

# Concept, Context and Communication

## Interrelationship: designer, viewer, wearer

**Keywords:** body / conceptual fashion / interdisciplinarity

### **Abstract**

*The paper exposes the findings of the design research methodology developed through my recently completed practice led PhD at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. The work is informed by contemporary reactions against 'fast fashion' and the emergence of conceptual and experimental fashion. It exposes new and interdisciplinary approaches to creating and communicating at the intersection of fashion, fine art and performance from the perspective of the fashion designer. The process of design developed here focused on the body, experimentation and testing, reaffirming the emphasis on the creative process and addressing context as fundamental to the communication of clothing centred concepts.*

*The research method within the practice explored the potential of communicating body-related concepts and behaviours to wearers and viewers through the medium of clothing. The collections of concept-based work were specifically designed to encourage particular movements or behaviours. The potential for these garments to physically and emotionally communicate messages to wearers and viewers has been tested and analysed on a range of wearers and in a variety of contexts and written up as three major case studies.*

*The paper uncovers the complicated network of communication between designer, wearer and viewer of concept led fashion design. It will discuss how the individual's understanding of the body affects this communication and reading, specifically looking at experiential, emotional and physical factors and contextual effects of wearing and viewing clothing.*

*The paper discusses how the design method and findings of the case studies have the potential to be employed in a range of disciplines that use the body and clothing to communicate meaning. It also demonstrates how the method has been employed in a live context in collaboration with Union Dance for 'Sensing Change', (2005), performed at venues such as The Queen Elizabeth Hall the Linbury Space at the Royal Opera House, London. This will be illustrated with a series of photographs from the case studies and the final performance.*

## Introduction

This paper is based on research conducted through a practice-led PhD at The University of the Arts London entitled *Interface; Concept and context as innovative strategies for Fashion design and communication* (Bugg, 2007). This paper specifically focuses on the body in context and explores the way that the designer, wearer and viewer contribute to the overall communication and understanding of conceptual fashion in a range of contexts. This is illustrated through an overview of the case study findings taken from the PhD.

The intention of the research was to provide new insights into the way fashion designers can work conceptually and how their work might be perceived differently, dependent on contexts of presentation. Contexts in this case refer to both the contexts of a wearer and the location in which the embodied garment is viewed. The project has established how different spaces from art galleries and live performance to photography affect the way a garment is read and responded to. It exposes how the conceptual intention and context of presentation affect these readings, identifying the classification of a garment as fashion, art, costume or concept for both the viewer and the wearer.

The project is situated in a climate of heightened interest in fashion as an area for research and critical debate. In an academic context fashion has, to date, predominantly been discussed by theorists, critics and historians and this research responds to a perceived need for an analysis of contemporary practice from the perspective of the fashion practitioner. Considerable attention has been placed on developing an appropriate methodology to interrogate the hypothesis. The multi method uncovered contemporary practice in the area of research and employed analysis of interviews with contemporary practitioners, three practice case studies and two live applications as central to the investigation. The case studies utilised conceptually-led design methods and explored the potential of communicating messages to wearers and viewers through clothing design. The findings suggested a much broader application of conceptual creative practice within fashion design and related industries.

The research tracks the development of 'conceptual fashion' and explores interdisciplinary approaches employed by high-end fashion designers. It responded to the growing use of performance and spectacle on the catwalks in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the increasing instances of designers showing their work in art galleries. The contexts for

communicating fashion garments and concepts have moved beyond the confines of the catwalk, the traditional store space and the printed page. Designers' work is now communicated through and within film, animation, the music industry, art photography, virtual space, performance and the art gallery.

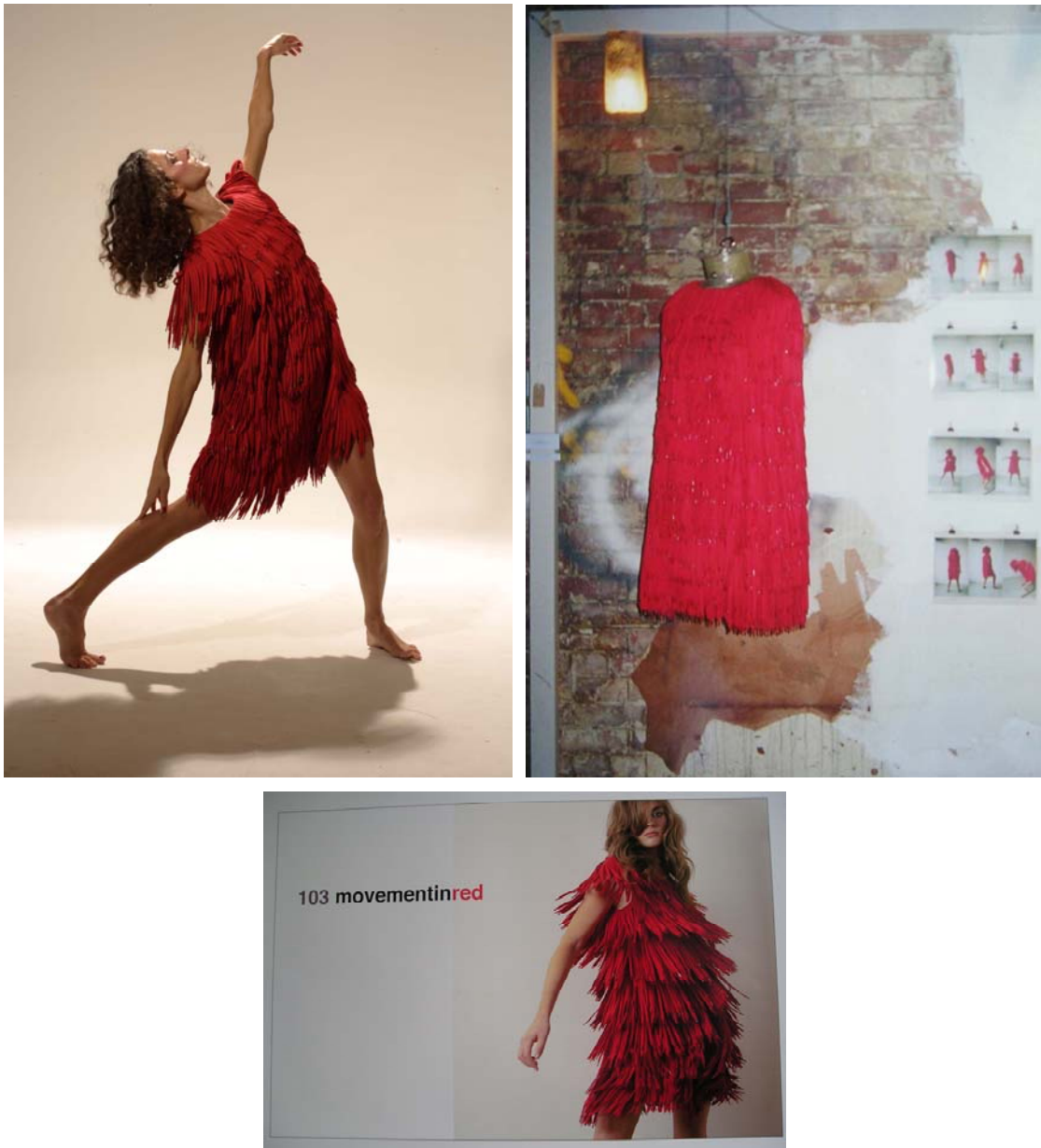
The research questioned the reasons for this shift in approach and addressed how fashion is understood within these interdisciplinary contexts and where its boundaries lie in relation to the disciplines of fine art and performance. It argued that in some cases this is far more than a mere promotional tool and should be seen to be an important indicator of the blurring of boundaries and the sharing of knowledge between disciplines. It is further argued that attempts to pigeonhole this type of interdisciplinary practice into the term 'fashion' can restrict the viewer's interpretation and interaction with the work and indeed can restrict opportunities for the designer's methodology and outcomes.

### **Wearing and viewing concept in context**

Several texts have explored the way the clothed body communicates; *Body Dressing*, (2001), *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and the Body*, (1998) and *Fashion as Communication*, (1996). Issues surrounding the social psychology of clothing have been discussed by Susan. B. Kraisier in her book of the same name that builds upon J.C. Flugel's work *The Psychology of Clothes* (1971) which although first published in the 1930s remains a seminal text in this area of work. However, the issue of how clothing is read and responded to by and through the physical experience of wearing clothing is relatively un-explored. This research aims to bridge this gap by exploring the interface of concept-based clothing, the body and clothing, clothing and the wearer and the clothed body and the viewer. This gives a more inclusive understanding of how clothing and fashion are understood in the context of the body by viewing bodies.

Contextual placement of clothing and specifically the location of an item affect the way it is 'read'. Malcolm Barnard has discussed this issue in relation to Derrida's notion of 'undecidability' he states that; 'Intertextuality means that the meaning is always unpredictable' and goes on to say that the meaning of an object is 'Both produced and destroyed by the item's relations to other items and by its place in a number of discourses' (Barnard, 1996, p.173). However, what is less clear is exactly how different types of contexts affect the reading of the clothed body and

indeed to what extent the context impacts upon designer, wearer and viewer of conceptual fashion.



**Fig 1.** a) *Red shoelace dress* in performance,  
b) *Red shoelace dress* exhibited at *The Barge House*, London,  
c) *Red shoelace dress* in Editorial context.

The case studies within this research practically investigate the effect of contextual communication of garments on the different agents within the production of a creative outcome or method of communication. It is argued that rather than destroying the meaning of 'texts' this type of approach allows author, wearer and viewer to participate in the reading and creation of

texts within a 'system of difference' and through an exploration of 'intertextuality'. This reading takes place not only on a broader field of cultural and historical references but is coupled with the important performative element of wearing clothing.

### **The Researcher's Design Process**

The case studies investigate whether it is possible for a designer to communicate messages through the clothed body to wearers and viewers and explores the way different viewers and wearers reacted to this network of communication. Simultaneously, they expose the effect of context upon these readings. The garments were intended to encourage certain movements and behaviours as an intrinsic to their design. The design came from analysis of videos produced of the body in movement and were developed in 3D. The design and process of testing investigated the emotional and experiential factors of fashion/ clothing and exposes how wearers experience and respond to clothing/ fashion in a variety of contexts.

A practical and responsive method was developed in respect of the design and manufacture of garments that was sympathetic to the design concept and intention. This reflects and builds upon current empirical methods used within the design sector. This work on designers' processes has the potential to be explored further through case study analysis. However, for the purposes of this research the focus was placed on how concept can be embedded within clothing and how this is responded to. The concept of designing 'from the body to the body' was developed out of the intention of the designer to produce work that focused on the body, movement and behaviour. This focus allowed the researcher to explore a practical concept the effect of which could be tracked through the wearers and viewers responses.

The concept of movement was explored in depth through a combination of visual and practical research. Design intention was derived from a series of approximately sixty five body movements recorded on video with a model carrying out the process. These movements and behaviours were generated between the researcher and the model in an improvisation session in a dance studio. The behaviours and actions included walking, jumping, punching, climbing up stairs, sitting/squatting, spinning, hip swivels, head movements and hand gestures. Ideas and initial forms were then tested and developed in physical form on the body.

This dialogue is extended through the exploration of presentation and communication methods that expose the effect of context on concept based design. This method is employed

intentionally in stark contrast to more linear design methods employed by many contemporary commercial designers, to allow for reflection on practice and an investigation of the researcher's process in a non-commercially driven context. It is arguable that 'fast fashion' continually pushes the designer to outcomes rather than allowing for research and experimentation. The design method developed here opposes this non-reflective method and seeks to correlate design intention and selected methods of communication.

### **Case Studies as a Method of Research**

The question posed by this research is a complex one and it addresses several issues, asking 'why' interdisciplinary practice is taking place within the fashion industry. It questions 'where' the boundaries of fashion are with other disciplines and seeks to explore 'how' this interdisciplinary work is produced and subsequently received and understood by wearers and viewers in a variety of contexts.

Robert Yin (2003) identifies that 'how' and 'why' questions can be answered by using case studies, experiments or histories. This type of depth that a case study allows supports the complexity of the research area of investigation. The researcher needed to 'test' the affect of a variety of different settings and wearers on the reading of the garments. Although case studies are more usually associated with social science rather than design research, the method is appropriate to allow for examination and analysis of live situations and interaction between people and their surroundings. The research method enabled the researcher to observe and analyse the experiences, feelings and behaviours of participants.

### **Design of the Case Studies**

Each case study followed a fixed structure that defines the boundaries of the case in relation to both the research question, interviews and the findings from the previous case study. Individual case studies tend to be focused on a very specific and singular activity. (Denscombe, 2003) However, for the purposes of this research the case studies explore a range of interrelated factors. The process for observation, reflection and analysis within the case studies was controlled through the careful development of different types of data retrieval formats that served as a structure throughout the research.

One of the key elements of the research was to investigate the effect of context on the understanding of interdisciplinary work and as such, garments have been tested in different

scenarios from fashion shoots, editorial, videos, live performance spaces to art venues. Subsequently reaction from viewers was obtained and analysed.

A wide network of relationships and forces affect the way we read clothing in a variety of contexts. To give insight into this process and to answer the aims of the research the case studies were strictly structured around key issues emerging from the contextual review and the interviews and followed a structured process of analysis.

### **Participants: Viewers and Wearers**

Participants included wearers, production teams and a constant group of three differently trained viewers. Wearers and production teams varied dependent on the scenario and context and were selected for their appropriateness to the type of communication. This enabled the researcher to draw out the participants' understanding of the clothing concepts and the effect of context upon their responses.

A set of three standard viewers remained constant throughout the case studies to allow for a comparative analysis of their responses in different contexts. They were drawn from a variety of backgrounds and this allowed the researcher to assess what, if any, affect the viewers background and experience has on their understanding and reading of the work. The viewers were as follows:

- Art trained: Arts development officer
- Fashion trained: Fashion designer for high street market
- General public: No formal training, customer services executive

The viewers come from different social groups and their experience of fashion and art varies considerably.

It was not appropriate to retain a consistency of wearer throughout the case studies as wearers were selected dependent on their training for a particular scenario. For example in the fashion shoot fashion models from a model agency were used, whereas in live performance contexts performance artists and dancers wore the garments.

## **Methods of Recording and Analysis**

Wearers were asked to respond to how the garments make them feel and behave in an improvisational situation. Both viewers and wearers were asked to respond to the garments, the idea behind them and to how they made them feel and respond emotionally and aesthetically under key themes. At no stage were any of the participants informed of the design concepts and intentions by the researcher.

Each scenario within each case study was recorded visually through video or photography, the method of recording was selected to be appropriate to the given context. A series of standard questions were asked to interrogate the hypothesis and the emergent findings from the contextual review. All respondents were asked the same standard questions and the discussion was recorded on dictaphone. Verbal response was recorded for each individual garment in each scenario/context.

Information recorded design data, context data and wearers and viewers background/ training, behavioural understanding/ interpretation, emotional, aesthetic responses, there interpretation of the design concept and their response to the context/ location. Once the information had been recorded both a comparative and content analysis was undertaken between each garment in each of the scenarios. This information was then drawn into a scenario analysis through a content analysis method. Finally all of the findings were collated into a case study conclusion.

The conclusions from each case study were then drawn into a matrix designed to record a summary of response from wearers and viewers. The matrix was broken down into specific research areas under generic central research themes a summary of which is discussed here.

## **Concept and Context: Wearers**

It has been established through the case studies that concepts related to the body, experience, emotion and behaviour can be communicated to wearers through the medium of clothing. It should be noted that the concepts behind each case study were focused on specific behaviours or actions and it is clear that this type of design intention suggests ideas to wearers in a very direct manner through the design, shape and feel of the garment. This is borne out in the fact that messages were conveyed most clearly to wearers through the physical experience of wearing the clothing, their behavioural responses often indicated the design concept rather than their verbal response.



The aesthetic and emotional effects of clothing are relevant to wearers and viewers. It became clear in case study 1 that the way the wearer responded to how they felt in respect of certain shapes, colours, textures and the links that they drew to other forms such as animals, angels and so on affected their reading and understanding of the work. This was explored throughout the design process and the researcher was able to utilise aesthetic and emotional findings from previous designs to inform subsequent garment design.



**Fig 2.** *Red shake dress*, J.Bugg, final shoot 2006. The Images shows a dancer exploring the movement potential of the garment.

Wearers are rarely affected by the context or environment in which they are working, they are more concerned with the context of the clothing itself. However, it emerged that wearers are directly affected by the presence of an audience and this can alter their behaviour and focus. Interestingly, they appeared not to be affected by the presence of a video camera. This suggests that video is an appropriate format for communicating the work in a manner that is unobtrusive to the relationship between the wearer and her response to the garment. This

method of recording and capturing interaction enables one of the most natural responses from wearers and the clearest communication of concept.

The wearers across the case studies read the design concept most clearly in movement contexts such as in live performance and improvisational video footage. The wearers' backgrounds and training clearly affected their responses. Dancers were more able to identify the design concept both verbally and through their behaviour, this suggests that their heightened understanding of both movement and their own bodies made this type of wearer the most appropriate to convey the design concept of movement. Fashion models reacted very differently to other wearers, they were less concerned with concept or context. They did not respond physically or verbally to the design concepts; they work in a different way and tended to be directed by the photographer or stylist. Fashion models did not demonstrate strong emotional responses to the garments. In light of this it is suggested that it is necessary to select wearers appropriate to the idea behind conceptual work and that fashion models are not always the appropriate communication platform for conceptual or interdisciplinary fashion.

Wearers are overall less concerned with aesthetic issues than viewers, however, the fashion models are concerned about how they look in the clothing, and whether it is flattering or not. This is important in a commercial context to sell clothing and their reaction suggests that they are performing a specific role or learnt behaviour in the context of a fashion shoot.



**Fig 3.** *Toothpick Spine and shoelace bustle* J.Bugg, 2005. Seen here in performance for the final shoot 2006.

### **Concept and Context: Viewers**

It has been established that both wearers and viewers respond differently depending on their training, background and experience. The art viewer was most responsive to the work in art or dance related contexts, she had strong negative responses to the fashion contexts and specifically the use of fashion models. This indicates that there is potential to further consider the audience as central to the communication and understanding of the work and is particularly relevant in response to the growing and changing audiences for fashion as discussed in the contextual review.

Viewers read the concept of movement most clearly through the wearer's behaviour in movement related contexts, such as video and performance. This indicates clearly that this is the most appropriate format for communicating the concept of movement to wearers and viewers; it also suggested a reading of the work as dance or performance for many of the viewers.

However, viewers clearly read the concept most clearly and free from classification and discipline boundaries in exhibition contexts where there are a variety of methods of communication. Viewers respond to narratives and draw links between different formats for example in the test application exhibition at the Fashion Space Gallery). Feedback supported the argument that the static garment presented in the space presented with photographic narrative and video explained the whole concept. In effect, having the garment in the space places the focus on the clothing, rather than the technique of the photograph or the dance in the video for example. In the *Mutiny at the Bargehouse* exhibition this was reiterated as a garment seen alone does not explain the whole story to viewers and can be read as many things. It emerged that the use of the body is important in helping viewers to understand the meaning of the clothing.

Viewers were able to read specific concepts more clearly than wearers. This is interesting as it suggests that the aesthetic and distant perspective of viewers is stronger and allows more clarity than the emotional and physical perspective of the wearer. This is borne out in the fact that viewers tend to draw more aesthetic responses than wearers. They relate the garments to animals, natural forms, objects, and see shapes and colours as signifiers of other things. This demonstrates the importance of the image and of 'signifieds'. In contemporary communication all viewers are used to reading images regardless of their backgrounds and training. It has also become clear that what a garment signifies for one viewer is not always the same as for others. Although viewer's emotional responses are clearly less strong than wearer's, the strongest emotional responses came when the garments were communicated in performance, video and art contexts.

Viewers are strongly affected by context, a context can align the work to a specific discipline, however, context is not always discipline prescriptive. Viewers' backgrounds and experiences affects the way they receive garments in different contexts, however, overall viewers responded most positively to video, performance and art gallery contexts. Issues of classification diminish in movement and performance contexts, but these contexts can still suggest words associated with performance in the feedback. The work is hard to classify in static contexts for viewers. Art and fashion are the most commonly used terms in reference to static work. The 'look' of the wearer also dramatically affects viewer's response. The body is vital to an understanding of the work in context.

## **Interface**

In respect of how conceptually led fashion is read in specific contexts it has emerged that not all contexts are discipline-specific for viewers and wearers. However, the fashion context, specifically the editorial format, was the most discipline prescriptive for viewers and wearers drawing all viewers to a reading of the work as 'fashion'. The discussion around whether an art gallery makes a garment or fashion 'art' was explored throughout the case studies in different types of gallery and in different formats. It emerged that this is not the case, in fact art-related contexts allowed for a more diverse reading of the work for viewers.

Contextual placement can align work to a specific as well as multi disciplinary reading. Context can also affect the concept of clothing and the body on which it is worn and the space in which it is viewed all impact upon the way the work is received. Within the case studies there were many examples of very different feelings about the same garment presented in different ways. Performance and video are the most positively received methods of communication throughout the case studies. They allow for the most open reading of the work and for heightened emotional and aesthetic responses. To classify the work to a specific discipline is difficult for both viewers and wearers. Viewers are comfortable using a variety of terms and disciplines to describe the work within the case studies. Wearers tend not to classify the work under a discipline heading and refer to the work as clothing, garment, dress, etc. All respondents use a variety of terms to describe the garments; clothing, costume, garment, piece, dress etc. The terms appear to be interchangeable, however, it also indicates a difficulty with locating this garment-focused practice. This is evident across the case studies and viewers will often use more than one term in a single response.

## **Interrelationship: Designer, Viewer, Wearer**

This research can be seen to add to an understanding of the process of communication between the designer, wearer and viewer of concept-led clothing design. This can inform the design processes employed by designers working in new and interdisciplinary contexts as it focuses on the central issues of fashion: clothing, the body, wearing and viewing work in context, as opposed to dealing with abstract concepts and trends. The findings of the case studies illustrate that there is a complex network of communication that takes place between these different parties in the construction of meaning. The model of findings which follows

demonstrates the considerations that have arisen from this research in respect of this complex interchange.

The idea of communicating concepts through clothing has been central to the work and the research illustrates the importance of a context that was sympathetic to the concept behind a design or collection. Properties and subsequent meaning of items of fashion and dress can convey different and often contradictory things at the same time. The reading is further complicated in relation to clothing worn on the body, as there is more sense of interaction and movement - a possibility of further recontextualisation. The body on which the garment is worn also adds to this 'intertextuality'

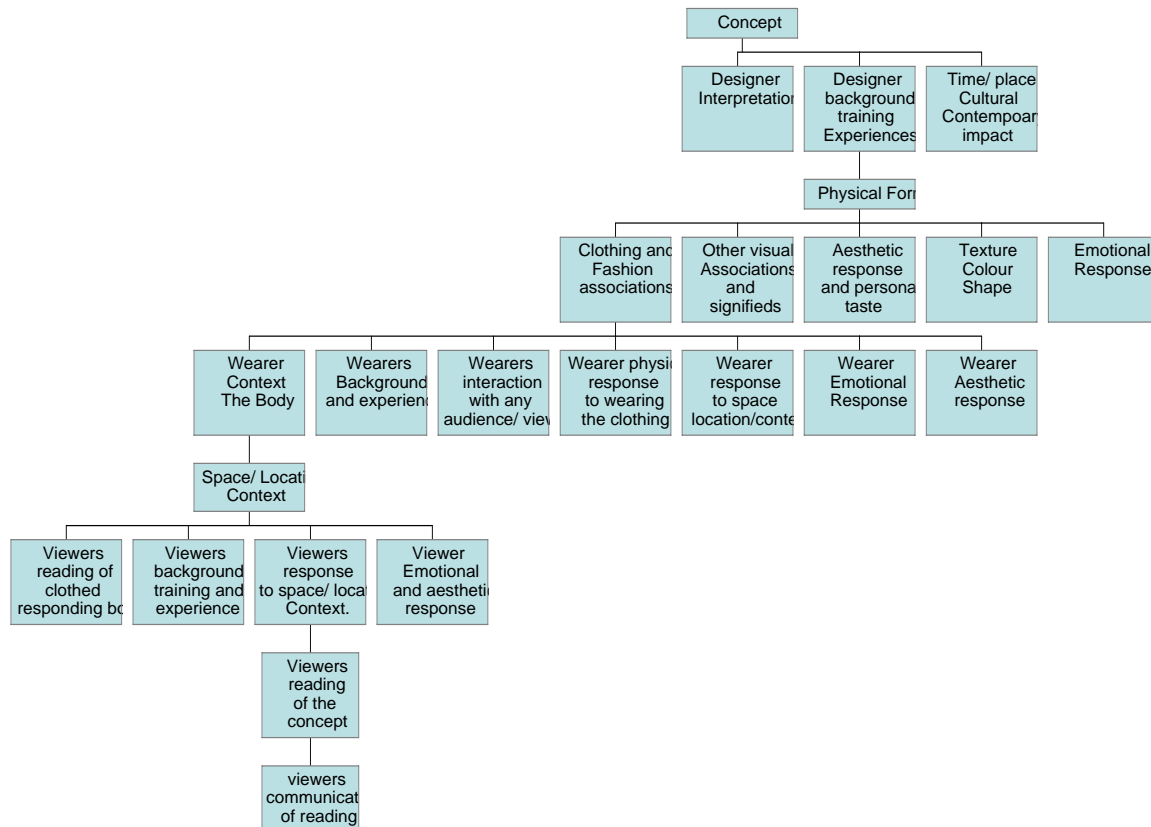
A discourse emerges between not only the author, the 'text' and the viewer, but also between the 'text' and the wearer. Thus creating a four-way dialogue with many readings and interpretations based not only on knowledge assumed but also on new knowledge created at this interface. The concepts are therefore open to variety of readings. The wearability and physical human contact brings on board this very important and largely ignored 'performative dynamic'. However, as the research has continued it has become clear that it is not as straight forward as this and it is not always appropriate or indeed possible to describe fully the concept to viewers. It has emerged that a viewer's reading of clothing-based work in context is complicated and that viewers read through a process of association, emotional responses and their own understanding of the body and clothing as well as the effect of context.

This network of communication and the findings of the case studies can be applied in whole or in part suggesting implications to take in to account when producing concept-led clothing that seeks to communicate to wearers and viewers in a specific contexts. It also has commercial applications where clothing is central to the communication such as design for dance, theatre or fashion promotion, fashion photography, styling, fashion curation, art direction. It is also suggested that this information can inform fashion designers in respect of developing design methods for particular contexts, as well as selecting contexts appropriate to the design intention of their work.

### **Model of Findings**

The following model draws together and demonstrates the complex interrelationship of factors and findings of this research project. The essential contribution to knowledge of this study is

embedded in the diagrammatic representation of a sophisticated network of communication between designer, wearer and viewer of conceptually directed garments communicated in contexts. It is anticipated that this model could be used to inform a wide range of disciplines that use the clothed body to communicate concepts to audiences in a range of contexts.



It became clear through the research that, although the project initially was set outside of a commercial arena, there were in fact key commercial contexts in which the research method and design concept were applicable. In light of this the researcher would argue that if a designer is working for a new context such as dance, theatre or exhibition, then clear attention needs to be paid to the new context in which the designer is working, within the design methodology. Context as established within the case study conclusions goes beyond a physical space. There are a broad range of contextual issues to be considered; the discipline context; the wearer of the clothing; the new audience resulting from this context and the participants within the arena. This attention to context should directly inform the design process and as a result allow for a more grounded and fully considered communication in the final work itself.

### Application of methodology

The researcher was commissioned by *Union Dance* to design and make the costumes for *Sensing Change* (2005) a contemporary dance performance that would tour both nationally and internationally. The project was collaborative, bringing together a series of practitioners from different disciplines to work together on the production and development of the work. The intention of *Sensing Change* was as follows:

a programme of work that embraces the notion of collaboration on a creative level with the intention of conveying both immediacy and timelessness. It reflect this with work devoted to the concept of change ...it reveals how twenty-first century culture embraces and celebrates transformation. (Bougaard, 2005 p. 1)

*Sensing Change* embraced two productions by two different choreographers. *Pure C* choreographed by Mavin Khoo and *Silence Disrupted* choreographed by Rafael Bonachela. The two pieces had their own distinct identity and, therefore, required very different approaches to the costume, music, lighting and visual and technical effects.



**Fig 4.** Costumes designed by J. Bugg for *Silence Disrupted*, *Sensing Change*, 2005, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London. A collaboration with *Union Dance* where the research findings were applied in a live design context.

### Attention to Concept and Context

This research has produced a body of knowledge around wearers' responses to concepts of movement designed into clothing. This knowledge directly informed the *Sensing Change*



designs, specific garments from the researcher's practice were developed further and elements were employed within the costume design. The concept was determined by a design brief set by the artistic director after discussion with all of the participants in a production meeting. The idea of designing 'from the body to the body' was central within the context of dance. The fact that the designer was working for extreme movement meant that close attention needed to be paid to the function of the garments to enable and/or enhance the movement of the dancers.

All of the costume was developed as a response to the dances themselves. the researcher attended the early rehearsals where the dancers were experimenting with the choreographers' ideas and from these rehearsals videos were made throughout the development of the dance and these were sent to the researcher periodically. Rather than being solely concerned with the thematic response, it was possible to design from the videos of movement to respond to the generic concept of movement and change.

## **Conclusion**

The research has sought to highlight the emergence of collaborative and interdisciplinary practice at the edges of the fashion discipline and argues that it is necessary for fashion designers to review the way in which they design for interdisciplinary contexts. Designing for contexts such as dance, exhibition and performance requires a different approach that pays attention to both concept and context at the point of inception. The more designers work across disciplines the more they will need to consider context and to develop methods appropriate to this. The knowledge developed in relation to audience reading and understanding in specific contexts is applicable in many visual disciplines but can be applied in a range of ways to develop methods of design and communication within fashion.

The research indicates potential directions for the practitioner of conceptual, experimental fashion by extending an understanding of the relationship between designer, wearer and viewer of conceptual clothing communicated within a range of interdisciplinary contexts. It suggests potential approaches to interdisciplinary practice within fashion and potentially across a wider range of disciplines. The method is not a traditional fashion design method and has become a process in its own right. It can inform work that uses the adorned or clothed body to explore the interface between clothing the body and its context across a wide range of disciplines.

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