

SOMA POIESIS:

*An exploration of the redirective potential of
somatic experiences in fashion*

Todd Robinson

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Todd Robinson declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Design at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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ABSTRACT

Representational practices play a significant role in fashion. At a general level they depict and display fashionable bodies. Fashion images foreground aesthetic practices showing bodies wearing a variety garment styles, understood with reference to brand or designer, or visual properties such as form and silhouette as well as novel combinations of surface characteristics such as colour, image, pattern and texture.

These images circulate within the global fashion system providing an array of fashionable opportunities for consumers but also design possibilities in the form of styles, materials, themes and colours as well as novel garment features that represent an emergent creative context for fashion design.

Feminist and gendered perspectives claim that fashion images negatively impact women through the propagation of narrowly defined body aesthetics. These arguments contend fashion images place inordinate emphasis on how one's body appears to others and generates a distance between observers of the image and those depicted. Such a view also conceives images as ideological mediums through which recognizable messages are conveyed and that fashion itself is a symbolic system.

While this highlights the impact of fashion images, more recently there has been a focus on understanding fashion beyond a visual phenomenon by considering the interaction between bodies and garments in terms of the body's comportment and movements in space. This foregrounds living bodies and material garments in specific acts of wearing.

These new perspectives are informed by gendered concepts of wearing and renewed interest in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and reminds us fashion cannot be understood without reference to somatic experience. A focus on the experiencing body shifts emphasis from bodies as passive objects of the gaze to something experienced at a first person somatic level. This also highlights the potential of corporeal experience to enhance rather than decrease the potential benefits to women as well as other groups that participate in fashion.

This research is concerned with an exploration of the significance of embodiment in fashion. My position moves beyond recovery of the somatic body, to consider the re-directive opportunities embedded within presentational and representational practices of fashion.

Re-directive practices are oriented towards the processes and mechanism of the way practices change. The practices of concern to this enquiry are fashion design as well as those representational practices of fashion, with a particular focus on moving image practices. This enquiry provides re-directional resources in the form of an observational framework, an enriching vocabulary, garments and films that support new perspectives of value to fashion practitioners.

This thesis considers in what way these resources are tied to the question of how corporeal representation can offset forms of corporeal detachment realized by representational practices germane to fashion. Drawing on the field of Sensory

Ethnography, I develop of a visual methodology using moving images to foreground tactile, kinaesthetic and interoceptive aspects of dress while at the same time supporting an empathic mode of fashion design practice.

The enquiry employed an iterative process encompassing making garments and their use in *sartorial sessions*. This involved participatory activities where individuals wear purpose-designed fashion garments in combination with sensory-tactile materials such as water, sand and seeds. These sessions generated responses such as bodily movements, which are then subject to examination and exploration.

This written thesis reflects upon my readings of the body and its movements in these sessions. It draws on my experiences as both a maker and wearer of fashion. These movements are examined from the perspective of a theoretical framework drawn from corporeal phenomenology. The practical work invites viewers to identify directly with moving images through representations of sensorial experience of those depicted on screen.

Thus, the significance of this research emerges from examination of the relationship between fashion and embodiment and the re-directive potential stemming from representations of sartorial experience grounded in the shared-ness of sensorial experience.