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The clothes make the person Headline:The clothes make the person

By John E. Mitchell
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North Adams Transcript

ADAMS -- Kate Hartman doesn't just want you to wear clothes; she wants you to interact with them.

Hartman -- who is also a professor at New York University's Interactive Technology Program -- creates clothing with a technological edge. Her Muttering Hat creates an outward representation of thinking for the wearer, while her Gut Listener wraps around a person's midsection and amplifies bodily sounds through headphones.

Hartman has also fashioned such items as the Inflatable Heart, which is worn like a brooch and grows or deflates in order to express emotion, and the Ear Bender, which allows a companion to amplify intimate or angry words directly into the ear of the person wearing the hat.

Some of Hartman's creations are currently on display at Greylock Arts in Adams as part of its "Wearable Expressions" show.

"I do a lot of work with wearable electronics as well," Hartman said during a recent interview, "imbedding sensors in clothing and that sort of thing. With a lot of the pieces there's a more conceptual approach looking at a physical embodiment of ideas."

With the Muttering Hat, Hartman sought to create a wearable item that would mirror an inner process -- thought. The hat has two balls attached by Velcro that hang near a person's ears -- the sound of actual muttering emanates from them and gives an outside embodiment to the processes of our own brains.

"It's a

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static muttering, but I talk about it as being a placeholder for whatever the sound of your thoughts would be," Hartman said. "Obviously I can't read anyone's mind at this point, but this is a placeholder to give you the opportunity to think about what would thoughts sound like if we could capture that soundtrack. Both the sound and the hat itself are tools for imagining, to get people thinking about how we could represent ourselves in that way."

The wearer can also detach the balls and let them hang down not so near the ears.

"You can get a little distance," Hartman said, "a little perspective, so they're not overwhelming you so much -- or you can also share them with a friend."

With the Gut Listener, Hartman amplifies the actual sounds of your insides rather than creating any sort of stand-in.

"It requires you to be very, very quiet, so you can literally hear your guts," she said. "It's interesting to think about the literal and metaphorical implications of listening to what's going on inside of you, but it's a nice moment when people put it on because they are

very still and they listen very hard."

After Hartman creates these devices and uses them herself, she enlists people to test them out and find out the possible uses of any of the objects -- the way people view themselves is as varied as how they view Hartman's wearables. She will use videos of these tests in her installation.

"Some people use them to express admiration or lust or something like that. Some people use them to express anxiety; some people use them to express fear or pride," she said. "It's a really simple thing with a lot of different interpretations. Some people use them for storytelling. It's about physically handing off an idea to other people and seeing how it gets interpreted."

Hartman began working with the human body as her canvas about five years ago while going to grad school and studying a discipline called physical computing, which creates electronics meant to interface with the body. She began with literal uses of the technology, then moved beyond that in her artistic scope, using the technology as metaphor just as she might use any other artistic tool.

"I branched out into doing these more conceptual pieces because it seemed important to me to not have everything dictated by the technologies that were available," Hartman said. "I was doing these more conceptual explorations, and



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they tended to be just as communicative as the things that I was doing with sensors and microcontrollers and all of that. That was really interesting to me, to think about what sort of tools were really necessary to communicate an idea."

Her work tends to bring inner things out as a way of bringing outer things in.

"I focus a lot on illustrating the unseen and giving physical presence to things that affect us greatly, like illustrating relationships," Hartman said. "I think a lot about the way people relate to each other."

Hartman is very interested in the idea of personal space and non-verbal cues humans use to communicate. One of her earliest efforts, the Go Go Gloves, involved two gloves hooked up to computer animation -- the slightest movement of a finger in either glove caused dancing girls on the screen to break loose into movement.

"I use two gloves of the same hand so a person can't play alone," she said. "That way, you have to dance with somebody else. It's interesting to see two people approach and be very serious -- and sometimes they're strangers, but then they're having this crazy dance party."

Hartman has designed "networked clothing" that expands your personal space to another person -- your garment exchanges information with someone else's. Think of a couple being at a party and one wants to leave -- one of Hartman's designs allows one person to touch a section of clothing and send a message to the other that it is time to leave. She has also designed a feedback system embedded in the jacket that creates soothing vibrations when wearers hug themselves, creating a psychologically safe, comfortable space within their own jackets.

"Clothing generally serves two purposes. One is protection and the other is expression," Hartman said. "People will focus on one end more than the other. If you stop to think about if we actually use our clothing to communicate, what can it say -- and not just in terms of it being a method for us to broadcast a certain persona, but what if it really tells something about us and our actual state of being?"

When Hartman isn't getting clothing to talk, she's teaching plant language. In one of her projects, Botanicalls, she networked house plants to be able to make phone calls or send text messages for specific purposes. To do this, a probe was stuck in the soil to measure how wet it was -- a micro controller constantly monitored the level and would alert the plant owner when it was dry.

"It knows the different thresholds, so if it's dry, it will send out a message over the network to say that it's thirsty," Hartman said. "If you water it, it also is able to recognize that, so it will respond with a thank-you message. It will give you feedback as to whether you water it too much or too little, that sort of thing."

Currently, Hartman has that plant set up with a Twitter account. The day a sweater or a shoe might have the same is probably not far off.

"Everything's getting smarter and more talkative," Hartman said.

It might be a while before any of this appears on a mass level, but it's not as if someone hasn't thought of the idea in regard to at least one of her creations.

"I got contacted by some hat manufacturing company in China that really wanted to produce and distribute the Muttering Hat, which I thought was incredibly strange," Hartman said. "But then I also thought about all the crazy hats that are out there and thought that kind of makes sense. It never went anywhere, but I thought it was so amusing."

Hartman can be found online at www.katehartman.com. Her plant's Twitter address is www.twitter.com/pothos.

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