

## THE EYE OF THE WEARER

Margo Barton

The 2016 Intellectual Fashion Show, an exhibition mounted by the New Zealand Fashion Museum and held at the Gus Fisher Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand, called for artists and designers to respond to one of the costumes' titles which artist June Black had used as the basis of her 1959 Intellectual Fashion Exhibition. Black's metaphorical costumes were said to have "explored ideas concerning the way in which 'costumes' enhance and protect our fragile psychological states."<sup>1</sup>

I am a fashion designer and milliner and, through my practice as fashion curator of self and of others in fashion parades, exhibitions and events, I have developed a keen interest in the interaction between the wearer and their clothes and accessories. This artist page focuses on Costume 14 in the 2016 show, *The Costume to Face the World of the Commonplace*, an ensemble made up of a sun bonnet which is accessorised with a swimsuit. Both of these pieces provide sensory experiences for the wearer that go beyond the purely visual.



Figure 1. *The Costume to Face the World of the Commonplace*, 2016, for the New Zealand Fashion Museum Intellectual Fashion Show Exhibition and Catalogue 2016. Fashion and millinery: Margo Barton. Model: Olivia at Unique Model Management. Photograph: Fraser Chatham.

More often than not, critiques of fashion focus on visual aesthetics, with the aim of 'getting the look,' and sometimes on the technical and making expertise involved. There is a lack of discussion about tactile aesthetics or enquiry into the intimate relationship between wearer and fashion object, identified as "the hedonic experience of touch."<sup>12</sup> In addition, the user experience through wearing is overlooked in most fashion reviews. Why is this so? Is it possible to communicate an intimate fashion wearing experience to those on the outside, to those not wearing?

## THE COSTUME

The methodology of designing the costume was informed by a phenomenological approach, vision, touch and movement coalescing as "complex tactile phenomena."<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the purpose of much millinery created to protect the wearer from the sun, or to add aesthetic value to the wearer's personal design style – whether they are on the street or in catwalk shows and exhibitions, designed as spectacle for the audience to enjoy – the millinery and swimsuit designed as a part of the 2016 Intellectual Fashion Show was created to be a sensorial experience for the wearer:



Figure 2. *The Costume to Face the World of the Commonplace*, 2016, for the New Zealand Fashion Museum Intellectual Fashion Show Exhibition and Catalogue 2016. Fashion and millinery: Margo Barton. Model: Olivia at Unique Model Management. Photograph: Fraser Chatham.

Costume 14's swimsuit is novel in its construction and shape. It is not made of a two-way stretch textile, the customary fabrication of contemporary swimwear – instead, a one-way stretch fabric is tailored to fit the body, unlike commercial swimwear of this century. The bathing suit is made of plush velour, a textile which is the knitted version of velvet, and with its thick pile, soft and luxurious to touch and wear, the swimsuit could be described as cosy – not an attribute of traditional swimwear. The velour textile provided the ideal characteristic by which swimwear can equip the wearer to face the world of the commonplace, contradictory to what is expected, both comforting and exposing the wearer. Visually, these attributes could be understood in this way when displayed on a shop mannequin or a live model, both in the gallery and the catalogue.

"Fashion is the armour to survive the reality of everyday life." Bill Cunningham.<sup>4</sup>

Millinery is the discipline or craft of making artefacts which are worn on the head, a process and product. The word is both verb and noun, and millinery, the sun bonnet in this case, possibly more than any other article of clothing or accessory, can both attract and deflect attention. The hat can act as a disguise or a costume to enable the self to adopt an identity, an 'other' personality, both for the world to observe and for the self to occupy. The hat shields the self from the world and shields the world from the self. The well-considered hat can also assuage the troubled mind by providing a haven, a secure place to face the tediously dull world of the commonplace and, furthermore, to celebrate the uncommon in millinery wearing.

It is fair to assume that hat wearing was commonplace when June Black initiated her project in 1959 – photographic evidence in the newspapers of the era shows seas of hats adorning the masses. Millinery wearing is not commonplace in the twenty-first century.

"The bygone object always gives the appearance of being a wallflower. Beautiful though it may be, it remains 'eccentric'!"<sup>5</sup>



Figure 3. *The Costume to Face the World of the Commonplace*, 2016, for the New Zealand Fashion Museum Intellectual Fashion Show Exhibition and Catalogue 2016. The wearer's view – shards of sunlight shining through the pulled thread work onto the gold leaf inside the brim of the sun bonnet. Millinery: Margo Barton. Wearer: Margo Barton. Photograph: Margo Barton.

The bonnet, out of time and out of place, is a bygone object and is thus viewed as a signifier of individual fashion style. The bonnet shields the wearer from the sun's harsh rays; it is a fashion accessory, and bygone object, and these particular attributes are easily understood when viewed. The sun bonnet can be donned as a conventional, albeit fashion-forward, beach hat; while the viewer can see it, this bonnet does not reveal all of its properties to the viewer. The bonnet is also transformable; housed within the spacious brim is texture, colour and light; sensory matters provided solely for the wearer's delight. The sun bonnet becomes a little haven from the world, architecture for the head, and for the mind, and a delightful mechanism for facing the world of the commonplace. An uncommon experience designed to face and conquer the dreary commonplace.

Fashion is designed to be worn, to be inhabited, is a thing that is to be known intimately, by being worn triggering an experience of tactile aesthetics felt through touch and motion.

"Movement and time are not only an objective condition of knowing touch, but a phenomenal component of tactile data."<sup>16</sup>

Can the experience of wearing be communicated to the viewer? After much reflection on my contribution to the exhibition, I believe that the exhibition viewer, catalogue reader and indeed the reader of this artist's page will not fully understand the essence of the costume without wearing the hat, without the experience. It is only when the sun bonnet is placed on the head, and when the wearer chooses to transform the brim, to open it, to place their face inside the architecture, and to cosset their head and themselves from the world around them, that the visual, aural, spatial and tactile experiences involved are communicated. Only then, through clothing the psyche does this hat become *The Costume to Face the World of the Commonplace*.

## CONCLUSION

Fashion garments and accessories are designed to be interacted with by the wearer – anything less is falling short. I suggest that to truly understand the garment or accessory, participation is required in the form of wearing.

"The body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical ... experience [is] always in terms of the world to which we are attending from our body."<sup>17</sup>

In engaging in designing, wearing and communicating *The Costume to Face the World of the Commonplace*, I have uncovered a rich area of future research into a language of wearer experiences in a fashion context.

Corporeality gives the worn object meaning – you had to be there.

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- 1 Sheridan Keith, "Fashion and the Intellect," in *Intellectual Fashion Show 2016*, ed. Linda Tyler (Auckland: Blikfang Art and Antiques and the New Zealand Fashion Museum, 2016), 5.
- 2 Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence, "Tactile Aesthetics: Towards a Definition of its Characteristics and Neutral Correlates," *Social Semiotics*, 21:4 (2011), 569.
- 3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 368.
- 4 Glenn O'Brien, "Landmarks of Fashion," *New York Times*, 14 March 2014, 21.
- 5 Jean Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and its Destiny, 1968-1983*, ed. and trans. Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis (London: Pluto, 1993), 36.
- 6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 367.
- 7 Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 15.