



Fashion Theory

The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture

ISSN: 1362-704X (Print) 1751-7419 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfft20

Mediating Methodologies: Examining the Competing Interests of Designers and Curators in Fashion Exhibition-Making Practices

Alexandra Foxwell

To cite this article: Alexandra Foxwell (23 Feb 2026): Mediating Methodologies: Examining the Competing Interests of Designers and Curators in Fashion Exhibition-Making Practices, Fashion Theory, DOI: [10.1080/1362704X.2026.2632513](https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2026.2632513)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2026.2632513>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 23 Feb 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 751



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Mediating Methodologies: Examining the Competing Interests of Designers and Curators in Fashion Exhibition-Making Practices

Alexandra Foxwell 

Alexandra Foxwell is a curator and fashion researcher, and an MA Fashion Curation and Cultural Programming graduate of London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. She earned a First-Class BA in Fashion Design from Kingston University and worked as a womenswear designer for global brands. Her work appears in *Designing a Fashion Collection* (Bloomsbury) and *Europe: Rising Fashion Designers* (Schiffer Publishing Ltd.).
alexandrafoxwell@hotmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the complex relationships between designers and curators in contemporary fashion exhibition-making, foregrounding the curator's evolving role as mediator between artistic vision and institutional constraints. Challenging the assumption that the functions of "Curator" and "Designer" are distinct in current practice, this study interrogates how authorship and legacy are negotiated when exhibiting the work of living designers. Through comparative analysis of Andrew Bolton's curation of *Rei Kawakubo: Art of the In-Between* (Met, 2017), Claire Wilcox's *Radical Fashion* (V&A, 2001), and Judith Clark's independent collaboration with designer Hussein Chalayan (*Play: Hussein*

Chalayan, 2000), the research explores differing modes of dialogue and mediation across institutional and independent contexts. Drawing on archival correspondence, curatorial interviews, and theoretical models, the study reconsiders curatorial autonomy and the ethics of collaboration. It argues that productive tension between designer and curator can be a generative force, reframing the curator's practice as a form of "mediation-curation". By focusing on the communicative and relational dimensions of exhibition-making, the paper redefines the curator's responsibility – not only to the objects on display, but to the creative relationships that make their display possible.

KEYWORDS: fashion exhibition-making, monographic exhibitions, autonomy, mediation, curator-designer collaboration

Introduction

A curator can also be someone who can mediate between the needs of the artist and that of an institution, having a good knowledge of both. (Lipscombe and McKenzie 2020, 34)

Monographic exhibitions are integral to fashion curation. These exhibitions aim to provide visitors with a comprehensive understanding of a single designer's work and the nuances of their creative process: promoting a richer appreciation for their contributions to the fashion industry.

However, who holds the ultimate authority over the presentation of a designer's work? When collaborating to display the work of living designers, curators who work in institutions typically require curatorial autonomy and often act as intermediaries between artists and institutions. In this capacity, a curator needs to mediate complex dynamics, juggling artistic creations with the constraints and requirements of the museum. Designers may have specific (or even unconventional) ideas about how their work should be presented and interpreted, seeking to challenge traditional norms. On the other hand, institutions have curatorial standards, wider goals, budgetary constraints, and visitor expectations. The curator also acts as a mediator of interpretation, between the designer's language – often deeply rooted in personal experiences and emotions – and an audience's diverse perspectives.

Baxandall argues that an exhibition consists of three distinct terms, independently at play: "makers of objects, exhibitors of made objects, and viewers of exhibited made objects," noting that "each of these agents is active, and the resulting relations are complex, dynamic and sometimes fraught" (Vergo 1989, 43–44). Written thirty-five years ago, whilst Baxandall's framework provides a valuable structure for understanding the complexities of exhibition-making, my research will challenge the notion that these functions are "distinct" in current practice

and seek to question the dynamics when the roles of “Curator” and “Designer” converge, meanwhile examining how “active” these agents are.

Exhibiting the work of living designers in a museum environment is a relatively new phenomenon (Menkes 2017) which can be complex and carry ethical concerns. Previous studies have examined the risk of exhibitions of living designers’ work being seen as commercial, rather than educational or cultural, endeavors (Silverman 1986; Steele 2008). This criticism has inadvertently limited the scope of fashion curation and by reducing these exhibitions to commercial ventures, critics overlook cultural, historical, and artistic dimensions. Research has yet to fully explore this from the designer’s perspective – how does the presentation of their work impact them, or are commercial considerations an important factor? Some designers may have strong opinions about the presentation of their work or may be concerned about misinterpretation. Neglecting these opinions in favor of a narrow commercial lens has hindered the potential for insightful explorations of fashion’s broader significance and of designers’ roles in exhibition-making.

The investigation focuses on how the designer-curator relationship unfolds across two distinct areas: institutional collection and display, and independent curation and exhibition-making, aiming to understand the differing dynamics of collaborative exhibition-making, and to interrogate ideas of creative autonomy, authorship, and legacy. Ultimately, the research seeks to answer two key questions: (i) do designers and curators benefit from collaboration when exhibiting the work of a living designer, and (ii) how might they navigate competing interests and negotiate the display of fashion in a way that satisfies both?

Studying the intricate relationship between designers and curators, particularly from the designer’s perspective, represents an essential area of inquiry, which has not yet been substantially explored. The deeply personal nature of fashion designers’ work and the permanence and legacy which exhibitions provide make accurate interpretation and representation of their vision of paramount importance. This is compounded when working with avant-garde designers, whose work is not easily typified. Research not only adds depth to the professional dialogue within the field, but contributes valuable guidance for future collaborations, shedding light on the nuances of communication and interpretation between designers and curators.

Methodology

Research design

There are no clearly defined theoretical frameworks for studying or producing research about fashion (Kawamura 2020). In response, this study adopts a multimethodological approach (Jenss 2016), formed of

qualitative research and drawing on curator interviews, and critical analysis to bridge theory and practice in the context of designer-curator collaboration.

Engaging with leading curators, this research seeks to uncover their approaches to collaboration with designers by looking at specific examples and contextualizing findings within broader curatorial practices. The examination of correspondence records relating to *Radical Fashion* (2001) from the Victoria and Albert Museum's (V&A) archive offers insights into the interactions and communications relevant to the study.

Andrew Bolton's catalog for the *Art of the In-Between* exhibition, featuring a transcribed and seemingly unedited conversation between Bolton, "Wendy Yu Curator in Charge" of the Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Met), and designer Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, captures a broken-down working relationship, presenting concrete data for analysis.

Baxandall's framework

Two things are essential to this model. First, all three terms are active in the exhibition. Second, the activity of each of the three is differently directed and discretely if not incompatibly structured. Each of the three is playing, so to speak, a different game in the field. (Baxandall 1991, 2)

In *Exhibiting Intention*, Baxandall (1991) proposes a conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics within an exhibition, focusing on the interaction among three key agents: the maker of the artifact, the exhibitor, and the viewer. The model highlights the distinct activities and purposes of each agent. Utilizing Baxandall's framework in studying the dynamics between curators and designers in fashion exhibition-making practice involves recognizing the different roles and activities of each party.

While curatorial studies have challenged fixed distinctions between artist and curator – foregrounding hybrid roles (e.g., O'Neill 2012; O'Neill and Wilson 2010; Von Bismarck, Schaffaff, and Weski 2012) – Baxandall's tripartite model remains analytically valuable for mapping the structural interactions at stake. I employ Baxandall's model as a lens through which to analyze contemporary exhibitions in a fashion design context, while highlighting its limitations: it assumes minimal direct interaction between the object-maker and the object-exhibitor, which does not reflect modern, collaborative practices. My use of this framework is therefore not an endorsement of its "traditional" separation of agents, but a deliberate point of departure. Applying it to contemporary fashion exhibition-making, I highlight where these boundaries collapse, particularly in designer-curator collaborations.

Communication theory

Martin Buber's communication theory, outlined in *I and Thou* (1937), centers on dialogical relationships between individuals (Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna 2004). Buber distinguishes between two primary modes of relating: "I-It," where individuals treat relationships as a means to an end; and "I-Thou," characterized by genuine, reciprocal engagement and recognition of another's inherent value. Buber's theory provides a valuable lens to understand and analyze the nature of designer-curator interactions within different institutions and contexts. By exploring the extent to which these relationships manifest as "I-Thou" engagements, this analysis can delve into the quality of mutual recognition, collaboration, and shared understanding.

To utilize Buber's theory effectively, instances are examined where designers and curators view each other as collaborators with unique perspectives, rather than merely as instruments to achieve individual goals. Analyzing communication patterns, decision-making processes, and the reciprocal influence between the two roles within various institutional and contextual settings can contribute to a nuanced understanding of how relational dynamics shape the outcomes of collaborative projects in fashion-exhibition making practice and collection policies.

Literature review

The monographic exhibition

Much has been written about the staging of monographic exhibitions (e.g., Cumming 2004; Steele 1998, 2008; Stevenson 2008), described by Horsley as the most prevalent exhibition type to date (2017). Previous studies have explored the commercial and ethical considerations associated with monographic exhibitions of eponymous designer brands (Silverman 1986). In 1983, a significant turning point in the presentation of fashion exhibitions occurred with Diana Vreeland's retrospective of Yves Saint Laurent, marking the first major museum show dedicated to a living designer (Steele 2008). In *Museum Quality*, Steele writes that subsequently the Met ceased organizing exhibitions focused on single living designers as critics deemed the exhibition controversial due to its association with Saint Laurent's economic interests (Steele 2008). She argued against a cessation of these exhibitions, emphasizing the need to address the problems arising from the (so-called) commercialization of designer fashion exhibitions and the resulting public criticism. This paper, in contrast, challenges the notion that commerce is intrinsically problematic; beginning with the fundamental assumption that every exhibition inherently involves commercial elements – including the museum's own commercial position – which are an integral aspect of the exhibition landscape.

By contrast, ModeMuseum, Antwerp (MoMU) is renowned for the close relationships it builds with designers, showcasing monographic

exhibitions of living designers who, whilst not necessarily household names, are deemed culturally significant (Horsley 2015). As Debo notes, MoMu is ‘a place where designers could be studied’ (Debo 2012, 5). Because the museum’s exhibitions are grounded in design-process interpretation and routinely co-curated with designers, MoMu has been theorized as a case of ‘design reflexivity’ within a fashion museum context (Pecorari 2012, 127). As such, it presents a specialized model rather than one that is representative of fashion exhibition practice more broadly. While MoMu’s curatorial methodology has been examined in existing scholarship, this research focuses on institutions that are *not* dedicated fashion museums – specifically the Met and the V&A – where curators must navigate broader institutional hierarchies. This distinction is crucial for understanding how curatorial agency and collaboration operate differently in multidisciplinary rather than specialist settings.

Artists as curators

To contextualize curatorial roles beyond the fashion-specific scholarship outlined above, existing literature emphasizes the emergence of “artist-curators” in the fine art space who, driven by a desire for curatorial independence, navigate a space between curating and artmaking (Doubtfire and Ranchetti 2016). This shift challenges established curatorial norms, as these individuals use exhibitions as a medium for artistic expression, intertwining curatorial roles with their own artistic practices and acknowledging the codependency between artists and curators.

This ‘artistic turn’ in curatorial practice has had a profound impact on how exhibitions are conceived within the fine art exhibition-making sphere, encouraging a more creative, self-reflexive approach to curating. This prompts a reconsideration of exhibitions as works of art and influences contemporary curatorial methods (O’Neill 2012, 252). Yet this discourse rests largely on fine art models and pays limited attention to fashion, where the dynamics of authorship differ significantly. Fashion designers have long presented their work through alternative, self-directed media – runway shows, lookbooks, film, digital presentation, and brand-produced installations – meaning they have never been solely reliant on museums, galleries, or curators to articulate or legitimize their practice. As a result, the negotiation of agency and authority in fashion exhibition-making operates within a distinct ecosystem that has received little critical attention. This study addresses that gap by exploring these dynamics across both institutional and independent contexts.

The curator

Obrist notes it is: “important to not subordinate [artists’] work to the curator’s vision” and that “the curator’s role is more that of enabler”

(Obrist in Jefferies and Groves 2014), mirroring Claire Wilcox who describes her role as a curator as “channeling” (Wilcox 2023). Obrist’s implication is that curators must foster environments where artists thrive, ideas flourish, and creative boundaries are pushed. In this context, a curator becomes a facilitator, empowering artists to express themselves freely. Yet is this possible if a museum exhibition’s aim is to carry out a curator’s thesis or proposal? Analyzing the “exhibitor’s” role within Baxandall’s framework (1991) provides insight into institutions’ impact on the relationship between curators and designers, including wider museum goals, policies, and constraints that influence fashion exhibition-making practice.

Thompson writes that curators must maintain professional harmony and that “personal considerations should never be allowed to inhabit proper collaboration ... museum professionals should always be open to consultation” (2012, 723). Thompson’s curatorial *Code of Conduct* contains many adjectives regarding an ideal collaboration, or mediation: “amicably” “resolved,” “mutually satisfactory,” “courtesy,” “fair mindedness,” “working relationships” (2012, 649–716).

This research explores how these principles guide curatorial decisions and influence the selection, presentation, and interpretation of exhibited works, and how this creates tension with designers’ aims: “the curator marks and evidences [their] understanding of the artefacts and their relationships, whilst allowing such relationships to be communicated non-verbally through visual, contextual or relational dialogue” (Doubtfire and Ranchetti 2016).

Art of the In-Between (2017): a curator’s thesis

Rei Kawakubo (RK): It was very hard for me to accept your curation.

Andrew Bolton (AB): Yes, as the creator of your clothes, that’s totally understandable. When it comes to working with living artists, however, the museum requires curatorial autonomy. Also ... apropos exhibitions, artists are not always the best judges of their own work.

RK: In what way?

AB: Perhaps most notably in object selection. When I was working on the Alexander McQueen exhibition, I was privy to a show that McQueen was planning before his death. Often the objects he had selected held deeply personal and subjective narratives.

RK: For instance?

AB: A dress that the model Kate Moss – a close friend of McQueen’s – wore in one of his shows. In terms of artistry, the dress was unremarkable, but it was special to McQueen. I think what I’m trying to convey is that artists can sometimes prioritise sentiment over artistic excellence.

(Bolton and Kawakubo 2017, 17)

Curatorial autonomy

The *Art of the In-Between* (2017) exhibition at the Met, curated by Andrew Bolton, focused on the work of Japanese fashion designer Rei Kawakubo and her avant-garde label, Comme des Garçons. It was the Costume Institute's first exhibition devoted to a living artist since its controversial 1983 Yves Saint Laurent show (Smith 2017). As the above excerpt references, Bolton required "curatorial autonomy," despite the Met's claims that the exhibition design was a collaboration: "achiev[ing] a playful instability that complements the eccentric work of Kawakubo" (2017). Kawakubo, having declined to work with the museum many times previously, concluded that she would like to "collaborate with a museum... so that after I'm gone, they can refer to it as a model" (Bolton and Kawakubo 2017, 17). She appears to acknowledge the museum's power to attribute legacy and legitimacy and accepts that the narrative surrounding the authorship and interpretation of her work may evolve once she is no longer present. However, the legacy which an institutional monographic exhibition can offer may be a double-edged sword – by delegating authority to a curator, a designer necessarily incurs risk to their legacy.

Longair writes that: "curatorial authority is established, shaped, and inherited" and "the command over knowledge... might appear to be a fundamental component of curatorship" (2015, 1). Bolton appears to confirm this: "to a great extent though, the role of a curator is defined by interpretation" (2017, 22). Longair's notion of "inherited authority" is significant, implying firstly that institutions provide curators with influence, and that, by virtue of their role, curators play a pivotal part in directing an exhibition's narrative and thematic focus. His emphasis on a "command over knowledge" underscores a curator's role in possessing (or appearing to possess) a profound understanding of artworks and the artist's intent. To what extent though should a curator's deemed knowledge be at the expense of an artist's expertise?

Exhibition-maker Judith Clark shares Bolton's views on objectivity: "artists are not always the best judge of how their work perhaps sits in a broader conversation" (Clark 2023). Wilcox adds, "artists don't have the objectivity required to create a good exhibition. There are of course exceptions, and some artists are very aware of what a museum or a visiting public require... I think being married to an artist, I know from personal and professional experience that just as a book needs a good editor, an artist's exhibition needs a good curator" (Wilcox 2023). However, Clark also references the universal dilemma: "the institution has always wanted to be autonomous, even though my contention is that it probably isn't, in that it wants to be neutral. It wants to be neutral as though that is the same as being objective. But of course, it's still subjective" (Clark 2023). Clark highlights a common curatorial challenge: institutions seek autonomy and a neutral, unbiased presentation of art but achieving true neutrality is difficult, as the pursuit of

Table 1 A table showing the differing objectives and opinions of Kawakubo and Bolton.

Object Maker (Rei Kawakubo)	Object Exhibitor (Andrew Bolton)
Wants sole responsibility of curatorial selection and narrative	The Met require curatorial autonomy
Clothes to be shown on the floor in open displays without bodies	Safety of the objects a main concern as well as the hierarchy of display
Not to be a retrospective, exhibition to be future not past focused	The exhibition was not presented chronologically but it did contextualize objects
Many compromises: “it was a battle,” did not want to include collections they “regret”	Kawakubo refused to loan many collections particularly those from the 1980s
Only wanted to include her last 7 collections: “where my mind is right now”	Garments from throughout Kawakubo’s 40-year career
To create a 3-D exhibition with garments moving. Would include objects not linked to collections	Mannequins displayed in a traditional manner
Title: “A True Modernist”	Title: “Art of the In-Between”
“I was never going to be comfortable with your interpretation”	“The role of a curator is defined by interpretation”

autonomy still results in subjectivity. The institution’s aspiration for neutrality may not necessarily lead to objectivity, with inherent subjectivity in choices and perspectives.

Bolton’s insistence on “curatorial autonomy,” especially when working with living artists, appears out of balance with Doubtfire and Ranchetti’s statement: “the professional curator... is able to disappear behind the process of mediation, given that, in this form of exhibition, the artworks’ agency takes precedence” (Doubtfire and Ranchetti 2016). While one curator might aim for transparent mediation, allowing artworks to lead, Bolton’s requirement implies intentional foregrounding of the curatorial perspective, deviating from Doubtfire and Ranchetti’s subdued, linear approach. This contrast prompts an exploration of how curatorial styles, including the curator’s thesis, vary and impact the narrative of a designer’s work and how they are understood more broadly, exposing tensions between the curator’s visibility versus the pure execution of a designer’s creative intention.

Dichotomies

RK: There is method behind your madness.

AB: That’s a nice segue into talking about the curation.

RK: It was a battle. Are you going to write that we fought?

AB: Yes, of course. From the outset, you were resolute that the exhibition not be a retrospective.

RK: No, I did not want a retrospective, but you’ve turned it into one.

(Bolton and Kawakubo 2017, 19)

With 150 garments, the exhibition was divided into 9 dichotomies which expressed the notion of “in-betweenness,” e.g. Absence/Presence; Object/Subject; and Clothes/Not Clothes.¹ Although Bolton aimed to

break down the notion of categorization evident in Kawakubo's work, to what extent could it be said that he inadvertently created an additional dichotomy between himself and Kawakubo?

The catalog accompanying the exhibition includes the transcript of a conversation between Bolton and Kawakubo, where they discuss the process of creating the exhibition with hindsight. It's interesting to analyze the power dynamics, given that the Met used the "collaboration" between designer and curator as a marketing point for the exhibition, described by the museums' director as "the first monographic exhibition to contemplate the designer's thought process" (Campbell, quoted in Bolton and Kawakubo 2017, 12). The dialogue reveals a recurring tension and struggle between the curator's vision and the designer's intentions (Table 1), particularly in the thematic sections and object selection, capturing the complexity of presenting a living designer's work in a museum setting and the interplay between personal vision, curatorial choices, and public reception. Cynically, it might have been Bolton's idea to bring this tension to the fore, knowing that he may have been subjected to criticism. In press interviews before the exhibition's opening, Bolton described the working-relationship as "hard; she doesn't like looking back," resulting in Kawakubo giving Bolton free-rein, only intervening when she felt "absolutely necessary" (Bolton, quoted in Feitelberg 2017).

A key theme of the dialogue is Kawakubo's resistance to retrospection: she adamantly opposes the idea of looking back at past work, emphasizing her continual pursuit of originality. Kawakubo also appears keen to separate herself from the exhibition narrative: "it's your thesis not mine," "still, it's your interpretation" (Bolton and Kawakubo 2017, 22). The discussion unveils the personal nature of Kawakubo's relationship with her work, which she likens to a journey of suffering and continual self-improvement: "...my inner sentiments, my doubts, my fears and my hopes" (Bolton and Kawakubo 2017, 12). The clash arose as Bolton sought to curate a comprehensive overview of Kawakubo's career, while the designer insisted on avoiding retrospection: "Kawakubo has felt more comfortable talking about the making of her clothes rather than the meaning" (Bolton and Kawakubo 2017, 12).

The dialogue reveals the complexities inherent in curating an exhibition that respects an artist's aversion to retrospection while fulfilling the curatorial responsibility to contextualize and present a comprehensive narrative within an institutional setting; encapsulating the continuous push and pull in their collaborative efforts. This dynamic reflects a broader tension between pushing boundaries and the traditional expectations associated with retrospective exhibitions. Kawakubo's preference for showcasing her most recent work reflects her forward-looking approach but would no doubt have been criticized for commercialism – showing work that was available in shops and department stores.



Figure 1

Installation view of Alexander McQueen's 'Red-Glass Slide and Ostrich Feather Dress' (Voss, Spring/Summer 2001), in *Radical Fashion* (2001), V&A, London. The display referenced the original Voss runway presentation, which staged garments within a mirrored enclosure. Photograph by Fiona Hanson.

Whilst there was clearly a conceptual lacuna between the designer and curator, it may be that allowing Bolton's own thesis (i.e. a retrospective-type exhibition) to be the starting point for discussion, effectively rooted all future dialogue in an insurmountable tension. Bolton's idea of "curatorial autonomy" extended not just into the presentation of the work, but also the conceptualization.

Tension as creative purpose

AB: You are one of only a handful of designers past and present who warrant – and whose clothes can sustain – a monographic exhibition in the context of an art museum.

RK: That's nice to hear, thank you. But, really, why does it matter? Is finding a difference so important?

AB: Designers such as yourself point to the absurdity of the age-old sibling rivalries between art and fashion by promoting an art without obsolete hierarchies and pejorative classifications – one that is defined instead by candor, criticality, and contemporaneity. But I must ask, how do you feel being the first living designer to have a monographic exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art since Yves Saint Laurent in 1983?

RK: As well as pursuing its vision of fashion history, I hope going forward the Museum will work and collaborate with living designers more frequently. Fashion, after all, is a living art form. (Bolton and Kawakubo 2017, 23)

Bolton explains that critics are the reason that the Met have not produced a monographic exhibition of a living designer since 1983, emphasizing the influence of critics on institutional decision-making. This cautious approach reflects an apparent aversion to risk and demonstrates that the dynamics between institutions and living designers are not solely driven by artistic merit but are significantly shaped by external opinions. By the end of the dialogue, Kawakubo and Bolton appear to come to a resolution; Kawakubo's hope for the museum's increased collaboration with living designers underscores the exhibition's significance in preserving a legacy within the evolving landscape of fashion but also highlights the gap fashion exhibition-making has in catching up to the broader cultural landscape.

The dynamic between an object's creator and the one responsible for exhibiting it can be analyzed through the lens of communication theory, conceptualized as a dialogue: "Dialogue allows differences to exist without trying to resolve, overcome, synthesize, or otherwise tame them" (Wood, quoted in Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna 2004, xvii). As Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna point out, dialogue is a joint performance characterized by responsiveness to each other and the environment, leading to unexpected outcomes (Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna 2004). This unusual view on dialogue invites differences and opens possibilities for creativity, Wood argues that "tension is inherent in and integral to dialogue" (Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna 2004). Whilst Kawakubo had to make sacrifices, the resulting tensions had interesting consequences for Bolton's publication. In this context, the exhibition serves as a tangible manifestation of the exchange between the two agents. The objects created by the maker become a means of communication, conveying ideas, emotions, or concepts to the audience through their physical presence in the exhibition space. The exhibition itself becomes a visible and palpable representation of the ongoing conversation between the object-maker and the object-exhibitor, exemplified by the transcript. It is within the confines of the exhibition that this dialogue takes on a concrete form, showcasing the results of interaction and collaboration. This perspective highlights the interactive and communicative nature of the relationship, and the crucial role of tension in the ongoing conversation between creator and exhibitor.

"Your encounter with the object is completely determined by a thesis that never presupposes to be right, just an option. Sometimes it's quite dismaying when people go 'no, this is right' or 'this is wrong'. It's an *exhibition*, it's a version of something, it's a *proposal*. And for me, all of them are hypothetical" (Clark 2023). Clark's perspective reinforces the notion that an exhibition is a dynamic and subjective presentation, challenging viewers to engage with it as a hypothesis rather than a fixed truth. This highlights the interpretive and speculative nature of the relationship between the audience and the exhibited objects, within the context of the dialogue between the maker and the exhibitor.

Claire Wilcox – radicalizing relationships

A museum curator's agency is perhaps less of an artistic director and more an act of curatorial patronage that allows artists the opportunity to run free with their radical imaginations. (Wilcox, quoted in Brooks and Eastop 2017, 196)

Claire Wilcox, Senior Curator at the V&A for over two decades,² spoke to me about the “freshness in approach” and directness of representation that comes from working with designers, a view she mirrored in her introductory essay *I Try Not to Fear Radical Things*: “Designers can perhaps educate museums about the possibilities of radical change in our approach to fashion, as both curators and commentators, for we share the same concern that such displays invariably fail to convey the fugitive nature of appearances” (Wilcox 2001, 5).

Wilcox's ground-breaking exhibition *Radical Fashion* (2001) at the V&A, marked a pivotal moment in the exploration of avant-garde and unconventional approaches to fashion exhibition-making, staged at a time when she was: “struggling to identify my own role as a curator, my relationship to fashion designers and my duty to the museum” (Wilcox 2023). The exhibition transcended traditional boundaries, offering a thought-provoking journey through the evolution of “radical” fashion using the work of 11 contemporary designers³ who were each given 30 sq. ft. in the display, the final exhibition built from: “individual tableaux, devised in collaboration with each designer” (Wilcox 2017, 192) (Figure 1).⁴ Wilcox's curatorship played a crucial role in redefining fashion exhibition design: “The radicalizing aspect of the display was welcoming contemporary designers who each “curated” their own work” (Wilcox, in Brooks and Eastop (2017, 194).

Ownership and compromise

Yet the root of the problem with this exhibition is that the curator has compromised her pivotal role by encouraging the designers to make their own selections and to choose how to display them. (Menkes 2001)

Wilcox admitted that Menkes' critique is “nuanced”: “Suzy presented that as a criticism, whereas to me it was the opposite. [I was] actually talking to fashion designers, and tried to understand what makes them tick, what matters to them” (Wilcox 2023). Wilcox underscores the intricacy of the process; noting that *Radical Fashion* was not about giving away curatorial authorship but engaging in a joint effort with designers to understand their world. The threshold featured a captivating, oversized photograph of an eye, inviting visitors to step into the iris as they entered the exhibition space: “I wanted to suggest that you are walking into the mind of the designers” (Wilcox 2023).

Contrasting with Bolton's "curatorial autonomy," Wilcox highlighted the need to communicate and clarify roles from the outset of the process: "the role of the curator has been muddled through overuse of the term. It's explaining what we do and why we do it and understanding that we're working within the parameters of a wider institution that has its own set of priorities" (Wilcox 2023). This reinforces the idea that a well-designated role is crucial to fostering successful collaborations in the museum-designer dynamic: "There can be a conflict between an artist and curator when the role is not clearly designed" (Lipscombe and McKenzie 2020, 35). Communication notes for *Radical Fashion*, accessed at the Art & Design Archive at the V&A, evidenced that Wilcox's early emails to designer's teams contained charts outlining the scope of work, clear requirements, and deadlines. Wilcox emphasizes that, in the display of contemporary fashion, dialogue with designers is crucial as "a way of ensuring that they [designers] wouldn't say no because, if it was a participatory relationship, they were much more likely to agree" (Wilcox 2023). This viewpoint suggests that designers are interested in working collaboratively but want some form of authorship over their own legacy. Perhaps designers mistrust curators acting as their voice within an exhibition, as "outsiders" to their process.

Designer vs curator

Organising a major group exhibition with designers of such calibre as those involved in *Radical Fashion* is a demanding and complex occupation. I have dedicated the last year to research, persuasion and developing this concept ...

... However, and here is the crunch, the exhibition depends upon a creative dialogue and productive working relationship with each designer – this is in fact what makes it unique. I could easily just go out and buy some Martin Margiela clothes and display them how I wanted. However, for *Radical Fashion*, I wanted to create a dynamic that goes far beyond just putting clothes on mannequins.

As I am sure you understand, in order to make the exhibition work for both you and us, we need Martin to now demonstrate an equal commitment to the concept.

(Claire Wilcox, pers. comm. with Patrick Scallon (Director of Communications at Maison Martin Margiela), April 26, 2001.)

The correspondence on *Radical Fashion* represents a character study on the disciplines: Wilcox is structured, concise and clear; the designers are overstretched and often unable to meet deadlines. The communication dynamics reveal complex and intricate narratives, encompassing skillful negotiation, collaboration, and the delicate balance between creative freedom and institutional constraints. Each designer had unique interactions with Wilcox, often mediated through their press officers or

marketing teams; meeting notes show that designers were often absent during conversations. Wilcox engaged in back-and-forth dialogues offering suggestions and seeking compromises; negotiations involved discussions on concepts, exhibition space, and logistical details. Notably, Wilcox navigated unforeseen challenges, such as financial concerns for Chalayan⁵ and communication difficulties with Rei Kawakubo and Junya Watanabe from Comme des Garçons.

When offered the chance to design their space, each designer had a differing response and level of involvement; for example, early in the process, Kawakubo communicated through her representative: “our decision... is to provide the costumes and material according to the V&A’s wishes. We feel that it is better this time to give V&A complete freedom regarding the usage of this material” (Claire Wilcox, pers. comm. with Chigako Takeda from Comme des Garçons April, 2001). This is an interesting departure from the approach Kawakubo took when working with Bolton on *Art of the In-Between* (2017), suggesting perhaps a differing level of trust or comfort with the relationship.

Emails reflected the curator’s efforts to inform the designers about each other’s involvement and showcase the exhibition’s potential; Wilcox’s strong negotiation skills were evident, interestingly in leveraging competition between designers to ensure commitment, e.g.: “we are at an advanced stage of discussion with all the other designers.” This would not have worked so well in a purely monographic setting but is used advantageously in *Radical Fashion*. Wilcox also references the international legitimization that the exhibition could provide, she writes of an “enormous amount of press coverage,” and that she is “besieged by journalists” (Claire Wilcox, pers. comm. December 2000). Wilcox is able to fiercely broker their involvement, in letters to the designers she referred to “her choice of the most radical designers in the world” – designers want to know who else will be featured, and their position within the exhibition; it is this competitiveness and relation to the “star-system” (Kawamura 2020) that confirm their involvement. Where communication hurdles surfaced, such as with Margiela, Wilcox emphasized the importance of a creative dialogue for the exhibition’s success.

The curator’s role extended beyond negotiation to coordinating details including floor plans, materials, and even funding considerations. Margiela, for example, contributed 60% to the display boxes’ cost – devised from shipping crates – when budget constraints meant he may have been forced to use alternative materials. The communication notes contain the designer’s initial sketches showing ideas for his section, described in a review as “one of the most thought-provoking installations” (Quinn 2002, 442).⁶ Margiela’s willingness to contribute financially demonstrates commitment to ensuring accurate representation of their vision, indicating a desire for greater creative control and customization of the exhibition space, and the impactful nature of the curator-designer relationship in facilitating this. Wilcox’s exhibition, like



Figure 2

A 2014 video still of Judith Clark unboxing Hussein Chalayan's *Remote Control Dress* (1999), commissioned and funded through the Judith Clark Costume Gallery. Video directed by James Norton for SHOWSTUDIO.

Bolton's, faced institutional constrictions, however her relationships with designers allowed her to circumvent or mediate issues, rather than letting them be insurmountable. The tension created by these limitations gave rise to greater collaborative and creative potential – seen in Margiela's innovative design for their space.

Wilcox was able to leverage relationships to negotiate donations of garments to the V&A. She noted that these connections, while respectful and positive, are often temporary and dissolve once projects conclude: "You become respectful acquaintances for as long as the project lasts. And then because they're busy and you're busy, the relationship sort of dissolves. Every single designer I've worked with I've liked and admired and been interested in their view. Regarding their working relationship with me, they would think 'I'm working with the V&A', not 'I'm working with Claire'" (Wilcox 2023). This position – having the institution as a figurative "third party" in the relationship – contrasts with that of an independent curator. Wilcox stressed the emotional element and balancing act required: "my ideal working relationship would be a very civilized one where everyone listens to each other and understands and accommodates the parameters of either the museum's institutional needs or the designer's desire to be recognized, acknowledged, understood" (Wilcox 2023). Despite the recognized importance of her exhibition,

Wilcox expressed a sense of nostalgia and frustration regarding the lack of documentation for *Radical Fashion*, indicating a desire for her work to be remembered and acknowledged. While Bolton's viewpoint on subjectivity centered on artists, Wilcox's experience underscores that curators too may struggle with a similar lack of objectivity when reflecting on their exhibitions.

Yet, observation of these interactions, mostly taking place through intermediary contact (via the designer's wider teams) and usually dissolving post-project, I wonder whether institutionally bound relationships can be defined as what communication theorist Buber refers to as a "functional or transactional" type of interaction, termed "I-It" (1937) (Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna 2004, 5). In these relationships, the focus is on utility, and the depth of personal connection is diminished: "Many human inventions and institutions place obstacles in the way of this kind of contact; yet it remains the site of human becoming. If appropriately facilitated, this quality of contact can enhance understanding" (Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna 2004, 33). Wilcox noted that when it came to decision-making about the tableaux, "they didn't really have the time or the skill and most [of the designers] just sort of crumbled" (Wilcox 2023). Buber believed that the relational space that exists between individuals engaged in an authentic, reciprocal dialogue is the dynamic, interpersonal space where direct, immediate, genuine encounters and connections occur, where each can acknowledge "each other's subjectivity and presence" (1937). In the process of what Wilcox described as a "channeling," the curator's role in the production of exhibitions involving the work of living designers should be in facilitating the space for these direct encounters to happen.

Inspiring change

The recent *Rebel: 30 Years of London Fashion* (2023) at the Design Museum, London was an exhibition that puts designers at the heart of its thesis. Wilcox's open dialogical approach undoubtedly shaped the field, of which subsequent exhibitions, including this one is indebted.⁷ *Rebel* even borrowed the same language, its featured designers are "radical change makers," demonstrating the future of "what being a designer means" (Design Museum 2023). Designers Sarah Burton, Priya Ahluwalia and Christopher Kane are listed on the *Rebel* advisory panel, along with journalist Sarah Mower, who has spent her career mentoring London's young designers, as a guest curator. It is clear mediation has been a key component of the museum's exhibition-making practice and shows how much has changed since the production of *Radical Fashion*.

Whilst photographic documentation of *Radical Fashion* is sadly lacking, what remains in the national archive is the dialogue which Wilcox opened with each designer, the shared collaborations forged. This view was echoed in my interview with Clark who remembers the exhibition: "It was radical because she gave them space. And within the confines of

the V&A, was trying to give them *carte blanche* ... it was starting something which is now taken for granted” (Clark 2023).

Institutional contexts

Curating within an institution will always pose certain limitations, yet differing styles of establishing dialogue and relationships can mitigate the impact. Contrasting with a pure collaborative approach with fewer institutional restrictions, the tensions which arise can themselves lead to a more productive and creative dialogue.

Conceptualizing and communicating to a designer from the outset what a curator is or does appears to be at the root of forming a successful collaborative relationship. Designers operate in a world of privacy – designs are top secret until being unveiled at a show or brand presentation, for example. In this way, it is easy to sympathize with designers who balk at the notion of giving autonomy to a curator over the presentation of their prized work. Additionally, if what institutions offer to designers is “legacy” – something intangible and permanent, it is understandable that designers seek some form of authorship over what their “legacy” looks like. Whilst Wilcox likened the roles of designer and curator in exhibition-making to “author” and “editor,” where a curator oversteps the line, this relationship risks becoming one of “author” and “ghost-writer,” in which the curator takes a designer’s story and speaks it purely in their own words, losing the nuance and intimacy which only the designer can offer. A monographic exhibition need not be a curatorial monologue, but a dialogue between curator and designer.

Examining and comparing the varying approaches of Bolton and Wilcox, common threads arise. It is evident that in creating an exhibition, both designer and curator seek a sense of legacy and recognition. If this is accepted, neither party can be considered objective and so the relationship must be one of collaboration and communication to ensure both party’s goals are adequately understood by one another. The only way to achieve mutual recognition and understanding is through direct communication between curator and designer. Discourse via intermediaries’ risks dissolving the vital creative tension which leads to successful outcomes.

Curator as mediator

The most powerful agents in the construction of identity appear to be neither the producers of objects nor the audience but the exhibition makers themselves, who have the power to mediate among parties who will not come into face-to-face contact. (Karp and Lavine 1991, 15)

The word “mediator” originates from the Latin “mediare,” meaning “to be in the middle,” to “halve” or, “to intervene” (Chambers 1999). The term evolved into English to describe someone who acts as an intermediary, facilitating communication, negotiation, or resolution between parties. According to Obrist, a curator is not just an arranger but, “a mediator bridging different cultural spheres’ (2014). In this context, the concept of mediation can be considered a linchpin that could either elevate or impede the collaborative potential of curators and designers.

Karp and Lavine argue that exhibition-makers wield considerable influence in constructing artists’ identity and can shape narratives without face-to-face contact between artist and audience (1991). However, contemporary dynamics have shifted toward both more direct collaboration between curators and living designers, and designers being empowered to engage with audiences without relying on traditional mediators or turning to corporate curation.

The independent curator – Judith Clark: a designer’s voice

I love what can be derived from the [designer’s] mood board, and I’d prefer to start with theirs rather than mine.... It doesn’t mean I can’t have another idea, but often it starts with their reference. (Clark 2023)

Judith Clark, an architecture-trained exhibition-maker, began experimenting with displays at the Judith Clark Costume Gallery (1997–2002), a compact space in West London. Clark’s fashion exhibition-making methodology is characterized by building personal relationships and mutual trust. Her testimony provides valuable insights into how designers and curators can navigate creative journeys whilst retaining individual autonomy. Clark has collaborated with numerous designers including Manolo Blahnik, Simon Thorogood, Stephen Jones, and Adelle Lutz, developing a curatorial methodology that is facilitatory, creative, open-ended, and inter-disciplinary: “[to] take their voice and use an exhibition as a sort of tannoy to their own perspective whilst backing it up. In a way, post-rationalizing what they’re saying and giving it a kind of cultural weight, because I do have huge regard for the artist’s voice” (Clark 2023).

Reflecting on her background, she says: “I came in having studied architecture and feeling there was a ‘gap’ in relation to extending the theoretical rhetoric around dress via exhibition-making. I use archives as case studies with which to test different versions of this. The dialogue with designers is more equal because I make the project very explicit” (Clark 2025). Clark’s rejection of singular or fixed interpretations reflects the material shifts that define fashion: “I work with temporary structures. The meaning and politics around dress change by the minute” (Clark 2025). Clark’s exhibitions remain provisional, allowing for reinterpretation and revisitation, reflecting her belief in exhibition-

making as an evolving conversation. She treats ephemerality not as a limitation but as a strength: recognizing the exhibition space as a live site of negotiation, where meaning is continuously produced and refined, just as creative relationships are.

Clark rejects binary positions and views her curatorial decisions as one of a number of possible ways of presenting a designer's work: "I'm very loathe to think of it as *right* and *wrong*... A curator can make anything of it" (Clark 2023). Clark fulfills a mediatory position in which she (albeit herself as an exhibition-maker) combines the designer's wish to have their creativity, process and passion displayed alongside their objects, alongside the more traditional goal of curating an exhibition for an audience. Clark once referred to her practice as: "creating something akin to a three-dimensional sketchbook" (Clark, quoted in Barbieri and Pantouvaki 2014) – hinting at her affinity to the design process, a testament to her desire to capture the essence of creativity in tangible forms.

Play: Hussein Chalayan (2000)

Clark's mediatory role is perhaps most clearly illustrated in her long-standing collaboration with designer Hussein Chalayan. After meeting through mutual creative circles in 1998, Clark commissioned Chalayan's *Remote Control Dress* (1999) (Figure 2) for Zaha Hadid's *Mind Zone*,⁸ through her experimental gallery⁹: "He [Chalayan] knew that I was someone who was practical enough to know that these things were expensive and that few could afford to make the things that they wanted to make. There was a moment where I could afford to commission that piece. And I've always done that. If I had 10 pounds to spare, I would put it toward this" (Clark 2023).

Clark's act reflects her practical understanding of the financial challenges designers face and an appreciation of the importance of their continuing creativity: "I could see that people were just not prepared to commission. They just didn't want to put their money where their mouth was... I think it's still incredibly rare to just put yourself in the financial reality of it" (Clark 2023). Clark's financial intervention, her own *deus ex machina*, to a designer who would otherwise be unable to secure funding to innovate, creates a *quid pro quo* benefit to both parties – creator is empowered to create, and curator sees the realization of an invaluable piece to curate.

After appearing in the finale of Hussein Chalayan's Spring/Summer 2000 Collection, the *Remote-Control Dress* was then displayed in a singular object exhibition titled *Play: Hussein Chalayan* at the Judith Clark Costume Gallery from July – September 2000: "the space itself was so small that everything was like a single grouping. And that was the point: it was like playing around on one plinth" (Clark, quoted in Domus 2009). The exhibition was described as offering the audience a rare chance to see and "play" with the dress: "the space became a kind of

futuristic playground” (Barbieri and Pantouvaki 2014, 94); an intervention still radical now, providing a hands-on immersive experience between maker, exhibitor, and viewer. Here, however, those three roles are blurred further when one considers that the “exhibitor” commissioned the designer to make the piece. The base and mechanical controller for the *Remote-Control Dress* are now housed within Clark’s personal archive.¹⁰

In this project as commissioner and exhibitor, Clark has both the physical and metaphorical (remote) control of the work. Clark has included Chalayan’s work in exhibitions in London, Antwerp and Miami and the *Remote-Control Dress* has been lent to museums worldwide. I wonder about Clark’s personal attachment or bias toward the dress, is it challenging to maintain complete objectivity, particularly as she has played a significant role in its creation, promotion, and success? If bias does exist, is this necessarily a flaw in the curatorial process or a benefit, allowing Clark to curate the piece with a deeper understanding of its worth and history?

At the behest of the designer, Clark has written and lectured on Hussein Chalayan’s work for many years, an on-going collaboration as cultural contemporaries that is led through having conceptual conversations, “speaking to him and then describing back to him possibilities and cultural descriptions that might fit. He was reticent about talking about his work for a while” (Clark 2023). Perhaps Chalayan, in seeking Clark to be his voice box, understood his own limitations. Deciding on a curator of his choosing allows Chalayan to protect, and even *curate*, the reception of his vision.

Clark’s involvement, offering varied perspectives on Chalayan’s work, showcases her interpretive authority; crucial in shaping how the audience perceives the designer’s work, as she describes: “there’s a defence of and engagement with his experiment” (Clark 2023). Clark’s approach is characterized by a sympathy of the designer’s vision; she facilitates a creative dialogue, by herself taking an active role, where the designer’s ideas are central, ensuring that her projects are a true reflection of a designer’s voice, whilst adding curatorial expertise to enhance the cultural significance of their work.

Modes of engagement

Wilcox and Clark emerged as practitioners before contemporary paradigms such as “curator as facilitator,” “educator,” or “performer” were widely established. While both share a long-standing fascination with Hussein Chalayan: “His work is able to communicate concepts with a poetic efficiency like very few others” (Clark 2025), their methodologies diverge sharply due to their positions within – or outside of – institutional frameworks.

Wilcox’s approach in *Radical Fashion* was based upon a collaborative structure negotiated within the boundaries of museum practice. The

exhibition opened with a striking installation by Chalayan: “it was a dazzling start; his flower dresses suspended from above so that you could look up and into them. It was beautiful... and his film was enticing” (Wilcox 2023). Yet despite this aesthetic intimacy, Wilcox’s relationship with the designer was governed by professional distance and the necessity to remain within the museum’s operational boundaries: “[curators] are the housekeepers, the instigators of the idea, the conceptualists...” (Wilcox 2025).

In contrast, Clark’s independent position allowed for a fluid exchange of ideas. Today, Clark describes how she is “exploring [with Chalayan] ways of archiving aspects of his work - that attempt to record and conserve it (materially) but not restrict the meaning” (Clark 2025). Clark’s nearly 30-year professional relationship with Chalayan stands in stark contrast to the institutional case studies in this paper, an ongoing exchange that has moved beyond the exhibition space into collaborative forms of meaning-making and legacy-building.

Wilcox expressed admiration for this approach, reflecting on her visit to *Play: Hussein Chalayan*: “Immediately, I felt a sense of a kindred spirit [in Clark], both believing that being a curator is an artistic practice.” She continues, “I was struck by the concept of having a single object around which a duplicity of interpretations could emerge. I was intrigued by the scale and intensity [of the space], and the artistic freedom she had” (Wilcox 2025). This acknowledgment reinforces the distinct freedoms afforded by Clark’s position outside the museum, enabling an interpretive intensity for the audience in ways that institutional structures inhibit.

Yet Clark is careful to resist romanticized notions of curatorial freedom. She observes that “constraints come from everywhere” (Clark 2025), recognizing that both museum and independent work can be creatively fruitful or limited, depending on context. Working with brands highlights this complexity: “Most memorably, those tensions occur with a brand... there is a machinery around them that is kind of safeguarding the qualities of the work that they want to highlight...” (Clark 2023). Wilcox agrees, noting that “it was the press officers that complicated matters, protecting the designer” (Wilcox 2025). While one-to-one collaborations with designers ostensibly allow for a balance between object-maker and object-exhibitor, it is often rare in reality. Neither Clark nor Wilcox presents their position as superior; but together they articulate complementary visions of what curating fashion can mean, mapping two ends of a shared spectrum.

Conclusion

You are looking at one of the dilemmas inherent to our position. And largely why I prefer to be independent, not because I can speak on behalf of a brand, but because in a way, I also don’t

have to speak on behalf of a museum... They're symmetrical in their preoccupations, and to be free is a third way. (Clark 2023)

At its core, an exhibition of a living designer's work is an invitation to gain insight into the designer's world. While museum curators may contribute to conceptualization and thematic direction, designers should have space to exercise agency in shaping the visual and spatial aspects of display, jointly contributing to the overall aesthetic and experience of the exhibition – recognizing that in many ways designers are best placed to narrate their own work and its presentation to an audience.

The key to successful collaboration lies in early communication and a clear understanding of the roles and expectations between the disciplines, acknowledging that both have competing needs for autonomy. Designers typically seek authorship of their own narrative, creative control, and alignment of their legacy with their vision. Institutional curators, however, are often restrained by internal machinations of museums and seek their own autonomy: mediating internally between artistic aspirations and the practical constraints imposed by institutions. Establishing structured channels of dialogue and clearly delineated responsibilities provides a foundation through which these tensions can be productively navigated.

As the quote above identifies, independent curators may be able to navigate a “third way,” adapting to align with Obrist's concept of curator as an “enabler” (Jefferies and Groves 2014). This is embodied by Clark, whose commissioning of designers' work leads to a type of “curator-led design”; contrasting with certain exhibitions which might be termed “designer-led curation” (that is, commercialized exhibitions). While Chalayan's dress was realized through “curator-led design,” the relationship is also design-led, as Chalayan independently designed the piece and chose Clark to advocate for his process; it is a circular and mutually beneficial relationship. Here, one sees the role of the “curator-mediator” take center stage – not just as a facilitator, but as a conductor and composer of a dialogue, orchestrating exchanges that invite tension and treat difference not as a hindrance but as a generative force. In this mode, the curator-mediator constructs a space where dissonance becomes harmony, and the interplay of disciplines gives rise to new, daring forms of exhibition-making.

What started as an exploration titled “Mediating Methodologies,” aiming to investigate whether a third-party could (or should) mediate the diverging methodologies of curators and designers during exhibition-making, instead became an investigation into the methodologies of mediation. Independent curators, less bound by curatorial norms and institutional ideologies, could emerge as the preferred choice for avant-garde designers that seek greater flexibility. The challenge then lies in finding differing ways to effectively “self-mediate” relationships for better co-creation, ensuring that collaboration does not collapse under competing claims to authority.

In curatorial defense of a designer's process, curating returns to the etymological root of the word curator – “curare,” translating as “to take care of” (Chambers 1999), a kind of “mediation-curation.” Perhaps it is time for fashion curators to recognize their role as individuals who also “take care of” their creative relationships. In a landscape where authorship and legacy are always contested, it is precisely this type of curatorship – not just for the objects and ideas on display, but for the relationships and creative processes that bring them to life – that offers the most radical form of care.

Notes

1. Images of the exhibition can be found at the following link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2017/rei-kawakubo/exhibition-galleries>
2. Claire Wilcox has been a pioneer and change-maker in the field, beginning with *Fashion in Motion* (1999 - current), a curatorial project that brought designers into the museum to stage live events, challenging perceptions of fashion's place in the museum.
3. The designers featured in the exhibition were: Azzedine Alaïa, Hussein Chalayan, Jean Paul Gaultier, Rei Kawakubo, Helmut Lang, Martin Margiela, Alexander McQueen, Issey Miyake, Junya Watanabe, Vivienne Westwood and Yohji Yamamoto.
4. Further images of the exhibition can be found at the following link: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/exhibiting-fashion-victoria-and-albert-museum/VAWxuCOYoCgBIA?hl=en>.
5. Wilcox writes in a letter that she has heard of Chalayan's financial problems, offering to “help him to continue to be a part of the exhibition” and suggesting “one possibility might be for the V&A to purchase a small number of pieces for the exhibition” (communication between Wilcox and Annika McVeigh, 2000).
6. The Margiela correspondence file was bountiful (as well as Miyake, both of whom had worked on exhibition projects before), including an 8-page design proposal document. Margiela's display featured a collection of shipping crates with cut-out holes that allowed viewers to see the clothes inside (Blanchard, 2001). Unfortunately, no photos of the innovative display remain.
7. The exhibition opens with a floor-to-ceiling corner showcasing 8 designers (including Louise Grey and Mary Katrantzou) with a single outfit by each, who they invited to “design the backdrop”, providing each with a *mis-en-scène*.
8. Mind Zone, by architect Zaha Hadid, was one of fourteen Millennium Dome exhibits. The Millennium Dome designed by architect Richard Rogers, now known as The O2, was originally constructed to house the *Millennium Experience* (2000), a major exhibition celebrating the turn of the century.

9. Barbieri and Pantouvaki note: “designers and artists whose creative conversations with Clark resulted in work being developed and displayed in the gallery included Simon Thorogood, Dai Rees, Hussein Chalayan, Alexander McQueen, Mat Collishaw, Naomi Filmer, Matthew Williamson, Arkadius and Adelle Lutz. Each gravitated towards the Judith Clark Costume Gallery at a time when they were considering new methods of presentation for their work” (2014, 83-84).
10. Under agreement with Chalayan, the dress is available for loan to temporary exhibitions and accessible to other curators.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Alexandra Foxwell  <http://orcid.org/0009-0009-5275-5003>

References

- Anderson, Rob, Leslie A. Baxter, and Kenneth N. Cissna. 2004. *Dialogue: Theorizing Difference in Communication Studies*. California: Sage Publications.
- Barbieri, Donatella, and Sofia Pantouvaki. 2014. “Making Things Present: Exhibition-Maker Judith Clark and the Layered Meanings of Historical Dress in the Here and Now.” *Catwalk: The Journal of Fashion, Beauty and Style* 3 (1): 77–100.
- Baxandall, Michael. 1991. “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects.” In *Exhibiting Cultures*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Bolton, Andrew, and Rei Kawakubo. 2017. *Rei Kawakubo: Comme Des Garçons: Art of the in-Between*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Buber, Martin, and Ronald G. Smith. 1937. *I and Thou*. London: T. & T. Clark.
- Chambers. 1999. *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*. Illustrated ed. London: Chambers.
- Clark, Judith. 2023–2025. “Interviews with Author.” September 27, 2023, and 28 March, 2025.
- Cumming, Valerie. 2004. *Understanding Fashion History*. London: B.T. Batsford.

- Debo, Kaat, ed. 2012. *MOMU X: Ten Years of MoMu*. Antwerp: ModeMuseum Provincie Antwerpen.
- Domus. 2009. "On the Art of Fashion. Installing Allusions." September 18, 2009. <https://www.domusweb.it/en/design/2009/09/18/on-the-art-of-fashion-installing-allusions.html>
- Doubtfire, Joseph, and Giulia Ranchetti. 2016. "Curator as Artist as Curator." *Curating the Contemporary*, April 30, 2015. <https://curatingthecontemporary.org/2015/04/30/curator-as-artist-as-curator/>.
- Feitelberg, Rosemary. 2017. "'Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between' debuts at the Met." *WWD*, May 1, 2017. <https://wwd.com/eye/people/rei-kawakubocommes-des-garcons-art-of-the-in-between-debuts-at-the-metropolitan-museum-of-arts-costume-institute-10877780/>.
- Horsley, Jeffrey. 2015. "A Fashion 'Muséographie': The Delineation of Innovative Presentation Modes at ModeMuseum, Antwerp." *Fashion Theory* 19 (1): 43–66. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14113933306789>.
- Horsley, Jeffrey. 2017. "The Absent Shadow: Reflections on the Incidence of Menswear in Recent Fashion Exhibitions." *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion* 4 (1): 11–29. https://doi.org/10.1386/csmf.4.1.11_1.
- Jefferies, Stuart, and Nancy Groves. 2014. "Hans Ulrich Obrist: The Art of Curation." *The Guardian*, March 23, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/23/hans-ulrich-obrist-art-curator>.
- Jenss, Heike. 2016. *Fashion Studies: Research Methods, Sites, and Practices*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Karp, Ivan, and Steven Lavine. 1991. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Kawamura, Yuniya. 2020. *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress: An Introduction to Qualitative Methods*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.
- Lipscombe, Beca, and Lucy McKenzie. 2020. *Atelier E.B: Passer-by*. Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.
- Longair, Sarah. 2015. "Cultures of Curating: The Limits of Authority." *Museum History Journal* 8 (1): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1936981614Z.00000000043>.
- Menkes, Suzy. 2001. "Designers' Choice at V&A Fashion Exhibition: Radical Chic, but Is It Art?." *International Herald Tribune, The New York Times*, October 23, 2001. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/23/style/IHT-designers-choice-at-va-fashion-exhibition-radical-chic-but-is-it.html>.
- Menkes, Suzy. 2017. "Olivier Theyskens: 'She Walks in Beauty.'" *British Vogue*, October 12, 2017. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/suzy-menkes-olivier-theyskens-she-walks-in-beauty-momu-antwerp>.
- Obrist, Hans Ulrich. 2014. *Ways of Curating*. London: Penguin Books.

- O'Neill, Paul. 2012. *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(S)*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: The Mit Press.
- O'Neill, Paul, and Mick Wilson, eds. 2010. *Curating and the Educational Turn*. London: Open Editions.
- Pecorari, Marco. 2012. "'The MoMu Effect': On the Relation between Fashion Design and Fashion Museum." In *Museum and Design Disciplines*, edited by Matteo Ballarin and Maddalena Dalla Mura, p. 113.
- Quinn, Bradley. 2002. "Exhibition Review: 'Radical' Fashion? A Critique of the Radical Fashion Exhibition, Victoria and Albert Museum, London." *Fashion Theory* 6 (4): 441–445. <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270402779615334>.
- Silverman, Debora. 1986. *Selling Culture: Bloomingdale's, Diana Vreeland, and the New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan's America*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Smith, Roberta. 2017. "The Met's Rei Kawakubo Show, Dressed for Defiance." *The New York Times*, May 4, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/arts/design/the-mets-rei-kawakubo-show-dressed-for-defiance.html>.
- Steele, Valerie. 1998. "A Museum of Fashion Is More Than a Clothes-Bag." *Fashion Theory* 2 (4): 327–335. <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270498779476109>.
- Steele, Valerie. 2008. "Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition." *Fashion Theory* 12 (1): 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174108X268127>.
- Stevenson, N. J. 2008. "The Fashion Retrospective." *Fashion Theory* 12 (2): 219–235. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174108X300003>.
- Thompson, John M. A. 2012. *Manual of Curatorship: A Guide to Museum Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Vergo, Peter. 1989. *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Von Bismarck, Beatrice, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski, eds. 2012. *Cultures of the Curatorial*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Wilcox, Claire. 2001. *Radical Fashion*. London: V&A Publications.
- Wilcox, Claire. 2017. "Radicalizing the Representation of Fashion: Alexander McQueen at the V&A, 1999–2015." In *Refashioning and Redress: Conserving and Displaying Dress*, edited by Mary Brooks and Dinah D. Eastop. Los Angeles: Getty Publications.
- Wilcox, Claire. 2023–2025. "Interviews with Author." August 25, 2023, November 2, 2023, November 17, 2023, and March 18, 2025.