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Almond, Kevin and Swindells, Steve

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Sculptural Thinking in Fashion

Kevin Almond and Steve Swindells

Abstract

Human thinking in relation to the body is conditioned by an understanding of the body as a three-dimensional form. The fashion designer Madame Gres said ‘I wanted to be a sculptor — for me it is just the same to work with fabric or stone.’¹ Sculpture and fashion both adopt figurative formations, a default position of representing human form in space, motion and time: both an art form receptive to the senses of sight, touch and gravitational pull. This research questions whether the thinking processes in fashion design are common with thinking in sculptural practices within fine art. The question emerged through conversations between a fashion designer and a contemporary artist and centered upon the use of language, thinking and reflective practices, and the articulation and application of material processes. To address these questions we focused upon two approaches: whether thought and its articulation in the lexicon of creative practice is common and whether there is a two way flow of visual, material and technical influences. The initial conversation centered upon the art historian, Rowan Bailey’s essay ‘Herder’s Sculptural Thinking.’² Our interpretations of this work identified that thought itself evolves in the experience of three-dimensions and sharing our experiences of touch. The idea of the sculptural therefore becomes social; a shared phenomena. We became interested in how thinking begins to take shape in material forms, or the notion of working creatively in three-dimensionality is in itself a structure of the emotions that connect to a line of thought. The first section of the paper establishes a platform for the second section by investigating the significance of touch and mimicry, and the philosophies behind thinking sculpturally. The second section considers the effects of influence between the two disciplines, noting an interaction between the creative processes in sculpture and fashion design, such as: modeling, draping, molding, stacking, casting, shaping and carving. The paper concludes by drawing together the two sections.

Key Words: Touch, sculpture, thought, fashion, material, technical, three-dimensional.

1. Introduction: The Conversation

This paper emerged through conversations between a fashion designer, Kevin Almond³ and a contemporary artist, Steve Swindells⁴. Discussions focused upon the use of language and reflection common to both practices, and the articulation and application of material processes. A number of starting points were initially

referenced during the conversation, in particular the aforementioned paper by Rowan Bailey, *Herder's Sculptural Thinking*. This presents the German philosopher and theologian, Johann Gottfried Herder's⁵ ideas of human expression derived through language, where all the senses interconnect, to conclude thinking as being composed of physical and social experience. Initial practical examples discussed included the work of Madame Gres⁶, Jean-Paul Gaultier⁷ and Andrea Zittel⁸. An exhibition of the work of Madame Gres entitled: *Goddess of Drape*,⁹ involved garments displayed in the living space of the sculptor Antoine Bourdelle,¹⁰ suggesting parallels between both sculpting with stone and draping with cloth. At the onset of her career Gres declared her wish to be a sculptor, citing the similarities of working with fabric and stone. Another exhibition by fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier: *Pain Couture*¹¹, featured sculptures of bread shaped into Gaultier's signature designs. Gaultier asked some of France's leading bakers to work with his couturier's to create a collection of garments and accessories made from bread and bread baskets. A further example is contemporary artist Andrea Zittel, who traverses across visual art, performance, interior design, architecture and fashion to arrive at hybrid, sculptural-fashion sensibilities. In 'Smockshop' Zittel designed a simple double wrap-around apron style garment. Each of these smocks were sewn by a different artist who reinterpreted Zittel's original design based on their individual skill sets, tastes and interests. Through these initial conversations and examples we became interested in whether fashion thinking and sculptural thinking share the same traits and possess similar modes of activity in the making process. We were also interested in whether following a line of thought becomes analogous to tracing a human form – and what unites an understanding of the relationship between the human form and abstract shapes?



Image 1: Madame Gres exhibition at Musee Bourdelle, Paris, 2011. Photo courtesy of © Pierre Antoine

Philosophers, and cognitive psychologists agree (from the psychologist, Jean Piaget¹² through to contemporary cultural theorist, Laura Marks¹³) that humans acquire a stock of simple abstract spatial concepts; concepts of lines, planes, angles, spheres, cones, cylinders, curvilinearity, rectilinearity, convexity and concavity. Thus we are capable of making abstract constructions into complete physical forms, which can be thought of *in the round* - realised in various ways from memory. In order to grasp forms in their full spatial completeness, sculptors and fashion designers, alike tend to combine innumerable silhouettes or projective views, and accordingly a sense of touch with the materials in the development of their work.

Arguably, sculptural and fashion thinking share the same traits by requiring the practitioner to think and simultaneously handle and work materials round, in the hands or to look at them from a number of points of view in order to grasp their formal properties and ways they may be constructed. Sculptural thinking and fashion thinking are thus both bound by the philosophies of touch and tacit intelligence, which can be thought of as a competence of thinking three-dimensionally, generally acquired from experience of the world. For the fashion designer and sculptor, thinking, looking and handling materials all become aggregated into a complex web of one's entire social, cultural and psychological experience, which, in context to sculptural thinking, enables the cognition of the canon of art and fashion, including the history of the anatomy of the body and of the mind, to form a working, creative logic.



Photo © Pierre Antoine

Image 2: Madame Gres exhibition at Musee Bourdelle, Paris, 2011. Photo courtesy of © Pierre Antoine

The first section of this paper explores our ability to think, nurture and conceptualize abstract ideas and forms. In particular, exploring how our relationship to materials, objects and people serve as a platform for thinking: accordingly how taking-awareness of the world is made possible through sensory bodily experience (touch) and the ability to remember this awareness and transpose this into fine art and fashion practice. The second section builds upon the platform of the first by considering the historical flow and effects of influence between sculptural and fashion design practices. The paper concludes by drawing the two parts together.



Photo : © Pierre Antoine

Image 3: Madame Gres exhibition at Musee Bourdelle, Paris, 2011. Photo courtesy of © Pierre Antoine

2. Thinking Sculpturally: The Acquisition of Knowledge Through Touch and Empathy (part 1)

The historian and philosopher Robert D. Vance, claims that ‘Sculptures are objects in three dimensions,’¹⁴ and that ‘...what counts for sculpture is real occupancy of space with the three dimensions.’ In the art historian Erik Koed’s paper, ‘Sculpture and the Sculptural’¹⁵ he develops a theory of the sculptural in terms of a distinctive way of using materials as an artistic medium, the dimensions of sculpture and the sculptural having utility and relevance without being overly prescriptive. The developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development explores how humans acquire, construct, and use knowledge. Piaget claims that our first spatial concepts are derived, not only from looking at objects, but from how we touch and engage with them. In the early stages of cognitive development, touch reinforces thought, or more precisely touch helps to complete

thought. Therefore the accrument of knowledge gained from developing competences of handling materials is also a form of intelligence, generally accrued through the development of tacit knowledge. Piaget calls this a *sensori-motor phase* of our development.

Our capacity to touch and handle materials, the order and status in which we place them, contributes to our grasp of reality and our capacity to think. For artists and designers, specifically in the production of their work, this thinking through materials often becomes a plastic embodiment of reality, by way of seeking a personalised engagement to the world by making things. To locate these ideas within fashion practice, the most intimate way of producing clothes is through the bespoke industries. Here the fashion designer works directly with individual body size and clothes are often sewn by hand, the sense of touch and feel being integral to this process. However, with the development of digital technologies in mass garment manufacture beginning to infiltrate the bespoke industries, there are concerns that the sense of touch and feel in the manufacturing process is being lost. For instance, mass manufactured tailoring is capable of producing garments of similar quality to the more luxurious bespoke tailoring. As this technology takes over less people have skills in manual pattern cutting and manufacture, negating the relationship between the designer, material and wearer. In this context technology shifts notions of sculptural thinking.



Image 1: Bespoke tailors at work in the design studio utilizing manual skills. Photo courtesy of © Kevin Almond

Herder believed our cognitive abilities and emotional sensibilities are co-dependent. Thought is essentially dependent on, and framed in scope by the acquisition of both emotion and language. In other words, a person can only think once they have grasped a language through which they are able to express themselves linguistically, emotionally and physically. As soon as a person has an understanding of and use of words, they are able to participate in the practical

activity of making abstractions of sensibility. Herder argues that sculpture is a distinctive art form because it holds a fundamental position towards, the sense of touch as much as vision. Arguably, in fashion design the sense of touch is the controlling force dictating the designer's vision. A fundamental skill imparted to fashion students, dictates they do not attempt to design without having sourced the fabric. The handle of the fabric is extremely important as it indicates the possibilities and limitations of the design. For instance a soft drape fabric will not create a structured shape and *vice versa*. For fashion designers such as Madame Gres, the process of design always began with the manipulation of fabric on scaled down shapes of the human figure. This involved an intimate handle of the raw material and the activity assisted in shaping the eventual vision and direction for the design of the clothes.

In fashion one is touching something all the time, the quality of the surface material being touched is what gives clothes their status, and correspondingly the status of the wearer – the qualities of touch will relate to both thought and emotion, thus informing the design process. Fashion garments often distort or exaggerate the natural body and in so doing create sculptural forms through application of *other things*. Through touch the fashion designer has to experiment with fabric and a multitude of *other* textile fibres, such as interfacing and canvas, which can be applied to a fabric in order to sustain silhouette and shape. Alternatively, the human body can be constricted by garments such as, corsets or control pants, which distort the natural figure. In fashion, touching something is therefore a performance of thinking and touching the world one is affected by, and as a consequence of this, the borders of one's body registers our feelings to the world in which it lives. Lived-bodies are able to sense their spatial environment through the experience and feeling of their periphery.

These theories are now related to the potential flow of influences between sculptural practices and fashion design – do they stimulate each other? The analysis focuses upon the use of language and reflection common to both disciplines and the articulation and application of material processes. It considers ways in which the modes of thought in the creative and three-dimensional practice of both, have commonalities and are a shared phenomena.

2. Cross-Current Thinking (part 2)

The authors approach to the second stage involved reading through the various philosophies, theories and examples evidenced in the prism of professional practice, as well as incorporating action based research in studios, experiencing first hand perceptions about sculptural thinking in the making processes of both disciplines. The research also focused on object-based enquiry, observing and handling garments in workshops and archives, as well as reviewing fashion and sculpture exhibitions. We began to look at fashion garments as sculptural silhouettes that require the maker to imagine both complex and subtle designs,

sometimes simultaneously. In this process, the maker often employs simple spatial concepts in varying degrees to realise designs that may be composed of complex facets and angles. There is plenty of evidence in designers and artists' sketch-books, and in manuals of architecture, to show that in trying to grasp new and innovative shapes the creative practitioner makes use of established schematic frameworks. In practice, artists and designers tend to make forms intelligible in their thoughts and sketches, first by reducing them to simpler, more easily conceived shapes (such as cylinders, cones, spheres, squares etc) and then, if required, by analysing these developments, which can lead to the more complex constructions.

There is considerable literature detailing the design and technical development of fashion garments being inspired by sculptural form. Examples ranged from technical studies examining how the cut and construction of garments mirrors the ways thinking begins to take shape. In general, fashion designers were more likely to have been directly influenced by sculptural practices and works rather than fashion influencing sculpture. This was evidenced either through chronologies of fashion history, designer biographies or through journalistic reports in the fashion press and on the Internet. There proved to be little literature that reviewed how fashion has influenced sculpture or sculptural thinking. Clothing has certainly been depicted in sculpture throughout its history, such as the representation of the human figure during the high classical period in Ancient Greece, where the portrayal of drapery on clothes was used to add to the impact of active poses. More recently, in the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's exhibition,¹⁶ at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK, the artist dressed his figures with highly coloured African fabrics. Similarly, the life-size figures of American artist Duane Hanson¹⁷ are hardly fashionable but the attention to detail is only fully realized by the nature and styling of the clothing used.

Several historical and contemporary designers and artists, whose work straddles both art and fashion include the Australian designer Patricia Black,¹⁸ American artists Robert Kushner¹⁹ and Andrea Zittel, to more conventional fashion designers adopting sculptural thinking such as, Madame Gres, Claude Montana,²⁰ Madeleine Vionnet,²¹ Pierre Cardin,²² Christobel Balenciaga,²³ Charles James²⁴ and Jean Muir.²⁵ Each of these designers had diverse approaches ranging from the fluidity and drape of Vionnet's clothes, to the structured and corseted work of Charles James. James was renowned in the mid twentieth century as a master at sculpting fabric in a stiffened way for the female form. His garments were described as, '... a built environment, constructed on principles of abstraction but substantiated by ample materials, that the woman wearing becomes curiously self sufficient as well.'²⁶ Through these abstracted constructions James employed two phases of independent thinking, namely 'inductive' and 'deductive' spatial organisation. Inductive spatial thinking is based on a tacit intelligence derived from an engagement with actual materials and

techniques: whereas deductive spatial thinking tends to be acquired more abstractly often without direct engagement with physical things.



Image 4: Claude Montana, deep red wool circle jacket with exaggerated, sculpted collar, 1980's. Photo courtesy of © Kerry Taylor Auctions.

James most famous garment was the 'Clover Leaf' dress.²⁷ It reveals his fascination with geometry and mathematics and the technical thought process of a designer who was not only a fanatical perfectionist, but who, '... saw the female form as an armature on which to fashion sculpture, not just cover with clothes.'²⁸ Similarly, Vionnet's work, was inspired by the exact proportional relations of classical Greek sculpture. The basis for all her designs was the relationship between body size and shape and the material. She worked directly in three-dimensions using scaled down wooden dolls, draping and pleating fabrics onto these shapes before scaling the ideas up into human dimensions. In the 1980's, Japanese designers such as Issey Miyake,²⁹ Rei Kawakubo³⁰ and Yohji Yamamoto³¹ revolutionised ideas about the relationship between the body and

clothes, for instance Miyake is noted for experimenting with the body's volume by changing its dimensions.



Image 5: Issey Miyake charcoal grey wool cocoon coat, which alters the natural silhouette of the body. Photo courtesy of © Kerry Taylor Auctions.

Other contemporary designers who adopt sculptural sensibilities included: Iris Van Herpen,³² Phoebe Philo,³³ Boudicca,³⁴ Mary Katrantzou,³⁵ Gareth Pugh,³⁶ Hussein Chalayan,³⁷ Vivienne Westwood³⁸ and Aitor Throup.³⁹ The inflated clothing of Gareth Pugh became his trademark. His first collection used balloons to accentuate models' joints and limbs. Pugh is noted for experimenting with form and volume to create '...nonsensically shaped, wearable sculptures,'⁴⁰ which change the shape of the human frame. Pugh has likened his work to a struggle between light and darkness; designs have included PVC inflated into voluminous coats, black perspex discs linked like chain mail, and shiny latex masks and leggings. The materials used to sculpt such shapes include diverse combinations of parachute silk and mink fur combined with plastic charged by electric currents and Afro-weave synthetic hair. Hussain Chalayan's work integrates fashionable clothing and the human body with science, technology and architecture, playing with ideas constructed around anthropology. His most innovative work has been

described as wearable art such as his *Table Skirt*, in which he used a wooden material to create a skirt that fits to the body, but folds into itself to form a table. The London based design duo of Zowie Broach and Brian Kirkby, known as Boudicca, create a sculptural collage on a body through *moulage*⁴¹ and then start pattern cutting from the installations. Here the sculptural shape influences the three-dimensional shape of the garment and *vice versa*.

In a non-scientific investigation a questionnaire was issued to fashion students and fashion professionals. It resulted in forty-three replies from fashion students and thirty-eight replies received from fashion professionals. The questionnaire asked the respondents to consider concepts of fashion and sculpture and to discuss how they related these discussions to the work of specific fashion designers and future directions for what could be termed *sculptural fashion*. All the replies provided a useful platform to analyse key shared terms and practices. Some responses implied that sculptural fashion is created when the fabric lifts away from the body, to form a shape of its own. This can be achieved in a variety of creative and technical ways, which can include simple darts and pleats or more structural applications to fabric that create shape, such as interfacing, wire or horsehair. Sculptural fashion was labelled as expressive, accentuating or exaggerating the human form to create strong silhouettes that work from every angle *in the round*.

Respondents proposed sculptural designs as something that encase the body or fail to follow the natural line of the body, working with or in spite of the human frame. Style lines were also considered important, ranging from the angular or curved, close fitting or extended out from the body to emphasise or distort the human shape. Some respondents noted that fashion designers are inspired by a variety of art mediums, such as painting and printmaking, but they generally felt that fashion and sculpture have a greater affinity. As a practice, sculpture is influential because it is normally liberated from any utility and able to follow its own conceptual and aesthetic position. It was noted that both disciplines achieve form in similar ways, using techniques such as moulage, creative cutting, modelling or moulding. Equally, both disciplines default to representing an accentuated human frame in the round and in this respect the flow of inspiration can be considered equitable.

3. Conclusion

Through this research we identify how thought is completed by touch and the significance of touch in relation to understanding three-dimensional form; in the context of fashion, by providing us with the edge of ourselves where the body that is *contained* by materials becomes in touch with itself by being in touch with something *other*. Piaget claimed that our cognitive development and our capacity to think is reinforced by the experience of touch. Our capacity to touch and handle materials, and the order and status in which we place them contributes to our grasp of reality and our capacity to think. Human thinking in relation to the human frame

is conditioned by an understanding of the body as a three-dimensional form, and it is in this context that sculpture and fashion thinking both adopt figurative formations.

The Cognition of form and surface takes place when one is actually able to be in touch with other things; the performance of touching is not just an inner performance of inner feelings, rather it actually gives thought a feeling of something that in fact exists outside oneself: it is an experience of the self being exposed in the world and simultaneously demarcated. Herder proposed that a person could only think once they have grasped a language through which they are able to express themselves linguistically, emotionally and physically, and this is what underpins aesthetic sensibilities. Cultural theorist Laura Marks plus others similarly placed importance on *tactile epistemologies*⁴² as something gained not from vision alone but through both mimicking the world around us and our capacity to touch and handle physical materials, in the act of mimicking. Overall the research revealed a wider fusion of ways in which thinking in fashion and sculpture take shape through our expressive capacities with respect to our abilities to manipulate form and materials.

Notes

¹ ‘Madame Gres as Sculptor,’ *Suzy Menkes*, accessed 06 July 2014.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/19/fashion/19iht-fgres19.html?_r=0.

² Rowan Bailey, ‘Herder’s Sculptural Thinking,’ *Parallax*, 17, no. 2 (2011): 71-83.

³ Dr. Kevin Almond, is Head of Department of Fashion and Textiles, University of Huddersfield, UK.

⁴ Prof. Steve Swindells, is Professor of Creative Practice, University of Huddersfield, UK.

⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder, (1744-1803) was a German philosopher, theologian, poet and literary critic.

⁶ Madame Gres (1903-1993), was a French couturier. Her signature, draped gowns were classical and sophisticated.

⁷ Jean-Paul Gaultier (born 1952), French fashion designer. Known for his sculpted use of corsetry and playing with traditional gender roles in his work.

⁸ Andrea Zittel (born 1965), American sculptor, installation artist and fashion designer.

⁹ ‘Madame Gres,’ *Musee Bourdelle, Paris*, 30 March – 24 July 2011.

¹⁰ Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1829) was an influential French sculptor, painter, and teacher. His studio became the Musée Bourdelle, a museum dedicated to his work; located at 18, rue Antoine Bourdelle, in the 15th arrondissement of Paris, France.

¹¹ Jean-Paul Gaultier, 'Pain Couture,' *Fondation Cartier pour l'art Contemporain, Paris*, 6 June – 10 October 2004.

¹² Jean Piaget, (1896-1980), was a Swiss development psychologist and philosopher. His theory of cognitive development and epistemological view are together called 'Genetic Epistemology'.

¹³ Laura Marks, (born 1972), is an American media theorist and artist.

¹⁴ Robert D. Vance, 'Sculpture,' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 35, no. 3 (1995).

¹⁵ Erik Koed, (2005) 'Sculpture and the Sculptural,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63, no. 2 (2005): 147-154.

¹⁶ Yinka Shonibare, 'FABRIC-ATION,' *Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK*. 2nd March – 1 September 2013.

¹⁷ Duane Hanson, (1925-1996), was an American artist and sculptor. He was known for his life cast works of people in materials that ranged from resin, bronze, fibreglass and polyester.

¹⁸ Patricia Black, (born 1984), is an Italian artist once described as a 'Poet of Cloth,' She has worked in a range of artistic outlets: from theatre costumes to three-dimensional textiles. Her work represents an adaptation of traditional techniques using acid dyes to create 3-D forms that enfold the body.

¹⁹ Robert Kushner, (born 1949), is an American painter who is known for his involvement in pattern and decoration.

²⁰ Claude Montana, (born 1949), French fashion designer, whose work is often described a sculptural utilizing aggressive shapes and strong colors.

²¹ Madeleine Vionnet, (1876-1975), French couturier, known as an architect for her use of the bias cut.

²² Pierre Cardin, (born 1922), French fashion designer, known for his geometric shapes and space age designs.

²³ Cristobel Balenciaga, (1895-1972), French couturier, known for his spare, sculptural creations.

²⁴ Charles James, (1906-1978), British born fashion designer, considered a master of cutting and structural form.

²⁵ Jean Muir (1928-1995), British fashion designer, known for her sensuous, draped clothes in soft fabrics.

²⁶ Richard Martin, *Charles James* (London: Assouline, 1996), 5.

²⁷ 'Clover Leaf,' *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed 8 May 2014. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/81678>.

²⁸ Elizabeth Ann, Coleman, 'Charles James,' in *The St James Fashion Encyclopaedia, A Survey of Style*, ed. Richard Martin (New York: Visible Ink Press, 1997), 182.

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- ²⁹ Issey Miyake, (born 1938), is a Japanese fashion designer, known for his technology-driven clothing designs and exhibitions.
- ³⁰ Rei Kawakubo, (born 1942), is a Japanese fashion designer, founder of Comme Des Garcons.
- ³¹ Yohji Yamamoto, (born 1943), is a Japanese fashion designer and master tailor, known for his avant-garde tailoring featuring Japanese design aesthetics.
- ³² Iris Van Herpen, (born 1930), is a Dutch fashion designer known for her innovative experiments with materials, techniques and technologies.
- ³³ Phoebe Philo, (born 1973), is a British fashion designer known for an understated approach to design and construction.
- ³⁴ Boudicca, are a London, UK based design duo of Zowie Broach and Brian Kirkby, known for their pattern cutting their garments always pay a serious attention to fit and finish.
- ³⁵ Mary Katrantzou, (born 1983), is a Greek fashion designer who works in London. She is interested in the way printed textiles can change the shape of a woman's body.
- ³⁶ Gareth Pugh, (born 1981), is an English fashion designer, he is known for his inflated clothing, which accentuate joints and limbs.
- ³⁷ Hussein Chalayan, (born 1970), is a British/Turkish Cypriot fashion designer. His work integrates clothing with technology, science and architecture, playing with ideas that investigate anthropology and culture.
- ³⁸ Vivienne Westwood, (born 1941), is a British fashion designer responsible for the development of punk clothing. Her work has since ranged the use of historical 17th- and 18th-century cloth-cutting principles, and reinterpreting these in a subversive and often sculptural way.
- ³⁹ Aitor Throup, (born 1980), his work evolves around innovative methods of design and construction, in particular a process which utilizes his own sculptures of the human body as a system for blocking garments.
- ⁴⁰ 'Dressing for Dinner,' *Daniel West*, accessed 9 July 2014.
<http://dressing4dinner.com/2011/12/08/gareth-pughs-new-make-up-range-for-m%E2%80%A2a%E2%80%A2c/>.
- ⁴¹ Mouflage is a French term meaning casting or molding. In fashion it is used as a term for draping fabric on a dress stand in order to create a design.
- ⁴² Tactile epistemologies is the acquiring of knowledge through physical contact.

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Kevin Almond, PhD, is Head of Department for Fashion and Textiles, University of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, UK.

Steve Swindells, PhD, is Professor of Creative Practice, University of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, UK.