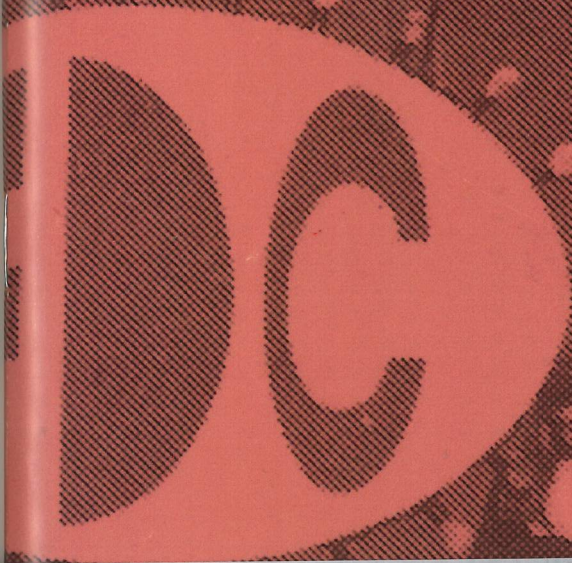


RMIT DESIGN ARCHIVES JOURNAL

VOL 8 Nº 1 2018

SPECIAL ISSUE

HIGH RISK DRESSING /
CRITICAL FASHION





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 SIX'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 Archives will be unpacked, discussed and catalogued throughout the duration of the exhibition in a new 'archive' space designed by Ziga Testen. 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 ARCHIVES WILL BE UNPACKED, DISCUSSED AND CATALOGUED THROUGHOUT THE DURATION OF THE EXHIBITION IN A NEW 'ARCHIVE' SPACE DESIGNED BY ZIGA TESTEN. 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.

