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**Forming Bodies:
Interrogating Transgressive Dress Practices**

**Tasha Maree Dangerfield Smith
2015**



**Forming Bodies:
Interrogating
Transgressive Dress
Practices**

**Finger through pages
Get a good look**

**SMITH-SMITH
Made In New Zealand
xx**

Forming Bodies: Interrogating Transgressive Dress Practices

Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts endorsed with Design at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

**Tasha Maree Dangerfield Smith
2015**



Abstract

This research project consists of a written exegesis and a creative component that consists of a fashion collection and a conceptual short film that interrogates the formation of gendered identities in dress practices. The directive of this thesis is to push the boundaries of gender through transgressive dress practices. It will go beyond the debates regarding the validity of unisex and androgyny and will focus on gender as a construction and the way dress informs identity and sexuality. This body of work seeks to reflect on the shock value techniques used within the framework of high-fashion spectacles in catwalk collections and their ready-to-wear disseminations in order to explore the act of dressing as a form of performance and sexual expression. Drawing on the design oeuvre of Vivienne Westwood, Thom Browne, Walter Van Beirendonck, Hood By Air (HBA) and Comme des Garçons, this study draws attention to the politics of the body as a site of transformative dress practices.



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Preface

From a young age I have had a playful relationship with dress. My parents gave me the freedom to decide what and how to wear my clothes without restriction. I recollect a few moments in my childhood where my dressed appearance was cause for concern among peers, family, and friends. I remember exactly what I was wearing and how their judgment henceforth affected my sense of self. I started my life in Wellington wanting to feel a part of something, having just recently come across my 'deviating' sexuality¹, I continued to play with my dressed presentation, somewhat more consciously. I was intent on reflecting my sexual identification through visual signification. I felt the need to embody a static representation, or what could be understood as looking like a stereotypical lesbian while battling with the desire to identify with an absolute label (something I couldn't and still cannot really do). I started to critique gender, its boundaries and binary nature. Too anxious to publicly push boundaries I play, often alone, with the way I wear dress, colours, combinations, and proportions. This sense of play translates to my design process. I'm not afraid to exaggerate, to test proportions of dress on the body and levels of detail. I experiment at the boundary between theatrics and everyday. Fashion has provided an outlet for my unrestricted play, constructing with the imaginary, creating garments that interrogate the stability of an absolute gender and sexual identification. I am interested in testing out roles and activities. Forever attentive to the relationship between bodies, garments and other bodies, I like to look, to predict and analyse dress practices (both other people's and my own).

My undergraduate fashion collection in 2013, [EXPANSION], had a strong influence from Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle*². [EXPANSION] used leather and sheer organza as materials in which to explore the interchangeability of Barney's ascension and descension concepts. Garment construction and texture was manipulated to create vulvic and collapsible yet phallic representations, genital-inspired signifiers as an extension of the body. This four-look collection was performed by a group of women; they caressed each other's dressed bodies forcing the viewer into an uncomfortably voyeuristic position. The refusal of reciprocated gaze resulted in the loss of the viewer's autonomy. As the models increased the parameters of their caress, they started helping each other undress. They embodied varying and changing power roles in the exchange, they stood back and watched, became a little violent in their caress, and focussed toward one at a time as they licked and slapped each other. It was framed as though the performance was the beginning of something more, something pornographic: a women-centric orgy. Rather than being made for the viewer's gaze, the models were presented as completely engrossed in what they were doing and exhibited a shared inwardness.

Early in 2014, at the start of my Master of Fine Art (MFA) degree, I was invited to construct a four look collection that was focussed on creativity rather than commercial viability for the Wellington Fashion Week Leather Competition. I chose to construct the same dress four times with the leather provided, each a variation on the last. These garments were designed

to represent a multiple of the same, a uniform approach to sameness while accounting for the potentiality of misinterpretation within fashioned dress practices. Fit and comfort were intrinsically challenged, as the first iteration was form fitting flowing into an A-line skirt. The second garment took on a more hourglass silhouette. The third garment presented itself as too big, the body was not enough to 'fit' and the fourth, an exaggeration in the opposite direction, side-breasts were pushed out, the hemline significantly shorter, and shoulders shrunken. Each of the dresses were decorated with wax-moulded textures to further exaggerate the proportional shifts.

The Purple Project (2014) tried to use a generative daily 'becoming', through daily construction and intimate colouration ritual that saw me apply gendered colour stereotypes (through blue and pink food colouring) to my recently constructed dressed body in a specially constructed boudoir/tent in the studio. This month-long labour-intensive ritual saw by bodily autonomy decrease and my senses of comfort evade. The clothes were made at such a pace; thoughts of ideal embodiment were misconstrued in the garments, forced into the excruciatingly bold uniform. The pink and blue colours became discomforting, too much in themselves, they started merging, becoming multiple, and shades of purple. Near the end of the month, I invited critique participants to participate in the colouring ritual. I fell into an educationally passive role. The encounters were awkward, exposing and telling of an out of context intimate caress. They avoided touching my sexed body wherever possible, laughed and censored themselves. They wanted a moment to think, to plan, organise a way to be comfortable with their caress, movement. Upon completion, I became yet another 'Other'. I lost my way in dressing for comfort; I forgot how I used to dress and present my body to the social world. All my clothes suddenly became irrelevant, a shell that helped my body blend into the background.

I finished the first year of MFA dressing my peers in a uniform – exploring the connection and the caress of the uniform, and experimenting with decoration. Minimal, utilitarian shapes were decorated with ruffle, excess colour, gaudy and tacky embellishment and any utilitarian function was restricted to the joining together, the clipping on, whether it be another individual or another garment. Throughout this master's project, I have been experimenting with the way in which I present myself. I wanted create a singular garment structure that catered to my everyday activities making me feel comfortable, appropriate and desirable. It was over this time that I grasped the everyday social uniform as a platform for my thesis. From here, I continued to explore the parameters of self-imposed uniform and self-imposed dress practice with reference to gendered signifiers. My taught naturalisation of a feminine aesthetic exposed itself while confining boundaries of comfort. This extended into an experiment where I attempted to re-ritualise the process of getting dressed. I wore bodysuits (with no crotch snaps) altering my daily interactions between bodily function and dress practice and creating new intimacies. This project combines my interest in everyday perceptions of dress practices, censorship and ritualised embodiments with my desire for a representative instability of gender and sexuality.

1 I use the term 'deviating' due to the complicated nature of my sexual identity at the time; it created a sense of strong personal un-ease, of perversion. I now see deviancy as a constructive term, one that resists the insistence of a hegemonic identity. 'Deviant' as Other to 'normal'.

2 Barney, *The Cremaster Cycle*.





