

Star SHIP



Robert McKenzie

The Overworked Body: An Anthology of 2000s Dress

As teenagers in the late 1990s and very early 2000s, my twin sister and I would follow the most vanguard fashion magazines we could find. I remember *The Face* being available at the local library. On a family vacation passing through an Australian country town we came across a shop selling an exciting new magazine and the interest and intrigue was so intense I can still summon the memory of it twenty years later. The types of publications we liked, titles like *i-D* or *Purple* or *Dutch* magazine, are probably familiar to most readers who find themselves holding this particular contemporary art publication. They are, whether acknowledged or not, part of the fulcrum from which contemporary art has pivoted or pushed against. It felt like there was something personal in the relationship we had to each magazine title. The American magazine *Nylon* seemed to have a special hold on my sister at one moment and I had some fetish-fondness for *Doingbird*, an Australian magazine devoted to experimental fashion photography. From a vaguely post-subcultural worldview the magazines we were interested in probably all seem pretty same-same. At the time though, even the smallest difference in emphasis or perspective appeared full of meaning and vital. It would be too solipsistic to recall all the minutiae of my youthful interest in fashion and the various emotions and ideas that formed through these encounters, but what I want to say is that it was valuable to me. Beside the obvious influence of encouraging me to save money and buy some unnecessarily expensive clothes, it also encouraged me to meet other people with an interest in “underground” forms of art, fashion and music and if one can excuse any sense of cliché, I can honestly say that my life really was radically altered by it.

So it was with a certain sentimentality that I came across the exhibition “The Overworked Body: An Anthology of 2000s Dress.” This group show was spread across two Lower East Side locations; the non-profit project space Ludlow38 funded by Goethe-Institute and the trans-atlantic enterprise Mathew Gallery run by artist/dealer/musician David Lieske and his business partner Peter Kersten. Ludlow38 has an annual curator’s residency and the chosen curator is responsible for the yearly programming. For 2017 this position was filled by Saim Demircan, one of the organizers of “The Overworked Body” and a former curator for the Kunstverein München. Matthew Linde, an Australian curator who specializes in fashion, was the other organizer and from the outside it would seem he was the project’s main protagonist.

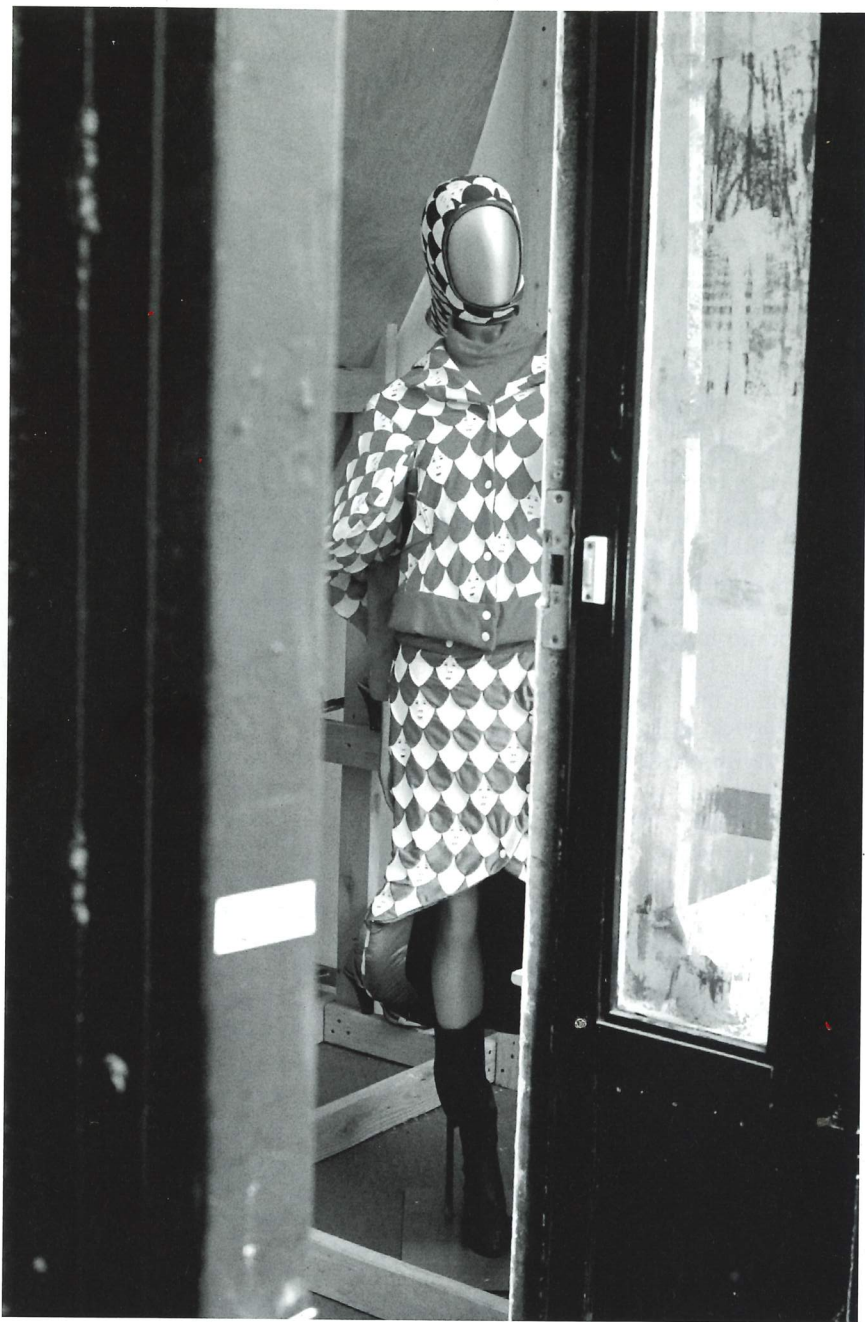
The experience of the exhibition rested largely on a dense aggregation of designer clothing. Outfits were put together using items that shared aesthetic affinities. A European contingent including Helmut Lang, Bless, Lutz and Maison Martin Margiela were shown on the same or adjacent mannequins, a nod to their professional and intellectual cross-contamination. The same went for Japanese designers like Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake and Final Home. Through these groupings one could identify the key geographic localities for what I would describe as “underground” fashion: Antwerp, Vienna, Paris, Tokyo, New York. For myself, as something of a self-described lover of fashion, or as the French might say *amateur*, the show encouraged a train spotter’s compulsion to identify and recognize. There were many great examples of the period’s fashion from many designers who were the locus of my teenage investigations.

The exhibition design was similarly engaging. Mannequins were placed on low raised platforms lending the installation a museum-like impression. At Ludlow38, these platforms intervened with a passageway in the space, forcing the audience to walk across them as if entering the static runway. The platform also curved up towards the front window where the artist Whitney Claflin had created a special window display. Wigs were produced for many of the mannequins by Isaac Davidson who runs a company called Wigbar that specializes in wig design, hair styling and hair extensions for photo shoots and television. This production seemed to mimic the excessiveness of The Metropolitan Museum’s costume exhibitions where architectural interventions and lighting have become major features of such shows as the recent Comme des Garçons retrospective.

Archival “support material” from the 2000s, various types of publications and other documentation, was also included. A vitrine at Ludlow38 displayed Bernadette Corporation’s *Made in USA* magazine. A couple of monitors showed video footage of runway presentations. At Mathew Gallery a group of Bernhard Willhelm look books and posters were spread along a shelf. All these elements combined—the clothes selection, exhibition design and ephemera—worked impressively to summon the ghosts of recent fashion and its momentary interventions into everyday personal expression.

Many of the qualities that had brought me to fashion as a teenager were warmly affirmed. The curator’s chosen outfits were full of the formal exuberance (terrific colors, textures and unusual compositions) that had so engaged me. Critical jokes about functionality or semiotics which were key components of many garments and still functioned in the ways I had so fondly remembered.

The largely personal-nostalgic aspect of the exhibition was, however, only one of its attractions for me. What stimulated me greatly was the curators’ focus on such a recent time period of fashion history. This seemed so much in contrast with the art world which is almost terrified of the preceding ten or twenty years, preferring to wait for generational change or to focus only on the very contemporary. The awkward memories of the preceding few years are often ana-



Ludlow 38, New York, 2017

thema to an art world that would like to forget that its activities are also subject to shifting tastes and other such vagaries.

Contemplating this exhibition, and the lessons it might have for the art world, I couldn't help but think about what shifts in style might actually mean. Why do we desire endless novelty and reinvention in cultural expression? Is art merely a merry-go-round of significations that randomly index a specific moment? Or are they more complicated symptoms? Meaningful actors on the ideas that create our social matrix? To

answer these larger questions, it is unfair to look to one curator and one exhibition. Nonetheless, Matthew Linde kindly agreed to indulge me by answering some questions.

I loved the title of your exhibition—"The Overworked Body: An Anthology of 2000s Dress." It states very clearly the ambitions of the exhibition—to present a survey of the main themes of 2000s fashion. Can you tell me about the parameters you set for the exhibition and the methodology you used to select designers?

My title alludes to Cecil Beaton's 1971 exhibition "Fashion: An Anthology," which was held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. It was an important curatorial landmark for fashion as it was the first time that artistic trends in modern clothing were deemed worthy of museological study. It is interesting to acknowledge that the specific curatorial requirements for something as vague as "fashionable clothing" posed a major dilemma. Traditional custodians of historical clothing had dealt with and analyzed these "artifacts" from either anthropological or sociological perspectives. "Fashion" as artistic expression needed to be treated differently. It is interesting to think of this also in the relation to the art curator and what their responsibility is to history, sociology, anthropology or some sort of more pure "spirit essence" of the contemporary.

So with this interest in the creative aspect of "fashion" rather than some sort of pure history, this bon vivant Beaton took on the task of "curating." For this purpose he used the format of an anthology—selecting as his whim dictated the most vivacious examples of different clothing. This has set the tone for a lot of fashion exhibitions since, most notably those produced by Diana Vreeland who in 1973 was appointed Special Consultant to the Costume Department at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Vreeland, who had been the editor of *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*, was often criticized for her ahistorical groupings, which one might say was a betrayal of the curator's "fiduciary" duty to historical accuracy. In a more positive light I would say her ability was to decipher fashion's ineffable élan regardless of trivial concerns such as the what, why and when of the objects. For "The Overworked Body" I wanted to hijack Beaton's and Vreeland's approaches and take them to the point of ad nauseam. In contrast to Beaton's 1971 exhibition though, which had a clearly delineated chronology (like this is what was chic in the '30s, this is what was hot in the '40s and so on), the only criteria necessary for inclusion in my exhibition was that the item of fashion or ephemera had to have been made in the 2000s. Obviously that cast a wide net for an exhibition over only two small spaces. The 2000s defines a period of fashion that I see as being so overloaded, or as the title suggests "overworked," and

complicated that I just wanted to communicate that without being bogged down by too many specific parameters. I did not want historicity to get in the way of what I saw as that decades more important artistic advantages. And rather than explication, isn't it more fun to at least to some degree enact the spirit of what one is trying to communicate? In contrast to much fashion curation, take for example the Museum of Modern Art's recent show "Is Fashion Modern" which was something like a series of Wikipedia entries, I had no interest in tracking various subcultural styles. I certainly did not want to have, for example, a neo-rave section, a hip-hop corner, a Paris Hilton homage etc. Nor was it going to be a survey of luxury labels of the time who did quantitatively well in press and sales. Different to "survey" or "overview," an anthology means a selection by choice. My methodology was to try and highlight the fringe voices, or critical designers of the period. So I included a mix of designers; from the iconoclastic like Viktor&Rolf; the underground like The Organization of Returning Fashion Interest; the scholarly such as Anke Loh; the carnivalesque like Bernhard Willhelm; the multi-disciplinary like BLESS.

Hearing your curatorial methodology, and being a fan and follower and even a participant in a very minor way of the period you focused on, I found it very successful. It was a real pleasure to have the spotlight on objects and ideas that have only just become "memories." Your period of inquisition is just too recent to have become universally nostalgic. It made me consider how discourses can change almost arbitrarily. As if time passes and for that reason alone, without any other higher guiding force, things must be made different. The art world obfuscates this reality by talking of "changing styles" rather than "changing fashions." But the art world is just as subject to these forces as clothing or anything else for that matter. Do you see any correlation?

Personally I find it incredibly exhausted to compare the art world and the fashion world. But that's just me.

Ha ha. Ok. Was there any particular aspect of the 2000-2010 discourse that

you were looking back on that you felt was particularly urgent to communicate?

Before the 2000s, fashion was much more of an insider game. You had to get the right magazines or attend the shows to witness these "discourse changes." It's important to remember *i-D* had only a few retailers in Australia pre-21st Century, so new designers and collections were especially obscured for those who didn't live in fashion capitals. I think a major shift in practice occurred alongside the online digitization of fashion. This "democratization" of fashion has allowed emerging designers to deploy the newfound tools of the widening attention economy to gain global visibility with incredible speed. As I wrote in my review for NYFW, this contemporary condition has led to practicing the quick assemblage of image-ready design. *VFILE* is a good example of this system, which values the impact of the image in obvious design one-liners and gimmicks, and in doing so extracting the gains of social-media metrics. Exaggerated silhouettes with a macro, uncomplicated design approach, appropriate for the consumption of the four-sided frame, works best under this system of data aggregation. You can see this happening in so much graduate work across the globe.

The 2000s expressed the growing pains of this shift. Looking back at shows on Vogue Runway as late as 2008 or 2009 the image quality is like 150x250 pixels! Technology for online viewership was somehow still lo-fi, including the mini-dv video recording of the time. It almost feels as if the industry was undergoing puberty, awkwardly adjusting to its new technological identity. In "The Overworked Body" there was a grouping of European designers (Lutz, Ann-Sofie Back, Anke Loh, Dorothee Perret, Wendy&Jim, ___fabrics inter-season, BLESS) whose practices were rather unspectacular insofar they remained somehow at odds with the immediacy of the image, working with generic garments as their departure point. One of the pieces by Lutz, a designer who used to work under Martin Margiela before forming his own label, is a relatively quotidian black trench coat. Inset into the shoulder seams, however, are zips that when undone collapse the garment into a negligé dress. An Ann-Sofie Back corporate outfit features a conventional blouse made out of worn silver fabric.

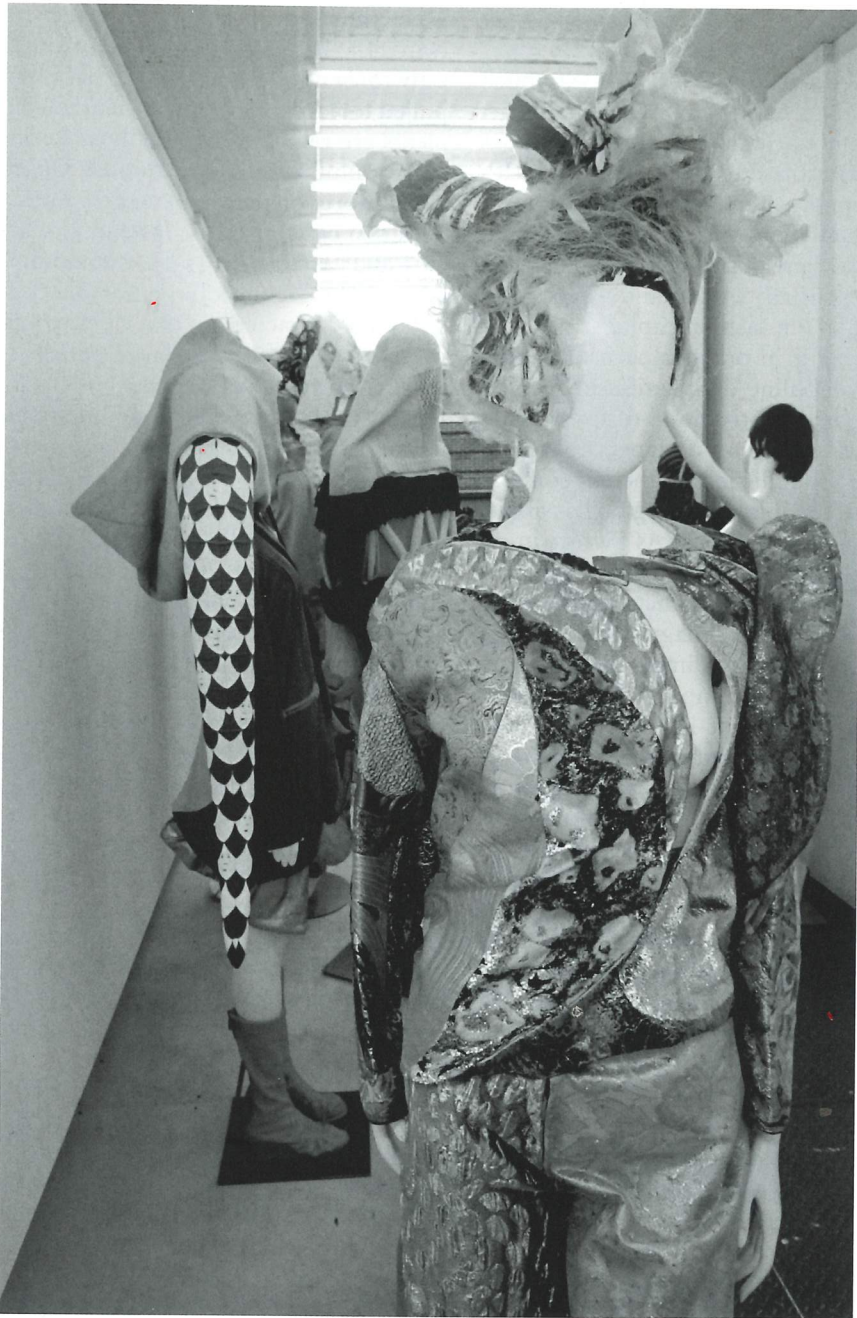
When the fabric tie is pulled together towards the back, the front appears modestly conventional and when the fabric is pulled towards the front, two large box pleats are revealed over the bust, seemingly mimicking saggy boobs. Upon close inspection the mundane grey slacks feature a circular fabric fastening to secure and carry a belt, as if for mountaineering. The Wendy&Jim ensemble consists of a characteristic '80s/'90s prom dress refashioned as a large necklace worn over the top of a blazer. It floats in front of the figure and impossible to wear as the actual dress through an operational side-seam opening. It was these sorts of examinations between generics and functionality that attracted me to such designers—a subdued quality I think is worthy of reflection today.

My argument is not that 2000s fashion were inherently critical, my interest was the way in which designers deviated from their adolescent prevailing technologies. Many designers also made experimental printed matter as part of their practice. Cosmic Wonder made booklets with prose, instructional guides and installation imagery. Keupr/van Bentm produced a document outlining the plot of a fictional runway show, as an expanded mode to present their collection. BLESS made parasitic look books published in different local art journals and magazines across the world.

But I'm just as interested in today's designers as I am of historical fashion. For example some of my earlier points I see addressed in Vetements, both in their interest in reformatting generics as well as reimagining modes of dissemination.

The exhibition also prompted me to think about that oft invoked, but for me little understood, idea of "critical distance." Is it the sense of emotional indifference that occurs once a certain period of time has past? When questions at stake no longer feel rooted in personal identity? Is it the period after which only the historian and the conscientious student care about the specific crises from moments that have already past?

I digress though. To return to your curatorial activities, I understand "The Overworked Body" will be more widely disseminated through a new publication based on the research you made for the exhibition. Can you tell me anything more about it?



Ludlow 38, New York, 2017

David Lieske and Rob Kulisek have a fashion magazine that we are going to turn into the exhibition 2.0... It will behave as a catalogue, with install imagery alongside an encyclopedic-style documentation of each piece; a fashion magazine, commissioning various stylists and photographers to construct new editorial photo shoots with the pieces; a journal, including essays by fashion scholars discussing fashion and time; as well as reprints of archival 2000s fashion advertisements from magazines. BLESS will also feature their

new signature “parasitic look book” in the publication.

Well I very much look forward to seeing it. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.

Florian Zeyfang
Scott C. Weaver
Mikhail Wassmer
Antek Walczak
Anne Turyn
Vera Tollmann
Natasha Soobramanien
Monika Senz
Theresa Patzschke
Viktor Neumann
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