

# Debating critical costume: Negotiating ideologies of appearance, performance, and disciplinarity

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## Abstract

In this article I present an argument for a proposed focus of 'critical costume'. *Critical Costume*, as a research platform, was founded in 2013 to promote new debate and scholarship on the status of costume in contemporary art and culture. We have now hosted two biennial conferences and exhibitions (Edge Hill University 2013, Aalto University 2015). These events have exposed an international appetite for a renewed look at how costume is studied, practiced and theorized. Significantly, *Critical Costume* is focused on an inclusive remit that is interdisciplinary and supports a range of 'voices': from theatre and anthropology scholars to working artists. In that regard, I offer an initial argument for how we might collectively navigate this interdisciplinary 'pocket of practice' with reference to other self-identified critical approaches to art practice. By focusing on an interdisciplinary perspective on costume, my intention is to invite new readings and connections between popular practices, such as Halloween and cosplay, with the refined crafts of theatrical and film professionals. I argue that costume is a vital element of performance practice, as well as an extra-daily component of our social lives, that affords distinct methods for critiquing how appearance is sustained, disciplined and regulated. I conclude by offering a position on the provocation of critical costume and a word of caution on the argument for disciplinarity.

In 2013, I co-founded *Critical Costume*\* as a platform to deliberate the status of costume in contemporary art and culture. Our first event at Edge Hill University and proceeding special issue (Hann and Bech 2014) offered a range of scholarly and artistic positions on costume. My proposal for *Critical Costume* as a research platform was developed in response to individuals, such as Donatella Barbieri (2012) and Aoife Monks (2010), questioning why theatre and performance academics rarely spoke of

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\* I am indebted to Sidsel Bech, as co-founder of Critical Costume and as co-editor of a double issue of *Scene* on costume practice, for her searching questions on the future of costume scholarship and practice that informed our early discussions.

costume when it was evidently significant to the practices under discussion. Discourses of ‘the body’ often subsume costume as a symptom of bodily representation, rather than an independent mediator. Concurrently, my colleague Sidsel Bech and I were struggling to locate teaching resources that framed costuming as a critical act, beyond questions of craft technique or period interpretation. Refined as part of our first symposium and exhibition, *Critical Costume* as an organization emerged as a platform for scholars and practitioners to enrich and further argue the case for costume. Originally delivered as part of a keynote for the first event, performance designer Dorita Hannah echoes this sentiment:

[Critical Costume] is rich in its potential play on the word ‘critical’ – as analytical, crucial, serious and essential – even harbouring a threat should certain things be ignored. In other words, the critical signals that something major is at stake, thereby de-trivializing the ‘theatrical’ – too often considered false, exaggerated or histrionic – and emphasizing the fact that the lived world itself is far stranger than fiction.

(2014: 16)

While scholars such as Hannah and I had not historically focused exclusively on costume, the provocation engendered by the idea of ‘critical costume’ simultaneously opens the study out to new voices while profiling previous scholarship. The ethos of the organisation and the conceptual invitation of critical costume sustain potential readings and practices that have been historically ignored or marginalized. Some of the reasons for this scholarly neglect will be unpacked as part of this article, but needless to state that costume – as distinct from dress or fashion – is not a subject that has a substantial library of critical scholarship preceding it. In recent years, there has been some notable publications (Schweitzer 2009; Monks 2010; Rewa 2012; Barbieri 2017) as well as a new academic journal devoted to costume design, *Studies in Costume & Performance* (Intellect). It is the provocation, however, propagated by Hannah’s

observation that ‘something major is at stake’ which underlines the focus of this article and informs my call to re-evaluate costume’s ideological and disciplinary tensions.

Informed by other critical responses to arts and design practice, my aim for this article is to outline potential approaches to critical costume and the associated interdisciplinary challenges that this idea engenders. I map a rationale for framing costume as critical and how this relates to pre-established ideologies: confronting base questions on what constitutes costume, who engages in costuming, and how costume sustains a locus for interdisciplinary scholarship and practice. Equally, I identify a number of competing definitions developed from a disciplinary mindset. For instance, ‘costume’ for a fashion scholar typically bears a distinctly different connotation to the usage as understood by a theatre scholar. The first understands it as a pseudonym for historical or folk dress, the second as the bodywear of an actor. While these two usages have been conflated within other disciplinary contexts, such as art history, there remains confusion as to the alliance between these distinct approaches. I argue that costume is not the sole preserve of theatre or fashion as a disciplinary context. Costume is an activity that bridges a number of established disciplines: including theatre & performance, fashion, dance, fine art, cultural studies and anthropology among others. Accordingly, as part of a review of costume and performance studies I argue for a renewed distinctiveness of costume beyond a symptom of dress. This section includes a critique on the slippages sustained by the theoretical implications of performativity that nullifies the theatricality of costume. Likewise, I propose that the ‘hug’ of costuming accounts for costume’s agency within a reciprocal relationship between body, material and action – resisting a collapse of costume into normative dress or discourse of the ‘the body’. Lastly, I

recommend a path to establishing a shared approach to costume scholarship that transcends disciplinary boundaries.

### **Why critical costume?**

The proposal for critical costume emerged from a call to debate costume practices with greater rigour and visibility. The organisation of *Critical Costume* provides a gathering point, a platform, for this overarching aim. Yet, the provocation of critical costume, as summarized by Hannah, also exceeds the biennial events undertaken in its name. Indeed, one of the motivations for a critical costume is a re-positioning of costume as plural (in terms of practice) and inter-disciplinary (in terms of theory). Central to this re-positioning is that costume *needs* criticism. To some this may appear a contentious or even aggressive statement. While the reverse (costume scholarship needs costume) is typically taken as a given, it is important to argue how practice benefits from the platform afforded by the *act* of criticism. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) positions criticism as something that is undertaken, where ‘to *criticize* means to *call into crisis*’ (1974: 319). Barthes argues that a critical stance isolates the ‘speck of ideology’ engrained within an act or object in order to ‘attack it like an acid capable of dissolving fats of “natural language”’ (1974: 317). Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) approach, a founder of the Frankfurt School of ‘critical theory’, aligns with Barthes’ reading. Whereas Barthes talks of ‘crisis’, Horkheimer observes the ‘tensions’ that denote criticality. ‘The identification, then, of [people] of critical mind with their society is marked by tension, and the tension characterizes all the concepts of the critical way of thinking’ (Horkheimer 1975: 208).

Barthes and Horkheimer both argue the act of criticism as a means of isolating and interrogating the ‘traditional’ stereotypes or theories used to frame a particular practice or social class. As Barthes observes, to ‘distance the stereotype is not a political task, for political language is constituted by stereotypes; but a critical one, i.e. one seeking to put language into a state of crisis’ (1974: 317). Accordingly, a ‘language of costume’, as with languages of sculpture or painting, can be reviewed through the isolation of archetypes in order to expose how the conventions of that language sustain an ideological predisposition towards particular readings or practices. Moreover, Horkheimer defines the critical attitude as being ‘wholly distrustful of the rules of conduct with which society as presently constituted provides each of its members’ (1975: 207). A critical approach to costume is, following Barthes and Horkheimer, a process of interrogating the politics of costume – both as a material construction and conceptual framing of bodies – in order to isolate and argue its significance within contemporary scholarship and practice.

The notion of criticism as an *action*, as something that is done, feeds a number of potential positions on critical costume: whether rendered through practice or theory. To *en-act* a critical study, is to potentially nullify the normative conventions of the subject in order to assess its overall ideological condition. In this regard, critical costume echoes the interventionist qualities of ‘critical architecture’. Jane Rendell observes that the term critical architecture ‘emerged as a short-hand for critical architectural practice and as a simple way of marking a place between criticism and design in architecture’ (Rendell 2008: 2). This remit intentionally sought to bridge a divide within UK architectural schools between design and criticism: where ‘design should take place through the production of buildings, while criticism should be performed by critics who

‘judge’ buildings by writing essays’ (Rendell 2008: 1). Michael Hays first posited the notion of critical architecture in 1984. In his essay *Critical Architecture: Culture and Form*, Hays’ usage of the terms ‘resistant’ and ‘oppositional’ to characterize his approach as interventional: confronting assumptions that inform practice and theory in order to better argue the interdependency of these activities or communities. The argument for costume is, however, multifaceted. It is inclusive of the methods in which costumes are constructed and read, as well as approaches to wearing and discarding them.

Costume design (film costume, theatre costume, etc.) has, nevertheless, sustained a disciplinary and ideological distance from popular costume cultures (costume parties, fancy dress, etc). This distinction is evident in Deborah Nadoolman Landis position that the ‘word “costume” works against us. The word is vulgar when what we do is incredibly refined’ (Nadoolman Landis 2012: 8). Nadoolman Landis cites practices such as fancy dress and Mardi Gras as negatively effecting the professional status of costume designers. The implication being that these popular practices contravene the high-level of craft expertise required to sustain a career as a costume professional. In the regard, the study of costume practice is arguably in a similar position to Hays’ argument on the divisions innate to 1980s architectural criticism. Where Hays positions *culture* (the uses of architecture) in opposition to *form* (built structures), costume as an artistic activity is often removed from costume as a familiar cultural activity. Accordingly, costume’s *craft* (a high status material practice and professional undertaking) has been prioritized in educational forums over costume *culture* (acts of participation that occur through costuming). A critical approach to costume invites a re-consideration of this political positioning. A critical sensibility asks, not only how

theory might transgress this ideological predisposition, but also why these ideological penchants have been deemed necessary in order to further the case for costume.

Costume design, as evident in positions such as Nadoolman Landis, has aligned itself with the high status politics of post-Romanticism theatre, opera, and latterly cinema. The 'high-art' of costume design is positioned in binary opposition to its 'low-art' counterpart of fancy dress. Yet, the term costume remains part of the popular vernacular and is readily applied to fancy dress activities. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby's notion of an industrial 'critical design' offers a parallel discussion that contextualizes the potential scope of this argument: 'Whereas architecture and fine art often refer to popular culture, industrial design is popular culture. Its language is accessible and appeals to the senses and imagination rather than the intellect' (Dunne 2005: 147). What Dunne notes of product design is also the case with costume. Costume exists as a popular cultural practice. It is practiced by the masses to signify their participation within a liminal event or cultural activity. From birthdays to Halloween, the act of costuming is a familiar undertaking throughout the world. In reclaiming the popular into an academic understanding of costume, this offers a potentially renewed platform for costume scholarship as well as new directions for costume practice.

My argument for critical costume is also an argument for costume's distinctiveness against notions of dress or fashion. I contend that the political and material consequences of shifting between bodily situations (of costume and normative body fashioning) sustain a principal point of costume's criticality: a gap in which to isolate costume's ideological condition. Hannah outlines how 'body-objects' are rendered eventful, and therefore costume, through the manner in which they are worn: 'Familiar

body-objects such as veils, wigs, bridal gowns and headscarves are rendered theatrical through unfamiliar usage and movement as well as by their incongruity within public space' (Hannah 2014: 23). Following Hannah, I propose that the 'theatrical charge' of costume is connected to the 'manner' (Goffman 1959) of costuming as much as the symbolic references and craft of costume's material performance. Crucially, this position echoes Butler's call for strategies that subvert the disciplined repetition of normativity:

The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.

(Butler 1990: 147)

Approached as an interventional practice, costume represents a potential strategy for subverting the ongoing repetitions of body politics. The theatrical charge of costume is innately related to its conscious 'othering' of the act of appearance. Beyond questions of an imposed or systematic 'otherness', othering is a conscious and eventful tactic for demarcating an action as – to use the words of Eugenio Barba (1991) – 'extra-daily'. Costume explicitly evokes and sustains a theatricality of duality and tension, of resistance through the potential for multiplicity. Consequently, the act of costuming simultaneously presents and contests the construct of identity through an active strategy of conscious othering. It is this premise that I return to later in this article. Yet, the exercise of founding *Critical Costume* has equally highlighted how the practice of costume has been forgotten, or set aside, within the wider critical-creative arguments of scenography.

### **Critical costume practice?**



In terms of theatre and performance practice, Delbert Unruh has observed that theatrical costume has, thus far, not undertaken the same material and aesthetic revolution as the other methods of scenography:

The development, dissemination and wide acceptance of the idea of scenography was a process that relegated costume design to a supporting role. In many ways, the development of the idea of scenography sought and achieved a unity of directing, scene design and lighting design. The issue of costume design was momentarily set aside in the effort to forge this unity.

(Unruh 1991a: 28)

Costume design (by and large) remains fixated on the identity politics of representation. As Barbieri points out: ‘Read primarily as a pragmatic sign, however useful to the narrative and to the marketing of the show, costume can be reducible, reproducible and can ultimately be taken for granted and become unnoticed’ (Barbieri 2012). The history of costume design, in both the film and theatre, is conditioned by fashion systems as a criterion for how bodies are rendered. While the (in)visibility of costume within critical accounts and reviews of narrative artworks is not the principle concern of this article, the processes by which costume’s subversive qualities are flattened and performers are considered – to use the words of Monks – ‘already dressed’ (2010: 9) points to the core of certain costume ideologies. Moreover, Unruh’s lament on the status of costume experimentation is a direct concern of critical costume. Indeed, a number of notable events have occurred since the publication of Unruh’s article in 1991 that have sought to confront the question of costume practice that figured in the formation of *Critical Costume*.

In 2011, as part of the 12<sup>th</sup> *Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space*, Simona Rybáková curated a new exhibition event focused exclusively on costume practices. Entitled *Extreme Costume*, Rybáková describes the exhibition as an opportunity to address costume practices while also reflecting on costume *as* costume:

The costumes present us with their messages using metaphors as well as the materials from which they have been made: clothing made of ice dissolves with the warmth of the human body, a cloak is lightened and lifted by the water that is the stage, light gives substance to its inner object, multiple items of everyday use tell their stories.

(Rybáková in PQ 2011: online)

In asking the exhibitors to utilize ‘extreme materials’, the resulting costumes focused more on the form and practice of costuming than the specific requirements of appearance politics or dramaturgical conditions. From the ‘dissolving’ costumes of Madaleine Trigg to the inflatable forms of Pat Olezko (see figure 1), *Extreme Costume* offered a useful benchmark to assess how the changing contexts of scenography have become manifest within costume practice. As Barbora Příhodová notes, the costumes were ‘presented as a distinct element removed from syntagmatic relationships (within the performance) and resituated within paradigmatic relations (with other costumes)’ (2012: 80). In relation to the *Critical Costume* project, the practices and theoretical material put forward by *Extreme Costume* have informed the scope and direction of the exhibitions featured at Edge Hill (2013) and Aalto (2015). The exhibition isolated the material qualities of costume in order to underline the act of costuming as an ephemeral encounter. The event at the Prague Quadrennial exposed costume as a means of critically interrogating contemporary bodies and costume crafts through practice.



Figure 1: Image of *Extreme Costume* exhibition at PQ2011 curated by Simona Rybáková

As exemplified by *Extreme Costume* and the *Critical Costume* exhibitions, the provocation of a critical costume practice echoes the notion of ‘critical spatial practice’ as outlined by Rendell. In her book *Art and Architecture*, Rendell proposes that to ‘practice after conceptualism is to think more carefully about procedures – about what we are doing and how we are doing it – and the questions this attention to methodology raises’ (2006: 193). In framing this approach as a critical spatial practice, Rendell argues that this gives equal emphasis to the need to investigate criticism through practice and to practice the findings of criticism. The two activities are interrelated. A critical costume practice might exist at the interstices of established methods and approaches, where to ‘practice is be self-aware and to critique its own terms of engagement’ (2006: 193). Rendell’s approach resonates with the work of costume designer Alex Rigg. Focused on creating costumed events that draw upon a range of

disciplinary positions, Rigg positions his practice as a method for investigating how costume *works*:

Personally where I get the chance I like to make a costume, to rehearse somebody and then not give the costume till just before the show. The costumes are very awkward so they are constrained. Performers agree that they will attempt the choreography and the work is then a struggle.

(Rigg in Maclaurin and Monks 2015: 65)

Rigg's resistance to the idea that a performer should be familiar with their costume allows the spectators (and performer) to witness the collision of material design and body. The performance itself exists through the exposure of how costume is learned through an act of material and physical negotiation. To evoke Rendell's phrasing, a critical costume practice exposes the methods in which costume is worn, read and/or constructed. Rigg's work is, following this reading, identifiably critical of the established methods and modes of encounter aligned with costume practice. Indeed, his practice evidences this process through the exposure of the tensions that may otherwise be obscured. In the same manner that Rendell proposes a reworking of spatial practice, the examples of *Extreme Costume* and the processes of Rigg are indicative of a critical investigation of costume through practice. The exhibitions at Edge Hill and Aalto hosted a range of projects that echoes this principle (see Hann and Bech 2014; Pantouvaki 2015). To practice costume as a critical act is to examine the interdisciplinary tensions that score how costume is encountered, conceived and articulated. Critical costume practice offers a distinct method in which to study a body caught in the act of appearance.

### **Negotiating costume ideologies**

One of the motivations for critical costume was a perceived historical lack of costume scholarship that embraced a shared interdisciplinary position. Inclusive of the myriad

practices that currently occur in costume's name – from the professional wear of an actor to a child's party outfit – the relationships between these distinct cultural practices remain underdeveloped or inadequate. Symptomatic of this reluctance is the ill-defined relationship between dress, fashion and costume. On one level this association is straightforward. For instance, Pamela Church Gibson defines film costume as 'the clothes worn in films, whether period or contemporary dress' (1998: 36). Valarie Steele articulates fashion as 'the cultural construction of the embodied identity' (1997: 1). Steele's position aligns with the notion of fashion as a system (Barthes 1967) inclusive of industrial, economic, and aesthetic structures that levy appearance stability and material desire. Accordingly, Joanne Entwistle approaches dress as an ongoing 'situated bodily practice' (Entwistle 2000: 239). Entwistle argues that the economic and aesthetic concerns of a fashion system 'endows garments with beauty and desirability, sometimes making direct contact with art. In doing so, it weaves aesthetics into the daily practice of dressing' (Entwistle 2000: 43). If Church Gibson's definition is expanded to all representations of clothes within narrative artworks more broadly, costume, fashion and dress appear to have a logical relationship: costume accounts for clothes within narrative artworks, fashion is an ideological system for the construction of identity, and dress is a normative daily practice that enacts fashion conventions.

Costume is, however, often rendered an ideologically invisible practice. This follows the Romanticist paradox that appearance should be an authentic sign of internal character (see Rousseau 1758, *Lettre à D'Alembert sur les spectacles*). To expose the construction of appearance is to imply an instability of character that, following Romanticist thought, is at best subversive and at worst criminal. You should appear as the person you *really* are. Romanticist ideologies of appearance stability are rendered

explicit within the costume ideologies of Hollywood film: where acting and costume are read as synonymous, to the point where a 'successful' costume is an 'invisible' costume (see Nadoolman Landis 2012). Pam Cook cites this as one explanation as to the 'critical neglect of screen costume design: we are encouraged to 'see through' clothes to the inner persona, and the impulse towards realism in cinematic dress reinforces its invisibility' (1996: 52). Echoing Hollander's observations, Cook's reading evidently positions Hollywood film costume as distinct from the overt slippage between performer and costume often found in the popular practices of cosplay or Halloween. The distinction of film costume as serious and 'fancy dress' as trivial is partly reinforced by the legacies of Romanticist thought, where contested notions of truth and authenticity are the hallmarks of high art. Film costume's ideological invisibility actively distances the practice from the duality of theatricality. While fancy dress is theatrical, film costume is 'authentic': receding into the identity politics of 'the body' and conflated into the craft of acting. The nullification of costume's theatricality is not unique to film costume. The invisibility is a symptom of how appearance and identity are conflated more broadly. To view costume as costume is to expose the underlying theatricality of fashion cultures. All fashion is theatrical, in that fashion is a system of representation and codification that sustains ideologies of 'self as immanent in appearance' (Finkelstein 1991) through repetition and market forces. While this argument exceeds the focus of this article, the positioning of costume cultures as trivial is arguably in recognition of its subversive – theatrically charged – potential to expose body fashioning as regulated and ideological rather than 'natural' and authentic. Costume is far from trivial.

In terms of an interdisciplinary framework, my position is that a definition of costume as a symptom of narrative artworks is reductive for two reasons. Firstly, it partitions ownership of costume as a practice to professional costume designers (if we assume that mediated and narrativized artworks are commercially defined). And secondly, this approach positions costume cultures such as cosplay (costume-play) and Halloween as ideologically lesser or ‘not-costume’. The implication is that amateur or social costume practices exist outside of a defined narrative artwork and are undertaken by non-professionals. To include these alongside professional practice is to ‘weaken’ the craft of costume. Instead, I posit that costume is qualified as costume through a conscious act of ‘showing dressing’ (an idea that I unpack later). Accordingly, the act of costuming can score an individual’s participation within a particular event. Theatre and film costume are an outstanding exemplar of costuming as an act of participation: where costume is a means of ‘getting into’ character or preparing a body for the extra-daily act of theatre. Moreover, costume is not a synonym for dress or historical fashion. The positioning of costume as ‘historical’, I argue, results from costume’s ideological resistance to the normative conventions of a contemporary fashion system. Whereas dress is ideologically normative, costume is always eventful and subversive whether in terms of period, profile, gender norms, or economics (see Hann 2016).

I contend that dress normativity, as disciplined by a fashion system, is challenged through the subversive and othering qualities of costume. Butler observes a similar quality within the costume practice of drag: where in ‘imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency’ (Butler 1990: 137). Within the costumed act of drag, acts of gender performativity are rendered distinct from the designation of biological sex. The actions and bodily regulations of

the feminine are ‘put on’, quite literally, to expose how gender is ‘tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler 1990: 140-141). As exemplified by the drag artist, the manner in which the act of costuming invites a re-consideration of how appearance is disciplined through ongoing strategies of repetition and display – whether conscious or unconscious – scores the regulated politics of body fashioning: where appearance is learnt and rehearsed against a prescribed socially enforced criteria. What renders costume distinct is its resistance to the disciplined normativity of dressing as codified by a fashion system. In relation to my own argument, it is notable that Butler’s critique positions drag and costume as being symptomatic of a wider practice, that of performance and performativity. However, costuming and dressing are all too often conflated when situated under the performance theory umbrella. While costuming is a performance tactic, the equation of costume with dress, I argue, acts to nullify the critical potential of costume as a subversive act.

### **Critical costume and performance studies**

Fashion studies, as with a number of other disciplinary contexts, has sought to understand the construction of appearance by drawing upon ideas of performance studies. Following Erving Goffman’s definition of appearance as a potential ‘temporary ritual state’ (1959: 15), Richard Schechner argues that ‘every action is a performance’ (2013: 38). Influenced by approaches to modeling behavior in the social sciences, Schechner introduced a number of diagrams and binary readings of performance in the 1970s as part of a wider mapping of performance’s centrality to everyday life. Following this predilection, Michael Kirby (1972) suggests the premise of a ‘costume continuum’ within a binary on acting and not acting. Kirby proposed that the symbolic



and representational status of costume is built upon a series of ‘signs’ that remain highly dependent on context. For instance, Kirby provides the example of encountering a ‘cowboy’ costume on a street, which is slowly constructed through the gradual addition of items:

If he also wears a wide tool-leather belt and even a Western hat, we do not see this as costume [...] it is merely a choice of clothing. As more and more items of Western clothing—a bandana, chaps, spurs and so forth—are added, however, we reach the point where we either see a cowboy or a person dressed as (impersonating) a cowboy. [...] The effect of clothing on stage functions in exactly the same way, but it is more pronounced.

(Kirby 1972: 4)

The slippage between ‘cowboy’ and impersonation is a trait of costuming in Kirby’s continuum. While this binary framework cites the transition from Western hat to cowboy, it also isolates the innate unknowingness that ultimately results: is this a costume or a cowboy? Costume’s criticality is, in part, situated at the tension generated by an observer’s capacity to discern costume from normative dress. Moreover, Kirby recognizes that the situational context heavily alters how costume is interpreted. Theatre or film encompasses a distinctly different sign system to that of the street. All clothes on stage are theatrically charged: where costume is a convention of representation rather than an ideological tension. The theatrical charge of costume is, correspondingly, governed by ideologies and conventions of observation assigned to certain places: albeit a stage, screen or street.

Beyond the ‘contextual frame’ (Goffman 1959) of a situation, Kirby suggests that a costume also performs potentially in spite of an individual’s behavior: ‘the performer does not act and yet [his or her] costume represents something or someone’ (Kirby 1972: 4). Central to this interpretation of Kirby’s model of a costume continuum situates costuming as an event, as a transitional practice that is understood in

relationship to distinct transitional states: of not-costume, costume, impersonation, normative dress. Like Goffman, Kirby's model is also one of social observation, where the observer is the locus of definition and interpretation. This is complicated when an observer mistakes costume for normative dress. The slippage between these observational states of appearance is conditioned by the visibility of costume's theatricality. If the theatrical charge of costume is depleted or nullified, costuming for an observer becomes conflated with dressing as a normative practice. The observational event of costume is, therefore, directly related to an implicated theatricality.

The subtleties of theatricality can, in certain instances, complicate the borderless assertions of performance theory. Alan Read (2013) observes that the 'catch all' remit of Schechner's approach implies that there are at least two perspectives in play: *Performance* as a disciplinary field and *performance* as event. The first position argues how the study of appearance / action offers a means of framing all human (and non-human) activity that renders the idea of Performance as borderless. The second is focused on the act of appearance itself. As part of a discussion on costume, Schechner's Performance sustains an active blurring of unconscious dress performativity and the act of costuming. This reading aligns with Entwistle's focus on the act of dressing as the 'translation of fashion into everyday practice' (2000: 237). Where fashion is a system of body regulation, Entwistle (2000: 11) argues that dress is an ongoing daily practice that is learnt over time. Accordingly, there are innate connections between ideas of *costuming* and *dressing* as both are arguably constituent practices under the wider heading of Performance. Practices that are intentionally rehearsed in order to present a certain social, political or economic status to a wider 'audience': whether that is within an auditorium or on the street. The practice of costume is positioned as a symptom of

dress in Performance theory. Yet, the extra-daily performance of costume is tied to its theatrical potential (to skew, other, or subvert). To engage in the act of costuming is to evoke an explicit theatricality of appearance. Whereas disciplined performativity enacts a structure for the ongoing practice of dressing, costume is always charged through a conscious theatricality whether visible to an observer or not.

The choreographer and dance artist Ninel Çam van Chapull's *YOUMEYOUME* (2016) offers a useful summary of how normative dress is rendered costume through a situated theatricality. As a participatory work, the premise of *YOUMEYOUME* centres on an invitation from Çam van Chapull to swap clothing with a stranger. Documented by photographer Dorothee Elfring (see Figure 2), the images and the work itself expose how ideas of intimacy and identity are sustained through normative dress. In terms of costume, the invitation to exchange clothing and wear the material appearance of a stranger sustains a theatrical charge that demarcates – both for an observer (when aware of the artwork's premise) and the participants – an event of costuming. Emphasized by a social unfamiliarity and risk associated with bodily intimacy, the extra-daily event of *YOUMEYOUME* challenges both sets of wearers to look again at their own clothing re-presented on another: to see the construction of their own appearance othered through an exchange of clothing. What renders Çam van Chapull's work of significance is, I argue, an active othering sustained by the act's theatricality: a skewing of the individual's normative dress situation. Consequently, *YOUMEYOUME* scores a line between disciplined body politics and a theatrically charged event of costuming. To observe the slippage between these states is to observe the transitory states of not-costume, costume, impersonation, and the regulated politics of normative dress.



Figure 2: *YOUMEYOUME* (2016) by Ninel Çam van Chapull. Photography: Dorothee Elfring

I contend that the umbrella theory of Performance sustains a slippage between costume and normative dress that often acts to nullify costume's theatricality. In costume scholarship, the linguistic implications of this exchange are evident in the work of James Laver (1969) and Alison Lurie (1992) where costume is taken as a synonym for dress. To speak of costume is to speak of dress, and vice versa. Costume, in this instance, is approached as a symptom of dressing for social communication: for 'putting on' a character or persona. I argue that to engage in the act of costuming is to consciously skew or other the normative practices of appearance. The ideological agent for this conscious othering is theatricality, as distinct from disciplined performativity. For theatricality resists an unconscious slippage between normative practices and extra-daily events. Discourses of theatricality isolate the construction of appearance as a conscious othering. The act of costume is an extra-daily performance that subverts the

normative practices of dress. Rather than a symptom of dress, costume operates as a critical interrogation of how dress is rendered complicit to fashion ideologies. Consequently, to maintain a slippage between costume and dress is to nullify the subversive qualities of costuming. To evoke Read's observations on performance, I suggest that there are two distinct understandings of costume in currently in circulation. *Costume* with a 'C' and *costume* with a 'c': as a symptom of dressing and as a distinct practice. The first feeds an appraisal of how dressing is a socially mitigated construction that, when rehearsed over time, slips into unconscious acts of disciplined appearance. Whereas the second is the methods by which individuals alter their appearance in order to demarcate their participation within an artistic or social event. One exposes how appearance is a product of disciplined conditioning, while the other is concerned with a conscious act of appearance: of 'showing dressing'.

The practice of costume as a conscious act of showing dressing echoes Schechner's modeling of 'doing'. Schechner proposed that 'showing doing' (as opposed to being or doing) is a deliberate scoring of an individual's awareness of their actions. "Showing doing" is performing: pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing. "Explaining 'showing doing'" is the work of performance studies' (Schechner 2013: 28). Theatre is an act of showing doing, in the same way that reenacting or mimicking a past event demonstrates a heightened awareness of an individual's symbolic actions. In reading costume through this lens, Schechner's notion of showing doing can be reapplied to costume: where the act of costuming is a heightened state of dressing. The slippage between a costume's performed identity and the individual's 'known' identity equates to the idea of showing dressing. Monks observes a similar trait, stating that the manner in which actors wear theatrical costumes 'open up a gap between the self and dress,

generalize dress, rendering it desirable and imitable' (Monks 2010: 36). Costume is, following this reading, identifiably aligned with a temporary method of appearance. What Goffman terms a temporary ritual state, Victor Turner would label costume as 'liminal': a state of signifying an individual's participation within a particular event. Consequently, the idea of costume as showing dressing aims to underline how costumes render a body as 'between or betwixt' the normative expectations of appearance. In aligning costume with ideas of participation and liminality, the act of costuming emerges as a theatrically charged state of appearance: a subversive event of dressing, rather than a daily practice.

My application of Read's implied analysis of *Performance* and *performance* to costume is, however, a misnomer. In using this modeling, my intention was to draw out the interdisciplinary readings of costume in order to argue its distinctiveness. What is self-evident is Costume is already covered, in critical terms, by Performance: where the Performance perspective accounts for how appearance is constructed through social and moral constraints. Costume is not a symptom of dress, but a method of critiquing and resisting the systems of dress. I am not, however, proposing a distinction between costume as a critical framework and costume as practice. Instead, I have applied Read's model in order to ascertain a potential focus of critical costume, as a platform and undertaking. My position is that costume is distinctive and peculiar, not universal and borderless. The platform of critical costume should, I argue, be centred on how appearance normativity is challenged, subverted, re-conditioned and altered through the event and practice of costuming. While this is inclusive of the concerns of costume designers, it also invites contributions from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives: from performers to anthropologists, art historians to choreographers. The negotiation

of these disciplinary tensions is, consequently, a key mediator for initial questions on costume's criticality.

### **Costume and hugging**

I propose that costume's ability to critique the act of appearance, through the act of appearance, underlines its uniqueness. In opening up a conceptual gap between the worn and the wearer, costume can reveal the processes of dressing through the exposure of appearance as an act: of showing dressing. This is not to imply that acts of semblance are not critical, rather than a critical approach to costume isolates how semblance enacts ideologies such as an imposed invisibility or authenticity. Moreover, the act of costuming itself is equally significant. Inclusive of costume's ability to enact character traits, the event of putting on a garment for the purposes of artistic performance remains of distinct interest. The process of preparing a body for a liminal act, while exposing the regulatory structures of a fashion system, facilitates an important discussion on how bodies are designed and felt through our most immediate material relationship. While architecture and objects are considered independently from bodies, costumes operate in tandem as a unity of movement, identity and design. The unpicking of costume's ideological concerns and material agency within this bodily matrix is therefore a key concern for critical costume.

Thus far I have outlined the disciplinary and ideological tensions that frame the study of costume. The event of costuming is, however, a significant mode of investigating costume in its own right. In particular, I contend that wearing of costume affects both the worn and the wearer: an event that invites an affective felt immediacy that influences the form and movement of both entities. In this regard, my argument for a

re-consideration of the affective qualities of costuming, as a temporal and material culture, echoes how Bernard Tschumi has argued the event of architecture where ‘there is no architecture without program, without action, without event’ (Tschumi 1996: 3). Following this reciprocal model, Sylvia Lavin presents a theory of ‘kissing’ as a critical framework for understanding architecture as a temporal practice sustained through multiple agents. Lavin argues that a ‘kiss offers to architecture, a field that in its traditional forms has been committed to permanence and mastery, not merely the obvious owner of sensuality but also a set of qualities that architecture has long resisted: ephemerality and consilience’ (Lavin 2011: 5). Moreover, Lavin’s approach seeks to recognize the qualities of the distinct agents involved (whether bodies and architecture, or projected media and architecture) and how the event of this relationship is tantamount the act of kissing.

Kissing confounds the division between two bodies, temporarily creating new definitions of threshold that operate through suction and slippage rather than delimitation and boundary. A kiss performs topological inversions, renders geometry fluid, relies on the atectonic structural prowess of the tongue, and updates the metric of time. Kissing is a lovely way to describe a contemporary architectural practice.

(Lavin 2011: 5-10)

Whether in terms of material-to-material or material-to-body interactions, Lavin’s theory of kissing isolates the event of material participation a principal point of architecture’s criticality. In terms of costuming, I propose that Lavin’s kiss is tantamount to the hug of a costume.

To hug, as a verb and a noun, is to foster or cherish. While also a moment of intimacy, a hug sustains a collaboration between distinct agents that act together – as a unit or assemblage – that is categorically temporal as well as physical. The durational circumstance of a hug is central to its qualities as a point of interaction, a moment of



reflection, and a practice of togetherness. Moreover, hugs are not innately positively charged nor are they always welcome. A hug can be uncomfortable and exposing, as well as restorative and protecting. A theory of hugging isolates the material event of costuming that retains a distinction between demarcated boundaries, while also recognizing the shared qualities of the agents involved. Yet, the experience of a hug is always fully understood from within: to observe a hug is to be ontologically removed from the immediacy of the hugging event. Indeed, intimacy is a shared quality of hugging and costuming. The hug of a costume shapes how movement is conceived, as well as read by an observer. To understand the event of costume is to understand how the intimate relationship of material and body sustains action through qualities of tension, texture, and pliability.

Take Martha Graham's (1894-1991) seminal work *Lamentation* (1930) (see figure 3). For this dance piece, Graham designed a purple tube costume made with elasticated fabric. The choreography for *Lamentation* emerged from a material potential for structural resistance and a bodily immediacy sustained by the costume's elastic qualities. The hug of Graham's costume profiled a reciprocal exchange between body and material that is rendered explicit through her pushing and re-shaping of the costume. Graham's principles for a movement of tension and release are magnified through her material relationship *with* the costume. Both costume and body are shaped by one another. To watch *Lamentation* is to watch an ongoing negotiation, a negotiation that is of the order of hugging. Interestingly, Graham's body and the material qualities of the costume – although collapsed in terms of the conception of movement – remain distinct entities. While the spectator sees only Graham's extremities, the costume

remains at a critical distance to Graham's body: resisting a slippage into normative dress or general discourses of 'the body'. *Lamentation* is an exercise in hugging.



Figure 3: Martha Graham's *Lamentation* (1936)

As evident in Graham's choreography, I argue that the affect of costume is tantamount to the affect of architecture. That costuming is always an ephemeral encounter (between costume and body) and is only ever fully understood from within: in that a theory of hugging situates costume as an architecture of extra-daily movement. The reciprocal relationship of a costumed hug informs the topological configuration of costume and body, fabric and action. Moreover, a hug resists the ideological slippages (between normative dress and 'the body') that have rendered costume invisible or unseen. In viewing the act of costuming as a hug, this challenges scholars and practitioners to consider costume as an active and reactive performance agent. Beyond a descriptive practice, costume shapes movement through an affective reciprocal exchange between body and costume: where the immediacy of the costumed act affects both the worn and the wearer. Lastly, and to paraphrase Lavin, I propose that a hug is a lovely way to describe contemporary costume practice.

## **Conclusion**

I believe that costume is critical. In stating this as a position, my intention is to simultaneously argue costume as a vital practice and interrogative act. It is my contention that costume is integral to the professions that craft appearances, such as performers, while also being a method for isolating the body politic. A costume's eventful and liminal status generates a conceptual 'gap' between the worn and the wearer, an active process of othering. While also focusing on the event of costuming, this positions the peculiar practice of costume as a method for exposing the normative expectations of appearance. In positioning costume as critical, I encourage an inclusive approach to all costume scholarship that occupies the intersection between a number of established disciplinary positions. While this may lead to the development of distinct methodological processes for the study of costume, it also signals the interdisciplinary scope of costume that transcends any one disciplinary remit, such as theatre or fashion. From a child's shop-bought Halloween outfit to a bespoke garment for a Shakespearean production, costume embraces the popular and the artistic, the social and the personal. In arguing for an interdisciplinary discourse of costume, I believe that we are arguing for a renewed assessment of how bodies, materials, and appearances are performed through the act of costuming.

Consequently, the provocation of critical costume invites two possible responses to the structures of disciplinary tension: to find a shared point of exchange between established disciplinary readings or to argue the case for costume's disciplinary distinctiveness. As this article has outlined, I feel that there is much to be said for the first approach. In critiquing the normative assumptions aligned with distinct

disciplinary readings of costume, it is possible to point out underlying synergies and the benefits of a shared framework for costume scholarship (between fashion, theatre, performance, etc.). In connecting pre-established methods and modes of working, there is potential to gain critical clarity and strength from a collaborative undertaking. This position is not to argue that costume is a symptom of dress or fashion, rather that the subversive qualities of costume resist defined academic borders. To take on the provocation of critical costume is to study a range of material and political conditions that render it less an exact discipline and is more – as Hannah and Olav Harsløf describe of performance design - ‘a porous and fluctuating term’ (Hannah and Harsløf 2007: 12). It does not follow that costume’s peculiarity and distinctive practices are best served by operating in the position of a finite academic discipline. There is much to be said for resisting the disciplinary game and occupying the fluid state of inbetweenness that has defined ideas of performance design. *Critical Costume* offers a meeting point for exchange and debate, both for those familiar with the practice and those who are new. To argue costume’s exclusivity through a disciplinary border would potentially negate this collective aim. Lest we forget that costume is a familiar practice.

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