

Exploring the Empty space

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0207

The Asian Conference on the Cultural Studies 2013
Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

Keywords: empty space, Ikebana, fashion design theory, position of fashion in social space

The purpose of my report is to develop theory to support a concept of an Empty space in Fashion design. The idea of the Empty space to serve for creative minds is not new and has been explored in the Far East culture since ancient times. The development and practical applications of the Empty space can be found in Zen philosophy and as result in various crafts of Japan. Firstly my report is focusing on analysing the approach of use of the Empty space in Ikebana. Ikebana is an ancient flower arrangement craft of Japan, which was applying philosophy of the Empty space into its three dimensional form. The second part is discussing possibilities of use the Empty space in Fashion practice through both theoretical and practical approaches. The research is shown that application of the Empty space for fashion has huge impact on design and even more importantly shifting social position of the fashion too.

Introduction

My investigation of the “Unseen” started as a result of personal unseen journey through cultural and emotional shock. I went to Japan where the cultural and language barrier made me unseen as an intellectual human, but made possible to develop as a creative human. As a result, I learnt Ikebana art, where the unseen is a medium, intuitively. I went through emotional shock, when my kids were born. As a woman I experienced unseen physical transformations within my own body, changing forever my relationship with my body. I went through the emotional shock second time when my father had gone. He became a part of the unseen world, nevertheless existing in my heart, leaving forever his unseen mark on my perception of the world and style of my conduct. Then the idea started to form, to write about my experience, to unfold something of the complexity of the “unseen”. I feel a sense of mission in my attempt to communicate the cultural importance of the “Unseen” topic. As a fashion designer and a human, I feel privileged to be able to unfold this topic through the beauty and philosophy of Ikebana.

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1 Chapter 1 Ikebana

“A holy place is never empty”

Russian proverb

1.1 *What is Ikebana?*

Ikebana is an art form which has developed throughout its 1200 years history. The thousands of Ikebana schools exist in the present. Each of them holds its own view on what Ikebana is and how the beauty or essence of the art needs to be expressed. Same time the philosophical approach is embedded in the practice of Ikebana.

Visually, Ikebana is an asymmetrical composition made with flowers. However, Ikebana is not a frame to show visible beauty of nature, but rather a living stage, where veiled meanings and spiritual engagement attain between a master and viewers (guests) imagination.

The plant materials used in Ikebana art form are both a material and a philosophical tool. The physical state of the flower, as it transform through time, is an endless possibility for comprehension of our world. Stem, bud, full bloom, broken stem, old flower and countless shades of those stages will be appreciated and accepted in composition with gratitude. If the flower is imperfect - so be it and as a result it will never be discarded by the modern Ikebana practitioners. From this perspective, every flower is a chance to understand the essence of nature.

1.2 *The ‘Unseen’ in Ikebana*

One of the primary goals of the Ikebana artist is exchange of creative ideas, not a monopoly of the teacher in educating, but rather a dialectic process. As result the Ikebana arrangement is a starting point to unfold artist idea, in similar way as we do it in poetry. The Ikebana artist leaves the unseen part of the composition for the interpretation of the audience (the guest). The concealed appearance of the composition, a de-centring of the practitioner in this tradition in favour to the guest, gives the artist the possibility both to show ideas that gave rise to the composition and also leave space for the guest’s imagination.

Additionally, the empty space in Ikebana arrangement is not really empty – it is the unseen space, sustaining spiritual fullness.

The earliest artefacts show the use of flower arrangements refer to the decoration of Buddhist temples (Sato,1972), (Steere,2000). According to the nature of Shinto, I believe, Shinto shrines may have certain connections to Ikebana too; yet, no recorded evidence of a prior use of flowers for the Shinto shrines during earlier times has been found.

However, in my opinion, major characteristic of Ikebana knowledge on the unseen space come from practice alongside of expanded universe of Buddhism (Rikka arrangement (Steere,2000:112), where the composition was made with many branches), as well as of concentrated universe of Zen (Nagaire arrangement (Steere,2000:55), where composition may consist of single flower). Figure 1 shows one of the oldest images of the arrangement with the lotus flower. This arrangement consists of a small bud, a blooming flower, and a leaf, which may reflect a triad of

Buddhism (Sato, 1972:18). Equally we can see two flowers used to present the whole complex of Yang-Yin (Yoh-In in Japanese) philosophy (Figure 2).

1.3 *Symmetry in Ikebana comes together with the unseen space.*

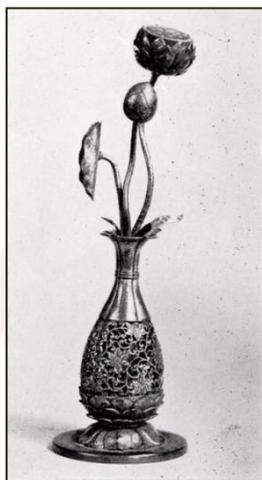


Figure 1 A gilt bronze vase.
(The Kanshin-ji Temple, 1192-1333). (Steere, 2000)

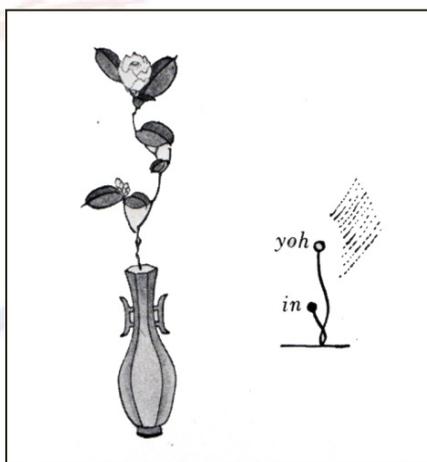


Figure 2 Yoh and In balance. (Steere, 2000)

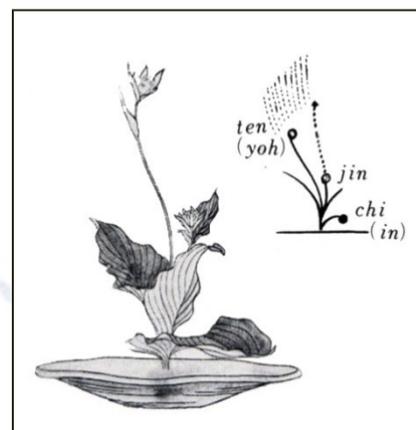


Figure 3 Seika balance. (Steere, 2000)

Visually Ikebana composition has an absence of symmetry; however it shows a strong sense of balance and dynamic.

As already mentioned, the statue of Buddha was framed by flower arrangements on both sides (Sato, 1972:18). The significance of this record is in forming of the exterior Buddhist triad by Buddha statue together with two flower arrangements on each side, additionally to the interior triad seen in the compositional form of bud, flower and leaf mentioned above. This exterior triad consisted of image of Buddha framed by two flower arrangements are the most important basis for my theory of the 'empty space' in Ikebana.

“If the central arrangement is considered to take the place of the Buddha (see Figure 4, and Figure 8), then the arrangement on the viewer’s left is on the Buddha’s right, thus creating the somewhat confusing tradition of calling an arrangement whose main branch curves to the left a right-hand arrangement, and one whose main emphasis seems to be on the right a left-hand arrangement” (Sato,1972:23).

As we can see from Figure 5, suddenly metaphysical ‘empty space’ appears, holding religious meaning. Moreover this ‘empty space’ is active, as it represents Buddha looking at us, as suggest the tradition to call right-hand and left-hand arrangements by opposite names, making sense when the view point to the arrangement is from inside. As result, when the Seika Arrangement become a one-vase arrangement, the ‘empty space’ was split between right-handed (Figure 6) and left- handed (Figure 7) parts of the former three-vase composition.



Figure 4. A classic three-vase Rikka arrangement attributed to Ikenobo Senmyo XLI, early nineteenth century. (Sato, 1972)

The act of making this kind of arrangement becomes an act of communication between Buddha and artist, or as we call it presently, an act of creative meditation. The communication between Buddha looking on the artist from the ‘empty space’ is a reasoning point of the Ikebana arrangement. Consequently the Ikebana itself become a crosspoint or a “flesh”, as Merleau-Ponty called analogous phenomenon in invisible ater (Merleau-Ponty,1968); forming a communicational triad between Buddha and the artist, between an Artist (or Teacher) and a viewer (a Guest), between a Viewer (or Guest) and Buddha.

When we start analyse a right hand arrangement of Seika Ikebana composition of the Kyoto Koryu Ikebana School (Figure 8), we see absence of symmetry. Nevertheless the composition shows a strong sense of balance and dynamics. As we have seen from the development of the ‘empty space’ after Buddha statues were no longer routinely part of such arrangements, and as witnessed in the terminology in naming the sides of the arrangement, symmetry in Ikebana comes together with the unseen space. This space is outside of the ‘visual box’ of what is seen.



Figure 6. Right –hand arrangement. Seika Ikebana. Author own picture, 2003.



Figure 7. Left –hand arrangement. Seika Ikebana. Author own picture, 2003.



Figure 8. Seika Ikebana composition of the Kyoto Koryu Ikebana School, author own arrangement, 2004.

1.4 One of the greatest skills of the master is actually catch a glimpse of the third force in the point of time when it starts to form.

In my opinion, Third force concept is a fundamental aspect of: the Unseen concept in Ikebana, proportions, asymmetrical appearance and a whole dynamic of the arrangement.

When in nineteenth century Ikebana was simplified the Seika style emerged (Figure 3), the Yang part was divided into two, such created “the heaven” (Ten in Japanese) and “the human” (Jin in Japanese). In different Ikebana school three fundamental parts of Seika may have different name, however one important feature will stay same: “human” part is holding special role: it part of the “heaven” but it stay between the heaven and the earth. Additionally, “human” part may be supported by the “heaven” part, and always made with same material. Consequently, the space occupied by “the heaven” and “the human” is the biggest in the compositional form and is having a nature of Yang. The “earth” is representing Yin nature.

When the balance between Yang and Yin is broken, then a third force emerges to balance them. The third force is “almost” invisible part of the composition. One of the greatest skills is to be able to catch a glimpse of the third force in the some point of time when it starts to form. Additionally to “almost” invisible characteristic, the third force have characteristic of ever-changing settings, it is represent development. In Ikebana arrangement “the third force” always represented by branch or flower which is almost hidden by other branches. It almost invisible, but we still can see a blink of it. It adds dynamic to the composition, supporting ever-changing concept. Thus third force is representing two concepts in one outline: the Unseen concept in Ikebana as partial concealment and ever-changing concept.

In my opinion, the balance of Yang and Yin was broken in Ikebana intentionally, with a purpose to “show” the appearance of the Third force. This artificially created situation, where the harmony is developing from imbalance. The imbalance phases have huge range from just starting to the extreme point, as a result of a time when development of third force is caught. As already discussed, symmetry in Ikebana is come together with unity of the visible part of the arrangement and the empty space. The third force in my opinion is represented by the empty space, on external level of Ikebana triad and as hidden branches on internal level of Ikebana parts.

As Senei Ikenobo, wrote in his introduction to proportions (Steere,2000:51), the differences in form arise, when “according to the point in time when the third force is caught in point of its development”. Consequently proportions of all three parts will depend on the state of the Third force.

1.5 Pregnancy of the subject

The Pregnancy of the subject, “This may be said of the characteristic feature of Japanese traditional arts in general, not of Ikebana alone”

Senei Ikenobo (Steere, 2000:51).

In the philosophical viewpoint of Ikebana the third force will begin to emerge when a relationship between Yang/Yin parts is out of balance, as stated above, and this has great importance in the philosophy of Ikebana (Steere, 2000:51). This emerging third force will always be partly hidden, somewhat concealed, and suggests an uncompleted appearance of the Ikebana arrangement. As the third force is representing “future” of the unity, it could not be seen directly, only suggested and awaited. This is a pregnancy of the subject.

One of the most famous examples of this art phenomenon is The Stone Garden of Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, which consist of fifteen rocks and the fifteenth rock is always hidden; however when the viewer moves along the edge of the garden, one of the fifteen rocks will appear, another - disappear. Similar to poetry, where we can catch only a glimpse of a truth and to Ikebana, where we can catch only a glimpse of a third force, balancing Yang and Yin; in this garden we can catch only a glimpse of the fading fifteen rock.

1.6 Ikebana conclusion

As we have seen throughout Ikebana history so far, this art has developed utilisation of the “empty space” on a visual and philosophical level. Each century helped to evolve the conceptual material to the next level expressed through natural material of flowers. Constant research into relationships within flower forms and proportions, flower and vase relationship, flower arrangement and space, contributed into development of the concept of the “empty space”. Intentional imbalance between parts and third force conceived philosophical meaning and emotional power of empty space.

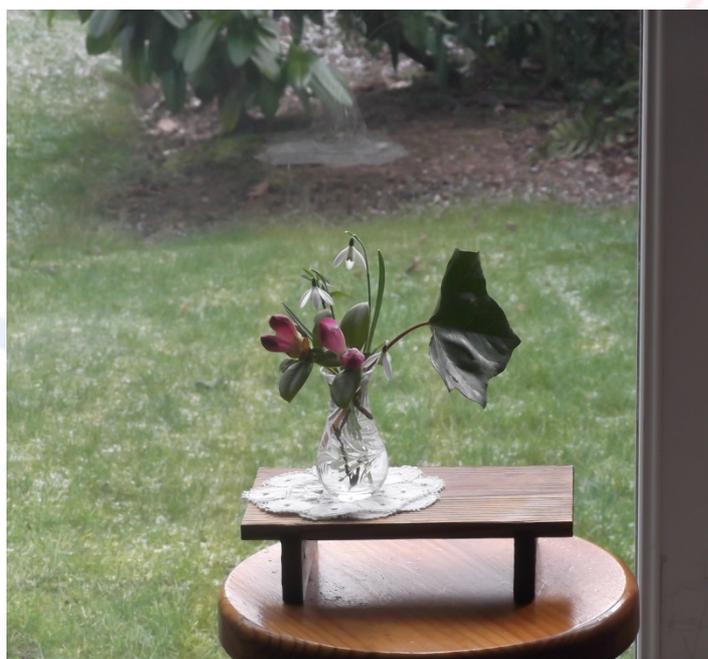


Figure 9. Free style arrangement, Kyoto Koryu School. Author own picture, 2013.

2 Chapter 2 Communication

2.1 *Negative space in communication*

In the field of western art and design the space surrounding a subject is called *negative space*. In my opinion, this concept is also dividing our universe in terms of three forces:

- Force one is the unseen space all around us;
- Force two is positive space of the subject;
- Force three is negative space and same time is a “third force”.

If all surrounding space is considered as unseen space, then subjects in this space could be located only by a special force the “third force”, which pushes the subjects

out of being unseen to existence. In other words, this third force is carving a subject (as positive space) out of unseen space.

This “third force” may be visible or invisible. Together with location of the subjects (we may see many at same time) we are getting focus on the subject (something really interesting us). The “third force” in this case is invisible. Artists may use contrasting negative spaces, and then negative space becomes visible and very often primarily visible. As result, another conceptual problem arises – which is to be considered as negative space and which as positive space if both are equally visible? Our “focus” will determinate a subject.



Figure 10. Two ladies in Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto . Author own picture, 2004.

Example: in communication (Figure 10) we need to determinate what the subject is. This picture was taken in The Stone Garden of Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto. Two beautiful young ladies were discussing something, and I ask them for permission to take a picture. In this picture the two bodies form an outline for the Stone Garden in some sort of vessel shape, inside of which we see the garden.

My question is what to consider be a subject: the Ladies or the garden? When starting analyse this question in positive-negative system:

- if focus is the people (they become subject), then negative space is the Stone Garden and simplified system will look like in Figure 11.
- if the focus is the Stone Garden, a discussion about it, an impression it gives, the topics it provoke (it becomes the subject), then the people form a negative space with their body in Figure 12.



Figure 11. Stone garden in Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto, as negative space. Author own picture, adapted 2013.



Figure 12. Two ladies as negative space . Author own picture, adapted 2013.

This conceptual framework can be extended to a communication space – if the humans are forming it, they act as negative space (third force). If the communication space is a subject, then it was already in existence. In figure 18, two people cut out a certain time and space from out of the unseen communicational space. The Stone garden was there before they arrived, however at the point of time they been sitting there, the garden (as space) had initiated their talk. Are only these two people able to locate this communication space, or could anyone locate same communicational space?

The communication space is constantly in existence and **any number** of people can pin it in some point of time and location. When new people will come to see the garden, they will start to perceive the given information. They see a garden and as result the communicational space is located or pinned. Any number of people can do that and information they perceive is more or less similar. The differences will occur only for reasons as primarily knowledge on the subject, personal likes-dislikes or personal sensitivity. However, when people are perceiving information in a group, the balance in communication space, in my opinion may look same as in composition of Ikebana. The balance of talk-listen-information is same as flower arrangement, when result is communal knowledge.

As example, figure 21 is a representation of the situation when the person sitting on the left (in the original image, figure 18) is dominant speaker – this corresponds with the right-hand arrangement in Ikebana, when the Stone Garden acts as communicational space and as well as unseen space. Figure 22 represents when the other person is dominant speaker – and we see a left-hand arrangement when the Stone Garden again acts as communication and unseen space.

In Figure 13a and Figure 13b, the humans act as a subject. They perceive the garden, they communicate with each other and they collaborate in creation of communal perception of the garden. This turns the garden into the subject, because the garden becomes a pinned communication space. When Merleau-Ponty asks, “How can there be a compound of the visible with the invisible” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) this can be answered using such a framework: the compound is possible within communication space and in the understanding of humans, when the focus on the positive and negative space constantly exchange position.



Figure 13a. Graphic Ikebana, Two ladies, right hand side arrangement. Author own picture, adapted 2013.

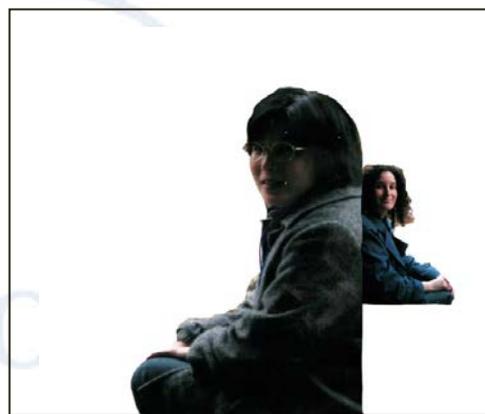


Figure 13b. Graphic Ikebana, Two ladies, left hand side arrangement. Author own picture, adapted 2013.

Initially, the perceiving information is different for both individuals due for the reasons I discussed before. The reason why I call the Stone Garden the Unseen space here is that after intersecting the Unseen space this two ladies knowledge became combined. The combined knowledge about the garden will emerge during communication as result of the intersection of individual knowledge, creating communal knowledge about the garden.

2.2 *Human body and unseen*

A human body is left to be “unseen” by the owner of the body as well as by society.

As I began to bring the concept of ‘unseen space’ alongside my studies in fashion, I asked questions about where this ‘unseen space’ could be found in fashion. One avenue for exploration emerged when I found myself ‘unseen’ by my own eyes in one sense, as I began to live without using a mirror at home. I began to wonder: what would happen if the mirror didn’t exist?

When we look into the mirror we see a reflection of ourselves. What we see is deeply affected by our existing feelings. With a positive mind we see ourselves as attractive and satisfied (Figure 14a). What happens when we look with a negative attitude? The same body could become an object of ridicule, or we might revisit a grudge against it or we start to reproach ourselves (Figure 14b).

Accidentally I didn't have a wall to put my mirror on, so it was placed behind a wardrobe. As result I can go for weeks without seeing my reflection. People I know

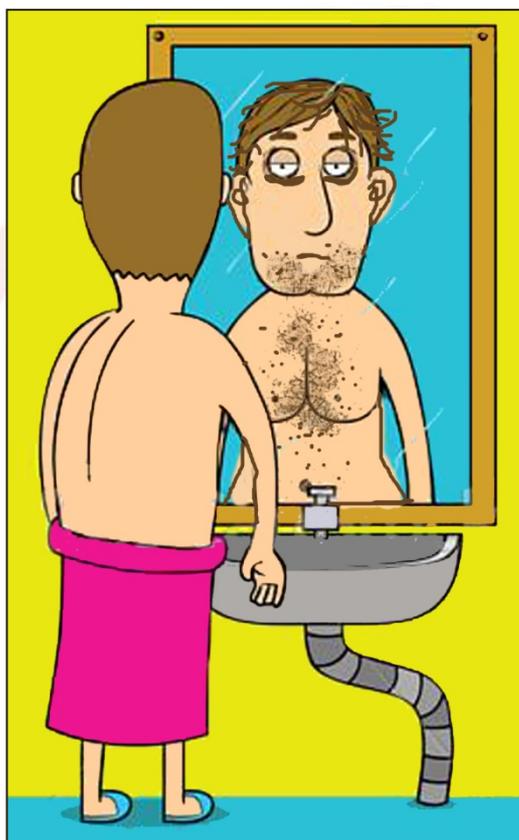


Figure 14b. Adopted from <http://uk.photos.com/stock-illustrations/> (2012)



Figure 14a. Adopted from <http://uk.photos.com/stock-illustrations/> (2012)

don't seem to have changed their attitude towards me; people whom I don't know see me as I am. I have become more relaxed and simply can't see "unsuitable" combinations in my clothing any more. I can imagine myself as I like to – and behave accordingly. I can say it is not a mirror that is telling me how I look today, but my own feeling. If I want to meet the world, I feel good – I look good, and the opposite applies as well - if I don't feel good, I don't want to see the world, I can hide myself in clothing.

As I have explored this way of living without the mirror, I have observed a resonance in the styles I see on the street: it seems that comfort is another everyday aesthetic which is becoming increasingly popular in the modern world.

What would happen if mirror would not exist for anyone? Could we all step into an 'unseen space' where we could pay sensitive attention to our feelings, as a guest? Would this slow down progress in fashion? What would change? How would elegance appear, without a mirror? How do "street style" and comfort will relate to the elegance of fashion?

2.3 Dress and body and 'empty space'

Each human represent itself as a communication complex consisting of human body and a dress. Despite the complex being quite visible, the "real" communication complex is unseen.

Clothing hides a human body, as a mask is hides a human face. Dress and mask are creating a space for the communication, the poetical interpretation of onlookers. The effect of how the body is perceived by onlookers depends dramatically on the clothing.

"At first sight, [the veil] seems to have little more than a simple concealing function; in fact it usually succeeds in increasing attention to the face" (Liggett, 1974:112).

Bigger dress - bigger negative space – as result the body taking overall space become bigger and the attention it holds from onlookers also increases. This is why, in my opinion, dresses for royalty, balls, and weddings are increasingly bigger, especially in social contexts. A study of dress forms within a context of theatrical study at the Bauhaus showed that both costumes and masks depersonalize a body. As a result this creates a universal human, who becomes centre of an acting space (Rowland, 1990).

Nevertheless, the dress is carving a particular body out of the communal social space. Negative space is a universal tool in determination of a communication complex. What we can consider to be a negative space: is it the human body or a dress capturing all the attention from onlookers? In Figure 15, the dress has completely hidden the body, creating a picturesque landscape, rather than a human body – the negative space here is a body, and in fact dress created a bigger unseen space for the body. In Figure 16, the negative space is empty space, the dress doesn't need a human body at all, and again, in fact it creates a huge unseen space for the "potential" body. Yet again, in Figure 17a and 17b the dress becomes a positive space for a body, the body is negative space there - the dress becomes alive.



Figure 15. Dominant negative space
Source © Etienne Tordoir, Manon Kündig(2012).



Figure 16. Empty dress. (2011)



Figure 17a. The enigma of creativity. Capucci (1984).

Chapter 3 Exploring “empty space”

In this section I explore possible meanings for “empty space” in fashion which I juxtapose with ideas drawn from Ikebana. Empty space is not the same as unseen; nor is it merely the opposite of full, as there is another aspect which emerges if we consider the conceptual opposition of full and empty.

3.1 Unseen space and “empty space”

Unseen space can be completely filled with objects that we just cannot see yet. Darkness is a perfect example – the world is not disappearing when we close our eyes; however, the world has definitely become unseen for us. In *‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’* by Lewis Carroll, the Cheshire Cat seems to appear from nowhere. It doesn’t mean that it was not there a minute ago. It was there already, but Alice just did not see it yet.

Similarly the service cables and pipes that provide utilities to buildings are usually unseen, but would be missed if they were not present. The Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris is famous example of what happens when those unseen services are exposed. What else can be somewhere, but we may never see? The fact that these services, and similarly many construction features in fashion, are unseen doesn’t mean they do not exist; it is merely unseen for us to some point in time; wink of underwear in special slashes of a dress, exposed seams, uncovered corsets, are some of the examples.

3.2 “Empty space” not opposite of “full”

Space can be just as ‘unseen’ when it is visually crammed. Someone might say “I cannot see any space!” when looking into a bulging wardrobe, because it is not possible to see any unused space there. What is interesting when full and empty are compared is that an “empty space” may seem at first to mean ‘nothing’. However, when there is a lack of space or the space feels crowded, then we may feel a sense of discomfort.

This discomfort points towards the design consideration of “empty space”. This thesis relates the research topic of the designed object to the surrounding space. An example is the way in which exhibition space may be occupied by art objects. Recently, I experienced a lack of “empty space” for my dress during an exhibition. The dress occupied about 3 m³ but when standing close to it I couldn’t really “see” it. I felt claustrophobic. I started to feel comfortable when the radius between me and the object was closer to 5 m.

When we look at “empty space” in medieval Chinese paintings, there is often an “empty space” on the white paper not being filled with images. The drawn images need “breathing” space.

“Empty space” is not the direct opposite to full, swarming space. As far as space is concerned, the space has existence, which invites a desire to fill it.

“Emptiness always means empty of something. A cup is empty of water. A bowl is empty of soup. We are empty of separate, dependent self. We cannot be by ourselves alone” (Hahn, 1998:136).

Therefore, the visually “empty space” has a great potential for being filled in. If the space is already full, it doesn’t leave space for expressing the guest’s creativity. Somebody has already filled it. What does a lack of inviting space say to a fashion customer? Is the cultivation of “empty space” a foundation for a shift in perception of fashion customers as co-creators with designers? Perhaps designers can explore a role with similarities to that of the Teacher in Ikebana – a person who arranges frames, spaces and an invitation for the guest’s creativity to emerge.

“Empty space” is performed in bridal culture. The couple can be formed if they have “empty space” in between them. Similar to Kawabuke arrangement in Ikebana, a creative distance, a space which connects and which appears between two people, can be filled with their emotion, communication, and acceptance. This “empty space” is vital for creativity. Thus empty space of a couple is co filled by two individuals, is space of intersection of individuality of both humans. The healing and creative power of the intersectional space between two parts of one arrangement has been richly developed in the philosophy and construction of Ikebana (Coe, 1988).

Conclusion

I strongly believe that only usage of the unseen communication space and a new philosophical attitude to the customers, as in the Ikebana practice, can move Fashion to the next level of social phenomenon. This will open up new possibilities in development of Fashion not only within material revolution but within socio-psychological values as well.

Unseen in fashion could bring forward idea of united composition of clothes and body. Introduction of the third force into fashion design could lead to diversity and unity, in forms and human/cloth relationship. When deep philosophical ideas are extracted from the art form, art becomes a manual work. Similar to art, modern Fashion deserve to be transcended, because it hold our body, create unique relationship with our body and greatly influence how our body does behave and perceived. Creation of the philosophy of the unseen relation between body, mind and fashion should be modern alternative to current fashion design.

While researching “Unseen” topic, I learnt that this topic have important cultural heritage: philosophy, art, architecture, poetry, fashion, theatre etc. No any single area of human creative activity was left untouched by the subject. Moreover, this topic could be found as well in a research subject in science, communication etc. Thus “Unseen” may be called a universal medium, a complex which brings together different disciplines.

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