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# col·lec·tion

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**Abstract:** col·lec·tion is a visual research project exploring the notion of the 'collection' in order to critically reflect on the construction of meaning and value in the current fashion system. It employs methods of dissection and collage as tools with which to actively engage with the fluid and dynamic relationships that constitute fashion and the shifting role of the fashion designer. Unpicking the garments along original seam-lines functions as a metaphor for the unravelling of the mechanisms that constitute pervasive fashion practices and production processes. The resulting loose material

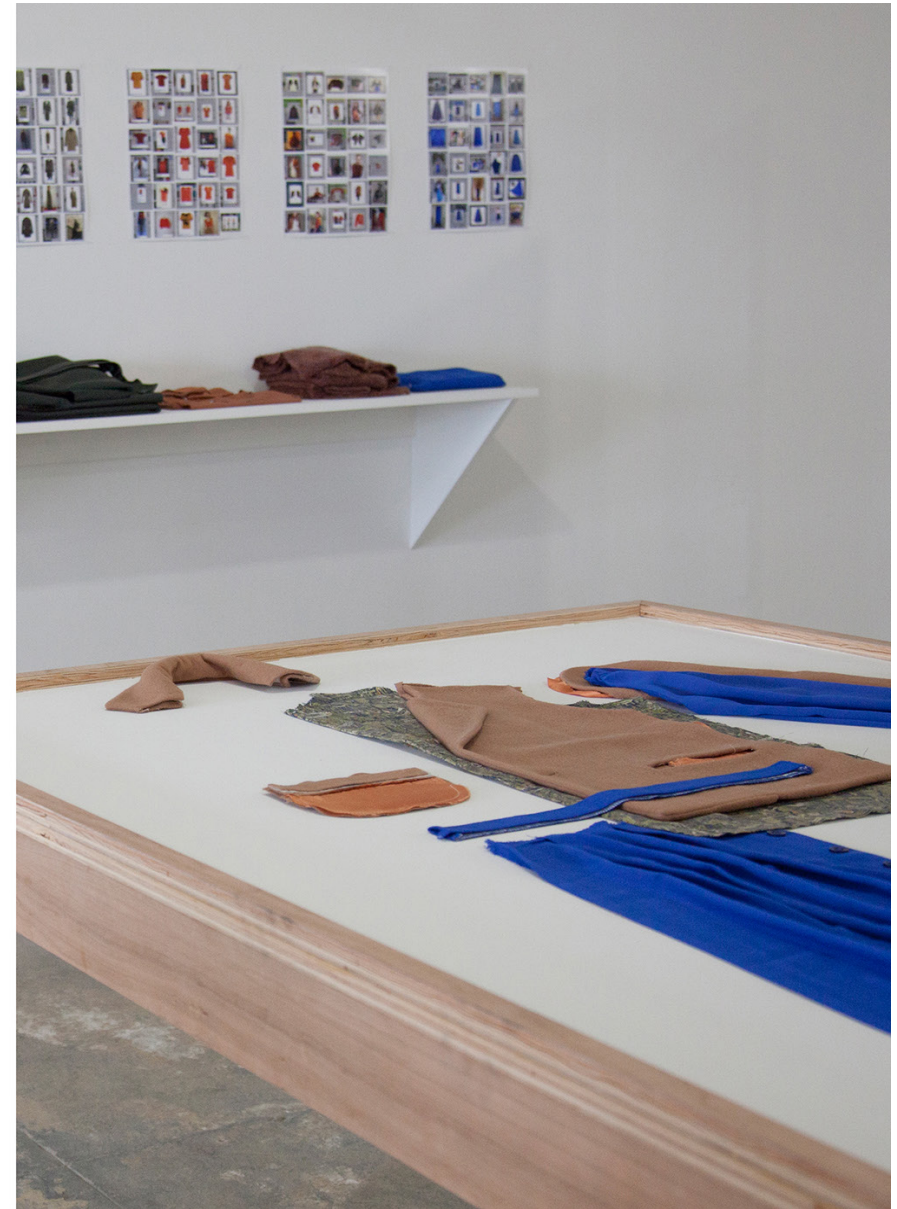
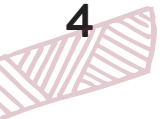
elements can then be rearranged into new formations or mappings and in turn, translated into proposals for alternative ways of engaging with fashion. The project draws inspiration from personal wardrobes, within which various styles, brands and materials are brought together in each personal collection. It attempts to activate the tacit knowledge embedded in the practice of curating our wardrobes and in the daily act of dressing. The interactive exhibit invites participants to engage intuitively on a material level in order to inspire and inform a wider discussion around the roles of designer and wearer in contemporary fashion culture in an effort to explore innovative and inclusive modes of 'doing' and 'being' fashion.

**Keywords:** Collection; Fashion, Value; Dissection; Wardrobe, Wearer.









*col·lec·tion – part 1*

*Second-hand garments dissected along seamlines can be reassembled or reformatted. Participants will be invited to experiment with these elements as an alternative experience of the fashion system.*





col·lec·tion – part 2

A series of second-hand dresses each dissected and reconstructed to form two interchangeable parts from the original. Bottom left Image credit: Pablo Moura





## Introduction

My work is primarily concerned with the fashion object as a unique artefact carrying evidence of human activities and transactions. Collecting clothing and textiles I explore their origins, patterns of use and layers of value and meaning. The project col·lec·tion forms part of an ongoing body of visual research to explore the current fashion system and reveal multiple histories of the origin, authorship and use of clothing. The resulting design process is unconventional in that it is reversed; deconstructing accepted processes and outcomes of the current fashion system.

The project aims to reveal how the perceived value of a garment can be manipulated through intervention and contextualisation. It unravels the role of the fashion designer, investigates alternative modes of operating and challenges the accepted understandings of fashion production. Just like our wardrobes and mechanisms in fashion itself, the garment pieces can be experienced as a series of interchangeable elements: their meaning and their value in constant flux.

### col·lec·tion – part 1

Part 1 invites participants to take part in visually and conceptually mapping the fashion system by reassembling and reformatting elements of dissected garments as an alternative experience of constructing fashion utilising the skills and knowledge inherent in individual wardrobe interactions and daily practices of dressing.





## col·lec·tion – part 2

Part 2 consists of collaged garments constructed using a similar process which have been presented in various different fashion related contexts. This illustrates the shifts in meaning and value that are constantly occurring and reveals the reality of the fluid and dynamic relationships that constitute contemporary fashion as a space for new modes of presenting and engaging with fashion.

The combination of exhibited objects/images with the interactive collage aims to initiate discussion around social, economic and cultural aspects of the fashion system and to stimulate an alternative economy of time, knowledge and value that challenges accepted ideas of clothing and the design process. As such this project is directed at the theme Ways of Knowing: Methodologies of practice, intentionality and critical thinking.

## The Collection

Collecting is an important part of my process and presentation methods. It is in the resulting repetition that the similarities between the items reveal small differences. I implement methodical procedures of observation, data/material gathering and categorisation on the ordinary or everyday revealing details which otherwise remain unnoticed. I present these collections as archives or museum displays but also use them as a source of material experimentation.

‘It should be stressed that the concept of collecting (from the Latin colligere, to select and assemble) is distinct from that of accumulating. The latter - the piling up of old papers, the stockpiling of items of food - is an inferior stage of collecting... The next stage is that of the serial accumulation of identical objects. Collecting proper emerges at first with an orientation to the cultural: it aspires to discriminate between objects, privileging those which have some exchange value or which are also ‘objects’ of conservation, of commerce, of social ritual, of display - possibly which are even a source of profit. Such objects are always associated with human projects. While ceaselessly referring to one another, they admit within their orbit the external dimension of social and human intercourse’ (Baudrillard, 1994).

This understanding of the collection referring to its social and cultural context forms the point of departure for this research project. The use of the word ‘collection’ within the fashion context refers to a set of garments using variations on a theme of colour, material and details, produced and presented seasonally by a brand or designer. However a collection has many different definitions and may be bound by various other attributes that have the potential to extend beyond one season or one designer. This project is an exploration of alternative understandings of the ‘fashion collection’.





By questioning the accepted understanding of a fashion collection it is possible to also challenge the ways in which these are produced and consumed. The focus lies on the reversal of traditional fashion design practice as a process to create alternative 'fashion collections'. The resulting objects and activities are critical reflections on the workings of the fashion system and proposals for how we might begin to subvert these with new modes of practice for the fashion designer and the wearer.

## The Wardrobe: Personal Collections

The wardrobe, seemingly far removed from the glamour and pace of fashion, is an intimate space, a gathering of garments. Like chapters in a book, the clothes hanging side by side represent layers of information, the sediment of time passing, collected and contained, temporarily static before being worn again or discarded. Emotional value of garments has been an area to which I have devoted much attention and research. This aspect continues to play an important role through the use of garments that have been worn and so have a story interwoven in their fibers.

A woman's wardrobe can be understood as a container of such cloth relations, each representing interaction with others and recalling moments in time and space. Some items are treasured souvenirs, others unwanted gifts never worn; over time, women can become detached from older pieces lacking sentimental value: the wardrobe becomes





a nascent collection with its own logical relationships between elements, to which new pieces are added and others are expelled. (Norris, 2004)

The nature of the wardrobe as a collection; constantly changing as pieces are added, kept unworn or disposed of for various reasons, has been of particular interest during this project. In addition to its very personal meaning and relevance the collected contents of a wardrobe is also a reflection of the diversity of the fashion industry. It brings together different brands and types of clothing as well as the social and cultural codes and multitude of nuanced values these represent. The average wardrobe constitutes an eclectic mix of mid-market, second-hand, and high-end garments. The owner of a wardrobe is constantly monitoring and adjusting the content of this collection and curating its display daily with the choice of an outfit. It is in the creativity and authenticity of this act of curating and wearing that the collection is brought to life.

Thus the materiality of the cloth breaks down the perceived boundaries between self and the world, and as endlessly shed, can be used as a new resource to re-tie connections with others while renewing the self (Norris, 2004).

As Norris describes, clothing is a powerful interface. This ability of our clothing to act as a connector has yet more potential when we consider the universality of clothing and how clothing is inextricably linked with



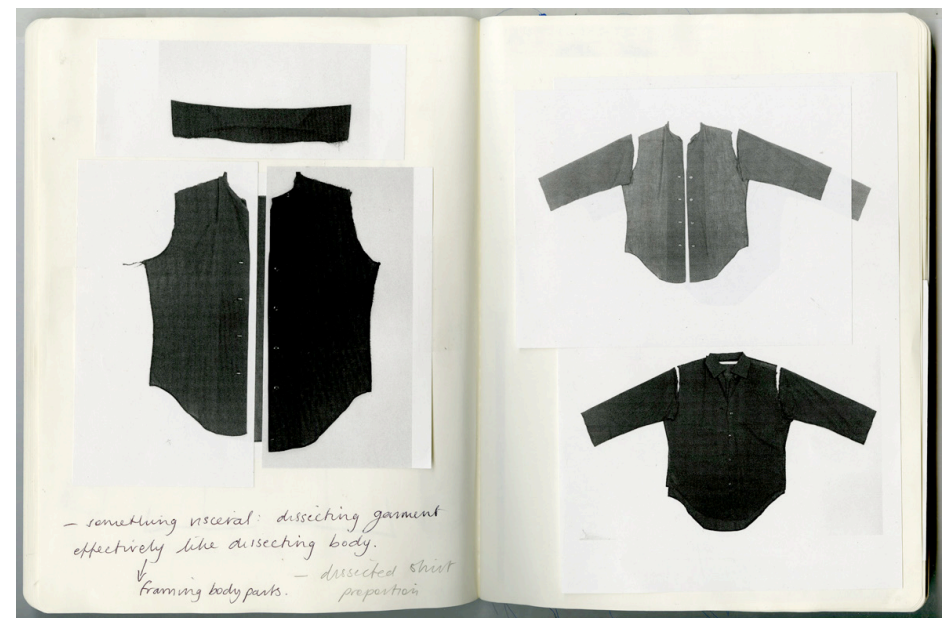
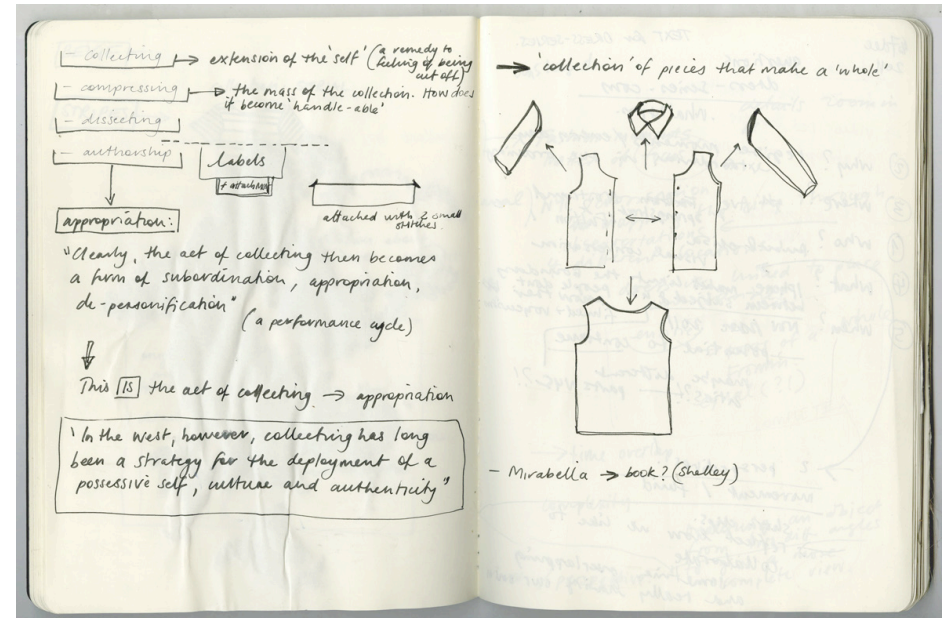


broader cultural and social patterns and human interactions. When we start to unravel the production of meaning in fashion objects and how this is activated and subverted by the wearer an alternative economy is revealed. The aim of this project is to begin to map, document and experiment with the potential that can be found in this.

## Dissecting, Unpicking and Unravelling: Garments and Processes

The act of taking apart or un-doing to understand plays a central role in this project. The garments are dissected and the resulting elements are then implemented for experimentation. Simultaneously mechanisms of the fashion system are unravelled and opened up to the possibility of reformatting.

By dissecting or fragmenting the garments into pieces along original seam lines each garment essentially becomes a collection of loose elements. These elements can be repeated, isolated, combined and layered in different ways. Through this process our normal patterns of wearing can be altered and the body framed and revealed in new forms. Through dissection the clothing can be understood not as something stable or fixed but transient both in its material form and embedded meaning. Just like fashion itself, the garment becomes moveable: a fluid object.





The research process consists of de- and re-construction, or in other words cutting and pasting of both photographs and second-hand garments, in doing so it is also deconstructing traditional process of designing a collection. The working methods can be compared to the bricoleur. The bricoleur puts existing things to new purposes (Luvaas, 2010). Essentially this is reusing material to create something new, however in doing so it is also dissecting and reapplying cultural symbols and meanings and intervening in existing cycles and patterns revealing opportunities for alternative modes of engaging with the fashion object and the design process.

The act of dissecting also interrupts and redirects the lifecycle of the actual clothing. However, rather than a proposal for a method of production – often referred to as up-cycling – the dissection and reassembling in the context of this project is used as a tool to reveal aspects of the fashion system and draw our attention to the very complex reality of fashion production. This enables critical reflection on the roles within the design process, the aim being to create the space and flexibility (literally and metaphorically) for the imagining of and experimenting with alternatives.

The process of working with second hand garments methodically unpicking and unravelling them offers a new perspective on reality of fashion/ garment production.

The act of dissecting in this instance gives a physical experience of the crafting of the object – by completing the act in reverse (taking it apart). The process of deconstruction allows for contemplation of the complex materiality of the garment, the many who have been involved in its conception and construction and a sense of how long this may have taken.

## **Collective Fashion: The Shifting Roles of Designer and Wearer**

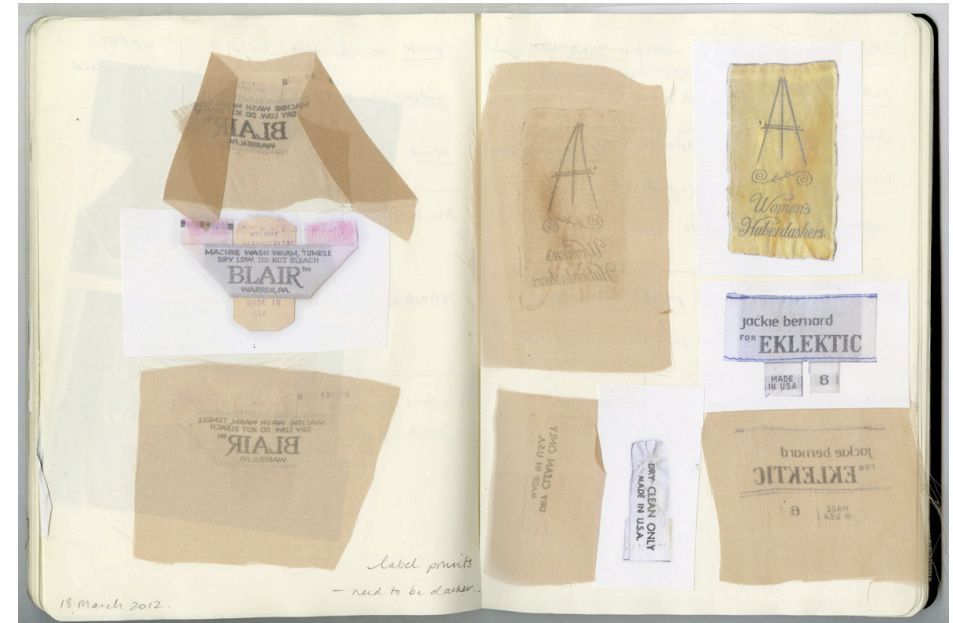
The mystification of the design process has succeeded in elevating the fashion designer to the level of creative “genius” (Kawamura, 2004). Value and meaning of a garment or a collection is often embedded in the immaterial; associations with celebrity and the spectacle of fashion, resulting in the authenticity of the fashion object being attributed solely to one designer or brand. The deliberately obscured reality of fashion production is one in which garments are designed and produced by a network of actors – each and every garment is the result of a collective process.

‘If things, or rather Dinge, are gatherings, as Heidegger used to define them, then it is a short step from there to considering all things as the result of an activity called “collaborative design” in Scandinavia. This activity is in fact the very definition of the politics of matters of concern since all designs are collaborative designs – even if in some cases the collaborators are not all visible, welcomed or willing’ (Latour, 2008).



Latour presents collaboration as an inextricable part of designing, something far more intrinsic than is ever revealed in the fashion industry. I would argue that in fashion the wearer is one of these collaborators, often enacting more influence on the value and meaning of a garment than its designer, and the wardrobe a kind of gathering. Latour's definition reflects an approach to design in which the claim of absolute authorship is less relevant. It rather shifts the focus to an authenticity that develops, emerging through engagement with materials, skill and time rather than a moment of conception by a single designer. The label found in the garment becomes a tool to address this aspect of value creation in fashion. It reveals the patterns of authorship, and the value of perceived authenticity which have become standard in the fashion system of today. By altering or reproducing the label the objects still refer to the 'original' designer as well as alluding to the more complex reality of fashion production.

"... It is never a process that begins from scratch: to design is always to redesign" (Latour, 2008). This could be seen as an alternative to the designer as "genius" paradigm that exists in the current fashion system (Kawamura, 2004). Through the process of dissecting the garments into elements then reassembling them into new objects questions are raised around the role of the designer and the creation of value in fashion. With the understanding of the wardrobe as a live collection deeply embedded within a social and cultural context it is clear that the wearer is an active participant in the 'design' process and the collective creation of meaning





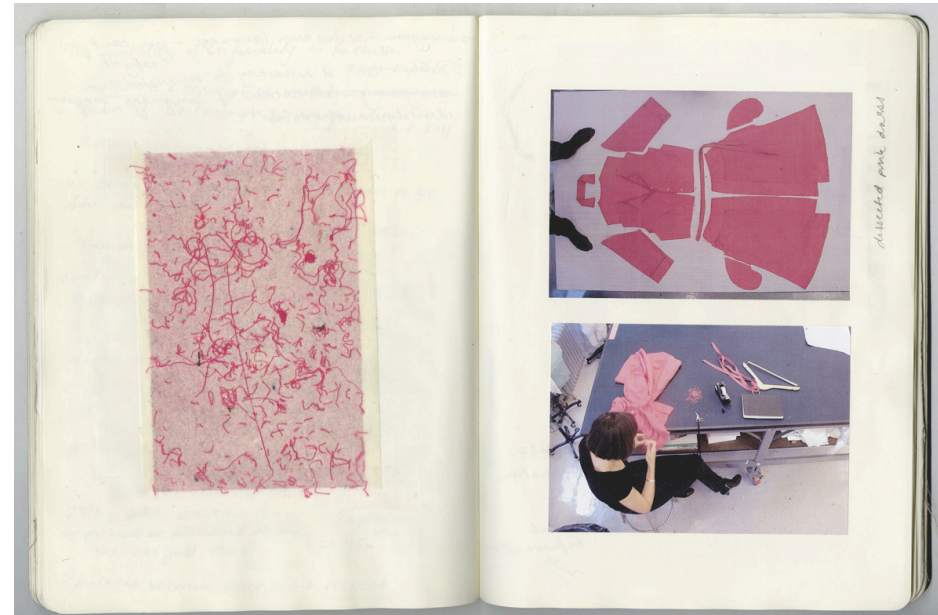
and value in fashion through the curation of their personal wardrobe and the daily act of dressing.

The two parts of this project (exhibited objects and the interactive display) together present an exploration of alternative perspectives of the designer and the wearer as well as referencing the ways in which layers of value and meaning are constructed in various fashion contexts.

The interactive element of the project aims to activate the daily ritual of dressing using loose elements of dissected clothing (rather than complete items) in order to explore how this tacit knowledge and constant reinvention might be useful as a design process. Participants will also be encouraged to apply this process conceptually as a way of understanding the fashion system and identifying moments of potential for inclusive ways of 'doing' and 'being' fashion. This process will act as a catalyst for discussion around questions such as:

- What is a fashion collection and what does it look like?
- What constitutes the design process in fashion?
- How and by whom is the value and meaning of a garment created and can this be subverted?
- What are the roles of the fashion designer and the wearer now and what might it be in an inclusive fashion system?

During the conference I will guide and document these conversations and visual experiments.



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