

**MA WITS
HART 7006**

TERM PAPER

AN EXHIBITION & CATALOGUE PROPOSAL: 2011

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**TITLE: FREEZE-FRAMING FASHION
EXPLORATIONS in FILM, TEXT & NARRATIVE**

“Today, in the same way, the work of art is **becoming an image** with entirely new functions, of which the one we are aware of, namely the artistic function, stands out as one that may subsequently be deemed incidental. This much is certain, that currently photography and its issue, film, provide the most practical implication of this discovery.”

The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Walter Benjamin (2008 [1936]: 13)

“Fashion, with its affinity for **transformation**, can act out instability and loss but it can also, and equally, stake out the terrain of becoming – new social and sexual identities, masquerade and performativity.”

Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness

Caroline Evans (2003:6)

AIM:

Two key issues contextualise this exhibition proposal; first is the nature of the **image** of the electronic age and second is the construct of a new **audience**, in an everyday world dominated by the aestheticised (and aestheticising) image. *Freeze-Framing Fashion* aims to showcase how fashion acts in a cross-disciplinary context; investigating not only fashion as the embodied practice, but fashion as the images, ideas, expressions and narratives of the chaos, disconnectedness and disillusion of contemporary global culture. Curated to address concepts of the fashion image in the 21st century, where the moving image (and experience of that moving image) is extended beyond the time and space of either the magazine spread or the fashion show, and thereby reaching new audiences, the project aims to bring together fashion designers, film-makers, curators and photographers that can collectively contribute to a new discourse and narrative on South African fashion, its identity and its development.

RATIONALE:

The project will investigate the role of the material object (as fashion on a mannequin), the impact of the **fashion film** (as video projections) and the photographic still (as captured moment), and the nature of the public interface that has shifted in the digital world. In an industry long dominated by the still photographic image, Nick Knight of SHOWstudio (2009: 4) highlights the use of film as an entirely new mode of circulation of fashion. The fashion film¹ explores notions of mobility and instability, often beyond any form of narrative and allows for the investigation into the fashion image; of the “fictive space that is particularly appropriate to a post-modern model of identity” (Evans 2003: 212). The electronic age has brought about new possibilities for creative processes that transcend time and space, presenting the “fragmentation, interval, cutting, collage, and montage – all notions readily taken as criteria of artistic modernity [which] assume highly diverse (and often opposed) meanings” (Ranciere 2009: 55). It is this movement and the notion of the narrative in the electronic age that underpins the “common factor of dis-measure or chaos [that] now gives art its power” (Ranciere 2009: 45).

¹ SHOWstudio.com was launched in 2000, and the first fashion film projects developed from *Moving Fashion* (2005), *Editing Fashion* (2006), *Political Fashion* (2007), *Future Tense* (2008) and *The Fashion Body* (2009).

Freeze-Framing Fashion will consist of installation pieces, fashion films and photographic prints which, when installed in a public context (a gallery, museum, mall, etc), will explore the dynamic of fashion and the construction of new visual identities. The tension created by a desire to belong, between the everyday and the image, between public and private, between reality and imagination, is highlighted by the conflicts between the object (materiality), embodiment (identity) and the digital image (philosophy).

METHODOLOGY:

In recent academic studies on art history, aesthetics and visual culture, there is much focus on the transformation of object and image in the shift to a more technological society. This shift is accompanied by an anxiety about the individual and the object, as well as disconnectedness to both the object and the image (Foster 1999, Baudrillard 1994). An interdisciplinary approach in this project aims to address current developments in terms of visual culture in a mediated, digital age infused with the image as representative of the neither the illusory nor the real².

Fashion films capture movement, narrative and the idea. Using this medium to show, at times clothing as it behaves on the body, at others interpretations of clothing as it relates to the idea, the environment, the dream-wish or image as illusion, together with film's power to capture a kind of spirit of fashion at a specific point in time, means that fashion films are in tune with a restless public who experience a world instantly, live, online and up-close yet simultaneously, at a distance (SHOWstudio, 2009). Interest in these new forms of visual interference in fashion has led to further projects developing from the SHOWstudio initiative, including *Dazed&Digital*³ and *A Shaded View on Fashion Film 2010*⁴. The fashion film is developing from the staged production of the runway/catwalk shows, in much the same way that film developed from the stage one hundred years earlier.

Recent studies and renewed interest in the writings of Walter Benjamin have informed this proposal; in particular *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in which Benjamin discusses the impact of film which "indeed enriched our perceptual world" and "resulted in a similar deepening of apperception across the whole optical (and now also acoustic) segment of the sensory world" (2008 [1936]: 28). Benjamin's relationship with Andre Breton is evidenced in a statement by Breton that claims "a work of art has value only in so far as it quivers with reflections of the future" which Benjamin supports with the idea that "among art's most important functions [is] to generate a demand for whose satisfaction the time has not yet come" (2008 [1936]: 30). Caroline Evans, drawing on a number of theoretical and literary perspectives, expands on this and other key notions of illusion and the spectacle, the labyrinth, the return of the repressed, and the phantasmagoria of memory in her analysis of fashion and philosophical concerns at the turn of the 21st century, heavily influenced by the writings of Benjamin.

² See Baudrillard (1983) in terms of representations and illusions where he claims illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.

³ *Dazed&Digital* was launched in 2004 and showcases cutting edge experimental work of designers, bloggers, online and new media projects with global impact.

⁴ The third edition of Paris's annual film festival dedicated to Fashion, Style and Beauty, *A Shaded View of Fashion Film 2010*, is curated by Diane Pernet, sponsored by Samsung and shown annually in Paris at the Centre Pompidou, after which it travels to various museums and international galleries.

The new digital flows, and the way that virtuality alters space and time to interact with new audiences, underpins what SHOWstudio attempts to convey with the fashion film as a counterpoint to the speed and immediacy of both the Internet and fashion itself. Using fashion film to convey a moving representation of the object, fashion in motion, or fashion as an idea, the medium lends itself to a new discourse that reflects and challenges space, perception and objects in a digital age that is dominated by the image. The fashion film allows for exploration of fashion that investigates simultaneously process, perception, performance and participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Current research and literature around fashion has accelerated in the last twenty years with a number of key writers addressing fashion concepts, fashion theories, cultural and social studies, and the relationships between modernity, identity, semiotics and fashion. The complex notions involved in the multiplicity of fashion forced a closer reading of specific texts for this research project. In particular I chose to focus on current re-readings of the work of Walter Benjamin evidenced in the writings of Buck-Morss (1989), Evans (2003), Kwint & Breward (1999), Leslie (1999), Lehmann (2000), McRobbie (1994), and Wilson (1985). This renewed theoretical interest in Benjamin's writings has surfaced through a renegotiation of the vocabulary established in earlier cultural studies, as McRobbie states (1994: 97), and an interrogation of the broader cultural settings for images and texts that surface in a 'technological and uncertain age', that echo in ways, the instability of the urban modernity of Benjamin's earlier writing.

In *Fashion at the Edge*, Evans (2003) investigates many of the symptoms of alienation, dislocation and trauma that were clearly evident in the work of fashion designers and photographers, as they responded to the chaos and uncertainty around them towards the end of the last decade (the 1990s). What has become evident though is that the 'disconnectedness' has initiated new interpretations of the self as Evans states "alienation can be pictured as a 'loosening of the self', and perhaps the person who is best at 'doing' fashion is the person who is best at embracing their own alienation, loving it and obsessively reinventing themselves through it" (2003: 309).

This echoes much that has been written about the *flâneur*: the metropolitan persona, the artist-intellectual, and the semi-detached spectator of the spectacle of urban modernity. The *flâneur* is an "observer, a gazer; and, as Simmel and Sartre have shown vividly, the glance has powerful effects on the psyche and in constituting social relations" (Weinstein & Weinstein 1993:60). Susan Buck-Morss's *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (1989) investigates four key narratives in Benjamin's writings: the fossil, the fetish, the wish-image and the ruin. In the ruin, the fourth of Benjamin's thematics, Buck-Morss reminds us of the other side of consumer splendour where "the image of the ruin is also a symbol of fragility of capitalist consumer culture; the transitoriness of fashion" (McRobbie 1994:110). Much of Benjamin's writing reflects on the instability of meaning, on the multi-accentuality of the sign, on the capacity for change and the extent to which historical change is condensed and encapsulated in the meanings of consumer goods, and this underpins his relevance in the reading of fashion as sets of signs, allusions, illusions and narratives (McRobbie 1994:113).

The combination of fashion (as material object), the embodied practice of fashion (as dress and identity), and film (as moving disconnected images) aims to bring together the issues involved into a kind of expanded semiotics, that floats free from the ramp, the body, the consumer good, the magazine pages and the digital screen, in such a way that other forms of consumption begin to transpire; a visual consumption, a mixing of time and space, an imaging of desire, an escape to memory; like “Benjamin’s angel of history who is blown backwards into the future by the storm of progress, surveying the wreckage behind him” (Evans 2003: 309).

How, and why, all of this may relate to a project dealing with South African fashion designers, is to investigate the dynamics of extreme social transformation, trauma and memory, in a society intent on restructuring its identities, histories and futures. Some fashion designers work with these narratives of address: the politics of identity, the power of dress, and the potential for transformation through an image of public display. Ranciere describes the two potentialities of images: “the image as raw, material presence and the image as discourse encoding a history” (2003: 11). Fashion as an encoded image has been explored by a number of writers; notably, Barthes (1967), Lipovetsky (1994), Barnard (2008) and Craik (2009) who have analysed the semiotic value of fashion as it communicates socio-cultural shifts, alterity and belonging.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

In *Translations*, Grech (2007) expands on *Walter Benjamin and the Virtual: Politics, Art and Mediation in the Age of Global Culture*, with a review of papers that explored Benjamin’s writings in relation to an electronic age. The following papers were relevant to the theoretical development of this project: Mika Elo’s *Elemental Politics* reconsidered Benjamin’s thoughts on photography, language, and politics in the light of present technology with attempts to re-theorise the image in the age of its digitisation. Kristen Daly’s *The Dissipating Aura of Cinema* took another perspective on the relationships between critic and auteur, artist and audience, textual objects and those who encounter them, and argued that Benjamin’s analysis of cinema was not fully realised until films became digitised. Simon Lindgren argued that the challenge of critically analysing the dawning digital era and exploration of the new communities created through *YouTube* and *flickr* technologies repositions Benjamin’s notion of the *flâneurs* and locates the user of these technologies as contemporary *flâneurs* that approximate the earlier formations of modernity found in the Paris arcades. Furthermore, Allen Meek explored *Benjamin, Trauma and the Virtual* in relation to space and time in a contemporary global culture. Meek proposed that digital media creates a new spatial dimension consisting of mobile, transitory flows of information in a ‘real time’, in a cultural condition that can be understood as a generalised form of ‘dissociation’. Meek’s analysis of Benjamin in the context of virtual culture, sees his analysis of modernity as anticipating today’s techno-culture.

Fashion films act as extensions of the critical positioning of the image in a complex consumer culture. The image as reflection of the other, yet simultaneously the image as representation of the self in an abstracted world, places fashion and the expression through dress in emerging global contexts as vital to the development of new social (and virtual) identities. Fashion design in South Africa has begun to engage with these globalised circuits of text and image in more immediate ways, where geographies have been replaced by ideologies, and location no longer

determines the history. Lipovetsky explores this democratisation of fashion, claiming that fashion “diminishes social conflict by helping people to achieve such indifference by not engaging deeply with the world” (1994: 28). These shifting perceptions and expressions of self, mimic the dislocation experienced in modern urban contexts, and in the new technological age.

“Today, the photographic sequences, the video monitors or projections, the installations of familiar or strange objects that fill the spaces of our museums and galleries seek less to create the sense of a gap between two orders – between everyday appearances and the laws of domination – than to increase a new sensitivity to the signs and traces that testify to a common history and a common world.”

The Future of the Image

Jacques Ranciere (2007: 66-67)

SELECTION:

In discussing the selection for this project, I will outline a pilot idea. The number of participating individuals, galleries, and locations could shift, if the project receives sufficient funding to take it to a broader context. In this outline I will keep the scale of the project to a multiple of 6. I have identified *Arts on Main*, in Johannesburg as a location for the project. *Arts on Main* features a number of galleries, a boutique, a cinema, public spaces, and a growing reputation for cutting-edge events and exhibitions. There is potential to collaborate with David Krut Publishers for a catalogue publication and with various galleries to concurrently exhibit the fashioned object/s and photographs. The films could be installed as video works within these galleries after the initial screenings.

See attached: Appendix 1

6 suitable spaces identified at the Arts on Main (in the courtyard at the Goethe on Main, in the triple volume atrium and upstairs in the event space). For the screening event these films will be shown simultaneously throughout the Arts on Main complex, encouraging an engagement with the public spaces within the venue.

6 participating galleries will be approached to showcase the single photograph and the single outfit on a mannequin. The galleries participate in this project with a focus space within the gallery (not utilising the entire gallery) as the project will not generate sales, but rather present a collaborative showcase within the Arts on Main complex.

6 established or recognised South African designers are chosen for the project. This process may be facilitated through a call for interest to designers who then submit a portfolio and abstract for consideration by the other collaborators in the project.

6 film makers or digital arts practitioners are approached through identifying projects with graduates from schools that have developed programmes in new media; namely, AFDA, WSOA, Design School and Vega.

6 key writers are invited to collaborate in the project developing a short written component to the project. This may take the form of academic positioning of the

project or a conceptual narrative that situates the film, designer profile or curatorial intent in the work.

6 photographers participate in the project to create one still image of the object that features in the installation and in the film. This photographic print will be reproduced in the catalogue.

6 guest curators are invited to lead the curatorial and theoretical development of the project. This forms the crux of the project as the field of fashion curation has only recently been developed through the MA in Fashion Studies at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, the MA in Fashion Curation at the London College of Fashion and the Masters in Fashion Theory at the National Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. These programmes in fashion curation have established new approaches in curatorial practice. The invited curators from London or New York or Antwerp will contribute to the development of this new discourse of fashion in South Africa through the collaborative nature of the project.

The overall inter-disciplinary and international context of the project means that this 6x6 selection of participants could be expanded exponentially, with the potential for the project to travel to other venues, and/or to be developed simultaneously with designers, film makers, photographers and galleries from New York, London, Istanbul or Antwerp. This project could initiate new dialogues in terms of inter-active media, new audiences and multi-disciplinary collaborations which will not only expose a new discourse, but potentially encourage an engagement with the process, the presentation and the performance of fashion and its image in the 21st century.

CATALOGUE/PUBLICATION:

In support of the project, a small square format exhibition catalogue will be developed from a combination of photographs and focussed essays. David Krut Publishers, at Arts on Main, could participate in the event with the launch of the catalogue with a 'key speaker series' or discussion sessions around the content in the catalogue. Essays, ranging from creative interpretation to more academic writing with guest writers, will contribute to the development of the discourse on South African fashion, highlighting the much-needed conceptual and curatorial critique in the field. The catalogue will feature an introductory essay, written by the project co-ordinator, to position the collaboration, the academic terrain, and the key conceptual underpinnings. This will be followed by 4-page focus features on the collaborative groups; namely curator, designer, filmmaker, photographer and writer on one page, facing the chosen photograph from the exhibition, and a 2-page narrative/text that follows. The basic framework for these group features will be determined by the project, but the individualised 4-page feature can be creatively developed to continue the curatorial intent of the collaboration. In the initial project, with six inter-disciplinary collaborations chosen, there will be 24 pages of editorial, which together with the cover, contents, introduction or foreword and credits, will generate a 30-page catalogue.

See attached: Appendix 2.

TIMELINES:

- JULY 2010 Invitation or open call for interest
Consolidate relationships between collaborators, partners & funders
- SEPT 2010 Designers, curators, filmmakers set up meetings for dialogue
Confirm collaborations for concepts/content for films
- OCT-FEB 2011 Develop curatorial content & frameworks for films
Set dates, location, content etc for filming
- DEC-FEB 2011 Coordinate stills photography for catalogue/publishing
Prepare essays & written narrative
- JAN 2011 Meet with publishers
Develop press materials
- APRIL 2011 Set dates for film SCREENING
Confirm event, venue/s and logistics (include travel if necessary)
Investigate a travelling exhibition: JHB LONDON NY

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