

Making it up as we went

MERRYGN GATES

The staircase to the Seaview Ballroom was an event in itself. Wide, grand and in disrepair it formed the perfect backdrop for the arrival of audiences to the thriving scene of Melbourne's little bands in the early 1980s. Art and fashion students from every campus – Prahran, Preston, RMIT, VCA and Melbourne State College – joined with the film kids from Swinburne and the music boffins from Latrobe for the scene stealing gigs of The Birthday Party, or the more esoteric Essendon Airport or Laughing Hands.

It was a time of do-it-yourself *couture*. Op Shops were scoured for treasures, and worn in combinations that would make their original owners gasp in horror. The punk ethos of shock and confrontation was still paramount, tempered with a more theatrical taste for costume. Each week would see a new subtle variation of last week's finery. There was a kind of street dialogue going on, with people riffing off what others in their tribe were doing, as much as responding to the inevitable international trends. Sometimes the outfit *de jour* was, like theatre costumes, sewn on the wearer, intended (if it held) for one night only.

The tribes were many. One would not dream of going to the wrong club, or their club on the wrong night! St Kilda, with its air of decaying finery, cheap rent and outsider status, was a meeting ground for many. As fashion designer Jenny Bannister recalled: 'Well, there were all the clubs, like Sheiks in the city and Inflation on King St, but I was more into live bands – I'd go to see Nick Cave, The Church, The Models and The Saints at the Crystal Ball Room in St Kilda or the Tiger Room in Richmond. I spent my life between these two venues.'¹

In-between

In between doing the pub/club² circuit, you might be checking out an exhibition or performance at the George Paton Gallery or the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre, co-ordinated by David Chesworth (Essendon Airport). He pinpointed '1980 and 1982' as years that marked 'an exciting point of transition in art and culture in general [with] ... the emergence of Post-Modernism with its "decadent" ethos and its accompanying modes of quotation, appropriation and cut-and-past'.³

Alternative, experimental (seemingly overwrought terms) were the conscious position of the subcultures of the day. There was much convergence, as has been noted by historians of the period:

Melbourne's alternative scene was smaller than and art students, film-makers and musicians tended to know each other through going to the small venues and generally mixing on the same circuit.⁴

Everyone listened to 3RRR, the preferred channel of communication and champion of bands that did not get



commercial airplay. These bands might get their first gig at a RRR concert (I recall one in the car park behind Lygon Street shops in Carlton: they started small) and then they might cut a 7-inch with Missing Link. 3RRR gave them a Melbourne-wide audience. And to further the dialogue, independent (there's another term) magazines started to appear for the emerging cultural theorists to cut their teeth on: *Virgin Press* (1981, ed., Ashley Crawford), *New Music* (1980, ed., Phillip Brophy), *Art & Text* (1981, ed., Paul Taylor), cassette magazine *East Forward* (1981, ed., Jane Joyce, Michael Trudgeon, Andrew Maine and Bruce Milne of Missing Link), and *Crowd* (1983 ed., Jane Joyce and Michael Trudgeon), etc. The National Gallery of Victoria brought the phenomenon into the mainstream with the Paul Taylor curated *Popism* (1982).

Party Architecture

Party Architecture was a two-girl entrepreneurial team that booked bands for The George Hotel. Julie Purvis was a 3RRR presenter, manager at Inflation and post-graduate student at the VCA. Jillian Burt was a budding music journalist. In 1982 they hatched the idea of an art/fashion parade to be held at The Seaview Ballroom. As fashion illustrator and graphic designer, Robert Pearce (responsible for the posters of both Fashion 82 and Fashion 83) said: 'It's looking at fashion as the most confrontational of the artforms: you wear it, you have to confront it.'⁵ Robert worked his magic pre-computer with Letraset, Rotring pens and the coveted Promarkers.

Fashion 82⁶ billed a mere seven designers 'playing with fashion as art and art as fashion'⁷ from the *haute couture* of Desbina Collins to the leather uniforms of Peter Bainbridge and the work of four artists: Ian Russell, Tobsha Learner, Maria Kozic and Rosslynd Piggott. Essendon Airport and comedians Mandy and Melanie Salamon performed. To top it all, there was a demonstration of how to tease your hair to Pink Flamingo heights compered by Robert Pearce.

Tobsha Learner, a VCA graduate, evoked a tribal feel in sync with the 'hideous to the eye' vision of The Birthday Party's *Nick the stripper* music video of 1981, shot as a promo by The Rich Kids (Paul Goldman and Evan English). A review in *The Sun*



fashion pages noted that Tobsha's clothes 'were paraded before slide backdrops of dinosaurs and lions and the backing beat of tribal drums.'⁸ The aesthetics of contemporary art installations, film, and her involvement in theatre, were all influences on her presentation. A soundtrack for each designer was composed by Dean Richards, band leader of Hot Half Hour (regular gigs at Inflation), guitarist with Equal Local.

In a recent video, Tobsha, now a well-known author, reveals her continuing interest in costume as an exploration of character as she discusses her books in period dress.⁹

Neo-pop artist Maria Kozic set a cooler mood with a series of seed packet dresses, which the same reviewer details with inexplicable seriousness, reporting that her:

'...cotton sun dresses featured a range of blown-up Hortico seed packets in a rainbow of dazzling colors [sic]. These included onions, capsicums, pumpkins, turnips, and marrows in orange, green, purple and black. They were modelled to the music of *In an English Country Garden*, and proved a big hit with the crowd.'¹⁰

The Hortico seed packet dresses were indeed a fashion 'statement', one very much in keeping with Maria's use of text in her art. Her interest in printmaking and multiples made the transition to fashion seamlessly. Photographic silkscreen techniques, à la Andy Warhol, were enthusiastically brought into the printmaker's studio throughout the 1970s, and the quality of fabric printing inks was improving. Image scavenging and a cut-and-paste aesthetic met with second-degree abandon in art, fashion illustration, magazines, posters, record cover art, and textile design. As *Art & Text* stalwart Adrian Martin realised, 'the punk and new wave movements of the 1970s and 1980s ... transformed Warhol's artistic project into a series of 'subcultural'

highly stylised experiments in music, fashion and design ...'¹¹

Maria's work, although often about highly emotive subjects, maintained a 'quotational' emotional distance. It is hard to resist reading the seed packet dresses as symbols of fertility. But they could not be further from the overheated, pre-AIDS, highly-sexualised, discotheque culture of the time – a culture Maria and her fellow tsk tsk tsk members (Philip Brophy, Jane Stevenson, Leigh Parkhill and Ralph Traviato) 'stripped bare' with surgical precision in *Asphixiation: what is this thing called 'Disco'?* performed at the George Paton Gallery in 1980.¹² The installation included images from *L'Uomo*, *Vogue* and *L'Official*, selected because, Brophy says, they 'smelt of high fashion'.¹³ A video of *Asphixiation*, and other works by Maria, were included in *Popism* in 1982.¹⁴ Maria held her first solo exhibition at the George Paton Gallery in 1981 and the seed packet dresses crossed-over into the art world proper in her exhibition *Animal, mineral, vegetable* at Reconnaissance in October 1982.

The catwalk of Fashion 82 was another performative site for Maria, which found ultimate expression in the *MARIA KOZIC IS BITCH* billboard (1990) in which the artist herself has become the (costumed) subject.

Fashion 83

Fashion 83¹⁵ was an altogether more ambitious affair with twenty-one designers, many of them with a growing professional reputation in the fashion world such as Inars Larcis and Clarence Chai. Louise Neri (inaugural director of 200 Gertrude Street Gallery) barely wearing Jenny Bannister was held aloft by well-oiled musclemen, and Alannah Hill buffalo-girled her way down the catwalk in *Galaxy* (Sarah Thorn and Bruce Slorrach). The



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The look of



THIS off-the-shoulder black leather and fur jungle rig was designed by Tobsha Learner.

2 women leather, or a vegetable dress

TRIBAL outfits of fur and leather, Japanese warriors and vegetable dresses.

There were all aspects of an "alternative" fashion show, from the means of transportation to the venue, which was staged recently at the Brisbane Botanic Gardens.

The designers arranged the models with the Japanese look in the center, the leather and fur with Indians on the left and the vegetable dresses on the right.

With this in mind it is easy to see why the vegetable dresses would make the most sense of the parade, and the more traditional looks, such as the fur and leather, were placed at the end of the parade.



VEGETABLE seed packets for the ecologically-minded feature this fun dress by Maria Kazin.



parade continued Party Architecture's aim to 'weld together the many disparate elements of avant-garde and underground fashion ... It was a mixture of the recognised and the unknown, the trained and the amateur, high fashion and tongue-in-cheek, new wave humour.'¹⁶ In fact Fashion 82 had generated so much interest that Fashion 83 tickets were forged, the capacity of the venue exceeded, and security guards were brought in to secure the dressing room. The Rich Kids filmed the event for a documentary that was never completed.

Several artists were still involved. Jane Stevenson continued the neo-pop printmaking thread with a series of self-referential 'Butterick' shifts. Ian Russell's metal crinoline was worn by model Deborah Thomas, later *Crowd* contributor and editor-in-chief of *The Australian Woman's Weekly*.

The undoubted *cause célèbre* of 1983 was artist Rosslynd Piggott's memorable 'infanta', received, it was reported, 'with an audible gasp'.¹⁷ A young boy swept down the stage in the six-foot wide concoction, held a handkerchief aloft showing a single red dot, then turned and walked – regally, haughtily – off. The artist later recalled how incredibly important the parades were:

The first year [1982] I made the Kabuki-inspired costume just using cheap cotton from Dimmey's, and bamboo framework. The costumes in those two shows were particularly sourced from art. The second one was from Velazquez's child *infantas*.

My interest in clothes, costume and the idea of dressing began to slip into my art. Boundaries became blurred. While this interest began in the early 1980s with these costumes, I have also been dealing with the image of clothes in recent work, *Constructing Paris* (1996-7), *Conversation* (1995), and *La Sonnambule* (1997).¹⁸

Elsewhere Rosslynd has spoken about 'dressing to be uncomfortable'¹⁹, and the 'infanta' is a good example of the clothes wearing the person. Ten years on the costumes had left the

catwalk and entered the gallery space – a space Rosslynd had from the start approached as a place for total creative immersion, and eventually installation. In *La Sonnambule* the figure is altogether absent, the fringed silk dresses perform for each other divided by a reflective glass disc. The gloves in *Constructing Paris* – the soft leather imprinted with a map of the city – traverse Paris unaccompanied, their great number hinting at many untold stories. Later her interest cohered around traditional Japanese fabrics, their delicate floral patterns inspiring the fragile forms in her paintings such as *Blossom and flower vibrations* (2004). Unpicked *obi* silk forms the basis for the installations *Blossom* (2002–03), and *Nature in Black* (2001), recently reworked in *Dark Light* (2011).²⁰

The Fashion 82 and Fashion 83 parades presented a potent mix of art and fashion. For the artists it was an extension of their established interests. Unfettered by concerns of production, supply and demand, their contribution was much more closely aligned with performance and even theatre. Julie and Jillian of Party Architecture approached the event as a total experience in this way also, designing nights in which the catwalk parade was surrounded by music, comedy, and video, and the parades had original 'scores'. All of these things set them apart from the many smaller fashion shows that were appearing with increasing frequency that were presented in a more traditional format.

The parades, especially Fashion 83, aroused media interest for the increasing number of emerging young designers working in the city and made it clear that there was an audience for alternative fashion.

Party Architecture laid the groundwork for what became the Fashion Design Council of Australia, co-founded by Kate Durham, Robert Pearce and Robert Buckingham in late 1983 with Victorian Ministry for the Arts funding. The FDC located

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itself squarely within the fashion industry to 'act as a lobby group for the [independent] designers and provide a unified voice with which those designers could address the *straight* fashion world'.²¹ The FDC presented exhibitions, events and annual parades for many years, and operated a retail shop from 1989 until the organisation folded in 1992, a mere decade after Fashion 82 first set the art and style scene of Melbourne abuzz. 🐼

1. Jenny Bannister quoted in Briony Wright, 'What the hell happened: fashion definitely seemed more fun with Rennie Ellis', *Vice Magazine*, www.viceland.com
2. This was a time when the generalist discotheques were giving way to the more exclusive clubs, each tailored for a particular clientele. 3RRR employee and presenter, and Fashion 82 model, Jules Taylor opened the Hardware Club in Hardware Lane, Melbourne, which took advantage, as did most of these little clubs, of the liquor licence held by the once popular profession-based clubs. One early DJ was Laughing Hands musician Paul Schutze who is now based in London and is known for his sound installations and photography. He was commissioned by the Victoria & Albert Museum to compose a soundscape for Radical Fashion 2001. www.paulschutze.com
3. David Chesworth, 'Pivotal moments: the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre and the George Paton Gallery 1980–1982', in Helen Vivian, *When you think about art: the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, 1971–2008*, Macmillan, 2008, p. 166.
4. Barbara Paterson, *Renegades: Australia's first film school from Swinburne to VCA*, Helicon Press, 1996, p. 146.
5. Robert Pearce quoted in Jonathon Green, 'Fashion's other face', *Juke*, May 21, 1983.
6. Fashion 82: Produced by Party Architecture, Seaview Ballroom, St Kilda, June 22, 1982. Stage manager: Julie Purvis; Set design: Robert Pearce and Julie Purvis; Front of house: Jillian Burt; Graphic Design: Robert Pearce; Choreography: Lizette Brummer; Lights: Peter Webb; Sound production: Dean Richards; Original Music composer: Dean Richards; Band: Essendon Airport; Comedy: Mandy and Melanie Salamon; Hairdo demonstration and tease-off: compere Robert Pearce; Plus: Fashion movies and videos. Designers: Desbina Collins, Kirsty James, Peter Bainbridge, Maria Kozic, Ian Russell, Rosslynd Piggott, Tobsha Lerner.
7. Paul Stewart, 'The look of leather or a vegetable dress', *The Sun*, 28 June, 1982, p. 38.
8. Stewart, 1982: p. 39.
9. See <http://www.youtube.com/v/JdTp3uR8ZYA&hl=en&fs=I&>
10. Stewart, 1982: p. 39.
11. Adrian Martin, 'Chain her down', *Art and Australia*, 29:1, 1991, p. 62.
12. David Chesworth discusses George Paton Gallery Director Judy Annear's role in bringing these two organisations and bringing new music performance into the art world in David Chesworth: Vivian, 2008: pp. 166-174.
13. Phillip Brophy quoted in Robert Rooney review, *The Age*, 16 July 1980.
14. *Popism*, National Gallery of Victoria, July 1982. Artists: Howard Arkley, David Chesworth, Ian Cox, Juan Davila, Richard Dunn, Paul Fletcher, Maria Kozic, Robert Rooney, Jane Stevenson, The Society for Other Photography, Imants Tillers, Peter Tyndall, Jenny Watson, Tsk tsk tsk; Curator Paul Taylor.
15. Fashion 83: Produced by Party Architecture, Seaview Ballroom, St Kilda, 17 May, 1983. Stage manager: Julie Purvis; Set design: Robert Pearce and

- Kate Durham; Front of house: Valerie Fiscaro and Gillian Burt; Graphic Design: Robert Pearce; Choreography: Lizette Brummer; Photographer: Andrew Lehmann; Makeup: Cecilia Dutkiewicz; Hair: Donna (effbee); Daryl (Godfrey and Taylor), George Huxley; Lights: Peter Webb; Film: The Rich Kids (Paul Goldman and Evan English); Sound production: Sound Experience and Dean Richards; Musclemen: Rocco Oppedisano, Paul Hay, Neil Brophy; Original Music composer: Dean Richards; Bands: The bum steers and The Buddy Lowenstein Band; Afterparty at Inflation; Designers: Jenny Bannister, Beverly Boyd, Clarence Chai, Desbina Collins, Kate Durham, Maureen Fitzgerald, Matthew Flinn, Merryn Gates, Inars Lacin, Kirsty James, Jane Joyce, Vanessa Leyonhjelm, Graham Long, Vanessa Oliver, Rosslynd Piggott, Jane Purtill, Raro, Ian Russell, Sara Thorn and Bruce Slorrah (Galaxy), Anthony Smethurst, Jane Stevenson.
16. Robin Barden, 'Fashion 83', *Tension*, #1, July/August 1983, p. 18.
 17. Barden, 1983: p. 18.
 18. 'A way of being in the world, a conversation between Rosslynd Piggott and Merryn Gates, 12 February 1998', *Suspended breath*, National Gallery of Victoria, 1998. Note: Dimmey's was a landmark department store in Richmond, Victoria. It stocked remainder and discount items, and many young designers sourced their fabric there. Another haunt was Job's Warehouse on Bourke Street.
 19. Barden, 1983: p. 18.
 20. see www.rosslyndpiggott.com
 21. Peter Lawrence, 'The politics of fashion: the Fashion Design Council', *Stiletto*, #17, September 1984, p. 37.

Merryn Gates is an independent curator and writer. She participated in Fashion 83 serving a green cocktail to Ian Russell wearing a miniature lounge room around his neck and pushing a lawn mower, and designed Boudoir Bondage. Merryn was co-presenter with Julie Purvis of *Bedlam*, a weekly program on 3RRR (1980–86), and was Assistant Director of the George Paton Gallery (1981).

P48: (l-r) Paul Schutze, Jane Joyce, Dean Richards, Robert Pearce, Merryn Gates, Ian Russell, Timothy Newsome; centre: Jillian Burt, 1981. Photograph by Julie Purvis.

P49: 1/ Fashion 82 poster, illustration by Robert Pearce. Collection the author.

2/ Fashion 83 brochure, illustration by Robert Pearce. Photographs by Andrew Lehmann. Collection the author.

P50: 1/ Tobsha Learner dress, in Paul Stewart, 'The look of leather or a vegetable dress', *The Sun*, 28 June, 1982, p. 38.

2/ Maria Kozic vegetable seed packet dress, in Paul Stewart, 'The look of leather or a vegetable dress', *The Sun*, 28 June, 1982, p. 39.

3/ Merryn Gates, *Boudoir Bondage*, modelled by (left) Rosslynd Piggott and (right) Jill Spratt for Fashion 83.

4/ *Dressing room*, Fashion 83, showing Rosslynd Piggott's 'after Velasquez' costume modelled by Timothy Newsome, and Jane Stevenson's Butterick dresses. Photograph by Merryn Gates.



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Gwyn Hanssen Pigott Still life with two cups 2009 Translucent porcelain 29.5x33x26.5cm. Ipswich Art Gallery Collection PHOTO: Brian Hand