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Wardrobe Hackers

Seam rippers refashion duds while a camera purse blogs for the record

By Brett Ascarelli



Growing trend: Designers Diana Eng and Emily Albinski's fancy gown inflates (so you don't have to).

This May, some 30,000 people will descend upon the San Mateo fairgrounds to participate in a grand, silicon-imbued expo of Information Age inventions. Anticipating the human deluge, organizers of this second-ever Maker Faire have already booked two extra hotels for guests and have doubled its physical area from last year to max out all available 48 acres of the fairgrounds.

Akin to Burning Man (but with less nudity and more microchips), this year's fair offers such attractions as a fully operational, 65-square-foot, 25,000-pound version of the retro Mousetrap board game; a track where gear-heads can race modified power tools; and the Neverwas Haul, a steam-powered engine that propels a three-story Victorian house instead of a train car.

Pleased with the fair's success so far, organizers have been shopping the concept around, hoping to expand it into other cities. Already, it will unfold in a second venue, Austin, Texas, for the first time this year. "We're always planning and plotting," says Maker Faire director and Occidental resident Sherry Huss, who mentions that New York, Dublin and Berlin may be next.

A project of the Sebastopol-based tech conference and publishing giant O'Reilly Media, the fair was designed to augment O'Reilly's popular DIY magazines *Make* and *Craft*. While *Make* appeals to hardcore hackers who, for example, want to learn how to make a music amplifier out of a Ritz crackers box, *Craft* teaches its readers how to knit kimonos and needle-felt the form of a lemon. Despite their wildly different subject matter, the two magazines surprisingly share much of the same editorial staff. Likewise, the fair--which, coincidentally, means "to make or to do" in French--encourages two normally opposing realms, art/craft and science/engineering to flourish alongside one another and, whenever possible, cross-pollinate. For the sartorially inclined, this translates as wardrobe hacking.

At last year's fair, Diana Eng, a former contestant on Bravo's reality show *Project Runway* (see the [Geek Chic](#) sidebar), and her collaboration partner, Emily Albinski, were the featured designers of a fashion show in which models sporting science-fair-project-meets-haute-couture strutted down the catwalk. Popping their hips, they wore scarves patterned from the Fibonacci sequence and illuminated jewelry strung together from fuses. One model even sported a jewelry set that functioned as a radio. Tuning in somehow with a knob on the necklace, she grooved to the miniature speakers dangling from her ears. The techiest creation of all was a

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hoodie featuring a built-in camera that Eng and Albinski had programmed to snap pictures as the wearer's heart-rate increased, so that only scenes that excited the wearer got recorded.

But the highlight was a white dress that the pair had collaborated on in school and was later picked up for the cover of I.D. magazine. Affixed to the bodice, a vacuum pack inflated the bottom portion of the dress, turning it into a voluminous and wispy skirt.

This year, Eng returns to the Maker Faire to work Yahoo.com's booth. Last October, she, Albinski and another collaborative partner, Audrey Roy, won a Yahoo-sponsored hack competition in which they were given 24 hours to repurpose the company's code for a creative project. They took apart a Nokia phone, hooked it up to a pedometer and built the whole contraption into a purse, which they called "Blogging in Motion." Every time the purse's human component walks 20 steps, the camera takes a shot, which is then uploaded in real time to the photo-sharing website Flickr.com with the exact GPS coordinates of the shot. From there, the information gets posted on a blog, and at the end of the jaunt, you can retrace your footsteps--or at least 5 percent of them--virtually. The purse will be available at their booth for fairgoers to borrow. A large screen will show the photos, only adding to the weird visual overstimulation. Lower tech DIY fashionistas need not feel unwelcome, however. In a hearty nod to those who prefer needle and thread to zeros and ones, the Maker Faire hosts its gigantic Swap-O-Rama-Rama, in which a heap of worn-out duds morphs into a crazily creative runway show.

This is how it works: Stuff your closet's rejects into a bag. Deposit the bag at the swap with zillions of rejects from other people's closets. Sift through the communal wardrobe and--la!--one man's trash is another man's trousers. You can stop there and end up with free clothes or attend one of many design workshops, like "Shine-On! Light Up Purse," then zoom around to different stations to refashion your finds under the guidance of a local designer (Darryl Hannah turned someone else's cast-off garment into a slip dress last year). Some of the most modest options include turning T-shirts into dresses or revitalizing a dusty pair of pants by adding bell-bottom panels, but many swapsters will wax wackier.

Swap-O-Rama-Rama is the brainchild of free spirit Wendy Tremayne, 39. One of Tremayne's other notable contributions to society was the institution of New York's first coed naked yoga class, which she created in 2005, she says, "as an offering to the [local] nudist community."

Speaking by phone from her new home in Truth or Consequences, N.M., Tremayne explains that she hit upon the idea of the swap during a year of self-imposed barter. "When you're living outside of currency," she explains, "you have to get really creative. How am I going to see a dentist?" Despite that limitation, she still wanted to keep "abundance" in her life and started holding small clothing swaps in her apartment. After a year-and-a-half, the swaps outgrew her small space, so she held her first public Swap-O-Rama-Rama at a community center on the Lower East Side. Five hundred people came.

Since then, some 30 to 40 cities, including those as far-flung as Jerusalem, have hosted such swaps, and Tremayne estimates that the total number of participants falls in the six-figure range. Closer to home, the Alchemy Swap in Santa Rosa is slated for May 6 (see tag info).

Among past swap workshops, DIY-ers have learned how to make a handbag out of a bra, how to compost clothing, how to iron garbage bags into usable textiles and how to make jewelry out of Legos and board game pieces. This week, the sixth swap to sweep New York will feature a workshop on how to use a washboard. "I let anyone," says Tremayne, "who has any ideas about extending the life of a textile through some creative process teach a workshop."

Harboring such a relaxed attitude, Tremayne decided not to copyright or franchise her wildly popular swap. "If I wanted the world to actually change," she explains, "into a world I'd like to live in, I decided the best way to do that would be to give this idea away. Better to have a good idea and give it away like a hot potato so you can make room for the next one."

Licensing her event instead as a Creative Commons project, Tremayne now functions as a trainer for communities who want to host their own swaps. She also sees herself as the project's gatekeeper to prevent the corporate sector from co-opting it. After all, one of the main points of the swap is to "deconstruct the consumer" and piece back together communities that she feels marketing departments have fractured into artificial demographics so they can be easily targeted. One way she accomplishes this is by forbidding mirrors at the swap. This forces people to strike up conversation: they have to turn to each other to find out how they look.

"I'm less excited by what people are making and more about the fact that they're making something," says Tremayne, who won't even bother to pack clothes for her upcoming trip to California, where she's co-producing the Maker Faire's swap. She's counting on finding plenty to wear right there. Cheap, sustainable and creative, the refashioning subculture is building a substantial following, especially in San Francisco boutiques, where remade clothing often gets a rack--or in the case of Miranda Caroligne Burns, gets its own boutique.

Burns has run her own boutique, Miranda Caroligne, in the Mission, since 2005. Every piece in the store is one-of-a-kind, and instead of labeling her clothes with traditional sizes, Burns makes alterations for each customer. "I prefer people to try things on," she says by phone, "and make a judgment about how they feel and how they look, rather than having that be dependent on an arbitrary number."

From time to time, Burns uses fabric scraps from the ends of cloth bolts, but usually she just relies on pre-existing garments for her creative raw materials. "I have a lot of people trying to tempt me," she says, "to go fabric shopping with them in L.A., but it just doesn't make sense for what I do."

Making an unusual analogy between the lives of clothes and the lives of people, Burns sees refashioning as a way to reflect the course of human learning experiences, which she likens to "the bumps and bruises and stains and holes that happen to your in life."

Burns, 32, will be on-hand at the Maker Faire swap to lead a workshop, "Running with Scissors," which she explains is "how to trick out old button-downs and chop them up to make accessories from the collar and cuffs." Her book, *Reconstructing Clothes for Dummies* (Wiley), hits stands this August.

Another designer at the swap is Hope Meng, 30, who will help man the CPR ("Clothes Perfected through

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Refashioning") booth. Co-owner of Stitch Lounge, a sewing center in San Francisco's Hayes Valley, Meng has also jumped on the refashioning publishing bandwagon. In fact, her book, *Sew Subversive: Down & Dirty DIY for the Fabulous Fashionista* (Tauton; \$14.95), which she co-wrote with her business partners Melissa Rannels and Melissa Alvarado, has been so successful in the eight months since it came out that the release of a follow-up book, *The Subversive Seamster*, is already scheduled for September.

Meng estimates that at least every week she gets an e-mail asking whether Stitch Lounge is planning to franchise. (She and her partners haven't decided yet.)

"At this point, I think refashioning isn't an infant anymore," Meng says in a phone interview. "It's in its teenage years."

In a moment of reflection, Meng adds, "It's like our generation's wearable art. It's like the new thing for people these days, and I think it's here to stay."

The Maker Faire rolls out every conceivable stop, including the Bizarre Bazaar of 75 craftspeople selling their wares, on Saturday-Sunday, May 19-20, at the San Mateo Fairgrounds, 2495 S. Delaware St. \$2.50-\$15. For full schedule, see www.makerfaire.com. **Alchemy Craft**, featuring Sonoma County's indie designers, makers and their handmade goods, benefits the California Parenting Institute on Sunday, May 6, at Chops DeMeo Teen Center. Featured artists include Todd Barricklow, Jill Bliss, Michelle Feileacan and any more. 509 Adams St., Santa Rosa. 1pm-4pm. 707.843.1171. **The Design and Industry Department of San Francisco State University** hosts its 18th annual student design exhibition, **Techné**, crafting through concept, Tuesday-Friday, May 15-18, at the SF State Cesar Chavez Student Center, Jack Adams Hall, San Francisco. <http://design.sfsu.edu/techné>.

Geek Chic

Diana Eng, princess of electric seams, sews up the digital divide

At a mere 23, Diana Eng is already a self-proclaimed C-list celebrity. But dwelling in stardom's lower echelons is probably a good thing; jadedness, for one, has yet to come knocking for her autograph. Once, while riding the New York City subway, Eng caught a glimpse of herself in an ad. To the embarrassment of an acquaintance sitting beside her, Eng flat-out screamed, "Look, there's me!" A couple weeks after the subway incident, she scored an invite to Heidi Klum's Halloween Party. Sporting a dress that glowed, Eng went as a lightning bug.

Often seen in spectacles and less often in an MIT sweatshirt from her brother, Eng's claim to fame is incorporating science-geek technology into her fashion designs. This ability earned her a spot on season two of Bravo's fashion-design reality show, *Project Runway*. "I was like the nerdy person on the show," she admits, speaking by phone from her New York City apartment.

A graduate of the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design, Eng majored in apparel design but her interest in technology--she has been programming since she was eight--inspired her designs to take a futuristic direction. For her study abroad program, she flew to England to study mechanical engineering and then applied this science to her thesis project: a collection of convertible clothing, like the old reversible garments, but more nuanced and fluid.

In her senior year at college, Eng noticed a small flyer advertising tryouts for *Project Runway* on the school bulletin board. "I figured, New York is pretty close by, so I just went," she explains in a voice that sounds like she's always smiling. Thousands of applicants had the same thought. About a month later, she received a voice-mail on her cell phone from Tim Gunn, who acts as a mentor to the show's contestants, telling her the good news. After that, she was whisked away for *Project Runway* and missed her graduation.



"The first day," says Eng, who was one of 16 contestants, "you're super self-conscious, but then you get used to it, because the cameras are always there"--even, she soon discovered, when you're sleeping. Eng recalls sleeping once during filming and awakening to find five men standing above her with their cameras, preparing to shoot her day's first moments. Naturally, she screamed. The reveille footage didn't make it on air.

Hosted by Klum, *Project Runway* requires the contestants to design and construct a bevy of garments, usually with draconian time constraints; competitors often only have 24 hours to make a project. In addition to being understandably sleep-deprived, the young fashion designers were pretty nice to each other, unlike in most reality shows where one gets the sense that whoever says the cattiest things gets a bonus. Not so on *Project Runway*, where there wasn't even any sabotage.

"Chloe really looked out for me a lot," says Eng of the season's eventual winner, someone with whom she still keeps in touch. "I never really wore makeup before I was on the show. . . . We figured if I was going to be on TV, I should at least cover all my zits."

Eng made it through about half of the show before she was eliminated during the Banana Republic Challenge in the sixth round. Trying to play to her audience, she'd toned down her traditionally conceptual and "out there" approach to design; instead, she made an uncharacteristically conservative outfit, which, she now thinks, turned out to be "way too conservative."

Magic Powers

Eng now works for a large New York fashion corporation--she can't divulge the name, other than it's not

Versace--as part of its research and development team. It may seem unusual for a clothing company to have such a science-gear department, but little by little Fashion Avenue is merging with Silicon Valley. One reason why, Eng says, is that companies like H&M can copy designers' clothes so fast that both the knockoffs and the originals hit the stores almost simultaneously. To protect themselves, designers are beginning to research fabrics imbued with special properties--anti-odor, anti-bacterial, anti-wrinkle, vitamin-enriched, skin-softening and even silverized (supposedly, the metallic thread has health benefits)--which are harder to replicate.

According to Eng, the trend goes the other way, too. She reports that technology companies like Motorola and Phillips are hiring design R&D teams to think up ways to incorporate their technologies into fashion. Intel has even hired *Harper's Bazaar* contributing editor Mary Alice Stephenson for advice on how to bridge the digital-runway divide.

Even so, most of this fashion technology refitting is still at least a few minutes away from being fully realized. Eng says the biggest challenge with this burgeoning business is creating things that people can relate to. At this point, most of the technologies aren't exactly ready to wear. For the average person, the prototypes can seem quite alien. "That means if you design something to be successful in the mainstream," says Eng, "it has to make sense and be a great design--people have to be able say, 'I can see why you used that technology.'"

The new, tiny iPod that can clip onto your shirt is Eng's idea of just such a triumph. Wait, iPod as fashion? She sees it as sort of an accessory. "It kind of fits into the fashion thing," says Eng. "Fashion is like the impression that you want to give to other people about yourself. If you have an iPod, then people think good, iPod-y things about you."

Recently, Eng made a chef's jacket that uses thermochromatic ink to expose a pattern when it gets hot. But why is she so turned on by the junction of fashion and technology? "Because it's so new," says Eng, "I might be able to define what fashion and technology are. It doesn't have like a pre-set thing of what it can be."

Diana Eng will be at the Maker Faire Saturday-Sunday, May 19-20. Find out more about her on www.dianaeng.com.

--B.A.

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