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Presenting the Fashion Object: Analyzing the exhibition Fashioning the Object: Bless, Boudicca, Sandra Backlund

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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PRESENTING THE FASHION OBJECT: ANALYZING THE EXHIBITION
FASHIONING THE OBJECT, BLESS, BOUDICCA, SANDRA BACKLUND

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Art History

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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Abstract

This thesis discusses methods of display taken up by fashion designers Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund, as seen in the museum exhibit of their work, *Fashioning the Object*, held at the Art Institute of Chicago from April 14 to September 16, 2012. It focuses on how these methods differ from those traditionally used in the fashion world to show that fashion designers are looking towards the art world for new ways to present their work. The first chapter examines how the frame of the museum itself functioned in this exhibition. The second chapter studies Bless’s use of performance art events and Boudicca’s use of fashion films as a replacement for the traditional catwalk show. The last chapter considers the still life photographic techniques used particularly by Ola Bergengren for Backlund that depict her garments as art objects. Overall, the thesis shows how contemporary designers are reconfiguring the traditional display methods of the fashion world in order to shift attention from commercial purposes to the artistic intent of fashion objects, and to create a more engaged viewership.

Keywords
Fashion, museum fashion exhibitions, catwalk, performance art, Happenings, fashion film, fashion photography.
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A/W = Autumn/Winter fashion season
F/W = Fall/Winter fashion season
S/S = Spring/Summer fashion season
Introduction

In a 1987 essay art critic turned fashion curator Richard Martin dreamed of a day when visual culture as a concept would be whole, thrilling and powerful enough to consider fashion as a form of art.¹ This essay countered various arguments against fashion as art by giving specific examples of how these worlds were colliding.² Since then, many others have tackled the perennial and thorny question, “is fashion art?” significantly extending the academic study of the intersections of art and fashion.³ In the wake of this work, fashion is now deemed a significant cultural force worthy of serious study alongside other popular art forms such as theatre, journalism, advertising and film.⁴ Studies have focused on a number of issues such as fashion as a form of communication, fashion as a particular branch of aesthetic theory, fashion and the representation of the body and fashion’s economic impact.⁵

Art has long influenced fashion design. One example is the work of French couturier Yves Saint Laurent, whose 1965 collection of garments was inspired by the lines and flatness of neoplastic paintings, specifically those of Piet Mondrian.⁶ Furthermore, a number of collaborative projects have drawn together fashion and art, including the work of artist Vanessa Beecroft and fashion designer Tom Ford (Gucci), where Beecroft’s models were dressed in Gucci accessories for a few of her museum

performances. Other notable collaborative projects include those of fashion designer Marc Jacob and Japanese artist Takashi Murakami for the design of Louis Vuitton handbags, and Jacob’s project with Cindy Sherman that involved the artist producing advertisements for his personal fashion label. Such projects have made fashion a suitable subject of academic inquiry and museum exhibitions, leading to the creation of the academic discipline of fashion studies. As fashion studies has come into its own right, more informed discussion of the intersections of art and fashion have become possible.

Despite the fact that fashion is now studied more seriously, art historian Christopher Breward believes the new discipline suffers from a widespread tendency to address fashion in a singular manner; either as a cultural sign, a consumable commodity, or as evidence of broader historical and social processes. In particular, academic work centered on fashion has relied upon second-hand investigations of fashion as image or text rather than looking at the actual garments. One way these concerns can be addressed is through the museum exhibition of actual fashion objects, where the considerations of form, surface and presentation can be explored in their material complexity, offering a vital platform to challenge and reconfigure the meaning of fashion. Since fashion now has a higher profile within international museums and private art galleries than ever before, curators are increasingly able to break down the ideological barriers between fashion and art in new and innovative manners. In many instances the curatorship of contemporary fashion in art galleries tries to establish a common ground between the disciplines of art and fashion. Most notably, the 1996 exhibit and accompanying catalogue of the Biennale di Firenze: Looking at Fashion, curated by Ingrid Sischy and Germano Celant, laid the groundwork for the presentation of fashion as fine art.

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7 For further explanation of these examples see Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, “Fashion and Art: Critical Crossovers,” in Fashion and Art, ed. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, 1-13 (New York: Berg, 2009).
8 Breward, Fashion, 14.
9 Breward, Fashion, 12.
10 The accompanying catalogue of the exhibition discusses the multifaceted relationship between art and fashion, and presents the work of historical avant-garde artists, such as the Futurists and Simultanists, and also of contemporary artists who use fashion as a theme. Germano Celant, ed., Art/Fashion (Milan: Skira Editore, 1997).
Following this project, the number of writings and other exhibitions on the intersections of art and fashion skyrocketed, furthering the discussion of fashion as art.\textsuperscript{11}

Traditionally, fashion in the museum has been exhibited in historical costume displays focusing on the chronological history of style with an emphasis on the changing silhouette.\textsuperscript{12} These exhibitions typically draw upon the institution’s existing permanent fashion collection and especially those of its objects that are rich in documentation and provenance. These traditional displays often employ well-established museological techniques borrowed from theater and window displays, thus using mannequins, wigs, and shoes to complete ensembles and balance silhouettes.\textsuperscript{13}

More recently, a popular means of displaying fashion in the museum has been designer retrospectives. These shows continue to be organized around living and deceased couturiers, such as Christian Dior (1997) and Alexander McQueen (\textit{Savage Beauty}, 2011), both at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. These exhibits, which tend to cast fashion as entertainment and can be blatantly commercial in terms of promoting a particular brand, have been very popular with the general public but quite contentious within academia.\textsuperscript{14} The academic concerns arise from the fact that designer retrospectives are limited to presenting the garments of a single designer, focusing on the history of a brand rather than on a theory or idea. Furthermore, the featured designer is often a contributing force, determining how the fashion objects are presented within the exhibition space, which can limit the curator’s ability to reinvent the traditional display techniques used for fashion in a museum setting, or further the concepts and ideas of fashion studies.

\textsuperscript{11} A typical example is the establishment of the academic journal \textit{Fashion Theory} in 1997 as a platform for investigative and informed discussions concerning fashion concepts, cultural understandings and museum exhibitions.


\textsuperscript{13} The Victoria & Albert Museum, London, England has a comprehensive fashion collection that is allotted for this type of display.

\textsuperscript{14} It is undeniably the motivation of designers to co-operate with curators in having their work displayed in museums as such exhibitions are largely about prestige, self-promotion and profit. Therefore, many of the designer retrospectives have been critiqued based on the pure economic gain for both the designer and institution.
In the 1990s, however, the display of fashion in museums began to change from relatively static historical costume displays and designer retrospectives to more lively conceptual or theoretical exhibits. These new exhibition approaches visually address social, theoretical and academic concerns. Such exhibitions encourage the average museumgoer to identify with fashion as everyday items and give the visitor the vocabulary and tools necessary to discuss the exhibit’s underlying message or theme.

Fashion designers have also started to adopt new display methods to show their work as art. Recently Zoë Ryan curated an exhibit that highlighted fashion designers new display tactics at The Art Institute of Chicago entitled Fashioning the Object (April 14 to September 16, 2012). Ryan justified her selection of Bless (designers Desiree Heiss, Paris and Ines Kaag, Berlin), Boudicca (designers Zowie Broach and Brian Kirkby, London) and Sandra Backlund (Sweden) on the basis that they are some of the foremost experimental designers working today as opposed to those of a purely commercial nature. She stressed that although all three of the fashion houses work within the fashion industry, each also borrows from an “avant-garde” tradition of fashion design that draws inspiration from daily life. In other words, Bless, Boudicca, and Sandra Backlund create work that responds to their individual, social, political and cultural environments, but also explores the creative process itself. It is in the guise of the conceptual fashion exhibit, which removes some of the limitations of designer retrospectives by developing new display tactics for fashion objects, that Ryan’s fashion

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15 Theoretical fashion exhibits often explore the theme of non-Western dress. A typical example is Akiko Fukai’s Japonisme, inaugurated in Paris in 1996, and later shown in Kyoto, London, New York, Tokyo and Los Angeles, which presented the influence of Japanese clothing on Western designers. Fukai’s show highly influenced Valerie Steele’s China Chic: East Meets West at the Museum of FIT in 1999, which sought to show how designers such as Yves Saint Laurent and John Galliano have been influenced by various images of China, including Imperial China, 1930s Shanghai and the People’s Republic of China under Mao.

16 Zoë Ryan, Fashioning the Object: Bless, Boudicca, Sandra Backlund (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2012), 11.

17 The term “avant-garde” is applied to these designers loosely, but when examined through the defining works of Raymond Williams, “Language of the Avant-Garde,” in Politics of Modernism, ed. Tony Pinkney. (Bath, UK: Bookcraft, 1989), and Peter Brüger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), one can begin to understand how Ryan places Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund within the history of the “avant-garde” in conjunction with other fashion designers.
museum exhibit contributes to the academic discipline of fashion studies, and thus invites further investigation to fully appreciate its achievements within the discipline.

Ryan raises a key factor that draws Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund together when she observes, “going beyond traditional means of presentation…these ideas-driven designers embrace a more cross-disciplinary method…to create work that revises conventional methods of fashion presentation and provides tools with which viewers can further engage the work.” 18 Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund, she continues, “frequently reinvision traditional methods of fashion presentation in order to upturn established approaches and suggest alternative methods that will open the world of clothing design to a wider frame of reference.” 19 Although Ryan highlights the alternative methods of display chosen by Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund to present their collections to the fashion world, she does not consider how fundamental these presentation methods are to the meaning of each fashion label, nor how they tie them together conceptually.

In the exhibition, Ryan advances two curatorial theses, one via the gallery wall text, and another within the accompanying catalogue. In the text of the gallery wall panels, Ryan suggests that, “what ties these three labels together is both the breadth of their sources of inspiration, [as] they look to the disciplines of “fine art, performance, design and architecture,” and that they move their practice beyond the facture of clothing towards an “interdisciplinary approach harnessing film, photography, graphic design, and architectural installation.” 20 The exhibition suggests that such interdisciplinarity in inspiration and output brings these designers together, showing how they engage the world in a way that opens up new avenues for dialogue.

Ryan’s second thesis emerges in the catalogue where she suggests the designers’ approaches “both allow and require them to extend their practice beyond clothing designs and into design more generally…. There has been less discussion of the correlations between fashion and areas of design such as furniture, product or multimedia design. All

18 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 12.
19 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 32.
these interrelationships are important to understanding the influences of Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund."\(^{21}\) Thus, Ryan’s aim is to further study the intersections between fashion and design. To do so, the catalogue is broken down into subsections offering points of intersection between fashion and design; “Modernity Roots,” “the Everyday,” “Architecture and the Vernacular,” “Punk and Its Legacy,” “Everyday Haute Couture,” “Technology and Material Explorations,” and “Life Lessons by Design.” However, these subsections were not featured within the actual gallery space, which leads us to believe that they constitute minor themes within the specific collections, but are not an important part of each fashion label’s design philosophy.\(^{22}\)

That said, art history professor Rachael Barron-Duncan, who reviewed *Fashioning the Object* for *Fashion Theory*, criticizes Ryan for not presenting a strong academic or curatorial thesis to connect the work of Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund. She begins by stating that although it is a hard thing to accomplish, *Fashioning the Object* placed a finger on the pulse of the aims of fashion designers today. Barron-Duncan defines the “pulse” as filling the zone between fashion and life, between design and life, and between art and life.\(^{23}\) She goes on, however, to question the use of the word “object,” arguing that it misleads the viewer who expects to see designed objects, which was not exactly what was on display.\(^{24}\) She further criticizes Ryan for using weak categories that do not add up to a coherent whole.\(^{25}\) In fact Barron-Duncan argues that the lack of cohesion between the three design houses was furthered by the experience of the show, which leaves the visitor wondering how these labels fit together. Barron-Duncan concludes that despite these shortcomings, it was nevertheless exciting to see museums presenting fashion exhibitions, and curators with diverse backgrounds taking a

\(^{22}\) It should be noted that only Bless falls into each of Ryan’s subcategories by way of multiple different objects and design collections.
\(^{23}\) Barron-Duncan’s description of the “pulse” for contemporary fashion designers can be seen as an avant-garde perspective as explained by Peter Brüger, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.
\(^{24}\) Although Barron-Duncan critiques the use of the word “object” as misleading, within the discipline of fashion studies the word “object” alludes to the actual garments, as well as promotional items. See Valerie Steele, “A Museum of Fashion is More Than a Clothes-Bag,” *Fashion Theory* 2 (1998): 327-336.
\(^{25}\) Barron-Duncan, “Review: *Fashioning the Object,*” 446.
leap into the world of art and fashion.\footnote{Barron-Duncan, “Review: Fashioning the Object,” 455.} In her view, the success of the exhibit demonstrated that there is an enthusiastic audience for fashion exhibitions, even in the case of labels that are not widely known. Most importantly, Barron-Duncan states that \textit{Fashioning the Object} “offers a model for a fashion exhibition that rethinks the default honor guard of dressed mannequins and opens the door for new directions and non-traditional fashion productions.”\footnote{Barron-Duncan, “Review: Fashioning the Object,” 455.} However, from my perspective, the most conspicuous absence from Barron-Duncan’s review is the emphasis Ryan placed upon the presentation methods of the three design houses. In the following chapters, I will pursue this issue by considering the way all three design labels present their output in innovative ways by drawing on different artistic frameworks such as performance, film and fashion photography. Although Ryan shows the alternative methods of display used by each designer, she does not consider their importance for the designers’ own practices, something I will address in each of the three cases.

I argue that storytelling is key to these designers and that their presentation methods play a fundamental role in shaping the overall collections’ narratives. The alternative presentation methods used by Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund are distinctive in their own right as they try to define their output, permit insights into their working processes, showcase their inventive spirit and ultimately allow for more complex readings of their work that transcend any single garment or accessory.\footnote{Ryan, \textit{Fashioning the Object}, 12.} Furthermore, I contend that Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund can be linked together by their use of interdisciplinary practices pertaining to performance art, film, photography, sculpture and installation as all three move “beyond traditional means of presentation, such as the catwalk show, window display, and printed page”\footnote{Ryan, \textit{Fashioning the Object}, 12.} looking towards the art world for inspiration both technically and conceptually. In each chapter, I focus on one specific display method and discuss how it plays a role in furthering the fashion label’s philosophy as well as the collection’s narrative. Chapter one examines the museum as a lens through which to understand the objects being shown. By focusing specifically on
the curatorship of *Fashioning the Object* at the Art Institute of Chicago I address how Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund can be understood in the context of the art world. Chapter two explores the methods taken up by Bless and Boudicca to create alternatives to the catwalk. Tracing the history of other avant-garde fashion designers who have used alternative catwalk methods, I consider Bless’s use of performance and Boudicca’s use of film. Chapter three delves into the world of fashion photography, looking at the work of Sandra Backlund to understand the different narrative potentials of the various photographic styles used to capture garments. Thus my thesis will engage with the existing art and fashion literature to consider how contemporary designers are reconfiguring traditional vehicles for displaying fashion in order to focus on the artistic, rather than commercial, intent of fashion objects and, in the process, create a more engaged viewership.
Chapter 1: The Museum Frame

When fashion is placed within the museum, it is critical for the curator to arrange the space in such a way as to create an exhibition that is engaging, informative, and educational for the average museum visitor. When the fashion exhibition is successful, the museum space provides an all-encompassing frame that highlights the artistic qualities of the fashion objects. It is through the museum’s frame that fashion objects come to function with a purpose that differs from traditional ideals of clothing. This chapter will argue that the presentation of the fashion objects inside the framework of the museum space can further the meaning of those objects within an art historical context. First of all, I will discuss the history of fashion in the museum, moving from designer retrospectives to more recent conceptual or theoretical fashion exhibits, in order to provide a context for understanding Ryan’s exhibit, Fashioning the Object. I will then examine Ryan’s multi-faceted approach to displaying the designs of the three fashion houses, one per room. I will argue that the designer-specific rooms facilitated a better understanding of the designers’ interpretations and creations by showcasing their inspiration and process. In doing so, each fashion houses’ presentation methods are highlighted, which in turn enables Ryan to draw attention to the new tactics designers have employed to present their objects in museums as opposed to presenting them in the traditional fashion world.

For a long time academics deemed fashion unworthy of entering the museum as it fell within the decorative arts category alongside tapestry, furniture and ceramics. Further complicating matters, many saw the study of historical costume or dress as a by-product of the textile industry and therefore part of economic production. The first popular fashion exhibition was held at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1900, and housed in the Palais du Costume. The exhibition consisted of thirty scenes containing waxwork figures arranged in historical and contemporary scenarios. Different settings included “Gallic Women at the time of the Roman Invasion” wearing reproductions of historical

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dress, and “Getting Ready for the Opera” featuring the latest couture creations. The historical portions of the international exhibition were based on research completed under the rubric of costume societies, while the modern costumes were intended to promote contemporary French fashions. Indeed, long-standing costume societies in Europe and America have accumulated a wealth of knowledge related to the study of historical dress, including its construction, style and patterns of usage, which museum curators and others have drawn on since the nineteenth century. However, it was not until 1977 that a museum of fashion was established: the Musée de la Mode et du Costume at the Palais Galliera in Paris. This was followed by the Musée des Arts de la Mode in a wing of the Louvre Museum in 1997. Specialized fashion branches or departments of museums were also established around the world by private collectors such as The Costume Institute for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1944, originating from the collection organized by Irene Lewisohn, Aline Bernstein and Polaire Weissman and The Costume Court at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, England in 1982. These early museum exhibitions of fashion objects tended to be antiquarian in their approach and chronological in their organization, and it is only recently that curators have begun to explore different methods of presentation.

Breaking with the established practice of exhibiting fashion garments as period pieces or cultural artefacts, recent curatorial interventions have often tried to establish a common ground between fashion and art within a museum setting. These interventions are often viewed as controversial because of the difficulties associated with removing the fashion objects from their economic contexts and placing them within the aesthetic or academic realm. Fashion exhibitions are becoming more popular in both private galleries and internationally acclaimed public museums, making the museum an increasingly important site for fashion. Curator Fiona Anderson’s article “Museums as Fashion Media” discusses the ways different art locations, such as national museums and private

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3 Ibid.
4 Breward, Fashion, 10-11.
6 Breward, Fashion, 14.
7 Steele, “Museum Quality,” 8.
galleries, stage fashion exhibitions. Although there are fundamental differences between 
the museum and the private art gallery, when fashion is placed within the context of the 
museum or art gallery its value as a commercially driven product transitions from 
consumable merchandise to art installation. Yet, museum shows that exhibit living 
designers’ collections, such as Giorgio Armani held at the Guggenheim Museum (New 
York) in 2000, have generally been criticized for furthering the commercial gain of the 
designer as well as the institution. Indeed, critics often find it difficult to look beyond 
the financial implications of a show to see the extraordinary work created by 
contemporary, cutting-edge fashion designers as pieces of cultural significance. Shows 
of this nature continue to blur and trouble the boundaries between art and fashion. 
Nevertheless, in spite of this problem, many curators are still trying to elevate fashion to 
a higher level by adopting new types of exhibition practices. For example, Diana 
Vreeland, the former editor of Vogue and “high priestess of fashion,” became special 
consultant to the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1971, and 
continued to work there into the early 1980s. During her time in this position she 
transformed the exhibition of dress from “futsy [sic] antiquarianism to spectacular and 
stylish displays.” Vreeland was also instrumental in refocusing fashion exhibitions 
toward modern and contemporary designers and designs by introducing valuable 
innovations to the curation of fashion, such as stylized mannequins, to attract a much 
widder audience. Vreeland placed an emphasis on the fashion spectacle in her 
exhibitions, which should not be discredited, for it plays an important role in conveying 
the experience of fashion. In 1983 Vreeland organized the first major museum show

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10 A typical example of such criticisms can be seen in the article John Potvin, “Lost in Translation?: Giorgio Armani and the Textualities of Touch,” in Neo Craft: Modernity and the Crafts, ed. Sandra Alfoldy (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2007), that specifically discusses the Giorgio Armani show.

11 Steele takes this issue up in “Museum Quality” by addressing museum fashion exhibits and what they contribute to the discourse of fashion studies.

12 Steele, “Fashion,” 19.

13 Steele, “Museum Quality,” 12.

14 Steele, “Museum Quality,” 12.
devoted to a living fashion designer—a retrospective of Yves Saint Laurent that caused tremendous controversy due to the economic gain the designer, his fashion house, and the museum stood to realize. Although there was much criticism of the show, Vreeland started a new trend of presenting living designers and creating novel types of museum fashion displays. 

Influenced by Vreeland, the curating partnership of Richard Martin and Harold Koda began organizing exhibitions for the Design Laboratory of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in the 1980s. Martin and Koda focused on modern fashion rather than historical dress for their most famous exhibition at FIT, *Fashion and Surrealism*, in 1987. Martin and Koda also curated retrospectives of Versace and Halston, and a show entitled *Three Women*, which compared the work of Madeleine Vionnet, Claire McCardell and, Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons. After a decade of exhibitions for FIT, the dynamic pair were appointed curators-in-charge at the Costume Institute.

The most valuable idea brought forth by Vreeland and Martin and Koda was the new “styled” fashion exhibition based not on historical narrative but instead on the concepts and ideas that inform the items themselves. To “style” an exhibition is to position the mannequins in unique tableaus that highlight the detail and artistry behind the design, rather than to relate designs to any specific historical context. When the exhibit is “styled” in such a way, visitors can be educated about the garments’ design processes, inspiration, and social and cultural value. It should be noted, that although fashion exhibitions were increasingly being “styled” to create more spectacular settings for the garments, additional elements such as fashion photography, film and other related objects were not generally shown alongside the clothing, at least during the 1980s and 1990s.

Thanks to Vreeland and Martin and Koda, the most popular fashion exhibitions have became the retrospectives of famous designers. For instance, in 1992 Martin and Koda created an exhibition devoted to Gianni Versace for the Design Laboratory at FIT.

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15 Steele delves into Vreeland’s curatorial practice, specifically her influence to stage designer retrospectives, while also commenting on the criticisms Vreeland faced for such exhibits.
17 A typical instance of using multimedia display techniques within museum fashion exhibitions is seen in Fiona Anderson, “Museums as Fashion Media,” 371-389.
The show received no negative criticism because the Design Laboratory was viewed as a space associated with the fashion industry. In 1997, after Gianni Versace’s murder, Martin organized a second retrospective of the designer’s work at the Costume Institute, where it provoked mixed critical reviews. Although many saw it as a very sexualized show on account of Versace’s risqué lifestyle and sensational murder, the aesthetic arrangement of the garments was well received. Claire Wilcox curated a third retrospective on Versace for the V&A in London, England in 2002. It was the largest exhibition devoted to a single designer by the V&A, showcasing 130 designs in sections such as, “Art” and “Theatre,” and one devoted solely to the work of Gianni’s sister, Donatella Versace, the company’s successor. The exhibition was attractively installed and, “featured a wealth of historical and technical information that contributed to raising it beyond the banal paradigm of designer-as-artist.” Retrospective exhibitions of this type have helped to establish a place for fashion within the museum. They can be self-serving for the designer and the fashion house in terms of economic gain, promotion and advertisement, but nonetheless it should be noted that these exhibitions play a crucial role in assessing the contributions particular designers make to understanding current social conventions, while also furthering the notion of fashion as an art form.

Yet, designer retrospectives are not the only kind of contemporary fashion displays in museums. Others include thematic or conceptual exhibitions that focus on ideas or concepts and include multiple designers. These types of shows define the importance of fashion in different ways using new theories, subcultures or styles to talk about contemporary society. For example, the 1996 Biennale di Firenze: Looking at Fashion exhibition curated by Ingrid Sischy and Germano Celant, as well as its smaller 1997 version, Art/Fashion, at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, showcased “futurist reconstructions of fashion (i.e. utopian antifashions)” along with surrealist art/fashion collaborations, such as that between Andy Warhol and Lucia Fontana for Bini-Telese, and artists who use fashion as a theme in their work, such as Joseph Beuys and Charles

18 Steele, “Museum Quality,” 15.  
19 Steele, “Museum Quality,” 16.  
21 Steele, “Museum Quality,” 22.  
LeDray. The Guggenheim show resulted in a number of articles related to art and fashion, and to more museum fashion exhibits.²³

One extremely influential conceptual fashion exhibition was *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* held at the V&A in 1994. The exhibition presented a visual interpretation of Dick Hebdige's theoretical book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), and was one of the first fashion exhibitions to take its focus from academic work. Hebdige’s book analyzed youth subculture styles in postwar Britain as symbolic forms of resistance, drawing on Marxist theory, and the work of literary critics, French Structuralists and American sociologists. The exhibition featured a large range of the subcultures Hebdige discussed, including beatniks, Teddy Boys, hipsters, surfers, hippies, punks and Goths, all of which inspired different haute couture fashion trends (fig. 1).²⁴ Although the exhibition was highly criticized, curator Amy de la Haye created a space that facilitated discourse around clothing design, its inspirations and its connections to specific social issues. Each outfit had a label that identified the subculture, the date, the place it was worn and by whom it was worn, as well as information about fabric and designer or manufacturer, which allowed people to draw their own connections while also identifying the pieces within their particular contexts. Rather than displaying the designer’s personality, theoretical or conceptual fashion exhibitions of this sort instead work with the ideas, inspirations, values and beliefs that have come together to create a garment or object.

²³ Ibid.
²⁴ Steele, “Museum Quality,” 22.
Although some critics see the fashion exhibition as a “purely aesthetic endeavour for the museum,”\textsuperscript{25} it can also be viewed as a site of innovative thinking and scholarship that contributes to understanding articles of clothing as cultural objects. The many different types of fashion exhibitions correspond to different disciplines including art history, fashion studies, design and museology, all of which play a crucial role in the study, interpretation and display of clothing.\textsuperscript{26} It is in the guise of the conceptual fashion exhibition that Zoé Ryan’s \textit{Fashioning the Objects} gets pulled into the history of the fashion show.

In planning the exhibition at The Art Institute of Chicago, Ryan brought together three design houses that to her represent a “conceptual and intellectual approach to fashion.”\textsuperscript{27} The Art Institute of Chicago is internationally recognized as a leading fine arts institute of education and national museum. The exhibitions presented there reflect the growing discipline of visual culture, and include historical themes as well as emerging

\textsuperscript{25} Steele, “Museum Quality,” 25.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ryan, \textit{Fashioning the Object}, back cover.
fields of inquiry such as fashion and design. Adhering to the Art Institute of Chicago’s mission statement, Ryan encouraged an individual experience of the works, collecting, displaying and interpreting them in order to show the average museum visitor how fashion is a part of visual culture and an important component of everyday life. Since Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund all draw inspiration from a number of disciplines, including architecture, furniture design, performance art, film and fine art, they were excellent candidates for the first contemporary fashion exhibition at the museum. In the exhibition and catalogue Ryan situates Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund as essential players in an expanded contemporary design scene, stating that all three “view fashion as a critical forum for dialogue and exchange…. [T]his ambitious approach both allows and requires them to extend their practices beyond clothing design into design more generally.”

Ryan highlights Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund’s individual clothing collections, design projects, and presentation methods to help viewers further engage with the narratives within their work.

The exhibition was staged in three rooms, one per fashion house. Each room placed the objects within the individual label’s own creative philosophy. The first room the visitor entered was dedicated to Bless, the female design duo that works via Skype communications between Berlin and Paris. Within the categories Ryan created to describe each fashion house’s position in the larger show, Bless fell under that of “contextualizing fashion.” Although Ryan's rationale was not made explicit, this label perhaps refers to their process of “tweaking or adding to existing objects to create new and unexpected alternatives,” allowing the objects to have a familiar quality yet also take on new meanings. The Bless space consisted of an installation created by Ryan and the Bless designers, Desiree Heiss and Ines Kaag. Bless hated the idea of having their designs presented on static mannequins and wanted something intimate, informal and

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28 The Art Institute of Chicago can be compared to FIT in that both are educational institutions that allow the development of knowledge around visual culture to flourish. Because of their institutional similarities certain types of exhibitions, primarily fashion, can be seen as educational and investigative rather than of a purely commercial nature.


30 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 12.

different, and so with Ryan they created an installation of a chainmail curtain. The chainmail installation, entitled N° 45, *Musiccurtain (PROP)*, exemplified the design house’s approach to the presentation of their fashion objects, which favours unconventional methods (fig. 2). The installation defined the gallery space by flowing throughout the room and showcasing their many projects produced over the past fifteen years.

Figure 2: Bless, *BLESS N° 45 Musiccurtain*, Installation view *Fashioning the Object: Bless, Boudicca, Sandra Backlund* at the Art Institute of Chicago, 2012. From The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA, https://blog.artic.edu/blog/2012/12/ (accessed April 24, 2014).

Amongst the many fashion objects displayed within the chainmail installation was Bless’s piece *Hairbrush* (1999). Bless created *Hairbrush* when asked by a hair salon to propose the next haircut of the month (fig. 3). Instead of creating an actual hairstyle they came up with *Hairbrush*, which consisted of the base of a typical hairbrush but replaced the bristles with real human hair. Their inspiration for the piece came from people who had their long hair cut off yet wanted to keep it as a souvenir. In this respect, Bless saw it as a functional memento of what was once a part of a living person.\(^\text{32}\)

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\(^{32}\) Bless has stated that *Hairbrush* has no surrealist heritage, although many art critics have placed surrealist intentions upon it. See Ryan, *Fashioning the Object*, 37; and the Bless Interview in Adriano Sack and Kai von Rabenau, “Bless: In Disguise,” *Mono. Kultur* 28 (Summer, 2011): 5-16.
Figure 3: Bless, Hairbrush 1999. From The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA, http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Fashioning-Object/Bless (accessed April 24, 2014).

The Bless room also included a free standing piece of furniture entitled Perpetual Home Motion Machine, which could be reconfigured to a specific environmental need (fig. 4). It was a large-scale work made from wooden supports including shelves and tables with multiple sections that hung like a mobile. This piece was built to serve many functions, such as room divider, television stand, closet or shelving unit. Home Motion Machine illustrated how Bless “perceives fashion as an exhaustive platform for creative expression and ultimately a forum for creating qualitatively different objects that transcend previous versions” of items of necessity.\(^{33}\)

Figure 4: Bless, BLESS N°22 Perpetual Home Motion Machine, Spring/Summer 2004. Reprinted from Zoë Ryan, Fashioning the Object (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago 2012), 40-41.

\(^{33}\) Art Institute of Chicago, “Fashioning the Object: Bless, Boudicca, Sandra Backlund.”
The objects on display in the Bless room demonstrated the meaning of Ryan’s term “contextualized fashion.” The architectural structure of *Musiccurtain* showcased the concepts that inspire Bless’s designs just as it functioned as a separate project in itself as an unorthodox system of display. Although, *Musiccurtain* highlights Bless’s alternative presentation methods, there was little comment in the exhibition about their off-runway presentations. The only source of information about these presentations comes in the form of images. This can be seen with the collection *Know Howowow* which was represented in the exhibition through the illustrations and photographs created from Bless’s most recent happening or performance event, designed to showcase the collection (fig. 5). This concept will be furthered explored in chapter two when I specifically discuss Bless’s alternative catwalk methods. Additionally, *Musiccurtain* allowed the space to become interactive as visitors awakened the metallic chains and activated wind chimes embedded in a curtain that was reminiscent of their beaded counterparts from the 1960s. The visitor’s movement through the curtain allowed them to touch the items on display as they passed, generating a multisensory experience of touch, sound and sight.

![Figure 5: Bless, BLESS N°43 Know Howowow, Fall/Winter 2011-12, published in mono.kultur 28 (Summer 2011). Reprinted from Zoë Ryan, Fashioning the Object (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago 2012), 6.](image)

Although the idea of touching fashion garments in a museum space is not new, it is still often forbidden and can have negative connotations. One of the most famous examples was in the Giorgio Armani retrospective held at the Guggenheim Museum,
New York, in 2000, when the museum encouraged visitors to touch the garments. But as curator Harold Koda stated, such a strategy meant that many older pieces by Armani were not displayed because the fragile fabrics would have had to be viewed from behind glass, distancing museumgoers from the object and preventing them from having an intimate experience with the clothing.\textsuperscript{34} The idea of bringing the spectator closer to the object allows for the rules of the formal museum space to be broken, permitting the individual to examine material culture to its fullest extent by eliminating the traditional distance between objects and spectators that typically fosters an attitude of reverence and protects the objects.\textsuperscript{35}

In a similar way, Ryan created a space for Bless that allowed visitors to feel the textiles and objects, while interacting with the pieces as they swayed on the chainmail curtain as bodies passed between the aluminum strands. The room arrangement illustrated Bless’s “idiosyncratic approach to recontextualization in the presentation of their work as a way to engage the viewer and incite dialogue and exchange.”\textsuperscript{36} Many of Bless’s live presentations enable viewers to interact with the garments and objects of a collection in ways that facilitate a “dialogue and exchange” between the designed object and its intended purpose. The main focus of the space within \textit{Fashioning the Object} was to solicit personal responses from the visitor while guiding them towards the narratives and alternative ways of viewing fashion that Bless creates. Having the viewer physically interact with Bless’s work immerses them in the designers’ world. Without the interactive experience, the objects would have seemed static and removed, and Bless’s design philosophy that tries to explore greater issues of functionality in everyday life may not have been fully understood by the viewer.

The second room of Ryan’s exhibition was dedicated to Boudicca, the British design couple consisting of Zowie Broach and Brian Kirkby. Ryan categorized Boudicca under the label “intellectualizing fashion,” because their work is “investigative rather than simply decorative.”\textsuperscript{37} They see fashion as a forum for exploring issues related to

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\textsuperscript{34} Potvin, “Lost in Translation?” 91.  
\textsuperscript{35} Potvin, “Lost in Translation?” 91-92.  
\textsuperscript{36} Art Institute of Chicago, “Fashioning the Object: Bless, Boudicca, Sandra Backlund.”  
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
contemporary society, such as technology and politics. Therefore, they design garments that engage these critical narratives.

The main focus of the gallery display was to present Boudicca’s artistic films that accompany their clothing collections. Their films layer many images and ideas to form “unexpected juxtapositions and set up narratives of everyday life.” Many films were shown alongside specific clothing ensembles from their past collections displayed on stylized mannequins. *System Error* (S/S 1999), a video reinterpretation of a staged catwalk show, was the only film projected onto one of the dark grey painted walls in the room. Other films were played in a loop using mounted monitors, such as *The Library Kills* (2009), a short montage of images pulled from the world of film, art, history, magazines and many other sources edited into a poetic narrative of death. The films that will be discussed in further detail are ones that showcase a particular collection or garment, rather than those that define the fashion house’s design philosophy. The film *Motion Capture Sequin Dress* (2011) focused on a specific garment, a technology-based dress that was part of their *Fragmented Dreams* collection (fig. 6). The dress was created out of thousands of blue sequins that were activated by the motion of a hand running across the dress, flipping them over and leaving a trail reflecting the gesture. The film screen was divided into a grid of four shots, each presenting the same model performing different hand motions across the dress. The multiple shots intensified the mesmerizing effect of the sequins, allowing the technology woven into the dress to be fully understood.

38 Ibid.
Ryan’s favourite piece in this display was *Wode* (2008), Boudicca’s first fragrance and the only one in the exhibition. The inspiration behind the perfume came from the legend of Boudicca, the ancient Briton warrior queen who led the fight against the Roman invasion. According to the story, before going into battle Queen Boudicca and her warriors painted their faces blue. Broach and Kirkby wanted to create a perfume that would leave a scent but also spray onto the skin an opaque blue colour. It took seven years to develop a product that sprayed onto skin as an opaque blue paint but dissolved when rubbed into the skin, leaving only a scent behind.\(^{39}\) To present the blue perfume, a film was created of a blonde model laying down in an oversized white dress shirt, rubbing the blue spray over her body in a sexualized manner (fig. 7). The film not only

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
showcased the product but also commented on the sexualized nature of advertising created for the fashion perfume industry. Thus the designers used the same tactics as the fashion industry to promote their products while simultaneously criticizing them. The ambivalence of the film makes it difficult for the viewer to differentiate between art and advertising. Further complicating matters, the film also references other famous works of art such as Yves Klein’s *Anthropometrie* (1960) where the bodies of nude female models were covered in blue paint to mark a blank canvas, a process that turned the women into living paintbrushes. Although completely different in its concept, the sexualized presentation of Boudicca’s work and the use of blue colour invite the viewer to look beyond the fashion world’s advertising narrative of scent as sexy, and view its other art historical layers of meaning.40

![Image of models in promotional film for Wode, 2011.](image)

**Figure 7: Boudicca, stills from promotional film for Wode, 2011. Reprinted from Zoë Ryan, *Fashioning the Object* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago 2012), 70-71.**

Moving from fragrance to design, the short film *Tornado Dress* (F/W, 2009-10) directed by Ben Bannister with music by Daniel Pemberton, also played continuously in the Boudicca space (fig. 8). This film re-enacted the actions taken to produce a three-

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dimensional sketch for a dress. A white mannequin spins in a white room while lengths of black material weave around the body, providing an imaginary narrative of how Boudicca builds their garments on tailor’s dummies. When watched closely, however, the viewer can see the trials and errors encountered in the process of designing garments for Boudicca’s third haute couture collection, *Essays*.

**Figure 8: Boudicca, still from the *Tornado Dress*, Fall/Winter 2009-10. From The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA, [http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Fashioning-Object/Boudicca](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Fashioning-Object/Boudicca) (accessed April 24, 2014).**

Although at one time film was an innovative method of presentation in the mainstream fashion world, lately it has become more widely used to replace the catwalk in promoting fashion collections. As a result, Ryan’s curation of Boudicca’s work seemed less innovative when compared with her presentation of Bless. In fact, the films and fashion objects in this room were presented in a relatively traditional manner with the films endlessly looping, and the mannequins standing in tableaus wearing the clothing. Nevertheless, the incorporation of other media, such as film, alongside fashion objects within the same setting can be seen as a new curatorial technique to further educate the average museum visitor. However, one cannot help thinking that Ryan missed an

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41 For further examples of the use of multiple fashion objects displayed within a fashion exhibition see Fiona Anderson, “Museums as Fashion Media,” and her discussion of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s recent curatorial practices and fashion events.
opportunity to position Boudicca’s use of film in larger discussion of alternatives to the catwalk. What she did achieve, however, was to stress Boudicca’s intellectual approach to design by showcasing the sources of their inspiration from such diverse fields as philosophy, architecture, history and sociology.

Backlund’s work, showcased in the third room, was categorized by Ryan under the label “framing fashion.” Influenced by Sweden’s strong history of craft, specifically knitting, Backlund creates three-dimensional knitwear garments for her collections. Throughout her career, Backlund has felt that typical fashion photography did little justice to her designs, therefore she hired Swedish photographer Ola Bergengren to create still-life photographs of her garments. In the case of this exhibition, Bergengren was asked to take the photographs of the items on display and highlight the technique and quality apparent in Backlund’s work. The photographs reveal the hidden, yet innate, objecthood of the garments by presenting close-up images of the textile, construction technique and form of the garment.

In the case of Fashioning the Object, both the artistic qualities of Bergengren’s images and previous museum presentations of fashion photography, (such as at MOMA), likely led the curator, consciously or unconsciously, to arrange Backlund’s designs in the traditional art museum format of the white cube. Although controversial, fashion photography, like the garments themselves, has found its way into the museum. In 2004 the Museum of Modern Art, New York, held an exhibition entitled Fashioning Fiction in Photography since 1990, curated by Susan Kismaric and Eva Respini, which traced the changes in representation that take place when art and commerce intertwine. Focusing on fashion photographs taken by well-known artists such as Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman and Irving Penn, the exhibition explored the ways clothing was subordinated to lifestyle, narrative and photographic strategies. Although the commercial intent of the photographs

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42 Art Institute of Chicago, “Fashioning the Object: Bless, Boudicca, Sandra Backlund.”
included in the exhibition was widely criticized, the exhibition itself was innovative in presenting such images within a museum space.⁴⁵

Within the space dedicated to Backlund, Bergengren’s images were the focal point—large-scale prints hanging from floor to ceiling beside mannequins wearing the garment that was the subject of the photograph. Because each image was devoid of a human presence, the function of the fashion object risked being lost. Instead, the mannequin encouraged the viewer to connect the image to the garment, both of which could then be viewed as art. An example of one of Backlund’s more unusual garments that was displayed alongside a still life image by Bergengren is Pool Position (S/S 2009), a crotchet top and hand-knitted sculptural skirt that have a weightless quality but appear bone or shell-like in structure (fig. 9). Sea creatures that have shells or large external skeletons as protection were the original inspiration behind the collection’s narrative of external armour. Bergengren’s photographs drew attention to the symmetry and textural qualities of the hand-knitted piece. Similarly, the collection of In No Time (S/S 2008) presented hand-knitted garments created from three-dimensional shapes to look like protective armour moulded to the body (fig. 10). These forms built up the natural shapes of the skeleton such as the shoulders, collarbone and hips. In this instance Backlund sought to create pieces that represented the armour she needed when going into a fashion world that she found very fast-paced and competitive.⁴⁶ Other garments from collections such as Ink Blot Test, and Fall/Winter 2010-11 were also displayed throughout the space, which I will discuss in further detail in chapter three.

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⁴⁵ Criticisms of this exhibition can be found in Angel Chang, “Exhibition Review: Fashioning Fiction in Photography since 1990.”
⁴⁶ Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 81.


Although, the gallery space dedicated to Sandra Backlund was organized in a typically stark-white cube style, it nevertheless fulfilled Ryan’s desire to present
Backlund’s and Bergengren’s relationship as one that re-frames traditional fashion images as “art.” The concept of presenting garments alongside other media objects has already been seen in the exhibition space for Boudicca, and, as pointed out, has a long history in other fashion exhibitions that tried to reshape preconceived notions of fashion items. Thus reasonably knowledgeable viewers would have been primed to experience the narrative Backlund and Bergengren create between the hand-knitted objects and the photographs, as both documents within the context of fashion photography as well as artworks in and of themselves. Despite the fact that the photographs in this exhibition were taken solely to be shown beside the garments, other images by Bergengren have been shown separately as documentary images for Backlund. Although both the space and methods used to show Backlund's work are fairly traditional, when Ryan displayed the object and image together, a new dynamic emerged bringing the viewer closer to the garment designs.

This introduction to the exhibition itself, leads us to conclude that one purpose of the museum space is to frame the exhibition objects as art, which happens in the case of all three fashion design houses, albeit in different ways as I will discuss in subsequent chapters. The overall presentation of the exhibition was innovative in terms of displaying cultural artefacts, such as photographs, films, and other designed objects and accessories alongside the clothing to facilitate a dialogue about the intersections of art and fashion with a particular emphasis on the presentation modes used in each sphere. To accomplish this task, Ryan categorized the fashion houses under different labels - Bless as “conceptualizing fashion,” Boudicca as “intellectualizing fashion,” and Sandra Backlund as “framing fashion” - all of which reflect their alternative methods of display. This

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47 An example can be seen with Alexandra Palmer’s 2002-2003 exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum devoted to the relationship between Canadian retailer Holt Renfrew and fashion label Christian Dior, entitled Elite Elegance: Couture Fashion in the 1950s. The exhibition included mannequins wearing the clothing, as well as cultural objects of study that furthered the social significance of the garments on display. These cultural items included contemporary advertisements, inspirational photographs and design sketches, photographs of the donor and/or models wearing the ensemble, as well as objects such as scarves, jewellery, or handbags that went with the outfit. In the Elite Elegance exhibit Palmer displayed the garments alongside labels that contained traditional information such as the designer, material and year, but also included additional information such as who wore the outfit, where it was worn and other relevant facts. The clothing was displayed behind glass on mannequins alongside the other items of cultural value and interest; their proximity to each other making the relationship between the clothing and cultural items more accessible to the average museumgoer.
chapter comments on the relationship fashion designers have with the museum world, and how the frame of the museum itself functions in the context of an exhibition like this one that attempts to revitalize the mode of displaying fashion objects. Now that I have unpacked the curation of the exhibition space, I will use the following chapters to delve further into the alternative presentation choices of Bless and Boudicca as methods to avoid the traditional catwalk show, and of Backlund to change the narrative of fashion photography.
Chapter 2: Alternative Catwalk Methods

Chapter one discussed the function of the museum space and how it contributed to understanding the work of Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund. The next two chapters will concentrate on the specific presentation methods taken up by Bless, Boudicca and Sandra Backlund that further an understanding of their collections. This chapter specifically looks at ways in which these designers avoid the traditional catwalk show to present their seasonal collections and employ other methods. It focuses primarily on Bless’s use of performance events or Happenings and Boudicca’s fashion films.

With the development of the fashion show in the 1900s a platform was provided for designers to present their designs and ideas.¹ This traditional mode of exhibition has continued to be the most popular form for fashion designers to showcase their garments in a sensational way in order to sell them. Yet, the late 1990s marked a significant turning point in the development of the fashion show when it started to embrace spectacle, performance art and new media technologies such as film, and, in some cases, to tackle social issues. Additionally, designers began looking beyond the runway to present their seasonal collections in new locations. Some of these alternative catwalk methods can be seen in the exhibition Fashioning the Object. Although well represented (in some respects) within the museum space, the alternative presentation methods of the two fashion houses, Bless and Boudicca, are only briefly considered in the accompanying catalogue. In this chapter, I will examine more closely the ways in which contemporary fashion designers, Bless and Boudicca, find creative solutions for disseminating their work to a larger public.

Going beyond traditional means of presentation, fashion duo Ines Kaag and Desiree Heiss of Bless have staged “presentations” that are akin to Allan Kaprow’s definition of the 1950s and 1960s Happenings. Their presentations are not lavish events but instead consist of casual gatherings with friends acting as models in unusual locations, and are attended by a committed fan base. These presentations have become “mini-movements” that engage audience participation as a forum for creative expression

rather than simply being an enterprise directed by commercial imperatives. Although Bless has staged fashion presentations in various environments, this chapter will focus on No 42 Know Howowow (2011), which was staged in a Parisian loft apartment. Audience participation was mandatory during the presentation as viewers were responsible for executing the images of the garments. To better understand the images that were produced, I will consider the event as a Happening, in order to understand the collection as a whole.

In a similar vein, British fashion design team Zowie Broach and Brian Kirkby of Boudicca have explored whether film can be a viable alternative to the catwalk for presenting fashion. Boudicca’s use of film provides them with the freedom to explore narratives related to their work and sources of inspiration, which otherwise could not be presented in the fashion world. In their film Couture 03: Essays (January 2009) Boudicca explore their third couture collection, Essays (A/W 2009), from inspiration to finished garment, as a layering of images from disparate sources, including their own trademarked ideas. The film offers a window into Boudicca’s practice by building up concepts related to the work through the rhythmic editing of still images. Ryan displayed many of Boudicca’s fashion films in the exhibition, but this chapter will specifically discuss Couture 03: Essays, because it was intended to be viewed as an accompanying presentation to a specific collection, rather than a stand-alone fashion film. I will examine Boudicca’s Couture 03: Essays through the lens of the essay film to address the advantages of showcasing the clothing collection in this manner. First, however, I trace the trajectory of contemporary fashion shows that have utilized performance art and the history of the fashion film, including video projection in catwalk shows, in order to demonstrate the evolution of 1990s catwalk from live event to Internet film, and to locate Bless and Boudicca’s experimental approaches within this context.

From approximately 1900, fashion shows were staged in couture houses and department stores as charity fund-raising events in Britain, France and the USA. Yet, the concept of the catwalk show has an even longer history going back to courtier Charles

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2 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 42.
3 Evans, “The Enchanted Spectacle,” 271.
Worth in the middle of the nineteenth century. English dressmaker Lady Duff Gordon or “Lucile” (as her establishment was called) furthered the live fashion presentation during the 1910s. She claimed to have started the first “mannequin parades” and social fashion events, taking them from London to New York and Paris with huge success. The events consisted of hired girls, who would walk to and fro displaying the garments to an audience composed of members of high society. Lucile’s hopes were to commodify sensuality through her gowns and presentations and enhance sales.

During the same period in Paris, fashion designer Paul Poiret was known for his flamboyant window displays and his live fashion shows attended by prominent men and women of society. Poiret’s live events presented his current clothing collections on models or dancers in a theatrical manner using the architecture of the room – models floated down a large staircase, appeared in doorways or did a small dance to display the garment. It is also with Poiret that we encounter the first use of cinema as an alternative to the live fashion show. His 1911 promotional film, which charted the full history of his designs, was used as a substitute for the live event during his USA promotional tour. The film allowed him to avoid paying customs fees for importing the physical dresses into the country. Poiret acted as presenter/lecturer while the film played to audiences. Although Poiret’s live events gained more public attention than his promotional film screenings, it is important to note this first use of film as a substitute for the fashion show.

Live fashion events continued as large, theatrical performances in department stores in the 1920s and 1930s as a strategy for promoting clothing to predominately middle-class female audiences. These events created an aura of a fashionable and glamorous life, which translated into furthering the retail culture and eventually the development of the fashion runway show. At this time, the fashion film continued to develop in the form of the newsreel, also known as the “cinemagazine.”

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5 Evans, “The Enchanted Spectacle,” 275.
6 Marketa Uhlirova, “100 Years of the Fashion Film: Frameworks and Histories,” Fashion Theory 17 (2013): 142.
7 Breward, Fashion, 106.
8 Ibid.
9 Uhlirova, “100 Years of the Fashion Film: Frameworks and Histories,” 142.
cinemagazine appealed to the sophisticated female spectator and became the most popular format for displaying and promoting the latest fashions while also offering sartorial advice. Thus, during these decades, fashion shows and fashion films were pitched to middle-class females to educate them about styles and trends and encourage consumerism.

After World War II, the Theatre de la Mode, or fashion show of the Parisian couture industry tried to create an international market by placing emphasis on the models and designers’ personalities. This shift in emphasis onto the personality of the fashion model and designer, as well as the phenomenon of the fashion catwalk itself, remains vitally important in today’s culture for the marketing and branding of a couture image. Catwalk events are elite affairs with private guest lists consisting of other designers, photographers, models, celebrities and journalists as well as makeup and hair artists, all of whom are essential in creating an aura of exclusivity around the designer and their brand. That said, the point of the fashion show is to attract enough media attention to warrant dissemination to the greater public through multimedia technologies such as photography, television and media outlets like fashion blogs, magazines and associated websites.

The main stages for couture fashion shows have been further organized into fashion weeks held twice a year, Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter, in key fashion hubs including Paris, London, New York and Milan. Designers align themselves with a specific city to showcase their work and further establish the identity of the designer and brand. For example, in the past Boudicca aligned itself with the couture fashion hub of London, but was also invited to present during Paris fashion week. Although the main purpose of the catwalk show is to get noticed, due to the large number of shows taking place within these specified weeks, it is difficult for designers to make much of a statement. “The clothes themselves are now often not enough to grasp the necessary media attention… which has led designers to turn their attention to the catwalk show

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10 Ibid.
11 See chapter 3 for more information on this subject.
itself.” Consequently, haute couture designers have shifted their attention away from a simple presentation of the actual garments to the creation of spectacular, controversial and conceptual events that garner media attention.

Curator Ginger Gregg Duggan suggests that spectacle catwalk shows are “closely connected to [the] performing arts of theatre and opera, as well as feature films and music videos…. Spectacle designers feature far more than garments.” During the 1990s spectacle catwalk shows became the norm. These shows incorporated themes, employed alternative locations, used celebrity models and new media technologies such as video projection to captivate and shock the press. For instance, the collaboration of fashion designer Martin Margiela and photographer Mark Barthwick produced a large video projection of three women wearing Maison Martin Margiela garments used as background at the designer’s A/W 1998 catwalk show. Another example was seen at the Stella McCartney for Chloé’s horse-themed S/S 2001 runway show, where footage of running horses was projected as the backdrop to the strutting models. Most notably, Alexander McQueen consistently employed film as a backdrop for his shows. In his S/S 2003 collection Irene, McQueen featured a dreamy underwater choreography shot by John Maybury that captured a drowning body in a chiffon dress. Again, at his A/W 2007 show In Memory of Elizabeth Howe, Salem, 1662, his film backdrop consisted of naked Amazonian bodies, bees and “Satan-like-figures” that melted into flames, emphasizing the witch-hunts that were the theme of the collection.

McQueen also used film in alternative ways, as can be seen in his A/W 2006 show, The Windows of Culloden, where he collaborated with filmmakers Bailey Walsh and Simon Kenny to produce a film installation that created an illusion of a real body using virtual, two-dimensional imagery. For the show’s finale, the stage was darkened and a faint amorphous swirl appeared in a large glass pyramid that had been constructed

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13 Khan, “Catwalk Politics” 114.
15 It should be noted that even with the incorporation of spectacular elements, the majority of designers have remained committed to the general structure of the conventional fashion show.
on stage. As the swirl continued, the gradual image of a three-dimensional apparition of model Kate Moss in a flowing gown appeared, suspended in mid-air. The use of video and film in this instance served to illustrate the fantastical world of fashion, while also furthering the innovative self-image and brand of McQueen by guaranteeing media coverage. In competition with McQueen, other designers soon created events that read as dream sequences and fantastical visions that rivalled theatrical productions.\textsuperscript{16} As a result, fashion show productions became more closely associated with the mediums of performance art and theatre.\textsuperscript{17}

Certain designers have attempted to use the runway as a place to incorporate other mediums, and as a public platform to address cultural issues in order to elevate the fashion show experience. In her article “Catwalk Politics,” Natalie Khan has called this type of fashion show the “radical catwalk.” Khan asserts, “the radical catwalk is an event that not only seeks to attract attention of the media, but which is in itself reflexive, if not critical, of the mechanisms it utilizes.”\textsuperscript{18} These shows depict a type of protest about the superficiality of the fashion industry by creating a forum for more serious contemplation.\textsuperscript{19} To illustrate the radical catwalk, Khan uses three main examples: Alexander McQueen’s A/W 1999 show, Hussein Chalayan’s A/W 2000 show and Martin Margiela’s S/S 1992 show.

As previously mentioned, McQueen’s shows were visual spectacles of breathtaking theatricality and technical skill. He considered the catwalk space the most intimate and immediate area of contact with a public that he sought to shock and challenge.\textsuperscript{20} His A/W 1999, \textit{No. 13}, show used model Aimee Mullin, an American model and student who was born without tibia bones resulting in her legs being amputated below the knee when she was an infant. The message of physical disability as beautiful

\textsuperscript{16} A typical example of this catwalk style can be seen with John Galliano’s fashion shows for both Givenchy and Christian Dior that read like sequences of a dream. Specifically Galliano’s A/W 1998 show for Christian Dior, entitled “The Doriant Express,” took place in Paris’s Austerlitz train station decorated with palm trees, orange sand and baskets of dates and oranges. The show began with a train full of models arriving at the station. The models disembarked and paraded the station in elaborately designed costumes. For more examples of spectacle catwalk events see Duggan, “The Greatest Show on Earth,” 243-270.
\textsuperscript{17} Duggan, “The Greatest Show on Earth,” 244.
\textsuperscript{18} Khan, “Catwalk Politics,” 117
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Khan, “Catwalk Politics,” 118.
was captured on the catwalk in traditional haute couture style thanks to McQueen’s carved wooden prosthetic legs for Mullins, which complemented the designs of the collection. The carved legs were shown as symbols of perfection and beauty, not commodities but rather functional pieces of clothing that had all the decorative qualities of a pair of boots (fig. 11).  

Figure 11: Alexander McQueen, Ensemble of corset of brown leather; skirt of cream silk lace; prosthetic legs of carved elm wood, No. 13, Autumn/Winter 1999. 

Hussein Chalayan’s designs, meanwhile, focus on the idea that fashion is associated with bodies that are “shaped” by issues of religion, identity, sexuality, personal space and freedom. These concepts become the themes of his collections and are taken up in his performances. Chalayan’s performances can be categorized as ones of “substance” according to Duggan, since, unlike the large spectacle shows, they relate the concept of his collection to everyday rituals and occurrences. His A/W 2000 show

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22 Khan, “Catwalk Politics,” 120.
23 Ibid.
centered on the function, meaning and use of the garment as an object in times of war.\textsuperscript{24} The twenty-minute performance took place in the traditional theatrical setting of Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London, where he created a stage set featuring a group of models standing behind grey armchairs and a wooden table. The models stood motionless for almost twenty minutes but, as the show came to an end, the models took off the chair covers to dress themselves. Thus, the covers were turned into simple, elegant dresses and the table was dismantled to become a skirt (fig. 12). Through these actions, Chalayan recasts the horrific situation of having to pack up your life and possessions in times of chaos as an aesthetically pleasing (albeit disturbing) fashion show.

![Figure 12: Hussein Chalayan, Afterwords, Autumn/Winter 2000. Reprinted from Zoë Ryan, Fashioning the Object (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago 2012), 42.](image)

In the last of her three examples of alternative catwalks, Khan describes the presentations of Martin Margiela as reminiscent of Happenings and performance art.\textsuperscript{25} They differ from the spectacle shows of the 1990s in four main respects. First, his collections are designed from second-hand pieces, which are not ‘new’ but rather recontextualized.\textsuperscript{26} Second, he never uses professional models, which allows for unpredictable events to take place. Third, he rejects any notion of “personality,” referring to himself as part of a larger design team and never making public media appearances, even going so far as to refuse to label his garments. And fourth, he does not use the

\textsuperscript{24} Khan, \textit{Catwalk Politics}, 121.
\textsuperscript{25} Duggan, “The Greatest Show on Earth,” 244.
\textsuperscript{26} Khan, \textit{Catwalk Politics}, 123.
traditional runway setting but instead picks locations that are outside of the fashion industry, just as Happenings in the 1950s employed locations unfamiliar to the theatre.

The simplicity of his performances differ from spectacle shows that use the distractions of set design, props and technology. For example, in one of his presentations from the 1990s, Margiela directed models to move anonymously through the crowded city streets of Paris accompanied by members of his staff dressed in white warehouse overalls that mimicked those of earlier courtiers like Givenchy.\(^\text{27}\) The city sidewalk became the runway for an “everyday” low-key presentation of the garments. Additionally, the presentation commented on the history of the sidewalk as an exhibition site of clothing activism, presentation and inspiration. The use of the sidewalk was also seen in the 1970s and 1980s in the case of high-end designers, such as Vivienne Westwood, who was involved with subcultural styles like Punk and Goth. Another key figure for Margiela is Guy Debord, whose activist Situationist disruptions in city streets and the art world during the 1960s provide an important precedent.\(^\text{28}\)

A further example of a unique location used by Margiela for his S/S 1992 show, was the Salvation Army depot in Paris. Known for his second-hand materials and garments, Margiela chose a location that both reflected the concept behind his fashion house and confronted his audience with a reality that they would not often encounter in the haute couture fashion world.\(^\text{29}\) Thus, the ethically-suspect world of fashion was brought into sharp contrast – the low status of second-hand clothing set against the high value of a “one-off” designer piece.\(^\text{30}\) All of the devices employed by Margiela in the presentation of his collections are highly critical of the fashion systems in which he works. His events become performances that draw attention away from the personality of the designer and brand by focusing on the actual items of clothing.

Complementing the examples presented by Khan, Bless’s innovative presentation methods also resemble performance art or Happenings and function much like the radical catwalk. Before forming the fashion label Bless, Kaag and Heiss were pen pals during

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\(^{27}\) Ryan, *Fashioning the Object*, 44.
\(^{28}\) Ibid.
\(^{29}\) Khan, *Catwalk Politics*, 123.
\(^{30}\) Ibid.
their university careers. Kaag attended the fashion school at the Art Academy of Hanover, which focused on practical applications of fashion. Heiss attended the Art Academy of Vienna, where Helmut Lang taught a more conceptually oriented fashion program. Kaag and Heiss’ different educational backgrounds and approaches to design enabled a constant questioning and rethinking of the world, approached with the childlike imagination, from which all of their work stems.\(^{31}\) They create original collections that include garments, furniture and products from existing objects by tweaking them in new and often unexpected ways.

These recontextualized objects are designed to meet a perceived “need” that the original product did not address. Examples include their first project \(N^0 00\) Furwigs, where they created a wig from fur rather than real or synthetic hair that acted as either hat or wig depending on the situation. Another example is Towelbag, a beach take on the reusable shopping bag that unzips into a towel. It is important to note that Bless is not a subsidized arts project detached from commercial realities, but rather a fully functioning business with an infrastructure of suppliers and outlets, including a self-run store in Berlin. The Bless store is located in an apartment in a residential area and is run as an interactive art gallery, offering a space for social exchange where visitors are encouraged to nap, read or have a cup of tea as they interact with the Bless items.\(^{32}\) In this respect, Kaag and Heiss do not feel the need to participate in the traditional fashion system and marketplace, and therefore their output and retailing take rather different forms.

Bless’s conceptual design collections involve equally innovative presentation methods. Kaag and Heiss founded their studio at the height of the 1990s spectacle catwalk shows, however, such dramatic performances were not in keeping with the Bless ethos and character of design. On numerous occasions the designers have stated that they enjoy the process of creating, but do not like the business of exposing or showing their finished garments and products.\(^{33}\) Instead of sending models down a catwalk, they set up what they prefer to call “presentations” in venues such as art galleries, museums and people’s homes. Just as the design team relies on a dedicated fan base to hunt out these

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
unusual locations, they employ a coterie of friends, both young and old, to wear their work rather than hiring professional models. Unlike the spectacle events of McQueen and others, Bless’s presentations are staged as more informal gatherings where models are casually seated or walking around the space. Since Bless’s presentations take place as events independent of the fashion world, they have, according to Kaag and Heiss, grown into a “mini-movement.” By establishing a mini-movement of fashion presentations, Bless has become a part of the larger narrative of fashion designers reframing the fashion show.

Bless’s presentations have been described as performance art – Happenings – and compared to the fashion presentations of Chalayan. Bless’s presentations can also be compared with the type of shows that Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s, which took place in unusual locations that audiences had to seek out for themselves, such as a swimming pool in New York in 1988 and a disused Metro station in Paris in 1989. Additionally, Bless has been inspired by Margiela’s repurposed objects, and presentations that use alternative venues and borrow ideas from performance art.

Margiela’s influence can be seen in Bless’s N° 19 Uncool presentation, staged at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris in 2003. Bless’s collection Uncool consisted of chunky wool garments designed for the summer season (fig. 13). The garments were hand-knit from multiple pieces of wool and all imperfections and mistakes were kept. The garments of Uncool drew attention to the categories of high and low fashion created by the fashion industry and the way they belittle do-it-yourself styles and elevate haute couture fashion houses. Harnessing low-tech approaches to design, Bless created clothing whose beautiful imperfections contrasted with the “perfection” of the everyday fashion landscape of identically mass-produced garments.

Uncool aimed to elevate the techniques of craft as a means for making high-end fashion. The craft of knitting has traditionally been seen as women’s work as opposed to

34 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 38.
35 Ibid.
36 Another example of wearable furniture is seen in Chalayan’s A/W 2000 collection and show.
37 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 43.
haute couture. Haute couture refers to the most expensive and exclusive goods created by a particular designer. Haute couture garments need a high level of skill in patterns, fittings and hand-sewing and are produced for a select clientele, versus everyday hand-knitted creations by anonymous makers. Recently, however, handcrafted fashions have been elevated to a higher status within the fashion industry due to designers such as Backlund, John Galliano and Azzedine Alaïa, who all experiment with knitwear. That said, Bless does not create perfectly knitted pieces as these other designers do. Instead, Bless highlights the process of the craft by focusing attention on the beauty of the individually created garment. Each piece is distinctive because of the creator’s hands, the different threads and yarns used, and the imperfections left by the creative process.

Figure 13: Bless, BLESS N°19 Uncool, Spring/Summer 2003. Reprinted from Zoë Ryan, Fashioning the Object (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago 2012), 28.

By moving their showroom into the museum, Bless wanted to position their designs for the Uncool collection as art rather than fashion, opening up their work to discussion and debate beyond the traditional confines of the fashion industry. Visitors to the presentation of the collection could try out a selection of objects and garments, which were available for sale in the museum shop. By presenting garments of a handmade and “low- couture” nature in the museum, their project became a type of performance art in

38 Breward, Fashion, 50.
which visitors were invited to interpret the meaning of the work through participation. Furthermore, by giving visitors the opportunity to try out their pieces, the presentation took on the character of a user survey. This format suggested that visitors were free to question the underlying premise of the collection; what makes something cool or “uncool.”

Bless continued to employ the museum space in subsequent shows as seen with their collection N°28 Climate Confusion Assistance, which was staged at the Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris in March 2006. Bless completely redesigned the scenography for the space by hanging a series of wallpapers that depicted the interiors of their work studios. Friends of Kaag and Heiss modeled the garments by wandering the rooms, while others lay in hammocks, which were also part of the collection. The objects and garments were made from a nylon knit fabric and different furs, and had unique functional elements, for example, hammocks featuring special pockets for books (fig. 14), or Fat Knit Duvet Jacket, which could function as either a jacket or duvet. The presentation of these objects required audience participation in the form of trying on and out the pieces to negotiate their meaning, status and function.

Figure 14: Bless, BLESS N°28 Climate Confusion Assistance, Spring/Summer 2006. Reprinted from Zoë Ryan, Fashioning the Object (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago 2012), 48.

Moving away from the museum setting, Bless’s presentation for their collection N°43 Know Howowow used another alternative location – the lived-in loft apartment.

39 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 44.
The collection title and designs were inspired by the German expression “Au-wowow” which is normally used to signify heartfelt approval. As the saying is used to acknowledge a very personal act or achievement, Kaag and Heiss felt it provided them with a sense of security. By changing the phrase to “know howowow” they wanted to create a saying that defined a type of person who acknowledges individuality – just as Kaag and Heiss did in their designs. A “know-how” is someone that does not play by the rules but creates their own path.\footnote{40} For the presentation of Know Howowow, Kaag and Heiss created a welcoming and intimate atmosphere by staging the event in a two-floor, furnished loft apartment in Paris, employing friends and family members to model the garments. The models clustered in groups throughout the apartment as if posing for a still life drawing class. The audience was predominantly made up of students from local art and fashion schools, who were asked to sketch the clothing. A photographer was also present to document the event and the clothing. These drawings and photographs were later sent to the media in lieu of press images (see fig. 5 and fig. 15).\footnote{41} During this presentation, there was little division between the audience and the models, minimizing the traditional gap between the models on stage and the seated audience. This lack of divide fostered a sense of casualness, allowing guests, designers, models, art students and photographers to interact on the same level. By inviting art and fashion students, Kaag and Heiss used the event as an opportunity to provoke an interaction between many different people, thus extending the fashion community by directly connecting their fans to the collection’s pieces, its presentation, and the images of it.\footnote{42} By allowing viewers to experience the Bless collection in such an interactive context, Kaag and Heiss encouraged independent interpretation and discovery. The viewer interpretation was in the spirit of the collection’s inspiration – to create one’s own path of self-expression.

\footnote{41} Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 46.
\footnote{42} Ibid.
Bless’s fashion presentations fit into the “substance” category as described by Duggan. The substance category can be specifically seen in the performance for Know Howowow, which emphasized process over product by having the art students complete the collection by making images of the garments. The presentation highlighted the development of the fashion objects from initial inspiration to finished garment through the performative event and creation of promotional images – all the components of a finalized collection. The concept of Know Howowow is embodied in both the collection and its mode of presentation. Kaag and Heiss do not follow the norms of the fashion world to present the garments and objects, but instead forge their own path, exemplifying their “know-how” as do the art students, who take the idea further. Since they were given little to no direction for drawing the models and their clothing, each art student used their own “know-how” to understand the collection.

Rather than being driven by the demands of the fashion media, as is the case with spectacular catwalk shows, substance events do not look for media coverage, which can further blur the boundaries of art and fashion. It is significant that the pictures created by the art students during the presentation became the sole promotional images of the

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collection, and were only published in one source, the magazine *Mono.Kultur* (Summer 2011). Although Bless follows in the footsteps of substance-performance-art-based fashion shows by using unassuming locations, stressing concept over spectacle and refusing to court media attention, they differ from designers like Chalayan and Margiela since their presentations need audience participation to be fully executed.

Like performance art of the 1950s and 1960s, Bless’s presentations employ audience participation to produce new methods of showcasing the work. These presentations reflect artistic Happenings as defined by Kaprow. As Kaprow explained, “Happenings are events that, put simply, happen.” The best Happenings have some form of impact but do not make a literary point, and have a fluid structure with no beginning, middle or end. Kaprow asserts that Happenings are regarded as different from theatre performances for four main reasons. First, the context of a Happening differs as its environment or setting consists of unusual spaces such as outside venues, old stores, basements or apartments. The setting also has little to no separation of audience from actors, thus allowing for a more immediate experience with the work as seen in Bless’s *Know Howowow* presentation.

The second criterion of a Happening is that there is no plot or obvious “philosophy.” The idea or concept behind the performance is generated by action, not by written or verbal instructions or a script. The concept behind *Know Howowow* was never stated outright during the presentation. Nevertheless, the meaning of the tweaked saying was fulfilled by the actions of the audience members during the live event. Also important is the third criterion of chance, which plays a large role in a Happening as whatever happens is seen as right. Thus for *Know Howowow* the sketches and illustrations created by the invited art and fashion students were never regarded as wrong or unusable. Instead, each image was seen as an individual understanding of a specific

45 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
garment. The fourth criterion is impermanence since a Happening is something that cannot be reproduced but only experienced in that moment.\textsuperscript{50} Bless’s presentation of *Know Howowow* was not a commodity, but rather a one time event that highlighted the concept behind the collection.

The above examples of the live catwalk event, including Bless’s *N° 42 Know Howowow* presentation, focus on two main aspects: the idea that the live event can be manipulated into a platform for conceptual ideas or themes, and the fact that designers are using alternative spaces, new media technology and audience participation to evoke an event more closely aligned with performance art than the traditional fashion world. But can the fashion catwalk show be understood and executed to its fullest extent in an off-runway event using another medium? The rest of this chapter will look at the use of the fashion film, which has been taken up by many contemporary designers in recent years, to extend (and even replace) the traditional catwalk. These films are pitched to the media in order to present designers’ current collections to a general public and further knowledge about the designs, the personalities of the designers and models, and the collection’s narratives.

With the launch of fashion photographer Nick Knight’s “web-as-a-magazine”\textsuperscript{51} website SHOWstudio in 2000, the emerging fashion film was given a place to be constructed, produced and viewed. This was the first platform to systematically encourage fashion designers to make films showcasing their collections, and to question the fashion industry’s traditional modes of presentation. Knight’s aim was to allow designers to use film to spotlight the creative processes of fashion and fashion image-making while still highlighting the finished product.\textsuperscript{52} Many designers began using SHOWstudio as a place to present their work, as in the case of Margiela’s *Martin Margiela A/W2004*, directed by Nigel Bennet. Another example is Chalayan’s film presentation of his S/S 2008 collection *Readings*, where models wore garments that incorporated laser light technologies and Swarovski crystals. The film was made in collaboration with SHOWstudio’s Knight and Ruth Hogben, and was the sole method of

\textsuperscript{50} Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 20.
\textsuperscript{51} Uhlirova, “100 Years of the Fashion Film: Frameworks and Histories,” 149.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
presentation for the collection. The film highlighted the way laser lights bounced off Swarovski crystals creating intricate light displays. It was because of the development of SHOWstudio and its type of art-based fashion films that specific designers made the shift from performance events to film as their catwalk medium.  

The stand-alone fashion film was relatively slow in establishing itself as a viable medium mostly due to technological issues, such as bandwidth for streaming large data packages, but in 2011 Vogue joined the trend by creating Style.com’s Video Fashion Week. It became a secondary place for designers to show off-runway through film, but remained a rather exclusive experience given its daily time slots for video premieres and the fact that new films were only presented twice a year (during the designated A/W and S/S seasons). Nevertheless, the fashion film website created a novel, highly accessible and well-established arena for viewership, and placed significant emphasis on the fashion film as a tool for promoting designers’ couture collections.

Designers Broach and Kirkby of Boudicca have taken up film as an alternative to the traditional catwalk in their film Couture 03: Essays. The designs of Boudicca are investigative rather than simply decorative and tend to explore issues related to contemporary society and their own lives. Boudicca’s women’s wear collections make numerous references to historical and contemporary British culture, drawing from history, politics, philosophy, as well as art and design to enrich the “intellectual aesthetic” of their garments and films. The inspiration for a particular work dictates material choices, construction techniques and the functionality of their garments, not to mention their modes of public presentation. The joy of experiencing Boudicca’s work lies in the designers’ abilities to finesse these varied influences into something that is more than the sum of all its parts, but also to create pieces and collections that “define the present moment by being acutely aware of what came before.”

53 Although high-end designers such as Yves Saint Laurent, Chanel, Dior and others produced big budget Hollywood-style fashion films in the late 2000s, they were shown either as part of their on-schedule live performances or simply as advertisements, and not in the confines of SHOWstudio’s philosophy.
56 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 56.
Boudicca constantly rethinks how its work is presented, and has used a wide variety of methods to engage audiences to reflect on its creations.\textsuperscript{57} The designers prefer presenting their work in thought-provoking forms. Thus, their critique is aimed not solely at the traditional catwalk, but also at the ways fashion is disseminated and understood by the public. They invite reflection by having films and digital look-books replace runway events and still fashion photographs. A precursor of their fashion films was the catwalk show for their collection \textit{System Error} (S/S 1999), which was concerned with understanding how our current use of technology isolates the individual.\textsuperscript{58} This runway show employed just one model who wore all thirteen garments. For the audience, there were excessive wait times during outfit changes, which became palpably uncomfortable for those used to the traditional catwalk’s fast-paced entertainment.\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, the elongated intervals between modeled garments gave the audience time to think about the inspiration behind the collection.

The most conspicuous of Boudicca’s alternative catwalk efforts have been their short films created either to accompany collections or to function as independent explorations.\textsuperscript{60} These works reinforce their ideas, strengthen narratives inherent in their work, and ultimately further the viewer’s understanding of their design practice. Broach has commented on their method stating that, “the product is not enough…it’s the emotional potential of the interaction between garment and person…. The process of making clothes or another form of expression, like a film or a book…all become part of the design.”\textsuperscript{61} Using film to contextualize their collections, Broach and Kirkby have taken inspiration from Chalayan’s short films that accompany his collections, which have replaced live performances.

For Boudicca’s third couture collection, \textit{Essays} (A/W 2009), Broach and Kirkby experimented with paper construction in lieu of fabric. This non-traditional material allowed for “daring and innovative shapes including voluminous sleeves, printed obi

\textsuperscript{57} Ryan, \textit{Fashioning the Object}, 62.  
\textsuperscript{58} Marketa Uhlírova, “Interview with Zowie Broach and Brian Kirkby of Boudicca,” \textit{Fashion Theory} 10 (2006): 413.  
\textsuperscript{60} Ryan, \textit{Fashioning the Object}, 62.  
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
sashes, bold oversized flounces and arabesques that stood erect and separate from the body in ways that fabric never could.\textsuperscript{62} The sculptural garments were inspired by dress from the Elizabethan era. The final garments were recorded in a short film of approximately five minutes, entitled \textit{Couture 03: Essays} (fig. 18). The film was originally presented in the Boudicca studio in Bethnal Green, London and later online as an interactive website, not to mention played on a running loop on a mounted monitor in the \textit{Fashioning the Object} exhibition.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{boudicca_stills.png}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{62} Barron-Duncan, “Review: \textit{Fashioning the Object: Bless, Boudicca, Sandra Backlund},” 450.
The film was created to highlight the narratives and influences that informed the collection, which could never have been captured in a runway show during Paris Fashion Week. The film is a collage of texts, (written by authors such as Victor Hugo), and scenes drawn from nature, museum displays and portraits of historical figures, (such as Countess Mary Cornwallis, Urraca of Zamora and the bullfighter Patricia McCormick) alongside images of Boudicca’s garments. By having the historical references and garments floating side-by-side, Boudicca’s designers reveal the sources of their inspiration, and show the viewer how ideas have been thoughtfully modified and reinterpreted in their paper and fabric clothing.  

To present each garment and its inspiration, the film is made up of individual segments lasting approximately ten seconds in length. For example, in one ten-second segment of the film, we see a black-and-white image of a historical painting of Countess Mary Cornwallis wearing an elaborate court dress. A second image appears of the head of a female model, overlapped with the left arm and neck of the British monarch, showing the cut and paste process of the designers. The third layer shows the same female model on the right wearing Boudicca’s finished contemporary design. The final image brings the viewer full circle, allowing them to see the inspiration, process and finished garment side by side (fig. 17).

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63 Ibid.
Another example begins with a still, faded black and white image of a model dressed in an elaborate veiled headpiece. As the scene continues, three squares appear on the left hand side, one by one, each showing a moving image of American bullfighter Patricia McCormick, who was recognized as the first female to fight bulls in Mexico. After three images of McCormick appear, the model from the background image is brought into the segment again by way of a square box in the centre of the screen. The model is shown in colour and is dressed in a vibrant blue body suit and a black veiled headpiece, while she moves in a robotic manner that imitates the movement of a bullfighter. The inspiration of McCormick, the movement of the model and the background of the final image are not presented in sequential order from inspiration to finished garment, but are shown side-by-side so that referent and garment are seen together (fig. 18). Coupled with the images is the music of Arvo Pärt, which evokes an eerie, haunting effect that immerses the viewer into the mindsets of Broach and Kirkby as they approach each design’s inspiration, construction, and final product.
As one might guess from the title, *Couture 03: Essays* is an essay film. Film scholar Laura Rascaroli suggests that “the label ‘essay film’ is encountered with ever-increasing frequency in both film reviews and scholarly writings on the cinema…of unorthodox, personal, [and] reflexive "new" documentaries…. It is a hybrid form that crosses boundaries and rests somewhere in between fiction and nonfiction cinema…. The essay film disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, [and] it is self-reflective and self-reflexive.”64 The essay film can be seen as a product of pure reflection where emphasis is placed on reflexivity, form and aesthetic attitude.65 Boudicca’s *Couture 03: Essays* is an essay film in the purest sense, as it is neither fact nor fiction, but a personal investigation involving both passion and intellect.66

Boudicca’s film is accompanied by a poetic essay that is only available on their website. The essay contains thoughts, feelings and quotations that exemplify their view of contemporary society. Boudicca writes, “How do you find truth in what you create? How

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do you know what you are truly responsible for? Anaesthetised [sic] by aesthetics. Condemned by knowledge. Stricken by guilt and caught up in a multi-layered, interweave of history and existence.” These sentences, which express thoughts rather than concrete facts, are echoed in the film through the layering of text, moving images and sound. An example of this is present in the opening sequence, when we encounter a quote from Victor Hugo’s *The Man Who Laughs*: “What is history? An echo of the past in the future; a reflex from the future on the past.” Hugo’s line speaks to the designers’ overall desire to create an ongoing dialogue with history, fashion and art. Following the lines of Hugo, a quote from Boudicca’s accompanying essay appears on the screen. The two segments of text help set the tone of the film, introducing the spectator to the dialogue that is present within each screen sequence. The film also enables Boudicca to present their inspiration for the collection purely through visual means. The layering of images creates a visual reference for the spectator to show how their inspiration was used to design the final garment.

The film work of Boudicca, including *Couture 03: Essays*, places significant emphasis on reflexivity just as essay films do, and thus has been interpreted using Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “dialectical image” by curator Marketa Uhlirova, (a reference Boudicca has acknowledged as relevant). “As montage does in cinema, relating an image drawn from the past and another from the present leads, according to Benjamin, to a “critical constellation” that opens up these images to new readings that transcend original interpretations.” The film *Couture 03: Essays* is based on the principles of collage that preserve a certain fragmentary condition, not pretending to have one clear objective or subject matter. Thus a filmic version of the dialectical image is created to encourage new readings through the layering of images that relate the present to the past - Boudicca’s finished garment to its inspiration. Therefore, each individual spectator engages with the film by piecing together its multiple images to discover the intellectual

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67 Boudicca, “Form follows Emotion.”
68 Ibid.
70 Ryan, *Fashioning the Object*, 73.
and emotional meanings embedded within the film. Boudicca’s short film offers a self-reflexive examination of their collection, while placing a loose narrative upon each garment by weaving together their inspirations and influences. The essay film becomes the perfect filmic type for Boudicca’s Essays collection, as it allows for a dialogue to be formed that is not an absolute truth, but rather the fragmented thought processes of both Broach and Kirkby, as well as a space for contemplation by the viewer. Although Boudicca has an interactive website dedicated to the collection Essays, the majority of viewers only encounter the film. Therefore, the film was created to be a stand-alone presentation of their collection. However, Boudicca’s Couture 03: Essays film does not generate the same emotional investment as the more elaborate entertainment of live events. Instead the film allows Broach and Kirkby to delve deeper into the storylines they create through the collection to further the knowledge of the viewer.

In conclusion, we can see that the catwalk has evolved over the years. Fashion designers working in the 1990s revamped the catwalk show to include spectacular elements and socially relevant themes and concepts using performance art and new mediums like film and video technology. Such innovations have helped elevate the catwalk into a performance medium in its own right, especially in the case of designers such as McQueen, Chalayan and Margiela. Taking this process one step further, designers Kaag and Heiss of Bless borrow ideas from earlier art events to foster social exchange and critical reflection through audience participation. Their presentations do not follow the norms of the fashion world, but instead are more self-reflexive. Interestingly, the fashion film has been used in a similar way by designers Broach and Kirkby of Boudicca, who consider it a sufficient stand-alone method for presenting their collections. Both Bless and Boudicca’s alternative catwalk tactics require further engagement from the viewer, whether physical and/or mental, to understand the intellectual and emotional inspirations and meanings embedded within the collections than does the traditional catwalk show. Furthermore, Bless and Boudicca’s presentations reflect critically on their own work and that of the fashion world, and especially on the mechanisms utilized to disseminate their fashion objects. Thus, both Bless’s presentations

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and Boudicca’s films extend Khan’s notion of the “radical catwalk” by including alternative mediums of presentation. These alternative catwalk mediums encourage viewers to look at fashion through an art world lens by referencing art, history, fashion and design, and in the process generate a more highly engaged and culturally literate audience for fashion. The idea of producing new frameworks within the confines of the traditional fashion world will be further discussed in relation to the medium of photography in the following chapter.
Chapter Three: Fashion Photography, Still Life Meanings

In chapter one, I introduced the fashion design practices of Bless, Boudicca, and Backlund and described their placement within the Chicago exhibition. I then discussed how they incorporate different methods of display to further their collections and designs. In chapter two, I specifically focused on Bless and Boudicca’s alternative methods of presentation from the catwalk, including Happenings and film. Since I did not discuss Backlund’s creative approaches to the question of display in that chapter, I return to address her work in this one.

Although Backlund, a leading knitwear designer, still presents her collections on a six-month schedule on the live runway in Sweden, she is also concerned with her garments’ depiction in fashion photography. She is most interested in focusing the lens of the camera on the garment itself, rather than allowing the clothes to become stage props for a fashion photography storyline. In order to do so, Backlund has worked with Swedish still life photographer Ola Bergengren, who turns the garment into a sculptural object, giving it a life without a wearer. For the exhibition Fashioning the Object, curator Zoë Ryan furthered the relationship of Backlund and Bergengren by commissioning Bergengren to take photographs of Backlund’s garments displayed in the museum. Although reviewer Rachael Barron-Duncan claims that Backlund was the “odd woman out” in the exhibition, I believe that her photographic relationship with Bergengren offers another opportunity to analyze an alternative method of display that complements those of Bless and Boudicca, which I have already discussed. In particular I examine the way that Bergengren’s photographs of Backlund’s work displayed in Ryan’s exhibit use a still life aesthetic to develop a self-consciously artistic form of fashion photography that builds on the pioneering precedents of Irving Penn and Wolfgang Tillmans. First of all, I look at Backlund and Bergengren’s photographic relationship, and their place within the Fashioning the Object exhibit in order to set the stage for a discussion of the history of still life fashion photography and its decline in the wake of the growing popularity of fashion lifestyle narratives. From there I go on to examine Bergengren’s images for three

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1 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 82.
of Backlund’s collections, *Pool Positions, Ink Blot Test*, and F/W 2010-2011,\(^2\) to show why the still life photographic style is best suited to capture her designs in their fullest integrity.

In general, still life fashion photography has fallen out of favour in recent years. Oddly enough, then, in an industry preoccupied with the latest trends, Bergengren’s “old-fashioned” presentation of Backlund’s designs actually highlights the artistic quality of her garments by framing them as art. The image becomes a stand-alone art object through the use of the traditional aesthetic of the still life. Thus, by removing both the garment and the image from traditional fashion world discourses, Backlund and Bergengren help reinvent them.

Backlund’s knitwear uses traditional Swedish craft techniques. Backlund studied at Beckmans College of Design in Stockholm, Sweden in 2004, where her graduating fashion collection consisted of knitted sculptural garments using hair.\(^3\) She established her own label in 2005 in Stockholm, and works alone to produce each garment. Her largest market is in her home country, and she has no retail business outside of customer-specific orders. Each garment is knitted on a made-to-measure basis and the only one created. Backlund’s knitted designs are sculptural and organic in form. She weaves together different materials and knitted components to create elaborately structured forms that highlight, distort and transform the natural silhouette of the human body.\(^4\) To create such pieces, she works with a tailor’s dummy or her own body to discover new shapes and silhouettes. The only constraints she places upon the garment’s design are ones she sets herself, such as needle size, number of stitches or rows, thickness and materials. She works with a variety of materials including wool, wood, wire, copper, mirrors, paper and cotton. She has also worked with textile machinery in Italy to produce specific fabrics for design ideas that, in the past, were only possible to achieve through paper origami construction. Because of Backlund’s practice of weaving multiple materials to form

\(^2\) This collection was not given a title but is instead referred to by its season, Fall/Winter 2010-2011.
\(^3\) For more on Backlund’s graduating collection see *Art/Fashion: Between Skin and Clothing* at Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg, Germany, 2011.
\(^4\) Ryan, *Fashioning the Object*, 79.
three-dimensional knitwear, curator Ryan describes her work as an experiment with the handmade processes of craft traditions.5

Backlund’s work recalls that of other haute couture fashion designers working in knitwear, such as Junya Watanabe, Azzedine Alaïa, Cristóbal Balenciaga and Paco Rabanne. Along with these designers, Backlund draws attention to the distinctive qualities of the knitted shapes produced, while blurring the divisions between high and low forms of fashion. Yet Backlund’s practice is unusual in its focus on three-dimensional knitting techniques. Her work is inspired by specific emotions and experiences in her life. Backlund has said that her design practice is very time-consuming and a true trial of strength, mentally and physically, and yet for her, knitting is synonymous with creative freedom.6

Having found her place within the fashion world as a creative knitwear designer, Backlund has had her work photographed by a variety of photographers, both for her own professional archives and for fashion magazines. Despite that, the images produced rarely capture the garments’ technical qualities or narratives. This is largely because traditional fashion photography tends to turn garments into props in fictional stories that are carefully pitched to appeal to potential buyers. Disliking this approach, Backlund became interested in finding innovative ways to document her designs. To further understand the photographic concepts employed by fashion photography, Backlund hired two photographers to capture her F/W 2008-2009 collection, Last Breath Bruises. This collection was extremely personal. The inspiration was the colour spectrum of a forming bruise. The bruise represented the grieving process Backlund experienced after the death of her grandmother. The collection consisted of ten chunky knitwear pieces that signified the shelter she desired for grieving. Fashion photographer Annika Aschberg took conventional model shots of the designs and produced the first set of photographs (fig. 19). These images highlight the strong three-dimensional silhouettes of the garments, which characterize Backlund’s work, although the delicacy and fragility of her technique

5 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 31.
6 Ryan, Fashioning the Object, 76.
is overlooked. Also, the personal narrative within the garment is not highlighted, as the persona of the model tends to dominate the clothes.


For a second set of images, then, Backlund commissioned Bergengren, known for her still life photographic style. Prior to working for Backlund, Bergengren’s practice had consisted of still life images portraying industrially designed objects as high art sculptural forms. Bergengren used the same technique with the fashion objects by producing a close-up image of each garment set against a solid background. This composition focused attention on the details of the garment, namely the tactile texture of the knitting, stitching, folding, and weaving. As a result, the garment became the sole subject and narrative of the image (fig. 20). Backlund found that Bergengren’s images better corresponded to her own design philosophy by returning the focus to the clothing. Bergengren has commented that the relationship she formed with Backlund is fitting because they both
employ “low-tech” approaches and deal with sculptural elements. Backlund’s designs are sophisticated and complex, but they are also “low-tech” as she crafts them by hand. This “low-tech” approach is complemented by Bergengren’s photographic practices, which use an analog process without any retouching of the images. The exhibition photographs taken by Bergengren for Fashioning the Object showcase the still life photographic techniques needed to capture the sculptural and technical qualities of Backlund’s designs by removing the clothing from the traditional context of fashion photography. While Bergengren’s images solicited the attention of the museumgoer, they did so without referring to a wearer, specific season, collection or story.


According to Ryan, Bergengren’s photographic style elevates Backlund’s fashion objects and images to a fine art. Both the image and garment function as art objects in and of themselves. Susan Sontag has explained that the photograph is not only like its subject and a homage to it, but it is also an extension of the subject that acquires its own

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7 Ryan, *Fashioning the Object*, 83.
8 Ryan, *Fashioning the Object*, 14.
meaning, which in turn affects the way the original object is understood.\textsuperscript{9} Thus object and image are then a part of a larger system producing information and knowledge.\textsuperscript{10} Bergengren’s images become an extension of Backlund’s garments using the rhetoric of the still life to transform them into works of photographic art. Indeed, Barron-Duncan argues that Ryan’s curation of the space suggests that Backlund’s work makes bridges to other art forms through Bergengren’s photographs, and in turn, the images produced further the photographic practices of the traditional fashion world.\textsuperscript{11}

The still life aesthetic has played a minor role in the history of fashion photography, for example, in the pages of Vogue, and also in various art photography series such as those of Irving Penn and Wolfgang Tillmans. Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, the still life format has generally fallen out of favour for depicting contemporary fashion, where it has been replaced by fashion lifestyle narratives, such as those of the 1960s working girl or 1990s heroin chic. Such shifts are part and parcel of fashion photography as it is continually adapting to the constant flux of social forces that shape culture.\textsuperscript{12} The field of fashion has always relied upon the power of visual communication as a medium for translating the garments into products that are seen, widely discussed, and sold.\textsuperscript{13}

With the establishment of Vogue as a fashion magazine in 1909, images were increasingly used to make innovative aesthetic commentaries on fashion culture.\textsuperscript{14} The fashion plates emphasized desirable designs and ideals of female beauty, style and behaviour.\textsuperscript{15} The predominant goal of the fashion photographer was the pictorial rendering of desire. Drawing out the social narratives associated with the clothing created this desire; the clothing itself was not the main focus. The fashion image has become the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{9} Susan Sontag, \textit{A Susan Sontag Reader}. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1982), 350
\item \textsuperscript{10} Sontag, \textit{A Susan Sontag Reader}, 350.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Barron-Duncan, “Review: Fashioning the Object,” 454-455.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Breward, \textit{Fashion}, 115.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Breward, \textit{Fashion}, 122.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
predominant mode through which fashion is articulated and disseminated, and the narrative style has continued to be the most popular format used today.\textsuperscript{16}

Nevertheless, between the 1930s and the 1950s, Irving Penn introduced a new style of fashion photography that incorporated the artistic tradition of the still life. Still life has had a long history as an artistic mode of representation, originating in seventeenth-century painting in Europe.\textsuperscript{17} Over the ages, still life images have reflected the material and social developments of their era and in that respect can be seen as providing a survey of prominent ideas and styles.\textsuperscript{18} Traditional still life objects include flowers, fruit, skulls and mirrors, all of which contain a symbolic meaning that can be interpreted by the viewer, often provoking strong emotional responses.\textsuperscript{19} The object’s meaning is shaped by the artist’s arrangement, or the positioning of the camera lens for the final image.\textsuperscript{20} Still life images tend to provide both descriptive and symbolic interpretations of material culture, often pointing to the superficiality of worldly goods.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, the aesthetic concept of still life translates well into the pages of a fashion magazine, as the latter’s main goal is to disseminate social values by way of desire. Yet still life images can be ambivalent, both celebrating the pleasures of the good life, and also condemning them. This aspect of still life imagery is often overlooked within fashion photography as “too critical” of society and material possessions. Rather than focusing on the still life’s symbolic meanings, fashion images use the aesthetic technique to portray objects as beautiful, as in Bergengren’s work for Backlund, or to portray a specific message indicated by the accompanying magazine article, which is the case with Penn.

Art director of \textit{Vogue} in the 1940s, Alexander Liberman, hired Penn as a studio photographer of still life images. Creating a poetic display of fashionable objects, Penn established the use of still life as a viable photographic format for the magazine in his images of “the good life.” The good life images depicted food and drink, as well as other accouterments of the social elite, such as kid leather gloves, gold lighters and Spanish

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
shoes. In 1946, still life objects became a narrative component of Penn’s portraiture and garment images conveying the inner self of the sitter. Penn’s other still life techniques consisted of natural lighting, a straightforward line of view and a focus on form and shape. In 1950, Penn was given the opportunity to take fashion images of Parisian couture garments straight off the runway. His simple, clean and elegant images were not cluttered with lifestyle elements, all of which allowed the viewer to construct their own narratives about the clothing. The models were presented as socially superior, but the focus of the image was on the active silhouette of the garment, rather than the persona of the model (fig. 21).22 During the 1950s, Penn was engrossed in the realm of fashion imagery. He only photographed clothing items he believed to be works of art that merited his time.


By the 1960s, Penn was doing less work for Vogue and devoted more time to his private photographic work. Between 1972 and 1980, he created three photographic still

life series: *Cigarette Trash, Street Trash, and Momento Mori*.\(^{23}\) His still life photographs were provocative because they appeared to be purely symbolic in intention and had no reference to fashion.\(^{24}\) The images followed the extreme formalistic approach Penn had always used, but the objects symbolized a continuous commentary on death. Penn’s series *Cigarette Trash* in particular comments on the dual nature of still life images. Penn found his subjects for this series on the street. By bringing cigarette butts into his studio and carefully creating minimalist compositions he transformed one of the most widely consumed and discarded products of consumer society from pure debris into a symbolic representation of contemporary culture. This transformative act resulted in one of the most elegant yet direct expressions of life and death.

Penn presented these discarded items as objects of beauty by placing them on a solid white background and highlighting their shape and texture (fig. 22). His photographs shift the emphasis away from portraying cigarettes as desirable commodities to showing them as transpired objects, perhaps symbolically alluding to their lethal effects on the human body. Moreover, the photographs of cigarette butts can be compared with aspects of Penn’s celebrity portraits.\(^{25}\) His celebrity portraits are likewise technically beautiful, but “capture the subject’s wrinkled, crumpled and spent appearance”\(^{26}\) just as the still life images of cigarette butts do.\(^{27}\) In this respect it could be argued that like cigarettes, celebrities are bad habits as ordinary people become addicted to following their lives. We consume them, and once they are burned out, we discard them.

Typically, still life images that have a strong association with death, like the *Cigarette Trash* series, do not appear within the pages of fashion magazines, as those buying clothes do not generally want to be directly reminded about death. That said, highly aestheticized images of morbid women have been widely used in advertising, in

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\(^{23}\) It should be noted that Penn’s still life images were included in the *Fashioning Fiction in Photography since 1990* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His specific work with fashion was not presented, however; as if to suggest that he was artistically capable of producing other images. Penn, like Bergengren tried to carve out a space for himself as an "art" photographer. For further information on the images included in the exhibition see Angel Chang, “Exhibition Review: *Fashioning Fiction in Photography since 1990*,” 361-368.
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
general, and in fashion in particular. Such advertisement images and tactics have attracted the attention of feminist critics who have pointed out the serious damage they can do to women’s self esteem.\footnote{Although this thesis does not address this issue in depth, it is taken up by many feminist scholars who address advertising campaigns that portray women through the male gaze and as “ready-to-be-raped” or “dead” objects of desire. For sources on this subject look to chapter one, footnote 40.} Furthermore, certain issues within the fashion industry itself, such as the suffering of anorexic models, and the notion of ‘heroin chic,’ which I discuss further below, have generated representations that conjure up the spectre of death within the fashion world. However, as in the case of Bergengren’s photographs, the fashion world generally prefers still life images that beautify the fashion object.


Even though Penn was primarily devoted to his own art practice during this time, he still produced photographs for the fashion world. These images did not focus on the symbolism usually associated with still lives, but rather on the genre’s sensuous rendering of beauty. In 1974, he was commissioned to create an advertisement campaign for the cosmetic line Clinique. The images used the visual codes of still life by focusing
on the cosmetic items as aesthetically pleasing objects, rather than depicting a model’s face in full makeup. (One might compare this with the way Bergengren removes the model from her images.) During the 1970s Penn’s artistic and commercial photographs became almost indistinguishable as both focused on the arrangement of everyday objects to create assemblages that changed the subject’s original purpose.\(^\text{29}\)

While Penn was experimenting with ‘still life photography’ the mainstream of fashion photography was moving in a different direction. In the 1960s, constructed storylines for fashion shoots became more popular within the pages of *Vogue* and other fashion magazines. During this time, the fashion photograph was a vehicle for promoting the new ideal of the “Single Girl” or “Working Girl.” The Single or Working Girl represented a strand in popular culture that embraced the new social and sexual status of many women. It was an image that legitimized the working woman and affirmed her importance in a changing society. Fashion magazines underwent a transformation during the 1960s in terms of both subject and style, appealing to the young, single, economically self-sufficient female of the day, rather than the socialite of pre-war years.\(^\text{30}\) Fashion photography shifted stylistically to keep up with the trends of these magazines, eliminating the kind of still life images made by Penn. The new images freed models from the staged studio-space and placed them outside and active in their daily lives.\(^\text{31}\) The fashion photograph no longer depicted garments as artistic objects worthy of a stand-alone image. Although the pictures were beautifully packaged to sell the new social ideals, the images nevertheless remained a series of constructed actions directed by a professional photographer using models to enact a spontaneous moment, and affirmed the commercial function of fashion photography.\(^\text{32}\)

Even more important for our purposes, in this new style of photography the model represented something more than just the clothes since she was also was portraying herself. During this period, models developed independent identities and became


\(^{31}\) A typical example of fashion photography in this format can be seen in Penn’s images for *Vogue* from the 1950s. See the archive book by Irving Penn in Westerbeck, *Irving Penn: A Career in Photography*.

significant players in the fashion world.\textsuperscript{33} In Backlund’s opinion, the celebrity model is a problem that hinders the portrayal of her designs in images. Mainstream fashion editors and photographers focus the lens of the camera upon the personality of the model. This trend originated with fashion editors of the 1960s, who sought a “face” that was somehow “new” or different, while stressing a certain image of “girlishness.”\textsuperscript{34} Twiggy was one of the first models to be identified as fulfilling these ideals. Yet Twiggy’s popular identity got the better of her modeling career, and she was seen as an inflexible vehicle for selling clothing, thus she retired only three years into her career. Following Twiggy, Jean Shrimpton became the ideal 1960s model by functioning as the synthesis between the older ideal of style as elite, and the new ideal of style as a disposable consumer item.\textsuperscript{35} Shrimpton projected a youthful image and adapted to a given photographer’s direction and vision, while always conveying her own sense of identity. Shrimpton’s modeling career in the 1960s illustrated how fashion images came to constitute the “popular” ideal of the decade through the construction of staged narratives.

Fashion narratives continued to flourish in the 1990s with the introduction of the grunge lifestyle and “heroin chic” appearance. Documentary photography became the new aesthetic for fashion images within the pages of \textit{Vogue} and other fashion magazines. This photographic style made visible areas of ordinary life and components of alternative lifestyles that had been rarely documented up until that point. This new fashion phenomenon was responding to the glamorized commercial image of previous decades and a growing desire to present the emotionally ugly narratives of the industry.\textsuperscript{36} While the traditional intention of fashion photographs had been to create a glamorized, unattainable fantasy, the new realist fashion photographs were seen as creating, promoting and furthering the destructive ideals of the 1990s youth.\textsuperscript{37} The defining characteristics of fashion photography during this decade consisted of snapshot records of the model’s life, characterized by an ambiguity of gender and beauty. Such photographs

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Charlotte Cotton, \textit{The Photograph as Contemporary Art} (London: Thames and Hudson 2004), 145.
\end{enumerate}
dissolved the boundaries between what is worn and the way one chooses to wear it, and explored loneliness, urban alienation, poverty, illness and drug culture.38

Fashion model turned photographer Corinne Day was instrumental in challenging the traditional notions of fashion photography by breaking away from the impossibly spectacular and theatrical narratives of more mainstream images, such as those made for designers like Versace. Day’s photographs of nineteen-year-old Kate Moss for The Face (1990) precisely captured her “unprofessional” or “amateur” technique, resulting in a supposedly more realistic documentation of a young girl’s day. The black and white images captured Moss’s unkempt hairstyle, thin pubescent body and pale, almost ill, look through intimate moments of laughter and pain. After the success and acclaim of these images, Day was commissioned to take photographs of Moss for a series entitled “Under Exposure” in Vogue (1990). These images featured Moss in the more urban setting of her own unkempt apartment while wearing “oversized” items of lingerie. A number of high profile fashion images emulated this documentary approach and furthered Kate Moss’s identity as an innovative fashion agent. The images of Moss changed the status of fashion photographs into documentary images, embodying the narratives of uncertainty and loss of control felt in the 1990s.39

The snapshot aesthetic prominent in the 1990s was deceptive, as it purported to reflect an authentic event but was actually a staged narrative used for commercial purposes. As the grunge lifestyle and heroin chic ideals of the fashion world continued to grow, further fashion images portraying this aesthetic were produced for the pages of Vogue. Grace Coddington, Fashion Editor (1988-1995), and Creative Director (1995-present) of Vogue, is known for creating fashion magazine stories of epic proportions.40 Coddington’s first priority behind every fashion photo shoot is the story being told through the images. Next in importance is the model, who must have a strong character, but also possess “an absence of allure.”41 The allure of the model is then brought forth through clothing choices that define the narrative, along with the garments that define the

39 Cotton, The Photograph as Contemporary Art, 144.
41 MacSweeney, Vogue: The Editor’s Eye, 182.
season. These stylistic characteristics can be seen in Coddington’s most controversial photo essay based on the grunge lifestyle trend from 1992. Steven Miesel was employed as the fashion photographer, and worked hand-in-hand with Coddington to create beautiful and compelling images. The images present various stories Coddington had encountered on her trip to Britain, depicting the grunge music scene featuring Kurt Cobain, and the incorporation of vintage clothing into everyday attire. The models were dressed in plaid shirts and ripped jeans, with piercings and dark makeup, and staged in unkempt interiors and outdoor settings. The images shocked and startled the readers of Vogue, as they stylized and glamourized the underground lifestyle of the 1990s youth culture. The end result imported alternative chic aesthetics into the sphere of traditional, spectacular fashion imagery.

Despite the fact that recent fashion photography has tended to privilege the constructed narrative, still life fashion images have gradually reappeared in the pages of Vogue. In 1988, Anna Wintour became Editor-in-Chief of Vogue and began to revamp the magazine. Wintour realized Penn’s still life techniques could elevate the beauty section of the magazine through a strikingly beautiful single image per article, which would capture the attention of the reader. Alexander Liberman (Editorial Director of Condé Nast Publications 1962-1994) agreed with Wintour. As an old friend of Penn, Liberman asked the photographer to work on the beauty section imagery with the help of Executive Fashion Editor, Phyllis Posnick. At this stage in Penn’s career, he no longer cared to produce commercial pictures, but instead focused only on what he deemed “memorable images.” He had to think the subject was of the highest calibre and had to feel strongly about the image’s projected message. Posnick and Penn worked together for years, creating the single image required for each beauty article within Vogue. Images of food, drinks, flowers, bugs, skulls, and fashionable objects such as makeup, shoes and accessories, were all incorporated depending on the content of the article. Penn continued to employ models for his still life images, usually stripping them of any humanistic qualities, but using their structure to highlight specific storylines. In a similar vein,

42 MacSweeney, Vogue: The Editor’s Eye, 183.
43 Ibid.
44 MacSweeney, Vogue: The Editor’s Eye, 301.
Bergengren either completely removes the model to highlight the garment or else uses the model to emphasize the built up shapes and forms of the garment, as seen with the images for Backlund’s *In No Time* collection discussed in chapter one (see fig. 10). For example, one of Penn’s most difficult shots was entitled *Bee Stung Lips* for an editorial about the dangers of lip injections in *Vogue* (1995). To symbolically represent the contents of the article, Penn created a close-up photograph of a bee sitting on model’s plump red lips, insinuating that one can accomplish a similar plump lip effect through a dangerous bee sting. The value of Penn’s still life images should not be diminished by the fact that they were produced for the beauty section of the magazine.

In addition to Penn’s work for *Vogue*, contemporary artist Wolfgang Tillmans also produced a series of still life images featuring clothing. Tillmans’ artistic practice involves manipulating formal issues such as composition, colour and texture to create aesthetically significant images. Regardless of the subject matter, Tillmans’ pictures convey a state of bliss by depicting the most ordinary objects as significant. He has created a signature style of photography consisting of a flat aesthetic achieved by bouncing a hand flashgun intuitively into a room, preferably off a white wall. Tillmans’ lighting technique largely eliminates shadows and foregrounds clear, flat objects, which are perfect for still life images.

Although his work as a fashion photographer is well known, he did not start out in the industry. His first introduction into the fashion world was in 1989 through *i-D* magazine, where a series of his portraiture photographs were used as fashion images because they engaged with popular subcultures of society. As his work with fashion continued, he tried to channel attention away from the fashion industry’s emphasis on popular labels, trends, and lifestyles and onto the multilayers embedded in the personality of the garment. One reoccurring motif in Tillmans’ still life work is clothing left to dry or abandoned by its wearers on floors, doors and stair banisters (fig. 23). “The limp

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45 Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 128.
sculptural forms that are unwittingly made by discarding of the clothes suggest the shapes of the bodies they once contained, like a shedded [sic] animal skin." Tillmans’ focus is on the garments not as objects of artistic merit but rather as objects of human existence. Although the clothing is elevated to an object in and of itself, its “life” is shaped by its own history as a garment, rather than an external narrative spun by the designer or photographer.


Backlund and Bergengren’s artistic relationship builds upon this trajectory of still life fashion photography, but furthers its concepts by focusing on the garments and their intended meaning. The images are produced for art rather than commercial purposes, and also for Backlund’s personal archive. Bergengren’s artistic portfolio is expansive, covering diverse subject matter from industrial machinery to fashion objects. Her images highlight the sculptural and organic nature of the subject matter, opening up new ways of looking at inanimate objects. She has worked for other fashion labels to produce advertising campaigns using the visual codes of still life. Past advertisements include shoe and accessories images for Giorgio Armani, Prada, Muse, Louis Vuitton and New Balance, not to mention images for Borsalino Shirts for the S/S 2014 collection, where she photographed the shirts in such extreme close-up that they become unrecognizable as

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49 Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 130.
garments. Bergengren has also taken still life images that incorporate fashionable accessories to promote fashion trends for *British Vogue, Another Magazine* and *Contributor Magazine*.50

Nonetheless, Bergengren’s images for Backlund are quite different from images of fashionable items made for commercial purposes in that they focus on the sculptural and organic design qualities of the garments. The exhibition images taken by Bergengren remove Backlund’s designs from the usual narrative context of traditional fashion photography and place them into the more aesthetic sphere of still life. The garments “are devoid of the human body and set against monochromatic backgrounds…either appearing to float in space, rest on flat surfaces, or occupy corners.”51 Thus, the designs appear as three-dimensional objects, whose exact function is uncertain. In the absence of references to lifestyle, seasons and trends, the image focuses on the craft, textile and designer-intended narrative present within the garment. Backlund has stated that she enjoys how Bergengren’s still life images cut the natural link between clothes and wearer to give the garments a meaning on their own, and draw the viewer’s attention towards the details of the designs.52 Thus, the still life aesthetic seems to more accurately represent Backlund’s creative process and designs, not to mention fulfill her intentions of turning the lens back onto the clothes, something she feels is missing from narrative styles of fashion photography. Additionally, her fashion photography allows references to art, history, and culture to emerge as the viewer interprets the work and develops its meaning.

One example of where Bergengren’s image furthers the personal narrative of Backlund’s garments is seen in the photograph of a hand-crocheted top for the collection *Pool Positions* (2009). Backlund’s designs are often anatomical in inspiration, as she looks to skeletal forms and shapes based on ribs, vertebrae, and other structural body parts. She explains the use of such forms stating that she likes clothes to look as if they

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50 Bergengren’s artistic portfolio is available online, but does not specify any dates. The images are ordered from the most recent, with the 2008 images for Backlund towards the bottom of the list. The relationship between Backlund and Bergengren has been a significant force in furthering Bergengren’s career as a still life fashion photographer.
51 Ryan, *Fashioning the Object*, 83-84.
52 Ryan, *Fashioning the Object*, 85.
are a natural part of the body, rather than attached or decorative (see fig. 9). Specifically, for the collection *Pool Positions*, Backlund explored the aesthetic forms of external skeletons of animals as protective armour. She constructed the light blue, alpaca wool, crotched top to highlight the structure of the upper body, namely, the spine, ribs, shoulder bones and hipbones (fig. 24). Not only about protection, this collection also addressed the intrinsic relationship between clothing and body movement by following the lines of the human form, just as an animal’s external skeleton would. Furthermore, the construction of the top displays a delicacy that highlights the fragile nature of the skeleton. Bergengren places the top against a grey background that highlights the garment’s intricate skeletal form. The photograph not only alludes to historical still life images of lobsters, insects and bones, but also resembles stone fossils.

![Figure 24: Sandra Backlund, Pool Position, Spring/Summer 2009. Photograph by Ola Bergengren, 2009. Reprinted from Zoë Ryan, Fashioning the Object (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago 2012), 86.](image)

Bergengren’s photograph of this top is more closely related to natural history images than fashion. A comparison with the work of Japanese artist, Hiroshi Sugimoto,

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53 Ibid.
demonstrates this point. When photographing a fossil, most photographers try to capture every diagnostic feature, as well as its surface texture. In Sugimoto’s *History of History* (2005), we see still life photographs of his personal collection of objects, which include artworks, artefacts and fossils dating back to prehistoric times. His intention in the series was to make an extended exploration of time and life as perceived in the context of nature and history.\(^{54}\) Not unlike Bergengren, Sugimoto works in the tradition of still life photography in order to further the meaning of the objects by capturing every detail possible and, in doing so, to generate a new narrative. Sugimoto views fossils as a form of “pre-photography” as they are a natural way in which history has been recorded, and sees himself as creating another “fossil” through photography.\(^{55}\) Thus, he views his images as addressing history, while also recording a new history that produces a contemporary narrative for the fossil.\(^{56}\) By comparing Sugimoto’s artistic images of fossils and Bergengren’s image of *Pool Positions*, one can see stylistic similarities in their attention to detail. The still life visual codes allow for the object to be recorded in its full integrity. The whole object is captured on a plain background, highlighting the surface texture and structure, which enables the viewer to better understand the anatomical shapes presented. Thus, Bergengren portrays Backlund’s top as something like a fossil specimen, acknowledging the personal narrative embedded in the garment and making it the sole focal point of the image.

Turning to Backlund’s F/W 2007-2008 collection *Ink Blot Test*, we see a wide variety of materials used to construct the designs. One of the key purposes of Bergengren’s images of these garments was to highlight their materiality while obscuring their function. For this collection, Backlund found inspiration in the Rorschach Inkblot Test – a psychological evaluation that uses symmetrical inkblot patterns printed on white cards to assess a patient’s mental and emotional state. The collection was based on the patterns found in the inkblot images. She wanted to create pieces that drew attention to


\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
the symmetrical qualities and idiosyncratic shapes that she could create. Backlund used a black, white and grey colour palette that mimics inkblot images while also highlighting the sculptural quality of her work. The shadows created by the three-dimensional construction of each garment are especially visible in her monochromatic colour palette and are further accentuated in the images by Bergengren.

Backlund constructed one of the pieces in the collection, *Origami Top*, using an origami paper construction of square cubes (fig. 25). All the square cubes were attached together to create a spikey surface consisting of paper valleys and mountaintops. The top is completely symmetrical in shape and colour. Bergengren’s image of *Origami Top* (2011) positions the garment in a corner of a white-walled room with most of the top on the floor and one shoulder propped up against the wall (fig. 26). Using the corner of the room in this way to stage the photograph further accentuates the edges and corners of Backlund’s origami construction. The function of the garment, however, is completely lost, as it no longer resembles a wearable item.


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57 Ryan, *Fashioning the Object*, 84.
The second piece Bergengren photographed from *Ink Blot Test* was *Hand Knitted Dress* (2011) (fig. 27). The dress was crafted using a thick wool and mohair blend fiber in a black and grey colour palette. The dress is symmetrical in shape from the left to right side, as well as top to bottom when folded at the waist. However, the top of the dress is constructed with light grey wool, while the bottom is made of black wool. The middle of the dress mixes in dark grey wool to transition from light grey to black, creating an ombré effect (fig. 28). The entirely symmetrical aspect of the dress, however, is lost in Bergengren’s image. For the photograph, she coiled the dress in a snail shell-like formation, placing it on a white table and letting the rest of it spill off the table and out of sight. The top half of the dress was photographed, focusing on the light grey colour, but even so the ombré colour effect was still apparent due to the shadowing of the image. The image highlighted the tactile nature of the wool and the intensive labour of the craftsmanship.


In Bergengren’s images, the narrative of the Rorschach Inkblot Test is slightly obscured. However, the idea of psychological states of being is conveyed to the viewer
through the colour palette, material and construction method, as well as the manipulation of the garments for the image. For *Origami Dress*, the creation of a thorny exterior can be associated with the negative psychological or emotional states of a human’s personality, while *Hand Knitted Dress* comes across as a warm and comforting object due to its soft and fluffy wool, which can conceivably symbolize the traits of love and kindness.

Although Backlund’s collections usually consist of handcrafted designs, her F/W 2010-2011 collection explored the use of machine-made fabric. In this case she employed the help of an Italian textile manufacturer to customize fabrics to her exact specifications so they would have the same kind of sculptural qualities of the origami paper she had used in the past. One item from this collection that Bergengren photographed was a pink silk dress entitled *Pissé Dress* (fig. 29). The tank dress had a streamlined silhouette for the upper body, while the lower body exaggerated the natural curves of a woman’s hips by placing multiple triangular-shaped, pleated appliqués in surprising configurations on both sides of the skirt. Again Bergengren’s image did not resemble a functional dress, but instead captured the delicate construction of the fabric. In her photograph, the garment takes on a whimsical shape as if floating in gusts of wind (fig. 30).


Bergengren’s images show how using still life visual codes can give the clothes a voice of their own. The photographic relationship of designer Issey Miyake and photographer Irving Penn produced similar results. Penn’s first photographs of Miyake’s work were of his S/S 1983 collection for an editorial in *Vogue*. The images delighted Miyake, as he had never envisioned his designs taking on such forms and shapes. From that day forward, Miyake and Penn have created almost two hundred images together. Miyake believes a fashion designer always needs someone else who can look over the work from a detached and objective viewpoint to create the next piece of art in the collection, which is the image. For Miyake, Penn reinterprets the clothes, gives them new life and meaning and presents them from a vantage point that he never originally intended. Most importantly, Penn highlights the essence of design in Miyake’s garments. Similarly, Bergengren creates images for Backlund that gives the garments new meaning and stresses the design techniques used.

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59 Ibid.
Thus we can conclude that the images produced by Bergengren of Backlund’s work for the *Fashioning the Object* exhibition revive the photographic technique of the still life in a fashion context. Bergengren’s photographic style lends itself to capturing the sculptural qualities and personal narratives of Backlund’s designs and enables the garments to function as objects in and of themselves. Thus, the museumgoer was able to understand the construction, materiality, and story behind each piece, while simultaneously using their own knowledge and narratives to make sense of the work. Most notably, the relationship of Backlund and Bergengren revitalizes an older tradition of fashion photography. Although traditional fashion photography will continue to favour lifestyle narratives where garments are merely props, this series of still life images shows what else is possible.
Bibliography


http://www.artic.edu/about

http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Fashioning-Object/index


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