

RMIT DESIGN ARCHIVES JOURNAL

VOL 8 Nº 1 2018

SPECIAL ISSUE

HIGH RISK DRESSING /
CRITICAL FASHION

FDC





A photograph of a light blue dress with a black beaded belt and a dark blue jacket with gold buttons. The dress has a black belt with white beaded text that reads "RMIT". The jacket is dark blue with two gold buttons visible. The background is dark.

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HIGH RISK DRESSING /
CRITICAL FASHION

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Postcard promoting
the 'Fashion *87
Parade!' Video Party
held at Inflation,
1987, showing
members of the
Fashion Design
Council. Gift of
Robert Buckingham,
1998, RMIT
Design Archives,
0176.1998.0021

Half Cover

Garment forms in
Martha Poggioli's
'A Modular
Program', staged as
part of the *High Risk
Dressing / Critical
Fashion* program.
Photographed by
Layla Cluer.

Inside Half Cover

Performers at
'Le Tapis Noir'
an event presenting
S!X's work for *High
Risk Dressing /
Critical Fashion*.
Photographed by
Monty Coles.

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D&K's collection,
'All or Nothing'.
Photographed by
Agnieszka Chabros.

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The 'archive' space
of *High Risk Dressing
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designed by Žiga
Testen. Photography
by Tobias Titz.

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*Epilogue:
Reflections on the archive*

Harriet Edquist



RMIT Design Hub is located alongside the RMIT Design Archives – an extraordinary collection of design artefacts that reflects Melbourne’s rich design history.

In the exhibition *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* (17.02.2017 – 13.04.2017) we drew on this archive to display, interpret and interrogate the diverse range of materials related to the Fashion Design Council (FDC).

Comprising some 1500 artefacts including videos, photographs, newsletters, articles, flyers and posters, the FDC archive was considered in detail for the first time since the collection was donated by Robert Buckingham twenty years ago. The exhibition was developed by a curatorium of four members: Robyn Healy, Kate Rhodes, Nella Themelios and Fleur Watson. This issue of the *RMIT Design Archives Journal* documents the exhibition and reflects upon emergent and experimental fashion practices in Melbourne today.

The FDC (1983–1993) was a membership-based organisation established to support, promote and provoke avant-garde Australian fashion, founded by Robert Buckingham, Kate Durham and Robert Pearce. In using the FDC archive as a reflective tool, the exhibition opened up and queried ideas promoted by the FDC. Rather than looking back at the FDC’s history with nostalgia, our intent was to critically explore its legacy, testing its influence and relevance to contemporary practice.

High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion also convened a new ‘collective’, drawn from contemporary fashion practice. This new collective – many of whom had little knowledge of the FDC prior to the exhibition – were asked to research and respond to the FDC materials in the archive. Participants were provided with a curated collection of ephemera to use as the basis of their research. They were encouraged to use this material to reflect upon the criticality of their own practice. The new collective responded with a diverse range of projects – installations, fashion presentations, performances, films, publications, residencies – which activated Design Hub over the eight-week period of the show.

The curatorium approached the exhibition design as a form of scenography – a performative, set-like environment to house the diversity of practice taking place. For Project Room 1 of Design Hub we commissioned three local architecture practices – Sibling Architecture, Studiobird with Caitlyn Parry and WOWOWA Architecture with Andre Bonnice – to design an exhibition environment that referenced the creative, social and promotional spaces

central to FDC activities: the office, the bar and the shop. Each studio was asked to capture the shift outlined in our title – from *High Risk Dressing* to *Critical Fashion* – and in doing so reflect upon the transition from an emerging, provocative and collaborative creative culture to today’s world of internationally-networked, conceptually-driven, contemporary fashion practice. This approach to the exhibition design reflected the FDC’s inherently cross-disciplinary spirit and provided an opportunity to ask: are these sites still relevant to fashion practice? Each design studio looked over their shoulder to the FDC for inspiration, but produced outcomes that firmly reference the context, challenges and energy of working as a designer today.

In the adjoining gallery – Project Room 2 – the FDC collection from the RMIT Design Archives was unpacked, discussed and catalogued throughout the duration of the exhibition in a new ‘archive’ space designed by Žiga Testen. This parallel zone positioned the archive as a ‘living’ resource where we discussed the material on display through public programs, as well as drawing on the critical reflections of original members of the FDC and others associated with the organisation. Visitors to the exhibition were also invited to take part in the process of nourishing the collection by offering their own recollections of the FDC and, in doing so, contributing directly to the ‘living’ nature of the archive. Harriet Edquist expands upon the qualities of the ‘active archive’ in her essay within this issue of the *Design Archives Journal*. In addition, fashion practitioners working today, also exhibited in this space, tackling and testing ideas relating to the nature of archives.

For *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* the exhibition curatorium also commissioned a series of video interviews with figures such as FDC founders Kate Durham and Robert Buckingham, FDC shop manager Alasdair MacKinnon and designer Michael Trudgeon who worked in the same building that housed the FDC offices, played in a band that performed at FDC events and edited *Crowd* magazine – an influential publication that reviewed FDC exhibitions and activities.



High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion Spaces

The Office

Located within Stalbridge Chambers at 443 Little Collins Street – a nineteenth-century building that most recently housed a warren of legal offices – the Fashion Design Council’s first office was a small, affordable and legitimising environment. The office gave the fledgling FDC credibility: a postal address for their letterhead and a place to meet current and potential funders. It was a site for members to meet with the Council’s founders, where the newsletters were written, printed and posted, and where new ideas were hatched. The office was part of a network of spaces at Stalbridge Chambers, which also included artist and designer studios. The proximity of so many creative people to one another encouraged collaborative relationships, including a convenient and rich assortment of creative producers for the FDC’s events and activities. As designer Michael Trudgeon states:

Stalbridge Chambers was where we all had offices. It was a converted legal building and the rent was unbelievably cheap. It was also in a good part of town in terms of access to art shops, and a tramline away from where 3RRR was then residing in Carlton (at the time, it was the radio station for RMIT University). You’d go up to the FDC office in Stalbridge Chambers, and everyone would be sitting around working. In a way, it was the idea that urbanism – of living in the city – was most interesting when it was experimental and when it was as wild as possible. I think the idea of what a city was started to emerge quite strongly in the 1970s. Cities were places that became generators; they were places where people congregated to do experimental, challenging and provocative things. So, it seemed absolutely natural that the FDC should emerge from this.

FDC co-founder Kate Durham adds:

Peter Corrigan was very important to the foundation of the FDC because he got a sense of our outreach right from the start. He told us “you can’t call yourselves ‘Painted Lizard Architecture’ and all of those things, you’ve got to call yourselves something important, like the Fashion Design Council of Australia.” Then we got this idea that

you could make stuff up and it would become true: you would invite people, say we’ve got the world’s youngest fashion designer and before long we got publicity. People were interested in us and that attracted more people.

WOWOWA Architecture and Andre Bonnice’s design for the ‘office’ in *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* used the idea of the office as a shopfront as a point of departure: the way a postal address and a physical workspace can legitimise an organisation or brand. Their ‘fish bowl’ working space comprised an acrylic decagon in hues referencing the rose-coloured filters of social media and the geometries of the UFC boxing championships, while the hand-stamped ‘terrazzo’ floor drew upon the cut-and-paste graphic language of the FDC newsletters. This suggests that the office of today is like a stage, putting its inhabitants on show within a ‘shopfront of stability’, communicating confidence and success to potential clients. These days, more than ever the office is the space that designers physically fashion into an environment that projects their values, showcases their tools and welcomes those with whom they interact – peers, clients and followers on social media.

The Bar

Melbourne’s alternative drinking and music spots – such as the Crystal Ballroom, Earl’s Court and Inflation – were key spaces for the Fashion Design Council during the 1980s. The bar or nightclub was where the FDC’s activities reached their zenith. These spaces were used as platforms for members to present their latest work in highly produced, choreographed catwalk shows curated by the FDC founders. The parades were infamous and attracted large crowds, audiences experienced clothing created to reflect the moment and to fill a gap in the market for alternative fashion designed locally. Kate Durham recalls:

The Melbourne scene was more infused with art making and architecture than the British DIY and punk movements, which were more about rebellion and being brash and aggressive and very homemade. Our scene got quickly into being something very artistic. It was more art inspired. At the same time in the late 1970s there was an interesting group of designers arriving in Paris from Japan who were doing androgynous cuts and interesting folding work. What I was attracted to about that work

This page

A workspace inhabited by CHORUS in the ‘Office’ space in *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* designed by WOWOWA and Andre Bonnice. Photography by Tobias Titz.

Note

All quotes in this article are from the following recorded interviews commissioned by Design Hub in early 2017: Monique Woodward (WOWOWA) and Michael Trudgeon; Matthew Bird (Studio Bird) and Kate Durham; Jane Caught (Sibling Architecture) and Alisdair MacKinnon; and Žiga Testen and Robert Buckingham.



This page
The 'archive' space
of *High Risk Dressing/
Critical Fashion*,
designed by Žiga Testen.
Photography by Tobias
Titz.



FDC co-founder Robert Buckingham states:

Small designer catalogues were handed out at shows, these were to give people contacts for the designers and their stockists. Other publications we produced, such as the newsletter, were about keeping people informed and sharing information, doing our job as a not-for-profit organisation. The newsletter was more conventional in the sense that it was about sharing information and trying to help people out in their independent enterprises. We were very conscientious about that; we wanted to help our designers. What the FDC set out to do was to enable young people to join together as a group or a collective. It sounds old fashioned and daggy, but it does work. It gives you a presence and it gives you some confidence. People really developed faster that way, rather than just going to design school. It was immediately competitive but in a very embracing way so that people tended not to want to trip into someone else's area in a sense. They were interesting young people. They just needed a break.

For *High Risk Dressing/Critical Fashion* Žiga Testen designed a purpose-made live cataloguing space for the FDC archive and for visitors to see the exhibition curators, researchers and exhibition assistants catalogue the collection. It provided a dedicated zone to discuss and grow knowledge around the FDC artefacts. Standard archive shelving, and its cold, steely framework, ran the length of the gallery space and housed a multitude of printed materials and videos donated by Robert Buckingham on behalf of the FDC in 1998. The intent of this purposefully staged 'archive' space was to give visitors a sense of the real home of the collection at RMIT; its materiality and the handling and storage protocols required to transition it from a personal collection to an institutional one; to ensure longevity and instigate new relationships with future researchers and creative practitioners.

Conclusion

Alasdair MacKinnon concludes:

I think the main success of the Council was putting fashion on the map for Melbourne, particularly creative fashion, not just commercial fashion. We wanted to be a platform for fashion more in theatrical kind of way, like how it was presented in the haute couture shows of Paris. To highlight fashion in a way that goes beyond the clothes. FDC designers were involved with art and culture at the fringes of the mainstream. I think that's what the FDC did, locally there was a viable culture that could be grown and sustained. I think the diverse fashion landscape we have now is very much a result. They planted the seed for people to continue on with.

MacKinnon's comments resonate with our core remit at the RMIT Design Hub to bring together a diverse community of creative practitioners, curators, academics and students dedicated to research and sharing the process of making progressive design ideas with our visitors. For *High Risk Dressing/Critical Fashion* we tap into the culture of the FDC, its ambition for cultural and social change through experimental thinking and shared creativity, mapping this onto the fashion culture of today. The result is two-fold: through this reflective and explorative process we enrich our understanding of the FDC's legacy and relevance, in a way that cultivates the FDC archive for further investigation by our community. We also discover and identify a vibrant, contemporary fashion culture supported by the academy; a sophisticated, reflexive and critical world of thinkers and makers.

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Letter from Dael (sic)
Evans, Chairman,
Built Moderne to Robert
Pearce, May 22, 1985.
Gift of Robert
Buckingham 1998,
RMIT Design Archives
0176.1998.0663



DAVID



DAVID

22/5/85



Bobby



This is the 'INFLATION'

hit list.



We got it on the Proviso



that they get ours and the
FBC's lists.



Could you send it to



us immediately so we can

copy it and give it to them for

the NEW INFLATION Seaya Daet



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The reappraisal and scrutiny of the fashion system in recent years has sparked debate and contemplation on new approaches to the discipline and its traditions in terms of design, manufacturing, communication and experience. Current commercial practices of fashion are dominated by homogenised, large-scale global design brands in an industry driven by increasing speed to put garments to market. Major issues of the environment and ethical impacts of the commercial fashion system are now more pressing than ever. As a result, debate concerning the viability and sustainability of current approaches has launched a mounting enquiry into alternative fashion systems and the role that niche sole practitioners and micro enterprises¹ might play in the transformation of this industry.

In this changing setting, fashion is no longer simply driven by stylistic trends and collections of clothing – instead there is capacity to consider its complexity.² The emerging notion of critical practice in the fashion field offers a way that we might reconsider and invent fashion's future. For instance, in 1999 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby popularised the idea of critical design using the premise of speculative design informed by critical thinking to generate new ways of working and to address how design might respond to the pressing issues of our time.³

In this essay the application of critical fashion is explored through modes of exhibition and archive practices to consider how this approach to fashion has emerged in the niche geographical location of Melbourne. Through the exhibition *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*, an exhibition I co-curated alongside Fleur Watson, Kate Rhodes and Nella Themelios, the ideas of critical fashion, from an archive to gallery space, activate hindsight alongside new works.

From High Risk Dressing to Critical Fashion

By Robyn Healy



PEER
REVIEWED
ESSAY

The exhibition and FDC archive as a critical device

The exhibition set up a scenario and scenography that explored venturous acts and narratives of fashion through parallel practices set in Melbourne in the 1980s, as well as today. The Fashion Design Council, a collective organisation established in 1983 by Robert Buckingham, Kate Durham and Robert Pearce, reflects a moment when independent designers and artists expanded fashion's commercial boundaries, exploiting its performative and cross-disciplinary potential. Coined by the group, the term 'high risk dressing' expresses the kind of confrontational clothing that was being produced at this time by many local independent designers in Melbourne during the post-punk era. The exhibition looked at the lineage of the FDC through the lens of practice today, how contemporary practitioners challenge the ways in which fashion is conceived, produced, distributed, communicated and consumed.

The device that inspired the exhibition was the FDC archive housed in the RMIT Design Archives. This is a collection of photographs, film material and graphic ephemera accrued over the course of the group's active years (1983-1993). During this period, the organisation was significant in championing the representation of local independent design, positioning fashion within a broader scope of creative practice and exchange with other disciplines.

The archive is crucial in providing insights into a little-known area of local fashion history and the growth of collective networks during this period, as researcher Stefan Heidenrich notes: 'Archives make known things known again'.⁴ While the current interest in fashion archives of major global fashion houses, such as the recently launched Dior archive 'Dior Heritage',⁵ positions them as a stylistic mechanism to continually revive the lineage of the fashion house; this uses brand history to maintain authenticity and commercial viability, however other uses of fashion archives are possible. For *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* the archive functioned in two ways. It was publicly shared, with materials presented in custom-built display cases across one section of the Design Hub gallery space. Then, the archive was also the activator for new works as a digitised selection of key material in the collection was provided to the invited fashion practitioners as a starting point for their engagement in the exhibition.

Today, in an entirely transformed cultural landscape from the FDC, critical practice is an emerging notion in fashion, encouraging reflection on fashion beyond its market framework. Both these moments of practice, high risk dressing and critical fashion, highlight the innovative and speculative activities of independent practitioners to generate alternative approaches to mainstream fashion. Activating the FDC archive was not about calling up a particular aesthetic or specific design iterations, rather, it was about exploring the ideas behind the members' organisation which embodied cross-disciplinary practices as a point of departure for new approaches working towards an expanded view of fashion.

A critical fashion organisation – the formation of the FDC

In forming the FDC, the members developed a manifesto, a device they used consistently to vehemently position their view of fashion as an idea as well as an industry. In one early edition of their newsletter, they wrote the following in bravado and earnestness:

We were concerned with the status of fashion, the lack of cultivation and appreciation of style in Australia, the perceived superiority of imports, the overwhelming need to export Australian design effectively within two years. We wanted to assert that Australian designers, being more or less freelance and independent, tend to evolve fairly idiosyncratically, untrammelled by any reference to fashion conventions or allegiance to Fashion Houses. They retain a viability and manoeuvrability that would not be possible in Tokyo, Paris or New York.

– Fashion Design Council manifesto, 1984

For the FDC, the descriptor 'high risk' drew attention to other possibilities of creative expression. It reflected their anarchic and humorous tone in seeking to distance themselves from the familiar conventions of the commercial fashion system of the time; one that was guided by formally-trained designers and industry benchmarks, based on European models of fashion. Orthodox views of local fashion were challenged by the FDC which fostered a boisterous mix of members, each with their own individual style languages of punk-inspired DIY. The group encouraged the production of fashion across media – from illustration, photography, film, performance, installation, runway events and business forums – all of which occurred in diverse settings, from exhibition and retail, to bar venues. Supported by State Government funding – the group had a particularly strong relationship with Race Matthews, Minister for the Arts (and Police and Emergency Services), and to some extent, was an official advocate of the growing cluster of independent designers. The group instilled confidence and credibility in designers and artists that were operating outside conventional industry practices of design, production and communication.

The formation of a Council was an astute strategy to empower independent practitioners through strength in numbers. Collective representation for emerging designers facilitated opportunities to disseminate diverse fashion practices outside existing commercial models, and expand conventional experiences of fashion. To this end, the collective performed both as a member-based organisation and multidisciplinary agent. The group supported its members through various activities and services while successfully merging with the larger design community: it interacted with creative practices from fine art, music, architecture, dance, communication to industrial design. As a result the FDC activated networks of creative and participatory practices, which were united by diverse expressions of fashion.⁶

Opposite

Ephemera from the Fashion Design Council archive on display in *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*, designed by Robert Pearce. Gift of Robert Buckingham, 1998, RMIT Design Archives.

Over a ten-year period, between 1983 and 1993, the FDC involved a diverse collective of designers, artists, architects, choreographers, musicians, hairdressers and makeup artists. Fashion designers included Martin Grant, Kate Durham, Kara Baker (formerly Sirens), Jenny Bannister, Fiona Scanlan (Scanlan and Theodore), Leona Edminston and Peter Morrissey (both formerly Morrissey and Edminston), Graeme Lewsey (formerly Gyro), Bettina Liano, Sarah Thorn and Bruce Slorach. Other practices collaborating in FDC activities were architects Roger Wood, Randal Marsh and Dale Jones-Evans (formerly Biltmoderne), Peter Corrigan (Edmond and Corrigan), filmmakers Mark Davis, Mark Worth and Simon Burton (Kino Productions) and choreographer Shelley Lasica, among many others.

The FDC's strategy to communicate and support emerging practitioners was prolific and often brash; publishing and documenting their activities to gain media attention and exposure to a broader community. Though the FDC's platforms were analogue and their message outspoken, their modus operandi remains relevant today, especially in communicating new forms of fashion outside the current fashion system dominated by large-scale global brands. At this critical time – and as the FDC founders did – futurist and academic Lidewij Edelkoort adopted the manifesto format to confront these issues in her 2015 'Anti.fashion' text, which boldly declares that current commercial practices of fashion are no longer viable, nor relevant today. This reappraisal and scrutiny of the fashion system in recent years has sparked debate and contemplation towards new approaches in fashion and its traditions in terms of design, manufacturing, communication and experience. For example, designers Martijn van Strien and Vera de Pont have put forward a fashion system where customisation, production on demand and reuse become commonplace in their 'Open Source manifesto 2016'.⁷ In Melbourne Lois McGruer's label Lois Hazel, launched in 2015, is committed to sustainable and ethical practices, offering 100% transparency on sourcing and production of garments with all craftsmanship made in-house or in a network of local seamstresses.

While the ongoing dialogue between The Global Fashion Agenda Group⁸ and the fashion industry takes place with regular summits and calls to action. For instance at the 2017 Copenhagen Fashion Summit, the global fashion industry was challenged to adopt a circular fashion system. These bold manifestos and statements reflect an industry in crisis and aim to provoke and stimulate the field to think and act differently.

In a local setting like Melbourne and looking at contemporary practice, this changing fashion landscape presents both challenge and opportunity. *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* embraced the latter by inviting a group of contemporary practitioners who approach fashion's critical and creative potential in their work. These practitioners had little or no experience of the FDC, and were invited to engage with the organisation through exposure to the archive.

A critical fashion practitioner

In their enquiry into alternative fashion systems, theorists and practitioners Otto von Busch and Pascale Gatzzen highlight:

*'A true "democratization of style" must go beyond increasing the number of available consumption choices, engaging people more directly in the active and intentional development of their personal style, and of the clothing they choose to express it.'*⁹

A return to diverse, niche, localised practice as an alternative to the large-scale operations of the fashion system, with practices which are more agile and progressive, is needed.

As an emerging phenomenon in discourse, the descriptor 'critical fashion' is being used in varying ways. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas¹⁰ position critical fashion as a branch of the fashion industry where contemporary fashion designers have adopted complex forms of social commentary and critique certainties of fashion to facilitate deeper reflections about their own work and the fashion system. Although the concept of critical fashion is not yet clearly defined, it has become a way forward for those working in fashion to test new ways and forms of expressing fashion. Designer and researcher Elisa van Joolen notes: 'Critique is used in a way to draw things together, to find new ways to collaborate. Critique as a proposition.'¹¹ For the exhibition, we framed the critical fashion practitioner as one characterised by a way of working that is abrasive to fashion's commercial framework, and, whether intentionally or inadvertently, critiques fashion by offering sustainable or speculative approaches. These practices scrutinise fashion, engaging with new forms of technology, social networking or sharing practices, to put forward alternative experiences of fashion, how it is consumed as both a concept and a product.

A more globally-accessible and increasingly digital world, where new forms of fashion are created and easily shared, has radically changed the fashion industry in niche geographies like Melbourne. Fashion practitioners are now dynamic self-publishers, working across mediums of performance, film, writing, curation and installation, many of which do not create clothing outcomes per se. The changing role of the creative class encourages us to reflect on the contemporary relevance of an organisation like the FDC that supported independent and alternative practice.

All invited fashion practitioners in the exhibition had a relationship with the academy, either as undergraduate or postgraduate students, as PhD candidates, or as academic staff. Fashion practices supported by research culture provided a commentary that moved beyond the traditional paradigm of fashion production. This potent relationship with the academy has fostered criticality and reflective practice. Growing cohorts of higher degree candidates and graduates in the fashion field who are active practitioners, has enabled clusters or communities of practice to be formed that naturally critique their practice and the fashion system, and collaborate with each other.



Continued



Alison Gwilt¹² identifies this critical shift in thinking more deeply about fashion's role in everyday life and draws attention to the impact this has on cultural, social and environmental concerns, acknowledging the different roles the fashion designer plays.

Members of the new collective established for the exhibition, are contemporary fashion practitioners working as individuals, but sharing with the FDC an expanded approach to the subject of fashion and a disdain for convention. Their practices reflect clothing production in limited editions, experienced via film or through alternative distribution channels, such as in the works by Denise Sprynskyj and Peter Boyd (S!X), Amanda Cumming and Kate Reynolds (PAGEANT), Cassandra Wheat and Louise Pannell (CHORUS), and Alexandra Deam (DIS/OWNED). Or they explore the potential of clothing beyond the fashion industry's conventions, for instance, Annie Wu (Articles of Clothing) designed a uniform for Design Hub staff and Martha Poggioli produced a series of interactive wearable objects. The culture of fashion, the fashion system and its aura of hype was critiqued through performance and text by Ricarda Bigolin and Nella Themelios (D&K), Winnie Ha Mitford and Adele Varcoe. While the representation of fashion as a political and cultural phenomenon, from gallery to page, was interrogated in the installation by Matthew Linde (Centre for Style) and in Laura Gardner and Žiga Testen's weekly exhibition publication.

The exhibition and archive were staged, performed and reactivated through a series of twenty nine events and performative acts. As Mark Meissen notes: 'The archive's role in this form of reanimation, where the connection of the event to the archive produces new meanings and creates another set of relationships.'¹³ Intrinsic to the FDC's activities was this drawing together of people for fashion events, that fostered an appreciation for multiple forms of dress and appearance. This strategy was continued in *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* to circulate fashion ideas to broader audiences.

The FDC became known for staging spectacular events, particularly in music and nightclub venues, to present fashion in unconventional, performative contexts. Inspired by this approach, on the opening night of the exhibition, a performance of 'FASHRAP' by fashion activist, performer and academic Adele Varcoe was staged in front of 300 people. Four rappers (including Varcoe) dressed as plasticine models, accompanied by a look-a-like Karl Lagerfeld, rapped about 'jumpsuit girl'. The playful performance reflected Varcoe's continual and scholarly study of fashion as a daily, personal and cultural experience. Adele has been wearing a jumpsuit for over three years, exploring the social effects of fashion, dress and clothes.¹⁴ Varcoe's event literally performed her research, using the medium as a tool to provoke audiences to think more deeply about the pervasiveness of fashion, while expanding on similar event-based approaches pioneered by the FDC, whose catwalks were choreographed, performative events far from traditional catwalk presentations.

Another form of reanimation was through practitioners in residence in the exhibition space. This scenario introduced the mechanics of micro enterprises and demonstrated new ways of creating fashion. For example, CHORUS (Cassandra Wheat and Lou Parnell) follow a collaborative approach to design and work outside the standard seasonal clothing collections for fashion by developing an outfit per month known as 'The Monthly Edition'. In direct response to FDC archive material, CHORUS were exposed to at the beginning of the exhibition, they developed their monthly outfit in their gallery residence every Tuesday and Wednesday. The edition referenced and re-contextualised the graphic and cultural signifiers of the FDC. Visitors to the exhibition were able to engage with an enterprise based on limited edition, made to order, locally made clothing, a system forming a critical response to the larger fashion system operations of over-production and over-consumption.

Another regular resident of the program, Laura Gardner (who is currently undertaking a PhD in the School of Fashion and Textiles at RMIT), created a weekly exhibition newsletter, the *HRD / CF Newsletter*, in response to the model of the FDC newsletter. The in-house publication drew from the exhibition and its layered event program with a new editorial purpose in each issue connecting to a thematic aspect of the FDC archive through contributions from practitioners in the exhibition. The project aimed to add new contextual material to the FDC archive and critically reflect on the role of the FDC in 1980s Melbourne by emulating some of their publishing strengths.

Installations in the exhibition by practitioners like Martha Poggioli proposed activating and producing clothing in inventive ways beyond the standard production of generic clothing types and customary fashion practices of dressing. In reference to the experimental focus of clothing in FDC activities, 'A Modular Program', displayed a series of cloth objects, suspended like banners. The cloth objects were designed as 'propositional' garments to be assembled and worn in multiple ways. The final look of the garment was playfully constructed by the wearer through a system of fabric loops and buttons. Every Saturday during the exhibition, the clothing objects were lowered, to set in motion a dressing ritual. In this performance, the abstract cloth forms were transformed into clothing, as visitors and performers interacted with them, often dressing one another. In this installation and performance, Poggioli drew attention to cultures of consumption and rituals of use, producing garments with no rigid styling, introduced multiple ways of use with customisation led by the wearer. In parallel to the works of the invited practitioners, the FDC archive was the subject of a program of live cataloguing convened by the exhibition invigilators. Where exhibition curators and engaged guests, participated in the task of documenting critical reflections from members and others associated with the organisation, in an effort to organise and add to the Archive's knowledge and repository. Curated conversations brought original members of the FDC together with contemporary practitioners addressing topics such as music, writing, drawing and architecture.

Opposite Top
Spread from issue one, *The Archive*, of the *HRD / CF Newsletter*, a project by Laura Gardner in collaboration with designer Žiga Testen.

Opposite Bottom
Spread from issue three, *The Shop*, of the *HRD / CF Newsletter*, a project by Laura Gardner in collaboration with designer Žiga Testen as part of the exhibition *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*.

Continued



Conclusion

The FDC promoted a DIY approach and embraced ad hoc strategies; with many members working from their bedroom or garage, in many ways in opposed formal design education, instead encouraging raw, un-institutionalised talent. Studies identifying distinctive fashion micro-enterprises in key urban centres such as London, Berlin and Milan have identified the importance of self-organised professional fashion urban networks and social networks to support these enterprises.¹⁵ The critical dialogue evident in FDC's organisation and noticeable in the exhibition *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* reveals the lineage of critical fashion practices since the 1980s that are also supportive networks.

Today, this kind of expanded and performative practice in fashion often emerges from the domain of the academy. In the current climate, the institution is a space that offers creative, conceptual and economic flexibility. The increasing number of fashion designers undertaking postgraduate studies to innovate in their practice and their field, has contributed to an expanded critical dialogue supported by research. The growing role of the academy in bridging innovative practice with industry is important in proposing new, critical modes of fashion and clothing design practice that are both propositional and commercially viable.

Endnotes

- 1 The Australian Bureau of Statistics dataset measures the number of business entities within a range of employment categories including no employees (that is, sole trader/practitioner) and 1-4 employees (micro business). Bernard Salt, "We're a nation of small businesses," *The Australian*, April 13, 2017, 28.
- 2 Luca Marchetti and Emanuele Quinz, eds., *Dysfashional* (Barcelona: BOM, 2007), 8.
- 3 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, "Critical Design FAQ," Dunne & Raby, <http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/13/0> (accessed October 31, 2017).
- 4 Stefan Heidenreich, "Unknown knowns and the law of what can be said," in *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict*, eds. Markus Meissen and Yann Chateigné (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 184.
- 5 Nick Vinson, "Vault lines: we unwrap a few house secrets at Dior's museum-worthy new Paris archive," 2017, *Wallpaper Online*, <https://www.wallpaper.com/fashion/we-unwrap-a-few-house-secrets-at-diors-museum-worthy-paris-archive>.
- 6 Robyn Healy, "High Risk Dressing by the Collective known as the Fashion Design Council of Australia," in *The Design Collective: An Approach to Practice*, eds. Harriet Edquist and Laurene Vaughan (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).
- 7 Martijn van Strien and Vera de Pont's Open Source Fashion Manifesto was created for the Tidelik Modemuseum as part of Het Nieuwe Institute Rotterdam. Martijn van Strien, "Open source fashion manifesto," 2016, <http://www.martijnvanstrien.com/open-source-fashion-manifesto/>.
- 8 The Danish Fashion Institute (DAFI) established the Global Fashion Agenda as a means to mobilise the international fashion industry to transform the way we produce and consume fashion.
- 9 Otto von Busch and Pascale Katzen, eds., "Alternative fashion systems," in *The Journal of Design Strategies* (New York: Parsons, 2014).
- 10 Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Critical Fashion Practice: From Westwood to Van Beirendonck* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

Centrespread

Materials from the Fashion Design Council archive. Gift of Robert Buckingham 1998, RMIT Design Archives

Opposite

A Fashion Design Council newsletter from 1985, designed by Robert Pearce. Gift of Robert Buckingham, 1998, RMIT Design Archives.

FASHION

THE FASHION DESIGN COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA



A CENTURY OF FASHION FROM THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM:
A lecture hosted by The Fashion Design Council of Australia

Dear

The Fashion Design Council would be delighted if you could attend this scintillating lecture (details as per invitation enclosed) as our guest.

Valerie Mendes - Assistant Keeper of Fashion at The Victoria and Albert Museum in London and an expert in her field - has an extensive knowledge of the history of 20th Century fashion, which is her major responsibility at the V & A.

Her involvement in the recent Fashion and Surrealism exhibition which initially premiered at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and more recently at the V & A in London and now the subject of the recently published collections and edition book, "Fashion and Surrealism" (Chambers & Hudson) by Richard Martin, ensures that this lecture will be a fascinating insight into fashion's evolution: past, present and future.

Valerie Mendes will be in Melbourne from Tuesday, 8th November to Wednesday, 9th November.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further information or would like to schedule an interview. (Ph: 670 7516)

Yours sincerely,



Renata Gombac
Publicity Co-ordinator
THE FASHION DESIGN COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA
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TELEPHONE: 03 670 3886/670 1249
THE FDC ACKNOWLEDGES THE LOYALTY AND ASSISTANCE OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT FOR THE A.P.C.

FALLOUTS ILLUMINATIONS

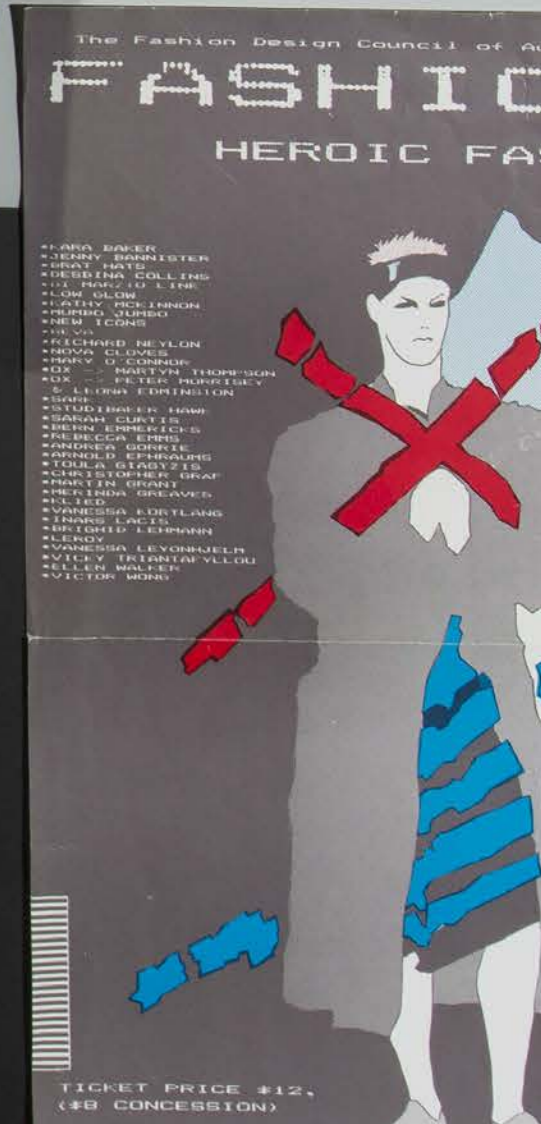
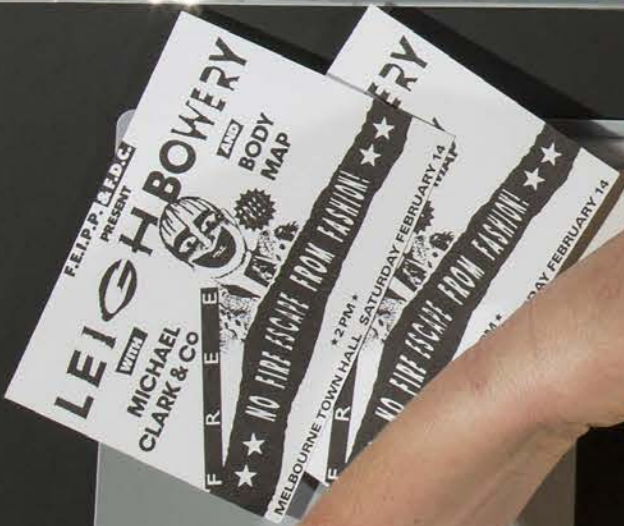


MARCH 20th, 8.30 pm



PLEASURE

WEAR FROM MEMBERS OF THE FASHION DESIGN COUNCIL



MOELLA EMMS.
A. LEHMANN © '85

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Introduction

Publishing is an essential component of the fashion industry, but also offers a space to experiment, conceptualise and galvanise critical narratives on fashion.

The Fashion Design Council (FDC), particularly through the organisation's co-founder and graphic designer Robert Pearce, were prolific in the creation of printed matter as an exercise in creative thought as well as communicating and consolidating the group's ideology and culture.

The exhibition *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* held between February 17 and April 13, 2017 at the RMIT Design Hub brought local fashion practitioners into the archive of the FDC – which largely comprises print ephemera – to respond with works that reflect a new, expanded notion of critical fashion. This essay frames comments captured in the event 'The Limits of the Page', a panel discussion I convened within the exhibition program, to explore fashion on the page towards an emerging framework of critical fashion practice.

The page as site for critical fashion – print media between the FDC and practitioners of *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*

By Laura Gardner

Critical practice is still a concept in development in fashion, one that is only beginning – unlike in other cultural fields of art and design – to find its coordinates. For art, terminology around criticism and criticality is under constant and rigorous scrutiny, making it an established, albeit unstable, mode of practice and discourse. Print and publishing practice as a site for experimental thought and criticality has a similarly rich history, particularly through the writings of conceptual artists, curators and art theorists that set in motion a discourse on artists' books, periodicals and other publishing activities since the early 1960s. Performative modes of critique in these fields from fictocritical writing to concrete poetry, present a paradigm shift from writing about critique, to writing as critique. The role of the page as a site or platform for these writing experiments is equally as important as the textual and visual content they house. Artists' magazines and publications offer spaces to interrogate the formal qualities of art writing, demonstrating that an expanded notion of practice, is beneficial to an expanded notion of discourse.

In fashion media and writing the term 'criticism' is more familiar in relation to the writing practice emerging from literary tradition. Theorists and journalists that have evaluated this genre, including, among others, Francesca Granata, Andre Rangiah and Ann Hollander. Peter McNeil and Sanda Miller's book *Fashion Writing and Criticism* offers a more comprehensive history of fashion criticism in terms of its most well-known format: the fashion review. These efforts call for a revision of the level of emphasis placed on the written word in fashion, however present a limited view on the performative and critical potential of the medium of the page.

As an organisational body, ephemera were the group's artefact and material legacy. Along with Robert Buckingham and Kate Durham, founding member Robert Pearce's background as a graphic designer and art director afforded him a keen visual sensibility and affinity with print media that drove much of the graphic output for their events, shows and announcements. Further, with print being the primary communication medium for fashion in the 1980s, expression had to be through the page, and so the printed matter in the archive bears the traces of the creative process of the group.

Pearce's approach to layouts and formats was influenced by the DIY culture of the 1980s, in particular, street-style and culture periodicals emerging from northern centres, such as *i-D* and *The Face*. This reflected experimental, cut-and-paste strategies that played out in their posters, postcards, letterheads as well as through the group's regular newsletter, a document distributed by mail on a more or less biannual basis.

The FDC newsletter functioned to service paying members by informing and updating them on recent achievements, upcoming events, as well as including editorial reflections on fashion and excerpts from magazines. The newsletters would inevitably open with the group manifesto, a bold statement of FDC's ambitions and intentions that sought to galvanise and remind members of the social, cultural and political ambitions of the project.

The FDC were prolific self-publishers, but nevertheless part of an era burgeoning with print experimentation. Since the 1980s, many fashion designers have been highly creative in their output of print material in tandem with the garment. During this time, in Europe and Japan, avant-garde designers such as Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto, Walter Van Beirendonck and Martin Margiela were emerging as small-scale independent publishing houses producing objects of print as a key component to their cultural and seasonal production. Theorist Marco Pecorari's writing on fashion ephemera captures the way in which creative and conceptual graphic media created by independent designers extends upon the symbolic, economic and social reach of a brand, and, similar to the way in which the FDC used graphics to galvanise their creative community and following. He writes:

*'although the dress still plays the role of protagonist, fashion designers are producing complete universes that require diverse languages to translate and fully represent their visions. Invitations, catalogues, press releases, fashion films, exhibitions, and websites stimulate interaction with other disciplines, consequently blurring the boundaries.'*¹

I have looked at this space through access to the FDC archive and research of the group's activities through my involvement with the exhibition program. A discussion I organised as part of *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*, in the transcript that follows, aimed to explore the limits of fashion publishing, to open up the possibility of fashion as publication and stretch the discourse on critical fashion practice. The event was predicated on the idea of the page as having potential for critical thought in fashion, posing questions to practitioners involved in the exhibition that aimed to draw out their creative intentions and negotiations with the page as a site for criticality.

Speaking at the 'bar' site of the exhibition, Michael Trudgeon, Ricarda Bigolin and Nella Themelios (D&K) and Winnie Ha Mitford shared their practices in relation to fashion and fashion publishing in the event 'The Limits of the Page' – captured on the following pages. These local fashion designer publishers and experimenters of writing and image-making on the page challenge the commercial habits of the fashion system, and our conception of fashion within this. By illuminating the parallels between the print output of the FDC and that of the contemporary fashion practitioners involved in the exhibition, I hope to contribute to notions of 'critical fashion' and an expanded fashion discourse.



PEER
REVIEWED
ESSAY

The Limits of the Page

A panel discussion with Michael Trudgeon, Winnie Ha Mitford, Ricarda Bigolin and Nella Themelios

LAURA GARDNER I want to start by asking you all – though you may not define yourselves as ‘fashion publishers’ in the formal sense – how do you work on the page or with writing in relation to fashion?

MICHAEL TRUDGEON We began making publications at the start of the ‘80s in an age prior to the internet, when getting data about new, young, experimental practice was very difficult.³ In creating *Fast Forward* we tried to resolve the question of how do you make a magazine where people don’t just *talk* about music, but can *hear* it. *Crowd* was the same thing for us in terms of design: there was an incredible range of small independent practices bubbling up – from fashion, industrial design, architecture – all bound in their locales. Fashion had become a really critical medium for experimentation of thought. We saw it as a vehicle for a range of practice: from intellectual engagement to rambunctious expression, and a vital means of building culture. By ‘culture’ I mean a way of establishing identity and a presence for, in our case, practices based in Melbourne. What was appealing about fashion as a medium was the opportunity to explore something very inclusive, but also incredibly experimental and provocative. There was also the physicality of print that appealed to us, which is important in terms of what publishing printed matter does as opposed to the digital realm. We were interested in the haptic dimensions of the published object. Print is visceral and you can relate what it is you’re capturing in the content, to the way that you set up the medium of the page or magazine.

LAURA Winnie, your work doesn’t necessarily deal with the visceral nature of the printed object, but maybe more the visceral nature of text?

WINNIE HA MITFORD Yes, my work deals with the visceral nature of language.⁴ I started writing in fashion for a number of reasons. The first was because I was looking for a way to write about fashion that was different from convention, that wasn’t about promotional language or pushing commercial fashion. I also wanted to write about fashion in a way that didn’t involve any garments, or clothing, to ask: What is fashion when you take away its tangible elements? What is fashion as an idea, or as a concept? I wanted to address these topics though not necessarily through academic forms of writing, often when you get into fashion theory it becomes heavy-handed. I wanted to write about fashion through the imagined experience of a garment. My work is non-physical, and I don’t deal with publications per se. Instead I explore formats – such as readings or recordings – that enable the experience of language through listening. A lot of words in fashion have a bodily quality, for example ‘frills’, or ‘silk’, or ‘tightness’ or ‘looseness’. They are very seductive, and effective. For me, writing is a way to get the reader, or the listener, as close as possible to the experience of the garment, and the understanding of fashion without the material.

LAURA This physicality of language is what a lot of commercial fashion writing capitalises on. Though not necessarily going about it in a critical way; exploiting the visual nature of words in fashion is a common tactic of fashion advertising.

WINNIE Yes, it comes down to the experience of the language or the experience of words, even singular words.

LAURA Ricarda and Nella, you both also use language and print ephemera in your work, can you expand on how writing and publishing operate in your practice?

NELLA THEMELIOS We use the format of writing regularly although it’s not our primary mode, or medium.⁵ For us, writing is a key site to critique parts of the fashion system, but we’re also interested in the language of fashion and how that mobile medium circulates, for instance from a press release to a magazine. We’re deeply invested in the commercial quality of language and we try to pick it apart, to think about the aspirational characteristics of that type of language, what that might mean and how that might position fashion. In *#thathaute couturefeeling* for example, we wanted to conflate marketing language with heightened interpersonal emotions in a poem-like format. Relating the emotions you might have for a luxury item to emotional attraction, as a similar process of wanting a thing that you can’t have.

RICARDA BIGOLIN We are also interested in the impact of certain words. We are less interested in the textual content of fashion production, or when text occurs in fashion, but rather the proliferation of certain kinds of text.

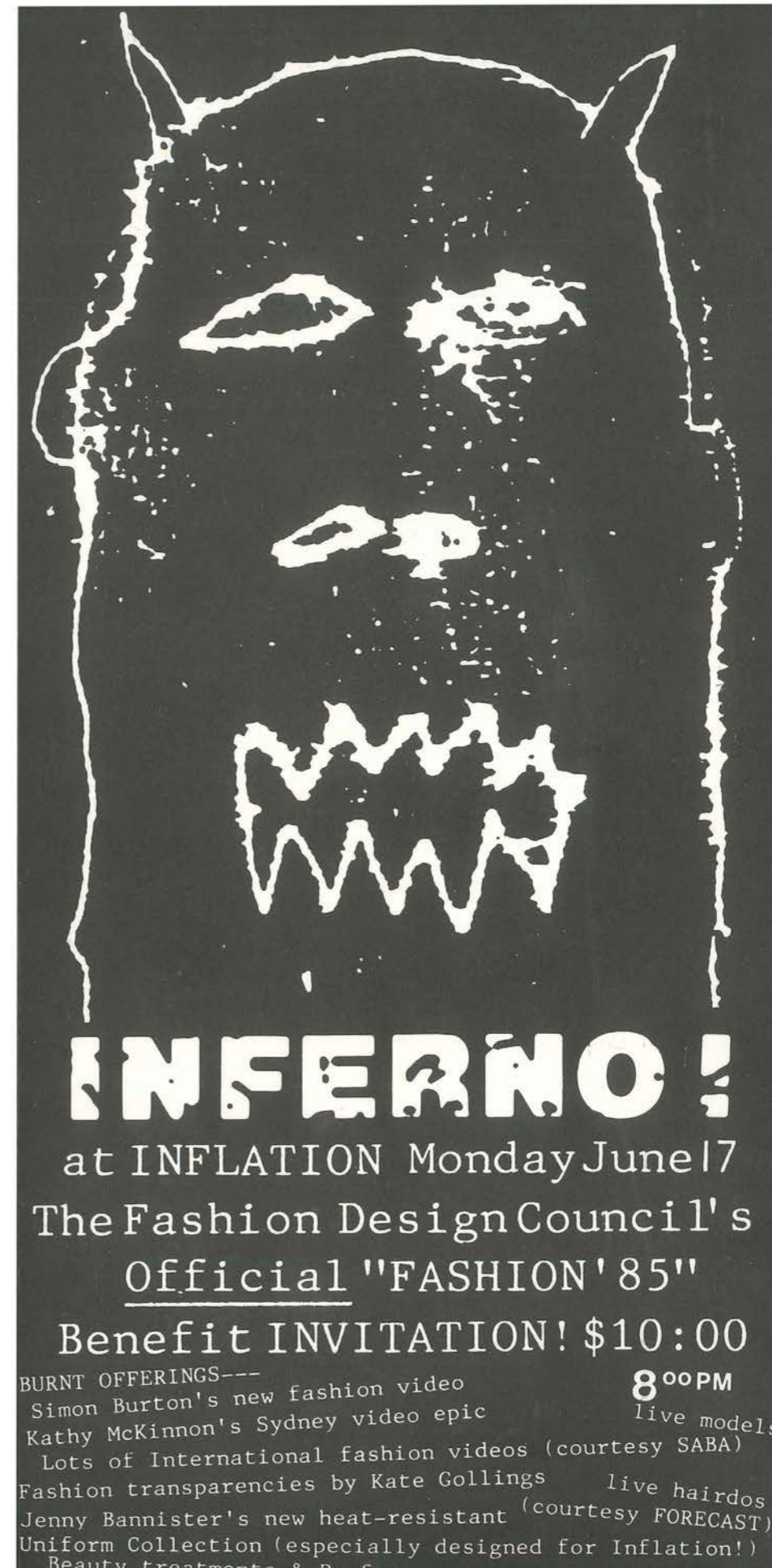
LAURA That leads me to a question of medium, or rather, technology, that marks a difference between how Michael and the FDC were working in the 1980s compared to now. There is a mobility of text in the way in which D&K use writing, which sometimes sits within the process, whilst at other times becomes the work itself. How do you make decisions about material format with such a fluid presence of text, for example in *#thathaute couturefeeling*?

RICARDA With that work we wanted to print text on a really fine piece of tissue paper to suggest the branded tissue paper you receive when you buy a luxury item.

NELLA With *#thathaute couturefeeling*, we wanted to explore hierarchies of value within fashion, from high to the low, so it made sense to publish that piece of writing in this very delicate way. There was another project we did where we took the language of the press release and tried to mess around with it by interspersing the marketing-speak with emotional, nonsensical language. In that project we produced many variations of the same press release to explore the kind of language that proliferates in fashion and to reveal some of its underlying politics.

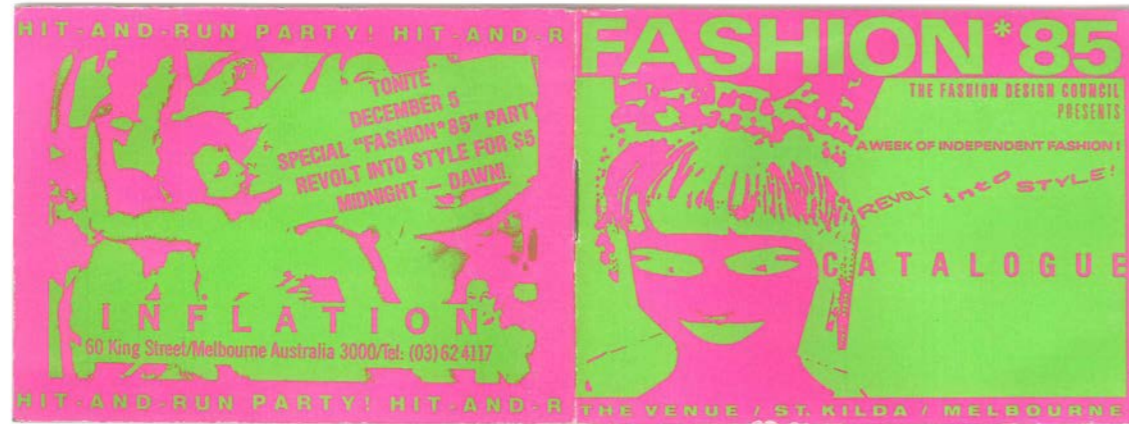
LAURA You touched on this before Michael, but I would like to know if you relate to the tradition of artists’ publishing in terms of the conceptual decision-making around material format in *Fast Forward* and *Crowd*?

MICHAEL We were operating in a context where we viewed the reader as a participant in the process and it was about sharing information in an exchange. Materiality was also liberating and a form of rebelling, because there were conventions around how you were supposed to use materials. Our guiding ideological and philosophical principles were coming from art and art practice, which had been picking up on the idea of transgression since the beginning of the century.



Opposite
Invitation for Inferno, the FDC's Fashion '85' benefit event, Inflation Nightclub 1985, designed by Robert Pearce. Gift of Robert Buckingham, 1998, RMIT Design Archives, 0176.1998.0002

Continued



LAURA D&K's work often draws from, and reconstructs, established formats and layouts in fashion editorial: How do you use image and text in your work?

NELLA We don't see ourselves working outside the discipline or conventions of fashion, but we try to disrupt and interrupt, or subvert those mechanisms. We're definitely aware of those processes and how they position fashion in a particular way.

WINNIE Can I add something about D&K's work that I really like? The way you use image and text will often show ideas without having to explain them, to propose ideas around fashion, without exhausting the work with language or explanations, which is a really valuable way of using word and image. We're able to see the explanation in the work or graphic.

RICARDA I think our text and graphic work serves more as an explanation in itself rather than us trying to offer a didactic description.

LAURA I want to move the conversation to talk about 'critical fashion practice', beginning with you Michael. I'm wondering if there was anything you were critical of in your publishing projects and what you saw to be commercial?

MICHAEL We had no foundation for what we were doing in terms of existing fashion; we were creating out of a desire to express ourselves and to produce work. It wasn't necessarily a critical opposition, we saw fashion as an opportunity to experiment. So our editorial approach wasn't necessarily an intellectual opposition or critique of existing models, but we had a vacuum to fill and we filled it in whatever way we could.

LAURA Winnie, you mentioned your disdain for fashion writing and media earlier, what are you critical of? Or perhaps it's about doing it better?

WINNIE I think fashion writing could be better. Most of the writing in fashion is more enjoyable, or performative, when it's not trying to sell anything. Traditional fashion criticism can be pretty dry and there's little engagement with fashion on a material level. There is potential for criticality in practices that explore fashion language, because fashion is about communication in the end.

LAURA So it's about writing as criticism, not writing criticism? In terms of D&K, do you describe your work as critical practice? Are you pushing back against it in the commercial realm of fashion?

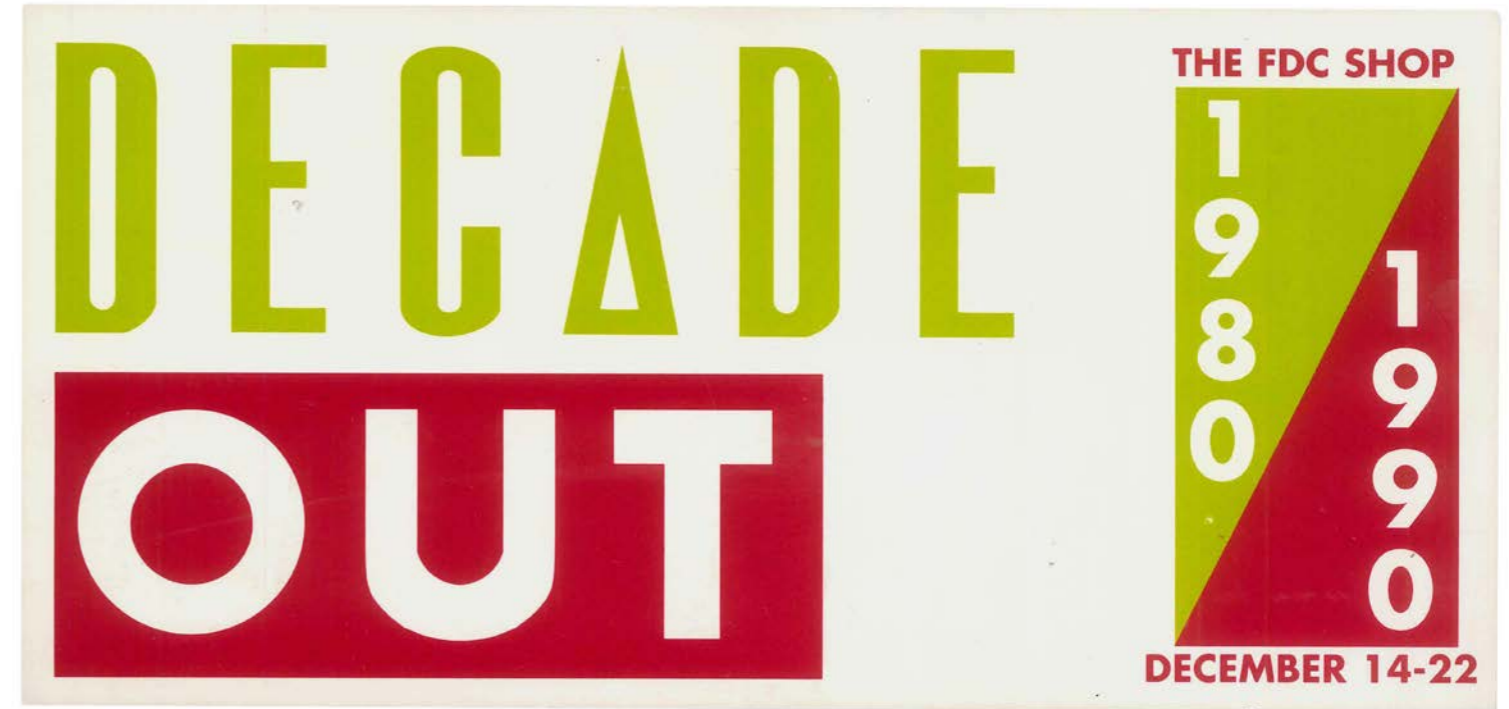
RICARDA I don't think we are. We started working this way out of interest and convenience. We are interested in certain conventions in fashion, and playing with them, but I don't think it's an opposition to commercial fashion practice. I actually think it responds to that world. For us the idea of critical fashion practice offers a space that is a bit more balanced and expanded, where there are more gaps and spaces to do stuff in, but not necessarily as a direct critique on the world of fashion.

NELLA It's about finding spaces within the mechanisms of fashion and how they operate to reveal a new way of thinking about fashion. We are not oppositional in the sense that we disagree with it, but we're trying to find a new language or new moments within the fashion system as it exists. New ways of thinking about what fashion is, what it does and how it does it.

Conclusion

Printed matter is central to the way fashion practitioners articulate, disseminate and fashion their garment output. Yet, publishing as a creative, critical practice isn't established in fashion in the same way it is in art discourse. The local, Melbourne-based practices, from the FDC to now, involved in *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* reflect dynamic, experimental and critical approaches to fashion on the page that extend the provocation of artists' publishing to fashion. The publications and practices discussed here demonstrate that fashion provides rich conceptual and creative material in regards to the ways in which word and image are represented in printed matter, and participate with a reader. Like the FDC media, they experiment with form, context and content, as interconnected and conceptual to produce alternative narratives on fashion.

'The Limits of the Page' centred on the notion of page as a site for criticality, not only through the use of image and text as creative material but also through alternative modes of dissemination in the wake of new technologies. The discussion explored practices and their specific audiences at the threshold of fashion that take on broader ambitions, relating to the culture, aesthetics and politics of fashion. This reflects the page as a space that not only enacts aesthetics complementary to a garment design and production, but as a subversive platform for critical fashion narratives to play out.



Endnotes

- 1 'The Limits of the Page' panel discussion and reading was an event that brought together practitioners that address fashion and the conceptual potential of the printed page, held as part of the *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* exhibition program, 17 March, 2017.
- 2 Marco Pecorari, 'Zones-in-between': the ontology of a fashion praxis," in *Couture Graphique: Fashion, Graphic Design and the Body*, eds. José Teunissen, Hanka van der Voet and Jan Brand (Houten: Terra Lannoo, 2013).
- 3 Michael Trudgeon is a Professor in the School of Architecture and Urban Design at RMIT University and Design Director of Crowd Productions. Trudgeon's past project work includes magazine publishing, music performance and recordings. In the early 1980s, Trudgeon was involved in the publications *Fast Forward* and *Crowd* magazine, as well as sharing a building and often collaborating with the FDC. Trudgeon's publishing projects were mixed-media that merged disciplines of art, music and fashion to explore print as a creative medium and extension of culture.
- 4 Winnie Ha Mitford completed her PhD at RMIT University in the School of Fashion and Textiles in 2015. Her research and practice explores writing as a conceptual and critical phenomenon, addressing the poetics of fashion as an experience and as an artifact. She proposes text as garment with written works that have appeared in the form of publications, public readings and voice recordings.
- 5 Ricarda Bigolin and Nella Themelios form two halves of D&K. Ricarda is a designer and runs the Masters of Fashion Design program in the School of Fashion and Textiles at RMIT University. Nella is a curator and creative producer at RMIT Design Hub, as well as being part of the curatorial team for this show. As D&K, they explore a critical fashion practice, at times producing clothes, at others participating or performing in exhibitions. They regularly use writing and produce print materials, such as fictocritical prose, poetry and screenwriting, throughout their exhibition-based and fashion projects.
- 6 *Fast Forward* was a mixed-media publication founded in Melbourne in 1980 and edited by Bruce Milne and Andrew Maine with graphic design by Michael Trudgeon. Recordings of the issues can be accessed on a digital archive of the publication at <http://spill-label.org/FastForward/>
- 7 *Crowd* magazine was founded in Melbourne by Michael Trudgeon, Jane Joyce and Andrew Maine in 1983.
- 8 *#thatautecouturefeeling* is a merchandise poem produced by D&K in 2013.

Opposite

Pocket catalogue for Fashion '85, Fashion Design Council fashion show held at The Venue, St. Kilda in 1985, designed by Robert Pearce. Gift of Robert Buckingham, 1998, RMIT Design Archives, 0176.1998.0001

Above

Postcard for 'Decade Out The FDC Shop 1980-1990' 1990. Gift of Robert Buckingham, 1998, RMIT Design Archives, 0176.1998.0512



Fake It 'Til You Make It

A panel discussion with Matthew Linde (Centre for Style) and FDC founders Kate Durham and Robert Buckingham held as part of *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*, February 2017.

MATTHEW LINDE One thing that struck me as interesting about the FDC was the membership system: What were the criteria for members of the FDC? I'd like to begin by discussing the structural format of the organisation in that regard.

ROBERT BUCKINGHAM: We had a fee membership, people paid to become members, so there was really no restriction on membership except the cost. I think the full membership was \$25, and you paid \$10 to be an associate member. \$25 would be the cost for designers, and \$10 for students or people who were our supporters.

KATE DURHAM The criteria for the parades we put on were quite different: we wanted to include work that stood out. It wasn't a popularity contest, we would ask ourselves: Is the work unnerving, interesting, worth looking at or worth thinking about?

MATTHEW So in that sense the parades were an ultimate goal for the membership?

KATE I think so, but all members got newsletters, discounts at events and other benefits. We tried, like any organisation would, to do our best to help our members.

MATTHEW In retrospect, the FDC was a prolific organisation with a very strong and important presence in the cultural landscape. I'm wondering if there was any backlash or criticism from the establishment that you were pushing back against?

ROBERT There was a bit of backlash from within the fashion world. Some people felt that, because we'd put ourselves out there, in terms of announcing ourselves as the Fashion Design Council of Australia, we needed to be knocked down. There was a sense that we were trying to be big, to be bold, and some people didn't like that. The mainstream didn't really take a lot of notice until we developed a broader reputation, then the media paid attention and people slowly became interested in what they were doing. It was a combination of power of the collective as an organisation, but also audiences who would follow designers that they particularly liked within our grouping.

MATTHEW How did the retail project of the FDC emerge? Could you elaborate on that?

ROBERT Initially there was talk about opening the store in a space on Banana Alley, which is the vaults underneath the railway lines of Flinders Street Station in Melbourne's CBD. The government were interested in trying to revitalise these spaces in the mid-'80s and they were going to give us some money to move in. In the end, we decided not to do it, because we felt the location was wrong, and we held off starting the shop until later. During that early period in the '80s, there was not a lot of the opportunities for fashion designers to show or to sell their work, which is why we felt it was important to have some collective space. By the time the FDC shop actually opened, which wasn't until 1989, a lot of designers had set up their own shops and had become more vertically integrated, many of them sold their clothes through their own boutiques, so the role of the shop was perhaps slightly diminished by the time it opened.

MATTHEW A question I often get regarding Centre for Style is: Do you sell anything? To which my response is often: 'not really'. Was the retail for the FDC similar? Did it serve broader cultural purpose as another mode of dissemination?

KATE Yes definitely it was; it was right opposite Australia Arcade where the Merivale shop had been, so the building had a fashion history. It was a good site but some of the problems were that designers were already becoming established or attached to other outlets.

ROBERT And we weren't very good retailers. It was a huge space, a large gallery space really, in a basement underneath the Merivale shop. But there were a few things against us, not to mention the approaching economic downturn of the early 1990s. Alasdair MacKinnon was the store manager, but we also had some assistance in terms of more traditional retailers, such as Christine Barrow, who runs the shop *Christine's* and Helen Rowe, who'd been working with Myer, on our board. We worked on consignment and our ethos was to make sure all the designers were paid at the end of the week.

MATTHEW 'Consignment' is a word that often has a negative connotation, but it shouldn't because what it allows is the sharing of the experience of fashion practices, certainly that's how Centre for Style functioned more as a cultural, rather than monetary, exchange. That's how I see the FDC as operating in terms of bringing the conversation and what was happening on the street – in places like London – to disintegrate the hierarchical structure of fashion. Were there similar conversations happening in other Australian cities?

ROBERT We had relations with quite a few designers from Sydney who showed with the FDC. By the early 1990's you started to see other stores bubbling up that were a bit like the FDC. There was one in Sydney, and there were others overseas, such as Hyper Hyper in London, a concept that was quite similar. Hyper Hyper was more about having concessions, so designers could have their own sections within the store. The FDC shop was more blended, perhaps, because the designers didn't have enough stock to be able to do that. But there were movements across the country; in Sydney in the late 1970s there was a strong culture of independent fashion emerging with people like Jenny Bannister, Clarence Chai and also Jenny Kee and Flamingo Park.

KATE They took our stock but the designers up there loved Melbourne because we were more on trend. I also think Sydney designers loved coming to Melbourne because we did a lot of marketing for them. That was the other job that the FDC took on: we did a lot of publicity for our designers.

MATTHEW It seemed like in the '80s there was a real cultural explosion happening in Melbourne in which the FDC were positioned as the fashion component. There was also John Nixon's gallery space, the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre and Paul Taylor in the mix. History tends to make mythologies and so I'm keen to hear your opinion of that time and Melbourne's creative scene. Was it really as groundbreaking as we make it out to be?

Opposite
D&K collection
presentation 'All or
Nothing'. Photographed
by Agnieszka Chabros.

ROBERT The early '80s was a very interesting period of cross-disciplinary activity. Music was really thriving at the time, but you also had publications like *Art & Text*, and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) was just starting up. I suppose it was that emergence, everyone seemed to be doing something.

MATTHEW Was that the first time that you saw fashion entering into this wider crate of discourse?

KATE Fashion was always important to me, but when I went to art school it was stigmatised as a lower form of art, it was seen to be a bad thing. Fashion was always interesting to me because it was challenging to do.

ROBERT At that time fashion was coming more from the ground up, rather than the top down. The way that music, filmmaking and art were beginning to relate with one another felt like the attitude and the philosophy were more connected, as opposed to the Paris model of haute couture, or fashion coming through more traditional media.

KATE The tourism commissioner, Don Dunstan, who was the former Premier of South Australia, was very artsy. I remember writing to him when we were starting out saying, do you realise what we're going to lose? We're going to lose the whole garment area of Flinders Lane, at the time there was still all these tailors and businesses through there. I can remember seeing Robert Pearce and other people trying to persuade them that there was something that we could do. The architect Peter Corrigan said: 'Go big, make yourselves a big organisation'. It hadn't occurred to us, because at the time we were just trying to get post-production funding for a film. We'd paid to film some of the Party Architecture parades that were going on, so we had all these reels of films that we didn't know what to do with. It was very inexact; we didn't know what we were doing...

ROBERT During the '80s there wasn't the same volume of fashion available. So what was being created were clothes that filled a kind of vacuum. What you're doing with Centre for Style is more about reacting to the oversupply of fashion.

KATE These days it's so saturated, I would hate to have to have countless Instagram followers and all that for my business. It's hideous.

ROBERT For some fashion companies, if you want a job, you have to come with a substantial social media following. In this entrepreneurial model, every person, every employee has to have a presence in the world, a connectedness. It's really interesting to look back thirty years ago in terms of how people feel connected to the world. It seems bizarre now that we were looking in magazines like *i-D*, that were sea-freighted out to Australia, but that was our connection back then. It's so different to now.

I think what Centre for Style does, and your work Matthew, is take a theatrical approach to fashion – considering the experience, the spectacle of it, rather than just the presentation of clothes. The commercial fashion system is about translating exactly what the garment is, so it can be purchased immediately; it's designed for consumption and not necessarily any kind of meaningful experience.



KATE I think the fundamental problem with fashion is that no matter how artistic or interested you want to be in your culture, it will always throw back to its commercial roots. Fashion is always a question of what's selling and how much can we sell. There was this really interesting period in the late '70s where the Japanese designers were doing beautiful work, creating clothes that had a conceptual androgynaiety. Designing clothes that could not only go between genders but also across ages. They were very architectural, but Paris fought back because it was losing its market. Karl Lagerfeld, for example, dumped all these hats with cakes on his models; he fought back with clothes that reflected traditional notions of status, frippery and idiocy.

MATTHEW Regarding 'experimental fashion', which is such a contested and saturated term, what was the FDC wanting to show in the parades in terms of the designers you included?

ROBERT There was a curatorial approach of keeping a variety of work. It didn't matter who was doing it; sometimes it was artists, sometimes it was engineers, sometimes it was fashion designers, but we were trying to cultivate an interesting mix. That was always the philosophy – trying to be unusual. It just wasn't your standard.

KATE You didn't have to be 'beautiful' or 'perfect', but you had to have something exuberant or interesting to say. Now things seem to have reversed and it's as if the fashion industry expects people to be goddesses, they create impossible standards for people.

ROBERT But we weren't the only ones doing stuff. *Crowd* magazine had a big fashion show in the early '80s and Bruce Slorach and Sara Thorn had their own show, these activities encouraged independent designers. The FDC wasn't the only game in town; it's just that we had the strongest base. We'd set ourselves up as a not-for-profit organisation, and as a result, we had different agendas, we weren't just a commercial enterprise.

KATE These days, fashion is much more about the 'individual' expressing themselves. For the FDC collective, it was a little swamp that they could emerge from, and they could slip back into the fold when they wanted to. That was our strength. It's also part of the mercantile nature of business that people are expected to be individuals, forget the collective, forget the romance of that. But this was the joy of it for me, when everybody started becoming individual, that was when I lost interest in it.

ROBERT Also the way we put fashion into different places, it was a kind of self-serve fashion. We did a nice show at Linden Gallery in St Kilda, perhaps before the gallery had opened (in 1986) it was a disused old mansion in St Kilda. We did a few shows there, we did one called 'Occupation Demarcation' which was about uniforms. We were trying to get the designers to think about how to reach new audiences and do things in different places. Art was really important to the FDC culture, and the gallery world was important to us, in that way it was different to the way mainstream fashion designers behaved. Now it's much more common that a fashion designer would do things in a gallery, or collaborate with artists and filmmakers, but back then it was a revelation.

Top
Detail of garment forms in Martha Poggioli's 'A Modular Program', staged as part of the *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* program. Photographed by Layla Cluer.

Bottom
Performers in 'Le Tapis Noir' an event presenting SFX's work for *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*. Photographed by Monty Coles.



MATTHEW Another topic I wanted to touch on was the nightclub, how you guys used and exploited these kinds of club venues. Can you elaborate on that?

KATE When you went out to the nightclubs, everyone was dressed to the nines, a buzz would build about the next event. We spent a lot on communication and the nightclub venues and events were a way of seeing the same people and getting the word around.

ROBERT They were also the civic spaces in which our audience operated. What happened at the time was that most nightclubs would legally have to close at 1am. There were a handful of places in town that had old licensing laws and could stay up all night.

KATE Of course the owners loved us because we brought our crowd with us. We didn't think about it then, but that's why we were popular and got free drink cards and could stay all night in these venues.

MATTHEW The nightclub has been a special place for me in terms of allowing my peers and community to have transcendental fashion experiences and explore subjectivities. To wrap up my questions, perhaps you could both identify one extraordinary moment in the FDC program?

KATE Mine would be the first time that I saw my jewellery on stage at an FDC show, there were three figures walking down the stage, until then it hadn't occurred to me how amazing it would look to see my creations lit up and animated by the body. I had a Joan of Arc body suit on one model, she had frayed straw shoes and straw in her hair and I was so moved by my work in a way that didn't happen in the studio.

ROBERT The big shows at the Seaview ballroom and the Palais were very beautiful and memorable. The theatricality of these events is always going to be memorable for me. But the backstage action was perhaps even more exciting, there was a frenetic energy and so many people involved in a way that would later become much more disciplined, and professionalised, in fashion.

KATE But of course, we never started on time.

Opposite
D&K collection,
'All or Nothing' staged
in *High Risk Dressing/*
Critical Fashion.
Photographed by
Agnieszka Chabros

The FDC collection from the Design Archive will be unpacked, discussed and catalogued throughout the duration of the exhibition in a new 'archive' space designed by Iga Teaten. In the archive, we invite visitors to take an active part in the cataloguing process by contributing their recollections of the FDC. Fashion practitioners working today will also exhibit in this space, tackling and testing the nature of archives.

THE FDC COLLECTION FROM THE DESIGN ARCHIVE WILL BE UNPACKED, DISCUSSED AND CATALOGUED THROUGHOUT THE DURATION OF THE EXHIBITION IN A NEW 'ARCHIVE' SPACE DESIGNED BY IGA TEATEN. IN THE ARCHIVE, WE INVITE VISITORS TO TAKE AN ACTIVE PART IN THE CATALOGUING PROCESS BY CONTRIBUTING THEIR RECOLLECTIONS OF THE FDC. FASHION PRACTITIONERS WORKING TODAY WILL ALSO EXHIBIT IN THIS SPACE, TACKLING AND TESTING THE NATURE OF ARCHIVES.



Epilogue: Reflections on the archive

Harriet Edquist

In an interview published in a recent anthology of essays concerned with the 'archive', Beatrice von Bismarck and Irmgard Christa Becker proffered two connected yet competing views. While both agreed that 'there are institutional similarities between archives and museums with regard to their basic idea, their administration and their reception'¹ for Becker, a trained archivist, the public archive is bound by rules that do not obtain for museums. Among these is display and access:

You can go to an archive, order the material that you want to use and then the material is delivered to you in the reading room. You can read and interpret it for scientific work or other things. I think that is the main difference between museums and archives. In museums the curator decides what is displayed to the public, what is shown in an exhibition. In an archive there are certain rules which define the open access to the material.²

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The 'archive' space of *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* designed by Ziga Testen where material from the Fashion Design Council Archive was exhibited. Photography by Tobias Titz

While the similarities between types of collecting institutions and organisations have been highlighted in recent years, the differences articulated by Becker are worth keeping in mind if we are not to collapse everything into the concept of 'the archive' and in so doing lose its particular specificity and value. Archives in the traditional sense do have rules, some of which are shared with other collecting institutions but some not. Since the nineteenth century when archival theory was formalised for the first time, certain fundamental characteristics have been deemed to be essential to its nature – *respect de fonds*, appraisal, description, provenance, original order, and the role of the archivist in maintaining the integrity of the archive. The principal of *respect de fonds* for example 'is a principle in archival theory that proposes to group collections of archival records according to their fonds – that is to say, according to the administration, organization, individual, or entity by which they were created or from which they were received'.³ Libraries and museums on the other hand store artefacts according to type and material – manuscript, picture, drawing, object, book – whether or not this entails dismembering the collection as it existed when acquired. Then again, while one of the main functions of a gallery or museum is to exhibit their works to the public, this is not the case with archives which maintain strict protocols around visitor access, as Becker notes.

Archives differ from museums in other ways. Museums tend to collect works that have already been through a form of cultural vetting that renders them worthy of joining the collection. These works generally are collected as isolated examples of classes of objects that illustrate narratives developed elsewhere – by archaeologists, palaeontologists, curators, historians, directors or collectors. They are exemplary. Archives are essentially different. While there is an appraisal process that determines the relevance of the archive for any particular institution's collection that can be contentious as all selection processes are, the objects within the archive often run to thousands, if not tens of thousands of separate items – sheets of paper, cards, notes, diaries, drawings, photographs, printed material, scrapbooks and so on. The value of the archive lies not in the discrete objects (although these may have significant value in themselves if pulled out of the archive) but the archive as a whole – for what it says over a long period about the person, institution, or company that compiled it. To uncover an archive, as Arlette Farge so eloquently describes, is to immerse oneself in a narrative constructed over time in hundreds and thousands of parts.⁴ The all-too-common complaint that 'the archive is boring' reflects, I suspect, just this resistance to immediate access, the strict rules around engagement, and the barriers to the sort of appropriation that increasingly characterises the public's experience of the twenty-first century museum. As Victoria Walsh and Andrew Dewdney note in their study of Tate Modern:

While the new Tate Modern extension clearly has galleries, what is more apparent than ever is the experience of circulation and event rather than exhibition and display. The experience of the museum is now not just

the event of the building, as we saw in the 1990s, but the event of people and time, as well as the event of the self-generated, time-specific photograph uploaded to Instagram, Flickr, and other competitive corporate image platforms.⁵

In my view, one of the things to like about the archive is particularly its resistance to the instant demand, its preservation against great odds, and of the voice of its creators. Yet even archives, including university archives that have an obligation to both the public and to their students, have to respond to the new pressures for 'transparency' and public clamour for entry into their realm of secrets. Digitising their objects and creating online versions of their analogue collections have been the most common way of achieving this and the new data revealed has transformed scholarship in all fields over the past two decades. But other means need to be attempted.

As a university archive RMIT Design Archives (RDA) has a commitment to student learning but also to RMIT's strong reputation for practice-based design education and research. These two factors have shaped its particular physiognomy over the past decade as it relates to collecting, stewardship and access. So, on the one hand, its collections demonstrate exemplary practice over time in order to offer precedents and parallels to current practice. And on the other, the curatorial concept of the 'active archive', a guiding principle of the RDA from its inception in 2007, seeks ways of being actively engaged with the world of design and ideas to contribute to the creation of new knowledge. Its particular commitment here is to initiate innovative practice-based ways of encountering the collections that nonetheless preserve the rules around archival access and integrity. In a modest way the RDA's remit parallels the contemporary archival thinking of Markus Miessen and Hans Ulrich Obrist: 'We were always wondering whether there would be a way in which we could think of an archival project purely in terms of productive encounter, in terms of production, in terms of producing new knowledge'.⁶

Over the decade of its existence the RDA has experimented with new modes of access, new modes of audience engagement and new ways to think about design history and its making. Robyn Healy has been an important ally here. In her two-part 2008 project 'Nomadic Archive One and Nomadic Archive Two' at Craft Victoria, Healy 'unpacked' the archives of textile designer Frances Burke, industrial and graphic designer, Gerard Herbst and the Fashion Design Council of Australia. Artefacts included 16mm films, audio-tapes, designer notes, textiles, clippings, inventories and storage vessels.⁷ There was a strong performative element in Healy's role as curator; for example, the objects tucked up in archival boxes were transported by RMIT industrial designer Mick Douglas from the University to the gallery as pillion passengers on his bike. The act of unpacking the boxes was presented as a performance by Healy. The display was relatively informal, since there were no barriers or glass boxes interposed between the viewer and the objects. Additionally, interviews and discussions were held in the space including with Herbst, creator of one of the archives.



The Nomadic Archive attempted to bring the collections alive by construing the exhibition as a form of urban intervention that brought the normally sequestered collections to a new audience. *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* on the other hand conceived of the Fashion Design Council (FDC) archive as a repository for innovative design thinking and practice that could form the conceptual basis for new work by contemporary practitioners, 'a starting point for their engagement in the exhibition'.⁸ This curatorial tactic reflects the established practice of Hub curators Fleur Watson and Kate Rhodes exemplified in their first exhibition at the Hub Gallery in 2013 'Public Offer: Ways to Share Design' that was also a collaboration with the RDA.

Healy notes: 'The device that inspired the exhibition was the FDC archive housed in the RMIT Design Archives.' It was 'crucial in providing insights into a little-known area of local fashion history and the growth of collective networks during this period'. But while the archive provided agency for present designers, it was also allowed to speak in its own voice of the past in the adjacent Project Room. Here, in a long thin space the archive was recreated – boxes on shelving, digitised versions of original material on a long table, similar to the sorting tables that dominate the RDA's work spaces, archival video on the screens, and a workstation where RDA staff and Design Hub Gallery volunteers continued to catalogue the FDC collection as performers in the exhibition. One might say too, that the audience was drawn into this active engagement with the archive when Anne Shearman, a visitor to the exhibition, decided to donate the personal archive of her brother Robert Pearce, who died in 1989, to the Design Archives. Pearce was, with Kate Durham and Robert Buckingham, a founder of the Fashion Design Council and his collection was a foundational inspiration for *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*.

Endnotes

- 1 Irmgard Christa Becker and Beatrice von Bismarck. "Positioning difference: the museological archive? A conversation between Irmgard Christa Becker and Beatrice von Bismarck" in *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict*, eds. Yann Chateigné and Markus Miessen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 57.
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- 3 Wikipedia contributors, "Respect des fonds," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Respect_des_fonds&oldid=799922628, (accessed January 19, 2018).
- 4 Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, (Yale CT: Yale University Press, 2015).
- 5 Victoria Walsh and Andrew Dewdney, "Temporal Conflicts and the Purification of Hybrids in the 21st-Century Art Museum: Tate, a Case in Point," https://www.stedelijkstudies.com/beheer/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Stedelijk-Studies-5_Temporal-Conflicts-Walsh-and-Dewdney_PDF.pdf (accessed January 10, 2018).
- 6 Yann Chateigné and Markus Miessen, 'Introduction: Productive spaces of conflict', Miessen and Chateigné (eds), *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict*, 11.
- 7 RMIT Design Archives Update 08, Melbourne, RMIT Design Archives, 2008.
- 8 All quotations are from Robyn Healy's essay in this volume.



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The 'archive' space of *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*, designed by Ziga Testen. Photography by Tobias Titz.

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