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Fashion Exhibitions as Scholarship: Evaluation Criteria for Peer Review

Curated exhibitions are places where research practice, creative design, storytelling, and aesthetics converge. In this paper we use the term "fashion exhibition" to refer to the organized display of extant dress-related items within museums or other public display spaces. Although clothing has been collected and exhibited by museums of art, design, history, and ethnology since the nineteenth century, fashion was not considered a "worthy" subject of exclusive display until the 1970s (Anderson, 2000; Steele, 2008; Taylor, 1998, 2004; Vänskä & Clark, 2018). Over the past 40 years, fashion exhibitions have become more popular and proliferated in both large and small institutions alike. In 2018, for example, *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, which was displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (5th Avenue and Cloisters locations), had record-breaking attendance of approximately 1.7 million people and was deemed the most popular museum exhibition of the year (Sharpe and Da Silva, 2019).

Curators engage in a rigorous research process that is communicated through a creative design (i.e., the fashion exhibition). In the updated edition of Ernest L. Boyer's seminal text, the authors asked: "Is it possible for scholarship to be defined in ways that give more recognition to interpretive and integrative work?" (Boyer, Moser, Ream, & Braxton, 2016, p. 56). Through fashion exhibitions, research and design are synthesized through presentation to diverse audiences. Just as knowledge can be gleaned from a text, so too can it be found within the structure of a garment and the display of fashion objects. Curators translate this knowledge by interpreting fashion objects within a designed exhibition layout.

The process of curating and mounting an exhibition is a form of research that has numerous outcomes, including the fashion exhibitions themselves and their associated publications (e.g., exhibition catalogues and websites); however, our field has not yet established a method to peer review exhibitions. Despite their clear intellectual value, fashion exhibitions are often considered "service" for faculty and thus omitted from tenure, promotion, and reappointment reviews or, when included, are not "counted" the same as scholarship that has been peer reviewed. Scholarly labor in fashion exhibitions is often intentionally made invisible through the seamless presentation of the exhibit as visual spectacle, which makes acknowledgment of this said labor that much more challenging. Service and scholarship are not mutually exclusive: fashion exhibitions bring intellectual ideas to wider audiences and are a form of public outreach and engagement. This type of scholarly service cannot be underrated – by producing fashion exhibitions, curators reach and inform larger communities. Why, then, should this type of scholarship not "count" in the same way as a blind peer reviewed text?

Evaluating curatorial work does not easily map onto pre-existing forms of academic blind peer review. Though scholars in our field have worked to elevate the status of creative scholarship, they have focused on the development of frameworks and models for fashion design research rather than curatorial practice (Bye, 2010; Lamb & Kallal, 1992). Peer review is used to evaluate faculty at colleges and universities (Boyer et al, 2016); therefore, if such a method is used in the tenure process as well as the system through which written work is measured for publication, should it not also apply to the evaluation of fashion exhibitions?

We build on the work of previous scholars to propose criteria for evaluating and peer reviewing fashion exhibitions. We aim to elevate the scholarly status of fashion exhibitions,

particularly those mounted by modestly-funded institutions, and use the exhibit *Women*

Empowered: Fashions from the Frontline (WE), as an example to illustrate our argument.

Context: History of Fashion Exhibitions and University Collections

Like other forms of museum display, fashion exhibitions have changed stylistically,

conceptually, and topically. Early twentieth-century fashion exhibitions tended to be antiquarian

in their approach and chronological in their organization (Steele, 2008, p. 10) and most

emphasized factual descriptions instead of the cultural or social relevance of clothing (Taylor,

2004). Recent developments in the fields of contemporary art and fashion have led curators to

reconsider these curatorial practices and engage with expanded modes of display and

interpretation. A number of contemporary exhibitions held at universities, including *Queer*

Fashion and Style: Stories from the Heartland (2018) at Iowa State University and *(dis)ABLED*

BEAUTY: The Evolution of Beauty, Disability, and Ability (2016) at Kent State University,

demonstrate the "vital role" fashion exhibitions play in transforming scholarship into a public

experience (Breward, 2008; Marcketti et al., 2011, p. 249).

In the 1990s, museum curators Valerie Steele, Alexandra Palmer, and Judith Clark began

to engage in the critical curation of fashion. As the Director of the Museum at the Fashion

Institute of Technology, Steele has strived to highlight the important role fashion objects play in

the creation of knowledge and "collect objects with artistic and/or historical significance,

especially objects that move fashion forward" (Cole, 2018, p. 145). For Steele, this method has

offered new insights into the historic and aesthetic developments of fashion and may "address

the problems that frequently beset fashion museum exhibitions – whether musty antiquarianism

or superficial glitz" (Steele, 1998, p. 334). Palmer, Senior Curator of Textiles and Costume at the

Royal Ontario Museum, has also pointed to the "enormous disparity in the educational content of museum exhibitions" (Palmer, 2008, p. 32). Fashion exhibits should employ "a didactic method that educates the public, informs the connoisseur, and offers resources for school groups and design students alike" (Palmer, 2008, p. 37). As an Independent Curator, Clark's use of unconventional props and media has further challenged traditional modes of fashion display. Her removal of object labels in *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back* (2005), for instance, demonstrated new ways of mediating and constructing knowledge about fashion, art and culture (Vänskä & Clark, 2018, p. 88). Today, many fashion curators have moved beyond spectacle to curate exhibits as a form of creative scholarship through critical curatorial practice. As Steele put it, "There is no reason why [fashion] exhibitions cannot be beautiful *and* intelligent, entertaining and educational" (Steele, 2008, p. 14)

While previous scholarship has helped to bridge the gap between theory and the practice of fashion curation in museums (Palmer 2008; Steele 1998; Steele 2008; Taylor 1998; Taylor 2004), only a few research studies have identified the challenges and opportunities university collections and smaller historical societies face when exhibiting fashion (Chapin, et al., 2019; Marcketti, et al., 2011). Since the late nineteenth century, universities and community colleges have collected historical clothing and textiles (Queen & Berger, 2006). These collections, which typically began as teaching examples, only some have designated display spaces. With the rise in popularity of fashion exhibitions, smaller institutions have looked for opportunities to display their holdings.

University collections serve as "material culture libraries of fashion history" that allow students and the surrounding community to access information on historical clothing and textiles

(Blanco, 2010; Sauro, 2009). They may provide hands-on experience for design students or depict silhouettes from different periods for fashion history and design courses (Arthur, 1997). University collections also provide learning opportunities for students outside of the classroom and provide opportunity for collaboration between numerous disciplines (Chatterjee, 2010). Miller and Portillo (1996) argued that university collections stimulate interdisciplinary research as well as community engagement.

University exhibitions provide a platform for academic scholarship and public outreach when students and faculty curate displays that communicate the stories of extant garments and the bodies that wore them (Loscialpo, 2016). Exhibitions are one way that university collections transform scholarship into a public experience that is shared with members of the surrounding community (Marcketti et al., 2011, p. 248). Marcketti et al., (2011) found that exhibitions "[give] the department visibility in the community" and often result in "increased donations of artifacts and financial support" (p. 256), which affirms the value of such collections and helps to fulfill critical mission statements of the university or historical society (Marcketti et al., 2011, p. 249). Marcketti et al (2011) also explored the challenges university collections face, and argued that exhibitions act as "a resource to expand course offerings, to build the reputation of the department through research, and as a highly-visible link to the department" (p. 255). Fashion exhibitions have thus become a means of justifying the value of university collections, while offering students the opportunity "to gain and share knowledge through material culture research" (Marcketti et al., 2011, p. 249).

Peer Review of Fashion Exhibitions

Despite the long history of university clothing and textile collections, particularly at land grant institutions and technical schools, our field has lagged in developing mechanisms to formally acknowledge the scholarly contributions that students and faculty make through public fashion exhibitions. We propose a set of evaluative criteria, in no particular hierarchical order, to set into motion a conversation about peer review for fashion exhibitions in an effort to recognize excellence in curatorial scholarship and to elevate the status of creative curatorial design research within the academy. While exhibitions cannot be anonymized and therefore cannot be *blind* peer reviewed, peer review is possible. We argue that to be a distinguished form of creative scholarship, the fashion exhibition must: (a) engage with theory; (b) use rigorous research methods; (c) demonstrate curatorial selection; (d) engage in iterative revisions; (e) produce a designed outcome; (f) be accessible, retrievable; and (g) contribute new knowledge to the field. All criteria should be considered against the backdrop of institutional context, including limitations or advantages related to funding, display space, collection size, and other factors.

To illustrate our evaluation criteria, we chronicle the collaborative and pedagogical research process that informed our recent fashion exhibition, *WE.* Under the mentorship of a faculty member, *WE* provided graduate and upper-level undergraduate students with the opportunity to conduct archival research and qualitative interviews, gain real-world experience, and organize findings into compelling vignettes presented visually, materially, digitally, and textually. We expound on the criteria presented for peer evaluation of fashion exhibitions, show how exhibitions are important forms of research, teaching, and public outreach, and demonstrate how creative scholarship is an invaluable contribution to the field of clothing, textiles, and fashion studies, and the area of design research more broadly.

Literature Review

Museums have become key sites where the contested cultural and epistemological questions of the late twentieth century have taken place (McDonald, 2011). Independent curator Hans Ulrich Obrist (2014) defined the act of curating as "simply about connecting cultures, bringing their elements into proximity with one each other...to allow different elements to touch" (p. 1). Similarly, independent art curator Maria Lind (2011) has suggested that new developments in curatorial practice have led to a new genre of curator. In addition to working with archives and constructing histories, curators should be equally as concerned with concepts and narratives as they are with selecting objects and exhibition design (Lind, 2011). Curatorial work thus becomes a means of "doing theory" when analyzing the interconnections between "objects, images, processes, people and locations, histories and discourses" (Lind, 2011, p. 63). Both Obrist and Lind's methods involve a renewed sensibility to cultural context and critical discourse for contemporary art and fashion, alike. Thus, the conceptual and aesthetic aspects of a fashion exhibition must be taken into account during the research and production process, as well as the peer evaluation.

Producing Fashion Exhibitions as Creative Scholarship

Models and frameworks developed in the field of fashion design scholarship provide a useful starting point to discuss fashion exhibitions as creative scholarship. Design research often follows a process through which the steps taken lead to an outcome. Design is a goal-oriented endeavor that, according to Friedman, "solv[es] problems, meet[s] needs, improv[es] situations, or creat[es] something new or useful" (Friedman, 2003, pp. 507-508). Ideation and iteration yields "good design," and the combination of these ideas necessitates continual evaluation so as to ensure the design's direction (Weisbrod and Kroll, 2017, p. 223). Frameworks such as Lamb

and Kallal's (1992) FEA Model of Consumer Needs have outlined a logical process through which work is ideated, developed, and refined. This model can be adapted for the development of an exhibition - the FEA model starts with the target consumer, and evolves through functional, expressive, and aesthetic needs. In the case of fashion exhibitions, the exhibition's audience is the "target consumer." The functional elements of the exhibition are related to the overall operations and logistics: location, space, time, etc.,which have to do with what goes into physically presenting an exhibition. The expressive aspect develops from the theme, tone, and/or story presented by the exhibition and may include the theoretical framing. Lastly, the aesthetic element develops through the design considerations utilized in the arrangements of pieces, items selected, and designed outcomes such as catalogs, websites, and the exhibition itself .

Elizabeth Bye (2010) outlined *problem-based design research, research through practice,* and *creative practice* as scholarship processes resulting in outcomes that can be peer-reviewed. Jablon-Roberts and Sanders (2019) recently emphasized designers' process, including the formative phases of *incubation* and *research.* In what follows, we situate the fashion exhibition as a form of creative production which reconciles enquiry and design in the visual presentation of information.

Bye (2010) has described *problem-based design research* as starting with a need-based issue, then developing through the traditional research process with "a review of literature, established research methods for testing or evaluation, and practice" (Bye, 2010, pp. 213-214). The results yield items such as objects or processes, resulting data are analyzed, and the research is then published or presented. In the development of a fashion exhibition, the need can be translated as identification of theme, with selection of and history or other content documented through the research process. Bye (2010) presented *problem-based design research* as similar to

a mixed-method approach of quantitative and qualitative work, with the addition of practice via iterative design (p. 214). In the creation of a fashion exhibition, mixed methods are used in the research process and iterative design occurs with the process of putting together the exhibition itself through garment selection, display arrangement, and the development of designed outcomes such as exhibition guides, websites, etc. Jablon-Roberts and Sanders (2019) emphasized strategies of *incubation* and *research* in theatrical costume designers' creative processes (Jablon-Roberts and Sanders, 2019, p. 43). As interpreted here, *incubation* refers to the rumination involved in the development of the conceptual grounding of the exhibition, integration of theory, and availability of primary sources, and *research* refers to the extensive process through which exhibition items are identified and information gleaned, uncovered, or otherwise documented.

The use of a basic framing method does not provide instruction into the discovery, aggregation, and evaluation of information (Horváth, 2007, p. 4); therefore, it is important to consider additional elements, such as design. Design provides commentary through production and the study of design yields the ability to expand the field of knowledge in which it is based (Yee, 2010). Horváth (2007) has presented *practice-based design research* as "a form of qualitative research operating with information concerning design processes and designed artefacts" (Horváth, 2007, p. 8). However, as evidenced by juried design exhibitions at conferences like the International Textile and Apparel Association, practice-based design research creates not only qualitative work, but physically realized objects and artifacts as well. In order to create scholarship, Horváth argued, "the concrete research methods of practice-based design research are such as: (i) participatory observation, (ii) action research, (iii) case study, (iv) protocol analysis, (v) expert interviews, (vi) grounded theory construction, and (vii) assessment

forums" (Horváth, 2007, p. 9). Some of these methods, when combined with established qualitative research methods and interpreted through the context of design research, provide support for the proposal of an evaluative framework through which creative scholarship such as fashion exhibitions may be peer-reviewed. Practice-based design develops knowledge (Bye, 2010) that is both "objective and testable" through design iteration (Horváth, 2007, p. 8). Thus, iterative design processes yield knowledge and designed outcomes that are subject to evaluation.

Evaluating Fashion Exhibitions

Fashion exhibitions have been evaluated and reviewed in a number of different venues: from popular media, like magazines, newspapers, blogs, and social media posts, to academic journals with "Exhibitions Review" sections, and awards from professional organizations. Exhibitions review sections and professional awards, however, are relatively recent additions to our field: it was not until 2018 that the journal *Dress*, for example, began a designated "Exhibitions Review" section with its own editor. In 2017, the Costume Society of America began awarding a Richard Martin Award to a small institution (in addition to a large institutional award), thus acknowledging disparities in funding, exhibition space, and resources.

Evaluation criteria for fashion exhibitions may draw from models used in other forms of creative design scholarship. For example, *The Public Historian* Exhibit and Museum Review Guidelines encourage contributors to evaluate current historical exhibitions according to the following criteria: content, relevance, accessibility, and impact. Serrell (2006) also developed an evaluative framework for the assessment of exhibitions, which involved participants rating on a scale of 1 (excellent) to 6 (counterproductive) how comfortable, engaging, reinforcing, and meaningful the exhibit was. Black and Cloud (2009) adapted this criteria in their suggestion that the development of an apparel design "capstone" exhibition be evaluated at various stages from

inception through presentation (p. 115), and expanded upon Serrell's (2006) criteria for direct application to garments. Both Black and Cloud (2009) and Serrell (2006) have suggested that curatorial selection should create a sense of comfort for the visitor and provide an engaging and meaningful experience that reinforces the knowledge intended to be displayed.

Unlike many forms of creative design scholarship, which exists in perpetuity in physical form, the fashion exhibition is ephemeral. The size of the institution mounting the exhibit, source of funding, and condition of items on display are but a few factors that impact the length of time and the number of locations that a fashion exhibition is displayed. For this reason, documentation and retrievability are critical to the potential for peer review. This can be achieved by the use of various media, of which digital photography and film appear to be the most cost-effective and efficient means of documentation and distribution. Rooted in the processes related to design research, the criteria for the evaluation of fashion exhibitions can be developed as a means through which the realized outcome of the research, i.e. the exhibit, can be reviewed by peers and given feedback.

Background of *Women Empowered: Fashions from the Frontline (WE)*

As an illustrative mechanism, we use a recent university exhibition held in the Mid-Atlantic region and curated by the authors of this paper to discuss our proposed evaluative criteria. *WE* was on display December 6, 2018 - March 31, 2019 and was collaboratively curated by students and a faculty advisor. The faculty advisor developed the title, concept, and a grant proposal and the university's arts council awarded a grant of $6100 for the exhibit. The faculty member, who was also director of the university's fashion collection, assigned *WE* as a semester-long project for a graduate course titled "Anthropology of the Fashioned Body." The purpose of *WE* was twofold: first, to create a public exhibition about the relationship between women's

empowerment, fashion, and place; and second, to provide an opportunity for students to learn about curatorial research and exhibition design as a form of public, creative scholarship. Students were presented the title of the exhibit and a short description which stated that the exhibition would feature fashions from a range of female athletes, artists, and activists, among others. Students were encouraged to participate in collective ideation and brainstorming to unpack the conceptual possibilities, and then expected to conduct archival and qualitative research that would follow the curatorial and conceptual direction. *WE* was the culmination of collective ideation and concept development between 14 students, one professor, and various research archivists, informants, administrators, and others who helped along the way.

The students were divided into four teams: curatorial, research, graphics, and administrative. The curatorial team was responsible for overall vision and exhibition design. The research team identified and researched possible items for inclusion in the exhibit. The graphics team developed designs for print and exhibit cases. The administrative team was responsible for budget, loans, correspondence, and other logistics. While each team was accountable for a specific aspect of the exhibition, major decisions were always made collectively and democratically. Students selected public spaces, where women used fashion on the metaphorical "frontline," as the overarching physical organization for the exhibition. Because of the predetermined layout of the physical exhibit space (enclosed glass cases), the class limited the number of spaces accordingly: (a) the street; (b) the government; (c) the stage; (d) the arena; and (e) the academy. The research team engaged with various collections throughout the university to find stories of women's empowerment that could be told through extant fashion items.

Additionally, students solicited individuals and other institutions to find items that could not be sourced from campus collections. After final selections were made, each student

conducted in-depth research by oral interview or archival inquiry to facilitate the creation of an exhibition catalogue, guidebook, and other visual communications throughout the display. In addition to the exhibit, the students and staff organized an opening reception that about 200 people attended.

Results and Discussion

Taking inspiration from Black and Cloud's (2009, p. 116) adapted criteria for assessing exhibitions, in combination with concepts from design research frameworks (Bye, 2010; Lamb & Kallal, 1992), we propose a series of evaluation categories through which fashion exhibitions may be peer reviewed: (a) theoretical engagement; (b) research methods; (c) curatorial selection; (d) iterative revisions; (e) designed outcome; (f) accessibility and retrievability; and (g) contribution of new knowledge to the field. By outlining criteria and guidelines for the interpretation and evaluation of fashion exhibitions as creative scholarship, we hope to set a precedent that will enrich and deepen the fields of fashion curation and design research scholarship. We begin with a discussion of context and limitations, followed by sections designed to explain each criterion, using examples from the *WE* exhibition.

Evaluating Within Context

In any exhibition, the curatorial team must work around a number of practical limitations such as funding, display space, time until scheduled opening, the availability of extant items, to name a few. Further, they must surmount these challenges according to exhibit concept and aesthetics of display. The evaluation of any exhibition must be done within *context*—that is, against the backdrop of budget, exhibition space, collection access, and other factors which may vary greatly across institutions.

In university exhibitions with a limited budget and time frame for execution (as opposed to exhibits mounted by major institutions), the availability of extant items becomes an important limitation. In *WE*, for example, students were fortunate to source objects from various university collections and from other institutions, but a number of times the curators were unable to negotiate cooperation and desired items were unable to be included.

Some limitations may be conceptual or theoretical: one of the greatest challenges in *WE* was the presentation of intersectional feminism. Fashion objects carry enormous potential to represent a plurality of self-expressions and social evaluations. A garment that is meaningful and progressive to one might be considered trivial or conservative by another. Achieving consensus on the multiple potential interpretations of such garments is an iterative process that might eventually leave some curators and visitors unsatisfied. Moreover, exhibition cases and gallery spaces are themselves somewhat antithetical to the idea of liberating women from prescribed boxes. Similarly, because museum exhibitions are static, fashion objects are presented in ways that are fixed, which presents a challenge because the lived experience of wearing clothing is active, meaningful, and in continuous flux (Entwistle, 2000).

Criterion A: Theoretical Engagement

Evaluation questions. Is a theoretical foundation (named or unnamed) found within, or produced by, the work? How has theory been applied and implemented in the designed outcome? Alternatively, how has new theory emerged from the research process and critical curatorial practice?

Analysis. Fashion studies scholar Elaine Pedersen (2007) has suggested that "theory provides order and guides research" (p. 123). Broadly speaking, any academic work makes use of theory to determine: (a) what questions and phenomena to investigate (e.g., research

questions); (b) how to respond to research questions and objectives (e.g., methods); and (c) what counts as meaningful data (e.g., reproducibility). Furthermore, in qualitative research, which often draws upon inductive reasoning, theory may emerge from the data or primary sources. Interpretation of research data may contribute to the development and further extension of theory.

WE relied on a number of theoretical assumptions that were discussed and negotiated throughout the curatorial process. First, students explored concepts presented in the title – women, empowerment, fashion, the metaphorical "frontline" – and collectively integrated contemporary fashion theory that built upon intersectional feminism into the exhibit ethos (Kaiser 2012). Through the Symbolic Interactionism (SI) Theory of Fashion — defined as the social process in which people who look to one another to understand the others' actions and use fashion to articulate and negotiate cultural ambivalences, ambiguities, and anxieties — student curators engaged with critical curatorial practice to interpret the "frontline" and focused on the fashioned body as a productive site where individual and cultural ambivalences are played out (Davis, 1992; Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton, 1995). The curators considered the fashioned body itself a frontline because fashion so tenuously marks the boundary between the body and the social world (Wilson, 2003, p. 2). Frontlines are also physical spaces, often of conflict, where two or more positionalities in an unequal power dynamic collide; therefore, frontlines are almost always tenuous. The exhibit was thus organized by various public, physical spaces where women have used fashion to create change through political representation, performance, social activism, education, or athletics.

For Parkins (2008), fashion is a site where human subjectivity and objects like clothing are intimately entangled with the construction of meaning. The fashion exhibition crystallizes

this meaning into a visual presentation that does not seek to disentangle the complexity of subject, object, and identity. Kimberlé Crenshaw, legal scholar and civil rights advocate, has noted that scholarly critical analysis has produced understandings of identity that consider intersectionality (Brown, 2018). Intersectionality refers to the fact that one aspect of identity – for example, gender – cannot be separated from other subject positions like age, religion, nationality, ethnicity, or class, to name a few (Kaiser 2012, p. 35). As Kaiser has pointed out, the points of intersection between identities are always "in motion," and "style-fashion-dress affords opportunities to connect the dots across a variety of subject positions and, indeed, to explore ways of being and becoming as subjects in the world in ways that may be otherwise difficult to articulate (as in words)" (Kaiser, 2012, pp. 36-37).

From a contemporary intersectional feminist theoretical perspective, *WE* curators were challenged with representing the U.S. or the women's suffrage movement, which has been criticized for excluding non-white women. The curators decided suffragette dress was an important early example of collective expression worn on the street, and analogous in many ways with the recent pink pussy hat worn during the 2017 Women's Marches. These two movements brought to light shortcomings of first- and second-wave feminist movements, which impacted the presentation and reception of contemporary iterations of feminism in the exhibit. The curators used a 1916 sash and bodice worn by a Cleveland suffragette to represent this moment in fashion history; however, interpretive text that accompanied the ensemble raised the question of who was empowered by this ensemble. Amidst continued voter suppression, and the fact that some women in the U.S. were not granted the right to vote in 1919 (for example, Native American women, incarcerated women, etc.), the ensemble enabled intersectional critique. The outcomes of class discussions, as displayed in the setup of the exhibition and subsequent

publications, are contributions to fashion theory: they put forward concrete suggestions of how key concepts such as empowerment can, and maybe should, be understood and challenged. In the development of *WE*, concepts found in the exhibit's title were considered as fluid, unfixed, and complex, with the understanding that through the exhibit these ideas could be reconsidered and reimagined, hopefully sparking critical reflection on the part of exhibit visitors.

Criterion B: Research Methods

    Evaluation questions. How were the pieces on display researched? Are the sources retrievable? If using the clothing of living people, have they been consulted and are their voices "heard" in the exhibit through video, audio, or textual means? Is there evidence of established research methods such as member checks, historical methods using primary sources, oral history collection, peer review, triangulation, or thick description? Is the curatorial process transparent?

    Analysis. Design research and creative scholarship may not follow an established research process like those found in other disciplines (such as quantitative or deductive research methods); therefore, it is incumbent upon the researcher to demonstrate the *rigor* of their research process. Challenges in demonstrating the rigor of design research and creative scholarship are (a) reproducibility and (b) ability to evaluate the credibility of the work, which can be mitigated by the use of "transparent, accurate, complete, and reflective" source material (Bye, 2010, p. 207). Alternatively, rigor may be evaluated through the following: peer-review, thick description, member checks, or triangulation.

    In *WE*, an example of rigor can be found in pianist Janine De Lorenzo's necklace. Contacted through internet message by a student on the curatorial team, she offered the necklace along with its backstory. After presentation to the class, the item was selected, De Lorenzo was interviewed, and a member check was conducted for the piece's written description. Through

this member check process, De Lorenzo read the text written by the student curator and offered insight and corrections. This, in addition to the inclusion of direct quotations within the text and the playing of her piano music during the exhibit's opening reception, increased the rigor of the work by providing a way for De Lorenzo's voice to directly be heard. Although research rigor in a fashion exhibition may appear different from the rigor of another discipline, the way the research is presented enables scrutiny of method. The use of direct quotations in text, consultation of other primary sources, member checks that ensure accuracy of interpretation, and thick description or gaining information from multiple sources during the triangulation process can help support the rigor of the work.

Criterion C: Curatorial Selection

Evaluation questions. Is the exhibition cohesive, from a conceptual perspective? Is there a critical and intentional logic to the display order? Is there evidence of ethical selection/display processes? Is the work timely? Is a novel concept, new approach, alternate viewpoint, or (current sentiment/zeitgeist/social concern) being presented? Will the exhibit resonate with a broad audience?

Analysis. Curation involves a type of translation, wherein the curator(s) develop(s) an exhibition of objects they believe represents a theme, concept, or narrative. Their interpretation of objects and the exhibition design (including both object display and flow of exhibit areas) communicate their intent to a viewing audience. The communication must be comprehensible by topical specialists and audiences who may have no background experience with the subject. Therefore, the curation and communications created are important to consider. As costume designer William Ivey Long stated in Jablon-Roberts and Sanders: "Never underestimate the viewing audience." (Jablon-Roberts and Sanders, 2019, p. 46).

Curation involves assigning value when selecting items (Ughetto, 2017) and developing a concept for an exhibition by considering multiple factors including relevance and resonance. In the development process for *WE*, student curators were challenged to present weekly "fashion current events," which stimulated conversations around contemporary fashion topics. From these discussions, students developed a "wish list" for items they felt were timely and reflected the zeitgeist.

After sending out numerous solicitations (many of which went unheeded), curators had the opportunity to include a number of high-profile items including Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's judicial collars and a pair of shoes worn by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez during her primary campaign. The holes in Ocasio-Cortez's shoes were emblematic of how the women's work on the frontline—in her case, campaigning on foot in her district—may cause visible, material degradation of fashion items. Following the 2018 midterm elections and the recent appointments of two new justices to the Supreme Court, both the Ocasio-Cortez campaign shoes and the Ginsburg judicial collars resonated with audiences because of their timeliness in the national political landscape and attracted major media attention.

According to Ughetto (2017), "the material media of an exhibition… are not 'separate' from the scientific reasoning, they are its expression and essential foundation. This is because the scientific content shows itself through a narrative which is itself expressed through objects" (p. 383). These elements, developed by the curator, are important for the development of the exhibition display and communications. The objects are assessed for interpretive value and subsequently visually arranged; it is this display and the accompanying materials that communicate the curator's intent to the viewing audience.

Criterion D: Iterative revisions

Evaluation questions. Where did the original concept begin, and where is it now? How was the exhibit critiqued and revised internally throughout the process? Are there outcomes from the iterative process from which others can gain knowledge?

Analysis. The media interest generated from the inclusion of the Ocasio-Cortez campaign shoes sparked a wide array of public commentary about the objects included in the exhibition, with over 14,000 comments on a Fox News Facebook post alone, and many more thousands on the CNN article that was later translated into Spanish, Greek, Portuguese and Russian. Criticism and questioning in social media and national television heightened the profile of the exhibition and caused the curators to re-evaluate the pieces in the exhibition to determine if any major perspectives or "voices" were left unheard. The term "frontline" for most people evokes the military, and because the curators were committed to a metaphorical interpretation of this word, they had chosen not to include combat military apparel worn on the literal frontline. However, after many thousands of social media comments about the dearth of military uniforms in the exhibit, the curators decided to include a Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) Navy uniform worn Maj. Kate Payne. This uniform represented a complex story that did not actually take place on a military frontline (thus maintaining the metaphorical interpretation of the concept). Maj. Payne served on another kind of frontline: while wearing her uniform she worked in degaussing (protecting Navy men on the literal frontline), and later moved to the frontline of self-healing by amassing a library of spiritual texts which are available to the public through a meditation center she co-founded after retiring from the military in 1967.

Iterative processes are both small and large, and visual methods of documentation such as PowerPoint slides, storyboard sketches, and photographs were used as presentation tools in the

collaborative revision process throughout the semester. Email communications sent between committees demonstrated how the exhibition's theme was altered and conceptualized over time, and adjusted in response to elements beyond curatorial control, such as media output and garment request refusals. Revising and adjusting exhibition design can measure progress, serve as a forum for new ideas, and allow curators to check that the message, theme, or topic they intended to portray is the message being received. Iterative revision is thus one way to ensure fidelity of the source material.

Criterion E: Designed Outcome

Evaluation questions. How are the principles and elements of design considered in the exhibit layout and graphic materials? What are the designed outcomes, and are they cohesive?

Analysis. Basic design principles are the building blocks for the physical display of a fashion exhibition. The exhibition's concept/theme/narrative must be conveyed visually, in the form of graphics and extant objects arranged in three-dimensional space with some kind of way-finding communication. Exhibitions present objects alongside textual work; therefore, the physical space may be evaluated according to the principles and elements of design. More ephemeral aspects of the exhibit may be considered as well. For example, a speech given during an opening reception is designed to communicate a message about the exhibition by one of its contributors. These *in situ* moments may have a profound impact on attendees and can be recorded by audio and video and made retrievable via the internet.

The designed outcomes for *WE* included the exhibition itself, promotional materials (i.e., posters, postcards, and social media posts), a short documentary film, a 45-page guidebook, and website. The guidebook was designed by the graphics team and collaboratively written, featuring facsimiles of photos, manuscripts, and items that could not be physically included in the exhibit

but provided greater context for each piece. The exhibition website was designed to chronicle the exhibit and contains   images, audio, video and other visual content is accessible through a weblink. A short documentary film was created to showcase interviews, speeches, and background shots of the exhibit and its audience, which is also available to view via the exhibit webpage.

As an example from the physical exhibit, "The Stage" vitrine included a cohesive color story of red, black, and white. While color was kept in mind as an aesthetic component of design layout, pieces in specific colors were not directly solicited. It was during the development of a PowerPoint presentation to the class that an emergent color theme of black, white, and red emerged. The physical layout of objects within the case was later designed to best highlight the color balance alongside narrative flow. Black-and-white photographs were used as a partial backdrop across all cases for consistency, with tonality selected to contrast the value and hue of the garments directly in front of them. Display tools, such as pedestals, bust forms, and mannequins, were tested in the case until an aesthetically pleasing result was created.

Fashion exhibitions are visual designs that convey the stories of qualitative, inductive research. The power of the garments researched and included, as well as of garments omitted from the display, ultimately guide the viewer's experience and understanding of the subject. Other design elements, such as color, arrangement of items, choice of backdrops, garment or look groupings, number of display cases, presence or absence of labels and more, may influence the ways such creative work is perceived and used to teach. In every exhibition, these factors contribute to the ways in which a story is told through fashion curation and display.

Criterion F: Accessibility and Retrievability

Evaluation questions. After the physical exhibition has closed, will the designed outcome still be retrievable, and how? Is the exhibit accessible, particularly for individuals living with disabilities or whom cannot physically travel to the exhibition?

Analysis. Fashion exhibitions are ephemeral combinations of extant objects held in physical spaces. While they may travel to other institutions, they are temporary and therefore retrievable by publications (e.g., catalog, exhibit guidebook, etc.), website, or other form of media.

WE was mounted in a display space that is considered accessible according to the Americans with Disabilities Act. Guidebooks, instead of mounted labels (which would only be height-appropriate for some individuals), enabled visitors to read at their own pace and viewing level. Accessibility may also refer to access of material: if the information and outcomes are retrievable (e.g., the website) but not readily accessible (e.g., blocked by firewall), the curatorial scholarship may become more challenging to evaluate. The kinds of knowledge generated during the exhibition development process can provide valuable information to the public, other scholars, members of industry, and others. Throughout the exhibition research, installation, opening, and ongoing presentation, social media has provided an important outlet for conveying research to the public. Not everyone has access to a university library or live in close proximity to the physical exhibition; therefore, social media worked as a democratizing medium to reach wider audiences with our exhibition concept, research findings, and stories of fashion history.

WE has been documented through popular media features, video documentary, a webinar, photography, and an exhibit. In these ways, the ephemeral space of the exhibition was captured and presented to an audience beyond the bounds of the original timeframe. In documenting *WE*, the exhibit has joined the ranks of other well-documented fashion exhibitions in becoming easily

accessible and retrievable online. Further, this action places *WE* in the ranks of the exhibitions originally consulted online by the student curatorial team – in reflecting upon the exhibit and comparing it to others, we demonstrate Boyer's recommendation.

Criterion G: New Knowledge

 Evaluation Question. Does the exhibition contribute new knowledge to the field? Is the concept novel, innovative, or unprecedented?

 Analysis. Through the curatorial research process, knowledge is accessed through primary sources such as notes, manuscripts, correspondence, and etc. Additionally, knowledge can be gleaned from the physical handling of garments or the observations made by a trained eye. For example, construction techniques, materials used, and aesthetics such as color, silhouette, and style can all yield clues into the garment's history and context. New knowledge was developed through the curation of *WE*: backstories were uncovered and histories updated, and connections made between specific pieces and their placement within the exhibition.

 In *WE*, new knowledge was conveyed through the various forms of "frontline fashions." While some garments, like pink pussy hats, were worn purposely to make a statement and convey solidarity, other fashions worn by women on the frontline, like sports uniforms and power suits, *enabled* them to make change. Garments like Cecile Richards' blue dress and blazer were worn when she was on the metaphorical frontline when she testified before congress as president of Planned Parenthood. Items worn while women empowered, educated, and protected others were an important theme: *WE* included a dance shawl made and worn by the queen of the Hupacasath First Nation, who taught dancing and sewing after the cultural genocide of residential schooling, which ended in 1973. Another category of garments showed the wear and tear of being on the frontline, like the worn away soles on the shoes of a female clown with

Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey; these items were not necessarily intended as fashion statements, but they acquired meaning and significance through destruction – something often considered antithetical to fashion and rarely shown in fashion exhibitions, thus making their display novel.

In *WE*, as with all forms of museum display, the positionality of curators and their aims influenced the messages conveyed by their work. Through the process of research, curation, and design, students worked collaboratively toward a curatorial vision. In this way, museum curation can be a productive, disruptive, or transformative method of creative design, research, and teaching.

Conclusion

Creative scholarship has the capacity to offer visually and materially compelling means by which to communicate fashion studies research. Research is, after all, "accessible systematic inquiry" where the communication of design research are tools for the dissemination of creative practice (Bye, 2010, p. 206; Gray & Malins, 2004, p.3). Within a university, "museum exhibits transform scholarship from a private act to a public experience because they reach a wider audience than most journal articles and refereed presentations" (Marcketti et al., 2011, p. 249). In this way, an exhibit curated and developed by university faculty, staff, students, and other volunteers may create a means through which wider audiences learn from the items displayed. Additionally, the visual and textual content generated through the exhibit research and design process will last beyond the life of the display itself.

The process of mounting an exhibit is a form of creative scholarship: what begins as an idea or question goes through a rigorous research process to result in a tactile, material, and

visual form of knowledge that is the fashion exhibition. Through exhibition catalogues, websites, and social media posts, information is made accessible beyond the the physical installation.

University collections are in a unique position to engage the next generation of fashion studies scholars to ask and answer research questions through critical curatorial practice. *WE* provided students with instruction and experience in everything from exhibit development and archival research, to historical garment and artifact handling, networking, visual display techniques, public speaking, photography, writing and peer-editing, production management, cross-team collaboration, and the expertise and fluency that comes with deep immersion in a topic. Therefore, creative scholarship is found through process, the development of a curated exhibit, and the visual and textual artifacts that accompany the exhibit. The amount of labor involved in researching, curating, and mounting a fashion exhibition at a small institution is immense and often budgets are prohibitively small. Furthermore, faculty and students aspiring to be part of academia are evaluated by the research outcomes they have produced, and which must be peer reviewed; therefore, developing a formalized mechanism for evaluating fashion exhibitions as creative curatorial practice is critical to incentivize, promote, and institutionally recognize this important form of scholarship.

Suggestions for Future Research

By reframing our field's perspective on the fashion exhibition, we create space for an important and critical form of design research that can be applied in future exhibitions. Future research might focus on identifying the best forms of digitally archiving and documenting exhibits, improving logistics of traveling exhibitions, incorporation of exhibition design into pedagogy, and development of research methods unique to fashion exhibitions.

As is the case with the development of any evaluation criterion or theoretical framework, credibility is essential. Thus, future research should focus on how to *implement* the peer review process. Should peer reviews be made public through academic journals or at professional conferences? Or should the evaluation process be kept classified as part of tenure dossiers? In order to convey the scholarly significance of fashion exhibitions to university administrators and faculty on tenure and promotion committees, establishing evaluation criteria for peer review is a necessary first step. The next step will be implementation of the peer review process. We hope that this article has inspired our colleagues to engage in this conversation and join us in committing to next steps in developing a formalized process for peer review.

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