

Articulate Questioning of Heteronormative Practices, Performances and Perspectives in Queer Design Practice

Gunn, Maja *Body Acts Queer: Clothing as a Performative Challenge to Heteronormativity* (diss.). University of Borås: The Swedish School of Textiles 2016 (345 pages)

MAJA GUNN'S PRACTICE-BASED doctoral thesis that explores experimental fashion design through a lens of power, sexuality and gender as performative processes finishes with series of short quotations from the participants in the project that make up the body of practice work in *Body Acts Queer*. It is pertinent to start my review with noting the final words of Gunn's thesis as she makes extensive and creative use of words, texts and speech acts in her practice and examines their importance and relevance within the thesis. The thesis itself begins with the design and performance projects that constitute the "action research" and practice elements of the thesis; the first of which, *On and Off*, is presented here as a series of written texts that had been performed by Gunn as a monologue or "speech act."

This first main section of the thesis, including and following *On and Off*, introduces the projects through the texts and images of designed garments, performances, events or installations. While they are briefly

introduced in the overall thesis introduction they stand alone as work to be engaged with by the reader, in as close a manner to the original as is possible in a printed format of this nature, before Gunn elaborates more fully on the circumstances, development and intention of each of the projects in the following section “About.” The seven projects – *On and Off*, *If you were a girl I would love you even more*, *Utopian Bodies*, *The Safety Top*, *The Club Scene*, *Exclude Me In*, and *The Lesbian Shirt* – are all concerned with the performative acts and embodied experiences of clothed bodies and how “queer design” practice can be performed; and as such they underpin the explorations in the thesis as a whole.

That this thesis is concerned with design and how clothing is created in relation to notions of feminism and queer (both in the form of queer theory as an underpinning theoretical perspective and an identity that provides a challenge to heteronormativity) is apparent in all of the projects but in subtly different ways. *The Safety Top* used norm-critical design approaches to investigate an issue around gendered dressing within the Swedish Fire service and questions the ways in which male and female firefighters respond to the development of a gender-neutral safety garment. *The Club Scene* in its three iterations at different venues in Stockholm provided attendees with a selection of prepared garments that they were encouraged to try-on, combine in self selected combinations or be advised by Gunn and colleagues in selection and fitting of garments. The performative acts of undressing, dressing and redressing in clothes that may not initially be those that would be chosen in other circumstances because of style or fit and that were adapted to the clubgoers’ bodies were supported by requests for responses from the participants about these site specific, curated experiential events. For *If you were a girl I would love you even more*, Gunn encouraged a heterosexual male friend to dress in increasingly “feminine” garments, recording through interview and photographs her “collaborators” changing perceptions of societal pressures and his own comfort levels. In both instances, Gunn intended these experiences to inform her approach to design through the experiences of her participants.

The questioning of gender positions in the previous two projects was

perhaps even more explicit in *Utopian Bodies*, where Gunn designed garments and prosthetics for display in the “Gender” section of the Stockholm staged *Utopian Bodies: Fashion Looks Forward* (for which I wrote the section essay for the catalogue). The perceptive elements of this project were less about engaging with the eventual design than about the responses of exhibition visitors to trying on the male and female breasts that responded to a statement that fashion “has the ability to redefine gender” and asks the visitors to think about this. *The Lesbian Shirt* again began with garments designed from interviews by Gunn and engaged directly with fashion through the employment of a professional model and photographer to interpret the shirt through images. The textual elements comprised real and imaginary conversations and statements about the nature of this “iconic” garment. The participatory elements were much more explicitly public for the artwork *Exclude Me In* that turned Gothenburg’s streets into a public queer club with a carnival float and “outdoor act” at which participants provided with designs based on clichés and stereotypes of queer style. In the book this is represented by the text of a manifesto and photographs of the costumed participants, reflect the “implementation of queer theory and practices in a creative process” (Gunn 2016, 16).

As a practice-based PhD the inclusion of the practice is important in this printed final thesis but perhaps the challenge for the types of practice that Gunn undertakes is the temporal nature of performative pieces and the ways in which the essence, spirit or design contribution is captured in text and image which in itself becomes another form of production – one that Gunn questions and justifies in her thesis. The themes and underpinning theoretical perspectives of the projects and the overall body of work are captured in the second half of *Body Acts Queer* in five thematic “chapters” – Queer, body, language, design and performative design – that address Gunn’s engagement with theory and practice in relation to the projects. These also serve to explain more about Gunn’s methodological approaches in her work and in this doctoral research. Both performative design as an “artistic design practice in relation to performance and performativity” (253), with a feminist

and queer theory underpinning, and action research as a participatory art where “notions of space, context and change can be achieved through and within bodies” (247) are central to Gunn’s methods and approach to develop the work/projects and their analysis. As Gunn notes, work that engages with multiple participants in a variety of contexts requires a careful consideration of ethics and in the “Notes” chapter Gunn explains her ethical standpoint and reflects on the her own projects in the context of other artistic examples.

Body Acts Queer offers new contributions to the multidisciplinary fields of fashion and design, exploring how clothing has a fundamental role in the questioning of heteronormative practices, performances and perspectives about bodies and the performance of queer design practice. This book version of the PhD provides lavish pictorial evidence of Gunn’s multidisciplinary practice projects in which she collaborated with architectural groups, fashion organisations, and graphic designer and engaged with “queer” communities, groups and individuals. The use of text both as an element of the artistic practice and as the written elements that underpin and explain the design approaches and theoretical considerations of this PhD ensure that this is a valuable, readable as well as visually rich exploration of the relationships between theory and practice.

SHAUN COLE
LONDON COLLEGE OF FASHION
UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON