

The Costumers' Lens: An Encounter with the Pink Silk Dress

Introduction

This visual essay documents the development and creation of, *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* at the Great Western Arcade, Birmingham, United Kingdom in June 2022.¹ The installation, featuring the pink silk dress (figure. 1) aims to 'renegotiate the contract for participation' (Machon 2016) between everyday dress and the spectator within immersive encounters in the exhibitions of dress, which have previously privileged elite and aristocratic dress.

Hosted in June 2022 at the Great Western Arcade, Birmingham, United Kingdom *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022) is informed by embodied practices (Davidson 2019) and embodied knowledge (Stig- Sorénson & Rebay- Salisbury 2013) while channelling my own experience as an expert of costuming for live performance. Although not a costume, the pink silk dress is legible to me through its performative potential and narrative capability (Porter Abbott 2008: 3) as a narrative object and text (Bal 1997: 5). Extant construction marks (figure. 2) remaining from the original maker amplify the pink silk dresses narratives, which are understood through my own expert embodied practices of costuming for performance.

Significant to this visual essay and the research is Donatella Barbieri's, *Encounters in the Archive* (2012)² which, by highlighting, a range of individual artistic and scholarly perspectives from where to engage with archived costume objects, particularly through the follow up catalogue of interventions 'Re-Encounters' (2012b), which included a costumier, a costume

designer, and a fashion historian. It grants through its focus on expert embodied knowledge positions, an approach to the archived costume that challenges systematic processes espoused by Jules Prown (1980) as discussed in her subsequent article (Barbieri 2013).

The agency of extant objects captured and documented in Barbieri's *Encounters in the Archive*, (2012) alongside my experience of the study of historical dress within my education, teaching and costume practice is being utilised to 're-present' the pink silk dress within *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022), an immersive experiential exhibition that marks the culmination of my Ph.D. research journey instigated by an initial encounter with this same pink silk dress in 2012. Employed alongside my 'knowing' (Allen 1995) and knowledge of costumes capacity to connect the audience to the performance, *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* sought to explore and amplify possible porous relationships (Monks 2010: 1) between the spectator, everyday dress and the research inquiry.

The Costumers Len's

The methods employed to investigate and analyse the pink silk dress's (figure. 1) as possible lived biographies (Kopytoff 1986) reiterate a previous practice with which I was conversant, that of the object- based study of historical dress to inform costume construction for theatre. This practice was informed by historical dress researchers including, Janet Arnold in the *Patterns of Fashion* series of books, (Arnold 1977,1985, 1989) and Norah Waugh's, *The Cut of Women's Clothes*, (Waugh 1994) and *The Cut of Men's Clothes* (Waugh 2013). A previous emphasis on the practice of re- constructing and reinterpreting historical dress for the stage,

informed by the study of extant historical dress, had trained my costumers' lens to find evidence of the wearer, maker and making within the pink silk dress.

Time spent with the pink silk dress, and the reflective practices of looking and re-looking over time have permitted access to past his-stories of the pink silk dress buried deeper within its appearance' (Monti & Keene Taylor 2013: 6). Preliminary investigations of the interior of the pink silk dress exposed residual traces of the original maker, with extant pencil construction marks (figure. 2) evidencing a shared practice of making between the original maker and me. Rendering the pink silk dress as an emissary for the original maker (Korn 2013: 67), the extant marks, which rarely survive in examples of historical dress, provoked a commitment in me to privilege the making and maker narratives of the pink silk dress.

The Pink Silk Dress as the Stimulus for the Inquiry

The discovery of the assemblage of everyday dress in 2012 provided the initial stimulus for the research inquiry explored through my Ph.D. research. The find incited in me, a pledge to share the discovery and research within a performative encounter which renegotiated the contract for participation (Machon 2016) between everyday dress and the spectator in encounters with historical dress. The performative agency of the objects was first tested within the confirmation³ in September 2019. The selected dress was displayed amongst supplementary research documents, audio which captured material culture analysis undertaken of each of the objects alongside the written exegesis. (figure. 3)

‘Performed’ within the archive at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London reiterated the objects centrality to the research inquiry and its embedded-ness within every stage of the research inquiry.⁴ Prior to entry to the archive, the contract for participation (Machon 2016) was established with the examining team with an introduction by me to what the examiners might expect. Each member of the examining team was allocated one object to study and review which were secreted in an archive box, which featured collaged images on the interior of the lid, which was specific to the research undertaken of each object.

Displaying the research materials, audio of the material culture analysis, written exegesis alongside the objects sought to explore their performative agency within the encounter. The anticipated result within the confirmation was to support, and elicit a personal encounter between the featured objects and examiner through a performative encounter. The initial ambition to share the objects with others was a significant stimulus for research inquiry and the methods employed within it. The practices employed, resulted in the transitioning of the participants of the confirmation from examiners into collaborators and contributors to the research inquiry.

Evolving from the confirmation, *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022) utilised and extended many of the methods featured and tested within the confirmation in 2019.

Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress (2022) featured the pink silk dress, amongst specific research practices employed in the inquiry including, material culture analysis, (Prown 1980, 2000; Mida & Kim 2015) fictional writing, costuming and a soundscape. Sited within a Victorian Arcade, and furnished with objects specific to the late c1870’s-80’s *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022) aimed to immerse the spectator within the research. (figure.

4) Representing the pink silk dress through imaginings of its, 'possible' lived biographies (Kopytoff 1986) sought to replicate the observed phenomenon of the transition of the examiners into active participants of the research inquiry harnessed similarly to evolve new porous relationships between the pink silk dress and the spectator in *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022).

Evocations of the Pink Silk Dress

In 2020-21 the absence of my objects of study due to the pandemic evolved a form of fictional writing (Iser 1997; Leavy 2016) which evolved as an art's- based research practice, (Gerber 2022) permitting, 'imaginary' access to the absent objects. Particular emphasis was given to the interpretative practices employed in both Prown's material culture analysis (1980, 2000) and Mida and Kim's (2015) dress specific analysis of dress with transcriptions of the material culture analysis undertaken of the pink silk dress in 2018-19 providing a fragmentary framework for the pink silk dresses possible life histories.

Knowledge gained from the analysis was utilised within the fictional writing in an unpublished 'object- narrative' entitled, *The Adventures of a Pink Silk Dress; Written by Itself* (Chapman, 2020).⁵ Privileging the object as the protagonist in a tale of its life, the 'facts' and 'fiction' (Iser 1997) drawn from the research were interwoven evolving into an evocation of the pink silk dress within the research inquiry. Within the tale, the pink silk dress recounts her adventure, in this circumstance, to the researcher as a human amanuensis (Bellamy 2014: 118). Adapting and adopting this eighteenth- century form of writing, the object or it- narrative offered a creative solution granting, 'imaginary entry into what otherwise [was]

inaccessible' and to gain 'access into imaginary or possible worlds' (Leavy 2016: 20, emphasis added). As an imaginative practice it enabled me to improvise, immerse, reflect, form, assemble, deconstruct and integrate (Gerber 2022: 40) the pink silk dress's narrative potential within the research inquiry.

The Soundscape

Evolving out of the Great Western Arcade, as a Victorian arcade, as the site for *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022), and the aims of the research inquiry, an idea emerged to create a soundscape to be featured in the installation. The proposal to utilise two chapters from, *The Adventures of a Pink Silk Dress; Written by Itself* (Chapman 2020) as a piece of spoken word, which when interwoven amongst the recorded material culture analysis would evolve into a performative encounter with the pink silk dress. Referencing the use of the audio employed within the confirmation in 2019, *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022) was further inspired by the subtle use of ambient sounds in Dennis Severs House, which featured sound from the inside and outside of a silk workers house.⁶

The value of audio to evolve new relationships with new audiences between artworks and visitors to the National Gallery was explored in the National Gallery's 2015 exhibition, *Soundscapes*. Within it, the National Gallery commissioned composers to 'select a painting from the collection, and compose a new piece of music or sound art in response to the chosen artwork.'⁷ The exhibition had a mixed response, however having visited it I felt that the use of audio had some merit in providing new means to access the art works within the National Gallery. Further inspiration of the agency of audio when experienced within a

curated space was offered in Enda Walsh's *Rooms* (2019) at the Barbican. *Rooms* (2019) offered a performative encounter within specific rooms with spoken, 'intimate details from the lives of disparate individuals' lives. The dialogue and space located the narratives of the individuals within their own particular worlds and viewpoints ⁸ and provided inspiration for the soundscape within *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022).

Within *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress*, (2022) two audio recordings were interwoven with one another creating a discourse between the researcher and object, which the spectator of the installation would be witness to. The soundscape revealed and supported the advancement of, 'new dimensions of knowledge' (Gerber 2022: 8) of the pink silk dress for the spectator. (figure. 5)

Toiles and Patterns as Maker and Making Narratives

Cutting, (figures. 6, 7, 8 and 12) making, and toiling (prototyping) were employed as an investigative device to explore the pink silk dresses biography. Calico patterns and toiles were featured within *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022) to emphasise the maker and making narratives of the pink silk dress (Davidson 2019). Detailed study of the featured 'horizontal dart' on the pink silk dress was undertaken through cutting and re-cutting, first at half scale, and latterly at full scale. (figure. 7) Following the practice of cutting on the stand, and the subsequent creation of a half scale iteration of the bodice, the same cutting practices were applied to full- scale stand version to ensure that the knowledge gained at half scale was not particular to scale and proportions of the stand. The scaling up produced the same affects at full scale.

Undertaking moulage and toiling at half scale evolved knowledge, answering questions I had about the prevalence of the horizontal dart in the c1870's repeated on the pink silk dress. (figures. 6 & 7) The practices of cutting and re-cutting created a 'doorway' through which I could access knowledge of the pink silk dress (Stig- Sorénson & Rebay- Salisbury 2013; Davidson 2019). The darts running from bust to hip leaving an excess of fabric at the waist which could only be removed with either a seam or a fish- eye dart. (figure. 7) The original makers practices, and her, 'ideas and concerns' (Korn 2013: 6) connected through the practices of cutting and making with the original maker of the pink silk dress. The practices employed, evidence of the maker visible in extant pencil construction marks, (figure. 2) alongside my practice as a costumer evolved a narrative re- structuring (Porter Abbott 2008) with characters associated with the pink silk dress emerging through the analysis and practices employed.

Site- Specificity: Unit 6, The Great Western Arcade

The pink silk dress, as an object, is located within consumer culture and the gendered craft of dressmaking in the nineteenth century. Reading the dress through my costumers' lens, it was vital for me that the site amplified its making and maker narratives, and the hypotheses uncovered in the research inquiry (Barbieri 2012, 2012b; Korn 2013; Davidson 2019). Opening in c1877-78, the Great Western Arcade, (GWA) Birmingham, United Kingdom, (figure. 9) emerged as a potential site to host, *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress*. (2022)

Corresponding with the proposed date of the pink silk dresses creation, and the existence of a cellar and a gallery space GWA offered the potential to amplify the pink silk dresses 'known' and 'possible' narratives. (Gerber 2022) Reiterating the suitability of GWA as the site for, *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress* (2022) archival research undertaken of advertisements in *The Birmingham Post* at the Library of Birmingham across c1875- c1880 revealed that GWA was populated by a range of professionals in 1877-78 including the dressmakers 'Misses Gee' in Unit 26.

Each of the spaces, supported the exploration of two distinct narratives of the pink silk dresses life history, one 'known'- the discovery of the pink dress, and the other, a hypothesis – an imagined narrative of the pink silk dresses realisation. Renegotiating the contract for participation (Machon 2016) the gallery space offered an encounter within a nineteenth century dressmakers' studio. (figure. 9) The studio invites entry into an 'other-world-ness' (Machon 2016: 35-36) and immersion into the 'real', research findings and an 'imagined hypotheses' (Iser 1997: 4) of the pink silk dresses realisation by a dressmaker. (figure. 4) Descending into the cellar, the spectator enters a hidden space secreting the pink silk dress, sharing a reinterpretation of the assemblage's discovery in 2012. (figure. 5) Featured alongside the soundscape, the experience facilitated the audience to, 'Hear, the (pink silk) dress!' experiencing an intimate encounter with the dress.

The Dressmakers Studio

The upstairs gallery as a dressmakers' studio, offered a space within which the pink silk dress may have been fashioned after the original lavender silk dress. (figure. 11) Furniture from the

late 1870's- 80's, were purchased, thank you Ebay, with objects and tools specific to the dressmakers' craft reconfirming the space as a dressmakers' studio. The space was not intended as an authentic reproduction of a dressmakers' studio in the late nineteenth century, but instead, sought to evoke the space within which the pink silk dress may have been realised. (figure. 4)

Privileging the practices of making, the passer-by in GWA viewed a large canvas in the left window featuring the pink silk dress. The right window featured a calico toile (prototype) as an echo of the pink silk dress (figure. 4) reiterated the space as a dressmakers' studio.

Entering the space, on the left, a ladies' writing desk reconfirmed that this was a place of business, a 'Singer' sewing machine, on a table with pins, a pin box, threads, needles and calico patterns (figure. 8) reinforced the making and maker narratives. Displayed alongside a partially completed toile on a mannequin, rolls of fabric, and a sewing box further evidenced the dressmaking and dressmaker. Which, alongside a carved wooden gothic chair, pushed back from the table with the sewing machine, restated the temporary absence, and potentially imminent return of the dressmaker to her studio.

At the rear of the studio, a decorative screen was used to suggest dressing and undressing, with a kimono casually draped over the screen indicating the influence of Japonisme within the arts and crafts movement, prevalent in the late nineteenth century.⁹ The salmon pink and cream brocade fainting couch, (figure. 4) feature wall painted the same colour, with three frames featuring William Morris's, 'Pimpernel' wallpaper, reiterated the space as feminine.¹⁰ The mirror restated the space as a place which invited looking, which also reflected the studio space, revealing the back view of the toile, featured in the window.

(figure. 12) Plants were employed to reconfirm the studio as a living, working and lived active dressmakers' studio. Each item featured within the installation sought to evoke the dressmaking, and the dressmaker as a means for the spectator to gain entry to the research uncovered enabling access to the, 'everyday' pink silk dress.

The Cellar Space

Reminiscent of the eerie, intimate quiet of the store cupboard in the School of Fashion and Textiles at Birmingham City University where the pink silk dress had been found, a narrow, uneven brick staircase (figure. 10) descends into the secreted space of a cellar. The spectator is greeted first by columns of archival boxes, formerly containing the assemblage of dress. Arranged into two columns, one stack featured a green leather clad box overflowing with what appears to be fabric. (figure. 5) A large pink box with cream twill straps, buckles and tissue paper is utilised to re-iterate the pink silk dress's temporary resting place following its discovery. Each object displayed within the cellar reiterates the pink silk dresses life history after its discovery, supported by the soundscape featuring the object-narrative.

Two spotlights (set to below 50 lux), were utilised to preserve the condition of the dress whilst on display and, with eyes slowly adjusting to reveal the shadowy silhouettes of the featured objects within the cellar. (figure. 5) The atmospheric lighting was employed to echo and reiterate the pink silk dresses emergence from the remnants of fabric, and the dark store room within which it had been neglected for many years. The decision to display the dress in this manner was to emphasise the pink silk dresses precarity and perception value (Thompson 2017). The shadowy silhouettes were utilised as a device to conceal and reveal

the objects, and to evoke a personal discovery of the pink silk dress for attendees to

Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress.

Conclusion

This visual essay offers a very brief account of the influence of the costumer's lens to evolve and develop *Narratives of Dress: the Pink Silk Dress*. (2022) Featuring imaginings, costuming, fictional writing and immersive performative practices, I aimed to show how the specific lens of the costumer might support a renegotiation of the 'contract for participation' (Machon 2016) within the display of the pink silk dress.

The creative practices were used in tandem to evoke, 'known' and 'imagined' narratives to 'fill the spaces within and between more traditional forms of data,' (Gerber 2022: 28) exploring how, through the re-imagining of a creative practitioner, costuming might support the development of porous relationships between the object, research, and spectator. The installation located the pink silk dress within an, 'in its own world"-ness' where space, scenography, sound, and [costuming]' (Machon 2016: 35-6).

The shared, 'hidden' practices of the research, encouraged the spectator to invest and build personal, intimate relationships with the pink silk dress. Establishing the contract for participation, the spectator's transportation into a dressmakers' studio from the nineteenth century, and later the descent into the secret cellar space immersed audiences in the research and the object eliciting a personal discovery between them and the pink silk dress.

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Notes

¹ See project specific website: <https://lchapman070161.wixsite.com/narrativesofdress>

² See *Encounters in the Archive* website: <http://www.encountersinthearchive.com/>

³ The confirmation is an assessment point, sometimes called a mid-point review at which the researcher is asked by an examining team to present a written document which generally takes the form of a literature review. The examining team includes the supervisory team and an internal examiner with the assessment employed to confirm whether the student being assessed has evidenced their suitability to progress onto a Ph.D.

⁴ Film taken of the confirmation in September 2019. https://youtu.be/6Fm54AiSk_c

⁵ For each object, I have developed an object narrative to imagine the objects into life. One of them is being submitted as part of the thesis submission.

⁶ <https://dennissevershouse.co.uk/>

⁷ <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/past/soundscapes>

⁸ <https://www.barbican.org.uk/rooms-by-enda-walsh>

⁹ Japonism: described the craze for Japanese art and design that swept France and elsewhere after trade with Japan resumed in the 1850s, the country having been closed to the West since about 1600. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art->

[terms/japonisme#:~:text=Japonisme%20is%20a%20French%20term,Burty%20in%20the%20early%201870s](#)

¹⁰ The featured domestic furnishings were utilised to reiterate the comforts of a domestic home of the nineteenth century, within which the dressmaker's client could feel 'at home.' The Morris wallpaper was employed within the space in reference to Morris's lectures and relationship with the Municipal School of Art in Birmingham.