

Rethinking Children and Clothes

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Abstract: *Rethinking Children and Clothes* is a photo book designed to register the relationship children have with the garments in their wardrobes. I produced and photographed children in the intimate setting of their home, aiming to explore identity development during the transition from childhood into adolescence. Here, the clothes have emotional significance, durability that surpasses the physical integrity of the fabric. The photographs focus on the wear and tear, holes, stains, and rips that become part of much loved, worn clothing. The pictures show details of the dressed body, preserving the privacy of the subject but revealing aspects of their identity. Based on Sally Mann's work with her family and discussions about children as research participants, this project is a conversation between fashion and childhood. I intend to propose a different way of seeing identity in a visual medium that is removed from identification. Additionally, the materiality of clothing, their "thing-power" (Bennett 348), demand their existence as objects of discourse between a child and society. The participants were invited to edit the final product and to share their thoughts in a brief interview. With this work, I suggest that wearing worn out clothing creates an emotional connection, preserving garments that do not have to be discarded or replaced so swiftly.

Keywords:

Identity
Children's Fashion
Material Culture
Photography

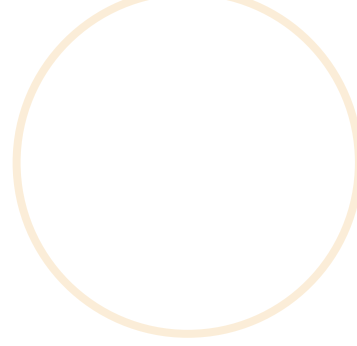
Introduction

Rethinking Children and Clothes is a series of photographs shot over four weeks in the spring of 2018, recording clothes that are part of a child's wardrobe. Part of a broader inquiry into children and fashion I have been interested in exploring, twenty-two photos assembled in book form are intertwined with comments from the children, a nine-year-old girl and an eleven-year-old boy. *Rethinking* is a project that wants to reimagine the relationship children have with their garments, using photography as its expressive medium. The goal was to photograph signs of wear on garments residing on the body and inside the closet, clustered in a messy but somewhat organized and unique manner. These photographs register children wearing clothing and dealing with the materiality of fabrics, its marks, and styles at hand to start creating their self-identities and personal tastes. Additionally, I sought to show the relationship between children and clothes to advance studies about childhood and fashion beyond consumption and into dress practices.

Intimate and Family Photographs

Photographing clothing is an exercise in intimacy, especially in the case of this project, whereby the purpose is to highlight overlooked details and imperfections that are intrinsic parts of the worn garment. I decided to take pictures of my children for two reasons: the first was convenience, as I could do retakes at any time, exploring the light inside my house at various periods of the day. Also, there was the issue of proximity between the children and me and the photos of their clothed bodies: "The photography of private and daily existence has ... often been realized with a snapshot aesthetic or openness on the part of the photographer to represent the spontaneity of domestic life" (Cotton 159).

The process to achieve a desirable aesthetic and satisfactory result that represented the themes I wanted to examine was relatively long, but easy. There was a need from the start to be close enough to the children to capture garment details while maintaining their freedom of movement and not compromising their daily routines. I had to be near their bodies and the physical spaces they occupy and, for some shots, I had to ask them to stop moving, so I could make a sharp picture. Despite photographing my children, it was important to forge a different bond with them. I managed to create an environment where I made myself "invisible." Upon taking a high number of photos, some were classified as "snapshots" and deemed not usable (they were good, but registered movement, which defeated the purpose of clarity for garment details). Finally, the children's willingness to have their pictures taken made a crucial difference to the expected outcome. Consent, therefore, was negotiated and agreed upon following my explanation of the reasons I was taking the pictures. At the end, they agreed to have their real names displayed but not their faces, and participation in the editing process allowed them to take back control over their image and the way it was presented.



Photographic Aesthetics

Informed by the criticism Sally Mann's work with her children has received over the years, I was cautious about exposing the bodies of my own children, careful to preserve their privacy, and, above all, concerned with how the photographs would be interpreted. The controversy about Mann's work comes from the way she portrays her children, the themes depicted in the pictures, the manipulation and artifice that appears in her approach to the frame, and especially "her transgression of taboos concerning the nudity of young children" (Steward 369). Mann photographs children's bodies, which raises questions about sexuality, but this tells more about the viewer who sexualizes the subject than the actual intent of her gaze. Consequently, she "raises serious questions about our examination of the world of children" (Steward 367). The criticism that Mann's work drew often seems to be related to the misinterpretations of people who are not familiar with a child's world, and she has frequently defended her pictures as simply a register of a life moment. Reflecting on Sally Mann's work, Steward explains that "the images are thus not about the 'thing' of childhood but about, in Mann's words, 'the idea of being a child and a family member, the complexity of it'" (369).

In *Rethinking*, I am doing the opposite, but borrowing her gaze to inform my starting point in the same way she uses artifice mixed with authenticity to create discussion, while creating an ambiguous picture. My photographs, although not manipulated, still carry a form of intrusion into the personal life, space, and body of a child; however, presented with kindness and respect. *Rethinking's* photographs were planned to look as real and spontaneous as possible, using natural light that produced grainy textures, dark scenes, and sunbathed pictures, elements essential to provide an aesthetic similar to what Cotton calls "seemingly unskilled photography [that] is an intentional device that signals intimacy" (137). The majority of pictures are close-ups of details of fabric surfaces, its stains, and other marks of wear and tear. The photographs work as an unusual type of mirror, revealing the marks a body imprints into the clothes. Other photos focus on the assemblage of the clothing stored in the closet or thrown over a stand, falling to the floor, transforming the sight into an unidentifiable pile of mixed-use garments.

Children as Participants

In a rush to shelter childhood, we tend to replace children's agency and voice with an adult worldview often at odds with a child's life reality. In the field of social studies about childhood, there has been a move towards situating children as active social agents, acknowledging their individuality and their "very diverse ranges of experiences" (Barker and Smith 92). Recent research takes photography into the collaborative realm, putting children in the role of photographers to give them the possibility "to explore, document and make meaning of their own lives" (92).

It was important for this project to include the children in the process of making the book but not the pictures, because my intention was to capture them wearing their overused garments. The result was photographs taken spontaneously, without manipulation or posing. As Pink argues, showing photos to the research participant can "invoke memories, knowledge" while converging the subjectivity of both researcher and participant (16). The editing of the book, on the other hand, required the children's participation for them to reflect on how they wear clothes, and how they would choose to show this wearing in public, enabling them "to make decisions about the mood and appearance of the final product" (Barker and Smith 96). Upon analysis of the details and clothes photographed, the children made a point of seeing the clothes differently. The attachment they have with the garments can be observed in the captions they created for the photos. A quick chat with both Catarina (Nina) and Igor was included in the book, revealing their opinions about the photography process and the relationship they have with their clothing.

Barker and Smith alert us to the complexity of bringing children into the role of research participants. Although their study was designed around children taking the pictures, it is possible to extrapolate their findings to studies that use children as subjects. Here, as they reflect, the work will be produced after "interaction and effective communication between researchers and participants" (Barker and Smith 100). Another reason why I took the pictures instead of my children was to discuss the ways my observation of their relationship with their clothes is mediated through my expectations as a mother. It was important for me to counter my perception of an apparent lack of care with their affection for the garments. The cuts, tears, rips, holes, and pulled threads are signs of recurring wearing. Catarina, my daughter, has a seeming disregard for her clothing, often displacing pieces carelessly on top of the clothing stand. This clutter masks the reality of her liking the garments, evidenced by the countless times she wears them and the marks left on her clothes. She does not want to put them away, back in the closet, so the pile created with the most worn pieces, despite the imperfections each one carries, demonstrates her dressing choices.

Materiality of Clothing

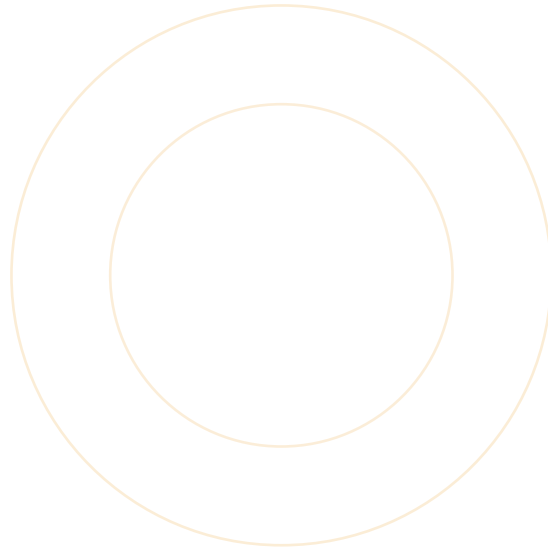
The clothes that appear in the photographs were chosen, and outfits composed, by the children without my interference, to wear at school or while at home. Those pieces are the ones they were obsessed with wearing at that time, acquired as gifts and purchases I had made months before. Ruggerrone argue that in the process of dressing, we choose as much as are selected by the clothes we put on our bodies, creating the process of becoming (582). Ruggerrone goes further as to suggest “the dress is something that will morph into my body and into which my body will change when I go out into the world” (585). Children for a brief period “morph” their bodies and clothes, evidenced by the constant wear put on the same set of clothes, showcased in this book. The haptic sensations of wearing clothes with imperfections such as holes and rips do not bother the children, as it is as much a part of their bodies as a scratch or a bruise.

As for the intimacy of the scenes, Cotton argues that “[p]hotographing at home offers a close-at-hand set of subjects and scenarios to satisfy a practitioner’s need to see what something might look like photo-graphically, but it also provides the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the particulars of his or her domestic life” (152). The “particulars” in this photographic project are the clothes themselves. Sontag said that “[p]hotographs turn the past into an object of tender regard” (71). The clothes photographed in *Rethinking* will eventually become objects of the past, memories of childhood, of the relationship forged with apparel in a moment in Igor and Nina’s lives when they were discovering themselves. These children develop their identities using clothing as a medium of discourse with the world; as Shilling argued, “the body is affected by discourse, but we get little sense of the body reacting back and affecting discourse” (qted. in Blackman 28). *Rethinking* is in dialogue with this idea, criticizing the current vision of childhood we find in the media of a clean and neat child, where there is no space for mess or errors.

“Photographs are, of course, artifacts. ... [that have] the status of found objects ... pellets of information” (Sontag 69). My pictures, therefore, are slices of time, objects that contain and consecrate other objects, giving them life, connecting realities from the past with the realities still present. The clothes are playing “a special role in recalling the past due to the way they take an imprint of the body that wears them” (Bide 455). The clothing items in the pictures are still being worn but will soon become a memory. The children will grow up, and probably would forget the clothes if it were not for the photo book to capture and trap this moment of their life. All the worn pieces, with their imperfections, represent a sign of a life lived playing. The memory of clothing is connected to the embodied experience by its smell, texture, and feeling of wearing the garment, creating a link between past and present, no matter if the clothing is a physical material in the present (Slater 135).

Bide reminds us that “[o]bjects evoke memories: they connect the past and the present” (451). Indeed, there is a new concept of materiality that attributes power to objects, or what is called “thing-power” (Bennett 348). Thing-power occurs when an object has the power to demand its existence. If an object is not able to claim its own power, it is transformed into waste, losing thing-power. If given life, the object can become part of material culture. “Thing-power materialism emphasizes the closeness, the intimacy, of humans and nonhumans” (Bennett 365). Clothing is the most intimate, close to the body thing we possess and experience. We are taught how to wear clothes and what to wear since we are born. Igor and Nina’s clothes were gifted by family members and friends and purchased for the wardrobe. In the case of these children, clothes purchased by myself, for them, makes the bulk of the collection, and as Woodward explained while discussing women’s wardrobes, there is a negotiation of the “sense of self, individuality and autonomy” that bears a dependence on others (101). While I bought most of the clothing for my children, ultimately it is their choice of what to wear and how often that will enable them to manage this process of negotiation with their object and their identities.

Clothing can acquire a biography in an early life stage, and as Kopytoff reflects, “we accept that every person has many biographies — psychological, professional, political, familial, economic and so forth — ... [b]iographies of things cannot but be similarly partial” (68). The author also discusses the concept of singularization, the possibility to personalize an object, make it individual to reflect someone’s personality. “Societies need to set apart a certain portion of their environment, marking it as ‘sacred,’ [and] singularization is one means to this end” (Kopytoff 73). My children keep wearing the same clothes until the point that marks appear, singularizing them, creating a unique and personal object that reflects their use, and somewhat their personalities, in that moment in time.



Conclusion

Rethinking Children and Clothing, as a photo book, is not a study in fashion photography; instead, it borrows from that style, mainly from the mid-1990s “gritty realism” (Cotton 144) as a mode of representing clothing. Mindful of the controversy about some fashion photographs of the period, as well as Sally Mann’s work with children, I touched on themes that subverted how childhood is seen through photography, and the photos in this project avoid the identification of subjects. My intention is to use past works as a basis for thinking about what is being portrayed and the future implications that this work might generate, because it deals with children and the protection they deserve. I am proposing a different way of seeing clothing and presenting another form of identity that is removed from identification, thus maintaining privacy while showing the wearability of clothing in a daily, almost banal setting.

Ultimately, this series of photos intends to rethink clothing, focusing on the discarded garment, stripped from its thing-power. The children in these photographs do not mind wearing damaged clothes. Repairing, mending, reconstructing, and wearing imperfect clothes is a habit worth pursuing and celebrating, both now and in the future.

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