

The identity of designers in relation to alternative modes of doing, seeing and experiencing fashion.

There is no definitive answer to the definition of what 'fashion' is. The dictionary contrived it as "a style that is popular at a particular time, especially in clothes, hair, make-up, etc.:" (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2022) however, in an ever-changing social, political, cultural context it changes the mindsets of designers, experiencers (consumers) affecting the portrayal of what fashion is. This then changes the identity of practitioners all around the world in line with responding to alternative fashion systems. My personal perspective on fashion is that it is an ever-changing environment not through the products or the 'outcomes' you see but an ongoing process for research, social development, experiencing alternative modes and dictating alternate perspectives on the world. My portrayal of identity within this work is not in terms of a specific group of people or culture but in fact how your practice may contribute to a collective identity that you may not know exists who are all responding to how the current fashion system exists. I will dissect into the work of Femke de Vries and Ruby Hoette whose practice is applied in line with theoretical context, it doesn't exist as a separate identity but shapes who they are. This will allow me to better understand how I perceive their identities through practice in comparison to myself allowing for a conversational but applied piece that can be taken into account for me and others. Using Bourdieu's field describing it as a 'structured space of positions and forces' (Bourdieu, 1993- 72: Bourdieu, 2004: 33). It is a 'social microcosm' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996:97) created with specific rules of functioning which dictates the practice of the individuals belonging to it, sets up the tone of how I see fashion as a field and how separating will allow greater development of individual and collective identity is what I set out to discuss.

As outlined before I am looking at two working practitioners/educators within the current 'fashion system' who are Femke de Vries and Ruby Hoette who both conduct what I would call an alternative fashion practice/critical fashion practice. This is also where I situate myself in the current state of my practice and an opportunity to delve into the social sciences and how this affects the political, social and cultural context of the work and my personal identity which could run parallel to others.

Leon Stevenson: White male born in the United Kingdom

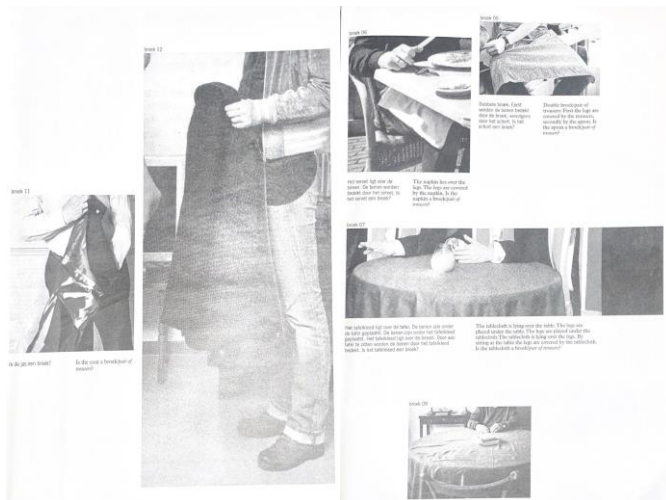
Femke De Vries: White female born in the Netherlands

Ruby Hoette: White female born in Australia

Otto von Busch suggests that "fashion activism needs a multitude of self-organised 'base communities' or 'small scenes and practices'" (2008, 107-93). Looking at this idea starts with the application of the practice existing within different communities who have no direct relation to one another, but the practice shapes a common social identity but why is this the case? This informs the idea of Peter McClare's 'hegemony' which describes how society can inadvertently keep a damaging system in place for the masses and not allow for responses to the system, in this case the 'fashion system' in my opinion. An independent publication which Femke de Vries is involved in is called Warehouse Magazine who advocates the fashion system that exists as of today and is just one of the many fashion systems that could exist. They seek to create "alternative, non-capitalist, non-industrial modes and frameworks for making, doing, seeing and experiencing fashion" (Warehouse, 2022) this is taken further by the courses both practitioners teach, which both follow a similar ethos to Warehouse.

I wanted to look at two separate pieces of work from the individuals de Vries's Dictionary Dressings and Hoette's col.lection, with also bringing in my own work called four shirts, two trousers, two skirts, shirt, trousers, skirt. Firstly, dissecting Dictionary Dressings, as a brief overview this involves responding to how clothing is described in the dictionary through visual imagery and in line with this questioning the

very role of what fashion is. It is important to note that within this work the definitions have no reference to fashion or style, so everybody is seen the same through what they might wear.



de Vries, 2016, p29-31

In conversation de Vries talks about the project and said “this kind of playfield in fashion and design provides the possibility to move beyond the hierarchical and re-define approaches to fashion production in the future”(de Vries, 2016, p10) this idea questions the capacity of designers and the structures that are currently in place which in a way define the identity that designers can show through their practice as they are having to respond to a capitalist society in order to survive. This is heavily linked to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1993), in particular the writing in ‘the Field of Fashion’ where he states that “fashion exists not only through clothes but also through discourses on them” but where does this discourse exist? Coming back to the idea of a collective identity and not wanting to respond to just one fashion system is where I would situate the discourse in the 21st century this separation creates a new identity it may be a critical identity an alternative identity, but it has scope. If we look at this work with a lens on it being criticism, criticism is about finding it hard to come to terms with what you do not yet know exactly how to deal with, to pass judgment, to expose yourself, knowing that you expose yourself, putting your prestige and your very identity at risk. (Svenden, 2017) This leads to Hoette’s col.lection which is a visual research project exploring the true essence of what a collection is and critically engaging with this notion within the context of the current fashion system.



Ruby Hoette (Copyright 2015)

In relation to the traditional communication of what a fashion collection constitutes this mode challenges the very means of it from the perspective of the designer and viewer. When you remove the form of tradition within the context of design what happens to the perception? The product is then an act of critical reflection within the context of fashion, it is not just a form of product it takes shape as ongoing practice-based research in my eyes and how others can respond to this to help shape their identities as designers and even as a consumer it creates that interrelation between the two and more social, cultural and political awareness. This breakdown made me wonder whose identity the works shape, it is not about a singular person or a small group it is to inform everyone. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1993) work on the field he says "The value of a thing, be it a work of art, a word or a sentence, is not to be found in the thing itself or in its author, but in the field, it belongs to, in the interplay between the forces of opposition and conservation that structure the field and give its agents the power to speak and be listened to; the power to consecrate." The basis of this is to give greater advocacy for this form of practice to allow a more welcoming identity within the fashion system. You challenge what people already know and how to experience it through a relationship between the social sciences and design process to allow progression for all.

Now where do I situate my personal identity through all of this? Looking at my own practice and the work four shirts, two trousers, two skirts, shirt, trousers, skirt. Looking at the fundamentals of a fashion design practice and exploring the context that they can be taken to through an alternative mindset giving the user an opportunity to question what exactly they are doing and questioning whether there is a definitive answer. It isn't about what is produced, it is about opening conversations to situate my practice in line with my personal identity.



Stevenson, 2022

“A narrow vision of fashion as an industry, with its large scale and complex interrelations, has led to defeatist attitudes, preventing those who work in it to think and act beyond established ways.” Aicha Abbadi (2019). Stating that people have two options surrendering to its symbolic power or opting out of the industry completely. Where does this situate designers in line with this? I am coming to the realisation that developing your practice and identity are not separate but intertwined, being that your identity has shaped the way you design today whether that be your upbringing, the education system you were in or even to the extent of conversations that you have had. Coming into the education system shaping identities feels like a relevant point to discuss, radical pedagogy is described by Paulo Freire (1972) as ‘problem-posing education’ which allows “action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” I see potential to allow this to develop a more collective identity within society rather than following existing structures that limit progression.

The interrelations between the practices help gain a better understanding of what a collective identity may appear to be like within the fashion system. Practice based research within a fashion context may develop the identities with this experiencing and doing fashion like Hoette and de Vries opens this to the possibilities. Brockling (2010) states that to avoid becoming easily marketable in a consumerist society as being stated as ‘being different’ is by ‘being different differently’ where you would not follow the market or the presumed outcomes of so-called oppositions. Bringing in the two courses they teach, one being MA Critical Fashion Practices - Arnhem and MA Design Expanded Practice – Goldsmiths, they advocate harmonising research and theory embedded with the practice allowing one another to dictate to each other. I believe this development would create a more ingrained perspective on fashion as a whole, allowing a greater cultural understanding between one another but also the development of an identity from a designer's perspective to better understand the context of who and why they are doing what they are doing.

To sum up the findings of this essay most likely results with more questions than answers to discover a more considered response to what the title suggests. However, it has created a development in how you assert your identity within your own practice and how this can allow fruition of the feeling of a collective identity by seeing someone's process of doing fashion which may resonate with you. I come back to this quote “fashion activism needs a multitude of self-organised ‘base communities’ or ‘small scenes and

practices” (Von Busch, 2008, 107-93). When I see words such as base communities and small scenes it brings me the picture of individuals who have a specific identity that is shared in some ways with others as the start of a collective identity and a growing alternative fashion system. Questions in relation to the content discussed: What is a joint identity within the fashion system? Is identity shaped through creating and sharing knowledge? Can more than one fashion system truly exist? Do designers have an identity in the current fashion system?

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