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Affect and Sensation: Authors Note

The dress archive is a space of affect — a space in which different and at times, conflicting, emotions reside.

The words and images which follow this introductory note form part of “The Afterlives of Clothes,” a practice-based project which addresses the affects of imperfect garments in museum archives. Initially developed during a fellowship at The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and later a residency and exhibition at Bard Graduate Centre (“Emotional objects” 2019/2020) the project brings together archival research with auto-ethnographic writing, image, and filmmaking to engage with the intricacies of wear, gesture, and trace. Focusing on accessories, objects which Jones and Stallybrass term “detachable parts” of the self (2001b:116), it explores methodologies for highlighting the bodily practices of wearing and maintaining clothes, clothing as lived and embodied experience, in collections where little or no biographical evidence exists.

The project asks how, in a field where absent bodies and narratives are already understood as problematic, presenting the traces of use might re-contextualize objects which would otherwise be excluded from view. The research starts from the position that as, increasingly, museums address their dress collections as “fashion” rather than “costume” or “dress,” it is important to think about what, in this reframing, is excluded or left unsaid. That is to say, while fashion (both as a system and a bodily-material language) is an important aspect of our relationships with clothing, equally important are the habitual embodied practices of wearing, maintenance, and repair. It suggests that often, in framing clothing in museums as fashion, the day-to-day tactile and bodily nature of our relationships with clothing is excluded.

Broadly, this work takes a phenomenological and psychoanalytic approach to dress and embodiment. It draws upon Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Paul Schilder's formulation of a body schema which "does not end with the human skin as a limiting boundary, it extends far beyond it..." (1935: 56) and equally on psychologist Donald Winnicott's (1953) theory of the transitional object — an object which is both "me" and "not me". In applying these ideas of attachment and emotional investment to clothing my research is concerned with the ways that as bodies and garments meet and are changed: how people and the things they wear become entangled through use. This entanglement "the transposition of thing into person and person into thing which take place through wearing" (Sampson, 2020 no page) is evident both in one's own clothes and the clothes of others: those which are no longer worn. Clothing touches and holds us, containing our bodies and recording our gestures and interactions with the world. As clothes are worn they become records of the actions and bodies which resided within them. It is the outcomes of these tactile relationships, the material traces of our interactions with our clothes, which this project explores. It asks what is made materially manifest in the marks of use and how we might uncover, interrogate, and interpret the experiences and histories they contain.

"The Afterlives of Clothes" takes these ideas of entanglement and applies them to imperfect garments in archives and museums: those which due to their condition are often considered too unappealing or fragile to display. Presenting archives as repositories of affect, labour, emotion, and bodily trace, it asks how ideas of affect and containment might shed light on the encounter with and power of archival garments and the archive itself? Garments in archives are both containers and producers of affect — an affect which, in part, stems from the bodies that wore and made within them, but also from the multiple meaning that they acquire through

accession, storage, conservation, and display. Equally, archives themselves, both as spaces and taxonomic systems are emotional objects, constructed to induce and retain certain feelings. How do these spaces, repositories of unworn and no longer worn clothes act upon us: as curators conservators, archivists, and academics. In utilizing ideas of affect and sensation to explore the encounter with imperfect garments in archives I draw upon the work of Deleuze (1980) Ahmed (2006), Berlant (2010), and in particular Ruggerone's 2016 paper, "The Feeling of Being Dressed," which positions the experience of clothing as a confluence of ever-changing affects. In doing so I use the term "affect" not in the context of negative or positive affects or in opposition to emotion — but instead as experience which sits at the edge of or beyond language — so that these meetings in the archive are embodied encounters whose "meaning can only be partially captured by interpretative/linguistic discourses" (Ruggerone, 2016, 8). Equally, my work frames these encounters in the archive as a meetings of bodies, not only the Spinozan sense that all affects stem from a meeting of bodies, or in metaphorical sense that garments are "body-like" things, but instead as an actual meeting of bodies: ones which are materially as well as metaphorically present.

Indeed, archives themselves are somewhat overlooked as a topic of fashion research, frequently positioned as source material rather than the subject itself. With some notable exceptions (In particular Judith Clark's and Adam Philip's site-specific work "The Concise Dictionary of Dress" (2010) at Blythe house, The Victoria & Albert Museum's off-site storage), the archive itself is often overlooked in favour of more active or animate fashion spaces such as the exhibitions, catwalks, or the street. In thinking about the encounter in and with the dress archive, it is important to think about how archives act upon us. Archives are, of course, structuring forces: sites on

which particular power structures and knowledge are reproduced and maintained. As fashion exhibitions become increasingly important cultural events, the fashion archive is an increasingly important aspect of the fashion system. And our tendency to overlook them is problematic, not just because in overlooking archives, one overlooks the majority of garments in museum collections, but because the archive is significant to our understanding of dress in museums as well as to fashion more generally. Archives inform our understanding of what constitutes fashion, both historically and contemporarily: they are one of the sites on which the boundaries of fashion are negotiated and defined.

The project is thus an attempt to both analyze and materialize these archival encounters. Working with analogue photography (Polaroid, Cyanotypes, medium-format slides, and 16mm film,) I seek to build both an archive of the marks of use and to create larger works that highlight the entangled and intimate nature of these objects. I use the camera as a way of looking closely: of attending to the materiality of the garment and responding to it. In doing so I draw upon the writing of both Roland Barthes (1980) and Georges Didi-Huberman (1984) to explore the analogies between the photograph and traces of use. In particular I draw upon Didi-Huberman's framing of both photographs and stains as indexical imprints, traces of something that was once there but is now gone, and equally of Barthes' positioning of the photograph as both "there then" and "here now," a confluence of spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority which lends them a particular punctum. The images I produce attempt to transpose the affects of the archive and make them present for the viewer in another place and time.

This series of images were developed for a residency and exhibition a Bard Graduate center in the winter of 2019 which responded to the exhibition “French Fashion, Women, and the First World War.” This exhibition explored archival clothing’s affects through two everyday objects: the handkerchief and the glove. These artefacts, mundane, yet over determined, are bound up with the etiquette and traditions of courting and mourning, of private and public, of work and of war. They are souvenirs, love tokens, and mementos: deeply entangled with performances of love, labour, and grief. Despite the their ritualized and socially proscribed modes of use, gloves and handkerchiefs are also deeply personal and tactile objects, often understood as indivisible from those who used them. They are bodily objects, objects that stand in for and act upon us in lieu of absent bodies. They are accompanied of poetic writing, written to be performed at the Met Fellows colloquium in March, 2019.

Affect and Sensation: A Phenomenology of the Dress Archive

There is something macabre about a dress archive, with its host of garments no longer worn: groups of bodiless bodies, hung up or laid to rest in drawers. Fashion conservator Sarah Scaturro has compared the conservation lab to a morgue, but for me it is in the museum archive that this analogy holds most true.

The sensation of being in a dress archive is one of muted but contrasting sensory affects, of silence, the coolness of metal, the rustle of tyvek; of dimmed lights and occasionally musty smells. One is, or at least I am, continually checking one's desires to touch, to run one finger through racks of dresses, to paw at furs and to stroke the fingers tips of white suede gloves. These empty garments cannot respond and yet the archive teams with agencies: with bodies waiting to affect you.

Garments in archives hold a particular place in our networks of things because they will never be worn again. They are, to borrow from fashion curator Beatrice Belen, “objects in stasis” (or attempted stasis at least — which is another interesting topic). Whilst this stasis is a normal part of accession — and the outcomes of this practice have been extensively addressed, there is I think a particular affect to meeting these unworn and empty clothes. They possess “a punctum,” (Barthes, 1980), which stems from their bodily nature. This work frames these encounters with garments in the archive as a meeting of bodies: both metaphorically, as “distributed personhoods,” agencies embodied in and transmitted through clothes, and also as a literal meeting of bodies, the meeting with garments that have become materially entangled through use. Though there are clearly other affects to the archive: the scopophilic pleasures of looking, the uncomfortable affect of an irreparable garment, or being unable to find something. Here I wish to focus upon the encounter with imperfect garments, with

bodily and body-like objects: objects whose affect, I suggest, stems from a conceptual or material entanglement with the bodies who wore them.

Pseudo Bodies

The most frequent category of bodies one meets in the dress archive are not real bodies, per se, but “pseudo bodies”: meetings with body-like things. Due to their similarity of form empty garments frequently stand in for and affect us in lieu of an absent body, or body part. The garment acts as a simile, a likeness that recalls something else. Frequently, this affect hinges upon the garment’s capacity to conform to or mimic the contours of a particular body — those which have “been cut and stitched to fit the individual...” (De la Haye, 2006: 132).

Accessories such as gloves, stockings, and shoes are highly reminiscent of the body part they covered, so that in meeting them one cannot help but recall (or speculate upon) the body that once resided within them. Not just similes but metonyms, a part that stands in for the whole. Jones and Stallybrass suggest that the affect of these “detachable parts” of the body stems from their capacity to “trouble the conceptual opposition between person and thing” (Stallybrass & Jones 2001: 118), to blur the line between animate and inanimate.

For me, this affect is most evident in my interactions with gloves in archives, whose curled fingers and creased palms are so resonant of my own. So close in form are they that one often reads the glove and the hand as interchangeable — so that one may stand in for the other in numerous situations. Stallybrass and Jones (2001) write of the interchangeable nature of gloves and hands, of the glove as an envoy for the absent body.

For me, gloves are rooted in longing because the glove so closely recalls the sensation of touch. Touch or its absence is integral to the archival encounter — both the missing touch of the absent body, “the having been there” thing, and also because our own sensory experience is so often stilted — we touch only through latex gloves or sometimes not at all, so that another’s hand must stand in for our own. We rarely feel the textures of the things we see.

Absent Bodies

If the clothing archive is full of pseudo bodies, then it is also full of absent ones: bodies that are no longer there. Garments which bear traces of use, the footprint in a shoe, a run in a stocking, a collar’s frayed hem, are what are what museologist Jeffery Feldman terms “contact points,” “a general category of object that results from physical contact with the body, and then subsequent removal or destruction of that body” (2006: 246). These garments bear causal relationship to the bodies and gestures once performed within them: they are “indexical.”

These traces, these “absent-presences,” act upon us, recalling something that is no longer there: the mark of a hand entering and leaving a pocket, the hole where a toe wore through a sock, creases where movements wrinkled a sleeve. For me, the affect of contact point is not so much the affect of an absent body but the affect of absent gestures: the minute and material capturing of movements that would otherwise be lost to us. In these tiny marks we meet not bodies but movements, the twist of a hand as it stitched, the way a heel was ground into the floor. Like a blurred photograph or a frame of film, these marks are indexes of absent gestures, the body in time and space: the imperfect garment as gesture retained.

Transpositions

If the contact point recalls an absent gesture, then certain garments in the archive do not only recall an absent body but instead make that body materially present for us. As a garment is worn it is imbued with bodily matter, so that the archive is full of minute aspects of previous wearers: entangled and waiting to affect us.

Stains in particular are not just referents of an absent body but are instead a transposition of its material: a rearrangement of matter so that one becomes part of another. A tearstained handkerchief does not simply refer to the weeping of its owner but contains it, a material embodiment of grief. If for Didi-Huberman the stain is an index, then I would suggest that it is that and more. For a stain is not simply an indent like a footprint or a remnant, such as the “still smoking cigarette butt,” it is a transposition of the material of the original; an intermingling that blurs the edges of the object.

Bodily stains, tears, blood, sweat, milk, make the absent body materiality present for us, not as signifiers but as distributed parts of it — our bodies mixed with the broader body schema. As textile theorist Barbara Baert writes:

Intentionally or unintentionally, in various ways and places, we leave our own traces in the form of “liquid relics.” A stain of this kind is an extension of our own physical boundaries and marks our dealings with the world. (2017: 285)

Our tactile entanglements with clothes allow the blurring of subject and object to occur, because in wearing garments, which already correspond to our physical form, they become more bodily: not just imprinted, but imbued with bodily trace.

The affects most commonly associated with stained and bodily garments are those of the abject, of things, which threaten or breakdown symbolic order. For Kristeva (1982) this confusion of subject and object, this subjective crisis, is typified

by substances, which are at once bodily and separate from the it: liquid, membranous, or peripheral aspects of the body, those most liable to contamination and to contaminate; a categorization that could apply both to clothing and to the marks that litter it. However, I suggest that in the entanglement of wearing, the intermingling of the bodily self into the material of the garment, this breakdown has already occurred: so that these affects are not simply the confusion of person and thing but of the encounter with an absent/present body — the worn garment as a confusion of the “here now” and the “there then.”

It is this affect, the experience of an artefact which sits between two times, which my work most frequently, attempts to call forth and explore: the particular “punctum” of bodily trace.

Unknowning

There is, however, a final affect I wish to discuss — one I have not yet unpacked the same extent — and that is the affect of unknowing. If the previous affects are located in a bodily encounter, then this last is perhaps more of a cerebral one. It is the affect of what is lost to us within the archive. So much of one’s interaction in the dress archive — however knowledgeable and studious one is — is of unknowing, of the impossibility of comprehending the gestures and intentions that that altered these clothes. Of understanding the actions, which caused a garment to be as it is.

Writing of unknowing in the context of grave goods dress historian Hilary Davidson states:

I like the ways what I found in the pieces eludes the documentary; slips into a silence that is eloquent if you can read its messages. I like the presence of

absence, the holes left by stitches, the impressions and the corrosions and the challenge of unpacking incomplete, incoherent remains. (2013: 8)

“Unknowing” and its companions “fantasy and speculation” are central to the experience of the dress archive. The imaginative is a fundamental, but often overlooked aspect of research practice — the ways we speculate and in speculation are inspired. Take, for example, a crumpled and stained handkerchief frayed at the edges and marked by tears. How can one engage with these traces without trying, futilely, to reconstruct its story? Why and how it came to be as it is? To add drama to what may have been banal — to ponder at why a damaged item was retained.

This unknowing can be frustrating but the gaps it leaves are seductive — spaces into which we can project aspects of the self. So that in these spaces of unknowing it is not the previous user who intermingles with the garments but instead we ourselves.

The intimate and bodily nature of clothing renders garments without bodies powerful sources of affect: an affect that is particularly apparent in the case of garments which show traces of use and wear. These traces disrupt the binaries of there and not there, of animate and inanimate, of person and thing. An encounter in the archive is not merely an encounter with garment but instead an encounter with a body, which is both absent and present for the viewer. These affects of the dress archive might be summarized thus: as absent touch, absent gestures, present bodies, and as unknowing. These affects are cumulative and multiple so that we experience them as overlapping sensory experiences: layerings of looking and not touching, and in looking being moved. These experiences are the punctum of the dress archive, its piercing details: its power to entangle and affect us.

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Biography

Ellen Sampson is an artist and material culture researcher whose work explores the relationships between bodies, objects, and experience both in museums and archives and in everyday life. Using film, photography, performance, and writing, she interrogates the ways that artefacts become records of lived experience: how people and things become entwined. Sampson has a PhD from the Department of Fashion and Textiles at the Royal College of Art, London and was 2018 Polaire Weissman fellow at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and 2019/20 Professorial Fellow in Fashion at University for the Creative Arts, UK. She is currently Senior research fellow in Design at Northumbria University

Key words

Archives, Affect, Phenomenology, Fashion, Bodies, Trace

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