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Fashion at the Interface: Designer—Wearer—Viewer

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Abstract

This article draws on my practice-led PhD at the London College of Fashion proposing alternative practices in a research and design context that explore the edges of fashion, fine art, and performance methodology and practice. The project documented and tracked the emergence and development of conceptual and experimental fashion, exposing interdisciplinary practice at the edges of the fashion discipline. The hypothesis underpinning my research was that there can be clearly articulated alternative strategies for fashion design and communication that are concept and context based, rather than being driven by commerce, the market, and trends.

I designed collections of concept-based work, which were driven by concepts and processes and were tested and analyzed in a variety of contexts and written up as three major case studies. The process of design developed focuses on the body, movement, and behavior. I argue that designing for contexts such as dance, exhibition, and performance requires different approaches considering both concept and context at the point of inception.

KEYWORDS: conceptual fashion, interdisciplinarity, context, communication, design

Introduction

Having trained as a fashion designer and subsequently worked in a range of interdisciplinary contexts from exhibition to contemporary dance and the music industry it has become increasingly clear to me that my work did not fit neatly within the prescriptive terminology and definition of "fashion design." This lack of "fit" with conventional definitions led me to undertake a practice-led PhD at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, entitled "Interface, Concept and Context as Innovative Strategies for Fashion Design and Communication" (Bugg 2006) on which this article draws.

The hypothesis underpinning my research was that there can be clearly articulated alternative strategies for fashion design and communication that are concept and context based, rather than being driven by commerce, the market, and trends. I sought to identify new ways of approaching and developing such work and, through an exploration of the intersection of fashion with fine art and performance disciplines, aimed to add to an understanding of interdisciplinary practice within contemporary fashion design. As a result, the use of the term "fashion design" to describe this area of practice was then called into question. In undertaking this study, it was important to give considerable attention to developing an appropriate methodology to interrogate the proposition.

The research began in part through questioning my own practice, though as the investigation progressed it rapidly emerged that contemporary interdisciplinary practice surrounding fashion raised similar questions in relation to the work of other designers. This article focuses on the contemporary situation of fashion design in the late 1990s, specifically in relation to designers communicating their work in interdisciplinary contexts and the integrated relationship between theory and practice developed within my research methodology (see Figure 3).

The "location" for communicating fashion garments and concepts has increasingly moved beyond the confines of the catwalk, the traditional store space, and the printed page. Designers' work is now communicated

through and within a range of media: fashion film, animation, the music industry, art photography, fashion illustration and fashion graphics, virtual space, performance, curated space, and the art gallery. The research questioned the reasons for this shift into new territories, addressing how fashion is understood within interdisciplinary contexts and where its boundaries lay in relation to other disciplines, particularly fine art and performance. It also emerged that certain fashion designers working in these contexts appeared to be employing methodologies that are not driven by commercial imperatives but rather by processes at the boundaries of fashion that speak of both fine art and performance practices.

My investigation has tracked the development of "conceptual fashion" and explored interdisciplinary approaches employed by a small but increasing number of high-end fashion designers. I have investigated the contribution of the designer, the wearer, and the viewer in the communication and understanding of conceptual fashion in a range of contexts. By "contexts" I refer to both the context of a wearer and the location in which the embodied garment is viewed. My methodology rejected a purely semiotic or theoretical analysis and has established, through analysis of practice, how different spaces, from art galleries and live performance to photography and fashion imaging, affect the way a garment is "read" and responded to.

In an increasingly interdisciplinary fashion landscape it has become clear that the conceptual intention and context of presentation of the clothed body can dramatically affect these readings, leading to classifications of a garment as "fashion," "art," "costume" or "concept" for both the viewer and the wearer. I suggest that when fashion design is seen within new contexts, clarity of alignment to a specific subject has the potential to become blurred and that the generic term "fashion" may then be inappropriate, demanding a broader application and terminology for conceptual creative practices within the discipline of fashion design.

In order to conduct the study I used a multi-method approach to research, employing analysis of interviews with contemporary practitioners, three practical case studies, and two live applications in performance which were central to the investigation. The case studies utilized conceptually led design methods and explored the potential of communicating messages to wearers and viewers through clothing/fashion design, investigated via feedback gathered from the participants in interviews and questionnaires. This will be discussed in more detail in the section on Case Study Methodology.

The Fashion Space

Discourses around high and low cultural outputs are increasingly able to be reassessed in a postmodern context where fashion is now serving

new roles, functioning in both commercial and non-commercial arenas and across creative disciplines. The reassessment of these discourses at this commercial/non-commercial interface provides the starting point of the research. I have been able to develop and interrogate this through an assessment of the literature and the series of interviews undertaken with contemporary practitioners working at the intersection of fashion and other creative disciplines. The subject of fashion design and communication has become more diverse, collaborative, and interdisciplinary and some high-end designers are clearly reacting against the commercial focus of contemporary fashion, moving away from the traditional fashion cycle, seasonal restrictions, and market-led processes towards a more conceptual, experimental, and process-driven approach.

There have been an ever-increasing number of designers exploiting art and performance contexts as well as adopting art-related and interdisciplinary methodologies in their production. This is illustrated in the work of designers such as Hussein Chalayan, Shelley Fox, Rei Kawakubo, Martin Margiela, Issey Miyake, Dai Rees, Helen Storey, Simon Thorogood, and Viktor & Rolf. These designers have all, to varying degrees, adopted a conceptual approach, and have shown their work within galleries, non-traditional and emergent fashion spaces. They utilize a range of media and processes to communicate their ideas and continually extend their methodologies.

The fashion catwalk show has, since the late 1980s, engaged with these performative and interdisciplinary developments. Performance of the clothed body has emerged as a central tenet of catwalk presentation in the early twenty-first century. The mechanics of the theater and the stage are employed in hugely expensive productions and catwalk shows have become highly sophisticated, art directed, and spectacular (Duggan 2001: 250; Evans 2003: 70). As Dejan Sudjic observes:

> In the past thirty years the traditional catwalk has changed from a private commercial transaction behind closed doors into a public spectacle regarded as part theatre, part performance art and part entertainment (Sudjic 1990: 25).

There has been a steep escalation in theatrical and performative modes of presenting fashion on the catwalks in Paris, Milan, and especially in London. Some of the most spectacular of these events can be seen in the work of Alexander McQueen and John Galliano who have created fantastic narratives, visualizations of characters and scenarios that directly relate to the ideas behind the collections. They have both used the catwalk, albeit in different ways, to tell stories and create drama around the collections. Examples are wide ranging, from Galliano's high-drama Dior S/S 2007 *Madame Butterfly* collection or his Fall 2007 collection inspired by Parisian street life in the 1910s and 1920s, to Alexander McQueen's performance of a lone model wearing

a white dress and revolving on the stage as industrial spray-painting machines sprayed her in black and yellow graffiti (McQueen, *Untitled*, S/S 1999).

Although there is a relationship between the design concept and its method of communication in these examples the dramatic presentation and use of spectacle can ultimately be seen to be employed for press coverage, brand-building, and commercial reward. As Galliano himself states:

> It is great to tell a story in a collection, but you must never forget that, despite all the fantasy the thing is about the clothes … at the end of the day there has to be a collection and it has to be sold. We have to seduce women into buying it. That's our role. What you see on the runway isn't all that you get. That represents less than a quarter of what we produce. Merchandising is vital (McDowell 1997: 59).

Arguably, other designers—notably Chalayan and Miyake—demonstrate a greater integrity in the selection and utilization of specific contexts. Both regularly work in interdisciplinary contexts and select the appropriate context in which to show specific collections, often moving away from a catwalk environment. Both Viktor & Rolf and Margiela have also challenged the catwalk and used it as a space to confront or explore the capitalist values of fashion.

The articulation of the specific contexts for presentation is perhaps the most obvious crossover between fashion, art, and performance. The emergence of individual fashion designers showing their work in art galleries has fueled an ongoing debate around the boundaries between disciplines and the appropriateness of contexts for showing fashion, provoking reaction from both viewers and critics (*BBC Radio 4*, October 10, 2003; Menkes 1998: 13). The intention and purpose of showing fashion in an art environment has further been called into question when major brand names such as Giorgio Armani exhibit their past collections in art galleries (Royal Academy, 2004) as static installed works. This and similar presentations and installations are played out against the historical hierarchies of design and art, as well as our understanding of the purpose of the art gallery.

The emergence of fashion curation as a named discipline (including the development of masters-level courses in higher education in this area) can be seen to reflect the shift towards contemporary fashion exhibition as a distinctive form, as opposed to the established practices of historical costume and fashion display in museums. This raises questions about the distinctive function of gallery spaces and museums respectively and suggests that context has a significant impact upon the viewers' reading of the work. This is illustrated by Lars Nittve in his introduction to the catalog for the *Fashination* exhibition in Stockholm

in which he suggests that art galleries have the potential to define the work of some fashion designers as art:

> Many of the more notable fashion designers of our time produce collections and shows which, if they were exhibited in an art gallery or museum, would automatically be assimilated as art (Moderna Museet 2004: 9).

Chalayan offers one of the clearest examples of this recasting of fashion as art. His work draws on a diversity of concepts and themes from cultural migration, the relationship between man, technology, and nature, the human body, transience and memory, religious practices to voodoo. He redefines and challenges the boundaries of fashion; he communicates ideas and issues through his designs and selects appropriate communication methods for specific concepts and works. Quinn (2002) states:

> The point of Chalayan's departure from conventional fashion was his use of clothing as a site of exploration, and his designs were created as expressions of concepts rather than as garments made with only functionality in mind. As a result, Chalayan's collections are characterised by a heightened sense of meaning, an allusion to a more intense experience somewhere else, or the promise of a richer, wider horizon to be found (Quinn 2002: 46).

Chalayan's showpieces seem as comfortable in an art gallery as they do on film, as photographic image or shown on a catwalk. More importantly, Chalayan is an example of a designer who selects the context in which the work is to be communicated as an integral part of his concept, method, and its execution.

Fashion Promotion and Merchandising

The notion of "fashion space" has been progressively developed but it is not only in the gallery where these questions are raised. Fashion promotion and merchandising in fashion outlets is being continually reinvented and methods of communication are becoming more and more sophisticated to draw in consumers. There is a shift towards new methods of display and the boundaries between the gallery, museum, social space, and retail environment are becoming blurred. Consumers have become sophisticated viewers and their expectations from a retail experience are now much greater. This was clearly illustrated as early as 2002 when Prada opened a flagship store in New York designed by Rem Koolhaas, which operated at the boundaries of retail, architecture, and gallery in its creative methods of display and communication. Koolhaas

brought together areas for the display of artwork, a dramatic staircase inhabited by a group of mannequins that the customer walked past, a performance space, and interactive technology. The store had the feel and function of the gallery, as well as retaining its function to sell fashion and the brand: "Koolhaas's new space upholds the union between fashion, consumerism and art as though they are an indissoluble trinity" (Quinn 2003: 48).

It is not only the gallery, store, and catwalk environments that demonstrate these shifts in approach; there is now a much broader multimedia communication base, which designers and artists are utilizing within their work. Fashion is no longer purely about the garment and the growth in the fashion imaging industries reflects this.

As Caroline Evans points out in her essay "Yesterday's Emblems and Tomorrow's Commodities:"

> Current fashion participates in an economic system that is developing very differently from its nineteenth-century origins, which pioneered the techniques of retail and advertising to promote the garment. Now the fashioned garment circulates in a contemporary economy as part of a network of signs, of which the actual garment is but one (Evans in Bruzzi and Church Gibson 2000: 96).

The focus on fashion communication has grown and it is here that some of the most innovative and interdisciplinary practice is currently taking place. The promotion and marketing of fashion has become a creative space in which photographers, illustrators, marketers, and art directors are able to promote and communicate particular collections. They are challenging methods of communication through working on the interface of other disciplines. Developments in fashion, film, and animation are in the vanguard of fashion communication and new media fashion images explore the boundaries of fashion photography and illustration. Virtual spaces and websites, in particular the innovative www.showstudio.com, have also demonstrated the potential of fashion animation and fashion film as well as new methods of navigation and consumption of fashion images and ideas for viewers. It is particularly in fashion communication that conventional terminology seems inappropriate to describe emerging practice since many of these activities are functioning in new spaces and serving different functions.

Questions are clearly raised: to what extent are contemporary manifestations of performance and interdisciplinary communication within the fashion industry functioning on a cultural level or as a promotional tool? Do they indeed have a deeper conceptual root as a method of exploration and communication?

I would argue that the use of performance on the catwalks in recent times has, in most instances, been employed as a means of promotion and is rarely rooted within the designer's process and the concepts

behind the collections. There are exceptions, as I have previously discussed, who clearly employ methods of presentation that are wholly appropriate to the concepts behind their collections and to their intended audience. The key issue remains, however, that performance is employed with varying degrees of appropriateness to the designer's concept and to the collections themselves. This creates a division between those who adopt the surface value of performance and art disciplines and those who employ a design methodology and method of communication as central to their conceptual approach.

It is clear to me that a small but increasing number of designers have approached design from a new perspective and have moved into interdisciplinary contexts as part of their process. Shelley Fox is a good example of this as she has increasingly started to show her work in exhibition contexts as well as in contemporary dance. Fox, in a lecture at the opening of her *Philadelphia Florist* (2006) exhibition, discussed her particular approach and her disillusionment with the fashion industry. She said that she has "pulled out of seasonal selling because other opportunities came through" she also identified that in new contexts such as galleries she "didn't need to sell it and so she could be more creative" (Stanley Picker Gallery, October 4, 2006).

A small number of influential designers are also stepping out of the commercial side of fashion in reaction to the need for constant renewal. They are embracing a slower approach to fashion, more in keeping with their strongly held personal philosophies and approaches. Helen Storey, when interviewed as part of my research, discussed her move away from the commercial side of fashion. In response to the question "Why do you think fashion designers are turning to other methods of communicating their work?" she identified a need for change in the industry, saying she "found the catwalk format stifling" and had moved her work into new contexts. She also highlighted the benefits of embracing new methods and approaches as integral to this change (Helen Storey, personal interview with author, 2003).

This was also discussed with designer Simon Thorogood, where he talked of "a culture shift, exploration and cross over." He suggests that education has allowed for a more "cross-fertilized world," saying "possibly new generations of graduates were coming out of art school as creatives, rather than as a sculptor, or a fine artist or a fashion designer" (Simon Thorogood, personal interview with author, 2004). This culture shift can be seen to be extended through the development of fashion exhibition, academic and theoretical study in fashion, and the growing acceptance of fashion as a conceptually as well as culturally significant practice. If, as I suggest, the parameters are shifting, then this puts the conceptually led designer in an interesting position. Although the number of designers working in this way is still relatively small their work is becoming increasingly significant and there is arguably now an opening for these designers to move their work and ideas into different contexts,

to wider audiences and disciplines as part of this change. Emerging opportunities for funding and project sponsorship for conceptual and interdisciplinary projects also suggests that there will be more examples of fashion designers working in new arenas and with conceptual and experimental methods.

Case Study Methodology

It was in this climate of heightened interest in fashion as an area for research and critical debate that I undertook my own practice-based study from 1998 to 2006. Debate had to this point been primarily the territory of theorists, critics, and historians, whereas my research was a response to a perceived need for an analysis of contemporary practice from the perspective of the fashion practitioner.

The complex nature of the questions posed through my initial hypothesis and the need to interrogate issues relating to both experience and creative process led to a carefully designed multi-method approach to research that utilized theory and practice and a range of interdisciplinary methodologies. This approach incorporated three practice-led case studies of my own designed garments, semi-structured interviews with participants and viewers of the work, and a series of interviews with relevant practitioners in this area of inquiry. The nature of the inquiry necessitated an empirical investigation in live contexts. The experience of wearing my designs and the communication between designer, wearers, and viewers, together with the response of all those involved in the process, was central to the research methodology employed.

Each case study therefore followed a fixed structure but also built on the findings from the previous case study, whilst referencing the initial intention and contextual interviews in exploring a range of interrelated factors. The working method of the research program developed as the first case study informed the second which was analyzed to inform the third. Case Study 1 drew on random movements of dancers to inspire design, whereas in Case Study 2 a more controlled approach was developed which in turn informed the extended range of contexts applied to a single garment in Case Study 3.

The process of observation, reflection, and analysis within all of the case studies was controlled through the development of data retrieval formats that served as a consistent structure throughout the project. Garments were tested in different scenarios from fashion shoots, editorial, videos, live performance spaces to art venues. Subsequently reaction from viewers (some of whom remained constant throughout) and wearers (different according to context) was obtained. All respondents were asked the same questions and the discussion was recorded and transcribed to ensure all feedback was comparable and consistently retained for analysis.

The findings of the case studies were applied to final designs that were presented in contexts informed by the findings of the research.

Case Study 1

The first case study was started early in the research, only one garment was used and this was tested in three scenarios that allowed an initial exploration of the interface of fashion and art. This first case study was used as the pilot vehicle to develop the case study method, structures for analysis, and the basis of the design process.

Case Study 2

Case Study 2 was developed from this experience as a more complex study that produced a significant quantity of raw data for analysis. It involved a collection of nine garments, *The Movement Collection*, which derives ideas and shapes from the body; these could then be tested and developed on the body in movement, a process that could be described as "from the body to the body." Each garment was designed to enhance or encourage a particular movement or behavior and was recorded and analyzed in five different contexts. The *White Wing Leotard* (Figure 1) illustrates this and is designed to place specific emphasis on fluid arm movement, seen here in the context of an art shoot where the wearer is actively engaged in the communication process.

Case Study 3

The idea for the third case study, *Red Shoelace Dress*, emerged from wearer feedback on the resistance and stimulus afforded by the weight

Figure 1
Initial tests of garment forms, *White Wing*, J. Bugg, 2001.

Figure 2
Red Shoelace Dress, J. Bugg, 2003. Shown here in live performance, 2004, in the exhibition *Mutiny at the Barge House 2003*, London, and in editorial context.

of the garments in Case Study 2. This led to further exploration of the potential of weight in a garment to encourage movement. The garment was constructed from layers of shoelaces, which would lift as the wearer moved with the garment and which then prompted a responsive movement on the part of the wearer, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Only one garment was used for the case study to gain greater focus on this and other issues raised in the earlier case studies with a particular emphasis on exploring critical contexts of display and communication. The study centered on how the design functioned in a wider range of contexts, previously unexplored, as well as contexts requiring further exploration.

Working Methods

The practice-led focus of the project allowed me to discover through "doing" and offered insights into process and context that could only

be achieved by practitioner research. Nevertheless the interface of theory and practice was entirely integrated from a practitioner perspective throughout. An extensive contextual review and interviews informed my practice, and the practice both informed and created theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 12), through the work produced and analyzed within the case studies. My working method embraced testing, analysis, and development through practice and sought to establish a framework for analysis and development of design form and function, as well as allowing for reflection and analysis on the effect of a variety of contexts of communication for conceptual fashion design. The approach was constructed from an analysis of methods and creative processes operating within contemporary fashion, art, and performance disciplines.

Design Concept

The design concept was to develop garments that extended the possibilities for movement. The design is derived from aspects of body movement as a catalyst for design. By taking design back to the functional primary element of the body, issues of human communication through behavior might be addressed. Each garment was designed to enhance or encourage a particular movement or behavior. Through analysis of the wearers' responses to the garment a judgment would be made as to how and if wearers read meaning in clothing through the physical experience of wearing a particular garment.

The design process developed and built on traditional empirical fashion research design methods, analysis, development, and construction. It drew on processes used in craft, sculpture, the visual arts more broadly, and design for performance. The method was informed by the contemporary and historical practice of artists and designers working on the boundaries of creative disciplines and with clothing the body. It placed significant emphasis on empirical practice, experimentation, testing, and analysis as an iterative process. The method allowed for analysis of clothing's physical and physiological affect on a wearer and provided a means of informing garment design processes. It also allowed for a closer examination of experimental fashion design practice outside of consumer, trend, and seasonal constraints.

Recording and Analysis

Each scenario was recorded visually through video or photography, as appropriate to the given context. A series of standard questions were developed and refined over the duration of the research project. The questions sought to interrogate the initial hypothesis and emergent findings. As the program progressed, more focus was placed on embedded design

concept and meaning within clothing and how this is responded to by wearers and viewers. All respondents were asked the same questions and the discussion was recorded and transcribed to ensure all feedback was retained for analysis. Verbal responses were recorded for each garment in each scenario/context from wearers, viewers, and the production team then comparative and content analysis was undertaken for each garment. In this way, I was able to explore the impact of a practical design concept and demonstrate how its effect could be tracked through the wearers' and viewers' responses.

Research Design Methodology

Significant time was devoted to identifying and developing appropriate methods and frameworks in which to locate and "test" the practice. The approach brings together elements from scientific, empirical, and experimental research with a focus on observation and discovery, testing, and some use of controls and variables. From social science it employs methods of data collection, interviews, open questionnaires, case studies, and elements of grounded theory. Finally, derived from the historian's research method it utilizes reflection on past precedents, theory analysis, description, and unstructured interview techniques. As a practicing designer my approach also drew upon experiential, haptic, and tacit knowledge. The design research methodology employed is perhaps best described in the design research methodology map (Figure 3).

The method was both empirical and qualitative in respect of its analytical approach. Quantifiable methods were not appropriate to answering the questions raised within the research, as many of the findings were not measurable in this controlled manner. The qualitative approach can be seen as sympathetic to the designer's process and, more importantly, it allows analysis of human response to clothing in different contexts. It was critical to gauge emotional, as well as behavioral and physical response and a qualitative method allows for a deeper investigation of emotional and experiential elements. This is clearly supported by Strauss and Corbin (1998):

> By the term "qualitative research," we mean any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings … (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 10).

The semi-structured interview method facilitated feedback from participants within the case studies, allowing them to talk freely about their physical, emotional, and aesthetic responses and to explain their reading and understanding of the work. Denscombe (2003) reiterates the

Figure 3
Research model, J. Bugg, 2006.

relevance of unstructured and semi-structured interviews to this type of project, saying: "They lend themselves to in-depth investigations, particularly those that explore personal accounts of experiences and feelings."

The Design Process

The practical and responsive method developed for the design and manufacture of garments was sympathetic to the design concept; an emphasis was placed on how concept can be embedded within clothing and how this is responded to by wearers and viewers. The approach of

designing "from the body to the body" resulted in designs that centered on movement and behavior, allowing for clear focus on the effect of concept and context on garment design.

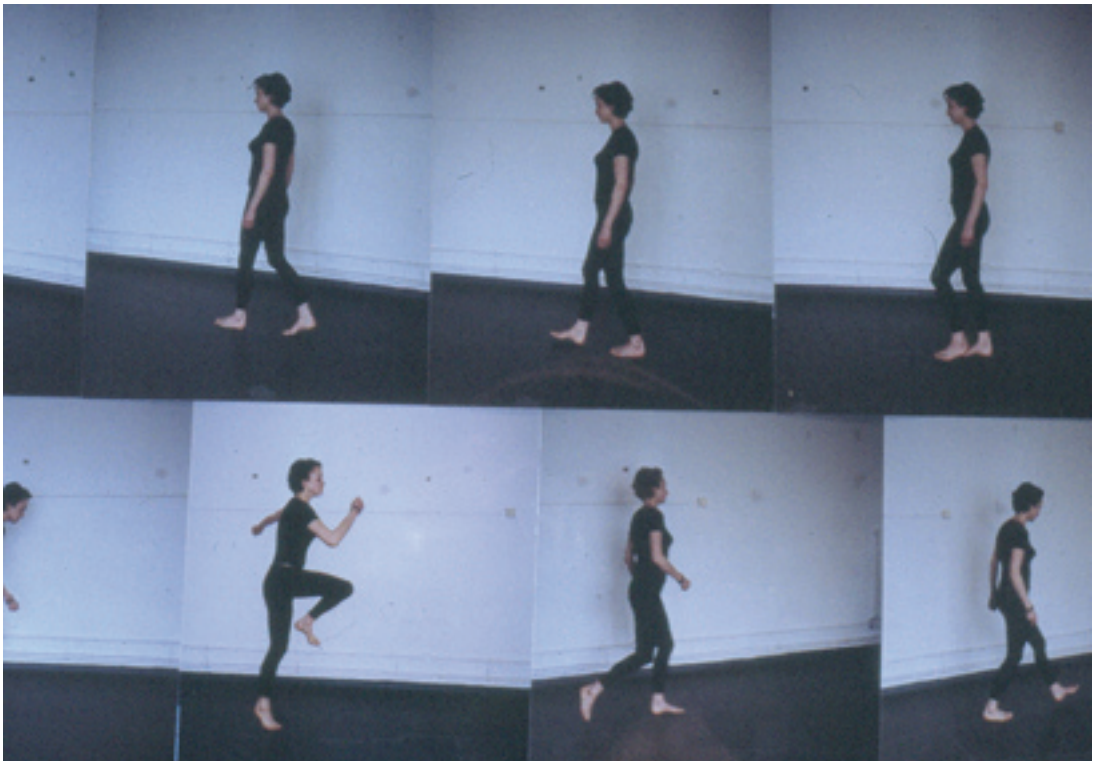
The designs, working at various stages with a model in improvisational sessions through a series of sixty-five body movements, actions, and behaviors, were recorded on video. Ideas were then translated by building in physical form on the body, then redesigned and developed from this stimulus. A two-way dialogue was enacted throughout the design process and was then extended through an exploration of presentation and communication methods to reveal the effect of context on concept (see Figures 4a–d). This method of working was employed in contrast to linear design methods, to allow for reflection on practice and an investigation of process in a non-commercially driven context. The design method rejected non-reflective methods, often exacerbated by "fast fashion," which continually push the designer to immediate outcomes rather than allowing space for research and experimentation.

Participants, Viewers, and Wearers

The participants in the different contexts covered within the case studies were the production teams, viewers, and wearers. The three viewers remained constant throughout the program to ensure equivalence in the comparative analysis of their responses to the various contexts. They were drawn from different social groups and backgrounds, one was art trained, the second was a fashion designer for the high street market, and the third had no formal training or experience in art or design. This facilitated assessment of what, if any, effect the viewer's background and experience had on their understanding and reading of the work. It was, however, not appropriate to retain a consistency of wearer throughout the case studies. Wearers and production teams varied dependent on the context and were selected for their appropriateness to the type of project. For example in the fashion shoot fashion models from a model agency were used, whereas in live performance contexts performers and dancers wore the garments.

Both viewers and wearers were asked to respond to the garments, the idea behind them, and how they made them feel, as well as to comment on their own emotional and aesthetic response to the work in its particular situation. At no stage were any of the participants, with the exception of the production teams, informed of the design concepts and intentions of the designer.

Comparative and content analyses were undertaken between each garment in each of the contexts to explore both the success of the design concept communication and the effect of context. Findings were compared across contexts and then synthesized into overall case study



Figures 4a and b
Design development and working “from the body to the body,” 2001.

Figures 4c and d
Design development and working "from the body to the body," 2001 (*continued*).

conclusions. The conclusions from each case study were then drawn into a matrix designed to record a summary of response from wearers and viewers in each of the case studies. This data was then used to inform a series of final designs communicated in contexts responsive to the research findings (see Figures 5 and 6).

Interface

It could be concluded that not all contexts are discipline-specific for viewers and wearers. The fashion context, specifically the editorial format, however, was the most discipline prescriptive for viewers and wearers, all viewers reading the work as "fashion." The discussion around whether an art gallery makes a fashion garment into "art" was explored throughout the case studies in different types of gallery and other formats. It

Figure 5
Red Shake Dress, J. Bugg, final shoot, 2006. Photographer: Roy Shakespear. The image shows a dancer exploring the movement potential of the garment.

Figure 6
Toothpick Spine and Shoelace Bustle, J. Bugg, 2005. Photographer: Roy Shakespear. Seen here in performance for the final shoot, 2006.

emerged that this is not the case, and that in fact art-related contexts generated far more diverse readings of the work for the viewers.

Further analysis revealed that context can align work to a specific as well as multidisciplinary reading. Context can affect the concept of clothing and the body on which it is worn and the space in which it is viewed, all impacting on the way the work is received. Within the case studies there were many examples of very different feelings about the same garment presented in different ways. Performance and video were the most positively received methods of communication throughout the case studies.

They allowed for the most open reading of the work and for heightened emotional and aesthetic responses. To classify the work to a specific discipline is difficult for both viewers and wearers. Viewers are comfortable using a variety of terms and disciplines to describe the work across all the case studies. Wearers, however, tended not to classify the work under a discipline heading and referred to the work as clothing, garment, dress, etc. All respondents used a variety of terms to describe the garments: "clothing," "costume," "garment," "piece" or "dress." The terms appeared to be interchangeable, indicating a difficulty with locating this form of garment-focused practice. It was evident across the case studies that viewers will often use more than one descriptive term in a single response.

Interrelationship: Designer, Viewer, Wearer

The findings of the case studies illustrate that there is a complex network of communication that takes place between these different parties in the construction of meaning. The model of findings set out in Figure 7 offers a diagrammatic representation of a sophisticated network of communication between designer, wearer, and viewer of conceptually directed garments communicated through context. This model has the potential to inform a wide range of disciplines that use the clothed body to communicate concepts to audiences in a range of contexts.

Communication of concepts through clothing was at the core of this program throughout and this study has been able to demonstrate the importance of appropriate context to concept. The characteristics and consequential meanings of items of fashion and dress convey different and often contradictory messages at the same time. These readings are further complicated in relation to clothing worn on the body, through interaction and movement, introducing further recontextualization. The body on which the garment is worn also adds to this "intertextuality" (Barnard 1996: 173).

Within this study a discourse emerged between not only the author, the "text," and the viewer, but also between the "text" and the wearer, creating a four-way exchange with multiple readings and interpretations based not only on knowledge assumed but also on new knowledge created at this interface. The concepts are therefore open to variety of readings. The wearability and physical human engagement brings into play an important and largely ignored "performative dynamic." Through the research it has become evident that it is not always appropriate or indeed possible to describe fully the concept to the viewer. The viewers' reading of clothing-based work in context is complicated and readings are mediated through a process of association, emotional responses, and personal understanding of the body, clothing, and the effect of context. All of this has implications for the production of concept-led clothing, as well as for commercial applications where

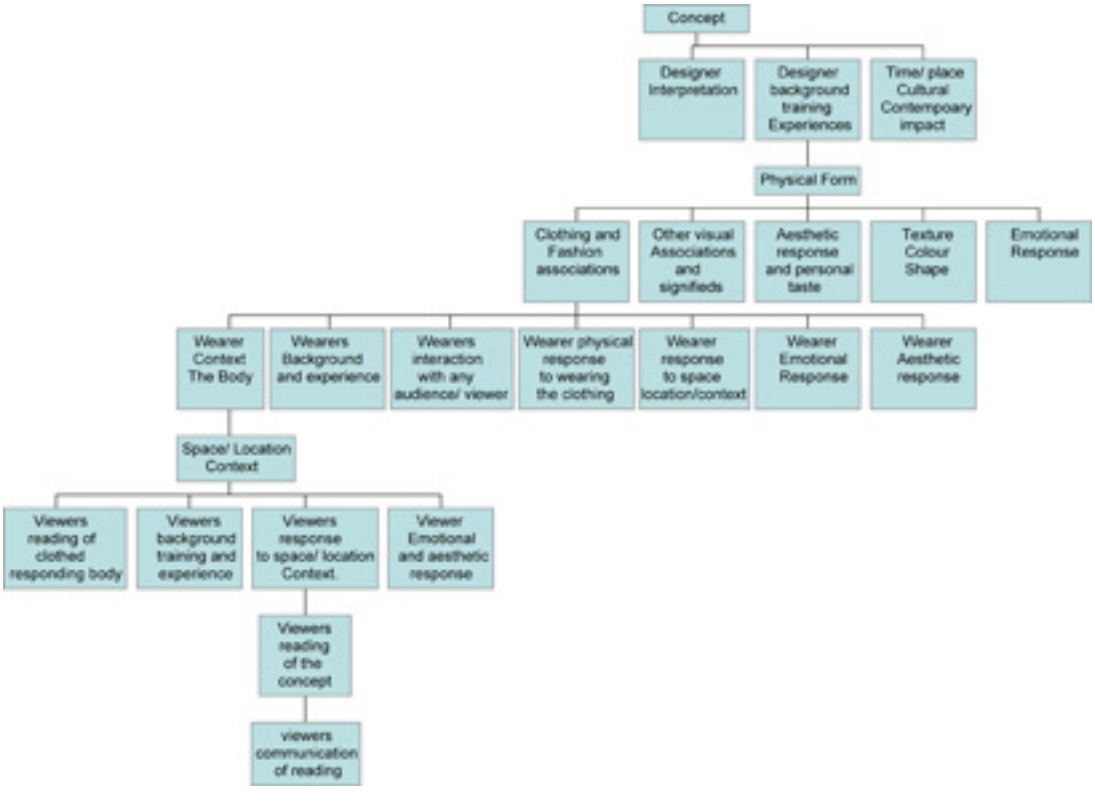


Figure 7
Model of findings, interrelationship, designer, viewer, wearer, J. Bugg, 2006.

clothing is central to the communication such as design for dance, performance, theater or fashion promotion, fashion photography and imaging, styling, fashion curation, and art direction. It may also be relevant to fashion designers designing for particular contexts, and in the selection of contexts appropriate to the design intention of their work.

Concept and Context at the Interface

In conclusion, my research has demonstrated that it is possible to produce concept-led clothing and communication that functions on the interface of disciplines, allowing for an open reading of the work free from restrictive boundaries and classifications. It has been established that context does not definitively align conceptual fashion to a specific discipline such as fashion, fine art or performance. Analysis of the case studies suggests that context can add to a reading of the work as fashion

or art, however, the work does not need the specific classification as fashion and neither does it need to be characterized as art in the majority of contexts. The work was most often described by bringing together several discipline terms, the only exception to this is the fashion editorial context which drew a definitive reading of the work as fashion due to the power of editorial contexts and the use of a fashion model and styling.

Through collaboration with other disciplines, the work has the potential to move from one classification to another. For example, the garments produced for the two live contexts that were used in the project, costumes for Union Dance's production *Sensing Change*, which was in two parts: *Pure C* and *Silence Disrupted* (Figure 8), and an exhibition in the Fashion Space at London College of Fashion, showed clearly how garments within specific contexts are read. The costumes for the dancers were clearly read as costume and the work in the exhibition was interpreted as fashion or art.

In other contexts, and through appropriate methodologies, the work was able to move beyond the parameters of specific classification and many viewers identified the fact that it was unnecessary to classify the work at all. The case studies have shown that viewers wanted to find terms to describe the work; however, they felt that it was not necessary to define the practice. It also emerged that in the case of conceptual and experimental design practice the garments have the ability to function in quite different ways in a variety of contexts.

In contemporary culture, artists and designers are increasingly drawing upon interrelated stimuli and methodologies. Those trained in one discipline are working within another and this in itself makes the boundaries of subjects difficult to define. In a number of cases designers are working in cross-disciplinary spaces for more than promotional

Figure 8
Costumes for *Sensing Change (Silence Disrupted)* for Union Dance at the Queen Elizabeth Hall premier, J. Bugg, 2005. Photographer unknown.

reasons, and this can be seen as an important indicator of the erosion of boundaries, resulting in very positive sharing of knowledge between disciplines. Designers such as Chalayan, Margiela, and Shelley Fox, driven by conceptual, interdisciplinary, and experimental approaches to their subject and communication defy attempts to pigeonhole their practice into the existing terminology of fashion. To attempt such pigeonholing constrains the consumer's interpretation and interaction with the work and restricts opportunities for the designers and their work.

My study challenges the terminology currently available for describing fashion practice as restrictive, and not embracing the emergence of new fashion methods, approaches, and modes of communication. The term "fashion" may need to be diversified in order to acknowledge new types of contemporary practice, using fashion as an umbrella heading, just as art practitioners are often subdivided into multimedia artists, sculptors, painters, and performance artists; similar refinements of definition are evident in other creative disciplines. Fashion classification has increasingly focused on consumption and market level, as opposed to reflecting the designer's intention, process, and the context for which the work was designed. Clearly, there is a growing divide between commercial and conceptual fashion, and production and consumption models can be reassessed in this light. Design for the market is a different practice to experimental fashion and interdisciplinary work again serves a different function, where the consumer becomes a viewer in performance and gallery contexts, consuming fashion in new ways.

I have indicated some directions and necessary considerations prior to embarking on interdisciplinary and conceptually oriented fashion practice, in respect of methodology and communication of work. Designing for contexts such as dance, exhibition, and performance requires different approaches, considering both concept and context at the point of inception. The more designers work across disciplines the more they need to consider context and to develop appropriate methods.

This work has examined the effect of design processes, and the reception and consumption of conceptual fashion in different contexts that directly inform work that uses the adorned or clothed body, exploring the interface between clothing the body and its context. The knowledge developed in relation to audience reading and understanding in specific contexts could be applicable in many visual disciplines.

A case in point is dance and performance where the costume has the potential to become fully integrated in terms of sympathy to the movement and the physical restraints imposed upon the dancers, the choreography, and the context of the final communication. It might also be applied in a range of ways to develop methods of design and communication within the fashion industry, in fashion merchandising, photography, styling, marketing, and advertising, as well as in fashion curation and exhibition.

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