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Exhibition Review

Disobedient Bodies: J.W. Anderson Curates The Hepworth Wakefield, Wakefield, Yorkshire, UK, 18 March–18 June 2017

Reviewed by Sarah Walker, Nottingham Trent University and Ania Sadkowska, Coventry University

Overview

The exhibition *Disobedient Bodies* curated by Jonathan Anderson in collaboration with 6A Architects and Wakefield Gallery brought together sculpture and fashion to stimulate new conversations and debates about objects and the body. The scope of the pieces selected for the exhibition included early works from Wakefield's own pioneering sculpture artists Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, William Turnbull and Brancusi alongside iconic fashion by radical designers such as Commes des Garçons, Martin Margiela, Jean Paul Gaultier, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yammamoto, Vivienne Westwood, Loewe and Jonathan Anderson's label J.W. Anderson.

Fashion and sculpted artefacts were paired and grouped specifically to create a juxtaposition of aesthetics, surface, style and form in a matrix of interconnecting spaces framed by draped textiles and quotations to transform the viewer's perceptions of the body in relation to crafted artworks and garments. From the viewer's perspective, the exhibition generated a rich sensorial experience by facilitating visual and tactile conversations by juxtaposing fashion and sculpture to highlight themes relating to the crafting of bodily expression.

The subject matter of the body was explored in both a playful and at times controversial manner, with themes of gender subversion and sexuality being brought into a meaningful dialogue through the provocativeness of some of the pieces (e.g. by Helmut Lang and Hans Bellmer). However, one of the most memorable impressions from the exhibition was its success at bringing people closer together to contemplate the body and experience it in motion, as instigated by Anderson, whose interactive space of specially designed, oversized knitted jumpers invited visitors to become disobedient with their bodies, by trying on, playing with and engaging with the knitwear to create new forms, characters and juxtapositions. This type of participatory engagement, hinted at in Room 1 of the show via Jamie Hawkesworth's idiosyncratic photos of Anderson's collections, represents a move away from traditional, often alienating fashion exhibitions, towards an experience that is more human, interactive and democratic.

Prompting new conversations between art and fashion

Bugg (2009: 13) reflects on the craft of (fashion) curation as a 'distinctive form, as opposed to the established practices of historical costume and fashion display in museums'. For example, different decisions made by the curatorial team regarding the use of space, object and contextualization impact upon the viewers' understanding and interpretation of the work. As the curator of *Disobedient Bodies*, Jonathan Anderson transcended his previous experiences as a fashion designer, as creative director of French label Loewe and more recently of his own self-titled brand J.W. Anderson. Prior to this, Anderson worked as a visual merchandiser – which clearly influenced the position that he adopted in his role as a curator, which he described as: 'creating new conversations using space, textiles and objects', to provoke a new conceptual mode of language by envisaging the objects in the exhibition as a series of 'cocktail party scenarios'¹.

¹ In conversation: Jonathan Anderson with 6A Architects and Emily King, Saturday, 3 June, The Hepworth Wakefield, Gallery Walk, Wakefield WF1 5AW, UK.

One of the methods that Anderson employed to enable the artefacts in the exhibition 'to talk to each other' was using textiles as a surface medium for connecting with the audience. This included presenting artefacts within a series of draped fabric compartments in such a way as to create embodied learning spaces for thinking and reflecting. The intimacy of these spaces encouraged the viewer to closely examine potential relationships between the items and reflect on them within the broader context of contemporary fashion and sculpture. A good example of this is illustrated in Figure 1, where similarities and contrasts of colour, scale, shape, form and texture are combined through artificially created companion pieces by Mo Jupp, Rick Owens, Junya Watanabe, Robert Gabor and Daniel Sinsel. Here, in this strange intimate gathering, the viewer is placed in a material dialogue, expressed through the disparate objects and suspended fabric partitions, expertly installed by 6A Architects. This staging created new opportunities for viewers to connect with the material world and the material possibilities that exist within it through pausing to look closely at artwork or sit and view a rare film by Martha Graham or Samuel Beckett.



Figure 1: Exhibition pieces from top to bottom: Mo Jupp, *Helmet*, 2015; Rick Owens, pieces from the *Glitter* collection, A/W2017, menswear; Junya Watanabe, *Architectural Dress*, S/S, 1999. Bottom photographs of textile draping on pieces of work: Robert Gabor, *Unittled*, 1990; Daniel Sinsel, *Vest*, 2006. Photograph by Sarah Walker.

The notion of subversion was underpinned throughout the exhibition by unorthodox garments and sculptures by avant-garde designers and artists who have provided us with an alternative lens to view the world through. Interestingly, Anderson blurs the borders between fashion and art, and in many respects, goes as far as suggesting an equal status between them despite their often distinctive and disruptive practices (e.g. Geczy and Karaminas 2012; Teunissen 2009). Traces of this was evident in the work of Louise Bourgeois, Sarah Lucas and Nick Knight. Anderson aimed to generate an 'instantaneous' feeling in the audience – to create new meanings and to elucidate a better understanding of fashion and art, in some instances, fashion as art. The idea of creating a new language (through fashion) is a concept previously found in the work of Japanese designer, Issey Miyake. Miyake's formula towards new vocabulary explores innovation through experimental craftsmanship and is memorable in his pleats revolution that re-shapes the body silhouette into sculptural forms, closely resembling the formality of architectural structures (Quinn 2009). As Swindells and Almond (2016: 45) note, such sculptural thinking about fashion objects opens up a possibility to work in a way that is 'analogous [and] to visually and mentally tracing a human form in a psychological space'. The synthesis of material objects and space, achieved through the careful curation and design of *Disobedient Bodies*, provided the viewer with such a space, encouraging the viewer to speculate upon the place of the body within and outside of the work.

As suggested, textiles played a significant role within the exhibition through their highlighted presence within the fashion objects and by framing, grouping and isolating artefacts with walls of neutrally coloured (off-white) drapery in different weights and textures (see lower images in Figure 1). Text was also used discreetly on the floors to contextualize the individual spaces. Some signage was instructive, such as in the tactile play area of overgrown knitted jumpers, whilst other captions were cleverly formulated to tease, provoke and challenge the viewers' preconceptions about exhibits (see Figure 2).

'Our Bodies, Our Experiences': Shared references to sexuality and gender

Themes of gender and sexuality were explored openly through the selection and positioning of key artefacts in the exhibition. While sexuality can be inherent and inescapable when exploring human form, there was a particular sense of openness and simplicity in the way Anderson represented it through iconic creations that both referenced and negated binary notions of gender. Phrases such as 'Soft bodies. Desiring monsters' reinforced Anderson's straightforward use of fashion as a tool to dislodge identity as evidenced by some of the idiosyncratic art forms on display by artists such as Anthea Hamilton or Anderson's own work (Figure 3).

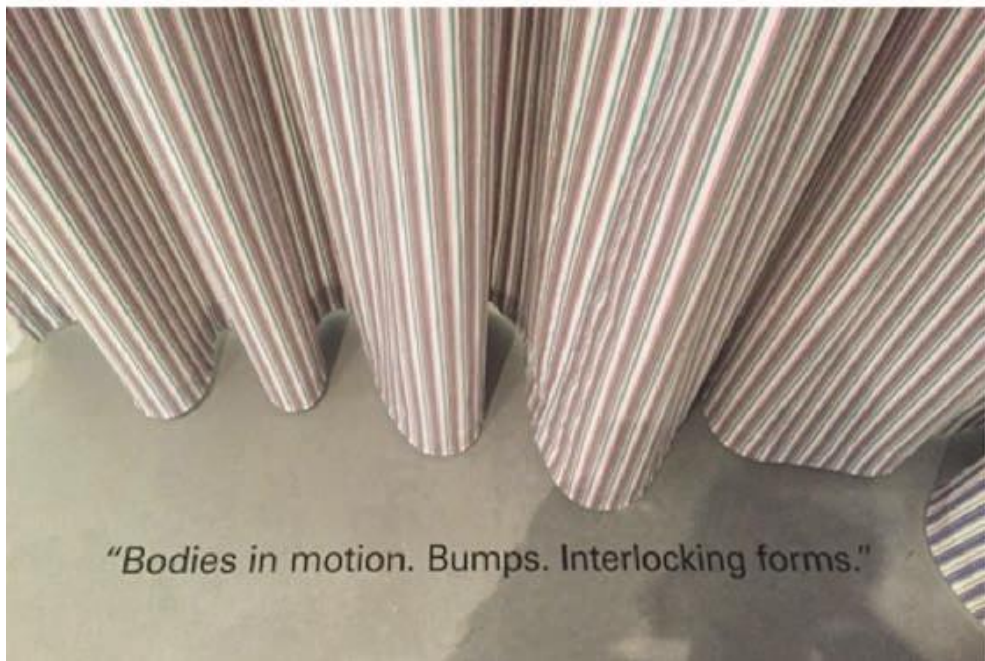
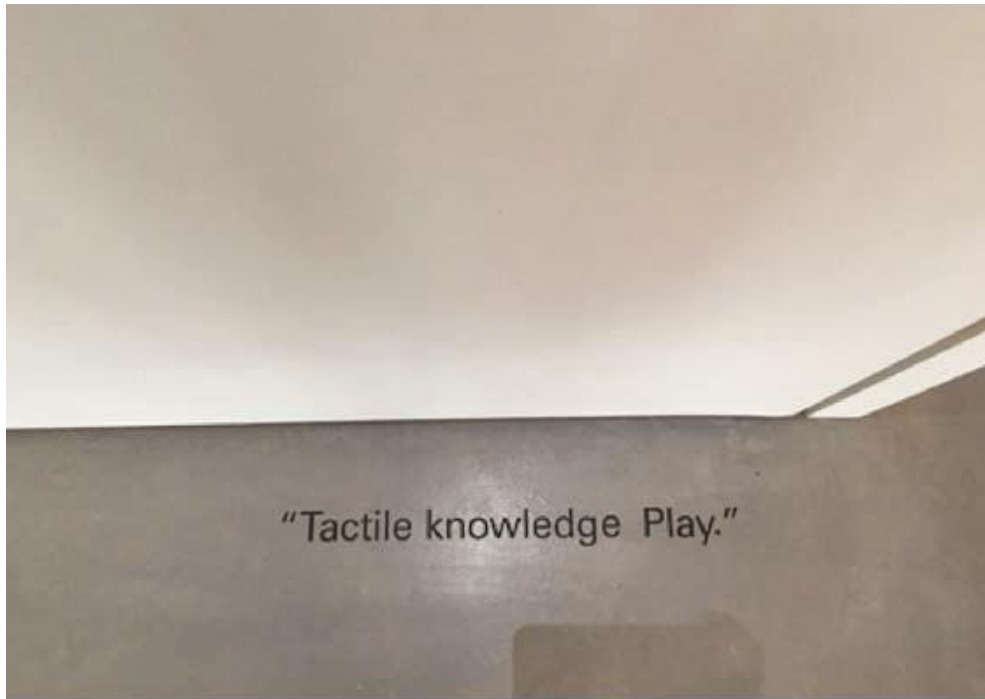


Figure 2: Vinyl text printed on the exhibition floor. Photographs by Sarah Walker.



Figure 3: Anthea Hamilton, Leg Chair, 2012; J.W. Anderson, Ruffle Shorts, A/W 2013/14. Photographs by Sarah Walker.

Fashion as a tool for democracy and positive well-being

A room of elongated knitted jumpers designed by Anderson in different yarns, patterns and textures occupied an entire room space (left image, Figure 4), inviting visitors to interact, give form and shape to the creations with their bodies. An earlier composition within the exhibition suggested a similar connection between fashion becoming communal and playful (right image in Figure 4). The most interesting part of this interactive space was how people, especially children from a young age, responded to this unorthodox activity area – fun and explorative play becoming essential to the space and informing a sense of positive well-being.

In comparison to the rest of the exhibition, this space reflects Anderson's attitude to wanting fashion (and art) to become freed from its hierarchical constraints to be more accessible, viewed through an authenticated lens. Anderson used a fashion runway show to extend his point about how very strange it is for us to simply witness these pieces of hard labour and love from afar, never really appreciating their real socio-material value before they become timeless pieces in archives or wardrobes. For the future of museum collections and exhibitions, Anderson's visual arts approach created through initiating new dialogues and physical engagement with the objects in the exhibition broadens the relationship between viewers/wearers with objects and artefacts of fashion and art.



Figure 4: Images from left–right: J.W. Anderson: Knitted jumpers suspended from the gallery ceiling and in formation as a collection of pieces within the exhibition. Photograph by Sarah Walker.

Conclusion

Anderson moves towards bodily transformation as a key theme within the exhibition. He vivaciously plays with his existing tools as a designer and maker to create an approach that he refers to as having a 'childlike naivety' by questioning 'how to take all of the components of fashion and sculpture and make them work together'. Intimacy is another theme that emerged through the exhibition as a viewer and potential wearer of things. The artefacts, text and space were used to bring closer the viewer/wearer to addressing internal thoughts and feelings towards the subject of the body. These key components also extend the viewer's/wearer's perception of how to interact with objects and spaces – particularly within the interactive, play space with knitted fashion textiles. Gender and sexuality run as a seamless thread throughout the exhibition. The curating of the artefacts within the exhibition helps the viewer to mitigate physiological and psychological boundaries of the body through objects based on and subverting the rules of formal design. For example, items from *Commes des Garçons 2D Collection*, A/W 2012/13 and the bookcase in waxed mahogany (c.1900) by C. F. A. Voysey, quoted by Anderson as one of his favourite pieces of the exhibition, play with notions of the body's capacity to be ambiguous and illusive. On the other hand, a dress by Madame Grès from the 1950s appears to have been left draped, by someone, on the *Transat chair* (1926) by Eileen Gray, an uncharacteristically informal way of presenting an item of haute couture in an exhibition that speaks more of human nature than iconic fashion. Ultimately, *Disobedient Bodies* is just that, a collection of disparate but connected, conceptually crafted material objects that invite the viewer to think about how we experience the world of art and fashion through our bodies.

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Contributor details

Sarah Walker is a Ph.D. candidate, tutor and textile designer at Nottingham Trent University. She has a background in multimedia textiles and textile design innovation. Her research interests lie in the intersections between design practice, psychology and sociology and she is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in an interdisciplinary project that investigates the needs of innovation design teams situated within the field of electronic textiles. Sarah has supported a number of interdisciplinary projects such as the EPSRC-funded project 'An Internet of Soft Things' and University-funded project 'Electric Corset and Other Future Histories'. These projects, which relate to her Ph.D., have enabled a combination of skills and interests to be acquired and applied through new knowledge-sharing platforms. Her relationship with cross-disciplinary programmes of research extends beyond electronic textiles into new learning territory that unpack meaning from personal experience to validate this in its own right as a source of uniquely defined co-production of knowledge created with a diverse range of practices.

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Dr Ania Sadkowska is a fashion designer, lecturer and researcher at Coventry University. Her research explores the intersection of sociology and psychology with art and design practices. Her current projects span a variety of topics including fashion and ageing, masculinity, phenomenology, and art and design research methodologies. Ania has presented papers at various UK and international conferences including Denmark, China, Sweden and United States. Her work has been presented at the *Crafting Anatomies* exhibition (2015, Nottingham, UK), *IFFTI 2014* (Florence, Italy), 'ASVOFF 2015' fashion film festival (Paris, France), *Research Through Design 2017* (Edinburgh, Scotland) and *Everything and Everybody as Material 2017* (Boras, Sweden); recently she has been involved in a co-creative research project titled 'Emotional Fit: Developing a New Fashion Methodology with Older Women'.

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