The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

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The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

ABSTRACT

The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

The seam is the principal construction technique employed by the contemporary fashion industry. It produces both garments and, in turn, the semiotic or fashioned body. The implications of the semiotic relationship - between clothes and bodies - are however largely obscured by fashion, which secrets the seam away inside the garment. As such, fashion is often considered under-coded compared to other semiotic systems, such as images or text. In contrast, this research seeks to both comprehend and reconsider the semiotics of the seam by drawing upon the notions of blindness and deconstruction in the work of Jacques Derrida. This deconstructive understanding of the seam is then used to inform a close reading of Roland Barthes’ The Fashion System that makes visible the implicit signification of the garment within the text. Furthermore, these notions are explored through fashion practice in the form of clothing which itself makes visible the obscured signification of the seam and reconsiders the garment’s relationship to the body.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Cut & Sew: The Double Gesture of the Seam.

How can the seam, which structures the fashion garment and in turn the fashioned body, be reconsidered through deconstructive practices in order to both make visible and to invert the obscured signifying processes of the garment itself?

How can seaming practices, such as exposing, exaggerating, multiplying, highlighting, reducing, removing, eliminating, and depicting, articulate this semiotic relationship - and the space that exists - between, the garment and the body?
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is 20,919 words in length, exclusive of diagrams, tables, bibliographies and appendices.

Remie Cibis
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CONTENTS

List of Figures vi

INTRODUCTION
Blind Stitching: The unseen seam. 1

1 CHAPTER ONE
Back Stitching: How does the seam structure the production of both fashion and the body? 9

2 CHAPTER TWO
Unpicking: How does construction deconstruct itself? 21

3 CHAPTER THREE
Under Stitching: Reading the real-garment in Barthes’ written-garment. 33

4 CHAPTER FOUR
Cutting: Patterns that equate and patterns that relate. (Practice Part One: Toiling and Experimentation) 40

5 CHAPTER FIVE
Sewing: Articulating the seam. (Practice Part Two: Garments and Runway Performance) 52

CONCLUSION 92

Bibliography 93
FIGURES

Fig. 01  Reader’s Digest, Seaming, 1977, illustration. From: Reader’s Digest Editors ed. Reader’s Digest: Complete Guide to Sewing. (New York: Reader’s Digest, 1977), 131.

Fig. 02  Winifred Aldrich, Standard Body Measurements, 2008, diagram. From: Winifred Aldrich, Metric Pattern Cutting for Women’s Wear. 5th ed. (Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 11.

Fig. 03  Winifred Aldrich, The Close Fitting Bodice Block, 2008, diagram. From: Aldrich, Metric Pattern Cutting for Women’s Wear, 17.


Fig. 09  Francisco Goya, The Clothed Maja, c. 1800 - 1808, Oil on canvas, 95 x 190 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, accessed November 27, 2016. https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-clothed-maja/a3121efc-6924-454c-8a9f-e4320f26d3d0

Fig. 11 Remie Cibis, *The Signifying Structure of the Fashion Garment*, digital collage, 2017.

Fig. 12 Ferdinand de Saussure, *The Chain of Signification*, 1916, illustration making visible the interval that exists in order that meaningful signs may be produced. From: Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 115.


Fig. 17 Maison Martin Margiela, *Spring/Summer 2000-2001*, 2000, various fabrications. From: Mark Borthwick ‘Chloe Sevigny Wearing Oversized Garments, which included a men’s trench coat, men’s shirt, vintage dress, and slip enlarged to an Italian size 78.’ *Purple Magazine*, 5, 2000, 359.


Fig. 20  *Side-by-side comparison of Spokane bank robber’s right leg: ‘Questioned,’ and right leg of model wearing jeans recovered from suspect’s home: ‘Known.’ Numbers show where identifying marks correspond.* From: Kitty Hauser, ‘The Fingerprint of the Second Skin,’ in *Fashion and Modernity*, eds. Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans (Oxford: Berg, 2005) 163. 31

Fig. 21  Remie Cibis, *The Chain of Fashion’s Supplementation*, Digital Illustration, 2017. 32


Fig. 25  Remie Cibis, *Block Based Design Lines Experiments*, 2015, Black Viscose Bind, Red Stickers and Steel Pins on Size 10 Mannequin. 41

Fig. 26  Remie Cibis, *Unpinning Block Based Design Lines Experiments*, 2015, Black Viscose Bind, Red Stickers and Steel Pins on Size 10 Mannequin. 41

Fig. 27  Remie Cibis, *Draw String Shirt Toile*, 2015, Cotton Calico and Polyester Thread. 42

Fig. 28  Winifred Aldrich, *The Basic Skirt Block*, 2008, diagram. From: Aldrich, *Metric Pattern Cutting for Women’s Wear*, 24. 43

Fig. 29  *Circle Skirt Drafting.* From: Pinterest, Tamra Botkin, Sewing, accessed April 15, 2017. https://au.pinterest.com/jerandtambotkin/sewing/ 43
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Materials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Remie Cibis, <em>Circular Bodice Block Toile</em>, 2015, Cotton Calico and Polyester Thread and Pencil.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Remie Cibis, <em>Circular Skirt Toiles</em>, 2015, Cotton Calico and Polyester Thread.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Remie Cibis, <em>Various Circular Sleeve Toiles</em>, 2015, Cotton Calico, Polyester Thread and Pencil.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Remie Cibis, <em>Various Circular Pant Toiles</em>, 2015, Cotton Calico and Polyester Thread.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 45  Remie Cibis, *Gore Skirt with Exaggerated Seam Allowances*, 2016, Silk Suiting, Silk Crepe de Chine, Vliesofix, Polyester Thread and Metal Press Studs, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 46  Remie Cibis, *Skirt with Exaggerated Seam Allowances*, 2016, Silk Satin, Vliesofix and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 47  Remie Cibis, *Development of Loose Apron and Loose Singlet*, 2016, from Viscose Crepe and Polyester Thread to Silk Satin, Vliesofix and Polyester Thread.

Fig. 48  Remie Cibis, *Singlet with Exaggerated Seam Allowances*, 2016, Silk Satin, Vliesofix and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 49  Remie Cibis, *Apron Dress with Exaggerated Seam Allowances*, 2016, Silk Satin, Vliesofix and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.


Fig. 52  Remie Cibis, *Shirt with Exaggerated Faggoting*, 2016, Viscose, Linen Thread, Self Covered Buttons and Polyester Thread.

Fig. 53  Remie Cibis, *Shirt with Exaggerated Faggoting*, 2016, Viscose, Linen Thread, Self Covered Buttons and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.


Fig. 56  Remie Cibis, *Jacket with Exaggerated Faggoting*, 2016, Silk Suiting, Linen Thread, Self Covered Buttons, Fusible Interfacing and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 57  Remie Cibis, Pant with Exaggerated Faggoting, 2016, Silk Suiting, Linen Thread, Fusible Interfacing, Metal Slide Fastening, Plastic Zipper and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 58  Remie Cibis, Tank Top with Exaggerated Faggoting, 2016, Silk Suiting, Linen Thread and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 59  Remie Cibis, T-Shirt with Faggoted Trompe l'oeil Singlet, 2016, Viscose, Linen Thread and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 60  Remie Cibis, Dress with Faggoted Pieces, 2016, Linen Viscose, Silk Crepe de Chine, Linen Thread, Self Covered Button and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 61  Skirt with Faggoted Pieces, 2016, Linen Viscose, Silk Crepe de Chine, Linen Thread, Self Covered Buttons, Plastic Zipper and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 62  Remie Cibis, Overlocking Stitches: Digital Print Concept, 2017, Digital Illustration, 2017.

Fig. 63  Remie Cibis, Stitches: Digital Print Concept, 2017, Digital Illustration, 2017.

Fig. 64  Remie Cibis, Layplan for Seam Print, 2017, pencil on paper.

Fig. 65  Remie Cibis, Photograph for Seam Print, 2017, digital photograph, photographed by Matt Stanton, 2017.

Fig. 66  Remie Cibis, Cutting the Seam Print T-Shirt, 2017, Silk Twill.

Fig. 67  Remie Cibis, Seam Print T-Shirt, 2016, Silk Twill and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 68  Remie Cibis, Seam Print Shift Dress, 2016, Silk Twill and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 69  Remie Cibis, Seam Print Pant, 2016, Silk Twill, Non-Fusible Interfacing, Plastic Zipper, Metal Slide Fastening and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 70 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Collection*, 2017, Various Fabrications and Constructions, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.

Fig. 71 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Bianca Boyd, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.

Fig. 72 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Bianca Boyd, Milda Vidugiryte, Eleanor Stewart and Cici Chen, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.

Fig. 73 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Danielle Abery, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.

Fig. 74 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Danielle Abery, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.

Fig. 75 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Eleanor Stewart, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, still from video footage by Aly Peel, 2017.

Fig. 76 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Ebony Tiffin, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.

Fig. 77 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Cici Chen, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.

Fig. 78 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Cici Chen, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.

Fig. 79 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Milda Vidugiryte, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.
Fig. 80 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Cici Chen, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017. 86

Fig. 81 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Danielle Abery and Ebony Tiffin, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, still from video footage by Aly Peel, 2017. 87

Fig. 82 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Danielle Abery and Ebony Tiffin, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017. 87

Fig. 83 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Eleanor Stewart, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017. 88

Fig. 84 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Eleanor Stewart, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017. 88

Fig. 85 Kate Moss and Marc Jacobs, *Louis Vuitton Ready-to-Wear Fall/Winter 2013-2014*, 2013, Photographed by Jacques Brinon. From: T. Adamson, ‘Inside Kate Moss’ and Marc Jacobs’ hotel room at Louis Vuitton Paris show,’ *Times Colonist*, March 6, 2013. 89

Fig. 86 Rare Candy, *I have Become a Sign to Many*, Carlton Gardens, Carlton, 2013. Photographed by Remie Cibis, 2013. 89

Fig. 87 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Fitting Sessions*, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017. 90

Fig. 88 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Fitting Sessions*, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017. 91

Fig. 89 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Fitting Sessions*, featuring Kel Glaister, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Yvette King, 2017. 91

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xiii
INTRODUCTION
Blind Stitching: The unseen seam.

In the context of fashion, the seam can be understood as the joining together of two or more surfaces of cloth by means of stitching or bonding (fig.01).\(^1\) It is one of the oldest, simplest and most versatile construction techniques of fashion practice.\(^2\) The seam is also one of the most widely used methods of contemporary garment construction, favored by the fashion industry for ease and economy.\(^3\) Although other techniques (such as knitting, draping, knotting and bonding) are available, none is as ubiquitous, accessible or easily communicated as the seam.\(^4\)

The seam is also one of the few fashion processes that literally forms the garment. As seams are fashioned, so too is the garment. Of course a number of additional techniques may also be required to make a piece of clothing, such as pressing, fusing, basting, tacking, pinning or trimming, as well as more specific processes such as printing, pleating, embroidering and washing. These techniques however, although sometimes necessary, do not actually construct the garment: that is, ‘make by fitting parts together; build, form.’\(^5\) Ultimately, a construction technique is always required, of which seamming is the most common and fundamental.

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\(^1\) This conception of the seam is articulated by Raechel Margaret Laing and Janet Webster, *Stitches*.


\(^3\) Pamela Stecker, *The Fashion Design Manual* (South Yarra: Macmillan, 1996), 223-228. Here Stecker details the most common ‘Garment Production’ and ‘Production Processes,’ highlighting the emphasis on seam based - cut, make, trim (CMT) - techniques.

\(^4\) See chapter two for a more detailed discussion of the seam’s significance and pervasiveness.

The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

As yet, however, our understanding of the way in which the seam produces fashion remains relativity limited. A significant body of practical research exists in the form of stitch manuals and technical guides to aid manufacturers, as well as a number of notable fashion collections and projects that test the limits of seaming.\(^6\) Neither of these fields of research, however, sufficiently contextualizes the seam within a detailed conceptual and academic framework, as the fundamental structure of the fashion production. As such, it is generally considered unremarkable that the majority of garments are sewn, and the function of the seam remains largely unquestioned.

Not only does the seam go unremarked, in most cases it also goes un**seen**. The seam evades attention by turning itself inwards and secreting away inside the garment. Often sandwiched between the outer garment and the lining fabric, the seam is visible only by a fine line - a sort of non-space between two approaching boundaries. It is no coincidence then, that many consider the French seam (which further diminishes and obscures the seam by once again turning it back in upon itself) to be the finest of seaming techniques. Similarly, the appearance of seamlessness is a coveted aim of contemporary production technologies. The fashionable look\(^7\) is one that sees the garment as a finished image but not the manner of its construction. In this way the seam constitutes a blind spot within the production of fashion, or indeed produces fashion only as a blind spot, as an unknowable text.

This obfuscation at the heart of fashion practice may explain, to some extent, why fashion is so often dismissed as frivolous, its function merely whimsical. As Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton note, ‘fashion, as a field of cultural activity, has managed to barricade itself against systematic analysis; it has put up rather a successful fight against meaning.’\(^8\) Fred Davis’ reading of the garment as an impoverished text, for example, typifies this perception that fashion lacks significant meaning and shows

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\(^6\) For example Issey Miyake’s seamless knit project A-POC, Christian Carol Poell’s experimentation with distressed or weakened seams and Material By Product’s ongoing investigation of seam placement as both functional and decorative detail.

\(^7\) Mark Wigley refers to the white walls of Modernist Architecture as the antifashion look: the style/mode of surveillance that protects architecture against fashion. The fashionable look then, is one that presents the appearance of seamlessness and that ensures against the intrusion of the seam. Mark Wigley, White Walls, Designer Dresses; The Fashioning of Modern Architecture (1995. Reprint Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), xxii.

that even within fashion theory such thinking is not uncommon. Describing the garment as ‘under-coded,’ Fred Davis argues that any meaning associated with clothing relies too heavily on contextual factors - such as time, place, activity, social milieu and the physicality of individual bodies - to be inherent to the garment itself.

Ronald Barthes seminal work *The Fashion System* must be understood as highly influential here. By analyzing the texts of two fashion magazines (*Elle* and *Jardin de Modes*) Barthes proposes that the writing of fashion *magazines* produces fashion meaning, while the garment only ever supports it. Furthermore, he suggests that owing to this impoverished potential to signify, fashion can at best only ever signify *itself*, what is in-fashion, or its *opposite*, what is out-of-fashion.

Barthes reaches these conclusions, however, solely through the analysis of fashion writing, or what he terms the *written-garment*. Although briefly acknowledging the fashion image, or *image-garment*, is capable of signification, the *real-garment* is, for its part, only mentioned to be dismissed. The swiftness of this rejection constitutes a gap in the text and in the *written-garment*. Barthes does not sufficiently address the *real-garment* in order to convincingly conclude that it is indeed incapable of signification. In fact, in dismissing the *real-garment*, Barthes appears to identify construction, and specifically the seam, as the keys to understanding its structure and meaning:

… the structure of real-clothing can only be technological. The units of this structure can only be the various traces of the actions of manufacture, their materialized and accomplished goals; a seam is what has been sewn, the cut of a coat is what has been cut; there is then a structure which is constituted at the level of substance and its transformations.

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In contrast to this understanding of Barthes however, a growing body of fashion scholarship, like this research, seeks to comprehend the fashion garment as itself meaningful. Joanne Entwistle and Anne Hollander argue that clothing 'embellishes the body... adding a whole array of meanings to the body that would otherwise not be there.' As Entwistle observes, most societies require that various dress codes be met for social situations and deem nakedness unthinkable except in private. In this way fashion constructs a body that is culturally meaningful by producing an intelligible social form from an otherwise-inconceivable-nakedness. When a person dons a tailored suit, a school uniform, or a wedding dress, they convey a number of highly specific cultural messages about their identity, function and place within society. These messages are communicated both outwardly, to other members of the group, and inwardly, establishing and re-enforcing the wearer’s own identity.

More subtly, clothing works to codify the amorphous mass, abject mess of the body into knowable, namable parts. The idea of a sleeve, for example, is indissociable from the idea of an arm, and vice versa. This correlation is most obviously demonstrated when considering that the typical cut of a full-length sleeve runs from shoulder to wrist, as an arm does. Meanwhile, other sleeve types that do not so closely align to the arm, such as the raglan or batwing, are seen as deviations requiring clausal names. As Germano Celant writes in To Cut is to Think, ‘cutting structures language, but also clothing.’ In this way, fashion functions much as language does: as a cultural system, producing correlations between concepts and words, or in this case between concepts and garment forms. The naked body can then only ever be understood in relation to the forms that clothe it; leg is to pant as waist is to belt.

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16 Such social forms of course vary from culture to culture, as these constructs are always firmly rooted in their context and not in the body itself.
17 It is worth noting that although specific dress forms do convey specific culturally located meanings, that there is significant scope to play with and subvert these messages as exemplified by drag.
18 Bernard Rudofsky observes similarly that; ‘(t)rousers represent a typical paradox of modern dress—an abstract shape, the tube, superimposed upon an organic shape, the leg.’ Bernard Rudofsky, The Unfashionable Human Body (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984), 157.
This conceptualisation of the body - as constructed by the seam and the fashion garment - allows for a diverse range of cultural forms and meanings, but it also tends to distance the *wearer* from the *body* and from the processes that construct it. The majority of commercial and archetypal garments are not produced using any actual, living body as a reference. Instead, designers work using standardized body measurements in the form of block patterns: approximate and rectangular templates for bodies (fig. 02, 03). As Rickard Lindqvist notes:

> One can work with an abstraction of the body, a template, and by altering the pattern new types of garments are created. ... This opens up for new possibilities and refinements in cutting but also introduces an aspect of alienation to the work, a risk that the awareness of the body is lost in the act of cutting.\(^{20}\)

Fashion items conceived of in this way are distanced from the body, although worn upon it. These garments instead represent simplified, flattened and fragmented approximations of living bodies.

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This would suggest that this blind spot produced by the seam is not so much a lack of meaning, as it is the concealment of meaning. That is, the concealment of the meaning constructed through the relationships of the garment to the body of the wearer, and the hand of the producer. Given the problematic nature of these relationships, it is imperative that the fashion garment is not accepted simply as a passive site upon which meaning is inscribed by text or image, but rather as the productive interstice between the body and culture. ‘If we see women's fashion as a field of representations of the female body it then becomes a significant text of how culture constructs femininity and how it addresses that representation to women.’

In the case of women’s wear and the globalised western fashion industry, the issue is a political one. The majority of designers of fashion-garments are male, while the labourers who make garments (fig.04) and the wearers who buy them are largely female. As Angela McRobbie reminds us, ‘Fashion is of course an almost wholly feminized industry. Apart from a few men at the top, including manufacturers and retailers, celebrity designers and magazine publishers, it is and has been a female

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The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

sphere of production and consumption. Late capitalist fashion is a system that effectively alienates women from their own bodies and the labour of their bodies, keeping them in a receptive, rather than productive, position in the production chain.

In this light, it is worth reflecting on the work of theorists, such as Regina Lee Blaszczyk, and practitioners, such as Ricarda Bigolin, who seek to broaden our understanding of what it means to produce fashion. In *Undo Fashion: Loose Garment Practice*, Bigolin takes the notion of production from the context of manufacturing, and expands it to include an understanding of how fashion is ‘communicated, shown and experienced.’ In particular Bigolin draws upon notions of deconstruction to define this loose conception of production as undoing fashion, or a reversal of fashion’s primary practices of making and doing. By defining an expansive approach to production, Bigolin opens up gaps within fashion that allow for a diversity of practices, practitioners, and engagement.

This would suggest that a deconstructive approach towards garment construction processes likewise expand our understanding of the ways in which the seam constructs both the fashion garment and the fashioned body. Of particular interest is Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive notion of the blind spot. In the context of philosophy, Derrida posits that a blind spot exists that covers over the production of meaning and obscures the relationship between the terms that constitute language. Through a close reading of philosophical texts, Derrida is able to show how this blind spot, and what it covers over, may be comprehended.

Theorists of deconstructivist architecture, such as Mark Wigley, provide a useful model for how Derrida’s thinking may be understood in the context of design. In his analysis of modernist architecture, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, Wigley directs us particularly to consider what is ‘almost always looked at in passing, lightly, obliquely, held in the periphery of discourse, if

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23 Kaat Debo makes a similar observation suggesting that; garments made using standardized pattern blocks are a phenomena unique to mass production and industrialization. Kaat Debo, ‘Patterns,’ in *Patronen (Patterns)*, eds. Kaat Debo and Bob Verhelst, (Ghent: MoMu Antwerpen, Ludion, 2003) 10.
24 Ricarda Bigolin, ‘Undo Fashion: Loose Garment Practice,’ (Ph.D., RMIT University, 2012), 41.
The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

not the blind spots that occupy its center.\textsuperscript{25} He describes such blind spots as the ‘point of vulnerability,’ by which a structure can be ‘unpicked,’\textsuperscript{26} and thus deconstructed, to uncover what has been obscured.

As we have seen, the seam represents just such a blind spot within fashion practice. Although fundamental to garment production, it is often overlooked, and taken for granted. Furthermore, the seam is quite literally the garment’s greatest point of vulnerability, which can indeed be unpicked. Through the process of constructing the garment, the needle holes left by sewing allow for thread to pass through fabric - bringing the garment together - while simultaneously perforating and weakening it. The seam thus becomes the most fragile point of the garment, at which it will most readily come undone.\textsuperscript{27} By comprehending the seam as a blind spot then, it can be understood not only as a site of construction, but also of deconstruction, and in this way offer an opportunity to reconsider fashion’s obscured relationship to the body.

\textsuperscript{25} Mark Wigley, \textit{White Walls, Designer Dresses; The Fashioning of Modern Architecture}, (1995. Reprint Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), xv. Of further interest, although beyond the scope of this paper, Wigley identifies fashion as the underprivileged term of architecture, suggesting that fashion can only ever be understood as supplementary. Further research is, of course, needed as to the implications of this denigration for the operations of fashion’s own supplementary term - the seam -, which this paper sets out to make visible.

\textsuperscript{26} Wigley, \textit{White Walls, Designer Dresses}, xxi.

\textsuperscript{27} Direct friction from wear may also cause significant damage to the garment, though this too is often most evident at seams.
CHAPTER ONE

Back Stitching: How does the seam structure the production of both fashion and the body?

Nothing is more fundamental to the production of the fashion garment than the seam. From the woven shirt with its complex piecing, to a pair of knit stockings, joined simply at center and toe, there is no category of clothing to which the seam is unknown. As Laing and Webster note:

> Although developments in fabrication processes where three-dimensional items are produced directly, such as fully-fashioning, three-dimensional knitting and thermoplastic molding, have occurred, seaming remains fundamental to the development of textile, and a range of non-textile, products.\(^{28}\)

The pervasiveness of the seam in contemporary garment manufacture can be attributed to three key factors: versatility, economy, and accessibility. The versatility of the seam is evident in the vast scope of seaming applications, covering various garment types, design details, fabrications and seam styles. Seams are a crucial component of all types of contemporary western clothes including shirts, t-shirts, trousers, skirts, jackets, coats, and even socks and jocks. Furthermore, it is common for seamless garments translated from other cultures for a western audience to be enhanced by additional seam details to shape and/or embellish the design. This can be seen, for example, in the shoulder seams of fitted ponchos, or the waist shaping of ‘cover-up’ sarongs. Seams are employed to structure many such design features, including paneling, pockets, cuffs, collars, as well as to control fullness and fit. Seams function across a wide variety of material types, from natural to synthetic, and are readily appropriate for joining knit, woven, and non-woven fabrics. Added to this is also a wide diversity of seam types such as bound, lapped, superimposed, channeled, ornamental, turned, edged, or enclosed. As such, there are very few garments, if any, that cannot be produced through seaming.

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\(^{28}\) Laing & Webster, *Stitches and Seams*, 1.
The fashion industry thus favors the seam, on account of its scope and the self-perpetuating access and economy that it confers. Given that seaming technology is indeed so broad, both in terms of use and application, it is no surprise that factories and manufacturers focus their energies on offering seamed production facilities. The result of having one dominant model of manufacture is, of course, both improved access to sewn manufacture and economic competition between suppliers to deliver a cost effective service. The prevalence of such factory models is evidenced in such texts as Nayak Rajkishore and Padhye Rajiv’s Garment Manufacturing Technology and Cooklin's Garment Technology for Fashion Designers, which notably present seamed production methods as the norm for industrial garment manufacture.

New technologies, such as seamless knitting and 3D printing, currently represent the forefront of garment manufacture, and as such are not yet as readily available or affordable as seaming. This is largely due to the scarcity of producers and the increased lead-times associated with these new technologies, which do not sit well with the fast turnarounds of industrial garment production. In addition, the versatility of such techniques currently remains limited, with 3D printing restricted to hard sculptural or articulated forms and seamless knit offering no solution for woven products. All the while, established systems of seamed production continue to grow as the dominant means of production.

Historically, the significance of the seam can be attested by its early appearance in the chronology of garment-making practices. According to Ian Jones and George K. Stylios, ‘Stone Age people (30,000 years ago) used sewing needles of bone and ivory to join animal skins together into clothing.’ Archeological research conducted by Ian Gilligan at the University of Sydney confirms Jones and Stylios’ dating. In The Prehistoric Development of Clothing: Archaeological Implications of a Thermal Model, Gilligan identifies the 35,000 year old Kostenki 15 / Gordocovskaja Needle as the world’s oldest eyed needle and places the advent of sewn garments somewhere.

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29 While developments in 3D printing soft textile products using Fused Deposition Modelling and some forms of Selective Laser Sintering are developing rapidly, the techniques are as yet expensive and best suited to small scale production. See: Rimma Melnikova, Andrea Ehrmann and Karin Finsterbusch, ‘3D Printing of Textile-Based Structures by Fused Deposition Modelling (FDM) with Different Polymer Materials,’ pres. 2014 Global Conference on Polymer and Composite Materials (PCM 2014), (China: Ningbo, 2014).

between 43,000 and 28,500 years ago. Although Gilligan goes on to note that such eyed needles (fig.05) need not have been used exclusively in the manufacture of garments, the development of needle technology matches closely to artistic depictions of fitted garments and is strongly indicated by use-wear analysis of such tools.

This timeline for the emergence of seaming technologies significantly predates that of all other garment construction methodologies. Unlike knotting and knitting, which did not emerge until approximately 25,000 years ago, early sewing was able to be carried out using raw materials such as animal skins and sinew based thread. Knotting and knitting, meanwhile, rely much more heavily upon plant fiber technologies for the production of yarns, which were not developed until much later. Consequently, it is impossible to conceive of yarn-based constructions without first considering the influence of seaming methodologies, that would have already existed during the development of yarn-based garment construction methods.

The seam’s fundamental impact on the development of knitting, for example, is evidenced in one of the earliest surviving knit garments known today: a pair of

32 Such as the hooded figurines of Buret and Mal’tinsk, or the cave engravings of Gabillou.
33 Use-wear analysis is the study of wear patterns and trace elements found on durable items, such as stone tools, in order to infer probable practices, and other nondurable information. It is a key method employed by archeologists investigating the Paleolithic area and is especially important to the investigation of early textile practices.
Egyptian split toed socks (fig.06), constructed between 200 and 500AD. The socks, housed in London’s Victoria and Albert Museum, were produced using an early form of knitting known as nålebinding. The V&A describe the construction of the socks as being less like contemporary knitting and ‘more like sewing.’\textsuperscript{36} The antecedence of seaming and sewing is thus made visible. Furthermore, though predominantly knitted, the socks clearly exhibit seamed construction at the transition between foot and leg. Notably, such seaming is not technically required in order to shape the knitted garment here. Knitting is highly capable of producing fully-fashioned garments without the need for seams, as demonstrated in the heel of the socks. Despite this capability, even today it is far more common to find knitwear produced from cut and sewn meterage or pieced garment parts.

![Fig. 06 Maker unknown, Pair of Socks. c. 250-420 AD, wool nålebinding, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, accessed 28 November, 2016.](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O107787/pair-of-socks-unknown/#)

In the case of weaving, the story is somewhat different, as the development of early weaving techniques remained distinct from garment-making practices for some time. The earliest known woven artifacts, found in North Western America and believed to

\textsuperscript{36} ‘Knitting Items from the Collections: Pair of Socks,’ The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, last modified April 28, 2005, [http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/15811](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O107787/pair-of-socks-unknown/#).
be some 11,000 years old, include mats, trays, baskets, bags, and other types of receptacles, but notably no garment forms. These finds suggest that, although earlier evidence of woven textiles exist - in the form of textile impressions upon clay and ceramic items - that these textiles were not produced for clothing the body. In fact, many of these earthenware impressions suggest the use of textiles for similar storage and transportation purposes. Realistically, it was not until the further developments of the loom and spindle during the Bronze Age (around 4000 years ago) that weaving became strongly linked to the production of clothes.

In establishing the historical significance of the seam, it is also crucial to acknowledge the prior use of unseamed skins in the dress and protection of the body. Such coverings demonstrate, as the seam does, technologically mediated interactions between humans and the environment in order to clothe the body. These skins, although unsewn, would have required the use of dedicated hunting, skinning and scraping technologies in order to prepare hides for wear. What differentiates these earlier coverings from the later seamed garments is the constructive function of the seam. The seam not only treats or prepares a material for wear, it also shapes and forms that material to better fit the requirements of the wearer. Seaming can therefore be considered the first method of garment construction.

Gilligan too, identifies the advent of garment construction through seaming as a significant cultural development, classifying it as ‘complex’ in distinction to earlier ‘simple’ clothing forms. He cites associated tool technologies, insulation capabilities and structural refinements, as having conferred a significant survival advantage throughout the Pleistocene period, and made possible the migration of people into more thermally challenging environments. Gilligan concludes, however, that what is most compelling is not such practical benefits but rather the cultural impact of

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40 Commonly referred to as the Ice Age.
The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

collection upon the body.\textsuperscript{42} He argues that ‘a pragmatic repercussion of complex clothing [was] that covering of the skin surface with fitted garments [meant] that decorative and symbolic modification of the human body [were] displaced elsewhere, onto garments,’ and that ‘the repercussions of complex clothing for social display have archaeological implications - particularly for the emergence of modern human behavior.’\textsuperscript{43} In other words, the construction of more complex clothing expanded the capacity of garments, and by association the body, to communicate more complex cultural messages associated with modern human behaviors, drastically expanding the scope of cultural practices of the body.

This coincidence between the seam and modern human behavior highlights the constitutive relationship between construction and culture. If culture is that which a given society or group of people \textit{produces} - be it beliefs, practices or material expressions - then it is that which \textit{produces}, that which \textit{constructs}, that constitutes a culture. As such, it is not only the seam that constructs the garment as the material expression of culture, but also the cultural practices and beliefs that surround our understanding of the body.

As the material expression of the seam’s constructive activity, the garment is effectively a material expression of culture, or, considered from a slightly different angle, an embodiment of cultural practices and representation of cultural beliefs. In other words, the garment functions communicatively, to express and share culturally encoded ideas between members of a given social group. This may include concepts such as occupation, wealth, status, political ideology, religious belief, gender identity, sexuality, and so on.\textsuperscript{44} A crisp white cotton shirt, buttoned to the neck, may symbolize the professional occupation of a white collar worker or a proselytizing religious group. Similarly a simple baseball cap may indicate an interest in a sports team, a


\textsuperscript{43} Gilligan, ‘The Prehistoric Development of Clothing,’ 62-63.

political ideology, a gang affiliation or gender identity. As Barbra Brownie observes:

A blouse, for example, has established design features and methods of wearing. Even if we are not using the term to refer to any specific item, ‘blouse’ as a concept is surprisingly specific. It has standard features that are taken for granted, such as a collar and buttons. The term also has cultural connotations, being both gendered and, increasingly, formal in contrast to new and more casual alternatives.

This notion that clothing and dress constructs a body that is meaningful to a given culture is supported by a number of prominent theorists and philosophers. Derrida, for example, writes that, ‘[a]n article of clothing is not natural; it is a fabric and even - another metaphor of metaphor - a text, and this text of artifice appears precisely on the side of the symbolic contract.’ Meanwhile, Slavoj Žižek’s reading of Jacques Lacan’s *Graph of Desire* (fig.07), in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, specifically

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45 For example the red ‘Make America Great Again’ baseball caps worn by supporters of Donald Trump in the run up to the 2016 American Presidential Election.
48 Unfortunately the scope of this research does not permit a more detailed discussion of Lacan’s *Graph of Desire*, beyond mentioning the relevance of stitching and the seam to the production of meaning. That said, a detailed analysis of the *Graph of Desire* in relation to fashion warrants the attention of further research, perhaps in the form of future PhD research.
comprehends the action of stitching as the process by which meaning and the symbolic contract, in other words culture, is formed.\textsuperscript{49}

In terms of fashion, Joanne Entwistle argues that the social ‘conventions of dress transform flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture.’\textsuperscript{50} In her article \textit{Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice}, she shows how the ‘unruly and disruptive’\textsuperscript{51} naked body is given meaning and structure through cultural practice.\textsuperscript{52} Citing various dress codes, such as the boardroom suit and the beach bikini, Entwistle is able to illustrate how the inversion of such codes would result in an incomprehensible body. The boardroom swimsuit, for example, would be both culturally inappropriate and absurd, if not unthinkable.

Likewise, Anne Hollander explores the way bodies are comprehended thorough clothing in her text \textit{Seeing Through Clothes}. In particular, Hollander analyses depictions of dressed and nude figures throughout art history, drawing parallels between the rendering of each. In her comparison of Francisco Goya’s \textit{The Nude Maja} (fig.08) and \textit{The Clothed Maja} (fig.09), for example, she makes clear the effects of garment structures upon the body.\textsuperscript{53} As she notes, the figure of \textit{The Nude Maja} shares an identical waist-shaping to that of the corseted figure in \textit{The Clothed Maja}, despite the nude’s apparent lack of such a garment. Furthermore as Hollander observes, the gravity defying bust and lower body posture of \textit{The Nude Maja} figure is strikingly suggestive of other supporting garments, similar to those worn by her clothed companion. What these two paintings illustrate, Hollander argues, is that the nude is never truly naked, but is instead dressed by social conventions and the image of the body produced by clothing.\textsuperscript{54} The corset - a product of culture or the symbolic

\textsuperscript{50} Entwistle, ‘Fashion and the Fleshy Body,’ 323-324.
\textsuperscript{51} Entwistle, ‘Fashion and the Fleshy Body,’ 326.
\textsuperscript{52} Interestingly, as Entwistle discusses in \textit{Addressing the Body}, such social messages need not always be communicated by clothing per se, but may also be produced by direct manipulations of the body including grooming, maintenance and modification. This broader understanding of dress in relation to the body, though of great value to fashion, and theories of the body, is beyond the scope of this research, which intentionally focuses its attention on the garment, and the seam, as a specific instances of dress which relate specifically to construction and deconstruction.
\textsuperscript{54} John Berger defines the difference between nudity and nakedness, stating that nudity is a culturally constructed guise, or dress, which is put on as opposed to nakedness which is associated with

Fig. 09 (bottom) Francisco Goya, *The Clothed Maja*, c. 1800 - 1808, Oil on canvas, 95 x 190 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, accessed November 27, 2016. https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-clothed-maja/a3121efc-6924-454c-8a9f-e4320f26d3d0

order - may be comprehended, as may the corseted chest, but beyond these forms the body remains ultimately unknowable.

Ferdinand de Saussure puts forward a similar concept in his *Course in General Linguistics* when he proposes that - in the case of language - meaning is produced as a *linguistic-unit* by connecting abstract *thought-concepts* to material *written-images* or *sound-images*. Illustrating his theory of semiotics with two undulating planes (fig.10), Saussure describes how the field of ideas - plane A - is connected to the field of sound/writing - plane B - through the production of language, which is represented by a series of lines running vertically between the two. Like the figure of *The Nude Maja*, it is only through the intervention of culture - in this case language - that meaning is formed.

![Diagram](image)


For example, our understanding of a knit top with an open front (plane A) is only produced when it is connected by language to the word ‘cardigan’ (plane B). Likewise, there is no inherent connection between the word ‘cardigan’ and idea of the knitted top, as it can easily be replaced in other languages by other words; such as ‘strickjacke,’ in German or ‘jopico,’ in Slovenian. A ‘cardigan’ is then understood only in contrast to other types of knitted tops such as ‘vests,’ or ‘jumpers,’ which define it differentially. As such the link between ideas and words is culturally produced and arbitrary, receiving meaning only through language and through differential comparisons to other words within language, otherwise known as binary opposition.

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That is not to say that because the system is arbitrary that it is free, rather that these arbitrary relationships are defined from within a fixed network of sound-images and thought-concepts, particular to a specific culture or societal group. As Saussure clarifies:

The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up; by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value.\textsuperscript{56}

Although Saussure’s work deals specifically with the field of language, his \textit{Course in General Linguistics} makes frequent reference to the workings of similar structures within various other disciplines, including fashion.\textsuperscript{57} While himself a linguist, Saussure was keenly aware of the potential to employ his thinking within other cultural fields. To this end his discussion of the production of linguistic meaning follows on to the broader theories of signification and semiotics in which the terms; sound-image, thought-concept and linguistic-unit, are replaced by the broader notions of signifier, signified and sign. In the case of fashion then, Saussure’s undulating planes could be alternately understood as surfaces of cloth - connected together by the stitches of a seam - illustrating how the body: plane A, is connected to the garment: plane B (fig.11). For as we have seen, it is the intervention of construction, in particular the seam, that binds the garment to the body and produces meaning.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Fig. 11} Remie Cibis, \textit{The Signifying Structure of the Fashion Garment}, digital collage, 2017.
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{56} Saussure, \textit{Course in General Linguistics}, 113.
\textsuperscript{57} Saussure, \textit{Course in General Linguistics}, 75-76.
Our understanding of the body, then, is always the product of signification, or that which has been *fashioned*. As we have seen, the body and the garment are both constructed through cultural processes and technologies all of which are underpinned by the logic of the seam. Any consideration then of the relationship between the body and the garment must first address the seam, and furthermore, any *reconsideration* of this relationship must proceed by way of seaming.
In order to comprehend how the seam can be considered as both a construction technique - fundamental to fashion practice - and reconsidered as a deconstructive blind spot, we must now turn to Derrida and his notion of deconstruction. Derrida’s work is of course, largely concerned with his own practice of philosophy, and its relationship to language, however we shall also see how his thinking is especially relevant to fashion practice, and in particular our consideration of the seam.

Although Derrida insists that deconstruction cannot be thought of as analysis, critique, method, act, operation or concept, we can consider the ways in which he articulates deconstruction, and how his own practice of close readings makes visible the workings of deconstruction, which can instead be considered as always already at play - ‘It deconstructs itself.’ As Derrida explains in an interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta; to understand deconstruction, to make it visible, ‘we must proceed using a double gesture.’ That is, by identifying and inverting the existing hierarchies imposed by systems of binary opposition, and at the same time marking that interval between the binary as an additional undecidable element.

Systems of binary opposition are fundamental to Western culture and metaphysics, producing meaning, as Saussure proposed, through the differential relationship of two opposed terms - such as presence and absence, speech and writing, or the body and fashion - rather than through any specific values inherent to either term. Although this process allows for cultures to generate and share meaning, binary oppositions also set up an unbalanced, hierarchical system in which one term is privileged over the other. The body is seen as a positive natural value, existing in and of itself, in contrast to fashion which is generally understood as a supplementary or artificial addition. In The

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59 That is, the way in which every thing which is said ‘to be,’ or to be present, is already complicated by an inherent absence. Derrida, ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend,’ 2.
Truth in Painting, Derrida specifically discusses the way that the garments, or drapery, of statues and painted figures are understood as artificial decorations added on to complement the pure beauty of the nude itself. This thinking, which preferences the nude and the body over drapery and the garment thus constructs fashion and the garment in a secondary, or supplementary, relationship to the body.

In order to disrupt or invert such hierarchies, Derrida conducts close readings of philosophical texts that reveal how privileged terms rely upon the supplementary support of their secondary inversions. For example, for presence to be thought of as such, it must be defined in opposition to absence, thus insinuating absence within presence. Alternatively, as we have seen, in order that the body may be defined and understood, the garment must first fashion it with meaning. Furthermore, Derrida shows that the differential nature of such relationships opens up a space, or a gap, between the two opposed terms, an undecidable interval which is neither one nor the other.

An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present on and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, every thing that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singular substance or the subject.

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62 Wigley states that ‘Unlike other objects, clothes can only be understood as supplements.’ Wigley, White Walls, Designer Dresses, 20.

In *Positions* Derrida gives the example of the *pharmakon* - which is understood as both poison and remedy - to describe such an intermediary term. Elsewhere he refers to this space as *différance*, ‘the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other,’\(^6^4\) (fig.12) and also as *unsewing*.\(^6^5\) The recognition of this undecidable interval, ‘the "unsew-it" of *La Pharmacie de Platon*,’\(^6^6\) is what differentiates deconstructive thinking from other dialectical propositions which seek to resolve the conflict of binary opposition through processes of synthesis. Rather than uniting the two terms, and closing the interval, deconstruction instead always retains this contradictory spacing.

As such, deconstruction never resolves the binary’s antithesis, only makes it *visible*. This notion of visibility is connected directly to the concept of the blind spot, as it is these moments of oversight that, once observed, make apparent the hidden *différance* inherent to all cultural constructs and metaphysical concepts. As Derrida puts it, ‘(b)lindness thus produces that which is born at the same time as society: the languages, the regulated substitution of signs for things, the order of the supplement. One goes from blindness to the supplement.’\(^6^7\)

And so we return to the seam which, like language, can be considered as both a blind spot and a producer of meaning. In the context of fashion, the seam is understood as the joining together of two or more surfaces of cloth by means of stitching. More broadly speaking, however, the seam can be understood as a fissure between parallel edges,\(^6^8\) a gap, or an interval. Furthermore, this definition of the seam as both *join* and *fissure* suggests a certain undecidability. As both the cut and the sew,\(^6^9\) the seam holds both the possibility of constructing a garment and of its coming apart at the

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\(^{65}\) Jacques Derrida ‘Interview with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta,’ 85.


\(^{68}\) The geological seam is one such example of the seam as fissure. Bruce Moore, ed., *The Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary*, Fourth Edition. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1942), 977.

\(^{69}\) Most common seams are produced in two stages; first by cutting fabric to a desired shape and then by joining together cut pieces; a technique commonly referred to by industry as ‘cut & sew.’ Although more complex variations exist, for example piped and sealed seams, and exceptions; such as fashioned-knitwear, are available, the vast majority of seamed garments ultimately require the actions of both cutting and sewing.
point where cloth is weakened by stitching. ‘Damage usually occurs in the seam area rather than in the middle of the cloth.’ As fashion theorist Alison Gill writes:

>[T]he ‘seam’ in garment construction is highly suggestive as a productive third term, an undecidable, that has the potential to give further insight. In simple terms, the seam is a trace of garment production that cannot be fully concealed; more interestingly, it functions as a hinge interface and borderline between two pieces. [...] When conceived along these lines, the exposure of the seam is a radical element in the vocabulary of deconstruction fashion.

Despite the fact that Derrida’s own work deals mostly with the field of philosophy and the philosophy of language, he has also said that ‘the most effective deconstruction … is one that deals with (the) nondiscursive, or with discursive institutions that don’t have the form of a written discourse.’ In particular, although always maintaining the position of a philosopher, Derrida’s work has also engaged directly with architectural practice in the form of projects such as Chora L Works with Peter Eisenman and various recorded discussions with other architects and theorists, such as Christopher Norris, Daniel Libeskind and Jeffrey Kipnis.

In these discussions, Derrida repeatedly points out that deconstruction cannot be thought of only in terms of philosophy, but must be considered as an aspect of all cultural practice. This is because language (and thought expressed in language) is just one instance of cultural production which, regardless of form or practice, is always premised on hegemonic systems of difference. In discussion with Norris, Derrida suggests that in place of his own close readings of philosophical texts, architects must

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73 Chora L Works was a proposed outdoor space, designed for the Parc de la Villette in Paris, by Eisenman and Derrida. The development and discussions surrounding the project are detailed in the book of the same name. Jacques Derrida & Peter Eisenman, Chora L Works, eds. Jeffery Kipnis and Thomas Leeser (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997).
instead question architectural assumptions and privileges through *architecture’s own practices*. ‘Deconstruction comes about,’ he says, ‘when you have deconstructed some architectural philosophy, some architectural assumptions – for instance, the hegemony of the aesthetic, of beauty, the hegemony of usefulness, of functionality, of living, of dwelling. But then you have to reinscribe these motifs within the work.’

(fig.13) Where a philosopher, like Derrida, reads and writes philosophy, architects must instead engage with deconstruction through practices of designing and of building, and the fashion designer by designing and constructing garments.

Architectural theorist Mark Wigley discusses this further in the catalogue to the 1988 MOMA *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition. Here Wigley states that; 'It is the ability to disturb our thinking about form that makes these projects deconstructive. It is not that they derive from the modes of contemporary philosophy known as "deconstruction". They are not an application of deconstructive theory. Rather, they emerge from within the architectural tradition and happen to exhibit some deconstructive qualities.' By using terms such as *deconstructive* and *deconstructivist architecture*, Wigley intentionally distinguishes between architectural practices that, like Derrida's philosophical texts, seek to make visible the workings of deconstruction.

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and deconstruction itself - which is always already at play. Furthermore, these terms are used to define a field of architectural practice that is distinct from the philosophical work of Derrida.

Similarly, within fashion practice, the term deconstruction fashion is often used to describe the work of designers who engage with deconstructive thinking. It is not just, as popular culture may have us believe, that the work of designers like Martin Margiela, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto has simply ‘slashed, spoiled or distressed clothing.’ Rather, as with deconstructivist architecture, such fashion practices approach the garment as a culturally-produced structure of meaning which calls for close reading. These designers call into question fashion’s own intrinsic terms, such as luxury, glamour and style, or what Gill identifies as ‘the enabling conditions of fashion’s insistent drive to produce collections in line with a commercial system that prizes the aesthetic idealism of innovation, spectacle and

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76 As Gill observes, the term ‘deconstruction fashion’ was first applied by theorists and critics in the 90’s to describe various practices that questioned fashion systems and modes, rather than by designers themselves. Gill, ‘Jacques Derrida: Fashion Under Erasure,’ 252-253.

The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

seamlessness. Of course in the case of fashion this ‘reading’ takes the form of fashion practice and the production of garments. As Flavia Loscialpo says:

By the practicing of deconstructions, such designers have disinterred the mechanics of the dress structure and, with them, the mechanisms of fascinations that haunt fashion. The disruptive force of their works resided not only in their undoing the structure of a specific garment, in renouncing to finish, in working through subtractions or displacements, but also, and above all, in rethinking the function and the meaning of the garment itself. With this, they inaugurated a fertile reflection questioning the relationship between the body and the garment, as well as the concept of ‘body’ itself.

The work of Martin Margiela, exemplifies such an approach to fashion design. The themes and concerns of Margiela’s collections - as well as the way in which the work is communicated, shown, and experienced - persistently questions the elements of design, production and the fashion system that are most often taken for granted: fashion’s privileged terms. Where fashion revels in exulting the name and the brand, Margiela’s labels are instead left blank; in place of the ever-fetishised new, replicas of iconic garments are remade; and, in contrast to fashion’s ever growing obsession with smaller sizes; pieces are produced at drastically enlarged scales.

In Margiela’s Garments Reproduced from a Doll’s Wardrobe (fig.16), doll’s clothing is scaled up to human size, amplifying the strangeness of the garments proportions. This is most noticeable in details such as trims and zips, which could not easily be produced at sizes small enough to match the original miniature scale. The strangeness

80 Work produced by Margiela’s house has insistently been referred to as that of Maison Martin Margiela in official press releases, etc., so as to emphasise the collaborative nature of fashion and to devalorize the myth of the genius designer. Here, however, an intentional choice has been made to refer to the work as that of Martin Margiela, so as to specify the years 1989 – 2014: namely, the period from the first collection shown by Martin Margiela under the name Martin Margiela up until John Galliano’s appointment as creative director of the house.
of the proportions, however, is subtly visible in the more general scale relationships of garment parts, such as the torso and the sleeve. By amplifying and making visible these oddities, Margiela draws attention to the inherent strangeness, the always already strange, of the relationship between the body and the garment, and the space (or spacing) which exists between them.  

Similarly in the House’s Autumn/Winter 2000-2001 collection (fig. 17), the interval between the garment and the body was again made visible through a disruption of the standard industry approach to sizing. The entire collection was offered only in an Italian size 78, a size 15 sizes greater than those most commonly catered for by commercial fashion brands.  

With this as the only available garment size, most customers were forced to reconsider how the clothes could be worn or to confront a significant gap in their relationship to the body. This discrepancy between the body and the garment is particularly interesting in light of Lindqvist’s concerns regarding the block and the body. As he says, a ‘mathematical take on cutting, i.e. using a

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81 Flavia Loscialpo offers a similar reading of this collection. Loscialpo, ‘Fashion and Philosophical Deconstruction: A Fashion in-Deconstruction’ 7.

82 An Italian size 78 would equate to an Australian size 46, if calculated using the most commonly available 8,10,12,14,16 size range as a starting point.
matrix drawn after the body measurements, shows one way of perceiving the body...which is not necessarily based on the body although it is applied to it for practical reasons. By multiplying the usual measurements used in block pattern formulas, and by grading up a size which no longer equates to an idealized body, or a standardized idea of the body, Margiela again makes visible, makes unavoidable, the interval, which, as Lindqvist notes, is always already at play.

Most interesting for this research, however, is Margiela’s *deconstructivist* approach to construction. In Margiela’s work the seam is rarely a blind spot; rather than turned inwards and secreted away inside the garment, the seam is presented as a crucial element of the design. In *Lining Dress*, 1991 (fig.18), the seams and internal structures that form the garment are exposed, the lining literally turned outwards and worn externally in place of more usual decoration or embellishment. The usual hierarchy of an aesthetic and meticulous exterior over internalized laboured inside, is thus disrupted, not only through inversion, but also by making visible what has been hidden and offering it up as a decorative, or aesthetic, possibility.

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In exposing the construction processes of the garment, and in making visible the seaming, Margiela highlights the otherwise obscured labour of the seamstress as producer. As Gill observes, ‘Maison Margiela’s designs express a double movement, or the bi-directionality of un-making, in the acknowledgment of the dress-maker’s labour (usually concealed in the finished garment).’ Kaat Debo also draws our attention to this aspect of Margiela’s practice in the Maison Martin Margiela: (20) The Exhibition catalogue. Here Debo lists the various traces of production evident in the work, such as seams, darts, white basting thread, patterns, fabric shears, shoe lasts, clothes hangers, and dressmakers dummies, all of which she identifies as ‘elements directly referring to the labour process.’ (fig.19)

Kitty Hauser’s essay, The Fingerprint of the Second Skin, similarly uses the seam to read the repressed labour of the producer into the garment. Following the investigative work of FBI agent Dr. Vorder Bruegge - into a series of bombings and robberies in 1996, in Spokane, Washington - Hauser details how Bruegge was able to use the seam as a sort of identifier, like a fingerprint, in the case. Using CCTV footage recovered from the crime scene, Bruegge was able to identify the suspects (whose faces were covered with thick balaclavas) by matching the individual patterns of ‘ridges and valleys,’ on the seams of their jeans, visible on the CCTV footage, to those of garments recovered from their homes (fig.20).

What is it that gives a pair of jeans their unique and individuating wear patterns? As Hauser’s essay states, it is not simply the product of the wearer’s personal interaction with the garment. Although usage, body shape and laundering habits do contribute to ‘developing’ these patterns, the initial sequencing of ‘ridges and valleys’ is shown by Hauser to be set in place through the manufacturing process. ‘When, in making up jeans, the operator pushes the denim through the sewing machine, unavoidable tensions are created in the fabric causing a puckering along the seams, a series of ‘ridges and valleys’ that is effectively induplicable.’ It is therefore not only the wearer and the wearer’s body that is revealed through this close reading of the seam, but also that of the producer. Though stressing that the seamstress remains ultimately

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anonymous, Hauser concludes that, ‘(w)hat was illuminated - inadvertently - was an otherwise hidden relationship between garment, maker and wearer.’

Or as Leslie Esther states in her *Response to Kitty Hauser*:

Hauser’s paper returns the category of labour to the study of fashion. Her investigation shows that the mode of making cannot be ignored. The specific mode of production of the jeans necessitates a pushing by hand through sewing machines, in order to fix thick seams. In Marx’s terms, ‘living labour’ asserts itself against and in conjunction with ‘dead labour.’ Making jeans is apparently not a process that can be automated successfully.

This is because, unlike so many other industries of mass production, garment construction and sewing machines remain reliant upon human labour. ‘As yet there

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The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

have been no commercially viable solutions capable of simulating the human hand, which is still the only viable ‘limp fabric handling device’ which can perform the tasks associated with material handling for sewing construction.89 This means that fashion production continues to depend upon the body of the maker and the interaction of the maker with garment, despite obscuring this work within the finished garment.

![Diagram of the body, garment, and producer](image)

Fig. 21 Remie Cibis, The Chain of Fashion’s Supplementations, Digital Illustration, 2017.

In this way the maker, or producer, can thus be understood as occupying a repressed or supplementary position in relation to the garment. The garment both relies upon the producer and the producer’s labour to structure itself (its meaning and its form) and yet the process of garment manufacture works actively to suppress this.90 It is only through acknowledging the seam - the space that exists between the producer and the garment - as Margiela and Hauser do, that this structural imbalance may be made visible. It is however, equally crucial to acknowledge also the way in which the body relies upon fashion, and the garment, to define itself and to be understood. For as long as fashion is seen as only a meaningless supplement to the body, its own supplement can only remain doubly repressed (fig.21).

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90 In his Deconstructivist reading of Modernist Architecture, Wigley refers to the White Wall which he identifies as a blind spot of Modernist Architecture as an active mechanism of erasure. Wigley, White Walls, Designer Dresses, 8.
CHAPTER THREE

Under Stitching: Reading the real-garment in Barthes’ written-garment.

In light of this deconstructive understanding of the significance of seam and the fashion garment, we may now return to Barthes and in particular to his structuralist analysis *The Fashion System*. For as long as Barthes is understood to claim that it is the *written text* of the fashion magazine that alone gives the garment meaning, both the body of the wearer *and* the body of the producer can only remain obscured. This problem calls for a *close reading* of Barthes’ work; a reading that proceeds by way of the seam and that acknowledges both the significance of the garment and the labour of the producer.

Although *The Fashion System* focuses its attention on the ways in which fashion produces meaning, Barthes limits his analysis to the study of fashion writing. A choice no doubt influenced by Barthes’ own practice as a writer. Barthes initially identifies three types of clothing - clothing itself, which he calls *real-clothing* or the *real-garment*; fashion photography and illustration, termed *image-clothing* or the *image-garment*; and fashion writing; which he refers to as *written-clothing* or the *written garment*. Despite this, only the category of *written-clothing* is given any serious attention. Consequently, the majority of the analysis is given over to demonstrating the signifying action of fashion as explicated by the *written texts* of the French fashion magazines *Elle* and *Le Jardin des Modes*. ‘As for the units of *real-clothing*,’ he states, ‘they cannot exist at the level of language.’91 And as for seams, Barthes claims that, as ‘we cannot take the seam out of the garment,’ it is then ‘pointless to note that they exist.’92

In defining the structure of fashion’s signification, Barthes tends towards a linguistic model, identifying neither the seam nor actual garment construction, but the three quasi-grammatical categories: ‘the object aimed at by signification (O), its support

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(S), and the variant (V)’ (fig. 22), as the foundation of this structure. Barthes explains, that when the fashion magazine says that ‘a square-necked, white silk sweater is very smart,’ the notion of ‘smartness’ is attached to the ‘white silk sweater,’ which otherwise only exists upon the ‘vague plane’ of garments. He argues that the link indicated by the statement is both arbitrary and differential, operating in the same way as Saussure’s definition of signification. The association of ‘smartness’ is indeed arbitrary, as that which is recognized as smart varies widely across cultural contexts, and even from season to season. Indeed, ‘a square-necked white silk sweater’ is not necessarily the apogee of smartness today. Likewise, the statement can be understood as functioning differentially, in that ‘a white silk sweater’ can only be thought of as ‘smart’ in contrast to other garments or variations which are cast as ‘casual,’ ‘untidy,’ ‘blue collar,’ or ‘unfashionable.’

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a pullover with a closed collar} & \quad \equiv \quad \text{dressy} \\
\text{a sweater with a boatneck collar} & \quad \equiv \quad [\text{Fashion}] \\
\text{a hat with a high crown} & \quad \equiv \quad [\text{Fashion}]
\end{align*}
\]


What this analysis seems to miss, however, is that the system is not so free or unbound. In proposing that it is the linguistic act alone that produces the connection between ‘a white silk sweater,’ and the notion of ‘smartness,’ Barthes gives great license to the fashion writer, allowing them to effectively rewrite an otherwise socially derived meaning to their own liking. However, ‘the signifier, although to all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it.’ The words of the fashion writer cannot construct new significations for the *real-garment*, anymore than a speaker of

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95 Saussure refers to the undulating planes as either ‘vague’ or ‘jumbled’ prior to the intervention of language. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 112.
96 Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 71.
English can propose new linguistic signs alone. The case of the 1960’s midi-skirt illustrates this clearly. The style, promoted heavily by fashion writers and the fashion industry, was thoroughly rejected by the public who refused to accept it as the latest fashion and instead understood it as a regressive and conservative reaction to the freedom of the mini (fig. 23). It therefore cannot be the fashion writer who alone constructs the sign, but rather the fashion writer who recognizes the sign by drawing upon their fluent knowledge of the fashion lexicon. The sign itself, the real-garment, already exists in its own arbitrary and differential relationship to other real-garments.

To explain this further must then turn to another of Barthes’ texts, Mythologies, which although superficially opposed to The Fashion System, actually presents - Barthes insists - ‘the same argument and demonstration.’ Mythologies applies semiotic

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97 Of course new words are invented all the time, but always as variations of those already existing within language.

methods to the analysis of various everyday objects and practices, such as wrestling, soap-powder and cars, without the insistence on the primacy of a written text, as in *The Fashion System*. In his essay ‘The New Citroën,’ Barthes details the signification of the physical qualities of the car itself, such as its metal, glass, and wide rubber grooves and the traces of its manufacture.\(^9^9\) Barthes writes that it:

\[\text{... it excites interest less by its substance than by the junction of its components. It is well known that smoothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling.}\(^1^0^0\)

The essay makes no reference to written (or photographic) representation of the vehicle, with Barthes proclaiming instead that, ‘\text{(w)e must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature.}\(^1^0^1\)

![Image of diagram](image)


Furthermore, in *Mythologies* Barthes proposes that in some semiotic systems there exists a secondary layer of signification. This second layer, which he refers to as connotation, imposes itself over an initial denotative system, emptying out that system’s signs so that they may act as the signifieds of the second layer signs (fig.24).\(^1^0^2\) Barthes uses the example of a photograph of a ‘Negro-French-solider-saluting-the-tricolour,’\(^1^0^3\) and shows that the second-order signified of (mythic) nationalism relies on draining the man in the picture of his history, and lived experience. In the case of fashion then, the written-garment can also be understood to

\(^1^0^0\) Barthes, *Mythologies*, 88. Note also Barthes awareness of our tendency to shy away from acknowledging production and the work of human hands.
\(^1^0^1\) Barthes, *Mythologies*, 88.
\(^1^0^2\) Barthes, *Mythologies*, 115.
\(^1^0^3\) Barthes, *Mythologies*, 122.
operate in this way, as a secondary signification which both draws upon and empties out the preexisting signification of the real-garment and, in turn, the history of its production. As Barthes puts it himself, ‘words impose on the real-garment, for words, as we shall see, take over an object, the garment, which itself is already a system of signification.’

This parasitical relationship between connotation and denotation can be a cause for particular concern, as, like all systems of signification, its process is obscured. Connotations are not immediately apparent as artificial meaning constructed in addition to a pre-existing semiotic system; instead they appear in natural relation to their object. With written-clothing, ‘the function of the rhetorical system is to mask the systematic and semantic nature of the utterances submitted to it by transforming equivalence into reason.’ Or as we have seen, to construct the double blind of the garment and the producer. For although connotative signs, like all others, are constructed arbitrarily, Barthes makes clear that connotative (mythic) signs are not unmotivated. Instead, myth seeks to naturalize ideological messages. In the case of fashion, the message is fashion itself, or rather the glamour and desire for what is fashionable, which simultaneously works to obscure the denotative structure of producers upon which fashion relies. Labour is not fashionable. Hence Barthes’ former assertion that, in the case of written-clothing, fashion can only ever signify itself.

‘There is,’ however, according to Barthes, ‘one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links language to the making of things, meta-language is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible.’ This language of making, of labour, is what Barthes elsewhere identifies as the denotative system, upon which myth relies. Such systems, according to Barthes, utilize direct and transitive links between the speaker and the object. In stitching the garment, the seamstress does not speak about the garment, but rather speaks the garment through her action.

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106 Barthes, Mythologies, 146.
107 Barthes, Mythologies, 145. Barthes uses a similar example, a woodcutter ‘who speaks the tree.’
One of the few instances of such thinking apparent in *The Fashion System* appears towards the end of the text in the short section on ‘Signs and Functions in Real Clothes.’ Here Barthes writes that ‘every object is also a sign,’\(^{108}\) and that ‘a raincoat protects from the rain, but it signifies rain as well.’\(^{109}\) Expanding upon this relationship between the *real-garment* and signification, Barthes seems to suggest, as he does in *Mythologies*, that the object itself is capable of signifying without the secondary intervention of the *written-garment*. While intended functionally to protect from the rain, Barthes writes that once the ‘raincoat’ has taken on a culturally accepted form and construction, it can no longer be understood as merely functional and must also be understood as a sign. Distinguishing between construction and the formlessness, between the sewn and the unsewn, the example of the raincoat seems also to foreshadow the later work of Gilligan exploring the relationship between construction and culture. As Barthes reasons:

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\text{In order to find purely functional objects, it is necessary to imagine improvised objects: for example, the shapeless covering Roman soldiers threw over their shoulders to protect themselves from the rain; but once this makeshift garment has been fabricated, and we might say, institutionalized under the name *paenula*, the protective function is taken over by a social system of communication.}\,^{110}
\]

The discussion of the raincoat echoes the original argument employed by Barthes to seemingly dismiss the analysis of *real-clothing* as unworthy of serious analysis. In stating that, ‘the structure of real clothing can only be technological,’ or functional and that ‘the units of this structure can only be the various traces of the actions of manufacture,’\(^{111}\) Barthes seems to contend that *real-clothing* can only ever represent the traces of its own making and nothing more. What he eludes, however, is that these traces of making provide the key to understanding the way in which the *real-garment* produces meaning. As Barthes himself states, ‘in order to analyze the *real-garment* in systematic terms, i.e., in terms sufficiently formal to account for all analogous

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garments, we should no doubt have to work our way back to the actions which governed its manufacture.¹¹²

As a result, although Barthes does indeed focus his attention in The Fashion System upon the analysis of the written-garment, a closer reading of the text (in conjunction with Barthes broader oeuvre) indicates that he does not, in fact, believe that this is the only way to understand fashion. Indeed, by employing the expertise of his practice as a writer, Barthes is able to offer an incredibly detailed account of how the written-garment functions as a connotative system to repress the signification of the real-garment, and in turn the labour of the producer. It is, now and ever, the work of fashion practitioners to employ the methods and thinking inherent to their own practice - of construction and of seaming - to better understand and to interrogate the conditions of the denotative system of the real-garment.

CHAPTER FOUR
Cutting: Patterns that equate and patterns that relate.
(Practice Part One: Toiling and Experimentation)

If the garment itself can be considered as both a constructive semiotic system and, in turn, a site of deconstruction, it is crucial to address the garment directly in terms of fashion practice and the production of clothes. It is not sufficient to simply discuss the garment, but rather as Derrida says, ‘you have to reinscribe these motifs within the work.’ To this end, I produced a series of seaming experiments and garments in order to observe more closely how the seam both constructs and deconstructs itself.

Proceeding according to the double gesture of deconstruction, this practice-based investigation can be understood in two parts. Firstly, as the identification and inversion of the hegemonic relationship between the garment and the body, explored in terms of the cut, or pattern. Then secondly, as a marking of an interval between the body and the garment, explored through seaming and construction techniques.

The initial structuralist, or semiotic, investigations of the relationship between the garment and the body began by mapping out the key points from a standard bodice block onto a standard dressmaker’s mannequin (fig.25). These points included the bust points, back nape, and high shoulder points, as well as several other locations found by correlating vertical positions (such as the center front line) with horizontal positions (for example the waistline). I then used these key block points to guide the placement of potential design lines, or seams, which I marked out using lengths of black binding.

Despite however, the ability to generate a large number of complex designs quite quickly the overall results lacked significant variation. Regardless of how many or how few seams were added, the underlying structure of the block continued to assert itself in the visual similarity of the designs, demonstrating the limits of designing in this way.

Instead, it was the unpinning between design tests that produced the most interesting results; the dangling, draped lines formed as the binding was unpinned (fig. 26). Unlike the lines drafted strictly between block points, these loose, linear arrangements hung from and around the body, meeting it at certain moments and floating free at others. The lines found their way in relation to the body, the two forms interacting to produce the design.

Drawing on this loose line, I toiled a shirt in calico to test whether a similar interaction could be produced between the body and an archetypal garment derived from the block. Points similar to those used in the previous experiment - for example, the high shoulder point and tip of the sleeve head - were identified and used to define
lines associated with fit – in this case the shoulder line (fig.27). The neck, scye and wrist positions were likewise located and marked out. This time however, in place of fixed, ridged lines - held firmly in place between points - these lines were constructed as binding channels, through which I inserted draw-strings.

These draw-string lines made it possible for the key fit points of the shirt to shift and adjust in response to differing bodies. Barbara Brownie describes Rei Kawakubo’s 1983 Wrapped Collection similarly, noting the way garments could be wrapped, draped or tied to facilitate a multiplicity of wearings. By loosening or tightening the draw strings the garment could be expanded and contracted independently at each fit point. For example, the shoulder could be tightened to accommodate a narrow torso, while at the same time widening the neck circumference to allow for a more muscular neck. This allowed for more personalized fittings, in contrast to more common industrial sizing systems that involve fitting a body to a static garment size range.

After this shirt, although I made no further garments exactly in this way the key concepts of the loose line and the loose form, became integral to many of the

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garments and experiments that followed. The next series of tests, for example, developed the notion of *loose form*, by moving away from both the standard blocks and archetypal garment forms. When drafting a pattern block from scratch, lines and measurements are usually mapped out according to a system of vertical and horizontal grids, that produce a rectangular approximation of the body (fig.28). As Lindqvist points out:

This mathematical take on cutting, i.e. using a matrix drawn after the body measurements, shows one way of perceiving the body. Drafting systems using vertical and horizontal lines connected in straight angles in this way imply a certain view of the body, which is not necessarily based on the body although it is applied to it for practical reasons.\textsuperscript{115}

By contrast, pattern-making approaches derived from circular geometries instead tend to produce volume and looser relationships between the body and the garment (fig.29). Of course, circular geometries are equally inept at equating to real or lived bodies,

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especially when considered flat. When cut flat, a circular bodice block (fig.30), produces areas of excess that flap freely at the sides and shoulder indicating the inability of the shape to fit to the body.\(^{116}\) When cut as volume, however, the aim is no longer to equate geometry to the body, but instead to relate geometry to the body (fig.31). The full circle is left loose, touching the body only momentarily to produce a form that, like the unpinned design lines, is revealed when worn. This approach to the body is more similar to non-Western garment forms, like the kimono, which are not derived from standardized pattern blocks but rather from loose shapes that do not attempt to approximate the body.\(^{117}\)

Continuing this line of thought, I generated, a number of experimental garment forms by applying circles of various sizes to the body which drew upon the principle of the circle skirt. Initially, the diameters of the circles were set by taking measurements from the body. For upper body pieces a high shoulder to hip measurement was used, while for lower body forms a waist to ankle measurement was taken. As the circles were not pieced or seamed together, however, I encountered limitations in terms of the larger diameters required for full body pieces, as most fabrics are loomed at widths no greater than 150cm.

This also meant that the pieces were effectively seamless, employing cuts and the attachment of loose linear elements - such as straps and ties - to fasten to the body. By

\(^{116}\) It is also worth noting, that the discrepancy that exists between the circle and the body, unlike the rectangle, is shared with fabric and pattern paper/card, which are themselves quadrilateral in form.

\(^{117}\) Rickard Lindqvist makes a similar observation describing garments such as the kimono as having a non-figurative relation to the body and in this way avoid the trap of attempting to define it. Rickard Lindqvist. ‘On the Logic of Pattern Cutting: Foundational Cut and Approximations of the Body,’ (Ph.D., University of Borås, 2013), 33.
Fig. 32 *Circular Singlet*, 2015, Digital Illustration, Calico Toile, Viscose Crepe Sample.
Fig. 33 Circular Apron, 2015, Digital Illustration, Calico Toile, Viscose Crepe Sample.
eliminating seaming and its implications of fit, the full volume of the circles was
allowed to float freely about the body, except for where ties and straps acted as loose
anchors (similar to the draw strings of the earlier shirt toile). The garments relied very
much on their interaction with the body in order to realize their form. In the example
of the Circular Singlet (fig.32), for example, the pattern is composed of a single
circle, spliced through the center, which only reveals itself as a singlet, when worn
upon the body.

This same approach was applied to the development of the Circular Apron (fig.33). In
this case, instead of being worn over the body - as is common in traditional circle
cutting methods such as the circle skirt - the circle was instead worn on front of the
body. The inversion of the axial relationship, between the garment and the body, then
revealed new possibilities for folding and draping sections of the circle to create an
unusual apron-like shape, which was likewise enacted only through dressing.

The circle also provided a challenge to traditional seaming techniques and methods.
As with pattern blocks, seams rely upon rectangular principles, with seam allowances
added to patterns using the gridded markings of a grading ruler. If seams are curved,
seam allowances must be decreased, or cut into, to allow for the seam to be sewn.
Otherwise the discrepancy created between the convex side of the curve (whose edge
increases as it widens) and the concave side of the curve (whose edge decreases as it
widens) will be too exaggerated to construct (fig.34).
Furthermore, when working with two convex shapes, or a pair of circles, the possibilities for seaming pieces together become even more complicated. It is impossible to bring the edges of two circles together for more than a moment, unless you either partially or entirely overlap the pieces (fig.35). This suggests some serious difficulties in terms of constructing garments composed of circles, as well as a significant challenge to traditional seaming methods. In this way, a circular approach to pattern making not only disrupts the usual block based formulas of pattern making but also common assumptions regarding the construction of garments.

Using this idea of overlapping circles, I toiled a series of skirts, this time using multiple circles connected together (fig.36). When just two circles were joined the results echoed the earlier Circular Bodice Block Toile. While they exhibited small areas of excess, they still largely conformed to the shape of the body. It took at least three circles to provide sufficient volume in the garment, in order to allow for a significant spacing between the garment and the body. This increase in volume could not be added alternately simply by increasing circle size, as this would also require an increase in overlap (where pieces were brought together to fit the waist) and that would ultimately exclude volume from the rest of the skirt as well.
Fig. 37 Various Circular Sleeve Toiles, 2015, Cotton Calico, Polyester Thread and Pencil.
Further similar experiments were conducted with other parts of the body and garment shapes including the arm/sleeve (fig.37) and the leg/pant (fig.38). It proved more challenging to construct the circular garments for these bifurcated areas of the body, associated with movement. The excess fabric produced between the legs or under the arms was, for the most part, bulky and restrictive. Whereas the volume of the skirt or top shapes could sit around the body, allowing there to be empty space, the bulkier bifurcated styles filled those empty spaces with fabric.\textsuperscript{118}

\textbf{Fig. 38} Various Circular Pant Toiles, 2015, Cotton Calico and Polyester Thread.

Meanwhile, the toiling of circular cut slippers (fig.39) offered some more promising outcomes. Not only did they seem to suggest a more comfortable relationship between the body and the shoe/garment, but when considered in conjunction with the earlier Circular Apron as domestic items, they also began to allude to softer space for experiencing fashion. Unlike the runway or boutique, the magazine or billboard (which communicate the image-garment or written-garment), the domestic space seemed to provide an opportunity for experiencing the real-garment on its own terms, or in the terms of the wearer. While the slipper experiments themselves were not resolved further into final samples, their influence is still visible in the final presentation of the creative work discussed in Chapter Five.

\textbf{Fig. 39} Circular Slipper Toiles, 2015, Cotton Calico and Polyester Thread.

\textsuperscript{118} A refinement of the circular pant experiments is evident in the Circular Jumpsuit Toile, page 51.
The last of the circular cutting experiments was the ruffle. Although drafted using circles to create its form, the ruffle differs from the earlier examples in that its form does not compose the shape of the garment. Rather, the ruffle inserts itself into an existing shape, altering and expanding that form, or highlighting an element or detail.

The Circular Jumpsuit and Circular T-Shirt (fig.40) are examples of garments cut to combine a combination of archetypal or block elements with a looser circular cut component. In each case the main body of the garment was cut as a circle, according to the logic of the previous experiments and tests. In addition to this, however, a vast number of additional circles were also cut and inserted into the main circular seam as ruffles. The overall effect was one of emphasizing and highlighting the circular form and of drawing attention to its geometry, in contrast to the more structured and archetypal shoulder area.

![Circular Jumpsuit and Circular T-Shirt Toiles, 2016, Viscose Jersey, Polyester Jersey, Cotton Calico and Polyester Thread.](image)

In this way, these final circular toiles (unlike their earlier predecessors) not only loosened the traditional form of the garment through cutting but also purposively drew attention to their construction through highlighting the seam. This notion of highlighting the seam and the garment’s construction, went on to become the major focus on the final development of the project.
CHAPTER FIVE
Sewing: Articulating the seam.
(Practice Part Two: Garments and Runway Performance)

Following on from the exploration of the garment’s relationship to the body through pattern cutting, the work shifted to focus more directly on the seam itself. The two garments that marked this shift were the Half T-Shirt and Half Singlet (fig.41).

![Fig. 41. Half T-Shirt and Half Singlet Samplers, 2016, Silk Satin, Vliesofix and Polyester Thread.](image)

The shapes of these garments, although not based on circular cutting methods, employed similar seamless cutting strategies to those developed through the circle garments experiments. In the Half Singlet, for example, I included no seams - only the sewn (but uncut) bust dart and the cut (but unjoined) binding edges. In place of more familiar seam constructions, however, the garment is instead ‘seamed’ together through dressing and through wearing. Yohji Yamamoto notes similarly that, ‘Clothing is, ultimately, made to be worn. It is complete only at the instant it is donned by a living human being.’¹¹⁹ The garment’s form depends upon its interaction with the wearer’s body. As the name suggests, the singlet was produced only as a half;

¹¹⁹ Yohji Yamamoto. My Dear Bomb. (Ghent: Ludion, 2010), 68.
Fig. 42 *Half Dress, Half Singlet and Underdress*, 2016, Silk Crepe de Chine and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 43 Half Dress, Half Singlet and Underdress, 2016, Silk Crepe de Chine and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
in this case either as the left or the right of what would usually compose a more traditional singlet shape. This is seen more clearly in the later iterations, made up in contrasting blush and ivory tones (fig.42, 43, 44).

While the seamlessness of the half garments reduced seams and allowed for the alternative seaming through wearing, the other important construction technique, that I tested in the Half T-Shirt, exaggerated rather than eliminated traditional seams. This approach, which is demonstrated at the shoulder seam, side seam, and armhole of the garment, can be understood directly in regard to the obscurity that usually masks the seam’s relationship to the body. Unlike traditional seaming techniques which work to conceal the seam inside the garment with minimal seam allowances, this seam was turned outwards and exposed, its scale significantly enlarged. In contrast to the narrow 1cm width favored by industrial production, the seam allowances of the Half T-Shirt were increased to 5 cm and used the full width of a standard grading ruler.

Despite exaggerating the scale of the allowances and exposing them outside of the garment, however, their function and relationship to the body was not clear. In placing the seams on the outside of the garment and increasing their scale, their functional aspect was obscured by their new role as design elements. They no longer read as seams; instead they appeared as large pleats or decorative folds. This decorative appearance was particularly apparent in the case of the Gore Skirt with Exaggerated Seam Allowances (fig.45), which could easily be taken for a pleated skirt. The folds and overlaps of the skirt were, however, not formed using any traditional pleat drafting techniques, but were instead the result of pressing an
Fig. 45 Gore Skirt with Exaggerated Seam Allowances, 2016, Silk Suiting, Silk Crepe de Chine, Vliesofix, Polyester Thread and Metal Press Studs, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 46 Skirt with Exaggerated Seam Allowances, 2016, Silk Satin, Vliesofix and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
increasing number of enlarged seam allowances around the body.

By exaggerating the seam beyond its functional necessity, the excess allowances drew out the seam’s inherent decorative aspects. Thus inverting the supposed opposition of the functional and the decorative, or else marking out a possibility of the two occurring simultaneously. A similar decorative quality became apparent in the Skirt with Exaggerated Seam Allowances (fig.46), with its single vertical seam taking on the appearance of a wrap or flange.

Following on from these pieces, I sampled two more garments that combined this exaggerated seam allowance approach with the earlier pattern cutting experiments. The patterns for the new styles were developed directly from the Circular Apron and Circular Singlet, which were squared up and sectioned off into pieces, so that enlarged seam allowances could be added (fig.47). This addressed the circular seaming issues inherent in these garments, detailed in chapter four, so that the pieces could be converted from unseamed to seamed shapes. Crucially, however, the volume that was initially created by employing a seamless and circular cutting methodology and a loose relationship to the body was retained in the new square, seamed forms. In fact, by multiplying the number of seams in these pieces, the proportions of the garments could be expanded even further and move beyond the limitation of fabric width. The loose, relational characteristics were likewise enhanced (fig.48, 49).

Given that these attempts to draw attention to the seam by exaggerating it had made visible the seam’s decorative properties rather then its semiotic function, I gave
Fig. 48 *Singlet with Exaggerated Seam Allowances*, 2016, Silk Satin, Vliesofix and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 49 *Apron Dress with Exaggerated Seam Allowances*, 2016, Silk Satin, Vliesofix and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
further consideration to how the seam’s relationship to the body may could otherwise be emphasized. As emphasizing the cloth - that which is *cut* - had formed the basis of the seamless experiments, the stitch - that which *joins* - became the focus of the experiments that followed. To this end the *loose forms* and *loose linear* elements, developed through the circle cutting experiments, were put to one side and archetypal garments were used to test the stitch.

Following a thorough investigation of various enlarged or prominent stitch types - including over-locking, overcasting and zigzag, as well as stitch techniques more commonly used in leather work (fig.50), footwear, bag making and upholstery\(^\text{120}\) - I became particularly interested in an insertion stitch technique known as faggoting. Most commonly it is applied as a small decorative detail in women’s wear garments such as blouses and dresses (fig.51). Unlike other decorative stitches (like embroidery stitches) faggoting acts functionally as a means to construct the garment. However, although faggoting joins together the various pieces of the garment, it also keeps them apart.

This division, created by the fagot inserted between the pieces of the garment, opens up a space in the construction that highlights both the processes of making and their effects. As the threads of the stitch trace out this interstitial space, the eye follows them, retracing the movements of the hand that sewed them. The stitches mark out the labour time of the garment’s production and make visible the body of the unseen maker. This labour is then written upon the body of the wearer through the garment,

\(^{120}\) The use of waxed linen thread to faggot seams and areas was a direct outcome of this research as it is a material commonly used in leather work and similar industries.
in the relationships of garment parts to body parts. As the sleeve is separated from the body by the faggot, it is revealed as a construct that articulates the arm through its division as a juncture or interstice.

The process of constructing a garment in this way also disrupts the usual methods of production favored by industry for their ease and economy. Making a garment in this way is both time consuming and labour intensive, requiring hours to do what could otherwise be achieved in a matter of minutes. In the case of these garments, produced by myself, this protracted production time had the unforeseen effect of opening up a greater space for reflection and thought during making. Simply put, sewing a shoulder seam for over an hour leads one to question why sew a shoulder seam at all. In turn this time for thought allowed for new decisions to be made about seam placements and relationships. In the *Shirt with Exaggerated Faggoting* (fig. 52, 53) for example, I transformed the usual under arm seam into an overarm seam to better show off such work, which I had laboured over for so long.

![Shirt with Exaggerated Faggoting](image)

*Fig. 52 Shirt with Exaggerated Faggoting*, 2016, Viscose, Linen Thread, Self Covered Buttons and Polyester Thread.
Fig. 53 *Shirt with Exaggerated Faggoting*, 2016, Viscose, Linen Thread, Self Covered Buttons and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Of course, industry can still find ways to exploit such techniques despite their increased labour demands. The majority of labour-intensive fashion manufacturing, such as embroidery and beading, is produced in countries with minimal industrial labour protections where workers are pushed to produce at the speeds and costs amenable to mass production. Except in cases where it is explicitly drawn to their attention by news like the devastating Rana Plaza Collapse in 2013, most consumers continue to turn a blind eye to these exploitative working conditions. This research is as yet unable to propose any solutions or alternatives which would directly address these issues so inherent to fashion production. At most, it hopes simply to make the labour of construction more visible and to stand in opposition to such exploitative production processes.

Alternately, in order to avoid the problem of exploitative labour while also maintaining lower production costs, some brands will instead create the look of a faggoted seam by using a trim insert in its place (fig.54, 55). Preen, for example,  

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121 Rana Plaza was a eight-story building in Bangladesh that collapsed in 2013 killing 1129 people and wounding approximately 2500 more. The building was largely occupied by garment factories and garment factory workers, despite a residential status and insufficient structural engineering to support them. Ignoring warnings of significant cracking on 23rd of April, that lead other occupants to evacuate, garment workers were ordered into the building on April 24th, which collapsed only hours later.
applied a faggoted trim of this type in their 2014 Spring/Summer Ready-to-Wear Collection. The trim subtly marked out seam lines, such as the shoulder and armhole of a shirt, but did not actually construct the garment as a stitched faggot would have. By applying a decorative trim of this type rather than make visible the obscured labour of production, the trim masks labour by presenting what appears to be an automated alternative. When inspected in detail, these types of trims exhibit a uniformity and consistency foreign to the hand and thoroughly suggestive of an automated machine. It takes a closer inspection again to uncover also the small stitches, produced by a machine operator, that hold the trim in place and that do, in fact, construct the garment.

Following on from the initial Shirt with Exaggerated Faggoting, the technique was then tested in the context of an archetypal jacket form (fig.56). As with the shirt, the intention was to construct the entire garment using only the enlarged hand faggoting technique to connect pieces. As can be seen however, an exception had to be made for the collar, which could not hold its shape in the absence of traditional seaming. Although somewhat disappointing at first, this limitation drew attention to the relationship between the faggoting technique and the loose linear elements developed elsewhere. The lines of faggoting, like the ties and drawstring, lacked the structural firmness of common seaming which tends to produce areas of rigidity. As Arunangshu Mukhopadhyay and Vinay Kumar Midha note, ‘seamed parts of fabric bend comparatively less than unseamed parts.’ The faggoted seams however, tended to shift and sway, allowing pieces to slide in and out of alignment and occasionally allowing for the body to escape also as fingers and shoulder blades protruded outwards.

In place of a strict approach to seaming along archetypal lines - that is, the lines defined by classic garment shapes, such as shoulder and side seams - I loosened up my approach a little and began shifting and inserting extra seams. This shifting is first alluded to in the pocket of the jacket, which is faggoted around its entire perimeter, by way of highlighting the pocket, whose seams are usually simply contained within.

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Fig. 56 Jacket with Exaggerated Faggoting, 2016, Silk Suiting, Linen Thread, Self Covered Buttons, Fusible Interfacing and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
The three significant variations that I sampled following on from the jacket were the Pant with Exaggerated Faggoting (fig.57), the Tank Top with Exaggerated Faggoting (fig.58), and the T-Shirt with Faggoted Trompe l’oeil Singlet (fig.59). Each of these pieces aimed at expanding the insights of faggoting technique by applying it according to a unique seam configuration and logic in each case.

The tank top and the t-shirt, like the original faggoted shirt, followed strictly the logic of faggoting all joins, while the Pant with Exaggerated Faggoting instead lead on from the jacket and applied the technique more judiciously. With only the side seams faggoted, the pant alluded to both the satin stripe of a formal tuxedo pant and the tear-away Adidas Snap Pant. This peculiar conflation of formal wear and tradition with street wear and sex, suggested that an in-between or undecidable quality was being produced by the seam. It was clear in the case of the pant, with its single faggoting location, that of course the seam was the key element of the garment that produced this reading.

For the Tank Top with Exaggerated Faggoting, meanwhile I applied faggoting at all seams but in reduced quantities as compared to the shirt. While maintaining the concept of the archetype through seam placement, and somewhat through silhouette, the tank made a return to the notion of the single piece pattern and the minimal seaming of the former exaggerated seam allowance pieces. The tank was cut as one piece by retaining the shoulder seams as a pushed forward yoke line and by replacing the side seams with a single center back seam. The yoke lines highlighted the juncture of the shoulder and the body, while the centre back seam highlighted the halving of the body so common at such points. Again, as with the pant, this reduced application of the faggoting tended to emphasize these moments, while subtler details like the V-neck or hem length tended to recede.

The T-Shirt with Faggoted Trompe l’oeil Singlet, was quite different again. Whereas the pant and tank both maintained their exaggerated allowances, the allowances in the T-shirt were in fact scaled back to 1cm, a measurement that is more similar to that used in traditional faggoting. This was done in order to emphasize the effect of the trompe l’oeil produced by the seams. As the name suggest, this garment was made in the shape of a t-shirt but was seamed following the lines of a singlet. Given that the
Fig. 57 Pant with Exaggerated Faggoting, 2016, Silk Suiting, Linen Thread, Fusible Interfacing, Metal Slide Fastening, Plastic Zipper and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 58 Tank Top with Exaggerated Faggoting, 2016, Silk Suiting, Linen Thread and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 59 T-Shirt with Faggoted Trompe l’oeil Singlet, 2016, Viscose, Linen Thread and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
straps used in the rest of the collection followed the proportions of draw strings and other such *loose linear* elements, it was important that the seam straps of the trompe l’oeil singlet reflected this. Acting as a singlet sign, rather than a singlet form, the construction of the seams produced the idea of a singlet without simply becoming the image of a singlet.

A similar line of thinking is visible in the *Dress with Faggoted Pieces* (fig.60), where another tromp l’oeil singlet was created by the stitch work in the upper portion of the garment. This dress however, marked a considerable shift in my use of the faggoting technique that expanded its application significantly beyond traditional usages of faggoting. As in previous examples, the stitches acted to join garment pieces and to communicate the idea of the singlet, but this time they also took the place of pattern pieces and of cutting. Comparing the *T-Shirt with Faggoted Trompe l’oeil Singlet* to the *Dress with Faggoted Pieces*, one can see that the stitches of the later garment fulfill a similar role to the sleeve and décolletage pieces of the former.

By replacing the cut with the sew, this technique reversed the usual concept of the seam as a linear element or design line, explored in the initial *Block Based Design Lines Experiments*. Instead of demarcating the body with cuts and lines, these stitched areas traced loose passages of production across the body. As with the faggoted seams they lacked structural rigidity and tended to shift and move much more freely than fabric. The effect was that of allowing the body to show through and to influence their hang and fall. In contrast to this, the pattern pieces cut to sit between the faggoted areas then took on the linear qualities of traditional seams. The narrow strip of fabric, cut to run round the neck and out across the shoulder, took the place of what would otherwise have been a shoulder and neck seam.

The *Skirt with Faggoted Pieces* (fig.61) applied this thinking again but this time without the illusion of the trompe l’oeil or the reduction of pattern pieces to linear elements. Instead, I focused the faggoted area over the hip to take advantage of the loose qualities of the seamed area, allowing for greater movement and fit flexibility. These stitched areas also took the place of the common yoke\(^{123}\) panel line which is

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\(^{123}\) A yoke is any garment panel cut to fit over the shoulders, or between the waist and hip, to which the rest of the garment is attached, that is panelling in the upper portion of the garment.
Fig. 60 Dress with Faggoted Pieces, 2016, Linen Viscose, Silk Crepe de Chine, Linen Thread, Self Covered Button and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 61 Skirt with Faggoted Pieces, 2016, Linen Viscose, Silk Crepe de Chine, Linen Thread, Self Covered Buttons, Plastic Zipper and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
often used to eliminate darts and fit the garment to the body. In this way, I was again able to replace paneling with stitching. Large center front and center back seams were also added, in place of the side seams used in the dress - a reference to the halved form of pattern blocks. As well as a diagonal seaming run from center to side, allowing for greater fullness to be cut into the lower portion of the skirt which did not have the benefit of the loosely stitched hip areas.

In contrast to the both the pattern cutting and construction based garments, the final series of garments were developed around the concept of a seam print. This approach aimed to eliminate both the cut and the sew from the production of the seam, so that it would be emptied of physical function and allowed only to function aesthetically, decoratively or communicatively. Initially I had thought to create some sort of random seam repeat pattern that could be used to recut the previous seamless pieces with the illusion of paneling. To begin I made some attempts to create such a print digitally (fig.62, 63), however representing the seam as a graphic image in this way tended to preference the stitch, often reducing the seam allowance to nothing more than sets of parallel lines.

Eventually, it became evident that the best way to capture the subtlety of the seam - that which is unseen - was photographically and so I produced a series of physical samples using random seam placements. Although these pieces marked a significant advance in representing the seam, the random placement was still problematic. The seam placements of previous garments had been chosen according to either necessity or the logic of archetypes. By contrast, the random seam placements appeared
meaningless. It was not until I made the decision to continue to follow the archetypal seam placements of the existing garments that things began to progress.

![Fig. 64 Layplan for Seam Print, 2017, pencil and paper.](image)

Developed from the previous tank, t-shirt, and pant patterns, I planned seam placements to match to the minimal seaming of these pieces (fig.64). The resulting *Seam Print T-Shirt* (fig.65, 66, 67) and *Seam Print Shift Dress* (fig.68) were planned so that printed seams would only occur at the raglan/shoulder positions and centre lines, to match the minimum requirements of seaming such garments. The *Seam Print Pant* (fig.69), meanwhile, reflected the logic of its antecedent the *Pant with Exaggerated Faggoting*, and was designed for a simple printed seam placement vertically through each leg, reminiscent perhaps of a classic pant pleat. What was most interesting about these garments was their subtle reference to the earlier *Half Dress* and *Half Singlet*. For example, in the case of the *Seam Print Shift Dress*, the printed seam placements were derived from the earlier *Tank Top with Exaggerated Faggoting*. (An additional center front seam was also added, reflected the center back seam, to provide interest in the longer garment.) Unlike the sewn seams of the tank, however, the printed seams required that pattern pieces be merged together to form seamless areas onto which the print could be applied. This merging resulted in a flattening out of the garment in the absence of shaping that would otherwise be supplied by seaming. A flattening into two halves: front and back.
The two halves of the *Seam Print Shift Dress*, then were the only parts of the garment that received any form of sewn seaming. Because the garments are seamed only at the side and shoulders, the sewn seams go almost unnoticed in contrast to the impact of the print. This final series of printed pieces, then came full circle, again obscuring the seam in preference of other design details.

![Fig. 65 Photograph for Seam Print, 2017, digital photograph, photographed by Matthew Stanton, 2017.](image)

![Fig. 66 Cutting the Seam Print T-Shirt, 2017, Silk Twill.](image)
Fig. 67 *Seam Print T-Shirt*, 2016, Silk Twill and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 68 Seam Print Shift Dress, 2016, Silk Twill and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 69 Seam Print Pant, 2016, Silk Twill, Non-Fusible Interfacing, Plastic Zipper, Metal Slide Fastening and Polyester Thread, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
The final collection of garments (detailed throughout this chapter) were shown at two alternative fashion presentations, both of which, made use of lived domestic spaces and intimate formats. The first of these was the live, Seam, Seam Runway Performance (fig.71-84), which was then followed by an open invitation to attend the Seam, Seam Fitting Sessions (fig.87-89). Both aspects utilized spaces within my own home and apartment block; Tunbridge Manor, East Melbourne.

The Seam, Seam Runway Performance was presented in the first floor corridor of the building, which was chosen for its visual similarity to a traditional runway or catwalk. The long, narrow space was lit with stage lighting and professional sound equipment was installed, to dress it up for the event and to illuminate the garments. Other than this little was done to interfere with the corridor’s daily function. Running between the six apartments of the first floor, the corridor filled a transitional, or interstitial, role for the tenants allowing access between their private spaces of dwelling, as well as between the apartments and the public world outside. Being in-between in this way - neither public nor private - but a space that connects the two, the corridor itself can be understood as a transitional zone, or spatial seam.

During the performance, the models emphasized these qualities by pacing up and down the corridor’s length (as in a traditional runway) and by entering and exiting through the various apartment doors (fig.75). Their paths traced the linear length of the seam from end to end and the passage of the stitch running back and forth across it. By entering and exiting the apartments, the models also traced a loose narrative of comings and goings referring back to the everyday use of the corridor and marking the transition between spaces as they entered private apartments, into which the audience could not follow. This transitional quality, between the public and the private, was perhaps no more apparent than when the two models wearing the Half Dress and Half Singlet pieces, met in the corridor to exchange garments, performing the intimate act of dressing, or seaming through wearing, before the audience (fig.81).

A parallel could perhaps be drawn between this performance and the 2013 presentation of Louis Vuitton’s Fall/Winter Ready-to-Wear Collection, by Kate Moss.
Fig. 70 *Seam, Seam Collection*, 2017, Various Fabrications, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Fig. 71, 72 (top to bottom) Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Bianca Boyd, Milda Vidugiryte, Eleanor Stewart and Cici Chen, shoes by Preston Zly, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.
Fig. 73, 74 (top to bottom) Remie Cibis, Seam, Seam Runway Performance. garments modeled by Danielle Abery, shoes by Preston Zly, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.
Fig. 75 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Eleanor Stewart, shoes by Preston Zly, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, still from video footage by Aly Peel, 2017.

Fig. 76 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Ebony Tiffin, shoes by Preston Zly, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.
Fig. 77, 78 (top to bottom) Remie Cibis, Seam, Seam Runway Performance, garments modeled by Cici Chen, shoes by Preston Zly, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.
Fig. 79, 80 (top to bottom) Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Milda Vidugiryte and Cici Chen, shoes by Preston Zly, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.
Fig. 81 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Danielle Abery and Ebony Tiffin, shoes by Preston Zly, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, still from video footage by Aly Peel, 2017.

Fig. 82 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Danielle Abery and Ebony Tiffin, shoes by Preston Zly, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.
Fig. 83, 84 (top to bottom) Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Runway Performance*, garments modeled by Eleanor Stewart, shoes by Preston Zly, hair and make-up by Xeneb Allen, lighting by Evan Drill, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Kristin Wursthorn, 2017.
and Marc Jacobs (fig.85). Throughout the Vuitton runway, models entered and exited the scene through hotel doors, creating what Jacobs’ described as the ‘intimacy, the mystery of what's going on behind the door.’ However unlike the Seam, Seam Runway Performance, the Vuitton Runway did not make use of a real lived space, but was instead a theater set constructed at the Louvre, Paris, to replicate the fantastic space of the hotel through which one escapes the everyday, as by holiday. The Seam, Seam Runway Performance, then could perhaps be better compared to Rare Candy’s I have Become a Sign to Many presentation of 2013 (fig.86), in which models walked through the Carlton Gardens without further intervention than a soundtrack played on an old portable stereo.

The use of domestic and everyday spaces can also be linked to the earlier garment based experiments resulting in the Circular Slipper and Circular Apron. In contrast to common fashion communications that privilege the image or the text, by utilizing lived, everyday spaces, a softer, more experiential relationship between the body and the garment can be formed.

Finally, the Seam, Seam Fitting Sessions explored this idea again by inviting the public to enter the private space of my own apartment. Those interested were asked to return, following the runway, so that they could experience the clothes more closely.

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Fig. 87, 88 (top to bottom) Remie Cibis, Seam, Seam Fitting Sessions, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Christian Capurro, 2017.
Upon entering the apartment, guests were guided to the bedroom, where I explained that they would be allowed time to experience the clothes by themselves. Choosing from the selection of garments hanging in the wardrobe and laid out about the room, visitors were encouraged to try pieces on and experiment with styling the garments in their own way (fig. 89). As opposed to a runway or boutique, the fittings aimed to allow the visitor a more intimate and personal space in which to experience the garments, more akin to the everyday act of dressing each morning.

Fig. 89 Remie Cibis, *Seam, Seam Fitting Sessions*, featuring Kel Glaister, 2017, Tunbridge Manor: East Melbourne, photographed by Yvette King, 2017.
The Seam: From/Of Construction to Deconstruction

CONCLUSION

The seam is the principal construction technique employed by the contemporary fashion industry. It produces both garments and in turn the semiotic, or fashioned body. The implications of this semiotic relationship - between clothes and bodies - however, are largely obscured by fashion which secrets the seam away inside the garment. As a result, fashion garments are often dismissed as under-coded semiotic systems unworthy of significant attention or analysis. Moreover, such oversight worryingly allows for many of the alienating structures that support the fashion system - and garment production in particular - to persist unquestioned, outside of theoretical discussion and debate.

In contrast, a growing field of fashion theory has begun to show how the garment itself can indeed be understood as meaningful. By drawing upon more established theoretical fields such as sociology, art history and anthropology, theorists such as Entwistle, Hollander and Gilligan, have demonstrated how fashion garments do in fact produce meaning and construct our understanding of the body. Most semiotic analysis of fashion, however, still tends to suggest that although some aspects of fashion - such as fashion writing or the fashion image - can produce meaning, that actual garments are too under-coded to be meaningful in and of themselves. This limited semiological conception of garments, as under-coded or impoverished texts, can largely be attributed to a common, although questionable, interpretation of Barthes’ major semiotic analysis of fashion; The Fashion System. Given that Barthes focuses most of his attention in The Fashion System upon the written-garment, dismissing any consideration of the real-garment, many readers have inferred that Barthes’ intention was to also dismiss the real-garment’s capacity to signify or to produce complex meaning.

Such an interpretation, however, soon appears untenable when The Fashion System is considered in relation to Saussure’s foundational semiotic analysis; the Course in General Linguistics. Here Saussure proposes that meaning is produced by cultures through the arbitrary and differential association of signifiers and signifieds. As a linguist Saussure, of course, takes the example of language to show how meaning is
constructed through the association of signifieds such as thought-concepts, with signifiers such as sound-images, but he never restricts the production of meaning to language alone. Saussure instead makes frequent and decisive reference to the functioning of semiotic systems within other fields of cultural practice. In the case of fashion therefore the seam can be understood similarly to language; as a productive interstice which constructs meaning through the association of garments and bodies.

If then we are to understand why this semiotic function of the seam, and the meaning of garments, has been overlooked, the seam must not only be understood in terms of construction but also in terms of deconstruction; as fashion’s blind spot. Expanding upon the work of Saussure, Derrida describes how blind spots, such as the seam, are formed by cultural practices and arise simultaneously along with meaning. Such blind spots purposely cover over, or obscure, the productive aspect of meaning, so as to give to it the appearance of naturalness and to fix certain hierarchies of privilege. In the case of fashion, for example, this may be the privileging of luxury, spectacle and innovation, over practicality, modesty and endurance. Additionally, Derrida shows that such blind spots can also be understood as undecidable terms capable of guiding close readings of texts and practices, which make visible the obscured production of meaning and disrupt established hierarchies. The seam, as both the cut and the sew, or the join and the fissure, is of course such an undecidable as it both produces the signifying garment, as well being as the site at which it is most likely to come undone.

Drawing on this understanding of seaming - in terms of both construction and deconstruction - it is then possible to return again to The Fashion System and to reconsider it through close reading. By focusing attention on the few passages of the text were Barthes does in fact discuss the real-garment, or the seam, in conjunction with his earlier text Mythologies, it soon becomes apparent that Barthes does not see the written-garment as the only significant aspect of fashion. In fact, Barthes explicitly notes that the ‘every object is also a sign,’¹²⁵ and that once a garment has been fabricated that it also becomes a meaningful system of communication. Furthermore, in Mythologies, Barthes readily applies semiotic analysis to objects other than texts, such as soap-powder, cars and margarine. Mythologies also clearly details how secondary or connotative systems; such as the written-garment, function

by imposing themselves on top of pre-existing denotative systems; such as the real-garment, draining and obscuring their meaning into order to produce their own. In this way it becomes clear that what The Fashion System is in fact proposing, is not that that real-garment is meaningless, but rather that it’s meaning is intentionally concealed by the written-garment. In order to privilege ideas such as seamlessness the written-garment, and fashion more generally, must obscure the production of meaning, or in the case of fashion, the labour of production and of seaming.

Given then, the garment itself can be considered as both a constructive semiotic system and, in turn, a site of deconstruction - that uncovers the labour of production - it is crucial to address the garment directly in terms of fashion practice and the production of clothes. As such, a series of garments were produced by way of the seam and according to the double gesture of deconstruction. Firstly, through a series of pattern cutting experiments that sought to identify and invert the hegemonic relationship between the garment and the body. Then secondly, as a marking of an interval between the body and the garment, explored through seaming and construction techniques, such as exposing, exaggerating, multiplying, highlighting, reducing, removing, eliminating, and depicting.

These garments, like the theoretical research, articulated through their form that it is the very fact that fashion is constructed, and the fact of those who construct it, that makes the work of fashion so meaningful. And that it is only through construction - through fashion practice, through reconsidering how fashion is produced and what that means, through making new garments, through finding new ways of communicating, showing and experiencing clothes - that fashion can invert these repressive structures and articulate itself in new ways.

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