

Artistic research as hacking: Analysing similarities of modes and methods through the observation of the experimental fashion project *T-Typo*

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Abstract

The article connects hacker culture with artistic research in fashion, highlighting how both areas share methods of producing and disseminating knowledge. Three key connecting points are highlighted: the unfinished thinking; the exploration phase through trial-and-error; the undisciplined use of tools. These shared elements are further emphasized by analyzing the experimental fashion project *T-typo*, which employs an artistic research methodology resulting in a form of hacking design practice. In *T-typo*, the shared key features between hacking and artistic research are identified and observed from a fashion design perspective.

Keywords

Hacker culture; artistic research; methodology; fashion design; critical thinking.

1. Introduction

Although widely used in institutional settings, meaning art institutions, academies, and universities, artistic research is an approach characterized by a “methodological openness” and by the absence of a pattern for validation (Serig, 2012). It embraces ambiguity and “unfinished thinking” (Borgdoff, 2011), indicating that the focus is more on the insights you get from the creative process and from the confrontation with other researchers, rather than on the finished piece of art.

The dissemination of “bits of knowledge” and research paths is indeed constitutive of the methodology, as it allows researchers to exchange feedback and generate a proliferating network (Bazzichelli, 2006) of research and resources.

Similarly, hacker culture is not just about “doing things differently”; it is a way of operating that grows within the community rather than with the singular hacker and that works with an open-source ideology. In hacker culture, documentation is indeed pivotal to share bits of code with other peers, as it allows them to acknowledge the frictions (Groten, 2019) and bugs in the process. Knowledge exchange constitutes an important, generative tool within the phenomenon.

By briefly isolating three key features shared by hacker culture and artistic research, this article aims to highlight that a hacker attitude can also be found in experimental fashion design projects that employ artistic research as their main methodology. The experimental fashion project *T-typo* is used as a case study to further highlight this methodological resonance.

The three key features listed below are strictly intertwined and outline the two methodologies as ways of doing and researching that use “existing functions, subsystems and parts by creating patchwork and crossover techniques” (Von Bush, 2008, p. 63), and that thrive on collective effort.

1.1. The unfinished thinking

Differently from product-driven design research, where the goal is to come to a finished product, artistic research embraces an unfinished (Borgdoff, 2011), sometimes ambiguous approach to research, conceived as an ongoing process that encounters milestones rather than final results. This approach contributes to making the research an open path in continuous evolution, where other people can jump in and provide new understandings and developments. The sharing aspect is intrinsic in both hackers’ and artistic researchers’ attitudes, which, far from being monologues, are in constant dialogic dynamism (Loveless, 1989).

That is why, to share the research with the community, there is a need for evidence and documentation. Documentation makes it easier for other people to access, intervene, modify, and keep disseminating the research started by somebody else. The research conducted by the individual feeds on the confrontation with its own

ecology of interest. In that sense, both the artistic researcher and the hacker somehow share the ownership of their research with their peers.

1.2. The exploration phase through trial-and-error

As highlighted by theorist Janneke Wesseling (Wesseling, 2016), in artistic research the research questions pursued by the artist-researcher emerge directly from their practice. It is a methodology focused on discovery rather than hypothesis testing, which is why defining the starting point by formulating research questions is less useful than undertaking an exploration phase. In such an approach, the outcomes of the exploration phase widely embrace serendipity and the unknown and are closely related to qualitative aspects such as materials, tools, and methods employed.

For this reason, resistance encountered throughout the process of making provides insights to the researcher and play an important role in the advancement of the research. Likewise, hackers are used to the frustration of the trial-and-error phase. Hackers' approach to coding, programming, and reverse engineering is one of trial-and-error, a patient strategy that is "a direct result of encountering resistance, over and over again. (...) It is the thin line between frustration and pleasure that is important to understand when describing a hacker's mode of production" (Groten, 2019, p. 239).

1.3. The undisciplined use of tools

Artistic researchers appropriate, mix, and reverse engineer (Von Bush, 2008) different research methods and approaches, which results in a set of methodological strategies tailored on their practice. This multi-method approach makes the artist-researcher a "bricoleur" (Serig, 2012, p. 128), an (un)disciplined practitioner.

Artist-researchers often appropriate methods both from established and experimental research contexts and move fluidly between them. This liminal attitude resonates with hackers, which often "plugs" into (informatic) systems to redirect their functions (Von Bush, 2008, p. 59) actively intervening and (un)making digital tools and platforms.

Both methodologies employ a hands-on engagement, and often use tools and materials improperly to generate new insights, making them "available for other meanings, other appropriations, other play" (Ploeger, 2022, p. 207). This (un)disciplined approach, especially in artistic research, fosters the development of practices that re-use and re-elaborate pre-existing materials and tools, questioning conventional ways of designing.

As highlighted by Otto von bush, hacker culture "is more about using existing functions, subsystems and parts by creating patchwork and crossover techniques, rather than creating something entirely new or truly unique" (Von Bush, 2008, p. 63).

To observe the concrete application of the above-mentioned key features in fashion, the experimental fashion project *T-typo* will be briefly analysed. The project employs an artistic research methodology, moving across fashion, publishing, and creative writing.

1.4. *T-typo*

T-typo is a constantly growing repository of printed garments founded by Martina Alia Mascia and Alice Alloggio, functioning as a research tool and creative space for experimental writing and publishing. Most of the contents printed on the garments contained in the repository are text-based. The pieces of the collection are used for historical and material research and loaned to whomever is interested in using them. The pieces are also employed for workshops and collective activations that focus on exploring the garment as a “writing prop”. Specifically, we select the piece to be collectively activated based on its potential for redesign, re-signification, and discussion. Once the piece is selected, we may suggest creative writing strategies or textile print techniques, but we no longer have control over the design process.

Whether through digital means or hands-on engagement, participants are invited to expand upon the published content of the piece – cut-up, fold-in, collage, scanner art, digital interventions, creative writing. In the *T-typo* activations, participants engage in an undisciplined crossover of DIY techniques from both garment-making and book-making, utilizing tools and methods from both disciplines.

The content printed on the garment is collectively altered and the reader-wearers simultaneously engage with the texts *written* by others, generating a flux of correspondences and transforming the garment into a wearable network. The new piece is “collectively built upon” (Von Bush, 2006, p. 29), and so is its authorship. The initial prompt is hacked by appropriating and altering its brand naming and aesthetic, and each participant contribution blurs into each other’s in a co-dependent semiotic relationship. Just like hackers, participants in the project rearrange bits of text and images to create a new page, a garment with a new semantic value.

Moreover, In *T-typo* the outcomes of the making process are not intended as definitive endpoints but rather as single steps in a wider net (Bazzichelli, 2006, p. 72) of creative experimentation. The aim of the project is to generate a network of reader-wearers open not only to participate in the process individually, but also to engage in a broader (text)ile dialogue where each one can access to the work of everyone else.

The practice of *T-typo* unfolds through the methodology of artistic research, promoting a transdisciplinary approach to making and thinking. The project can be conceived as a “hacked” way of designing and doing fashion, where existing materials are re-designed (Von Bush, 2008, p. 63) to offer a different perspective on both the disciplines of fashion and publishing. By “improperly” using an existing textile production, the *T-typo* garments take on a new use and function. The pieces are garments, publications, and examples of collective authorship.

This feature prompts a reflection on the impact that adopting an artistic research approach can have in fashion design, raising questions on whether its methodological openness could be beneficial for the creative process. Most of traditional fashion schools are fixated with the achievement of concrete result, overlooking the importance of intertwining conceptual and material thinking.

Being critical-reflexive and speculative in its nature, artistic research challenges conventional ways of designing, re-focusing the goal on the creative process rather than the finished product, allowing for exploration, trial and error.

Although not always leading to the development of finished products, this type of research promotes interdisciplinarity and critical thinking through a multi-method approach, generating cross-disciplinary interactions. A hacked form of research that challenges and expands established research methodologies is perhaps what we need in a moment where (industrial) fashion should limit over-production and refocus its priorities.

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