Der Mut zum Unsinn ist der Mut zum Sein.

The Courage to Nonsense is the Courage to Being.

A humorous reaction to today's stressful society

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1 Introduction

'It's not Dada that is nonsense -
but the essence of our age that is nonsense.'
- The Dadaists -

In today's stressful life we sometimes forget our human needs. We find ourselves constantly under pressure, because of the expectations other people have of us, be it our boss, teacher, parents or frequently our own expectations. We are constantly living up to expectations and it is exhausting us. We are exhausted of 'doing', of the logic of clock and calendar that we always have to follow, like functional little machines. The modern world makes us work too hard and feel needy and incomplete. Therefore we become predatory producers and hungry consumers. (Leith, 2009)

Why are we doing this? Why are we doing what we are doing instead of being who we are? Why are we struggling to do and not enjoying to be? Have we all gone insane?

In the insanity of everyday life during World War I an art movement called Dadaism posed the same question. Now nearly a century later their answer to the question is just as applicable as back then. Their answer was to turn to the nonsensical, and use humour. The moment we are laughing, we forget about schedules, ambitions, deadlines and expectations. Humour can be a powerful and effective mechanism for coping with stress. (Guide, 2014) In humour and Dadaism I seek inspiration for my graduation collection.

My research paper starts by discussing the problem of the current Zeitgeist. The paper then discusses five themes to address this problem: humour, Dadaism, unfunctionality, the unaesthetic, and deformation. The paper then discusses the concept I have developed
based on these themes. Subsequently, the paper sets out the design principles, their origin and the translation of these principles into the collection. The paper concludes with my personal vision and design philosophy.

2 Zeitgeist

“Life is what happens when you are making other plans.”

John Lennon

Today's world is all about productivity. Especially in today's western society many people live their lives by the clock. As a result, they are constantly busy, stressed and under pressure in jobs, family life and studies. Indeed, modern day young professionals are even stressed in their social lives, because they need to show off in the virtual world. A holiday to Bali is not enough; all their online friends have to see just how awesome this holiday was. And then there are all the commitments people have. They have to do so much for their bosses, their teachers, their parents, their friends, and themselves. And no matter how much they do, it is never enough because "the busier we are, the higher is our self-worth and placement in our society and, supposedly, the better we feel." (Bermudez, 2014, p. 1) "Doing, it seems, is the ticket to success." (Bermudez, 2014, p. 1) And as a result, somewhere along the line modern (wo)man forgot how to go with the flow and let life surprise and amaze him.

Yet surprise and amazement form the essence of what it means to experience life. It is therefore time to stop 'doing' and focus on 'being'. Preoccupied with doing people live their lives without reflection, on autopilot. 'Being' on the other hand implies consciousness and true experience of life, through all the senses.
This generation needs to be aware that their state of being is truly up to themselves. Why do they have to proof anyone else how busy they are? Does that make them happy? Let them get rid of the "bondage of socio cultural-programming", "re-establish(ing) a balance between 'having', 'doing' and 'being' " and let them "re-connect with the largest and deepest realms of all". (Bermudez, 2014, p. 3)

3 Themes

During my own struggles with the pressures of today's hectic life, I have searched for possible perspectives on this issue. This search has led to the following themes: humour, Dadaism, the unfunctional, the unaesthetic, and deformation.

3.1 Humour - The Escape through humour

Did you know that a good, hearty laughter relaxes your whole body from physical tension and stress for up to 45 minutes after? (Smith and Segal, 2015) And the best is, humour is contagious and we communicate through humour. So let yourself be infected, because humour is the best medicine to the stresses of daily life.

Humour is universal and is found in all human cultures. Through humour people share experiences, create solidarity and group identity. (Kuipers, 2008, p. 370) Humour is important to communicate, to share, to expose and express the contradictory experiences of life. Sasha Favorov plays with this contradiction in his photography. As Fig. 1 illustrates, he focuses on the relationship between subjects, their colours and shapes. Thereby the new unexpected, interfering combinations of objects create uncertain and suspended scenes with the help of playfulness and irony.
Fig. 1 Untitled, 2015, Sasha Favorov
Humour has a powerful property. It allows people to ignore reality. In humour “the rules of logic, the expectations of common sense, the laws of science and the demands of propriety are all potentially in abeyance. Consequently, when recipients are faced with a joke, they do not apply the information-processing procedures appropriate to serious discourse” (Kuipers, 2008, p. 381). The moment the audience hears a joke, they forget about everyday life, expectations and all the things they still need to do. It might last only a second, but this brief moment brings in a more playful atmosphere and some lightness to our everyday lives of doing. Humour can be “an assault” on reality, it allows us to look at the world and ourselves in a slightly distorted way and deal with unpleasant experiences.

In my collection I apply humour’s powerful cognitive tool for drawing enhanced and prolonged attention. Furthermore, I want to reconnect society through humour. Humour and wit invites an audience, to come closer and to feel personally connected; because you are laughing together, you are sharing your joy.

3.2 Alles DADA?

While researching humour my attention turned to Dadaism, as Dadaists introduced humour to modern art, applying scatological or nonsensical humour (Ben-Meir, 2013). More importantly, Dadaism used humour to deal with a negative situation.

Dadaism is an international artistic and literary movement (1916-1923). It was born out of the disgust of the dominant social, cultural and political values during World War I. It was more a protest movement with an anti-establishment manifesto than an art style. Dadaists used the instruments of confrontation and provocation, attacking the current aesthetic, the social values and
traditional artistic values with irrational attitudes and thereby making anti-art. Even though Dadaism was born out of the brutality and horrors of the First World War, the art was not disgusting or horrible. Instead Dadaists created fun, absurd, cynical and colourful art that broke all the rules simply by having no rules.
This humorous rule breaking approach is exemplified by the work of Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp, one of the leading Dadaist pioneers, illustrated the Dadaist idea that art could be made from anything through his "readymades". These "readymades" are works of art made from ordinary objects. One of his most well-known art objects is *The Fountain*, a porcelain urinal placed upside down to rid it from functionality and signed by R. Mutt. *The Fountain* illustrates how Dadaists were examining provocatively what art and making art could be, by using the irrational, the spontaneous, unusual materials, and new techniques. Dadaism rejected the inherent beauty and the innate value as impossibilities. Thereby beauty itself becomes irony. (Martin-Smith, 2014)

![Fig. 3 Cock and Bull, 2012, Damien Hirst](image)
This Dadaist technique of dislocating objects from their normal context and representing them as art was used widely by later assemblage, Pop-artists and other contemporary movements. Fig. 3. Cock and Bull (2012) from Damien Hirst is an example of a contemporary artist who is building on the Dadaistic approach. He is combining nonsense and irony, making the artwork so wrong and at the same time so intriguing. It provokes the audience to think.

Fig. 4 ABCD (self-portrait), 1923, Raoul Hausmann
What is fascinating about Dadaism is that it is not conforming to the same conventions and norms of the insanity during the First World War, but instead criticised and ridiculed them. It is this social critique and the humorous method by which it operates that allows us to apply Dadaism to the current Zeitgeist. Dadaism is still so relevant because it is capturing a particular anti-establishment attitude and uses powerful tools like humour, and the unaesthetic and the irrational as instruments. Dadaism does not give answers, it raises questions. It thereby reminds people to think critically and demonstrates that what we are doing does not make any sense.

3.3 Questioning the Unaesthetic

What is unaesthetic? There is no clear and generally accepted definition. The Oxford dictionary defines unaesthetic as "not visually pleasing; unattractive", the Merriam-Webster as "disagreeable to one's aesthetic", and the Collins Dictionary defines the word unaesthetic as "not beautiful" and "not in good taste". Whether an object or a creature is aesthetic or not is often defined by three features - order, symmetry, proportion.

We constantly have expectations, even if we do not think we do. That is also why we can label something as ugly, because we have certain expectations of beauty in mind. What makes ugliness special "is the unique way in which there is a combination of expectation - even perhaps, of need - for order, balance, and perfection (...) and an unexpected shattering of the desired aesthetic organization by threatening fantasy and anxiety." (Hagman, 2003, p. 102) That means our expectations are not met when we judge something is ugly. "It is the disruption of the formal/aesthetic dimension of our subjectivity that forms the core of ugliness." (Hagman, 2003, p. 103) What expectations of beauty are not met when something is considered as ugly?
When Sir Francis Galton created composite images of faces to visualise the facial characteristics that were common to a particular group of people, e.g. criminals or soldiers, he found the composite faces more attractive than the individual faces. More recently psychologists have created composite faces by the use of computer graphic methods. The composite face is perceived as more attractive than the average attractiveness rating of their constituent images. (DeBruine and Jones, 2006) This means that, when human faces are averaged together to form a composite image, they become progressively closer to the "ideal" image and are perceived as more attractive. Fig. 2 shows average faces which are created with this method. Does that mean that we just prefer the normal, most common look? That we find faces ugly when they differ widely from the average?
I believe that nowadays ugliness becomes so special, so unique that it acquires a beauty of its own. Just because it is different, it gives us a sense of relief because it is not perfect. We enjoy seeing things which are not perfect. Nowadays models who would previously be considered ugly are working as successful models, e.g. Shaun Ross and Rick Genest (Fig.3). It is time to look for beauty in the distinct, the anomalous.
3.4 Form Unfollows Unfunction

When typing unfunctionality into Google, Google immediately redirects to functionality. Seriously? It is not even possible to find any definition of "unfunctionality", only translations in different languages.

But how can I define it? I need to go back to the opposite, functionality, which means capable of serving a purpose well. "Functionalism" was a design movement in the early 20th century. The designers/architects were supposed to design something based on the purpose and utility without any decorative effects. Through this Louis Sullivan's mantra "form follows function", developed, which means that beauty is resulting from functionality.

Fig. 7 Hair Brush, 1999, Bless
Unfunctional designs leave us with mixed feelings of curiosity and intrigue, like *Hair Brush* (Fig. 7). This is one of the first pieces from the designer couple Bless dating from 1999, created with a playful vibe through a literally translation of a "hair" brush. It is somewhat unnerving but at the same time funny.

With the help of unfunctionality, I can let go of the usual starting points in the creative process: function and commercial use. By doing so, new ways of thinking about design emerge.

3.5 The Human Body and its Deformation

Darwin once wrote "Man admires and often tries to exaggerate whatever characteristics nature may have given to him." Therefore fashion gives the opportunity to correct or corrupt nature's bare facts. (Rossi, 2001, p. 105) The nature of fashion is to reshape the body form, whether actual or by illusion, whether by forming or deforming the body. This estrangement can be achieved by disturbing or exaggerated shapes, missing or added limbs. By objectifying body parts the relationship to the human body and our psyches can be expressed. It is a form of embracing the body.

Dating well back to prehistoric times, many different peoples and cultures have performed body modifications, such as scarification, mutilation, dental modifications, body piercing and tattooing, to distinguish themselves from others. These modifications have different reasons, e.g. a sign of social status, looking fearless, or for aesthetic purposes.
Orlan is a French artist who uses her own body as a work of art to express social criticism. She is the first who uses plastic surgery as an artistic means to make the changeability of the body subject of discussion. In the series *Self-hybridization* the body is understood to be a surface for the inscriptions of culture. Through surgery Orlan connects beauty ideals from the past with those of today. She embraces cosmetic surgery instead of condemning it. She incorporates masculinity instead of rejecting it and she frees her identity by refusing the restraints of nature and DNA.
Sarah Lucas (Fig.4) is a British contemporary artist who employs in her works bawdy humour, metaphors of sex, death and gender and visual puns by focussing on the construction and deconstruction of the body and the traditional depiction of the human figure in sculpture.

Building on humour, Dadaism, the unaesthetic and unfunctionality, the deformation of the human body connects all these topics. Extra or missing body parts can be very unfunctional as well unaesthetic. Deformation of the human body allows me to play with both topics.
4 Der Mut zum Unsinn ist der Mut zum Sein.

Humour, Dadaism, unaesthetic, unfunctionality, and the deformation of the human body come together in the concept: Der Mut zum Unsinn ist der Mut zum Sein. These five elements reject conventional aesthetics and social values. They provoke and confront, and differ from the usual design principles in fashion, thereby breaking the bonds of logical thought. My goal is to help the audience reconnect through laughter, amaze them, surprise them, confuse them, and make them think about new perspectives. Based on the rejection of doing and living up to expectations, I develop the following concept:

Clocks ticking, agenda's, deadlines, expectations, expectations. Doing, doing, doing. Everyone is watching. Steadily the pressure builds, until our logic cracks and a bright ray of colourful nonsense breaks free. In the background a large silhouette asks: what makes nonsense nonsensical? When is aesthetic not aesthetic? Unplanned, undefined but playful. Sometimes things are as simple as a kid's drawing.
Der Mut zum Unsinn ist der Mut zum Sein.
5 Translation into the Collection

Fig. 11 Collection line-up - Der Mut zum Unsinn ist der Mut zum Sein. 2015, Maria Wöstmann

5.1 Design Principles

Translating the spirit of Dadaism to fashion, the collection challenges the conventional values of fashion with absurdity, travesty and physical authenticity. It constantly questions the aesthetic ideals. The collection does so by deforming, adding or removing body parts and exaggerating silhouettes. The unusual combination of materials is inspired by the materials used by the Dadaists. There is a random and unplanned mix in the outfits, made from weird materials all with a touch of humour. This collection uses indefinable garments to reach the audience with surprise, laughter and absurdity, and question fashion, modern society and our way of doing.
5.2 Colours

Since colours are influencing our mood and feelings, colours can help to achieve a focus on 'being'. Therefore the colour card is light and upbeat, with popping colours, to emphasise playfulness and fun. The popping colours are combined with some calmer tones to relax from the constant pressure and to focus on the hope of a more appreciated and enjoyable life. Some colours seem very unnatural to help escape the natural and stimulate non logical thought.

Escaping the everyday pressures of 'doing' with vibrant playful prints in intense tones, allowing pattern-worlds to interact, creating the energetic reinvigoration by rediscovery of our 'being'. Softer colour choices with subtle warm tones, where colour has a tangible vitality and brings along enjoyment. Warm colours mixed with airy, optimistic tones and highlighting colours, which elicit surprise through their unexpected placement and unusual colour combination.
5.3 Materials

The combination of materials is inspired by absurdity and the unaesthetic. Through unusual fabric combinations the collection underlines random weirdness. The question 'Why?' is supposed to come to mind, so that the audience asks themselves the question: 'Why are we doing this?'

Solid fabrics conceal and shelter the raw silhouette. A mix of textures breaks the perfectly polished aesthetic approaches. Unusual materials, like spongy neoprene, explore details and tailoring. In contrast provocative, more effortless and playful materials like popping jacquards or terry cloth or materials with similar hairy textures. Symmetric lines contrast with organic shapes. Three dimensional hairy voluminous surfaces and rough textures meet sleek and smooth fabrics.
Fig. 14 Digital Leg Print - Der Mut zum Unsinn ist der Mut zum Sein. 2015, Maria Wöstmann
6 Target Group

This collection is not meant to be a commercial collection, but an art collection; it is not meant to be worn as a functional garment, but to provoke thought. It is for everyone who wants to have a break from the pressure of life and who is interested in seeing fashion from a different perspective.

A translation of this collection would be aimed at a high end fashion audience. Modern women, who like to wear playful fashion and who like to distinguish themselves through outstanding garments.
7 Personal Design Vision

Humour is used more and more in our daily life, in advertisements, in communication habits, in fashion. The world is joking as much as it has never done it before. It is becoming a new art form and an instrument of communication, also in fashion. Brands and designers like Walter Van Beirendonck, Sibling or Thom Browne, are using it. It is time to introduce humour and start laughing at fashion and at the serious world which surrounds it.

With the collection 'Der Mut zum Unsinn ist der Mut zum Sein' I use humour to react to today's society. Although the Dadaistic approach to fashion is unique to this collection, the collection builds on my general vision on design. As in some of my previous collections, I explore volumes and thereby reshape the human body. I also use an unusual mix of textures to draw and hold the audience's attention. When experimenting with embroidery, I like to use existing pieces to put them in a new context and to play with their meanings. This underlines the surreal, humoristic and Dadaistic nature of this collection, but builds on my design vision that embroidery and eye for detail are essential to give garments a refined and personal touch.
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