

Body/Dress Praxis

Developing Embodied and Interdisciplinary Methods through Practice in Research

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I reflect here on the challenges and opportunities presented through doing a practice-led PhD in conceptual fashion design in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when practice research in fashion and costume was nascent. Cultural and historical studies, material culture studies, and sociology were, and arguably still are, the dominant modes of researching fashion and dress. Published research in fashion and dress at that time was written by sociologists, fashion theorists, historians, and critics, as opposed to practitioners.¹ Costume research was being undertaken from an archival, material cultural perspective, and was largely absent in performance studies and in the developing body of Performance Practice as Research (PaR). Drawing on significant developments since this time and my experience of doing a PhD, I reflect on how researching the designing, wearing, and viewing body has shaped both my practice and career.

Doing a PhD in a practice mode in this context required navigation of research terminology and the place of practice within it, to develop an interdisciplinary methodology through which to research lived experiences of the body and dress in fashion, art, and performance. I sought to elevate the voice of the fashion design practitioner-researcher, and to question the complex networks of communication between designer, viewer, and wearer in both the production and consumption of my work. The PhD responded to increasing interdisciplinary approaches

1. Jessica Bugg, 'The Body as Site: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Dress in/as Performance', in *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods*, eds. Sofia Pantouvaki and Peter McNeil, London, 2021, p. 214.

emerging in fashion design and communication in the late 1990s that spoke to performance and art practice, but that often seemed disconnected in terms of design concept and mode of communication. The PhD enabled me to interrogate the disciplinary parameters of my creative practice and to engage embodied methods to research dress in its relationship to the body.

The past two decades have seen a significant increase of published knowledge on creative practice and its place in research. Whilst resources such as these were not available at the time of my own PhD, they have provided useful frameworks for my post-doctoral work and for other researchers and doctoral students working with material and performance practices.² It is, however, the increase in fashion and costume practice PhDs that has enabled fashion and costume researchers to begin to define and disseminate their own methods and approaches. Since completing my PhD, I have become part of a community of practitioner-researchers working with embodied approaches in fashion but particularly in costume design, where the agency of dress in performance and hierarchies in production are being rethought.³

Such approaches have elevated the position of practice in research; as costume researcher Sofia Pantouvaki and design historian Peter McNeil identify, they have been informed by 'material', 'embodied', and other cultural 'turns' that enabled 'new ways of thinking through culture'.⁴ This has influenced costume and

2.
 - Estelle Barrett and Barbra Bolt, eds., *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, London, 2010.
 - Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, eds., *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, Edinburgh, 2009.
 - Robin Nelson, ed., *Practice As Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*, London, 2013.
 - Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, eds., *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, Edinburgh, 2011.
 - Ludivine Allegue, Baz Kershaw, and Angela Piccini, eds., *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*, London, 2009.
3. These practitioners include costume researchers such as Donatella Barbieri, Sally E. Dean, and more recently Christina Lindgren and Sodja Lotker.
4. Sofia Pantouvaki and Peter McNeil, 'Introduction: Activating Costume: A New Approach to Costume for Performance', in *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods*, eds. Sofia Pantouvaki and Peter McNeil, London, 2021, p. 1.

fashion design research, and both disciplines can be seen to have 'been re-connected in new and exciting ways to theories of the body and embodiment'.⁵ Informed by my PhD and this growing community of practice, my post-doctoral research has demonstrated how working with the agency of dress and embodied methodologies can lead to more integrated approaches to design in communication, performance, and contemporary dance.⁶ Drawing on these learnings and shifts in my own post-doctoral practice, I make a case here for multi-modal and embodied methods in interdisciplinary, material, and body-sited research, calling for further porosity between existing and emerging fields in the research of dress in its relationship to the body.

Doing Practice Research in Fashion and Dress

I started my PhD in practice-based mode at the London College of Fashion (LCF), University of the Arts London (UAL) in 1998.⁷ As one of the first practice-based PhDs in fashion at LCF, it was the wider cohort across UAL that exposed me to practice-led and practice-based PhDs in Art, Architecture, and Performance. Previously published practice PhDs in these fields became a critical resource as they placed focus on creative practice, activity, action, and reflexivity,⁸ providing ways to think about the role of practice in my research and how to answer my emerging research questions by focusing

5. Ibid.

6. Jessica Bugg, 'Emotion and Memory; clothing the body as performance', in *Presence and Absence: The Performing Body*, eds. Adele Anderson and Sofia Pantouvaki, Leiden, 2014, pp. 29–52. This chapter focuses on the body as the site for production of meaning and performance and makes a case for clothing not only to be present in the production process of performance, but also argues that it can become a generator of performance and communication through design.

7. Jessica Bugg, 'Interface: Concept and Context as Strategies for Innovative Fashion Design and Communication: An Analysis from the Perspective of the Conceptual Fashion Design Practitioner', PhD Thesis, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, 2006.

8. Baz Kershaw, Lee Miller, Joanne 'Bob' Whalley, Rosemary Lee, and Niki Pollard, 'Practice Research: Transdisciplinary Innovation in Action', in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, eds. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, Edinburgh 2011, pp. 64–65.

on the relationship between the body and dress in context. Precedents were few and far between and, as Else Skjold observes, 'until the mid 1990s, the body was surprisingly absent in research on fashion'.⁹ In the early 2000s, there was an important shift: fashion studies and cultural studies began engaging with situated theories of the body and dress.¹⁰ This offered relevant theoretical and critical frameworks, although it did not adequately address designers and their practices, or the embodied, agential nature and experiential aspects of dress, particularly in performative contexts. Joanne Entwistle's publication in 2000 was significant in that she approached dress as a 'situated bodily practice',¹¹ providing means to think about embodied frameworks for researching the interrelationship of body and dress.

Such perspectives, together with the emerging knowledge in practice PhDs in art and performance practice enabled me to develop a methodology to understand the experiential and relational aspects of bodies that make, wear, and view dress in a range of contexts, from galleries and editorial to contemporary dance and performance. The interdisciplinary and embodied nature of dress necessitated a methodological approach that could, as fashion studies researcher Heike Jenss identifies, unearth 'the intimate, corporeal sensations of making an appearance with the wearing of fashion and clothes, to the designing, making, mediation, or distribution of fashion objects, images, and imaginaries'.¹²

9. Else Skjold, 'Making sense of dress: On sensory perspectives of wardrobe research', *Artifact: Journal of Design Practice*, 5: 1, June 2018, p. 42.

10. See, for example:

- Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, Oxford, 2004.
- Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, New Haven, CT, 2003.
- Susan B. Kaiser, *The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context*, New York, 2000.
- Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory*, Cambridge, 2000.
- Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and the Body*, Oxford, 1998.
- Yuniya Kawamura, *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress*, London, 2011.

11. Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, p. 4.

12. Heike Jenss, 'Introduction: Locating Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites and Practices', in *Fashion Studies, Research Methods, Sites and Practices*, ed. Heike Jenss, London, 2016, p. 2.

Engaging with the full corporal experiences of the designer, wearer, and viewer enabled understandings of the experience of engaging with dress in context, and provided means to connect both design and communication.

Prior to studying a PhD my practice engaged with the aesthetic and psychological significance of dress and the impact of design on wearers. The PhD enabled an exploration of the full embodied experience of dress, not only from the wearer's perspective, but also of designers and viewers. The PhD was a turning point for my practice, moving me towards employing the body as the site for research and using the term 'dress', as opposed to fashion design or costume design, as it enabled porosity between fashion, performance, and art disciplines and methods. I now understand the body as 'a lived, experienced and socially connected entity; it is also a creative site and method for working with materials and modes of communication'; the body has become both the site and the material of my research through its intimate and inseparable relationship to dress.¹³ As I have argued since the PhD, dress is uniquely connected with the body and when worn it 'resonates visually, physically, cognitively, sensorially and emotionally in the site of the body'.¹⁴ In and through lived experience, dress has agency that, to draw on more recent thinking from philosophical and feminist scholar Karen Barad, 'cannot be designated as an attribute of either "subjects" or "objects" as they do not pre-exist as such'¹⁵; dress is always in resonance with the body in its context and this network of relations is never static.

Over recent decades, fashion and dress researchers have engaged a range of interdisciplinary approaches that draw on material analysis, wardrobe studies, object-based research, design research, ethnography, autoethnography, and anthropology. This has enabled the study of fashion, dress, and costume, not only in museum and archival contexts, but also in everyday life. Developments in 'the social sciences and humanities have contributed to our understanding and analysis of clothing and human behaviour',¹⁶ expanding

13. Bugg, 'The Body as Site', p. 221.

14. Ibid.

15. Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs*, 28: 3, Spring 2003, p. 827.

16. Kawamura, *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress*, p. 13.

fashion and costume research and contributing to new understandings and methods. As Sofia Pantouvaki and Peter McNeil observe, 'costume, like fashion and dress, is now viewed as an area of dynamic social significance and not simply as a passive reflector of a pre-conceived social state or practice'.¹⁷ Despite this progress, there remains, as practitioner Ruby Hoette has argued, a continued and 'urgent need to produce, interrogate and value knowledges of fashion that are generated through and by practice — to establish fashion practice as research'.¹⁸ Hierarchies between theory and practice, social sciences and material sciences, and art and applied arts have arguably restricted progress, confidence, and innovation in practice research in fashion and dress. Robin Nelson underscores such issues, reminding us that it is critical for practice as research to move beyond 'Cartesian binaries of mind/body' and of 'theory/practice'.¹⁹ Moving beyond polarized positions is vital to develop the place of practice in research, and particularly in dress and body-sited design disciplines. Critically, 'drawing attention to the body in practical enquiry does not preclude, but embraces, thinking'.²⁰ Such thinking enables theory to come into dialogue with practice in new ways, but also to be generated through practice.

Fashion and costume practice PhDs have been slow to develop their place in the academy, in relation to other practice disciplines and design research more broadly. Sociologist and fashion theorist Monica Tilton discusses disciplinary power relations in the academy, suggesting that practice-based fashion research can currently be interpreted as 'a sub discipline that is in the middle of a process of institutional and academic classification'.²¹ Many years on from my own PhD, I question why this is still the case. Fashion designer Angela Finn suggests that 'continuing to focus on the differences

17. Pantouvaki and McNeil, *Performance Costume*, p. 1.

18. Ruby Hoette, 'Notes on Fashion Practice as Research: Episodes of Conversation Pieces', in *Fashion Knowledge, Theories, Methods, Practices and Politics*, eds. Elke Gaugele and Monica Tilton, Bristol, 2022, p. 81.

19. Robin Nelson, ed., *Practice as Research in the Arts (and Beyond): Principles, Processes, Contexts, Achievements*, Cham, 2022, p. 20.

20. Ibid.

21. Monica Tilton, 'Theory as Practice: Notes on the Sociology of Practice-Based Fashion Theory', in *Fashion Knowledge, Theories, Methods, Practices and Politics*, eds. Elke Gaugele and Monica Tilton, Bristol, 2022, p. 31.

between practice-led research and other types of fashion research' is one factor 'limiting the ability for practitioners to contribute to the development of fashion as a discipline'.²² I agree with Finn that there is a need for 'development of fashion knowledge *through* practitioner research',²³ and whilst there is an argument for using broader disciplinary terms, classifying fashion practice research as a sub-discipline of fashion studies, or indeed costume as a sub-discipline of performance studies, can also be problematic. Bringing fashion design thinking and practice under the conventions of established fields could itself perpetuate hierarchies between theory and practice, and between scientific, humanities, and creative practice research, curtailing the development of bespoke methodologies. Finn also suggests that the roots of practice-led research in arts and design more broadly has led to a 'framing of fashion practitioners as equivalent to arts practitioners, for the purposes of academic research, has had positive and negative consequences',²⁴ pointing to an overemphasis on methodologies as opposed to theoretical and methodological frames within the field of fashion. Whilst this may be the case for some researchers, for me it was essential to draw on methods and theoretical frameworks from fashion studies, art, performance, design, and the social sciences to address my research questions.

A preoccupation with practice '-led' and '-based' research appears to prevail in fashion research, as it did with my own PhD experience two decades ago. At the time I was studying there were limited definitions of practice in research. Christopher Frayling's perspectives on research 'into', 'through', and 'for' art and design framed my early positioning of practice in research.²⁵ My PhD started in practice-based mode, closely aligned to Linda Candy's definition of practice-based research, wherein new

22. Angela Lee Finn, 'Designing fashion: An exploration of practitioner research within the university environment', PhD Thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2014, p. 3.

23. Finn, 'Designing fashion', p. 25.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

25. Christopher Frayling, 'Research in Art and Design', *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, 1: 1, 1993/4, p. 5. Frayling was professor of Cultural History at the Royal College of Art, London, at the time he wrote this. He went on to be the rector of the Royal College of Art from 1996 to 2009.

knowledge is generated 'by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice': whilst the 'significance and context of the claims may be described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with reference to those outcomes'.²⁶ Over the duration of the study, my PhD moved to practice-led mode. Drawing again on Candy's definitions, my research became 'concerned with the nature of practice and [led] to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice', seeking 'to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice'. For me the focus was on how my practice could generate knowledge within the wider methodological framework.²⁷ Reflecting on these definitions now, my PhD research functioned across practice-led and practice-based research modes, and sometimes I was researching *through* design and sometimes *for* design. It was a messy, creative, and iterative process. Over the course of the study I became less focused on whether the study was practice-based or practice-led. I ultimately submitted in practice-led mode on the advice of my supervisors, as the practice had become a tool in the research that had enabled the knowledge to be generated within the wider methodological framework.

On reflection, the lack of precedents arguably enabled a deeper engagement with methodological matters, in response to my research questions and the reflexive development of the research and its design. I developed a bespoke methodological approach, connecting appropriate methods, theoretical frameworks, and modes of data collection and analysis to rigorously answer the bodily and interdisciplinary research questions. I drew on methods and knowledge from across different disciplines, and integrated approaches to theory and practice relating to and through a bodily, material, and phenomenological lens.

Interdisciplinarity: Embodied Research and Multi Methods

My early rejection of the commercial fashion system had a profound impact on my practice as a designer. I originally trained in fashion design and worked in fashion design and visual

26. Linda Candy, *Practice Based Research: A Guide*, CSS Report, November 2006.

27. Ibid.

merchandising. Doing an MA in Fashion and Textiles was a turning point, enabling the exploration of the semiotic and psychological aspects of dress through practice and research, working with dancers to explore the impact of garments on the moving and experiencing body.²⁸ Prior to starting the PhD I worked in costume manufacture and renovation for the Northern Ballet, using my skills in making, but not design. I left to take up my first fractional post in academia as a fashion design tutor and worked as a freelance designer for the music industry, applying my design skills outside of the commercial parameters of fashion. Soon after I started the PhD, alongside developing my academic and freelance career.



Jessica Bugg, *MA Work, Confrontation, Concept and Clothing*, 2006. *Face Tube*, 1996. Photo copyright Jessica Bugg

One of my main motivations for undertaking a PhD was to interrogate and understand my practice and its place in the world in relation to fashion, art, and performance disciplines. In a professional context, fashion and costume design were, and still are,

28. Jessica Bugg, 'Confrontation, Concept and Clothing: an investigation into the network of relationships between clothing, the human body, the wearer and the viewer', MA Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 1996.

distinctly discrete creative disciplines, with their own traditions, critical frameworks, design processes, and audiences.²⁹ Fashion design's focus on commerciality, contemporary aesthetics, and everyday dress has traditionally been seen in opposition to costumes' focus on supporting character creation as part of narrative practices. The development of more conceptual approaches, including new modes of storytelling and communication, combined with the emergence of new audiences, has led to less binary understandings of fashion and costume design, but the delineation nonetheless remains. The tension between the commercial, aesthetic, and craft dimensions of fashion design,³⁰ and the long-standing hierarchies between art and applied arts, and between theoretical and practical approaches, have also arguably made interdisciplinarity and practice research in these disciplines more difficult.

I employed a reflexive approach to the development of my PhD methodology to enable connectivity between disciplines and theoretical frameworks, and to analyze participants' experiences through practice. In this mode 'creative artefacts, became tools through which I could engage with the lived experience of wearers and viewers in a range of contexts and understand the nature of my own and others' practice'.³¹

Reflecting both 'within and on practice',³² I combined both 'creative doing with reflexive being',³³ as both a designer and researcher and wearer of dress. Wearers improvised in response to the garments, which were 'designed to communicate concepts or behaviours and I sought to test ideas and uncover knowledge of their affect and perception in a range of disciplinary contexts

29. Jessica Bugg, 'The Clothed Body in Fashion and Performance', *Journal: Museum of Applied Art*, 7, 2011, p. 70. Here I discuss the differences between fashion and performance and go on to identify a hybrid practice in the early 2000s that brought costume and fashion design into a closer dialogue. I draw on Joanne Entwistle's writing on embodiment and her understanding of fashion in everyday dress as a 'situated bodily practice' (Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, Cambridge, 2020, pp. 4–5) to understand the relationship between fashion and performance.

30. Finn, 'Designing fashion', p. 25.

31. Bugg, 'The Body as Site', p. 215.

32. Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Practitioners Think in Action*, London, 1991.

33. Kershaw and Nicholson, *Research Methods*, p. 64.

and scenarios on differently trained wearers' bodies'.³⁴ Modes of documentation and interviewing captured data from these interactions and enabled the capture of the practical, experiential, haptic, and tacit knowledge of designer, viewers, and wearers to answer the 'what, how and why' questions of the research.³⁵ The PhD generated knowledge of the complex performative dynamic between designer, wearer, and viewer and suggested considerations for conceptual fashion designers working in new disciplinary contexts to better integrate design and communication. This knowledge was applied in a curated exhibition and in a costume for a dance commission to test the findings and inform the contributions of the research.



Jessica Bugg, *Costume for Union Dance, Sensing Change*, 2005. Photo copyright Tessa Musgrave

Body/Dress Praxis: Doing, Being, Thinking, and Knowing with the Body and Dress

Performance as an expanded field has become central to my post-doctoral research, more than costume or fashion, and has enabled my practice. My research now engages with a process of 'thinking, practicing and researching in the active site of the body to understand the lived experience of dress both in and as performance'.³⁶ In this process, I am thinking through the intra-activity

34. Bugg, 'The Body as Site', p. 216.

35. Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, London, 2003.

36. Bugg, 'The Body as Site', p. 213. This publication unpacks several of my post-doctoral research projects and the related methodologies.



Jessica Bugg, *PhD Movement Collection, Hair Spine Trouser and White Square*, 2004.
Photo copyright Roy Shakespeare



Jessica Bugg, *PhD Movement Collection, Toothpick Spine and Shoelace Trouser*, 2004.
Photo copyright Roy Shakespeare

of bodies, dress, design, and movement in context, through my own and other participants' embodied experiences and understandings. I now understand this as praxis where 'action and thinking work dialectically',³⁷ and which, following Nelson, brings together 'being, doing, thinking', where 'all thinking is embodied'.³⁸ Embodied experience and knowledge is negotiated and shaped in dialogue with dress and the experiences of participants and collaborators in my praxis. I work with the agency of dress and the relationality of dress and bodies, that through 'intra-actions'³⁹ can never be fixed and are always in a state of emergence and becoming. They are in dialogue with one another in the creative and social contexts within which they are created, communicated, and experienced.⁴⁰ This has moved my work away from solely ergonomic or aesthetic concerns, from a fixation with terminology and techniques of disciplines, to researching and practising with a 'mindful body that acts and resists'.⁴¹ The embodied methods that I employ leverage the agency of bodies and materials in context through lived corporeal and temporal experience.

Doing a PhD has fundamentally transformed the way I think about my practice; it has pivoted me away from an uncomfortable relationship with my discipline and its industry practices and commercial contexts, and towards exploring the possibilities of dress in the site of the body. Reflecting on, in, and through practice in research has enabled the integration of theory and practice in my work, where thinking, doing, and knowing are

37. Christopher Crouch and Jane Pearce, *Doing Research in Design*, London, 2012, p. 40.

38. Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts and Beyond: Principles, Processes, Contexts, Achievements*, Cham, 2022, p. 20.

39. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglements of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC, 2007, p. 178.

40. Sofia Pantouvaki, Ingvi Fossenheim, and Susanna Suurla, 'Thinking with costume and material: a critical approach to (new) costume ecologies', *Theatre and Performance Design*, 7: 3-4, 2021, pp. 199–219. The authors draw here on Karen Barad arguing that 'the agency of costume matter occurs through enactment between its human and non-human actants' (p. 204).

41. Sarah Adams, *Performing Dress and Adornment in Southeastern Nigeria*, in *Dress Sense: Emotional and Sensory Experiences of the Clothed Body*, eds. Donald Clay Johnstone and Helen Bradley Foster, Oxford; New York, 2007, p. 115.

interconnected in reflexive modes. My post-doctoral research has sought to destabilize hierarchies in production, and to elevate collaboration and the role of dress in the creative process. This work rethinks relationships between disciplines and their critical and theoretical positions, research methods, production contexts, and disciplinary techniques. This has generated a 'new knowing across a range of intra-disciplines',⁴² connecting creative, humanities, and science fields. It has resulted in an enduring body- and dress-based research praxis that develops and applies embodied methods in fashion, curation, contemporary dance, performance, and short experimental films.

The PhD has arguably moved my practice beyond fashion or costume design and perhaps it aligns most clearly now to performance and art practice. I communicate my work through short experiential dance/dress films and garment outcomes, shown in screenings and galleries. The embodied methods I employ and my engagement with the performative dynamic between designers, wearers, and viewers informs the design and communication of my work, as well as curation of my own and others' work. For me, practice and research are now inextricably interconnected—practice generates theory and theorizing generates practice, and I no longer practice outside of a research context. I publish on the embodied and multi methodologies and knowledge gained from my practice in research and employ these approaches to new areas of research working across disciplines. The PhD has moved me further away from disciplinary belonging and I no longer produce commercial work for fashion, performance, contemporary dance, or the music industry. Since the PhD, I have held senior leadership roles for academic programmes in performance, fashion design, and fashion media and communication and in fashion and textiles research leadership. On reflection my research has been shaped by the precedents in practice research in art and performance. Looking back, I was responding to shifts in fashion design practice and theory at the time, with my focus shifting from aligning my work to conceptual fashion in the early 2000s to positioning and understanding the significance of my practice in a research, as opposed to disciplinary, context. This has ultimately led me to a career in academia and

42. Nelson, *Practice as Research*, p. 19.

a focus on disseminating practice research and publishing in the contexts of fashion, performance, dance, and fashion curation, yet my interdisciplinary practice and knowledge do not always fit neatly into prescribed academic disciplines or fields of research. However, practice in research, the body, and dress remain central to my praxis, academic leadership, and PhD supervision.