



Hardcore Fashion:
An interview with Matthew Linde

L
I wanted to discuss with you the idea of the shop, and how you engage with this under the auspice of 'Centre for Style'. To begin, could you give some background on CFS, when, how and why did you begin this project?

M
2013. I'd finished my honours degree at RMIT in fashion design, and I had developed a performance art practice throughout my studies, dealing with semiology and fashion. At the same time I was running a nightclub night that changed locations with each of its three iterations. These were spectacles that were participatory art in some capacity. What I was looking at during my studies were these event-based productions, as well as the idea of fashion as a community project. Coming out of my degree, I was juggling two kinds of practices; my own performance art practice, and, after the club ended, trying to develop a kind of organisational structure for a fashion showcase. This became CFS. I thought the format of the store was an exciting project because it cemented the idea of community production around fashion, apart from just, say, dancing at a bar, or working on a single designer label. But also married to this was the (very tired) line that I was fed up with the lack of difference with boutiques, not just in Melbourne, but around the world. So it was kind of twofold in that sense: to satisfy a fashion organisation as well as 'finding a gap in the market'.

L
Was the move from the club to the shop also more useful because a shop really deals with fashion directly? It's wholeheartedly about fashion.

M
Exactly. But the store and nightclub are also parallel in the sense that they are both communicative spaces.

L
How did the first incarnation of the CFS store, which was in a basement space of the Melbourne CBD, evolve as a space and as a practice?

M
Our reception was largely through the art world. We attracted invites to do exhibitions, and shows, and performances. So through that it really developed as a curatorial program, but that was never the modus operandi, it was accidental. And, first and foremost, I knew the store would never function as a conventional business, insofar as breaking even, but I never expected to garner any profit - certainly not a proper salary. I knew that it was not going to function in the traditional sense of exchanging product for cash. I wanted some other means of exchange with these fashion practices. I became enamoured with the idea of an experiential exchange in order to engage the use of the garments. We'd do events like poetry readings, performances, we did a gig where the musicians had to style themselves with the garments we stocked. These were communicative events that don't necessarily marry with the conventions of a store, because they did not generate economic return, but for me are still very much a 'boutique' practice. Though it's true that they might be more closely associated with an art practice and its shared history within the gallery system regarding things like lectures, discursivity, performative events, etc.

L
And your community has often attracted the art crowd, rather than people in fashion...

M
What CFS has done, or aims to do, is galvanise discourse around a particular kind of fashion practice, one that is very much fashion with a capital 'F', but that has a critical approach. So these may be artists who are creating garments as an additional creative milieu within a broader body of work, or they might be fashion designers that don't produce seasonally, and certainly don't produce in large quantities in factories. We often work with project-based practices. I would never erect such a binary as art versus fashion, but absolutely these are fashion practices that work with other disciplines, such as art.

L
Is that part of the rationale of 'curating' the store? In the way you select the makers that you

stock, or work with, who have a more expanded view of fashion or that are operating in a way that is discursive?

M
I think the criteria are too nebulous to give it a manifesto. But it's a question I often get, and I think my favourite response is that I like 'Hardcore Fashion', when it pushes you into things. More often than not, I can't just look to fashion designers to do that. In that respect, I think fashion graduate collections have a lot of gusto to them, but they are also interesting because people don't know their name as a fashion designer. Or artists, like K8 Hardy, that produce fashion work to interrogate its signs. That's the type of work that pushes my understanding of fashion. In this way, 'Hardcore' is also synonymous with fashion on the periphery.

L
It's all fashion at the periphery right? But practices in varying degrees of self-awareness of this status... but I know how much you hate my use of binaries! Alternative/mainstream, etc.

M
But of course we need binaries to help define our argument. Coming back to why I started CFS, I feel the store was always a very performative space. This idea of the store as a place where clothes come to die - not only in stasis but in how they are packaged as final products - was never going to sit with me. My hope is that the store, and the clothes within it function as a critical platform. Particularly as a boutique that's stocking a variety of works, it's not an innocent space. For me it's important to exaggerate the auteur role of the boutique to explore the experiential and performative capacity of the garments and the work that we're showing.

L
Do you think fashion still has the subversive potential as material for institutional critique, as with other 'organisational' practices, like '90s NY groups Bernadette Corporation, or Art Club 2000?

M
Corporations today have become so well-versed in using the methods of the art world, and art movements, that no longer can artists appropriate corporate language to any degree of separation. I think David Joselit makes an interesting point about this in his review of the 2016 Berlin Biennale for *Texte Zur Kunst*. Although he doesn't reflect on this in the piece, in many ways Balenciaga, or Demna, is a perfect example for the argument I'm trying to make. For this season they came out with the Kering jumper - Kering of course being Balenciaga's parent company - reflecting a tactic I would have imagined in an Andrea Fraser lecture decades ago. So now these luxury fashion houses have begun to adopt the kind of art-world methods of appropriation, or institutional critique, for their own gain. So to apply that kind of methodology, especially as an emerging fashion label, I think is naive and certainly not reactionary.

L
What did you think about the reference to the Bernie Sanders logo in that same collection then?

M
I had no issue with that, especially since this radical-chic motif has existed within fashion labels for decades. I'm more perturbed by these fake old-looking boots from the Vetements collection⁴ that same season which reference working class dress, than some Bernie scarf. Punk was recuperated decades ago, so to corner the Bernie scarf would be short-sighted of the industry's terror. I think we, as emergent, critical practitioners and designers, need to look to more political modes of communicating fashion than repeating these procedures.

L
How do you think being a collective entity, rather than have an individual identity, might take a stronger position against this?

M
I don't necessarily think it puts me in a stronger position, it was stronger for bc because they were appropriating the guise of a corporation at a time where institutional critique was taking its final breaths. What gives me hope is that Centre for Style is not read as some pseudo-corporate structure trying to self-appropriate. In his article Joselit talks about the juice

bar set up in the Berlin Biennale, in which the artist uses corporate imagery of health and fitness culture into this elaborate, and probably expensive, display that ultimately appeared lack-lustre. But it just felt like a shitty juice bar on Swanston Street that's just learning Photoshop skills. So does that make us think: oh sure, corporations are all a façade? No, I think the visitors either felt that it was underwhelming, or they just enjoyed the juices.

L
To come back to retailer vs curator, can you elaborate on the parallels between these roles?

M
I engage with the role of curator to some extent, but, as I think most people in the field will reiterate, this is a very expanded, nebulous, position to take these days. It also takes into consideration roles such as public relations or publishing, among other things, in a way that echoes the kind of corporate identity that curators have either adopted, or unwittingly come into contact with. So you have curators who function as a kind of brand, with a particular 'star power'. While I think the work that I do sits within this broad curatorial field, I have never - nor am I interested in - dealing with these traditional and very 'understood' roles of curation. These are: preservation, collecting and documentation. But in my role as a retailer, I am absolutely invested in looking at emerging, critical fashion practices. As a retailer I view garments as both autonomous objects of wear, as well as trying to frame them within a broader conversation.

L
And giving a platform for that work within a collective?

M
I aim to enter these practices into a point of exchange. Not necessarily a traditional, money-for-garment-exchange, but an experiential and discursive exchange. We do this by putting them into performances, or exhibitions - in contact with an expanded discourse.

L
Can you tell me more about the spaces Centre for Style has occupied? You had your first site in Melbourne's CBD...

M
That was tiny but we were annexed to a larger gallery space that meant that we could do events. The second space we occupied was mediated through Melissa Loughlan, who was director of the gallery Utopian Slumps, and who was opening up a space called Slopes at the time. She had some friends in property development who held this mechanics warehouse in limbo between contractual agreements with the local council before they could start development. She invited us to occupy the back of the gallery that was a giant space, the opposite of what we'd had in the city. We were able to flood the shop with clothes and embrace it as a retail context. In this space we also did two full-fledged fashion shows for HB Peace⁵ and Rare Candy, poetry readings⁶, and a kind of performance intervention by two artists in an immersive theatre-type experiment, convened by Holly Childs.

L
And alongside this you had, and still occupy an online store, right?

M
Yeah, and this is something I desperately want to reactivate. I think it's important for us to have a physical store, but an online store is an equally intimate experience in a sense that you are able to go there on your own terms. I would like to treat it as an exhibition of unexpected encounters that somehow disrupts the organised format of a store website.

L
What about the collateral and marketing of Cfs, is this something you are particularly conscious of? To relate to the FDC, who used collateral in diverse, but very serious ways, constantly putting their name to and on documents, publications; business cards and so forth. Which also has the function of posterity. Are you aware of your official-ness in the presentation of Centre for Style, but also these modes of self-archiving?

M
I'm aware of it as much as anyone is, it's impossible not to be. At the moment I'm contemplating deleting social media, I think there is value in withdrawing from these systems of brand identity, and exposure. I'm also very conscious of this with the website and how it serves as an archive to our activities.

I am provoked by people like Isabelle Graw, who talk about this binary of those, and here she's referring to artists, who engage with networking economies, social media etc., and those who resist. She comments on how withdrawing can bestow a certain integrity by refusing this mainstream system. So this can be a double game of capitalising on an 'anti' network economy. I am wary about how I present myself authentically, but also as a rebellious tactic... But to analogise it in relation to the FDC: my collateral is largely social media. For the FDC it was handouts and flyers, and a strong graphic design presence. But that's just my theory, perhaps you disagree?

L
I think you could include your publications? And didn't at one point you have Cfs business cards? Certainly you've generated event ephemera, but I guess things like this have multiple functions.

M
Yeah? I mean, our publication I'm very proud of. Originally it was going to be quarterly, or something insane, but we only made one!

L
Did the Centre for Style Rag galvanise things for you in a way?

M
It established something pedagogical, which has always been essential to me. That's coming back to the very first question of why I started CFS, I was very interested in what is a critical fashion practice, or rather, the question of what is a critical fashion designer.

L
Could you expand on the 'critical' way in which you work, or where you find this in the work of others? I'm interested to know what it is about mainstream fashion that you critique, or push back against, and how you can do this through the market characteristics of a shop.

M
It's not that I am particularly anti or critical of mainstream fashion, I mean, you just heard me before, having a very apolitical stance on luxury fashion designers re Balenciaga! And coming from someone who looks at *Vogue Runway* every season, cultural production that is funded by huge corporations like Kering, and LVMH, horrendous corporate evils! I have a distance with mainstream fashion, I engage with it for aesthetic enjoyment while only momentarily blocking out its politic. Centre for Style isn't concerned with mainstream fashion in that regard, instead I am excited by 'Hardcore' fashion designers, what they're doing and what that practice offers to the discourse. What are new conceptions of the body? How can you configure fabrics in new ways to image or speculate, the body? These are the kinds of questions I want to explore.

L
We've talked about communities of independent designers in New York, do you relate to other collectives now, or in fashion's recent history?

M
Certainly there are stores in which I take a lot of inspiration from. The genesis of Centre for Style can be located in retail precedents, boutiques like RA in Antwerp, or The House of Beauty and Culture in London, or the fun bombastic stores of cities like Tokyo. These are all very market-oriented projects, rather than ficto-critical approaches to what an organisation is, or can be. Cfs emerged from a very literal appreciation and love of retail spaces.

L
Market-oriented though they may be, they are creating a sort of alternative for independent designers.

M
Particularly for HOBAC, whose methods were around assemblage, bricolage and collaging. Procedures that are quite foreign to market-oriented fashion. What is

interesting to me is the way in which they galvanise these practices within a retail setting in a way that honours the work. In this respect, I have come to understand the boutique as an experiential framework.

L

Fashion is, and has to be, an event-based phenomenon. To come back to the parallels between CFS and FDC, both organisations have had similar trajectories with roots as nightclub happenings, and then going on to occupy retail settings within a program of other activities. What direction do you want to move towards?

M

Well I definitely want a retail space again, and to explore the prospect of withdrawing from social media. I want to reboot completely, change the name and identity of CFS as the next chapter in a long, iterative project. To forego the name and indeed its 'brand' would be an important step in escaping some of these systems of exposure that are so pervasive in fashion. Because this isn't about the name, it's about a love and appreciation for the work. Something I want to keep doing for the rest of my life.

Endnotes

- 1 - David Joselit, 'Four Theses on Branding', *Texte Zur Kunst*, Issue 103, September 2016. <https://www.textezurkunst.de/103/four-theses-branding/>.
- 2 - Balenciaga autumn/winter 2017, menswear. <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2017-menswear/balenciaga/slideshow/collection#30>.
- 3 - Bernie Sanders as told to Véronique Hyland, 'Bernie Sanders Reviews the Balenciaga Men's Collection' in *The New York Times*, January 18, 2017. <http://nymag.com/the-cut/2017/01/balenciaga-mens-spring-2017-riffs-on-bernie-sanders.html>.
- 4 - Vetements autumn/winter 2017. <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2017-menswear/vetements/slideshow/collection#17>.
- 5 - Matthew Linde, 'Liminal Lyricism: Boredom and H.B. Peace' show review for *Centre for Style Rag Online*, March 2015. <http://www.hbpeace.com/liminal-lyricism>.
- 6 - 'Mode Series 2' event held at Centre for Style shop, June 2014, with readings by Adelle Mills, Aftra/D&K, Blake Barns, Bunny Rogers, Esther Edquist (sleep well), Harry Burke, Katherine Botten and Matthew Linde. <http://www.centreforstyle.org/mode-series-2.html>.

Issue three or four of the *HRD / CF Newsletter* turns to the store, or rather, the boutique and its pivotal role in the activities and archive of the FDC. The FDC store opened in September 1989 (closing in 1992) at 243 Collins Street in Melbourne's CBD during the later years of the group's activities and became a lively venue for FDC designers and members. Exhibitions, parade presentations, talks and seminars were held in the space to inform and socialise with their network. In 1990, the FDC also moved their office into the store environs - making the shop space central to the organisation at large.

Earlier templates of a boutique as a subcultural space, canonised by institutions like SEX, Hyper Hyper, The House of Beauty and Culture and Sign of the Times, embraced the conception of a store as a performative environment. These precedents, housing garments by independent, often stylistically radical practices, were informative for the FDC. Their boutique did not aspire to the conventional properties of a store, instead, it was a place of cultural and social exchange, rather than economic profit.

Shops have often functioned as creative melting pots for alternative practices. Retail environments catalyse the particular cultural movements or subcultures in which they are located. More significantly, perhaps, is the structure of the shop as its own cultural ecosystem. An emporium of multiple dimensions and exchanges mediated through style. From the punk's boutique to the acid house store, the retail environment reinforces the essential role of style in subculture.

Retail bricoleur Matthew Linde is well placed in this discourse of alternative retail scenarios. Linde's Centre for Style has occupied various premises embracing the curatorial and symbolic capacity of the store as a fashion marketplace.

Newsletter number three includes an exchange between Linde and Laura Gardner, and an image series, 'Anastasia', by Blake Barns and Kate Meakin.

LG

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Pages 1-2, 7-10, & 13 show 'Anastasia' by Blake Barns and Kate Meakin.

Pages 14-16 show an interview with Matthew Linde of Centre for Style.

Pages 3-6 & 11-12 show various print ephemera generated by the FDC shop during its active period (1989-1992) and housed in the RMIT Design Archives.

We warmly thank Blake Barns and Kate Meakin for their images, Matthew Linde for his words and Rickie-Lee Robbie and the RMIT Design Archives for use of their material.