

FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING: CRAFTED 9 TIMES... these modern traditions

BY ERICA DE GREEF

CRAFTED : made with skill, considered, and in this facilitated project, fashioned products developed through the combined discussions, processes and inputs of designers and local crafters, whose life experiences and backgrounds could not be more diverse. How did this diversity unfold and integrate the possibilities of a shared transfer of skills? In a country where amnesia comfortably occupies much of fashion's grand obsession with new, Western and idealized perfections, this project offered the participating crafters and designers opportunities to investigate languages spanning notions of time and place. This was where the urban and rural, the past and present, the viability and validity conflicted in the creative exchange and resulted in expressions where forgotten crafts were momentarily remembered.

Fashion's obsession with modernity (contemporaneity, change and technology) has created a large discursive divide between AUTHENTICITY and MODERNITY. In the globalised world of fashion, industrial technologies threaten the individual, the unique and the 'authentic'. Traditional craftsmanship, local cultures and indigenous histories are presented as the alternatives to the homogeneity of an industrialised, globalised and stylized contemporary fashion field. The question is whether we LABEL these alternatives authentically modern or therapeutically exotic.

In Teunissen's introduction to *Global Fashion, Local Tradition: On the Globalisation of Fashion*, the focus navigates the search for authenticity in contemporary fashion (2000: 11-17). Here one could interpret 'authenticity' as the 'OTHER', i.e. not fashion, not modern, not globalised. How this impacts on the language around fashion and Africa is highlighted by a number of respected writers whose works explore the notions of "traditional or authentic", and "modern or fashionable", and the "problematic terms inherited from colonial discourse", most notably Eicher (2001), Niessen (2003), Rabine (2002) and Rovine (2001, 2004).

In a similar sense, the classification of dress as TRADITIONAL or cultural is used as a tool to preserve the boundary between fashion and anti-fashion, the differentiation between the West and the Rest of the world. In this way, Niessen (2003: 257) describes in *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalisation of Asian Dress* how Western fashion protects its position of power, and ensures the 'maintenance of a conceptual Other on which to rely for self-definitional purposes'. This strategy illustrates what Polhemus and Proctor referred to as the "artificial preservation" of the traditional (1978: 28) in full recognition that the models of time and modernity represented by fashion and anti-fashion, are merely conceptual tools, and that these models are highly problematic as all societies CONTINUALLY shift and change as they experience globalisation.

How then do South African designers, producers and consumers navigate the dialectical images of MODERNITY and TRADITION? When the designers and the crafters discuss, dialogue, negotiate and create, it is arguably in the present, and within the modern experience. Nevertheless, the 'modern experience' is always mediated by personal and cultural histories and memories through which the INDIVIDUAL practitioners explore and express their NOW and their HERITAGE. In the last few years of South African fashion, there have been multiple interpretations of diverse forms of heritage and associations to traditions, yet very little analysis has been processed regarding the nature, emotion, or intention of these so-called 'pasts'.

Media perpetuates the myth of authenticity, tradition, culture, and heritage as notions seemingly embedded in the PAST. It is these same THEMES that are defined as representatives of local South African fashioned iconographies which tend to conflict with modernity, with the market, with fashion, and with the idea of globalisation, all of which are firmly located in the PRESENT.

As Carolyn Evans describes in *Fashion at the Edge* (2003: 17), that a small proportion of designers were among those whose work articulated experiences of forms of cultural discontinuity, transforming 'negative' ideas into critical and questioning designs. The memory traces invoked were historical fragments of instability and transience from earlier periods. Because fashion is an appropriate arena in which to investigate the complexities of modernity, identity and urbanism,

local designers can and do echo the politics of change where meaning and transformation in South Africa has played itself out so profoundly: socially, culturally, emotionally and economically.

This shift in contemporary fashion towards heritage and histories that are embedded in local traditions, currently spreads from Peru to Puma, from Tartans to Diesel, from Prince of Wales checks to Pedi smocks, from Watanabe to Black Coffee. Is it about CRAFT, this new coutured ideal?

LEST WE FORGET, FASHION likes to FORGET, to LOSE, UNRAVEL and to UNDO, ONLY to DISCOVER, to REMEMBER and to find the PLEASURE of stitching ANEW.

REFERENCES:

Brand J. & Theunissen J. eds. (2005), *Global Fashion, Local Tradition*, ArtEZ

Institute of the Arts: Terra

Evans C. (2003), *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness*,

New Haven and New York: Yale University Press.

Niessen S. & Leshkovich A. M. & Jones C. (eds.) (2003), *Re-Orienting*

Fashion: The Globalisation of Asian Dress, Oxford and New York: Berg

Rovine V. (2001), *Bogolan: Shaping Culture through Cloth*, Washington and

London: Smithsonian Institution Press