Falling against texture:

Writing as fashion practice

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Abstract

In its flickering appearances and rush of narratives, fashion exudes an underlying dynamism cradling the possibility of manifold aesthetic intensities. Rendering a recurring thrust towards potential worlds, fashion manifests a momentum that rouses the imagination and incites change.

This research pursues the aesthetic potential of fashion in the absence of physical garments. It draws from Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin’s abstraction of fashion as the elevated, phenomenal expression of ephemerality and transience in the production of the eternally new. The intent is to develop an innovative approach to writing as creative practice based on the lived, aesthetic paradigm of fashion. Less ‘writing about fashion’ than ‘writing fashion,’ the practice engages with the reflexive relationship between aesthetic imagination and its verbal expression, and between the body and writing, as the basis of fashion’s aesthetic paradigm.

Existing studies of fashion writing – based on its prevalence as a genre in popular media – are mostly situated within the fields of professional practice, criticism, communication and semiotics. In contrast, I engage with writing as an artistic and philosophical endeavour, exploring its capacity to stir and vivify the depth of aesthetic experience that is as palpably lived as it is imagined. The research engages with three areas of research that intertwine: (1) fashion theory, primarily through Ulrich Lehmann’s study of fashion as the metaphysical expression of modernity; (2) aesthetics in relation to lived experience through the phenomenological method; and (3) writing as a medium of creative production.

I engage with contemporary theorists, writers and creative practitioners to draw connections between aesthetics, perception, imagination, the body as medium, and the sensation of language. To do so, I produced a series of prose-works – fragments of narratives, word-lists and notes written as brief poems. As exploratory processes, they allow me to engage directly with research questions, concepts and speculations. These writing experiments subsequently lead me to understand why and how I write through the fashion paradigm, that is, as a way of shifting between lived experience and imagination – between the tangible and the imaginable – which I argue is a profound quality of fashion that distinguishes it from other aesthetic practices.
To understand ‘what the practice does’ and the kinds of experiences it could engender, as well as to explore possibilities for future practice, I test the work across a spectrum of formats, audiences and experiential contexts: academic conferences, public exhibitions, print publications, audio recordings and reading performances. Shifting the practice beyond the written page lends a vital sense of immediacy, performativity and contingency; it reveals the myriad ways by which fashion expression can be produced and communicated and at the same time reflects the processes of its own construction.

The practice is framed as a dynamic approach to ‘writing fashion’ based on lived aesthetics, to catalyse processes that are critical, speculative and performative; this includes the composition of this dissertation. By allowing the practice to be unfixed, I emphasise writing – in parallel with fashion – as a way of opening up rather than narrowing aesthetic expression, thus innovating the way writing is produced and experienced in and as fashion practice. The research contributes to contemporary thinking and practice in the field by offering a mode of writing that mediates the aesthetic, phenomenal and imaginary paradigm of fashion – performing in and as practice the deeper, underlying structure of fashion.

* The prose-works generated over the course of this research are compiled as a single document, separate to this dissertation. As companion pieces, they are best read alongside each other. Excerpts from the prose-works are cited throughout the dissertation with the acronym WHM (Winnie Ha Mitford).
Introduction: Writing through Fashion

If we suspend fashion from the instrumentality of clothes, what remains of its agency and how do we substantiate it?

I started this research out of curiosity for an underlying profundity of fashion that emanates from its ephemerality and changefulness. Beneath the shimmer and flux of objects and appearances, fashion manifests fugitive tendencies and a momentum for change. Teetering between potential and obsolescence, it imparts an incessant urge to renew, resist, refract, transgress, transmute, evolve.

In its deliberate instability and brevity, fashion harbours an inner dynamic that renders it distinct from other aesthetic expressions. This research develops a new way to write through this particular idea of fashion. It explores fashion as an aesthetic phenomenon that is as palpably lived as it is imagined, and how writing stirs and vivifies it. It offers an approach to writing that is subject to fashion as a transient world buoyed by the sensation of language and surge of imagination. The intent is to demonstrate the capacity of writing to catalyse new aesthetic expressions that reflect the dynamics of fashion.

The question that frames the research, following the proposition above, is: How would one write through the aesthetic paradigm of fashion, and why would one do so?

This research stems from my interest in the poetics of fashion expression with respect to imagination, perception and language. The conceptual framework brings together perspectives on fashion, phenomenology and aesthetics. I engage with a cluster of contemporary voices in literary criticism and writing-based practices through the lens of contemporary fashion practice. I address the poetics and processes of the aesthetic imagination, the body as expressive medium, and the performativity of writing, at the
intersection of fashion and literary thinking. In exploring these concepts, I generated a body of prose-works: fragments, lists, notes, correspondences with others and brief narratives. More akin to ‘sketches’ than definitive outcome, these writing experiments were a spontaneous way of working through ideas, methods and questions. The writing practice was subsequently tested in the public context through academic conferences, print publications, audio recordings and reading performances. These activities explored the potential for the practice to catalyse and mediate expressions beyond the written page. They constitute my approach to practice as an immediate, performative and critical process.

*Falling against Texture* seeks to accentuate the contours of fashion’s aesthetic paradigm – to engage with the immediacy of lived expression at the core of its thinking and practice and, at the same time, reflect upon the processes of its construction. It pursues an approach to writing that shapes and gives weight to fashion’s ephemeral and transitory nature, to foster a new understanding of fashion as concept and practice.

+Fashion through Phenomenology+

This research asserts fashion as a sense of dynamism that drives aesthetic expression. I suggest that ‘the pulse of fashion’ – beyond its flippant reputation – harbours the possibility of something profound that sustains our momentum of self-expression. Beyond the artifice of material appearance and the shell of representation, the elusive heart of fashion stirs the imagination.

In the context of practice, what becomes fascinating is the ephemerality and transience that cradles fashion’s aesthetic imagination, sensation and language. By ‘aesthetic,’ I refer to the full, sensuous spectrum of perception – the raw material of lived experience as mediated by the moving, feeling and sensing body – that is continuous with the imagination. I write with the intention to engage with the immediacy of aesthetic encounters, rather than to make an assessment of the formal properties and characteristics of the object or event.
In contrast to the analytical application of aesthetics related to issues of taste and judgement, my research attends to the affective dimension of aesthetic encounters. Gaston Bachelard’s writings on the inhabitation of space and the phenomenological imagination – in particular his ideas around resonance, repercussion and reverberation as the dynamics of experience – initiated my interest in fashion as an aesthetic world that is constituted through the body. In his seminal philosophical treatise on phenomenological aesthetics, Mikel Dufrenne suggests that an ordinary object becomes an aesthetic object only when it is perceived for its own sake. Aesthetic perception, in phenomenological terms, involves an experiencing body or subject that is deeply invested not only in the object of experience, but also the bond that is formed at the moment of encounter. According to Edward Casey, it is when the subject joins with the object of experience that an aesthetic world is forged, such that the subject comes to inhabit, and be immersed, in the aesthetic world that is at once affective and expressive.

In my writing, the ‘aesthetic object’ could be an image, a word or a quotation that opens outward. It takes me to the brief worlds that open up between the imagination and its verbal expression, as words and images slide, elide, submerge, and slip between each other, connecting momentarily by chance, accident or coincidence. Edmund Husserl, the principal founder of phenomenology, introduced the concept of ‘epoché’ in 1913 to show the intrinsic link between phenomenology and imagination. This phenomenological method calls for a suspension or ‘bracketing’ of preconceived realities – to question them as ‘being able not to be’ – in order to allow new possibilities to arise. While the act of perception, by definition, accepts ‘an object as being effectively existent, imagination suspends the actual existence of the object and

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5 Depraz, Natalie. ‘Imagination.’ Sepp, ibid., pp. 156-156.
is directed towards the pure possibility of the latter." Within the space of aesthetic experience, the continuity between perception and imagination implies a continual passage from the actual to its potential; my premise is that herein lies the dynamic epitomised by fashion.

The concept of fashion as lived, aesthetic dynamism flows from Charles Baudelaire’s expression of the phenomenon in his seminal, nineteenth-century essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life.’ It is characterised, first and foremost, by ephemerality and transience. For the nineteenth-century poet and critic Baudelaire, fashion (la mode), is a paradigm of modernity (la modernité). In doing so, he identified a place for fashion in aesthetic discourse where it is ‘isolated from the history of costume, clothing, or dress itself.’7 He drew attention to fashion as a concept of aesthetics, and a poetic expression of the dynamism of modernity. In his philosophical text on fashion, Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity (2000),8 the contemporary philosopher and fashion scholar Ulrich Lehmann advances Baudelaire’s concept of fashion as the ‘coexistence of the ephemeral and the sublime, the fugitive and the profound.’9 The ‘fugitiveness of fashion’ extends Baudelaire’s depiction of fashion, specifically in the context of modernity, as ‘the immediate, unpredictable and the charm of constant change.’10 In its transience, ephemerality and elusiveness – qualities that Baudelaire regards as fashion’s elevated expression – fashion cradles a sense of dynamism that is vital to my understanding of its poetic agency. Eschewing the formality of language and literal representation, the writing experiments with fashion as a vessel for aesthetic expression, adrift in a phenomenological sea.

Why write in fashion?

Contemporary fashion scholarship is primarily concerned with the culture, communication, psychology and history of fashion, where the essential subject of analysis is clothing. It includes many different interrelated areas of study: clothing as

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6 ibid.
9 Lehmann, ibid., pp. xiv-xv.
10 ibid., p. 19.
object (design, art, economics); the effect of wearing clothes (sociology, psychology, body studies, material culture, history, politics); and the representation of clothing (communication, semiotics, literature). By comparison, philosophical approaches to the study of fashion are less prevalent. Due to its transience and preoccupation with artifice, fashion allegedly lacks substance. However, it is precisely for these reasons that fashion has something unique to say about the nature of our aesthetic selves.

In *Tigersprung*, Lehmann draws from the writings of the nineteenth-century poets Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, and the cultural critic Walter Benjamin, to present a philosophical discussion of fashion as a paradigm of modernity. His argument forms the basis of my approach to fashion as an abstract expression of transience and changefulness. I connect his discussion on the aesthetics of fashion with conceptual practices that emphasise the communication of fashion – more specifically fashion as mediated experience beyond the instrumentality of clothes, epitomised, for example, by the abstract fashion film. The emphasis on aesthetics guides my understanding of fashion as a force of expression in which the imagining, moving and sensing body plays a central role as an experiential medium and a metaphor for writing.

Accentuating the connection between the imagination of fashion and its verbal expression, I write to coax brief moments of intensities; the tone is suggestive rather than opinion-led, the effect impressionistic rather than analytical. It is less concerned with how something is mimetically described than how the descriptions affect and mediate what could potentially be. The characteristics of the practice reveal my background in fashion design and scholarship, with a vested interest in the relationship between language, imagination and the body, and how to account for this in practice.

When I started this research, I was asked an obvious and simple question: *In a field as pervasively and potently visual as fashion, why write?* My intention is not to replace the visual with the verbal, nor to translate one into the other. It is to pursue what Asbjørn Grønstad describes as ‘a form of language that neither aspires to exhaust the visual (thereby abusing it), nor attempts to evade it altogether,’ but instead generates new meanings at the intersection of the image and word. According to Grønstad, ‘what we need is a critical gesture that is imaginative enough to speak and to signify with the

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11 ibid., p. 4.
visual rather than for it.” The aim of the writing is to coax a self-reflexive engagement with fashion’s aesthetic realm. I propose that in doing so we reveal the processes and tendencies of our own aesthetic expression. This shifts the agency of the verbal from representation to expression. Writing also deepens my engagement with practice as I unravel myself in its process.

My writing is influenced by a cluster of contemporary writers, notably Ben Lerner and Chris Kraus, who deliberately play with the porous boundaries between poetry, criticism, fiction, memoir and autobiography, with the effect of shifting the way we construct our experience of the world. Extending from Lerner and Kraus, my writing projects an acute self-awareness of my own voice, position and authority as narrator (and practitioner). It differs fundamentally from the practice of ‘writing about fashion,’ which is primarily the goal of fashion journalism, criticism, and communication, as well as the culture of blogging. These forms of writing operate within genre conventions of form, style, voice, audience and format, pertaining to the scope and intentions of professional writing in the fashion industry. In contrast to existing modes of fashion writing that are focused on the transmission of an opinion or a message, my aim is to explore, experience and discover writing as the manifestation of fashion practice.

It should be emphasised here that the intent of this research is not to produce writings about fashion but to develop a creative practice that uses writing as the basis for generating new fashion expressions. While writing is the main activity, the practice is not limited by it. The intentionality of creative practice defines the parameters around how to write, why the writing matters, and how it should be read. In developing the practice, I produced brief prose-works, including fragments and lists, which explored writing as a creative medium in the context of research. Some of the prose-works were the basis of public reading performances and audio recordings for exhibitions and academic symposiums. They reflected the conceptual complexities underpinning the research, capturing the reflexivity between scholarly research and creative practice. They were also experiments in the compositional methods of description, allusion and metaphor, comprising a study of the mechanics of aesthetic expression.

The research centers upon two interrelated concerns: the body and the aesthetic imagination. The chapter on ‘Writing/Body’ discusses the centrality of the body in the practice as a medium for lived, aesthetic expression. The body also serves as the metaphorical basis for understanding how the writing has come together to form a body of work – as the corpus (body) – that constitutes the practice.

The subsequent chapter, ‘Writing-Imagining,’ explores the continual loop between what is imagined and what is written. It reflects on the compositional processes of writing and imagining, alluding to the constructed nature of aesthetic experience as it is continually framed, translated, appropriated through language. The two chapters express the contingency between body, writing, and imagining, aesthetic imagination and its verbal expression. As the research unfolds, the body (corpus) – a metaphor for writing – presents itself as a vital medium of aesthetic composition and communication.

I begin by sharing some questions and thoughts that initiated the research:

How do we speak of impressions that are not yet fully formed – something that we imagine could exist if we utter it? How do we speak of those amorphous shapes and curvatures of aesthetic experience that we do not fully comprehend because they elide our intellectual grasp, the sudden jolts of our impulses that resist the fixity of language? Perhaps we approximate and cut them with things we already know or have; we fill in the gaps with imprecise though evocative images/imaginings; we put clumsy nouns and adjectives against something that is otherwise unfathomable, something just beyond the reach of our tongues. We make it up as we go along. Joan Didion says, ‘We tell ourselves stories in order to live.’13 I would add, though, that we tell stories in order to imagine. We dress ourselves with colours, shapes and forms, and mark our bodies to stake a claim to this world. Our bodies push forth, continually chasing after ways of articulating ourselves into

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13 Didion, Joan. *The White Album: Essays*. New York, USA: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, p. 11. Didion is a contemporary novelist and literary journalist known for her essays and novels that cut across the genre conventions of fiction, memoir, non-fiction and journalism. She wrote for popular newspapers such as *The New York Times, Life and Esquire* in the mid-twentieth-century. She also had a brief stint at *Vogue* magazine (1956-1958).
being. We fashion our words, and sink our bodies into the story in the hope of finding some measure of authenticity.

WHM, Notes, 2012

The title *Falling Against Texture* seeks to capture the sense of the body touching and being touched by the aesthetic world. My understanding of the term *falling* touches on Martin Heidegger’s concept of *verfallen* (falling). A twentieth-century German philosopher who contributed substantially to the field of existential phenomenology, he depicts *verfallen* as an active and essential state of present-ness, of ‘being-in-the-world.’ Conveying the phenomenon of ‘falling’ as an expression of the ‘everydayness’ that is fundamental to the ontological grasp of *Dasein* (Da-sein: there-being), he contends that *falling* does not mean that one is falling away from a purer or higher state, but rather an absorption into, and identification with, the world. In my usage of the term, *falling* alludes to the body feeling its own weight and gravity as it pushes into something, and vice versa. My intent is to elicit a sense of touch between the body and its environment that is transient, though changeful: a momentary spark that transgresses the present moment, the gravitational force that compels one to exceed oneself. What becomes intriguing is the possibility of language and the imagination touching, enhancing and changing each other.

Texture, which refers to ‘web or structure,’ is from the Latin verb *texere*, meaning ‘to weave.’ Texture refers to the composition of images, voices, sounds and other aesthetic experiences that manifests through the body. In a metaphorical sense, the process of composition – writing – is the coherence of the corpus that is the text.

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15 On one hand, *falling* refers to *Dasein*’s intentionality to make direct and immediate contact with the world; on another hand, it refers to the inevitable tendency for *Dasein* to ‘lose itself’ in the process. In this manner, ‘falling against’ also alludes to Heidegger’s concept of *thrownness*, that is, to have been cast into the world, which suggests that the body has acknowledged itself as ‘being-already-in-the-world.’ See Schmid, Hans Bernhard. ‘The Broken ‘We.’ Making Sense of Heidegger’s Analysis of Everydamente.’ *Topos Journal*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2005, pp. 16-27; and Oberst, Joachim L. *Heidegger on Language and Death: The Intrinsic Connection in Human Existence*. London, UK: Continuum, 2009, p. 50.

Falling Against Texture is about the palpable experience of words, images and sounds, as they emerge and cohere at the point of our encounter with them. It aims to evoke the fleetingness of a moment at the verge of verbal expression. It is about the intensity of aesthetic experience as it urges, pulses, surges. Through language, our imagination unravels, dilating with suffused potential.

There is an impulse here to write in pursuit of the aesthetic imagination, to feel the weight of potential, to fall against new textures that might reveal something about us. The electric current between word and imagination is lived moment to moment: it is the tiny shock we feel through our bodies right before the point of contact.
1.2 The aesthetic paradigm of fashion

… Because the quest for perfection must be manifest in the imaginary, as no one can hope to achieve it within a context that by definition has to change constantly, it follows that fashion is at its most perfect in art, and art is at its most evocative in attempting to celebrate fashion, to ‘design’ or echo a written piece of clothing.17


Fundamental to this research is a specific formulation of the fashion concept as lived, aesthetic expression. It is understood via the phenomenal and aesthetic imagination, embodying qualities of contemporaneity, mutability and ephemerality. I explore fashion as an immaterial force that affects our experience of self in relation to the world, as a kind of dynamism mediated through the body and language. This is to distinguish fashion from the functions and effects of dress and dressing, which are primarily, studied within social, cultural, historical and anthropological structures.

My interest lies in the phenomenological approach to fashion, and how to convey it in and as practice. It should be stressed here that my interest in ‘aesthetic experience’ focuses on the raw material of experience rather than notions of taste and judgement. In distinguishing between these two basic views of philosophical aesthetics – ‘experiential-psychological’ versus ‘judgement-based’ – David Fenner, a contemporary scholar in the theory of aesthetics, differentiates the immaterial ‘substance’ of sensory experience of the former from the ‘formal’ consideration of the latter that is more to do with ‘aesthetic analysis.’18 Fenner uses the term ‘raw data’ to refer to the sensuous aspects of experience – that which is felt through our body and its sensory faculties. It is the immediacy of the aesthetic encounter, both actual and imagined, that underlies my phenomenological understanding of fashion and the body.

My understanding of fashion as lived, aesthetic expression is developed through Charles Baudelaire's idea of fashion as ephemeral, fugitive and transitory.19 In ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ – first published in the Parisian newspaper *Figaro* in 1863 – he

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18 Fenner, op. cit., p. 42.
used fashion as the paradigm to express the dynamism of the contemporary experience in early modernity. In doing so, he conveyed fashion as a poetic principle. From the visual and literary fragments glimpsed in the streets and libraries of Paris, and the aesthetics of consumption and display of commodities (especially clothing), he assembled a materialist expression of the momentum and transformative agency in his construction of history. He was influenced by Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927) – translated as *In Search of Lost Time*, or as *Remembrance of Things Past* – which evoked the act of remembrance as weaving, in process. For both writers, the past is realised as a charge of the present, and vice versa. Lehmann states, ‘Text becomes textile; the collected works of remembrance are woven like a tapestry or fabric, similar both in epistemological structure and in textual appearance.’ The poetics of remembering, weaving and writing constitute the essential text(ure) of present experience. Fashion, as a continual dialectic between what had passed and what is to come, ignites the past in the process of realising the present. This aspect of Benjamin’s thinking, inflected through Proust’s works, accentuated my interest in an abstract and profound *dynamism*, embodied within fashion, that fundamentally expresses an essence of contemporaneity that is the ‘aesthetics of change,’ vis-à-vis acts of remembrance and the imagination. While a pure examination of Benjamin and Baudelaire’s works, in particular their contributions to studies of modernity and historiography, is beyond the scope of this PhD, their conception of fashion as abstract dynamism forms the basis of my approach to fashion.

Fashion is a powerful cultural agent and its symptoms and effects are ubiquitously felt in the way we look, behave, speak and even imagine; fashion moves our imagination and perceptive experience, not only of ourselves but the world. The fields of sociology, cultural studies and psychology offer sustained studies on fashion as: (i) a belief system based on an institutional structure; (ii) the aesthetic expression of such

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belief systems; (iii) social homogenisation as well as individual contrast and differentiation; and (iv) a mode of self-presentation and social curation. These studies typically analyse fashion through changes in the body’s appearance, dress and behaviour. Here, fashion is observed and interpreted from the outside in.

Another study worth discussing here is Roland Barthes’ *The Fashion System*, which was published in 1967 as a linguistic treatment of fashion. He defined the ‘written garment’ as pure description, entirely constituted with a view to signification, with no practical or aesthetic function. Through the written garment, he sought to demonstrate how verbal structures could produce a sign system (with changeable units of signification), to ultimately produce a scientific articulation of fashion as an abstract notion. Barthes’ impetus is semantics, whilst mine is poetics. In contrast to his understanding of fashion as a closed system of linguistic units that could be arranged differently to produce different meanings, my approach attends to the creative principles of fashion (as aesthetic concept) and writing (as creative process). His intent is to show how singular meaning is constructed through formal verbal structures, whereas mine is to use verbal processes to evoke fashion’s aesthetic, imaginative potential that requires not specificity but rather multiplicity and subjectivity.

While there is a large repository of studies across fashion, history, sociology, social psychology, material culture and cultural studies demonstrating the significance of fashion as the barometer of social and cultural change, what is less obvious and often overlooked is the aesthetics of change itself. Ulrich Lehman suggests that an abstract analysis of fashion on par with attempts to construct a philosophy of art, of music, or of literature, remains largely absent. He went on to produce the text *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (2006): a sustained account of fashion’s philosophical paradigm that has significantly influenced this research. In the text, *Fashion: A Philosophy* (2006), contemporary philosopher Lars Svendsen also attempted a philosophical

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26 Simmel, Ernst. ‘Fashion.’ *International Quarterly* (New York, 1904), English version of *Philosophie der Mode (The Philosophy of Fashion)*, Berlin, Germany: Pan Verlag, 1905.
treatment of fashion. However, his analysis is more an introductory sweep across fashion’s relationship to language, art, society and identity, rather than a substantial and innovative study of fashion. His conclusion is that fashion, even when taken up as a philosophical project, remains a superficial subject of study: through fashion, we ‘cultivate surfaces’ and ‘live in an increasingly fictionalised reality.’

For my purposes, however, it is precisely the phenomenon of surfaces and fictions that is of interest. Within its flickering appearances and kaleidoscopic narratives, fashion embodies an underlying dynamic that I believe says something profound about the way we imagine and produce aesthetic worlds. Fashion is embroiled in processes of construction that are repetitive, cyclical and multilayered. It calls attention to the poetics of change, which, in an oblique way, carries the charge of potential. What becomes fascinating is the productive friction between the aesthetic imagination of fashion and its verbal expression, and how the body mediates between them.

Within the realms of aesthetic theory, the most significant work that addresses the centrality of the body is Mikel Dufrenne’s 1953 seminal study, *La Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique* (*The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*). In the field of media theory, Bernadette Wegenstein’s contemporary analysis of the body as mediality – which she discusses in the context of artistic practices of body performances and digital architecture – is also a significant influence on this research. However, while Wegenstein provides a comprehensive account of the body, in terms of its image and agency in the production and mediation of artistic and aesthetic practices, she does not discuss fashion.

In the context of my research, the body is a way of navigating and making sense of phenomena, whether physical or imagined. As a phenomenological medium, it is the utterance of the world. I use the term ‘lived aesthetics’ to refer to the phenomenological dimension of experience: the immediate first person encounter with the aesthetic event, which is intentionally perceived and imagined through the body. According to Dufrenne, at the moment of encounter between the experiencing subject and the object of experience (such as an artwork), the latter transforms into an aesthetic experience (which extends beyond the artwork originally perceived). He

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31 Svendsen, ibid., p. 157.
32 Dufrenne, op. cit.
introduces the notion of ‘reciprocity’ as a special bond that joins the subject with the aesthetic object in the process of perceptual experience transforms the artwork into an aesthetic object – objective mental representation into a subjectively lived, aesthetic experience. Privileging the point of view of the spectator or experiencing subject, Dufrenne suggests that aesthetic perception must connect with the artwork (an objective representation) in order for the aesthetic object (a subjectively lived experience) to appear. Through the imaginative faculty of the subject, the work ‘expands in scope by an emphasis on the “world” of the aesthetic experience.’

Dufrenne’s phenomenological aesthetics framework offers a model for my writing practice that seeks to create encounters between the object of verbal experience and I (the author and experiencing subject). The verbal process (writing) incites an expansive aesthetic experience (imagination). When I write about a ‘fashion object,’ such as the red ostrich feather Alexander McQueen dress in the prose-work Falling, it is not about the dress but rather my encounter with it as an aesthetic world of palpitating redness, of the lightness and density of feathers, of the seepage of blood. The dress is the active access point to a world of affective potential, blooming as images and words come into contact, which then mutate to form more images and words. In the work Through the Writing Body, The Beginning of a Narrative, I started with the image of Honoré de Balzac’s white writing robe, which – through the writing process – led to a sensuous world of inscribed flesh, embroidered textile and an infectious skin rash, as metaphors for the micro-journeys of imagining, writing and composing.

The rash grows and travels from one part of my body to another; it’s hard to catch where and when it stops and ends, and when it mutates.

Memories become scratched from use, images melt into one. Something always mutates in the passage from image to word and back again. I follow the crumbs on the ground. I meander the corridors of the city – they form a textile under my feet. Something always spills over too.

34 Casey, Edward S. ‘Aesthetic Experience,’ op. cit., p. 3.
35 ibid.
The rash, the city, the image of Balzac in his robe – like language they ripple outwards.

WHM, *Through the Writing Body*, 2013

I suggest that writing has the capacity to draw out the phenomenal potential of fashion because it is, in itself, a phenomenal process. Experiential fashion is not object-based but rather connects lived experience with an affective intensity. Writing, within the framework of phenomenology and aesthetics, echoes this intensity. Teetering at the verge of transformation, the appeal of fashion is its fugitiveness, as it insinuates the potential for newness and change.

Words affect us because they turn the visible into the imaginable, involving sound and resonance, atmosphere and mood, gravity and weight, affect and feeling, all of which can move us.

*Fashion as Dynamism*

*What is left of fashion beyond the object and how do we talk about it?* I explore the possibility that what lingers is the realm of potential.

… because we are led to think there’s an invisible core from which everything blooms, that there is a center of gravity to which we owe our momentum, that we are magnetised into a higher sequence that choreographs our pulse ….

WHM, *Notes*, 2015

My intent is to find a way to write this gravitas of fashion – not to explain but to approach it by way of language. As opposed to writing in the strict representational sense, I offer writing as a way of attending to the dynamism of fashion: its phenomenological realm. The premise is that writing, in relation to other verbal processes such as reading and listening, has the capacity to ‘thicken’ aesthetic imagination – to give weight and adhere to its affective qualities. If the profundity of fashion lies in its fleeting compulsions, then there needs to be a way to be absorbed into it.
My practice poses a response to the everyday experience of fashion that is largely mediated through the digital realm. Fashion blooms through a diverse spectrum of voices that are increasingly hybridised not only in terms of the field (such as fashion, art, architecture, design and literature) but also the presentation format (such as printed page, digital platform, moving image, blogs and journals); all of these variously differentiated voices mesh together to create a kaleidoscopic world that is ubiquitous though provisional. Fashion is experienced as rapid-fire successions of snapshots of ‘everyday fashion’ in street style blogs, social media, and celebrity culture including ‘models off-duty,’ stylised images and films in advertising and branding campaigns, and repetitive catwalk shots onstage and backstage. Flashing through these images, films and scenarios are catchphrases, quotes, brand names and advertising tag lines that, cumulatively, contribute to the mass dissemination of fashion as an intensely visual culture. My approach to fashion expression is informed by its inherent flux and multiplicity that is increasingly amplified through digital technologies. Drawing parallels with the medium of film, I suggest that writing, in addition to its instrumental role in the communication of fashion, has the capacity to operate at a more fundamental level: to catalyse new aesthetics by shifting the way we perceive and practice it.

The steady advancement of digital technologies such as the camera/video phone, together with applications for live streaming and sharing, continues to exponentially transform the way fashion is experienced, represented, consumed and shared. Nick Knight, for example, produced an entire advertising campaign for DIESEL on his iPhone. The editorial images were instantly available on his website SHOWstudio, along with a short film that documented the process of shooting the campaign. Knight, together with Peter Saville, created SHOWstudio in 2000, a leading platform for digital fashion film. SHOWstudio is a screen (metaphorically and literally) through which the world of fashion flickers and pulses. It is now possible to create entire, screen-based expressions of fashion without any tangible objects. As such, fashion can be conceptualised as pure mediation. Digital technologies are not only shifting the way fashion is created, but also enabling increasing levels of abstraction as well as new ways of manipulating the experience.

Fashion designers are also using the film medium to express the poetics of their creative practices. For their Spring/Summer 2015 collection presentation, Australian label P.A.M. (Perks and Mini) released a fashion film that was shot in real time with a VHS handycam video. The film, Psy-Active Mutation, is about a human “alien” that is found on a distant planet, embalmed, and sent off into the ‘next life, shining and enlightened.’ The entire film consists of hazy, abstract textures and fragmented blips and glitches, to perform the seasonal ‘retro sci-fi’ mood and aesthetic sensibility of the practice.

According to Marketa Uhlirova, ‘the moving image has proven to be an enticing alternative to other forms of (re)presentation because it has a capacity to open fashion to a performative dimension with a different kind of sensorial and experiential complexity.’ The fashion film Sans Couture (2014) attempted to capture the dynamic movement of fabric through the manipulation of film. The idea was to express the sensation and movement of veiling, wrapping and unwrapping the body, as if they were abstract brush strokes of paint on canvas, suggesting the movement in ballet and written music. It was produced by Nick Knight with fashion consultant Amanda Harlech, as well as fashion writer Alexander Fury who referred to the project as a ‘live haute couture shoot and fashion film.’

Another SHOWstudio project, The Fashion Body (2009-10), featured a series of forty-two short films on the body, each expressing the sensuous qualities of a body part in the process of being dressed or adorned: the right foot sinking into black Swarovski Crystal leggings, the right rib being shot with electric lime green paint bullets to the sound of shattering glass, and the waist shaped and laced into a silk corset. The films all sought to close in on the fashion body – which is usually either static (in

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45 http://showstudio.com/project/the_fashion_body/video/waist (12 March 2015)
photographs) or fleeting (on the catwalk) – through the dramatisation of sound, motion and camera work; they show the body in its sensorial minutia by slowing down and zooming into it. In *Obscure Desires* (2012) a short film based on Alexander McQueen’s Spring/Summer 2012 collection, directed by Dustin Lynn and produced by Selfridges’ *The Film Project* – the first half of the film consisted of mostly sound and hues of yellow, with vague shadows and indefinable shapes and lines forming and deforming out of focus. Gradually the image comes into focus, and the viewer is presented with folds and grooves. As the camera moves through – as if skimming a landscape in extreme close-up – the images become apparent as stitches, lacework, pleats, and lacing on the surface of a dress that was seemingly an otherworldly organism.

Nathalie Khan, in her essay, ‘Cutting the Fashion Body: Why the Fashion Image is No Longer Still (2012),’ discusses the implication of fashion film on the way the body is expressed and experienced. Referencing the act of ‘cutting’ that is a staple practice in film editing (and also in dress-making, to sculpt fabric around the body), she suggests that it is through these procedures of manipulation that the body is increasingly a fragmented entity, an illusion that is ‘no longer still.’ Far from being simply a tool that stimulates consumption, she suggests that digital fashion film is ‘something that is set to change our notion of fashion as a moment in time.’ Khan’s sentiment is echoed in Uhlrova’s paper, as mentioned earlier, in which she speaks about the capacity of film to mediate new experiences of clothing; it is less about representing clothing on screen than defamiliarising it, in order to pursue new and abstract cinematic experiences.

Projecting beyond the fashion object and image, film amplifies and mediates fashion as the dynamic expression of the transformative, transitory and polymorphous. In seeking to account for it in/as the practice of writing, I suggest that writing directly connects to processes of imaginative perception and, in turn, the dynamism of experience that constitute contemporary fashion.

The collages of images, sounds and words that pulse through contemporary fashion expression echo Walter Benjamin’s sentiment behind his ambitious, though

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46 Lynn, Dustin. ‘Obscure Desires by Alexander McQueen.’ *Selfridges: The Film Project.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUhQ_35nr_k (accessed 4 April 2015)
48 Ibid., p. 236.
unfinished work, *The Arcades Project (Das Passagenwerk)*. Between 1927 and 1940, Benjamin produced an enormous collection of written fragments in which the topic of fashion featured prominently. Benjamin wove together images of nineteenth-century Parisian city life (which was also the start of the history of fashion) with his own period, the 1930s. He brought to the fore the tempo of fashion and how it resonated with the pace of city life, drumming into the tumultuous rhythm of industrialisation. In Benjamin’s study, the sense of dynamism was embodied within the flâneur, prostitute and rag picker: those who walked the streets and arcades, taking in the juxtapositions of modernity and the socio-economic disturbances caused by capitalism. These figures embodied the experience of passage, as an exchange between *what had been* and *what could become*. In her essay ‘Fashion and Worldliness: Language and Imagery of the Clothed Body (1997),’ Patrizia Calefato suggests that Benjamin used the Parisian arcades, or *passages couverts de Paris*, as a metaphor for fashion, ‘whose destiny is that of a perennial transit, of movement as passage and mutation.’

In my practice, writing is a chase for new expressions, whilst being embroiled in its momentum, vis-à-vis the sensation and elasticity of language. I propose that the impermanence of fashion constitutes a vital momentum of expression. The gravity of ephemerality and transience accentuates the transformative agency of the imagination.

This sensibility of dynamism resonates with the actions and ambitions of the Futurists at the beginning of the twentieth-century, who sought out a new way of thinking and acting in the world in general, and to art in particular. Steeped in political provocation and mass spectacle, Futurism assumed the role of a philosophy in action and in progress. The Futurists pushed for the aesthetic experience of the ephemeral and the transitory, seeking out the vitality at work in all fields of human activity from art, music, food and fashion to politics. Inspired by the cacophony of modernity with the emergence of cities, machines and noise, they thrived on the technological values of automatism, speed and ceaseless innovation that characterised life in the metropolis.

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49 Benjamin considered the iron and glass covered ‘arcades’ in nineteenth-century Paris not as a means of travel towards a destination, but a conduit in itself: a natural habitat of the flâneur whose art was the stroll. See Calefato, Patrizia. ‘Fashion and Worldliness: Language and Imagery of the Clothed Body.’ *Fashion Theory*, vol. 1, iss. 1, 1997, p. 77.

In contemporary analyses of fashion, the dynamism of the modern city and life in modernity remains an essential expression of fashion.\(^{51}\)

I propose that what is more significant to note – and more interesting in the context of my research – is the gravity of invisible forces that drove those actions, rather than the actions themselves. The ‘buzz’ in the air was both figurative and literal: the art historian and critic Giovanni Lista explains that ‘the advent of electricity, coinciding with a new awareness of energy as a vital flow, as omnipresent as it was impossible to grasp, inspired an art that was able to appropriate, as well as represent, this new factor.’ For example, Loïe Fuller’s *Serpentine Dancing*, with its ‘perpetual whirling of colors [sic] and forms,’ expressed ‘an art of immateriality entirely devoted to the “poetry of motion.”’\(^{52}\)

The Futurists sought to express their new mode of perceptual experiences especially in art, inasmuch as they sought to express the aesthetics of dynamism. In the realm of painting, Futurist artists created volatile compositions with repetitive, fragmented forms and colours, and sequences of lines and sharp angles, to project the rhythm of movement and sensation of simultaneity experienced through visualisations of noise, light and disturbances in the air. Images by artists such as Gino Severini and Giacomo Balla often appeared as though refracted in a prism of signs and colours. These visual representations were carried through to the realm of fashion. The Futurists also released numerous written manifestos on fashion, calling for clothes with geometric shapes and simple lines that promoted unencumbered movement of the human body. The ultimate goal of clothing was to enable unprecedented self-expression by liberating the individual from social and sartorial conventions.\(^{53}\) Dynamic textile designs and asymmetrical cuts evoked the fast-paced rhythm of modern life, and the


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concept of transformable apparel was introduced as a means to involve direct human action in the wearing of garments.

The dynamism at the core of my practice echoes that of the Futurists, though the echo is faint. They were captivated by the body’s functionality and physicality, while I use the body as the medium for phenomenological experience and imagination. The Futurist body simulated the city and the machine, emphasising detached, mechanical actions, synchronicity, speed and motion. By contrast, I use dynamism to cajole a sense of the imaginable and the gravity of potentiality – metaphysical qualities that are intrinsically bodied. The subject at the centre of the Futurist experience is a machine, while mine is the phenomenological body that is drawn towards the imaginable.

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**Fashion as dynamic imagination**

In fashion’s celebration of the frivolous, artificial, and excess, it is most reliably the backbone of commodity culture. However, if we separate the experience of fashion from its commodification, fashion from its capital, what, then, remains of fashion? How do we engage with aesthetic experience without the aesthetic object?

For after the object is removed, or the eye shut, we still retain an image of the thing seen, though more obscure than when we see it. And this is it, the Latines call *Imagination* from the image made in seeing … But the Greeks call it *Fancy*, which signifies *appearance*, and is as proper to one sense, as to another. Imagination therefore is nothing but *decaying sense*.54


In gathering the effect of fashion as aesthetic imagination, I suggest that it is precisely in its instability and transitoriness that it is most alluring; we become obsessed with what we are about to lose. Despite its fugitive nature – or rather, precisely because it is always fleeing – fashion is most potent at the moment of change. As it passes over the realm of potential – which the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, as quoted above, refers to as ‘decaying sense’ – the imagination shimmers.

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Simple imagination is ‘when one imagineth a man, or horse, which he had seen before’ while compound imagination is defined as ‘when from the sight of a man at one time, and of a horse at another, we conceive in our mind a Centaure.’


A fundamental power of fashion is *momentum*, referring to its capacity to move imagination, to urge us to imagine, and to form ideas. Extending British empiricist thinking, Hobbes suggests that there is a strong continuity between imagination, perception and memory.

In the absence of the object of perception, we become more invested and aware of our complicity in the making of its potential world. Through the faculty of the imagination, fashion expresses the tension between the actual and the possible; its profundity lies in its capacity to evoke aesthetic possibilities beyond the actual realm.

When one writes, does one have to write everything? And when one paints, does one have to paint everything? For pity’s sake, leave something to my imagination.

Denis Diderot, *Salons*, 1759–81

The fashion imagination harbours a sense of departure into the next, the not-yet-known. It is palpable because it is unstable, mutable and immaterial; it is felt as tendency and magnetic charge. In *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity*, Lehmann traces a philosophy of fashion as an aesthetic concept, positing that fashion is potent precisely because it is fleeting, transitory and fugitive. The concept of fashion as an abstract force draws from Charles Baudelaire who saw, in fashion’s transience, a way of understanding the birth of modernity. Baudelaire’s coinage of *modernité* is a neologism for the aesthetic and metaphysical principle behind modern life. The stage for this is highly specific: Paris from the late 1840s to the late 1920s, which saw the birth and

55 Hobbes, quoted in McNeil and Miller, ibid., p. 89.
58 ibid., p. 10. Lehmann uses the French term *modernité* to express aesthetic and stylistic modernity, and differentiates it from the English term ‘modernity,’ which denotes the more sociological and political aspect manifested in the idea of ‘modernism.’
The aesthetic paradigm of fashion

rapid development of Western fashion industry. In ‘The Painter of Modern Life,’ he sought to understand modernity through the visual and verbal arts, and was particularly interested in the transitoriness of fashion that captured a sense of the contemporary spirit. He believed that writings on fashion held not only sensual but also epistemological value, and presented fashion, mode – a paradigm of the modern spirit – in a conceptual interplay with the aesthetic modernité.

Every old master has had his own modernity; the great majority of fine portraits that have come down to us from former generations are clothed in the costume of their own period. They are perfectly harmonious, because everything – from costume and coiffure down to gesture, glance and smile (for each age has a deportment, a glance and a smile of its own) – everything, I say, combines to form a completely viable whole. This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with.

Charles Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life, 1863

Baudelaire saw – within the small, ordinary objects of fashion, possibilities for transformations that constituted ‘fashion as process’ – the paradigmatic and metaphysical agency of fashion that is the aesthetics of change itself. He recognised in fashion the perception, feeling and unfolding of change itself. The aesthetics of change express fashion as continuously in flux and resonating with transformative potential.

At the heart of it, was a game of chase, a basic and uncomplicated conceit. She saw, in the shadows, moving around her, these dark figures of the fugitive, gliding in and out of doors, leaping across the hallway. One moment it would disappear inside a drawer, and the next moment it would weave itself into the lacy curtain. Silent marks that changed shape as they merged into the edges of things. She traced these movements with her index fingers. As the pair of fingers danced around each other, she could see the fugitive slipping out of

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59 ibid., p. 9.
60 Baudelaire, op. cit., p.13.
61 Hroch, op. cit. p.122.
62 ibid, p. 108.
the captive’s grasp, over and over again. She realised that it was the captive who kept letting the fugitive go, to keep the communion going. She understood then that her escape would be inevitable, though illusory.

WHM, *Kaleidoscopia*, 2015

In the prose-work *When I Think about Dynamism*, I aimed to engage with fashion as a paradigmatic force – as a way of delving into the poetics of dynamism and change – that is central to the experience of contemporariness: fragmentation, transitoriness, ephemerality, fugitiveness, and – along with these, the sense of an inherent motion, being perpetually unfixed, poised for transformation, palpating with potential. It is a sense of impulsion, of dynamism, and magnetism. Most significantly, there is an inherent appreciation of potentiality – the felt capacity to go somewhere, get beyond, transcend the here, now and what is known. It is magnetic, drawing the subject of fashion into its orbit, to be wrapped in the *stimmung* – the tone, mood or atmosphere – of the contemporary spirit. Fashion is at its most enigmatic when one catches it at the cusp of transformation. It is the sense of potentiality – or the illusion of it – that coaxes subjectively lived imagination.

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin wrote about the loop-the-loop ride that was popular at Parisian amusement parks. He noted that the ability to go faster did not lead to the linearity of progress. Rather, ‘the loop-the-loop ride, like fashion, satisfied the “need” for the “sensation of movement,” providing the *perception, feeling, or aesthetic* of change (my emphasis).’ In this vast collection of literary fragments – a section of which was dedicated to fashion – he attempted to capture the momentum of revolutionary change that was the nineteenth century. Fashion shares a main characteristic with modernism: the break with tradition and an unceasing endeavour to reach ‘the new.’ Benjamin presented a view of fashion that was not simply about getting and spending, but concerned with the poetics of change.

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64 Hroch, p. 115.
Peter McNeil and Sanda Miller, in *Fashion Writing and Criticism: History, Theory and Practice* (2014), assert that ‘if fashion might have a poetic dimension, then it can be thought of and written about using different apparatus than the public relations department might provide.’

Lehmann asks: What are the aesthetic effects of the fugitive, ephemeral, and transitory? How do we elicit and account for the dynamism of everyday transformations? Rather than studying fashion through its representation in material dress and objects, this research explores fashion through its capacity to evoke our imaginative tendencies and urges. By attending to its momentum, fashion reveals our participation in the continual imagination and making of the world, that is a realm of unending potential.

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**Fashion through the body**

The formation of modern subjectivity is bound up with various forms of dress and self-presentation, as some histories and contemporary studies of the self have shown (Davis 1994; Entwistle 2000a, 2000b; Entwistle and Wilson 2001; Finkelstein 1991; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979; Laver 1968; Paulicelli and Clark 2009; Sennett 1977). These studies discuss the relationship between fashion and the subject within sociological, cultural and ethnographical contexts such as gender, race, class and occupation, amongst others. I would argue that these analyses presume a fixed subject located and understood in relation to its sociological, ethnographical and historical context.

This research emphasises the fugacious language that defines fashion, and explores how the body – as expressive medium – meets and transacts with it. Fashion is the reflexive extension of the body – the mirage of kaleidoscopic multiples, with manifold indeterminacies and transformative possibilities.

He recognised the pattern on his body. It matched the one he saw in a dream. He held out a mirror and tried really hard to read it. He saw himself curling tightly into his own body and unravelling out into that dream. The dream was a cacophony of dots that could be rearranged to

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66 McNeil and Miller, pp. 5-6.
67 Lehmann, p. 4.
form patterns. He tried to make one stick – a pattern that couldn’t be undone – but it couldn’t be done.

WHM, *Through the Writing Body*, 2013

Offering brief but acute shots at the maelstrom of continually shifting and fragmented experiences, fashion makes sense of the flux, multiplicity and mutability that riddle the contemporary condition. Premising the transient and fugitive, fashion ‘unfixes’ the phenomenological body as it responds, refracts and transforms with and/or against the world.

This conception unhinges the study of fashion from the contexts of society, culture and history that are external to the subject, and begins with the body’s phenomenological imagination as the context for engaging with fashion. There are numerous analyses of the subject, body and dress in fashion within the framework of psychology (Johnson and Lennon’s *The Social Psychology of Dress* (2014), Flugel’s *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930), Bergler’s *Fashion and the Unconscious* (1992), among them). Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick, in *Fashioning the Frame* (1998), use the notion of the clothed body to explore the boundary and margin between self and other within the social world. Their emphasis on the body influenced Alison Bancroft’s psychoanalytic conception of fashion in her text *Fashion and Psychoanalysis* (2012). Adopting a Lacanian framework to explore the fashion subject, Bancroft attempts to demonstrate fashion as the site on which the psychic processes that both constitute and challenge subjectivity are expressed. While I acknowledge the contribution of these works to fashion particularly around issues surrounding the body, subject and subjectivity, they do not address fashion as aesthetic expression, in practice. In contrast to the psychoanalytic intent to explain fashion as a fundamental effect of psychic structures, my project frames fashion within phenomenology and the aesthetic imagination to explore the body through what it does – which Wegenstein discusses in terms of mediation and mediality: how it enacts the poetics of contemporaneity that is fashion. In the psychoanalytic context, the fashion body is inherently sexed and represents psychical conflicts, whereas in the phenomenological context, the body is not an agent but rather is the agency itself. The philosopher Renaud Barbaras, in his

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contemporary interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s work, reminds us of the phenomenologist’s idea of the body, as that which ‘… has its world or understands its world without having to pass through representations; it is the potentiality of the world.’ Drawing from the etymological origin of the term ‘fashion’ which refers to the act and effect of forming, moulding and shaping – *fashion* and *fashioning* are fundamental to the expression and representation of the body in the world. Through the fashion/world, the subject/body continually recalibrates and transforms.

The sensual qualities that I pursue in my writing refer to the experiences afforded by digital fashion film, in particular those that create new, abstract aesthetics that are impossible in the physical world. I suggest that the medium of writing, in parallel to the digital, moving image, is capable of engaging poetically with fashion expression and reception.

In this research, I seek to demonstrate a poetic conception of fashion in parallel with the development of a writing practice. The notion of dynamism underlies my approach to aesthetics. It beckons fashion experience beyond the static image – and writing beyond the representation and translation of the visual – thus opening out to the realm of the temporal and phenomenal. It calls attention to the way we imagine and verbalise the imagination, and it is therefore fundamental to my approach to fashion practice.

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1.3  Fashion writing: existing practices and studies

Writing and publishing in fashion constitutes a vast web of genres, forms and formats, as well as roles, voices and readerships. This section addresses how my practice engages with these existing modes of writing. As a comprehensive analysis of fashion writing is beyond the scope of this research, I focus the discussion on two fundamental functions: firstly, to describe clothes, textiles, and other objects; and secondly, to evaluate and assess them. For instance, if we were to describe a red dress, we might talk about its fabric, silhouette and exact hue of red – ‘what it's like.’ There are many such examples, with varying levels of detail and imaginative scope – from poetic expressions in literary novels, metaphors and hyperbolic proclamations in fashion magazines, to technical descriptions on exhibition labels and production specifications. If we were to assess the dress – ‘what it’s worth’ – then we would write about its context, which could be economic, social, cultural, historical, political, semiological, material or experiential. Descriptive commentary and critical evaluation are the principal efforts of professional fashion criticism and reportage, contained within the magazine, blog or journal.

While the research engages with different kinds of writing across the literary, popular and academic genres, it is not framed within these contexts. My writing practice does not reflect the conventions of the novel, magazine and academic text. Indeed, it is by virtue of its departure from these external frameworks, that I am able to reflect critically on the internal processes of my writing. Therefore my writing should not be understood in the context of genre but practice. The aim is to account, in practice, the dynamics of aesthetic imagining, which form the basis of a critical, experiential and performative approach to fashion expression.

Rather than focusing on the written outcome – what the red dress means and how to write it according to the rules of the genre – my fascination lies with the process and experience of writing – how it catalyses and mediates the aesthetic expression of the dress. Writing can crystallise a tumultuous overflow of perceptions. It can fragment, refract and redirect the surge of imagination. It can also compound the swell and let it all cascade forward.
Describing dress

Literary description is a powerful medium for imagining fashion and dress, and the lexicon of fashion is dotted with delightful words. The names of fabrics, for instance, may conjure exotic sensations – just at the tip of one's tongue, or perhaps whole-bodily:


Rosie Findlay, On the Delight of Fashion Words, 2014

Descriptions of dress affect us differently than if we were to see and touch the actual dress. Between the literal and visual imaginations, new possibilities emerge. From catchphrases in magazine editorials and advertisements, to museum exhibition labels, descriptions can ‘denote,’ or describe actual garments, or to ‘connote,’ or relate the object to the world.73 The imaginative potential that arises at the image-word encounter is evident in literary fiction; novelists, through the intensity of their descriptions, can evoke entire worlds of dress. The nineteenth-century novelist Thomas Hardy for example, created sensual impressions of the character Tess D’Urbervilles through the garments upon her body and the landscapes in which they physically moved through.74

Words can be allusive, and strings of them may begin to conjure an internal world that shimmers between the signs and our imaginations. In Laird O’Shea Borrelli’s literary

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analysis of fashion writing in *Vogue* from 1968 to 1993, she demonstrates how fashion language – or ‘*Vogue* speak’ – seduces through visual metaphors, hyperboles, alliteration and rhymes, as well as through allusion to other images. In contrast to O’Shea Borelli’s linguistic intention, Tymorek adopts a poetic approach; in *Clotheslines* (2001), he aligns poems about dress with paintings and photographs that emerge as poetic couplings between the word and image. To write and read about garments and bodies can be visceral, as words pass through our bodies as signals in search for our understanding. We also search for words to animate objects, infusing them with bodily sensations. Qualities such as thickness, tightness and heaviness in a garment are grasped, especially, in relation to our own bodies. Imagine, for example, a ‘corset … of hand-draped glass etched and painted red,’ or a ‘jaw bone mouthpiece in aluminum’ – the aesthetic world of objects and images is enlivened as much through our sensing bodies as the words that describe them.

At the juncture of fashion and literary studies, there are substantial analyses of fashion and dress descriptions in literary fiction. The objects of fashion are often studied as signs in social, cultural, historical and political narratives; for example, as expositions of class, gender and power in the construction of women’s identities and the female body. Descriptions of dress – and how it is worn – are also employed in fiction as metaphorical representations of characters and subjectivities. A popular example is Patrick Bateman, the meticulously dressed protagonist in Brett Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991). Proust, in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, shows his fascination with dress through intense descriptions, using it as a literary device to account for acts of

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79 Proust, op. cit.
observation and aesthetic perception that underlie the deeper complexities of remembrance, desire, jealousy and grief.80

Alongside analyses of dress descriptions in the literary novel, there is wide scholarly interest in the fashion magazine as the primary vehicle that sustains and represents the culture and industry of fashion. Anna König analyses British *Vogue* through an examination of the content, tone, lexicon and cultural references in the writing; her aim is to show that fashion writing is not a fixed form but rather a fluid structure that holds up the fashion world.81 Similarly, O'Shea Borrelli analyses *Vogue* to show how the writing operates in relation to the fashion image.82 Her analysis implicitly demonstrates the power of words and images in fashion magazines to mediate and control the relationship between the individual and social, the producer and consumer. In her comparative analysis of fashion language through three *Vogue* editors (Diana Vreeland, Grace Mirabella and Anna Wintour), she presented four *functions* of words in fashion magazines: the visual (through adjectives and metaphors); the oral (as alliteration and rhyme); the emphatic (that is, to emphasise via hyperbole and repetition); and the popular (as in, fashion’s persistent references to popular culture).

The interest in how words function to sustain the seemingly ‘closed’ system of operations within the fashion magazine brings to mind Roland Barthes’ idiosyncratic effort to devise a semiotic fashion system in the mid-sixties. He analysed written or described fashion as a system of signs that could hold its own structure of meaning, independent of the image and actual garment. Alluding to the potential for fashion to operate as a system of signs, he asserted, ‘Even if the garment of fashion remained purely imaginary (without affecting real clothing), it would constitute an incontestable element of mass culture, like pulp fiction, comics and movies.’83 Eugenia Paulicelli also draws from Barthes fashion system in her analysis of Cesare Meano’s84 *Commentario dizionario italiano della moda* (Commentary and Italian Dictionary on

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82 O'Shea Borrelli, Laird, op. cit.


84 Cesare Meano (1899-1957) was an Italian poet, writer and filmmaker.
Falling against texture

Fashion). Meano’s text was published in 1936, by order of the fascist regime, to purge French terminology from the language of fashion and to put in its place an Italian lexicon of fashion; the aim was to use fashion as a political media machine to manage the social body in a controlled culture. However, Meano’s project – as with Barthes and Borrelli’s efforts – focused on the power of fashion to be circulated as an independent system of meaning-production and ideology, at the expense of the agency of the individual self, the body and aesthetic experience – and this is my point of departure from them.

Even a brief description of a garment in the magazine, if unaccompanied by an image of the garment, can potentially create another world all unto itself. It points to the capacity of language to mediate fashion’s aesthetic dimension and our participation in its making. My research alludes to this resonant potential for imagination that is, currently, hardly addressed in contemporary studies on fashion writing. It calls for an approach to writing that is intentionally creative and expressive rather than representational – one which inspires productive friction between the imagination of fashion and its verbal expression.

A Critical Lens

Charles Baudelaire’s essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ is often cited as the first and most profound analysis of fashion as a serious concept, signalling the beginning of fashion as a legitimate subject of criticism. McNeil and Miller, in Fashion Writing and Criticism: History, Theory and Practice (2014), explain that fashion criticism comes from ‘a long tradition of evaluative and critical writing that is historically specific.’ Criticism, as a mode of ‘aesthetic judgement,’ was popularised by the philosopher Denis Diderot in the eighteenth century, who produced critical reviews of paintings and sculpture at the biennial salons in Paris. He was writing at a time when ‘philosophical aesthetics’ was emerging as a branch of philosophy, and played a crucial role in advancing the Enlightenment concepts of taste, imagination and aesthetic pleasure. By the nineteenth-century, there was a growing sense that ‘aesthetic judgement’ was not

86 McNeil and Miller, p. 100.
87 ibid., pp. 5, 98.
simply a matter of entertainment or erudition, but presented a cultural shift towards different registers of human creativity. According to Rachel Teukolsky, ‘Nineteenth-century British writers helped to invent the idea that art spectatorship could provide one of the most intense and meaningful forms of human experience.’ This was also the time when fashion emerged as an undeniably influential agent of the new consumerist and discerning society. The couture houses in Paris, like the art salons of the Enlightenment, became sites of aesthetic interest, where the latest collections on display were commented upon and evaluated. Baudelaire was a key figure in this development, and became the first ‘professional’ critic to introduce fashion as a topic of philosophical interest. Influenced by Diderot’s concept of ‘taste’ as the basis of aesthetic judgement, Baudelaire introduced the concept of ‘charm,’ which marked the beginning of a way of appreciating fashion through the historical and aesthetic paradigms.

Following Baudelaire, the poet and critic Stéphane Mallarmé similarly tackled the subject of fashion as an intellectual and artistic pursuit. In 1874, he produced an idiosyncratic art project, in the form of a series of fictional fashion magazines called *La Dernière Mode* (The Latest Fashion). Taking on the role of a fashion ‘insider,’ and under a variety of pseudonyms, he wrote all the articles in the magazine, on topics ranging from garments, fashion houses and travel, to interior furnishing, food and theatre. Through the magazine’s meta-fictional devices, Mallarmé used fashion to produce a satirical commentary on French class and society, while conversely alluding to the social processes that sustained the myth of fashion. Perhaps the most intriguing – and certainly prescient – aspect of his fashion magazine was the allusion to the relationship between content and form.

Fashion reportage proliferated through the medium of the magazine in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. The emergence of the magazine was an inevitable effect of the commercialisation of the fashion industry and advertising, consumer culture, urbanisation and a much-improved publishing industry of the time. Its primary

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89 McNeil and Miller, p. 100.
90 ibid., pp. 72-74.
function was to describe and evaluate the fashion image, persona, collection and garment, thereby fulfilling a vital, commercial purpose. The rise of fashion houses in Paris, for example, provided robust material for the evaluation and assessment of clothing and trends, in the style of the ‘descriptive commentary.’ This descriptive and critical approach would remain fundamental to the culture of fashion writing and criticism from then onwards.

As a commodity in itself, the fashion magazine is in the business of selling and consuming ‘sensation.’ The fashion text serves to reinforce fashion’s absolutes and extremes, and carries the effect of fashion, which Gilles Lipovetsky describes as a ‘cocktail of images, sounds and meanings.’ It is often a vital part of the graphic design and identity of the magazine and brand. In the 1990s, the proliferation of niche magazines and journals such as *Purple, Tank, i-D, Dazed and Confused, W* and *The Face* has been instrumental in shaping fashion as the hybridised voice of popular culture, high fashion, art and the avant-garde. The scope of professional writing is becoming increasingly specialised and diverse, in line with the proliferation of specialist courses in higher education. Institutions such as London College of Fashion and Central Saint Martins offer Masters-level degrees specifically in fashion writing and criticism, situating it within the broader culture of curation, publishing, new media and the moving image and critical writing. In this arena, what is the place for a theoretical practitioner who uses writing as the medium of creative practice?

Within the last decade, several fashion-focused publication outlets have been influential in stimulating different forms, formats and voices, specifically at the juncture of academic research and popular discourse. Framed within the hybrid format of the printed fashion/cultural journal and online blog, they feature essays, interviews, prose and narrative fiction that aim to render academic research more accessible on one hand, and on the other, situate fashion discourse as an intellectual endeavour. Across the broad spectrum of formats and forms of publications, there is

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93 McNeil and Miller, p. 99.
a variation in the level of criticality that is contingent on a complex set of interrelated factors: the publication outlet, readership and authorial intention. The blog *Threadbared* was founded in 2007 by two academics, as a discursive platform, to engage with readers on contemporary issues in fashion within the context of gender and identity politics. Two contemporary London-based publications platforms, *Vestoj* and *Address*, are deliberately generating writing at the juncture of criticism, reportage, prose, and fiction. They aim to question and create dialogue at the juncture of consumer press, journalism and academic text.

The publication platform *Vestoj* was founded in 2009 by Anja Cronberg as a ‘journal of sartorial matters.’ She was previously an editor at *Acne Paper*, the bi-annual publication produced by the Swedish fashion label and collective *Acne Studios*.

I was getting increasingly frustrated that we as *[Acne Paper]* magazine were somehow always justifying the fact that we were a fashion publication (and brand marketing tool) by including material from other creative disciplines, art, architecture, film and whatnot. A lot of fashion publications suffer from this type of inferiority complex. It’s as if a magazine dealing with fashion can’t be taken seriously unless you include a heavy dose of material from the creative disciplines considered superior in the hierarchy of the arts.

Anja Cronberg, 2014

In contrast, *Vestoj* is strictly about fashion. It critically explores fashion and dress through scholarly study, interview, fiction, poetry and image-making. It bridges the gap between academia, literature and industry within fashion, to provide a platform for academics to co-exist with practitioners, for cross-pollination, learning and mutual understanding. Cronberg explains that its primary aim is to express fashion in new

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98 The US-based online journal *Threadbared* was founded in 2007 by two academics, as an intellectual platform to discuss the culture of fashion and beauty within a political context. *Threadbared* website. [http://iheartthreadbared.wordpress.com/about/](http://iheartthreadbared.wordpress.com/about/) (accessed 23 May 2014).


and unusual ways. The publication uses both online and print media, and features an editorial advisory board with prominent fashion scholars.

Another publication that specifically addresses fashion writing and criticism at the juncture of popular press and academic writing is the UK-based journal *Address: Journal for Fashion Criticism*, founded in 2012 by London College of Fashion researcher and academic Johannes Reponen. He refers to *Address* as a ‘…platform online and in print to think, talk and test ideas around fashion and approaches to criticism in a rigorous, entertaining and accessible manner.’ Its manifesto is to ‘expand and contract fashion as a topic of interest,’ and to ‘record the transactions of fashion in society – from the way you tie your shoelaces to the impact of the latest catwalk.’103 Operating in a similar thread to *Vestoj*, *Address* publishes writings by a range of fashion practitioners in academia, design and journalism. However, its emphasis is on the critical voice. In my past correspondence with Reponen,104 he had rejected my submissions on the basis of them being ‘fiction,’ ‘not opinion-led,’ and therefore unaligned with the conventional parameters of fashion criticism. This rejection revealed the issue of criticality, particularly in the context of creative practice.

Contemporary outlets such as these play a significant role in spurring fashion discourse and creative practice across popular press and the academy. The intellectual pursuits of these journals, combined with highly visual format in both print and digital formats, bridge the gap between fashion as the visual expression of contemporary culture, and fashion as the theoretical and discursive platform upon which political complexities pertaining to societies, cultures, subcultures, and the individual are parsed and played out. In explaining what he calls ‘the crisis of criticism,’ Gavin Butt proposes the idea of criticism as a kind of ‘cultural participation in its own right.’ He calls for the ‘loosening’ of academic inquiry and the repositioning of the role of the critic in society so that criticism should be ‘… enmeshed in the very, perhaps, even “creative,” production of the cultural fabric itself.’105

My practice is fundamentally motivated by the poetic possibilities that emerge between the text, writer and reader. Spurred by the elusive nature of fashion as concept and language, the writing gestures towards a dynamic, lived and contingent

104 Reponen, Johannes, email to author, 7 March 2011.
relationship between fashion and its verbal expression. I write as a means to account for the multiplicity of aesthetic expression. Intractable qualities, abstractions, oblique aspects and obscure tactile textures can be rendered.

By contrast, the conventions of criticism – according to McNeil and Miller – assert that it is the responsibility of the critic, or the ‘qualified observer,’ to provide description, interpretation and evaluation.\textsuperscript{106} I would suggest that this narrows aesthetic expression. While I similarly engage with processes of observation and description in my writing, the intent is to coax alternate transactions between the image and word, rather than to interpret and evaluate an external object, or to assess and pass judgment according to a set of standards, which is considered the ‘proper domain’ of criticism.\textsuperscript{107} Even though McNeil and Miller maintain that criticism is ‘re-creative’ – that it is not simply ‘opinion’ but rather can be a ‘work of art’ in its own right\textsuperscript{108} – the primary role of the critic is to provide commentary based on established standards of taste.

As mentioned earlier, the editor of \textit{Address: Journal of Fashion Criticism} differentiated my writing from conventional criticism on the basis of its refusal to be ‘opinion-led,’ and my tendency towards fictional devices. The rejection has led to my understanding that the criticality lies not in the content of the writing proper but rather how the writing is experienced by both author and reader, how it reveals the processes of its own construction, how it brings to the fore the immediate and tentative dimension of fashion, in and as practice. In this manner, I posit that the writing performs a criticality of practice that is contingent on creative expression.

Another journal that is relevant to this discussion is \textit{Fashion Projects: On Fashion, Art and Visual Culture}. Founded in 2005 by Francesca Granata, a fashion scholar based at Parsons School of Design in New York, it focuses on experimental fashion practices within current critical discourses, involving artists, writers and curators from diverse fields to foster fashion-based dialogues. The journal dedicated Issue #4 to fashion criticism. Through a series of interviews, it featured the diversity of voices from within fashion and beyond, locating fashion criticism expansively across artistic and curatorial

\textsuperscript{106} ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{107} ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} ibid.
practices, as well as deeply entwined with cultural criticism. One of the interviews featured the prolific author Judith Thurman, who writes about ‘books, culture, and fashion’ in The New Yorker. She writes about writers – Isak Dinesen, Gustav Flaubert, Colette and Margaret Fuller – and fashion designers – Rei Kawakubo, Balenciaga and Alexander McQueen, amongst others, in addition to other artists and cultural figures. Her story on Yves Saint Laurent, entitled Swann Song (via Marcel Proust), was published in the March 2002 issue of The New Yorker, and was considered as a literary achievement and included in the Best American Essays of 2003. Thurman’s writing demonstrates the potential for fashion writing to be produced, and operate, at the level of sophisticated literature.

Thurman, however, sees herself as a cultural critic writing about fashion. This brings to mind Robin Givhan from The Washington Post, who, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 2006 ‘… for her witty, closely observed essays that transform fashion criticism into cultural criticism.’ Fashion is often validated through its allegiance with external contexts such as art or cultural criticism. This betrays a sense that fashion, on its own, is insubstantial – somewhat lacking – as an intellectual concept.

While it is important to acknowledge the lineage of art criticism in fashion reportage and criticism, there is a risk of the latter remaining in the shadow of the former. I am more interested in the medium of writing than its message. I approach writing from the perspective of a creative practitioner, and I differentiate my role from the professional fashion critic, reviewer and editor. In pursuing fashion as an aesthetic paradigm, my interest is in how one encounters the aesthetic object or event through all that language allows you to reach, and what one might learn about oneself in that process. I use processes of verbal description and reflection in order to move beyond, or transcend, the object of description. In this manner, I propose there is scope to develop writing as a catalyst for new fashion expressions.

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In the process of describing a red dress, and by tracking the moment-to-moment event of doing so, I would be inclined to pay attention to the durational experience of perceiving or imagining it in the midst of the perceptive or imaginative process. I would probably try to express the sensation of redness, how the dress might fall and feel against my skin, what it reminds me of. As I indulge in the richness of words and different ways I could describe the dress, I might be inclined to imagine something else altogether – why not?

The iconic fashion editor Diana Vreeland, with her column ‘Why don’t you?’ was famous for publishing surrealistic, rhetorical remarks in Harper’s Bazaar and American Vogue. She would make proclamations such as: ‘Why don’t you … rinse your blond child’s hair in dead champagne to keep its gold, as they do in France?’ She said of her column, ‘It wasn’t writing, it was just ideas. It was me, insisting on people using their imaginations …’ She had a way of using language to evoke notions of fashion as imagination without the effect of trivialising it, but rather to incite a sense of wonder and potential. Her provocations urge us to go beyond ourselves – to transgress what is already known, in order to revel in the imaginative unknown.

Headdress, The Girl Who Lived in the Tree, autumn/winter 2008-9
Wood and coral.

Philip Treacy for Alexander McQueen

Vreeland is a reminder of the fundamental impetus of my practice, that is the creative pursuit of the connection between the aesthetic imagination of fashion and its verbal expression. In my writing, I wonder: What is left unsaid in this picture of fashion, and how will the ‘saying’ change what we are looking at? Without having seen nor touched Treacy’s headdress for McQueen, how might I speak of it? Who is this girl in the tree, all wood and coral?

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115 Bolton, Andrew, op. cit., p. 235.
1.4 Writing as emergent practice in fashion

As stated previously, there are different kinds of writers in the contemporary fashion world: cultural critics, newspaper reporters, journalists, publicists and bloggers. Fashion designers may reflect upon their work and practice through exhibition narratives, press releases, interviews and monographs – in which they are often written about by others. These writers typically focus on fashion in terms of profession, industry and culture, where writing is a supplement to the primary business of fashion design and communication. Additionally, text is essential to the graphic design of branding strategies, invitations and catalogues. It is also a vital part of visual narrative for designers such as Walter Van Beirendonck, Katherine Hamnett and Vivienne Westwood, who often communicate political ideas and provocations in the form of the slogan or catchphrase written on the garments and within their media materials. In her book, *Couture Graphique: Fashion, Graphic Design and the Body*,116 Professor José Teunissen (ArtEZ Institute of the Arts, Arnhem) explores the significance of fashion media materials in contemporary practice, presenting many examples of ‘visual text’ in communication design that operates, beyond their commercial purpose, as vehicles for artistic expression.

While the visual design of text is widely acknowledged as a significant aspect of the industry, along with professional and scholarly writings that critique and disseminate the vocation, the business, and the culture of fashion practice,117 what is less common is writing that, in itself, the expression of practice. As a counterpoint to the business of ‘writing about fashion,’ I offer writing as an experimental approach to ‘doing’ and ‘thinking’ fashion – an immediate and performative gesture that is as playful as it is critical. I am driven by the possibility of new fashion expressions, rather than to represent what already exists. Writing is creative expression in and of itself, in the midst of practice, as opposed to writing that happens after practice.

The chapter focuses on what language implements beyond the printed page through a cluster of practitioners who critically and artistically engage with fashion as concept

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and practice. They use language to reflect on their own processes of production, communication and experience, and to express the mechanics of imagination, as well as to critique fashion from within itself. They demonstrate how text could be expressed in various forms and formats beyond the written medium such as interactive exhibitions, live performances and participatory situations.

I draw from performative and experimental practices such as the self-proclaimed ‘avant garde couture label’ Kenpr/van Benthm; the politically-inclined art collective Bernadette Corporation (BC), as well as local Melbourne, Australia practitioners Dolci & Kabana (D&K), and Adele Varcoe. The fashion curators Professor Judith Clark (Director of The Centre for Fashion Curation, London College of Fashion) and Professor Robyn Healy (RMIT University, Melbourne) employ text as expressive device, activating the viewers’ participation in the construction of the overall exhibition narrative. I have deliberately chosen a broad mix of practitioners with radically different approaches and positions in the field: from well-established contemporary curators and scholars such as Clark and Healy, to emerging and experimental practitioners Varcoe and D&K. Although none of them explicitly uses writing as the core activity of practice, they all engage with the poetic agency of words to generate ideas and imaginings of fashion as well as new expressions of practice. For the exhibition project, *The Concise Dictionary of Dress* (2010), Clark, in collaboration with psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, explicitly explored the power of words and their connotative capacity to create new experiences of fashion and dress. Healy is another established fashion curator who pays close attention to the role of words in curating experiences; for example, using dress descriptions to carefully and discretely subvert the way fashion and dress histories are constructed and experienced. Varcoe has used descriptions of garments, without the garments themselves, as the basis of imaginary fashion shows. These practitioners demonstrate the potential of words to catalyse new narratives by using them to perform and enact ideas. D&K write as well as perform poetry readings as one of their performative gestures towards the practice, and simultaneous critique, of the fashion system. They draw from the artistic practices of the international art collective Bernadette Corporation. In their mix of poetry, film, fashion magazines, fashion label and even a novel, BC plays with the anxieties that

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pervade the contemporary world, using fashion as a device to amplify the tension between surface and artifice, identity and commodity, banality and simultaneity.

Through these practitioners, whose specific practices and projects are discussed further in this chapter, I have come to understand the different ways in which text plays a central role in revealing the performativity of fashion as a language: a tentative system of parts and their meanings that is highly contingent on the object, process and spectator of experience. In addition, the significance of the role of writing in creating sites of encounter between the work, writer and the audience, is introduced via Jane Rendell’s architectural writing. It is in the context of these practitioners that I aim to articulate a critical and performative practice that uses writing as a catalyst for creative expression.

Writing as critical gesture

A practitioner who has particularly inspired the development of this research, especially in its early stages, is the architecture practitioner and scholar Jane Rendell.\footnote{Jane Rendell is Professor of Architecture and Art at the Bartlett, the Faculty of the Built Environment within University College, London. See https://www.janerendell.co.uk (accessed 2 February 2010)} While she does not operate within fashion, as a contemporary writer and researcher operating at the intersection of art criticism and architectural writing, the way she connects writing to practice is especially relevant here. Through her practice of ‘site writing,’ Rendell ‘performs’ architectural theory and criticism by placing the body of the writer-critic within the work. Her practice of ‘site writing’ attempts to recast architectural criticism as a form of spatial transaction between the writer-critic, the work and its textual representation. These transactions comprise moments of free association, conjectural interpretation and construction. She presents her writing in textual installations, exhibition catalogues, exhibition ‘walks’ (curatorial and performative), and audio works; these are her ‘text-works,’ which she differentiates from the more traditional, printed works such as books, chapters and essays.

Through these ‘text-works,’ she demonstrates a writing practice beyond the printed page. It takes on many different forms, formats and capabilities, and is distributed across different genres, conditions and experiences. For the text-work
Embellishment: Purdah (2006), she repeatedly wrote the word ‘purdah’ in black kohl in the script of Afghanistan’s official languages, Dari and Pashto, on twelve panes of glass of a window at the Domo Baal Gallery in London. The Persian word purdah means ‘curtain’ and describes the cultural practice of separating and hiding women through clothing and architecture – veils, screens and walls – from the public male gaze. ‘Embellished’ in Arabic script, the gallery windows referenced the veiling of the burqa and the kohl-lined eyes of Muslim women. In The Welsh Dresser: An Atlas (2003), she sat in front of a dresser with an arrangement of objects, and produced a text-work in response to the experience of this encounter. The relationship between analysis and contemplation, and between documentation and imagination, forms the core of her practice.

Rendell’s text-works also take the form of narrative-based responses to critical concepts and theories (A Configuration Pregnant with Tensions, 2011); a dialogue between practitioner and practice (Confessional Constructions, 2002); and conversations with other practitioners in architecture and beyond (Intermezzo, 2011). In addition to writing, Rendell also experiments with performative reading, walking/talking tours, and voice recordings. For the project Walking to Wapping / Walking through Angels (2001), she produced an audio tour that blurred the distinction between the physical, architectural domain and one's imaginary space of reflective experience. Rendell uses writing as a process to critically reflect on the construction of site – alluding to an alternate engagement with ‘site’-specificity, and therefore, the broader context of architectural representation.

In my reading of her work, Rendell’s writing is performative, critical and reflexive of the practice of architecture itself. It has led to an understanding of the potential of writing to express fashion as a concept and practice, at the same time, reveal and critique the processes of its own construction.
Some thoughts on design writing practice

In the process of understanding what my practice was and how it should be framed, I studied a variety of existing approaches to writing. In addition to the spectrum of fashion writing previously discussed, as well as Rendell’s architectural writing practice, I also explored current perspectives on design writing and criticism. In academia, traditional scholarly writing across design emphasises the transfer of knowledge through evidence-based research.\(^{126}\) Much emphasis is placed on writing about design practice, the designed, and the designing of the designed.\(^{127}\) These approaches assert the critical significance of the design object, practice and process, relegating writing to cold mechanisms or the background. These led me to seek out alternative models that foreground the writing as a creative process in itself.

Design communication scholar Adrian Miles, for example, suggests that writing is a way of ‘thinking-through,’ or thinking in process.\(^{128}\) In defence of writing as an expressive medium of thinking in the academic context, and resisting the conventional idea of certainty and permanence that lay at the base of academic writing, Miles promotes a kind of writing that is ‘heuristic, poetic and iterative,’ and ‘which is no longer the reporting of the discovered, realised, or already understood – that which “had–been–thought” – but is the very event of a material thinking in itself.’\(^{129}\)

Miles’ notion of ‘writing as design’ is exemplified by the Limited Language project. Initiated in 2004 by two academics and practitioners in visual culture and theory – Colin Davies (University of Wolverhampton) and Monika Parinder (Royal College of Art)\(^{130}\) – it was based on an interactive web platform designed to generate writing that was, in turn, dependent on a feedback loop between writers in art, design, architecture, and sonic and visual cultures. The aim was to reveal the dynamics of

\(^{126}\) Davis, Meredith. ‘Research Writing in Design.’ Design and Culture: Academe and Design Writing, vol. 5, iss. 1, 2013, pp. 7-12.

\(^{127}\) Willis, Anne-Marie. ‘On Design Writing.’ Design and Culture: Academe and Design Writing, ibid., p. 42.


design as the fluidity of information exchange between designer, user and technology. *Limited Language* was as a live project that drew from the mechanics of the ubiquitous digital feedback culture that was immediately responsive, simultaneous and compressed. While it was described simply as ‘a site for commenting, thinking and reading about design,’ it instigated processes of cutting, pasting, recycling and sharing text between participants, to explore how ‘writing about design’ could emerge from those very processes.

The idea of writing as the communicative and creative event, or the process of ‘thinking-through,’ contributed to the development of my writing practice. In researching different perspectives and practices of writing in design, I came to understand how my practice relates to some design-based approaches to writing – such as those proposed by Miles and the *Limited Language* project – and how it differs from the field of design writing. While I acknowledge the significance of design writing in contributing to the thinking and practice of design including fashion, as well as the potential to innovate design practices through writing, my writing is not a mode of design or design writing. This is because design writing is typically concerned with the translation of objects and experiences into words, and the explication of the processes of making, understanding, criticising and communicating about design. By contrast, the intent of my practice is to use writing as a medium for aesthetic expression; the writing is the ‘thing,’ experience, method, and expression of fashion. While I come from a fashion design background and have, to some degree, ‘designed’ my writing practice, it should not be understood in the context of design writing. Design writing practices conventionally use writing for the critical exploration of design thinking and the mechanics of its practice; rather than using writing to explore design, designing or the designed in fashion, I use writing to mediate the fashion concept, which, in itself, is the critical as well as creative event. This refers back to the intent of my research, which is to use writing to catalyse the imaginative act and to elicit new expressions of fashion. As such, my writing should be considered within the realm of creative practice.

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**Performativity of language in/as fashion practice**

I situate my practice in the context of contemporary fashion practitioners who engage critically with the language of fashion as an expression of practice. The cluster of practitioners that has influenced the development of my approach to fashion practice operates in the context of the exhibition, publication, live performance and participatory situation. The playful use of text and exploration of language as creative practice can be traced back to Fluxus, the Pop Art and Conceptual Art movements of the 1960s (and, further still, to the public readings of the Dadaists), where language proliferated in a complex relation with poetry, newly emerging performance art and experimental music. Liz Kotz directs our attention to the use of words in visual arts – away from language's supplementary function (as caption, title, inscription or criticism) – towards the agency of words in enacting a set of procedures to realise the work. In experimental music, theatre and poetry, language is used as notation, instruction, schema, or template in the 'event score' or performance instruction. In these scenarios, language is chiefly instrumental or inscriptive in the performance, action, perception or object: it is the language that is seen as the actual work.

I suggest that it is possible to make connections between the evocative qualities of the ‘event score’ or performance instruction, with the description of garments in magazines, catalogues and museum exhibits. The descriptions are often brief, with the sole purpose of delivering technical information about the title/name of the garment, its fabrication, the designer, when it was designed and – in the case of museum pieces – to whom it belonged. In its brevity of description, there is potential for imaginative wanderings. In this sense, language is a point of departure for the imagination, rather than the definition of a particular expression. Just as the ‘event score’ – also comparable to the movie script – is a set of parameters with the purpose of spawning a spectrum of possible experiences, the simple description of a dress is capable of triggering multiple associations and imaginings, including its own subversion.

**Subverting fashion (Robyn Healy)**

The expressive capacity of verbal language and the narrative imagination of fashion are widely explored especially within curatorial practices. Dress descriptions are often

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134 ibid., p.4.
used as a conduit for the imagination of multiple narratives, taking on a pivotal role in activating the interplay between the viewer, the object of display, and the space and context in which the encounter takes place. The established Australian fashion curator Professor Robyn Healy has worked extensively with public collections of fashion and textiles, asserting the significance of the historical imagination in our contemporary reading of fashion. Through her practice and PhD research, she has contributed a specific approach to fashion curation that frames museum and exhibition practice as the creative context within which the conventions of fashion interpretation and dress experience are destabilised. She often reveals the hidden, neglected and excluded aspects of material histories through strategies of display. In the exploratory exhibition Noble Rot (2006), she worked exclusively with garments that were in various states of disintegration, using the historic period home, Como House, as a stage to reveal and perform the hidden histories of the garments. The interior of the House – the bedrooms, wardrobes, bathroom and breakfast room, amongst others – was exposed for public contemplation, as they became the very sites and surfaces where the ‘interiors of garments, trims, the incomplete, the mended or the imperfect’ were splayed open. For instance, the narrow Nurse’s Room at the end of a corridor led to the back stairwell where ‘one can glimpse a vibrant green ballgown skirt cascading down the stairwell.’ Just as the worn-out interior of the garments overturns the idea of the pristine in fashion display, Healy’s intentional reversal of standard selection criteria subverts the traditions of museum, archival and exhibition methodologies. In doing so, she invites new interpretations and experiences of fashion. In order to express the nuanced sensations of Noble Rot, she included a carefully selected vocabulary in her armoury of curatorial devices. Seductive words such as ‘tatters,’ ‘inside out, outside in,’ ‘fripperies,’ ‘stain,’ ‘unfinished,’ and ‘relic’ – the six themes of the exhibition – resonated with covert stories and alluded to the fugitive and ephemeral nature of fashion. The displays were punctuated with descriptions such as ‘section of skirt cut from Wedding dress 1890, silk, imitation pearls, altered, stained, disintegration’ or ‘Unmade shoes c. 1890.’ The descriptions – precisely through their

138 ibid., unpaginated.
brevity and lack of flourish – accentuated the reader’s imagination. The vocabulary included these too:

… discoloured, mended, mottled, splitting, darned, blackened, torn

…\(^{139}\)

Robyn Healy, *Noble Rot*, 2006

I propose that this set of words, by virtue of its simplicity, reflects the quintessence of the *Noble Rot* experience. It calls upon the affective potential of words on our experience of fashion.

**Curating with words (Judith Clark)**

The use of language to curate a scenario, situation or experience is evident in curatorial practices, where language and text do not merely describe or represent visual content but rather, *are doing something* in terms of creating content. This is about creating situations in which language instigates experience rather than bookends it. A single word – momentarily placed next to an image, or uttered in association with another word – may surprise us with what it can do. The contemporary fashion curator and scholar, Judith Clark, explores how words could be used to catalyse new fashion experiences within the exhibition context. Resisting the traditional function of museum text to describe the provenance of exhibits, she uses text to expand the possibilities for encountering fashion and dress histories and narratives. For *The Concise Dictionary of Dress* (2010),\(^{140}\) Clark and Phillips chose a series of ‘definitions’ of selected words based on their sartorial, spatial and psychological significance. The definitions were then used as prompts to curate eleven site-specific garment installations. The associations between the words, definitions, images, spaces and materials sparked each other, evoking imaginative narratives in the viewer. In this way, Clark demonstrates the performative capacity of words to curate experiences, using their definitions to open them up, rather than to close in on them; a word such as ‘fashionable,’ which we may well take for granted, could just as easily set us off on an alternate path.

\(^{139}\) ibid.


Writing as emergent practice in fashion

**Fashionable**

1. A form of alarm; armour for the anticipated emergency; secret knowledge of contemporary intimidations. 2. Excited impatience with the body; something made to disappear; anything that can be refashioned. 3. Of its time by promising a more alluring future; a kick start, a longing, a private nostalgia. 4. History without footnotes; the past in new clothes; undercover conservation. 5. Taking liberties with the future and parasitic on it. 6. Anything that tries to stop the present collapsing back into the past; the new without fear. 7. Something that makes space for itself. 8. An experiment with pleasure, without proof; living for the last moment.\(^{141}\)


In *Captions (2000)*\(^{142}\) – an experimental project produced around the elements of dress display – Clark displayed a dramatic Alexander McQueen silhouette at the Judith Clark Costume Gallery in London. Visitors were invited to write captions to be nailed to the wall opposite the gown. This simple gesture suggests the capacity for language to challenge the primacy of the image in fashion. What might happen if language does not come after, but rather before or alongside, the fashion image? In this way, writing becomes an active agent in fashion practice: rather than asking, ‘what kind of writing on fashion should there be?’ The question becomes, ‘what kind of thinking on fashion can there be?’ By emphasising the poetic agency of language, writing becomes a means by which we open up the scope of fashion expression.

**Making imaginations (Adele Varcoe and KeuPr/van Bentm)**

A three-piece classic suit; the exquisite jacket and wrapped skirt overprinted with a smudged red, pink and purple imitation tweed.

A jacket and skirt made from cream wool, edged in a thick creamy blanket stitch. The jacket features two fake pockets at the hip with appliqued rectangular cloth giving this impression. Round button-


fastened, soft, gentle cardigan jacket; each button has been constructed with Chanel’s linked C logo, floats in a circular dome with gold metal trim; bright green blue orange red and purple emerge at the collar.

A little bell is worn at the hip; it fastens with two delicate metal hands with the middle fingers almost touching, but not quite.\textsuperscript{143}

Adele Varcoe, \textit{Imagining Chanel}, 2012 and 2014

The descriptions above are from a live fashion show entitled \textit{Imagining Chanel} by Melbourne-based artist \textit{Adele Varcoe}.\textsuperscript{144} In her practice, Varcoe explores fashion as a constructed social situation. In this work, she set up a strategic situation to enact the potency of words, such that they become the experience. \textit{Imagining Chanel} had so far been staged at Fashion Space Gallery (London, 2012); The Rocks (Sydney, 2012) and the Monash University Museum of Art (Melbourne, 2014). Each show consisted of a hostess reading out descriptions of actual Chanel outfits while nude models walked the stage. The models posed and gestured according to the characteristics of each outfit, imagining how each garment would fall, drape and move around the body. The language of dress and dressing thus takes on a performative urgency that is mediated by the models in conjunction with the imagination of the audience. This performativity forms the core of the work. It also points to the inherently experiential, embodied and gestural nature of dress descriptions.

Another relevant project is \textit{Friction / Parade 1999} by the art/fashion collective \textit{Keupr\slash van Bentm}. Directed by Michiel Keuper and Francisco van Benthum, the ‘avant garde couture label’ was active in the Netherlands from 1997 to 2001. This particular project consisted of a booklet produced in collaboration with \textit{The Experimental Jetset}, a graphic art collective from Amsterdam. It chronicled the day leading up to an imaginary fashion show:

\begin{quote}
This collection … was never executed. The show intentionally never took place. \textit{Friction/Parade 1999} only existed as a little booklet and in imagination. And exactly that was the point. The show location was picked out of a Paris telephone directory, the show date was set to
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{144} ibid., (accessed 23 May 2014)
coincide with the Paris Haute Couture Week in January 1999. It was made sure however that guests only got their invitation (= the booklet) a day after this date so nobody would be tempted to actually show up, because it was by no means a practical joke. It was a conceptual collection in the most literally [sic] sense; it allowed us to do the impossible.145

Keupr/van Bentm, Friction/Parade, 1999

The booklet also contained detailed descriptions of impossible outfits that read like surreal poems. For instance, ‘No. 013: Fictitious Aphrodisiac’ consisted of:

… pale-blue synthetic taffeta coat-piece with emphasis on an extended, padded shoulder, worn over asymmetric, patch-worked, diabolic overkill of K/vB fragmented dresses in blue, orange, red, green, yellow, pink, lilac and white.146

Keupr/van Bentm, Friction/Parade, 1999

In Varcoe’s Imagining Chanel and Keupr/van Bentm’s Friction/Parade 1999, the element of fiction appears as a critique of the ‘constructedness’ of fashion as social sensation, spectacle and fantasy. In both projects, the language of fashion – expressed through the fashion show, dress descriptions and the ‘sensation’ of fashion created through verbal hype – is used to critique the processes of its own construction, consumption, communication and experience.

**Gesturing to the political (Bernadette Corporation (BC))**

D&K draws from the art collective Bernadette Corporation (BC), in particular, their preoccupation with issues around personal identity, the commodification of art/fashion, and the tension between the individual and the system, personhood and capital. BC consists of core members John Kelsey and Bernadette Van-Huy, along with roving members and collaborators scattered across New York and Paris. BC started in the New York club scene in the 1990s, and in 2013, a retrospective of their


146 ibid.
work, entitled 2000 Wasted Years, was presented by the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London. BC uses fashion as an agent to express ideas about contemporary culture in terms of global homogenisation, rapid transformations and simulations in relation to notions of superficiality, misinterpretations and emptiness. They reference the language and processes of fashion’s consumerist culture to internally reflect upon the politics of globalisation, consumption and cultural mediation.

Between 1999 and 2001, they released three issues of the semi-fictitious fashion magazine Made in USA, referencing the poet Stéphane Mallarmé's self-published nineteenth-century fashion journal La Dernière Mode. They also developed the DIY fashion label ‘BC Fashion’ – a semi-fictitious label situated in that ambiguous space between fiction and reality; the label incorporated mock branding and corporate propagandist strategies. In 2009, they produced an epic ode entitled, The Complete Poem: an artistic exercise in poetry and photography that juxtaposed a fictional fashion advertising campaign with a poem about New York. The poem is a conflation of cultural references as per their usual inclination, using fashion as a tool to expose the loss of identity as a result of over-production. The contemporary art Bennett Simpson wrote that ‘BC’s fictions don’t want to be fixed or put to work; they want to defect.’

BC’s works are fundamentally performative and reflexive: communication tactics and strategies are employed in a way that deliberately reveals the mechanics of their own processes and those of the marketplace. In its emulation of a corporate image, BC relies on the dynamics of humour, protest and subterfuge that are mediated through fictional characters and avatars to amplify the artifice of cultural experiences and identities produced for the market. The New York-based performer, Jim Fletcher, who collaborated on The Complete Poem, said, ‘It’s good if something can have the possibility of not being real.’

147 ‘Surfaces are for Slipping up.’ Bernadette Corporation. 
150 Penn, Asher. ‘Interview with Jim Fletcher.’ Sex Magazine, no. 3, spring 2013. 
Playing the system (Dolci & Kabana (D&K))

The practices I have cited thus far interrogate the processes and procedures that tentatively ‘hold up’ the structure of fashion as a belief system or cultural myth. They all toy with the idea of fashion being ‘not real.’ Melbourne-based fashion practice Dolci & Kabana (D&K) conveys fashion as a loose system of arbitrary messages. An emerging practice that has evolved, in part, from practice-based PhD research, D&K is interested in designing strategies and methods to critique fashion from within itself; for example, they employ the language of fashion branding and marketing to reveal the artifice of fashion production, communication and experience. D&K does everything a typical fashion brand does: it has a logo; it is fronted by two fashion personae (the designers themselves) as the ‘brand image’; it indulges in clichéd fashion expressions, and – at every possible opportunity – repeats and reiterates itself. It refers to itself as a brand in search of an identity. In 2014, D&K was featured in the exhibition The Future of Fashion is Now at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, amongst a select group of experimental, emergent fashion practices from around the world. For this exhibition, they launched their ‘inaugural brand D&K 101,’ with a collection of garments that were all variations of the T-shirt, in the form of a ‘thought catalogue.’ They also released a poem entitled, ‘Small Talk, Soft Sell, Hard Brand:’

… Hidden promises,
too subtle to say directly,
too subtle makes ambiguous.
Too directly take risks,
identities glittering in typographic success,
incandescent sculptures.
Kerning that kerns your two souls.
Insert placeholder text …

D&K, 2014

Through their various productions – garments, live performances, participatory situations and installations – they interrogate the fundamental terms and conditions that ‘prop up’ the myth of fashion, via strategies of production, consumption and communication. As Roland Barthes stated, ‘Any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning.’ All of their processes are ‘subversive interrogations’ that ‘invite new fashion thinking and making.’ While D&K designs, produces and sells garments on the racks, what the practice is really doing is ‘performing’ the mechanics of fashion, showing that what holds it together can just as easily dismantle it.

In addition to their garments, D&K composes poetry with clichéd fashion expressions and the detritus of corporate branding and language. The artifice of fashion – won through the tactics of language – is revealed through D&K’s visual and verbal gestures. As a ‘performative agent’ who employs the language of fashion as a strategy of self-critique, and through its deliberately inconsistent actions, D&K reveals the arbitrary processes that constitute fashion as a language, and our complicity in its ‘constructedness.’

I locate my practice within this niche area of fashion practice that explores writing and language as a reflexive engagement with its own processes. The common thread that connects the practitioners discussed above is the emphasis on the practice and poetics of fashion expression. Firstly, they explore how writing draws forth the complex transactions between the object of perception and its verbal expression, as well as the role of the imagination in practice. In a practical framework, writing shapes ideas and gives form to the aesthetic imagination – it is a vital speculative faculty. It also performs a critical role in mediating the encounters between designer/practitioner, the work and the audience. In a poetic sense, writing makes tangible the aesthetic imagination towards which we gravitate: language illuminates many possible trajectories.

Secondly, their projects often reveal the processes that sustain fashion as a system, belief structure, social experience and imaginative construction – processes that are


154 *The Future of Fashion is Now: D&K*, ibid.
reflected in the language of fashion. Their projects also engage with the performativity of language to critique the conceptual and practical processes that cradle fashion expression; in this manner, they share an interest in the use of language to investigate practice. By exploring other practices, what became apparent is the significance of the loop of thinking, process, expression and reflection, between the practitioner and practice.

As the writing progressed, I realised that it was less about the content and more about the kind of experiences it could engender. In emphasising the imaginative, reflexive and performative processes that are intrinsic to the conception and practice of fashion, I propose a mode of practice that is necessarily performative in nature. The verbal processes of writing, reading and listening that constitute my practice are concrete gestures towards the ephemerality and transitoriness of fashion. Writing reflects the production of fashion as communication and as an experience in itself.
Writing as fashion practice: voices, methods, influences

Everything is gestation and then bringing forth.\textsuperscript{155}

Rainer Maria Rilke, \textit{Letters to a Young Poet}, 1903

This research builds on my previous work in fashion research and practice, which focused on the poetics of body and its experiences, especially those mediated through sound, live performance and text. Phenomenological experience and the poetic imagination – especially concerned with ways to verbally account for them – are fundamental to my approach.

Framed within the critical and creative practice model, the practice constitutes a reflexive mode of research, thinking and doing. It engages directly with the complexities of how to write, and why it matters in contemporary fashion. The practice has evolved through testing the writing across various publications, public presentation formats and audiences. It posits that critical discourse and writing in fashion has the capacity to be an evocative expression and process.

The writing experiments are intrinsic to the development of the research. I produced fragments of writing including prose-works and word-lists.\textsuperscript{156} I also generated notes in the form of small poems, some of which were produced in correspondence with other writers. This was a way of shaping abstruse concepts through the interplay between two writers – writing, exchanging ideas and casting words back and forth. I generated

\textsuperscript{155} Rilke, Rainer Maria. ‘Letter 3.’ \textit{Letters to a Young Poet}: \url{http://www.carrothers.com/rilke3.htm} (accessed 7 January 2015)

\textsuperscript{156} Richard Serra’s ‘verb lists’ (1967-68) was as a way of using language to draw out the different possibilities and nature of the artist’s process. See Friedman, Samantha. ‘To Collect.’ \textit{Inside/Out Blog}. New York, USA: Museum of Modern Art, 2011. \url{http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2011/10/20/to-collect} (accessed 17 June 2014)
notes on potentiality,\textsuperscript{157} reciprocity,\textsuperscript{158} multiplicity\textsuperscript{159} and ecstasies\textsuperscript{160} in conversation with another writer. As compositional experiments, we created ‘concept and word associations’ as streams of consciousness akin to the exquisite corpse technique – one word or concept catalysed the next. Through these various writing experiments, I was able to playfully and intuitively engage with research questions, confusions, propositions and curiosities. They were pivotal in seeding my writing practice. By testing different methods, formats, voices and styles, I came to understand how I wrote and the potential for many kinds of compositional processes.

2.1 The literary influence

Throughout the research process, I engaged with a spectrum of literary practices and genres, in order to understand how a fashion writing practice model might be understood within established frameworks. Is it fiction or non-fiction? Is it criticism? Is it fictocriticism? Is it creative writing? I considered the conventions of these frameworks – voice, style, tone, form and format – and the subsequent assumptions about my practice and its future direction.

I realised that this approach would mean absorbing the practice into the established conventions of genre and literary practices, at the expense of the paradigmatic conception of fashion and practice-based design thinking. What became evident was that ‘writing fashion’ should not subscribe to the set parameters of literary practice but rather forge its own path within fashion-based thinking and practice. The mode and methods of my practice were deliberately designed so as to engage with the specific formulation of fashion as dynamism and lived, aesthetic experience. This looped back to the fundamental intent of my research – to innovate the practice and study of fashion from within the field.

While my practice is not situated within the literary framework, I draw from some of its concepts and voices in order to map my own trajectory as a practitioner in fashion, specifically through a movement of thinkers who grapple with the relationship between perceptive experience, imagination and language, and between the actual and

\textsuperscript{157} See p. 118 and pp. 171-172 of this dissertation.
\textsuperscript{158} See p. 124.
\textsuperscript{159} See p. 128.
\textsuperscript{160} See pp. 137-138.
non-actual or fictive. In the process of exploring the parameters of fiction, criticism and facto-criticism, I realised that I was more interested in the crossovers between them, especially when they were further enmeshed with the more personal voice of the memoir, autobiography and travelogue. I was fascinated with the voice, intentionality and subjective entanglement of the authors, and how they folded themselves into the work. I explored how different writers ‘talk’ about their processes: I read literary essays, interviews with authors, and I listened to podcasts where authors would either read excerpts from their works, or speak about their writing.

Ben Lerner and Chris Kraus are two writers who have significantly influenced my practice. Lerner is a contemporary poet, critic, novelist and Professor of English at Brooklyn College, New York, USA. He has published three poetry collections, although he is more known for his two award-winning novels. Kraus is an art critic, experimental filmmaker and co-editor of the innovative independent press Semiotext(e) that publishes works of ‘theory, fiction, madness, economics, satire, sexuality, science fiction, activism and confession.’ She has published seven books that purposefully entwine art criticism, confession and fiction. Both authors, in their own ways, manifest a performative approach towards writing, challenging the limits of the fictive, confessional and critical voice by actively shifting between them, and using one to illuminate the other.

The research was initially inspired by Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities (1972), where imaginary cities are metaphors for the complexities and limits of language and representation. Through the brief, though richly detailed descriptions of cities – each with extraordinary forms, shapes, inhabitants, histories, and futures – Calvino leads the reader through a journey of ideas. On the paradoxical relationship between the real and its representation, he writes: ‘It is our eyelids that separate [the real from its

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163 Paradoxically, although all the cities in the book are imaginary, they all refer to a real city, Venice. This is Calvino’s overall strategy in conveying the crisis of representation: that the more we attempt to ‘fix’ something by means of signifiers, the further we stray from the real or signified (that is, Venice gradually becomes ‘invisible’). What is visible to us is its representation (through language, for example): this is a similar strand of thinking behind Roland Barthes’ ‘written fashion’, where he postulates that it is the described garment that carries meaning and thus participates in a system of signification, not the ‘real garment.’ See Calvino, Invisible Cities, pp. 11-12; and Barthes, Roland. The Fashion System, op. cit., pp. 3-5.
representation], but we cannot know which is inside and which outside.’ 164 As a work of meta-fiction, the stories of the imaginary cities allude to how ideas and human experience of the world push up against language and imagination.

In the short stories of Lydia Davis and the travelogues of W. G. Sebald, the raw material of aesthetic experience divulges the idiosyncrasies of human nature and behaviour. Both Davis and Sebald are highly regarded as radical minds in contemporary literature.165 Their narratives reframe the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and present experience. In their worlds, writing operates beyond representation; it is the lens through which human experience – whether historical, mnemonic, phenomenological – becomes transparent. The act of writing is a contemplation of the process of experience itself; language has the capacity to reveal not only what, but how we experience.

That human beings are the subjects of stories means then that the communicative act in which a story is told is constitutive of its participants, that it is an experience in itself, and not merely a way of talking about experience, though it is that as well.166

Wlad Godzich, *Story and Situation*, 1984

The short stories of Lydia Davis are less concerned with what they are communicating than how they are told. Davis presents brief but acute observations of the everyday – chance events, associations and coincidences through the incisive syntax of her language. She says, ‘I’m leery of planning stories out ahead of time. Almost without exception they tend to begin from an idea or a phrase, which I then plunge straight

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164 ibid., p. 94.
Falling against texture

into and explore. What may be mundane events become extraordinary because of the way she relates them.

My experience of her work is similar to that of W. G. Sebald’s: to write is to indulge in the idleness of the everyday and our daydreams, to reach the nuances of what constitute living. In The Rings of Saturn (1995), Sebald constructs fictive, historical and philosophical musings through the events, people and things that he encounters, as he walks through Suffolk. Sebald excavates alternative histories through his imaginative observations. Included in the pages of his book are photographs that may or may not be historically accurate. His metaphorical walk through Suffolk is an encounter with history and memory as an imaginative process of writing-through, walking-through, thinking-through. Here, he brings to mind the figure of the flâneur: the drifting observer who confronts the wonders of the world as if it were his personal labyrinth to make sense of. The flâneur’s wanderings remind me of the mnemonic and dream-like dimension of writing.

My own experience of writing – durational, procedural, lived – is as significant as its purpose and outcome. Most of my prose-works, for instance Through the Writing Body and #2 – allude to the reflexive dimension of this practice; they are contemplative exercises in ‘writing about writing,’ a process of abstraction that eventually keys into sensation and reassemblates. Just as remembrance brings to mind an experience (a process of recollection), writing – as a compositional process – makes our imagination coherent, inasmuch as it makes it leap.

A pond becomes a lake, a breeze becomes a storm, a handful of dust is a desert, a grain of sulphur in the blood is a volcanic inferno.

W. G. Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 1995

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2.2 Shades of fiction

You adulterate the truth as you write. There isn't any pretense that you try to arrive at the literal truth. And the only consolation when you confess to this flaw is that you are seeking to arrive at poetic truth, which can be reached only through fabrication, imagination, stylisation. What I'm striving for is authenticity; none of it is real.\textsuperscript{170}

W.G. Sebald, \textit{The Emergence of Memory}, 2010

Shifting between authenticity and artifice, Chris Kraus' voice in \textit{I Love Dick} (2006)\textsuperscript{171} cuts across theory, fiction, art criticism and confession. The 'Dick' in the title refers to the real life sociologist and media theorist Dick Hebdige, and the book consists of the many letters that Kraus writes to him. In an intimate diaristic tone, she professes her (unrequited) desire for him, interjecting with her sense of failure in the Los Angeles art film world. Her confession quickly becomes a romantic fantasy all of her own construction. At one point, she writes in her diary, 'Dear Dick, I guess in a sense I've killed you. You've become Dear Diary.'\textsuperscript{172} The letters were subsequently sent to Hebdige in real life, a move in which fiction is flipped around to reveal its own construction and capability. The book is based on Kraus' real life marriage, career and letters to a real man, and the scenes of failure and desperation allude to the power imbalances and struggles of the female artist and voice in the Western contemporary art world. In her foreword to the book, the writer Eileen Myles refers to Kraus as a performer, and says, '... the book reminds me of Carl Dreyer's exhortation to use "artifice to strip artifice of artifice ..."'\textsuperscript{173} It is precisely the interactions between these voices – how they put a mirror up between them – that makes the book so effective in the expression of self-conscious authenticity, where the critical and the fictive are already confessional and diaristic, and vice versa.

In Ben Lerner's \textit{Leaving the Atocha Station} (2011),\textsuperscript{174} the protagonist, Adam Gordon (based on Lerner himself) is struggling with his own perceived inauthenticity as a poet. He self-medicates and fabricates parts of his persona, and begins to question what is

\textsuperscript{171} Kraus, Chris. \textit{I Love Dick}. Los Angeles, CA, USA: Semiotext(e), 2006.
\textsuperscript{172} ibid., p. 81.
\textsuperscript{173} Myles, Eileen. \textit{Foreword}, in Kraus, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{174} Lerner, Ben. \textit{Leaving the Atocha Station}. Minneapolis, USA: Coffee House Press, 2011.
indeed a genuine and profound experience even in the course of everyday life, or whether everything we encounter is already mediated – through technology for instance – and distorted through language. As a poet and critic, this is Lerner’s first ‘fiction’ novel. Like Kraus, he writes across different genres, enfolding fiction, memoir, autobiography and criticism. Lerner’s protagonist, Adam (who is largely based on himself), is in Madrid on an art fellowship to produce poetry, where he gradually becomes unfixed with the dysphoria of instability and tries to act himself in the vacillating space of translation and stewed meaning. Kraus (as herself in the book) is turning her obsession with an acquaintance to ‘produce’ an epistolary artwork. Both are performing self-examinations of what constitutes authenticity in artistic production, with the self as the subject in question. Lerner asserts that fiction is a powerful means for organising and understanding our actual experience, and that our speculations of the future (which are necessarily fictions) affect our lives in the present.

It is precisely the artifice of fiction – especially our acknowledgement of it – that reveals something authentic about our willing participation in it. As the critic and novelist Katie Kitamura says, ‘Rather than inject reality into fiction, fiction can be used to perceive the contours of what we describe as reality.’

This line of thinking illuminates the artifice that cross-grains fashion, which is the medium for the expression and imagination of mutable, and multiple, subjectivities. Just as a fashion show is a fabricated stage through scheduled sound and lighting, the fashioned self is a constructed existence of shifting identities in response to social structures. Fashion is the meta-fictional stage on which imaginary narratives of self and the world are knowingly played out in the actual.

The effects of speculative narratives are evident in the relationship between fashion and science fiction narratives. Like science and fantasy fiction, fashion is about creating visions of other worlds, with imaginative projections on how else the body and dress could be experienced. It has an affinity for the extreme, embracing novelty and the need to shock, transgress, surprise, and break boundaries, traditionally through the development of new silhouettes, designs, materials, fabrication processes,

Shades of fiction

and contexts.176 Marie O’Mahony, a scholar in advanced fashion and textiles, expresses the significance of science fiction thinking in the development of new textiles, in her studies on the depiction of materials and the representation of the body and its functions in literature and film.177

The incessant oscillation between the actual and the fictive – like a fugitive sliding back and forth – divulges the mutual implication of one in the other. These boundaries can also create a feedback loop. In the context of this research, there is a voice of self-awareness persistently gesturing towards the artifice that is always already in flight in the act of writing, which doubly refers to fashioning.

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A note on fictocriticism

The fictocritical model has been influential in this research from its early stages. It offers a precedent for writing in the academy that challenges the conventional rift between objective, critical distance and subjective expression. In her paper on fictocritical approaches to design practice research, Hélène Frichot calls for ‘new expressions of critical response that are more performative, that employ fiction and autobiography, that multiply voices and points of view.’178 Fictocriticism emerged from mostly feminist writing as a reaction against disciplinary academic authority, which called for a dismissal of ‘the fantasy of objectivity’ and deviation from ‘established modes of critical behaviour.’

According to Anna Gibbs, [Fictocriticism] is writing as research, stubbornly insisting on the necessity of a certain process in these days when writing is treated by those who determine what counts as research to be a transparent medium, always somehow after the event, a simple ‘outcome’ of a research which always takes place

Falling against texture elsewhere.\textsuperscript{179} This view is especially persuasive in the practice-based model of design research, within which the researcher/practitioner is deeply entwined. Frichot adds, ‘The critic is in the midst of the work, contributes to the work, and even creates the work, for the critic is also the creative practitioner.’\textsuperscript{180}

Fictocriticism, as opposed to traditional criticism, is concerned with the voice and position of the self. It is self-aware and self-conscious; it is a reflexive mode in that what is being said has a direct impact on how it is said and experienced, and vice versa. Rather than framing critical stance as distinct from creative practice, fictocriticism seeks the embedding of each in the other.

Fictocritical writing not only shifts between different voices and positions, but also between different forms; blending essay, fiction and poetry. It also makes use of what Gibbs refers to as ‘literary detritus’ – ‘indeterminate forms’ of writing including ‘the prose poem, and also of lists, fables, clichés.’\textsuperscript{181} Following Luce Irigaray’s ‘interruptive strategies’ in writing, fictocritical practices use ‘interruption’ as a technique to destabilise the text. Drawing on various situationist-based techniques including; \textit{dérive} (digression, wandering), \textit{détournement} (the turning around or undoing of something by turning it on itself), in addition to other modernist strategies such as collage, montage and the cut-up, fictocritical writing seeks to reveal spaces of interrogation, speculation and reflection.

Though my practice is not contextualised within strict fictocriticism, it does share similar strategies, forms and techniques listed above. However, it does not reflect fictocriticism’s activist inclinations and should not be interpreted in those terms. More importantly, I suggest that positioning the work within the genre of fictocriticism diverts it from the realm of fashion practice, and skews its fundamental intent to innovate the field of fashion from within.

Influenced by writers such as Lerner and Kraus, who deliberately experiment with the relationship between different authorial positions and multiple voices, my intent is to


\textsuperscript{180} Frichot, p. 70.

explore the authenticity of the writer’s experience as it transacts between actual experience, memory/recollection, dream and imagination. All of this remembering that I am less interested in drawing distinctions between the actual and fictive than in revealing the *reflexivity* between them – how one is enmeshed in the other.
2.3 Testing the practice

The writing is one aspect of the practice – the other vital aspects being the communication and dissemination of the pieces: to understand what it does and how the scope of how fashion – as concept, discourse and practice – could be enacted. I explored how the writing could be disseminated publicly and experienced by others to test, in practice, my approach to fashion as lived, aesthetic expression.

In seeking outlets to publish and present the prose-works, I intentionally submitted expressions of interest and proposals to a broad spectrum of publishers (online and print), academic conferences and exhibitions. I applied to conferences that focused on design practice, contemporary writing, the ‘art of research,’ contemporary women’s writing and fashion practice. I was attempting to identify which fields of research and practice would be most receptive to my approach to writing and fashion practice. There were as many rejections as there were acceptances. My proposal to contribute a chapter on ‘writing as fashion practice,’ to a book on the intersection of art and design practices, was rejected, as was my request to publish some prose-works in a journal on fashion criticism. I also never heard back from an art journal.

However, the reviewers for the conference on women’s writing replied with useful advice. They suggested that my proposal (for an exploratory paper to be written in three voices) was ‘more based in the realm of performance than women’s writing (i.e. performance is integral to the realisation of the work)’ and that ‘the panel did not think that this particular conference environment was necessarily the best place for your to explore these complex ideas.’ They further recommended that I consider a different area such as conferences involving performance and voice. By applying to these different outlets, engaging with their individual research agendas, and collating their responses, I was able to better understand how the research connected to existing paradigms of creative practice and research. I realised that the most appropriate context for my writing was indeed the field of fashion practice, with an emphasis on experience and the performativity of language. I also came to understand the significance of the audience’s engagement with the work; it was not simply about the writing but, more importantly, about how it would be presented and experienced as practice.

182 Anon., email to author, 24 January 2014.
My proposal to create an audio recording of my writing, in the form of an unofficial audio guide, was accepted for a fashion exhibition. I was also successful in my bid to write a new prose-work for a reading performance in an exhibition/symposium context. I was asked to collaborate with a fashion photographer and museum curator, to produce a piece of writing for an online publication, based on a selection of historical garments from the museum archive. My proposals were also accepted at five academic conferences, most of which had an exhibition or performance component. I presented reading performances of my prose-works at these events; they became a prominent feature of my practice.

The first of these was *Falling*, which was presented at the 2013 *Drawing Out* conference organised by the University of the Arts, London (UAL). The prose-work was used as the basis for a discussion on the power of words to enact fashion as abstract and imagined experiences. In opposition to the descriptive text adjacent to pictures in magazines, which asks for a precise, literal transference between the written and the image, it presents writing that provokes rather than describes, broadens rather than defines, mystifies rather than clarifies. In transacting between text and image, and especially in the case where one is physically absent, the less accurate and certain the other becomes, and, therefore, the richer its potential to emerge as something else entirely. For these purposes, I presented a reading of *Falling* at the conference rather than a conventional paper presentation: a move to express the concept through the practice itself. The audience comprised scholars in art, architecture and design practice research. This presentation became the basis for the book chapter, ‘Writing Fashion: From the Static Image the Writing Grew’ published in *The Drawn Word*, edited by Professor Stephen Farthing from the UAL.

*Falling* was further used as the basis for ‘Writing on the Transformative and Imaginary Body,’ a paper presented at the 2014 *Shapeshifting* conference organised by the


Auckland University of Technology. I presented a second iteration of *Falling* as a reading performance, to test how it may expressively mediate the core concepts of the research: aesthetic experience, phenomenology and the ekphrastic imagination. For the 2013 conference *Research Through Design: Praxis and Poetics*, organised by Northumbria University at Newcastle upon Tyne, I delivered a reading performance of *Through the Writing Body, a Beginning*. It was presented in an intimate setting at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, to a group of designers, artists and academics external to fashion. The conference organisers tested a new conference format where presenters were asked to speak about their practices through the ‘artefact,’ which, in my case, was a piece of prose. *Through the Writing Body* was the basis for discussing the techniques and strategies of the practice, and culminated in a paper published in the conference proceedings with the title *Writing Fashion as Contemporary Practice: Experience, Imagination, Knowledge*.

In addition to reading, I also tested how one may listen to my work. The project: *Do you dream of me at night?* was produced as a script for an unofficial audio guide for the 2013 exhibition, *Walter Van Beirendonck: Dream the World Awake* held at the RMIT Design Hub. It was presented as a 25-minute voice recording that visitors could stream as they walked through the exhibition. It could also be downloaded and experienced on its own. This work was composed as a dreamscape – a dream narrated in fragments – that was specifically to be read and listened to: it held alliterations and rhymes, along with deliberate pauses and gaps in the narrative. I drew from Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s project, *Murder of Crows* (2008), which I

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University of Technology, 14-16 April 2014.


experienced at the Pier 2/3 site during the 2008 Sydney Biennale; Cardiff’s voice had an enormous effect on me, and influenced the way I developed this audio guide. Subsequently, it formed the basis for a discursive paper on fiction in fashion, entitled *The Power of Fiction in the Fashioning of Walter Van Beirendonck*. It was presented at the 2014 International Federation of Fashion Technology Institutes (IFFTI) conference: *The Power of Fashion*, held at the Bunka Gakuen University in Tokyo.

While I did not intentionally set out to locate my practice in the exhibition and museum contexts, they were an appropriate choice to test the work in public. They connect with my interest in fashion curatorial practices that engage with the performativity of language and the specificity of site, in the production and presentation of fashion (as) experiences. However, it should be noted that it was not the institution of the museum or the establishment of the gallery space that was important to me, but rather their public context as space to test, present and discuss creative works, and as a stage to perform and conduct experiences. The conjunction of the performat ive stage and the public context, along with an attentive audience, was instrumental in shifting my approach to the practice and speculation for future projects. They led me to further develop the performative and experiential aspects of the practice, to be more attuned to the conditions and environments in which the work would be experienced and discussed. These notions were carried through in the project, *Closer, in Fragments*, which was created in response to a specific site, the RMIT Design Hub. I composed it while imagining how it would sound being read or whispered to another.

*Closer* was presented at the *SITUATION 14 Symposium and Exhibition*, which was part of the Interior Design / Interior Architecture Educators Association (IDEA), in collaboration with RMIT’s Interior Design program. It was presented as a reading performance staged on the dramatic staircase between the basement and ground floor of the Design Hub. *Situation 14* attendees – primarily artists, writers and practitioners

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from art and interior design – dotted themselves around me on the staircase as I read. *Closer* was about the power of words to evoke the particular ‘mood’ of narratives. It was based on my understanding of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s notion of *stimmung*: the lingering resonance in the air that was invisible though ubiquitously felt and lived – as with sound or weather – that would test the powers of perceptive and verbal expressions. The ‘constructed’ reading situation at the Design Hub was as intimate as it was alienating; my naturally soft voice was amplified through speakers, set in a very tall, though narrow, concrete staircase, lined with claustrophobic metal pleating. I wanted to convey my conception of *stimmung* – metaphorically, as well as palpably felt – as the force of gravity and magnetism between people, and between people and their environment. *Closer* was essentially a project that tested the notion of ‘lived, aesthetic phenomenon’ that I offer as the core of my fashion concept.

In addition to reading performances, I also tested the work across various publication outlets. The prose-work, #2, for example, was published in *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, an electronic refereed journal published twice yearly. This particular issue focused on creative writing in and as research, in response to the current challenge faced by writers in the academy ‘to identify with greater precision how their creative work genuinely contributes to knowledge in both the field of writing and other specified related areas of research.’ Contributors were asked to submit previously unpublished creative writing, and to situate them in the context of how they may be read and assessed as research.

Aside from design research conferences and publications, I also tested the work in non-academic outlets. The prose-work *Through the Writing Body* was published on the blog site of *Vestoj: The Journal of Sartorial Matters*, as well as recorded as an audio track. Following this, *Kaleidoscopia* was published in *Vestoj’s* issue 4, *On Fashion and Power* (2013). The prose-work: *How to escape the present* was commissioned by *Vestoj* as

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part of the project *Inside Out* (2014)\(^{198}\) – a collaboration with the Fashion and Textiles curator at the National Gallery of Victoria (Paola Di Trocchio) and a fashion photographer (Adam Custins). Working with a selection of historical garments from the gallery’s archive, the collaboration sought to draw out the innate, aesthetic qualities of archival pieces that were either overlooked or dismissed, by turning them inside out – literally and figuratively. The photographer captured the interior spaces and details of the garments and interpreted them as abstract marks and textures, whilst the curator wrote about their hidden histories and contemporary contexts. The imaginary narratives that I produced, based on the garments, were intended to express the structure of their compositions – metaphorically, to reveal the mechanics of the writing/imagining process. I used the garments as catalysts for processes of speculation, reconstruction and imagination – processes that are fundamental to creative practice.

A fundamental quality of my practice is deliberate self-awareness. By pointing to its own processes of construction, and its contingency on the public context and performative environment in which it is presented, it demonstrates an understanding of creative practice as inherently reflexive, as that which continually unravels itself to discover further structures and possibilities.

2.4 Performative inflection

In a contemporary postmodern world, knowledge is no longer ratified by meta-narratives of absolute truth, but rather by the performativity of the operations of knowledge - by the way it acts, and the effects it has …

Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 1979

In developing a new way to ‘write fashion,’ the research opens up questions of what the writing says and how to say it. It points to the broader issue of the criticality of the practice, and by extension, my agency as a practitioner. While my work is not positioned within the genre conventions of creative writing, fictocriticism, criticism and memoir, it is influenced by the performativity of the voices, especially their effects on the works’ critical intentions.

In *I Love Dick*, Chris Kraus channels the voice of a struggling female artist who fights to be heard through her unrequited letters. In my reading of her text, Kraus is performing, through the book’s meta-fictional structure and the narrator’s sense of acute self-awareness, her agency as a critic, novelist and artist. In a review published on the Observer.com entitled ‘The Novelist as Performance Artist,’ Michael Miller refers to Kraus as a ‘theoretical novelist’ and her book as ‘more of a performance than a typical book.’ I suggest that the performativity of the writing, and thus its emphasis on the experience of both the writer and reader, points more to a mode of creative practice than any literary genres.

This is the line of thinking that has significantly influenced the development of my writing. Most of the prose-works are concerned with the tension between aesthetic imagination and language – how to write, and how they might be received. The experiential dimension to the writing, and the effect of the prose-works – in all their tentativeness, immediacy and contingency – are enacted through the public presentations. Activities such as public readings, as well as text and sound-based...

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Performative inflection

exhibitions convey an inherent performativity to the work, which, in turn, has a vital influence on how the practice is to be understood. Most of my prose-works were written for the purpose of being read out aloud, whispered, listened to. When I wrote Through the writing body, #2, Do you dream of me at night? and Falling, I imagined them as intimate dialogues and monologues, as conversations between myself and the reader/listener. They were intended to suggest the intimacy of my presence and voice.

In his essay, ‘Introducing Performing/Knowing (2010),’ Gavin Butt explores the place of performance in the contemporary production of knowledge, and the performativity of knowledge. A contemporary art historian and performance theorist, Butt’s essay served as an introduction to the research project, ‘Performing Idea’ in 2010 – part of the larger event ‘Performance Matters’ – which brought together performance studies practitioners to explore the ‘shifting relations between performance practice and discourse, event and writing.’ According to Butt, the significance of performative practice is now acknowledged in disciplines beyond performance and theatre studies, such as gender and queer studies, anthropology, art history, and literary and media studies.

I suggest that the ‘performative turn’ in the production of knowledge readily extends to the culture of research in creative practice. In the paper: ‘Unpacking Models, Approaches, and Materialisations of the Design PhD (2014),’ Laurene Vaughan and Andrew Morrison – scholars in media, communication and interdisciplinary design – acknowledge the difficulties in communicating knowledge, especially in a mode that does justice to the ‘situated and practice-informed ways of working’ that constitute design practice models. The nuances of ‘how we design’ and ‘how we know’ may not easily translate into a tangible prototype, and are more difficult to publish in journals and conferences that place their definitions and criteria for academic rigour largely in more traditional and established disciplinary academic domains. In light of this, Vaughan and Morrison call upon design researchers to experiment and find their own forms to express the idiosyncrasies of their activities and expressions, such as

202 Butt, op. cit., 2010.
‘inflecting’ them with ‘performative characteristics.’

The poetics of creative practice often resist straightforward analysis. In his essay, ‘The Known World (2010),’ Ross Gibson calls attention to the significance of embodied and tacit knowledge in critical discourse, particularly when creative arts are used as the basis of scholarly research. As an artist, a writer and a scholar in contemporary arts and creative research, he suggests that creative practices reflect the interactive processes underlying cultural phenomena, which are ‘complex, dynamic, relational, ever-altering and emergent.’ The ‘ebbs, flows and pulses of artistically led research’ constitute a vital mode of knowing, and play a critical role in the transfer of knowledge. The dynamism that cradles creative processes calls for a performative engagement with knowledge and meaning. It also brings attention to the reflexive nature of the relationship between the researcher/practitioner, the work, and the audience. What becomes important is how the poetics of practice are communicated and experienced by others, to show and perform the research rather than to give a distanced analysis.

Drawing from these ideas, I engaged with different presentation outlets and formats, such as audio recordings and performative readings, to test how the writing would be experienced in live settings. I was curious to find out how the performative inflection might alter my own understanding of the practice. I performed readings of my prose-works at several academic conferences on design practice, in lieu of conventional paper presentations. The intent was to perform the writing as a direct expression of the research process. The prose-work Through the Writing Body, for instance, uses the metaphor of ‘the robed body’ and bodily inscription to explore the mechanics of the imagination, by revealing its own processes of construction. As previously mentioned,

it was delivered as a reading performance at Northumbria University, as a deliberate response to the conference theme, *Research through Design: Praxis and Poetics*.

Butt calls attention to ‘how the traditional boundaries between critical and scholarly writing on the one hand, and creative practice on the other, have been broken down or traversed by forms like artists’ writings, the performance lecture, the talk event, and by critics, academics and curators who increasingly think of themselves as artists or creative practitioners of one kind or another.’\(^{207}\) For example, Adrian Heathfield, Professor of Performance and Visual Culture at the University of Roehampton, examines the performativity of knowledge. Through his performance lectures, dialogues, fragments and essays, Heathfield presents knowledge as ‘talk,’ or that which is formed and exchanged between people: the verbal as an event. In his book *After Criticism* (2004), Butt suggests that while these ‘novel, less overtly theoretical’ modes of critical response deviate from ‘established modes of critical procedure,’\(^{208}\) they are no less critical in practice.

The concept of ‘talk’ and the primacy of the spoken word in artistic practice was the subject of a 2009 show at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London. The ICA *Talk Show*\(^{209}\) explores voice as medium, where the verbal is no longer relegated only to that which frames the art work – as a discourse ‘about’ it; rather, ‘talk’ itself has becomes ‘the thing … the work itself.’\(^{210}\) This brings to mind the work of performance artist Andrea Fraser, who stages ‘museum tours’ as a parody of the institutionalisation of art. It is neither the work in the museum nor the discourse about the work, but the experience of Fraser’s speech as she presents the tour that is the work of art itself. Her work demonstrates the power of oration – and the performativity of the verbal – in the production of art as experience.

Fashion, as an aesthetic expression of ephemerality – poised at the verge of transformation – is inherently performative; it coaxes us to escape with it. What fascinates me most – and the conception that has become the fundamental trope of this research – is fashion’s fugitiveness: a paradoxical quality that denotes fashion, and, yet, at the same time, estranges it from contextual definition. If the agency of fashion

\(^{207}\) Butt, op. cit., 2010.  
\(^{208}\) Butt, op. cit., 2004, p.6.  
\(^{209}\) *Talk Show,* *Institute of Contemporary Arts,* London, 6-31 May 2009,  
http://www.ica.org.uk/whats-on/seasons/talk-show (accessed 8 August 2014)  
\(^{210}\) Butt, 2010.
is that which is ‘given to disappear,’ I would suggest that the purpose of writing
fashion, then, is not to represent, reproduce and define fashion, but to evoke its
imaginative potential. In this sense, writing and speaking are an indulgence in the spirit
of pursuit; what becomes important here is not the outcome but the performative
possibilities of writing – how fashion escapes the verbal, the means by which it makes
us chase for words.
2.5 Being fugitive

This is our Protagonist,
indeffable, save for a heated presence,
verging a palpable absence.

We sense it coming as an amorphous force-field,
tuned to the frequency of our bodies.

It flickers in-and-out;
mental static,
comes to us in fragments of an idea:
resonance of an orphan experience
to which
words fail.

A moment’s evanescence as moments evanesce,
keeps us changing,
keeps us dancing,
around
the margins of a cascading centre.

Fugue shadows disentangling from the light,
aching, abstract and wanting,
chased and chasing.

It is, utterly magnetic.

WHM, Closer, in fragments, 2014

In my practice, writing is a durational process of composition; it is a way of drawing out impressions and ideas. The way I write stems from my training in fashion design,
and MA research into the phenomenology of dress and the body through sound, text
and live performance. The approach has developed from my ongoing fascination with
the aesthetic-experiential dimension of the body, dress and the fashion concept, and
more importantly, to find a way to actively account for it. My prose-works are
influenced by the aesthetic drama of fashion photography and the short film, where
the body and its movements were often central to the visual frame, along with
intensity of material and atmospheric sensations: cloth, sounds, colours, breath, gravity. My approach to fashion expression is inherently phenomenological – an aesthetic engagement with the visual, aural, textual, temporal and spatial.

The world of the verbal – writing, listening, reading – is constructed over time. Narratives unravel as a sequence of events and our participation in their making. Ideas emerge as patterns of relations. Messages form in flash-point encounters between disparate images and words, and inklings of meaning evolve between what is written or said and what is left unspoken or elliptical. Narrative possibilities take shape in the form of stories, prose poems, essays, and collections of lists, verses, words, and quotations. They are loosely provocative, descriptive, affective, and open-ended – permutations of messages and ideas. The description of an object or an image is exposed to the slippery processes of (mis)representation, (mis)quotation, (mis)interpretation and (mis)translation, spurring the entwinement of language and the imagination. It is this sense of the fugitive that has inspired the development of my writing, and determined how the practice and fashion concept should be understood.

The literary sense of the verb ‘fugitive’ means ‘fleeing.’ Its etymology lies in the Latin term *fugit*, which is related to both *fugere* (‘to flee’) and *fugare* (‘to chase’).\(^{211}\) The idea of being ‘fugitive’ points to the qualities of being allusive and also gesturing towards or chasing something. By example: ‘My thoughts are quickened by this rhythm of unseen feet round which the anklets of light are shaken,’ says the poet Rabindranath Tagore in *The Fugitive* (1921).\(^{212}\)

The figure of the ‘fugitive’ was initially drawn from Charles Baudelaire’s essay, ‘The Painter of Modern Life.’ The ‘painter’ in the essay is Constantin Guys, an illustrator for the *Illustrated London News*. Baudelaire cast him as the ‘observer, philosopher, flâneur’ of modern life, as ‘the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity it contains.’ He adds, ‘For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.’\(^{213}\) As a special feature of the urban metropolis, fashion – in all its transience and fugitiveness – was, for


Baudelaire, the paradigm by which to capture the aesthetic experience of the ephemeral, transience and fleetingness of quotidian life in the modern world. In the passing fads of everyday objects and mannerisms of the fashionable, contemporary existence, along with its paradoxes and alluring illusions, he sought to capture a sense of dynamism, which, in its very brevity, constituted the essence of modernity.

And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what? Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him – this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert - has an aim loftier than that of a mere flâneur, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance … He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call ‘modernity’; for I now of no better word to express the idea I have in mind. He makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory … By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.214

Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1863

Baudelaire addresses the notion of the ‘fugitive’ several times in this essay, alongside ‘ephemeral’ and ‘contingent,’ to refer to the metaphysical paradigm of modernity, of which fashion is a primary symptom. Fashion expresses an abstract dynamism of everyday life; it is the image and impression of movement, multiplicity and change, and the *flâneur* is central to the ‘passing’ experience of it all. Extending the notion of ‘fugitive fashion’ – and resonating the actions and postures of the *flâneur* – I imagine the fugitive as a dynamic figure constantly on the move, always in passing and leaving transient traces in his wake.

At the heart of it was a game of chase, a basic and uncomplicated conceit. She saw, in the shadows, moving around her, these dark figures of the fugitive, gliding in and out of doors, leaping across the hallway. One moment it would disappear inside a drawer, and the next moment it would weave itself into the lacy curtain. Silent marks that changed shape

as they merged into the edges of things. She traced these movements with her index fingers. As the pair of fingers danced around each other, she could see the fugitive slipping out of the captive’s grasp, over and over again. She realised that it was the captive who kept letting the fugitive go, to keep the communion going. She understood then that her escape would be inevitable, though illusory.

WHM, *When I Think about Dynamism*, 2015

The sense of ‘being fugitive’ expresses the dynamic processes of imagining and writing. It imbues a constant sense of departure and pursuit – fleeing from one place whilst chasing another. As such, it is a metaphor for a specific mode of writing practice that is entwined with the agency of fashion as lived imagination. It describes my approach in writing as a pursuit for lived, aesthetic experience, while at the same time acknowledging the transience, elusiveness and mutability of such experience. Premising the dynamism of the fashion imagination, the fugitive points to a mode of practice that is tentative, contingent and restless – the fugitive is always about to escape the ‘here and now.’ I wrote the prose-work *When I Think about Dynamism* during the process of writing this dissertation because I needed to find a way to show my ideas around dynamism. I composed a list of brief metaphors, to allude and gesture towards some ideas around dynamism, using fugitive figures to enact them.

As a compulsion of the imagination, the fugitive also expresses fashion’s allusion to other possible worlds. This is not to say that the fugitive is only involved in escapist fantasies, but rather that it resists fixed identities by perpetually gesturing towards the potential for change. The fugitive elides fixed identities and definitions with their established parameters; he/she shuffles between what is already known, and what is not-yet-known. The fugitive is always partially concealed and has to be chased – a perpetually shifting transaction between the realm of the imagination and its verbal expression. All efforts to describe the fugitive – to ascribe meaning – must admit to their contingencies, as the fugitive is always in transit, suspended between this and the next. The fugitive lends everything a sense of reflexivity, fluidity and immediacy.
2.6  Dynamism

The fugitive is a device by which to understand the urges, intents and conceptual approach of the practice, in line with the inherent dynamism that cradles fashion. The image as well as the actions and sensibilities of pursuit serve to illustrate the tendencies of this kind of writing in contemporary fashion practice. The fugitive echoes the dynamism of modernity to which Baudelaire first alluded; whilst some decades later, Walter Benjamin pushed for a new language that could lend it textual form. In The Arcades Project, he urged for more immediate and ephemeral textual practices that could utter the fragmentation, eclecticism and dynamism of modernity. Inspired by the contemporary innovations of journalism and advertising, radio, photography and film, as well as the fragmentary writings of the early German Romantics, Benjamin brought to the fore the techniques and effects of the monad, the treatise, the constellation, the aphorism, the ephemeral 'thought', 'dream' and 'dialectical' image, the textual 'snapshot', the cinematic montage.\[215\] These formal as well as perceptual devices pushed for the richness of creative interpretation and indeterminacy in reading and textual representations. I suggest the goal of such works aspires not to come to a definite conclusion or meaning, but rather to participate in the spontaneity and immediacy of acts – gleaning, collaging, juxtaposing, uttering – that constitute a dynamism of expression.

The Futurists and poets sought to manifest, within everyday gestures and especially in art, a similar sense of fragmentation, spontaneity and simultaneity that was brewing at the dawn of the technological age. In Futurist poetry, Marinetti called for onomatopoeic noise, a real fragment of sound matter. He urged poetry to be composed of intuitive analogical associations, so that it may 'seize the primal state of language, prior to any rational finality.'\[216\] Lines of writing became slanting, vertical and circular patterns, leading to a 'materialistic poetry' that premised the physical and the plastic expression of typographical characters.

A jewel and an egg, a potentially useful quote. Seville is an orange kinda town but there’re no orange trees in Orange County. 6 faces on a cube then 9 smaller faces then 36 faces all of you collapsing protruding

melting fracturing. Hey sugar. Neon pink, mohair, lollipop face, mother-of-pearl light at the tip of her nose, enamel carousel. And she turns her head and all I see is cellophane yellow across her face y’know? It’s now or never, she’s the perfect shot, here and now, ‘nude synthetic with mud and wooden beads painted ivory and yellow.’

WHM, *All in or Nothing*, 2015

While my writing practice does not engage with the performative gestures as physical and graphic expressions that characterise Futurist art, fashion and poetry, it does echo the Futurist fascination with the sensation of dynamism, albeit in a different light. My understanding of the aesthetics of dynamism is influenced by the digital age, rather than the mechanical; it is the screen-based immersion of live simulcasts, multiplicity of information and abstract digital simulation that is instant, fractured, careless and repetitive.

The prose-work *All in or Nothing* sought to capture the rush of images and sound bites that pervade our everyday digital experience of fashion. The images and voices in the increasingly ubiquitous screen-based fashion experiences express a rush of experiences, all at once, such that their juxtaposition incites a kaleidoscopic world that is continually transforming – fragmenting, deforming, reforming, recomposing, blooming, blurring – and multiplying.

At 5:30am you could see the city below in that beautiful state of half-awakeness.

On the table there is a suite of photographs. They are lined up in chronological order, though it’s hard to tell unless you compare the dates written on the back of each one. 6.12.11. 14.2.12. 7.3.12. 22.4.13. The image in all the photographs is the same, just taken at different angles, at different times. I shuffle them around to try to imagine it as seen, at once, from all angles, like a body that has exploded and then jammed into a picture frame. The numbers turn into a pattern of black lines and dots.

Flickering ants move in imperfect grids below. They meet at a distance, kiss. Gazes overlap. They pose, wait and pull back.
They form a pattern that you read but are not a part of.

WHM, *When I think about Dynamism*, 2015

As opposed to Futurist physicality, my conception of dynamism within contemporary fashion experience is more visual, sensual, and experiential. It is a form of kaleidoscopic dynamism, which Baudelaire alluded to:

Thus the lover of universal life enters the crowds as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and producing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.217

Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1821

The kaleidoscope became popular in nineteenth-century London when it represented a new way of seeing the world – one cradled an endless dynamism of sensational configurations. According to Helen Groth, ‘to describe an event or phenomenon as kaleidoscopic evoked a sense of perpetual transformation,’218 and for early nineteenth-century London, it became an optical representation of the ‘existential flux’ of modernity.

The prose-work *Kaleidosopia* sought to express the sense of dynamism that pulses through the continual fashioning of our identities and appearances. Seen through the kaleidoscope, the mannequin is refracted into limitless figures and pieces – simultaneously moving in and out of different configurations; it is the metaphor for the fragmentation, multiplicity and changeability of the fashioned self that is always in flux.

In the room: a flawless creature, the phenomenon of our pursuit. She is standing upright in the center of the space, surrounded by angled walls of glass mirror. Images of herself – endlessly fractured and multiplied – are pulsing and reverberating in symmetrical loops all around her. The

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217 Baudelaire, op. cit., pp. 9-10.
Falling against texture

ceiling and floor, also of glass mirror, suspend her in a state of illusory motion. Each move she makes ripples outwards and back repetitively, continually drawing her forward then back to the moment before. All is in chaotic equilibrium.

WHM, *Kaleidoscopia*, 2013

*Kaleidoscopia* further expresses the tentativeness and contingency of the aesthetic encounter as that palpable moment when we catch ourselves mid-process. The kaleidoscopic image, the ‘composition,’ exists as a relation of parts — the coalescence of a moment that must pass. At the point of aesthetic encounter, it forms a singular entity — albeit one that does not ‘actually’ exist. As we follow the turn of the kaleidoscope, the image reveals its arbitrariness, its momentous composition of interacting parts is an illusion of our own making. As soon as we acknowledge it, it would have already changed.

She pulsates with myriad possibilities, drawing you again and again into her fold — and therein lays her power. In this kaleidoscopia, she is your mask and mirror, your flight and soft release. She is the point of departure.

WHM, *Kaleidoscopia*, 2013
2.7 Being allusive: between image and word


WHM, Notes, 2013

My choice of words is a significant facet of my practice. They express my fascination for the immaterial, phenomenological dimension of experience: the realm of vapours, gases, sound, vibration, resonance, gravity and dream. Words such as ‘oozing, profusion and pulsing’ suggest the alchemical behaviour of matter in their perpetual transformations from one state to another, while ‘hollowed,’ ‘peeling back’ and ‘rising’ are intended to coax impressions of surfaces and depths in the midst of formation/deformation. They amplify the aesthetic phenomena of the sensorium – the visual, aural, tactile, olfactive and taste, as well as gravity, weight, distance, and depth – which immediately evoke the body.

In this state of transformation everything seems to pulsate in symphony (you can almost taste the conceit, but you choose not to question it). So, you, too, want to be thoroughly dissolved into it.

Everything is simultaneously expanding, bursting, melting, dripping and falling apart then together again – a chaotic transformation of solids to liquids to gases. You are losing body mass, waste material draining out of you and accumulating around you. It dissolves into air, rearranging itself into new striations of sensation, leaving your tongue wanting as you taste something indescribable.

WHM, Falling, 2012

The body in Falling is caught in a whirlwind of transformative processes – the intangible flows and effects find tangible expression through the body. Here, I am alluding to the ephemerality and mutability that constitute the dynamism of fashion; these qualities fascinate me because they evade the fixity of concrete meanings and representations, preferring instead fertile ambiguities.
In her discussion on perceptual mimesis, Elaine Scarry – a contemporary scholar in literature and language – speaks of ‘thin’ images as ‘rare.’ The term ‘rare’ is derived from classical Latin, rānus, depicts something that is of ‘loose structure, porous, widely spaced, sparse, sparsely occupied.’219 We can also refer to a colour as ‘rare,’ meaning it is ‘thin, faint, pale.’ Scarry cites Aristotle, who conceives of ‘rarity’ not as an absence of something, but as a positive possession. He writes:

‘… any body which has considerable rarity tends to rise upwards, for the air supports it. This we often see when we throw a gold coin or some other heavy substance into the water and it immediately sinks; whereas if we throw in a piece of wood which has rarity in it, it does not sink … That which has rarity can never altogether sink.’220

Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC), On Plants, 1913

An ‘airy’ substance such as a vapour, feather, or whisper, and a ‘thin’ image such as a vague memory, take on an aesthetic urgency; they are unfixed, perpetually poised on the verge of movement and change. They beckon us to have a closer look and feel. It is by virtue of their lack of definition and porosity that we are able to immerse ourselves in them. Here, it is possible to connect the positive qualities of the undefinable image, with fashion’s ephemerality, mutability and transitoriness – that it is precisely these qualities that elevate the imagination.

In his fictional fashion magazine, La Dernière Mode (1874), Stéphane Mallarmé uses words such as ‘vapour,’ ‘clouds,’ ‘perfume,’ or ‘dream,’ to describe clothing; to him, fashion is a phenomenon ‘characterised by the undefinable, transitory and

219 The term ‘rare’ is originally used in reference to ‘an organ or tissue, soil, or other substance having the constituent material or particles loose or not closely packed together; not dense or compact; attenuated.’ In later use chiefly: (of air or a gas) having low density, thin. Also fig., with reference to the workings of the mind: refined, subtle, rarefied. See “rare, adj.” OED Online. June 2015. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158248 (accessed 22 August 2015)

immaterial.’221 It is that which ‘passes,’ leaving behind a void, which, for him, constitutes a ‘necessary antithesis to the material,’222 just as the lacuna in music makes possible the inherent rhythm and pace of the overall score.


I am drawn to words that gesture towards the dynamism of aesthetic experiences – the intangible forces of time and space that give them a dimensional quality.

*Free-Falling.* Some words can carry us away – they say something about the way we imagine.

[+]

Ensemble: coat of duck feathers painted gold; skirt of white silk embroidered with gold thread.

Prosthetic leg, no. 13; carved elm wood.

Headpiece; silver, Swarovski gemstones, and gull feathers. Dress; *cream silk and lace.*223 (for *Widows of Culloden*) (my brackets)

Descriptions, *Savage Beauty* exhibition catalogue, 2011

The composition of the prose-work *Kaleidoscopia* was based on the descriptions of Alexander McQueen’s garments and accessories, excerpted from the back of the *Savage Beauty* exhibition catalogue. While there were images of these works in the catalogue, I did not refer to them in the writing and instead relied only on my hazy impression of them. Recalling them through the writing, as fast, fugue textures, was a compelling process. The fugitive imagination – akin to writing – is fleeting and slippery; it carries us along on its aesthetic flux. To describe a remembered image is to throw oneself intensely into the whirlwind of remembrance, which always already tends towards the imagination, and so we improvise and reconstruct the image, to begin a process of imagining: to create fiction out of remembrance. Just as memories are unhinged from their original contexts and cast into newly imagined settings, iconic fashion figures, images and events, as well as quotations from other writers are folded

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222 ibid.
into my compositional processes, such that I am engaged in imagined dialogues with them. Possibilities occur as meanings bloom in the slippage between image and word, between the actual and the non-actual.

In the project *The Concise Dictionary of Dress* (2010),224 fashion curator Judith Clark and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips created an installation at Blythe House in London, with an accompanying publication. The project expresses, in my opinion, a kind of magic that happens when a word encounters its own set of definitions, such that the latter does not merely describe or illuminate it, but also draws out the shadows that haunt it. Each word and its definitions are associated with the display of a garment, and what arises, in the gap between them, is a tentative, though potent, eruption of meanings, coaxing palpable experiences of anxiety, wish and desire. For example, the word ‘plain’ is defined as: (1) ‘Nothing special where nothing special intended;’ and (2) ‘Hiding to make room.’225 In the exhibition space, ‘plain’ was displayed next to a series of dresses wrapped in a white material used by museum conservators to preserve artefacts. The act of covering the dresses – thereby erasing their ‘actual’ identities – invited the viewer to speculate and imagine. Akin to a blank slate, ‘plainness’ was conveyed as a requisite condition for imagination.

Brian Dillon, a critic and writer in art and design, writes about the seductiveness of archives in reference to this project,226 pointing out that ‘… knowledge arises precisely out of the fugitive and unpredictable relations between images,’227 and – I would add – in connection with words and specific viewing/reading conditions. Constellations of things, images and words – the archive, library, lexicon and cabinet of curiosities – manifest the mechanism of my compositional process and imagination. Writing becomes a conduit to my understanding of fashion, not as a way to represent it but to gamble with its transformative agency.


227 ibid.
A dictionary definition functions by boxing a word into its definition via other words, although in doing so, it opens up another word/world that seeks further definition. The box reveals an escape hatch. In the midst of perceptual intensity, the more closely I describe an image, the sooner the words lure further images, allowing the original image to disintegrate and transform into other possibilities. Without a preconceived plot or program, the processes of verbal description and aesthetic imagination are free to roam and coax each other to bloom. Processes of allusion, association, quotation and mis/appropriation take over.

This calls attention to the notion of *ekphrasis*, which is further discussed in chapter 4, *Writing-Imagining*. Ekphrasis is the art of the verbal to express the nonverbal: while the latter can be real, the former is often a work of fiction. The notion of fiction, as it is used in this context, does not refer to artifice or fantasy, but rather to the creation of something new as we shift from one mode of expression to another. Ross Gibson explains the ekphrastic process as one of ‘concentrating on some highly resonant influence or extant text or object so as to translate the old thing into a new, personal utterance.’

Through the ‘mutative process’ of translation, an ekphrastic description can transcend that which it is describing. The contemporary novelist, poet and literary critic Ben Lerner suggests that ekphrasis in prose fiction has the potential to shift our perspectives on the aesthetic world.

I’m drawn to an ekphrastic prose that operates at a greater remove, less concerned with detailing the object than the total environment in which the artistic encounter takes place. Prose fiction can allow you to offer a robust description of all the epiphenomena and contingencies involved in a particular character’s encounter with a particular work.

Ben Lerner, *The Actual World*, 2013

*Falling* started with the intention of depicting the image of Alexander McQueen’s red and black ostrich feathers and glass dress from the VOSS collection (Spring/Summer 2001). The process of description opened out to the impression of an entire world of aesthetic sensation. In describing the ostrich feathers and glass medical slides, and

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especially the *redness* of the dress, I was led to the visceral dimension of blood, animals, butchery and bodily decay – red skies, the movement, weight and smell of liquids, gases and melting solids – palpably imagined from inside the depths of the body. It was the pursuit of the *quality of redness* that spawned the aesthetic world of *Falling*. The *qualia* of aesthetic experience point to a sensuous and wondrous dimension, spun through the ekphrastic imagination.

In *Falling*, the body is thrown into different worlds; in each, it is intrinsically expressed through the *affect* of the weather, as well as sounds, smells and the weight of other bodies in its immediate surrounding. This alludes to the dimension of atmospheres and moods, captured in the notion of *stimmung*, referring to the encounters between our bodies and material surroundings that affect our psyche.\(^{230}\) The notion of *stimmung*, in the context of the qualia of aesthetic experience, tests the power of our verbal description to tune into the phenomenal world, which, by virtue of the ekphrastic imagination, opens out to the vagaries of undiscovered realms.

\(^{230}\) Gumbrecht, op. cit., p. 4. See chapter 4 for further discussion on *stimmung*.
2.8 Between fragment and montage

My prose-works are plot-less. I do not compose with any program or resolution in mind; rather I compose with fragments of images and strings of words to produce brief textual images, sketches and collages. The point is less about delivering a narrative than pursuing brief and tentative impressions – to spur the ephemeral, suggestive and fugitive dimensions that conjure the allure of dream. Each fragment alludes to another through layers of metaphor, association and disjunction. Each piece is not an end in itself, but a part of an on-going, iterative process of composition. Vivid scenarios are juxtaposed with sparse narratives. I piece together fragments of visuals, memories and quotations, to form provocations, thoughts, ideas and questions.

Rising veins, coursing blood, splitting skin. Mouldy wood, rustling feathers, sticky blights. This is the surreality of the landscape to which she and you are entwined, a deeply romantic tale set in the wilderness of your imagination.

WHM, Kaleidoscopia, 2013

Kaleidoscopia, along with other prose-works such as Falling, Do You Dream of Me at Night? and How to Escape the Present are composed as visual and textual montages. The narratives are formed through tentative associations and metaphors – the juxtaposition (of image and word) brought about by dissonances, chance and the accidental. Like surreal dream sequences, these are compositions of visual and verbal references, memories and imaginations – impressionistic, immediate and serendipitous – that burgeon, often much to our surprise, at the moment of encounter. Textual ‘snapshots,’ vignettes, fragments of experiences and imaginations are never ‘entirely there’ (one has to imagine what is missing in the gaps) – the pauses and gaps gesture towards speculation.

In Benjamin’s tremendous collection of citations and commentaries that comprise The Arcades Project, he demonstrates his compositional method as literary montage, which Caroline Evans affirms by stating that his juxtapositions create the ‘dialectical images’
that work 'like a montage technique of cinema.' According to Hroch, Benjamin saw himself as a collector or ragpicker. He writes:

I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 1927-1940

Hroch further cites Adorno, who compares Benjamin’s method to weaving and his work as a ‘textile, a complex and transient fabric that leaves impressions … one is asked to ‘brood over it until he finds what is inherent in it.’ This strikes at the heart of fashion and its staple practices of picking, remembering, juxtaposing, reconstructing, rearranging, unpicking, rethreading, redoing, undoing – all of which allude to the micro-processes cradled within the broader compositional process of writing and imagining at the core of my practice.

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In the project *Do you dream of me at night?* I explored montage as a compositional technique. It was produced in response to the Walter Van Beirendonck exhibition *Dream the World Awake*, as an unofficial audio guide. This was a 25-minute track on the web platform *SoundCloud*, which the audience could stream during the exhibition or download beforehand. Subverting the purpose of exhibition audio guides, which is to deliver factual information, this piece is intended as an alternative experience of the exhibition. It evokes visceral imaginations of Van Beirendonck’s world, one that is set within a distorted fairy tale realm, and in homage to the provocations by the contemporary artist Mike Kelley, whose aesthetic sensibility greatly permeates through Van Beirendonck’s world.

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233 ibid.

Do you dream of me at night? was composed as a montage of motifs, images and text sourced from the exhibition. I also gathered fragments of material from further research into Van Beirendonck’s background and the idiosyncrasies of his persona as portrayed in the media. Conceived as a ‘lullaby,’ the voice or narrator tells the listener about a boy who is being taken into the woods – a dreamscape in which he encounters rituals, nightmarish premonitions, shadowy memories and singing. Each ‘scene’ is a discrete event or dream, constituting images and words that reference Van Beirendonck’s oeuvre and other imagined settings derived from his photo shoots and interviews. These are juxtaposed with my own distorted memories of Antwerp (his home base), coupled with the strangeness of Mike Kelley’s scenography in his video works. Do you dream of me at night? is based on my experience of Cardiff and Miller’s The Murder of Crows, installed at the 2010 Sydney Biennale. Upon entering the space (Pier 2/3), I was confronted by a complex composition of ninety-eight separate channels of sound swirling around the cavernous space. At the centre was a lone megaphone speaker lying on its side on a desk, through which I heard Cardiff’s haunting voice telling a nightmarish story in an illogical sequence. The ninety-eight audio speakers amplified a clamorous orchestra, enacting Cardiff’s story through sound. Do You Dream of Me at Night? sought to deliver a similarly visceral effect of a nightmare in a sequence of loosely connected scenes, with deliberate gaps and dissonant relations between them. Juxtaposing Van Beirendonck, Mike Kelley and Cardiff-Miller’s works with my personal accounts, it was a visual montage that purposefully referred to Van Beirendonck’s collage and exquisite corpse techniques. Through his Wonderwall – a 60-metre-long collage of images, slogans, objects and videos at the Dream the world awake exhibition – it was possible to gain an insight into not only his world but also his design approach and methods. Designed as ‘an analogy of the workbooks he used to prepare for his collections,’ the Wonderwall was an epic montage of the images and words that influence his aesthetic world: aliens, ethnographic objects, sadomasochistic practices, cartoons, toys, and David Bowie. Do you dream of me at night? was an attempt to evoke another layer of visual montage, to propagate the layered references and metaphors at the heart of Van Beirendonck’s extraordinariness.

2.9 Gesturing towards: writing-moving-imagining

The poet Ted Hughes, on comparing his writing approach to that of his late wife and fellow poet Sylvia Plath, writes:

Our methods were not the same. Hers was to collect a heap of vivid objects and good words and make a pattern; the pattern would be projected from somewhere deep inside, from her very distinctly evolved myth. It appears distinctly evolved to a reader now—despite having been totally unconscious to her then. My method was to find a thread end and draw the rest out of a hidden tangle. Her method was more painterly, mine more narrative, perhaps.  

Ted Hughes, 1995

Hughes’ expression of Plath’s compositional method echoes the literary and visual montage technique that Benjamin adopts in *The Arcades Project*. The concept of her poetry as a pattern of images and words resonates strongly with how I approach my writing process. While discrete encounters between images and words could evoke specific associations and disjunctions as the precursor to a narrative, sometimes juxtapositions of a broad spectrum of material may reveal a sweeping impression or lead the mind’s eye through wild, wavering patterns.

This is the scenario: I am lying in bed in my bathrobe and I am trying to write my ideal story. There is a weary storm and absent sky outside. I don’t know what happens in the story yet. I just know that Balzac used to write in a robe and presumably could only write in the robe.

WHM, *Through the Writing Body*, 2013

My writing is spurred by a self-conscious effort to pursue a particular concept, idea or impulse – however indeterminate – that subsequently develops into a scene or an impression. Though Hughes conveys his own method differently, he shares with Plath the sense of ‘drawing out’ – bringing forth, eliciting, evoking, extracting – from the depths of the imagination and perception, towards the gradual formation of a

narrative, pattern, impression. Balzac’s robe, in the piece above, would later evolve into bodily inscriptions, the patterns of which denote a code, a language; the literal robe turns into a metaphorical one.

I started composing the prose-work #2 without a narrative trajectory in mind. The intention was to explore the mechanics of the visual imagination through the process of writing. The idea was simple: to compose a prose-work with one image unfolding and ‘growing,’ very gradually, from extreme close-ups, fading out and then dissolving – as if I were looking through the lens of the camera. According Judith Clark puts it: ‘you are always making choices about how you are going to communicate the material – I like the ambiguity of creating an impression rather than stating a fact.’238 I was interested to explore how the process of verbal expression – writing itself – impresses upon the visual imagination and vice versa. I began with:

Lately I have started to write about a miniature figure. She is minute in the way of a fleck of light on a blade of grass, stretching outwards to an endless green. Minute in the way the imagination is an infinite wilderness. Minute in the way our deepest, most heart-felt speech is all but a stutter within the boundless expanse of animal expression.

A partial glimpse, a vanishing act, an enigmatic Liliputian of the imagination. I can’t be certain that she has always existed, or perhaps I’m questioning this because the act of inscribing and creating her simultaneously erases her.

From this angle she is a bran-coloured spot. A bubble in the pale brown current. Everything else about her has not yet come into view.

WHM, #2, 2012

In my writing, descriptions of a thing, event, figure or an abstract sensation gesture towards possible narratives. For the prose-work #2, without a preconceived plot, the only ‘image’ that I started with, was a dot in the cinematic frame of my imagination. By putting words down, by moving the dot, impressions – as composites of words, images, voices, movement – begin to coalesce and bloom. Falling and Through the

Writing Body were composed with the same approach. Elaine Scarry suggests that according to recent findings in cognitive science, pictures are made to move in literature. She asserts that our aesthetic imagination has a cinematic quality: ‘Our mental composition of even a still picture – if we could watch ourselves composing in slow motion – has motion in it.’ She adds that these images possess the ‘creasable quality of cloth or the foldable, tearable quality of paper.’ The dynamism of the imagination, as it unfolds through the verbal, moves us.

Less ‘writing about fashion’ than ‘writing fashion,’ the practice draws out the dynamic and composite nature of writing and imagining, which is vital to my engagement with lived, aesthetic expression. The writing evokes the aesthetic capacity of fashion, while at the same time looks inward to reveal the processes of its own making. Fashion and writing are as much about our need to express our aesthetic selves, as it is about the ‘making’ of these expressions: why we do so, how we do it, and why it matters. Despite, or perhaps because of their fugitive natures, both fashion and writing constitute palpable, aesthetic worlds.

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240 Scarry, ibid., p. 137.
Come closer, he urged. His entire body was covered in inscriptions – glistening, raw, dripping with inky fluids the colours of ruby and gold, wandering feverishly over his back, chest, arms, thighs, neck, face. Mysterious shapes and symbols – seemingly alive – pulse and crawl along the surface of his skin, forming hardened clusters around the bends and joints, liquid gold articulating into filigrees. He was writhing in a dream’s fever, exquisite appetites uncontainable. The coloured inks were growing and oozing out of incisions on his skin, covering him almost entirely … it was hard to make out where his body finishes and where the inscriptions begin.

WHM, Through the Writing Body, 2013

This chapter attends to a multi-faceted array of bodies: the body as fashion image and object; the imagined or potential body; the body as metaphor for writing (a composition of parts that can be manipulated); the phenomenological body as a medium for aesthetic experience; and the presence of ‘my body’ and voice in the writing. They are all intertwined. The discussion that follows is intentionally non-linear. It instinctively phases in and out of various perspectives on the body, as it meanders through manifold associations with writing as medium, process and experience.

The body as corpus, and its scope for perception and imagination, is the starting point for my approach to writing and fashion. I explore ‘writing’ and ‘body’ as intertwining notions: one is reflected in the other, fusing the medium, process and environment that constitute fashion expression. At the start of the research, I dealt with the body as corporeal medium; it was a way of falling into lived experience, to attend to the aesthetic and phenomenological dimension of experience – whether actual or
imagined. It is, at once, the ‘thing that experiences’ and the ‘thing experienced.’ It senses, feels and remembers. It can lose balance, fall, and catch itself.

As the research progressed, the notion of ‘body’ became important as a metaphor for writing. I considered writing as an assemblage of narrative fragments, an arrangement of citations from memory, imagination and perceptive experience as a way of gathering meaning. Denoting the *corpus*, more broadly, as a collection of matter,\(^{241}\) I use the term ‘body’ to allude to the poetics of composition: the ‘coming-together’ of parts to form a comprehensible pattern. This concept was developed in the process of writing *Through the Writing Body*, in which the narrator engaged with various markings on skin, fabric and the page, searching for patterns and meanings. In *Do you dream of me at night?* I played with a juxtaposition of citations – images, quotes, memories and sensations – to create a string of scenes, to make a new composite of a world.

In researching fashion as a paradigm for aesthetic expression, I wrote about experiences of gravity, weight, movement and rhythm. The intent was to test how one might speak of lived or embodied aesthetic experiences without being anchored to tangible objects or events. By suspending preconceptions or taken-for-granted realities, I sought to amplify the immediacy of embodied experience and to test what language could do for the imagination, and vice versa.

In the way that the sensation of drawing ‘closer’ and ‘closeness’ calls for the lived body’s investment in the event, I propose that the phenomenal dimension of aesthetic experience – in its immateriality, elusiveness and transience – calls upon our capacity to imagine. The body, as drawn out through the process of writing, is a way of organising experience; we draw boundaries around ourselves not only to contain what and how we perceive and feel, but as a way to subvert and exceed them.

In the project *Closer, in Fragments*, I experimented with the idea of a body encountering an aesthetic object or event, without describing what the object or event was, nor the body itself. I was exploring whether a composition of imagined sensations and descriptions could rouse something new from nothing.

\(^{241}\) Corpus’ is the Latin term meaning ‘body,’ that is, body of a person or animal. It carries a sense of mass or bulk, such as a collection of writings, laws, facts or things. See “Corpus, n.” *Macquarie Concise Dictionary* (third edition). Sydney, Australia: The Macquarie Library, 1998.
3.1 Existing bodies in fashion

The body in fashion can be a powerful non-verbal communicator. Within fashion and dress studies, it is a key subject in discourses related to identity, power, gender, race and sexuality.242 The primary interest of much scholarship in this area lies in what the body is wearing, how and where it wears it, and how it acquires meaning with respect to its social world.

In the collection of essays entitled Body Dressing (2001),243 Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson emphasise the embodied experience of dress and dressing in the cultivation of identity and the social structure. Entwistle asserts that ‘dress lies at the margins of the body and marks the boundary between self and other, individual and society.’244 In The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory (2000),245 she explores how the body acquires meaning through social situations, which the fashion system (re)produces and consumes. In The Fashioned Self (1991),246 Joanne Finkelstein examines how the fashion system thrives on the commodification of image and identity, and the moral and psychological implications pertaining to the manipulation of the body’s appearance when it becomes synonymous with character. The fashion scholar and semiotician Patrizia Calefato analyses the ‘clothed body’ in terms of its social, cultural, ideological and political significations.247 She suggests that clothes constitute a sign system: a language that is expressed through fashion, that is, a ‘system of [sociocultural] rules that guarantees its internal connections and makes their expression possible.’248 The clothed body is a performing subject that enacts the syntax of fashion; it is the visible sign of the subject’s ‘material identity’ in the world, which is an ongoing construction and performance.249

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244 Ibid., p. 37.
An existing area of investigation that is relevant to my interest in phenomenology and aesthetics is the relationship between the body, fashion and performance. This concerns the role of the body as performative medium in the context of fashion as display, communication and experience. From the ‘mannequin parades’ in the early twentieth-century to the theatre and spectacle of the 1990s, the performative body is intrinsic to the history of fashion presentation. The body on the catwalk is less a passive mannequin (upon which clothes are displayed), than an active character of imaginary narratives created by the designer.

Drawing from dance, performance art and theatre practices, the concept of fashion as event or experience amplifies the performativity of the body in fashion, and vice versa. Jessica Bugg, a contemporary fashion scholar and practitioner who operates at the nexus of fashion, art and performance, engages with the experiential poetics of the moving, sensing and feeling body, as an intrinsic element of her design process. She uses video, spatial installation and live performance as the context for new fashion expressions. Drawing from performance practice, and working closely with dancers, she employs the dressed body as a ‘catalyst and space for creation and communication of meaning.’ While the mannequin is an inert surface of material display, the dancer actively feels, senses and moves in relation to its immediate, phenomenal context. The dancer brings attention to the lived, aesthetic faculty of the dressed body as the expression itself. As a counterpoint to the study of the body in fashion as a representation and a sign – an object, image or a subject whose meaning lies elsewhere – notions of embodied experience and performativity emphasise the body as the locus of experience and production of meaning.

From the psychological perspective, the body in fashion plays an important role in the study of human behaviour, beliefs, attitudes and feelings. The premise is that the way people choose to appear in the world is an indication of why they think, feel and act the way they do. In the psychoanalytic frame, it is the image of the body that is key to the formation and performance of subjectivity. In *Fashion and Psychoanalysis* (2012),\(^{253}\) Alison Bancroft situates her discussion of fashion as an artistic discourse and practice, focusing on a specific kind of fashion expression: extreme imageries of the body that are intended to challenge and transgress their own contexts. Drawing on Alexander McQueen and John Galliano’s avant-garde ‘show pieces’ that disrupt normative ideas of femininity and beauty, and Leigh Bowery’s self-distortion through severe costuming and makeup, she suggests that the perplexing and unsettling effects of these images reflect the underbelly of subjectivity, which is inherently sexed and conflicted.\(^{254}\) According to Bancroft, fashion is a mechanism through which psychical complexities of identification, desire, alienation and instability are played out and given expression.

The formation and expression of Lacan’s psychoanalytic subject is intrinsically tied to its capacity for language. Drawing from phenomenological thinking, ‘everything from its sense of how the world is, to the way it experiences its biological body, are over-determined by its accession to [the mother tongue].’\(^{255}\) While phenomenology focuses on the subject’s conscious experience in process, the psychoanalytic approach delves deeper into the realm of the unconscious, with all its paradoxes and contradictions. Focusing on ‘difficult’ language whose meaning is abstruse and deliberately unclear – for example, the work of the author James Joyce and the conceptual designer Hussein Chalayan – Bancroft suggests that avant-garde fashion, as a language of the unconscious, ‘offers an insight into the difficulties of subjectivity, not neat and contained resolutions.’\(^{256}\) Her psychoanalytic interpretation offers an innovative approach to avant-garde fashion and subjectivity. However, the connection she draws


\(^{254}\) Bancroft understands fashion as inherently feminine, defined in broader terms: ‘as pertaining to feminine subjects (usually but not exclusively women); as pertaining to and contingent upon the body; and, in the idiom of Lacanian psychoanalysis, following an impossible and contradictory logic. See Bancroft, pp. 4-5.


\(^{256}\) Bancroft, p. 21.
between fashion and language is less convincing, as her interpretation ends in irresolution, with no way of moving forward.

While Bancroft’s psychoanalytic frame could be similarly applied to the images in my prose-works, such as those of transgressive bodies by Alexander McQueen and Walter Van Beirendonck, I suggest that doing so would run counter to a fundamental premise of the research, which is to use the body as a medium for aesthetic expression. I engage with images of extreme bodies as catalysts for aesthetic intensities; they are the source material for writing experiments and the imagination. The bodies I write about not bound to any subjects; rather, as phenomenological entities, they constitute aesthetic worlds.

At an early stage of this research, I tested different approaches to the concept of the body. I wrote about it as an object, a subject, and an image. *Falling* and *Kaleidoscopia* broached concepts related to subjectivity, such as the mirrored self and the formation of self in the gaze of the other. While the psychoanalytic framework could have played a role in steering my research trajectory, I deliberately redirected my attention to the practice of writing. My intent was to create my own approach to writing and the body through the practice itself, rather than applying an established framework of concepts, methods and procedures to interpret the practice.

Through the prose-works #2 and *Through the Writing Body*, I came to understand the significance of the body as a sensing, moving and performing agent that mediates the writing, rather than a subject to be written about and interpreted. I began to frame the body as a metaphor for writing, to access the dynamics of lived, aesthetic experience and imagination. I engaged with literary practices, the phenomenological approach to aesthetic expression, and the fashion as performative practice, in order to develop a conceptual framework that reflects the practice. In this way, my understanding of the body was gradually shaped through the writing process. In the later works, *Closer, in Fragments* and *When I Think about Dynamism*, I sought to gradually remove the human dimension from the body, to further abstract the body as a medium that renders and catalyses aesthetic experience, just as one might use words to incite the imagination.

The coupling of writing and body, as arbiters of expression, is access to a depth of reflection, feeling and sensuous experience. In offering writing as a mode of practice specifically within fashion, writing/body conveys aesthetic scope and intensity that is
the epitome of fashion. The body – as an experiential medium and a metaphor for writing – harbours potential for new expressions. Just as the designer sketches to evoke images and ideas, I write to imagine and give form to what is not yet tangible – to test the limits of my aesthetic capacity.
3.2 When I write about bodies

As noted above, the body in fashion is extensively analysed, through the lens of psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural history, sociology and anthropology, as a visible representation of human behaviour and psyche, as well as the formation of identities, beliefs and cultural practices circulating in society. By comparison, there is less attention – especially within fashion research and practice – on the phenomenological dimension of the body, and, as a related notion, fashion as a concept of lived, aesthetic expression. This research extends the embodied and performative aspect of fashion expression. It engages with the body that senses, moves and imagines – where the body is, at once, an aesthetic agent and a metaphor for writing.

The chapter begins with the notion of the body-in-pieces. Firstly, it refers to a particular aesthetic sensibility of the body in my writing, which expresses the aesthetics of the material body turned inside out – the dimension of the visceral guarded by flesh, skin and blood; distorted, segmented, dissected; unfamiliar or unrecognisable; in the process of growth, de/composition, or in transition from one state to another. I write about bodies that disintegrate, fall apart and rebuild, and – gesturing towards fashion – dynamic bodies that are juxtapositions of parts (memories and projections, image and text) tentatively bound by chance. It has weight, it smells and it has a temperature. These sensations of the body-in-pieces and the ‘bodily’ are influenced by the work of a cluster of artists and designers whose images of distorted and fragmented bodies, presented through photography, sculpture and fashion, influence my visual aesthetic. Secondly, the notion of the body-in-pieces also reveals the compositional process through which I imagine and write about the body: as isolated parts and tentative entities that rely on sequences of descriptions to gradually shape and compose them. The image of a ‘body in pieces’ gestures towards a possible wholeness that is the ideal, the imagined or the idea of body, which includes its vulnerabilities, ambiguities and failings. Bodies stumble, creak, break.

The body-in-pieces is the means by which I express the fluid processes of fragmentation and composition. This leads into the concept of the body-in-fashion, which I use to denote the objectively perceived body in its entirety, as a whole image and ‘the ideal,’ which, in turn, imply conditions of illusion, fantasy and myth that sustain fashion as a mechanism of desire. As a counterpoint to the body-in-pieces that is experienced immediately as corporeal parts, the body-in-fashion is not actual, it is
regarded at a distance – as potentiality. The body-in-fashion is elusive, transitory and transient; it is embodied in the image of that Alexander McQueen dress (as described in the previous chapter) and the mannequin as the quintessential model. Through the prism of fashion, we are filled with projections of the ideal and the eternally new; under the spell of fashion, we may forget that these are passing illusions.

In our quest for perfection, we are ever more exposed to the flaws and incompleteness of our bodies. The bodies through which we breathe, pant and jostle fall short of the faultless image we crave. Once in a while – as we are jolted out of daydream – we acknowledge that all bodies disintegrate and end. However, it is because bodies expire that we acknowledge the profundity of transience. The peak of a moment is also the start of its decline; the essence of fashion is obsolescence.

It is precisely because of the inevitability of limits – with regards to the body, imagination and language – that we are urged towards subversion and transgression, in the way that we feel ourselves pulsing and radiating with aesthetic intensities in extreme fever.
3.3 Body-in-pieces: malleable bodies

The centrality of the body in my work stems from a longstanding fascination with bodies in extraordinary forms and materials, the isolation of parts, as well as extreme processes of bodily manipulation. I experimented with writing as a way of delving into the acuteness of corporeal and phenomenal worlds. How might one plumb the depths of sensation, for example, of an eye gradually sliced open with a razor? More significantly, how might one use this as the catalyst for new aesthetic intensities? I sought to explore how the poetic capacity of words could shift the role of the body in fashion, from an object of representation to a performative medium of aesthetic expressions.

I imagine and write about the body as both an object and a concept to be manipulated, in the way that the body (writing) is continually fragmented, shaped and recomposed through fashion (aesthetic expression). In Through the Writing Body, Kaleidoscopia and Falling, I use the doll and mannequin, as well as other body-related objects such as the robe and the mirror, as metaphors for the transformative potential of the body. They serve the body as prosthetic devices, enabling the body to be manipulated. In a related sense, I use writing as a process to stretch and play with the plasticity of the aesthetic imagination.

For the project, Do you dream of me at night?, I sought to express the dream state through montage. Composed as an audio lullaby, I imagined myself as the narrator trying to recall a dream in five parts. The dream montage was a juxtaposition of disparate images, sounds and memories, to allow accidental narratives, chance associations and ambiguous relations to emerge between fragments. I was experimenting with how narration – as deliberately fragmented and incoherent – could insinuate imagined worlds. This approach was influenced by Van Beirendonck’s interest in collage and the exquisite corpse technique, both of which were used by the Surrealists to coax automatic processes.

While some of the images and processes in my work echo those of the Surrealists, in particular the fragmentation and distortion of the body, fetishistic allusions to objects and materials, and the use of collage and montage techniques, they do not manifest

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Surrealist preoccupation with ‘pure psychic automatism,’ which André Breton, in the first of his Surrealist manifestoes published in 1924, defined as ‘the actual functioning of thought … in the absence of any control exercised by reason, [and] exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. In contrast, my prose-works were all driven by a pursuit for aesthetic intensity, and while unplanned in terms of narrative, each writing experiment set out to explore a specific research question or concept, and to achieve an aesthetic mood or effect. I wrote as a way to push the limits of how the body and its experiences could be fashioned, and to generate new potential expressions of the body and the bodily – what else it might be and what else it might feel like; these parameters are framed specifically around the aesthetic paradigm of fashion.

In the Surrealist landscape, bodies straddle the natural and artificial, and are transfigured, dismembered and frequently sexualised as objects of desire, eroticism and the feminine. In my prose-works, I use the body as a medium for ‘aesthetic imagining;’ it is through the experiencing body that I can access the lived, aesthetic dimension. At another level of experience, writing (as the ‘body’ of work) brings about a process of looking inward; the more I compose a work, the more conscious I become of the process of its construction. Its artifice becomes something to be tampered with. As I manipulate the body – stretching, fracturing, pulling it apart, turning it inside out – I am also toying with the resilience of my own aesthetic imagining and writing.

Aesthetic influences

In imagining what else the body might be, I started with existing representations of the body, in particular those by Hans Bellmer, Markus Schinwald, Matthew Stone, Berlind de Brueckyere, Lucy McRae, Matthew Barney and Janaina Tschäpe. They portray extra-ordinary visions of the human body through the manipulation of garments/wearables, sculpture, film and photography. Collectively, their works transgress the limits of the body as form, material, aesthetic sensation, subjective

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Falling against texture

identity, and object. The body becomes a plastic substance that is continually shaped and altered – fragmented, flattened, bound, twisted, stretched.

Markus Schinwald is a contemporary artist who works across performance, film, sculpture, painting, installation and puppetry. With a background in fashion design, he often creates modified garments and shoes to manipulate the body into unconventional postures and disrupt the ‘normal’ functioning of the body; for example, a suit jacket is laced at the back, restricting arm movement (like a straitjacket); shirt sleeves are sewn backwards, forcing one’s arms to remain raised (in jubilation as much in surrender); and flat shoes are made to point upwards. Schinwald also produces an ongoing series of prints based on nineteenth-century classic portraiture. In his portraits, faces are distorted by the subtle addition of metal braces, head coverings and chains – improbable corrective devices and prostheses that rendered the human characters slightly less human. Attached to the body, these clumsy prosthetics amplify the body’s limitations and – by disabling its functions – ‘unsettle’ our perception of it as an organic form to a mechanical device to be manipulated. Schinwald’s photographic series, entitled Contortionists (2003), features women in exaggerated, acrobatic poses. Sitting, standing or lying in hotel interiors, reading books or looking out of the window, these models are cast in highly-constructed sets that recall fashion shoots in glossy magazines. His characters are often portrayed as being (knowingly) manipulated into acts of banality that were the direct results of their physical limitations. In the video Dictio Pii (2001), a group of strangers in a nameless hotel aimlessly commits to a series of repetitive acts, while the narrator repeats: ‘We are the perfume of corridors, unfamiliarsed with isolated activity … We are immortal volunteers, disband prompted paths of movement, extended our bodies, became abysmal dancers.’ These human characters differ little from Schinwald’s automated marionettes that he dresses in suit jackets. Held up with strings and equipped with small motors, they repeat odd little actions: standing on a swing and rocking mechanically back and forth, lifting one leg in an obsessive-compulsive pattern, and occasionally twitching. We gain a sense, through these

259 Heinzelmann, Markus and Schafhausen, Nicolaus (Eds.). Markus Schinwald. Published as part of the exhibition Markus Schinwald: Tableau Twain at the Frankfurter Kunstverein held from 1 September to 24 October 2004. Berlin and New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2004, pp. 192-205.
261 p.75.
262 p. 77.
trapped bodies, of subjectivity rendered subservient to the physical limits of the body/environment. Schinwald also created wooden sculptures in the shape of table legs, displaying them by wrapping them around walls, appearing as fetishised legs bending and crawling up walls and folding over poles. An exhibition text describes this work as ‘… an impossible body. Some parts are painted, some are bagged, some stand straight, and others are perched up high. A network of metal rods holds them together, forming a central nervous system …’ Here, the body is the environment, and conversely, the environment – uncannily – gains a sense of the bodily. In Schinwald’s world, human action or body without purpose – like the leg without a body and the functionless facial prosthetic – distorts our perception of humanness. His characters are cast as strangers without identities in unnamed places – defamiliarised to one another and to us.

Schinwald’s bodies and marionettes recall Hans Bellmer’s various iterations of ‘The Doll’ that he produced in the 1930’s. The second doll had moveable ball-joints, and an extra torso and pair of arms and legs that could be joined and varied with their double body parts. Loved by the Surrealists, the doll fulfilled Bellmer’s desire to turn the body inside out, to re-order it in the same way an anagram mixes-up a word’s letters to discover new coded patterns. Bellmer produced many photographs of his doll in various configurations. The doll’s distorted body and faceless identity project the mechanisms of objectification and fetishisation, and a sense of defamiliarisation and the uncanny.

The contemporary Belgian artist Berlinde de Bruxyere creates sculptural works that draw out the visceral, aesthetic experience of animal and human bodies. Using materials such as wax, wood, wool, tree branches, horse skin and hair, she creates unsettling human and animal bodies that are often headless or faceless, with viscerally detailed skin surfaces. By reducing the body to its most basic state – as pure matter

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and weight, a calculable mass and weight – we are confronted with the question of what makes us human.265

Yes we are all flesh – but we are more than the physical, aren’t we?266

Anonymous, *Inside Me III, 2012*

For Janaina Tschäpe, bodies are vessels through which material transformations take place.267 In her videos, they are presented as shifting substances and embryonic forms in accordance with the polymorphous, botanical landscapes in which they exist. These visceral, aesthetic worlds of the animal/human hybrid – organic and synthetic – in extreme states of display and transformation are often cited in my writing. The central image in *Falling,* for instance, is the red ostrich feather dress by Alexander McQueen. Presented as part of the infamous Spring/Summer 2001 VOSS collection, the runway show268 – themed as a faux psychiatric ward – culminated with the British fashion journalist and fetish writer Michelle Olley in a glass box, reclining on a blood-red lace-covered sofa, her naked body covered in fluttering moths. A breathing pipe was connected to her mouth through what appeared to be a gas mask in the form of a pig. The image of Olley was based on Joel Peter-Witkin’s 1983 photograph entitled *Sanitarium*269 that featured a large woman connected via a breathing tube to a stuffed monkey. Olley recorded her experience in her diary prior to the runway show on 26 September 2000:

I am McQueen’s pulsing mirror, fashion’s greatest fear staring right back at them.

I am piggy in the middle.

I am the heart…of glass…


266 ibid.

267 Tschäpe, Janaina. Artist’s website. [http://www.janainatschape.net/about.html](http://www.janainatschape.net/about.html) (accessed 01 July 2014)


I am the death of fashion. The death of beauty. The death of fetish.
I am the death of my old self. Maybe.
I am going to be three days into my period next Tuesday.
I am terrified.  

Michelle Olley, *diary entry*, 18 September 2000

Schinwald, Bellmer, Tschäpe, de Bruckyere and McQueen present bodies in extreme states of transformation and transfiguration – bodies that defy the conventions of beauty, by playing with the porous boundaries between the human and the beastly, the organic and inorganic. Integrating bodily and non-bodily materials, skins and textiles, these transgressive bodies can be carnal, plastic or inert. Their aesthetic impact has a profound influence on the way I perceive, imagine and compose bodies – in particular, how they disintegrate and fall apart to reveal affective dimensions that resist language. My understanding of the body is fundamental to my practice and understanding of fashion – it points to an intensely visceral and phenomenological approach to writing and imagining. I explore the idea of the body reduced to a mass or bulk of matter that could be manipulated. Just as the process of verbal expression is a sequence of words, the body in my writing is composed moment-to-moment. The sequence or composition, however, is not predetermined; it can be flawed and inadequate. Over the course of formation, the body (writing) develops a chain of micro-events, a feedback loop of verbal and visual imaginings that may begin to spin away from my control. The path of experience may start with my body but end up far beyond or deeper.

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3.4 Writing in fragments

In developing the prose-works, I was experimenting with writing as a way of constructing new aesthetic intensities, based on the raw material of sensuous experience, fragments of imagination and memory, critical reflection and speculation. Through them, I came to understand the poetics of writing and imagining as an oscillation between fragmentation and composition – the centrifuge and the heart, pumping blood. The body-in-pieces is an apt metaphor for this process.

The body-in-pieces gradually coheres in the process of writing – a tentative composition of fragmented images, words, sounds and voices that aims to test the limits of familiarity, remembrance and fluidity of imagination – to push the bounds of what is possible. I write to elicit new aesthetic potentials (the body-in-fashion); I shift between various permutations and perspectives (the body-in-pieces). In my writing, the body is taken apart and reassembled, turned inside out, rendered amorphous, or wrapped into the environment.

The intent is to generate myriad formations of the body as well as ways by which it could be perceived, transgressed, misunderstood and transformed; it is to chase new aesthetic processes and experiences.

You remember being thrown into a scene: laying at the edge of a cliff, a material body opening out to the full thrust of the environment. You feel a pull in your core as deep and hostile as the immense, black ocean raging underneath. Tears are streaming down your face, your florid cheeks throbbing. An electric current hums through a web of veins; in its vibration you hear a prophetic urge. Your core drags irresistibly forward into emptiness, into limbo, into vertigo.

You tell yourself to remember this, to write it down before it dissolves. For now you just want to close your eyes.

WHM, Falling, 2012

The body is always the starting point in my writing-thinking process. My prose-works are not structured by plot; rather they are gradually shaped through the writing – a durational process of composing ideas and circumstances that shape (around/within/beyond) the body and its immediate condition. The stage (the frame)
Writing in fragments

could be an event, image or a scenario. The body is never fully described as characters or presented with whole bodies. Isolated and dispersed as puzzle pieces, the body-in-pieces evoke possible shapes and outlines, as if one were phasing in and out of dream-states. Writing is a way of figuring it out: moving in as close as I can towards the body — as if looking through the camera lens — specific parts are amplified in sequence through vivid description, while other parts necessarily fade into the background. Sometimes I replace the camera with the microscope and kaleidoscope. It is through writing that I begin to compose the body, to toy with the possibilities of what it might be. I write to coax the imagination, for the body-in-pieces to bloom with potential (wholeness).

According to Bernadette Wegenstein, a scholar in media studies and the author of *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory* (2006), the concept of the body has, throughout history, shifted between fragmentation and holism; indeed, both are ‘indispensable modes of imagining and configuring the body.’ The idea of the holistic body is based on parts that only make sense in their interrelations with other parts. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Galenic view of the fragmented body was important as an ‘anatomical as well as a symbolic representation of the body as a system of interrelated pieces working in harmony.’ Through advancements in medical and digital technologies, the body has undergone an accelerated process of being ‘opened up’ and fragmented into smaller and smaller pieces. Wegenstein suggests that ‘with the novelty of perspective, a desire for immediacy could be expressed, a desire to put the spectator right in the depicted world.’ We are now able to examine the body not only by peering into it (with the microscope, MRI and X-ray) but also manipulate and recreate it from within itself (through nanosurgery, reproductive technology, digital fabrication and simulation). The simulated body can be endlessly multiplied and diversified. As parts and layers, it can be sampled, mixed and matched to generate an infinite variety and number of bodily, or body-like, constitutions. The bodies I write about are collages of many different bodies that are deliberately fragmented, mis-remembered, dismembered and spliced into new sequences of events.

271 Wegenstein, op. cit., p. 3.
273 Wegenstein, p. 8.
Waves of sound pulsate and thrash around you, and you’re drowning. The body that you know no longer has any resistance. It is now pure physical density. The center has pulled away from the edge. You can hear it cracking, you can see it breaking, and you can describe it, but you can’t feel it. This can’t be a dream. *I’m wide awake.*

WHM, *Falling*, 2012

Writing without an image of the body, I compose it one part at a time. As it accumulates through images and words, I gather and find coherence in the relations between them. The body-in-pieces is always in the process of formation and deformation – its composition tentative and contingent to the time and place of imagining and writing. At any moment, the body-in-pieces is a limb, torso, waist, shoulder, tongue, ankle, toe, nose, lips – each piece is always already, in our imagination, referring to a potential whole.

As a metaphor for writing, the malleability of bodies alludes to the elasticity of the imaginative process. Here I am alluding to my engagement with writing as a manifestation of new aesthetic expressions. I write to elicit different modes of making and perceiving bodies. Susan Stewart, in her text *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), speaks of the phenomenological body in relation to time, experience and memory. She poetically captures the essence of the body as ‘… the place of origin for our understanding and perception of the visible and invisible, inside and outside, transcendence and partiality of perspective.’

The bodies I write about are a means to organise aesthetic experience; in them, I recognise sensations of gravity, weight, duration, speed, proportion, scale, distance and proximity – all of those immaterial, though dynamically embodied, dimensions that present bodies as phenomenally wrapped into the texture of the world. In the prose-work *Kaleidoscopia*, the body and its environment (the room) are drawn into being as extensions of each other – one is mediated through the other.

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The room: a flawless creature, the phenomenon of our pursuit. She is standing upright in the center of the space, surrounded by angled walls of glass mirror. Images of the creature – endlessly fractured and multiplied – are pulsing and reverberating in symmetrical waves around the room. The ceiling and floor, glass-mirrored, suspend her in illusory motion; it contracts and expands with the rhythm of her breath. Each move she makes ripples outwards and back, drawing her forward then back to the moment before. And the echo continues in a loop. She is caught in her own infinite kaleidoscopic labyrinth; the creature and the room in equilibrium.

WHM, *Kaleidoscopia*, 2013

According to Henri Bergson, the body is ‘what takes shape at the center of perception.’\(^{275}\) For Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological body is ‘not a mere intermediary in-between the subject and world’ but rather ‘access to the world: given, construed, performed, or even all at once … the body has its world or understands its world without having to pass through representations; it is the potentiality of the world.’\(^{276}\) In this sense, the body/writing can be a process of coming into experience – a way of making bonds between actual and potential experience, where one is reflected in the other.


3.5 Body-in-fashion: potentiality

Waking resists as otherworld condenses:
dream ties hair, sheets into braids,
one knot begets another,
expanding out to uncertain riddles –
temporary glitches, switches,
neon jewel light shimmering,
criss-crossing unknown territories,
a hand pulled forward,
by glimpses of man, girl, child, bird,
a vanishing, a cavity in flux –
all waiting to pass.
Waking is not so easy.

WHM, Notes on potentiality (with Marcus Mitford), 2014

In my prose-works, the body-in-fashion often appears as an image of an iconic dress, figure or persona; it is the reflection in the mirror, an illusion, Narcissus’ echo, the Chimera in Falling.

While the body-in-pieces comes together over the duration of writing, the body-in-fashion refers to the abstract conception of a whole body (the corpus), that is, the possibility of one, such as the image in our remembrance or imagination. The body-in-fashion gestures towards the possibility of an image in its wholeness; it is an imagination, speculation, spectre. Here I am alluding to a scenario in which the image remains at a distance, an ideal, a potentiality.

In the words of the poet Lawrence Dixon, it is as if ‘… the eyes were restless, haunted, a phantom paced pastel behind the fanlight of the iris’ …

In Aristotelian metaphysics, potentiality is contrasted with actuality; it is linked to the Greek word *dunamis*, meaning the ‘capability of existing or acting.’ Aristotle uses *dunamis* to refer to: (1) the thing’s power to produce a change; and (2) the thing’s

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capacity to be in a different and more completed state.\textsuperscript{278} Dunamis is also translated as: power or might, especially of bodily strength; faculty or capacity (such as a thing’s natural agency); and the force or meaning of a word.\textsuperscript{279} It is also the root of the modern English word dynamic; a force that can produce change. I use the body-in-fashion to express the force of potentiality that drives creative production and action; rather than a ‘thing,’ it is an invisible force, a desire, a propulsion imagined and felt as the magnetic pull of a (possible) destination rather than the destination itself. It is a dot on the page, the stage prior to the performance; the shell of a dress, the mannequin undressed – it is the urge to summon the imagination, to fill in the blanks. Unhinged from the socio-cultural and political structures of fashion that typically situate the body as an object in the world, I conceive of the body-in-fashion as an imaginative construct, lived and felt as resonance and gravity, compelling me towards expression. It is trembling, restless and feverish, palpitating with the potential for further imagination. It cradles within itself a reckless force that catalyses change. The body-in-fashion is a trigger for action. It urges me towards transcription:

She is covered in sand … and … ? What’s she like? It is difficult to represent her on this page. Words such as ‘raw, ethereal, grotesque, beautiful, dark, etc.’ – used without reference to our own condition, easily turn cold and inert; they become empty frames, surfaces without depth, closed and complete within themselves. They do not carry you forward in the capricious torrent.

Okay - she is covered in sand. No skin, just sand. From where I’m standing, each careless gesture of her fingers, nose, hips, lips, eyelids is luminescent through the diffused, shifting nebula. The nuances of her being span the full spectrum of light, but only a portion is visible to us, the invisible realm cradled within the noiselessness of shifting particles.


In the silence between words – in the distance between her and I – lay a spectrum of expressions attesting to an illusion of being. A thread criss-crosses the visible and invisible. It is a thickening of potentialities, a texture of relations between the one and its many possible narratives, or lives. This alone makes our pursuit meaningful. Without it we are merely orbiting around an illusory centre: letters without words, words without gesture, gestures without expression.

WHM, #2, 2014

I use the body-in-fashion, in my writing, to evoke the possibility of other worlds. In Kaleidoscopia, the body-in-fashion is presented as a fashion mannequin – a template, model and blank slate whose purpose is to catalyse our imagination, and for us to solicit a relationship with it. It makes us aware of our capacity to exceed ourselves – to spill over the edge of the known world.

From under the coat, a sudden profusion of white silk tulle exhales out and down towards the ground. Innumerable layers of fine, feather-weight fibres criss-cross in slow release. Across the bottom of the skirt, more gold spiders appear to grow and trace complex patterns, mirroring the trails on her veil. She stares into the mirrors again and sees herself suspended in a maze of refracted images, held in place by an elaborate network of gold and white silk fibres forming prisms of reflected light.

Gravity feels altered. In this kaleidoscopic mirror box, she is not only an image and an object but also a dynamic frequency. She does not control this body though she feels the weight of its reflections. She hears it fracturing, mutating and amplifying as it resonates throughout the network of mirrors. She is a specimen on a glass slide – a known probability but a wild card nonetheless.

WHM, Kaleidoscopia, 2013

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3.6 ‘Falling:’ flesh, textile, texture

The intention behind *Falling* is to test the capacity for writing to create an aesthetic experience of the body that cannot be easily achieved in physical form. I wanted to conjure an impossible body. Far from creating fantasies about bodies, dress and fashion, the intent was to engage the sensation of language in catalysing new aesthetic expressions, to shift existing notions of the body.

In *Falling*, the body is unattached to human figuration and characterisation; it is presented as an array of body-like parts, objects and substances: dress, flesh, gasses, liquids, colours, minerals, stones and metals. I had set out to objectively describe the body as pure *matter* through the aesthetic qualities of weight and gravity, movement and stasis. I wanted to convey the body as a ‘process-in-flux’ – as a chain of alchemical micro-processes. The narrative centers upon a body in the process of material decomposition, as it gradually breaks apart and is absorbed by dress. It alludes to Giacomo Leopardi’s poem *A Dialogue between Fashion and Death*,\(^\text{280}\) in which *Fashion* and *Death* are portrayed as ‘sisters’ in their power over the body. The red dress in *Falling* is based on the Alexander McQueen dress from the 2011 collection, *VOSS*, as mentioned, which I remember glimpsing once in a photograph.\(^\text{281}\) In the photograph, the dress is worn by a mannequin photographed from the back: it comprises a mass of ostrich feathers dyed red, along with a dense arrangement of microscopic glass slides stained red. Next to the image is a quote by McQueen: ‘There’s blood beneath every layer of skin.’\(^\text{282}\) The iconic image – so far removed from actuality – resonates a depth of allure and mystique, and exudes a magnetic pull towards which the writing gravitates. For me, it is the redness of the red dress that is compelling. While I could not physically touch the red dress that the photograph refers to, the dress of my aesthetic imagination – an idea and ideal that is the body-in-fashion – is a source of limitless projections. It is an egress to myriad trajectories. It is rife with potential textures.

In *Falling*, the body in the McQueen dress undergoes a process of intense decomposition; it ruptures and liquefies – each of its parts and stages amplified through words – such that one slithers through the body’s immense viscera. *Falling*

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\(^{281}\) Bolton, Andrew, op. cit., p. 75.

\(^{282}\) ibid., p. 74.
seeks the aesthetic experience of mutation, mutilation, disintegration and decay, to be deeply embroiled in an experience of transformation and regeneration into a new body. The body’s metamorphoses in surface appearance and materiality insist on the lived intensity of aesthetic experience as a thorough, all-over bodily sense perception; the visceral depth of visual, sonic, tactile, smell and taste sensations are enmeshed in a texture of something greater than the sum of its parts.

When I started *Falling*, my intent was to experiment with the gravity of words to vivify not the original image of the McQueen dress but my aesthetic encounter with the image. As the writing progressed, the dressed mannequin shifted from object to aesthetic experience – it began to bloom with aesthetic potential.

The dress and mannequin started as an object – the body-in-fashion appearing as a distant, flat image. Through the writing, the distance closes in, coaxing an aesthetic encounter at close range. The dress – as metaphor for skin and body – becomes permeable, offering an egress to the visceral dimension of the bodily – blood, skin, flesh; it is the body-in-pieces turned inside out. To express the immediacy of ‘the bodily,’ I delved into the ‘fleshiness’ of flesh. This is to speak of the *qualia* – the ‘raw feel’ of the body’s fleshiness, and the subjective qualities of such experience that I imagined as a spectrum of solids, liquids and gasses in transition between states:

> The translucent membrane encasing the feathers starts to dissolve into a sticky, gelatinous mess. The milky fluids contained within begin to froth on the surface of the feathers. You can feel fluids oozing from your nostrils, eyes and ears. The surface of your skin – now starting to marble with blue-grey veins – begins to rupture, oozing noisy fluids and gases from orifices. You close your eyes again and let the sounds recompose into a twisted unison of hissing, gurgling and popping, the surface of your skin cracking, peeling, slipping off.

WHM, *Falling*, 2012

Zoe Detsi-Diamanti et al differentiate the plasticity and ‘smelly materiality’ of the term ‘flesh’ from the concrete ‘bulkiness’ of the body: she offers ‘flesh’ as a more accurate
word to use in relation to transformation and change.\textsuperscript{283} As opposed to the ‘abstractedness and generalisability’ of the body, the idea of flesh calls to mind the sensation of organic matter that is amorphous and thus difficult to measure and contain. In the bio-industrial age, flesh is treated as expendable material in scientific laboratories: it is spliced, experimented upon, transformed and circulated.

This new skin stretches over an engorged blob enclosing you from the waist down. The blob is like a wrinkly, half-deflated water balloon, appearing light but its density impedes any lightness of movement. It shifts and rolls around in a state of retarded response. Laying there immobilised you think of those whole headless chickens with their appendages neatly tucked under their plump bodies, wrapped in plastic bags and sitting in a supermarket cool room …

WHM, \textit{Falling}, 2012

In the prose-work \textit{Falling}, the body is imagined through the red Alexander McQueen dress. In describing what it might feel like against the fleshy body, the dress gradually becomes flesh itself: an unknown quantity that we familiarise ourselves with through (our own) weight and volume, stretch, density, elasticity. Here I am alluding to dress as a metaphor for the body and skin. The fleshy body is malleable and vulnerable; it can be physically altered and cosmetically enhanced, although – for now – it remains susceptible to age, disease and decomposition. Depicted as the McQueen dress stretching over it as skin, the body in \textit{Falling} is a textile: a fluid composition that can be ‘probed into, fabricated, destroyed’\textsuperscript{284} and at the same time reconfigured and reconstructed.

The body in \textit{Falling} is not ascribed an identity, though it is referred to as ‘you.’ Rendered in second person voice, combined with the intentional vivacity of its description, the body being written induces us to imagine our own – to gauge the fleshiness of flesh in relation to it. I offer this to amplify the gravity of aesthetic experience as an encounter – how one must greet and be attuned to another in order to fall into the experience. It is the recognition of other bodies that one perceives oneself

\textsuperscript{284} ibid., p. 4.
as body, which brings to mind the sense of embodiment that Gail Weiss describes as ‘intercorporeality.’ She explains that ‘the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies.’ The second-person narration is an attempt to implicate the reader in the de/composition this body – the body (as a piece of ‘corporeal flesh’ and as a piece of writing).

The body (writing) becomes a necessary intermediary between the self and the unknowable outside reality of the body (writing), organising the relations to the outside through the mediation of images; the image one has of oneself is therefore the center of one’s being and perception, a kind of interface to the world.

Bernadette Wegenstein, *Getting Under the Skin*, 2006

Falling describes the process of dress, skin and flesh, each breaking and dissolving into one – and, metaphorically, the continual fragmentation and composition of the body and writing. At this point, it is alluding to something much more fundamental: the reciprocity between imagining and writing. The dress is melting into the body – the body disintegrating, the skin erupting, the flesh rotting. As it endures gradual decomposition, dress and skin weave into each other, forming a fluid textile.

Skin to skin as anchor, two writhe together –
diving, lusting, biting, thoughtless, hungry.
Two interior intervening –
face against chest against thigh
clinging to each rib,
interweaving, lips parting lips.
Sweat an estuary – every touch an entirety,
strung against shiver’s wrecking pace,
shared skins tremble, tumble
from one endless depth into another.

WHM, *Notes on reciprocity (with Marcus Mitford)*, 2014

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286 Wegenstein, p. 29.
In *Falling*, the dress exposes the body: it is by virtue of describing the dress that the body is revealed. Facing each other, the body and the dress are mutually contingent – one relies on the other to speak. This alludes to the reflexive relationship between imagination and its verbal expression – between the image and text – where one speaks of the other not as direct representation, but where one refers to, jumps off, or departs from another; they greet and transform each other.

The trunk of your body is covered with rows of small rectangular glass plates, overlapping one another in a spectrum of inky reds, mixed with midnight blues and purples – trembling, shimmering … They burrow into flesh … They gather and merge with skin at some parts, forming smooth seams where the surface meets glass. At other parts they protrude from under the skin, causing bluish-purple blisters to gather, soundlessly forging a new texture.

WHM, *Falling*, 2012
3.7 Writing (body) in practice

I envied the people around me who are hermetically sealed inside their secrets and isolated from the tyranny of objects. They may live out their lives as prisoners of their overcoats, but nothing external can terrorise or overcome them, nothing can penetrate their marvelous prisons. I had nothing to separate me from the world, everything around me invaded me from head to toe; my skin might as well have been a sieve. The attention I paid to my surroundings, nebulous though it was, was not simply an act of will: the world, as is its nature, sank its tentacles into me; I was penetrated by the hydra’s myriad arms. Exasperating as it was, I was forced to admit that I lived in the world I saw around me; there was nothing for it.287

Max Blecher, *Adventures in Immediate Irreality*, 2015

The Romanian author Max Blecher poignantly captures the absolute entanglement of the world with his body. Immobilised by spinal tuberculosis for most of his brief life, Blecher’s exasperation lay in his inability to escape the intensities of lived experience that was his body. He was fully exposed to the limitations of his own body that was, in turn, fully ‘penetrated’ by the world’s unrelenting phenomena; material objects only offered a superficial layer. Here, I recall Merleau-Ponty’s notion of lived experience, where the phenomenological body mediates the world. In my practice, the aesthetic world of fashion that I speak of stretches beyond clothing; I am interested in a thorough and overwhelming force – such as gravity and human desire – that cradles the momentum and texture of lived experience, and gives weight to our bodies’ participation in the world.

Contemporary fashion scholar and sociologist Joanne Entwistle addresses the significance of the fleshy body in understanding fashion and dress.288 She suggests that bodily or ‘fleshy’ practices – related to the embodied dimension of experience drawn from phenomenology – are direct expressions of social structures. Thus, she introduces the concept of dress as ‘situated bodily practice’ as inevitably subject to the


conditions of the social system, and thus tied to the production, consumption and
distribution of power. In an attempt to overcome the either/or of objectivism (of
dress and sociology) and subjectivism (of lived experience), she draws from sociologist
Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘lived practice or ‘habitus.’ While ‘habitus’ – as a
‘dynamic, durable and transposable set of dispositions’ – alludes to a sense of agency
on the part of subject, the body/subject is still contained within a structure and thus
remains ‘shaped by culture and rendered meaningful’ only in relation to others within
the social order.

I share Entwistle’s concern for the phenomenological dimension of the dressed body,
but divert from her sociological framing. While she discusses the significance of
phenomenology via the notion of ‘situated bodily practice,’ her focus is the perception
of self and identity through fashion and dress in the social context. Premising the
exploration of fashion as a concept of lived, aesthetic expression, my fundamental
intent is to account for fashion in practice, and the integral role of the body in the
process. By unhinging the body from the social context and placing it within the
domain of creative process/practice, my concern is with the body’s capacity to proffer
a phenomenological expression of fashion.

The power of fashion lies in its capacity to move the aesthetic imagination; in my
writing practice, I use the body – just as the act of writing itself – as the mediating
layer through which one feels the weight of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling,
and – most of all – imagining. To write in and as fashion practice – to involve the
body/writing – is to engage with the gravity of such aesthetic processes.

+ 289 Entwistle, Joanne. ‘Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice.’ Fashion
3.8  **Body as kaleidoscopic fictions**

Frantic, stirred, overflow / bodies fidget, repeat in gloss, buoyed by Siren Songs shredding air / migraine lights pixilating eyes, electric timbres bursting sharp, jagged voices splicing / agitated desires rushing, colliding / chains unlink / twisted, torn-up sounds / more sharp shrills splintering, self-annihilating / ‘ ’ a mouth twists into shape, then laughs then jerks, grating hands fail to take hold, spin out faster and faster / pirouette and trash mid-air.

WHM, *Notes on multiplicity and madness (with Marcus Mitford)*, 2014

Since the twentieth-century, the proliferation of mass consumerism, advertising, hedonism, and the control of communication in society, has shifted the labouring (industrial capitalist) body to the desiring (post-industrial) body. The concept of the body continues to shift with the transformations in media technologies and market economies. As a fictive construction of image and text, and with the ubiquity of digital media, the concept of the body is becoming increasingly multiple, fragmented and abstract; it is rapidly produced, consumed, copied, recycled and repeated.

Within a socio-linguistic framework, Elizabeth Grierson, a scholar in art and media criticism, investigates the body through economies of image and text as forms of inscription. She suggests that one’s reading of image and text in/on the body, and the kind of images/texts that are distributed, affect – and indeed structure – how the body is socially constructed and perceived. Citing from Michel Foucault’s analysis of power relations between the body and society, Grierson writes, ‘in market cultures of continual consumption, images on billboards and other predominant locations in public places can have the effect of a panoptic scheme to influence and construct cultural and social norms.’

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In the marketplace of fashion, the body is the prime medium for the translation of socio-cultural and political narratives into consumable images and signs. When bodies are presented as flawed, depersonalised or obsolete, fashion fantasies insurrection. The body then becomes a canvas for new fictions. Debra Walker King, a scholar in cultural and body studies, discusses ‘body fictions’ as the ‘externally defined identities and representations as bodies … [as opposed to] lived experiences, in other words … the collision between real bodies and an unfriendly informant: a fictional double whose aim is to mask individuality and mute the voice of personal agency.’

King proposes that our obsession with ‘the’ body oppresses the ‘real or lived body’ – that the represented body often signifies stereotyped identities or ‘culturally prescribed fictions. She asserts that body fictions are a ‘negating force’ that ‘silences the real voice of the subject. In her book Appearance and Identity: Fashioning the Body in Postmodernity (2008), art theorist and philosopher Llewellyn Negrin, similarly cautions against the power of fashion to subsume individual identities.

You walk down another neighbourhood, where fantasies come alive as quickly as they die, dreams are turned over like products at the checkout line, promises are made, then broken, then resuscitated in some other form. This is the street inhabited by the great dream makers and poets – Coco, Hubert, Christian, Alexander – but how quickly are they forgotten. They are all dead, leaving their names on shop windows. You walk along and stop in front of the guarded entrance of a gilded house. There is an alleyway right next to the it where you used to sleep, eat, piss – until a gatekeeper in a shiny helmet and steel-toed boots kicked you to the other end of the block … over time these glaring signs had started playing tricks on you. They shine their empty bright lights in your eyes, make you wince once for yes and twice for no.

WHM, Falling, 2012
The fashion body is charged with the urgency to appropriate and adapt to market forces, where supply and demand is volatile and torrentially fluid. However, it is also intuitive, creative and reactive. In *The Art of Self Invention* (2007), Joanne Finkelstein believes that fashion is essential to the cultivation of identity – within limits – in an increasingly visual culture. Negrin, similarly, asserts the significance of fashion as a vehicle for self-curation and self-fashioning. She writes that the ‘aesthetic cult of the self’ is caught between the freedom to cultivate personal fictions, and the socio-cultural exertions – amplified through the fashion system – that impinge upon, and delimit, that very freedom. However, in the socio-capitalist system of fashion, the ‘freedom’ to cultivate oneself remains constrained within the existing rules of that world. Grierson states that it is much too easy to confuse the freedom to consume with the idea of freedom. She recalls Susan Sontag’s prophetic statement, ‘Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself.’

Fashion plays a tremendous role in the fictive construction and dissemination of body images, ideals and possibilities, turning them into cultural mandates and myths. As a commodity, the body is very much in thrall to its socio-cultural determinations – perhaps somewhat inhibited by them, as alluded to by Grierson and Sontag. I suggest that what becomes fascinating is when we use the body in fashion to generate fictions that resist, subvert and transgress its limitations. This is to use the body as a medium for catalysing new aesthetic expression, by situating it in the territory of the imagination. In chapter 2, I discussed the significance of fictional thinking to speculate possible futures for the body and its wearables, for instance, through science fiction narratives in film and literature. I propose that it is at the limits of the actual world that the body becomes exciting, because that is the point at which it takes flight and transforms. In this sense, body fictions can expose the limits of what we perceive to be actual, as they gesture towards possible worlds beyond.

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297 Negrin, pp. 4-5.
298 ibid., pp. 9-10.
This is to call to mind a different kind of freedom afforded by fiction – one that comes from an enduring human fascination with the speculative and the extraordinary. In fashion, this is epitomised, for example, by the extravagances and extremes of haute couture and the artistic avant-garde. The works of fashion designers Walter Van Beirendonck and the late Alexander McQueen not only seek to subvert and transgress the body but also celebrate the freedom to do so. Indulging in imagination for its own sake, we take the body ‘into our own hands,’ and inscribe our own fictions with a kind of ‘realness’ that speaks more of self-definition than originality – of speculation rather than fancy.

Rather than viewing them as images or products to be consumed, body fictions inspire transformation. As a catalyst for change, fiction relates to the concept of the body-in-fashion discussed earlier. The body-in-fashion – or, in this case, the body-in-fiction – is not a depiction of what should be but rather what could be. It is a generative medium. It reveals our (real) perceptions of what else may be and what might come next. It leads us to continually reimagine our bodies as fictions that could change and carry forward. This is not to deny the socio-cultural context in our understanding of the body; rather, it is to inscribe that world through the moving, sensing, feeling and imagining body – to write it into our fictions.

I clothe myself in narrative and write myself into the scene:

So they wear all these different robes, and the robes are – you know – ideas of other lives. And after a while they begin to lose touch of their previous ways. The robes start to mutate and grow, attaching themselves to the bodies, becoming the bodies. They speak to me in changed voices – and soon enough I forget what I was altogether. New robes are cast out of the fragments of what was before. And then we start all over again.

Something gets left behind, though, purely by chance.

WHM, *Through the Writing Body*, 2013

By placing the body/writing at the centre – and from here, opening outwards – I engage with fashion as a dynamic realm of lived, aesthetic encounter. This is about inscribing, inasmuch as it is about expanding (imagining) the aesthetic world of fashion through the body/writing. This, in essence, is the fundamental aim of my
writing/body-centred, phenomenological approach towards fashion in practice. In the context of the phenomenological imagination, fashion – through the faculty of the body/writing – constructs and mediates new aesthetic imaginations:

Robed bodies with twisted limbs and weak hearts, kaleidoscopic visions at the edge of consciousness. Where do these bodies come from? Why do they all seem somewhat familiar? I chase them down, pull back their robes and scratch at them. Half-formed desires and mutated remembrances – these I find in the gaping holes. And at the torn edges of my body: the beginning of something unexpected.

WHM, Through the Writing Body, 2013

The ‘robed bodies,’ in this context, express the secret lives of bodies, images, memories or objects; unknown or hidden from us, they might be transgressive, different, mutant – mysteries either to be revealed or to revel in. As mentioned previously, I once read about Honoré de Balzac’s habit of wearing luxurious robes when he wrote – that he could only write when in these robes. Intrigued by the image of Balzac’s robe, I explored the idea of ‘wearing’ one’s writing (or stepping into one’s imagined world) such that the robe, as a ‘stand-in’ or metaphor for the body, became the mediator of ideas – the surface upon which inscriptions could take shape and the robe transformed into (a body of) writing.

Lately my body has been breaking out in a rash. This happens when I’m being chased by fever. I’ve been wearing this ankle-length robe for the past week to hide the rash (did I have a premonition of this rash when I bought the robe?). In my semi-delirious writing state I’ve been referring to it as my Balzac robe, my Balzac rash. The rash grows and travels from one part of my body to another; it’s hard to catch where and when it stops and ends, and at which point it mutates. When the rash travels up past my neck I just hide in my room. This gives me lots of quiet time to write and scratch at the rash. Staying for days on end in my room without any human contact draws me deep into other worlds ...

WHM, Through the Writing Body, 2013
I was also thinking, then, of Peter Greenaway’s 1996 film, *The Pillow Book,*\(^{300}\) in which the protagonist Nagiko uses her body, and those of her lovers, as a slate for writing. The film explored Nagiko’s obsession with sexuality, poetry, calligraphy and human flesh. I remembered an extraordinary scene in which the corpse of her lover Jerome – upon which she has written and turned into her ‘book’ – is flayed and his skin compressed into pages of writing. In my practice, I tend towards malleable bodies that are sensitive, elastic and porous, vulnerable to the sharp tumults of their aesthetic worlds that press upon them.

When I was writing *Through the Writing Body, A Beginning,* I had in mind a short story by Franz Kafka. *In the Penal Colony* (1914)\(^{301}\) features a torture machine that inscribes ‘the judgment’ (the criminal sentence) directly into the criminal’s flesh. In the story, ‘the Officer,’ as the machine’s operator, describes, numbly, in cold, precise detail, the technical intricacies of the machine. ‘The apparatus’ consists of a bed (into which ‘the Condemned’ is strapped), the inscriber and the harrow; the latter is an array of needles that is set to write into flesh. The intensity of Kafka’s image of the body being repeatedly cut into has always stayed with me. Even though the story does not describe any bodily experience, the specifications of how the machine works on the body insinuates a horrific impression of limit-experience\(^{302}\) that is irresistibly visceral. Here, I suggest that language has the capacity to reach intoxicating extremes of sensation and imagination in excess of itself and towards the inexpressible.

Greenaway and Kafka’s portrayals of the human body lay open the visceral dimension of aesthetic experience – an inner realm of deep-seated animal instincts and raw reflexes – against which the rationality of linguistic expression either falls short or breaks down. From the tip of a calligrapher’s stylus brushing the surface of skin, to the incision of a machine’s needle into flesh, the meeting of flesh and instrument sends a palpable thrill to my body that exceeds my capacity to transcribe it *post facto.*

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302 Michel Foucault, drawing from Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille’s notion of ‘limit-experience,’ stated that the task of experience is to ‘tear’ the subject away from itself, such that ‘it transgresses the limits of coherent subjectivity.’ See Martin, Jay. ‘The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault.’ *Constellations,* vol. 2, no. 2, 1995, pp. 155-174.
The bodies and flesh that I imagine and write about – with their compulsions and flaws as well as the complexities of comprehension – are infused with mine. They are fragmented pieces of imagination that can cohere and take shape, but they can also exceed my capacity to hold them.

The body I imagine – the body in practice – now, as I write, spills over the edge:

As you read, I follow the curvature of my arm, around the bend of my wrist, as you turn around (see how your words burrow straight into me).

The hem of my skirt catches underneath my feet (why do you keep stealing my attention?)
and I trip over my own words, half a step behind.

My body (it refracts the imagination) – is always too much too soon, but –
just for a split moment then, I felt the edges go still.

WHM, Notes, 2013

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3.9 My body

Our bodies, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, are ‘far from being merely an instrument or object in the world, [they] are what give us our expression in the world.’ Here I am alluding to the ‘work’ through which I express myself, that is my body or corpus of writing, specifically the prose-works and other fragments such as notes and lists. Writing is an ‘environment’ that enables pieces and processes to come together, and – like the body in the world – a stage where parts gather, and where meaning is performed and brought into being.303 The prose-works have catalysed my practice; they are the parts that condense to form a body of research, which, in turn, constitutes the essence of my role, voice and agency as a practitioner.

Through the Writing Body, a Beginning is concerned with the nature of my writing practice, and how I locate myself within it. I began writing this at a time when I was struggling to come to terms with how to write. What would I write about? What would I not write about? Why would I write in fashion? This work has led me to engage with the body, or the corpus, as the compositional process of (a body of) writing: a constellation of words and images that cohere to form tentative meanings, and at the same time gesture towards other possibilities.

My practice explores the body that mediates the aesthetic world by making sense of it: it is that which gathers and organises aesthetic phenomena into lived experience. In phenomenological terms, the body is aesthetic expression. This is about the writing/body transacting with aesthetic phenomena. The writing is not a representation of aesthetic phenomena but rather the revelation of its own aesthetic processes. It shows the bones and the pulse.

To this end, much of my writing has to do with revealing in, and as, practice the processes of my own thinking and imagination. This is about my own writing-body, and accounting for it in the process of its own construction. I imagined myself directly in the writing – moving, sensing, speaking; it was a way of thinking through how and what to write; who to write for, from whose perspective, and in what/whose voice. What is my voice in the practice, and why should it matter?

In *Through the Writing Body, A Beginning* the voice shifts between first, second and third person perspectives. The intertwining of multiple voices, bodies and disparate references alludes to the parallel experiences and exchanges between myself, the reader and other subjects implicated within the work. It carries a sense of self-conscious anxiety of co-opting other ‘bodies.’ Through the device of the second person perspective – by continually addressing *you* along the way – I was seeking the ‘felt’ presence of the bodies of the writer and protagonist as an extension of the reader/s. It is about gauging the gravity of my voice in relation to others. I wrote as a way to insert myself directly into (the body of) the writing, to brush up against the other bodies …

She is the taxidermied Chimera, with her history and narrative frozen …
You can touch her, and ask about her – but her presence remains as foreign to you as she is to herself. Though perhaps there is more to her in this abeyance.

You lift up her skirt expecting to find bare, mannequin legs, and you imagine her flinching, only to realise it’s you.

WHM, *Kaleidoscopia*, 2013

*Some kind of authenticity*

In this chapter I concentrated on my conception of the body; firstly, as the essential organ of lived, aesthetic expression that is the pulse of fashion. My understanding of fashion is influenced by Charles Baudelaire’s conviction that fashion – in all its fugitiveness and ephemerality – is the poetic expression of the aesthetic of modernity, and Walter Benjamin’s historiographical examination of fashion as the epitome of ‘the aesthetics of change.’ The body-in-fashion is my attempt to embody the magnetic qualities of the fugitive and transient, and the persistence of illusion and the ideal, that coaxes perennial pursuit. It is a fitting a metaphor for fashion, whose seductive power lies in its vagueness and ephemerality – the embodiment of transformative potential.

To manifest these experiential dimensions of fashion, I use the body as aesthetic medium; it is the (corporeal) body that, metaphorically, gives weight to the aesthetic expression, and in my practice, it is my writing/corpus that shapes expression.
Whereas the aesthetic world is phenomenal, the corpus points to some measure of concrete expression – superimposing, breaching and casting forward to lived experience. The body-in-pieces attends to the latter; it depicts the composite nature of writing, where images, words and their fragments suggest multiple juxtapositions, sequences and configurations.

His inscribed skin was the robe, the surface on which the marks first gathered form. It was his fleshy body, at the point of contact with mine, which awoke me. His inscriptions vaguely sketched out the field of my dreaming, and it was up to me sow my exits.

The marks curled, in turn, along the manifold tendrils of my imagination.

Oscillating between fragmentation and its imagined wholeness, the body-in-pieces and body-in-fashion are an analogy for the twin processes of writing and imagining – one is always forming or un-forming into the other – in the way that a mirror reaches out to steal from its spectral sister. In my approach to fashion practice, I shift between the two, sustaining a productive tension between the deliberate constructions (fictions) of the body (writing) and the elusiveness of the imagination. I seek, in the ephemeral and fugitive nature of fashion, some measure of profundity – for something concrete that might move me. Where there is restless energy, there is the potential for change.

Entranced by rapture,
the dance twirls –
the music and light crescendo a bodily-euphoria,
vision running between lambent fingers,
and all the unruly beauty of everything you love is,
all-at-once and suddenly,
Tangible.

And so you cannot – must not stop,
the centrifugal pull as the colours swirl –
past the eye in such delight,
with such fluid speed,
that the entire world is a spinning top –

an Aurora.

So let’s stay here for a while.

There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.\textsuperscript{304}

\textit{WHM, Notes on ectatics (with Marcus Mitford), 2014}

Beyond the masquerade of vagaries and passing fads, fashion strives for an ideal, an abstract quality in itself. Although the idea expressed by the word ‘fashion’ differs greatly within different contexts, it always denotes the imaginary and nonexistent or sets the existing in contrast to an ideal.\textsuperscript{305}


This chapter discusses the second fundamental intent of the research, which is the role of the aesthetic imagination and its significance in the discourse and practice of fashion, and how this is tested through the practice. In the previous chapter, drawing on Baudelaire’s expression of fashion as the aesthetic manifestation of the spirit of \textit{modernité}, I discussed fashion’s inherent movements and sensations of the fugitive and the ephemeral. This chapter reflects on these notions through the micro-events of imagining and writing, which constitute the vitality of lived expression in practice.

In contrast to existing modes of representational and descriptive writing in fashion, I consider writing and imagining as extensions of each other. Writing-imagining circumscribes the unique dynamism that underlies fashion expression, where the aesthetic impulse is felt as appetite, a trigger and propulsion. This points to an essential intent of the research, which is to engage with the tendencies of language to catalyse imagination, and conversely, the tendencies of the imagination to shift the way we write fashion.

In the collection of essays in the book *Writing Design: Words and Objects* (2012), a group of scholars and design practitioners examines the ideational capacity of writing to establish the very perception and understanding of designed ‘things and objects.’ In her essay, ‘Thinking in Metaphor (2012),’ Anne Hultzsch discusses the use of figurative language to reveal how writing mediates perception, and vice versa. An ekphrastic description, for example – the transaction between an object or image and its verbal representation – does not only record what is being observed, but also expresses the qualities of the observational act, or how the object/image is being perceived and thus formed in the subject’s imagination. Metaphorical descriptions, in mediating between abstraction and concrete experiences, demonstrate the manifold capacity of language to affect not only what is being perceived, but also reveal methods of the exacerbated, perceptual process.

The poet and literary theorist Susan Stewart asks, ‘In talking of an object’s qualities, do we form an object’s qualities?’ Emphasising the processes of imagining and speculating as productive forces specifically in design, Mads Folkmann, a contemporary scholar in design and communication, posits that the concept of imagination is ‘… tightly related to the possible and the potential that it engages … and operates as a vehicle in connecting sensual and conceptual meaning … [therefore] it deals with dimensions of meaning in design.’ The role of the imagination and the imaginary offers an entry point that allows us to discuss the possible in design. *Writing-imagining* explores the capacity of writing to evoke imaginative thinking that *speaks* something of us, and pontoons those potential worlds – otherwise intractable – that *do* something to us.

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309 Ibid., p. 5.
4.1 Imagining (through) fashion

Fiction is widely employed in the communication of fashion, such as the strategy of ‘telling a story’ through the magazine editorial, fashion show and collection. Narrative overlays typically communicate the identities and idiosyncrasies of the fashion magazine, fashion house, brand, and designer. Sometimes they gather momentum, accumulate and grow into icons and myths. Fashion journalist Dana Thomas released a book about Alexander McQueen and John Galliano, referring to them as ‘gods and kings.’ The ‘nonfiction’ book has been described as a ‘compelling as a work of great fiction,’ and ‘a dark story about excess, commerce, aristocracy and fashion as high theatre that is as operatic as the dizzying shows it describes.’ Fiction feeds fashion’s obsession with sensation and celebration, and vice versa.

Our desire to make and share stories also reveals our human urge to construct concrete evidence of who we are, to form cohesive order and meaning, emitted with control. Stories are a vital means for cultivating our identities and marking our relations to others and the world, and fashion – the vast stage upon which we perform our imaginations – seduces us to play with many versions of such stories. Fashion and fiction are natural allies; they reinforce within us the pleasures of speculation and artifice. France-based fashion magazine Purple published four issues dedicated to fiction between 1995 and 1998. In 2004, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York featured the work of thirteen contemporary fashion photographers who expressed the preoccupation of fashion, in the 1990s, to define itself as an all-encompassing, lifestyle commodity culture, with presupposed realities, luxurious aspirations and desires. Fashion photographers pursued these grand visions and illusions through the cinematic vista and heightened drama of the movies, or the private and accidental snapshot. They sought to express, through the photograph, the sense of a much larger world beyond. Suitably called Fashioning Fiction in Photography since 1990, the exhibition flaunted the paramount power of the fictive imagination in fashion.

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Fashion lures us towards distant dreams, inasmuch as it draws us into ourselves. Personal memories and anecdotes tap into the nostalgic and mythical realm that is essential to the immaterial memories of objects, and which is, in turn, bound to our sense of self. In April 2014, the London-based fashion journal *Vestoj* ran a ‘story-telling salon’ at the *Galeries Lafayette* department store in Paris, where a group of ‘fashion professionals … who had dedicated their life to the intimate study of dress’ offered stories in an intimate setting. Fashion designer Jean Charles de Castelbajac spoke about the cloak he made for Pope John Paul II in 1997 and Frances Corner (the Head of College at London College of Fashion, UK) spoke about her wedding dress and what it revealed about her as a woman, wife and scholar. A piece of clothing remembered can bring about the delights of reminiscence. Dissociated from the actual body, the garment of our imagination – just as a garment without a body – can be richly evocative and haunting, even as it amplifies the absence of the concrete reality. It takes on an enigmatic quality, an uncanniness that incites further wanderings of the mind. At the *Fashion Detective* exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne in 2014, crime fiction writers were invited to contribute fictional stories – along with material evidence, hearsay and forensics – to accompany a collection of historical garments that had limited provenances. While the Gallery’s decision to engage (only) with crime fiction – popular fiction with fixed genre conventions – is limiting, and neglects other, more creative modes of fictional practice, *Fashion Detective* does allude to the broader significance of fiction in the inscription of historical narratives, as a contingent process of reconstruction and conjecture.

Fiction can be a means to transcribe what might have been and what might be coming, based on what we know and feel. As a speculative device, it has an enduring place in architectural and design thinking. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, an eighteenth-

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century artist, produced a series of fourteen etchings that he called *Carceri d’invenzione* (*Imaginary prisons*). Archigram, a radical architectural collective that formed in London in the 1960’s, developed wonderful visions of new ways of living through drawings and collages. Imagined worlds such as *Walking City* (*a peripatetic giant reptilian structure*), *Living Pod* (*a miniature capsule home*) and *Instant City* (*an airship containing all the resources of a metropolis*) catch our attention because they challenge how we perceive and operate in reality. The point is less about what the fictional thing or world is, or how to actualise it, than what it says about *the way we can imagine and why we do so*.

Science fiction thinking, for instance, enacts possibilities that are vital to the speculative dimension in creative practice. It has a long legacy in design and architectural practice. Science fiction worlds in literature and film create bodies and wearables that might evolve from our current forms, as well as technologies and materials that can give rise to those forms. Exponentially proliferating technologies are not only transforming how wearables are produced but also how they are mediated and experienced; indeed, in the face of rapidly changing technologies, how are wearables to be conceptualised in the first place? Marie O’Mahony, in her studies on futuristic and fantastical textiles in relation to hybrid human forms in science, literature and film, writes that fiction has the ability to act as a catalyst for fashion, providing a narrative for the technology. At the centre of it all, is the rapidly changing idea of what the body is. This suggests a vast scope for the role of the fictive imagination in conceptualising the body and its aesthetic possibilities. Iris van Herpen is a contemporary fashion designer at the forefront of experimenting with new ways of making. Challenging what constitutes a garment or wearable, she visualises a ‘non material’ future for fashion in which people could be dressed in

318 O’Mahony, Marie. ‘Advanced Textiles for Fashion in Science, Literature and Film’ in Black, Sandy, op. cit., p. 479.
319 Bernadette Wegenstein’s concept of the body in the future – as it merges with technologies – is mediation itself. See Wegenstein, op. cit., 2006.
‘smoke, drops of water, coloured vapour or radio waves.’ In 2010, ARCAM (Architecture Centre Amsterdam) instigated a collaboration between Van Herpen and the architect Benthem Crouwel. Taking a leap from the idea of a ‘bath tub,’ she aimed to create a dress ‘that would fall around the wearer like a splash of water, like being immersed in a warm bath.’ In 2015, the performing artist Björk – on the cover of her album *Vulnicura* – emerges from earth in the form of inky purple volcanic lava. In the realm of the digital, the distinction between the actual/possible and fictional/impossible is beside the point.

We can create stories to express things that do not yet exist, to imagine what they might feel like against our bodies. But in order for them to do something to us, to mean something for us, these fictions should unsettle and perplex us – because we sense something in them that we do not yet know – that could ultimately move us to respond in new ways. It is not enough to create fictions for the sake of something new, but to use them to reveal the fundamental processes of aesthetic imagination and expression, and to pursue that which we do not yet have as a language. We can approach previously inaccessible extents, and step from the imminent into the immanent. This points to the pivotal heart of what I aim to achieve through the writing practice.

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322 Benthem Crouwel’s design for a new extension to Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum had earned it the nickname ‘bath tub.’
324 Björk, *Family*. Music video. 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAXvkbOzK6E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAXvkbOzK6E) (accessed 18 March 2015). The video was directed by contemporary filmmaker and artist Andrew Thomas Huang [http://www.andrewthomashuang.com/about.htm](http://www.andrewthomashuang.com/about.htm)
4.2 Using Fiction

My practice explores fictional thinking and imagination as an active process of organising and mediating aesthetic experience – whether real or imagined. My interest in fiction comes from its etymological root that is the act of fashioning or forming.\footnote{325} Rather than thinking about fiction in terms of the conventions of genre, I use it to frame ideas and to discuss processes of ‘creating,’ ‘making’ and ‘constructing’ that are vital to creative practice. Rather than focusing exclusively on the story and what it means, my interest is in how we imagine and make sense of our lived, aesthetic experiences. Fiction reveals the constructedness of our world, and – more excitingly – our live participation in its construction.

The fundamental appeal of fiction, in the context of my practice, as a structure of experience is its capacity to open up writing as an aesthetic practice. The cross-immersion of writing and imagining is seductive. Contemporary writers and literary theorists such as Ben Lerner and Michael W. Clune are especially attuned to the tendencies of our imagination and habits of perception. They operate in the interstices of fiction, memoir and criticism. Works such as Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011)\footnote{326} and *10:04* (2014),\footnote{327} and Clune’s *White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin* (2013),\footnote{328} use the device of fiction and memoir to interrogate the processes of their own construction, revealing the artificial layers of everyday experience, or what we perceive them to be.

The nineteenth-century philosopher Thomas Carlyle produced an elaborate work of fiction in 1833-34 entitled *Sartor Resartus (The Tailor Re-Tailored)*.\footnote{329} In it, an unspecified ‘English editor’ introduces his English readers to the work of the eccentric German philosopher, Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (‘god-born devil-dung’). According to the Editor, the Professor had devised a ‘Clothes-Philosophy’ in his mysterious magnum opus, entitled *Clothes: their Origin and Influence*. In it, he used clothing as a metaphor for human nature.

\footnote{326}{Lerner, Ben. *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Minneapolis, USA: Coffee House Press, 2011.}
that … grand Tissue of all Tissues, the only real Tissue … the vestural Tissue, namely, of woollen or other Cloth; wherein his whole other tissues are included and screened, his whole Faculties work, his whole Self lives, moves, and has its being.330

Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 1833-4

Everything we learn about the Professor’s philosophical reflections on human nature, and of the Professor himself, is through the reconstruction of the (fictional) character of the Editor. The layering of metaphors and fictional conceits culminate in an elaborate meta-fictional system. Drawing from the quote above, I suggest that our understanding of the world is inevitably tied to our own hermeneutical fictions. In metaphorical terms, it is not only about how we clothe ourselves but how we tailor and make our clothes in the first place.

In 2014, the contemporary Canadian artist Margaux Williamson produced forty-six figurative paintings that were captured in an exhibition catalogue published by a museum in the remote Yukon, Alaska, where she was living at the time. Her paintings were all titled with short phrases that, when read together, evoked vague narrative worlds; it was wholly up to the viewer to dream up his or her own version of these world/s. However, the exhibition never actually occurred and the museum – The Road at the Top of the World Museum – was an imaginary place. The museum, just as the book, is a fictive vantage point that reveals the ‘constructedness’ of what we accept to be real. Curator Ann Marie Peña penned an essay accompanying Williamson’s monograph (2014) that continued the fiction:

> From our position on this hill, just under the tree line at the confluence of the Klondike and Yukon rivers, the Road at the Top of the World Museum has a unique view; our outlook over the last of the spruce trees and below the brightest stars on the longest nights can have a

330 ibid., p. 2.
Using fiction profound effect on our perspective and how we conduct our daily existence.332


Williamson presents a view of fiction not only as a source of adventure, but – more interestingly – as a way subverting our experiences in, and of, the world, which could be multiple, and beholden to no one and ‘no thing.’ Fiction shifts our understanding of what is possible, revealing the tenuous nature of our habits of perception. The art critic, Chris Kraus, writes that Williamson has created a ‘child’s universe of trauma and wonder,’ where things are ‘seen and felt whole, without analytical distance or mediation.’333 Aptly, Williamson had called her imaginary exhibition *I Could See Everything.*

332 ibid., p. 14.
4.3 Rustling the imagination (writing phenomenologically)

My practice is fundamentally a pursuit for lived, aesthetic expressions, and in this context, writing necessarily takes on a phenomenological significance. It is as much an ongoing, processual attunement to the subject of the writing as it is an engagement with the writing process itself. It is about capturing in the writing process what it might mean to imagine, and – as the literary critic Gavin Butt suggests – to open up the meanings of experience to the processes of writing, and, by the same token, to open up the process of writing to the vagaries of experience. Here, I allude to the reflexive moments in writing that vitalise the practice – moments, which, in their fleeting and elusive ways, stir the imagination.

Drawing from Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenological expression of the literary image and onearic imagination, I use writing to pursue aesthetic intensities, and – in Bachelard’s terms – to journey towards newness. He speaks of ‘the imagined image’ in terms of how the creative imagination gives an image its place even before perception, as a forerunner of perception. In contrast to what he calls the ‘reproductive imagination,’ which is attributed to perception and memory, the ‘creative imagination’ invents more than things and events – it invents new life, new spirit; it opens to new types of vision. Creative imagination is dynamic; it is the faculty of wonderment and awakening. He calls it ‘the very experience of opening and newness.”

It is not enough to give verbal or literary form to the imagination; rather, the literary imagination must allow both writer and reader to take off from whence they started, towards a new onearic life. The double function of the literary image is to create a different meaning and to evoke a different reverie.


Approximating the generative experiences of idle sketching and daydreaming, the appeal of the literary imagination is its playfulness. Taking flight on a creative intent, I start writing and I let the process gain momentum. This initial impetus might be sparked by a vague image, word, memory, or verse, which – in its very incompleteness

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336 ibid., p. 19.
337 p. 18.
and imprecision – stands out, calling for closer attention. Often, in seeking to *precisely* denote a thing, event, image or impression, I follow the impulse to dig around it, uprooting loose matter. My writing process resists linearity; I glance sideways and encounter other possibilities of meaning. My words approach but stop just short of the mark – a part of it is left veiled and untouched, or it escapes. Here, we are reminded of the charm of fashion’s fugitive tendencies. Far from being flights of fancy and insubstantial fantasies, it is precisely in its brevity and transience that fashion rears a fervent sense of transformation and newness.

Writing opens up processes of unpredictable associations and accidental encounters, where words, images and sensations come together as tentative juxtapositions and gather in congruent strands of sentences. New aesthetic possibilities emerge in the midst of writing – at moments of encounter between the object of experience and its verbal expression. Drawing on Mikel Dufrenne’s phenomenological aesthetics, aesthetic experience is ‘sensuous,’ which Edward Casey describes as an ‘intensification and epiphany of perception.’ Dufrenne takes aesthetic experience into another level, where the aesthetic object is charged with expressive power that draws us into its world. He describes aesthetic expression as ‘[stretching] beyond mental representation,’ connecting to a depth of feeling and reflection that culminates ‘in the feeling that thrusts us, within the heart of meaning, into a world immanent in the work.’

Writing, phenomenologically, encompasses dynamic processes of observation, perception, imagination and feeling. In the transactions between the verbal, imagistic and affective, one does not represent the other; rather, they meet and mutually transform.

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338 Casey, op. cit., 2010, p. 4.
339 Dufrenne, op. cit., p. 212.
4.4 ‘What it’s like’

At the start of this research – prior to the development of practical methods – and guided only with the naïve ambition to ‘write fashion’ – I was stumped by certain questions (the simplicity of which only added to my dismay):

**How do I begin to write? Where does imagination begin and end?**

I eventually started writing because I wanted to recall an image that I had once glimpsed. It was the iconic image of that red ostrich feather dress by Alexander McQueen. Rather than describing the dress based on a picture of it, I wanted to create a personal aesthetic encounter – to get a sense of what it would be like to recall it imperfectly by *writing* it, to let verbal expression take over, to understand what could be lost and gained. I realised then that I was fascinated not with the representation of the dress, but rather, the durational experience of writing-imagining.

At the time, I was reading Rainer Maria Rilke’s elegies, which he began writing in 1912, during his stay at Duino Castle, on a rocky headland of the Adriatic Sea near Trieste. The legend is that one morning he walked out onto the battlements and climbed down to where the cliffs dropped sharply to the sea. From out of the forceful wind, Rilke seemed to hear a voice: ‘*If I cried out, would hear me up there among the angelic orders?*’ This is the verse that opens Rilke’s magnum opus, *Duino Elegies*. It also drew me into Rilke’s exasperation and melancholia, and incited a rush of further images and sensations: a body dressed in a sweeping mass of red feathers hanging over the edge of the cliff, a red bird trapped in a vacuum’s tug of wind and ocean, a surge of red and black sounds.

*Falling* (2012) was an experiment in writing that sought to give shape to the sensation of a body wrapped into its physical environment, a body helplessly cast into the world, a body at the verge of falling. *What is it like and how would I write it?* I was fascinated by the possibility of an embodied, synaesthetic intensity, as an inevitable effect of primal forces of animal reflex, physical gravitation and biological decomposition. Dufrenne asserts that the ‘inhabitation or immersion’ in the world of the aesthetic object is at

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341 Ibid., p. 25.
once ‘affective and expressive’ and in this sense, I suggest that the phenomenal depths the aesthetic imagination has the capacity to move us.

As the writing gathered momentum, the body in the red dress began to move; as it expanded in scope, the writing started to shift. Writing phenomenologically – as a condition of reverie and daydream that Bachelard speaks of – is a process of ‘falling into’ the depths of the imagination. In *Falling*, the dress gradually collapses into the body and merges with flesh. The inner organs of the body – the viscera – expand and bloat, then rupture under pressure. The surface of the skin melts.

The aesthetic imagination – lived and embodied – folds us into its phenomenal depths. Writing is a way of falling into it – to make sense of it. At this point, we sense a new piquancy to Bachelard’s question: ‘Why should the actions of the imagination not be as real as those of perception?’

In fact, as previously detailed, what drew me to the McQueen dress was the impression of its *redness*. I was attracted to its texture because I could not tell, at first glance, what the dress was made of. I was fascinated by the idea of writing about the *redness of red* – what that feels like. *Quale* (in plural form: ‘qualia’) is a term used by philosophers of mind to refer to ‘the sense of what it’s like for someone or something to have a particular experience.’ It tunes into our subjective awareness of what it feels like to experience the world, thus quale is essential to phenomenological experience. Quale is the experiential dimension of sensation that exists only, and thoroughly, through the subject’s body. The sensation of the colour grey, of different whites, or physical pain, for example, is subjectively embodied – ‘what it’s like’ reveals more about the experiencing subject than the sensation itself. In the context of writing, I suggest that the depiction of quale can reveal the mechanics of our aesthetic processes.

When I looked more closely at the *redness*, it began to seethe and grow.

When writing, I seek out aesthetic phenomena that are unfamiliar, uneasy and extraordinary – sensations at the limits of the physical world and verbal language. I am fascinated by experience that is perhaps ineffable:

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342 Casey, op. cit., 2010, p. 4.
343 Bachelard, op. cit., 1994, p. 158.
… the kind of concreteness that is sensed as gravity; imagined rather than seen, careless language turns it into weight.

WHM, *Closer, in Fragments*, 2014

Similarly, I am attracted to phenomena that *may* be impossible, or those made possible only *because* of words. In pursuing phenomena that are *not easily* grasped, the point is not to render it precisely in verbal form but rather to indulge in its strangeness and unfamiliarity: the exciting ingredients of first encounters. The phenomenological moment is that which is *prior* to knowing. The palpable sensation of aesthetic phenomena lies in its imagining, which is an anticipatory space, rather than its actualisation:

She is covered in sand, entirely … and …? *What’s she like?*

WHM, #2, 2012

Writing brings forth verbal acts that express in their qualities the nature and habits of aesthetic imaginations. Elaine Scarry states, ‘we habitually say of images in novels that they “represent” or are mimetic” of the real world. But the mimesis is perhaps less in them than in our seeing of them.’ Writing-imagining amplifies the aesthetic tendencies of our bodies, and how we read and use them. I understand the girl, whose body is covered with sand, only *in relation to* my body. It palpates and shivers through mine – it circumscribes my aesthetic capacity. To bring it into view is to draw my body closer to it and merge with it. Boundaries blur, and the blur itself accelerates.

Through the phenomenological process invested in writing, I propose an alternative approach for aesthetic experience and expression. My writing practice resists direct representation of a thought, idea, image or narrative. Instead, writing creates and shapes amorphous imaginings; writing occurs immediately alongside imagining and thinking, rather than *after*. Writing gives form to the aesthetic imagination, inasmuch as the imagination shapes the course of expression.

In this state of transformation everything seems to want to pulsate in symphony (you can almost taste the conceit, but you choose not to

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question it). So, you, too, want to be thoroughly absorbed into this liquid experience.

WHM, *Falling*, 2012
4.5 Imagining-around

The words that fascinate me, through the images and sensations that they evoke, give an indication of the *stimmung* of the imagined worlds in my prose-works. *Stimmung* is the German term for ‘mood’, ‘spirit’, ‘atmosphere’ and ‘feeling’. It is often used to describe the orchestration of consummate harmonies in music. The literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht uses the term to refer to the way literature gives the impression of ‘being wrapped’ into the material world. He explains *stimmung* in terms of the hearing of sounds – a complex behaviour that involves the entire body – by way of the tuning of a musical instrument:

Skin and haptic modalities of perception play an important role. Every tone we perceive is … a form of physical reality that ‘happens’ to our body and, at the same time, ‘surrounds’ it … For this very reason, references to music and weather often occur when literary texts make moods and atmospheres present or begin to reflect upon them.


Gumbrecht also quotes from novelist Toni Morrison who expresses *stimmung* ‘with the apt paradox of “being touched as if from inside.”’ The embodied and visceral ‘reach’ is vital to my understanding of lived, aesthetic experience. I begin each writing project with a mood – an atmospheric impression or vague bodily sensation. The mood evokes an image or scenario, a concept or an idea. Just as strokes of colour and lines on a blank canvas may occasionally spark relations, the mood at the start of each prose-work sublimates and incites an imagined world that is a passage of aesthetic experience.

The sound puffs towards me. As it comes closer, the hairs on my skin rise in greeting. Particles land on skin.

All is powder now.

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349 Ibid.
I am drawn into words as shapes form around me.

WHM, Notes, 2015

The prose-work *Closer, in fragments* was composed of aesthetic elements that are deliberately immaterial, emerging as atmospheric sensations that can only be felt through the body.

This is our Protagonist; indefinable, save for a heated presence, a palpable absence. We feel it coming as an amorphous force-field, tuned to the frequency of our bodies and the space that surrounds.

WHM, *Closer, in Fragments*, 2014

Unlike my other prose-works, *Closer* is not framed within a scenario or background against which an event unfolds. Instead, I wondered about the mood of ‘greyness’: magnets, overcast skies, humming buildings, the blade of a knife, a metallic taste in the mouth, feeling cold. I wanted to engage with the currents of the psychical interior via ‘felt’ phenomena such as the patterning of sound and air, and shifts in physical gravity. *Closer* was written specifically for a reading performance at the Design Hub at RMIT University (Melbourne), a dramatic concrete, steel and glass building with severe walls lined with tight vertical metal pleating. The immensity of the steel structure loomed in the background as I wrote. A central, interior column running through the full height of the building whirred and growled against the force of the wind outside. Since I had no knowledge of the structural engineering of buildings I imagined the column as a void. This fascination serves to explain what I wanted to achieve, in part, with *Closer*, that is to convey what it might feel like to be pulled or drawn towards something unknown, such as the force of attraction that comes with first encounters: the desire to get closer, the wariness of exposing too much, the roused distance between. Most of all I was curious to test how this sensation would translate to a listening audience. *Closer* alludes to the gravity of the aesthetic imagination that is fashion, and how it may be expressed through allure as well as the dynamics of ‘the chase’ that is my writing practice.

*Closer* is a deliberate exercise in writing, reading and listening as experiences of being *drawn towards* sensation, knowing that there is the danger that the closer we get, the more readily it escapes.
4.6 Imagining-away: the fugitive imagination

The figure of the fugitive not only calls attention to the elusive tendencies of fashion but also the fluid momentum of the imagining process. Ekphrasis has a long and slightly convoluted history. Deriving from the Greek *ekphrazein*, meaning ‘to speak out’ or ‘to tell in full,’ the term originated in classical rhetoric as an exercise. The purpose was to train rhetoricians to evoke an object in ‘such vivid terms that listeners would virtually accept the description as the real thing.’ Ekphrasis was originally used in the context of Homer’s description of the imaginary Shield of Achilles in *The Iliad* (c. 800 B.C.E.) – a descriptive account that is so vivid as to have ‘enlivened’ it. As the contemporary novelist and literary theorist Ben Lerner asks, ‘Are objects more real than words’?

Ekphrasis and ekphrastic practice form the encounter between fiction and a visual work, the literary expression of a non-verbal work, for example, a poem that uses verbal art to engage a visual one. The ekphrastic imagination is a vital aspect of my writing practice. This idea was developed through the writing to immerse both the reader and writer in the productive friction between the verbal and visual imaginations, coalescing the processes of writing, reading and imagining. I am interested in the surprises that emerge when the image and word do not find direct correspondence but rather produce something else altogether, as is the case when the mixture of two chemical elements produces not their composite but cause a reaction that transforms both. Elements compound but somehow the future dilates. According to Jas Elsner, images and objects – insofar as they are designed to relate to us at all – invite ekphrasis; indeed, they require it.

The descriptive act constitutes a movement from art to text, from visual to verbal, an interpretive act, but there is always betrayal involved. Not everything in the world of the sensual autonomy of the object can be translated into words, and much that was not there is

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351 Homer, *The Iliad*. Circa 800 B.C.E. Simon Butler (Trans.).
353 Elsner, p. 13.
inevitably added by words. In other words, description is not merely
selective; it is (at its best) a parallel creation.354

Jas Elsner, *Art History as Ekphrasis*, 2010

Lerner further asks, ‘How do writers dramatise acts of looking? What are the
difficulties of depicting images in prose, and what opens up in that disconnect?’ While
the ekphrastic poem is in part judged by its powers of description, the thing it
describes can be fiction. Ekphrastic literature is often a virtual form: it describes
something that cannot be made – given the limitations of the actual world.355

Ekphrasis is also a process of the poetic imagination; it draws on poetic thinking to
dep深 the experience of an object or expression of imagination, therefore imbuing an
imagined object with its own set of potentialities.

In Michael W. Clune’s memoir *White Out*,356 he speaks of his experience as a
recovering addict and recurrently brings up the experience of ‘perpetual newness’ as
an effect of dope. Clune is a scholar who is interested in the relationship between
literature, science and poetry. Following *White Out*, he published a critical text on
contemporary literary practice entitled *Writing Against Time* (2013),357 in which he
situates that experience within the context of artistic and literary production. He says
that the ability to ‘arrest time’358 is one of the ultimate pursuits of artists, poets, writers
and musicians. He discusses Proust’s character Swann and his sensorium, as well as
the legend of Apollo’s imaginary music. He speaks about the expression of art in the
‘ekphrastic’ mode, such as the poet’s use of the poetic imagination to disclose, unearth
and discover other possibilities; in doing so, the poem gains its own set of
potentialities. It can stave off habitual, diminishing and decaying recognition.

A partial glimpse, a vanishing act, an enigmatic Lilliputian of the
imagination. I can’t be certain that she has always existed, or whether I’m
already erasing her.

WHM, #2, 2012

354 Elsner, Jas. ‘Art History as Ekphrasis.’ *Art History*, vol. 33, iss. 1, Association of Art
Historians, February 2010, pp. 10-27.
357 Clune, Michael, *Writing Against Time*, op. cit.
358 Clune, ibid., p. 10.
Ekphrastic imagining sets off a chain of aesthetic events. In describing or recalling an image, sometimes my words lean away, skip over the image or elude it entirely. A gap opens up as a space for imagining. In music, an extended silence between notes or sounds – the lacuna – serves to amplify the gravitas of the sound that went before and what is to come next; it plays a vital role in the overall composition and the experience of the musical piece. A related strategy in musical composition is syncopation, which is a deliberate disturbance of the flow of a rhythm by shifting or prolonging the accent, with the effect of toying with the listener’s anticipation and breaking preconceptions. Writing can break us out of the habits of our imagination.

The gap between imagination and its verbal expression is full of potential; it points to the fugitive quality of the imagination and its verbal expression – where one does not represent the other but rather departs from it. Writing, just as easily as imagining, can swell and carry us away. The phenomenological attention that focuses the act of writing may, paradoxically, lead the imagination astray. When confronted with an evocative image or word – the moment of touch – the body curls in reflexive response; it moves aslant, refracts, takes off.

There are things that I need to ask her, but every gesture towards her makes her fainter on the page.

WHM, #2, 2012

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4.7 Imagining beyond the surface: vivacity and mimesis

In literary novels, there are many examples of brilliantly described images of garments and the bodies that wear them. In the absence of pictures (such as those in fashion magazines), a writer renders into verbal form not only what the picture is, but also what is essentially his or her experience of aesthetic perception. Elaine Scarry has written wonderfully on aesthetic imagination in the verbal arts, as a synthesis of literary criticism, philosophy and cognitive psychology. She discusses the act of writing descriptions as an experience of vivacity and mimesis. Vivacity denotes ‘natural vigour, vital force and liveliness,’ it engages not just the visual but also the whole sensorial spectrum – such that a vivid encounter could be palpably felt through the entire person’s being. Scarry offers the concept of imagining as ‘an act of perceptual mimesis,’ involving intellectual or mental animation, acuteness, or vigour, as well as quickness or liveliness of conception or perception. She distinguishes three imaginative phenomena: (1) immediate sensory content such as the music filling the room; (2) delayed sensory content or what can be called ‘instructions for the production of actual sensory content’ such as a musical score; and (3) mimetic content such as the verbal description of a piece of music. More specifically, she differentiates our everyday imagination (such as from daydreaming) from the imaginative mode afforded by the verbal arts.

The attributes of the imagined object in daydreaming are discontinuous with the imagined object elicited by the verbal arts. The daydreamed object has the Sartrean features of two-dimensionality, inertia and thinness. The image elicited by the verbal arts, in contrast, has some of the vivacity, solidity, persistence and givenness of the perceptual world, attributes that can in part be accounted for by the instructional quality of writings, the explicit directions for how to construct the image that replaces our sense of volition with the sense of something there for the taking.


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361 Scarry, Elaine. ‘Imagining Flowers,’ op. cit.  
363 Scarry, ‘Imagining Flowers,’ p. 97.
According to Scarry, through vivid verbal description, images could be evoked in our imagination as immersive aesthetic phenomena, suggesting that they encompass volume, weight, and motion. While the qualia of aesthetic experience resist discrete coordinates, they are given expression through the abstract capacity of the verbal arts – the domain of poetry, for example.

I posit that the interaction between writing and imagining evokes lived, aesthetic experiences of objects, such that it is the quality of the experience that matters, rather than the objects themselves. In the context of fashion practice, what becomes fascinating is how writing and the sensation of language could elicit aesthetic worlds through the object or image. The prose-works *Falling*, *Kaleidoscopia* and *How to Escape the Present* are the outcomes of deliberate processes of vivid imagining. They reveal my perceptual tendencies and dynamics of the imagination. Through descriptions of liquids, gasses and solids, *Falling* explores how images dissolve and merge, or turn inside and out. The intent is to evoke the hallucinatory quality inherent in processes of daydream and imagination. In *Kaleidoscopia*, I imagined the mannequin as endlessly fragmenting, multiplying and shifting. The ornamental details of the garments and accessories on the mannequin move and change – an allusion to how static images and objects become ‘enlivened’ with our imagination, the closer and longer we look at them. *How to Escape the Present* engages with the fugitive tendencies of language and the imagination, by exploring how an image or word refracts into another. For this work, I used the objects from the Gallery archive as a point of escape. Through these writing experiments, I came to understand the potential for writing to thicken the imagination, and vice versa.

The intent behind the verbal descriptions of these objects is to test the capacity for writing to evoke lived encounters with objects – mainly dress and dress materials – as constituted in my imagination. Aside from the sensuous qualities imagined as (visual) image, sound, taste, touch and smell, I write about the object’s volume, weight and its gravitational pull – intangible qualities (sailing, spinning, spilling) that can only be imagined in relation to my body (or the body in the writing). I want to get to the *thingness* of the thing by pushing up against it, to draw my own body, with that of the reader’s, into the encounter. These objects are inherently bodied, that is, they were *made* as well as *written for*, and through, the experience of the body. The paired succour of writing and imagining is an act of mutually consuming and evoking. Objects orbit and
are drawn to the centre of the slingshot. In *Closer, in Fragments*, I sought to express the
dynamism of the imagination through the shifts in sound, gravitational force and
movement in the immediate environment. To grasp an immaterial phenomenon, I
imagine the immediate condition in which it is wrapped.

We feel it as a looming, gravitational pull, a pulsing center with arms
sucking in and through, weighing down the room with loaded sighs.

Hovering, though going in and out of perception, at times it gets close –
then closer still, simmering between us and the stairs, walls, floors,
ceiling.

It spits and release low hisses as sweet-sticky caramel, edging towards
burning point.

We put our ears against the walls, our palms against the floor, feel its
tremor and electricity as heat buzzing across the building’s surfaces and
sterile spaces; we feel the rise in temperature as it encroaches our bellies,
barely tickling the tips of our belly hairs.

WHM, *Closer, in Fragments*, 2014

The point is not to write a precise description but to convey an impression – an errant
direction towards it, to be purposely incomplete so the reader becomes complicit in its
making. In the context of my prose-works, it is not so much about what I am
describing in these works, but rather how the process of writing (and reading) incites
the imaginative act, and what else is evoked. In Scarry’s discussion on the vivacity of
objects imagined under authorial direction, she uses the example of a verbal
description of music to imply that a writer is able to guide the reader as to how to
imagine music. The verbal description thus performs as a set of instructions. What is
interesting here is the shift in the site of mimesis, from the object to the mental act of
imagining.
4.8 ‘How to escape the present:’ subverting the actual

And then, nervous punctuation mid-sentence – an exclamation mark mid-story: a curious hat makes its way onto the surgical table. It is a mass of fine accordion pleats draped around a broad brim. The pleated cream satin dances in careless, improvised whirls, folding around itself in a circular motion and forming soft peaks and melting folds. It is a mysterious formation – a swift, spontaneous dance of soft, vanilla cream – oozing, drooping. The surgeon, in one clinical move, flips the hat around to reveal the mechanics of its conceit. The pleated satin is draped and secured around a small circular form at the base of the hat – a cyclonic device which holds the swirls together, tentatively, by its sheer internal force and tension of the dance. But I say, let us not forget, that on the other side of the eye of the cyclone, lays a bright little red cherry: the heart that makes it dance.

WHM, How to Escape the Present, 2014

The prose-work How to Escape the Present was produced as part of the collaborative project, inside out: Vestoj x NGV, with Laura Gardner, the editor of Vestoj, a fashion curator from NGV and a photographer. It came about from spending one full day together in an airless room in the basement of the NGV, with a rack of garments selected from the Gallery’s Fashion and Textiles archive. A few weeks prior, I had been asked by Laura to, simply, write about the garments.

Laura met me in the foyer of the NGV International, and led me through a sequence of doors and corridors, then down to the basement, and still more doors and corridors. It was a labyrinth that I never knew existed; and I most likely remarked to Laura about this. This subterranean space was pleasingly unkempt and in disarray; there was trash behind furniture, paintings and objects in various states of packaging whilst above us, sat the pristine geometry and precise motions of the monumental National Gallery of Victoria. We found the other members of the group in one of the numerous antechambers. Amongst the clutter there appeared to be a small rack laden with garments. The gloved curator pulled out the garments, one at a time, and spoke rapidly about their provenances through the shapes, fabrications and construction details, as well as the occasions for which they were made and worn. The garment
time lines ranged from early nineteenth-century to late twentieth-century. A Stephen Jones hat from 1995 named ‘Mr Whippy’ sat alongside a pelisse and dress ensemble from 1818. I was not allowed to touch them. I put some trash behind a stool.

The photographer set up his camera and lighting equipment, and said he would be shooting with rare, discontinued large-format Polaroid film. Then, the first garment – a thin, white cotton dress – was carried into the precisely lit spot, surrounded by a system of tripods, stands and arms whose job it was to hold up the dress just so, to reveal the hidden face and interior features. Thus began a sequence of minor adjustments of arms and tweaking of angles that would continue for the whole day. Nine garments were systematically photographed; each was suspended by a highly specific configuration of metallic props and lit to optimise its transparency.

… floating on the photographic stand, is a woman-child in the shape of a delicate, white cotton dress. Before she was a bride she had dared to dream of other loves, other lives. Now, strung up by her shoulders, she is merely swaying in this clinical place. Her gentle, puffed sleeves are crinkled from a late morning rise. The white flowers, seeds and leaves embroidered on her hems would have once liked to sing and dance on the lawn. But for now, she is mute. Her back is turned towards us. She is slit open, down the full length of her back, from the neck past her waistline, to reveal her interior. The void in her being is temporarily padded out with tissue paper, her paper-thin skin peeled back. The surgeon has to work quickly. The lights, cameras and sharp instruments are all pointing at her. In the light, she is so translucent that she is almost not there – only an impression and a faint outline are left of her. For a while I thought she might have just escaped. At the base of her neck is a little ribbon; someone close would have tied that for her, before fastening her with hook and eyes down her back. On the inside of center back seam, is an inscription of her name. Every time she is tied in, someone would’ve seen and whispered it to themselves.

WHM, *How to Escape the Present*, 2014

All of the garments were accompanied by provenances; through the museum system, each is assumed to have its own place in history, bound to particular narratives that
prescribe how it is to be perceived. However, hanging on the rack or folded in boxes in the museum archive, and now – each taking its turn in the artificial spotlight, the garments were completely dislocated from any known, perceptive context. They imbued something else altogether – something much more vast in imaginative potential precisely because nothing had been prescribed for them. Hanging there by themselves, the garments do not lack meaning but rather, brimming with it. Reset to their very first state – prior to nomenclatures – they were hollowed shells – afresh – there for the taking. As the day progressed, I realised that what I wanted to write about was not the garments themselves, but rather what they did in that photographic room at that point in time; how they incited the imaginative act, how they transacted with me. Rather than being discrete, imagined objects, they became the medium through which I imagined and wrote.
4.9 Imagining-into-body

Then the camera takes its shot, catches her just before she flees – or does it? And then we wait for her to re-emerge from 1818 – a magical conjuring, a chemical-synthetic, spiritual-ectoplasmic divination. And as the image begins to float to the surface of the photograph, she herself plates up the pièce de résistance: the dress without the body, the ghost without the form. Or the person without the name: Caroline Foster.

WHM, *How to Escape the Present*, 2014

My practice shares some surrealist disruptions to perception, such as the dissociation of time and space reflected in the dreamscape and the uncanny body. While I use thematic devices common to surrealist imagery – mannequins, mirrors, garments and objects that refer to the body (that is, the fetishisation of its form and image) – it should be noted that my practice differs from core surrealist intentions. The Surrealists were motivated by the subconscious and irrationality through mania, delirium and hallucination,\(^{364}\) which they celebrated as the expression of the psychoanalytic subject. By contrast, the fundamental intent of my practice is to pursue the intensity of lived, aesthetic experiences, as a means to open out to the phenomenological imagination. Like Bachelard – who was influenced by surrealist thinking but never participated in any surrealist groups or activities – I engage with some surrealist concepts as an outsider. My writing practice should not be understood primarily as an expression of surrealism. It is the aspect of the body in my work, especially, that could benefit from a surrealist reading. In the previous chapter, I discussed the body in my work in relation to the surrealist body and perception. Here, the focus is on the nature and habits of imagining – through writing – the body without dress, and vice versa.

Lehmann draws on dadaist and surrealist practices to discuss how fashion is employed artistically as a metaphor – a simulacrum for the human figure and the human character. Lehmann uses the metaphor of the ‘empty sartorial shell’ to suggest the garment abstracted from the human body/wearer, thus becoming an alienated object with its own significance.

The dadaists and surrealists imbued [objects] with a “magic” that springs from the perception of everyday objects in a way that is alien to their purpose proper. This process becomes more intricate in clothing, as the garments do not exist as separate entities – as do, for example, objects placed on a table – but normally would be seen on the acting subject (and moving with him or her). Separating or removing them from their usual context thus requires an even greater mental effort; as a result, their alienation is more complete and the sartorial objects become even stranger, even more mysterious.\footnote{Lehmann, op. cit., 2000, p. 282.}


This strategy of alienation, estranging and dislodging the object (or garment, image, or body) from itself – isolating it from the actual world it inhabits – primes it for transformation. This liberates and allows it to flee to other potential worlds. But, because it has come from somewhere, it always already carries within it the haunting of some prior being. Something has vanished but the gap it used to fill remains. Now it is a shell resonating with potentiality, a body in the shape of the gap – we hear it pulse and thrum.
4.10 Imagining-astray

Often in the mediation between imagination and its expression, unexpected events disturb the resonance between word and image, between concept and conception. An obvious occurrence is when an unpredictable relation emerges through random juxtaposition and chiasmus, or when an accidental gleaming of a word inadvertently jumpstarts a chain of images. Or perhaps, in jostling to find the ‘right’ word to lock in on an otherwise unfathomable phenomenon, I stumble upon some other word that draws my attention aslant and reshapes the entire word-image association into some oblique, synaesthetic event. Or, maybe the error in the association springs forth and reveals a radical paradox. Or perhaps these are necessary disturbances that force us to stop, to jolt us out of dullness, to make us more aware of the texture of words as they rub against our imagination. The stream of prefiguring unfixes from the prefigured.

One of the fundamental drivers of Bachelard’s philosophical writings across both science and poetry is the question of how creative thought comes into being. As architectural historian and critic Joan Ockman states: ‘Bachelard directed epistemological inquiry away from the continuities within systems of knowledge towards the obstacles and events that disrupt the continuum, thereby forcing new ideas to appear and altering the course of thought.’ Bachelard demonstrates how these ‘epistemological obstacles’ play a generative role in the history of thought, which incorporates its own history of errors and divagations. In the transaction between imagination and writing, it is possible to spontaneously move aside, to trick your assumptions and subvert yourself, to escape from this to that – in the space-between there is the lacuna, an imaginative freefall.

In the physical world, a lacuna is a gap, an empty space, spot, or cavity, such as an airspace in the cellular tissue of plants (an air-cell); or it might be a small pit or depression on the surface of the thallus of lichens. In animals, it is one of the spaces left among the tissues, which serve in place of vessels for the circulation of the body fluids. It might, for example, be a small, oval-shaped sac. In 1952, the experimental

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composer John Cage produced one of his most famous works entitled \textit{4’33”} – commonly known as his ‘silent’ piece in which the score instructed the musician to perform by \textit{not} playing his/her instrument for the duration of 4 minutes and 33 seconds. Rather than the expected silence, the audience was coaxed towards the ambient sounds in the environment, to demonstrate Cage’s contention that \textit{any} sound – even if it is unintentional or by chance – may constitute music. The musician took on the role of a mediator whose role is to bring forth to the listener what is always already there. It is not that the \textit{concept} of silence that is interesting, but rather what it \textit{does} to the listener – what \textit{surrounds} the silence, what it cajoles in the imagination. The lacuna is a durational experience, such as the rests between musical notes and verses in poetry. It cradles within it the possibility of something else; it activates potential expression – not of itself, but of its viewer, listener and reader.

The dress or body you imagine – at the moment it appears, prior to knowing where it came from, is without provenance. But, precisely because it does not already refer to something, it can only go forward. It is pure context – one that is not-yet-known. It is not the dress itself but the wildly distending lacuna between it and its future. It resonates not with static-provenance but with possibility – that is something to be attuned to, that is yours for the taking.

\textit{WHM, Notes, 2014}

\footnote{Cage, John. \textit{4’33”}. David Tudor, Pianist. Premiered 29 August 1952, Maverick Concert Hall, Woodstock, New York, USA.}
4.11  ‘Do you dream of me at night?’

I’m stepping through the door, and I’m floating in a most peculiar way.369

David Bowie, Space Oddity, 1969

My fascination with the concept of lacuna led to the project Do You Dream of Me at Night? As mentioned previously, it was composed as an unofficial audio guide for Walter Van Beirendonck’s traveling exhibition Dream the World Awake at the RMIT Design Hub in Melbourne in July 2013.370 The intent was to guide the listener through a ‘dream montage’ – a sequence of fragmented scenarios where elements of memories, nightmares, ideals and desires collided and formed new constellations. I wanted to toy with the sense of ‘another world’ that emerges from the experience of dissonance – an imaginative leap between this and another world.

The writing juxtaposed images and words ‘quoted’ from varied and disparate sources, including my own misshaped memories; curious relations arose from the collage of dream and memory – between what might and might not have been. My experience of the 2013 Melbourne exhibition recalled my visit to his store in Antwerp in 2008 – a memory that is so vague that I have many versions of it: imprecision can be a wonderful way of ‘re-collecting’ the past. I read interviews with Van Beirendock where he would mention Antwerp, and I recalled the gloomy weather of the city, grey and moody like the food I had when I was there. I remember selling Van Beirendonck merchandise in a seedy retail store in Los Angeles in the late 90’s – the same merchandise that I would sometimes search for, in idleness, on eBay but never bid on. At the Melbourne exhibition, he was there – far away and then facing me as we greeted each other. I saw us both as characters in a patchwork world: internet images of ourselves, juxtaposed against the prints on WVB t-shirts, the giant teddy bear laying on its side, the Puk-Puk stickers and key chains I once stole, melting into the images of Mike Kelly’s teddy bears, the grimy Antwerp café I once sat in near his shop, his bearded face on the front of the catalogue, the green gingham pants on the

Falling against texture

mannequin at the exhibition, Sonic Youth’s *Dirty* album\(^{371}\) cover … Everything that I know about Van Beirendonck is a concoction of simulated references.

In *Do You Dream of Me at Night?* I experimented with the juxtaposition, association and mis/associations of these visual, graphic and textual references to compose a dreamscape. Dreams are reliably eerie as they shed ordinal constraints and the bonds of corporeal duress. My intent was to extend the agency of Van Beirendonck’s imagination, in particular the way he curates his world, including his own persona, as a semi-fictitious realm from where narratives freely emerge. He composes his aesthetic with diverse cultural, historical, mythological and imaginary references, and strategically interweaves disparate images and text. Through narrative devices such as juxtaposition, association, allusion, disjunction and metaphor, he sets the stage for multiple combinations of narratives layered with historical and socio-cultural commentaries. The mythical qualities of his archetypal figures drive the trajectory of his narratives. The transgression of the BDSM players, *Dare Devil Daddy* and *Bad Baby Boys*, as well as the mysterious ‘otherness’ of shamans, spirits and aliens, upset the viewer’s anchor and coax his or her to imagine his/her own abstruse version of the story. His garments, objects and manipulated bodies often allude to alien rituals and urges. Within the darkness of the fairy tale mode, innocence is conflated with threat and fetish, fantasy with transgression. These are stage preparations for the expression of many possible aesthetic worlds; it is not so much what they mean and how we must interpret them, but rather what they say about the nature of our aesthetic imagination.

> These woods are for burrowing,  
> for make-believe,  
> secrets and escapades.  
> It belongs entirely to you.  
> The boy knows it well –  
> what it means to take flight,  
> to slip through the gaps.

*WHM, Do You Dream of Me at Night?* 2013

Do You Dream of Me at Night? leads the listener through the conflations and disjunctions, alongside the accumulation and reconfiguration of disparate elements, that make up our aesthetic experiences. It presents the aesthetic world as that which transpires through the gaps between actual experience, imagination, memory, and the written version of it. The cacophony of signs, the dispersion of multiple selves across spun-out stories and memories, the fragmentation of stories-within-stories, the simultaneity of the past, present and future, and the multiplicity of possible configurations – all of these point to the elastic processes of imagining and writing that constitute the dynamism of fashion as lived, aesthetic expression.

Fashion is seeking and chasing, though it is neither frivolous nor escapist; in its brevity, it intensifies the momentum of potential. Fashion is a perpetual departure from the actual; in each departure it reveals something about us, it is doing something to us; it urges us to ‘dream the world awake.’

What happens when an object, whether real or imaginary, is converted into language? Or rather, when an object encounters language?372


Barthes suggests that while the meaning of dress lies in its description, the significance of literature is evident in its skilful rendering of the world. In the case of fashion and its encounter with language, he draws comparison with the rapport between literature and the world. He puts forth the idea that ‘literature is the institution that converts the real into language and places its being in that conversion, just as our written garment.’ Extending from Barthes, Lehman states that the ‘being’ of fashion lies in the imagined world, and the ‘reality’ of its potential could only be evoked as imagination.373 I suggest fashion, as a language, can be profound in that it cultivates and cumulates within it the potential to constitute many possible expressions:

Book laid upon book in dense shifting surfaces, cascading layers and networks transmitting propagate-data, accumulated meanings straying-sprawling-enthraling – voice over voice, era after era rebelling and

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surging forwards with impasioned and strung out hearts, all of this leveraging with such force – a groundswell of otherwise elusive potentials. Each movement and flickering signal an urge seeking the next, addicted to transformation – the next necessarily a reverie, fantasy, a fever-dream or incandescent trance, always an imagining and the impossibility of an ending.

WHM, Notes on potentiality (in correspondence with Marcus Mitford), 2015

Fashion, as the quest of the imaginary and ideal, is the subject of literature. In an oblique though nonetheless potent manner, Lehmann asserts that we find fashion’s literary expression precisely in the 'implicit vagueness of the poetic description,' corresponding with its 'necessary transitoriness.' The instantaneity with which images and words flash across multiple screens; the ease with which bodies and identities repeat and merge into one as we scroll through the galleries; the quick-fire succession of impressions forming contingent worlds that dissolve as quickly as they emerge through the pages of the magazine – these are the dynamic glimpses, sound bytes, blips, and glitches that constitute our contemporary, digitally-simulated aesthetic world. Fashion is the intensification of this world, the magnetic core that substantiates the contours of the aesthetic imagination and experience.

This is the body pulled, shaped, full –
We are magnetised, whirlpooled.
Overripe fruit – drops through concrete –
We fall, land on ecstatic feet.

WHM, Notes, 2014

The gravity of fashion sustains us in its orbit; it gives form to our anticipation. Between here and there, is the blink of promise, a tinge of something else. We gauge the distance, we weight ourselves against the pull of potential. We join the resonance that comes just after, with the luminescence that comes just before. Here is the space for writing, and there is the seed of our aesthetic impulse.

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374 ibid., p. 289.
Conclusion

At the start of this research, my intention was to find a new way to write in fashion. I pursued fashion as concept and phenomenology: what fashion might be without the tangible garment, object, figure or event. I was fascinated with the idea of fashion as an aesthetic urge – pulse, momentum, a flicker of potential – and how this could be expressed in language. I wanted to discover what else could be done with words in fashion, and how writing could elicit experiences, which may, in turn, arc back and make space for new expressions. I was intrigued by the possibility of a connection between writing and fashion as parallel processes of lived, aesthetic expression, whereby the experiential and imaginative potential of one may be extended through the other.

I started writing as a way to engage more closely with these notions, to write myself directly into the research. With my training in fashion design, I developed an approach to writing based on strategies of visual composition, framing, and movement such as the montage and collage in fashion film and photography. Drawing from my previous research in fashion in the context of live performance, sound and language, combined with a personal storage of words, images, verses, stories, songs and memories, I wrote brief narratives, lists and fragments to experiment with different compositional processes. The initial series of prose-works, such as Falling, #2 and Through the Writing Body, sought to open out the research: through them I was playing with the theoretical concepts, forming research questions, testing out different answers, experimenting with my own voice. They also revealed the significance of the phenomenological body and the aesthetic imagination in my approach.

Through the writing experiments, I unpacked various ideas around the poetics of the body, the lived, aesthetic dimension of experience and the imagination. I engaged with: photographs, films and exhibitions by artists and designers who worked critically
with the body; projects by fashion-based practitioners that explored text and language; as well as stories and essays by literary critics and novelists who used fiction to elicit and recast lived experience. These sources informed the production of further prose-works, which gradually became more focused explorations on the writing itself as a practice. Upon reflection, I realised that what was important was less the analytical value of the prose-works than an immersion in the compositional process of writing, and how they would eventually be experienced by others. I came to understand writing, in parallel with fashion, as a process of organising lived experience and the imagination.

As a counterpoint to the descriptive and expository functions of professional writing in fashion, where the writing typically plays a representational role and functions to support the image, event, object or figure, I use writing as the primary medium and process of expression; it is through writing that I ease and suggest the image, event, object and figure. I intentionally wrote without prescribed narratives; I imagined myself as a designer sketching to give form to ideas – an artist or child playing with found materials to catalyse the creative process. Writing also drew me into the abstract realms of colour, weight, atmosphere, mood, heat and gravity; these sensations were essential to the way I wrote and imagined about the body, dress and dressing, and especially so in my pursuit for fashion as lived, aesthetic paradigm. Verbal language has the capacity to deeply access the dynamism of phenomenal experiences, and to give form to the intangible structures of feeling. In this manner, it echoes the medium and the experience of digital fashion film, which has the ability to convey fluid sensations and moods that are not easily contained. The cinematic experience is an effective device in fashion because of its ability to lure the viewer into immersive experiences. In addition – just as the invention of photography shifted the way we perceive ourselves – the ubiquitous Internet that mediates our everyday experience of fashion shifts the way we perceive and imagine the world. The prose-works When I Think about Dynamism and All in or Nothing capture the dynamism of fashion as simultaneity, instantaneity and multiplicity. In the way that digital technology can be a tool that opens out the world for us, writing – in parallel to the fashion concept – opens us outward to the vast potential of phenomena, complications, transcendence, and all that torrentially pours forth. Through this research, I offer a new understanding of fashion by shifting the approach to writing it, that is, by transmuting the focus of expression from the tangible to the imaginable.
An aesthetics of dynamism

Intertwined with the development of the writing practice is the philosophical engagement with fashion as a concept of lived, aesthetic experience. In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Charles Baudelaire presented fashion as expression of the aesthetic paradigm of modernity. He was fascinated with the qualities of ‘the fugitive, ephemeral and transient’ as the elevated expression of fashion. Rather than denoting fashion as frivolous and insubstantial, Baudelaire foregrounded fashion’s fleetingness in his poetic capture of the experience of contemporaneity. Baudelaire led me to Walter Benjamin whose historiographical framing of fashion, in terms of progress and revolution, added a sense of movement that reinforced my fascination with the aesthetics of dynamism. I formed an understanding of fashion through the volatile forces of impulse, pulse, urge and gravity, amongst others. Baudelaire and Benjamin inspired me to embrace the transience, ephemerality and fugitiveness that constitute the momentum of fashion – to account for this poetic conception of fashion both in and as practice. By connecting the aesthetic concept expounded by Baudelaire and Benjamin – as opposed to the notion of aesthetics that is to do with standards of judgment and taste – with the phenomenological imagination of Gaston Bachelard, this research offers a mode of fashion practice that propels through its very ephemerality and transience, and which blooms vividly from its immaterial dimension.

Writing/Body, Writing-Imagining

As the research progressed through the writing, what became significant was the relationship between the phenomenological body and the aesthetic imagination – including the intrinsic connection between them – in my approach to fashion as a concept and as a mode of creative practice. I began to conceive of the writing in terms of ‘corpus,’ which denotes both the ‘experiencing body’ and the ‘body of writing’ that constitute my practice. The body is thus a medium for expression: a metaphor for the writing/practice. It informs the principles of writing/body and writing-imagining which, together, guide the practice towards a specific formulation of writing through the lens of fashion, where the phenomenological body – as the capacity for feeling, sensing and responding – is the source of expression, and which, through the faculty of the imagination – has the potential to tassel out and change.
I have developed an approach to writing as an entry to the capacious potential of aesthetic imaginings, gesturing towards new experiences and expressions without exhausting them. As Italo Calvino says, ‘as far as I understand it, words [are] a perpetual pursuit of things … a perpetual adjustment to their infinite variety.’

There is this particular dance they do: one would encircle the other with both arms, cocooning without touching, one face then slowly falling towards the other, but right before they touch, one body would simply go limp and drop, shedding all physical weight in an exhale, leaving one's arms empty, and the body falls and almost-hits the ground every time, but it doesn’t, and the long red gown would whisper soundlessly, tickling the furry surface of the ground, and then the hem would float up to both calves, weightlessly, and right before the body sweeps away the redness would push out a breath, and the hair on skins would stand up in patterns –

And that's all I remember – and they would do that over and over each time getting nearer and nearer and so falling away faster and faster from each other, courting danger, more and more, rushing gravity and losing control bit by bit, each time letting go of each other bit by bit toying with the idea of it more and more and more – almost but never losing each other – I would think about how absolutely breathtaking they are: a pair of bodies like marionettes, one falling weightlessly against the other – all push and pull – just catching breath.

WHM, *When I think about dynamism*, 2015

In developing the prose-works, I was attempting to ‘make sense’ and participate in the body's capacity for phenomenological experience. I imagined and wrote about the body in various surreal scenarios: as a mannequin in *Kaleidoscopia*, decomposing and vertiginously merging (literally) with dress in *Falling*, and as an inscribed ‘robe’ (metaphor for skin) in *Through the Writing Body*. In the excerpt above, I attempted to write about the body as a dynamic sensation of weight and gravity. I used the writing

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process to coax the aesthetic imagination, to arch and experiment with how far the writing would take me in evoking visceral – though immaterial – experiences.

In the prose-work *Falling*, I depicted the body as the passage of aesthetic events; it bore the sense of the inevitability of bodily transformation. I used the body’s ‘weightiness’ to delve into the gravity of experience. It was an allusion to fashion as a gravitational pull – as the urge, impulse and desire that causes transformation – mediated through the body. *Falling* has led me to understand the significance of the body as vital phenomenological and metaphorical device. The chapter *Writing/Body* discussed the body as expressive instrument – that which enacts and mediates lived, aesthetic experience. In the context of the phenomenological method, the body is what makes experience possible and coherent (without the body, I would not be able to speak of experience). The prose-work, *Through the Writing Body*, which features the ‘robed’ body as decipherable surface (inscribed skin and embroidered textile), further pursues the metaphor of the body/writing as a medium for creative expression or practice. As the imagined body is gradually induced through the writing, the written gradually gives form to the practice.

**A literary fashion**

As the research progressed through the prose-works, I became interested in how the construction or composition of a piece of writing reflected the processes of the imagination. To understand ‘how I write’ is to understand ‘how I imagine,’ and vice versa. The prose-works *#2* and *Kaleidoscopia* experimented with the mechanisms of vivacity and mimesis that comprise the imaginative act: imagining-around, imagining-away, imagining beyond the surface, subverting the actual, and imagining-astray. I was seeking, through the prose-works, to engage with the immediacy and dynamism at the core of the compositional act. I was also fascinated with the special ability of verbal language to express the *stimmung* (the harmonious mood or atmosphere) and *qualia* of experience that cradle aesthetic encounters. In developing the practice and reflecting on the research, I explored works by contemporary novelists, memoirists and literary theorists that specifically studied the perceptual processes that take place through writing; these were pivotal in understanding the deeply entwined connection between the verbal and the visual imagination, which revealed to me the ekphrastic nature of my practice.
The verbal imagination has the unique capacity to construct an aesthetic world through its contact and transactions with the visual. It is about being attuned to the shifts in my perception and imagination in the midst of writing. In the process of writing, unpredictable juxtapositions often arise between disparate words and images; moments of dissonance, disjunction and incoherence can bring about new possibilities of expressivity. As I explored my own idiosyncrasies of writing and imagining, especially the inevitable connection between them, I came to understand fiction as a (re)construction of reality, which led me to the ‘constructedness’ of fashion as experience, through, and as, a ‘composition’ that was the writing. Literary concepts and expressions were vital to my focal conception of fashion as a paradigm for lived, aesthetic expression. I engaged with a spectrum of voices and formats – fiction, memoir, conversation/interview, dialogue, and essay; these were instrumental in shaping a specific understanding around how I wrote: the habits and tendencies that characterised my approach to fashion expression. In developing a fashion practice through the lens of literary practice and criticism, this PhD has demonstrated a novel approach in deepening the ways by which we practice, experience, and think about fashion.

**A performative approach**

To explore ‘what the writing was doing,’ I tested the prose-works in public. The prose-works were disseminated to diverse audiences – the general public, academic and online – and publishing outlets such as fashion journals, blogs and conference proceedings. In these deliberate spaces, I observed the affect of the writing on the audience, so as to effect the writing. I experimented with the performativity of the prose-works by speaking at academic conferences and offering an audio recording of my reading, in the form of an audio guide, at a fashion exhibition. I also gave reading performances in different contexts. As I moved the writing from the printed page to the live setting of the exhibition, event and performance, I sought to expand the parameters of how writing was shared and experienced. These activities led me to reflect upon the effect of the practice itself – what it was doing and what it might mean for other practitioners in and beyond fashion, and how it could contribute to the broader realm of creative practice.

*Through the Writing Body* and *Falling* were presented as reading performances at two design conferences, while the reading of *Closer, in Fragments* was performed in an
exhibition context. In addition, the voice recording of *Do you dream of me at night?* was presented as an audio guide for the Walter Van Beirendonck exhibition. The public presentation of the prose-works was a pivotal moment in the development of the practice, as it amplified the experiential and the performative capacity of writing as verbal expression, in practice. The experience of reading and listening to the prose-works further accentuated the ephemerality and fugitiveness of our lived expression, which was the essence of my approach. Thus, it was from publishing, performing and ‘speaking the work’ in public that I understood how the writing could constitute a mode of practice that was immediate and performative. This is a specific approach to ‘writing as practice’ that has been developed out of the fashion paradigm, but it is not constrained by fashion. It has been fundamentally set up as an approach to lived, aesthetic experience – with writing as a medium – and as such, it is relevant to a broad spectrum of creative practices beyond fashion.

**My voice**

As the research developed through the reading performances, along with the exhibition audio guide *Do you Dream of Me at Night?*, I became acutely aware of my voice, as an immediate projection of myself in the practice. In the context of the research, my voice opens up interesting notions around authenticity and agency; it draws attention to the place and performativity of the practitioner in the practice, and it intensifies the contingencies between the audience, the work, and myself. Additionally, as an expression of personal style, my voice has been instrumental in revealing the nature of my practice, which is phenomenological, reflexive and critical. For example, for the prose-work ‘Through the Writing Body,’ I had composed it by imagining how I would read it, how I might sound, and the kinds of mood or experience it could engender in the listener. It was a deliberate, albeit oblique, way of understanding my own voice and idiosyncrasies of practice. The way I chose to communicate and share the prose-works in public reflects an inherent performativity in my approach.

The practice has been designed as a responsive and generative mode of practice that may shift and develop as I attach myself to other practitioners and projects. It sets the stage for future projects and experiments in publishing, exhibition and live performance, as the creative contexts for the production, mediation and experiences of fashion. While my practice is based on writing, it is not limited nor defined by it.
Falling against texture

My ongoing intent is to pursue the performative and experiential gestures of writing, speaking, reading and listening. Through the joint process of writing and reflection, I have established an innovative approach to thinking in fashion, with writing as a catalyst for expression. Writing can elicit new expressions and thus create potential for new, aesthetic experiences. Underpinned by the concepts of ‘writing/body’ and ‘writing-imagining,’ I offer a mode of writing-based practice that is phenomenological, reflexive, performative and critical. It gives prominence to the agency of words in the expression of fashion. It attends to the ephemerality and transience that is vital to fashion, which amplifies the dynamism of aesthetic expression. This is to offer writing as an arcade of the imagination that channels the urgency of fashion.

This PhD contributes a new approach to fashion practice that is developed specifically through the aesthetic pulse of fashion. The crux of the practice is to use writing as a medium to make space for imagination – to give form to what is not yet known, and to dilate those flickering moments of potential. Echoing fashion, it augments our relentless appetite for new contours, resonances and textures.

At the heart of it, *Falling against texture* alludes to our self-perpetuating encounters with the lived, aesthetic world through language, not to contain it but to be woven into the endless – which careens in your fluent freefall – to be enthralled by the potential of being touched by something which prior was, utterly unspeakable.

There is a trace of an indefinite thingness … a powder-fine presence.

We feel the rise in temperature as it circles our bellies.

The lens shifts to the gaps between our bodies as it tracks the heat …

WHM, *Closer*, 2014

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