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The Practice of Theory

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This essay is concerned with the location of theory in practice-based fashion education. It contributes to a growing recognition of the productive relationship between theory and practice in fashion more broadly and the opportunities that this affords us, as educators, to develop critical fashion pedagogies with transformative actions in the real world. Through this essay, I share some ideas for micro interventions in the form of workshops. These workshops, although small in scope, aim to reconcile the gap between theory and practice, and also question the relationship between authority and language in fashion knowledge.

I write from the position of a fashion educator responsible for the design and implementation of a theory program across the entire institution in which I work, from undergraduate to postgraduate. Based in the UK, this particular institution is one of the only colleges in the world dedicated entirely to the teaching of fashion in an art school context. The theory program that I lead emerged in the early 2000s from the British tradition of Cultural Studies. In more recent years, however, our department has come to identify more with the interdisciplinary field of Fashion Studies that draws equally from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, linguistics, philosophy, and now, increasingly, from practice-based research.

Elke Gaugele and Monica Tilton identify this particular moment in fashion research as a “paradigm shift” where theory and practice have merged into an expanded field of critical knowledge. [1] This has happened through the expansion of practice-based PhDs within fashion, but also because of departments like ours which have developed a particular approach to understanding and teaching fashion theory within an art and design context. This paradigm shift has been escalated also through pressure from a new generation of students demanding a radical upheaval of the fashion system itself: a direct result of renewed concern over an industry that has pervasively relied on the outdated and exploitative modes of industrial production, steeped in histories of colonialism and rooted in the hegemonic order of global capitalism. These demands have called for a re-thinking of fashion theory which has been complicit in reproducing and maintaining a particular idea of fashion as a product of Western society, where the fashion norm has been created by European models of production. In fact, as Gaugele points out, the origins of fashion theory and its ways of thinking come from categorizations of Western colonial knowledge which prioritize a center or a mainstream and excludes everything else as tradition, myth, or even craft or costume. In our case, while the political concerns of British Cultural Studies have provided a very useful framework to work through many of these issues, we have had to quickly consider how we approach the teaching of fashion as a practice and not just an object of theoretical study. In other words, our work now is to demonstrate that

fashion practice itself is the impetus for transformative action in the real world.

On a macro level, this has entailed an entire re-thinking of our curriculum and its delivery, which we have done, and continue to do. It has also called for a re-thinking of how we position theory within our institution, not only to foreground practice, but also to reflect the complexity of fashion as a visual and social indicator of this political moment in time. On a smaller scale, through everyday pedagogical interventions, we have also moved more closely into the realm of fashion practice, creating situations and opportunities to inspire thought with action. In the following paragraphs, I outline one such intervention in the form of a workshop that I developed together with designer and researcher Ruby Hoette as part of our collaborative practice. [2]

The workshop begins with sets of photocopied pages from fashion theory texts—from foundational books such as *The Fashion System*, *The Empire of Fashion*, *The Fashioned Body*, *Seeing Through Clothes*, *Thinking through Fashion*, *Fashion, a Philosophy*, and so on. The books are not photocopied in full; rather, we select random pages. Students are invited to choose several of the pages and to read through them.

We discuss how it feels to read theory ‘out of context,’ and how these pages represent a history of bigger ideas that help us to understand the meaning of fashion. We also discuss the poetics of theory, looking at how ideas are formed through language and different modes of composition.

We encourage the students to look again at their photocopies, this time to search for small ideas that resonate with them. These can be single words, full sentences, paragraphs, or even chapter titles. We ask them to use the texts to construct their own ideas about fashion, using the language of theory like they would a material to make something completely new. They are provided with scissors, masking tape, Post-its, highlighters, pencils, glue, staplers, and other tools to help them cut up, collage, and re-configure the photocopies into their own essays.

The results are always visual and poetic, reflective of the weight of theoretical writing but also experimental and inventive. At the end of the workshop, we look at the essays together and discuss how it feels to—quite literally—cut up theory into scraps and shreds of ideas. The resounding response is usually that it feels liberating, but also that it helps us think about our own positionality in relation to theory. For most students, it is an opportunity to insert themselves into the discourse of fashion and to raise questions about its thinking: what do we need to know about fashion and what is considered valid knowledge? How does the structure of language shape knowledge and what does it leave out?

I will deliver a similar workshop in a few months’ time. This time, I’m going to ask the students to do something slightly different. The premise will stay the same, but I’m going to photocopy pages from two books: *The Shape of a Pocket* by John Berger, and “Hospital Underlife,” one chapter of Erving Goffman’s book *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situations of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Both texts discuss pockets in the context of resistance. Berger writes conceptually about resistance as pockets of people coming together. Goffman writes explicitly about pockets as living containers to hold personal items, especially when the expression of individual identity is under threat.

As a starting point, I will ask the students to scan the pockets in their own clothing. The scans can be small details or the entire pocket. They should spend time doing this, considering the

spatial qualities of their pockets, as well as their function and material construction. They will print out their scans and use them as a basis for their essays. As before, we will discuss the theoretical texts and students will be invited to cut them up and reconfigure them into new essays. In this workshop, however, students will be encouraged to work together in pairs and groups to create their own pockets of resistance.

The aim of these workshops is not to suggest that theory is meaningless, nor to reinforce the difficulty of its language. Instead, the aim is to consider how and where fashion knowledge is made and to validate it as a collective, disruptive and participatory activity. In Irit Rogoff's words, these workshops are a "shift away from a model that says that the manifest of culture must yield up some latent values and intentions through endless processes of investigation and uncovering." [3] In the gap between theory and practice there is great pressure to apply theory to practice, to demystify or expose fashion as a set of existing cultural meanings. As Rogoff points out, this assumes that meaning is always imminent, that it resides within the structures of fashion and can be uncovered through theoretical analysis, or as Anne Hollander suggests, our ability to "see through clothes." [4] Teaching cultural analysis in this way does produce valuable critical thought; however, it doesn't allow us to engage with the real and performative nature of culture where meaning is made—and re-made—in the here and now. [5] Importantly—and in the context of the paradigm shift in fashion knowledge—we need to understand how to "inhabit problems" and open them up by asking questions rather than tying them down into existing categorizations of thought. [6]

In this sense, the workshop interventions I outline here aim to open up new modes of thinking with theory, through the idea of praxis. The workshop format provides a space where ideas can be practiced and fashion knowledge can be produced through thinking, making, and doing. By examining the poetics of theoretical language and encouraging students to use these to express their own thoughts, it also foregrounds the "affect of experience," which can't be completely captured through cognition alone. [7] This includes the memories, feelings, and the relationality of our lived experiences with clothes. Or, as Irit Rogoff writes: it is a "mode of embodiment, a state from which one cannot exit or gain a critical distance..." [8]

It is also my aim, through these workshops, to consider how the practice of theory might actually take us to a place of productive unknowing. Unknowing, in the sense that Emily Ogden describes here:

"Can a person go back to the unpruned adjectives of immediate experience? Before one summed up this moment in history, what, exactly, was it? What, lying under the summary – what, before the predator's eye confounded itself – what was it, what does it continue to be? When I talk about unknowing, I am not talking about the refusal to know what can be known, or about the simple accident of not having found something out yet, nor even, although this is warmer, about the fact that we will each absorb only a finite amount of knowledge in the course of our finite lives. Instead I am talking about a capacity to hold the position of not knowing yet – possibly of not knowing ever." [9]

In the context of education, Dennis Atkinson talks about disrupting the normative frameworks of understanding through a pedagogy of the unknown "when the symbolic order is punctured, [or] a shattering of boundaries when our practices or representation are severely disrupted by something that happens." [10] This is not only through shattering or slicing through frameworks

of established theoretical thought but also through moments where we, as educators, enter into spaces of unknowing with our students. In these moments, we can disrupt hierarchies of knowledge and also those structures that regulate the practices of teaching and learning. We can learn to lean into uncertainty so that rather than working through a process of pre-ordained commitments, we can act in the moment, as urgencies arise and possibilities present themselves. Leaning into the unknown is, after all, at the heart of any creative practice.

Returning to Gaugele and Tilton's "paradigm shift," the authors argue that, in this moment, "fashion knowledge has been renegotiated, especially from the angle of reconfiguring the interrelations of theory and practice... [into a] theoretically reflexive form of fashion practice." [11] The new paradigm of critical fashion practice calls equally for a reconciliation between practice and theory, but also for new frameworks that validate practice as a legitimate mode of inquiry, beyond the existing normative structures that generate and circulate knowledge. As these workshops suggest, this means collectively leaning into the unknown—looking for the slippages and silences that characterize our relationship with fashion—but also unpicking the authority of language in relation to knowing and thinking. In Rosalind Krauss's words, "a withdrawal into those extremely personal reaches of experience which are beyond, or beneath speech." [12]

Notes: The Practice of Theory

[1] Gaugele, E. & Tilton, M. *Fashion Knowledge: Theories, Methods, Practices and Politics*. (London: Intellect, 2022).

[2] For a further iteration of this workshop see R. Hoette, "Text as Material" in L. Garder, and M. Mohajer va Pesaran (Eds.), *Radical Fashion Exercises: A Workbook of Modes and Methods* (Amsterdam: Valiz 2023).

[3] I. Rogoff. "Smuggling: An Embodied Criticality" (2006). https://eipcp.net/dlfiles/rogoff-smuggling/attachment_download/rogoff-smuggling.pdf: p.1 (Accessed 31/10/2024).

[4] A. Hollander. *Seeing Through Clothes* (California: University of California Press, 1993).

[5] I. Rogoff. "Smuggling."

[6] Ibid.

[7] D. Atkinson "Pedagogy of the Not Known" in R. Fortnum, and E. Fisher. (Eds) *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*. (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013)

[8] I. Rogoff. "Smuggling": 2.

[9] E. Ogden. *On Not Knowing: How to Love and Other Essays* (London: Peninsula Press, 2022): 6.

[10] D. Atkinson. “Pedagogy of the Not Known”: 140.

[11] E. Gaugele, and M. Tilton. *Fashion Knowledge*: 2.

[12] R. Krauss. *Batchelors* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999): 92.