

## Lucy McKenzie with Beca Lipscombe

### Atelier E.B – Back-to-back

A few years ago, a tailor described a curious experience to us: he was making an A-line dress for a client from a vintage paper pattern that she had supplied him with. Through the pattern, he discovered an ingenious way to finish bust darts, one that he had never encountered before. From the language and instructions in the accompanying construction guide, he could discern that whoever had made it in the 1960s must have worked in the couture industry of a previous age, and may have learned their trade in the 1930s. Paradoxically, this revealed itself less through what was there and more through what was absent. The step-by-step guide on how to construct the dress had certain small pieces of information missing from the process, the absence of which would only be noticeable to an expert like himself.

It is telling that something as simple as a mass-market dress pattern could contain such a wealth and variety of information, including the imparting of professional knowledge, and that the omission of certain details could express so much. If an object like this could so concisely delineate the space between the easy way we experience clothes and the complex system that places them on our backs, what other hidden messages are waiting to be read for those who wish to take a closer look?

A fascination with precisely this kind of hidden knowledge is what inspired Atelier E.B to transform from an interiors company to a fashion label in 2010. For our first fashion project we looked to the Scottish textile industry and tried to identify what might be said to constitute a 'Scottish style'. It was called *The Inventors of Tradition*, and the contradiction implied by this title expressed our wish to strip away received ideas and propose narratives of our own.<sup>1</sup> For this we consulted archives (in varying conditions, some just back rooms full of cardboard boxes) and interviewed Scottish makers and thinkers to find material to present to the public. Equally important to the project was the creation of a small collection of clothing and accessories (originally with no intention of commercial viability) which also put the research to use and tested what it was possible to manufacture on a purely local basis. This established the blueprint for how we work today: researching material culture; re-presenting the fruits of that research as we find it—with minimal intervention—through documentary display and interviews; and then responding to it through our own designs.

Art, fashion and historical research all have procedures and constraints that are unique to their particular fields. Our aim is to explore how these disciplines interact, and in so doing expose the structural underpinnings that govern them. One of the most interesting experiments that has arisen from this is the process of cross-applying methodologies from different spheres in order to push their boundaries, for instance by

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<sup>1</sup> *The Inventors of Tradition*, was an exhibition and film programme co-authored with Catriona Duffy and Lucy McEachan of Panel, Glasgow. The book which documented the project was published by Walther Koenig Verlag in 2012. It is now out of print but can be downloaded as a PDF file from our website.

embedding critical discourse into the making of clothing, questioning the role of artistic inspiration, or by utilising the notion of 'styling' as an artistic strategy.

The interaction between these spheres is relentless and dynamic, with contemporary art's influence on fashion and its display being one of the most visible forms of this process.<sup>2</sup> But while fashion may look to art for new stylistic trends, it needs to draw the line somewhere, and the fixity of that line is where we find the sweet spot. For instance, fashion cannot be as actively critical of the system which produces it or negate the spectacular in the same way that fine art can. There is less opportunity for fashion to challenge the fundamental hierarchies, prejudices and exploitations that exist within its industry because it is a business, in much more overt ways than art, and is expected to produce quantifiable results. This is not to say that contemporary art cannot be duplicitous, presenting critical strategies which appear to challenge structures without actually doing so. Artists are fascinated by—even jealous of—creative forms like fashion which work within utilitarian restrictions and are widely circulated in mass culture, able to catch the collective imagination with such immediacy. The relationship between fashion and art is longstanding and operates in a multitude of ways.

These include clothes-as-art, catwalk-as-performance and site-specific projects in magazines. Beca and I have the shared memory of seeing experimental fashion in style magazines in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> We remember feeling disappointed by the fact that even though these shoots looked like those that surrounded them, the clothes depicted were not for sale.<sup>4</sup> These were artworks that instrumentalised clothing and that used the mass-culture platform of the magazine as part of their content. Of course, most of the clothes in those magazines were unobtainable for us anyway—unaffordable to us as students—but this was different, it felt like yet another kind of exclusivity. Instead of the usual transaction of consumer desire being catered to and manipulated for profit, the accoutrements of that transaction (the models, the It girls, the photography, the magazine) and our consumer desire, were being used as both the material and content of conceptual art. As an audience, we were being instrumentalised too.

Clothes-as-art need not reflect the logistics of distribution or the practical demands made by the fact that they have to be worn. Statement pieces made for editorial and events can be untethered from reality and wildly experimental. We consider our work to be part of this cultural sphere, even though our designs do not look avant-garde in the way the term is generally understood. We don't work with unusual (or even unwearable) materials and silhouettes, and we don't have a manifesto, but this doesn't mean that

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<sup>2</sup> There are many examples, for instance the effect of performance and body art on the window displays of New York department stores in the 1970s, or the contemporary use of marble in designer boutiques—these interiors take their cue from marble's re-emergence in the 2010s as a sculptural material in visual art, rather than directly from luxury decor.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the work by designers Susan Cianciolo and Bernadette Corporation in magazines like *The Face*, *i-D*, *Purple* and *Self Service*. Other artists and designers working in this manner at the time included Miguel Adrover, Honeysuckle Company, *Imitation of Christ* and *Art Club 2000*.

<sup>4</sup> This is similar to the feeling of frustration when a garment or accessory in an editorial is captioned as the 'stylist's own', as it is usually the most interesting thing on the page.

our brand cannot be considered experimental in the same way. If you look at avant-garde fashion with a knowledge of fine art, the concepts employed can seem familiar.<sup>5</sup> What is impressive is that those concepts can be engineered to work within the restrictions of a commercial business, and that materials that appear ephemeral, fragile or abrasive can be manipulated to become machine washable at 30 degrees. The spirit of experimentation for us is manifested in the way we choose to engage with the fashion system, and not looking recognisably avant-garde is part of that choice.

We design pragmatically and within the limitations of the manufacturing processes we can realistically hope to access (as a tiny label with no financial backing). We also design to accommodate a variety of body types, and aim to appeal to a real audience, not the hypothetical and idealised customer the fashion industry's marketing by and large reflects.

In the fashion world there is an obstinate narrative that the designer who designs for real life, or for him or herself, has a lower status than the one who designs for the catwalk and editorial. More crudely, there is an assumption that the more abstract, fantastic or conceptual a design is, the more intrinsically artistic it must be. It's no wonder that institutional exhibitions of fashion favour this end of the spectrum, to the disadvantage of more ordinary clothing. Even luxury fashion that is quieter is often absent from institutional exhibitions. Maybe we should not be surprised by this. After all, exhibiting fashion is an innately spectacular undertaking. But skilled window dressers and display artists have been making the pedestrian look seductive for over a century. The likely explanation is that fashion institutions choose not to elevate the everyday because to do so would require too much ingenuity, and besides, would not lead to lucrative partnerships with luxury brands. Many blockbuster fashion exhibitions have the financial backing of one or another of a handful of large conglomerates and can thus be read as elaborate brand promotions, pushing a one-sided history of fashion. With the expectation that public institutions should be able to rival the level of perfection we see in the commercial display of luxury goods, only a few major institutions can realistically compete. We the public reflexively know what a cheap or out-of-date display looks like, and how a garment can be devalued by proximity to it. We are accustomed to a turbo-booster level of perfection.

Atelier E.B's clothes are unspectacular, so we must find other ways to communicate their value to the public. The task is twofold: to reveal the complexities of the everyday and make the unspectacular worthy of contemplation. For the exhibition Rik Wouters & The Private Utopia (MoMu, Antwerp, 2017), we created the decor of a teenager's bedroom and displayed clothes and accessories as they might be left lying around naturally, for instance a tracksuit hung over a chair and socks discarded on the floor. In *Passer-by* they are shown as if in the shop window of an old-fashioned outfitter on a provincial high street. This scenography is not meant to divert attention away from the ordinariness of the garments; rather it is an attempt to unburden them from the creative

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<sup>5</sup> The waistcoat made of chicken wire and porcelain crockery fragments by Maison Martin Margiela (autumn/winter 1989–90) channelled Arte Povera's handling of materials. The same can be said for Miguel Adrover's repurposing of Quentin Crisp's mattress as coat fabric (autumn/winter 2000–1).

baggage they were never meant to carry in the first place. As with the various other activities we have undertaken, such as publishing, sponsoring a women's football team, or the restaging of a historic dance piece, these are not distractions. They embody our wish for clothing to be a catalyst for other forms of engagement.<sup>6</sup>

Atelier E.B has developed idiosyncratically because it is enabled by the networks and opportunities offered by contemporary art. By piggybacking on existing structures and using their facilities, we can keep our overheads to a minimum and retail as cheaply as possible. Despite these strategies our clothing is still expensive. This is because we do not mass-produce and are committed to using good quality materials and small, local manufacturing free of exploitation. A viable retail price is only feasible because we don't sell through conventional channels, and also because we fund the label in other ways, primarily through the production of objects, such as paravent screens for interiors, which we sell as art. By doing this, we remove another burden from the individual garment: the expectation to make a profit from it. Our paravents—all of which have one side screen-printed by Beca and the other painted by me—are art-design hybrids and an expression of the individualism we maintain in our partnership. There is space within the collaboration for a certain naiveté about the other's field of expertise, with which we can give one another fresh perspectives. The paravents symbolise that we are a unit, standing back to back, looking in different directions. The notion of the screen mirrors the collaboration, as a space within which we can be both together and autonomous.

We first tried the strategy of showing and selling through art galleries when I invited Beca to participate in a touring exhibition of my work in 2006 called *Ten Years of Robotic Mayhem (Including Sublet)*. At that time, we were friends who had worked together occasionally and I was a devoted customer of her fashion label, Beca Lipscombe.<sup>7</sup> I learned about the fashion industry by wearing her clothes, listening to her experiences and her unusual point of view. After lengthy discussions on the problems of distribution and retail that her label faced, I conceived the idea of 'subletting' part of the exhibition floorspace to her, with the proposal that she display her clothes as she would ideally like them to be seen by audiences in the provinces. Several years before the launch of Instagram, she could bring them to people who would not encounter her work otherwise.<sup>8</sup> She would not need to engage with the mediating power-brokers—such as stylists, buyers and editors—that normally insert themselves between the independent designer and his or her potential public. We knew that the audience for art has many crossovers with the (albeit limited) audience for fashion. The sublet was advantageous to me too as I was already interested in the correlations between art, design, taste and ideology. Her boutique could function as a critique of the increasing prominence of

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<sup>6</sup> Atelier E.B became the sponsors of Leith Athletic Women's football club in 2014. As part of *The Inventors of Tradition II*, in 2015, Atelier E.B and Panel instigated a restaging of the piece *Yes O Yes* from Michael Clark's 1998 ballet *I Am Curious, Orange*, at Glasgow School of Art's Vic bar.

<sup>7</sup> Beca Lipscombe's eponymous label ran from 1999 to 2007.

<sup>8</sup> The exhibition travelled to several locations: Edinburgh, Norwich, Bristol and San Francisco in 2006–7.

museum shops and art merchandising, and as a way of testing how far institutions were willing to engage with the boundary between art and commerce.

This is not to say that operating within the art rather than the fashion system comes without serious issues and conflicts; in swapping one structure for another, we do not say that one is necessarily better. But for us the structures that underpin art have a higher degree of flexibility, offer more opportunities for contemplation and discourse, and impose marginally less of the precariousness and urgency that the fashion cycle demands, especially in regards to scale of production. We exploit the fact that my work as a fine artist is recognised and can open doors that would otherwise be closed to us. Being shown in an established institution that relies on private support is for us comparable to being prominently featured in a mainstream glossy magazine. In that context, in proximity to the ubiquitous beauty and luxury advertising, we become part of a set of contradictory messages. When reaching for a mass rather than niche audience, compromise is inevitable.

We make things from materials that we judge to be right for the needs of the garment. This can be, on the one hand, hand-made intarsia cashmere, which is expensive and labour-intensive to produce or, on the other, it can be ready-made Fruit of the Loom sweatshirts which are then printed with our graphics. Consistency is considered essential to any fashion brand. Despite the fact that our designs are produced, sold and promoted ethically, they are far too inconsistent—one could say stylistically 'hacked'—to be marketable as an eco-brand. Our collections are a Frankenstein patchwork of ideas, too uneven in style, price and material to be so easily categorised.

Perhaps the greatest difference between art and fashion is that fashion must be touched as well as looked at. Shooting the Jasperwear collection with the artist Josephine Pryde, we worked with models with varying degrees of visual impairment interacting with animals such as dogs and horses. This was to accentuate the pre-eminence of tactility, and to enable the viewer to identify with how the model feels, not just how she looks; to touch through her.<sup>9</sup> Before fast fashion there was more emphasis on textiles leading the design, which meant that people were more adept at haptically 'reading' fabric. With digital retail, haptic engagement is mediated at an even further remove. We acknowledge the limits of selling online by only stocking items in our webshop that can be fairly represented on-screen, and don't necessarily need to be tried on for size. We question every prefabricated role in the chain of encounters that brings fashion to the public, from the designer to the manufacturer, the distributor and the window trimmer, and lastly the person who comes across them in a window as a passer-by.

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<sup>9</sup> This is something that writer and director Jill Soloway has discussed as essential to defining the 'female gaze'.