

Dialogues through Design: Ethnographic Explorations of Creative Process

Abstract

Ethnography has traditionally examined fashion in the context of consumption. This aligns with material culture's inclination for examining the meaning of objects through consumption rather than design, which should be considered the actual starting point of their meaningfulness.

In spite of the wealth of perspectives interrogating fashion, there is a marked absence of literature exploring how it is actually created. Using an ethnographic study of women's shoe designers, this paper unpacks the real creative process. The research focused on the practical, material and social processes that bring the creative ideas of designers into the commercial sphere of the fashion system. Ethnography will be seen to be an integral method for revealing design from the perspective of its practitioners.

Central to the paper is an ethnographic dialogue between researcher, designers, ideas, materials and commerciality, bringing a more emotive perspective to design. Lasting eighteen months, the study involved observations of the practical stages of design and interviews with studio based designers, who apply a more handmade approach to their creativity.

Ethnography was used to understand how design happens practically and commercially, as well as how it is experienced from the perspective of individual practitioners. A phenomenological approach was applied with the researcher learning to design and make shoes, enabling a reflective interpretation of data.

Design was revealed to be fluid, sensory and reliant on tacit knowledge. The creative process for each designer was both experiential and personal, yet grounded in commerciality. The paper will tease out these tensions.

Keywords

Ethnography, designers, creativity.

Introduction

“As a designer I am constantly looking everywhere observing things around me, seeking new and sometimes quite unexpected sources of inspiration for my next idea. Whether it be bits of wood fallen from trees, worn pieces of rope washed up on a beach, the textured surfaces of natural leathers, the hard inflexible feel of plastic against the coldness of metal pipes, any of these can trigger my imagination, leading me to contemplate the infinite possibilities for my next shoe design”. (Chau Har Lee, interview, 2009).

This short extract exemplifies how a shoe designer has narrated their approach to a particular stage of their design process. It comes from one of many interviews undertaken with shoe designers for an ethnographic study that explored creativity within the realms of shoe design. This particular interview took place in Chau Har Lee's East London studio. I visited Chau a number of times, observing her, while she contemplated, conceptualized, reflected and made shoes. The ethnography with Chau, and the other twenty-four designers profiled, encompassed interviews about their design practice, observations of them working, and in some cases, object based interviews that focused on shoes that they had already created. The methodology sought to observe, describe and interrogate creativity in the context of shoe design.

As I spent time with Chau in her studio I observed that she was surrounded by bits and pieces; pages torn out from magazines and pinned to the wall, sketches, photographs of bits of material wrapped around her foot, shoes she had already made, pieces of leather and new designs in progress. All of these were the tools of her creativity, whether they be the sources of inspiration for designs or the physical realization of ideas. As we talked through the shoes that she had previously made, she showed me a green leather shoe with a heel that had been carved from a found piece of wood. Another design had a black fabric upper with a heel constructed from a sawn off piece of metal piping, again something she had found on the street. Through observing her work and listening to her creative narratives, it was evident that Chau experimented with her designs. It was the textural properties of materials that she found particularly inspiring, followed by the challenge of subverting these from something that was hard and inflexible into the aesthetic exterior that becomes the curved silhouette of a shoe.

These ethnographic encounters created opportunities to discuss and observe the creative process from the perspective of the design practitioner. More traditional theoretical approaches to design have tended to privilege its interpretation through the created objects, meaning that the processes and practices involved in making things can lie hidden (Clarke, 2011). Although there is a body of literature exploring design and designers, particularly architects, product and industrial designers, there is an absence of ethnographies that interrogate the creative process of fashion or accessory designers. In response, this ethnography brings the practical processes of shoe designers into the limelight, presenting how shoe design really happens. Through analysis of the empirical data the paper discusses how ethnography was implemented with these shoe designers and argues why it was the most appropriate method for taking a more nuanced approach to design, one that privileges the practice of the individual practitioner. Observations, interviews and the author's own foray into the world of shoemaking has resulted in a volume of different ethnographic dialogues, between researcher, designers, ideas, materials, tools, making and commerciality. More classical notions of design 'in which an act of drawing was thought to be prefigured by concept, embedding wherever possible the representation of mental schema into the context of social practice' (Küchler, 2011: 131) tend to prevail in design literature. Design is defined as a process of thought and planning, that gives 'form, structure and function to an idea' (Nelson and Stolterman, 2003:1). While the ethnographic findings do support this definition, the dialogues reveal that design is not linear, as the more classical approach implies. Instead it is complex, fluid and in the case of these designers, emotive. Through ethnography the paper explores how the practicalities of design are embedded with each designer's experiences of the complexities of their creative and commercial worlds. An ethnographic approach has fleshed out these tensions and in so doing reveals the often hidden workings of this part of the fashion system.

The opening sections of the paper take a theoretical stance to the subject matter, teasing out what is already known about how design and designers work. This will include a consideration of the synergy between anthropology and design. As this study was grounded in material culture and fashion, an analysis of how the study contributes to these disciplines will be explored. This is followed by the case for an ethnographic methodology which presents the approach to the methods and how they were implemented. The main section turns to the raw

data using it to describe and interpret how designer shoes are really created. Through the detail and depth of description the ethnography brings intimate knowledge of how design happens for these particular practitioners.

Theoretical approaches to design and the role of designers

The discourse that addresses design is vast and complex. Flusser (1999) drew out the complexity of the term, as it is both a noun, meaning a plan or aim, and as a verb, it includes the act of sketching and making something. In the context of this study a holistic approach to design and creativity has been applied, where the focus is not just on the idea, but the process that brings it into being. Historically design rose alongside the growth of a capitalist society, reflective of manufacturing changes but also a designer's own interpretations of culture (Sparke 1987). Problematic in the history of design theory and to an extent material culture has been its tendency to focus on the finished object. Ingold (2011) argues that it is impossible to study design without making as creativity is a forward moving process of growth from idea to finished form. The more object based approaches have meant that design is often unpacked in the context of use (Brandes, 2009), in this case the meaning may be quite different in use to how it was originally intended. This approach is prevalent in the fashion system where once a designer lets go of their creation and it enters the commercial world, its intended meanings may be quite different for the consumer who buys it (McCracken, 1986).

The literature that is concerned with design process rose out of design methodology in the 1960s and was concerned with how designers think and act (Cross, 1984). Lawson's (2005) work on the designer and their thought processes was particularly influential to this study. He acknowledged that design follows a particular trajectory, engaging a series of events, one of which is the formulation of ideas that leads to the creation of a product. It is a process that combines technical skills with aesthetic appreciation (Lawson, 2005). The creative process of the shoe designers will be shown to be guided by both the aesthetics of their individual design ideas, as well as the functional requirements of the commercial fashion system. Pye (1964) discussed how design was a relational process where form, materials and function of products are in a constant state of flux. Within the ethnographic dialogue to follow this flux is clearly evident, yet it includes also the designers and their individual approach to creativity.

How designers come to get ideas is integral to understanding creativity. Lawson (2005) argues that it begins in the mind but is then externalized most usually through the act of sketching which develops thinking around the creative idea (Verstijnen et al, 1998). Exploring the role of sketching has brought a reflective perspective to design (Schön, 1983). The 'gestures of hand in drawing allows the mind to think and explore the workings of design' (Sennett, 2008).

More traditional understanding of the workings of the fashion system is that it is a fast paced, seasonal system, driven by change. Blumer's (1969) study of Parisian fashion designers during the 1930's found that they were translating areas of modern culture into their designs, including art, literature, politics, which was understood to exemplify collective taste. The importance of the current zeitgeist as a source of inspiration for fashion designers is still frequently acknowledged (Vinken, 2004). As well as responding to cultural trends, designers are assumed to tailor creations to favour the needs of fashion editors, buyers and consumers. This would indicate that designs are grounded in commerciality and not the subjectivity of the designer, and in response the ethnography sought to investigate if this was really the case for shoe designers.

The fashion system as the means by which goods are 'systematically invested and divested of their meaningful properties' (McCracken, 1986: 76), tends to mask the creative processes of fashion products. Theoretically fashion is understood to be most meaningful at the point of its appropriation (Breward, 2003). Such a focus denies the significance of the process of design and production which are the true starting point of an object's life and therefore meaningful (Attfield, 2000). Fashion has moved from the frivolous to become a subject of

serious academic interest (Brydon, 1998). In particular its aesthetic and material propensity has paved the way for its role in understanding individuality and identity. While there is no doubt that what we buy and what we wear says something about who we are and gives a visible presentation of self, it is important to consider how the designers may also negotiate their identity through what they create (Campbell, 2012). It is this which the ethnography addressed with the objective of bringing further understanding of how another part of the fashion system actually works.

Although much is written regarding the workings of the fashion system, there is a lack of information about the intricacies of the design and production process of shoes. Discussion of shoe designers is generally biographical and reserved for the most famous shoe designers of the twentieth and twenty first centuries including Salvatore Ferragamo, Roger Vivier and Manolo Blahnik. In terms of design research, Giovanni Luigi Fontana (2006) has charted the role of the designer using a study of the development of the Italian footwear manufacturing industry. We learn from this work that shoes are a result of a creative process, through which they acquire certain 'shapes, colours and forms' (Fontana 2006: 327). However, despite this research into shoes, we know very little about why and how they have been created and what the shoe designer's role in all of this might be. The ethnography set out to address this gap.

Material culture which set the context for this study of creative practice in shoe design emphasizes that fashion means at the point of consumption (Miller, 2011). Articles of clothing objectify meaning for its wearers through the 'sensual and aesthetic' properties of materials (Miller, 2005: 1). Traditionally ethnographic approaches to fashion and clothing have focused on its relationship with the wearer (Woodward, 2007, Miller and Banerjee, 2003). This, alongside material culture's concern with the abstract analysis of things already made, is limiting, and spells an urgent need to explore how things are designed and made (Ingold 2011). Fashion as a worn article is not just aesthetic it feels and thus initiates an embodied experience of wearing (Woodward, 2007). It is how the material has been cut and stitched which imparts a particular feeling and initiates a dialogue between the article and the wearer, and there is a need to understand how the process of design is engaged in this. The role that materials played in the process of creativity was revealed through the ethnography and the data contributes a more material and sensory understanding of shoe design.

Anthropology's interest in design has increased significantly, particularly in design thinking (Gunn, Otto, Smith, 2013). This growing body of literature brings a different perspective to understanding objects, by bringing out the relationships between designing and producing (Clarke, 2011, Otto and Smith, 2013). As a consequence, there is a new emphasis on 'the social and emergent aspects of creativity in design and the shaping of *things*' (Otto and Smith, 2013: 9). The development of this relationship between design and anthropology strengthens the case for ethnographic enquiry as an inroad to unpacking how creativity gives rise to things. To truly understand creativity and how things are made, we need to follow the flow and movement of the design process (Hallam and Ingold, 2007). Ethnography with its focus on deep description and contextualization enabled the researcher to gain this knowledge through the 'convergent acts of observation and interpretation' (Drazin, 2015: xxv). Anthropological approaches to design complement the earlier work of theorists like Schön (1984) and Sennett (2008) who showed design to be 'reflection in action' (Otto and Smith, 2013: 10). By using ethnography, it becomes possible to elicit further understanding of reflection through the interrogation of the complex relationships that designers have between thought and action. Through a series of observations and interviews with twenty five designers, ethnography revealed that creativity was both a commercial and subjective process. In so doing it teased out the often conflicting dynamics of the fashion system.

Ethnographic approaches in the context of shoe design

As an 'instrument of inquiry' (McCracken, 1988: 9), ethnography with an emphasis on prolonged engagements with the informants presented itself as a suitable method to examine

the process of shoe design. These engagements included interviews, participant observation and a phenomenological approach where the author learnt to make. This research took place over eighteen months enabling the observation of a number of creative cycles.

The research focused on the specific sector of contemporary British shoe design that was high-end, expensive and usually defined by the presence of a single designer, rather than a large-scale commercial institution which may employ a team of designers. The act of creativity in the smaller companies profiled is personal and individual, centred on the sole designer who sits at the heart of a creative network which can include a factory, sales agents, PRs, buyers and fashion editors, amongst other cultural intermediaries (Entwistle, 2000). Creativity is not a quick act. Due to its link with the cycle of fashion, it evolves over a six month period from idea through to the production and subsequent sale of a commercial commodity. Even before the created shoe appears in the buyer's store, the design process for the next season is already in motion. With creativity, being thus, only a holistic methodology would enable close access to the designer's creative and commercial worlds. Ethnography as a method that brings depth of familiarity and trust between the researcher and researched, as well as allowing the prolonged engagements required to observe these creative cycles, was therefore deemed appropriate to interrogate design.

Ethnography was applied to produce rich, descriptive data that was in-depth, contextualized and all encompassing, situating the behaviours, actions and beliefs of these shoe designers in a wider, socio-cultural context of the fashion system. It involved 'direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience, that acknowledges, the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject (O'Reilly, 2005: 3). The study did not use ethnography in the traditional sense where researchers live in the midst of people under investigation (Hockey, 2002). Instead it took a more fragmented approach (Pink, 2009), observing these designers between private and public spaces, homes, studios, shops and sometimes trade fairs. This is symptomatic of contemporary British society where research sites are often heterogeneous and scattered, and where the most interesting stuff happens 'behind closed doors' (Hockey, 2002: 209). Ethnography has enabled access and been used to understand the individual and how they contribute to the culture of shoe design.

The research focused on the designer end of the British shoe industry, focusing only on women's shoe designers. The luxury end of the market was selected as it is here that creativity from the individual designer is most visible. The designers were chosen as they were known for creating shoes that were aesthetic and materially interesting and often open to experimentation in terms of their silhouettes and materiality. The majority of profiled designers were studio based who designed and made by hand. There were, however, a number of designers who also had shoes made for them in factories in Italy, Spain or China. This contrast brought a diversity of experience. In order to achieve the depth of data needed I visited the designers on many occasions and at different stages during the creative process. Interviews were carried out either in their homes, studios or in some cases their retail store. This enabled the observation of them at work either creating or selling their designs and it also brought access to past creations which formed the focus of object based interviews. Material culture shows how people express themselves through objects and was an important approach for exploring how designers narrate their identity both creative and personal through the things they have created. The interviews were conducted in an informal, semi-structured manner, often while the designer was working. The process was an opportunity for each designer to discuss their practice and experiences of it, which in turn allowed them to reflect on their own creativity (Pink, 2009).

In the realms of design, ethnography did have some limitations. As I observed and interviewed designers I was witnessing a process that was embodied, sensorial and material, but as a

researcher I felt distanced from these creative actions. This distance is well noted in ethnographic accounts of practical skills. Keller (2001) reasoned that despite the fact that the practitioner and observer are focusing on the same physical motions, they will see and think through them quite differently. For the designers to describe exactly how the actions of design felt was challenging as they work now so intuitively using repetitive acts, that become beyond verbalization. As ethnography is a corporeal process whereby the researcher not only learns from the research but also through their own physical experiences of what they are studying. I decided to apply a phenomenological approach by learning to design and make shoes. The body is the site of perception and consciousness, through which we can learn and make sense of things (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). So to make sense of creativity and reflect on the ethnographic findings I attended two design and shoemaking courses; the paper will make reference to this with the intention of showing how it supported the interrogation of the ethnographic data. The ethnography produced an extensive volume of individual narratives, supported by observational notes and fieldwork diaries. Due to the scope of the paper, these have been drawn from to give an overall view of design process. In the true essence of ethnography, though, particular examples from an individual designer will be described in more depth, to ensure a more contextualized and reflective approach to the understanding of shoe design.

Ethnographic Dialogues

Interviews, observations and a number of shoemaking ventures revealed that shoe design was not linear but instead fluid and sensory, reliant on the designer's tacit knowledge. All the designers profiled were creating for the fashion system, yet they worked in very individual ways. There are key stages that must happen in the design process, sourcing of ideas, material selection, sampling and selling (Lawson, 2005); yet how each designer approached this was very individual and could be different from one design to the next. This revealed the complexity and highly subjective nature of the creative worlds of these individuals. Sources of inspiration, as an example, were rarely narrated as being guided by current trends (Blumer, 1969) or the needs of consumers, but instead were expressed as representations of personal interest and taste. The line: "I design what I would like to see, rather than what is deemed to be next season's key look", frequently came through the interviews. The textured, coloured surface of a piece of leather seen at a trade fair may trigger the designer's imagination, perhaps evoking memories of something, a holiday or childhood experience. This may inspire a design that becomes a material representation of this memory. The ethnography revealed that design was very personal and experiential, but in stark contrast it was usually always geared towards commercial outcomes, ultimately the need to sell shoes. As one designer stated; "what I design is what I love and what I feel passionate about. Of course it does have to sell, but ultimately my creations are firstly about me" (Joseph Azagury, interview, 2009). Shoe design it seemed was about creative compromise, the balancing act between creativity and commerciality.

For the shoe designer Thea Cadabara the ideas stage of design was about experimenting with different types, textures and colours of leathers. It has always been one of the most exciting parts of her design process. When talking about her earlier years as a designer during the 1970s Thea recalled how much she enjoyed visiting a particular leather supplier in Paris.

"I always used to visit this wonderful supplier in Paris who did amazing leathers. They had piles and rolls of rolls of these wonderful kid skins with amazing textures. They were printed and sort of glistened. You could buy one skin and take it home and make a leather shoe. Then you could go back again and find something else. Each time was unique and fun. Seeing leathers and imagining what they could create it does excite one. Beautiful crafted leathers are exciting to see and finding a use for them is so inspiring." (Thea Cadabara, interview, 2012).

Thea does not actively research sources of inspiration, it is a more a case of continually observing things around her and seeing what comes to mind. This was the same for many other shoe designers. Although they went to trade fairs and observed materials and shapes for the forthcoming seasons, their actual designs ideas came through a process of reflection on all that they had seen and how that then translated into something which related to their personal passion and taste.

For Thea, kid, which is a fine soft leather made from goat or lamb skin, is her favoured material for creating shoes. During our interview she shows me her material chest which is full of brightly coloured and glittery skins. Thea loves the soft, almost papery feel of the skin's texture, and importantly it comes in small sizes perfect for her design work where she likes to combine lots of different colours in a pattern. She describes how through touch these skins just seem to 'come alive' in her hands. At the time of our first interview she was using these materials to recreate some of her past designs including a shoe based on a waterlily. Laid out on the floor of her sewing room were lots of different colours cut and stitched into tiny pieces that would form the petals and the leaves of the design. "I work with lots of colours and as I'm doing it I might change my mind and think that a fuchsia petal would be better in purple. So let's try that" (Thea Cadabara, interview, 2012). The start of Thea's creative process sees her surround herself with different colours and textures. Through handling the material, Thea connects with its tacit nature and a 'dialogue' begins and she understands how the material could translate into a particular shape and form (Sennett, 2008). Here her senses of sight and touch are in dialogue with each other inspiring and igniting the creative self. Thea is experiencing what Sennett terms material seduction and through the touch and manipulation of the kid skin she is gaining knowledge of its structural possibilities and the type of design it could become.

Thea's 'Waterlily' design emerges from the sensorial engagement with the textures of the kid skin. The materials' presence in the designer's creative process reflects not only the aesthetic and structural qualities that will become the designed shoe, but also that of the designer's personality, taste and creative biography. Thea's creative narrative demonstrates that rather than create shoes that will be determined by the commercial cycle of fashion and the following of seasonal trends, she is interested in designing shoes that reflect her interests and tastes and therefore have longevity beyond the limited temporality of fashion. Through her selection of particular materials and designs, Thea is reflecting the things that inspire her creative self and her designs become embodiments of her self-identity.

The interviews and observations with Thea took place in her home, where she worked. On one visit she showed me inside her shoe cupboard, where she had a pair of every shoe she had created. As we discussed what each meant to her and why she had made them, Thea was able to narrate her creative past, revealing and reflecting on her biography. Thea came to shoe design to fulfil a desire to make unique and outrageous shoes that she could wear to all the parties held in London during the 1970's which the 'design crowd' would attend. It was all about dressing up, being seen and standing out. Thea could make her own clothes but she said that unusual shoes were always a struggle to find. It was because of this that she found a shoemaker in London who agreed to take her on as an apprentice. By working with him she learnt the skill of shoemaking and acquired the technical and material knowledge of how a shoe design transforms from a flat piece of material such as a leather into a three-dimensional structural form that supports the body through wear. When we first met Thea had returned to her design roots and was re-creating past designs to sell in small numbers in unusual London boutiques. During our interviews it was clear, that for Thea, as with other designers, creativity was driven both by the inspirational and sensorial qualities of the materials and a passion for designing shoes that reflected her creative self-identity. These two strands to creativity were key in the ethnographic findings, and what they suggest is that while shoe design is intrinsically part of the fashion system, it is inherently personal and emotive.

One of Thea's most treasured designs is called 'French Maid', originally created in 1980, but remade in 2014. Reminiscing on the inspiration for this she recalled how her husband James had bought her a vintage French Maid's outfit. She wanted to create a pair of shoes that she could wear with this. She found some black and white kid and starting cutting out patterns that evoked the style of the maid outfit. 'I designed and made the black and white upper, with the white pleated apron front, tying at the back of the shoe with a bow' (Thea Cadabara, interview, 2013). The design of the heel was a pair of female legs carved out of wood by hand, which was a reference to the shape that women's legs take when wearing high heels. The curves of the naked legs on the heel played out the eroticism inherent in the connotations of a 'French Maid' and also in the heel itself as an objectification of gender (Brydon, 1998). When Thea recreated this design, she commissioned an artisanal factory in Italy to manufacture, with the intention of selling it in small volumes. A design that was originally unique and inspired by the designer's own personal memories, and therefore had an emotive connection, had become a commercial object. With that came all the tensions of the commercial system, negotiating prices and concerns the factory would not make the design as it had been envisioned. Yet as she recreated it her memories of the past are animated into the future. Embedded in the materiality of the design is Thea's biography which extends beyond the fashionability of the shoes.

The conceptualization of the design for the 'French Maid' shoe was created with the assistance of exploratory sketches and a sourced last and heels. While Thea manually cut, stitched and lasted these materials, her husband, James, carved the woman's legs by hand out of the wooden heels, which were to be enamelled in black afterwards. The 'French Maid' shoe embodied both Thea's creative inspiration and the practical activities which she and James had imposed upon it during the shoemaking process. Permanently embedded within the design's materiality were these individuals' particular skills of dexterity, as the knife was guided to cut the material, or carve the wood, and the needle and thread followed the hand through the motions of stitching. Creativity for Thea is 'experiential'. Ideas come from her engagement with the physical world and her shoes are created through a sensorial response to materials and forms. Thea's design ideas are externalized through the process of sketching where they are explored and confirmed (Lawson, 2005). Following from this the selected materials and forms are then combined through an embodied practice of shoemaking where the hand manipulates materials onto forms. The presence of the hand and its performative actions lie hidden, masked by the aesthetic exterior surface of the designed shoe. At the start of the creative process Thea has imagined how the shoe may look in her head but it is her body which has materialized it. Thea's ethnographic dialogue represents how the studio based designers of this study worked. Their design was a process of continual experimentation and reflection, engaging with materials, ideas and forms that would eventually become a shoe that would be sold commercially.

It is creativity as a material and embodied process that I was able to experience as I moved from ethnographer to reflective practitioner. Learning to design and make shoes brought understanding of the technical and practical skills needed to cut, stitch and shape flat materials such as leather and suede over the three-dimensional shape of a last (the wooden or plastic form on which a shoe is constructed. This is used to make the shoe and it directs the final dimensions in terms of width, height and toe shape). As I moved through the different repetitions and actions and witnessed the flat material change into what would become the aesthetic exterior, I felt the transformative processes. This phenomenological approach enabled me to engage in the practical creative processes of shoe design, and importantly to reflect on the ethnography with the designers. It was integral to understanding the feeling of processes, the role of the senses and the subsequent dialogues between practitioners and their practice. What this addition to the methodology brought was a different form of ethnographic knowing and a way into the designers' own experiences (Pink, 2009). Design is understood as a process that combines knowing and doing, and as a researcher I needed to learn how to do, to better understand and describe their creative actions.

Thea Cadabara is one example from many of the dialogues that the ethnography created. The observations and interviews revealed the designers' experiences and processes of creativity, and as they talked, they reflected on their creative past which was inextricably part of their own biographies. In contrast to Thea, Joseph, was a designer who conceptualized and sketched his designs, but would then have them made in volume in an Italian factory. This part of the creative process was, for Joseph, often rife with tensions. Negotiating prices and payments was often challenging and in some cases the factory would refuse to make a design as it was too complicated. In this case his creativity was compromised by the needs of the commercial system. His narratives stressed the desire for creative freedom and while commerciality impinged on this at times, it also gave him the opportunity to continue creating. The findings present both a literal and a romantic reflection on creativity. Romantically the designer is creative, but literally this creativity is structured according to the end goals of the commercial fashion system.

Conclusion

Ethnography has revealed how shoe design actually happens for these particular designers. At a time when there is an increasing focus on design and the end user, this study puts the focus back on the designer. It confirms that design is, for these practitioners, a process of observation and reflection. As they engage with the world around them and the materials of creativity, they become inspired to make shoes that both reflect their individuality, as well as conforming to the needs of the commercial wheel of fashion. Through ethnography these processes are unmasked and the designers' personal narratives illustrate not just how they practice, but how they experience creativity. 'The making of a product involves the objectification of one's work, and an object may thus be said to permanently embody an aspect of one's practical activity' (Thomas, 1991: 16). Embedded within the aesthetic exterior of the fashionable shoes are each designer's cultural and creative biographies. What ethnography has achieved is to give a voice to these designers.

Exploring the practicalities of design from these individual perspectives, highlights the designers' contribution to the social and material world, for which their designs are destined. The study confirms that objects do have meaning before consumption, and it is the designer that invests them with this meaning (Attfield, 2000). Ethnography's value has been to observe how design happens, but the narratives are key in showing how, the process is meaningful and, how, through the created objects, the designers make sense of their place in culture. Shoes, as fashion, may have a limited life, but, the designers' narratives give these creations a future permanence that extends well beyond the temporality of fashion.

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