

Performative Fashion Research: Adele Varcoe

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A bright yellow jumpsuit studded with black polka dots, was what our special guest and speaker, Adele Varcoe, was wearing during the first AIRs meetup on September 13, 2017. This is, however, just one example of Varcoe's quite extensive wardrobe of jumpsuits, which she has been wearing for the past years as part of her ongoing performative practice of researching fashion. Varcoe started wearing the jumpsuits in 2011 to investigate the impact of clothing on our identities. In an interview in 2014 with Megan Wray Schertler Varcoe points out how wearing jumpsuits after three years no longer feels as a performance, by claiming that it has changed her identity. Her performative practice has led to reflecting on how certain garments do not only influence the way we feel, but also the ways in which others perceive us. Varcoe does not stop at the 'simple performance' of wearing just onesies for almost seven years, but exploits the perceptions and reactions of others to her jumpsuit-wardrobe, to further enquire the socio-cultural implications of fashion. In addition, she translates her findings into participatory performances to explore the behavioral effects of fashion in more depth. These practices, during which Varcoe takes on several roles, are the basis of her performative research on (wearing) fashion and its social impact. Varcoe developed this research-through-performance during her recently finished PhD research at RMIT University's School of Fashion & Textiles. We can position her research at the intersection of artistic staged theatrical performances and the embodied practice of 'doing' identity – constructing specific concepts of the self – in daily life. Moreover, Varcoe's fashion practices and identity performances can be viewed as a form of embodied research. As argued elsewhere (Bruggeman 2018), an embodied approach to fashion is an important contribution to contemporary academic fashion discourse. As many practitioners who contribute to a new critical fashion discourse point out, it is increasingly urgent to redefine our relationship to fashion. In doing so, an embodied approach needs to be taken into account, which is also at the heart of the ArtEZ Fashion Professorship.

Adele Varcoe's embodied fashion practices

Adele Varcoe first visited ArtEZ University of the Arts in the Spring of 2014 for academic reasons.¹ She soon returned to ArtEZ in September 2014 to prepare a series of performances with students of the MA programs in Fashion Strategy, Fashion Design, and the BA Dance – an important interdisciplinary collaboration – students for the exhibition *The Future of Fashion is Now*, which took place from October 2014 to January 2015 in Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam. Her project was called *Feelings of Undress*; it explored the socio-cultural effects of fashion, thereby primarily enquiring how social interaction shapes our perception of dress and undress. In cooperation with the students, she explored questions like: How do the people we interact with affect the way we feel in what we wear? How do they behave? What do they say? What do we see?

The project is exemplary for Varcoe's fashion practice: through her embodied practices, she explores fashion as an action, a behavior or a belief that is affected within and partly created by a socio-cultural context. This illustrates how she moves in between two levels of performance: first performance as an on-stage intentional theatrical practice and second performing identity as an everyday embodied practice. Especially Judith Butler's (1990) work on performative identity dynamics and Erving Goffman's (1959) view on the enactment of certain social roles, provide a useful theoretical framework for comprehending the way in which clothing allows to perform identity. This understanding of identity performance is important to fashion studies since it allows embodiment and the clothed body's performative expressions to be taken into account. The bodily and material dimension is crucial since fashion is often understood as an immaterial system of signification (Barthes 1967). Fashion is often conceived of as invisible and immaterial matter. In her seminal publication *Fashion-ology* (2005), Yuniya Kawamura stated that *clothing* is a tangible material product whereas *fashion* is a symbolic cultural product. The distinction between fashion and clothing serves a conceptual and theoretical purpose but, in practice, there is a continuous interplay between immaterial values, signs and meanings that circulate in the fashion system and the material objects of clothing. In this sense, fashion is always inextricably interconnected to clothing. Matter and meaning are always entwined in fashion (Bruggeman 2014).

¹ She consulted professor José Teunissen concerning her PhD research.

To investigate this fashion system and its many intricate social codes and relationships, Varcoe has developed her embodied research practice by employing many different methods of artistic and performative research. During the AIRs meetup, she demonstrated and elaborated on her performative methods, such as selfing, drawing, scoring and participatory making.

Selfing, and performing identity

Varcoe's ongoing investigation of performing identity – expressing and constructing specific concepts of the self – through the immaterial codes and meanings of fashion as well as through the embodied practice of wearing clothing is mostly undertaken by using *selfing*. This is the method in which she performs 'personally'. This performance mostly consists of doing auto-ethnographic research while wearing nothing but jumpsuits and doing participatory observation by recording and noting the reactions that these embodied performances evoke in different social contexts, which helps to gain insight into the multiple dimensions of performing identity through fashion.

To better understand how Varcoe (per)forms identity, the work of Erving Goffman is particularly helpful. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman – who uses the perspective of theatrical performance for analyzing social life and identity – argues that the roles we play in the public sphere become part of who we are. According to him, individuals enact performances in society, playing roles in relation to social audiences, and usually are what they appear to be, as they are able to manage their appearances (1959: 71). Goffman views identity as something that is *done*. It is not an essential substance that precedes performance but is produced *through* performance. These ideas had a great impact on many fashion scholars (e.g., Entwistle 2000, Svendsen 2006, Teunissen 2009, and Smelik 2011). Identity is increasingly understood as a flexible, fluid or 'liquid' dimension that can be discursively shaped through fashion's material tools (Bruggeman 2014: 47). Varcoe shows how the embodied practices of wearing clothes help to performatively constitute and play with the fluidity of identity. By revealing the performative nature of identity, she illustrates what we do in our daily life: when dressing, we are also repetitively *doing* identity.

This is in line with the performances of other fashion practitioners and performance artists who use the medium of clothing to enact different concepts of

identity. It is since the 1980s that performance artists increasingly explored the dressed body in relation to commodification (Jones 2000). Especially in postmodernist performances, the boundaries between performance art, fashion and commodity culture are increasingly blurred. For instance, the Dutch journalist Aynouk Tan also engages in performative practices within the context of performance art's increased engagement with postmodern commodity culture, in which fashion and clothing offers the (im)material tools for embodied identity explorations. As argued before, Tan also reveals the performative nature of identity (Bruggeman 2014).

In a similar vein, Varcoe exposes the discursive dimension of this identity construction within the power structures of the fashion system. As part of her research, she organized a clothes swap, where for one month another person wore nothing but her jumpsuits. As she explains, she was looking for other people to swap wardrobes with, because she wanted to

feel someone else's experience now and for someone else to experience the jumpsuit, and document that. I'm interested in exploring just wearing someone else's wardrobe, too. It's a play on identity. [...] Part of me now just wants to see what happens if other people select things for me. I think that is part of the wardrobe swap, too, like I'm not actively choosing these things for me. I guess fashion today does that already in a way, like the fabric for the jumpsuits are something I choose and it's dictated by what is available in the store. (Varcoe, in: Wray Schertler 2014)

Varcoe reflects on how this switch in wardrobes was again an experiment with identity: what would her identity look like if someone else chooses for her? Interestingly, this 'freedom of choice' that we identify with fashion is something Varcoe touches upon as well. She explains that even if she buys the fabrics for her jumpsuits, the prints and colors of these fabrics have been decided for her: they are dictated by what is supposedly 'in fashion'. This relates to the paradoxical 'freedom' of forming identity through fashion, as theorized by Zygmunt Bauman (2000). Even when constructing a wardrobe that is outside of the fashion system, namely consisting of self-made varieties of one and the same garment (the jumpsuit), the influence of trend logic – and the discursive power of fashion as well as the structuring principles of the capitalist market – is strongly present. In this sense, Varcoe's explorations help

to understand how the fashion system operates, and how it influences consumers' buying behavior and identity performances. Moreover, her performances highlight how individuals are able to articulate their identities and to 'fashion' the self (Entwistle 2000) – give meaning to the self – within the power structures of capitalism. This again highlights the importance of performatively playing with and unveiling the ways in which the fashion system discursively shapes identity.

Drawing and claymations: exposing social structures

In addition to performing identity through *selfing*, Varcoe employs a practice-based method that she calls *drawing*. In this role, she translates and visualizes the social interactions that occur during *selfing*: the reactions that wearing her jumpsuits evoke. Although drawing is not the only medium that she employs, her drawings do form the basis of many of the later visualizations. She thus employs several artistic and creative practice-based research methodologies to better understand and communicate her findings into scenarios. Several of the scenarios, for instance, are also translated into 'claymations', where she narrates encounters and conversations, visualized in stop-motion clips of clay figures.² The videos play with the social impact of fashion, and how we often use fashion and appearance to quickly form an often stereotypical image of our peers. The reactions Varcoe shows us in the videos range from friendly and innocent to crude and sexist. In *JUMPSUIT GIRL episodes 1-12, 2016*,³ the situations range from her mockingly being called a little piglet by a yoga teacher, while dressed in a hot pink jumpsuit, to a couple of very artsy people considering her to be part of an exhibition, while being dressed in the same jumpsuit. She shows us a random guy at a party, blatantly asking her if they would go on a dinner date, she would ever wear a dress: '...it would be so nice to see you in something more feminine, and sexy.' Another man even obscenely licks his lips when spotting her when dressed in a jumpsuit, inviting her for a sexual encounter. Varcoe's visualizations thus shed light on how fashion constructs gender identity as well as how fashioned appearances are related to sexism in contemporary society. In line with fashion practitioners who employ performance as their medium, Varcoe creatively exposes the normative preconceptions concerning, for instance, the clothes we ought

² Adele Varcoe, claymations: <https://www.adelevarcoe.com/copy-of-performance> . See also: <https://vimeo.com/adelevarcoe>.

³ Jumpsuit Girl (2016): <https://vimeo.com/185431916> .

to wear when performing a certain role, as well as the fixed meanings and codes related to femininity, which are prevalent in the fashion system and in contemporary society.

Fashion has a great impact on the performative communication and on the formation of codified identities, which come-into-being within a fashion as a socio-cultural system. This relates to Roland Barthes' view on how fashion functions as a system of signification (1967), shaping identities and bodies as signifying surfaces. The roles of *selfing* and *drawing* culminate in Varcoe's video for *Jumpsuit Girl*⁴, a song the audience at the AIRs meetup also had the pleasure of seeing performed live for the first time. In the video, numerous of the claymation figures come to life. Dancing and posing around and on a car, and twerking while at the beach, the video and song state many of the facets of Varcoe's research related to how the fashion system operates. In the video, Varcoe explains how 'they have a name for me': the people she meets call her 'jumpsuit girl', hence derive the largest part of her identity from the garment she is wearing, thus reducing identity to outer appearance. Through the durational jumpsuit-performance Varcoe explores closely how fashion, and more explicitly the immaterial facets of fashion, completely shape one's identity and social position in the world. She asks herself: 'Who the hell am I in this? Who am I trying to be? Who is me who is she who are we?'; what is the position of the individual in the fashion system? It is also interesting to see how she notes that 'we all dress the same.' This points to the paradoxical dynamics of fashion that Georg Simmel already observed in his essay 'On Fashion' (1904: 133): striving for individuality, while having at the same time a desire for unification, imitating and belonging to particular social groups.

Varcoe also uses iconic figures such as Karl Lagerfeld and Anna Wintour in her video. They are examples *par excellence* of how fashion dictates above all an *image* of the self. In doing so, Varcoe shares her stance on what fashion is: 'Fashion ain't about clothes, about designer pros, it's born through interaction, the way we feel through reaction. It ain't about the jumpsuit for me, but about how it brings convo [conversation] indeed.' This ties back again to how Kawamura (2005) views fashion as a symbolic cultural product: fashion is not dependent solely on garments but grows and changes through the social interactions these garments provoke, shaping and

⁴ Jumpsuit Girl (2016): https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=153&v=v7xbqqwVU94

(per)forming fixed and fluid identities. Although many performance artists have employed the medium of clothing to reveal the performative construction of identity, Varcoe's diversity of practice-based embodied research methodologies exemplifies how an artistic and creative approach to fashion research helps to better understand and communicate how the fashion system operates.

Participatory performances

To complete her performative practice, Varcoe also uses the method of *scoring*. In this role she constructs participatory performances, investigating again the social components of fashion, how perception shapes fashion and identity. During the AIRs meetup she also staged a performance involving the audience: during a part of her talk the audience was asked to shout out several phrases and words. These phrases originated from her collection of interactions and were almost all reactions on her jumpsuit-wardrobe. Interestingly, despite receiving very clear instructions about the shouting, many audience members were quite hesitant to take part: some of the phrases appeared quite insulting. Even though many of the reactions might not have seemed polite, it is exactly these reactions that shape Varcoe's image to the outside world. The social context within which identity is (per)formed is thus especially highlighted in these kind of participatory performances, during which the audience is asked to comment on Varcoe's performance, identity and by reading pre-assigned texts – exposing and being confronted with many preconceptions related to appearance while doing so.

Although these preconceptions are related to outer appearance, the notion of 'performance' opens up the potential to play with the meanings and codes related to fashion and identity. This is where the work of Judith Butler comes in. Butler's notion of performance as an embodied practice helps to move beyond an understanding of performance in terms of mere outer appearances. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler emphasizes that gender is not an essential being – comparable to Goffman's theory, but states that gender is always a 'doing' by the repetition of certain acts and gestures (1990: 34). Butler thus views (gender) identity as being performatively constituted through a process of repetitive, citational and discursive practices, which are naturalized and normalized. Since identity is produced *through* the performance, this also opens up the possibility of actively choosing and managing the roles you want to play within different contexts. In other words, because the performative nature of

identity is revealed, the possibility arises, as Varcoe shows, of intentionally experimenting with performances of identity – undoing fixed discursively shaped preconceptions – through the embodied act of dressing.

In doing so, Varcoe again invites the audience to play an active role in these participatory performances. For example, with the performance *Imagining Chanel*, Varcoe shows the audience that they can all play an active role in the designing process. This piece does not center around the onesie or jumpsuit but focuses on the notion that fashion is more than a physical object. In a presentation that echoes the traditional salon-style of the previous era, Varcoe presented Chanel garments of the National Gallery of Victoria's costume collection without showcasing the actual garments. In an interview with Laura Gardner in *Vestoj* (2014), Varcoe explains how she aims to make her audience aware of the immaterial workings of fashion. We do not need to see the actual garment: through all the sartorial (tacit) knowledge that we have built up over years, we are quite capable to create an image of the garments ourselves. By not showing the physical garments she wanted to highlight the tacit elements surrounding clothing: fashion is something that affects all of our senses and can spark our imagination in so many ways. This again highlights the immaterial facets, yet also the sensorial and embodied facets, of fashion's performative dimension. In this sense Varcoe shows that on a daily basis, we all participate in the performance of constructing people's identity by imagining who they are based on our tacit knowledge of the codes and meanings of the fashion system. The senses – and the embodied dimension of our existence – play a crucial role in this process of imagination. This, however, also opens up possibilities to imagine who we could be, and what the identities are that we want to express and perform, in the future.

Embodied research and affective performances in fashion

Since fashion is an immaterial system of meaning that discursively shapes identity, the embodied practice of wearing clothes needs to be taken into account to highlight the performative expressions of the living body. While revealing the performative coming-into-being of identity, Varcoe's 'affective performances' (Del Río 2008) also demonstrate that we are actually engaged in an active, creative process of doing identity when performing concepts of the self by means of clothes. This perspective allows for more expressive agency and affective, performative power of the actual living body, and liberates the body from the 'pressures to perform according to

cultural, linguistic, or ideological requirements' (Del Río 2008: 5). The ways in which she employs multiple artistic and creative methodologies as part of her practice-based fashion research is a productive way of acknowledging the physicality of clothed bodies and embodied subjects. Since bodies are often objectified in fashion, this embodied and performative approach is an important contribution to the emerging critical fashion discourse. It is increasingly urgent to redefine our relationship to fashion and to focus more on the agency of all bodies, materials and embodied subjects involved.

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