

# Belonging & Belongings

## Design Research Through Visual Explorations

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Abstract: Design Research comes in various shapes and forms. It is conducted through out the lab, the field and the showroom [12]. The theoretical framework of design research has its foundation on the frameworks of other disciplines, such as Social Science, Computer Science and Behavioural Science. However, design research is not only limited to implementations and development of existing knowledge. It also contributes to various disciplines by introducing new knowledge and approaches. There are clear examples of designers carrying out original research that creates a new body of knowledge in its own right. They tend to explore areas that other, more established disciplines may dismiss. Their methods are often somewhat unusual in comparison to other academic research, due to the visual nature of the research processes and representations. This paper aims to demonstrate the value of creative ways of design research through examining examples that bridge the gap between established academic research practices, such as Anthropology, and the visual practices of design research by comparing how knowledge is created and explored. Moreover, it argues that clear ties exist between academic research, visual design research, and the ultimate use of the knowledge they create in industrial practice.

**Key words:** *artistic research, visual research, photography, film, identity*

### 1. Standing on the shoulders of giants

Design Research is a relatively young field of research practice. It has emerged and developed itself as an academic discipline, since the 1950s. Initially, design research was mostly related to Architecture and Industrial Design [2], but later expanded to other fields of design such as Interaction Design [4, 13]. With this general scope, design research is aimed at understanding and improving design processes and practices without focusing on the specialized knowledge of specific design fields. Due to this wide perspective, current design research is considered as a true interdisciplinary endeavor [12]. It encapsulates both research into the process of design, for instance by describing and improving design research methods, and research embedded into the process of design, for instance by contributing to the design process with insights on contextual aspects. In design research, practice-based knowledge and experience is synthesized with more general reflection on processes and results. The ‘chemistry’ between these two main perspectives within design research is very constructive [15].

By investigating, describing and celebrating the synergy between the academic and practice-based traditions within design research, it is well acknowledged that this relatively young field of work has not emerged out of thin air. Rather, it is ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’ [20], and uses the knowledge and methods from more established academic disciplines and practices as stepping stones for further explorations. However, one of the ‘giants’ supporting design research that has not received much attention up to date, is the tradition of Artistic Research [10]. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the artistic research approach within design research and its

benefits for the wider field. There have been many people working in Design, Fine Arts and Academia who explored and pushed the boundaries of creative approaches to design research. They often made use of highly visual media to explore and communicate their topics and findings throughout the process, in order to develop a better understanding of the world that surrounds us and our own roles in it. Some seminal examples of such design research *avant la lettre* that have contributed to advancing this particular part of the design research field, are described below. Most of them were not aware of the design research rhetoric and community. However, all of them were experimenting with visual media to create meanings and understandings, which then incorporated in their creative practices. Their experiments have inspired many people since then, both academics and practitioners.

### **1.1 Jean Rouch - Cinéma Vérité**

As a filmmaker and as an anthropologist, Jean Rouch developed in the 1950s an approach to the use of film in ethnography that merged two fields, cinema and anthropology, and by doing so he went beyond the boundaries that had surrounded these fields until then: “he found a way of fusing the realism of Lumière with the fantasy of Méliès” [7]. Rouch collaborated with the people he filmed, he participated in activities with them, both in front and behind the camera. This is why Rouch named his filmmaking “shared cinema” [18]. He even shares the experience of making the film with the people who see the film. For him, “film is not a device for collecting data but an ‘arena’ of inquiry” [18], and we are all invited to enter that arena and take part in the inquiry. All of this sounds very familiar to many design researchers today, who would call such an approach co-creative.

In his most well-known film ‘Chronicle of a Summer’ (Chronique d’un été, France 1961), a seminal documentary film and sociological research at the same time, Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin practiced and explored this approach extensively. They pioneered a new approach to documentary filmmaking they called Cinéma Vérité. In the film, interventions by the filmmakers like interviews and discussions with the protagonists are presented as new tools to portray everyday life of people in Paris. Rouch is not afraid to intervene; he thinks that through these interventions truth appears. He agrees with the idea that the camera changes the situations it enters, if it is remarked. People change their behaviour if they know they are filmed. But he disagrees that this would destroy what you want to film. On the contrary: “For Rouch, a camera does not capture reality, it creates reality – or ciné-reality – a set of images that evokes ideas and stimulates dialogue among observer, observed, and viewer” [18]. Later, Rouch stated in an interview that cinéma vérité was maybe not the best name he could have given to his style of filming. ‘Cinema-sincerity’ would have been better, he considered, because as a filmmaker he asks the viewer to have confidence in the evidence that is shown on the screen [14].

Rouch’s point that cinéma vérité creates reality has often lead to discussions on ethics and politics. Ethics, due to the circumstances in which the film was shot, how it was directed and the language it is using. Politics, because the filmmaker may have an agenda or ideology, consciously or not, and viewers have one - in the context of design practice this might be translated to ‘having preconceived ideas’. Rouch’s way to address this is through rejecting in his work as an ethnographer and filmmaker the search for absolutes. Rouch’s approach, originating in the late 1950s, is an important breakaway from the opposition between the realistic and the artistic approaches. These are oppositions anthropologists and filmmakers until then, and often still now, hold on to. Stoller [18] calls Rouch’s approach a “radically empirical anthropology” that “recognizes blatant incongruities, confounding ambiguities, and seemingly intolerable contradictions – the texture of life as it is experienced in the field.” This is illustrative for Rouch’s intellectual versatility, and not unlike the versatility that designers aim for when suggesting to ‘think outside of the box’.



Figure 1. *Chronique d'un été* (1961, France), documentary by Rouch and Morin.

At one of the café conversations in the film, ethnic solidarity is discussed in the context of racial violence in Congo, Marceline's dance with a black man, and the holocaust. Despite the sinister subject, the discussion is lively thanks to Rouch's playful provocations.

Rouch's 'playing with oppositions' is not an individual game; he does not play it alone. Everyone who participates in his films gets the opportunity to be part of the game, and the people who see the film can take part in it too [7]. This above all makes his films intense conversations between filmmakers, protagonists and spectators. The approach to filming Rouch introduces is something like setting up a conversation, the kind of conversation that design research often aims to raise in design practice, with design ethnography. The flow of the conversation and the process of making the film are more important than any conclusion that might be reached, Rouch states, showing his academic background in anthropology where advancing knowledge through discussion is more important than closing discussions [8]. Ambivalence is appreciated over certainty because it reflects the experience of the ethnographer and filmmaker Rouch in the field. The story always continues beyond the film; the films don't finalise the ethnographic research: "the work must go on" as Rouch told Stoller [19]. And that is exactly what good design research should do as part of a larger design process.

## 1.2 Wajiro Kon - Modernology

In the early Showa era in Japan (1926 - 1989), Wajiro Kon was highly interested in visually documenting societal changes that occurred as a result of Tokyo becoming a modern metropolis. As an architect, a designer and an educator, Kon established Modernology [11], the study of urban phenomena based on his interest in rapidly changing urban space and people's lifestyles lead by capitalism and consumer culture. In 1923 he started to notice the changes in the lives of Japanese people after the Great Kanto earthquake. He visually documented these changes with simple sketches which described the lives of ordinary people as they rebuilt the city after the earthquake. His representation of the societal changes redefined the creativities in vernacular practices, from oral history recording to quantitative and visual recording of those invisible but trivial changes. His sketches of temporary structures, housings and how people are dressed provided him with means to explore the creativities of everyday needs and influential relationships between people, structure and system in a society.

This Modernology study was regarded as a valuable sociological survey for post-disaster adjustments and it was immediately published. The most interesting result of this publication was that it was recognized as not only a sociologically significant documentation, but also recognized as art. In collaboration with people in various professions, such as Kunio Yanagita, an anthropologist and Yoshida Kenkichi, a stage artist, their drawings depicted the distribution of stores, maps with statistical data and illustrations of people and their movements on a map [11]. Modernology meant developing their own style and changing their expressive methods, which showed clear influences of the avant-garde movement. While the avant-garde movement was concerned with both artistic and social issues, Modernology emphasized the class issues arising from economic differences, representing niches in the society.

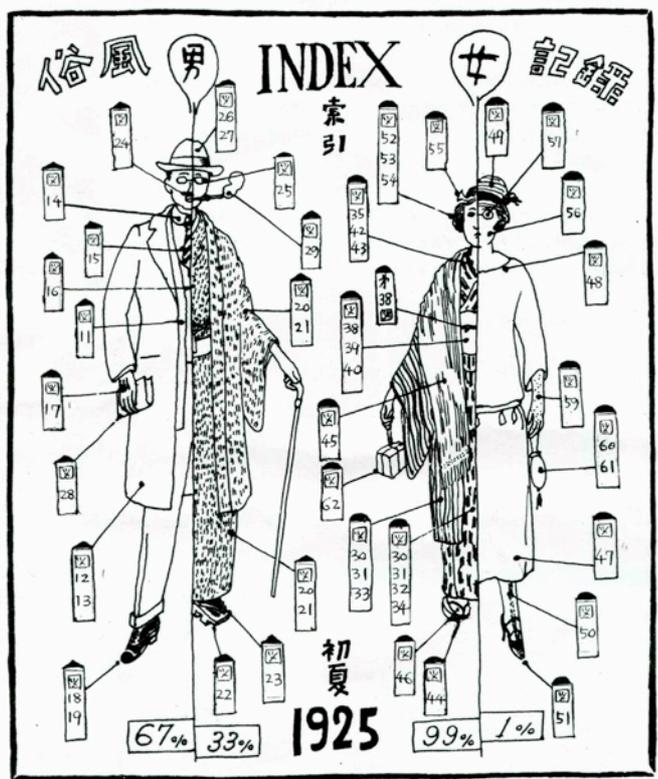


Figure 2. Index of the Report of Ginza Fashion Survey (Wajiro Kon, 1925)  
An illustration of what people used to wear on the street of Ginza, Tokyo in 1925, accompanied with statistical data such as percentages, which shows Kon's ethnographical approach and an analogy to current day's infographics.

Various academics and practitioners adapted Kon's approach to open up a new range of vision by taking a fresh look at reality, including the architecture firm called Atelier Bow-wow. In their projects 'Pet Architecture Guidebook' and 'Made in Tokyo', Atelier Bow-wow examined the complexity of Japanese urban landscapes through illustrating use of small spaces that resulted from large population in limited land mass, in various scales. With illustrations of maps, building structures, accompanied by relevant data and combined with photographs of the structures, these projects explore the urban developments and changes in layers and across time. Further, the projects open up possibilities of re-imagining these redundant spaces. In accordance with Modernology, Atelier Bow-wow projects deal with artistic and social issues in their own perspectives and interests through visual media.

### 1.3 Jane Fulton Suri - Intuitive Design

Jane Fulton Suri works for the international design agency IDEO as Creative Director. Her original background is in Social Sciences. When she joined IDEO in the late 1980s, she was asked to integrate research with the practice of design, and thereby strengthen IDEO's human-centered approach. She later wrote that at that time there were few models for her to emulate [12]. Research and Design were still considered as separate pursuits, developing in different academic spheres. Design was largely future-oriented, while research focused on the past and the present. Sharing an interest with designers in the future and in developing new and better products and service for people, Fulton Suri went on to develop and lead the Human Factors Research and Design team in IDEO. They were among the early pioneers who showed that design research can raise questions that prompt us, designers to consider new possibilities. For Fulton Suri, design research evolves around the reciprocity of 'thinking to build' and 'building to think'; bridging the gap between understanding and making, and between theoretical and actual solutions. In this way her work, and that of her colleagues, is clearly positioned at the cross roads of design practice and academic practice.

In 2005 Fulton Suri created 'Thoughtless Acts? Observations on Intuitive Design' [5], a collection of photographs that depict the subtle and creative ways in which people interact with the world. The pictures show people using everyday objects and environments in ways largely unintended by the planners and designers, but obviously useful and resourceful from the perspective of the person using them. With these visual observations Fulton Suri provoked her audience to accept that everyone is creative and able to tap into that capacity in their everyday lives. This work was much celebrated inside and outside the design research community, not just because of the engaging format of the artistic design research it represented, but also because of the then provoking statement that through using products and places in unanticipated ways people extend the process of design beyond the moment that the formal design by the design professionals is finished.



Figure 3. Thoughtless Acts (Fulton Suri and IDEO, 2005) shows “how we actively shape our environment and how we in turn are shaped by it.”

These examples show that not only does design research lead to valuable knowledge through its chemistry between academic investigation and design practice, but with its emphasis on artistic experimentation it also feeds into a wider scope of creative practices. Some other examples of artistic design research that are well known in the field are Cultural Probes [6] and Critical Design [3]. These works have also greatly contributed to new methods and knowledge creation in design research, but as they are more focused on creating interventions than on capturing visual observations, they are less relevant to discuss in detail in this paper.

## **2. Case study: Belonging & Belongings**

The authors of this paper have backgrounds in design research at the crossroads with cultural studies, interaction design, and fashion design. They work in both academia and industry. Together, they have collaborated over recent years on the project Belonging & Belongings, which explores how people in Japan and the United Kingdom express their online and offline identities through the use of various technologies in their daily lives (mobile phones, mp3 players, headphones, ID-cards, bicycles, computers, cameras, social media pages, avatars, etc.). The explorations for this study have been conducted in a highly visual way, using photography and film. The methodological approach to this project was a mix of observations, contextual interviews, and co-creation with participants. The overall aim was to keep the process of exploration and interpretation as open as possible in order to create results that can inspire designers working on new concepts to enhance the everyday situations observed. Through the analysis of the materials gathered, several concepts were developed and used as tags to label the large amount of visuals collected. These tags were then grouped in five themes: Socio-Techno Styles, Vulnerability, Multiplicity, Empathy and Particulariness. These themes are briefly described below, using some of the images collected as a starting point. A more elaborate of themes and tags may be found in the forthcoming book of the project, also titled Belonging & Belongings.

### **2.1 Socio-Techno Styles on the ‘urban catwalk’**

One of the early stage explorations for Belonging & Belongings involved street photography in Tokyo, London, Amsterdam and Copenhagen. The aim was to ascertain the synergy between people’s sartorial appearance and the portable technology they carry. Considering inner city streets as ‘urban catwalks’, this study observed and categorized the ways people carry and use mobile technology combined with the way they dress and carry accessories into a series of ‘Socio-Techno Styles’. The visual materials resulting from this study have been on display in a design research studio in London for about a year and have inspired many conversations with project teams working on new concepts for mobile technology. The analysis of this data has led to a better understanding of the multiplicity of identities that exist in a culture, but also even in a single individual. People seldom have only one identity. Instead, they juggle several identities and sometimes their sartorial appearances reflect these. The particulariness of the various Socio-Techno Styles is very specific. Culture has moved way beyond us having only a few identities to choose from (or being forced on people), but rather there are many - as for instance the multiplicity of styles of cyclists demonstrates. As a result people feel they create their own unique identity, as several students at Chelsea College at the University of the Arts London stated when we worked with them on Belonging & Belongings.



Figure 4. Photos by the authors from the B&B study in (clockwise from top left): Amsterdam (Haarlemmerbuurt, weekday morning, August 2008), London (Shoreditch, weekday afternoon, July 2008), Tokyo (Akihabara, weekday afternoon, August 2010), and Copenhagen (Nørrebro, weekday afternoon, September 2010).

## 2.2 ‘Vulnerability’ and ‘Empathy’ in the online and offline world

The next stage of the study was based on in-home video recordings in which young people in Kyoto showed the wide variety of clothing they own. During the editing, these video recordings were juxtaposed with fragments from expert interviews from the BBC Virtual Revolution television series [1]. The combination of visual observations from everyday life with theoretical musings from experts supported the exploration of how people acquire multiple identities as a normal course of their lives and how these identities can coexist through the multilayered character of our Socio-Techno Styles, in an online and offline mix. ‘Vulnerability’ and ‘Empathy’ came up as new constructs to consider in the ongoing investigation of ‘Socio-Techno Styles’. The participating students were asked to show us the contents of their wardrobes, in an attempt to understand their identities through the means they had to create their sartorial appearances: their garments. These proved to be as telling and at the same time as eclectic as a Google search on their names. They had considerable control over both their online and offline appearances, but not full control. The resulting edited films were presented as a video installation at the EPIC conference in Tokyo in 2010. The embedded statements on the interrelationship between technology, society and sartorial appearance, as well as the interplay between virtual and physical identities, provoked thoughts on ‘Socio-Techno Styles’. Presenting the outcomes of the study as a video installation at an ethnographic conference invited reflections on the contribution of design research to traditional ethnographic research.



"We are clothing ourselves in data unconsciously as we are being judged. We are walking around the internet, being judged by who the cookies say we are and who we declare we are or what information we put in to whatever website we might go to."



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"Some of us are more aware than others. Most of us honestly have no idea. But if it got turned off tomorrow we'd be upset because all of a sudden the services we had wouldn't be as good."

"Amazon wouldn't know what they know about you and E-Bay wouldn't know what they know about you. We're not aware of the information shadow that we cast and the response to that shadow that occurs automatically."

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Figure 5. Pages from the *Belonging & Belongings* book (forthcoming) depicting stills from the film 'On Identity In Society' and excerpts of the voice over by John Batelle, from the BBC series 'Virtual Revolution' (2009), used under the BBC DIGITAL Revolution License.

### **2.3 ‘Multiplicity’ and ‘Particulariness’ in social media and daily life**

The fourth and final stage of the study involved interviews with young people in London on their use of online social media for personal expression, and building and maintaining social relationships. This study particularly focused on identity creation, both online and offline. Several groups of master students in Communication Design at Chelsea College of Art and Design at University of the Arts London were observed, interviewed, photographed, and video recorded by each other. Their design research focus was on how participants were dealing with social media in their everyday lives. The results of these project were presented in an exhibition that consisted of five different multi-media installations. This allowed the authors to explore the installation as a means to express the insights that design research creates as an alternative to reports and presentations. Most participants were very aware of the fact that they ‘edit’ their online and offline lives continuously. However, they also found that they each created unique identities that did not fit any particular subculture they could name. Rather, they focused on differences between online and offline identities. This led one group to introduce the concept of Superself for their online identities. They presented this in an installation with three screens: in the middle they shared their reflections on how they create identities for themselves all the time, on the left they presented images from their Facebook pages, and on the right video documentation of their everyday life at home: “I realized that my online personality is quite an integral part of my whole personality. In most ways, it is my superself but still a version of my personality.” All five Belonging & Belongings themes (Socio-Techno Styles, Multiplicity, Particulariness, Vulnerability and Empathy) emerged clearly from the installations.

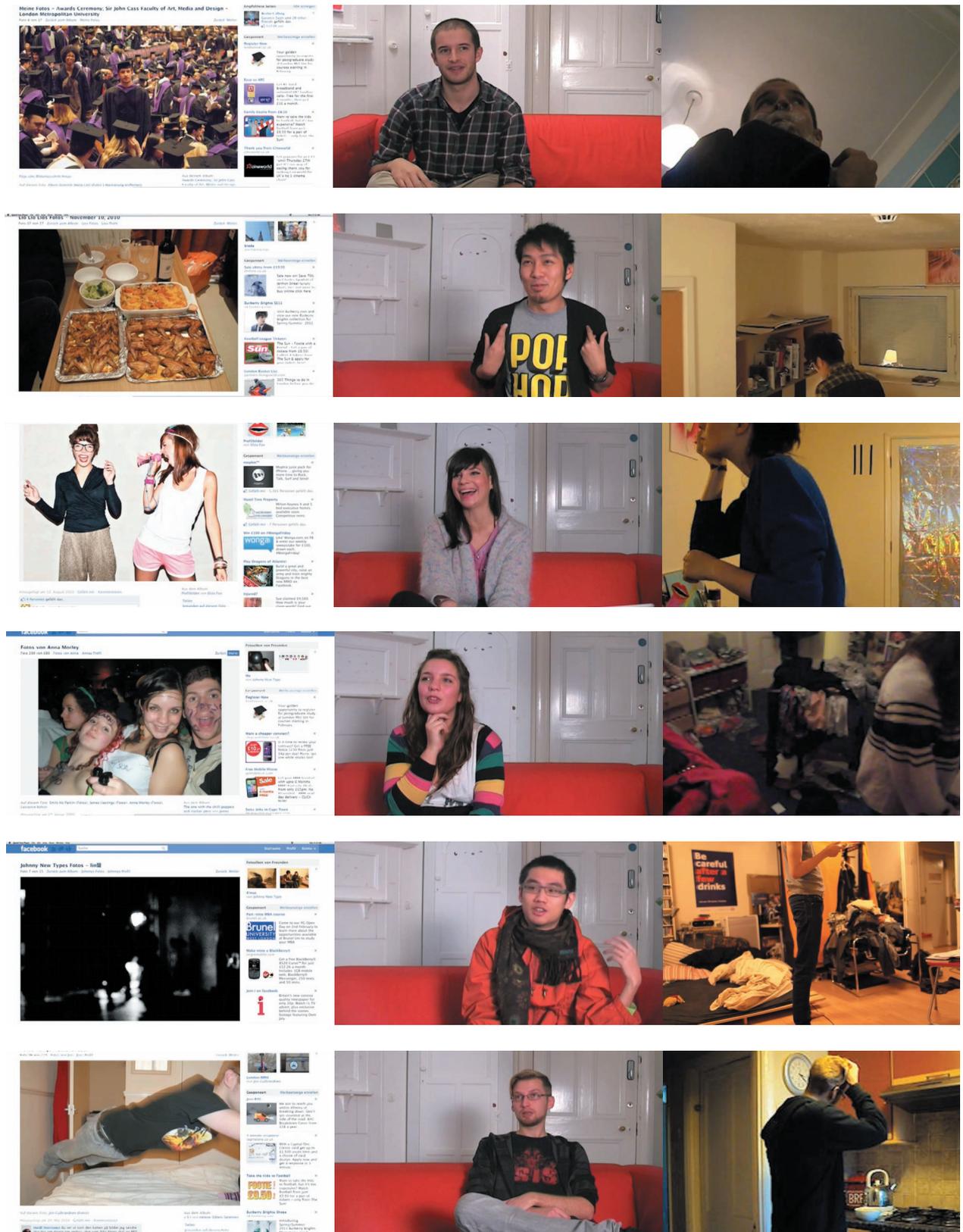


Figure 6. Stills from the installation Superself by Elisa Schönherr, Anna Morley, Alexis Dominik Maria Lazi, Jon Gulbrandsen, Lio Yeung and Zhi Xiang Xu with left their Facebook page, right their daily life at home and in the middle their reflections on how these connect.

Exhibited at Chelsea College of Art and Design University of the Arts London, February 2011.

### **3. Conclusion and discussion**

Throughout the Belonging & Belongings design research program documentations and representations using both photography and film were extensively carried out, resulting in a book, a series of ‘magazine style’ case study reports, and two exhibitions. One of the main constructs investigated across these studies is ‘Socio-Techno Styles’, explored in a visual way from an interdisciplinary perspective (Interaction Design, Fashion Design, Cultural Studies). The results of the Belonging & Belongings research make clear that ‘Socio-Techno Styles’ can be observed and studied, but also that they are highly volatile. They only temporarily materialize through the choices people make in a whole range of their clothing, accessories, expressions, interactions and behaviours. Socio-Techno Styles are not designed through formal design processes, they are the results of ‘silent design’ by the people that compile these styles as part of their everyday lives. Sometimes they are consciously, but mostly unconsciously, patching these styles together. In another moment, in another place, or in another context, they may make very different choices. ‘Socio-Techno Styles’ are therefore dynamic mash ups, they are multiple and particular, and at the same time vulnerable. This dynamic practice, even though it evades formal design directions, nevertheless makes much use of many purposely designed elements. And it can best be observed and captured through artistic design research.

The visual explorations of ‘Socio-Techno Styles’ represent current social behaviour, such as the creation of online and offline identities through the use of technology in everyday life, much like Kon’s Modernology sketches did in 1920’s Japan, Rouch’s Cinema Verité films in 1960’s France, and Fulton Suri’s Thoughtless Acts photographs in the early 21st century in the US. The visual representations offer rich insights into people’s everyday and contemporary practices. With this approach to design research it is important that the complexities and uncertainties connected to these everyday practices do not get lost in the process of documentation and analysis, as they are key to the understanding and further use of the results. The visual way of working is crucial to preserve the richness of the original observations. It is also very important that the results are open for further interpretation. They are meant to enable more in-depth academic investigation and inspire new design efforts to support and enrich the practices observed.

In addition to stressing the importance of the richness and openness of investigation, documentation and representation of artistic design research, and the significance of well-structured, well-crafted analysis and results should also be pointed out. The books, magazines and exhibitions created as results of the Belonging & Belongings design research project are by no means just a collection of observations. They are carefully selected, discussed and put together, just as any analysis process of qualitative ethnographic observations would be processed. This combination of openness and structure provides a useful stepping stone for follow-up design and research endeavors. It supports the ‘re-usability’ of the design research outcomes. Uncertainty, renegotiation, and re-use of the results of previous studies is part and parcel of the process. Although artistic research usually offers a time-based representation of contemporary phenomena, it also provides a more timeless source of reference and inspiration. Artistic, visually-driven design research can trigger new questions and interpretations. It often provides seeds for new ideas. At the same time it allows for a sense of confusion that may trigger productive discussions among peers in the field.

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STBY (Hanae Shimizu)

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