

Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

The return of the absent body in the fashion museum: 'Dressing the body' exhibition
DHUB Museu Tèxtil i d'Indumentària, Barcelona, permanent exhibition

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The mannequins as a person substitute

Ever since Marie Vernet (wife of Charles Worth and the first known fashion model) successfully increased sales of the crinolines designed by her husband in the mid-nineteenth century, the importance of mannequins' bodies as a strategy of fashion marketing has not been lost on the fashion industry. Nevertheless, until very recently, as the exhibition 'Dressing the Body' exemplifies (Ventosa and Teresa Bastardes, DHUB Barcelona 2008), the body's presence has been silenced in fashion exhibitions (Soley Beltran & Tatay 2009).

The first challenge for fashion museums is to present clothing without the living bodies that give them movement, volume, seduction, shape and character. To compensate for the absence of a real

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Exhibition Review

1. body, bodies are recreated through the shape of the garment, which is enhanced with the help
2. 'silhouettes cheaters' such as covered prostheses, casts, dressmakers' dummies with stitched shapes
3. stuffed with cotton (which gives them hips or chest), busts made of cardboard, and small pillows
4. sketching the arms. Even paper curls hairstyles are used as a reminder of heads – when they are not
5. left strangely bald. When wigs are realistic, stylized abstract faces with blind eyes and a cadaverous
6. complexion highlight the artifice (Zazzo 2009).

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8. **Inventing the missing body**

9. Since the 1980s, the museums of fashion and costume have specialized in inventing the missing
10. bodies under the aegis of scenography textile conservators, curators and some designers.
11. Museums like the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, or the Victoria
12. & Albert Museum in London, now ask designers to create hairstyles and makeup for museum models
13. in the same way that they would for catwalk shows. In the spectacular exhibition 'The Model as
14. Muse: Embodying Fashion' by Harold Koda (Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum, May–August
15. 2009) in one room some models were hung vertically, as if they'd jumped in the air and were
16. suspended by their hair, glued to the ceiling. Elsewhere, the artificial hair was curved like in paintings
17. and outrageous makeup reminiscent of the mask-like faces of catwalk stars was used (Zazzo 2009).

18.

19. **Echoes of the repressed body**

20. The exhibition, however, is far from the fever of the catwalk podium: invincible artificial stiffness freezes
21. the conventional grand dolls – always inadequate to present clothing. Ventosa and Bastardes (2009) distin-
22. guish the *consumer* from the *curator*. The museum space maintains a dialogue between the visitor, who is
23. accustomed to being a consumer who touches the products and feels them before acquiring them, and the
24. curator, who uses the language of museography and turns mannequins into a showcase of style in a
25. display cabinet. The fashion display at the museum becomes a silent impression that recalls the absence of
26. a body and its sensations, and evidences the missing wardrobe in the dark museum's showcases.

27. The shop's space is glittering in the spotlight or lit from the street; outfits and accessories are

28. awaiting a buyer to try them on, imagining multiple scenarios and stories of possible use. In contrast,

29. at the museum the garment still tells stories and feelings, but by proxy. I, the visitor, am not part of

30. the memory and the imagination of museum garments. For the clothes in the clothing museum are

31. never just material objects. They are simultaneously a 'textile object' and an 'image'.

32. The museum body is an absent presence. It is banned by the principle of the textile museum.

33. Textile heritage conservation does not tolerate fat, moisture or acidity of the skin, and fibres suffer

34. from every tension or manipulation. The museum body is a repressed body. We are now witness-

35. ing a new trend of the 'return of the repressed' body in museum exhibitions (Zazzo 2009).

36.

Which absent body returns to the museum space?

Every period contemplates the body – through the filter of its own moral values and standards of tastes – as a cultural object of style, position, conduct, identity and clothing. In his classic book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* ([1956] 1972) Kenneth Clark distinguishes the *naked* from the *nude*. In contrast to the naked body, which is without clothes, the nude as a conceptual and artistic category always involves the notion of ‘an ideal’ abstracted from the reality we confront in our everyday lives. Anne Hollander adapted this insight specifically to fashion when she argued, in *Seeing Through Clothes* ([1975] 1993), that in every period depictions of the nude in art and sculpture correspond to the dominant fashions of the day. In other words, the nude is never simply ‘naked’ but represents the contemporary conventions of dress. Thus ‘the body of fashion’ is not the body as ‘nature’ but the body as ‘art’.

It is not enough for the fashion museum to chronicle the fashioned body as art. In *The Fashioned Body* (2001), Joanne Entwistle reminds us that it is necessary to transcend the argument of fashion as pure aesthetics, since fashion is also product of a chain of industrial, economic and cultural activities (Ventosa and Bastardes 2009).

Several exhibitions explored the differences between art and fashion, setting both at the same level, among them ‘Dysfashional. Adventures in Post-Style’ (Luca Marchetti and Emanuele Quinz, MUDAC, Laussane, 2007) and ‘Looking at Fashion’ (Germanic Celant, Luigi Settembrini and Ingrid Sischy, Biennale of Florence, 1996). ‘Dysfashional’ reacts against the notion of fashion as a simple collection of clothes and accessories, and argues for the ‘subjectification of the object’, alongside a notion of ‘the garment as a subject [that] makes us, even defines us’ (Soley Beltran and Tatay 2009).

Dress presented in a museum is usually like a fetishized object displayed outside its historical and social context. However, the function of a fashion museum is not merely descriptive; they describe canons of beauty, tastes and style, and the materials and techniques of various periods. Above all they need to provide a critical or polemical interpretation of the social problems that are linked to fashion. Fashion is more than a meaning system. And as Kamawura says in *Fashion-ology* (2005), it is a system, not an isolated phenomenon, in which creators, publicists, companies of production and distribution, journalists, consumers, and other museums interact (Ventosa and Bastardes 2009).

A conceptual approach to fashion display

Artists and designers from the 1960s until the present day have shared an interest in embodiment. However, as a result of embodiment’s current social importance, and the academic emphasis on the body as key site for the definition of identity, it has recently appeared as a new museographic perspective that looks at ‘fashion bodies’ (Soley Beltran and Tatay 2009).

Exhibition Review

1. Anne Zazzo (2009) identifies two groups of fashion displays: sensorial (*passer d'abord par la sensation*) which focuses on visual and tactile qualities, and conceptual (*passer d'abord par l'esprit*) which focuses on abstractions, ideas and the relations between garments and body.

2. The permanent exhibition 'Dressing the Body', which opened in December 2008 at the Museu Tèxtil i d'Indumentària in Barcelona, belongs to the second group and it constitutes a quiet scenography revolution but a revolution nonetheless.

3. The relationship between fashion and the artificial body from the sixteenth century to the present day was the theme that guided the curators of 'Dressing the Body'. The exhibition is designed to show that it was the **dress** that **created** the outline of a **historicized body**. The forerunners of this exhibition were two earlier exhibitions. In 1999 the Kyoto Costume Institute showed an exhibition 'Visions of the Body', which explored fashion as a history of the fictitious body on a visible surface, and as a social structure that supports human relations. In 2001, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, opened the 'Extreme Beauty' exhibition by Harold Koda, which divided the body horizontally and conducted a comparative analysis between the devices used to compress or to extend bodies, in western fashion and globally (Ventosa and Bastardes 2009).

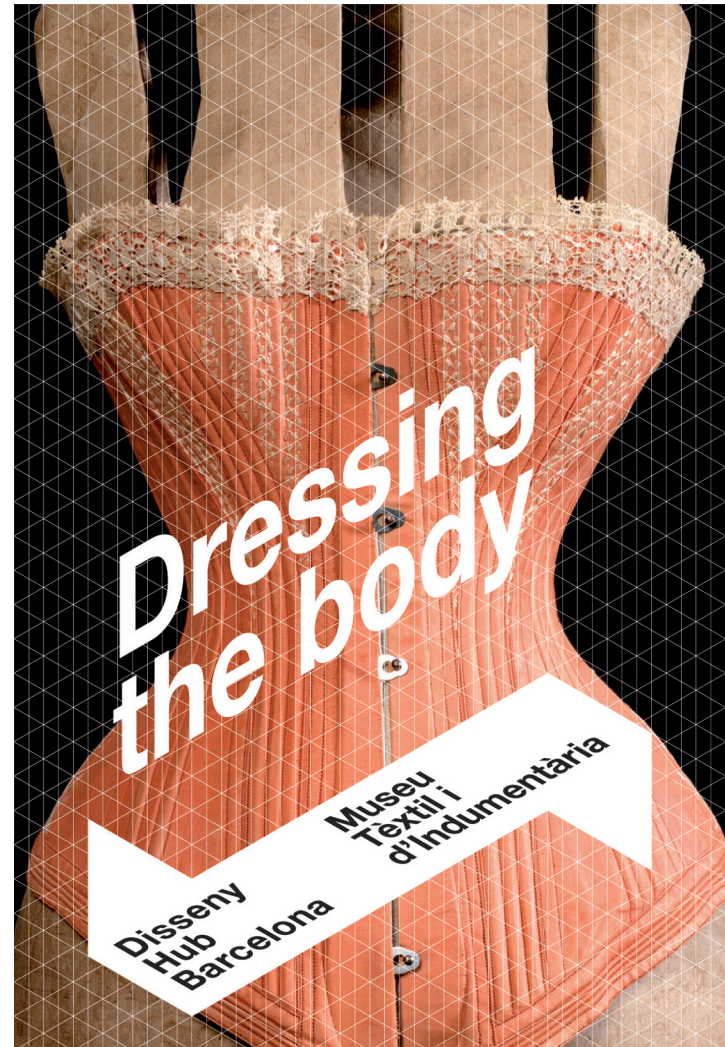
4. **'Dressing the body'**

5. Amongst the exhibitions that adopt the body as a perspective 'Dressing the Body' is the most innovative. The exhibition's starting point is a notion of the body as a hybrid artefact caught between culture and nature. From here, a history of fashion is put forward that renews its meaningfulness by attending to the ways in which fashion design modifies the body. The show effectively establishes the incorporation of the changing anatomical canon by means of interventions that reveal the aesthetic modification of the body in an engaging and entertaining manner.

6. The exhibition runs chronologically and thematically: each theme is represented by a large display cabinet, where clothes are arranged so they can be reflected upon from many points of view – sometimes with the aid of reflecting mirrors.

7. The design of the space, by the architect Julia Schulz-Dornburg, presents two parallel narratives. On one side the dresses of the collection are on display, and on the other the textual timeline contextualizes the periodic styles that underlie the concept. This is not a 'staged presentation', but a conceptual dialogue where the characters relate to each other through contrasts or similarities.

8. The narrative thread of the exhibition explores how the dress modifies the form of the body throughout history by operating on the body in a number of ways: *reduction, extension, elongation, outlining, revealing*. This endless variation underlies the essence of fashion and its arbitrariness: it does not respond to anything other than itself, located in a given social context (Ventosa and Bastardes 2009) (see pages from the exhibition catalogue below).



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Exhibition Review

1. Dress changes body proportions, modifies a person's relation to
2. space and to other people with some **actions**: increase, reduce,
3. lengthen, define and reveal.
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1. Increase: creates volume by added structures, stiff fabrics or tailoring that separate the garment from the body. The figure is widened: guardainfantes, hooped petticoats, crinolines, bustles and capes.



Crinoline, c. 1858.

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Exhibition Review

1. **2. Reduce:** minimizes the body's natural shape, in particular the
2. thorax and waist. The torso is squeezed: corsets, bodices, brassieres
3. and belts.
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Stays, 1750–1800.

3. Lengthen: stylizes the body so that it seems taller. Lengthens the body: high heels and platform shoes, hairstyles, hats and coat tails.



Dress, end of the eighteenth century–beginning of the nineteenth century.

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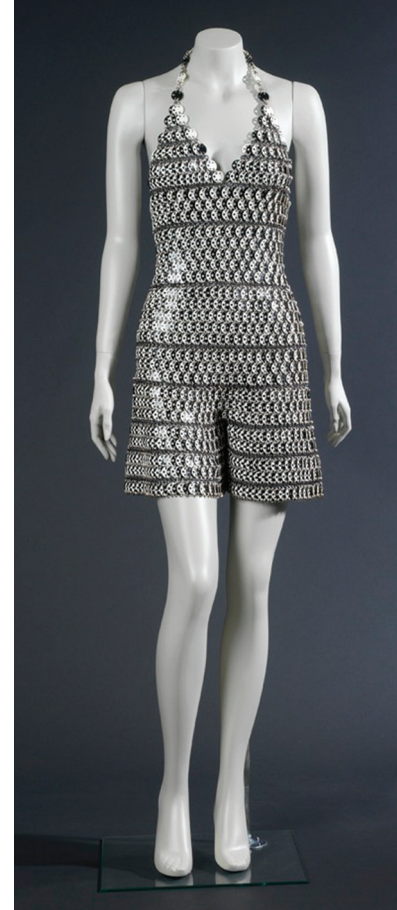
Exhibition Review

1. **4. Define:** adapts the body shape without changing it. The outline is
2. highlighted: stockings, gloves, body stockings and stretchy t-shirts.
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Mariano Fortuny, Delphos tunic, 1909.

5. Reveal: suggests the body's shape, uncovers arms and legs, and shows skin. The body is exposed: transparent fabrics, sleeveless, low-cut, short dresses.



Paco Rabanne, 1965.

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Exhibition Review

1. The presentation of the dresses themselves is novel. It is done with the dress that best portrays
2. the real body 'of the period'. This ruled out a standard mannequin of the kind used in shop windows.
3. Each museum model is 'naked' in line with the conventions of body shape of its time.
4. For simplicity, the presentation method breaks down each set of display cabinets into the best
5. five objects, illustrating the most important concepts in the field with some examples along the
6. following lines (each one addresses a different question (figure 1 from right to left)):
- 7.
8. 1. How? Anatomical modifications: anatomical mannequins with joints highlight the body parts
9. that are modified by clothing.
10. 2. With what element? The prosthesis – the silhouettes are changed on a partial mannequin made
11. of cardboard.
12. 3. Which example? The prototype garment that best represents the standard shape of a period.
13. 4. Like who? Reference to a garment from another period 'that does not fit' which reminds us of
14. the cyclical nature of fashion.
15. 5. What context? Finally, the representation (in the background) helps us understand the clothed
16. person in their period, with accessories, hairstyles, etc.
- 17.
18. The contemporary significance of the analysis presented by 'Dressing the Body' is related to a
19. self-evident social phenomenon – namely how current body ideals imply aesthetic interventions
20. that transcend clothing, thus realizing Elsa Schiaparelli's tenth commandment: 'never adapt the
21. dress to the body, but train the body to adapt to the dress' – a peculiar inversion of priorities that
22. it is actually only the tip of the iceberg in a complex ordering of subjectivity. The exhibition invites
23. continuing necessary and deeper consideration – from both academic and activist domains, as
24. well as from art and even the fashion system – in order to confer meaningfulness to creative
25. rebellion: a rebellion that should count on a 'delirious museum' (Storrie 2006) as a continuation of
26. the city, the place where the body and lifestyle become the main site for identity construction
27. (Soley Beltran & Tatay 2009).
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