

Fashion Text as Material

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INTRODUCTION

MODUS is a collaborative research and curatorial platform established in 2018 by Ruby Hoette (NL) and Caroline Stevenson (UK). It brings together an international network of fashion practitioners, writers and theorists to explore fashion in the expanded field: the peripheries between and at the intersection of fashion with other disciplines. MODUS operates across theory, practice and innovative pedagogies that encourage new ways of being, doing and thinking fashion.

WORKSHOP TOPIC

This workshop draws attention to the location of theory in practice-based fashion education. It contributes to a growing recognition of the productive relationship between theory and practice in fashion (Gaugele and Titton, 2022) more broadly and the opportunities that this affords us, as educators, to develop critical fashion pedagogies with transformative actions in the real world.

The workshop responds to the IFFTI subtheme of *Pedagogies*: it demonstrates innovative and experimental approaches to engage fashion students with theory, demystifying its structures and language, and creating visual approaches to its application.

It also contributes to *Communities* through ‘unlearning fashion’ by questioning how knowledge about fashion is made, circulated and validated.

WORKSHOP CONTENT

The workshop begins with sets of photocopied pages from foundational ‘fashion theory’ texts such as *The Fashion System*, *The Empire of Fashion*, *The Fashioned Body*, *Seeing Through Clothes*, *Thinking through Fashion*, *Fashion, a Philosophy* and so on. The books are not photocopied in full, rather we will select random pages. Participants are invited to choose several of the pages and read through them. They are also invited to bring a text to the workshop that they find relevant to their own practice. This can be, for example, a theoretical text, or a piece of fiction, a poem or even an instructional manual.

We will discuss how it feels to read theory 'out of context' and how these pages represent a history of bigger ideas that help us understand the meaning of fashion. We will ask the workshop participants to explain how and where they use theory in their own practices or pedagogies, and how we think students regard theory in relation to their practice. As fashion practitioners ourselves, we will share our need for theory to be mobile and 'travel among disciplines' (Chambers, 2006), rather than something we apply to an object of study. We will also discuss the poetics of theory, looking at how ideas are formed through language and different modes of composition. We will look at how theoretical texts are structured and how this serves as a validation of certain types of knowledge.

After the group discussion, we will ask participants to look again at their photocopies, this time to search for smaller ideas that resonate with them. These can be single words, full sentences, paragraphs or even chapter titles.

Working individually, we will ask the participants to use the language of theory as a material to create an entirely new essay. They will be provided with scissors, masking tape, post-its, highlighters, pencils, glue, staplers and other tools to help them cut up, collage and re-configure the photocopies into their own visual and experimental essays. We will encourage them to use the text as a material, paying attention to not only the words themselves, but also the play between black and white, spaces and absences and typesetting formats. We will suggest different options or 'ways in' to activating the texts – for example, focusing only on the verbs or adjectives in the writing, or using every third word.

We will encourage the participants to also keep the remaining text that they are cutting from and consider the 'negative' of their ideas.

At the conclusion of the workshop, the participants will display and read out their visual essays.

We will close with a discussion about how it feels to cut up theory, using other people's writing to create new ideas. We will discuss how this activity helps us to question the authority of language in validating fashion knowledge, and how we might expand fashion's theoretical frameworks through forms of practice and shared dialogue.

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

The workshop aims to consider how and where fashion knowledge is made and to validate it as a collective, disruptive and participatory activity through the 'act of pushing language around as well as the act of being emotionally moved by that process' (Goldsmith, 2011: p 1). It opens up new modes of thinking *with* theory: the workshop format provides a space where ideas can be practiced and fashion

knowledge can be produced through making and doing. By examining the poetics of theoretical language and encouraging participants to use these to express their own thoughts, it also foregrounds the 'affect of experience' (Atkinson, 2013) which can't be completely captured through cognition alone. This includes the memories, feelings and the relationality of our lived experiences with clothes.

Furthermore, it responds to a paradigm shift in fashion thinking away from outdated theories that have been complicit in reproducing and maintaining a particular idea of fashion as an individualised product of Western society. By unpicking the frameworks through which fashion knowledge comes into being, it challenges histories of ideas that have prioritised a centre or mainstream and excluded other forms of fashion practice as tradition, myth or even craft or costume. Instead, the workshop puts forward an inclusive methodology to generate new and expansive forms of fashion knowledge through practice and conversation. (Hoette, 2023)

Practicalities

Ideally this workshop should last for 2 hours, to provide enough time for discussion and activity. We will provide workshop materials for 25 participants including:

- Photocopies
- Scissors
- Masking Tape
- Staplers
- Pens, pencils, highlighters
- Gluesticks
- Paperclips and other stationery

In terms of room requirements, we would like to host this workshop in one of the visual studies seminars (for example on the 13th floor), where participants sit and work on tables. We would like to be able to display the essays at the close of the workshop, possibly for the rest of the conference participants to see as well.

REFERENCES

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