

## WHY DO YOU DO FASHION?

Alison Rasch

1 September 2011

Fashion Colloquia London

Why do you do fashion?

Studying and working as a fashion designer for over ten years, there have been moments, especially over the past two years, where I have found myself asking this question, often in moments of doubt and despair. Sometimes the answer has come up as ‘because I can’t think of anything else I would rather be doing’, sometimes it is ‘because I can’t afford to train up in another career path right now because I blew my government-sponsored loan on that MA’, sometimes it is ‘because I avoid a position of responsibility that might result in hurting people or small animals but I still do something beautiful and useful’. Occasionally I dig up ‘because it satisfies a creative drive to produce, that I am good at’. But how come I am asking myself this question 11 years down the line, and how come I continue to ask it? The answer for me these past couple years initially involved lots of expletives in frustration and anger during my Masters Degree course at Central Saint Martins, and definitely a few more in the past 18 months during the constant pressure to keep applying and interviewing to land a full-time design position. However, I am asking it more recently as a reflective practice technique, with the intention of integrating this into my practice as a fashion designer.

I will be discussing the use of reflective practice in fashion design, and how the application of mindfulness can be a means to inform reflective practice. I am not trained, nor proficient, as an academic researcher or writer, so the best I can offer in this forum is my own experience, and my opinion and evaluation of my own experience and some basic personal research, limited by my professional time constraints.

As regards the question of ‘Why do you do fashion’, my initial exploration of this came about in questioning why no one in the world of fashion has ever questioned what I do. I was asked just once, by a philosophy professor I was lucky to have in my second year liberal arts course at Parsons School of Design, why I did fashion design. I did not know what to say to him. I had known originally why I had wanted to go to arts college for fashion design, but what I did not have at that moment was a theoretical framework or analytical context to formulate what it was that I was doing or intending to do as a fashion designer. Nor have I

been formally introduced to any approach to start answering that question since that single class back in 2000 attempting to introduce a roomful of 19 year old art students to *agape* in 3 months with the help of John Dewey.

Fashion History, yes. Market Research, yes. Life drawing, yes. Creative output and endurance, pushed to extreme boundaries; driven by warped or benevolent tutors, my own perverse, neurotic work ethic which I came to recognize in most designers who are still working ten years on, and the competition invoked by being surrounded by some of the fiercest and most beautiful talents I have ever seen, yes.

But this question of ‘Why do you do fashion?’ asked in a slightly incredulous tone by many people, in my experience is not usually asked by those teaching and working in fashion. I still have trouble answering it beautifully or confidently. I found myself asking it of myself this summer, whilst preparing a presentation as an alumni representative speaking about my career to teenagers considering applying to fashion courses in university. I was trying to remember why I got in to fashion in the first place. Having designed and made clothes for as long as I can remember, the highlight of my early career probably was demonstrating at age ten how to make a pattern for and sew a mitten for a class project on ‘how to do’ a useful life skill... I also remember discovering the fashion industry in high school starting around age thirteen. This took the form of hoarding every single copy of Vogue I could lay hands on, defending sewing projects I had designed for friends as art assignments in my Honours art courses, and writing illustrated papers on how the fashion industry worked from concept to store so I had an excuse to talk about Ann Demeulemeester and Alexander McQueen. This was the seminal moment where I realized that I could have a career doing all this stuff I did anyways for fun, which just seemed like a brilliant idea.

This apparently great idea naturally led to art college for university, perhaps helped a bit by the fact that my application essays for ‘regular’ universities included how much I wanted to go to art college. Finding myself at Parsons School of Design in October of 1999 was an honour and a privilege, as I believed and still believe. October 2000 found me on the first year of the fashion design course, and having honed drawing skills and late nights in the previous Foundation year, I was ready to embark on what turned out to be the fast slide in to the deep end of top-tier fashion design training.

It was during this year that one and only tutor to do so did ask me why I do fashion. He was the philosophy tutor teaching a liberal arts course examining John Dewey's *Art as Experience*. I would approach him sometimes after class with questions, including doubts about having chosen arts college over a traditional liberal arts university. At this point I remembered being in a state of feeling disjointed and fuzzy, working like crazy, not being able to comprehend anything beyond the attendance requirements and the constant deadlines. When he asked me 'why do you do fashion?' I remember balking, and not having an immediate answer. What had happened to my obviously brilliant idea that had gotten me here in the first place? I think I mumbled something about a need to produce creative work, prefaced with 'I don't know...' Pretty much all I could be sure of at that point was I that I had to visit the *Belgian Fashion: Antwerp Style* exhibition next door at FIT on an almost daily basis.

Fast forward to my successful application to transfer to the Fashion Design BA course at Central Saint Martins for the autumn of 2001. Training and learning at Central Saint Martins was not as attendance driven as Parsons, but the deadlines just as important, and I quickly learned the importance of concept and process and its documentation as well as the final results. At no point in the interview process or academic immersion did anyone ask me why I did fashion. Perhaps it was assumed I wanted to do fashion, as I had to apply specifically to the fashion course, but I was not asked why. What I did know was that I wanted to travel and study outside the United States, and have exposure to the cultural forces at work in London and Central Saint Martins that were producing the kind of design I wanted to learn from and create myself.

Concluding my BA, which had included a year of work experience as a stagiaire at Raf Simons in Antwerp, I proceeded on to my first job as an assistant designer at Karl Lagerfeld in New York City, working with the amazing Melanie Ward as Creative Director. This was why I do fashion – to work with and learn from the greatest talents in the industry, work with a great team, contribute design to a top tier collection, and to actually support myself doing something I love.

At Karl Lagerfeld I also learned the volatile reality of the fashion design industry. That is to say, companies closing, jobs disappearing, and the fairly constant search for employment. After working in Vienna and San Francisco following my time in New City and making a career transition in to menswear, I decided to apply to the Masters Degree course at Central

Saint Martins in 2008. Re-reading my statement of intent, it answers the application's question of why I am applying to the course, not why I do fashion. As I remember my experience on the Central Saint Martins MA course, the emphasis there was developing your practice as a designer. Again, it was assumed that you were there because you wanted to be, and that you already had the skill level of good fashion designer who could create a solid collection. No one was asking why we did fashion, nor did they appear to care. We were supposed to know, or if we didn't, act like we did, shut up and finish out collections, change them, and finish them again. And then make some more changes and then maybe finish them. Needless to say at some point along the way there, I was asking myself the bigger question of why do you do fashion? On the verge of quitting several times, due to some personal crises at the time that were not helped by the rigour of the course, but shoved to the side like everything else other than your design work, I did not have time or opportunity to develop a reflective approach to answer the question along the way at that moment.

The opportunity came later, in the time following the MA, where not only was I asking myself why I did fashion, but also seeking a way to find, or produce, an answer I felt confident in. Answering this question is definitely a work in progress, but in the process of composing this paper it has also become clear that this progression is the point. 'Why do you do fashion' is a large question with many facets and factors, some of which change over time and some of which remain consistent, making it a good starting point for reflection and developing a reflective practice. I believe it is a question that all fashion designers should be asking themselves throughout their career, through college and employment and hopefully sharing with others. It is an important question providing a challenge on a personal level, and I think there should also be some responsibility taken by the academic fashion design community to be asking it of their students as well as themselves, and providing guidance, support, and exposure to ways of approaching it. This question is important at a personal level for motivation and can also be applied on a wider level for the fashion industry. Why we do this and what we want to accomplish personally can also be applied to why we do this as a company or as an industry and what we want to accomplish collectively.

My own investigation of this question has been a form of reflective practice, not just in looking back at my reasons for doing fashion as mentioned above, but also in an effort to clarify my own intentions at the present moment and going forward. My concept of reflective practice developed as I was taking a course in mindfulness this past spring. I refer to mindfulness as a breathing and meditation-based approach to raising awareness of one's

physical and emotional condition in the present moment. Mindfulness requires and fosters mental openness and an attitude of acceptance and curiosity, which can provide the basis for strategies for coping with anxiety, pain and depression, or just basic living day-to-day. The course I took was based on the teachings of Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program at the University of Massachusetts in 1979. (University of Massachusetts Medical School Center for Mindfulness, 2011). In her *Mindfulness Course Handbook*, Nathalie Salaun quotes Mr. Kabat-Zinn as explaining:

‘Mindfulness means paying attention  
In a particular way:  
On purpose,  
In the present moment,  
And nonjudgementally’ (Salaun, 2009 p.4).

The techniques of mindfulness were helpful to me on a short-term results basis, but as I have tried to include mindfulness in my daily life it has proven to be applicable as a long-term approach. Practicing mindfulness has allowed me to slow down my frantic mind and begin to accept my feelings, thoughts and actions, and to therefore examine them more carefully instead of skipping ahead or ignoring them all together. Within mindfulness there is an approach that allows for exploration of the question ‘why do you do fashion’ that fashion designers, design students and design tutors could all benefit from.

Mindfulness can be described as ‘becoming more aware of thoughts and feelings, relating to them in a wider, decentred field of awareness, and purposefully opening fully to one’s experience’ (Bishop et al, 2004, p. 234). Although many fashion designers I know are careful to steer clear of dogma or anything resembling boundaries, I would offer mindfulness as more of a complementary structure of practice, in thinking and in working, which can facilitate reflective practices. Fashion designers are trained to critique the work of others and their own, which in itself can be a form of reflective practice. But the inherent step of reflection arrived at naturally in mindfulness practice goes further, allowing one to step out and observe what is happening in real time in one’s own mind, body, and emotions. This objective state of mind can enable a processing of the process that does not have to slow down one’s inspiration or creative production. Rather, I consider the possible intention to be installing it in one’s efforts as one would install an ‘automate’ function in Photoshop, a basic action that has become necessary to the workflow of every document. This embedded action can then introduce awareness in to one’s practice in a way that can help acknowledge

personal emotions and thoughts as they happen, allowing recognition of what it is one is actually doing. Perhaps this objective self-awareness can lead towards further clarification of how one will structure one's practice, or what will be achieved by it. The beauty of introducing mindfulness to one's approach is that it applies on as minute or as grand a scale as suits the moment, including facilitating exploration of that big question of why it is that one 'does fashion'.

With mindfulness, you are aware of your status in the here-and-now at any given moment, which is an interesting concept when applied to the future-focussed perspective of fashion. Being extremely deadline orientated at the academic and industry level, fashion has never shown much time to reflect on what it is doing right here, right now. Future yes, past, yes, but right now? No time! Perhaps by being aware of one's feelings and actions at a present moment, the process of reflecting upon what one has done, learnt, and felt will be facilitated by that self-awareness.

By reflective practice, I mean an approach to, or process of, reviewing experiences one has had in creating an outcome, which in the case of fashion design will usually refer to a collection or project drawn, produced, or presented (or all of those). It could also apply to reviewing the steps taken to obtain a degree or job, or to set up or to run a company. The *cpd 23 Things for Professional Development* blog explains reflective practice as “an opportunity to **review the experiences we have, learning from them and applying what we have learnt.**” (*Thing 5-Reflective Practice*).

Reflective practice can be addressed in the academic arts setting in a variety of ways. Although it was not presented specifically as such in my time on my BA course, or indeed on my MA course, I am aware now of the University of the Arts London's provision for Professional and Personal Development (PPD). The guidelines for PPD appear to be quite broad, with the specifics of implementation, practice, and assessment left to individual courses to determine. There is a specific guideline that ‘All students must have the opportunity to reflect on their PPD across all domains of their experience, in a medium suited to their needs and course.’ (University of the Arts London, 2011 p.3). Whilst I think it is important to have such a guideline set out, the specifics of implementation regarding reflective practice are vague, and specific methods and suggestions contained to an appendix at the end of the document. Perhaps reflective practice do not need to be dictated at this point, as it is left up to individual courses. But perhaps vague guidelines can also leave reflective

practice to be assumed in a course, rather than addressed and introduced on its own as a specific skill and potential method to be included in practice as a designer.

In the context of my experience on the Central Saint Martins BA Fashion Design course, reflective practice in the curriculum seemed to be assumed, but not specifically delineated, within the format of critiques. In our critiques one presented one's work and discussed it, including the process to create it and the original inspirations, usually with the tutor and occasionally with classmates. I do realize that my experience is quite specific, as it is my personal experience. Perhaps other courses had PPD integrated and involved methods of reflection to a greater degree, or do so now. I am not attacking critique or its role in reflective practice. Critique from colleagues and tutors offer a chance for reflection on a specific level at a specific moment in time. This is very important to the creative process. But the point of my argument is that from my experience in fashion design I see a specific utility for reflective practice as to be introduced and explained theoretically and practically at the academic training level, so that designers learn a vocabulary and tactics to recognize their process and how their learning manifests itself and develops. Being able to identify their personal process of reflection and being exposed to different ways that they can incorporate it in to their own practice can challenge designers to apply that reflective practice to their design practice and career. Time is such a precious commodity in fashion design, at both the training and professional level, that learning and developing techniques to incorporate reflective practice in to one's design practice will prove itself useful and more productive if introduced sooner rather than later.

If reflective practice is to be assumed within a design curriculum, a valid although aspirational position, I would submit that there should be several additional routes available to introduce students to reflective practice, in order for them to discover an option that may work for them. Given the variety of ways that people learn, especially in a specialised arts environment, I think that offering a lot of different tools for students to experiment with and offering guidance and support as they choose the best way to approach reflective practice would prove effective, and fit in with the environment of an experimental arts institution like Central Saint Martins.

In a curriculum like Central Saint Martins' BA Fashion Design course, the projects are briefed, and then you go out and run with it, do the best you can with it. Limited training is provided, and it is up to you to immerse yourself in developing your skills, finding your

inspirations, and exposing yourself to new situations that may help you and your work. It is up to you to discover new or different ways of approaching problems or tasks, including new ways of thinking or practicing. I think it could be very beneficial to offer a variety of exposure to reflective practice at the academic level, not as just a written objective stated in course curriculum that may end up regarded as a burden for tutors to implement and for students to complete as described in Allison James' paper *Reflection Revisited: Perceptions of Reflective Practice in Fashion Learning and Teaching* (2007 pp. 15, 20-22). Reflective practice could be offered as a theoretical liberal arts course, as practical extra-curricular workshops, and as occasional open lectures or talks presented by tutors or staff from fashion design or other disciplines. In the fashion design course setting, reflective practice could be initially introduced by tutors in the form of a small un-marked project, and more specifically discussed in the tutorial or critique setting. Additionally, introductions to techniques of mindfulness, meditation, and stress reduction that are complementary to reflective practice could be made available through Student Services and as extra-curricular options. I know these services are offered to some degree through Student Services at the University of the Arts London, and by the New School Student Health Services as indicated on their website (*Health Topics*, 2011), but the overall exposure to these services and their association with reflective practice in design could be improved and increased.

I was heartened this past summer while listening in on an International Summer School arts instructor giving his closing remarks to the class as I waited to speak to them. He was encouraging the students to write, not just their ideas for projects, but also how they felt about their projects and how the projects were progressing. It was the first time I had heard an arts tutor articulate this method of reflective practice. Through the University of the Arts London Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design I am also aware of the e-portfolio system at University of the Arts London, with which students can have the opportunity to submit and display their work online, as well as 'monitor and reflect on their learning progress' (UAL CLAD *E-portfolio*, 2011). Opportunities like these, offered as direct methodical suggestions or specific curriculum formats encourage students to learn and adopt reflective practice that will remain applicable throughout their career.

If there is one thing I know from personal experience at Central Saint Martins, it is that the students there are hungry for opportunities to expand themselves and their knowledge and their skills. Given the freedom for experimentation that exists within the arts curriculum and is so encouraged, it wouldn't take much to introduce fashion design students to ideas and



theories of reflective practice, whether written or otherwise, to consider. Given the enthusiasm and energy that already exists in fashion design programs, it makes sense to offer a variety of opportunities for training and support of students' practice on an emotional, intellectual, and theoretical level to supplement and complement their visual production and technical practice. Encouraging access to the concept of mindfulness as an approach or as a practice brings with it the exposure to the additional mental health benefits, including techniques for accepting and coping with anxiety, stress, and pain, all of which are realities in the lives of fashion designers as much as other people. Fashion design students want to try anything, and they will, so they deserve to be offered more. More to try, more to use, more to take with them, and they will.

In conclusion, with reflection and examination of my own practice as designer, the active use of mindfulness has been useful as an approach to thought and emotion and most importantly, to just being, enabling my design practice to continue and develop. Practicing mindfulness has developed discipline on a new mental level for myself that allows for messing up, rejection, and sleeping, without fighting or hating myself. I am currently trying to see if this discipline can work its way in to a healthy and sustainable practice of designing in which I don't fight or hate what I produce, at least not for long. Something along the lines of recognizing the hate or disgust and trying to approach it with acceptance and curiosity until it disappears. Practicing mindfulness has enabled me to not be scared of asking the question of why I do fashion or to shy away from the truths of the answers. It has allowed me to reflect and accept how I feel upon reflecting, whether through writing, drawing, or being OK with just taking the time to think.

Of course I wish that I had been introduced to more theories and practices of reflective practice bit earlier in my career. Of course I probably would have blown it off with the energy and enthusiasm that could keep me up another night to put the final perfect touch on that project. But I know I probably would have filed it away to remember and research at some point when it might prove to be useful, even a few years down the line. Wait, I was, and I did. Thinking back on that philosophy class in 2000 where the tutor was teaching Dewey's *Art as Experience*, the class curriculum did involve the idea of reflection, the concepts of being and becoming, and this only returns now as I have found some techniques, and time, to remember and extricate and begin to develop the lessons from one single class more than ten years ago.

Of course I wish that I had been introduced to theories and practices of reflective practice and supported by exposure to them *throughout* my training. But I am grateful to now have this technique of mindfulness to facilitate reflective practice on my own now, and as a tool to muster when all my defences are down and I may have nothing else. At least in regards to my designing, I look to utilising mindfulness as a way to prevent my defences from ever being down, or maybe to not even exist at all.

Attending *The Unconscious: Psychoanalysts in Conversation*, held 18 March 2011 at the Central Saint Martin's Innovation Centre, I was struck by the comments made by psychoanalyst Michael Parsons regarding the uncanny, which he described as that which makes an artwork stand out to a viewer; an experience which I submit could also be similar to something like a creative inspiration, grasping a new insight, or developing an inquiry. One cannot anticipate or control when the uncanny will occur, but may only 'suffer' the uncanny by submitting to the experience of the uncanny. I take this 'submission' to mean supporting a state of mind that is open to experiencing the uncanny when it makes itself known. Parson's explanation of the this state of mind fully open to one's experience of the uncanny I later identified as being similar to mindfulness, the awareness of yourself in the present open to acknowledging sensations, thoughts, and emotions. Personal awareness through mindfulness can encourage acceptance of difficult questions and innovative ideas, allowing for personal reflection and response rather than simply reaction. I am interested to explore mindfulness and reflective practice further, and the potential for a mindful reflective approach to be applied on an open scale within fashion design to expand the range of the field as a valued cultural practice.

Again I apologise for the highly personal autobiographical nature of this paper, but it is all I have to offer right now of this particular work in progress given time and resource constraints. I look forward to exploring further the theoretical aspects of reflective practice, and developing the practical aspects to expand my own design practice.

So why do I do fashion? Right now, the answer is because I still cannot think of anything else I would rather be doing more. If I presently am doing it in a way that feels unfamiliar, I am using the opportunity to see if I can stay aware and receptive, to observe, to reflect, and to submit to the experience of the uncanny. I want to integrate self-awareness and submission in my design practice, that I may recognize the uncanny when it strikes me and create the same in my work.

## Bibliography

Bishop, S.R., Lau, M. , Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N.D. , Carmody, J., Segal, Z.V., Abbey, S. , Speca, M., Velting, D., and Devins, G. (2004) *Mindfulness: a proposed operational definition*. [Internet]. Available from <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness\\_%28psychology%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness_%28psychology%29)> [Accessed 23 March 2011]

*Brainwaves: The Unconscious – Psychoanalysts in conversation*. (2011) Central Saint Martins Innovation Centre: London. 18 March with David Bell, Leon Kleimberg and Michael Parsons.

Cpd23 Things for Professional Development (2011) *Thing 5-Reflective Practice*. [Internet]. Available from <<http://cpd23.blogspot.com/2011/07/thing-5-reflective-practice.html>> [Accessed 17 August 2011]

James, A. (2007) *Reflection Revisited: Perceptions of Reflective Practice in Fashion Learning and Teaching*. [Internet]. Available from <<http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/643/>> [Accessed 29 August 2011]

The New School Student Health Services (2011) *Health Topics*. [Internet]. Available from <<http://www.newschool.edu/studentservices/health/wellness/health-topics/>> [Accessed 29 August 2011]

Salaun, N. (2009) *Mindfulness Course Handbook*. London: Nathalie Salaun & Chrissie Burke.

Steele, V. (2011) *Exhibitions*. [Internet]. Available from <<http://valeriesteelefashion.com/blog/category/exhibitions/>> [Accessed 30 August 2011]

University of the Arts London (2011) *Personal & Professional Development (PPD) Principles and Guidelines for Implementation*. London: University of the Arts London.

University of the Arts London Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design: Strategies and Policies (2011) *Strategy for Student Learning 2011-2015*. [Internet]. Available from <<http://www.arts.ac.uk/cltad/ualstrategiesandpolicies/>> [Accessed 29 August 2011]

University of the Arts London Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design: Workshops and Short Course 2011-12 (2011) *E-portfolio*. [Internet]. Available from <<http://www.arts.ac.uk/cltad/workshops-2011-12/e-portfolio/>> [Accessed 29 August 2011]

University of Massachusetts Medical School Center for Mindfulness (2011) *Stress Reduction Program*. [Internet]. Available from <<http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/stress/index.aspx>> [Accessed 23 March 2011]