

# FASHION PROJECTS

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ON FASHION CURATION



INTERVIEWS WITH

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KAAT DEBO	ALEXANDRA PALMER
MARIA LUISA FRISA	SARAH SCATURRO
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# LONDON, AFTER A FASHION CURATOR

*An Interview With Alistair O'Neill*

by Alexis Romano

As a student, Alistair O'Neill worked at the Hardy Amies fashion shows on Savile Row. He recalled how "Sir Hardy would often stop the fashion show halfway through from the front row to show the decorative detail of a hem to a longstanding client sitting next to him. We had to serve champagne in whiskey tumblers (he disliked flutes) and make sure the clients had pens to mark their show program." The meaning behind small details such as this informs O'Neill's study of history through fashion, as it relates to the objects and images that surround us, and the way he communicates this as a writer, educator,

and curator. You will know him as the author of *London: After a Fashion* (2007); his work is also peppered throughout bibliographies of fashion and visual culture studies and dress history. Beyond his writing, O'Neill is a key figure in London's curation scene. His curation work centers mainly around his fashion-focused installations for Somerset House Trust's dynamic contemporary exhibitions program, which include "SHOWstudio: Fashion Revolution" (2009), "Valentino: Master of Couture" (2012), "Isabella Blow: Fashion Galore!" (2013), and "Guy Bourdin: Image Maker" (2014). In parallel, he directs

and teaches in the Fashion History and Theory pathway of BA Fashion Communication at Central Saint Martins. O'Neill explained how he brings his students into his curatorial projects when possible, including the annual MA Fashion exhibition, held in April after the catwalk collections are shown in February as part of London Fashion Week. "This is a really useful opportunity to demonstrate how a curated exhibition can bring a different level of meaning to the creative fashion collections the students produce." Collaboration and the merger of practice and theory are some of the elements that underpin O'Neill's thought-provoking work, from early exhibition projects such as "Wolf Suschitzky: Charing Cross Road in the 1930s" (2004) to more recent projects, a retrospective of the corset maker Mr Pearl for Somerset House, and a survey of contemporary London fashion for the new Design Museum.

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Valentino: Master of Couture © Somerset House

**Fashion Projects:** Fashion curation has a special place in London's academic and creative community, and the MA in Fashion Curation you helped create at London College of Fashion in 2004 played a role in shaping this atmosphere. Could you discuss its beginnings?

Alistair O'Neill: The graduate program was started by Christopher Breward, who joined London College of Fashion a little after I did at the end of the 1990s; his appointment was to develop a research culture at the college and this included the development of graduate and postgraduate courses. The Fashion Curation program grew out of the research interests of the staff who were joining the new research department and this included Judith Clark, Amy de la Haye, Lucy Orta, Simon Thorogood, and Philip Delamore. I think it also was born out of some of the small exhibitions we all curated for Chris [Breward] in the Fashion Space Gallery that made use of the archive collections that were coming into the college library's special collections at that time. I remember a wonderful exhibition on tailoring guides where we worked with a former Savile Row coat maker, Francis Redican, who had worked with Tommy Nutter in the 1970s, and tailoring tutor Alan Cannon Jones, to work with tailoring students to make a jacket from tailoring guides drawn from the 1850s to the 1950s. Each jacket was exhibited alongside the paper patterns, the tailoring guide and a representation of an ideal male body for the year the guide was published. These exhibitions were modest in scale (the college gallery is only around ten square meters), but they set in motion the idea that you could use exhibitions to present the thinking of researchers in relation to archive materials in a way that could engage both students and staff.

**FP:** Several years later you edited the curation issue of *Fashion Theory* (2008). Can you speak to the issues in the field at that time that influenced how you planned the issue?

**AO:** The special issue grew out of wanting to mark the new course and to draw con-

nections to some of the curators and projects that I identified with at the time. It was a manifesto of sorts, but it is important to point out that I was not alone in this. The issue was actually conceived as a double issue by Valerie Steele, who edited the special issue that preceded it with Alexandra Palmer, which was titled "Exhibitionism." Interest in the exhibition review as a form of critique is certainly shared by both issues, but I think the main point of difference between them is that the first issue is largely concerned with a museological definition of the temporary fashion exhibition, while the second is about raising this alongside alternative modes of exhibition, and the notion of a curatorial position not bound by the museum.

I wanted to commission Maria Luisa Frisa as I had long been inspired by the fashion exhibitions she had staged in Florence at the Stazione Leopoldo as part of the Pitti trade fairs. She was the first curator to mark the revival of interest in the 1980s, and her sensitivity to contemporary fashion taste as the indicator for her choice of exhibitions, which were staged in close dialogue with the business concerns of the industry, was a fantastic thing to witness and I felt deserved acknowledgement. In a similar vein, I had great respect for Val Williams and the work that she had undertaken as a photo historian. Her British Council touring exhibition "Look At Me: Fashion and Photography in Britain 1960-1997" was an important project in defining that fashion exhibitions didn't need to include dress on display to make meaningful points about the nature and role of representation in the production and consumption of fashion. Leading on from this, the interview between Penny Martin (then editor at SHOWstudio) and Alice Beard was a way of making the digital concerns of SHOWstudio connect with a fashion historian working on a history of Nova magazine.

Alice had recently curated a small display in the Women's Library about the role of Nova's readership, and this chimed with Penny's work in negotiating an audience for the creative projects she was commissioning online. Again, these examples were small in scale,





Isabella Blow: Fashion Galore! © Somerset House

but in being written up and brought together they offered strands for a new kind of inquiry. The issue also included new voices who had emerged out of the course, such as NJ Stevenson and Louise Clarke, but also established voices in fashion studies who we identified as essential to the definition of fashion research we were interested in pursuing, such as Elizabeth Wilson and Caroline Evans.

**FP:** What was your first curation experience?

**AO:** My first exhibition project was while I was studying at the RCA on the History of Design course twinned with the Victoria and Albert Museum. Claire Catterall was commissioned by Christopher Fraying, then the Rector of the RCA, to curate an exhibition showcasing the history of the college and its contribution to international design. I assisted Claire in mounting "Design of the Times: One Hundred Years of the Royal College of Art," which I remember was one of the first exhibitions that Graphic Thought Facility designed; and this led to working with her on a project which came to define the Cool Britannia moment in design terms, "powerhouse::uk." To think of it now makes

me smile: it was an inflatable building by the architect Nigel Coates in Horse Guards Parade on the Mall showcasing the products and ideas of Britain's creative industries. I had the chance to curate the fashion section, which involved finding content that could be staged inside a series of open globetrotter suitcases that travelled around a baggage reclaim conveyor belt. We had Hussein Chalayan, Julien Macdonald, Tristan Webber, Vexed Generation, Dai Rees, and many others.

**FP:** Sounds brilliant! Your History of Design training comes through in your poignant material and visually focused analyses. I've told you how much I enjoy listening to you speak, how you often draw your listener in with a simple object (Valentino's silk rose and YSL's personal collections spring to mind) and open up to a narrative connecting many people, objects, and ideas. How has your education and professional experiences informed your process as a writer, researcher, and curator?

**AO:** I have always valued the idea of not being hierarchical about sources. One of the first things we teach our students is that fashion history and theory is investigated in

the course through the study of objects, images, and texts; this is important as it upends that traditional model that defines the work of the historian valuing the primacy of surviving texts over extant images and objects. I suppose in my own career I started with images, as I trained in Fine Art first, before moving to an object-orientated definition of learning on my Masters where we learnt the history of design in the Modern period by

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engaging with museum objects at the V&A. My use of texts is informed by my use of archives and in thinking around the nature of the archive as a repository that produces a particular kind of history from it. I have always respected the definitions of history, but I also appreciate that it is a malleable thing, so my work as a historian, whether in writing or curating, has always sought to offer an engaging way into a terrain, often through a less obvious pathway or line of inquiry.

**FP:** Your exhibition, "Isabella Blow: Fashion Galore!" (2013) located a personal experience of fashion in a wider expanse, of metropolitan and national fashion cultures. Can you discuss how that project shaped up?

**AO:** The project first came to me through my colleague Professor Louise Wilson, who had helped Daphne Guinness establish bursaries to students on the MA Fashion course in memory of her friend, Isabella Blow. Guinness had recently purchased Blow's wardrobe to stop it from being split up at auction and she wanted to use it as a vehicle to [draw attention to] the Isabella Blow Foundation, established to raised awareness about mental health issues in the fashion industry. She had first thought that it could be something that

we could stage in our college gallery, but it soon became evident that it could be something much bigger, so we made the decision to introduce the project to Somerset House as a collaboration with Central Saint Martins. The exhibition was based on the principle of showing one woman's wardrobe, but because it was owned by Blow, it was very easy to raise complexity out of it, as she invested her clothes and the way she wore them with such a degree of elaboration underscored by a rich frame of reference. We were lucky enough to borrow the Noble & Webster silhouette sculpture of Blow from the National Portrait Gallery and this led to the conveyance of her silhouette through the lenses of art history and fashion history through a series of curated room displays. We were able to loan from Alexander McQueen Ltd and were greatly helped by Philip Treacy, who loaned and personally mounted many of the key hat designs that Blow wore in her lifetime. Steven Meisel also agreed to a small edition of his 1996 shoot for British Vogue, styled by Blow, to be made into exhibition prints and Nick Knight took on the role of shooting the catalogue photographs, which were styled by Blow's longtime friend, Amanda Harlech. I had the opportunity of working with the set designer Shona Heath on the exhibition design, complemented by the architects Carmody Groarke. The exhibition had resonance for many who visited because it remained true to the convictions of the woman it represented, so it was therefore analogous to life writing in some sense. It was a strange experience taking friends and colleagues who knew Blow around the exhibition and I wasn't prepared for tears to sometimes being the response to the curated display. But I am proud of what we achieved and it was an honor to work with such an impressive group of collaborators. I also think Caroline Evans's catalogue essay is an incredible piece of writing about the power of wearing clothes.

**FP:** I see your exhibitions as very much "alive" and pertinent—in the sense that they connect to the lives of viewers as well as speak to your own research and collaborative process. Do you have a favorite project?

AO: One of my favorite projects was an exhibition I curated in 2004 as part of the research project Fashion and Modernity, which was led by Caroline Evans and Chris Breward. I got the opportunity to reassess a body of photographs of the Charing Cross Road in London taken in the mid-1930s by émigré photographer Wolfgang Suschitsky. I had a copy of a small volume about them that Raphael Samuel has written a short essay for and I wanted to find out if there was more to learn about them. I met with Suschitsky, who was over 90 at this point, and he very graciously allowed me to go thorough the surviving negatives to see what else might be there.

It turned out that there were a lot of unpublished images, many of them revealing life on the road [strongly associated with its book-sellers] to be much more than selling books. One was a photograph of the men's outfitters Burton at the top of the road, another was of the newly built St. Martins School of Art building; the next a stall selling nylon stockings. It opened up a world of fashion that had hitherto been left at the margins of the account. Working with the photographer and hand printer Chris Clunn, we created a new set of prints that presented an alternate view of Suschitsky's work and we hung them in a beautiful gallery just off the Charing Cross Road, the Elms Lester Painting Rooms. I still worked at London College of Fashion at that point, but it paved the way for me move to Central Saint Martins a few years later, to work in the building on the Charing Cross Road.

FP: Can you give us a sneak peek into your current photography and fashion publication?

AO: I'm currently writing on Irving Penn's photographs of French couture shown at the Costume Institute's 1973 exhibition, "The 10s, the 20s, the 30s: Inventive Clothes 1909-1939," curated by Diana Vreeland. The photographs were published after the exhibition ended, as Penn decided to do the project after visiting the exhibition and being struck by what the exhibition was able to raise about

the feeling of the early twentieth century. The photographs are therefore a kind of testimony about nostalgia; at the same time, Penn was reappraising his own work by reprinting using the platinum printing process and this lends the idea of looking back through the medium of photographs an interesting proposition to investigate. I have also been through the exhibition files at the Metropolitan Museum archive and there are fascinating re-

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corded details about how Vreeland wanted to capture the period, using sights and sounds very far from the precise and calibrated nature of Penn's black and white studies, which now define that exhibition project. For many, the body of work represents a high point in fashion exhibition catalogue photography—Solve Sundsbo's images for the first Savage Beauty catalogue is an homage of sorts—and this is also worth unpacking.

FP: Can you reflect a bit on the field today? What does it mean to push the lines of experimentation?

AO: The field today is far greater than the one we described in Fashion Theory in 2008. Fashion exhibitions now occupy a central place in temporary exhibition programming in international museums and galleries, and interest in fashion as a discipline of design and an area of material culture shows little sign of abating. What was once regarded as a specialist area of inquiry is now seen as populist and center stage. But the appetite for large-scale exhibitions and the associated costs is something I remain uneasy about, as

it is not sustainable for all. We are already seeing a situation where smaller institutions are simply unable to compete with the offer of the blockbuster, and there is now evidence of some institutions directing funds away from the maintaining of collections to pay for the cost of a temporary exhibitions program.

Within this regime, experimentation is often given small consideration as the need to make a success of the project in terms of revenue, reviews, and visitor figures often dampens the need for it to be at an exhibition's core. But it is still possible. I would cite Kaat Debo's excellent ongoing program of exhibitions at ModeMuseum in Antwerp, including the beautiful and thought-provoking show "Game Changers: Reinventing the 20th Century Silhouette." And I was recently impressed by "Temporary Fashion Museum" at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam, developed by museum director Guus Beumer.

objects is hugely time-consuming. The time to think and digest is very, very precious and extremely fragmented. It is very frustrating. Doing anything—putting on an exhibition, writing an article, even reviewing a review—takes time. Carving out the time is the problem.

FP: What advice would you give someone interested in entering the field of fashion curation?

AP: There isn't a field of fashion curation; there is a field of museums. Curation is not necessarily the best skillset to learn. You need to understand about archives, you need to understand about objects, you need to understand about museum collections management, pest management—all sorts of things that are not remotely sexy. It is very different from this idea of fashion curation—since putting on fashion exhibitions is actually a very small part of my job. You cannot just do that without looking after the collection, worrying about conservation, dealing with donors, and all the things you have to do to manage a collection. Applying your academic rigor to fashion is no different than applying it to furniture history, advertising, industrial design or anything else. The critical skills for fashion are the same critical skills for other fields.

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