

CHAPTER NINE

HIGH RISK DRESSING BY THE COLLECTIVE KNOWN AS THE FASHION DESIGN COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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We were concerned with the status of fashion, the lack of cultivation and appreciation of style in Australia, the perceived superiority of imports, the overwhelming need to export Australian design effectively within two years. We wanted to assert that Australian designers, being more or less freelance and independent, tend to evolve fairly idiosyncratically, untrammelled by any reference to fashion conventions or allegiance to fashion Houses. They retain a viability and manoeuvrability that would not be possible in Tokyo, Paris or New York.¹ (Fashion Design Council manifesto, 1984)

The Fashion Design Council (FDC) 1983-1994 was a collective enterprise set up to represent independent Australian fashion design. The membership organisation aimed to promote alternatives to mainstream clothing forms, to build and sustain a vibrant culture of fashion in Australia. The initiative to support emerging designers and their associated activities grew out of a rabble of committed individuals drawn together by the idea of fashion. Led by Kate Durham, Robert Buckingham and Robert Pearce, the trio inspired by the proliferation of independent fashion activities in Melbourne, suggested forming a union of practitioners to assist in securing financial backing and profile. Significantly the FDC relied on partial financial support and credibility through ongoing relationships with both State and Federal Governments, creating tension between the expressive nature of an underground or experimental movement with authorised networks Thornton 1995). Although the collective was furnished with an official sounding title, it was not a

¹ *Fashion-able newsletter*. Melbourne: FDC, 1984.

government statutory body or an industry association. Indeed the creative powerbase operated outside the auspices of an official organisation. However the tactic to give greater voice to independent fashion in an organisational framework albeit a collective one was ambitious and ostensibly contradictory. Although empowerment of independent fashion practitioners through collective activities encouraged diverse outcomes and access to a wider community, it inevitably involved an authoritarian framework, selection processes and certain accountabilities, which lead to friction amongst members and those operating outside of the group.

Yet the formation of a Council was an astute strategy to empower the independent practitioner through strength in numbers. Collective representation for emerging designers facilitated opportunities to disseminate diverse fashion practices outside existing commercial models, and as a result potentially expand conventional understandings of fashion. Therefore the collective performed both as a member's based organisation and multidisciplinary agent. The group simultaneously supported members through various activities and services while successfully merging with the larger design community, interacting with creative practices from fine art, music, architecture, dance, communication to industrial design in the production of events and situations. As a result the FDC activated networks of creative and participatory practices, which were united by diverse expressions of fashion.

Buckingham recalled:

So to some extent fashion was important ... fashion being something, which the culture was throwing up and it was about people expressing themselves through fashion. There was a strong sense that fashion was just another way of expressing yourself. Some people did it through graphic design and some people did it through music and some people did it through film or architecture.²

In studying the role of the collective as a model to sustain and promote independent fashion practices in Australia, I begin the chapter by addressing the participatory nature of fashion and the complex set of relations proposed by the creation of fashion.

² Robert Buckingham Group discussion at the Frances Burke Textile Centre, Melbourne: RMIT University, 13 July, 2005.

Yuniya Kawamura's study *Fashion-ology* (2005) considered the intricate network of activities that communicate fashion. She identified "social production" as a means to describe the participatory actions that result from community engagement with fashion in production and consumption. For instance she recognised the distinction between forms of fashion expression, defining material and immaterial forms of fashion marking the difference between clothing production and fashion production. Kawamura (2005, p. 39) argued:

While the act of producing clothing is about creation and construction of material forms, fashion production embraced the network of people proposing and expressing the idea of fashion.

This study explores how FDC events and situations were instrumental in encouraging a vigorous expression of fashion that grew out of multidisciplinary practices, group dynamics and mass gatherings.

Production of Fashion

In the 1980s the communication modes of magazine, catwalk parade or nightclub spectacle articulated the changing conditions of both fashion producer and consumer. In particular the magazine was vital in publicising diversification and popularisation of creative production, unfolding the changing relationship between art, commerce and mass culture. The emergence of new "style" magazines like the British publication *i-D* and *The Face* were influential in Melbourne (the latest issues were air-freighted and purchased at great cost by local designers and fashion followers) provided an accessible means to consume the latest fashion ideas coming from British youth culture (McRobbie 1998). *i-D* documented street style and formed an eclectic social community attracted to following the most diverse and individualistic dress styles (Jones 2001). *i-D* reflected a shift in understanding fashion, which drew inspiration from the individual's dressing creations rather than the known designer. In documenting and acknowledging the potency of street style (Hebdige 1979; Maffesoli 1996; Jones 2001) the magazine became an inspiration for those interested in participating in fashion removed from standard industry models of fashion production and consumption.

The Face also conversed with a set of wider cultural practices with articles and images juxtaposing fashion with music, art, design, performance, nightclubs and politics (McRobbie 1998). The magazine identified or gave focus to particular movements or urban tribes that

defined the era, privileging the unknown over the well-known celebrity designer or commercial enterprise. Being represented in these magazine forums was aspirational, acknowledging street credibility and style leadership. Many local designers for example desired to follow the notoriety established by Australian expatriate Leigh Bowery (1961-1994) with his outrageous dressing style, made famous by nightclub appearances and reportage in style magazines. *The Face* assisted in establishing Bowery's reputation, enthusiastically unearthing his first collection "Pakis from outer-space" identifying "the new glitterati" style (White 1984). Bowery's extreme appearances and body distortions were followed throughout the 1980s in both *i-D* and *The Face* magazine. His fashion practice was indicative of the DIY (Do it yourself) movement having rejected formal design education and customary dressing habits. In the early 1980s Bowery abandoned his fashion degree at RMIT University, Melbourne before completion, desiring to expand his sense of fashionable identity and dressing practices from the glamorous nightclub scene of London.

Local magazines documented the shift in consumption and communication of creative practices. There was an emerging sense of connectivity through appearance and experience through DIY blurring distinctions between creator and consumer, practices drawn from the punk ideology of self-expression and self-organisation. DIY in the 1970s marked "anarchic ambitions of Punk", giving power to the people to make music, design and art without support from mainstream culture or industry related to "the potential to invent one's own culture" (McDermott 2007). As a result creative enterprises developed with little monetary support, operated outside existing organisational systems or processes, a design approach moving away from mass production to support local rather than global identity.

Fashion became part of a broader cultural understanding, broadcast in the context of other cultural products and creative practices. For example in the special 1982 February edition of the international art magazine *Artforum* editors Ingrid Sischy and Germano Celant proposed an expanded visual world and references. Their placement of fashion on the front cover of an art magazine was controversial and reflected the shifting relationship of fashion drawing parallels with other artistic practices in the post-modern construct of recycling historical styles (Sischy 2004). The cover displayed an arresting depiction of contemporary fashion, the model dressed in Issey Miyake's latest collection wore a confronting combination

of traditional and contemporary styles, a rattan and bamboo woven bod strikingly contrasted with a polyurethane skirt (Fig. 9-1).³



Fig. 9-1. The cover of Arts magazine Tension featured the clothing design Desbina Collins. FDC Collection, Design Archives, RMIT University.

³ *Artforum* 1982 Ingrid Sischy and Germano Celant wrote in their editorial: tradition of *Artforum* is not to limit its territory to one visual world, and the boundaries of its coverage have fluctuated in order to maintain a fluidity toward, discussion of, the very definition of art. This issue seeks to confront artmaking retains its autonomy as it enters mass culture at the blurred boundary of a commerce, and... popular art".

Similarly the Australian arts culture magazine *Tension*⁴ supported locally generated work, expressed synergies across various creative practices. The cover of issue no. 3 1983 for example portrayed two models dressed in “party” clothes by Australian designer Desbina Collins, luxurious materials of feathers and beading are dramatically posed against a stark concrete background. Fashion content was juxtaposed with articles concerned with writer Patrick White, musician Nick Cave, painter Imants Tillers, architect Peter Corrigan and designers Biltmoderne. *Artforum* and *Tension* magazines recognised the potential of clothing as a powerful form of expression to convey the concerns of a particular time and situation across disciplines, set the background for cultivating a fashion based collective. Kate Durham observed that:

Clothing was becoming an issue a topic ‘High Risk dressing’ was a phrase that came into use at this most volatile period in the middle of 1983. We (Robert Pearce, Bob Buckingham and myself ... attempted to produce a fashion film using the title “High Risk Dressing” as it seemed to have a peculiar and particular relevance to the kinds of confrontational clothing being produced for our times and our situation (*Fashion-able broadsheet*, 1985).

Significantly the FDC instigators Kate Durham, Robert Buckingham and Robert Pearce were not fashion designers. Yet their backgrounds and interests were aligned to fashion through association with events and their own creative practices. Pearce worked in communication design, while Durham was a jeweller and Buckingham studied law and arts but was interested in entrepreneurial activities. Their allegiance developed out of a desire to publicise the growth of independent Melbourne fashion. Initially the trio sought to increase access to fashion events by producing the film *High Risk dressing*, which documented an alternative fashion parade held at the Seaview Ballroom in St.Kilda orchestrated by fashion events group Party architecture⁵ run by Julie Purvis and Gillian Burt (Barden 1983).

The term “High Risk” proposed possibilities for fresh forms of creative expression. Moving away from familiar, conventional models of the commercial fashion industry lead by formally trained designers or industry benchmarks proven by levels of production and international recognition. Established understandings of local fashion were challenged, reverting to an anarchic mix of practices, informed by the culture of DIY (Do it

⁴ *Tension* magazine (1983-1991) produced in Melbourne. *Artforum* magazine.

⁵ Name taken from noted American “party architect”, Clive David.

yourself) and the power of individual style. "High Risk Dressing" implied possible conditions of failure and danger, hinted at potentially threatening dress circumstances and likely liabilities for commercial partners. Yet "High Risk Dressing" was also a desirable tactic, one aimed at recognising emergence of particular local practices, which were sometimes confronting. The phrase intentionally proposed an oppositional stance, which provoked and ridiculed the fashion industry. Describing independent fashion in this way invited fostering multiple expressions of dress and appearance and encouraged an appreciation for fashion production without strict boundaries (Melly 1970). The term published extensively in the media was an enabler, drawing attention to the collective.

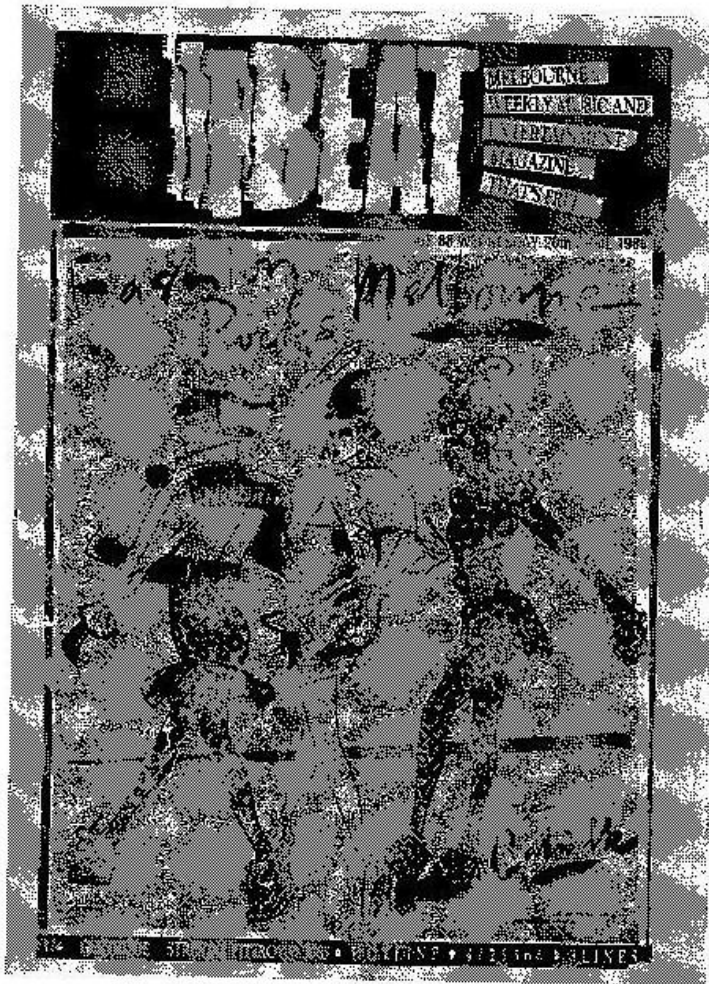


Fig. 9-2. Robert Pearce, "Fashion Rocks Melbourne", Cover Beat magazine, issue 88, 1988. FDC Collection, Design Archives, RMIT University.

The FDC grew out of the premise of “High Risk Dressing”. Supporters through extensive lobbying of government agencies and industry bodies were determined to receive endorsement for a fashion group sitting outside existing design or trade organisations. Durham, Pearce and Buckingham arranged meetings with government bodies, wrote formal applications to the Ministry of the Arts stating their intention to form a lobby group or powerbase for independent design. The well-known Melbourne architect Peter Corrigan suggested the group should adopt a powerful name to identify the new collective. The strategic selection of word/s to represent the collective would assist in the organisation’s profile and ability to access and broker government and business support. Corrigan advised the founders to “Call yourself something *fucking* serious—you’re not going to get sponsorship from public and private bodies if you call yourself something like *Pained Lizard*, they’re not going to want to know about you. Call yourself something that sounds authoritative”.⁶ The Fashion Design Council of Australia known as the FDC delivered a title of authority and confidence (Jennings 2000). From its inception the designation gave the organisation credibility and substance, which facilitated access to official bodies. As a result the FDC was able to successfully lobby government. The collective cleverly accessed official organisational mechanisms to support the growing entity of independent designers and produce a range of diverse and often risky public events and enterprises (Fig. 9-2).

In contrast the official Australian industry lobby group the Fashion Industry Association (FIA) represented established designers and companies. The FIA staged the annual Lyrebird awards, which recognised and promoted well-known and commercially successful enterprises that concentrated upon mass-producing clothing. The FDC was uninterested in award systems, instead concentrating on developing projects and initiatives, which facilitated designers cooperating together with employment and entrepreneurial opportunities activated through shared social and creative enterprises. However the FDC fervently engaged in debates about the future directions of the Australian fashion industry, investigating potential new markets offered by emerging designers, at the same time testing diverse ways to broaden the community’s understanding and experiences of fashion (Healy 2006).

⁶ Quoted in Meredith Parslow, “Fashionable politics”, ChaCha Declan, p. 18.

After successful lobbying the FDC secured start-up funding from the Victorian State Government and the Australia Council⁷, with an initial \$4,000 grant to cover administration costs. However additional funds were raised through membership fees set at \$15.00 for non-professional members and \$25.00 for practicing designers. Benefits promoted to prospective members included opportunities to participate in collective events, and professional development. Each member received a regular newsletter, entitled "fashion-babble". The newsletter was a key mechanism to recruit new members, inform existing members and broadcast to funding bodies the activities of the group. Although written in a tongue-in-cheek style each newsletter earnestly recalled the group manifesto and fastidiously compiled the group's history with a commentary and timeline of major events or milestones.

The FDC manifesto was both an internal and public declaration reflecting the goals and intentions of the body. In joining the collective the members committed to an allegiance with local fashion design and producing an alternative to standard fashion practices:

to the development of the art of fashion design, to the individualistic, the idiosyncratic, the experimental, the new and provocative, both in its wearable and unwearable form...separate to the conventions of mainstream and commercial fashion, the European tradition, the stranglehold of fashion houses.

The declaration of fashion independence for young designers offered an incitement to secede from mainstream fashion industry practices of "bland middle ground" to collectively support like-minded individuals in new affiliations of cooperative/collective/progressive enterprise. Therefore the formation of a lobby group to support young designers instilled confidence and credibility to designers and artists operating in outside conventional industry models. For instance the fine artist Rosslynd Piggott interviewed in *Tension* expressed shifts in her practice for the Fashion 83 parade, "Dressing to be uncomfortable is a concept that has disappeared and I wanted to create something which no-one ever sees" (Barden 1983, p. 19). Representation of the "off-mainstream" fashion creator was targeted to identify different models for circulation, and reception of local style. Local magazines were intrinsic in developing independent fashion by establishing a place for individual style to be disseminated and followed.

⁷ The Australia Council is an arts funding and advisory body of the Australian Federal Government.

Fashion-babble, the FDC newsletter, documented group activities and publicised opportunities for members; the publication showed the potential of individual practices working together. However, recognition of collective agency to sustain emerging creative practices was not exclusive to the FDC. In particular the work of Crowd productions, the trans-disciplinary design and communication practice of Michael Trudgeon, Jane Joyce and Andrew Maine co-founded in 1983, followed similar principles, working with collective projects including alternate magazines that placed fashion and design in a broader cultural context (Joyce & Trudgeon 1985' Maynard 2001). For instance the pioneering Crowd publication *Fast Forward* 1978-1982, reproduced contemporary music, recorded on cassette, to expose independent Australian bands without a record deal or established audiences. The magazine was instrumental in introducing bands like Nick Cave's *Birthday Party*, *The Go-Betweens* and *Laughing Clowns* to the community, was accompanied by editorial often concerned with aspects of fashionable style. *Fast Forward* tapped into the potential of using the magazine genre to unleash the unknown musician/artist/designer allowing audiences to witness diversity of styles and artistic differences.

Crowd magazine 1983-1985 focused upon design and culture connected with FDC activities by sharing both a collective organisational structure and mission to extend dialogues about contemporary design, artistic and cultural practices. Established with backing from the Victorian Government's Ministry of Employment and training, *Crowd* magazine generated opportunities for self-expression for unemployed youth, receiving funds allocated to creative practitioners operating cooperative ventures (Joyce & Trudgeon 1983). The magazine expressed a global identity expressing recent directions of style from the FDC alongside the latest collection reports and commentary from the emerging fashion centres of Tokyo and London. Significantly the first edition was distributed internationally and published in English, German and Japanese. Therefore FDC activities and events were placed in a broader context showing the rise of experimental fashion production and consumption.

The latest FDC catwalk parade was reviewed alongside commentary about new designer collections from London Fashion week or practices of retail aesthetics from Comme des Garçons in Tokyo. *Crowd* magazine communicated urban styles of Melbourne and Sydney, holding regular local street style competitions to recognised individual local styles and published a directory of emerging designers contact details (Joyce &

Trudgeon 1983) to facilitate access to small scale enterprise. Synergy between Crowd and FDC activities was heightened by location, where participant's practices crossed over into both enterprises. Significantly the Crowd publications office was housed in the same building as the FDC, situated in the Stalbridge Chambers at 435-443 Collins Street, Melbourne. From 1982-1988 the building became an extraordinary creative hub for contemporary design, where hairdressers, filmmakers, artists, architects, solicitors and fashion designers including FDC members Desbina Collins, Martin Grant, Tamasine Dale and Gavin Brown worked in close proximity to each other.

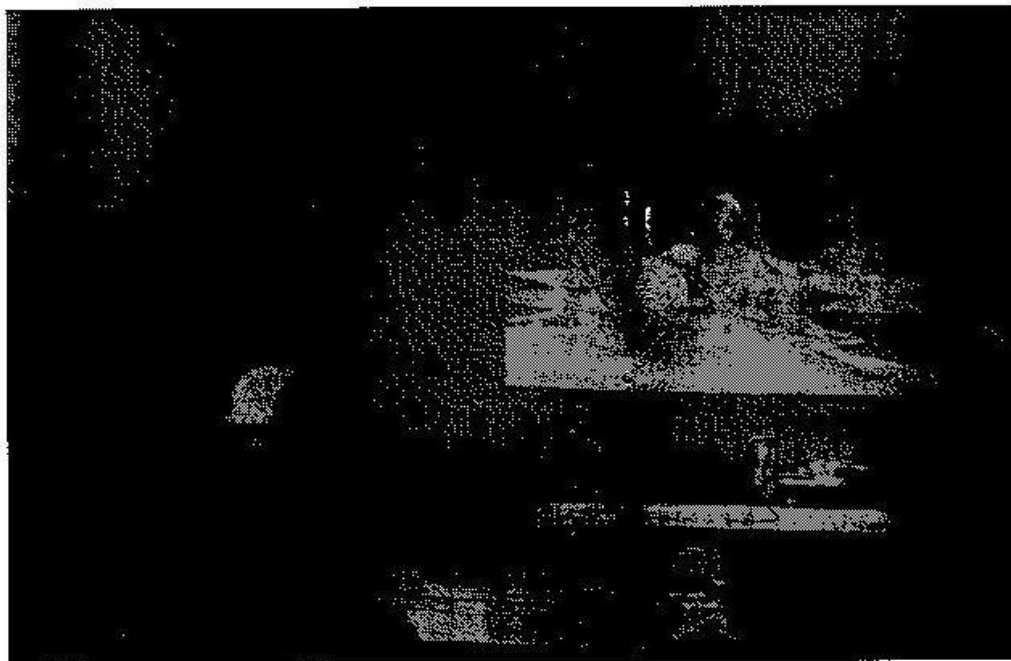


Fig. 9-3. Viewing FDC film footage at Craft Victoria, Melbourne. On the scene is a garment designed by Rosslynd Piggott from Party Architecture 1983, film from the FDC Collection, Design Archives, RMIT University.

Intrinsic to FDC workings was the drawing together of people participating in fashion activities. As discussed earlier the FDC platform declared a desire to foster multiple forms of dress and appearance, thereby promoting the status of fashion by cultivating an appreciation for these forms. The FDC embraced emerging practitioners who were not informed by formal design education or industry mechanisms like fashion designer

Martin Grant⁸ who was self-taught. Hundreds of activities were orchestrated, concomitantly expressing fashion through illustration, photography, film, performance, installation and theoretical guises, consumed via catwalk parades, diverse and thought provoking exhibitions, retail environments, particular events embedded in nightclub culture, the music scene, or business (Fig. 9-3). Exhibitions sited fashion within gallery contexts. The Self Serve exhibition held at Christine Abrahams Gallery Melbourne, curated by Alasdair MacKinnon placed fashion in the commercial art gallery space, began to introduce new ways of fashion engaging in fine art practices of display and installation craft. Special events were organised from international/expatriates such as the dance performance *No Fire Escape from Fashion* staged by Leigh Bowery and Michael Clarke & Co, reinforcing the inspirational and often confrontational nature of performance design (Fig. 9-4).



Fig. 9-4. Robert Pearce, invitation *No Fire Escape from Fashion!* Design Archives, RMIT University.

⁸ Martin Grant (born Melbourne 1966) began designing fashion at 15, he is now based in Paris showing in the RTW collections.

In 1989 the FDC opened its retail shop in Collins Street Melbourne, to represent members displayed either on racks or in focused exhibitions. The shop was a vehicle for to present member's first collections, mentor designers in commercial practices and test the market. It became a focal point for the collective, creating a constant interface with the community. Unfortunately the retail extension of the FDC was short-lived, closing after three years due to unfavourable market conditions and vagaries of business.

Catwalk Parade

Although the FDC was a small enterprise it became known for broadcasting large-scale events specifically catwalk parades. The fashion parade was a highly charged vehicle for showing the raw energy of local design. For the catwalk was a site of wonderment, unleashing a multidisciplinary platform where the spectacle enthralled the audience through a potent mix of theatre, performance, design and architecture. Fashion historian Lydia Kamitsis described the fashion parade phenomenon "as an exceptional moment ... It had to reflect a state of mind and deliver a message. Over and above the attraction of the clothes that were being staged, the clothes had to capture the attention of the public and dazzle the senses" (Kamitsis 2010, p. 93).

Therefore the production of 8 major parades from 1984-1989, *Fashion '84: Heroic Fashion*, *Fashion '85: Revolt into Style*, *Fashion '87: Parade!* *Nescafe Fashion '88* (Melbourne and Sydney), *Nescafe Fashion '89* (Melbourne and Sydney) inevitably established the FDC critically. The fashion parade was recognised as the major collective device for profiling FDC members and associates drawing attention to independent fashion in the wider community (de Teliga 1989; Cochrane 1991; Burton & Worth 1996).

The first FDC parade was greatly anticipated, entitled *Fashion 84: Heroic Fashion* the ambitious undertaking represented 40 artists and designers selected from the membership, showing an impressive array of 300 outfits. The parade promoted as the largest fashion event ever staged in Australia, was a constructive marketing ploy to draw attention to an event where designers and creative practitioners were relatively unknown. However this was an awkward premise, journalist Deborah Thomas was unconvinced "undoubtedly the Biggest-Ever-Single-Fashion-event-Yet-

Seen-In-Australia” So what? Queensland’s Big Pineapple⁹ is the biggest single pineapple yet seen in Australia and that’s no recommendation” (Thomas 1985, p. 30).

Pre-publicity for the event included a segment on the popular Australian music television show Countdown broadcast by the ABC (The Australian Broadcast Commission).

Attendees to the first parade witnessed the early collections of some of Australia’s most notable designers and artists of the 1980s in successfully launching their practices.

Designers and artists in the inaugural parade included Martin Grant, Desbina Collins, Peter Morrissey and Leona Edmiston, Bern Emmericks and Jenny Bannister. The production of the catwalk environment sought to create particular atmospheres for each designer through staging, music, choreography and styling to accentuate individuality and diversity of design (Besen & Waisberg 1988). For *Fashion '84* the set was designed by Biltmoderne (architects Roger Wood and Randal Marsh), set to an original music score composed by Paul Schultze, choreographed by Mahmoodi Sani, filmed by Kino productions, distributed after the event in video form. Staged over three nights to capacity audiences with the final showing turning away 300 people. Attendees dressed up and were as spectacular as those on the stage, drawing crowds reminiscent of a rock concert (Kamitsis 2010).

Fashion '84 served to spread the knowledge of local design and activate potential commercial openings. The parade was the catalyst for other creative outcomes, intended to generate and continue awareness of the FDC collective after the event was over. The complimentary catalogue for example was circulated to each person attending *Fashion '84* sponsored by the Design Arts Board, contained trade information and documented designers work through hand drawn illustrations. The film developed by Kino productions (Mark Davis, Mark Worth, and Simon Burton) was widely distributed, shown on television networks, while the video edition was sold to schools and designers for educational and promotional purposes.

⁹ Fibreglass 16 metre tall pineapple built in Nambour Queensland in 1971 to promote the local pineapple industry to tourists.

The associated collateral generated from each parade was key to maintaining and strengthening the membership, and attracting new designers desiring to take part in these events. However membership did not guarantee selection into the parade. Participation was invited and members submitted design concepts carefully chosen by a panel concerned with expressing the diversity of new fashion.

The design of spaces for FDC events reflected the expanded network of creative practices such as architecture and interior design, responding to the catalyst of fashion.

Although environments chosen for staging parades for instance were often pre-demolition sites, they invited more radical redesign. In that way the FDC positioned itself away from organised fit-outs, traditional sanctioned industry venues like civic halls or auditoriums. Instead fashion was thrown into spaces regarded high risk, buildings no longer considered viable or aesthetically appealing. As a result FDC activities drove the revitalisation of many urban spaces from derelict buildings to nightclub and parade venues. For these sites offered potential for reinvention and renewal, setting up a potent background for emerging design. For example *Fashion '84* was staged at The Venue Earls court, St. Kilda an establishment marked for demolition. Formerly an ice skating ring, the building was converted in the 1970s to a music venue for Punk and New wave bands (Fig. 9-5). However, by 1984 it was sold to make way for a luxury hotel.

Predictably the appeal of the catwalk spectacle was compelling receiving enormous media coverage, making familiar to larger audiences new forms of fashion and personal adornment (Ellis 1985). The Melbourne morning tabloid *The Sun* (the highest circulating Australian newspaper at the time) acknowledged the new wave of interest in local fashion generated by the FDC. Janet Cohen in an article recounted the varied reactions across industry: "It has evoked strong emotions of shock, disgust, and rejection amongst some of the conservatives in industry, but generally it has been well received because of the interest it has generated in fashion. Thousands of people have attended these parades and conventional designers have found it hard to generate the same interest" (Cohen 1984).



Fig. 9-5. Earls Court, The Venue St. Kilda, crowds queue before the start of the FDC parade *Fashion 84: Heroic Fashion*, movie stills from the FDC collection, Design Archives, RMIT University.

The staging of mass activities and associated media promoting or documenting these events increased the exposure and knowledge of local designers. The FDC cultivated local creative industries; acts of “High-risk dressing” released in major events, nurtured innovative environments for expressing fashion design practices establishing an alternative fashion scene in Australia. In assessing the impact of these parades judgements about the success of a fashion designer based on saleability and wearability of collections was not necessarily irrelevant to the FDC. Driven by different forms and exponents of fashion production, the group departing from standard commercial models founded upon recognition or elitism formed by association with particular labels to support varied modes of self-expression and self-satisfaction gleaned from designing and dressing up. The premise of the FDC collective was to coordinate promotion of new young designers and encourage self-employment.

Nightclubs

FDC activities influenced the use and inhabitation of Melbourne’s urban space. The inner city, suburbs of St. Kilda and Prahran were enclaves for

FDC designers and supporters driving revitalisation of dilapidated sites or instigating the design of new ones. The growth of nightclub venues supported staging multidisciplinary activities and an underground scene where fashion, music, dance, performance and film were integrated together for extended hours. However in the early 1980s restrictive licensing laws in Melbourne closed nightclubs at 1.00 am curtailing the scope of these endeavours. As a result inventive solutions in nightclub venues were adopted to extend staying out as late as possible, following practices of business clubs, which operate under 24-hour licences. Membership of a club allowed for unrestricted access to the club venue. Therefore a major haunt for fashion followers and members of the FDC became the Hardware club at 43 Hardware Lane, Melbourne, opening in 1983, the club operated until 8.00 am.

The Inflation nightclub at 60 King Street, Melbourne offered a constantly changing range of events from fashion, break dancing, to video and film performances (Crowd 1983). *Biltemoderne* (1983-87) partnership of Dael Jones Evans, Randal Marsh and Roger Wood (WoodMarsh architects) worked on sets for FDC parades, were commissioned to redesign Inflation nightclub. The inhabitation of the nightclub as a space for fashion was an important one, designed for mass spectacles with people dressing up and parading, glimpsed in mirrors or gyrating on various dance floors (Fig. 9-6 to Fig. 9-8). Justin Henderson reviewing the commission noted the decorative elements in Inflation were both 'threatening and captivating'. The exploration of materials and scale heightened an atmosphere negotiating the foreboding sense of threat amplified by an interior decorated with shards of glass, pillars of steel and dark foreboding colours. FDC member Jenny Bannister designed hard edged uniforms, black leather spiked garments for the Inflation club employees—completed the interior design reinforcing the threateningly thrilling ambience. The emergence of new forms of fashion production and consumption was fittingly translated into the nightclub surrounds. For the project *Biltemoderne* won the 1985 Royal Institute of Architects award for best commercial redevelopment.

Leon Van Schaik (2006, p. 89), Professor of Innovation in the School of Architecture and Design at RMIT University, noted the project “was driven by a conscious desire to look at life through “the body”.

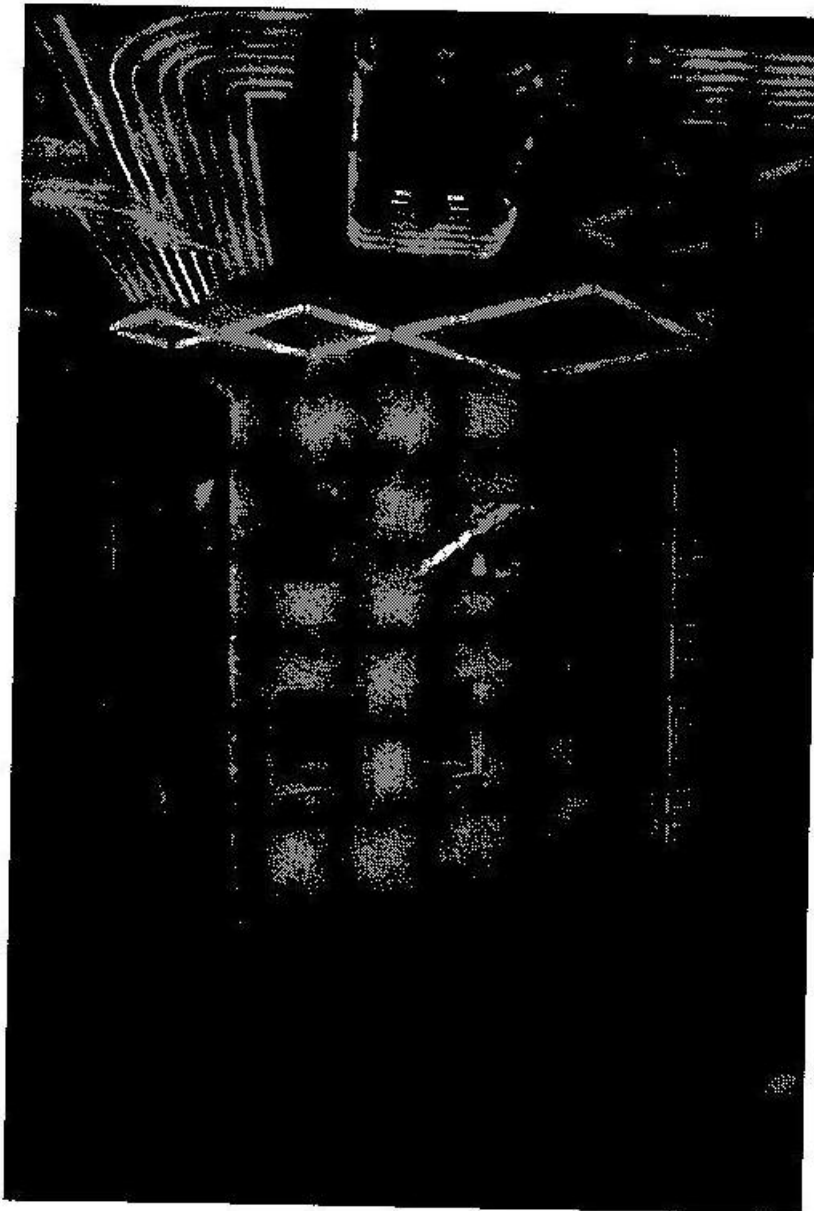


Fig. 9-8. Interior of Inflation Nightclub, Melbourne 1984 designed by Biltmoderne. Image courtesy of WoodMarsh architects.

The FDC championed sustaining young independent designers through media and events to acknowledge and profile the designer’s creative practice over customary preferential alignment promoting manufacturer or

retailer roles. In shifting this hierarchy of recognition in the fashion industry the FDC communicated independent fashion across a range of media from local daily newspapers, youth radio and television programmes to coverage in international design magazines. By widely circulating the ideas of the FDC collective to the Australian community it intended to create awareness and increase familiarity with local design at a time when the market was dominated by imported fashion and contained relatively few local clothing manufacturers. Australians were most familiar with big “name” local designers such as Prue Acton or Trent Nathan. Therefore the issue of redressing fashion production and consumption patterns drove many of the FDC strategies.

The aim to expand local exposure and recognition of local design was communicated by the FDC through identification of individual designers breaking the common practice of the “anonymous designer” working for a manufacturer (McInerney 1987) with no acknowledgement. For instance publishing photographs for each participating designer or artist in parade catalogues, increased exposure attempted to pull the small-scale designer out of oblivion. The use of the term “independent” was also a political stance and strategy, moving the affiliation of the designer away from the manufacturer or conventional practices of the fashion industry. Kate Durham recalled that adopting the term independent positioned the freelance designer away from being controlled by the retailer who purchased goods upon consignment and often didn’t acknowledge the designer. It was about stopping designers being ripped off and fighting for their independence.¹⁰

Critics

The FDC generated and supported fashion activities for emerging designers for over 10 years. However in the last years of operation the direction of the entity changed. The annual parade had become too expensive relying upon major sponsorship support. Entrepreneurial activities were increasingly centred on the retail shop 1989-1992, which brought with it more complex fiscal responsibilities.

¹⁰ Conversation between Robert Buckingham and Kate Durham, 11 April, 2006.

From the beginning critics of the FDC collective expressed concern about institutionalisation of the “underground” or independent designer. Whether acts of conformity implied by government sanction were perhaps at odds with the creative spirit and production of diverse fashion forms (Traviato 1985) (Fig. 9-9). Although the collective was never an official government agency it operated under the guise of one with similar bureaucratic structures of accountability to maintain funding and forge partnerships. Initially advantages of the collective masquerading as a key Australian fashion industry body worked for drawing attention and gaining notoriety. But unfortunately without the support of a large administrative infrastructure or substantial salaried positions, its influence was limited. However the FDC collective managed to forge a presence in the community, stirring up debates about fashion concerning both the nature and direction of Australian design. But the reliance on government funding and corporate sponsorship lead to tensions between creative directions and entrepreneurial success.

Unfortunately the FDC rhetoric originally aimed at wooing and convincing the Australian community about the vibrant scene of emerging fashion designers acted to alienate many participants and observers. The self-mythologising voice of the FDC became a destructive force, causing professional rifts and jealousies especially for those working outside the group. Divisive issues such as representational advocacy and commercial competition challenged the collective spirit of the FDC. Decisions concerning the style and participation in events particularly related to the selection process of designers for parade, exhibition or retail events were inevitably disruptive. Sustaining the belief and culture of the FDC to be a major conduit feeding the capacity of the Australian fashion industry was only powerful and effective through maintenance of member support and recognition from the community. Although the national collective was positioned to represent fashion related creatives Australian wide, the FDC was ultimately criticised for being Melbourne-centric with the organisation and three directors located there.

Indeed looking back (McPhee 1991; Webster 1997; Healy 2010) over hundreds of events curated by the collective, gradually the capacity of the rabble to drive spontaneousness, unconventional gatherings became diluted and eventually less relevant. By 1992 the role of the FDC in communicating fashion practices was no longer potent. Already an understanding of Australian design was more widespread and designers were keen to participate in more formalised organisations. Yet the legacy of the FDC is

still an important one, pioneering collective practices for emerging designers for both creative and business goals. Essentially by targeting the future, the FDC tapped into the potential of fashion to support emerging designers through professional mentoring and regular public exposure working towards establishing their commercial and creative independence. The FDC provided the emerging designer with a cohesive public voice and profile. In the 1990s aspects of the collective model were taken up by State and Federal governments with the instigation of regular trade shows and public events through establishment of Australian Fashion week and the annual Melbourne Fashion festival.¹¹ However the original spirit of the underground collective and rabble instilled in youthful exuberance, industry deviance and potent mix of multidisciplinary practices was eroded, although the potential of the collective to activate alternate fashion production remains in groups such as Craft Victoria¹² and in online communities expressed through independent websites, blogs and Facebook coverage.

¹¹ The article is drawn from the extensive archive of the FDC housed in the Design Archives, RMIT University. Thank you to Michael Trudgeon and Robert Buckingham, and Wood Marsh for supporting this article with interviews and illustrations.

¹² Craft Victoria is a member's organisation established in 1970. Recent blurring of the boundaries of craft and design practices has witnessed the increasing exposure and membership of fashion related members and communication of fashion production in hybrid forms.