

# **GLOBAL FASHION 2018**

## **The Human Condition of Dress - Homo Laborans**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This present paper discusses the speculative design installation *Homo laborans*, which is an intellectual and visual investigation of dignity in dress, to contribute to the concept of dignity as an integral element in the discourse of ethical fashion.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Literature review, speculative design, bricolage, phenomenology

**Findings (mandatory) Research limitations/implications:** Engaging in speculative design as a means to visualize the human condition we are living in under the current consumer culture, has shown to be an effective tool for the designer and an audience to reflect and understand the subject of dignity.

**Keywords:** Dignity, Speculative Design, Sweatshops, Fashion-Activism, Consumer Culture

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*All illustrations by Isabela B. Gygax*

## **ABSTRACT**

This present paper discusses the speculative design installation *Homo laborans*, which is an intellectual and visual investigation of dignity in dress, acknowledging the undignified human condition created by consumerism. It uses fashion and dress as an analogy for the wider social and cultural impact the lack of dignity provokes. This analysis aims to contribute to the concept of dignity as an integral element in the discourse of ethical fashion.

This project is founded on an extended literature review; still an unnoticed field of study within fashion and dress literature, many indications given prove however, that fashion and appearance are indeed a vehicle for human dignity (Craik, 2009), (Pols J. 2013). Dignity related topics such as self-esteem, human right issues or political activism proclaim themselves through dress (Torrens, 1997), (Perry P. 1972), (Hillery, J. and Paulins, A. 2009).

The artistic research (Dunne and Raby, 2013) and the design process is described in detail, as well as the curatorial efforts (Obrist, 2015) made to create a phenomenological (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013) setting, in which an audience could experience the installation. Personal observations and a brief email enquiry captured the experience.

Engaging in speculative design to visualize the human condition we are living in under the current consumer culture, has shown to be an effective tool for the designer and an audience to reflect and understand the subject of dignity. It is strongly transmittable through fashion, as the spectators can easily relate to the language of dress. The installation was thought and conversation provoking, which is a first step towards action. This indicates that the language-tandem of art and fashion could be the path to go for designers, eager to create a shift in societies' mind-set. It adds a powerful base and value to this field's voice in the ethnological, artistic and political discourse about democracy, fairness and a better future.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The history of costume has a big role when it comes to communicating social markers such as status, gender, social group allegiance or personality (Craik, 2009, p.5). In Ancient Egypt, as an example, garments were a clear classifier: The Pharaoh wore the finest loincloth fashioned from pleated, gold fabric. Children and slaves were unclothed (Tierney, 1999, no pagination), because they weren't seen as human beings.

Throughout history, fashion has been a way to stress the presence or the absence of a certain merit or privilege in society. It has also been the medium to communicate political thinking, to express individuality or even to designate conformity. Fashion can be revolutionary, a protest and an expression of outrage (Torrens, 1997). All this suggests that fashion is a significant carrier and communicator of human dignity.

However, in the industry, I see the undignified circumstances in which the majority of employees of the garment industry work; this status quo ranges from the designer who 'has become a conveyor belt for design', churning out six collections a year (Armstrong, 2015) or the exploited workers in Bangladesh's sweatshops. This situation is, in my view, the main reason why our clothes are of questionable quality and why the public, in turn, engages in wasteful and inconsiderate consumption.

If clothes are an indispensable tool for self-expression, this behaviour has the potential to put at risk the health of our society and, on a wider scale, the fundamentals of democracy. I ask myself, what do we actually display? Hannah Arendt, a German political theorist, investigated the notions of the human condition and dignity in relationship to consumption, and she asked if we display nothing more than a mere consumption – performance?

To investigate the above question through a fashion and artistic lens, this paper discusses and describes the making of the *Homo laborans*, a speculative prototype of a "perfect" sweatshop worker, for as the human cost of the fast fashion-profit-engine is devastatingly high. Frequently reports and images of suffering garment workers provoke waves of shock and public outrage, and yet the masses will not consume less. As of late, consumers even demand branding that allows them to buy with a clear conscience.

Imagining that slowing down consumption wasn't an option, how would garment workers evolve from here onwards, to become the machinelike, ever efficient and healthy organisms we need them to be? How will their bodies adapt the conditions within which they need to function?

The *Homo laborans* is a speculative prototype of a modified human, adapted to the major health-issues in the CMT-process (cut, make, trim), in order to meet efficiency expectations. If we take a

Darwinian approach to tackle the problems fast fashion confronts us with, and adapt humans to the inhumane conditions of production as opposed to the other way around - will we have found our solution? How far are we as a society prepared to go to uphold our appearances?

The digital prototype is projected onto a canvas made out of white high street garments. The train of clothes is long enough to walk on. Each time the body rotates, another part of the body becomes adjusted. Between those steps, clips from news reports and the film *Samsara* (2012) put the *Homo laborans* into context.

Key words and definition:

- Human Condition: The state or condition of being human, especially regarded as being inherently problematic or flawed. (See chapter 7.2)
- Dignity: The state or quality of being worthy of honour or respect, A sense of pride in oneself; self-respect. (See chapter 5.2)
- Consumption: The action of using up a resource; The purchase of goods and services by the public. (Oxford, n.d.) (See chapter 7.2)

### *1.1 Problem description and goal*

The problem which informs this research is in many ways all-encompassing. It is at its very deepest the question of what keeps us humans, human (Fry, 2012). It is the question of to which mechanisms we are exposed to, willingly and unwillingly, and what these structures made with our species and, more urgently, what we are going to be in the future.

The literature review has found, that the concept of dignity has yet not met with particular interest. This doesn't mean that fashion isn't a battlefield for human rights; women, children or worker right issues are manifold addressed through the lenses of fashion and has found a strong vehicle to outrage, form unions, demonstrate and to take actions (Hillery, J. and Paulins, A. 2009), (Torrens, 1997), (Roeland, P., n.d.). However, even though the human rights declaration mentions the inherent dignity of every human being in its very first sentence (United Nations, 2015), the link between fashion and dress studies and the secular concept of dignity has been widely neglected.

The study of the notions of human dignity or humiliation as concepts within appearance, would intertwine fashion studies tighter together with cultural and ethnological studies but foremost become more politically and socially relevant and eventually be recognised as a source for real agency, action and positive change-making, as it is indeed one of the strongest industries.

The issue discussed in this paper is, how we might communicate at different levels, a complex political theory, which is simultaneously linked with emotions and an indescribable feeling. As nobody goes undressed, or unseen, fashion is a major tool to exemplify our current consumer culture and how it affects the basis of our society that has been built on the principles of the UN declaration of human

rights. Clothes are the second closest thing to our body after food, we can't waste the potential this sector holds to make a positive impact on our future.

*How can the problem of an undignified human condition be made tangible through dress?*

This question guides me through the entire paper on hand, aiming to initiate a language diverse and powerful enough to communicate a dignity centred perception of the world. Demonstrating hopefully that, as garments are an indispensable tool for self-expression, we as a society do indeed display more than a mere consumption performance.

Specifically, the short-term goal of this project is to lay down a cornerstone for further investigations into possible languages to articulate social sustainability and to raise interest and awareness on the power fashion and its industry can have on the political stage in enhancing human dignity. With speculating design and curating as a communication tool, the project of the *Homo laborans* attempts to facilitate the understanding of the complex issue of human dignity through dress and to bring a strong, tangible message to designers, change makers, people interested in economics, politics, human rights as well to an audience interested in fashion and art.

## 1.2 Research scope and methods



This practice-based project comes with an in-depth literature research and a theoretical analysis of the practice and its development. The making led and informed the theoretical work, giving the basis for emerging thoughts and conclusions.

The overall methodology of this action-based project is best described by the term Bricolage, introduced for e.g. by Ezio Manzini, which implies a DIY attitude towards research methods and a spontaneous "go with the flow" process development (2015). The design process and the artistic research (Dunne and Raby, 2013) is described in detail, as well as the curatorial efforts (Obrist, 2015) made to create a

phenomenological setting, in which an audience could experience the installation. Personal observations and a brief email enquiry captured the experience.

The artistic research is split into two subdivisions, firstly, a personal artistic effort creating a speculative prototype visualising the human condition of mass consumption, secondly through curating a group exhibition, collaborating with different artists.

The exhibition served as phenomenological event, where an audience could access to the artworks. People were asked to leave their contact details and a sample answered a follow-up email interview. Personal observations and conversational insights do also inform the feedback generated about the *Homo laborans*.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review investigates if and how dignity has been analysed in fashion and dress studies, and focusses on the following:

- What we wear and why?
- How is fashion relevant in the context of dignity?
- What is the social impact of fashion?

As this project tries to express the current human condition through dress, it was essential to review the literatures awareness of dignity in fashion.

To understand what we wear and what drives us to wear it is an important realisation, as is an understanding where these garments come from. It is essential to understand that fashion is an integral part of a consumerism-oriented economy and what impact this has on the lives of all humans living within this system. Fashion is activism; to understand what its history and current impact are is what drives this literature research.

Reviewing dress studies of “dignity” show that it focuses on the very narrow topic of religious dress and modesty, but the research presented here concerns the political and human rights based concept of dignity. This review therefore, due to the lack of directly relevant literature, investigates how dignity is discussed in other fields, such as healthcare and jurisprudence, in order to draw parallels with fashion and dress studies. It is evident therefore, that there is a fundamental gap in fashion and dress literature, as well as in cultural studies about the link between dress, appearance and their link with human dignity, and how fashion could have a *positive* impact on the current human condition.

### *2.1 What do we wear and why?*

“We might not all read Vogue, but we still get dressed in the morning. And once we’re dressed, we carry with us into the day the sartorial significance of race, class, gender, sexuality – as well as issues of global politics, domination, imperialism, exploitation, and free will.” (Tarrant and Jolles, 2012)

#### *Making*

Before garments can be worn, they need to be made. For many among the younger generation making garments is surrounded with the notion of tradition and therefore with the past. In *The Craft Reader*, editor Glenn Adamson collected a variety of essays about craft “from a bewildering number of perspectives”. (2010, no pagination). In the chapter about the relation of the past to demands of the present, Dr. Rubin de la Borbolla sums this up beautifully: “When we are talking about tradition, we are not talking about the past, and I must insist on that (...) We are not discussing skeletons in our closets, we are talking about leading problems today, and tradition is one of them, because tradition is a

functional part of culture.” (2010, p. 204) Traditions are less nostalgic memories of the past, but the conservation of certain habits is an indication of how we intend to shape our future culture.

How sewing has a cultural impact is the question behind the book *The Culture of Sewing, Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* by Burman. An assembly of essays on the topic of home dressmaking in different cultures and times, mostly in relation to its influence on womanhood. It shows that making significantly empowers women (Torrens, 1997) providing them self-esteem and a certain independence. However, the book testifies also to the longlasting complicity fashion had with the oppression of women.

*The Vogue Sewing Book of Fitting, Adjustments and Alterations* communicates something of increasing value and relevance in relation to dignity in dress: “Creating a garment which fits perfectly is no accident. It is a result of time, patience, and understanding of the problem, and an insight into resolving it” (Perry P. 1972: preface, no pagination). Making a garment in this philosophy is here the key to success and satisfaction.

But today we face a reality which has switched to mass production and unlimited consumption. Who knows what a good fit is anymore? Fashion abuses workers’ rights and is the second most polluting industry after big oil (Marano, 2015). Making became producing and the manufacturer is now a mere human resource, especially women in developing countries (Kaur, 2016). Efficiency as a measurement tool of quality, is held against the human worker, the human capacity appears reduced as a result. This ideal is widely debated, for instance Austin Weber states “that also in production the human must not be devalued, nevertheless, there must be a debate about the future options and interest that manufacturers are going to be willing to defend” (2008).

## 2.2 *Fashion in the context of dignity*

*What is dignity?*

In her book *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt investigates and proves through studying the Nazi regime the glaring importance of an awareness to the human issue of dignity and highlights the political discourse in this matter (1973). Hannah Arendt is still one of the most prominent thinkers and voices when it comes to the abstract manner of human dignity and human rights.

To understand the concept of dignity the article ‘Dignity in the care of older people – a review of the theoretical and empirical literature’ by Ann Gallagher (et al.) was very helpful. Leaning on the definitions by theorist Lennart Nordenfelt, four distinctions of dignity can be made:

- The intrinsic dignity - dignity as inherent part of being. This is the kind of dignity human rights are based on: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”
- The contingent dignity - this category is split between the dignity of merit and the dignity of moral stature; it depends on something or someone and will be given or is possible to receive by acting, doing or being in a certain way. For e.g. a soldier will be decorated with a medal for being extraordinarily brave, his dignity of merit rises therefore, while a convicted criminal’s contingent dignity will be compromised.



- The dignity of personal identity - this last dignity division can shortly be described as the acknowledgment of the worthiness and value of each individual’s personal caprice.
- Dignity can also be violated. This involves not being seen, being seen but only as a member of a group, the violation of the personal space and humiliation

“Dignity is fundamentally concerned with claims of worth or value, with behaviour that justifies such claims and with treatment by others that shows appropriate respect: dignity is thus not reducible merely to autonomy or to respect” (Gallagher, et al. 2008:4).

### *Dignity and appearance*

Nordenfelt also differentiates between *humanitas* (comparable with the intrinsic dignity) and *dignitas* (2003), which is interpreted by Jeannette Pols in her essay *Through the looking glass: good looks and dignity in care* (2013) “as the engagement of individuals in the aesthetic genres of sociality they value.” As she goes further to investigate the aesthetic side of dignity, she argues for the reunion of *dignitas* and *humanitas* by finding a place for aesthetics within social philosophy and ethics, as it is not possible to ignore the aesthetic conceptualizations of *dignitas*. She supports this statement by analysing women trying to shape an appearance that has been damaged, especially by the loss of hair due to cancer treatments.

This link becomes even more evident in cases where the integrity of dignity becomes questionable or is even absent, as in cases of humiliation. The book *Dress Behind Bars* by Juliet Ash investigates historical and contemporary prison clothing and how societies would make use of them to abuse and

violate the detainees' dignity. Ash dedicates one chapter to the investigation of dress in Soviet labour camps and Nazi concentration camps: "It is almost a travesty to investigate prison clothing in incarceration systems that led to the death of millions. Yet, clothing was an integral part of these camps and to avoid them would be both historically inaccurate and give the lie to those who survived and subsequently wrote about their fear, humiliation and their experience of prison dress." (2010, p. 88). Examples are also the yellow star or the shaved heads on Jews during WWII, or how the US and British military "used hoods as visually degrading prison clothing in order to punish captured 'enemies' in Afghanistan or Iraq." (2010, p. 158).

But dignity or humiliation in appearance are often not as far from each other as one might think. Often the fine line between the two perceptions cause cultural and political controversies. One of the most controversial garments of recent history is the Burqa. In her paper *Reimagining the Burqa*, Jessica Auchter investigates a garment that "has represented the oppression of the Taliban through the lens of Farkhunda Zahra Naderi's 2010 campaign for the Afghan parliament. It has acted as a site of intersection and contestation among discourses of beauty, freedom, women's rights, human rights and religion." (2012, p.370). While the burqa in Europe is mainly seen as a symbol of oppression, in the context of Naderi's campaign it paradoxically stood for female empowerment.

For what the veil turns one into anyone, an overcoat is a symbol of being *someone*. It had a vital influence on Marx's thinking when he was denied access to the British Library without a coat, as they "did not accept just anyone off the streets, and a man without an overcoat (...) was just anyone." (Rocomora and Smelik, 2016, p. 29).

The question now is: is it the overcoat, the tailor's oeuvre, that miraculously transmits 'beingness' to the wearer in the eyes of the society or is personhood transmitted by the socio-economic status that enables someone to possess an overcoat?

### *Consumption*

Hannah Arendt predicted the rise of this phenomenon and made it her quest to prevent people from degenerating to mere consumers, or in her words, "machines". In 1964, she said: "The thing is that we are caught in a repetitive cycle of working-and consuming. It is important to be aware of this, because this behaviour suggests that for us, the world beyond the tangible products we surround ourselves with, has lost any significance. We don't care what the rest of the world looks like, as long as we can continue to restock our immediate surrounding and ensure it looks decorous" (1964).

Jean Baudrillard was a sociologist who made an enduring contribution to the studies of the consumer culture. In his book *The Consumer Culture* one chapter was of particular interest: The body as the "finest

Consumer object” (2005). In regards of fashion and dignity, the extent of the objectification and monetising of our outer appearances is revolting.

Essentially, to consume is a choice. However, I would argue that being regarded as consumer and not as human is dehumanising in itself and stands in glaring contrast to the definition of dignity. German philosopher Immanuel Kant was the one to argue that the human being holds natural value and is deserving of unconditional respect (Kant, 1999, p. 53). Unfortunately, as Arendt predicted, the current economic system is built on the paradigm of consumption, which leads the society to only grant us respect if we devote ourselves to the never-ending cycle of job, consumption and disposal.

### 2.3 *The impact of fashion*

#### *Fashion and Politics*

“Dress is a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time.” (Eicher, 1995: 1, in Keenan). As such, it is not only “a cultural symbol, facilitating the lived experience of a given (or chosen) identity, but is also a display, a statement of that identity, and has an important political significance.” (Brown in Keenan, 2001: 105).

There are many indicators that fashion is not only a tool for self-expression but plays an important role for the social status systems. “Fashion affects the attitude of most people towards both themselves and others.” (Svensden, 2006: 10).

The book *Uniforms Exposed* by Jennifer Craik shows the different civilian “uniforms” worn by priests, academics, judges and prosecutors, politicians and royals, all dignitaries, which indicates that society has a certain taste for how those in privileged and honourable positions should be dressed. It also reveals anecdotes about how people would resist war in subtle ways through their dress. As the Nazi regime for e.g. tried to impose German over French fashion, women were “trading bacon for dress goods, eggs for jewellery and butter for silk stockings,” (Guenther, 1997: 40) (Craik, 2005, p.92).

#### *Fashion as Change-maker*

This led the attention to an article by Kathleen M. Torres in the “Women’s Studies in Communication” Journal. It is about the paradox of constraint and opportunities women experienced in the nineteenth century. In her essay Torres examines Sibyl (a dress movement magazine published from 1856 – 1864) in order to investigate dress reform as a social movement. But fear of social stigma would hold back women from comfortable dress for another several years (1997).

A quite recent political dress is the pink “Pussyhat” (Schwartz, 2017) which played a big role in the Women’s March

## *2.4 Conclusion of the literature review*

The search for literature relevant to the question of how dignity has been analysed in fashion and dress studies, has led me into a broad field of investigation. Firstly, to find answers concerning the topic of dignity in dress, my research led me, paradoxically, to the field of nursing, in which dignity is particularly well-discussed. Also, bioethics, the law and psychology are concerned with this topic. What these subjects have in common is the vital importance of the relationship between people. Fashion is also a fundamental tool for self-expression and social interactivity, however, researching the three questions, ‘What we wear and why’; ‘How is fashion relevant in the context of dignity?’; and ‘What is the social impact of fashion?’ showed that the link between the concept of dignity and fashion as a positive force for it has been a neglected topic.

Historically, fashion has always been a manifestation of status, value and dignity, and the literature showed that the making of garments is a unique activity which reflects the two faces of fashion: the careful, made-to-measure approach and the machine-driven mass consumption.

Further we learned that appearance and aesthetic values are part of the experience of contingent dignity or dignitas, as argued by Pols with her research about cancer patients (*Through the Looking Glass*, 2013). But also, the opposite is possible and even more present in fashion and dress studies: dress as explicit tool for humiliation. Prison wear is an example for this, and a review of history shows how often dress has been used to stigmatise, dehumanise and to humiliate individuals or entire peoples or lifestyles.

However, the fashion industry, an economically important complex of power, supplies humanity with the second closest thing (after food) to our bodies; hence fashion and dress studies have a responsibility towards human dignity which can no longer be neglected.

Potential critics of the word and concept of dignity may argue that autonomy was the better description for the needs encompassed by dignity, as it would be politically and juridical easier to exemplify, but this would be an incomplete picture (Beckwith, 2010). Autonomy is only one aspect of dignity and examples like the link between consumerism and fashion show, that even though we may have the autonomy to decide what to buy, this does not prevent us from the undignified experience of superficial satisfaction and questionable quality, or from indecent production conditions.

Dignity is a concept which goes beyond one’s individual autonomy; it is interwoven with what we stand for as a society, and as a cultural and human population. It is a political act, deciding on what is seen as dignified, what is not, and what should be tolerated. This research has shown that fashion has always been a vehicle for ideas, concepts and disobedience to unjust authorities. Taking responsibility and engaging actively with one’s clothes bears the potential to reunite people and support human agency through knowledge, learning experience and pride of making.

The topic of dignity is incredibly broad, as the concept provokes a variety of questions, problems and solutions. Despite the lack of specific (secular) academic writing about dignity in dress, this literature review has shown that fashion is indeed an excellent vehicle with which to investigate human dignity and that, in tandem with modern quality research, draws some very significant parallels.

The evidence suggests that this approach could make fashion a stronger communicator for human rights causes. As fashion intervenes increasingly with everyone's life and life aspects, to include dignity as an integral element of focus in fashion and dress studies would strengthen their political relevance and be a more powerful tool to shape a dignified future.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

“We argue that critical analysis and debate, and the formulation of theoretical and philosophical frameworks is the responsibility not only of the 'external' critic, historian or theoretician, but essentially the responsibility of the practitioner - the Craftsperson. The informed, intimate perspective of the reflective practitioner leads to a greater degree of insight only possible from experiential, 'tacit' knowledge.” (Malins and Grey, 1995, p. 3)

Malins and Grey refer to Peter Dormer's concern stated in an article of the *Craft Magazine*, that theory could side step practice. Indeed, it is difficult to navigate the intuitive act of creating through the framework of an active purposed research further than instinct and self-satisfaction, aimed to ‘find something’ or to ‘transmit’ something to someone.

#### *3.1 Speculative Prototype*

To define the parameters in which the design process would take place, a brief was prepared. This document explained briefly what consumer culture and dignity is, introduced Hannah Arendt and the idea of the human condition as well as set fashion into relationship with human dignity.

Speculative design is a strong tool to visualise complex ideas in an intriguing way. The pioneers in this field Dunne & Raby bring it to the point: “Once we move away from the present, from how things are now, we enter this realm of possible works. We find the idea of creating fictional worlds and putting them to work fascinating. The ones we are most interested in are not just for entertainment but for reflection, critique, provocation, and inspiration.” (2013, p.70)

The *Homo laborans* is a speculative prototype of a human being, adapted to the efficiency driven cut, make, trim (CMT) production division in the garment industry.

It is a digital prototype showing a female body rotating. Each rotation brings a new step of morphing into the new body.

At first an investigation on the major health issues and their reporting has been conducted and reference from mainstream media to medical articles about garment production related problems.

These reports were discussed with a final year medical student from the Universität Zürich and a trained nurse from the Hirslanden Hospital in Zurich, Switzerland. The focus of the discussion was to speculate about how they would expect the body to change in order to not be affected by these health issues. A series of sketches was made based on the ideas established within this conversation.

To create the digital, animated prototype, a model was photographed from the front, ¾ right, right, ¾ right back, back and so on, like this it was possible to animate a rotation of the model with Photoshop.

Step by step and layer by layer the different body modifications have been drawn manually with the Wacom tablet, with a keen focus on the creation of light within the new forms and volumes of the body.

Once the morphing was completed, it was rendered into a mp4 format, and edited with Final Cut Pro. Bits from the chapter food and consumption of the film *Samsara* by Ron Fricke, where poultry workers work on a massive treadmill, were mixed together with the rotation and morphing *Homo laborans*.

The film is meant to be projected onto a canvas of white garments. The garments were mounted on a wooden structure to be fixed on the ceiling and a train of garment prologues the projection-canvas. In addition to the installation, infographics have been designed (see chapter 4), showing the body-modifications and explanations for the spectator to read while standing on the top of the garments.

### 3.2 Feedback generation

To generate feedback on the installation, a group exhibition with the title “What Is Our Water?” was curated and showcased at the BSMT Gallery in London on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2017. Twenty visitors from the London exhibition have been contacted

## 4 HOMO LABORANS PROCESS DEVELOPMENT

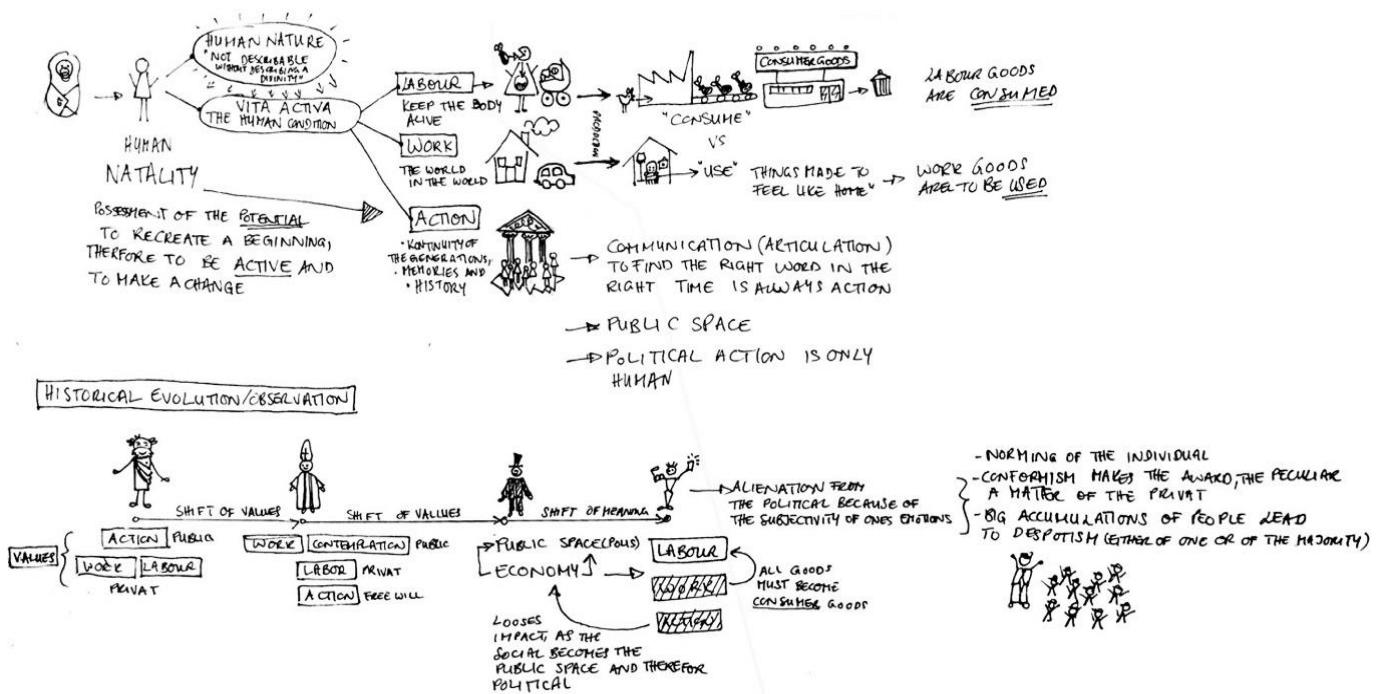
In her book *The Life of The Mind*, political theorist Hanna Arendt writes that ‘in contrast to the inorganic thereness of lifeless matter, living beings are not mere appearances. To be alive means to be possessed by an urge toward self-display which answers the fact of one’s own appearingness’ (1978, p. 21) What, as humans and as a society, do we actually display? Is our appearingness nothing more than a mere consumption-performance?

The *Homo laborans* reflects a world that failed to slow down consumption or to reconsider this culture, in which efficiency is the ideal, divine unit. It isn’t a human centred world anymore, Homo Sapiens alienated himself far from the world. How efficient can we expect human labour to be? And why is human labour still less expensive as automatized workforce? Labour is now the highest activity as everything became consumable. To keep the body alive and the system as efficient as possible is the *Homo laborans* world’s credo.

In Arendt’s book *The Human Condition* she spins the discourse about the shift of values further by introducing the term ‘vita activa’ which reunites the three fundamental human activities corresponding “to the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man” (Arendt, 1998, p.: 27): labour, work and action. Labour keeps the body alive and the species going, work is what humans do, when they build a world within the world.

Action, as the most human of the three activities, describes the political, the maintaining of the world for this and future generations, and the making of memories and history. Like communication (or articulation), as to find the right word at the right moment is action.

Arendt describes how the shift of values towards efficiency, norms, conformism and behaviourism and the urge to transform everything and every aspect of life into consumer goods, puts at risk and degenerates the fundamentals of democracy to a mere consumer culture, lived not by humans, but by Animal laborans, jobholders, ruled by bureaucracy.



The term *Homo laborans* is inspired by Arendt's use of the terms *Homo faber* and *Animal laborans*. While the first is the contemplating producer of the world within the world (home), the latter is the degenerated human, whose sole effort is to keep the body alive deprived from the capability of action. "The animal laborans is indeed only one, at best the highest, of the animal species which populate the earth." (1998, p.: 105). Still I didn't choose to name it animal, as this is a reflection beyond the present into a new, never yet experienced field, where the knowing human became the labouring man. I wanted it to remain accessible to the spectator, it should give the impression of an actual person, rather than a mere theoretical social construct.

And yet, the main purpose of the *Homo laborans* was to visualise the human condition we were living in, by eliminating everything that seemed to outrage the media and the consumers. If all the outrageous health issues weren't issues anymore, would they be happy to engage further with consumption, or could this visual input, the shock about how different we would have had to look, if we were to keep up with the expectation of efficiency and consumption, as we require it now.

After investigating several medical reports on garment workers and mainstream media articles on health and safety issues within the textile industry, I discussed how to alter the human body to resist them, with a medical final year student and a practicing nurse. Both had strong reactions to this undertaking, as they would be used to preserve the body, healing it and respecting life as such. Though the decision whether a form of life was seen as worth to live, or not was one made on a daily basis in the medical environment; they told me about ethical commissions, which had to debate these kinds of questions. But ultimately, they argued, it was a social decision of what we consider as humans and as a “good” life. Still, I’m impressed with the respect of the body they had and how they would defend and try to change the circumstances rather than manipulating the body other than healing it. And yet, one comment seems to me very significant:

*“This is, what bodies actually do; they adapt to the environment and we become, what we can be in this world.”*

Once the concept and the parameters were defined, the practical process could begin. The model that had been chosen to pose for the photographs, is the true opposite of the *Homo laborans*: A typical *Homo faber* who lives for her art. She is an award-winning fashion designer, bespoke tailor and theatre dressmaker. She is not only an incredible master artisan but also an expert in high end couture.

References such as Adam Peacock’s *Genetics Gym SS 18* ([fashionspacegallery.com](http://fashionspacegallery.com), 2016) or *Graham* by Patricia Piccinini ([meetgraham.com.au](http://meetgraham.com.au), 2018) gave insightful inspiration on how body modifications can bring strong messages to the public, start conversations and create interest in specific fields, as the audience engages very strongly with the seen, as they can relate and recognise themselves in this body. While themes like beauty as in the case of the *Genetics Gym* or road safety as in the *Meet Graham* project are linked to the everyday life and are thus thoughts we are used to think, the *Homo laborans* tackles the challenge to bring unusual thoughts to the mind-set of the viewer about an abstract philosophical theme.

See on the next few pages, the pictures of the infographic explaining the process from medical reports to the mass media into the newly designed *Homo laborans* and the speculative medical reasoning of the body morphing.

About 120 garment workers presented to emergency medicine department, with history of inhalation of unknown gas that was leaking from an abandoned cylinder at vacant plot near to their work place. In this case report, management and medico legal issues thereof are discussed.

(Sebastin , V. 2011)

Contrary to expectation, there was no significant change in respiratory function. However, the musculo-skeletal problems were found to be abundantly present with pain in 91% of the subjects. Region-wise mapping of pain revealed that postural pain in low back was present in 47% while in neck was 19%.

(Metgud, D. et al. 2008)

Musculoskeletal disorders are a common problem among textile workers. Employers can prevent WMSD hazards by properly designing the jobs or workstations and selecting the appropriate tools or equipment.

(Berberoğlu, U and Tokuç, U. 2013)

Occupational exposure to cotton dust, fibers, metal fumes and different chemicals used in the apparel manufacturing industries cause a wide range of physical and psychological health problems in the garment workers that may also affect their immune function.

(Sultana, R. et al. 2012)

It is also evidenced that garment workers suffer from health problems including short of hearing and poor vision, headache, urinary tract infection, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted diseases (...). The workers have to face humiliation in different forms in their workplace, which make them vulnerable for accidents, injuries and psychological disorders also.

(Islam, M.Z., et al. 2014)

Recent animal models have suggested a shift in the lung macrophage/dendritic cell population as a potential mechanistic explanation for persistent inflammation in the lung due to repeated cotton-dust related endotoxin exposure. Other types of textile dust, such as silk, may contribute to COPD in textile workers.

(Lai, Peggy S. and Christiani, David C. 2013 )

## Bangladesh garment workers suffer poor conditions two years after reform vows

Assault, verbal abuse and forced overtime persist following the Rana Plaza disaster, which killed 1,100 people in Dhaka, Human Rights Watch claims

(Burke, J. 2015)

## Indian garment workers fight for justice after factory injuries

Two weeks after the accident, Muniyammal was back at a factory sewing machine, stitching clothes for global brands.

Her injuries had not healed and she suffered excruciating pain. But according to co-worker A. Nithya, she had no choice.

(Anuradha Nagaraj, 2017)

## Avoiding the fire next time

After the Dhaka factory collapse, foreign clothing firms are under pressure to improve working conditions at Bangladeshi suppliers—or to go elsewhere

a(economist.com, 2013)

## Cambodian female workers in Nike, Asics and Puma factories suffer mass faintings

Poor ventilation and chemicals inside and outside factories contribute to the gruelling working environment, while workers at provincial factories can face exhausting journeys into work, standing for up to two hours in trucks.

(McVeigh, K. 2017)

## Report slams Walmart for 'exploitative' conditions in Asia factories

This includes „forced overtime“ during Cambodia's hottest season, leading to „mass fainting episodes resulting from over exertion, exacerbated by inadequate nutrition.“

CNNmoney  
(McNEIL, Donald, G. 2011)

## My life as a sweatshop worker: Undercover reporter tells of crushing hours and terrible pay in Bangladeshi clothes factory

A quick tour of the building revealed no fire extinguishers, only one exit - the front door - and little more than a hole in the ground, down a rat-infested hall, for the toilet.

(dailymail.co.uk, 2013)

## Turkey: Sandblasting Jeans for 'Distressed' Look Proved Harmful for Textile Workers

Silicosis From Work on Blue Jeans Killed Workers, Study Says

NYTimes.com  
(Smith, A. 2016)

## Sandblasting still used in Chinese jeans factories

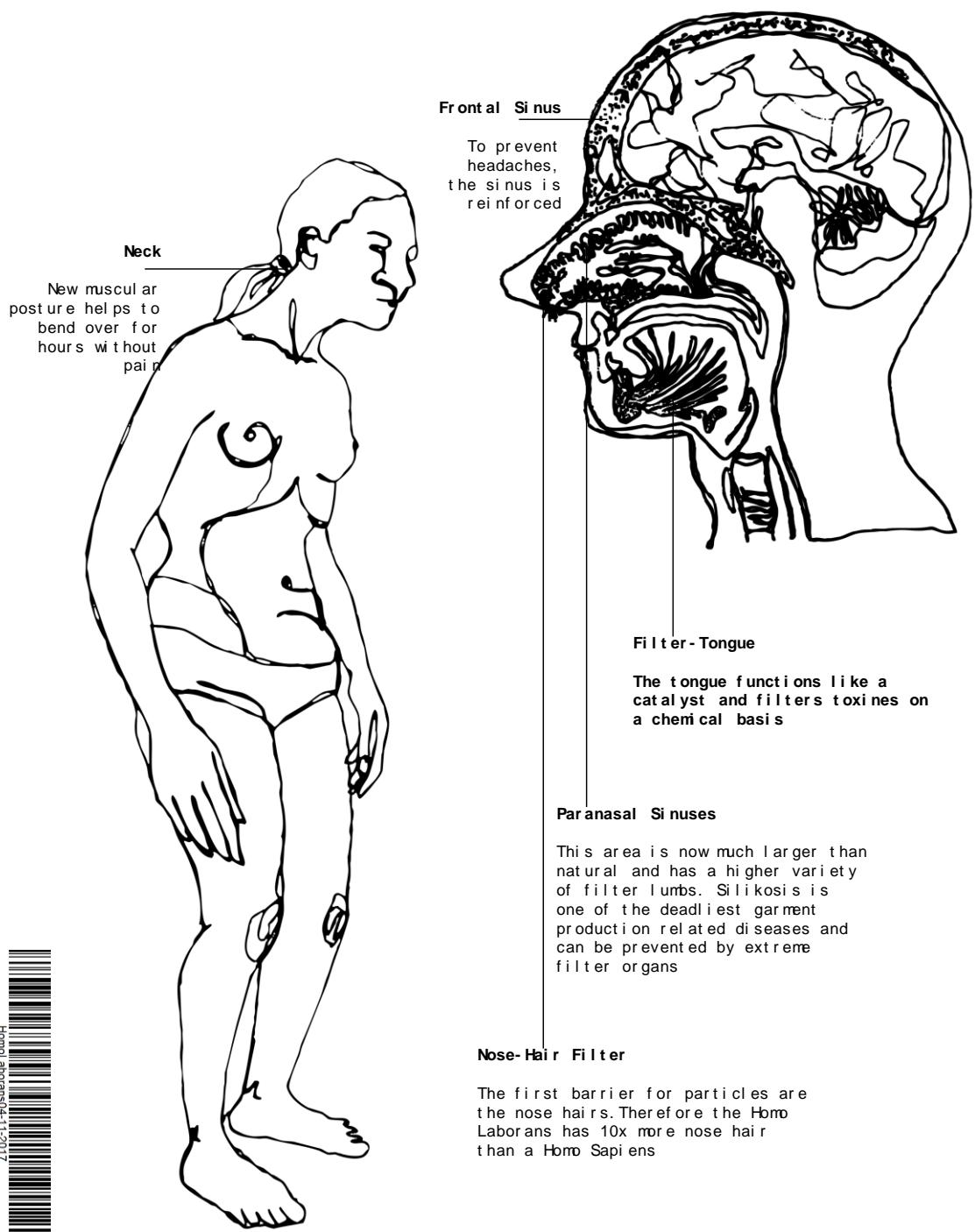
„The main problem with sandblasting is the dust. This means you risk getting silicosis if you are not properly protected.“

Some workers say they suffer not only from lung problems but also from allergies caused by dyes and other chemicals used in the making of denim.

(aljazeera.com. 2015)

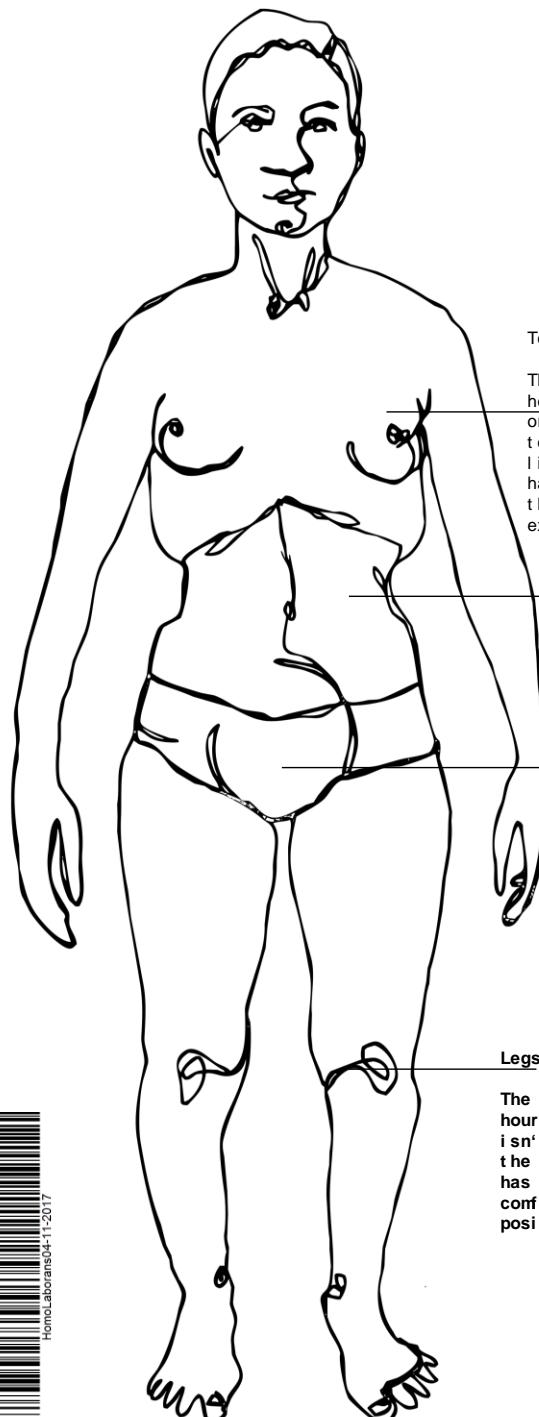
# HOMO LABORANS

Adaptation caused by  
pathological malfunction from  
workplace stress



# HOMO LABORANS

Adaptation caused by  
pathological malfunction from  
workplace stress



## Torax

The torax keeps the heart and the upper organs safe. As the toxic processing liver and the heart have been enlarged, the torax shape is expanded

## Abdomen

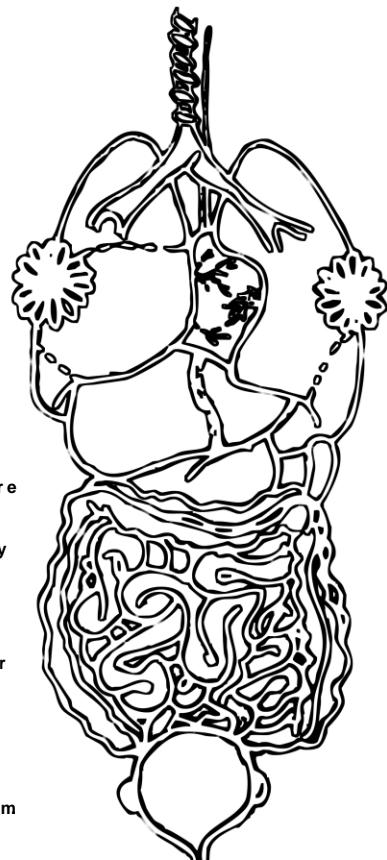
The stomach and the intestines are smaller to avoid the worker to be hungry too quickly

## Bladder

With a larger bladder the worker can stay focused for at least 15 hours without the need for toilet breaks. This also causes no physiological harm

## Legs

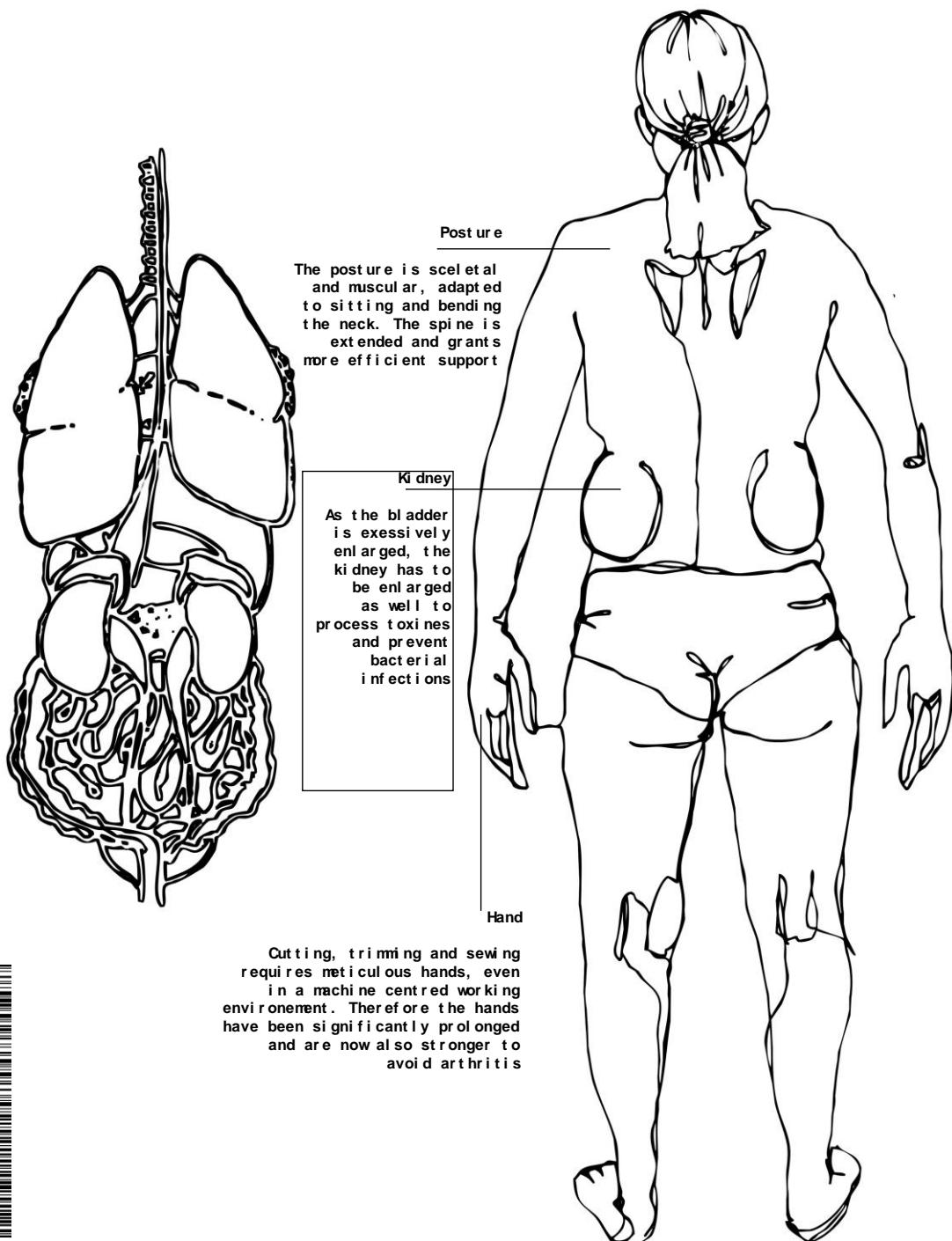
The worker will be sitting long hours. The natural human body isn't built for this. Therefore the legs and the muscular set-up has been changed to make it more comfortable to remain in a seated position.



Homolaborans04-11-2017

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The Model was chosen for she is the complete opposite of the Animal Laborans - A typical Homo Faber who lives for her art. She is an award winning fashion designer, bespoke tailor and theater dressmaker. She is not only an incredible master artisan but also an expert in high end couture.



#### 4.1 Feedback

The *Homo laborans* was part of the exhibition “What Is Our Water?” that was held at the BSMT Gallery in Dalston, London on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2017. The observations and reflections on the event (the phenomenon) derive from informal conversations with the visitors. The visitors were also asked to leave their contact details in order to participate in the feedback scheme; 20 visitors have since been contacted by email. The sample of visitors contained a balanced age and gender mix, also considering the importance of obtaining the views of those who were not already design and sustainability literate. Of the 20 visitors contacted, 13 wrote back and answered both questions, which were: A) What stayed with you after the exhibition? B) Would you say that the exhibition challenged / confirmed your existing views on your consumption performance?

The book *Researching Society and Culture*, edited by Clive Seale shows that qualitative interviews offer access to attitudes, values and feelings, flexibility, exploration of suppressed views. Sensitive issues can be broached, they can achieve depth and reflect complexity as well as allow respondents to answer ‘in their words’ (2012). Subsequently, I intended to analyse if the chosen art-forms: did had been a memorable language for the issue, and if they were sustainable communicators of complex political and personal thoughts. Did it meet the intention to let the audience gain a better understanding of the current human condition under the consumer culture had been accomplished?

It has been analysed which artworks were mentioned how many times, what stayed with them on a meta-level, how many felt challenged and/or confirmed in their consumption performance and what other interesting statements emerged.

It can be concluded, that all five art pieces were indeed memorable, and that they created a meta-level where the visitors would connect their experience at the exhibition to personal feelings (surprisingly often described as positive, calming and meditative emotions). The *Homo laborans* was mentioned the most.

Eight of thirteen respondents had their views on consumption partly or fully confirmed, what indicates that the audience was already interested in sustainability issues in general, but five of these eight had also some of their ideas challenged, especially regarding clothing. Four of thirteen persons seemed not to have confronted these thoughts before and only one person didn’t respond specifically to the confirmation/confrontation question but reflected on the economic development of the fashion industry in general. This indicates, that the questions could have been more specific, for example, with clear yes or no options.

The indications from the audit as well as the conversations with the visitors show, that the *Homo laborans* had a lasting effect on the audience. The questioned persons mentioned that it was a

comprehensible entry point to start the reflection on the topic of consumption. For some the installation was also revolting, mostly older people refused firstly to step on the garments.

Artworks	Times Mentioned
Homo laborans	5
Obey Series 1 and 2	2
Poems No Title	2
5 7	1
Unwearable Dresses	4

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#### **What stayed with you after the exhibition? Meta-Level answers, Selection**

Seeing clothes as canvas for ideas.

Reminders of the sacrifices people make for fashion.

Consumption has a bad impact on the planet and on humanity

Wasteful generation.

How much clothes are attached to people's identity.

That such a collaboration was possible.

The strongly positive atmosphere that enabled to see how standing up for the good cause could lead into a better, dignity centred world.

Every art piece puts light on another aspect of the fashion industry and its impact, but everything seems in sync.

How much time, careful and detailed work needs.

The myriad of ideas.

Is my size really determining my fashion choices?

How clothes define us.

Having to walk over the clothing mountain, without respect for the garments and their provenance.

Being impressed by the harmony and calmness of the exhibition.

That it wasn't about stuff or goods, but about people.

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**Would you say that the exhibition challenged / confirmed your existing views on your consumption performance?**

Challenged	4
Confirmed	3
Both	5
Nothing	1
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Deepened my view</li><li>• Provoked self-reflection</li><li>• Typical look?</li><li>• Political and economic reflection</li></ul>

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**Outstanding thoughts in conjunction with the second question**

I'm questioning the way I (though I'm certainly not the only one gullible to this) perceive people based on their consumption performance, or whether I should put any judgement on this at all.

Most importantly the idea that fashion is all around ("like water") and therefore naturally defies our attention is a thought that really struck me.

We need to start considering the garments we buy as an artisanal object more than a product.

If we would wear clothes fully produced regarding the question of dignity as an imperative, this would serve itself as an aide to behave within dignity and would lead insofar to circumstances in which we would more often stand up against injustice and would make the world a better place.

A question I often ask myself after the exhibition is about our appearance and what we do transmit through our clothes?

In my opinion, this exhibition should be made more accessible and even spread.

Trying to bring back the value of quality instead of quantity.

Clothes are everywhere and everywhere there are clothes there is consumption. That thought stayed with me immediately after the exhibition.

It made me think about how we have moved our manufacturing overseas and how we in the west view the typical look.

I have always in mind, that goods are made from people and materials are often limited resources.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Historically, fashion has always been a manifestation of status, value and dignity, and the literature showed that the making of garments is a unique activity which reflects the two faces of fashion: the careful, made-to-measure approach and the machine-driven mass consumption.

The study of the notions of human dignity or humiliation as concepts within appearance, would intertwine fashion studies tighter together with cultural and ethnological studies but foremost make dress more politically and socially relevant and eventually be recognised as a source for real agency, action and positive change-making. Dignity as vital part of the discourse in ethical fashion would in my view, strongly contribute to close the gap between fashion and the UN declaration of human rights.

The *Homo laborans* reflects on fashion and its current role within the consumer culture and how design can visualise the current human condition. Inspired by the design methodology of Dunne and Raby, indications found in conjunction to the group exhibition *What Is Our Water?* show, that speculative design was an effective tool. The feedback shows, that the *Homo laborans* had a lasting effect on the audience. The questioned persons mentioned that it was a comprehensible entry point to trigger reflection on the topic of consumption.

Overall, the feedback suggests that the *Homo laborans* is memorable, informing, positive, challenging as well as provoking and inspires self-reflection on practices and perceptions and political thoughts, putting the light on the value of the human life, and most importantly encourages individual action.

This shows that the main purpose of the *Homo laborans*, which was to visualise the human condition we were living in was met and does present an image of what lies beyond the surface of consumerism. The controversy of this installation, as well as the lasting impression prove the effectiveness of speculative design in conjunction with fashion and political theory. However, from a designer's perspective this action-based research inspired speculation process led to the understanding, that the vastness of dignity and the human condition must be displayed in a variety of artistic mediums and intellectual viewpoints. The mutual language of fashion, dress and clothing showed therefore to be a vast source of inspiration and a solid communicator.

Future projects could concentrate on different figures of the consumer culture, for instance, how would the typical consumer evolve under raising socio-economic pressure? It could be interesting to evaluate if the spectator would in this way not only reflect on a philosophical idea, but feel even more connected to the issue, as it would see someone from the same "status" (as consumer). This field is indeed a vast source of inspiration and reflection and holds definitely the power to contribute to more action towards a dignified future.

Finally, I can see the potential for the hearts, the perception of the world and the perception of the human value of future generations to be enriched and educated in the sense of a dignified human condition with the vital contribution of fashion. For that dignity is not the responsibility of the individual, it is, as successfully shown through this project, a collective one, whose sustainment is the action, that makes the human family walk upright.

Please find pictures of the installation which were taken at the Jenseits im Viadukt Gallery in Zurich in April 2018 by Fiona Knecht.







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