

# A Visual Essay: Enabling Entanglements of Cloth and the Body

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## Bios

**Katve-Kaisa Kontturi** is a senior researcher and adjunct professor of contemporary art studies at the University of Turku, Finland, and an honorary fellow at the Victorian College of the Arts, the University of Melbourne. She has published extensively on new materialisms and contemporary art, and her monograph *Ways of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration* is forthcoming from Open Humanities Press. Katve-Kaisa runs the *Feminist Colour-In* project with Kim Donaldson and organises a craftivist group for rejected asylum seekers.

The work of **Vappu Jalonen** happens at the intersections of visual art, literature, performance, sound art and research. Jalonen is doing her doctorate in the Department of Art at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture. Her recent work includes text-based performances in Helsinki, Geneva, Warsaw and Luleå as well as in Byron Bay, Melbourne and Sydney (2016–2018). Her work often deals with power relations and knowledge production by focusing on everyday objects, situations and words.

## **Abstract**

This co-authored paper critically reflects upon the entanglements of cloth and the body. It is an experimental, ficto-critical piece assembled from textual fragments and images. We suggest that the affective relations of movement and tactility that happen between the cloth and the body are essential for understanding what clothing is and how it works. Hence we speak about cloth-bodies – compositions that are *more-than-human*. New Materialism and its theories of entanglement, relational materialities and co-becomings support our focus on how clothing participates in extending or constricting the abilities of the body, and is not just a signifier of cultural identity.

**KEYWORDS:** cloth, fashion, more-than-human, entanglement, becoming, creative practice.

## Introduction

This collaborative paper assembles textual fragments and images that, in their various ways, touch upon entanglements (see Barad, 2007) of the cloth and the body, or what we call “cloth-bodies.” This concept highlights the material- relational qualities of the cloth: for example, the affective relation of cloth and body that, in our view, is essential in understanding what clothing is and how it works (see Tiainen, Kontturi & Hongisto, 2015, pp. 25–31). Our paper offers an experimental, practice-based perspective that aims to challenge understandings of what clothing is or can be. Through text fragments and images, we hope to raise new thinking-feeling (Manning & Massumi, 2014) with cloth-bodies – to make them felt and to address their agency by means of creative writing infused with theory and images. We are less interested in the semiotics of cloth than its material relations. There is much work in cultural studies that engages with the question of how fashion produces culturally legible identities (e.g., Nava, 1996; Buckley & Clark, 2017). But in the current paper, we want to shift the emphasis from what cloth means to what it does. That is, how cloth *materially* and *affectively* works with the body of its wearer, or “the embodied experience of dress” (Entwistle, 2001, pp. 55).

To be and become a body is to be and become a body in and with and through clothes. The human body becomes a cloth-body; it is almost always covered and touched by clothes. This co-becoming doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Cloth-bodies are entangled with other social, cultural, ideological, affective, and material things and technologies.

Hence, cloth-bodies are compositions that are *more-than-human*. This is a concept that suggests that human lives co-emerge with the non-human (see, e.g., Manning, 2013). As a concept, the cloth-body speaks against binaries, and seeks to attend to complex entanglements and becomings-with (Barad, 2007).

The more-than-human, as we theorise it, refers to the relationships not just between humans, but between organic and synthetic “technicised” materials, human labour and economies of production and consumption, and bodily capacities of movement, feeling and thought. To address the more-than-human of fashion, the paper poses the following questions: *How do cloth-bodies work? What can they do? What is their agency?*

## Writing

I'm writing at my sewing desk, which is of just the right height to let my arms rest in a comfortable angle when typing on the keyboard. The smooth surface of a standard Ikea dining table made of pine that I use as my desk pairs well with my writing chair constructed of Australian hardwood, which was likely made for a nineteenth-century worker's cottage. A comfortable position that allows for a good upright posture helps my writing to flow. But then, a good posture is not all about the furniture or how the core of my body is trained either.

According to Sara Ahmed (2006), who cites Edmund Husserl in her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, the closest object to the philosopher's body, when writing, is the table. But as Vappu Jalonen, my co-author, argues, this is not quite right, as clothing is far closer to the writing body than the table. While the table is often there, the body is, most of the time, at least partly covered, or rather *enabled* with clothing. Different climates, heating or cooling systems, and related body temperatures contribute to how many layers of clothing are needed – my clothes, for example, vary from a thin silk slip to several layers of wool, and sometimes down.

When I know that I have a tough day of writing ahead of me, I choose my clothing carefully. I need support and order, but flow too. It is with my body clothed that I relate to the desk, to typing, to the text emerging.

I am in the habit of choosing tightly cut clothing that fits perfectly, both adjusting to my body and supporting it, offering a sort of enabling frame that helps me to keep my focus – preventing my writing from making those associative, and at times all too complex, side paths it just loves.

The fabric is important. It can't be anything that irritates my skin, but rather, should caress it. Smooth, silky, preferably. At least some degree of stretchiness is needed, or that absolutely perfect cut when you hardly feel the clothing, or maybe the texture of the fabric itself but not the seams squeezing your upper stomach. That's an absolute no-no. My body shouldn't feel imprisoned in the clothing; rather, it should work with it.



Figure 1 A writing cloth-body, 28 November 2016. Photo: Katve-Kaisa Kontturi

Sometimes my favourite purple bodycon type of bamboo dress with a large drape crossing the body I made for long-haul flights is the best option. But today is too hot for that. And maybe my writing, and the timetable it must follow, will need more structure, too. Today I'm wearing a sleeveless dress with a knee-length, A-line skirt, the top tightly cut, supporting my core. The armholes come pretty high up. It's a hot and humid day and I don't want my armpits to glue to my skin. I need my arms to be able to move freely, without traction.

The colour and pattern have to have movement too, to enhance my writing, to bring the best out of it. So I wear a white dress with an intensive irregular spotty pattern, jade green, royal blue, a bit of black, and shadowy disarranging greys. A pattern that is too organised would only make things boring, repetitive, too structured.

With all its material-relational qualities, my dress works as an enabling companion to my writing. The qualities described above enable my body-mind to focus on details, and they also allow for imaginative flow. The dress is an "enabling constraint," a concept created and put in practice by people who work with Senselab in Montreal, Canada, led by Brian Massumi and Erin Manning. It means something that both conditions and propels action and movement (see, e.g., Manning & Massumi, 2014; Manning, 2013, 2016). Different kinds and cuts of cloth enable different processes. Different cloth-bodies write differently. Cloth-bodies are at the heart of a *somatechnics* of writing.

## Enabling

In the article “Marx’s Coat,” Peter Stallybrass (1998) pays close attention to Marx’s thinking around fetish and commodity by focusing on clothing – to the actual coat of Marx – and how it regulated what was possible for him.

*Marx’s overcoat was to go in and out of the pawnshop throughout the 1850s and early 1860s. And his overcoat directly determined what work he could or could not do. If his overcoat was at the pawnshop during the winter, he could not go to the British Museum. If he could not go to the British Museum, he could not undertake the research for Capital. What clothes Marx wore thus shaped what he wrote. (Stallybrass, 1998, pp. 187–188).*

As Stallybrass (1998) argues, the raw material determinism in Marx’s own biographical story – his dependence on the coat that disappeared once it became commoditised – is striking for the way its presence and absence conditioned his writing. Importantly, the coat and its peregrinations in the marketplace was materialised in *Capital* as an example to demonstrate Marx’s theory of use value and exchange value. The coat enabled the writing of *Capital* and became visible as a material thing: an object made by tailors and worn to protect his body from the cold, as distinguished from its life as a commodity. That is, as an effect of an abstract and arbitrary exchange value. As Stallybrass writes, “*Capital* was Marx’s attempt to give back the coat to its owner” (1998, p. 187). By making the production of the coat-object visible, Marx took away its power as a commodity- fetish – a value substituted for the thing itself. He restored to the object its agency as a thing with its own qualities.

We suggest that clothes are so close to humans that humans don’t notice their agency. Like Marx’s coat, the real functions that clothes have “disappear” from view when they are viewed as merely ornamental. As agents that participate in human activity, clothes contribute to the scholarly labour of thinking and writing. When it is apprehended as a material object, we must recognise cloth as a connection between labouring bodies materially enjoined by the unequal flows of global capital that accrue to some forms of labour and not others. As Angela McRobbie (1997) reminds us, the middle-class pleasures of Western fashion consumption could not be obtained without the labour of working-class, mainly female, mainly outsourced producers largely from Southeast Asia.

The labour relations between the white scholar and the pieceworker of colour are woven into the cloth that binds them: these relations enable money to be earned, dresses to be bought,

words to be written. The activity of writing is, then, never separate from the bodies that design and produce the writer's clothing. Although many of my clothes are vintage and were made decades ago, some have been stitched by labourers in Southeast Asia – I acknowledge my debt to their work. We certainly never write alone.

### **Moving**

Safety and protective clothing shifts the possibilities of the body. For example, firefighters wear uniforms that enable them to stay in extremely hot temperatures without getting burned. However, protective and so-called technical clothes are not really that different from “regular” clothes. A woollen sweater protects from the cold and becomes clean in an airy place, and clothes that cover the body prevent it from getting sunburned. All clothing is technology; different clothes enable different things and make others impossible for the human body. In other words, all clothes either add to or diminish the capacity of the body. However, the transition from “regular” clothes to technical clothes is often considered self-evident, even utopian. As Colin Gale and Jasbir Kaur (2004) write about the cooperation of muscles and clothes in their book *Fashion and Textiles*, “the correlation between clothing and muscles may one day change the way we experience tiredness, incapacity or movement itself” (Gale & Kaur, 2004, p. 167). Clothing can be thought of, too, as a technology that “disciplines” the body, which conforms, through clothing, to institutional spaces and demands (Entwistle, 2001, pp. 37–44). From a Foucauldian perspective, the body and what it wears is a site of social control. A new materialist approach also considers the processes of the body itself in its relations with cloth. The gendered technologies of corsets and shapewear, for example, produce postural habits that influence physiological processes such as breathing and blood pressure.

It is clear that some clothes seem to affect the body more than others but all affect the way the movement of the body is felt, as well as participates in producing a certain kind of movement. While clothing can – quite literally – mould the shape of the body (in the case of corsets designed for waist-training), the body can also lend garments a lived-in shape over time. This is true for the clothes we feel “at home” in.

I stop for a moment to describe a movement of my body and this garment I'm wearing now. This sweater has been with me for years and is now worn-out. In our heyday together, I made a blog about it, or should I say, we made a blog.

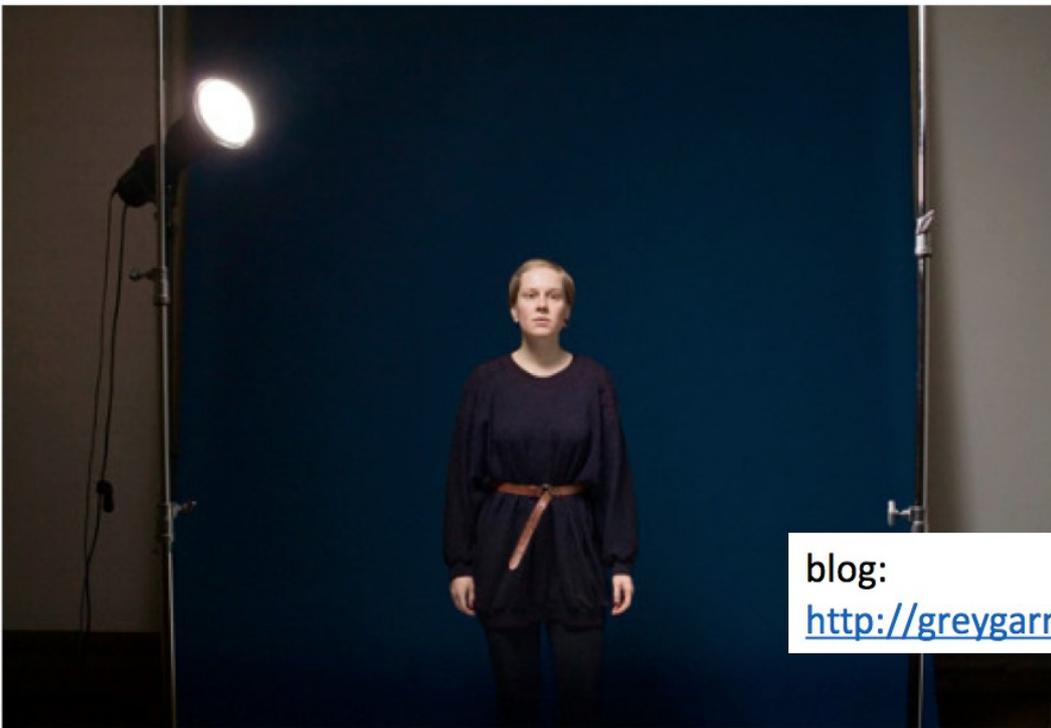


Figure 2 Grey Garment blog. 13 March, 2012. Photo: Elis Hannikainen.



Figure 3 Grey Garment blog, 5 February, 2012. Photo: Niilo Rinne.

Clothes influence the body in various material-affective ways. This sweater touches and rubs against my skin, it affects the movement of my body, it lets through and it does not, it warms up and it feels warm, it causes perspiration, it participates in the temperature regulation of my body. It affects how much my body spreads into its environment. It feels enjoyable and I often barely notice it. It shifts the boundaries of what is possible for my body, affects the capacity of my body and increases or reduces the power of my body.

I spread into the space through the sweater, I enjoy how the hem spins slightly around me with every step and then unfolds again. The sweater does not prevent me from moving; on the contrary, it seems to increase the possibility of movement. It also possibly produces a certain kind of movement.

Since the sweater is loose and elastic, it is possible to swing my arms around comfortably. It may follow that I will do it (one is more likely to walk around in shoes that are good for walking than in shoes that do not fit). And maybe also, since the sweater has wide sleeves, the shape of which is only visible after lifting my arms, I am perhaps more likely to lift my arms and hold them in that position for a little moment, in a position that is strange and unnecessary for movement or work.



Figure 4 Grey Garment blog, 11 December, 2011. Photo: Vappu Jalonen.

Of course, the movement of my body and the garment is also affected by various other factors: for example, the social situation. The material, the cultural and the social are entangled, not separate.

The fact that the sweater fits me, or in this case, rather, is loose enough, is of great significance. Clothes manufactured in certain sizes and cut in certain ways exclude some bodies, in a very concrete way: they do not fit. As Sara Ahmed explains, clothing patterns “presume certain kinds of bodies as having ‘sizes’ that will ‘match’” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 51). In other words, a piece of clothing assumes a certain kind of a body and directs itself towards it while a certain body orients itself towards a garment (ibid.). Worlds and clothes privilege some bodies over others. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes of the misfit: “A misfit occurs when the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it” (2014, n.p.). That means that the misfit comes into being only through a relation to the environment. For instance, clothes designed for thin or able bodies.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout our paper we’ve pointed out how our bodies do things in a material- relational connection to clothing. We want to emphasise how this relationality is tangible, tactile, material, yet such that materiality emerges as relationality. The materiality of the cloth, the breathing looseness of thousands of grey machine- made stitches or the smooth tightness of densely woven silky cotton satin threads reaches beyond its own material structure to the body upon which it is worn. It is a point of connection between producers and consumers within globalised power relations of race and class, and it is a mode of bodily extension in a more-than- human world of material entanglements.

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