

Shared Garments and Forced Choreography

Abstract

Fashion is often described as asserting or reinforcing social or professional bonds, but rarely is such a fixed bond established as when garments physically link one body to another. We may be familiar with shared garments in dramatic costume, as in Chinese dragons or pantomime horses, but there are also examples of everyday garments designed to contain multiple bodies. Examples include Lucy Orta's collective wear, Dana Karwas and Karla Karwas' *Party Dress* worn by five women simultaneously, and Aamu Song and Johan Olin's *Dance Shoes for Father and Daughter*. These garments not only assert relationships between wearers, but make that relationship inescapable by physically binding bodies together. By linking or binding bodies, these shared garments restrict movement, and ensure choreographed motion, forcing the wearers to move as one. This establishes a hierarchy, placing one wearer in control of motion, and others in subservient positions. This paper will discuss the wearing of shared garments, focusing in particular on how forced choreography affects issues of identity, interpersonal relationships, and social hierarchy. It will observe how shared garments may challenge or reinforce ideas about the relationship between fashion and identity, and will explore the social motives behind the design of such garments.

Key Words: Shared garments, collective wear, Lucy Orta, identity, choreography, hierarchy, multitude, social, conformity, difference.

The conflicting idea that clothing can simultaneously assert the need for conformity as well as difference is at the heart of numerous debates about fashion. This essential dialogue is never so vital as in the wearing of shared garments – garments which contain the multiple bodies. Shared garments bind wearers together, in a physical manifestation of interpersonal relationships and group identities. In becoming bound to one another, wearers must sacrifice individual identity, and the associated freedom of movement, so that every action becomes a precisely choreographed collaboration.

Audiences and consumers are not familiar with the shared garment because it has yet to infiltrate fashion. However, there are artefacts which are more commonly encountered, and from which we can learn about how a shared garment may be used and perceived. The Chinese lion or dragon, and pantomime horse, are two relatively common artefacts with similar properties to shared garments. They are both designed to be worn by several people at once. The pantomime horse usually contains two wearers, one playing the role of the head, and the other the hind legs. In Chinese lions, the number of wearers playing the role of the legs is multiplied, often many times. In both cases, one wearer, at the head, takes the

dominant position, while other wearers are subservient. The head guides the body, and the hind legs are forced to follow. That is not to suggest that the wearer at the head is entirely in control of the animal's movement. The animal can be brought to a standstill if just one of the wearers at the rear refuses to cooperate. All of the wearers must work together in a choreographed routine. The act of wearing a pantomime horse or Chinese lion costume is, therefore, an agreement to behave not as an individual but as part of a greater whole. The movement of the wearers must be synchronised. In theatrical performance, where we most commonly encounter these costumes, the costume is presented with the expectation of choreographed motion. The planned, practiced and synchronised motion of the wearers is vital. In particular, the Chinese lion, in dance and (even acrobatic) performance demands that all wearers move in time with one another. This synchronicity is so vital that performers undergo rigorous training in order to meet audience expectations.

One essential difference between the pantomime horse or Chinese lion, and the garments that are the focus of this study, is that the wearers of the lion or horse costume are essentially puppeteers. As Thomas Metzinger observes, 'the two people inside [a pantomime horse]... are the controllers of a puppet, which differs from an ordinary puppet only in that they are inside it rather than outside'.¹ They are not simply wearers, but 'operators'.² A central aim of the puppeteer is to inspire audiences to suspend disbelief to the point that they see a performing animal, rather than two or more people in a costume.³ They sacrifice not only their individual identities, but also their identities as humans, and replace it with that of a fictional animal. Superficially, this seems very different from the aims of the shared garments described in this paper, which do not attempt to conceal the human identity of the wearers. However, many of the consequences of the wearing of a shared costume also arise elsewhere. Issues of dominance and subservience, loss of identity, and the requirement for choreographed motion, are also applicable to other shared garments. The work of Lucy Orta has much in common with Chinese lions, and therefore bridges the divide between these puppet costumes and the other shared garments that will be discussed in this paper.

Lucy Orta's *Nexus Architecture* (1998-2010) is designed to contain multiple bodies, and is described by Orta as 'collective wear'.⁴ In this example, bodysuits are connected with 'tubes of fabric... to form one garment' worn by as many as a hundred people.⁵ The linked individuals form a 'single human chain' or grid, 'sharing a common space'.⁶ The result is a single 'roving beast' that navigates through public spaces in carefully selected locations.⁷ Orta's collective wear is reflective of the loss of 'territory' that has resulted in the 'information era'.⁸ In this era of 'portability', there is no such thing as personal space. We are permanently connected, via our phones and other electronic devices, to other members of society. *Nexus Architecture* is a physical manifestation of those links. It draws attention to the wearers' 'membership of a group', and consequently their 'loss of

self'.⁹ Orta describes how her work challenges 'our understanding of clothes as markers of individual/group differences':

In...Nexus Architecture, clothing becomes the medium through which social links and bonds are made manifest, both literally and metaphorically. The links of zippers and channels, while enhancing the uniformity of the workers' overalls, create androgynous shapes that defy classification by the usual social markers and attempt to give form to the social, not the individual body.¹⁰



Figure 1. Lucy Orta, *Nexus Architecture x 50 Intervention*, Köln 2001.

Source: Studio Orta

As with the Chinese lion, *Nexus Architecture* is designed for performance rather than everyday wear, and that performance is carefully choreographed. Although Orta's use of the term 'collective' to describe her garments implies equality, and common interest or aims, performances of *Nexus Architecture* demonstrate the difficulty that wearers have adhering to this ideal. Joanne Entwistle draws attention to how Orta's garment responds to the contradiction that George Simmel earlier identified as driving all of fashion: the need to conform, and

the conflicting desire to express individuality.¹¹ Orta's overalls are identical, and as with uniforms and other clothes that reinforce group identity, they signify adherence to a 'social contract'. This conformity is further enforced by the links that bind the wearers together, and so Orta's work aims to impose conformity far beyond that which we normally encounter in fashion (where ensembles tend to be chosen 'in congruence with the fashion trend,' rather than in strict adherence¹²). However, we see reflected in fashion, the desire to be 'both part of a larger social group and yet not to be so bound up in that group that they possess no individuality'.¹³ The desire for differentiation, and competition, is manifested in the different fashion choices made by individuals. Performances of *Nexus Architecture* draw attention to the conflict between the conformity imposed by Orta, and the wearers' desire for individuality. In each performance, Orta takes the role of choreographer, marshalling the wearers into place with a whistle so that the performance has the air of a military formation. The separate parts of the garment are usually occupied by volunteers. One volunteer, journalist Kieran Long, describes his experience of this process.¹⁴ Long describes a feeling of 'compromised subjectivity'. By becoming part of a strictly choreographed crowd, he felt that he had lost his personal identity and even his humanity, becoming, in his words, 'points in a geometric arrangement'. This imposed 'uniformity' felt unnatural and unsettling to many of the 40 volunteers in this performance at the V&A to the extent that many rebelled, contravening Orta's commands. 'Factions formed' and, in quiet protest, several volunteers began to 'deliberately subvert' the performance. Several chose to sit rather than stand, or to deliberately face the wrong way. Meanwhile, others were keen to remain compliant, and adopted the role of what Long describes as 'de facto prefects'. In this way, a social hierarchy emerged within the group, whereby several volunteers became dominant and compliant leaders, and others either subservient followers or defiant rebels. However much Orta's shared garment imposed uniformity, this hierarchy emerged to challenge the status quo.

Where *Nexus Architecture* diverges from the theme of shared garments is in its capacity to be dismantled. The garment 'comes apart into pieces of modular textiles', and is thereby 'transformed into individual' garments.¹⁵ The garment does not enforce a permanent connection between wearers, but instead offers them a choice between connectedness or independence. Wearers may detach themselves from the group in order to regain their individual identity. Similar possibilities are offered by the work of other artists and designers, including Tess Giberson, whose *Connection* (Spring 2004) allows strings of individuals to be connected by buttoning panels on their skirts. By offering this choice, Orta and Giberson may be considered not to have fully committed to the idea of the shared garment. In both these works, individuals have distinctly separate bodies. They may be linked, but are not bound to the extent that they become one body, and may choose to abandon their fellow wearers if they so desire. However, it is significant that this is a choice

that must be consciously made. The mere possibility and novelty of these physical connections encourages wearers to explore their relationships with others. The decision to detach from the group becomes a significant assertion of independence and difference. The bodies contained within *Nexus Architecture* are not simply one of the masses, but active social subjects. Following Hardt and Negri's concept of the *multitude*, they are not one single group, but plural. 'Unlike the masses or the mob, multitude is not fragmented and disconnected but consists of active social subjects that can act together'.¹⁶

This multiplicity is highlighted by one of the essential features of Orta's garment. The links which connect the wearers' many bodies together also serve the purpose of separating them. Each link – a fixed length – ensures distance between one wearer and the next. The wearers are connected, but held apart. In the virtual social networks that inspired Orta's creation, the constant contact with virtual peers is contrasted with physical isolation in the real world. In this garment too, wearers are alone in a sea of others.

Other shared garments, intended for fewer wearers than Orta's, include Karwas and Karla Karwas' *Party Dress*. *Party Dress* is a 'a shared, bustled garment' that is worn by five individuals simultaneously.¹⁷ The dress is connected at the skirt, which is large enough that it may be unfolded to 'create a temporary, inhabitable structure... with room for spectators beneath the fabric'.¹⁸ Although the Karwas sisters appear more concerned with the 'dialogue between... architecture and... fashion', there is much to be said about the roles of the wearers of this shared garment.¹⁹ The wearing of *Party Dress* places all five wearers in a subservient role. By being part of the structure, they are excluded from the events that take place inside the venue. With their heads positioned on the outside, they may not even watch the festivities. When the structure is erected, the wearers are not even able to face each other, and so lose every social contact, even with those to whom they are physically bound. In order to enable the social contact between others inside the venue, the wearers' own social needs are denied. It is possible to draw comparisons to the servants who obediently support sedan chairs while their masters relax in a privileged and enclosed space within. But more than simply being made subservient, these wearers are even dehumanised to the extent that they become objects. They become the tent poles or pillars holding the ceiling of the venue aloft. Hierarchy is also established and/or reinforced by Aamu Song and Johan Olin's *Tanssitossut* ('Dance Shoes for Father and Daughter') (2006). These red felt shoes resemble traditional Finnish boots, with a second, smaller pair attached above. The shoes are intended to be worn by 'a father and young daughter... together', with the father filling the main part of the shoes, and the daughter standing on top.²⁰ These shoes force the wearers into a traditional couples' dance position, with both wearers facing one another and one wearer, the father, taking the lead. This position reinforces the control that the father already has over his daughter, placing him in a dominant position. Moreover, the instability caused by the daughter's pose

requires the father to support her further by holding her hands, thereby further reinforcing the traditional supportive role of the father. In this pose, the wearers are forced into a choreographed routine. The father's movements must be mirrored by those of the daughter, who is forced to follow his lead as her feet are firmly attached to his.

Like many other garments, these shoes assert identity by highlighting relationships to others. The role of the man, as a father, is asserted by the physical bond to his daughter. Likewise, the identity of the girl as a daughter is communicated in the physical bond to her father. However, it is important to note that these roles are dictated not entirely by the shoes, but by the name given by their creators. These shoes could, in practice, be worn by any couple whose feet differ significantly in size. They could, for example, be worn by mother and son. It is only because the creators' have labelled them as 'dance shoes for father and daughter' that they reinforce the traditional familial and gender roles.

Choreographed movement is also required by Rosemarie Trockel's *Schizo-Pullover* (1988). Unlike those garments addressed so far, Trockel's piece does not establish a particular hierarchy. This artefact is consciously democratic. Both wearers occupy an equal position, each having one neck hole and one armhole. In this position, every action must be a collaboration. Actions must be performed as a choreographed motion by the left hand of one wearer and the right hand of the other. In this way, an everyday action that would normally be carried out by an individual becomes a collaborative event, which must be carefully planned and synchronised.

Trockel's garments is generally depicted not with two different wearers, but with two superimposed versions of herself. The name too, *Schizo-Pullover*, describes a garment designed to contain, and restrain, the conflicting desires of two parts of the same whole. As with all the shared garments presented here, this requires negotiation and agreement. As in *Schizo-Pullover*, *Party Dress*, *Tanssitossut*, and *Nexus Architecture*, behaviour must be modified to adhere to the demands of the group.

In analysing Lucy Orta's 'collective wear', Joanne Entwistle observes that 'the usual differences and distances between physically bounded bodies [are] overcome' thereby introducing the notion that the everyday separation of bodies is undesirable: an obstacle to be conquered or 'overcome'.²¹ It has been well established elsewhere that clothing often serves the purpose of uniting members of social and professional groups, generating and reinforcing sense of shared identity.²² If we are so driven by the desire to establish physical connections with others, why is it the case that shared garments are so rare? Why are they reserves for displays and catwalks? There are, of course, practical concerns. The independent actions that form essential parts of everyday life are incompatible with garments that bond bodies together. Although they reinforce desirable membership of a group, shared garments do not allow for the degree of independence which we

take for granted. As discussed earlier, Entwistle observes that shared garments enforce collective behaviour without allowing for individuality. The expression of individuality is, at least in Western society, a primary function of fashion.²³ Another primary function of clothing is the preservation of modesty; clothing functions to protect our bodies from the prying eyes of others, and from unintended physical contact in crowded spaces.²⁴ Shared garments require the wearers' bodies to be exposed to one another. This invites an uncomfortable level of physical intimacy.

Despite being awkward to wear, shared garments do serve an important purpose. They provide the opportunity to consider the body, and the clothes we wear, as expressions of our sociality. For the wearers, a shared garment provides opportunities to explore connections with others. For the designer, it is a means of articulating tension between the individual and social sphere.

Notes

¹ Robert Kirk, 'How is Consciousness Possible?' in *Conscious Experience*, ed. Thomas Metzinger (Lawrence: Allen Press, 1995), 397.

² Robert Kirk, *Raw Feeling: a philosophical account of the essence of consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 115.

³ Steve Tillis, *Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet: puppetry as theatrical art* (Westport, CT: Greenwood press, 1992), 48.

⁴ Joanne Milani, 'Lucy Orta: Global Gear', *Studio Orta*, 2001, accessed 21 April, 2011, http://www.studio-orta.com/media/text_47_file.pdf.

⁵ Bradley Quinn, *Techno Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 23.

⁶ Mark Sanders, 'Nexus Architecture x 50 Intervention Köln', *Studio Orta*, 2002, accessed 26 May 2011, http://studio-orta.com/artwork_fiche.php?fk=&fs=10&fm=0&fd=0&of=5.

⁷ *Tactical Design Collective* [blog], 'Nexus Architecture by Studio Orta', blog entry by Jonathan, 7 February, 2011, <http://tacticaldesign.mit.edu/archives/58>.

⁸ Lucy Orta, interviewed in Andrew Bolton, *The Supermodern Wardrobe* (London: V&A, 2004), http://www.studio-orta.com/media/text_38_file.pdf.

⁹ Orta, interviewed in Bolton, *The Supermodern Wardrobe*; Mark Sanders, 'Nexus Intervention with architecture students from the Technischen Universität Berlin,' *Studio Orta*, 2009, accessed 26 May 2011, http://www.studio-orta.com/artwork_fiche.php?fk=&fs=0&fm=5&fd=0&of=7.

¹⁰ Lucy Orta, 'Questioning Identity,' in *Aware: Art Fashion Identity*, ed. Gabi Scarbi (Bologna : Damiani, 2011), 36.

¹¹ Joanne Entwistle, 'Body Boundaries,' exhibition catalogue for the *9th Havana Biennale*, Cuba 2006, accessed 25 March 2011, http://www.studio-orta.com/media/text_74_file.pdf

- ¹² Christopher M. Miller, Shelby H. McIntyre, and Murali K. Mantrala, 'Toward Formalizing Fashion Theory,' *Journal of Marketing Research* 30, no. 2, (May, 1993): 143, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3172824>
- ¹³ Barnard, Malcolm, *Fashion as Communication* (London: Routledge, 1996), 11.
- ¹⁴ Kieran Long, 'Nexus Architecture', *ICON*, 016 (October 2004), http://www.iconeye.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2688:nexus-architecture--icon-016--october-2004.
- ¹⁵ Quinn, *Techno Fashion*, 20.
- ¹⁶ Lind Maria (2007) 'The Collaborative Turn,' in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands*, eds. J Billing, M. Lind, L. Nilsson (London: Black Dog, 2001), 18.
- ¹⁷ Museum of Science, 'Projects', *Seamless*, 2007, accessed 26 January 2011, <http://seamless.sigtronica.org/projects.html>.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Lloyd Alter, 'Party Dress: The Ultimate in Movable Architecture', *Treehugger*, 2008, accessed 26 January, 2011, http://www.treehugger.com/files/2008/02/party_dress_the.php#.
- ²⁰ Aamu Song, 'Tanssitoussut', *Sauma [Design as Cultural Interface]*, accessed 26 January, 2011, <http://www.saumadesign.net/danceshoes.htm>
- ²¹ Entwistle, 'Body Boundaries'
- ²² Most notably, Georg Simmel, 'Fashion', *International Quarterley* 10 (1904): 131, accessed 14 June, 2011, http://www.modetheorie.de/fileadmin/Texte/s/Simmel-Fashion_1904.pdf
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Elizabeth Rouse, *Understanding Fashion* (Oxford: BSP Professional Books, 1989), 8.

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