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Exploring ontology
through making and
wearing blue dresses

Alexandra Barton

Blue Dance of Two



The blue dress is dancing just by being.
I want to dance with the blue dress;
to do a *pas de deux* (dance for two).

I am pursuing alternative modes of interaction with clothing. In this exploration I look to my direct experiences with five blue dresses in order to understand the ontological positioning of my own subjective being. Further (and more radically), informed by the contemporary philosophical theory Object Oriented Ontology, I engage in the processes of making and wearing garments to accrue evidence that clothing too ascertains a mode of being.

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through making and
wearing blue dresses

Alexandra Barton 2014

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Introduction





This writing details my interactions with five blue dresses. While observing and analysing my making and wearing of these dresses, I recall and consider the uninhibited engagement with clothing that I experienced as a child. What I hope to produce is a contribution about modes of experience and ultimately an offering about being and objects. For these purposes I draw from the contemporary philosophical theory Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). This situates the subjective relationship I have with clothing in an ontological context. Ontology here refers to being-in-the-world and the ways that subjective reality is affected by experiences of existing with other things. In this exploration I look to my direct experiences with clothing in order to understand the ontological positioning of my own subjective being. Further (and more radically) I engage in the processes of making and wearing garments to accrue evidence that clothing too ascertains a mode of being.

Clothing is not commonly considered to be a tool for ontological exploration. As writer and researcher Elizabeth Wilson explains, clothing as dress includes any form of body covering. As an object, it is always understood in terms of this covering function as well as the codes of signification that are attached to it, such as social, aesthetic and psychological associations. Clothing has not always been understood in

1 **Wilson,**
Adorned in Dreams, 3.

relation to fashion – but fashion’s omnipresence in today’s prevailing capitalist culture means that clothing and dress are now almost always understood in terms of fashion. “Fashion is dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles.”¹ Though not all clothing can be ‘fashionable’ at once, it is inevitably understood in terms of fashion. The transient nature of what is ‘fashionable’ causes clothing to be regarded as disposable or its worth determined by how well it adheres to current fashions. I want to undo this. Clothes are the objects that live in wardrobes and in drawers and sometimes on the floor. We climb inside them in the morning and for the duration of the day clothing constitutes our most intimate environment. I intend to liberate clothing from its designated role of functioning as codified meaning and pursue alternative modes of interaction. The limited scope currently afforded to clothing – such a prolific object in our world – is astonishing. At a time of environmental crisis it is also irresponsible.

2 **Morton,**
“Waking Up,” 184.

A key tool in my attempt to exercise an alternative mode of interaction with clothing is OOO. OOO is a non-hierarchical understanding of reality that regards all forms of existence equally. This means that humans and non-humans, the animate and inanimate, can all be equally and appropriately referred to as an objects.² Fundamental to OOO, as a subset of the broader philosophical

3 **Meillassoux,**
***After Finitude*, 5.**

movement Speculative Realism, is that it critiques the well-ingrained and accepted Kantian notion of *correlationism*. French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (one of a handful of philosophers closely associated with OOO) explains correlationism as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”³ In opposition to this, object oriented philosophy argues that there is a reality that exists independently of human perception. The term ‘object oriented philosophy’ was first used by philosopher Graham Harman in his book *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002). Harman used the term to describe his philosophical position in relation to the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). The work of Heidegger remains the foundation for OOO, particularly the notions detailed in his book *Being and Time*, originally published in German in 1927.

The key text that I have selected to engage with OOO is Timothy Morton’s recent book *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (2013). Morton comes to OOO from the perspective of an ecological critique, which is sympathetic to my own motives for pursuing OOO. Among the variants of OOO, Morton’s work can also be distinguished by his emphasis on causality

as the aesthetic relations between objects, which is particularly productive when applying OOO to my own, very material, practice. *Realist Magic* provides a radical yet poetic explication of the ontology of objects.

Situating this exploration in my own experience of being, *Blue Dance of Two* began when I found a blue minimalist neoprene dress in a secondhand store in Tokyo. For a single moment the dress reached out towards me and held me in a childlike state of enchantment. This was the catalyst for a process of remaking this blue dress.

I remake in the hope of rediscovering a state of childlike enchantment and am trying to create a garment that has the ability to maintain this uncanny effect. Because what I am in pursuit of is so elusive and intangible, I approach it through material practice in order to ‘feel out’ that which is so resistant to ‘direct knowing’⁴. The chapters of this exegesis discuss the making and wearing of each dress and my experience of these processes while drawing from what might seem to be disparate strands to make sense of the phenomena that unfold.

Intertwined in the making process are the influences of Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943), Bauhaus theatre workshop Master during the

4 I use ‘knowing’ here in a philosophical context, referring to the ontological notion of access.

1920s; fashion designers Rei Kawakubo (of the label Comme des Garçons) and Issey Miyake who are attributed with the establishment of ‘Japanese avant-garde fashion’ both in Paris and internationally during the 1980s and 1990s; and finally, my own recollections of experiencing clothing as a child and within both rudimentary and learnt modes of embodied being, including practicing ballet.

I have come to experience the Japanese aesthetic of Kawakubo and Miyake through their participation in the international fashion scene. I am intuitively drawn to the work of both designers and there are two ways that I have engaged with it. One is through active participation in the fashion system in my everyday life, including the consumption of images of fashion shows and interactions with their physical garments through my experiences in a retail context (as both a consumer and as a retail assistant). The other way that I have engaged with the work of Kawakubo and Miyake has been through critical fashion discourse. In this theoretical context, their work remains relevant to the analysis of contemporary fashion. I consider the design content of today’s fashion scene as still reflective of avant-garde designers that were active during the 1990s. I had the opportunity to view a selection of iconic pieces

5 **Fukai,**
Future Beauty, 2014.

6 **Richard,**
“Our Kimono Mind,” 222.

7 **Trimingham,**
“Oskar Schlemmer,”
128.

of Kawakubo’s and Miyake’s from this time, in the exhibition *Future Beauty: The Tradition of Reinvention in Japanese Fashion Design*.⁵

Japanese fashion designers have been attributed with the deconstruction of codified meaning ingrained in Western fashion.⁶ The non-Western perspective of these Japanese designers has introduced new aesthetics to the Western fashion system and this is sympathetic to my interest in extending the notion of clothing beyond the context of fashion and pursuing alternative modes of interaction. Further, I am intrigued by my intuitive attraction to what is presented as a ‘Japanese fashion aesthetic’ and am pleased to find that unpacking these formal qualities is conducive to demonstrating notions of OOO.

I come to Schlemmer as a result of engaging with design histories as a context for my own design practice. The ideological impetus of the Bauhaus (in operation from 1919 to 1933) places the work that was produced by the school in a particularly interesting light. The Bauhaus strived for a new socially responsible and ethical aesthetic.⁷ Although Schlemmer’s theatre workshop was initially treated as peripheral in the teachings at the Bauhaus and his theatre performances sit outside the category of ‘mass produced objects’ for which the Bauhaus is commonly

8 [Hasting, et al.,
Das Triadisches Ballet,
1968.](#)

remembered, by reading Schlemmer's work through the lens of OOO, I can understand it as a new, social responsible and ethical aesthetic. In this exegesis I have selected *Das Triadisches Ballet* (The Triadic Ballet) through which to examine Schlemmer's application of aesthetics. My experience of this work is through viewing video reproductions, still photographs and further reading.⁸ Although *Das Triadisches Ballet* was in fact choreographed just prior to Schlemmer joining the Bauhaus school, it provides an excellent example of his philosophical approach to creating works, and also demonstrates an embodied mode of exploring space and materiality through ballet.

There are a variety of strands I am attempting to draw together in this writing, as well as two distinct approaches to the investigation. One approach is analytical and theoretical and the other subjective and embodied. I was initially reluctant to embrace the latter as I was concerned it might run counter to what I thought would be rigorous research with quantitative, finite answers. But an increasing acknowledgment and acceptance of the innate and complex qualities of subjectivity and ontology occurred gradually, as I made and as I wore. This research through my direct experience with materiality became

- 9 **A term historically used in philosophy that appears in German in the English translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Heidegger uses it to refer to existence and the uncanny nature of existence; that we cannot know it, because we are it.**
- 10 **Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 22.**

increasingly appropriate and productive. As Heidegger advocates: “any ontology” must “take its guideline from Da-sein⁹ itself.”¹⁰

In order to identify when I am engaging in this approach, I use blue text to signify my own subjective voice, which at times employs poetic devices to express a variety of content including: my personal recollections, my experiences in making, my experiences of wearing and my interpretations of being on behalf of the object I am interacting with.

Through my experiences of making and wearing blue dresses my understanding of the essential connection between embodiment, materiality and ontology in my practice has deepened. These notions further unfold with each dress – threads will be introduced and then revisited and elaborated across chapters.

Blue Dress Zero **Uncanniness**





An uncanny experience

Being in Tokyo was an overwhelming experience that I floated through with childlike delight and naivety. With no understanding of the Japanese language and being largely unfamiliar with local customs, it was a visual spectacle that I didn't have to understand. This is a state of being that I relish. I recall a particular instant when, in a crammed secondhand clothing store flicking quickly through garments on racks, my eyes fell onto a deep pool of blue. I was utterly captivated by a blue, minimalist, neoprene dress.

The 'dressness' of the dress (there is simply no other way to describe it) required a double take. There was no denying it, that dress was absolutely and indisputably, *overtly* 'being' there. I bought the dress, but back at home it did not strike me as it initially did. I want to investigate the now 'lost effect' of (what will now be referred to as) *blue dress zero*. I want to know the ontological explanation for this 'effect' that I experienced and how can I rediscover and recreate this phenomenon?

Morton provides a theoretical explanation of the mode of interaction that occurred between me and *blue dress zero*. He describes the experience as ‘uncanny’ and to demonstrate what he means by this, Morton uses an example of a direct experience with materiality – one that is not dissimilar to the one I have described above – a description of the sensation of jet lag in unfamiliar surroundings.¹¹ In order to unpack what occurred in an OOO context, the fundamental nature of an object must first be understood.

11 Morton, *Realist magic*, 64.

12 *Ibid.*, 16.

13 *Ibid.*, 16.

14 *Ibid.*, 27.

The OOO term *object* refers to a ‘real entity’ that is ‘withdrawn’.¹² Harman is credited with providing the OOO model of an object as ‘withdrawn’. It is Harman’s interpretation of Heidegger’s notion ‘Entzug’ (the term *withdrawn* being the direct English translation). ‘Withdrawn’ refers to the notion of access, that there is an intrinsic aspect of an object’s being that is incapable of being anything else; the “unspeakable unicity”¹³ of an object. Although ‘withdrawn’ conjures images of retracting to an internal space, Morton is adamant that this is not an internal manifestation but is rather: “an open secret”.¹⁴ This then maintains the possibility that *blue dress zero* momentarily let me in on a secret. Or perhaps I simply realised that there was a secret being kept? These speculations begin to help unpack what is occurring when an object appears as ‘uncanny’.

15 Morton,
Realist magic, 64.

16 *Ibid.*, 65.

17 *Ibid.*, 65.

18 *Ibid.*, 27.

Morton describes the uncanniness of objects as their quality of simultaneously being both themselves and not themselves.¹⁵ To help explain this phenomenon he refers to when “you have jet lag and everything seems weird... the sensual vividness of objects seems to jump out at me in front of those objects.”¹⁶ There is a strange kind of doubling that occurs; one of the two elements involved can be understood as the ‘withdrawn’ ‘unspeakable unicity’ of an object. The presence of this aspect of an object produces a sensation of things being “strangely familiar and familiarly strange”.¹⁷ Yet according to Morton’s explanation, this ‘withdrawn’ presence cannot be anything but the innateness of the object itself.

The second element in the equation is what Morton calls the ‘non-object’. Although this sounds mysterious, the ‘non-object’ it is in fact the everyday and ordinary appearance of objects that we are familiar with. In this discussion Morton is careful to define ‘we’ as referring to all other objects as well as ourselves. “All the things by which we specify the object are not the object.”¹⁸ In other words, the non-object is the ‘appearance’ of the object. This is the way that we know objects (or rather don’t know them) in an everyday sense.

19 Morton,
Realist magic, 37.

In conclusion, Morton explains that the fact that the objects do not always appear to be uncanny is an illusion produced on our part by a subconscious process he calls 'habitual normalisation'.¹⁹ The jet lagged, uncanny experience is in fact the default state of affairs. This accounts for the 'lost effect' of *blue dress zero*. I had not been able to habitually normalise Japan, the experience was too dense and too unfamiliar to digest. Therefore, *blue dress zero* appeared to me as uncanny, both itself and not itself, but as soon as I became familiar with it, this glimpse into the strange state of the reality of things faded.

Uncanny subjectivity

This is not the first time I have investigated alternative modes of interacting with clothing. My honours thesis, *The Affect Effect* (2012), explored clothing as a haptic, rather than solely visual, medium. Experimenting in alternative design processes, I moved in the clothing rather than looked in the mirror, to *feel* rather than *see* whether my creations were successful or not. To use one's own body in the design process is not common practice in commercial fashion design.

In doing this I was inevitably engaging with the particular kind of attunement that I have to my body, shaped by the unique experiences that we all have as individuals. In my case, this

attunement comes from practising classical ballet from a young age, which enabled me to establish a relatively uninhibited relationship with my own body. Through ballet I have built a degree of confidence to let my body respond to outside surroundings in an intuitive way (whether it be music or as in this case, clothing).

Joanna Entwistle's research, *Dress as Embodied Practice* (2000), was central in informing this method of intuitive bodily response as a form of design practice. Entwistle provided a revelation in my thinking about clothing by referring to sociologist Bryan Turner who states that "there is an obvious and predominant fact about human beings... they have bodies and they are bodies."²⁰ By recognising the wearing of clothing as an embodied practice, clothing immediately has the potential to operate outside of its designated role of functioning as codified meaning that ties it to the fashion system.

20 **Turner, Bryan.** *The Body and Society, 1985* quoted in Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body" *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 4, no. 3 (2000): 323.

In hindsight, this was the first half of my revelation about ontology, one that aligns strongly with an OOO view and Heidegger's notion of 'Da-sein'. Heidegger uses the term Da-sein to refer to the uncanny nature of being; we cannot know it, because we *are* it.²¹ I have a body and I am a body. For me, directly acknowledging this was a relief. In light of our current state of

21 **Heidegger,** *Being and Time*, 176.

22 **Gwilt and Rissanen, *Shaping Sustainable Fashion*, 75.**

environmental crisis there has been an increasing awareness of the highly unsustainable practices of the fashion industry, primarily the exorbitant number of garments produced and discarded to landfill.²² In emphasising the physical nature of objects as detrimental to the environment, I felt that materiality was gaining a reputation as being inherently destructive. To follow this logic means to limit the possibilities of materiality to negative implications. Yet I argue that it is not the object itself that is to blame, rather it is the fact that our mode of interaction with objects is limited to nothing more than consumption. Central to this idea is acceptance of our role as subjects with agency in this system.

23 **Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *The Speculative Turn*, 4.**

24 **In particular Caroline Evans' book *Fashion at the Edge* (2003) influenced my thinking around Marxist critique in regards to material forms.**

Marxism provides a productive framework for critiquing the fashion system rather than the objects it produces. Although Marxism is part of the 'cultural turn' in thinking, as opposed to that of the 'speculative turn' to which OOO belongs,²³ it is this line of thinking that has bought me to consider the ontological significance of materiality.²⁴ The work of philosopher Kate Soper extends the examination of the material via Marxist critique to a possible future scenario that she calls an *Alternative Hedonism* (2008), based on a revisioning of aesthetics. Soper makes a direct connection between the current environmental crisis and consumerism and suggests that the

25 **Soper,**
“Alternative Hedonism,”
567-587.

only way to make a shift to alternative anti-consumerist ethics and politics is to embrace new modes of thinking about human pleasure and gratification – a kind of hedonism in which aesthetics are identified as having a key role.²⁵

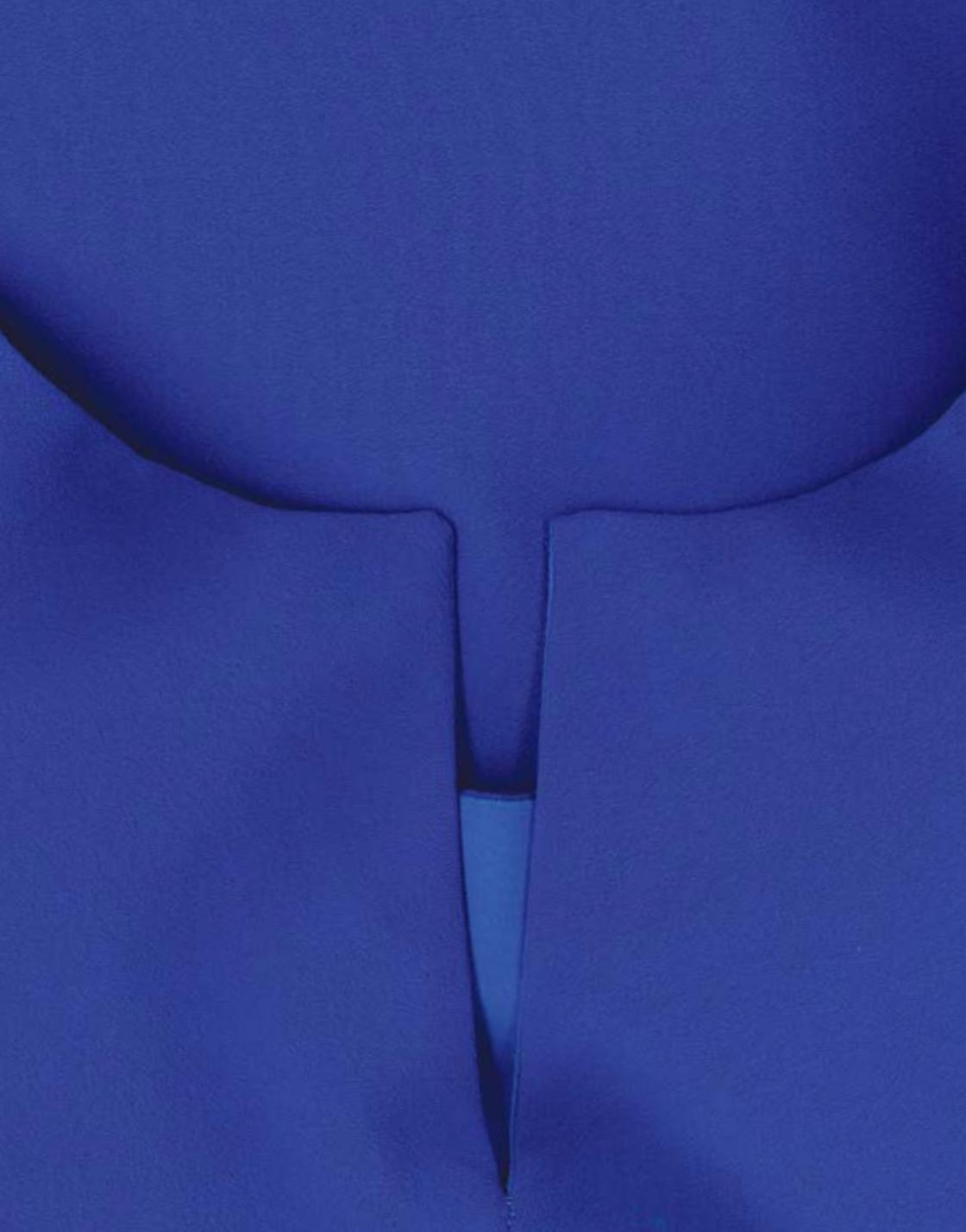
26 **Bagnall,**
“Performance of
Becoming”, 349-359.

Artist Catherine Bagnall's practice provides a demonstration of this thinking. Bagnall uses clothing to explore modes of 'being-in-the-world' with particular interest in pursuing the pleasure of being and immanence. Bagnall's high regard for clothing and its potential to operate as a kind of segue for humans to connect to other things, other beings and the world, is a revelation (a step ahead of the theoretical) that I have been exposed to throughout my undergraduate studies from knowledge of her performative works. Bagnall's work consists of walking in the wilderness (often alpine areas) dressed in clothing she has made that include animal features, such as ears on her hat and a long tail that drags along behind her.²⁶ This treatment of clothing as an intimate and personal medium has significantly influenced my own process. Her work is a demonstration of how essential it is to acknowledge one's own subjectivity when exploring interactions with objects and therefore the world.

**Uncanny
disappearance**

Blue dress zero provided me with an uncanny aesthetic experience in Tokyo. For a moment it had delighted me with its double act as both an object and non-object. In order to explore this intriguing phenomenon I decided to remake the dress. I will use my skills in flat patternmaking and sewing to create *blue dress one*, in the hope that I can recreate that uncanny moment and come to understand the ontological position of my subjectivity alongside that of objects.

Blue Dress One **Blueness**



Pursuing blue

By coincidence, the dress that struck me as uncanny in Tokyo was blue. Its colour was not a decision of mine. Now I am making *blue dress one*. I have a hazy vision in my mind of what this dress will be like. It is conical in shape, blue inside and out, with tube-like sleeves protruding from the top. In my mind, it hovers, defying gravity, in a vacuum. In this vision there is no body, just a dress.

Making *blue dress one* starts with choosing fabric. I am limited by the fabric selection that I have access to. Already this feels like a barrier to creating what I have envisaged. The blue I am looking for is not specific in its tone, hue or saturation - rather it is a specific kind of feeling that I am after. A blue that possesses a certain intensity - an expansiveness. It is important that the blue avoids any strong connotations with codified meanings. Blues can easily be too 'pretty', too 'royal', too 'nautical'. I need an ambiguous blue. It must be a kind of blue that you can fall into infinitely without being caught on anything.

To speak of blue is to speak of the appearance of *blue dress zero*. Blue is a single aesthetic quality of the dress. If appearances are not the object itself, how can they be ontologically accounted for? Because OOO favours a realist stance – the idea that there is a reality that exists outside of the mind – OOO relies on the theory of causality in order to explain ‘how things happen’ in this reality. Causality is simply the notion that things happen through cause and effect.

Morton’s contribution to this notion is that causality is not secret mechanical workings that happen behind things, rather causality happens out in the open. For Morton, causality is aesthetic. “The aesthetic form of an object is where the causal properties of the object reside.”²⁷ This explains why Morton refers to occurrences as taking place via the ‘aesthetic dimension’. “Precisely because reality is real – that is, encrypted against access by any object, including a probing human mind – the aesthetic dimension is incredibly important. Objects withdraw, yet they appear...”²⁸ In terms of causality, to my mind, blue can be understood as an effect – the result of something.

²⁷ Morton, *Realist magic*, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

Morton describes appearances as belonging to an object’s past – the aesthetic traces of things that have happened to it. “Like a glass whose shape was molded by blowers and blow tubes

29 **Morton,**
Realist Magic, 18

30 **Ibid.**, 18.

31 **Ibid.**, 20.

and powdered quartz sand. Every aesthetic trace, every footprint of an object, sparkles with absence.”²⁹ This explains the concept that although objects are intrinsically ‘withdrawn’ they can affect each other through “traces and footprints: the aesthetic dimension.”³⁰ To consider the blueness of a dress is to consider the fabric as an object in itself. It is the material properties of the fabric and the processes that have happened to it that generate the fabric’s blueness.

Textile design can therefore be considered an exploration in causality.³¹ Without the term causality, but with an excellent understanding of cause and effect, Japanese textile designer Makiko Minagawa creates fabric in this way. Minagawa has collaborated for over two decades with fashion designer Issey Miyake who is renowned for his use of innovative textiles.³² Minagawa is expert in the ways that the material properties of cloth and the processes it undergoes influence the fabric’s appearance. For example, the way that colour is experienced through a specific weave structure and how this reflects and absorbs light.³³ This impressive technical knowledge is combined with the Japanese treatment of fabric as having its own life and spirit, leading to an approach that maybe similar to one informed by OOO; acknowledging the material complexities of the object and valuing its ontological significance. I notice in the process

32 **Fukai,**
“Fashion,” 37.

33 **Wada,**
“Textile and Kimono,” 36.

of selecting fabric that I am drawn to a particular consistency of finish of cloth; fine matte textures of unstructured uniformity. This may be as much to do with an experience of colour as it is texture.

Blue dancing

Schlemmer approached colour from the perspective of a formative artist. He had previously trained in sculpture and painting yet came to the Bauhaus theatre workshop in order to pursue an embodied medium and create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). Schlemmer's approach was to dissect the elements of theatre into its key components, to study them and examine their strengths and limitations.³⁴ Schlemmer divided theatre into materials (form and colour) and arena (space and building). He then considered it the role of the artist to synthesise these media in perfect equilibrium.³⁵ In his process of dissection he refers to colour as abstract by virtue, an invention of the human mind.³⁶

34 Trimmingham, "Bauhaus Lighthouse," 200.

35 Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure," 17.

36 *Ibid.*, 21.

37 *Ibid.*, 24.

I immediately consider and reconsider my approach to blue; perhaps in my attempt to create in accordance with OOO I have engaged in a more abstract process than I intended. I had visualised the dress before I selected fabric. Yet Schlemmer's colour is certainly not abstract in the way it functions once physically manifest in his theatre works. "The costumes are partly of padded cloth and partly stiff papier-mache forms, coated with metallic or coloured paint."³⁷ I imagine that

to view this work in person would have been an entirely unique experience. The reality of paint on papier-mache would be an experience of colour intrinsically tied to its specific materiality.

I can recall, when I was six my Nana made me a blue tutu. It was the first tutu I had ever worn. It was certainly an object of memorable physicality. Tutus are a peculiar shape for the unaccustomed to dance in; one's natural arm space is significantly reduced. Even though you are inside the tutu it still feels as if you are dancing around it. I remember the physical danger presented by 'fittings'. There were pins that might stab you and scratchy fabric. I remember feeling like I must be frozen still in the not yet finished clothes.

In the old hall where my ballet classes were held I wore the blue tutu and performed my own mechanical ballet. I danced as a wind-up doll. I now attempt to recall the actions of the blue tutu at this time. I am surprised by the degree of detail that I can remember: rows of tiny blue knitted ribs stretch out and across. Overlooked edges curl under themselves. Planes of tulle grate against each other and stick out abruptly in shock from the sharp edge where they were cut.

38 **Trimingham,**
 “Oskar Schlemmer,” 131.

39 **Schlemmer,**
 “Man and Art Figure,” 22.

40 **Ibid.,** 22.

41 **Moholy-Nagy,**
 “Theater, Circus, Variety,”
 57.

Colour is an essential component in making Schlemmer's *Das Triadisches Ballet a Gesamtkunstwerk* through engaging the background and space to participate in the ballet.³⁸ Consisting of three acts, twelve dancers and eighteen costumes, each act is performed against a different coloured backdrop, first yellow, then pink, finally black. In *Das Triadisches Ballet* the background does not operate as a secondary component, each set provides a very intentional arena for “successive and transient action.”³⁹ Schlemmer uses colour as a means of establishing connections. Through his careful control of formative media, colour is continually at work in the *Das Triadisches Ballet*, forging the connections that Schlemmer was interested in: those between ‘man as dancer’ and space. With so many active elements at work in this ‘kaleidoscopic play’⁴⁰ man becomes formative media himself – on an equal footing with other formative media that are employed on stage.⁴¹ Therefore, when I view *Das Triadisches Ballet* through an OOO lens, I can see how it could be understood as a kind of ontologically flat theatre.





Alexandra Barton,
6 years of age,
performing *Wind-up Doll
Dance*, in ballet class,
1997, series of video
stills/VHS recording.

Making with blue

I found what I felt was an appropriately ambiguous, expansive, blue fabric to make *blue dress one*. I made a pattern based on the proportions of *blue dress zero* but, by cutting most of *blue dress one* in a single piece, reduced the seams to a single centre back seam. This replaces the contouring at the waist of *blue dress zero* with flat fabric and therefore *blue dress one* forms a cone shape. Once it is all sewn up and every raw edge of fabric is tucked inside the lining, it becomes a single object, a very blue dress.

When I wear the dress, I do not feel it on my body. I can only think about the visualisation of *blue dress one* I had at the outset and the inconsistencies between this imagined object and the real one. *Blue dress one* disappoints me. Its floppy, limp physicality dissatisfies me. It seems to resist the geometry that I intended.

I don't really 'know' *blue dress one*, I feel like I can't know it at all. Is this a question of ontological access or am I just looking in the wrong place? I realise I have been unintentionally working in abstraction, not with material. I have been engaging with a virtual object, but this was not my objective. I forgot that I have a body and that I am a body - this is the way I want to know an object.



Alexandra Barton,
Blue Dance of Two, 2014,
video still/digital video on DVD.

Blue Dress Two **Flatness**



Flatness in making

42 Fukai,
“Fashion,” 36.

43 Wada,
“Textile and Kimono,” 36.

44 Ibid., 35.

Flatness is an inherent property of fabric. As Japan has produced textiles for over eighteen hundred years, both traditional Japanese clothing and contemporary Japanese fashion designers demonstrate unique applications of cloth that utilise its inherent flatness.⁴² Japan’s weaving mills, which traditionally produced kimono fabrics before converting to Western-style fabrics in the early twentieth century, are collaborators in the production of fabrics for contemporary designers such as Miyake.⁴³ While these mills no longer exclusively produce kimono fabric, they have retained their approach towards fabric, as a result of its application in kimono. The kimono is constructed of flat rectangles – cloth that wraps and drapes from the body. “The Japanese view cloth as having its own life and spirit, interacting with the human body in movement and at rest.”⁴⁴

45 Isozaki,
“The Form of Cloth,” 55.

46 Fukai,
“Fashion,” 37.

As exemplified in the work of Miyake, the Japanese approach to creating clothing is a process of simplifying in order to keep the cutting of a textile to a minimum.⁴⁵ The width of the material and its other characteristics, including its flatness, have precedence over the shape of the garment. Not interrupting the fabric’s inherent form means to design garments that are flat until put on the body.⁴⁶ This results in the abstract shapes characteristic of Japanese fashion design that are the product of layering flat

47 **Richard,**
“Our Kimono Mind,” 219.

fabrics on the body.⁴⁷ This method, informed by an understanding of materials and the essential qualities of clothing, means the Japanese aesthetic is one that disregards the codified visual meanings of the Western fashion system.

48 **Doyle,**
“Tailor,” xvii.

Flatness is in direct contrast to a Western approach to making clothing, which is to contour the flat fabric to the shape of the body; a technique called tailoring.⁴⁸ This is a process of creating multiple, carefully contoured pattern pieces that will fit together to create a three-dimensional shape. This process requires many cuts into the fabric, and many seams in the final result, including darts, which are contouring, rather than structural seams.

When I am patternmaking *blue dress two* I think about preserving the flat shapes I create on the flat paper. Retaining the simplicity of form is satisfying. I do this in response to the flatness of the fabric and the flatness of the paper - the materials I am working with. I become a human compass, using my full arm span to stretch across the paper and draw a curving hemline in a single swing. I have created a flat geometric ‘net’ for a three-dimensional truncated cone shape.

Even when it is sewn up, *blue dress two* will always effortlessly revert to this flat form given the opportunity. It will know how to relax. But when it is engaged with other objects, its forms are unique and infinite. I consider this dress off the body, in a realm of flatness. There is an ambiguity as to how this dress will physically interact with other forms.

This ambiguity is around the unknown future of the object. If the appearance of an object can be understood as the aesthetic traces of things that have happened to it and therefore properties of the past, then how is the future of objects accounted for in an OOO view? Morton frames this as a question: what is it in an object that ‘persists’ or ‘continues’?⁴⁹ Morton establishes that this ‘persistence’ is the essence of an object, something which is intrinsically linked to the future of an object. This is a development of Heidegger’s notion of Da-sein. In *Being and Time* Heidegger discusses “the authentic occurrence of existence” as arising “from the future of Da-sein”.⁵⁰ This proximity to the essence of an object brings us back to the notion of ‘uncanny’. The ‘potentiality’ of being is central to the notion of Da-sein. To be aware of one’s potentiality – to realise ‘how one is’ – is a deeply uncanny sensation.⁵¹ If flat garments have a particularly ambiguous future, I wonder if they regularly experience a feeling of uncanniness?

49 Morton, *Realist Magic*, 212.

50 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 353.

51 *Ibid.*, 176.

Wearing flatness

I can recall the items of the dress-up box that generated the most creative applications to the body were those that were flat. Old table cloths, old sheets, curtains or blankets. Flat household textiles were full of possibility. It was wonderfully satisfying to wrap and cocoon oneself in flat cloth and disappear in it entirely or to use it as an extension of the body – as a cape for running through the garden or as a parachute for jumping from a tree. These objects simultaneously maintained some distance from, yet dynamically engaged with, the body.

52 Martin,
“Our Kimono Mind,” 219.

53 Frankel,
“Issey Miyake,” 146.

54 Edelkoort,
“Wearing Miyake,” 21.

Both off and on the body Japanese clothing may enact its own formal inclinations beyond the human silhouette as a result of its flatness.⁵² Flatness is taken to an innovative extreme in two of Miyake’s most experimental projects; *Pleats Please* and *A-POC*. *Pleats Please*, launched in 1993, utilises a special pleating technology and process, where flat garments are first ‘cut and sewn’ and then are permanently pleated.⁵³ When these pleated garments are worn, the fabric creates dynamic sculptural forms; “an architecture of becoming that is searching for a multiplicity of variations and possibilities while maintaining continuity.”⁵⁴ *A-POC* (an acronym for ‘a piece of cloth’) was a collaborative project between

Miyake and textile engineer Dai Fujiwara, begun in 1999. Together, they produced tubes of fabric from which entire outfits were ready to be cut out by the consumer. This gives the wearer agency in the final form that the clothing takes and therefore facilitates a different kind of interaction with clothing.

55 **Isozaki,**
“The Form of Cloth,” 55.

56 **Ibid.,** 176.

The prevalence of flatness in Miyake’s work occurs because it is central to his understanding of clothing.⁵⁵ Miyake’s creative explorations are concerned with pursuing what he considers to be fundamental to clothing. He has identified the essence of clothing as the wrapping of the body in cloth. Therefore he treats the body and cloth as two equal components in his work. Miyake sees his role as facilitating the co-existence of the body and cloth, working with the space that is a result of the formal inconsistencies between the two.⁵⁶

57 **Fukai,**
“Fashion,” 37.

Miyake’s work (as well as that of his contemporaries) has been praised for dismantling the symbolism that has become ingrained in Western clothing and for providing a demonstration of the way that clothing could function to overcome “ethnic and gender differences and even the confines of an establishment called fashion.”⁵⁷ While I cannot agree that the symbolism of Western fashion has been ‘dismantled’, Japanese fashion has provided an alternative realm of aesthetics that sits outside of codified Western meanings.

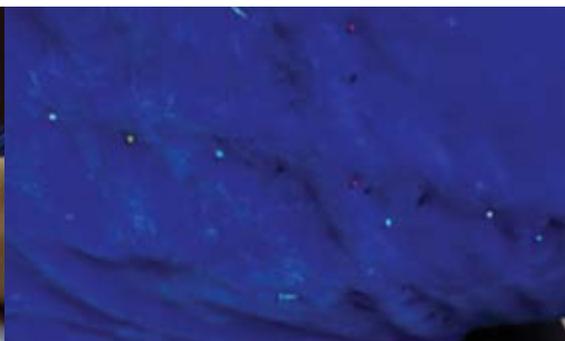
Being flatness

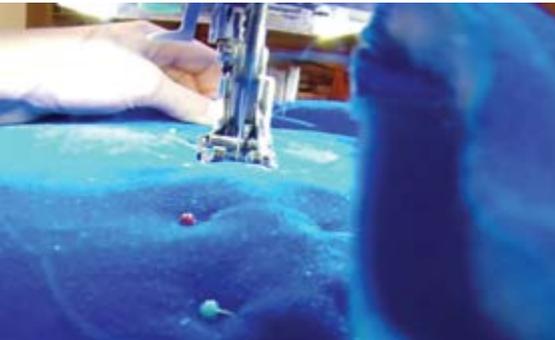
Flatness is productive due to its inconsistencies with us. During a ballet class we are instructed to ‘use’ the flat floor that we are standing upon. One’s foot must ‘caress’ the floor when moving across it, and maintaining this floor pressure is essential in providing the kinetic energy required to throw legs in the air and to jump. Once no longer in contact with the floor, the flat plane still exists as a spatial structure in which to ‘be’ in relation to. Like ‘blueness’, I feel that flatness has an energy to it, the potential to go on forever if unrestricted. A perfect arabesque line has this energy too.

To be flat is to be non-hierarchical. Flatness is equality. OOO is a flat ontology. In experiencing flatness one can never get above it, out of it, view it from a distance. We are always in it. “You just can’t jump outside your phenomenological skin... We are shrink-wrapped in reality.”⁵⁸ This is the perspective of all objects. On this single plane we brush past each other. Clothing against skin, skin against clothing. Clothing against floor, floor against clothing. So the world is flat after all. I take my flat dress and put it on the body. Naturally, it creases.

⁵⁸ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 67.

Blue Dress Three **Paddedness**





Alexandra Barton,
Making Blue Dress
Three, 2014, series of
video stills/digital GoPro
recording, mpeg.

Making paddedness

Blue dress three – a blue, velvet, quilted cone – is the manifestation of a rudimentary pattern-making test done before *blue dress two* was made. I had put a large cardboard cone on a mannequin. It was awkward and ridiculous. The two forms seemed incompatible. In order to ‘make it fit’ I removed all excess fabric from above the shoulders. However in doing so, a crucial line to the abstract apex of the cone was broken. It was just enough for the cone shape to become undetectable. I wanted *blue dress three* to retain the ‘coneness’ that was lost in *blue dress two*, so I returned to the awkward and ridiculous cardboard cone on a mannequin and tried to intervene as little as possible. Two holes for arms were cut. There was a space left between the excess fabric and the body. The Japanese refer to this as *ma*.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Fukai, “Fashion,” 37.

⁶⁰ Kondo, “Japanese Spatial Concept Ma,” 67.

In Japanese culture, *ma* is the concept of both physical and temporal space.⁶⁰ The kimono, that hangs on the body creating spaces between cloth and body, demonstrates the way that *ma* is considered to be an inherent phenomenon in clothing rather than problematic excess. Japanese fashion designers utilise *ma* in order to “transcend physical differences and achieve an abstract relationship with the body”.⁶¹ The acknowledgement of a physical space *in between*, values the boundary as a point of delineation from one object to another, as well

⁶¹ Frankel, “Flatness,” 63.

as simultaneously and equally valuing its role as a surface that connects one object to another. This extends the notion of an object beyond just what it is, to also include what it is not.

Heidegger's poetical exploration of a ceramic jug in his article *The Thing* (1971) identifies *the void* as essential to the jug's being. In examining the jug Heidegger is investigating "what in the thing is thingly?"⁶² Not dissimilar to my investigation of the dressness of the dress; that which cannot simply be identified in the direct qualities or appearance of the object, but lie in its persistence and possibility. When Heidegger examines the making process he deliberates whether the potter shapes the clay or the void. He concludes; "From start to finish the potter takes hold of the impalpable void and brings it forth."⁶³

62 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 165.

63 *Ibid.*, 167.

Paddedness in action

The capacity for a material to create a cone lies in its ability to create the void, the space, the *ma*. Layering and paddedness are innate qualities of Japanese dress that originated from traditional kimono and have been both subtly and explicitly integrated into contemporary design.⁶⁴ Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons is particularly notorious for her use of padding after her Spring/Summer 1997 collection *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body*.⁶⁵ The collection consisted of figure-hugging stretch garments, with padding inserted

64 Martin, "Our Kimono Mind," 215.

65 Frankel, "Rei Kawakubo," 162.

between the body and the cloth in unconventional places such as the upper back, sides and shoulders. This radical fashion show, as part of Paris Fashion Week, received immense media coverage and firmly established Kawakubo and the ‘Japanese aesthetic’ in the Paris fashion scene and therefore internationally.⁶⁶

66 Kawamura,
“The Japanese Revolution,”
204.

Kawakubo’s use of padding generated an intensely visceral effect in the way that it corresponded with the notion of *ma* – a concept foreign to most audience members at the time. Kawakubo’s lumps were densely packed spaces between the dress and the body. She had translated the invisible *in between*, into an overtly visual, and undeniably physical, phenomenon. The collection is frequently interpreted as a visual metamorphosis of the body through the illusion of silhouette.⁶⁷ But I argue that it is the reality, rather than the illusion, of a big dense lump on the body beneath the dress that is most compelling. The lump is the simultaneous delineation and correlation between two forms; an object and a subject, a dress and a body.

67 Seely,
“Body Without Organs,”
249.

In his theatrical experiments, Schlemmer drew from the abstract (mathematical), material and metaphysical dimensions and described the interactions between space and body that resulted as having a “quasi magical relationship”.⁶⁸ This is demonstrated in *Das Triadisches Ballet* where the rigid geometric costumes worn by dancers activate

68 Birringer,
“Bauhaus, Constructivism,
Performance,” 44.

69 **Trimmingham,**
“**Oskar Schlemmer,**” 133.

70 **Schlemmer, Oskar.**
“**B’uhnenelemente**”
cited in **Trimmingham,**
Melissa. “**Oskar**
Schlemmer’s Research
Practice at the Dessau
Bauhaus.” In *Theatre*
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29, no. 02 (2004) 134.

71 **Trimmingham,**
“**Oskar Schlemmer,**” 132.

72 **Von Schiller, Friedrich.**
Letters in the Aesthetic
Education of Man, 1795.
Quoted in **Schlemmer,**
Oskar, “**Theater (Buhne).**”
In *The theatre of the*
Bauhaus, eds. **Walter**
Gropius and **Arthur S.**
Wensinger. London: **The**
Johns Hopkins University
Press, 1961. 82.

the space and transform it into a mutable void.⁶⁹

The bulky, structured, costumes, often criticised for inhibiting the organic movements of the body, by the same virtue engage space as a dynamic component in the equation. Schlemmer asks “What is space? You cannot get hold of it, its essence... Thus, we use the line and exploration of its palpable limits... use the geometry of the surface of the field, from its central linear division... its diagonals, curves etc.”⁷⁰

The plastic geometric forms worn by the dancers articulate intangible space and make it visible. In *Das Triadisches Ballet* space and form dance together. Schlemmer’s disinterest in narrative conventions demonstrates his high regard for embodied practice as a productive mode of research.⁷¹ This situates his research in a philosophical position that is in alignment with the phenomenology of Heidegger and by extension of this, with OOO.

Schlemmer was also intrigued with the naïve pleasure that embodied formal interaction, free from narrative or precise ‘meaningful human expression’, can bring. He refers to dramatist and literary theorist Friedrich von Schiller’s *Letters in the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795): “Schiller calls the source of man’s real creative value, it the un-self-conscious and naïve pleasure in shaping and producing without asking questions about use or uselessness, sense or non-sense, good or bad.”⁷²





Alexandra Barton,
Roly-Poly, 2014, series
of video stills/digital
video on DVD.

Wearing paddedness

Getting into the blue cone is an undignified but joyous process. Both arms stuck up in the air I do little jumps to wriggle into the void made of rich and dense velvet triangles. *Blue dress three* asks that I know it through my body. Its paddedness compels one to reach out and touch it to confirm its substance. That is what is so satisfying about paddedness, it is not a solely visual phenomenon it is also an inherently haptic quality.

Inside *blue dress three* I really do feel a childlike sense of delight. It is very exciting to be inside this blue velvet, padded cone. I am enchanted enough to act upon my bodily inclination. On the green grass of a suburban park I do a roly-poly in my blue cone.

The blue velvet triangles crush upon each other as they become the centre of the cone in a tumbling motion. Padded triangles then unfold bouncing back to their original state as a conical form that wraps around a human body. A dense and rich blue manifests at the trough of an undulating crease before returning to a flat state of light fuzzy blue that reflects the sunlight.



Alexandra Barton,
Blue Dance of Two, 2014,
video still/digital video on DVD.

Blue Dress Four **Openness**



Making openness

I slow down. *Blue dress four* relaxes out across the table, thick wadding in between two layers of cloth. I stitch the three layers together by hand in lines that intersect to form equilateral triangles. By working in this way, at this pace, I spend more time with the object and observe the slow transformation. As I make, the language of *blue dress four* changes – morphs into different dialects. I cannot know what the result will be or what will be said.

‘Sashiko’ is the Japanese name for stitching layers of cloth together with a simple running stitch. “Sashiko is the noun of the verb *sasu*, meaning to pierce.”⁷³ Although it is an ancient technique with the earliest recorded example from the 8th century, it has retained prevalence in Japanese textiles and has been used by contemporary designers such as Miyake. Sashiko has a fascinating relationship with time and process.

Sewing by hand is a process of cooperation, as opposed to feeding and sometimes forcing fabric through a machine. Each stitch contributes to a transformation. As I sew, I think about how *blue dress four* will retain

⁷³ Shaver, “Sashiko,” 271.

the aesthetic traces of me and of this needle in my hand. I consider what aesthetic traces *blue dress four* will leave on me and I realise that this causality is happening presently, *blue dress four* has slowed me right down.

Morton uses the notion of time in describing the essence and the appearance of objects. He attributes appearance to an object's past and its essence to its future. However, Morton's OOO view of time is not to be understood as "a series of now-points 'in which' objects exist, but instead time flows out of objects in two different ways."⁷⁴ These two different ways relate to the knowable and the unknowable, the past and the future. With each sashiko stitch of *blue dress four* I experience the oscillation between the unknown and the known, the past and the future. Morton describes 'presence' as being hollowed out from the inside by the past and the future. My experience of this process is bodily. Morton asserts the radical yet compelling notion that "time pours out of objects."⁷⁵ In sewing *blue dress four* I let time wash over me. Morton concludes that this 'withdrawn' essence of objects that resides in the realm of the future is best described as 'openness'.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 215.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

Sensing openness

When I have finished making the garment, it continues on with out me. It persists in existence and still has experiences, which are its aesthetic becoming. It is a slow-motion entity. This flat, blue, quilted trapezium is humming with potential. Far from a static object, it is flexible, versatile and multiple. It is difficult to visualise, as it exists in many forms, spread out flat, folded on itself, on a table, on a body; it responds as it can. There are multiple future trajectories for this object. These futures are where the essence resides. One cannot know exactly what a garment will do when it is put on, that is why we have to try them on.

When we 'try on' a garment we are expecting a response. As clothing is an intrinsically 'withdrawn' object (as all objects are) this response is a kind of causality that happens via the aesthetic dimension. This is the way that 'withdrawn' objects contact each other. I understand this as 'object speak'. As I understand Morton's explanation of causality as the aesthetic dimension, all objects speak in their own language. Morton gives some examples: "Pencils pencil about sharpeners... The birds bird about the BP oil slick, telling us about it in bird metaphors... The train trains about the flash of lightning... And weather weathers about global warming."⁷⁷ As I understand, *blue dress* four drapes, creases and folds about me.

77 Morton, *Realist Magic*, 24.

Being openness

Ontologically there is very little difference between subject and object once the hierarchical superiority of the subjectivity is removed. In an OOO view, subjectivity can be regarded as one kind of aesthetic experience. Subjectivity is simply causality. However even with in an OOO view it is clear to me that there are indeed discrepancies between subject and object. As a subject I am conditioned to be shut off from this notion of openness – the essence of existence that persists into the future. This essence of being seems to be more accessible to objects than it is to me, as a subject.

What can I glean from an object's being? To pursue openness through embodiment, I use dance. Perhaps *blue dress four* is a better dancer than I am? It does a slowly morphing dance, invisible but palpable. I want to do the dance of the blue dress. Enfolded inside it, I will let it lead. The blue dress is dancing just by being. I want to dance with the blue dress; to do a *pas de deux* (dance for two).

Demonstrating openness

Through dance I can come to know the blue dress in an embodied way – on object terms – through causality and through the aesthetic dimension. Then when the object responds through its own object terms I am perceptive to them. By dancing together we are in the present, like layers of fabric sewn together with a sashiko stitch – a moment hollowed out from the inside by the past and the future.

I record the dances by digital video. It is a documentation of causality, which can be displayed through image because, as Morton has established, causality is aesthetic. The essence of an object is not buried behind it or inside it, rather its essence is out in front of it.⁷⁸ Moving image lends itself to the OOO view of time. It is not restricted to the time or the space in which it is shown. It presents a “permanent present”⁷⁹ that always contains the ambiguity of what will happen next – a continual unfolding of the known intertwined with the unknown.

78 Morton, *Realist Magic*, 210.

79 Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*, 2001. Quoted in Khan, Nathalie. “Cutting the Fashion Body: Why the Fashion Image is No Longer Still.” In *Fashion Theory*, 16, no.2 (2012): 235-250.



Alexandra Barton,
Blue Dance of Two, 2014,
video still/digital video on DVD.

Conclusion





This exploration aimed to liberate clothing from its designated role of functioning as codified meaning and pursue alternative modes of interaction. Through an alternative mode of interaction I hoped to locate the ontological position of clothing and my own subjectivity, in order to understand these positions in relation to each other. From the series of interactions that I have had, making and wearing blue dresses, I feel that the trajectory of *blue dress one* through to *blue dress four* has been towards achieving these aims. However, upon completion of *blue dress four*, I now understand these aims to be complex and fluid areas of investigation, as opposed to static tick-boxes. Further, the ontological relationship between subject and object (or in the OOO view object and object) could be explored infinitely. There is no direct answer to pinpoint, only more experiences to gain.

An exciting revelation to come from *Blue Dance of Two* is the way that my most successful explorations of subjectivity and of an ‘object’s being’ were the most pleasurable and satisfying experiences. Pursuing embodied pleasure (recognisable as ‘childlike delight’) in my experience of making and wearing, has been closely aligned with pursuing an ontological understanding of being and objects. This confirms that ontology is most successfully explored through an embodied state of being.

80 Soper,
 “Alternative Hedonism,”
 567-587.

Engaging with these ideas is a pleasurable process that gives this research the potential to be productive in application. As Soper’s ‘alternative hedonism’ theory (referred to in the *blue dress zero* chapter) argues: human pleasure and gratification could be the only motives able instigate a shift to an alternative anti-consumerist ethics and politics.⁸⁰ This is in direct contrast to emotions of guilt that are commonly associated with current attempts to practice sustainable alternatives to consumer behavior. Admittedly *Blue Dance of Two* has functioned as a personal reconciliation between me and clothing (whose potential negative environmental impact can be overwhelming).

I now understand that the way to know materiality is to engage with it in material terms – to experience it in an embodied state. As objects, we cannot know each other directly but only by the aesthetic effects of causality. Therefore I *dance* about dresses. Dresses *dress* about me, they *crease* about my body, *fold* about it and *drape* about it. Sometimes they *pucker* about my machine sewing. They are much more relaxed about my hand sewing. The blue pas de deux is a *conversation* between two objects – a blue dress and me.





Alexandra Barton,
Blue Dance of Two, 2014,
series of video stills/
digital video on DVD.

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