Contributors

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Robert Buckingham is co-founder of the Fashion Design Council, and former Director of MPavilion, Melbourne.

Kate Durham is co-founder of the Fashion Design Council.

Harriet Edquist is Professor of architectural history and Director of the RMIT Design Archives, RMIT University.

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Matthew Linde is curator and Director of Centre for Style, and a PhD candidate in the School of Fashion and Textiles.

Kate Rhodes is Curator at RMIT Design Hub, RMIT University.

Nella Themelios is creative producer at RMIT Design Hub, RMIT University, co-founder of Dolci and Kabana (D&K), and Chair of the Board of Bus Projects, Melbourne.

Fleur Watson, PhD, is Curator at RMIT Design Hub, RMIT University and founder of the collaborative creative practice Something Together.
RMIT Design Hub is located alongside the RMIT Design Archives – an extraordinary collection of design artefacts that reflects Melbourne’s rich design history.

In the exhibition High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion (17.02.2017 – 13.04.2017) we drew on this archive to display, interpret and interrogate the diverse range of materials related to the Fashion Design Council (FDC).

Comprising some 1500 artefacts including videos, photographs, newsletters, articles, flyers and posters, the FDC archive was considered in detail for the first time since it was the radio station for the new generation of designers. A British fashion designer and before long we got publicity. People were interested in us and that attracted more people.

woowa Architecture and Andre Bonnie’s design for the ‘office’ in High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion used the idea of the office as a shopfront as a point of departure: the way a postal address and a physical workspace can legitimise an organisation or brand. Their ‘fish bowl’ working space comprised an acrylic decagon in hues referencing the rose-coloured filters of social media and the geometries of the FDC’s branding, while the hand-stamped ‘terrazzo’ floor drew upon the cut-and-paste graphic language of the FDC newsletters. This suggests that the ‘office’ is a site where the designers’ practice becomes a form of public performance, communicating success and confidence to potential clients.

Melbourne’s alternative drinking and music spots – such as the Crystal Ballroom, Earl’s Court and Inflation – were key spaces for the Fashion Design Council during the 1980s. The bar or nightclub was where the FDC’s activities reached their zenith. These spaces were used as platforms for members to present their latest work in highly produced, choreographed catwalk shows curated by the FDC founders. The parades were infamous and attracted large crowds, audiences experienced clothing created to reflect the moment and fill a gap in the market for alternative fashion designed locally. Kate Durham recalls:

The Melbourne scene was more inflected with art making and architecture than the British DIY and punk movements, which were more about rebellion and being brash and aggressive and very homemade. Our scene got quickly into being something very artistic. It was more art inspired. At the same time in the late 1970s there was an interesting group of designers arriving in Paris from Japan who were doing androgynous cats and interesting folding work. What I was attracted to about that work you could make stuff up and it would become true: you would invite people, say we’ve got the world’s youngest fashion designer and before long we got publicity. People were interested in us and that attracted more people.
was that it had no fixed gender, it had no age barrier either.

Studbird’s (Matthew Bird) ‘bar’ responds to the nightclub as a key site of the FDC’s legacy. It was designed to accommodate interactive program-based activities around, within and upon it throughout the duration of the exhibition, including conversations and fashion presentations. It also functioned as an actual bar on which to dance and where drinks were served. Matthew Bird’s selection of materials — aluminium sheeting, LED strip lighting and fans — builds upon his own design research, which seeks to subvert notions of traditional luxury by using everyday materials to test and sustain a fashion practice. Before today’s diet of fast fashion and, at a time in Melbourne when it was difficult to buy alternative clothes, the FDC shop was a place to purchase fashion and, at a time in Melbourne when it was difficult to buy alternative clothes, the FDC shop was a place to purchase alternative clothes, the FDC shop was a place to purchase alternative clothes. Before today’s diet of fast fashion and, at a time in Melbourne when it was difficult to buy alternative clothes, the FDC shop was a place to purchase alternative clothes. Before today’s diet of fast fashion and, at a time in Melbourne when it was difficult to buy alternative clothes, the FDC shop was a place to purchase alternative clothes.

The Shop

The Fashion Design Council shop was the culmination of FDC activities and opened in 1989. Every surface of the striking Collins Street basement space (including the carpet) was painted in bright colours, aglow in then newly-available 12v track lighting and bathed in a soundtrack of dance music. The not-for-profit shop not only sold clothing but presented a changing program of exhibitions and education events for designers and students offering insight into how to grow and sustain a fashion practice. Before today’s diet of fast fashion and, at a time in Melbourne when it was difficult to buy alternative clothes, the FDC shop was a place to purchase alternative clothes, the FDC shop was a place to purchase alternative clothes. Before today’s diet of fast fashion and, at a time in Melbourne when it was difficult to buy alternative clothes, the FDC shop was a place to purchase alternative clothes. Before today’s diet of fast fashion and, at a time in Melbourne when it was difficult to buy alternative clothes, the FDC shop was a place to purchase alternative clothes.

Sibling Architecture’s ‘shop’ for High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion reflects the major shifts in spaces of consumption in the digital era with the rise of online shopping. Sibling’s landscape of large, pink foam cubes, orange ceiling mesh and video screens marks out an environment that captures the return to ‘programming’ — once central to the FDC shop — as bricks-and-mortar retailers seek out innovative ways to bring customers into contact with a brand. Now, in-store activities such as concerts, photo-shoots, signings and cocktail parties are designed to draw consumers out of bed and off the couch where we increasingly do most of our shopping. Sibling’s lounging environment mimics those sedentary places from which we browse, compare, share and confirm purchases from the screens of our phones and laptops. The shop housed a concentration of new works by contemporary practitioners who question how fashion is consumed conceptually, and as a product, by engaging with new forms of technology including film, soundscape and interactive works.

The Archive

Unlike the office, the bar and the shop, an FDC archive never existed. However, the FDC was conscious of its ‘past-in-the-making’ and aware of the value of printed matter in forming the FDC’s identity in a pre-digital age. Graphic design was central to the way the FDC positioned itself as a leading-edge organisation, both for growing its membership and for influencing its funders, and, as a result, the FDC invested in and put great emphasis on printed matter as its main form of communication.

FDC co-founder Robert Pearce was a graphic designer who created the visual identity for much of the group’s newsletters, flyers, invitations and advertisements and these artifacts form a significant part of the archive.
FDC co-founder Robert Buckingham states:

Small designer catalogues were handed out at shows, these were to give people contacts for the designers and their stockists. Other publications we produced, such as the newsletter, were about keeping people informed and sharing information, doing our job as a not-for-profit organisation. The newsletter was more conventional in the sense that it was about sharing information and trying to help people out in their independent enterprises. We were very conscious about that; we wanted to help our designers. What the FDC set out to do was to enable young people to join together as a group or a collective. It sounds old fashioned and daggy, but it does work. It gives you a presence and it gives you some confidence. People really developed faster that way, rather than just going to design school. It was immediately competitive but in a very embracing way so that people tended not to want to trip into someone else’s area in a sense. They were interesting young people. They just needed a break.

For High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion Žiga Testen designed a purpose-made live cataloguing space for the FDC archive and for visitors to see the exhibition curators, researchers and exhibition assistants catalogue the collection. It provided a dedicated zone to discuss and grow knowledge around the FDC artefacts. Standard archive shelving, and its cold, steely framework, ran the length of the gallery space and housed a multitude of printed materials and videos donated by Robert Buckingham on behalf of the FDC in 1998. The intent of this purposefully staged ‘archive’ space was to give visitors a sense of the real home of the collection at RMIT: its materiality and the handling and storage protocols required to transition it from a personal collection to an institutional one; to ensure longevity and instigate new relationships with future researchers and creative practitioners.

Conclusion

Alasdair MacKinnon concludes:

I think the main success of the Council was putting fashion on the map for Melbourne, particularly creative fashion, not just commercial fashion. We wanted to be a platform for fashion more in theatrical kind of way, like how it was presented in the haute couture shows of Paris. To highlight fashion in a way that goes beyond the clothes. i.e. designers were involved with art and culture at the fringes of the mainstream. I think that’s what the FDC did, locally there was a viable culture that could be grown and sustained. I think the diverse fashion landscape we have now is very much a result. They planted the seed for people to continue on with.

MacKinnon’s comments resonate with our core remit at the RMIT Design Hub to bring together a diverse community of creative practitioners, curators, academics and students dedicated to research and sharing the process of making progressive design ideas with our visitors. For High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion we tap into the culture of the FDC, its ambition for cultural and social change through experimental thinking and shared creativity, mapping this onto the fashion culture of today. The result is two-fold: through this reflective and explorative process we enrich our understanding of the FDC’s legacy and relevance, in a way that cultivates the FDC archive for further investigation by our community. We also discover and identify a vibrant, contemporary fashion culture supported by the academy; a sophisticated, reflexive and critical world of thinkers and makers.
Bob,

this is the 'INFLATION'

hit list.

We get it on the Proviso

that they get ours and the

FDC's lists.

Could you send it to

us immediately so we can

copy it and give it to them for

the NEW INFLATION Scaya Dae.

BUILDINGS

DALE EVANS

CHAIRMAN

FURNITURE

ROGERWOOD

DIRECTEUR

INTERIORS

LANDSCAPE

RANDEL MARSH

PRESIDENT

236 BAY STREET  PORT MELBOURNE  AUSTRALIA  3207  TELEPHONE (03) 64 25 74
Introduction

The reappraisal and scrutiny of the fashion system in recent years has sparked debate and contemplation on new approaches to the discipline and its traditions in terms of design, manufacturing, communication and experience. Current commercial practices of fashion are dominated by homogenised, large-scale global design brands in an industry driven by increasing speed to put garments to market. Major issues of the environment and ethical impacts of the commercial fashion system are now more pressing than ever. As a result, debate concerning the viability and sustainability of current approaches has launched a mounting inquiry into alternative fashion systems and the role that niche sole practitioners and micro enterprises⁴ might play in the transformation of this industry.

In this changing setting, fashion is no longer simply driven by stylistic trends and collections of clothing — instead there is capacity to consider its complexity.² The emerging notion of critical practice in the fashion field offers a way that we might reconsider and invent fashion’s future. For instance, in 1999 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby popularised the idea of critical design using the premise of speculative design informed by critical thinking to generate new ways of working and to address how design might respond to the pressing issues of our time.³ In this essay the application of critical fashion is explored through modes of exhibition and archive practices to consider how this approach to fashion has emerged in the niche geographical location of Melbourne. Through the exhibition High Risk Dressing /Critical Fashion, an exhibition I co-curated alongside Fleurt Watson, Kate Rhodes and Nella Themelios, the ideas of critical fashion, from an archive to gallery space, activate hindsight alongside new works.
Over a ten-year period, between 1983 and 1993, the rfc involved a diverse collective of designers, artists, architects, choreographers, musicians, hairdressers and makeup artists. Fashion designers included Martin Grant, Kate Durham, Kura Baker (formerly Stereo), Jenny Bannister, Fiona Scanlan (Scanlan and Theodore), Leona Edmundson and Peter Morrissey (both formerly Morrissey and Edmundson), Graeme Lowrey (formerly Gyro), Bettina Lams, Sarah Thorn and Bruce Slorach. Other practices collaborating in rfc activities were architects Roger Wood, Randall Marsh and Dale Jones-Evans (formerly Bilkmoderne), Peter Corrigan (Edmond and Corrigan), filmmakers Mark Davis, Mark Worth and Simon Burton (Kino Productions) and choreographer Shelley Lasica, among many others.

The rfc’s strategy to communicate and support emerging practitioners was prolific and often brash; publishing and documenting their activities to gain media attention and exposure to a broader community. Though the rfc’s platforms were analogue and their message outspoken, their modus operandi remains relevant today, especially in communicating new forms of fashion outside the current fashion system dominated by large-scale global brands. At this critical time – and as the rfc founders did – futurist and academic Lwedij Edelkoort adopted the manifesto format to confront these issues in her 2015 ‘Anti_fashion’ text, which boldly declares that current commercial practices of fashion are no longer viable, nor relevant today. This reappraisal and scrutiny of the fashion system in recent years has sparked debate and contemplation towards new approaches in fashion and its traditions in terms of design, manufacturing, communication and experience. For example, designers Martijn van Strien and Vera de Pont have put forward a fashion system where customisation, production on demand and reuse become commonplace in their ‘Open Source manifesto 2016’. In Melbourne Lois McGregor’s label Lois Hand, launched in 2015, is committed to sustainable and ethical practices, offering 100% transparency on sourcing and production of garments with all craftsmanship made in-house or in a network of local seamstresses.

While the ongoing dialogue between The Global Fashion Agenda Group and the fashion industry takes place with regular summits and calls to action. For instance at the 2017 Copenhagen Fashion Summit, the global fashion industry was challenged to adopt a circular fashion system. These bold manifestos and statements reflect an industry in crisis and aim to provoke and stimulate the field to think and act differently.

In a local setting like Melbourne and looking at contemporary practice, this changing fashion landscape presents both challenge and opportunity. High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion embraced the latter by inviting a group of contemporary practitioners who approach fashion’s critical and creative potential in their work. These practitioners had little or no experience of the rfc, and were invited to engage with the organisation through exposure to the archive.

A critical fashion practitioner

In their enquiry into alternative fashion systems, theorists and practitioners Otto von Busch and Pascale Catzen highlight:

‘A true “decommoditisation of style” must go beyond increasing the number of available consumption choices, engaging people more directly in the active and intentional development of their personal style, and of the clothing they choose to express it.’

A return to diverse, niche, localised practice as an alternative to the large-scale operations of the fashion system, with practices which are more agile and progressive, is needed.

As an emerging phenomenon in discourse, the descriptor ‘critical fashion’ is being used in varying ways. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaninas position critical fashion as a branch of the fashion industry where contemporary fashion designers have adopted complex forms of social commentary and critique certainties of fashion to facilitate deeper reflections about their own work and the fashion system. Although the concept of critical fashion is not yet clearly defined, it has become a way forward for those working in fashion to test new ways and forms of expressing fashion. Designer and researcher Elisa van Joolen notes: ‘Critique is used in a way to draw things together, to find new ways to collaborate. Critique as a proposition.’ For the exhibition, we framed the critical fashion practitioner as one characterised by a way of working that is abrasive to fashion’s commercial framework, and, whether intentionally or inadvertently, critiques fashion by offering sustainable or speculative approaches. These practices scrutinise fashion, engaging with new forms of technology, social networking or sharing practices, to put forward alternative experiences of fashion, how it is consumed as both a concept and a product.

A more globally-accessible and increasingly digital world, where new forms of fashion are created and easily shared, has radically changed the fashion industry in niche geographies like Melbourne. Fashion practitioners are now dynamic self-publishers, working across mediums and intentional development of their personal style, engaging people more directly in the active and intentional development of their personal style, and of the clothing they choose to express it.’

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Another form of reanimation was through practitioners in residence in the exhibition space. This scenario introduced the mechanics of micro-enterprises and demonstrated new ways of creating fashion. For example, CHOREUS (Cassandra Wheat and Louise Pannell) follow a collaborative approach to design and work outside the standard seasonal clothing cycles for fashion by developing an outfit per month known as ‘The Monthly Edition’. In direct response to FDC archive material, CHOREUS were exposed to at the beginning of the exhibition, they developed their monthly outfit in their gallery residence every Tuesday and Wednesday.

In this installation and performance, Poggioli proposed activating and producing clothing in inventive ways beyond the standard production of generic cloth forms were transformed into clothing, as visitors and performers interacted with them, often dressing one another. In this installation and performance, Poggioli drew attention to cultures of consumption and rituals of urbanites, producing garments with no rigid styling, introduced multiple ways of use with customisation led by the wearer. In parallel to the works of the invited practitioners, the FDC archive was the subject of a program of live cataloguing convened by the exhibition invigilators. Where exhibition curators and engaged guests, participated in the task of documenting critical reflections from members and others associated with the organisation, in an effort to organise and add to the Archive’s knowledge and repository. Curated conversations brought original members of the FDC together with contemporary practitioners addressing topics such as music, writing, drawing and architecture.
Conclusion

The RfC promoted a DIY approach and embraced ad hoc strategies; with many members working from their bedroom or garage, in many ways in opposed formal design education, instead encouraging raw, un-institutionalised talent. Studies identifying distinctive fashion micro-enterprises in key urban centres such as London, Berlin and Milan have identified the importance of self-organised professional fashion urban networks and social networks to support these enterprises.“ The critical dialogue evident in RfC’s organisation and noticeable in the exhibition High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion reveals the lineage of critical fashion practices since the 1980s that are also supportive networks.

Today, this kind of expanded and proactive practice in fashion often emerges from the domain of the academy. In the current climate, the institution is a space that offers creative, conceptual and economic flexibility. The increasing number of fashion designers undertaking postgraduate studies to innovate in their practice and their field, has contributed to an expanded critical dialogue supported by research. The growing role of the academy in bridging innovative practice with industry is important in proposing new, critical modes of fashion and clothing design practice that are both propositional and commercially viable.

Endnotes

1 The Australian Bureau of Statistics dataset measures the number of business entities within a range of employment categories including no employees (that is, sole trader/practitioner) and 1–4 employees (micro business). Bernard Salt, “We’re a nation of small businesses,” The Australian, April 13, 2017, 28.

2 Luca Marchetti and Emanuele Quinz, eds., Dysfashional (Barcelona: BOM, 2007), 8.


8 The Danish Fashion Institute (DAFI) established the Global Fashion Agenda as a means to mobilise the international fashion industry to transform the way we produce and consume fashion.


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Publishing is an essential component of the fashion industry, but also offers a space to experiment, conceptualise and galvanise critical narratives on fashion.

The Fashion Design Council (FDC), particularly through the organisation’s co-founder and graphic designer Robert Pearce, were prolific in the creation of printed matter as an exercise in creative thought as well as communicating and consolidating the group’s ideology and culture.

The exhibition *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion* held between February 17 and April 13, 2017 at the RMIT Design Hub brought local fashion practitioners into the archive of the FDC – which largely comprises print ephemera – to respond with works that reflect a new, expanded notion of critical fashion. This essay frames comments captured in the event ‘The Limits of the Page’, a panel discussion I convened within the exhibition program, to explore the page as a foundation of critical fashion practice.

Critical practice is still a concept in development in fashion, one that is only beginning – unlike in other cultural fields of art and design – to find its coordinates. For art, terminology around criticism and criticality is under constant and rigorous scrutiny, making it an established, albeit unstable, mode of practice and discourse. Print and publishing practice as a site for experimental thought and criticality has a similarly rich history, particularly through the writings of conceptual artists, curators and art theorists that set in motion a discourse on artists’ books, periodicals and other publishing activities since the early 1980s. Performative modes of critique in these fields from factocritical writing to concrete poetry, present a paradigm shift from writing about critique, to writing as critique. The role of the page as a site or platform for these writing experiments is equally as important as the textual and visual content they house. Artists’ magazines and publications offer spaces to interrogate the formal qualities of art writing, demonstrating that an expanded notion of practice, is beneficial to an expanded notion of discourse.

In fashion media and writing the term ‘criticism’ is more familiar in relation to the writing practice emerging from literary tradition. Theorists and journalists that have evaluated this genre, including, among others, Francesco Granata, Andre Rangiah and Ann Hollander. Peter McNeill and Sandra Miller’s book *Fashion Writing and Criticism* offers a more comprehensive history of fashion criticism in terms of its most well-known format: the fashion review. These efforts call for a revision of the level of emphasis placed on the written word in fashion, however present a limited view on the performative and critical potential of the medium of the page.

As an organisational body, ephemera were the group’s artefact and material legacy. Along with Robert Buckingham and Kate Durham, founding member Robert Pearce’s background as a graphic designer and art director afforded him a keen visual sensibility and affinity with print media that drove much of the graphic output for their events, shows and announcements. Further, with print being the primary communication medium for fashion in the 1980s, expression had to be through the page, and so the printed matter in the archive bears the traces of the creative process of the group.

Pearce’s approach to layouts and formats was influenced by the DIY culture of the 1980s, in particular, street-style and culture periodicals emerging from northern centres, such as i-D and *The Face*. This reflected experimental, cut-and-paste strategies that played out in their posters, postcards, letterheads as well as through the group’s regular newsletter, a document distributed by mail on a more or less biannual basis.

The FDC newsletter functioned to service paying members by informing and updating them on recent achievements, upcoming events, as well as including editorial reflections on fashion and excerpts from magazines. The newsletters would inevitably open with the group manifesto, a bold statement of the FDC’s ambitions and intentions that sought to galvanise and remind members of the social, cultural and political ambitions of the project.

The FDC were prolific self-publishers, but nevertheless part of an era burgeoning with print experimentation. Since the 1980s, many fashion designers have been highly creative in their output of print material in tandem with the garment. During this time, in Europe and Japan, avant-garde designers such as Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto, Walter Van Beirendonck and Martin Margiela were emerging as small-scale independent publishing houses producing objects of print as a key component to their cultural and seasonal production. Theorist Marco Pecorari’s writing on fashion ephemera captures the way in which creative and conceptual graphic media created by independent designers extends upon the symbolic, economic and social reach of a brand, and, similar to the way in which the FDC used graphic to galvanise their creative community and following. He writes: ‘although the dress still plays the role of protagonist, fashion designers are producing complete universes that require diverse languages to translate and fully represent their visions. Invitations, catalogues, press releases, fashion films, exhibitions, and websites stimulate interaction with other disciplines, consequently blurring the boundaries.’

I have looked at this space through access to the FDC archive and research of the group’s activities through my involvement with the exhibition program. A discussion I organised as part of *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*, in the transcript that follows, aimed to explore the limits of fashion publishing, to open up the possibility of fashion as publication and stretch the discourse on critical fashion practice. The event was predicated on the idea of the page as having potential for critical thought in fashion, posing questions to practitioners involved in the exhibition that aimed to draw out their creative intentions and negotiations with the page as a site for criticality. Speaking at the ‘bar’ site of the exhibition, Michael Trudgon, Ricarda Rigolino and Nelia Themelios (*txt*) and Winnie Ha Milford shared their practices in relation to fashion and fashion publishing in the event ‘The Limits of the Page’ – captured on the following pages. These local fashion designer publishers and experimenters of writing and image-making on the page challenge the commercial habits of the fashion system, and our conception of fashion within this. By illuminating the parallels between the print output of the FDC and that of the contemporary fashion practitioners involved in the exhibition, I hope to contribute to notions of ‘critical fashion’ and an expanded fashion discourse.
The Limits of the Page

A panel discussion with Michael Trudgeon, Winnie Ha Mitford, Ricarda Bigolin and Nella Themelios

LAURA GARDNER I want to start by asking you all – though you may not define yourselves as ‘fashion publishers’ in the formal sense – how do you work on the page or with writing in relation to fashion?

MICHAEL TRURGEON We began making publications at the start of the '80s in an age prior to the internet, when getting data about new, young, experimental practice was very difficult. In creating Fast Forward we tried to resolve the question of how do you make a magazine where people don’t just talk about music, but can hear it. Crow was the same thing for us in terms of design: there was an incredible range of small independent practices bubbling up – from fashion, industrial design, architecture – all bound in their locales. Fashion had become a really critical medium for experimentation of thought. We saw it as a vehicle for a range of practice from intellectual engagement to rambunctious expression, and a vital means of building culture. By culture I mean a way of establishing identity and a presence for, in our case, practices based in Melbourne. What was appealing about fashion as a medium was the opportunity to explore something very inclusive, but also incredibly experimental and provocative. There was also the physicality of print that appealed to us, which is important in terms of what publishing printed matter does as opposed to the digital realm. We were interested in the haptic dimensions of the published object. Print is visceral and you can relate what it is you’re capturing in the content, to the way that you set up the medium of the page or magazine.

LAURA Winnie, your work doesn’t necessarily deal with the visceral nature of the printed object, but maybe more the visceral nature of text?

WINNIE HA MITFORD Yes, my work deals with the visceral nature of language. I started writing in fashion for a number of reasons. The first was because I was looking for a way to write about fashion that was different from convention, that wasn’t about promotional language or pushing commercial fashion. I also wanted to write about fashion in a way that didn’t involve any garments, or clothing, to ask: What is fashion when you take away its tangible element? What is fashion as an idea, or as a concept? I wanted to address these topics though not necessarily through academic forms of writing, often when you get into fashion theory it becomes heavily-handled. I wanted to write about fashion through the imagined experience of a garment. My work is non-physical, and I don’t deal with publications per se. Instead I explore formats – such as readings or recordings – that enable the experience of language through listening.

WINNIE Yes, it comes down to the experience of the language or the experience of words, even singular words.

LAURA Ricarda and Nella, you both also use language and print ephemera in your work, can you expand on how writing and publishing operate in your practice?

NELLA Themelios We use the format of writing regularly although it’s not our primary mode, or medium. For us, writing is a key site to critique parts of the fashion system, but we’re also interested in the language of fashion and how that mobile medium circulates, for instance from a press release to a magazine. We’re deeply invested in the commercial quality of language and we try to pick it apart, to think about the aspirational characteristics of that type of language, what that might mean and how that might position fashion. In #thatshautecouturefeeling for example, we wanted to confute marketing language with heightened interpersonal emotions in a poem-like format. Relating the emotions you might have for a luxury item to emotional attraction, as a similar process of wanting a thing that you can’t have.

RICARDA Bigolin We are also interested in the impact of certain words. We are less interested in the textual content of fashion production, or when text occurs in fashion, but rather the proliferation of certain kinds of text.

LAURA That leads me to a question of medium, or rather, technology, that marks a difference between how Michael and the FDC were working in the 1980s compared to now. There is a mobility of text in the way in which D&K use writing, which sometimes sits within the process, whilst at other times becomes the work itself. How do you make decisions about material format with such a fluid presence of text, for example in #thatshautecouturefeeling?

RICARDA With that work we wanted to print text on a really fine piece of tissue paper to suggest the branded tissue paper you receive when you buy a luxury item.

Nella With #thatshautecouturefeeling, we wanted to explore hierarchies of value within fashion, from high to the low, so it made sense to publish that piece of writing in this very delicate way. There was another project we did where we took the language of the press release and tried to mess around with it by interpersing the marketing-speak with emotional, nonsensical language. In that project we produced many variations of the same press release to explore the kind of language that proliferates in fashion and to reveal some of its underlying politics.

LAURA You touched on this before Michael, but I would like to know if you relate to the tradition of artists’ publishing in terms of the conceptual decision-making around material format in Fast Forward and Crow?

MICHAEL We were operating in a context where we viewed the reader as a participant in the process and it was about sharing information in an exchange. Materiality was also liberating and a form of rebelling, because there were conventions around how you were supposed to use materials. Our guiding ideological and philosophical principles were coming from art and art practice, which had been picking up on the idea of transgression since the beginning of the century.
LAURA D&K’s work often draws from, and reconstructs, established formats and layouts in fashion editorial. However, how do you use image and text in your work?

NELLA We don’t see ourselves working outside the discipline or conventions of fashion, but we try to disrupt and interrogate, or subvert those mechanisms. We’re definitely aware of those processes and how they position fashion in a particular way.

WINNIE Can I add something about D&K’s work that I really like? The way you use image and text will often show ideas without having to explain them, to propose ideas around fashion, without exhausting the work with language or explanations, which is a really valuable way of using word and image. We’ve been able to see the explanation in the work or graphic.

RICARDA I think our text and graphic work serves more as an explanation in itself rather than us trying to offer a didactic explanation.

LAURA I want to move the conversation to talk about ‘critical fashion practice’, beginning with you Michael. I’m wondering if there was anything you were critical of in your publishing projects and what you saw to be commercial?

MICHAEL We had no foundation for what we were doing in terms of existing fashion; we were creating out of a desire to express ourselves and to produce work. It wasn’t necessarily a critical opposition, we saw fashion as an opportunity to disrupt and balance and expanded, where there are more gaps and spaces to do stuff in, but not necessarily as a direct critique on the world of fashion.

NELLA It’s about finding spaces within the mechanisms of fashion and how they operate to propose new ways of thinking about fashion. We are not oppositional in the sense that we disagree with it, but we’re trying to find a new language or new moments within the fashion system as it exists. New ways of thinking about what fashion is, what it does and how it does it.

Conclusions

Printed matter is central to the way fashion practitioners articulate, disseminate and fashion their garment output. Yet, publishing as a creative, critical practice isn’t established in fashion in the same way it is in art discourse. The local, Melbourne-based practices, from the FDC to now, involved in High Risk Dressing, Critical Fashion reflect dynamic, experimental and critical approaches to fashion on the page that extend the provocation of artists’ publishing to fashion. The publications and practices discussed here demonstrate that fashion provides rich conceptual and creative material in regards to the ways in which word and image are represented in printed matter, and participate with a reader. Like the FDC media, they experiment with form, content and context, as interconnected and conceptual to produce alternative narratives on fashion.

‘The Limits of the Page’ centred on the notion of page as a site for criticality, not only through the use of image and text as creative material but also through alternative modes of dissemination in the wake of new technologies. The discussion explored practices and their specific audiences at the threshold of fashion that take on broader narratives to play out.

RICARDA I don’t think we are. We started working this way out of interest and convenience. We are interested in certain conventions in fashion, and playing with them, but I don’t think it’s an opposition to commercial fashion practice. I actually think it responds to that world. For us the idea of critical fashion practice offers a space that is a bit more balanced and expanded, where there are more gaps and spaces to do stuff in, but not necessarily as a direct critique on the world of fashion.

WINNIE Can I add something about D&K’s work that I really like? The way you use image and text will often show ideas without having to explain them, to propose ideas around fashion, without exhausting the work with language or explanations, which is a really valuable way of using word and image. We’ve been able to see the explanation in the work or graphic.

MICHAEL Trudgeon in the School of Architecture and Urban Design at RMIT University, founding partner of the collaborative publishing and design practice Crowd. Trudgeon’s past project work includes magazine publishing, music performance and record production. In the early 1980s, Trudgeon was involved in the publications Fast Forward and Crowd magazine, as well as sharing a building and often collaborating with the FDC. ‘Trudgeon’s publishing projects were mixed-media ventures that merged disciplines of art, music and fashion to explore print as a creative medium and extension of culture.

Winnie Ha Mitford completed her PhD at RMIT University in the School of Design in 2017. Her research and practice explores writing as a conceptual and critical phenomenon, addressing the practice of fashion as an experience and an art. She proposes text as garment with written works that have appeared in the form of digital archive of the publication at http://spill-label.org/risks/dressing.

Ricarda Bigolin and Nella Themelios form two halves of /d.sc&/k.sc. Ricarda is a designer and runs the Masters of Fashion Design program in the School of Fashion and Textiles at RMIT University. Nella is a curator and creative producer at RMIT Design Hub, as well as being part of the curatorial team for this show. As artists, they explore a critical fashion practice, at times producing clothes, at others participating, or performing in exhibitions. They regularly use writing and produce print materials, such as fictocritical prose, poetry and screenwriting, throughout their exhibition-based and fashion projects.

1 ‘The Limits of the Page’ panel discussion and reading was an event that brought together practitioners that address fashion and the conceptual potential of the printed page, held as part of the High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion exhibition, 17 March, 2017.
2 ‘The Limits of the Page’ centred on the notion of page as a site for criticality, not only through the use of image and text as creative material but also through alternative modes of dissemination in the wake of new technologies. The discussion explored practices and their specific audiences at the threshold of fashion that take on broader narratives to play out.
3 Michael Trudgeon is a Professor in the School of Architecture and Urban Design at RMIT University and Design Director of Crowd Productions. Trudgeon’s past project work includes magazine publishing, music performance and record production. In the early 1980s, Trudgeon was involved in the publications Fast Forward and Crowd magazine, as well as sharing a building and often collaborating with the FDC. Trudgeon’s publishing projects were mixed-media ventures that merged disciplines of art, music and fashion to explore print as a creative medium and extension of culture.
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6 Fast Forward was a mixed-media publication founded in Melbourne in 1980 and continued by Bruce Minnie and Andrew Maine with graphic design by Michael Trudgeon. Recordings of the issues can be accessed on a digital archive of the publication at http://spill-label.org/FastForward/.
7 Crowd magazine was founded in Melbourne by Michael Trudgeon, Jane Joyce and Andrew Maine in 1983.
8 #barhamcentenforflying is a merchandise poem produced by Cult in 2013.
Fake It ‘Til You Make It

A panel discussion with Matthew Linde (Centre for Style) and FRC founders Kate Durham and Robert Buckingham, held as part of High Risk Dressing: Critical Fashion, February 2017.

MATTHEW LINDE: One thing that struck me as interesting about the FRC was the membership system. What were the criteria for members of the FRC? I’d like to begin by discussing the structural format of the organisation in that regard.

ROBERT BUCKINGHAM: We had a fee membership, people paid to become members, so there was really no restriction on membership except the cost. I think the full membership was $25, and you paid $10 to be an associate member. $25 would be the cost for designers, and $10 for students or people who were our supporters.

KATE DURHAM: The criteria for the parades we put on were quite different: we wanted to include work that stood out. It wasn’t a popularity contest, we would ask ourselves: Is the work unerring, interesting, worth looking at or worth thinking about?

MATTHEW: So in that sense the parades were an ultimate goal for the membership?

KATE: I think so, but all members got newsletters, discounts at events and other benefits. We tried, like any organisation would, to do our best to help our members.

MATTHEW: In retrospect, the FRC was a prolific organisation with a very strong and important presence in the cultural landscape. I’m wondering if there was any backlash or criticism from the establishment that you were pushing back against?

ROBERT: There was a bit of backlash from within the fashion world. Some people felt that, because we’d put ourselves out there, in terms of announcing ourselves as the Fashion Design Council of Australia, we needed to be knocked back down. There was a sense that we were trying to be big, to be bold, and some people didn’t like that. The mainstream didn’t really take a lot of notice until we developed a broader reputation, then the media paid attention and people slowly became interested in what they were doing. It was a combination of power of the collective as an organisation, but also audiences who would follow designers that they particularly liked within our grouping.

MATTHEW: How did the retail project of the FRC emerge? Could you elaborate on that?

ROBERT: Initially there was talk about opening the store in a space on Banana Alley, which is the vault underneath the railway lines of Flinders Street Station in Melbourne’s CBD. The government were interested in trying to revitalise these spaces in the mid-’80s and they were going to give us some money to move in. In the end, we decided not to do it, because we felt the location was wrong, and we held off starting the shop until later. During that early period in the ’80s, there was not a lot of the opportunities for fashion designers to show or to sell their work, which is why we felt it was important to have some collective space. By the time the FRC shop actually opened, which wasn’t until 1990, a lot of designers had set up their own shops and had become more vertically integrated, many of them sold their clothes through their own boutiques, so the role of the shop was perhaps slightly diminished by the time it opened.

MATTHEW: A question I often get regarding Centre for Style is: Do you sell anything? To which my response is often: ‘not really.’ Was the retail for the FRC similar? Did it serve a broader cultural purpose as another mode of dissemination?

KATE: Yes definitely it was; it was right opposite Australia Arcade where the Merivale shop had been, so the building had a fashion history. It was a good site but some of the problems were that designers were already becoming established or attached to other outlets.

ROBERT: And we weren’t very good retailers. It was a huge space, a large gallery space really, in a basement underneath the Merivale shop. But there were a few things against us, not to mention the approaching economic downturn of the early 1990s. Alasdair MacKinnon was the store manager, but we also had some assistance in terms of more traditional retailers, such as Christine Barrosse, who runs the shop ‘Christmas’ and Helen Rose, who’d been working with Myer, on our board. We worked on consignment and our ethos was to make sure all the designers were paid at the end of the week.

MATTHEW: ‘Consignment’ is a word that often has a negative connotation, but it shouldn’t because what it allows is the sharing of the experience of fashion practices, certainly that’s how Centre for Style functioned more as a cultural, rather than monetary, exchange. That’s how I see the FRC as operating in terms of bringing the conversation and what was happening on the street – in places like London – to disintegrate the hierarchical structure of fashion. Were there similar conversations happening in other Australian cities?

ROBERT: We had relations with quite a few designers from Sydney who showed with the FRC. By the early 1990s you started to see other stores bubbling up that were a bit like the FRC. There was one in Sydney, and there were others overseas, such as Hyper Hyper in London, a concept that was quite similar. Hyper Hyper was more about having concessions, so designers could have their own sections within the store. The FRC shop was more blended, perhaps, because the designers didn’t have enough stock to be able to do that. But there were movements across the country; in Sydney in the late 1970s there was a strong culture of independent fashion emerging with people like Jenny Bannister, Clarence Chui and also Jenny Kee and Flamingo Park.

KATE: They took our stock but the designers up there loved Melbourne because we were more on trend. I also think Sydney designers loved coming to Melbourne because we did a lot of marketing for them. That was the other job that the FRC took on: we did a lot of publicity for our designers.

MATTHEW: It seemed like in the ’80s there was a real cultural explosion happening in Melbourne in which the FRC were positioned as the fashion component. There was also John Nixon’s gallery space, the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre and Paul Taylor in the mix. History tends to make mythologies and so I’m keen to hear your opinion of that time and Melbourne’s creative scene. Was it really as groundbreaking as we make it out to be?
ROBERT: The early ‘80s was a very interesting period of cross-disciplinary activity. Music was really thriving at the time, but you also had publications like Art & Text, and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) was just starting up. I suppose it was that emergence, everyone seemed to be doing something.

MATTHEW: Was that the first time that you saw fashion entering into this wider crate of discourse?

KATE: Fashion was always important to me, but when I went to art school it was stigmatised as a lower form of art, it was seen to be a bad thing. Fashion was always interesting to me because it was challenging to do.

ROBERT: At that time fashion was coming more from the ground up, rather than the top down. The way that music, filmmaking and art were beginning to relate with one another felt like the attitude and the philosophy were more connected, as opposed to the Paris model of haute couture, or fashion coming through more traditional media.

KATE: The tourism commissioner, Don Dunstan, who was the former Premier of South Australia, was very artsy. I remember writing to him when we were starting out saying, do you realise what we’re going to lose? We’re going to lose the whole garment area of Flinders Lane, at the time there was still all these tailors and businesses through there. I can remember seeing Robert Pearce and other people trying to persuade them that there was something that we could do. The architect Peter Corrigan said: ‘Go ground up, rather than the top down. The way that music, filmmaking and art were beginning to relate with one another felt like the attitude and the philosophy were more connected, as opposed to the Paris model of haute couture, or fashion coming through more traditional media.

KATE: These days it’s so saturated, I would hate to have to purchase immediately; it’s designed for consumption and not necessarily any kind of meaningful experience.

MATTHEW: Was that the first time that you saw fashion showing in the parades in terms of the designers you included?

ROBERT: I think the fundamental problem with fashion is that no matter how artistic or interesting you want to be in your culture, it will always throw back to its commercial roots. Fashion is always a question of what’s selling and how much can we sell. There was this really interesting period in the late ‘70s where the Japanese designers were doing beautiful work, creating clothes that had a conceptual androgyny. Designing clothes that could not only go between genders but also across ages. They were very architectural, but Paris fought back because it was losing its market. Karl Lagerfeld, for example, dumped all those hats with cakes on his models; he fought back with clothes that reflected traditional notions of status, frivolity and idleness.

MATTHEW: Regarding ‘experimental fashion’, which is such a contested and saturated term, what was the i-D wanting to show in the parades in terms of the designers you included?

ROBERT: There was a curatorial approach of keeping a variety of work. It didn’t matter who was doing it; sometimes it was artists, sometimes it was engineers, sometimes it was fashion designers, but we were trying to cultivate an interesting mix. That was always the philosophy – trying to be unusual. It just wasn’t your standard.

KATE: You didn’t have to be ‘beautiful’ or ‘perfect’, but you had to have something exuberant or interesting to say. Now things seem to have reversed and it’s as if the fashion industry expects people to be goddesses, they create impossible standards for people.

ROBERT: But we weren’t the only ones doing stuff. Crowd magazine had a big fashion show in the early ‘80s and Bruce Slorach and Sara Thorn had their own show; these activities encouraged independent designers. The i-D wasn’t the only game in town; it’s just that we had the strongest base. We’d set ourselves up as a not-for-profit organisation, and as a result, we had different agendas, we weren’t just a commercial enterprise.

KATE: These days, fashion is much more about the ‘individual’ expressing themselves. For the i-D collective, it was a little swamp that they could emerge from, and they could slip back into the fold when they wanted to. That was our strength. It’s also part of the mercantile nature of business that people are expected to be individuals, forget the collective, forget the romance of that. But this was the joy of it for me, when everybody started becoming individual, that was when I lost interest in it.

ROBERT: Also the way we put fashion into different places, it was a kind of self-servive fashion. We did a nice show at Linden Gallery in St Kilda, perhaps before the gallery had opened (in 1986) it was a disused old mansion in St Kilda. We did a few shows there, we did one called ‘Occupation Demarcation’ which was about uniforms. We were trying to get the designers to think about how to reach new audiences and do things in different places. Art was really important in the i-D culture, and the gallery world was important to us, in that way it was different to the way mainstream fashion designers behaved. Now it’s much more common that a fashion designer would do things in a gallery, or collaborate with artists and filmmakers, but back then it was a revolution.
MATTHEW Another topic I wanted to touch on was the nightclub, how you guys used and exploited these kinds of club venues. Can you elaborate on that?

KATE When you went out to the nightclubs, everyone was dressed to the nines, a buzz would build about the next event. We spent a lot on communication and the nightclub venues and events were a way of seeing the same people and getting the word around.

ROBERT They were also the civic spaces in which our audience operated. What happened at the time was that most nightclubs would legally have to close at 1am. There were a handful of places in town that had old licensing laws and could stay up all night.

KATE Of course the owners loved us because we brought our crowd with us. We didn’t think about it then, but that’s why we were popular and got free drink cards and could stay all night in these venues.

MATTHEW The nightclub has been a special place for me in terms of allowing my peers and community to have transcendental fashion experiences and explore subjectivities. To wrap up my questions, perhaps you could both identify one extraordinary moment in the RRC program?

KATE Mine would be the first time that I saw my jewellery on stage at an RRC show; there were three figures walking down the stage, until then it hadn’t occurred to me how amazing it would look to see my creations lit up and animated by the body. I had a Joan of Arc body suit on one model, she had frayed straw shoes and straw in her hair and I was so moved by my work in a way that didn’t happen in the studio.

ROBERT The big shows at the Seaview ballroom and the Palais were very beautiful and memorable. The theatricality of these events is always going to be memorable for me. But the backstage action was perhaps even more exciting, there was a frenetic energy and so many people involved in a way that would later become much more disciplined, and professionalised, in fashion.

KATE But of course, we never started on time.
In an interview published in a recent anthology of essays concerned with the ‘archive’, Beatrice von Bismarck and Irmgard Christa Becker proffered two connected yet competing views. While both agreed that ‘there are institutional similarities between archives and museums with regard to their basic idea, their administration and their reception’¹ for Becker, a trained archivist, the public archive is bound by rules that do not obtain for museums. Among these is display and access:

You can go to an archive, order the material that you want to use and then the material is delivered to you in the reading room. You can read and interpret it for scientific work or other things. I think that is the main difference between museums and archives. In museums the curator decides what is displayed to the public, what is shown in an exhibition. In an archive there are certain rules which define the open access to the material.²
While the similarities between types of collecting institutions and organisations have been highlighted in recent years, the differences articulated by Becker are worth examining. You are not to collapse everything into the concept of ‘the archive’ and in so doing lose its particular specificity and value. Archives in the traditional sense do have rules, some of which are shared with other collecting institutions but some not. Since the nineteenth century when archival theory was formalised for the first time, certain fundamental characteristics have been deemed to be essential to its nature – respect de fonds, appraisal, description, provenance, original order, and the role of the archivist in maintaining the integrity of the archive. The principal of respect de fonds for example ‘is a principle in archival theory that proposes to group collections of archival records according to their fonds – that is to say, according to the administrative, organization, individual, or entity by which they were created or from which they were received’. Libraries and museums on the other hand store artefacts according to type and material – manuscript, picture, drawing, object, book – whether or not this entails dismantling the collection as it existed when acquired. Then again, while one of the main functions of a gallery or museum is to exhibit their works to the public, this is not the case with archives which maintain strict protocols around visitor access, as Becker notes.

Archives differ from museums in other ways. Museums tend to collect works that have already been through a form of cultural vetting that renders them worthy of joining the collection. Works generally are collected as isolated examples of classes of objects that illustrate narratives developed elsewhere – by archaeologists, palaeontologists, curators, historians, directors or collectors. They are exemplary. Archives are essentially different. While there is an appraisal process that determines the relevance of the archive for any particular institution’s collection that can be contentious as all selection processes are, the objects within the archive often run to thousands, if not tens of thousands of separate items – sheets of paper, cards, notes, diaries, drawings, photographs, printed material, scrapbooks and so on. The value of the archive lies not in the discrete objects (although these may have significant value in themselves if pulled out of the archives) but the archive as a whole – for what it says over a long period about the person, institution, or company that compiled it. To uncover an archive, as Artefact Forge so eloquently describes, is to immerse oneself in a narrative constructed over time in hundreds and thousands of parts. ‘The all-too-common complaint that ‘the archive is boring’ reflects, I suspect, just this resistance to immediate access, the strict rules around engagement, and the barriers to the sort of appropriation that increasingly characterises the public’s experience of the twenty-first century museum. As Victoria Walsh and Andrew Dewdney note in their study of Tate Modern, while the new Tate Modern’s extension clearly has galleries, what is more apparent than ever is the experience of circulation and event rather than exhibition and display. The experience of the museum is now not just the event of the building, as we saw in the 1990s, but the event of people and time, as well as the event of the self-generated, time-specific photograph uploaded to Instagram, Flickr, and other online image sharing platforms.’

In my view, one of the things to like about the archive is particularly its resistance to the instant demand, its preservation against great odds, and of the voice of its creators. Yet even archives, including university archives that have an obligation to both the public and to their students, have to respond to ‘transparency’ and public clamour for entry into their realms of secrets. Digitising their objects and creating online versions of their analogue collections have been the most common way of achieving this and the new data revealed has transformed scholarship in all fields over the past two decades. But other means need to be attempted.

As a university archive RMET Design Archives (RDA) has a commitment to student learning but also to RMET’s strong reputation for practice-based design education and research. These two factors have shaped its particular physiognomy over the past decade as it relates to collecting, stewardship and access. So, on the one hand, its collections demonstrate exemplary practice over time in order to offer precedents and parallels to current practice. And on the other, the curatorial principle of the ‘active archive’, a guiding principle of the RDA from its inception in 2007, seeks ways of being actively engaged with the world of design and ideas to contribute to the creation of new knowledge. Its particular commitment here is to initiate innovative practice-based ways of encountering the collections that nonetheless preserve the rules around archival access and integrity. In a modest way the RDA’s remit parallels the practice-based ways of encountering the collections that Burke and others have been the most common way of achieving this and the new data revealed has transformed scholarship in all fields over the past two decades. But other means need to be attempted.

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The Nomadic Archive attempted to bring the collections alive by contriving the exhibition as a form of urban intervention that brought the long acclimatized collections to a new audience. High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion on the other hand conceived of the Fashion Design Council (FDC) archive as a repository for innovative design thinking and practice that could form the conceptual basis for new work by contemporary practitioners, ‘a starting point for their engagement in the exhibition’. This curatorial tactic reflects the established practice of Hub curators Fleur Watson and Kate Rhoads exemplified in their first exhibition at the Hub Gallery in 2012 ‘Public Offer: Ways to Share Design’ that was also a collaboration with the RDA.

Healy notes ‘The device that inspired the exhibition was the FDC archive housed in the RMET Design Archives. ’It was crucial in provoking insights into a little-known area of local fashion history and the growth of collective networks during this period’. But while the archive provided agency for present designers, it was also allowed to speak in its own voice of the past in the adjacent Project Room. Here, in a long thin space the archive was recontextualised – boxes on shelving, digitised versions of original material on a long table, similar to the sorting tables that dominate the RDA’s work spaces, archival video on the screens, and a work environment where RDA staff and Design Hub Gallery volunteers continued to catalogue the RDA collection as performers in the exhibition. One might say too, that the audience was drawn into this active engagement with the archive when Anne Shearman, a visitor to the exhibition, decided to donate the personal archive of her brother Robert Pearce, who died in 1988, to the Design Archives. Pearce was, with Kate Durham and Robert Buckingham, a founder of the Fashion Design Council and his collection was a foundational inspiration for High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion.

**Endnotes**

7. next Design Archives Update 04, Melbourne, next Design Archives, 2008.
8. All quotations are from Robyn Healy’s essay in this volume.

**Previous Pages and opposite page**

The Archive space of High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion designed by Zipa Temon and artwork by Žiga Testen where the Fashion Design Council Archive was exhibited. Photography by Tobias Titz.
This Page

The ‘archive’ space of *High Risk Dressing / Critical Fashion*, designed by Žiga Testen. Photography by Tobias Titz.
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