

A Fashion Exhibit Without Fashion

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Abstract: In this review, I critically examine the fashion and art exhibition “fashion after Fashion,” April 7–August 27, 2017 at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City, curated by Hazel Clark and Ilari Laamanen. The exhibition design was commissioned work by six interdisciplinary artists/designers who incorporated a mix of sculpture, performance, and audiovisual material into their installations. The different installations, taken together and experienced together, acted back and upon each other in interesting ways in the exhibition, which was a strength of the curators’ method; the use of commissions exclusively acted as a kind of artistic method in itself. The first and most notable thing about the exhibit was that there were no clothes on mannequins. While the exhibition’s premise was on fashion, the intentional absence of clothing was a risky strategy the curators pursued to intervene in how viewers think about fashion. The installations were purposely amorphous and abstract as well to inspire a broader consideration of what fashion can be and what bodies can do. Though the relationship between fashion and the body has been a constant topic in fashion scholarship, this exhibition offered a new perspective through commissioning and showcasing the category-defying work of recent fashion and art school graduates and performance artists.

KEYWORDS

- creative process
- fashion
- art
- design
- craft
- exhibition review
- modern art

What would a fashion exhibition look like when all the pieces are new, commissioned installations? And what would a fashion exhibition look like when there are no historical gowns, suits, or elaborate accessories, or any other garments on display on mannequins? Can you have a fashion exhibit without clothing?

Whatever the answer, one walked out of the “fashion After Fashion” exhibit at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, curated by Hazel Clark and Ilari Laamanen, April 27–August 6, 2017, with a much different understanding of what fashion can be and of the relationship between art, fashion, and design.

And who better qualified to trouble any easy distinction between art and fashion than Dr. Hazel Clark, curator of the exhibit and Professor of Design Studies and Fashion Studies and Research Chair of Fashion at Parsons School of Design at The New School and co-curator Ilari Laamanen, Project Manager at the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York? Their backgrounds also prompt the question: what does a fashion exhibition look like when guest-curated by fashion scholars, along with entirely commissioned installations?

On July 20, 2017, Clark and Vanessa Friedman, fashion director and chief fashion critic at *The New York Times*, hosted an evening discussion at the Museum of Arts and Design to talk about the exhibit and how it relates to broader ideas in fashion. Friedman and Clark discussed art and fashion’s historical entanglements and

then went over some central tensions in fashion that have yet to be resolved. Some of the major questions raised during the discussion are perennial questions about shifting disciplinary boundaries, such as: is fashion art; does fashion belong in a museum; and what are the differences between costume design, dress, and fashion? Their conversation also identified other tensions between fashion and politics, including:

- **In what sense is fashion democratic?**
- **If planned obsolescence is built into fashion, how can we have sustainability?**
- **Can we reverse-engineer fashion's waste and obsolescence?**
- **How is social media changing fashion? Is social media affecting fashion's temporal rhythms? Is social media speeding up a runaway train?**
- **What do we do about the problem of fast fashion?**

The Process

In the summer of 2016, Clark and Laamanen started selecting artists who they knew had interesting, collaborative, and participatory approaches to design, fashion, performance, and art. The exhibition was in the works for more than two years. With support from the Finnish Cultural Institute, this exhibition showcased emerging designers from Finland, Denmark, Norway, and the United States. Three designers in the group are based in New York. In late fall 2016, each artist made time to visit the Museum of Arts and Design to scope out the layout and feel of the exhibition space before creating their work. As a reviewer, I attended the exhibition talk between Clark and Friedman, viewed the exhibition once by myself, and on a separate date interviewed the curators while they led me around the exhibition.

For Clark and Laamanen, contracting artists to design and create for the space folded them into the same collaborative process that they used the exhibition to highlight: fashion’s unpredictable and experimental possibilities.

By selecting emerging interdisciplinary designers and commissioning the production of new work, the curators aimed to generate a different approach to the typical fashion exhibition. The work of each of the six artists in the exhibition reflected many visions and would not have had the same integrity without their various teams of creative support. Thus, this exhibit also represented a small feat in logistics: successfully commissioning six different interdisciplinary artists (and their teams) to create time-sensitive and site-specific work.

Laamanen explained that the commission basis of the exhibition was a way for the curators to “channel some of the energy and ideas that are currently taking place in the culture of fashion.” Five of the six designers incorporated audiovisual material into their installations; as such, their interdisciplinary backgrounds come through in their creation of installations that elicited and evoked multiple senses at once. The different installations, taken together and experienced together, acted back and upon each other in interesting ways, which was a strength of the curators’ method. As we moved through the exhibit, it became clear to me that the use of commissions exclusively acted as a kind of artistic method in itself. Clark explained that their vision for the exhibition was to think of “fashion as expanded field of practice,” highlighting contemporary, cutting-edge practitioners and creatives that defy traditional disciplinary boundaries. She elaborated that their emphasis on practice allowed for direct and concrete engagement with what designers are currently doing, which “pushes the envelope of what fashion can be and who it is for.”

Henrik Vibskov

FIGURE 1

Photograph of installation by Henrik Vibskov, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.





FIGURE 2

Photograph of installation by Henrik Vibskov, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.

FIGURE 3

Photograph of installation by Henrik Vibskov, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.





FIGURE 4

Behind-the-scenes photograph of a video shoot for *Harmonic Mouth* by Henrik Vibskov, courtesy of Henrik Vibskov. Alistair Wiper, 2017, photograph.

FIGURE 5

Behind-the-scenes photograph
of a video shoot for *Harmonic
Mouth* by Henrik Vibskov,
courtesy of Henrik Vibskov.
Alistair Wiper, 2017, photograph.



Henrik Vibskov, a Danish designer and conceptual artist, and the most established and renowned contributor to the exhibition, is known for blurring the boundaries of art and design. He uses a variety of mediums to create collaborative performances, videos, installations, garments, and sculptures. This structure with sand at the base featured suspended, mesh, bulbous shapes (**see fig. 1, fig. 2, and fig. 3**). The red lighting was the largest and most visually arresting aspect of the exhibition. The installation's configuration required one to pass through the structure, an immersive experience that offered a refreshing departure from usual fashion presentation of fixed and static objects to be gazed at on mannequins. The fact that many people thought these amorphous shapes looked like genitals with pubic hair might have contributed to the work's accessibility and fun — the shapes invited viewers to come closer and to investigate, to laugh and to ascertain what type and kind of art this was as they moved through it. Affixed to a wall is a screen showing one of Vibskov's films, *Harmonic Mouth*, a soundtrack and performance in the woods by costumed dancers (**see fig. 4 and fig. 5**). Vibskov's installation gave us a furtive glimpse into an eerie and captivating world that piqued my interest while also making me question how to categorize what I saw: as art, fashion, performance, or an indefinable mix of all three.

Lucy Jones



FIGURE 6

Photograph of installation by Lucy Jones, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.



FIGURE 7

Photograph of installation by Lucy Jones, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.



FIGURE 8

Photograph of installation by Lucy Jones, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.



FIGURE 9

Photograph from the Seated Design collection by Lucy Jones, courtesy of Lucy Jones. 2015, photograph.

Lucy Jones' work deals with the body and movement in an immediate way. Jones co-designs with people with disabilities and impaired mobility to make clothing that addresses their specific needs and desires. By focusing on stressed areas of garments like the elbows and knees, where "ease" is required in the garment design, Jones uses the demands bodies make upon garments as an organizing framework for her creative practice. In the exhibit, the art in her process was seen: multiple iterations of sleeve prototypes hung, crafted and finished beautifully (**see fig. 6, fig. 7, and fig. 8**). A video of Jones discussing her work, *Seated Design*, played alongside her installation; the collection won her Parsons, The New School's Womanswear Designer of the Year award in 2015. Her practice asks how the design process changes when we design for people that are seated, rather than for a standing dress form (**see fig. 9**). Her design process also has a refreshing concrete political dimension to it, in serving and addressing the needs of people with disabilities — a population often left out of representation and routinely ignored by fashion.

Through her designs, we learn that accommodation has universal applications: everyone with knees can appreciate a garment designed for ease of movement and comfort. Jones' work balances skill with beauty.

SSAW



FIGURE 10

Photograph of installation by SSAW, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.



FIGURE 11

Photograph of installation by SSAW, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.

SSAW's installation was an interior space — a fashion room of one's own. The room had a bed, desk, and a window that looked out into the exhibition space. The space was plastered wall-to-wall, floor to ceiling, with fashion tear outs (**see fig. 11 and fig. 12**). Even the bedding fabrics incorporated these images (**see fig. 13**). The tear outs were not from any random teen magazine, as we might have expected, but instead were all from SSAW issues, where the photography had not been retouched or photoshopped (**see fig. 14**).



FIGURE 12

Photograph of installation by SSAW, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.



FIGURE 13

Photograph of installation by SSWA, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.

FIGURE 14
Cover image from *SSAW Spring Summer 2017* issue, featuring Christopher and Philipp Rosenthal in Alexander McQueen, styled by Tuomas Laitinen. Ola Rindal, 2017, photograph.



SSAW magazine, created biannually from inside a one bedroom apartment in Helsinki, is a labour of love. Since its creators chose to exhibit a bedroom, it's possible that this installation mirrored their own conditions of creative production. Laamanen said that the room offered a unique approach to fashion, and that it was "A very fun way of entering [the world of fashion]: through the teenage bedroom. It's kind of something that many people can relate to emotionally." As someone who covered the walls of my bedroom growing up, I connected to this installation and appreciated the adaptation of a sacred refuge many cling to during formative and formidable years.

Another dimension of the installation to consider is that the teen fashion bedroom can take place anywhere: urban or rural, cosmopolitan or parochial. Especially in small towns where there is less free, anonymous movement, an interior space of one's own is crucial. A safe, private space to express oneself in plays a role in the healthy development of creative identity and artistic practice. This installation signaled to the crucial impact that space has on fashion, *where* we imagine fashion happening, and what that cultural geography tells us about modernity and the nation. For Clark, this piece also highlighted fashion's opening accessibility via social media, and "the fact that you can be very fashionable now, fashion-informed, but you could be sitting naked in your room"; thus, there are decreased barriers for participating in fashion's co-creation.

The substance of the photography, however, and an analysis of the images presented in this work, is taken up in a critique by scholar Matthew Linde, who stated that, "Expecting an insightful shift, I instead discover the magazine almost exclusively depicts tall, youthful, waif-like models, many of them represented by major agencies, wearing the latest in luxury designer fashion. The professionally crafted visuals are virtually indistinguishable from those of mainstream fashion magazines." Linde's critique is spot-on; I also wondered why all the subjects depicted were white and conventional within Western beauty ideals, given that SSAW suggests that they offer a critical take on fashion imagery through their anti-retouching practices.

Ryohei Kawanishi



FIGURE 15

Photograph of installation by Ryohei Kawanishi, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.



FIGURE 16

Photograph of installation by Ryohei Kawanishi, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.



FIGURE 17

Photograph of installation by Ryohei Kawanishi, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.



FIGURE 18

Photograph of installation by Ryohei Kawanishi, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.

Designer Ryohei Kawanishi's installation mimicked a fictitious brand with his initials, RK, complete with a designer showroom, proof sheets displayed under glass, press kits, business cards, and garments with RK hang tags (**see fig. 15, fig. 16, and fig. 17**). Although this was the only installation that contained garments, the garments featured were not original: they were secondhand, and their original hang tags were covered by RK tags (**see fig. 18**). Was this intentional, and was this meant as a statement about forgeries, authenticity, originality, and creative authorship in fashion? Not enough information was provided to help understand why these particular garments were included in the installation. If the object of the installation was to challenge or comment on the fashion industry, the audience was unfortunately not given enough information or perspective from the artist to form an opinion about the installation's meaning.

Writing for the Finnish Cultural Institute, which co-sponsored the exhibition, Wendy Vogel explains that the use of secondhand and vintage clothing was intentional. Vogel says that while, "[Kawanishi] uses the actual garments as ready-mades — a tradition going back to the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp — the elements surrounding the collection are authentic, from photographic contact sheets for his marketing campaign to line sheets detailing pricing and design sketches." As a graduate of Central Saint Martins and holding a master's degree from Parsons, and as the designer behind the menswear label named Landlord, Kawanishi has the interdisciplinary social and cultural capital to make a bold statement in art, design, and fashion worlds. Yet, a little too much was left to the viewer and audience to decide what this installation meant.

ensæmble



FIGURE 19

Photograph of installation by ensæmble, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Jenna Bascom, 2017, photograph.

FIGURE 20

Photograph of installation by ensæmble, courtesy of Sanna Lehto and the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Sanna Lehto, 2017, photograph.





FIGURE 21

Photograph of installation by ensæmble, courtesy of Sanna Lehto and the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Sanna Lehto, 2017, photograph.

Alisa Närvänen and Elina Peltonen of the Finnish brand ensæmble met while working on their own separate lines while studying at Finland's Aalto University at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture. This commission offered an installation and soundscape video that took objects and presented them inside out, to comment on the relationship between interiors and exteriors. Garments, which are typically thought of as soft to the touch, comforting and conforming to the body, were re-presented as distant, cold, stiff, and hard plaster sculptures (see fig. 19). These sculptures were suspended or assembled on the floor, which worked to decouple garments from their associations with the body. Garments were re-created as alien objects. Multiple objects appeared to be frozen in the process of being taken off the body, stripped off inside out (see fig. 20 and fig. 21).

Laamanen explained that this inside-out work focused, in a very conscious way, our attention towards how value is produced in the context of museums.

Laying some of the pieces directly on the floor was one such strategy ensæmble deployed to get viewers to think about fashion, the question of value, and the role of institutions in creating value for some forms of art over others (for example, craft and its lesser-status).

Eckhaus Latta and Alexa Karolinski



FIGURE 22

Still image from the video *Coco* by Eckhaus Latta and Alexa Karolinski, featuring Juliana Huxtable, courtesy of Alexa Karolinski and Eckhaus Latta. 2017, still image.

The duo behind the label Eckhaus Latta met at the Rhode Island School of Design and consists of Mike Eckhaus, with a background in sculpture, and Zoe Latta, who has a background in textiles. They have collaborated with filmmaker Alexa Karolinski for over five years and teamed up to produce the video *Coco*, played on a loop in the exhibition. The video featured close-up interviews with a series of unrelated people and minor celebrities wearing Eckhaus Latta designs, all conducted in a mirrored bathroom (see fig. 22). The subjects in the film responded to questions posed in a deck of cards. The questions ranged in topics, from banal (“What is your ideal scent?”) to deeply personal (“Describe a time you were in pain.”), and the choice of a bathroom as the setting helped to craft a specific kind of intimacy. Yet, the lack of structure (viewers were not told what questions interviewees responded to) made it difficult for the viewer to make sense of what the respondents were talking about.

Since there was no narrative, I expected the subject’s answers to be profound enough to stand alone outside a linear plot. The answers the subjects provided, however, lacked depth, insight, and significance, so the film’s inclusion in the exhibition proved underwhelming. Since the film’s respondents did not generate meaningful commentary on their own, it would have been helpful if the clothing spoke for them and created an interesting juxtaposition. The casual garments in the film were mostly unremarkable, and the artists missed an opportunity to use the clothing to tell a particular story, convey emotions, and create additional layers of meanings. The artists also could have stepped in and made clear how this film contributed and connected to the larger exhibition. One simple way to do this would have been to have the subjects speak directly and specifically about art and fashion, and their ideas about how the two are defined.

Conclusion

It is clear that this exhibition took a tremendous amount of time, conceptualization, and coordination to organize and pull off. From the thoughtful use of space and placement of the installations to the exhibition name (intentionally lowercased and capitalized “fashion after Fashion” to point attention to everyday fashion practices and the “capital F” Fashion system and institution), this exhibit succeeded in getting viewers to think differently about fashion, art, and design. And really, as educators and curators, Clark and Laamanen are well-qualified to be asking the provocative and conceptual questions that push our thinking about fashion forward. Yet because the objects and videos were presented without text, without a guide telling viewers how to interpret the objects and to frame their possible interventions, it is unclear if the exhibition succeeded on that point — this is ultimately a question of strategy and personal preference to the degree of didactic teaching styles. It is up to the viewer to decide what they took away and what connections, if any, they made between the objects, art, design, and fashion.

This is the one obvious and major risk to the exhibition design and curation strategy of letting the objects speak for themselves and a facet of the exhibit the curators were well aware of as it is a recurring question one faces when tasked with presenting and representing objects. Fortunately, this criticism is minor compared to where the exhibit succeeded, offering a nexus of collaborative work, practice, and expression. Instead of a one-night open studio or individual performances, this exhibition gathered emerging artists’ work under one roof, finding a fitting interdisciplinary, institutional home at the Museum of Arts and Design with the amenities to ensure high-caliber installation and the capacity to ensure the exhibition was cared for and its record preserved. As such, while the takeaway message might have been ambiguous, and indeed there may have been no single takeaway message across the six installations, the exhibit itself was straightforward in its provocation of the question of fashion.

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Jen Ayres resides in Philadelphia, holds a MA in Fiber Science and Apparel Design from Cornell, and is an Instructor at Parsons School of Design, The New School.

She is also finishing up her dissertation titled *Enterprising Fashion: The Political Economy of Secondhand Clothes, Secondary Markets, and Vintage* in American Studies at New York University. Her dissertation offers a comprehensive analysis of the labor, institutions, networks, and actors that comprise the world of vintage in order to provide a sketch of a cultural economy that deepens our understanding of how value is created at different points in the commodity chain and over the course of a commodity's social life. What she shows is how the intersections of race, gender, class, immigration, and sexuality complicate simplistic notions about how fashion and the economy work.

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