

ALL

D&K LOOK BOOK 2019

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OR

NOTHING

Centre for Style opened in 2013 as a small fashion boutique of sorts. It stocked predominantly graduate designer collections, subsidiary clothes or props made by artists and project-based works by fashion designers who operated outside traditional seasonal collections. Through a dizzying and ill-defined appreciation of 'exploratory fashion practice', CfS showcased fashion on the periphery. It exploited the experiential space of the boutique in which relations between visitors and clothing take precedence; but, unlike traditional boutiques, whose clothing experiences are oriented towards wearability, CfS was much more invested in the conditions of their circulation. It organised installations, poetry readings, publication launches, gigs and runway performances, all as a means to 'open up' how the fashion practitioner might behave: through image, text, encounter and exhibit. As a 'centre', it aligned more with an artist-run space, which, at its inception, came to represent three staple local practices, each comprised by two founders: Rare Candy by Rohan Whiteley and Rex Veal; H.B. Peace by Hugh Egan Westland and Blake Barns; and D&K by Ricarda Bigolin and Nella Themelios. These three practices, among a network of other local and international designers who made appearances at CfS, offered an impressionistic glossary of strategies for critique in contemporary fashion. These strategies, which I describe as deskilling, boredom and mimesis, should not be read as paradigmatic 'isms' but as guidelines which contemporary critics, journalists and designers have often used to delineate the shared project of exploratory fashion practice.

Rare Candy

Rare Candy's studio practice begun under the image of the 19th-century ragpicker, a figure whose debased duty was to gather the discarded detritus of industrial society and resuscitate its second life for the impulsive pace of modernity. Rare Candy made clothes, accessories and tchotchkes that

were cobbled together from found items discovered at thrift stores, on online bargain marketplaces and, most evocatively, in the street. Defying the two 'pillar' design methods of patternmaking and draping, they speculated: if it already exists, why make it again? After foraging items, they would get to work unpicking linings, reversing innards, adding pattern pieces, darning cross-sections, burning holes, revealing seams, affixing bric-a-brac and colouring in fabrics with an assortment of materials, such as paint, markers, gold leaf, concrete and plants. At the end of this derailed mending, although completion was always an ontological debate, the found object endured—it was never toiled out of the picture, so to speak—preserving traces and material memories. With such a disinterest towards both tailor and dressmaker, Rare Candy's collections honed a decisive approach in deskilling that revived Duchamp's century-old provocation of artistic virtuosity.

Rare Candy's first project was an installation at Centre for Style titled *Freakkyjeans*. In the middle of the floor lay a repertoire of folded recycled fabrics and offcuts, assembled as if it were a child's patchwork quilt. The tightly arranged floor work displayed the label's contextual 'reference materials' alongside the alleged ready-to-wear garments and accessories of the collection. What distinguished these from their confusing collateral were the honorific titles bestowed upon them in the accompanying floor plan, identifying which items visitors could try on. Some of these items included plastic shopping bags, once the vessel of commodities, remoulded by an iron into delicate millinery; small figurines peeking from pockets stitched to the fabric; an offcut of fur twisted back on itself to create a splayed bracelet; or baby Prada sneakers encased in a cracked metallic orange patina. Also available were colourful long-sleeved T-shirts whose exteriors were completely saturated by faded hues of grey, peach and mauve paint, drawn over with frivolous scribbles in markers, pens and gold leaf.

The hero outfit of the collection was a found women's skirt suit coated with the same enthusiastic treatment and adorned with 1990s and early 2000s cartoon pins. Announcing the installation was a music stand mounting Rare Candy's 'look book'. It took an 'exquisite corpse' format, in which the head, torso and legs were spliced together from found images of everyday clothed people as well as outfits by various esoteric fashion designers Rare Candy admired. Images of works by 2047/120 and Hysteria Glamour, and Wild & Lethal Trash's mascot Puk Puk, for example, were folded, quite literally, into Rare Candy's design methodology of curatorial selection. To scramble the bricolage even further, visitors could flip through the individually cut segments of the body, generating an exponential number of corporeal-sartorial configurations.

Rare Candy's constitutive mode of production was that of consumption; selection was not only a work ethic but a *meisterstück*. Their performed window display work for Centre for Style's exhibition *Boulevard* incorporated old Junya Watanabe pieces sourced from unknown eBay sellers alongside scungy Savers bequests and a collection of spliced fetid rugs from share houses and streets. Through their mere exaltation of adoption, the designers achieved the deskilling promise to dislodge cognitive labour from a physical correlative, following the mould of historical avant-gardes to self-contaminate ideas of medium mastery, and reminding us that all fashion is in fact a patchwork assemblage of used signs.

The readymade approach also drew Rare Candy into a critical constellation with other designers involved at CfS, such as Giovanna Flores and Susan Cianciolo. Cianciolo, a significant figure in the downtown New York fashion-art nexus scene of the 1990s, would similarly procure inexpensive thrift-store items for reformation. Like Rare Candy's, her adjustments could be at times trivial, like displacing a pants button four inches sideways. Rare Candy's tinkering, ad-hoc

practice also drew historical connections to the collective House of Beauty and Culture (HOBAC), which similarly transformed scavenged street materials into fashioned treasure. HOBAC, a London store operating from 1986–89, housed a group of designers, jewellers, cobblers, furniture designers and image-makers who, as their monographer Kasia Maciejowska writes, made 'work out of waste materials, crafted specific pieces and developed a shared aesthetic that was outstanding and often odd, and cultivated a communal lifestyle that resisted the economic hierarchy and oppressive homogenization of normative mass culture'.¹

The HOBAC designers Christopher Nemeth and Judy Blame perhaps are the most redolent influences on Rare Candy's schizophrenically stitched construction of junk paraphernalia. For the collection *Rapunzel cuts her hair*, Rare Candy staged a runway at CfS that featured the woollen interiors of coats, reversible linings and skirts patched with horsehair interfacing displaced from jackets. Across the pieces were featured sticky grass weeds, precariously glued to the garments by their own juices. As a painterly, temporal dye and accessorisation, they confronted buyer-ready audiences after the show on how to negotiate the durability of this unsteady assemblage. Another wonderful anecdote surrounded one of their rounded, enlarged patchwork skirts made from what appeared to be wool suiting offcuts. A large grey pinstripe piece at the hem had been severely mauled, as it turned out, a couple days prior to the show, by a dog belonging to one of the designers. It was a symbolic confession: Rare Candy espoused the magic provisionality of budget living. Here, automated standards of fit and laundering embarked towards the profound richness abandoned in everyday happenings.

H.B. Peace

Since its founding in 2013, H.B. Peace's output has been incessantly sporadic.

Having presented a few collections through Centre for Style, as well as a couple of smaller projects and commissions, H.B. Peace's oeuvre is characterised by its elusiveness. Its silhouettes are often rudimentary: pants, shirts, jackets and a particular penchant for loose full-length dresses. Each collection exists as a different material study, comprising only one or two material conditions, not to be repeated in subsequent collections. The one constant in the label's work is an alternating small piece of poetry — hushed and indirect — branded somewhere on its garments. Strikingly unspectacular, H.B. Peace embraces boredom as a strategy to frustrate the mediagenic exigency of fashion today.

The title of H.B. Peace's second collection reads the final stanza of a poem in R.D. Laing's book *Knots*: 'the statement is pointless/the finger is speechless'.² Laing, a psychiatrist who repudiated diagnostic stigma, rethought mental disorders as embodiments of culture rather than its aberrations. H.B. Peace translated this subjectivity of condition into its collection, which concatenated the muted and unremarkable into subtle worn dramas. Comprised of washed-out tones and elementary cuts fabricated in bedsheets and second-hand woollen blankets, its work realigned fashion back to the sensorium.

Easy garments like pants with elasticated waists, full peasant skirts, relaxed coats, shapeless two-piece kimono-sleeved dresses and shirts with the referential metrics of tabs, buttonholes and neat mandarin collars all issued an impression of the 'basic'. The majority of pieces were made in cotton bedsheets that were hand-treated, colouring them mild, grey-toned blues and purples. Texturally enriching the fabrics, it also degraded them. They appeared etiolated and unbalanced, as if put through the washer countless times, gesturing to a life of wear. Various edges remained unhemmed so that the disentanglement between warp and weft monotonously plodded over time. Deadstock wool

army blankets, having undergone a similar treatment, were used for a long dustcoat and chunky pants — producing deflated silhouettes of ennui. Within our craptacular society of perfunctory mass markets and gimmick virality, the boredom and drained life of basic garments become a special site of resistance.

Smearred across their pieces were heat-transferred prints of H.B. Peace's hand-drawn name or figurative scribbles. As the adhesion of heat-transfers wears and stretches through the durational give of fabric, unique to the shape and movement of the wearer's body, slight puckering and twists occur, transforming the static image into an organic object prone to deterioration. This was also seen on their aged woollen scarves with giant A3-sized heat-transferred poems by artist Christopher LG Hill. Running across the surface of two blue-grey rectangular sack dresses, the most elementary garment form, lay delicate, labyrinthine beaded trails of tiny plastic droplets of the same colour. The design's majestic obfuscation rendered any good photo of this captivating detail almost impossible. In these instances, the designers willingly ruined clarity and, with it, the plight of rapid image techno-circulation, in favour of an intimate, personal discovery. If Cathy Wilkes ever fancied a fashion hard-on, this collection of worn malaise would be her Sunday best.

Basics, which are the machine for massification, instrumentalised by multinationals and cheap labour, are the symbols of our economically rationalised and psycho-uniformed society. Rendering visible the politics of this 'basic' aesthetic, H.B. Peace problematises this language by creating elegiac interruptions: dyeing materials to age them; texturising faint pilled surfaces; abetting fabric to unravel; and using heat adhesion as a counterproductive ploy for volatility. In appealing to the psychological experience of the basic through intimate haptic states, H.B. Peace evokes Benjamin's verse: 'Boredom is a warm grey fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and

colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream.³

Other designers involved in CfS have also explored the mundane rituals of everyday dressing as an escape route. In their earlier work, both BLESS and Ann-Sofie Back experimented with the recodification of generics: for example, Back's pedestrian beige polyester crêpe dresses with deflated box pleats awkwardly placed into the bust, or the appearance of flower motifs that are actually smudged traces of makeup. Similarly, in H.B. Peace's collection *Col. Gunavatta Kumfer*, presented in Centre for Style's *Dress Rehearsal*, the designers produced a series of generic-fit tailored suits using cotton organdie, a stiff, semi-sheer material that is primarily used for underlining and interfacing. In discussing the recodification of mundanity, Ulrich Lehmann concludes that these fashion practices explore 'the conceptual contretemps of the oddly shaped and cheap looking garment in order to visualize the "Other" of fashion's underbelly'.⁴

D&K

D&K, initiated in 2012, could be seen as the harbinger for the incoming Melburnian spirit of exploratory fashion practice. Its first project, *The Launch*, was an exhibition that took the form of a conjectural media announcement event. Inside the gallery, a vinyl print of its brand logo was sloganeered across the floor while a live performative video recording of test shoots took place, involving guests reading the scripts of fictionalised ad copy off a teleprompter. The pretence of an opening met with the allusion of lifestyling. Slightly estranged and highly mimetic of luxury industry jargon, D&K's 'launch' was curiously absent of the usual-culprit signifier: clothes (save a few branded long-sleeved tops). *The Launch* instead concerned itself with the conditions of its own production: in other words, the mystification of desire in high fashion. Other guest performances occurred throughout the exhibition, including a reading by Matthew

Benjamin of 'Staircase humour' and an abstracted *tableau vivant* of artist Kate Meakin wearing an ensemble by Blake Barns, one half of what would become H.B. Peace. This relatively small yet highly collaborative event proved to be incredibly prophetic of the niche practices soon to follow.

For its work *Effortless beauty takes a lot of effort* in the Centre for Style exhibition *Arcades*, the label staged a durational performance of a backstage editorial. The participants included a single model whose stylistic gestures and sartorial accoutrements were repeatedly altered by the two D&K auteurs. Positioned in front of a quasi-photographic studio setup, manned by two photographers dressed in black, the trio played out the machinations of 'effortless beauty' in perpetuity. This was no Emperor's New Clothes exercise — the designers and model-muse were adorned in a suite of new D&K bright baby-blue and black power mesh designs that intermixed body-consciousness and loose excess. The clothes were also accessorised with elegantly cut loose squares of fabric, all perfectly self-faced with stitchless Vliesofix. These were repetitively rearranged, clipped and draped over the body, exacerbating the ineffable élan of styling. The Andrea Fraser vs Beau Brummell performance could be viewed directly in one room of the gallery or from two screens in another via live feed. The model-muse would intermittently exit the backstage shoot and circle the entire gallery. Over the course of several hours we saw the umpired delirium of effortless beauty: a product of abstract liturgical manoeuvres by these drunken directors of mimesis.

While many designers may ironically reproduce the idiom of branding — fashion's Machiavellian lover — rarely do they reveal its procedural structures. D&K's work has also taken the form of interventions — although that word has unsavoury political pomposity — or, better put, cameo identities. The label's participation in *Boulevard* involved a model in H.B. Peace's runway performance carrying a human-sized D&K vinyl banner

print from *The Launch*. Unexplained and unannounced, D&K parasitically 'walked' the fashion show. Branding-as-omnipresent-ambivalence. At the Centre for Style grand opening, D&K instructed two stunt doubles to wear their splendidly branded bias-cut silk satin gowns to mingle with guests at the occasion, while at other events they would wear themselves ostentatiously as authorial subjects. Within their constant slippage of presence, D&K instantiated the elusive immateriality of brand identity. In one instance for which they were present, a poetry reading at CfS, they read scripts of interminable fashion-speak, meandering through dress clichés, sartorial fit, low taste and cut-and-paste corporate copy grabs of beauty products and performances, purchasing power and social finesse. Another exercise in D&K's befuddling excess was its piece for an exhibit at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, in which the designers individually constructed 101 luxury brand T-shirts, designing the signature motifs of the archetype (logo, print, swing tag) as reapplied accessories. The T-shirts were then displayed in a flat, unidentified pile, syncopating arduous, labour-intensive demi-couture 'value formation' into the paperwork of an 'idea' — brutally reminding us of Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's *Aesthetics of Administration*.⁵

As fashion semionauts mining the relationships between clothes and collections, desire and disappointment, product and personality, their mimetic approach in aping fashion conventions into critique also aligned, in varying degrees, with other fashion practitioners involved in the boutique. In her early career, the Austrian designer Anna-Sophie Berger's work dealt with the organisational superstructure of fashion collections. One 'administrative' collection comprised a series of basic block dresses in primary and secondary colours. Segments of the garment were printed with numbers that corresponded to the alerted measurements of its pattern block, including the degree of swing added to the skirt

or added inches in bust size — reifying the rhythmicity of a 'collection' as a series of austere, calculated measurement variables. The CfS *Rag* publication reprinted Dutch designer Elisa van Joolen's project *11" x 17"*, which addressed the arbitrary value formations attached to near-identical, plain crew-neck sweaters. Receiving samples from various brands from and for different markets and demographics, van Joolen incised 11" x 17" tabloid-sized quadrants and transplanted them into one another. Hiding in plain sight, the system-jamming of mimetic critique reveals the invisible authority of affect latent in fashion's endless confection.

Performing the Boutique

In so many ways, Centre for Style was a catastrophe... Stocktake was administered in a half-torn 99c notepad; I.O.U.s became the fiscal rule of thumb; events descended into depraved hangouts; and for a few months the only instore music was the atrocious Meredith Monk. It also organised forty or so events, exhibitions and performances in its three years of operation. By hysterically moving through the possibilities of how 'clothing in a store' could behave, the boutique gained a symbiotic relationship with the peripheral designers it hosted: a self-distancing from recognisability. These three significant practices, through their various strategies of deskilling, boredom and mimesis — although these monikers could certainly be stretched — proposed exploratory conjectures in understanding fashion's contemporary condition and, by consequence, the widespread cultural wasteland it inhabits.

- 1 Kasia Maciejowska and Gregor Muir, *The House of Beauty and Culture* (London: Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Arts; Roma Publications, 2016), 17.
- 2 R.D. Laing, *Knots* (Vintage Books: New York, 1972), 80.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 118.

- 4 Ulrich Lehmann, 'Ann-Sofie Back', in *Sample: 100 Fashion Designers, 010 Curators; Cuttings From Contemporary Fashion* (London: Phaidon, 2005), 32.
- 5 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* 55 (1990): 105–43, doi:10.2307/778941.



Gian Manik for D&K, *a&clb idakno a*, 2017, branded taffeta acetate ribbon, mixed media, 60 × 5.08 cm.

