

New spaces

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The reading of costumed bodies – whether embedded within a narrative, a lineage or a coded methodology of making – was the central theme to the Critical Costume 2015 discussion. These areas were the driving forces behind many of the discussions, questions and works that were presented, whether the research was in critique of these tropes or within them. The tension between these viewpoints created new spaces of thought around the clothed body; spaces that allowed renewed and revitalized perspectives on the costumed body and scenographic space. There was an atmosphere of unity and protest, of the costume designer as the unsung hero or heroine of the scenographic space, giving storytelling and character generation an essential and important textural grounding through the body.

Costume designers and researchers gave voice to and reflected on their own practice, and the important role it plays in imbuing the body with a renewed outlook in costume practice. The value of this type of reflection is paramount: the coming together of so many different practitioners and perspectives on the costumed body allowed for a varied and rigorous representation of not only costume design as encompassing the narrative embedded in garments, but also costume designers being active players in the performative arts.

As a fashion designer myself, the outlook on the body as a narrative space was refreshing and rigorous, and allowed for a renewed perspective on the clothed body, the garment and the interplay with identity as an interwoven artistic practice. As a fashion designer, notions of identity play a tenuous role in my practice. For me, it is more about how to get around identity; how to diffuse and confuse it, rather than display a specific character or idea of a narrative on and with the body. The differences between fashion practices and costume design as I perceived them are centred around fashion's focus on the performative body as a

cultural construction in terms of gender and identity – a cultural player reflecting and embodying a myriad of meanings – whereas costume design centres around the performing body within a constructed narrative.

Image 1: Reveal/Conceal, Alyssa Choat 2014. Leather digitally printed masks and garments, 3 of 6 look collection on exhibition at the conference.

What this conference confronted me with is that costume and fashion appear opposing on notions of identity formation on the body. Fashion acts as a consumable collage or nuanced pastiche of cultural signifiers and signs, thereby creating a complex idea of aesthetics and identity on the body, rather than a notion of narrative, holistic character development or journey of the performing body. Fashion in practice is less concerned with presenting a unified or holistic notion of identity, and more about the play with aesthetic notions and linkages with culture. However, I was also challenged on another idea at the conference: namely, that the two practices of fashion and costume are opposed on notions of identity, partly due to boundaries of disciplines being further broken down, opening up new spaces in which discussions on the presentation of the body become paramount over the lineage of a practice or discipline.

Queer space for performance work and methodology was one potential hybrid space in which to reflect on the lineage and grounded practice that costume designers must navigate in order to work in a reflexive and progressive manner. Speakers such as Phoenix Thomas and Sarah Gilligan opened up this discussion through their research into cases of cosplay and performance. Practitioners who uphold traditional practices and work within industry restrictions were confronted with an emerging space in which the practice and histories of costume design can be reflected on and utilized to set individual practitioners' work apart from this lineage, as well as to question what costume design is and can be. The tone was an

encouragement of the participants to embrace progressive and emerging queer spaces in which the practice of costume design can become a responsive and provocative statement on gender issues; not a rejection of the histories and lineage of costume design, but an acknowledgement of the restrictions that tradition and the locale of the work within it has, as well as the ways in which this can be reflected upon. This was the best practice for a costume designer: to comment on and push the boundaries of their own work so as to open up new spaces for the body to be clothed and performed.

This notion was interestingly challenged by some of the successful industry-focused speakers, who situated costume design practice as a much more nuanced and subtle expression of the clothed body *within* the boundaries of industry and history, rather than in opposition to them. As the engaging Deborah Landis proclaimed, the costume designer's role is to create costumes that 'do no harm'. And with such an interesting and illustrious career, she can contest to the success of this notion. Costumes, as she saw them, are expressive, but not the centre of the narrative; while important – this was not challenged – they are a backdrop, a silent but influential piece to the narrative puzzle. Rather than provoke or open up a protest or new space for the performing body, the costume should go unnoticed and therefore, some would suggest, unappreciated. However, this idea is in opposition to the role of the costume designer's work as provocation, which was a repeated and strong voice throughout the conference. Instead, it should service the story first; to be nuanced and unnoticed, and therefore successful.

What is good practice? This notion was highly contested and by the end of the conference there was no resolution – and there shouldn't be. The idea of 'good' costume design should always be shifting, evolving and hotly contended, as it was in this conference. This was the greatest success of the conference as I saw it: to effectively portray and showcase opposing and varied voices on costume design, as well as the oppositional and contradictory aims of

costume design within industry and research. The tensions and opportunities for this debate to continue throughout these few days over strong coffee and cinnamon rolls in the foyer was the most enjoyable and rigorous part of the discussion, and provided a rare and cherished opportunity. I left challenged in my ideas on the perceived difference between fashion and costume practices. The dressed body is such a highly political and powerful space for presentation. Whether as a cultural player (as in fashion) or within a performance, costume (like fashion) has the ability to challenge and reflect on culture. Dress is such a convincing and important space, with the ability to be both unified and fractured in its message, thereby offering new and evolving spaces for performance.