Marie Riegels Melchior & Birgitta Svensson (eds.) *Fashion and Museums. Theory and Practice*. London, New York: Bloomsbury. 2014. 210 p. ISBN 978-1-4725-2766-0.

Fashion is not exclusively about clothes, but fashion is indeed mainly associated with those kinds of objects that cover the human body and provide it with protection from cold, rain or heat. The functionality of such objects is, however, not its most interesting aspect. As social skin clothes are in-between-objects par excellence, living their life in the borderland between nature and culture, human subject and social community, historical conformity and individual taste. Distinction markers made flesh, clothes signify status, class, sometimes profession, and almost always gender, besides having the potential to transgress categories.

In the same vein fashion museology resides in a borderland between classical museology and market consumption, between commercial design and public exhibition, between art and everyday street-ware, between history and contemporaneity.

This rich collection of articles is based on a conference held at Nordiska Museet, Stockholm in 2011. The contributors represent a range of disciplines and a wide spectre of theory and practice, ranging from design to history of fashion, and from curatorship to art and ethnology. In the introduction Marie Riegels Melchior presents the ideas behind the book and the conference. She distinguishes between fashion museology and dress museology as two ways of addressing the challenges museums have to face, when taking up the relatively new genre fashion museology that relates to haute couture, design and branding,

and when at the same time dealing with the not so new dress museology, which relates to the more folkloristic traditional collection of dresses relating for instance to specific ethnic groups. Both forms are present in the different collection and exhibition policies that are dealt with in the articles. Riegels Melchior further explains and discusses how fashion exhibits have become fashionable and relates their success to the so-called new museology, arguing that the new museology's "aim of reflection on our cultural heritage and its multi-vocality is as yet unfulfilled by fashion in museums, except in rare instances". Giving a brief survey of examples of fashion displays she analyses the trend, among other things in relation to ethnologist Orvar Löfgren's examination of the "catwalk-economy" (Löfgren 2005). Some of the dilemmas and challenges that museums face in displaying dress and fashion are addressed, and it is argued that fashion exhibits create visibility and may draw new categories of visitors to the more traditional museum.

The ensuing contributions are divided into three sections, the first one dealing with fashion as a new territory of museums and presenting history as well as concrete examples of exhibitions. Section 2 focuses on the body as an inescapable element in fashion displays, and section 3 presents a number of concrete examples of how fashion and dress have been dealt with in exhibition practices. In the concluding afterword, Birgitta Svensson sums up the main points, not ignoring the dilemmas and challenges that still exist in both theory and practice concerning the link between fashion and museums.

Along the way we get concrete ideas for technical solutions to mannequin problems, discussions and examples of what variations in exhibition displays can do, among other things through historical disclosures. Also border

areas between display technique, scenography and traditional naturalistic museum exhibits are addressed in a variety of ways. For instance in discussing the abstract and the naturalistic as do Harold Koda and Jessica Glasscock in relation to the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We get a lot about how fashion functions as a cultural phenomenon through examples such as the exhibition on the corset that José Teunissen uses as one of his illustrations, or the role of ski clothing in women's liberation as in Marianne Larsson's article. We get discussions about how storytelling and narratives influence design, and how the potentials of biographies of designers through materiality can be explored, as shown in Jeff Horsley's enticing suggestions to use autobiography as an approach to fashion exhibition.

Marco Pecorari addresses issues of contemporaneity and curatorial strategy through the example of the Mode Museum of Antwerpen, and Julia Petrov opens up for the important issue of gender in her discussion of the gendered public wardrobe of 19th century England and the self-styled consumer of more recent times.

Examples of collection histories and exhibition experiences from concrete museums, such as the famous Bath museum of costume, presented by Rosemary Harden, and Amagermuseet in Denmark's recent experiments with dress and identity in new experimental exhibition designs as discussed by Ingeborg Phillipsen are highly illuminating and invite further reflections on the constraints and potentialities given by collection histories and new insights in public relations. The presentations of the Design Museum in Copenhagen by Kirsten Toftegård, and of the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology by Tone Rasch and Ingebjørg Eidhammer both interestingly point to the role

of textiles and fabrics in further exploration of design and fashion.

Several contributors deal with the question of what representations do. It is done directly in Anna Dahlgren's discussion of fashion photography, but the one that sums up the issue theoretically in relation to the challenge of presenting the human body is Anne-Sofie Hjemdahl's article on how to exhibit the body and dress as well as time in a historical perspective.

I cannot resist a small autobiographical note. Back in the 1970s when working as an anthropology student in the Ethnographic Department of the National Museum in Copenhagen, I was part of a group of female curators and university women, who worked for a couple of years to prepare and create an exhibition, which was eventually opened in 1977 under the title *Women of the World*, the *World of Women* (*Verdens kvinder – kvinders verden*). At the first meeting between on the one hand theoretically inclined university academics and on the other experienced museologists, who knew the challenges of transforming abstract ideas into material form, one of the curators expressed a concern that we had to solve the problem of mannequins (*giner*). I still recall my astonishment at hearing this. Not yet familiar with concrete exhibition work, I could not help hearing it as a superficial preoccupation with a small detail in the light of the grand theories on gender issues in the global world that preoccupied us as university women. Today I know better. And if I didn't, this book would surely enlighten me. It is a great satisfaction to be presented with issues of how to deal with theory in practice, and reversely, the potentialities of gaining new theoretical insights from practical experience. This collection of knowledge, thoughts and concrete experiences amply demonstrate that

164 such potentialities exist. What I saw as a small insignificant problem is here addressed in competent and interesting manners, and it has opened the eyes of the present reader further to the challenges of operating in the borderland between traditional museum collection and contemporary curated and designed exhibition installations.

As a small critique, which should be understood rather as a call for more, it could be claimed that some issues such as for instance gender and class perspectives might have been addressed more directly, theorizing them by way of the insights gained by practical museological work with material objects. Matter matters, as we now know from people like Judith Butler and Bruno Latour. So, how does materiality matter in making us wiser on gender theory, class, and cultural theory as such? Also, a more explicit elaboration of the dilemmas – which are mentioned explicitly here and there, but which lie between the lines in most of the articles – of the collection-loyal presentation of authentic objects versus the heavily curated, the spectacular, the seductive, the performative and entertaining that deliberately and strategically takes advantage of such elements in museological work, would be most welcome.

However, the book is indeed rich in illustrative substance, not only on fashion through recent times but also on museology and display techniques, and it nicely sums up the fashion exhibition in the borderland between the authentic object and the entertaining and seductive exhibition design.

It must have been an inspiring conference. One only has to imagine the richness of illustrations that could accompany the theme (a few are included in the book), and this collection of articles will surely find its audience both among museologists, designers, and scholars of material culture besides a broad spectre of people interested in clothes, fashion, and design on many scales.

LITERATURE

Löfgren, Orvar 2005. "Catwalking and coolhunting. The production of newness." In Orvar Löfgren & Robert Willim (eds.). *Magic, Culture and the New Economy*. Oxford: Berg.

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