

Whether it was simply a charming example of frugality and thrift or a wide-scale, author-less experiment in sustainability, the story of the *feedsack loop* provides the history of design with a quiet permutation of the famous maxim.....

FORM FEEDS FUNCTION.

« THE FEEDSACK LOOP »



¹It's this precise moment that articles on the subject breeze past: *Who set off the feedsack loop?* A woman, I'm sure. A secretary at a seed distributor? The wife of a board member of some milling company? She tells him the concept, over dinner, in a casual but precise way, expertly half-baked to leave him thinking the idea for re-printing the cotton feed sacks was his from the start.

THE FEEDSACK LOOP

During the Depression, women in rural areas repurposed standard cotton flour and grain sacks to make clothing. They would soak the sacks in kerosene or lard to remove the printed labels, dye the cotton and embellish the dresses with rik-rak and embroidery. Manufacturers got wind of this¹ and, as early as 1925, started printing the sacks in colorful, graphic patterns, in anticipation of their re-use. They hired textile designers from Europe who produced playful illustrations with bold, striking type. The cotton sacks, emptied of their contents, were granted a second-wind: this

time as walking billboard advertisements. Some companies went so far as to print the cut lines and sewing instructions *directly on their sacks*²—a built-in manual for its future circulation (not entirely unlike the dissemination of this book).

It was recycling, before recycling was a word. ("User experience design" before UX was a word). A 40-year-long, spontaneous, sanctioned feedback loop, the force of which seemed to have been accelerated by the severity of the economy's decline.

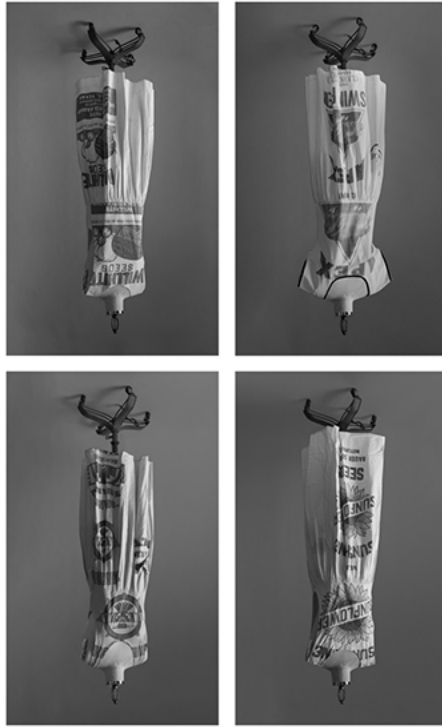
²A very rare and desirable specimen.



[My obsession the reflection of feet garment. I'd been loaned it to eventually fell and expensive using a simple pattern copied from Alix's original. The beauty of the standard feedsack dress—the construction itself—reminds me of traditional Japanese joinery (lacking any metal fasteners); the silhouette features an unusually wide dropped waist and low armholes that allow the dress to be pulled on and off the body without buttons, zippers, elastic or ties. The patterns "modularity" (in that it can be constructed using four flat rectangles, or two deconstructed cotton bags) is reminiscent of the Case Study Houses program of the 1940s-1960s. But the materials, in this case, were recycled.]



Suddenly, feed supply barns became makeshift fabric shops, to the disdain of one feed salesman interviewed in 1948: "They used to ask for all sorts of feeds, special brands you know. Now they come over and ask me if I have an egg mash in a flowered percale. It ain't natural."



Some feedsack dresses from my collection.

What started as economical, even patriotic practice inevitably became a mark of poverty. It was like wearing your family's income on your sleeve. There was shame with the admission that you were dressed in recycled fabric. The feed and grain companies responded by developing new water-soluble inks that made the process of removing the logos far easier, so that the resulting clothing became less distinguishable from "store-bought" garments, eventually blending into the vernacular. This back-and-forth between the suppliers and women—their new target audience—lasted upwards of forty years. But by the late 60's, cotton feedsacks gave in to more affordable paper bags, marking the end of the *feedsack loop*.