*Mediated Materiality and Meaning: Curating experience through the Body and Dress.*

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Abstract

*Fashion & Performance; Materiality, Meaning, Media* is an evolving research lead exhibition collaboratively curated by Jessica Bugg and Anna-Nicole Ziesche for the Design Hub, Melbourne in 2015 and is the performative development of a smaller pilot exhibition of the same name for the *Arnhem Mode Biennale* in 2013. The exhibition demonstrates a commitment to investigate and communicate contemporary ideas around dress, body, narrative and performance in ways which connect but go beyond traditional parameters of fashion or performance.  It exposes artistic approaches that focus on bodily narrative, aesthetics, spatial concerns and process as performance where clothing and the wearer’s active engagement is integral to the development of a communication through contemporary moving image based works.

Understood through writings on performance and technology, interactive art, and embodiment this chapter explores how the ‘mediated experience’ of clothing and the body, curated through the exhibition has extended the experience for the viewer/ participant. Ultimately the curatorial approach sought to engage audiences on an experiential level through their own bodily knowledge, kinaesthetic, sensorial engagement and knowledge of wearing. The problems associated with exhibiting film, performance, dress and lived experience are discussed here through the research lead, curatorial approach, furthering an analysis of curating ‘dress film’ through performance based strategies and bodily knowledge of dress.

**Key Words: fashion & performance, body and dress, dress film, research lead curation, embodiment, immersion.**

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**1 Fashion & Performance: Materiality, Meaning, Media**

In 2012 I began an ongoing research conversation with the visual artist Anna Nicole Ziesche drawing on our training in fashion design and subsequent shift towards employing performance methodologies and film within our practice. Our shared understanding of the relationship of fashion and performance in contemporary practice and the role of film in this paradigm lead to the conception of the exhibition *Fashion & Performance: Materiality, Meaning, Media,* as an outcome of our individual, collaborative and ongoing research. It draws on the need to recognise and understand this hybrid contemporary practice where worn and performed clothing has from our perspective an undeniably tightly interlinked relationship to both performance and fashion. Our early discussions focused on the distinct differences and shifts in methodologies in both disciplines and precedents in performance art where fluidity of methods and shared concerns have lead to works that occupy this interface stretching definitions, terminology and practice.

I have written elsewhere of the many examples of fashion practitioners embracing the mechanics of the stage in catwalk presentation, the increasing instances of performance based methods in the production of fashion design and examples of performance makers moving into fashion space and performers working with designers in the communication of their work***3Stern 2013: p.21). 6))11: p.107) p.234)lenic Cosmos,ulture. Be for the 12 framed works delivered today (as per the attached lis***(Bugg 2011, 2013, 2014).  The exhibition goes beyond these perspectives focusing on cross disciplinary artists who draw on an inherent awareness of both fashion and performance within their methodologies, aesthetic and communication methods. Discussed outside commercial imperatives usually associated with fashion, there was a commitment to investigate and communicate ideas around fashion and dress, the body and performance in ways which go beyond the traditional parameters of either fashion or performance(Bugg 2014, 2013). As researchers and practitioners our intention was to not only discuss this very specific area of practice but to uncover through the performing body an experiential and embodied communication in the curation of time based works.

The first iteration of *Fashion & Performance: Materiality, Meaning, Media* was curated for the Arnhem Mode Biennale 2013 (MoBA), supported by Li Edelkoort and the London College of Fashion. This provided an experiential platform to develop the exhibition concept and curatorial approach, drawing on theoretical research and a deeper analysis of our own practice in relation to that of others. The curation was developed through an iterative and reflective process that continues as it moves to other contexts, enabling the research to be disseminated and extended. Ongoing wearer and viewer analysis continues to inform the research.

In 2015 the exhibition was developed for RMIT Design Hub gallery in Melbourne as part of the *Virgin Australia Melbourne Fashion Festival Cultural Program*, supported by the School of Fashion and Textiles at RMIT. It included 21 established and emerging international practitioners: Anna Baumgart, Maria Blaisse, Ulrik Martin Larsen, Charlotte Gyllenhammar, Imme van der Haak, Bart Hess & Lucy McCrae,

B O U D I C C A, Jessica Bugg, Anna-Nicole Ziesche, HEYNIEK, Pyuupiru, Luke White & Remi Weekes, Marie and Kristian Schuller, Jacob Kok, Nirma Madhoo, Hussein Chalayan, Margret Wibmer, Henrik Vibskov & Andreas Emenius, Adele Varcoe, D & K (Ricarda Bigolin and Nella Themelios), Lucy + Jorg Orta. Coming from diverse backgrounds in fashion, textiles, architecture and the visual arts, some of the artists have trained or worked in more than one discipline and all have a preoccupation with clothing the visual, experiential and performing body.

The Design Hub was an ideal venue as it is ‘dedicated to design research, interdisciplinary practice and collaborative thinking intending to operate less like a traditional gallery than with the intensity of a studio environment …enabling research exchange’ (Rhodes & Watson 2015) This afforded the opportunity to test concepts and approaches working with an experienced team of curators in an environment where we could experiment with curatorial approaches within the gallery as opposed to mounting a pre designed exhibition.

Figure 1: Project Room 1, Anna-Nicole Ziesche, Maria Blaisse, Charlotte Gyllenhammar, Henrik Vibskov & Andreas Emenius and HEYNIEK, *Photography: Tobias Titz*

Figure 2: Project Room 1, Anna-Nicole Ziesche, Bart Hess & Lucy McCrae and HEYNIEK *Photography:* Marc Morel

**2 Mediating Materiality, Movement and Meaning**

**2.1 The Performing Body and Dress as Subject and Site**

The growing maturity of practice lead and practice based fashion research, significant developments in fashion theory, academic publishing in the field and shifts in designers’ practice towards more experimental and cross disciplinary approaches has in turn extended the remit of fashion exhibitions and the dress/ fashion curator. Dress curation is ultimately research informed, although the place of research varies within curatorial strategies. Curators such as Judith Clark and Amy de la Haye have been instrumental in extending the practice through their own research, curatorial practice and contribution to teaching as a critical and ‘reflective practice’(Pantouvaki & Barbieri 2014: p.79). In Clark’s approach, the process of making an exhibition enables ‘reciprocal creation, a reflection, an integration generated between the viewer/participant and the objects and ideas that are made present’ through the curation. (Pantouvaki & Barbieri 2014: p.91).

This engaged relationship with the viewer afforded through the body and dress was a core premise of *Fashion & Performance* and built on our existing work as visual artists operating in the site of the body. Clothes as both ‘part of the subject and as objects for the subject’ can never be conceived of as ‘totally separate’ from the body (Warwick & Cavallaro 2000: p.44) and more than this the body and self are perceived ‘simultaneously, as a totality … as an embodied practice’ (Entwistle 2009: p.10). The body and dress understood through the trans-disciplinary site of the wearing, viewing and experiencing body affords the opportunity to develop embodied communication and meaning. In this relationship a site responsive approach was applied to all aspects of the exhibition to activate and give agency to the space, garments, films and to extend the viewers kinesthetic and perfomative experience.

We sought to retain integrity to both fashion and performance and the balance of time, currency, aesthetics, movement, embodied narrative and experience became a framework for thinking. We were particularly aware of the issues associated with displaying garments on mannequins which have the ability to amplify absence of the wearer, movement and performance. The costume designer and curator Sofia Pantouvaki has researched display of costume aiming to ‘challenge the performativity of costume in its new context of exhibition, where the performers body is not present’ investigating ‘costumes on display, off stage, seen as performative works of art taken out of their original context and presented as fragments of memory of a performance within a new context’ (Pantouvaki 2014: p.103). She sees the costumes in the context of the exhibition as ‘as a new performance where the body does not participate in a conventional way’ (ibid. p.103). In her exhibition *Yannis Metsis- Athens Experimental Ballet* (Athens Experimental Ballet Cultural Centre Hellenic Cosmos 2011)she develops these ideas by employing material from the dancer’s archive, the original choreography and oral history narratives to inform the physical placement and display of costumes.

Working with garments both in and of performance presented us with issues of time, duration and authenticity. An exploration of trace and movement unfolded and informed the way we worked between the different mediums within the overall concept. Seeking not to directly cross reference physical fragments of the original scenography to the films themselves, we spent time unravelling how traces could be retained whilst leaving an open reading for the viewer. The artefacts within the exhibition were intended to be read in the intersection with the other works, films and in the physical and experiential movement of the viewer. They had the marks of being worn and performed and were displayed in such a way that captured physical relationships to the body, offering the potential to be re embodied. The audience were encouraged to forge connections between perceived and lived experience of what that garment might feel like, how it resonated in their own ‘lived experience’ (Ponty in Collins & Nisbet 2010: p.234). Dress in performance comes alive in its relationship to the body and we were concerned that the use of pre performed garments, the mediated contexts of screen based works and exhibition had a real potential to disrupt embodied engagement. Pantouvaki draws on Collins and Nisbet who state that: ‘The body of the performer in space draws together all the elements of scenographic practice’ and the body in space ‘implies not only relations between bodies on stage but also between stage and the audience’(Collins & Nisbet 2010: p.232).

Curation can be understood as a scenographic practice and more than this as Pantouvaki posits ‘designing an exhibition is analogous to designing a performance’(Pantouvaki 2014: p.104). Looking at curation through the lens of scenography as ‘a practice of the performing body, costume, set, light, sound, space and audience’(Collins & Nisbet 2010: p.232) was central to our approach. For our purposes the performance of the exhibition relied on the viewers’ participation through their own experience and the body itself became a central conduit for connecting the exhibits, the curation and the viewers. By reconnecting with performance as an approach and the performances in the artists’ work we aimed to bring different aspects of experience through time and movement to the surface holistically within the exhibition. Whilst plans were made between Anna Nicole and myself working on paper and through digital communication between Australia and London, it was not until we began physically working with our own bodies and experientially plotting in the galleries that the spatial and experiential qualities of the exhibition emerged. During the install much time was spent walking the audience’s journey through the space to experience through the body the physical relationships, sound narratives, positioning and affect of lighting on objects and the resulting emotional resonances. This devised and kinaesthetic encounter helped us to understand the experience and to feel the relationships as they developed to ultimately inform the experience of the viewer.

Noland’s perspective that: ‘The body is a source of sensory feedback that intervenes between the external world and the internal world either to filter out or focus on certain elements of the existing environment’(Noland 2009: p.63) exposed for us the potential that not only could viewers be physically moved but that empathy and memory could reawaken lived tactile and kinaesthetic experience. We sought to create space for the viewer to draw physical, cognitive and experiential relationship with the exhibition as a whole as opposed to providing clear narratives or direct relationships. There were different physical and conceptual entry points to the exhibition and active engagement and participation was key to all aspects of the curatorial strategy. For example, in Anna-Nicole Ziesche’s work in the first gallery, the garment slid down the wall, echoing the sense of movement and disorientation in the film. The wearable prosthetic feet at a distance from the film retain the marks of having being worn and were displayed to expose the wear and tear seeking to amplify the viewer’s own corporality. The film towered above, falling into the space, extending the sense of distorted perception, speaking in turn to the films narrative of a child’s perception as they lie in bed, letting their feet wander to walk on the ceiling. The physical, spatial and sensory experience were re-embodied in the space and in relation to the viewer’s movement and experience, as illustrated by a viewer who commented that the experience ‘was immersive. The presentation of the exhibition was very affective and it invited different ways to view the work … This invited the audience to move and perform as they experienced the exhibition’(Viewer feedback 2016).

The audience were encouraged to navigate the space and to literally ‘perform’ the exhibition in and through their own experience. To come close or step away in response to the scale of screens, to move through or stand between crossing soundscapes or engage intimately through headphones, to shift perspective and to read between material forms, films and display modes. As illustrated in the main gallery where Boudicca’s digital Chronophotography *‘Isolated Moments’* , an experiment with image, design and identity in movement, visually resonated in relation to my film *Optical Laces* (2014), an immersive work exploring viewer perception and a dancer’s experience of dress. The two evoke repetition and illusion and the sound of swishing shoelaces dress draws the viewer into the image, whilst *‘Isolated Moments’* employed headphones enabling the sound to be singular and intimate. Looking up Henrik Vibskov & Andreas Emenius *Fringe Project 8 (2009)* fell from above the door suggesting physical collision between the body in film and the body that walks under and through the door. On the left on the bridge in the space between galleries the *Optical Laces* garment falls inwards offering a reassessment of materiality, revealing its shoelace construction. It shifts spatial relations echoing movement from the film in the previous gallery where the dress spun inwards building a crescendo in sound and movement enhancing the optical affect, this memory of the dress in movement is reactivated in this new perspective. Strategies such as these sought to draw the viewer into a physical, sensory and experiential reading.

*Figure 3: The Bridge:* Henrik Vibskov & Andreas Emenius, *Fringe Project 8 (2009 and Jessica Bugg, Photography: Tobias Titz.*

*Figure 4: The Bridge: Jessica Bugg, Optical Laces (2014). Photography: Tobias Titz.*

Through the development of the exhibition we recognised the need not only for movement but for liveness and introduced this in the active experience and movement of the viewers and through two live interactive performances that were curated into the exhibition and performed simultaneously at the opening. This was recorded and included in the exhibition becoming an enduring part of the narrative*.* Wibmer’s *Time Out* encouraged the audience to step out of their daily routine, wear a gown and lie on pre placed mats to reflect through this ‘changing perspective and orientation’(Wibmer in Rhodes & Watson 2015) this encouraged deeper engagement and reflection in the space of the exhibition. The second immersive performance Adele Varcoe’s *Adjust (2015),* explored ‘the relationship between the body and garment and how the most simple adjustments can transform the way the wearer moves and feels’(Varcoe in Rhodes & Watson 2015). Working with dancers and choreographer Alice Cummings, Varcoe positioned the audience as unknowing participants as they moved through the exhibition where their clothing became physically and subtly adjusted by the performers. This enhanced a visceral connection between the clothes of the audience and the garments in the exhibition.

**2.2 Embodied Meaning through Mediated Means**

Film is a growing area for performance based communication in fashion and performance with the growth of fashion film as well as the use of film on the stage itself as part of the overall scenographic design and direction. Many of the films selected for this exhibition however speak more to the practices of ‘video dance’ and ‘cinedance’ that as Gretchen Shiller identifies ‘create dynamic and corporeal links between the art form and the public’s physical reception and perception’ and as such they ‘co-construct one’s kinaesthetic repertoire of movement sensation and experience’ (Broadhurst & Machon 2011: p.107). Whilst many of the films functioned independently in this way it was our intention to forge a deeper connectivity between films and across the viewers experience in the exhibition as an immersive experience. In our early discussions we explored examples where film had been curated in a way that would create an overall scenography in the space of the gallery in sympathy with the exhibition concept. Whilst there were plenty of examples of film being employed to extend narrative, we sought to extend its use to animate the space itself in the viewer’s experience. Charles Atlas’s video installation *MC9* (2012) of his collaborative *Media Dances* with Merce Cunningham at Tate Modern's Tanks (2013) became a means through which to discuss ideas of ‘choreography of space and time’.

We intended to create some intimate space around the films at the same time as enabling a connectivity between them and explored how planes of moving image and sound could both divide and connect space. Emotional shifts were developed through physical manipulation of meaning and media and considerable time was spent walking and performing potential routes of the viewer experiencing the relation between films, aesthetics, narratives and soundscapes. Headphones were placed with smaller more intimate films whilst scores such as Bart Hess’s *Extraordinary Gentlemen (2011)* that had the strength to fill the space and to interact across it were broadcast. We tested strategies for exhibiting screens such as floor mounted projections and sculpturally designed plinths and quickly moved towards the notion of floating and falling screens of diverse scale to amplify the sense of movement activating the line of sight, encouraging new physical relationships and viewing perspectives. These ideas played out across the exhibition, as illustrated in the placement of Charlotte Gyllenhammar’s film *Hang* (2006/2011). From the ceiling a girl’s body hung down from within a frilled voluminous skirt, the screen suspended in the centre of the main gallery on angle as if falling inwards, echoing the sense of precariousness in the film itself. Ziesche’s film *Childhood Storage* (2009) floated away from the wall, positioned high into the vertical projection of the gallery leading the gaze to Gyllenhammers’s work. The two narratives evoke memories of childhood and altered perspectives that pull the viewer into an engagement with the materiality and meaning in the works. Here ‘The body is a source of sensory feedback that intervenes between the external world and the internal world either to filter out or focus on certain elements of the existing environment’ (Noland 2009: p63). This understanding of the body as a source of sensory feedback, navigating present and past experience is embodied in a viewer’s overall experience of the exhibition where she says **‘**I particularly remember the movement and perhaps subconsciously reminisced about the feeling of twirling around and around in a frilly frock as a child’ (Viewer feedback 2016).

The relationship between the viewer, the material objects and the films open up relational conversations about action that has or may happen, drawing the viewer through and into the space. In the second gallery for example the viewer entered a long dark theatrical space where films and artefacts were projected on different planes, revealing, concealing or obscuring others, creating moments of intimacy and developing relationships between works. Viewers first encounter my *Black Point Dress* (2012) that explores awkward emotional memories of dress and identity. The contorted, shadowed and physical form of the dress is suspended on a scaffold pole, as the viewer moved forward their own shadow merges with that of the unrecognisable form and the confronting narrative and soundtrack of the film illuminates the emotional and physical resonance. The dark and jarring soundscape shifts as the viewer moves into a building classical soundscape shifting the experience and enhancing the encounter with the framed circular image of Boudicca’s *Ballet Marks (2012)*. The active image of physical marks made by a dancer in movement in its relationship to the film *Ballet Sketch* (2011) and *Ballet Shoe Machine* (2012) encourage reflection and reassessment of the original performer in movement. In proximity Ulrick Martin Larsen’s *The Choreographed Garment, #4- Intermediate Dress* (2011) exposes a choreography of dressing itself in a dialogue between the other works in the space bringing the viewer back to their own embodied knowledge of materiality and wearing.

*Figure 5: Jessica Bugg, Black Point Dress* (2012), *Photography: Tobias Titz*

*Figure 6: Ballet Marks (201),* *Ballet Sketch* (2011), Photography: Jessica Bugg

*Figure 7:* B O U D I C C A, *‘Ballet shoe machine* (2012), *Photography: Tobias Titz*

***3 Towards conclusions on experiential curation through the body and dress***

This chapter has exposed the process of conceiving and making an exhibition through a research based interdisciplinary process that afforded a reflective space for the curators to research, develop and experiment in an iterative process in the trans-disciplinary site of the wearing, viewing and experiencing body. By placing lived experience of clothing, the body and performance as central to the curatorial methodology and by understanding the viewer as a performer within the space and time of the exhibition it was possible to engage viewers in an experiential engagement within a heavily mediated context.

As opposed to separating the viewer from the lived experience the curation of dress based film, in relationship to other corporeal traces in the exhibition can be seen to extend embodied experience. As one viewer said ‘I observed the dancer interact with their clothes and could feel the affect it was having on the wearer’ and she illustrates the wider impact and experience of performance in the curation of the exhibition saying ‘The immersive environment… presented so many ways to think and feel fashion, clothing and dress’(Viewer feedback 2016). Clothing as intrinsically connected to the body enables the viewer to literally feel through their own lived experience and bodily knowledge, which is read in tandem with their own knowledge of wearing dress in movement.

Empathy, cognitive, sensory and kinaesthetic engagement enables the viewer to bring together past and present bodily experience of wearing and moving in the resonance of the works and their relationships. As Stern states we should perhaps ‘forget technology and rather study the encounters it creates’ and ‘look and feel with the body’(Stern 2013: p.21). Our approach here has been to understand the body of the wearer, curator and viewer as a shared site for creating and performing meaning. The exhibition has become a performance experience through the viewer’s participation. The mediated context of film and exhibition as opposed to creating a secondary or diluted encounter have forged a connected whole as an immersive performance experience in its own right.

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**Biography**

Jessica is Associate Professor and Deputy Head, Research, School of Fashion and Textiles at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and has eighteen years cross disciplinary teaching, and research experience in graduate and post graduate education. With a background in fashion, a practice led PhD from the London College of Fashion (2007), she has lead programs in fashion design (RMIT), fashion promotion and imaging (UCA) and design for performance (LCF, UAL).

Her research and practice is concerned with developing embodied methods for clothing design and communication that are informed by transdiciplinary practice at the intersection of fashion, fine art and performance. Designed predominantly for exhibition, contemporary dance and moving image her work has been performed and exhibited at UK venues including;  [ICA](http://www.ica.org.uk/), [Queen Elizabeth Hall](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/venues/queen-elizabeth-hall), [Linbury Space](http://www.roh.org.uk/services/venue-hire/the-linbury-theatre-and-foyer), [Royal Opera House](http://www.roh.org.uk/), The Place, National Gallery and internationally at Australian Centre for Moving Image (ACME), [Bolzano Festival](http://www.bolzanofestivalbozen.it/), Italy and [Wye Gallery](http://www.thewye.de/), for Berlin Fashion Week.

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