

# FASHION PROJECTS

15 YEARS OF FASHION IN DIALOGUE



EDITED BY  
FRANCESCA GRANATA

# Introduction

*Fashion Projects: 15 Years of Fashion in Dialogue* anthologizes *Fashion Projects*, the New York-based journal that I began publishing in 2005. The book is meant as an index, albeit a partial one, of a particular time within the fashion studies landscape and the attendant fields of fashion writing, fashion curation, and critical fashion practice during which the field witnessed a meteoric rise. It provides a record of designers, scholars, curators, and writers engaged in the burgeoning discourse surrounding the centrality of fashion as a cultural phenomenon—a discourse that has notably expanded over the course of the journal's existence.

## *Beginnings*

*Fashion Projects* was born in New York City in the early aughts; our first issue debuted in 2005. I had completed my master's in film studies at New York University in the aftermath of 9/11 and was exploring an interest in fashion in a variety of settings. I sent a handwritten letter to Valerie Steele, director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, asking for an internship; she gracefully took me on board. I was also working a part-time office job as well as screen-printing garment patterns and croquis onto clothing at the Lower East Side Printshop, which I sold at a boutique on Ludlow Street. This meandering was subsidized by a borderline-legal rent-stabilized apartment in Chelsea—I was a beneficiary of the cheap rents that were once plentiful in downtown New York but were quickly beginning to disappear.

It was in this context that I decided to start a zine about fashion, with the somewhat lofty goal of creating 'a platform to highlight the importance of fashion within current critical discourses.' Our mission statement continued: 'Through interviews with a range of artists, designers, writers and curators [*Fashion Projects* was meant] to foster a dialogue between theory and practice across disciplines.' *Fashion Projects* was intended to cultivate an open dialogue and thus was based on the interview format, which is both more immediate and less mediated than

other forms of writing and allows for dialogical exchanges to take place between the writers and subjects. To facilitate these exchanges, we tried whenever possible to conduct interviews in person. This approach was meant to encourage an open-ended conversation that allowed for multiple and evolving interpretations and a receptivity to different viewpoints.

I had always been interested in zines—particularly 1990s feminist zines—and independent publishing more generally. The magazine that had perhaps the greatest influence on me at the time was *Index*, the much-loved interview-based publication about independent culture in New York that ran from the mid 1990s to 2005. What I wanted to create was an accessible academic zine about fashion—which, I admit, was an improbable combination. I had a minimal budget to cover printing costs, but, of course, it had to be a print publication rather than an Internet journal. In the tradition of zines, the project demanded to be a material object that could be exchanged or given away; in the tradition of independent magazines, it had to be something that could be distributed in newsstands and bookstores. Indeed, one of the most exciting aspects of the endeavor was to walk into a store and see *Fashion Projects* for sale—it felt like a stealthy way of becoming part of the fabric of the city and beyond.

### *Dialogues and collaboration*

There was a wealth of support. Jay Ruttenberg, with whom I shared the aforementioned Chelsea apartment, had worked in independent publishing during the 1990s and edited the comedy zine the *Lowbrow Reader*, which provided cultural commentary on comedy. He knew the ropes when it came to printing and distribution. A number of friends helped with the layout and articles, and also put me in touch with designers. The invaluable Jennifer Noguchi and Cynthia Leung helped out early on, and they were soon joined by a cohort of brilliant fashion scholars I met at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), including Sarah Scaturro and Tamsen Young. As time went by, the network of people involved in *Fashion Projects* continued to grow.

Our initial rumblings corresponded to the period when blogs were becoming increasingly relevant (Rocamora 2011), but before social media had become widespread. Alongside the print issues, we soon launched an online version of *Fashion Projects* ([fashionprojects.org](http://fashionprojects.org)) where we published additional interviews as well as reviews of exhibitions, conferences, and festivals; this allowed us to continue the conversation started in the print journal online. Some of the most sustained investigations on the website came from a series by Mae Colburn in which she interviewed scholars and practitioners working at the intersection of fashion and

sustainability, and from a series on the role of art and fashion in the museum that was written and conceived by Ingrid Mida. Mida's interviews brought art museum directors such as Matthew Teitelbaum (the Art Gallery of Ontario) and Nathalie Bondil (the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts) together with fashion museum directors and curators.

The early and mid 2000s was a time of renewed creative energy in New York City, partly in response to the sense of dislocation brought about by 9/11; new pockets of creative practice began to develop in downtown Manhattan, an area that had been vacated by businesses and residents alike as a direct effect of the attacks. In fashion, this moment was captured by Sonnet Stanfill's (2007) exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, *New York Fashion Now. Fashion Projects* was both the result of this cultural moment and a means to document it, at least within the confines of independent and experimental fashion.

*Fashion Projects* also started not long after the field of fashion studies began to crystallize and define itself in connection with cultural studies and critical theory while breaking from—albeit remaining informed by—costume studies and dress history. It was, in fact, only in 1997 that Valerie Steele had started *Fashion Theory*, the first academic journal about fashion. In the 2010s, a number of new journals on fashion studies were introduced by Intellect—a testament to the growth of the field and its diversification and expansion into other fields, from film to theater and masculinity studies. The early 2000s was also the period in which new academic programs in fashion studies or related fields such as fashion curation and fashion media started to emerge. From its beginning, *Fashion Projects* aimed to be part of these conversations, while also occupying a space between an academic text and popular writing meant for a wider audience. As a testament to the urgent need for such a convergence, a number of other publications that straddled the lines between academia and a general audience emerged in the wake of *Fashion Projects*, including the Paris-based journal *Vestoj* and London's *Address*.

*Fashion Projects* also became a sketchbook of sorts for its editors and contributors alike, tracing our trajectories as we grew from graduate students just entering the field into academics, curators, and conservators. In fact, a few years after starting *Fashion Projects*, I began my Ph.D. at Central Saint Martins, and many of the zine's contributors also began doctoral programs, becoming progressively more established in academia or the museum fields. Their professional trajectories reflected, to some extent, the expansion of these fields. *Fashion Projects* and its subjects and contributors took shape as a community of scholars and practitioners who shared similar interests and experiences. The sense of community was reinforced by extemporaneous in-person meetings and events associated with each issue, ranging from panels to film screenings to social gatherings. As

the geographies of this growing community evolved and expanded, the subjects covered and the people interviewed also spread beyond the confines of New York, reflecting an extensive global network.

### *Issues*

Every issue of *Fashion Projects* was themed. The first issue, published in 2005, was loosely based on accessories. Its production was concomitant with the burgeoning creative scene that developed in New York after 9/11, and it explored this cultural moment through interviews with emerging designers and artists. Among them was Mary Ping, who spoke about her recently launched project *Slow and Steady Wins the Race*, a laboratory in which to explore the language of fashion, including the borders between authenticity and forgery as they pertained to luxury bags. The art collective Red Shoe Delivery Service discussed their participatory art project, in which they offered people who were willing to don glittery red shoes rides to their destinations, a ploy that played with ideas around wonderment and unexpected urban encounters. The issue also featured interviews with emerging art and fashion boutiques, such as the now-defunct Fashion Laboratory, run by the Lower East Side Business Improvement District to support designers and bring small businesses back to the area affected by 9/11.

The second issue, published in 2008, covered fashion and art collectives as well as collaborative projects between artists and designers, a reminder of the inherently collaborative nature of fashion. We interviewed Penny Martin, editor of the London-based SHOWstudio; the art collaborative Elsewhere, which had recently been founded in a century-old thrift store in Greensboro, North Carolina; and the Situationist-inspired Italian-based collective Serpica Naro, which aimed to expose the precarious labor conditions behind the Italian fashion industry. For this issue, we also gained official nonprofit status through the New York Foundation for the Arts and secured a small grant from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. As I completed my Ph.D. and joined the faculty of the School of Art and Design History and Theory at Parsons and its recently launched MA in Fashion Studies, *Fashion Projects* also gained a new means of institutional support through the New School.

The third issue of *Fashion Projects* (2010) was inspired by the literary scholar Peter Stallybrass's essay 'Worn worlds: Clothes, mourning, and the life of things,' an engaging and lyrical remembrance of the author's late colleague Allon White through the garments White wore; and by a class on fashion and memory taught by Alistair O'Neill as part of the Fashion Curation MA at the London College of Fashion, which O'Neill had just founded. In the article, Stallybrass elucidates people's intimate

relations with clothes—their materiality, their smell, their creases—and the inextricable relationship between clothes and memory. It traces the way in which clothes retain ‘the history of our bodies’ (Stallybrass 1993: 36). This issue unpacked how artists, designers, curators, and conservators explored the main themes of the article in disparate ways. For instance, Sarah Scaturro, at the time the textile conservator at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum (now Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum), together with photographer Keith Price, explored her intimate relationship with the museum’s textile collection. She also discussed curatorial practices with Judith Clark, whose exhibition *Malign Muses: When Fashion Turns Back*—based on Caroline Evans’s theories—was an investigation of the complex temporalities of fashion. Tamsen Young interviewed Tanya Marcuse on her photographic work in fashion archives, while fashion designer Shelley Fox spoke of her own design and textile practices and the way they embodied past histories.

One of the main missions of *Fashion Projects* has always been to underscore the importance of fashion as a cultural force and its centrality to negotiating cultural and social changes on par with other cultural forms. These same impulses led to the topic of our fourth issue, an investigation of fashion criticism. Why had fashion criticism remained understudied and undervalued? Was its delay in legitimization tied to the fact that it was historically written by and for women? For this issue, published in 2013, Michelle Labrague interviewed *Washington Post* critic Robin Givhan—the first fashion critic to receive the Pulitzer Prize—who spoke of such sexism while highlighting the importance of fashion criticism in negotiating changing ideals of gender and race. *New Yorker* writer Judith Thurman also connected fashion criticism’s relative lack of status to its association with the feminine—a sentiment echoed by Guy Trebay of the *New York Times*. Interestingly, this was the issue that resonated most widely, generating coverage and discussions in a diverse range of forums, such as *Teen Vogue*, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the *Paris Review*, and *Le Monde*. Working on this issue led me to edit the book *Fashion Criticism: An Anthology* (2021), which included work by many of the interviewees alongside a wealth of other writers.

The fifth and final issue arose out of a sustained interest in the field of fashion curation and the increasingly central role fashion occupied in museums, particularly in the wake of the watershed 2011 retrospective of Alexander McQueen’s work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Costume Institute. Published in 2018, *Fashion Projects* no. 5 explored the field of fashion curation through dialogical exchanges with working curators from a range of institutions, both head curators at major museum collections and independent curators working in *kunsthalle*-like spaces. Harold Koda, who discussed his long-term engagement with the Met’s Costume Institute and the future of connoisseurship, most closely embodied a more traditional meaning of the word ‘curator,’ as he spent most of his career as a caretaker of a



collection. Kaat Debo, director of the ModeMuseum (MoMu) in Antwerp, discussed the collaborative nature of curation, specifically when it comes to exhibiting living designers, as well as the difficulty in striking the right balance between the materiality of the object and the digital engagement needed to relate to younger audiences.

### *An anthology*

*Fashion Projects: 15 Years of Fashion in Dialogue* anthologizes articles from the journal's five print issues as well as its substantial online-only content. It documents a period in time that witnessed exponential growth in the field of fashion studies, and it brings together the voices of established and emerging curators, artists, designers, writers, and scholars. In many cases, the articles included in the anthology are among the most in-depth—and at times, the only—interviews with prominent figures in the field. Thus, it seemed important for them to be accessible and anthologized in the more permanent medium of a book, rather than existing solely in issues of the journal, now long out of print. The book privileges the Q&A interview format, as it is an open format that allows for a dialogic exchange wherein meaning arises through encounters and interactions. A concept first put forth by the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogism focuses on the dialogical nature of the utterance and the text as open-ended and deriving its constantly fluctuating meaning from interactions with other utterances and other texts (Bakhtin 1981, 1984). I thus use dialogism as a method by which meaning arises not only through encounters between interviewer and interviewee but also through the juxtaposition of the texts themselves, as well as the way they interact with other 'texts' within the field of fashion studies.

Unlike traditional academic writings, the dialogical format of the anthology allows for different entry points into the material and permits a range of voices to emerge throughout the book, wherein new knowledge and meaning are created as much by the interviewers as by their subjects. Consequently, even though this anthology is part of the discourse that in the past decade and a half bolstered the status of fashion as worthy of critical attention, it stands apart in its style of writing, which remains less formal and, at times, more intimate than traditional academic writing. The tone that pervades the anthology is a polyphonic one, made up of the multiplicity of voices of subjects and interviewers. The two roles at times become blurred, just as over the span of the journal's existence, many interviewers matured from emerging to established scholars or curators—see Sarah Scaturro, who, after contributing to early issues of *Fashion Projects*, became one of its subjects in her role as the head of fashion conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The anthology is divided into three sections: the first is devoted to interviews with curators and conservators; the second to interviews with writers and critics;

and the third to interviews with designers and artists. Its organization aligns with the themes of the issues only in part, but it does justice to those themes that were most consistent over time. The first section brings together the voices of curators and conservators and juxtaposes drastically different approaches to fashion curation—a rapidly evolving field. This section dovetails most closely with the fifth issue of *Fashion Projects*, but it also includes articles published in other issues, as curation remained a constant concern of *Fashion Projects*' contributors, many of whom either trained or worked in the curatorial and museum fields. The second part of the anthology focuses on critics and writers, surveying the shifting landscape of fashion writing and criticism as it opened up to multimedia platforms and became more explicitly political. The book's third section, 'Artists and Designers,' is more clearly focused on fashion as material practice. It highlights those practitioners who shine a critical lens on fashion, as many of the subjects advocate for alternative fashion systems and eschew the existing structure, based on star designers and vast exchanges of capital that result from endless cycles of consumption. These alternative approaches are apparent in the work of collectives such as Serpica Naro, which focuses on the relationship between fashion and labor; as well as in the practices of textile and fashion designers such as Pascale Gatzén and Rebecca Burgess, who explore different economies of fashion based on bartering and gifting.

The anthology also opens up and expands upon the original focus of the issues. Although initially centered primarily on New York, where it was based, *Fashion Projects*' focus expanded and complicated the established geographies of fashion. The most recent piece, which closes the book, is an interview with Michelle Ngonmo, the founder of the Milan-based Afro Fashion Association, whose work is helping to rewrite the concept of 'Made in Italy,' that ubiquitous national selling point. Transnational narratives are explored in Patty Chang's article on Papa Wemba and the Congolese *sapeurs* living in the diaspora in Brussels and Paris. Nonetheless, the book does not claim to be comprehensive in either geography or scope. *Fashion Projects* was conceived and developed in the spirit of zines, and its contents remain idiosyncratic, giving preference to critical practices and voices and shaped in many ways by the interests of its contributors as well as their limitations—one of them being that the vast majority of the interviews were conducted in English. Finally, this book is evidence of the efforts made by a number of designers, scholars, curators, and writers over a span of roughly fifteen years to carve out a space for fashion as a cultural practice worthy of critical attention.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1981), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist), Austin: University of Texas Press.



- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984), *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (trans. C. Emerson), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Granata, Francesca (2021), *Fashion Criticism: An Anthology*, London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Rocamora, Agnès (2011), 'Personal fashion blogs: Screens and mirrors in digital self-portraits', *Fashion Theory*, 15:4, pp. 407–24.
- Stallybrass, Peter (1993), 'Worn worlds: Clothes, mourning, and the life of things', *Yale Review*, 81:2, pp. 35–50.
- Stanfill, Sonnet (2007), *New York Fashion*, London: V&A Publications.