, giving way to new categorical distinctions. Thus, these "structures" do not possess a givenness, they are not natural distinctions, but are articulated through discourses that could or may be rearticulated according to different conditions and situations (Grossberg 1986: 53). This final point is taken up by DiSalvo (2012) in his work to advance an "adversarial design" practice intended to draw out the agonistic qualities and characteristics of design that by extension disarticulate the fixed or taken-for-granted meanings of design things.

Objects, as discursive texts, can act out or take up a contestational character that draws attention to and/or challenges hegemonic practices and agendas. For starters, Mouffe (2014) contends that in order to "envisage the possibility of transforming a given social order through political action, it is necessary to visualize this order not as the necessary expression of a logic that would be exterior this order, but as the temporary and precarious results of sedimented hegemonic practices" (p.46). Design can be used for "visualizing" or rendering visible the rigid structures that have emerged through hegemonic articulatory practices (DiSalvo et al. 2011), such as those found in mainstream fashion design. Through this work, design takes on a definite activist character aimed at disrupting, contesting, displacing. It functions to reveal, question, and even challenge existing orders and the inscribed meanings of social institutions. While hegemonic practices of articulation may result in stable social formations, or

taken-for-granted states of affairs, these formations may also – through counter-hegemonic practices such as activist or adversarial design – be disarticulated, displacing the stable meanings ascribed to particular categories, such as fatness. This opening up of meanings, dislocating signifier from referent, produces agonistic spaces where the questioning of existing social structures can take place, and by extension, new trajectories of political and activist action can be imagined.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2016, we posted a call for participants in three Facebook groups targeted to women with plus-size bodies. Seventy-one people responded to the call; twenty were selected to take part; sixteen of whom arrived for a full-day co-design workshop. We controlled for ethnicity, body size, and geographic location. The study also included queer women representing a variety of sexual identities, including trans*, lesbian, and bisexual. This research focused on women, as opposed to men, because there is a noticeable gap in the literature when it comes to addressing the gendered systemic barriers that limit plus-size women's access to fashion. For instance, participants remarked that there are more plus-size options available for men, and that these fashions are often featured alongside smaller sizes, not placed in a separate plus-size section, common in women's fashion retail.

In the end, the cohort represented an intersectional group of individuals who self-identified as female and whose body sizes exceeded size 20. While women's clothing sizes vary in North America depending on geography and fashion label, participants of this study ranged from 2x through to 6x. These sizes are rarely represented in the mainstream fashion industry. Even plus-size retailers do not accommodate above a 3x. At best, plus-size retailers, such as U.S.-based Torrid, scale up clothing to accommodate larger bodies, without considering how this will affect fit, style, and comfort. As one participant remarked, "It takes more fabric to go over a mountain than across a lane."

The researchers of this study come from a variety of backgrounds, including social work and fat studies, fashion design, political studies, and sociology. We recognize that in convening this research project we carry with us our own disciplinary epistemologies that affect how we encounter, report on, and perceive the intersectional dynamics of fatness. Most of the research collective are not members of what has become a close-knit fat activist community in Toronto. Additionally, two of the researchers identify as male and recognized that their co-presence at the workshop may unintentionally limit some participants' willingness to take part while in the presence of a male gaze.

To address these concerns, we identified a lead facilitator who is a fat studies scholar and member of the fat activist community. She acted as an insider researcher,

helping to bridge the worlds of the participants and researchers, who had not experienced weight-based discrimination. To address concerns of patriarchy, we let participants decide whether they were comfortable with male researchers being present. Initially there was some hesitation; however, as the day progressed the researchers gradually gained the trust of those in attendance by demonstrating that the workshop space was safe for personal reflection and storytelling.

There are few models to draw upon when it comes to co-designing fashion objects with non-experts; as such, we devised a mixed-method approach called “co-generative mapping.” This method combines “body mapping” – an arts-based method of storytelling used in social science and humanities (Gastaldo et al. 2012) – and “prototyping,” a technique used in design to quickly instantiate ideas in material form (Sanders & Stappers 2014). This method is intended to draw upon participants’ embodied knowledge and experiences. The body is a central instrument in making this knowledge known and durable. Translating embodied knowledge occurs at the threshold between making, doing, and enacting: where generative research methods are used to articulate latent and tacit knowledge (Brandt, Binder & Sanders 2013).

DISARTICULATING FATNESS THROUGH DESIGN

When participants arrived, they were asked to self-organize into groups of four. This organic group formation was used to encourage social bonding and demarcate the space as safe for personal storytelling. First, participants were asked to work in pairs to trace each others’ body on a large piece of fabric to create a body map. Using art supplies, such as fabric markers, paint, glue, and paper, they were then asked to respond to a series of questions about their body and their lived experiences navigating the world as an Othered person. The body maps became personal portraits of their experiences in a world that positioned them as exceeding the boundaries of the desirable cultural beauty ideal. A point put succinctly by one participant, “There’s a person inside you, you just have to lose weight to find them.” This mapping activity, an articulatory practice, was used to render visible the sedimented hegemonic practices used to articulate participants as Other. This is evidenced in one participant’s description of her relationship with her mother:

... she never expected me to have a long-term relationship that would turn into a wedding and turn into having kids. ... I personally don’t want them [children], so she doesn’t harass me about it and I think that’s good. ... Sometimes it’s hard to tell; if I was thin, would she have been pushing me more because she actually thought I had a chance.

These very personal portraits draw out and forward the intersectional discourses of fatness that rarely find space in public forums. Body mapping is a way to

make connections between people’s individual bodies and lives, and the broader systems that control the world they live in (Gastaldo et al. 2012). Thus this first step in the co-generative mapping was used to lay bare discourses used in the articulation of fat bodies.



Figure 1: Participants working together to complete a body map.

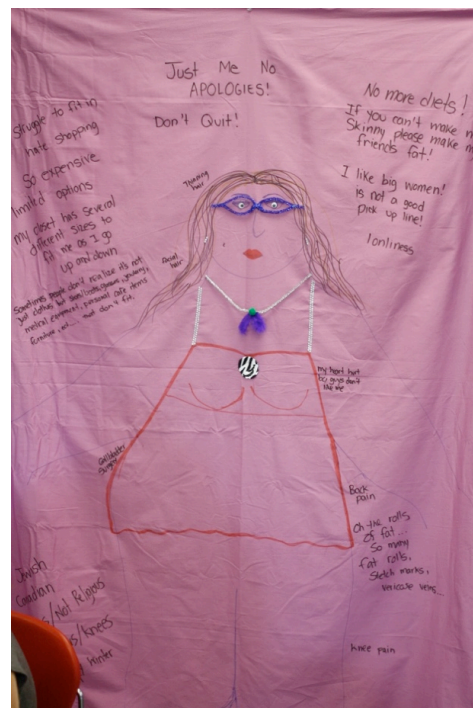


Figure 2: A completed body map.

In the second activity, participants were asked to draw upon stories told in body mapping to identify clothing features that might address barriers that impeded their access to fashion. We gave participants paper templates to aid them in their thinking. The purpose of this exercise was to imagine future clothing options, a process of drawing upon the past (discourses) to imagine the

future (proposals), which is precisely how design can take up a counter-hegemonic role. As Elizabeth Sanders (2014) argues, design enables “the ability to make ‘things’ that describe future objects, concerns or opportunities. They can also provide views on future experiences and future ways of living” (p.43). This work of identifying features that have gone unaddressed was a first step in “loosening up” or “disarticulating” boundaries used to position fat bodies in the category of Other. There were several instances where participants expressed discomfort with the aesthetic discourses in mainstream fashion that privilege an overtly femme-presenting gender expression. As one participant described, “I’m generally a masculine girl and I find there’s no plus-sized options for [a] masculine female.” Participants expressed a desire for clothing that was not “flowery” or full of “sequins,” signifiers often used to denote hegemonic representations of femininity. In making their wishes known, they opened up the possibility of alternative modes of dress for the fat body that accommodate a variety of gender expressions. These needs, wishes, and desires – discourses – presented the possibility that clothing could be designed not only to fit participants but also to become a welcomed cultural resource for identity work. In taking a stand and intervening in fashion discourses, participants were pointing to the possibility of alternative forms of representation of plus-size bodies that stand in stark contrast to mainstream representations of fatness articulated through medicalized discourses of obesity.

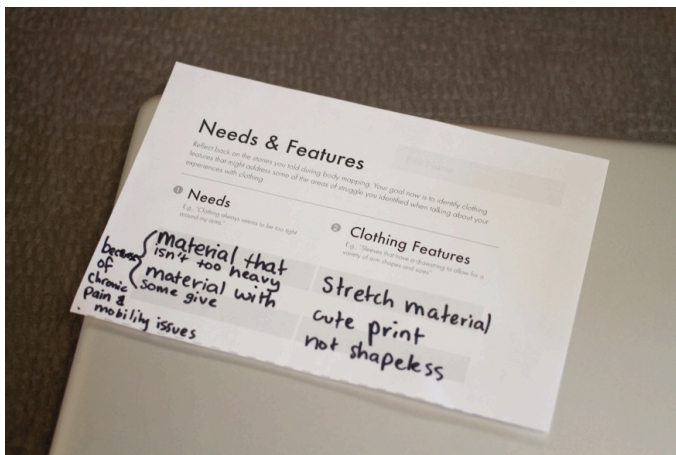


Figure 3: A completed needs and features template.

Lastly, participants were asked to design clothing concepts on a pre-printed paper template that featured an image of their body. The visualization was produced by body scanning each participant. Some participants remarked that this was the first time they ever had access to an accurate visual representation of their body. Using art materials, participants began to sketch directly onto the templates. Design proposals reflected a whole range of ideas that attempted to address the aesthetic, functional, and symbolic needs of people with plus-size bodies. In several instances, participants described a desire to have access to the “basics”: simple T-shirts, jeans, and pants. Other proposals were more specific. For instance, one 6x participant described difficulty in

finding formal attire, such as suits and dresses, that would be suitable for a job interview:

I don't even know what I'd wear to an interview. I have no idea. Like it's bad enough that they might not even hire me, because they'll see a fat body and they'll think lazy, but then like if I don't have the right clothes ... where would I even go. They don't sell my pants even in this country.

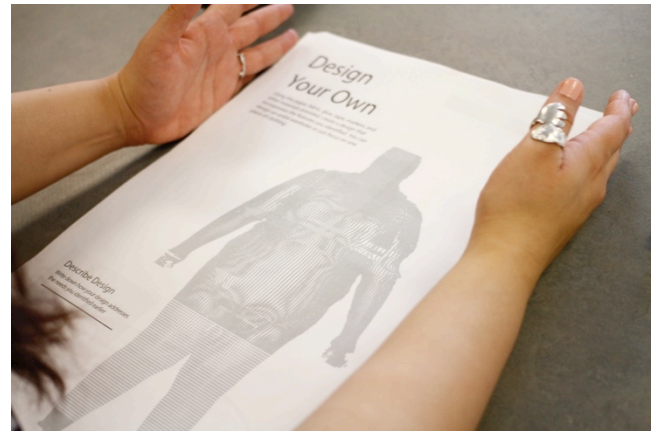


Figure 4: Participant reviews image of her body outline generated by a body scanner.



Figure 5: Participant works on a design proposal by drawing overtop of her body image.

In this final activity, design was taken up as counter-hegemonic practice used to rearticulate the meaning of fatness – dislodging the signifier of “fatness” from its referent, the plus-size body that has come to be marked by discourses of obesity and weight loss. Instead, fatness as “failure,” “sickness,” and/or “unworthiness” was rearticulated, if only temporarily, as “stylish,” “desirable,” and/or “resilient.” This co-design work positioned participants not as the failed subjects articulated through mainstream fashion discourse but as defiant persons deserving of love, attention, and concern. The proposals became a means to reclaim voice, otherwise denied by the mainstream fashion industry. Participants were able to enjoy the possibilities of fashion, and by extension envision themselves and their bodies as

something worthy. This alternative discursive space allowed participants to step over, and on, boundaries that have historically delimited their subjectivity. In doing so, these collaborative acts of activism became a place to try on a subjectivity at odds with the discourses of fatness articulated as the negative Other: a medical condition to be treated, a person lacking willpower, a body for public ridicule. In this moment, participants, some for the first time, saw their body as site of pleasure, desire, and beauty, deserving of time and attention. This is evidenced in the following exchange between participants who had met each other for the first time: “You have such terrific style. It’s so unique and it’s so hard as a fat woman to find unique style and you’ve managed to do it. I admire it.”



Figure 6: A participant presents her completed body map and clothing concepts.

The space in which co-generative mapping activities took place disarticulated what would traditionally constitute the fashion studio. Historically the fashion studio has confined individuals to particular subject positions according to their perceived levels of expertise, such as the expert designer and the end-user. This is borne out in the logic of designing *for* certain bodies, as opposed to *with* them. In the case of this research, the workshop space became a place of contestation wherein taken-for-granted assumptions about who possesses fashion design knowledge and expertise and who should and can do fashion design became a site of controversy which unfolded through collaborative acts of making. The bodies that coalesced in the space, and the affective register of their co-presence, formed a subaltern public: “Parallel discursive arenas where

members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990: 67). As several of those in attendance remarked, this was the first time they had been in a public gathering with other plus-size women where they could freely discuss their lived experiences navigating a world not designed for them.

CRITICAL VOICES IN DESIGN ACTIVISM

Our research takes up a design activist stance to the extent that it recognizes the limitations imposed by market actors but also seeks to interrupt these taken-for-granted positions that delimit the possibility of fat bodies as legitimate consumer groups. This work envisions plausible futures wherein clothing, an essential cultural resource used in identity work, might be made available to accommodate a variety of body types and subjectivities. But more than producing designed objects for consideration by market actors, this work draws forward the important identity work that transpires when designing clothes. As participants of this study have demonstrated, designing becomes a site where subaltern publics can form to consider other radical framings of what have come to be seen as stable identity formations. The so-called user, an overly reductionist framing of a consumer of designed objects, is contested inasmuch as our participants consider other discursive possibilities of designed objects. For instance, the sequined shirt intended by the mainstream fashion industry to satisfy the needs of a plus-size consumer by positioning “her” as “beautiful” and “feminine” was contested as a normative representation of hegemonic femininity. It was rejected as such and instead, through design, participants offered up proposals of designed objects that more accurately reflected their intersectional sense of self. These questions of intersectionality and more broadly subjectivity have gone noticeably unaddressed in recent design activist scholarship.¹ While there has been debate about the open-endedness of design objects, in other words “design-after-design” (Ehn 2008) and how objects are negotiated and adapted to local and situated contexts (Suchman 2007), questions of gender, sexuality, and race have not been adequately taken up in design activism scholarship.

DiSalvo (2012) has made some inroads in presenting a pluralist account of political actors, drawing principally upon Mouffe’s (1999) notion of “agonistic pluralism.” Here adversaries, functioning as heterogeneous actors, are linked together through common antagonisms, usually through class relations or other macro level grievances. It is important to note that these actors are not subsumed by these chains; instead, these linkages form part of a dynamically evolving identity of adversarial relations. At any moment, these chains may be broken and new relational possibilities could emerge. While this work successfully attends to questions of power and hegemony at aggregate (i.e., through collectives or publics) it remains distanced from the power dynamics that play out at the subjective level – in other words,

how individual identities are inscribed by encounters with and through designed objects and practices (a point we take up in preceding analysis). This accounting does not consider how gender, sexuality, and race might/could/should be taken up as contested sites for (re)design, where hybrid subjectivities might be envisioned, prototyped, or tried on, such as the politicized cyborg figure proposed by Donna Haraway.

We see the lack of engagement with critical theory as a shortcoming of recent design activist theory. As such, it is our intention, through the research presented here, to unite critical theory with the pragmatic aims of activist design – to not only imagine possible futures that address immediate and pressing social issues, such as climate change and income inequality, but to also consider the role plausible subjectivities instantiated through designerly methods, tools, and knowledge might play in lending vitality to new pluralist political imaginaries.

CONCLUSION

Design activists have envisioned a new territory of design practice that privileges the social over the profitable. Design, here, does not intend to fix problems but instead presents the possibility of new narratives, affects, and futures, while responding to and operating within the dominant logics of the marketplace and politics, namely neoliberalism. In the case of this research, the consumption of fashion objects is one among many possible points of design activist intervention. Fashion objects can also be accessed through alternative means, such as clothing swaps and DIY making, which in themselves represent alternative spaces for activist intervention.

While this research has resulted in producing clothing objects that more accurately represent the needs, wishes, and desires of people with plus-size bodies, design as a material practice was also used as a platform to contest, challenge, and re-design the meanings that have come to mark hegemonic representations of fatness.

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NOTES

¹ There are a few exceptions, including the work of Decolonising Design, a collective that interrogates the taken-for-granted euro-centric and heteronormative epistemologies that circumscribe much of contemporary design discourse. Similarly, Jacob (Jenna) McWilliams (2016) has done an admirable job opening up a dialogue between queer theory and participatory design research.

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