

## CONVERSATION PIECES

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### KEYWORDS

Conversation, Fashion, Language, Dress Practice

During the FRN Interdisciplinary Symposium I propose to exhibit a series of objects and images to illustrate the various iterations of the project **Conversation Pieces** as outlined and pictured in the following document. This may include an interactive or participatory element to engage the audience. This project relates to the themes of **Fashion and Space** (particularly *Collaboration and Exchange*) as well as **Fashion Making and Display**.

### ABSTRACT

**Conversation Pieces** is an on-going practice-led research project that investigates the implications of the fashion object as both the product and the instigator of conversations. The project employs tools and techniques that are related to both text (highlighting) and textile (unpicking) to generate perspectives on fashion practice that are embedded in everyday dress practices and associated language. Through objects and activities the project aims to contribute to dialogue around the role of the designer as well as acknowledgement of the role of the wearer in the 'design' process. Using (partial) garments, photographs and texts as well as collaborations, and modes of exchange as 'materials' the project encompasses various iterations and manifestations (from object to experience) that play with the fashion article as a discursive object and dress practices as dialogues.

### CONVERSATION PIECES – PRACTICING DIALOGUES

Fashion is often associated with making a statement – Statement pieces, a statement outfit. What if fashion were to be considered in more fluid terms? As a conversation, a discussion, an exchange, a negotiation or even a heart to heart? What insights does this provide for engaging with materials, process, value and authenticity? Based on this premise and taking both definitions of the term as starting points **Conversation Pieces** explores 'conversations' on different levels in fashion. These might be physical (between multiple wearers, viewers or makers) or symbolic (within the design process or in the use or application of an object/garment) as well as interplay between the visual and textual representations of fashion and the verbal exchanges that emerge from or around these.

The project builds on the understanding that Fashion is inherently a collective and/or collaborative practice. The production of clothing encompasses a multitude of exchanges between people working in a range of roles involving a complex dialogue between various sites of material and cultural production [1]. As Latour posits, the designed object (and so also the garment) is the product of a form of collaborative design "whether or not all collaborators are willing or visible" [2]. The

aim of the **Conversation Pieces** project is to work in a space in which the fashion designer departs from the fetishized attributes of originality and innovation that as Lipotvesky argues have long been seen as more valuable than the everyday activities and practices of the wearer [1]. Through ongoing experiments with processes of unmaking the project challenges the still pervasive role of the designer as the autonomous creator of the fashion object, the auteur or design authority [3][4]. **Conversation Pieces** collects and proposes glimpses of a different fashion discourse – one that identifies value and agency in the every day, the tacit practices of the wearer over the perceived creative expertise of the designer.

The tools and techniques employed are related to both text and textile. Through unpicking and highlighting one essentially engages in a process of opening up the garments and the texts for renewed interpretation and application. The act of unpicking along original seam-lines dissects each garment into loose pieces that quote from and refer to, the form and construction of the garments from which they came and yet are open to re-interpretation in function and placement. The simple act of highlighting in a text is a nod to the process of formulating ideas through quoting or referencing other authors. These are simple and accessible techniques that enable an immediate and intuitive interaction with the material rather than requiring specialist knowledge or experience. In addition the focus on daily acts of dressing - familiar yet usually unnoticed begins to reveal the improvisational and adaptive agency inherent to the act of dressing/wearing.

**Conversation Piece #1**, the first iteration of the project [5], visualises and materialises an exchange between sleeve and scarf using their definitions and functions as starting points and visual research on the everyday, or what might be considered mundane adaptations, as a tool for translation.

**Conversation Piece #2** consists of a series of dissected garments to be rearranged and re-configured both on and off the body to construct and photograph group portraits. These contemporary versions of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Conversation Piece painting genre form a document of the various interactions and compositions made by participants.

**Conversation Pieces #3** uses a booklet containing a selection of text fragments relating to garments and conversations paired with a highlighter marker. Participants are invited to 'highlight' specific words or sentences that speak to them making this personal selection stand out from the original text. Placing these different highlighted versions next to each other shows the variations in emphasis or interpretation that each reader gives.

**Conversation Pieces** frames an on-going process of discursive design – it aims to generate situations and objects that provoke a dialogue around the production and consumption of fashion both materially (clothing) and symbolically (narrative). Through mechanisms that dissect, fragment and 'open up' on a physical level it invites active engagement in a wider conversation. Simultaneously the project explores how to elicit and employ modes of conversation, co-operation and collaboration as techniques and/or materials in an expanded fashion practice.

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Sketch for Conversation Piece (2016)

BIOGRAPHY

Ruby Hoette is a designer/researcher exploring fashion in context through the intersection of theory and practice. Seeking to expand what constitutes 'fashion practice' her critical and experimental approach proposes alternate modes of engaging with and producing fashion by framing the garment as a unique artefact carrying traces of social, cultural and economic interactions and transactions. Ruby is a Lecturer in Design at Goldsmiths, University of London. She convenes the innovative MA Fashion and will be co-convenor of the new MA Design Expanded Practice from September 2017.



Conversation Piece #1 (2016)

**conversation piece**

*noun*  
 noun: conversation piece; plural noun: conversation pieces

1. a painting of a genre in which groups of figures are posed in a landscape or domestic setting, popular especially in the 18th century.
2. an object whose unusual quality makes it a topic of conversation.  
 "an umbrella stand conversation piece painted in garish colours"

Translate conversation piece to

1. konversation lappar

Show less

Screenshot definition of 'conversation piece' (2016)



Conversation Piece #1 (2016)

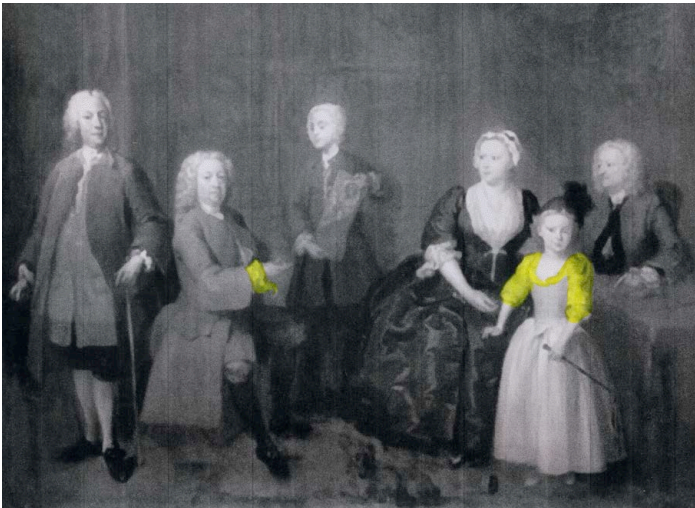




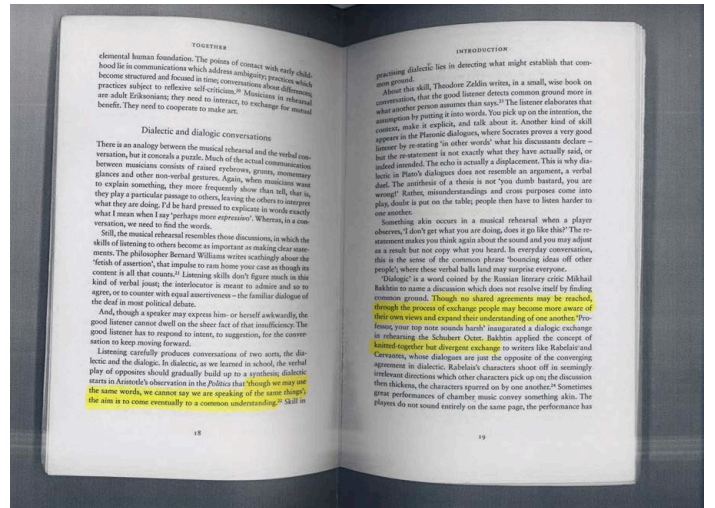
Conversation Piece # 2 (2017)



Conversation Piece #3 (2017)



Sketch for Conversation Piece # 2  
Highlighted scan of 'The Kirby Hall conversation piece'  
(1735c. by Gawen Hamilton) (2017)



Sketch for Conversation Piece #3  
Scanned and highlighted page from 'Together: The rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation.' By Richard Sennett (2017)