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# Towards a Collective Understanding of Fashion (Design) Practice: How the Academic Community can Support Practitioner Discourse through Reflection.

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**Keywords:** Fashion Practice, Design Curation, Cultural Narrative, Design pedagogy, Ecclesiastical artifact, Fashion futures, Sustainable Lifestyle, Redirective Practices, Transformative Experiences.

## **Abstract**

*This paper argues a 'thought structure' and narrative of 'seeing' exists through critical gaze when viewing and engaging with fashion practice. Through the creative practice of curatorial project work the unity of discourse between reflection and practice can be attributed to mapping and developing the knowledge's of fashion practice experienced and exploited through the practice portfolio or exhibition.*

*There is opportunity for professional doctorates of design practice to develop insightful methodological approaches informed through the design process of practice. The context of this research paper is the learning experience of a professional doctorate study that focuses on developing and evaluating a fashion (design) practice process of constructing the fashion narrative in a contemporary context.*

*Research suggests that present texts on design practice, reflective practice, visual anthropology and curation are still not effectively informing creative-authorship of practice as portfolio or exhibition of Design Practice. The fashion commerce and fashion cultural industries have much to gain in linking theory with practice towards a better understanding of what designers do, in, through and of practice.*

*The research concludes that a conscious 'seeing' exists as a pure discourse of fashion practice toward an understanding of what designers 'do' in thought and action and how the spectator can apply critical gaze to understand, perform, and respond to fashion practice in*

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*both a commercial and cultural context that is to be collectively understood; and that this achievement can be effectively facilitated through engagement with a professional doctorate programme.*

**Keywords:** Creative-Authorship, Auteur Theory, Spectator, Archeology, Critical Gaze, Curation.

## **Introduction**

Research interest in the creative disciplines is burgeoning and yet the inquiry of fashion practice as a visual culture appears to be lacking theoretical maturity and methodological innovation. Over the decades, if not centuries, it appears that the arts have achieved a cultural superiority due to the immediacy and innate able-ness of literary review and critique against a visual image rather than an object of study (Rose, 2007: 3). It is widely accepted, and was noted in practitioner interviews as part of this project, that design practitioners find difficulty in linking theory with practice, as practice is just what 'is done' and is mostly tacit until after the fact. Discussions concerning research practice are contentious and diverse yet, as observed by Dash and Ponce, (2005: 2) and Niedderer and Reilly, (2010: 1), there is a growing acceptance that new approaches to inquiry are needed if we are to advance research practice in the creative disciplines.

Tillman (2009), CBE, Chairman of the British Fashion Council, introduces a recently commissioned report on the value of the British Fashion Industry with the opening lines:

Our industry is revered as a world-leader in fashion education, and we consequently produce some of the world's most innovative designers, from John Galliano to Vivienne Westwood [...] The innovation and inspiration showcased on the catwalks drive the wheels of our industry, and have been likened to Research & Development in other great industries – the absence of which would leave a stagnated sector (Tillman, 2009: 6).

The question arises as to how we can best empower the design practitioner to innovate through methodological enquiry while in practice. It is clearly not the case that the fashion commerce and fashion cultural industries consider fashion (design) practice as unimportant. The UK fashion industry's direct contribution to UK GDP has been around twice the size of

the publishing (£9.9 billion), car manufacturing (£10.1 billion) and chemical manufacturing industries (£10.6 billion), and only slightly smaller than both telecommunications (£28.7 billion) and real estate (£26.4 billion) (The Value of the UK Fashion Industry 2009: 12). It would seem, from responses of fashion practitioners covered in this paper's discussion section that fashion practitioners may refer to reflection by different terms while also demonstrating various levels of engagement and/or understanding of the benefits that reflection through work-based learning may bring to their practice.

The search for the secret of 'what design practitioners do or know in practice' has given way to the more logical and measurable aspects of design practice that academia refers to as 'reflective practice'. However, the notion that it can be analysed, written down and disseminated to a wider audience raises questions. Designers would argue that their creativity is an innate response to a collection of variables, but that the recording of such actions firmly resides in the domain of the academics. Designers may argue that the majority of design theory is engaged with through a social sciences methodology albeit sociological, philosophical and anthropological. Fashion research practice as a relatively young discipline is challenged by its commercial bias. This paper discusses the views observed of practicing designers and their as yet unchallenged views of reflection traditionally being workplace-based and with any form of reflection being constrained through pressures of pace and commercial success or as a reactive 'on the job knowing'. This paper argues that by empowering fashion practitioners to be concerned with the *why* and *how* of thought and action through doctoral study and work-based learning, the curation and exhibition of these new forms of knowledge will build future discourses of fashion (design) practice; and these will ensure the 'innovative and inspirational 'wheels of industry' turn as Tillman commented earlier.

Fashion practice increasingly needs to be concerned with a (critical) discourse of practice that structures practitioner thought and action in the wider context of a postmodern visual culture. Breward (2003: 15) argued that 'modern fashion' *should* concern itself with creative-authorship, production methodologies and cultural dissemination, to better expose the practice's intent that results in the creative act of the fashion aesthetic. This research suggests an alternative discourse exists in structuring the fashion practitioner's thought and

action, in the wider context of postmodern visual culture, also embodied in the practices of many other design practitioners.

### **Case Study: The Practitioner Researcher**

This paper discusses a number of key considerations in evidencing fashion practice through curatorial intervention as constructed contexts of practitioner thought and action as 'knowing in practice'. This comprised the practitioners 'unabbreviated oeuvre'<sup>4</sup> as it emerges as fragments of pure expression, of imagination, and as experienced through a finite knowing or moment of practice by the author, as fashion practitioner. The creative act of fashion practice is observed through objective critical reflection to create an archaeology, or thought structure, that proposes to expose and examine critical gaze as a discourse of practice and producer of knowledge. This view shared by Barrett (2006: 135) who suggested a dilemma is faced for creative arts researchers whenever writing about their work, given the subjective nature of the discipline.

The paper emerges out of a piece of doctoral research and comprises three stages of examination which aim to 'open out' discussions concerning the inquiry of fashion practice, and to build on its theoretical maturity and to suggest a research framework that is concerned with creative-authorship, production methodologies and cultural dissemination.

The First Stage was to develop an understanding of how the author, as fashion practitioner, engages with the 'act of practice' with consideration to both practitioner thought and practitioner action as inherent entities of fashion practice. Schön's (1983) model of 'Reflection in Action' is concerned with the cycle of the lived experience of framing and re-framing the design problem, and moving toward framing the design solution. This meaningful and continual reflective cycle of questioning and improvement, (planning, research, action, observation, evaluation and reflection), frames the practitioner's narrative of thoughts and ideas generation that links both the process and the action of practice. It is this reflection in and of action that leads the enquiry to re-

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault argues that the 'complete oeuvre' should not simply contain a finished or published work by an author but should also contain his sketches, early drafts, crossings out, discarded works, notes and conversations leading to up to and including the published works.

framing of the initial problem that precedes stage two.

Stage two examined the process, practice and knowledge responses of the fashion practitioner when developing a body of creative work. Foucault's (1969) 'Author as Function' proposes a research paradigm that attributes the 'lived' practitioner role (as author) not as a singular process but one part of a whole, and as a performed function amongst many other performed functions executed during the (fashion) practice process. This research identifies an archaeology, or thought structure, that builds through practice, the foundations of a critical visual methodology of fashion practice research in organising knowledge and providing measure and means of what fashion practitioners know and do in and of practice.

Stage three examined viewer responsive engagement, (the spectator role). The meaning and understanding of those responses using interview and essay were also undertaken to expose and examine critical gaze as a discourse of practice in advancing how knowledge is recovered, studied and evaluated to advance fashion practice research and the creation of knowledge as it is collectively understood.

The success of exposing practitioner thought and action as being reflective intent is proposed to be through the use of a *living* portfolio, and its transformative influence is collectively attributed to the chosen narrative enquiry of the practitioner, the reflective interactions of the spectator and the staged interventions, as a curatorial project.

### **Background Context**

There is an argument to have, in that fashion as a high culture discipline is displaying a notable burgeoning of creative practice amongst those designers, who manifest themselves as key visionaries, often characterised by their scopic regime. For some, Viktor & Rolfe, John Galliano, Hussein Chalayan, Martin Margiela and the late Alexander McQueen, as examples, the spectacle of theatre or exhibition have become intrinsic monuments of fashion's landscape and an inherent phenomenon of postmodern visual culture. The fashion practitioner is considered a master of expression, of concept and of contextual metaphor beyond the mundane as the representations (constructed image or artefact)

'invite a seeing' of the practitioner's visuality. Such discursive manifestations of theme, symbol and experiment guised as sculptural form, abstract statement, technological proposition, cultural, and or social inference invite responsive and experiential viewer engagement.

Breward (2003: 14) suggested 'fashion' as an academic discipline is a new and emerging one and is often only concerned with singular theories around commerce, historical, cultural and social contexts and these are rarely considered together. Evans (2007: 4) argued that contemporary fashion practice can be constructed as image and meaning while sitting 'at the edge' of commercial purpose and cited the fashion trends of 'heroin chic' and the 'distressed body' as acted out 'traumas' of the 1990's. These complex narratives of meaning or message suggest a new cultural dialogue is emerging to be reasoned and understood through gallery or exhibition as museology or curatorial project work. Frisa (2008, p.172) argued that 'curatorial projects' can construct discourse around fashion in new ways to give fresh points of observation and that the curatorial project is a form of design and fashion communication that can break down the boundaries often assumed between the arts, fashion, architecture and design communication industries.

This journey of 'cultural turn' referred to by Breward (2003: 9-11) concerns itself with the evolution of fashion enquiry during the late twentieth century transitioning from historical reference, social identity and consumer culture toward the curiosity of, and fascination in, framing or systematizing (fashion practitioner) design thinking and (fashion practitioner) design process now in the twenty-first century. We now live in a world where experiences and participation form an integral part of our everyday lives. Fashion practice appears to be shifting from an object-focused to an experience-centered spectacle as argued by Davis (2008: 73), who suggests a paradigm shift in our understanding of the design process is needed if we are to better understand contemporary design practice and construct new knowledge towards a recognised research community. These real world practices, as professional knowledge, arouse notions of discourse and critical theories to be elicited in a cultural domain. From a practice perspective, the importance of asking: why, how, when, if, etc., appears paramount to contextualisation of practice and of practitioner knowledge leading to reflection.

### **Curating a Narrative of Discourse**

Goddard (2007: 119) argued that the narrative provided by both research practice and its exegesis exposes the decisions that were made through and of the 'process and practice of the research' and does not necessarily attempt to analyse or critically evaluate the findings. This research explored the existence of, and practice implications in, practitioner thought and action through the processes, practices and knowledge responses of fashion practice as evidenced through the author's practice portfolio.

This research drew on the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) the French philosopher who described himself as a 'Professor of the History of Systems of Thought'. It is Foucault's notion of 'thought structures' that this research builds through practice into a 'way of seeing', involving, as indicated by Berger (1972), the critical observation of the construct of the visual image. If we are to construct a narrative of discourse as Foucault described (Rose, 2007: 142), the language of fashion practice, as knowledge, concerned with the persuasiveness of how knowledge is understood and of practice itself, will ultimately challenge fashion's critics, design theorists, and the public. It will proffer that contemporary fashion practice belongs in a cultural domain similar to that of the arts. As a (modern) postmodern visual culture, interpreting the visuality of constructed image or artefact, is supported by Rose (2007: 13) with her sites and modalities facilitating a 'critical visual methodology'. This method interprets the visually constructed image or artefact through process (practice development), practice (practice conclusion), and knowledge (practice response). The death of the author as Foucault (1969) declared (originally claimed by Barthes, 1967) becomes, in this research context, the passive imperative to the authored function of fashion practice.

Taking inspiration from Duchamp's (Duchamp *et al*, 1957: 1-2) 'art coefficient' model, this research structured practitioner thought and action as a pure discourse of practice identified through a coefficient model (Figure. 1). The process, practice and knowledge responses as a community of meanings (Foucault, 1969, p.24), as 'Intra-cognitive Judgments, were shown to be integral to the fashion narrative and design enquiry inviting a 'way of seeing' when viewing or engaging with the visuality of fashion practice.

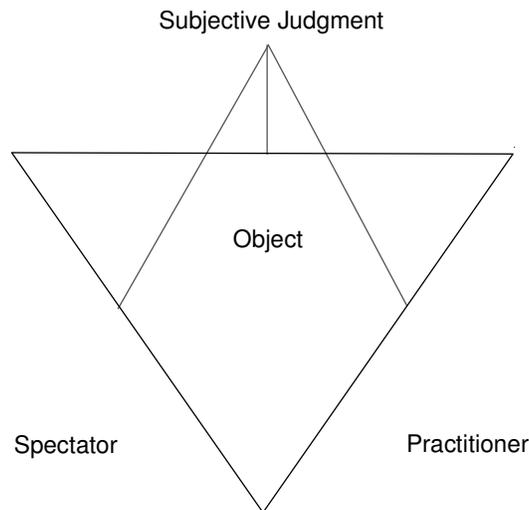


Figure 1: A Coefficient Model.

The viewer responsive engagement (the spectator role) is to be directed toward the ‘here and now’ positioning the fashion artefact and the practitioner’s role as authored functions of fashion practice to be ‘gazed upon’ in the wider research context through curatorial project work. Adoption of mixed media methodologies in the recording and curation of these practices are key to advancing viewer responsive engagement, which is supported by McNeil (2008: 65) who argues that a new type of viewing practice is emerging when viewing the fashion exhibit should include a range of new media experiences for the net-savvy generation.

Nevertheless, we should not discount the designer’s experiences of challenge in the externalising of their creative practices, for viewing and analysis by others and themselves. Gray and Malins (2004: 20) talk of the fear of losing creativity by speaking or even writing about it. To a practitioner this fear has resonance, as creativity often is spontaneous and

free flowing and the tacit stages of the design process are difficult to describe or externalize as explicit knowledge. Duchamp *et al*, (1957: 1-2) argued that a characteristic of the creative act is *'... the relationship between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed'*. Gray and Malins (2004: 20) argued that the research process involves researching through creative 'action' and 'reflection' resulting in on-the-spot reflection that leads to action. This dynamic thinking and practicing, as Yen *et al*, (2002: 1) described, empowers the practitioner to shape future forms of knowledge of practice. Practitioner research can also draw on Clandinin and Huber's (2010: 3) study of 'Experience as story' through narrative enquiry and McNiff's (2007: 308) linkages to action research enabling practitioner researchers to systematically examine and narrate the 'doing of research' through the lived practitioner experience.

Schön first posited the organizing of knowledge through reflective practice inquiry as a valid action research methodology in 1983. Schön's theories have since been widely adopted by the design research community and influenced many academic texts concerned with the processes and development of the reflective practitioner (Smith, 2001: 3). Nimkulrat, (2007: 1-2) discussed current art and design research methodologies as a 'conscious exploration of knowledge' that moves from problem to solution as the reflective researcher builds theories and knowledge through a continual cycle of reflection when developing a body of creative work. Coumans (2003: 64) acknowledged the necessary transparency needed of the creative process that integrates and exposes theoretical depth for the purposes of practice-led research. This 'knowing-in action' (Marshall and Newton 2000: 3) or 'way of knowing' (Schön, 1983; Dally, *et al*, 2004: 2) suggests a transparency and depth in framing the practitioners' narrative of thought and as a process of intelligence links both the process and the action of practice as an enabling methodology toward theory construction.

This investigation introduces a thought structure that evidences a process by which critical moments of judgment can be determined using the author's fashion discourse cycle (Figure.2) in supporting fashions literary, cultural and social status. In collectively attributing the act of fashion practice, the process, practice and knowledge responses as a community

of meanings<sup>5</sup> (Foucault, 1969: 24) or as instances of practice, are shown to be integral to the fashion narrative and design enquiry inviting a 'way of seeing' when viewing or engaging with the visuality of fashion practice.

Foucault (1969:27) argued that the archaeologies of practice, as discourse, shared a secret origin that has never quite been understood or said; a discourse of practice that manifests, as a tacit 'said' which is in fact never said. As with Archer's (2003: 22) 'inner conversations and self-reflexivity' and Shumack's (2010: 3-6) references to the 'conversational-self', engaging and negotiating the complexities of fashion practice as externalised and constructed contexts of practice suggests a new narrative of 'seeing' exists as a finite occurrence to advance a pure discourse of (fashion) practice. This 'way of seeing' of the practitioners' unabbreviated oeuvre and avidity of the practitioners themselves mediates the impact of the spectator in both relational and situational terms (Berger, 1972: 9-10; Rose, 2007: 10). In a postmodern context, increasingly, as viewer responsive engagement is invited, there exists a 'way of seeing' that objectifies practitioner thought and action as a conscious 'seeing' emerges that is determined by individual interpretation and of the minds reality. This 'way of seeing' as a phenomenon requires a new research methodology to advance our understanding of fashion (design) practice and to answer an insatiable craving for participation and experience-centric visualisation when viewing or engaging with fashion practice as argued earlier by Davis (2008: 73).

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault (1969: 24) describes the collective consciousness as the principle of unity and explanation; a 'community of meanings' emerges, often symbolic, as the interplay of 'resemblance and reflection' takes place.



be produced as written text through and of the translation and abstraction of image proposing an end to the hierarchy that exists between image and word. As visual texts these material realities (Collier, 1967, p.5; Rose, 2007, p.238) bear witness to the externalised position of self, noting homogeneity with Foucault's author-function role, locating the observed whole of the reflective self (Holliday 2004: 56-62) as explicit knowledge of practice.

In Fischer-Lichte's work (2008: 16-19), 'The Transformative Power of Performance', the subject-object relationship of the artist, as practitioner, and of the spectator, transforms the performance into a singular reality of experiences. Equally, the notion of design ethnography, (Ylirisku and Buur, 2007: 18), as the discovery of 'the studied practice', integrates the experiential reality of the spectator within the narrative of practice. Design ethnography as an emergent research methodology evidences communicable knowledge that exposes understanding of practice conveying the implicit (design knowing) and explicit knowledge (artefact) as a body of work to be collectively understood. Ylirisku and Buur (2007: 19) argued that design ethnography exposes the richness and also ambiguous characteristics of practice that can cultivate conversation and further discourse of practice. The practice response, as an experiential reality of practice as cultivated conversations, and their engagement with the artefact, exposes the process development, practice conclusion and knowledge responses of the studied practice. This transference to the spectator provides opportunity for 'double-loop' learning or understanding, as Argyris and Schön (1974: 19) argued, and contributes towards knowledge creation and a discourse of practice.

This research also acknowledges Barthes system of 'utterances' and 'signifiers' (1967) as a fashion system, but chooses to situate fashion practice in a (modern) postmodern visual context, where interpretive and aesthetic measure is integral to the narrative of practice. Duchamp *et al*, (1957: 1-2) discussed the role of the spectator and the essential transference of personal intent from artist to spectator that induces the catalyst for critical discourse and debate. An independent artist, art dealer and collector, Duchamp described with authority the 'aesthetic osmosis' that takes place when transferring the practice intent of an inert object toward the realisation of artefact in becoming an 'object of study'. Duchamp claimed that 'art coefficient' exists and is only realised once the spectator

participates in the viewing experience and aesthetic measure takes place. Biggs (2002: 1-2) also suggested that interpretation of the artefact or object of study is affected by how it is consumed and understood.

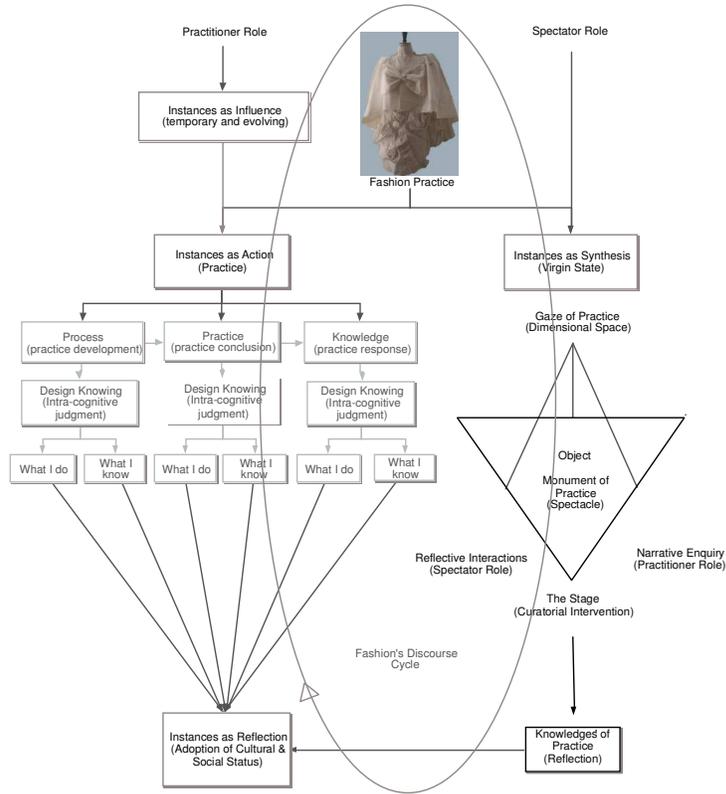


Figure 3: Mapping the Knowledge's of Fashion Practice.

This is supported by Margolin and Buchanan's (1995: 12) belief of '*a radical systematic pluralism*', which was described as a 'gene pool' for sustained and cultivated conversations concerning problems of practice encountered through experience. This narrative enquiry of practice transitions from 'in' practice to 'of' practice as the coefficient model as instances of influence, action, synthesis and reflection inculcates the pluralistic attribution of practitioner, spectator and artefact, as object of study (Figure. 3). This research proposes an interpretive understanding of the fashion practitioners unabbreviated oeuvre as the lived reality of experience or 'way of seeing' the tacit knowledge's of practice transitions toward cultivating a critical discourse worthy of knowledge creation.

O'Neil continues the debate as argued by Jonathon Watkins (1987: 27 cited by Rugg and Sedgwick, 2007: 21) during the late 1980's of curatorial practice as comparable to arts practice. Like Duchamp, Watkins suggests the object of study elevates as practice worthy of critique through the staging of the environment (the monument) as practice. A characteristic of both art and fashion practice research is to interpret the *significant* for critical debate, however, when describing or responding to art there appears to be an accepted critical language described as a kind of 'art speak' or literary review. Words, as adjectives, are often used in the media when describing fashion (design) practice but, more often than not, the words are used to sensationalise the piece rather than provide any critical note or analysis attached to it. Clearly a hierarchy of critical thinking exists within the creative arts disciplines. The challenge is to introduce the discourse assumed of the arts as culturally integral to fashion (design) practice and to establish a hierarchy of critical thinking as an accepted language of the discipline.

Towards the development of a collective understanding of the knowledge of fashion (design) practice this research evidenced a narrative enquiry that was both experiential and reflective of both practitioner, as phenomenon, and spectator, as experiences of the phenomenon characteristic of an 'interpretive research paradigm' (Ajjawi and Higgs, 2007). The outcome of this review of perspectives, practice and processes in developing, recording, and curating the forms of knowledge of fashion (design) practice was the process of visually mapping the interpreted actualities of experience elicited and exhibited through curatorial intervention.

### **Discussion**

The discussion that follows considers the experiences of reflective practice elicited via primary research from fashion designers employed in the fashion industry, and how the (case study) practitioner researcher experience of reflective/curative practice relates, compares, and informs a deeper understanding of benefits of a professional doctorate programme.

In-depth interviews with fashion designers were carried out over a period of a week from 3<sup>rd</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> October 2011. Six fashion design practitioners were chosen specifically for the

purpose of this study, with the respondents being employed in the fashion industry on a full-time or freelance basis in both High Street and 'Designer' fashion levels. Two of those interviewed have within the past six months become employed in Higher Education while retaining their practice on a freelance basis. Fashion designers were chosen over other fashion industry personnel in-line with the context of this research paper, "the learning experience of a professional doctorate study that focuses on developing and evaluating a fashion (design) practice process of constructing the fashion narrative in a contemporary context." Four interviews were carried out face-to-face and the remaining one was required to be a telephone interview. All interviews involved open-ended questions and differed in length from 40 minutes to 1 hour 10 minutes. The resulting qualitative data supplemented secondary research data, which used the keywords; reflective practice (in art and design); fashion design practice; the language of design; the fashion industry; fashion education; to build a discussion around the practice/reflection relationship.

Questions asked include; how do those in full-time practice perceive reflective practice themselves? What are the perceived barriers to formalising reflection in a professional practice doctorate? What is their perception of the industry in which they operate in respect of reflective practice? And is the academic institute the nucleus for reflection on practice?

Within design practice there is a particular connection between the processes of reflection and creativity. In defining 'fashion', McRobbie(1998: 14) broadly terms it as; applied creative thought to an aesthetic over functional application in the execution of clothing. She reflects on the definition with the conclusion that:

In this sense, fashion is inevitably a fiction, and what follows is a narrative, a sociological story about fashion design, whose value or relevance will also be judged accordingly. McRobbie(1998: 14)

In an industry that is valued at 37billion (Fox, 2010), "we must look on fashion as being less transitory and vain than those in intellectual circles would like to believe" (Lipovetsky, 2006:

10) and usefully study it in respect of it being a barometer of the traditional images of the artist which remains the most visible sign of an art education. Lipovetsky argues that the fine arts tend more to resemble fashion now that the boundaries of definition have been broken down. No longer is art defined by being in perpetuity or fashion being seen as transient and defined by iteration. De Kuyper (2006: 93) further adds to the debate by believing that fashion is a question of a paradox, "that fashion is at once ephemeral and enduring", an inconsequential phenomenon and, at the same time, one which is the embodiment of us as individuals.

Collections and their creation processes might be considered possible to curate as portfolios of experience, but the question many practitioners may have is: what benefit would they gain for such an investment in time? Even to undertake such a curation process as part of a doctoral programme would need to have greater professional benefit than the award itself. In considering a professional doctorate 'by project/portfolio', it is useful to refer to the UK Council for Graduate Education and Frayling (1993: 5) who acknowledge that the works presented encapsulate a contribution to new knowledge through a textual critical (self-) reflection.

This knowledge may take different forms and have different applications, but the task of the academic researcher and practitioner (as opposed to the creator of art) is to communicate the results of a process of enquiry, whether this enquiry be purely theoretical or whether it can be seen to have practical applications. (Doloughan, 2002: 58)

These 'practical applications' suggest that the results should have some direct influence on the industry in which they are situated. As part of this enquiry, it is therefore necessary to determine what practicing designers 'actually do', not in respect to their physical undertaking but of the intellectual engagement with their process as defined above. Dewey (1998: 17) sets out the benefits of planned reflective practice, in that he argues that it relegates impulsive action in favour of the rational and intellectual.

However, when exploring the notion of reflective practice from a practitioner perspective, the first issue encountered was the use of the term 'reflective practice' itself. In

professional practice, Schön(1983) referred to knowing-in-action, to observe the inarticulacy when describing what we do. He suggested that knowing is tacit in practice and implicit in action, and supports the theory that skilled practitioners are equally capable of tacit knowledge without prior deliberate intellectual action (Schön 1992).

Reflective practice is not a term I would use, being a practitioner. It's called 'being good at what you do' or 'improving on what you do'. The term also has overtones that time is allocated for it and this simply isn't the case. You don't get that opportunity in the real world, but it's more instant, more real (Respondent B).

'Reflective practice' throws me off slightly – I never use it. I would use terminology such as 'hindsight' and 'insight'. You're constantly reflecting on consumers and what they want – doing it both naturally and in a more structured/formalised way – analysing feedback from consumers and acting on it – it's a very customer-led brand rather than 'fashion brand' (Respondent C).

The responses of interviewees also raised issues of the detached language of 'academic discourse' with relation to how they would communicate their practice. Doloughan (2002: 58) suggests that academia has tended to distinguish research practice exclusively through the written word via a textual recording of the process, which is subsequently critiqued. Wood, interviewed in THES (Currie, 2000) suggests designers require the ability to communicate the 'knowing how', whereas scholastic knowledge gives emphasis to the 'knowing that'. Wood argues for the reflective schools of thought to be more compatible with the design process. "Many designers claim they don't think reading and writing are important, perhaps because they don't have time or because they prefer to absorb sets of ideas from pictures." He ascertains the academic process allows designers to both improve on their thinking and be better informed and that they cannot be responsible for their work unless they can think profoundly and understand what they do. Schön (1995: 80) echoes this argument for a united presentation of both the practice itself and the verbal reflection on practice, which he feels are not mutually exclusive in making up the language of designing.

Some things you just can't quantify - if something feels right in design, it feels right. You can sit down and theorise and document it, but ultimately the same things don't always apply – it just feels right at the time and you apply it. For example, pattern cutting is down to judgment not analysis, science and

theory. There are so many variables – like choosing a piece of fabric – done by touch, handle, drape and ‘knowing’ what it looks like as a collection. Theory’s always interesting, but it’s theorising on something I already do, so how much would be news? Just gives what you do a name, a theory and quantifies it (Respondent A).

Fashion practitioners do what they need to do, they source where they need to source, and produce what they feel like they’re trying to say (Respondent B).

“The design process, I believe, has to be an organic one with no constraints or great methodologies behind it”, Jonathan Seow interviewed in Davies (2010: 194). Davies himself reiterates the commonly held belief amongst practitioners that fashion design does not follow a preconceived path or routine, that each designer has their peculiarity that influences their working processes (2009: 6). The question of reflective practice, in a sector that moves as quickly as the fashion industry was unsurprisingly a subject that cropped up as a potential barrier to formalising theories in practice. Fashion has long been regarded as a barometer of society - a creative expression ‘for the moment’, a transitory experience (Lipovetsky, 2006: 10).

All respondents cited the pace of the fashion seasons’ demands as an influence on their role as designer. In most cases, the designer felt so pressurised by their daily demands that they could not actually see past their involvement with the next collection - the idea of someone taking formalised time to reflect seemed almost immoral to them. Two interviewees gave measured opinions.

If it makes you look and analyse your practice and improve, then I can see that it could hold promise for some practitioners, but for me, as a creative pattern cutter and as such, working in a fast-paced specialised arena, I couldn’t personally see the benefit as a pure designer. You learn to reflect ‘on the job’, at every stage, from receiving the initial sketch to first fitting to the final tweaks before going down the catwalk. Each time I do things I tweak the process as a consequence as part of the reflective practice – build on knowledge from each process, yet it’s never constant, always changing, you’re always doing new things and never settle on a particular process (Respondent B).

At such a high-end, fashion is seen as an art form and therefore the pressure to produce collections so quickly every 6 months and to better the last collection is very raw. This level of pressure simply doesn’t exist at any other art-based discipline. There is no set time for artefact and music production,

whereas fashion runs to a strict calendar. In addition, high-end designers are now under a certain added pressure from the high street to supplement their twice yearly collections with cruise collections and inter-seasonal collections - to keep it new (Respondent A).

During interviews with practitioners, the issue of employment in a commercial environment arose as an influence on the freedom to reflecting on practice. As a result, the respondents saw reflective practice firmly rooted in the relative 'freedom' of academia where academic prowess, peer approval and student creative achievement is prioritised over financial gain (McRobbie1998: 49). Despite the argument that the fashion educational system is criticised for it's lack of business and entrepreneurial skills in the curriculum (The Value of the UK Fashion Industry 2009: 14), it is McRobbie's argument of a cultural capitalism and "the traditional images of the artist which remains the most visible sign of an art education" (1998: 181) that can appear to place reflective practice principally in an academic environment.

Notwithstanding the views of McRobbie (1998: 49) and Kawakubo's (as cited in Undressed, 1998), that complete creative freedom and progress through experimentation and risk must circumvent market demands, the interviewees' opinions pointed to their practice being more dictated by financial and commercial demands. Three of the designers interviewed for this paper had been involved in High Street brand names at some stage of their career in addition to the higher-end names synonymous with 'designer fashion' and had found more creative freedom with fewer design parameters in the more high-end fashion design industries.

The point of a product is to be creative and to make money at it regardless of the level – you can't deny it's the case – people say design makes lives better, true but it makes money too - otherwise it's pure art – but even art makes money, From my own personal experience I've got an eye on both. What works, what functions best and then in the back of my mind I'm thinking about what the customer wants – am I pushing it too far? The ultimate reflection comes through sales – if it didn't sell, was something not right; the price, colour, fabric, design? Then you reflect at that point in a different sense. It's like design goes through a commercial strainer and is fractured and managed – you can only work with what you're given. For example, the target price of cloth limits the design – the materials are definitely a part of it, you can still produce good design but it effects the outcome – 'it was good for the price' would be a type of reflection, but can't really do anything more with it. (Respondent A).

The act of pure fashion creation is arguably an individual act. It is interesting to consider the

issue of whether practicing designers rely on third party exhibition curators and the fashion writers' 'critical language' to reflect and disseminate their practice to a wider audience. Perhaps the designers themselves should be constructing their own discourse? Referencing Bourdieu (1984) and his work on cultural production we learn from 'Haute Couture and Haute Culture' that the challenge of the third party reviewers and critics of art work is to create a 'belief' in, and an aura around the artefact. In relation to the creator themselves, Foucault's essay 'What is an Author?' can relate to fashion practitioners also when he describes a techniques of 'individualising' and 'subjectivising' through journalism influencing our understanding of their creativity or artistry (Foucault 1984: 101).

Designers do, however, have input into constructing their own discourse through the written and curated mediums. McRobbie (1998: 183) makes the link between Featherstone's (1991) 'aestheticisation of everyday life' and the consumption of fashion through gallery exhibitions and retrospectives, which now put contemporary fashion practice and fashion photography, amongst other forms, as integral to the consumption of fashion as high culture.

Someone like Hussein Chalayan does get quite involved – he did with his Paris exhibition - if he's going to get represented, then he wants control over it. What was really good about the exhibition in Paris was that you really had an insight into why he creates what he does, what really drives him. I think that unless the designer is involved in the curation, no-one else is going to really know, so the communication side, I do think the designer needs to be involved. Also, would it be as interesting or inspiring if the designer was creating an exhibition that wasn't high art content? (Respondent B)

In this paper, it is argued that professional doctorates of design practice have an opportunity to "develop insightful methodological approaches of practice" that will communicate the "transformational 'ah ha' experiences" (demystifying the much used term "I just know when it's right" described as 'Design Knowing' in this paper) to designers and spectators. In considering the benefits in terms of investment and return (intellectual or commercial), of recorded and reflected action in 'the workplace', interviewees were canvassed on the perceived benefit of doing such a professional doctorate. Findings were positive in respect of the personal need to constantly visit and revisit practice.

Nevertheless, the question of 'time well spent' while in industry was a principal concern - the notion that design in a commercial sense, not a theoretical one, has different pressures.

Fashion moves on so fast from season to season to season, then the benefit would be to do with a process or method, something that was an integral part of what I do, then yes. I would question whether writing about it, or 'waxing lyrical' about it is ever going to be that beneficial. If it makes you look and analyse your practice and improve, then I can see that it could hold promise for some practitioners, but for me, fashion is so fast, that I couldn't personally see the benefit as a pure designer (Respondent B).

The respondents saw the value of undertaking a professional doctorate as being similar in a way to 'breaking a cycle' or introducing something new into practice. However, in practice, the fashion designer's role (outside to inspiration gathering) is traditionally seen as 'workplace-based'. Professional Doctorate programmes of Design Practice require that candidates remain in their workplace for their research to be valid. This approach, in effect, makes their designing double count, commercially and academically while also empowering the design practitioner to better engage with their approaches to practice through work-based learning.

Nevertheless, in review of the options of engagement with the professional doctorate: being totally commercial; or a commercial/academic blend, it may be possible for those in a blended practice mode to have greater flexibility 'in' practice and more academic familiarity to develop reflective/curatorial practices. It is anticipated that of the totally commercial practitioners, those who may suit the processes of a professional doctorate might more likely be those involved in haute couture or the high-end fashion industries where conceptual expectation is high.

This discussion recognises that it is both possible and informative to record and curate practice developments in an electronic journal, annotating the theory as it underpins practice. This investment in time, by reflection becomes a developed experience and inspiration for new commercial and cultural opportunities.

However, the professional doctorate could also develop great potential for problem solving for those more commercial fashion industry sectors, particularly as understanding consumer demands and expectations are key to commercial success. The fashion design practitioner's tacit acts could be further understood by reflecting in and on practice, through visual process mapping and the curation of experience of practice preserving and extending the competitive edge needed for growth, sustainability and getting 'it' right.

Where people are saying 'there's something not quite right about what I'm doing' then there's a real opportunity. It's a way of looking at what you do, writing down the parts you're happy with and the parts you haven't developed yet, making a plan and then reflecting on your practice in order to gain the 'bits' you're missing, or capitalising on your strengths. It's formulating it in a way akin to an appraisal, but on a more regular basis. Very like a PDP<sup>6</sup>. (Respondent E)

It's noticing new areas for development, having the perception to spot new opportunities. It is implicit in the design process that people will reflect – however trite or trivial it may appear – the fact is, in order to move on you need to draw inspiration from something and invariably that process could be described as reflection. (Respondent D)

## **Conclusion**

Research methods literature suggests a consensus has yet to be reached by scholars that adequately build any knowledge of substance in the academic community of fashion.

Tacit knowledge is an important knowledge category and requires theoretical maturity, and the review process suggests a paradigm shift is needed generally for people to comprehend what is meant by 'Research' through and of practice. Researching through creative 'action' and 'reflection', links both the process and the action of practice, enabling the construction of theory towards shaping future forms of knowledge of practice.

Illustrative modeling or concept mapping is key to exposing thought structures and 'ways of seeing' in fashion (design) practice. Linear models of 'what designers do' would benefit from further 'in practice contexts' and ethnographic knowledge produced as written text or image proposes an end to the hierarchy that exists between image and word as Pink argued

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<sup>6</sup> Personal Development Plan

earlier Pink (2007: 119). Additionally, design ethnography as an emergent research methodology evidences communicable knowledge that exposes understanding of practice, where interpretive and aesthetic measure is integral to the narrative of practice. It is anticipated that there will always be a range of spectator responses to viewing the 'act' of practice, but a common experience after the individual's initial opinion, is their mental act of reflection. The curation of fashion (design) practice, as an enabler towards a hierarchy of critical thinking that is culturally integral to fashion practice, is needed.

Through the curatorial project the spectator engages and experiences the process development, practice conclusion and knowledge responses with the fashion (design) practitioner, as curator, towards a collective understanding of practice. The act of narrative as invention (creativity), is determined, deciphered and validated on aesthetic merit as the object of study is to be reasoned and understood through engagement between practitioner and spectator (as a coefficient model). The critical review and moment of judgment proffered value, meaning and message, not simply of the artefact itself, but also of the design of the experience of designing, or, of practice itself.

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