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Sight; Site; Cite

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Abstract

Whereas Fashion has found its place within the academic community the artistic community has been slow to use fashion as a broader visual commentary around the notion of individual, collective or national identity and socio-economic, cultural and historical position. There are some exceptions Lucy Orta's, 'wearable architectures' for example, which not only questioned contemporary living space but were transformative garments in themselves and 'occupied' urban areas and Susan Stockwells Money Dresses and Maps reflected on borders, trade, and globalization.

The proposed exhibition-presentation piece considers how we as people connect physically and virtually and are rooted within our environments and our cultural identity, yet free to embrace stylistic characteristics within globally influenced systems. It considers how cultural divergence through the digital age has influenced fashion and garments to exist without borders and has contributed to a decline in the uniqueness of individuals. It will be created specifically for IFFTI Beijing 2016, using techniques and materials developed previously (see images) and will be site specific.

The piece is neither sculptural nor product, and the laser etched images are drawn from a range of visual references, including tattoos, fabric representations, graffiti art, urban cityscapes and digital image representations. All references which hint at the familiarity of global visual codes and a stylistically homogenized fashion landscape.

The work considers the meteoric rise of the digital world and how this has added to the complexity of individual identity. The body although central to the piece is encased yet open to influence and asks the question if we are able to develop multiple collective identities that are no longer appropriated through a range of clearly defined factors such as gender, kinship, space or territory, race, culture and nationality (Smith National Identity 1991), then will future fashion and cultural identities become irreverent, impersonal and anonymous?

Key words: Cultural identity, Visual codes, Sight, site and cite, Sculptural design

It has taken considerable time but Fashion has moved from a position of disregard and a superficial phenomenon to being accepted within the academic community as a valid area of philosophical and socio-anthropological reflection.

The University of London's Institute of Historical Studies hosted the 84th Anglo–American Conference of Historians in July 2015 around the theme of 'Fashion' for the first time. Including keynote speakers such as Christopher Breward and Valerie Steele this event was significant in recognizing that the investigation of Fashion is a globally important area of academic study and debate in its own right. Across broad ranging issues surrounding identity, culture, gender, sexuality, image, politics and exhibition, academics at this event and further afield have debated, defined and documented a range of conclusions around global fashion systems and influences.

From, Walter Benjamin's early conclusions that Fashion is; "the sex appeal of the inorganic" representing the 'triumph of the commodity form' to contemporary commentators such as Lipovetsky who positions fashion within a post modern urban environment, "celebrating hyper-individualism" as the driver for identity. Or conversely, Baudrillard, who argues a diametric conclusion to Lipovetsky in that fashion is "unrelated to the intrinsic qualities of the individual and is in fact arbitrary and transient."

Ultimately the academic sector has embraced fashion and the range of critical discourse around the subject to date is diverse, challenging and stimulating.

The contemporary artistic community has however been slow to use fashion as a broader visual commentary around the notion of individual, collective or national identity and socio-economic cultural and historical position. Artists have certainly collaborated with designers and brands in recent years Anselm Reyle with Christian Dior in 2012, Damien Hirst with Levi Jeans and the Andy Warhol Foundation in 2008 and Graffiti artists Retna, Aiko, and Os Gemeos with Louis Vuitton in 2013, to name but a few. But these works have not been critical explorations into a discourse surrounding social or cultural identities, to all intents and purposes the artists have continued with a previous artistic convention where the application of fine art or pattern onto alternative surfaces and contexts, as surface or textural design, is in the main, for substantial reward alongside mainstream recognition.

The relationship between fashion and art has been consistently difficult, at times supportive and inspirational at others loathsome and indifferent. Setting aside the fact that both areas construct imaginary worlds and both rely on a dialogue with 'style' there has been little written or constructed that clarifies a convergence in terms of social and cultural resonance as opposed to the promise of fantasy within an object of desire.

The artistic avant-garde, whether Futurist, Constructivist or Dadaist from the early years of the twentieth century certainly engaged with the notion of fashion and its possibilities for questioning 'norms' and undermining European class structures. Although it could be argued that this was more of an interrelated distraction from their specialist works and an extension into product or imagery, which merely reinforces their willingness to both shock and concurrently have symbolic reference. This implies a paradoxically simplistic engagement rather than a thorough investigation into culture and identity within a broader and more meaningful context.

Ideological artists such as Moholy-Nagy who ran the Bauhaus weave workshop and Alexander Rodchenko did indeed have a utopian desire to develop standardized universal garments. In 1917 Rodchenko developed and wore a 'Productivist' overall while from 1923 Moholy-Nagy only wore working overalls as his outfit of choice. Although conceptually and politically sound, ultimately this type of intellectual optimism for a grander politicised fashion landscape, reminiscent of the workers in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, would be swept away by the reality of socialist realism and Fascist doctrines across Europe, in the mid 20th Century. If the early avant-garde artists recognized that they could make some form of comment, however elitist or politically ideal, through fashion and clothing, the reality was that they could neither, persuade nor influence change, as the infrastructural and telecommunication systems of the pre-war world were neither developed or advanced enough to support this end.

These artists who nurtured and proposed fashion agendas based on industrialization and functionality would surprisingly observe the reality of inception, post 1945, when ready to wear became abundant and the mass production of garments alongside the growth of global communication systems brought the first steps of a democratization of

fashion.

The Surrealists around the same period, on the other hand, led by Dali worked with renowned designers such as Schiaparelli, to reinforce an ideology of “shocking the bourgeoisie”. They embraced, collaborated and influenced fashion as a device, in Dali’s, case to attract media controversy and build his ‘brand’ in others such as Man Ray and Delaunay purely for financial reasons.

Artists may well have flirted with ‘Fashion’ as a method of communicating agendas and ideals but it is the body itself that been central to Art and creative expression in nearly all known cultures from the beginnings of civilization. Since man defined himself by first making representational marks the body has been, autobiographical, symbolic and an arbiter of ideals. It has been central to how we understand facets of identity such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity and has been manipulated and altered to align with or rebel against, social conventions and to communicate messages to others.

Realism and ultra realism was at the core of the artist representation of the body and image for centuries, until its systematic decline over the course of the 19th Century and the body became to be represented visually and symbolically within new mimetic contexts, which undermined this pre-modern art tradition. If Picasso viewed the human form through original eyes then he perhaps unwittingly contrived to almost eradicate the body as a form within art, as modernism and abstraction became the style of choice for the global art community.

The art historian Linda Nochlin, in, “The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as Metaphor of Modernity,” (1994) contends that; “the advent of the modernist era constituted a decisive break with a more cohesive past.” And “that the fractured forms employed by so many modern and post-modern artists are metaphors for the fragmentation that is endemic to contemporary living conditions. Whereas the past, at least in retrospect, is seen to be whole and coherent, the present seems lacking in fixed values, hierarchies and connections.”

Contemporary artists from the late 20th Century to today have therefore recognized that the body is central to the fragmentation of society and have more recently rediscovered humanism within art. This in turn has validated the body as a signifier of lived experience, as a challenge to social codes and as a canvas for the politics of identity and belonging.

Whether this is manifested in a more traditional format, or through performance and installation, the body is not simply physical or representational but has its reference in the broader contexts of influence. This includes the natural human circumstance, which informs self, and our relationship with technology, which is not only converged, but also symbiotic to contemporary lifestyle positioning. The broader implications of this, therefore, is that the body and its relationship to fashion through art can, and should, be viewed, across social, cultural, political and generational lines.

As noted few contemporary artists have identified ‘fashion’ as a term within which their work is located and which explores broader issues. There are some notable exceptions. Lucy Orta, Interviewed in 2001 says;

‘I cannot talk about the body or the human condition without considering issues of identity, personal space and the environment. I consciously blur the fields of art, architecture and fashion to pave the way for new alternatives.’

It is her work around wearable architectures such as ‘Refuge Wear’ and Collective Wear, which are rooted within fashion but act as interventions within urban landscapes as transitional spaces. She is commenting on, and addressing in practical terms, the homeless, mans relationship with architecture and urbanization ‘The Survival Sac with Water Reserve’ fabricated in microporous laminated polyester with a telescopic aluminum structure not only pushes new materiality but begins to identify that the information age is portable and this portability is at odds with the existing parameters of borders and territory. Susan Stockwell has also used full size garments made from maps and paper currency, such as dollars and Chinese RMB to re-consider borders, cultural identity, territories and globalization.

This use of alternative materials within creative practice remains a constant amongst many contemporary artists, including myself. ‘Unfinished Business’ was an early exhibition also constructed from paper currency shown in 2007 at the Darkroom Gallery in the Dashanzi 798 Art District of Beijing. Works presented referenced Chinese political paper cuts and championed the beauty of the now defunct paper ‘Jiao’ denomination of small currency. The more worn the currency the more stimulating and inspirational, embedded with history and with passing and passed on narrative. This process of enquiry, embedded

narrative and the use of alternative materials became a recurring theme in future works and curated exhibitions. The proposal to produce a new piece entitled ‘Sight, Site, Cite.’ draws from these references inspirationally, practically and intellectually.



Figure 1. ZhongshanZhuang Collar from Unfinished Business 2007

If ‘Unfinished Business’ inspired materiality then the process and methods of producing the constituent pieces for ‘Sight, Site, Cite.’ is based upon another previous exhibition entitled Home (2012) where the sculptural piece was entitled ‘History, Space, Place.’

The concept for representing ‘home’, which reflected a ten-year period living and working in China reflected a multitude of entangled narratives. Individual identity, social connectivity, the physicality and functionality of location and of borders, as well as the emotional attachments that develop, regarding people, spaces and environment. As an academic, fashion designer, curator, and artist the influences and observations from these narratives brought into question not only the practical aspects of urban life but the broader issues regarding mans relationship with architecture and his desire to own an individual space that he has absolute control of and total influence of. Striving to possess an individual structure or ‘home’ is by no means new. The dress section of the ‘History, Space, Place.’ piece was constructed from original 19th Century English mortgages (indentures).

These defined the amount of loans undertaken by individuals to purchase buildings and are hand written with wax seals on vellum, a traditional hide material used for official documents throughout European history.

The key to the work was whether ‘home’ is purely signified by location, architecture and investment and thus becomes a restrictive and divisive constraint within our urban

societies or can be seen as a more conceptual premise without borders and with empathy and engagement with appropriate communities.

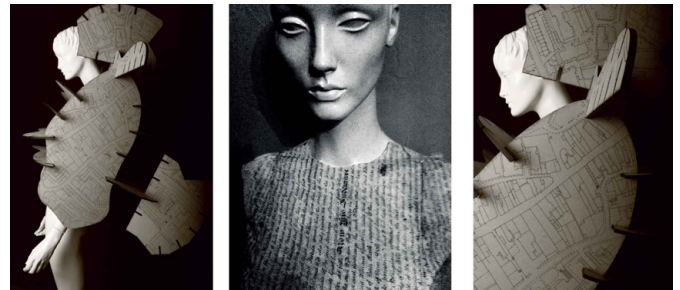


Figure 2. ‘History, Space, Place.’ International Fashion Art Exhibition 2012

By developing a process of laser cutting wood and etching on the interconnecting shapes, technology supported the idea of the restriction that populations have continually placed upon themselves in order to locate themselves within a community. The work not only questioned these distinctions, brought together historic and contemporary similarities and supported the idea that fashion and art can combine as forms of critical discourse which can be used to question how we have come to accept society norms.

This discourse was further investigated within the 2015 installation ‘Stories without Stories’.

A collaborative project with New York artist Tom Hall which explored the notion that within the evolution of Fashion it is not merely the garment itself, nor the creation of an elite group of designers, manufacturers or marketers that embodies Fashion, but that it is a more contextualized expression of individual identity located within social interaction and social comparison.

The installation, a large-scale garment, constructed from cardboard, re-considered the relationship that individuals have with their garments. Taking into account the embedded narrative within individual pieces owned and the context, whether real or imagined, of a relationship that includes context, familiarity and a lived experience.

The imposing piece left, as if discarded, on the steps of a grand building in Florence, occupied its own space and questioned the nature of fashion as purely adornment whilst considering the importance of location, situation, experiential activity and memory.



Figure 3. 'Stories without Stories' Florence 2015

The piece had the ability to reconstruct, retell and represent an implied narrative, confirming its non-passive role within its site.

If embedded narrative is a recurring theme then so is social identities within fashion. Both being systematic and theoretical elements, which imbue the formative investigation and critical underpinning of 'Sight, Site, Cite.'

Previously these elements have informed and been clarified within the creation of a touring exhibition of garments, artifacts and images entitled 'Fashion Revolution China.'

The exhibition was set against the context of a century of economic, social and political developments in China. Where fashion or clothing, depending on how this is defined, has acted as a representational and symbolic illustration of a culture trying to clarify its own identity as its population negotiated unparalleled turmoil and seismic change.

Elizabeth Wilson in *Fashion and Modernity* states that "The idea that ones dress might express one's own unique identity seems naïve these days" however, in the context of China it has represented the birth and rebirth of culture by being both dismissive and formative and for much of the 20th century contributed to and reflected on individual expression, modernity and political turmoil.

The initial exhibition at The Gallery 2012 illustrated certain principles such as how dress explores individual identity, as a non-verbal language, in response to a range of social, economic, political and cultural contexts.

The archived garments from China from the 1930's through to contemporary Chinese fashion designers reinforced and illustrated these themes by using dress/clothing as cultural artefact.



Figure 4. Fashion Revolution China 2012 The Gallery, Bournemouth

The exhibition followed an almost cyclic journey, beginning with the pre- revolutionary pieces constructed from fine Chinese and imported fabrics and incorporating hand embroidery and skilful manufacturing techniques.

Through the period post 1949, which although stylistically tempered by a political overview, were crafted with care and precision and on to China's contemporary designers who are reviving traditional skills and developing modern styles that are embedded with cultural resonance.

Ultimately the unique narratives of the artefacts illustrated through their owners or designers, evidence the notion that clothing and style cannot exist in a cultural vacuum yet responds individually to a cultural context and the subtle nuances of individual style within a collective paradigm.

The content and context of the exhibition and subsequent conference papers explored the narrative of the clothing against these topics exploring the social and political conditions that supported evolutionary cultural identity historically. It also considers how contemporary China is responding and developing a relationship to its fashion past, present and future through individual narratives around the garments themselves.

The question therefore is whether a sculptural construct, 'Sight, Site, Cite' can be successfully created which is both underpinned by the theoretical references noted and draws upon previous investigations both visually, creatively and illustratively.

Whilst fundamentally informing the content, which considers how we as people connect physically and virtually and are rooted within our environments and our cultural identity, yet free to embrace stylistic characteristics within globally influenced systems. Furthermore how cultural divergence through the digital age has influenced fashion and garments to exist without borders and has contributed to a decline in the uniqueness of individuals and individuality.

The body is central to the piece although it is passive and restricted.

If, as reflected on, by Schlemmer in 1924 in the piece 'Figure and Space Delineation'

"the body relates to its surrounding space through geometry and mechanics, which in turn connect its invisible inner functions."

Then 20th century technology elaborates on this making the invisible visible and creating the ability to visualize the virtual.

'Sight, Site, Cite.' considers the meteoric rise of this digital world and how this has added to the complexity of individual identity. It asks the question if we are able to develop multiple collective identities that are no longer appropriated through a range of clearly defined factors such as gender, kinship, space or territory, race, culture and nationality (Smith National Identity (1991), then will future fashion and cultural identities become irreverent, impersonal and anonymous?

There is a clear craft process in creating the piece, which involves building a rigid card 'toile' directly onto the mannequin whilst taking into account the interlocking construction technique, which enables the structure to be self-supporting. This is a significantly time consuming process as the 'garments' that are constructed are not pliable and require accuracy of fit informed by traditional pattern cutting methods. The card pieces are then digitised using Accuscan software for Gerber systems directly through a mobile phone, which automatically digitizes the 'pattern' pieces. Once in the system the pieces can be ported to the laser cutting software and the linear designs for laser etching can be added. The methods of construction and build require a skilful combination of the hand constructed, digital technologies and vector-designed imagery.

The vector designs for the etching relate to the visual and stylistic characteristics, which inform global fashion codes and a blurring of geographically, located identities. They consider if evolution is artificial as opposed to biological and that the relationship between the body and technology informs self-image through a powerful energetic digital social interaction agenda.



Figure 5. Vector Designs for 'Sight, Site, Cite.'

Ultimately 'Sight, Site, Cite.' recognizes the democratization of fashion through the expedient growth in 'the digital' which has seen new territories forming whereby the power to influence cultural trends and 'taste-making' is within the hands of many as opposed to the few located within a talent aristocracy. The visual codes and production techniques are informed from a large range of previous works both created and exhibited or written. The piece references the familiarity of global visual codes and a stylistically homogenized fashion landscape. It identifies how the body relates to its physical and non-physical surroundings understanding that we are a product of nature yet symbiotic with technology and that this symbiosis is a driver and influencer of identity beyond borders. Whether the final construction addresses the proposition that Fashion can be a driver for Art in terms of social, political and cultural observation remains rooted within its relationship to its audience and as O'Reilly says "the artist, artwork and viewer, should together negotiate an intellectual and sensory experience."

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