

Urban Empathy: Work in Progress

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I present the body of work that I have been developing since 2005: Modes for Urban Moods -Space Dress, Yuga, and Lags. An ongoing project, which aims to evolve through time and in different urban spaces, this suite of wearable mechanisms are intended to help coping with our social sphere in a rather whimsy fashion. Being more or less technological, each of the garments and accessories have a specific reason for being, and are designed according to the research context of location, influence, and availability, while at the same time being aware that different modes of expression are meaningful, or other misunderstood, depending on (self)experience.

Keywords

Wearable, everyday life, urban space, inflatable, sound, social jet lag

INTRODUCTION

Dynamic structures fashioned to the body and public space were the relationships that framed my initial research, together with the urgency in incorporating technology into our everyday life in order to sense and respond to our needs and demands. Does technology make us happier and help us cope with mundane situations, such as daily commute, or can it change the nature of work itself and determine our well-being in an office space, in voicing our feelings and frustrations?

I was initially intrigued by inflatable structures and the possibilities they offer to transform and animate. I wondered if a mutating wearable accessory could reflect one's experience in urban space. May it be a remedy to urban illnesses such as stress or anxiety? Can it effectively communicate moods?

In this paper I propose a series of wearable designs that originated as a form of personal expression, while utilizing and embedding technologies into their construction as a way of affecting and effecting both user and audience.

WEARABLE COPING MECHANISMS

In my search for responsive models of expression between beings and their environment and their distinct use of technologies and techniques as a means of interaction within a cultural and social context, I found the most diversified examples in art, fashion, and architecture, such as those that use electronic textiles [2], clothing that transforms into portable architectures [7], a remote control dress [3], or materials of and for resistance [1]. Most of these works are often presented as social commentary and they range from issues of the politics of borders and orders, to the personal and the built - place, city, body, to critiques of the establishment through the analysis of sign systems and technologies of power [6]. This is also what I started exploring with Modes, and continued through the latter projects.

Self-expression and control

With this series of wearables I also question if our need for technology means that we are losing our sense of immediate physical reality, as in the case of reclaiming personal space, or does embedding garments and accessories informed by technology in our everyday life mean that we are set to rely exclusively on outside inputs to determine our well-being. As I try to demonstrate in the following works, one can still be in control and be the main executer, maintaining individuality, while utilizing pervasive modes of expression.

WORK IN PROGRESS (NEW YORK CITY, LJUBLJANA, KUALA LUMPUR)

Modes for Urban Moods

Modes for Urban Moods are a suite of wearable coping mechanisms that explore relationships in public spaces and materialize invisible social networks.

They are tactile, spatial, sculptural expressions fashioned to the body, and are bizarre representations of situations which critique or identify the existence or absence of conditions, and transform meanings, senses, and dynamics through their actions. They juxtapose the surreal and bring to life the unseen and humanize the technologies we are being urged to incorporate in our lives.

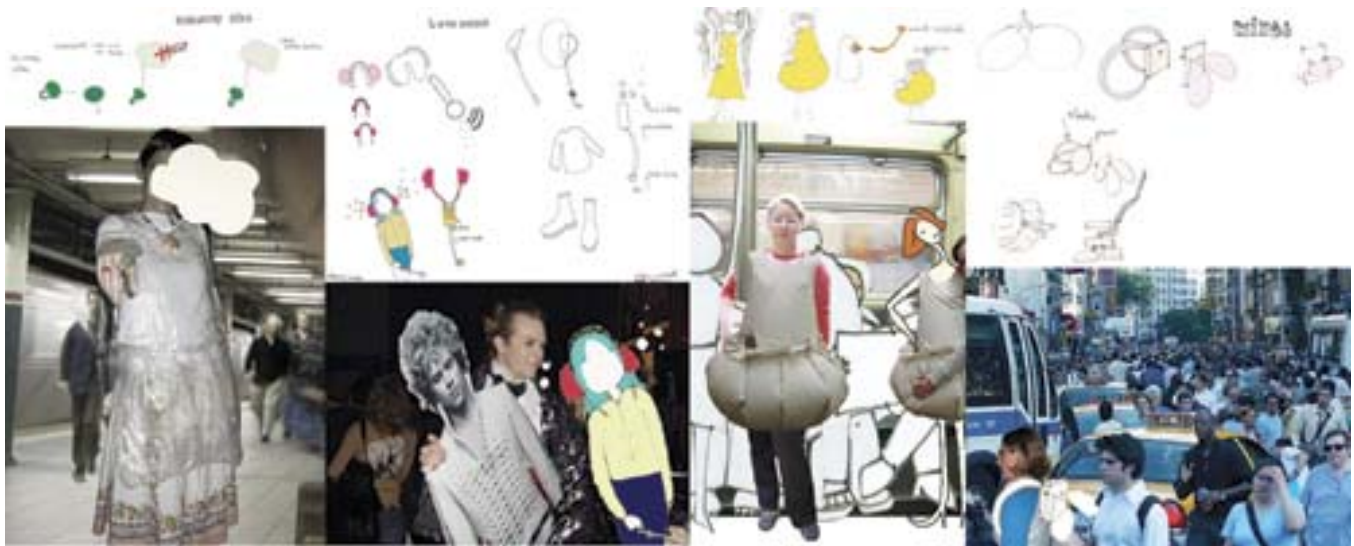


Fig. 1 Modes for Urban Moods: Emergency Ring, Loud Bubble, Space Dress, and Wings - sketches and illustrations.

Modes for Urban Moods consist of four elements: Emergency Ring, Loud Bubble, Space Dress, and Wings (figure 1). Each addresses different needs – the need to escape, the need for space, the need to breathe, and the need to ask for help or reclaim attention. Each is designed to (re)act under a specific set of circumstances such as stress, claustrophobia, panic, or comfort. They are whimsical wearable accessories which aim to offer inhabitants of the city the ephemeral possibility of coping and circumventing the urban pressures imposed on their daily rhythms. Modes explore dynamic structures fashioned to the body for use in public space.

Modes for Urban Moods are:

Emergency Ring is a piece of jewelry with an inflatable mechanism ready to pop up whenever the wearer decides it is necessary - either in a case of emergency or loneliness.

Loud Bubble is a mechanism consisting of earmuffs, a microphone, and soap bubbles. It visualizes noise pollution by picking up sound and transforming it into soap bubbles... It can be used as an aid in helping restrict this noise, or it can be used as a prop for some urban events and parties.

Space Dress is a dress that inflates according to its user decision and in specific situations. It is designed to cope with stress, anxiety and claustrophobic situations - or simply to provide comfort. It was originally designed for rush hour in New York City's subway system, and other crowded public spaces. It negotiates social bounds, communicates beyond protection/defense, and makes visible individuals/members of a community.

Wings is a mechanism that aims to help manage stress. By offering its user the possibility of controlling one's breath it encourages rhythm while commuting or dwelling in crowded spaces.

Modes are portable spaces, products, and artwork... and anyone may be a user. They are designed and created to provide a moment of rupture in everyday life [5]. They are catalysts for situations in public space.

Emergency Ring, Loud Bubble and Wings are concept designs, while Space Dress is a final prototype. The dress starts inflating if the user hits a switch (figure 2). It deflates when the same switch is off.



Fig. 2 Space Dress

The technologies and materials used for Space Dress are rip-stop nylon, micro fans, miscellaneous electronics, and a switch.

Yuga

Yuga consists of two wearable products: a belt and a handbag (figure 3). Both use sound as object, amplifying moods by the use of space.

The handbag helps managing feelings of frustration - of communication, misunderstanding or alienation. It functions as an external body that 'screams for you', when you throw it on the floor. Whimsy and playful, like a child's toy, it comprises a pre-recorded shout that when the bag, intentionally, hits the ground, is set off. It is made of a simple shock sensor handmade by Luka Freljih at Ljudmila¹, a record/playback module and speaker, plugged in and out of an Arduino². This handbag is also an original item/free giveaway from the Croatian Railways.

The belt, made out of felt, deals with attention – it interacts with the environment by detecting physical proximity and movement. According to the data collected it may create brief compositions – that allow others to notice this wearable user's presence or thus the user him/herself to reclaim spontaneous attention and/or interact with the surroundings. The accompanying dress is designed after Courreges and, like the belt, is made out of felt, which symbolically refers to feeling and protection [8].

The technology used consists of an Arduino board, a Ping sensor, a record/playback module and speaker, an amplifier, conductive Velcro and conductive thread, and miscellaneous electronics.



Fig. 3 Yuga

¹ <http://www.ljudmila.org>

² <http://arduino.cc>

Yuga is also a sonic and spatial translation of the physical transformations that, eventually, occur when new connections are created. By affecting or engaging people in the immediate vicinity of the wearer, it alters the site experience for onlookers, and the passive or neutral presence of the user.

This project was developed while in residency at Ljudmila-Ljubljana Digital Media Lab, within the frame of the Pepinières European Programme of Residencies for emerging artists³.

Lags

Lags are a series of patches for coping with social jet lag. Social jet lag is, according to European researchers/scientists, putting us at risk of chronic fatigue and it manifests when our body's circadian rhythm is out of sync with the demands of our environment [4]. Our behavioral patterns may alter and despite all the modern technologies available we still fall out of logic.

Lags are the result of living in a mirror-world, and are out of tune with the environment. They are the outcome of my current stay in Southeast Asia. Having moved there for work, I have felt again the urgent need to adapt. This constant need to cope with new surroundings is indeed a source of stress and exhaustion. The space/time dislocation and the mismatch of our bodies no longer fitting their surroundings are the motif for Lags, which are part of my ongoing research on wearable coping mechanisms for urban spaces.

They are made of free accessories handed out on an intercontinental flight from London to Singapore, applied textiles designed using traditional Batik materials and wax-



Fig. 4 EyeLag

³ <http://www.art4eu.net>

resist patterning technique learnt in Malaysia, and combined with low-tech electronics.

Lags are designed for an office site:

EyeLag (figure 4) consists of a pair of goggles equipped with a warm yellow LED (Light Emitting Diode) in the inside, reassuring 'sunlight', and aims to help maximizing comfort and productivity in a space deprived of natural light. HeadLag is a bracelet and soft pillow, for when one needs to nap. A small inflatable is triggered by the head's position on the arm, action that can be commonly associated with office napping. Other Lags are in research and development.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents work in progress with an emphasis on the personal and social issues involved in the creation and design of those products/artworks. Due to their nature, they might engage and be interpreted differently by different groups of people, while still communicating and displaying information that otherwise would be hidden. The increasing need and use of technology might help us cope with our physical reality, and embedding technological infused garments and accessories into our everyday life registers and challenges the way we perform in public space. Therefore, these are proposals to be discussed and developed in the context of the Pervasive Expression Workshop.

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