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Critical Costume 2015: Curatorial Approaches and Transmedia Display Practices in Exhibiting Performance Costume

Introduction: Exhibiting Performance Costume in the 21st century¹

Costumes displayed in exhibitions document past performances. Through their tangible qualities, they provide visual and material links to their original performance, which has either been in a live show (e.g., in theatre, dance, opera) or in a mediated artwork (e.g., in film, television, video). There are diverse ways to interpret costumes in order to present them in the framework of an exhibition by exploring the context of their original public performance and/or by studying the costume itself.² This confirms that costumes are "objects of material evidence of a performance as well as reminders of its experience" (Pantouvaki, 2014: 106).³ The new relationship between costume and audience afforded in an exhibition gives new expressive, meaning-making and artistic potential to the costume, which is then offered for viewing at close distance and appreciated also as an individual piece of art. Moreover, when it is placed in a dialogue with a new space and a new audience, new notional and spatial metaphors are created between a costume and its exhibition environment, enabling a new performance experience.⁴

Historically, costumes have been useful exhibition objects for various purposes: not only to celebrate a theatrical event, a cinematic anniversary or a past performance, but also to remember and pay tribute to the artistic communities around them.⁵ Then, costume may

^{1.} This introduction was further revised and updated since the original in-person presentation for the purposes of the paper's publication in the proceedings of the 5th Costume Symposium organized by the Hellenic Costume Society.

^{2.} See for example, Pantouvaki (2019b) and Barbieri (2013) on researching past performance through costume as a physical object; and Rybáková (2011), Pantouvaki (2014; and 2019a) and Pinasa (2021) on exhibiting performance costumes, and Pantouvaki & Barbieri (2014) in relation to curatorial and exhibition design practices for exhibiting dress more broadly.

^{3.} For additional perspectives on curating performance design and displaying scenographic objects as representative of past performances, see: Burnett (2007), Farley (2011), Čepcová et al. (2007; 2011; and 2015).

^{4.} In my previous research on curating performance costume, I have discussed in length the ways in which an exhibition can be seen as a new performance and how the performative qualities of the exhibition space may enhance the performativity of the costume (Pantouvaki, 2013; and 2014).

^{5.} One of the most recent examples that indicate the active role of costume as representative of performance in exhibitions is the public announcement of the V&A display *Re:Imagining Musicals* (running from 15 October 2022 until 27 November 2023) with the following statement: "Eliza Doolittle's

become a symbolic representation of the work carried out by the designer, the director, the technicians or crew members, and certainly by the performers. In the exhibition display, where the performer is absent, the physical body of the individual who once wore the costume becomes a memory – in other words, this body is replaced by a virtual presence that is implied by the costume.⁶ Exhibitions that pay homage to acclaimed actors and present their life stories usually employ the costumes to provide a bodily reference that represents the actor's imagined presence.

Exhibitions of performance costumes have recently grown and multiplied. This demonstrates a wider recognition of the field of costume design and its emancipation on both a professional and scholarly level. Established in 2006, the National Centre for Stage Costume (CNCS)⁷ in Moulins, France, is the first museum to-date to be entirely dedicated to the material heritage of performance costume (Pinasa, 2021). The CNCS focuses on the preservation, study and research of costume and presents regular thematic exhibitions to the general audience.8 It thus offers opportunities to investigate important questions regarding the display of performing arts costumes, such as the strategic decisions that are required in order to reveal the role of costume and its significance in the history of theatre, as well as its material identity and the background of its creation. In 2011, under the leadership of Sodja Lotker,9 the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space (PQ), the most important international exhibition in the field of performance design, 10 dedicated a special section of the PQ11 to a costume exhibition titled Extreme Costume, curated by Czech costume designer Simona Rybáková. As Rybáková (2011: 281) notes, this exhibition presented "unusual, unorthodox, limit-surpassing costumes" that reflected "a wide spectrum of today's trends in the field". It encompassed "the territorial, political and sociological aspects", the cultural diversity, as well as "the level of traditional or experimental approaches" representative of each participating country (Pantouvaki, 2019: 93-94). Although much more "traditional" in its approach, given its focus on high-budget film costume production, another exhibition presented a year later under the title Hollywood Costume, curated by costume designer Deborah Nadoolman Landis, foregrounded costume and costume designers in a globally renowned venue, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The *Hollywood Costume* exhibition offered a platform for the visibility of costume design and the work of costume designers and their teams to a wide audience.

sparkling dress is one of 100 items that celebrate 'transformative power' of musicals" (Sherwood, 2022, n.p.). In the specific example, an iconic costume signifies an entire performance genre, the musical.

- 7. The acronym is based on the French original name: Centre national du costume de scène.
- 8. The CNCS organizes two temporary exhibitions per year (Pinasa, 2021: 38).
- 9. Sodja Lotker was Artistic Director of the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space from 2008 until 2015. During this period, she curated the *Tribes* project, an experimental "walking" exhibition that featured costumed living people in the public spaces of Prague (Pantouvaki & Lotker, 2017).
- 10. "Performance design" includes all areas of design for performance, i.e. scenography, costume design, lighting design, sound design and digital/multimedia design for live performance.

^{6.} For an expanded discussion on how costume operates in the absence of the body in the context of an exhibition, see Pantouvaki (2014).

As "the most comprehensive exhibition of its kind in decades", this exhibition analysed "the extensive and detailed process employed to create a character through costume" (Nadoolman Landis, 2018: 91) offering the visitor "a practitioner-centric point of view" (2018: 93). This was of the utmost importance and served the objective of the exhibition – "to educate visitors on the role of the costume designer" (Tarter & Bekefi, 2014: 65). Another recent example was the Costume at the National Theatre exhibition, curated by theatre scholar Aoife Monks, which was on display at the Wolfson Gallery of the National Theatre in London (2019-2020) and focused on "the invisible labour undertaken by the costume-related workers – the NT costume makers and expert technicians working with the designers and actors" (Barbieri and Pantouvaki, 2020: 7). This exhibition revealed the voices of a wider network of professionals working in performance costume production. Such events confirm that exhibiting costume "becomes a field that brings together – in distinct ways – professional, artistic, creative, scientific and heritage worlds" (Pinasa, 2021: 47) and enables "a new awareness and dignity for costume when it is considered in and on its own terms" (Pantouvaki & McNeil, 2021: 4).

Exhibiting costume in the framework of Critical Costume

Critical Costume is an international platform for new scholarly thinking and design practices with costume conceived "as a means of critically interrogating the body in/as performance" (Hann & Bech, 2014: 3). It aims to promote research and practice in a combined way, sustaining a dialogue that is interdisciplinary in focus and welcomes all voices related to concepts, questions, or practices of costume within contemporary and historical cultures. The principal activity of Critical Costume is a biennial conference and exhibition, with the provision for smaller events where appropriate.¹³

Critical Costume 2015 (CC2015) was the second event conceived under the banner of Critical Costume.¹⁴ It consisted of an academic conference and an exhibition of costume artwork and new practice-based and practice-led costume research. Aligned with the conference themes, the exhibition invited contributions that would address: (i) the implications of research

^{11.} Researchers Tarter and Bekefi (2014: 65) remark that, in the *Hollywood Costume* exhibition, they saw visitors engaging "directly with costumes as objects or works of art in their own right, valued for their physical properties and as products of a material design process"; as well as appreciating them for "their function of animating character and making absent figures present". This strengthens my earlier point on the multiple functions of costume as an exhibition object.

^{12.} For more insights on this exhibition, see the curator's report (Monks, 2020) and an exhibition review for this event (Augello, 2020).

^{13.} Originally initiated as a research-informed pedagogical project by Dr. Rachel Hann and Sidsel Bech, who also convened the first conference and exhibition at Edge Hill University (UK) in 2013, the remit of *Critical Costume* has since expanded as an independent network for costume scholarship and practice with global reach, currently chaired by Sofia Pantouvaki. For more information, see: www. criticalcostume.com (accessed on 1 March 2022).

^{14.} *Critical Costume 2015* was curated by Professor Sofia Pantouvaki and hosted by the *Costume in Focus* research group at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture in Helsinki, Finland, in March 2015 as a part of the Academy of Finland FiDiPro "Costume Methodologies" research project.

processes and methodologies for researching costume in live performance, film and media; (ii) new technologies and media for the study and practice of costuming: costume in media, media in costume, mediated costume, digital and projected costume, wearable technology, interactivity and the dramaturgical implications of interpreting these; and (iii) design practices and performances that examine the performative qualities of material – whether physical or virtual – in relation to body and design. The impressive response to this call exceeded expectations and evidenced a growing interest in researching costume by promoting dialogue between theory and practice.¹⁵

The CC2015 exhibition title was *Critical Costume 2015: New Costume Practices and Performances* and featured contemporary costume practice and research by thirty-two artist-researchers from three continents and diverse artistic backgrounds. ¹⁶ The works included in the exhibition stimulated the audience's thinking to reconsider the role of costume in contemporary performance by proposing new modes of representation, new material applications, and new artistic processes for costume designers and their creative collaborators. The selected works explored how the scenographic body is constructed on a spatial, temporal, and conceptual level through body manipulation, bodily connections, material exploration, embodied design, and its interpretation.

In the following section, I discuss my curatorial approach as well as the exhibition design practices that we employed – my colleague designer Jorge Sandoval and myself, co-designers of the exhibition – in order to exhibit these contemporary performance costumes. To do so, I address certain thematic sections of the exhibition and analyse the display practices employed for select artistic works. There is special focus on the concepts of *mediated* costume and *projected* costume as paradigms that indicate the emergence of innovations in the field of costume design and, consequently, on presenting performance costumes in an exhibition context. Further on, this article focuses on analysing the combination of different physical and mediated display formats that co-create a transmedia design approach to exhibiting costume – an approach that offers rich and expanded exhibition experiences. This analysis of the design and display solutions that were researched and eventually used in the *Critical Costume 2015* exhibition aims to highlight recent trends in the field and to contribute to the discourse on exhibiting contemporary performance costume.

^{15.} Following CC2015 and the presentation of this paper in 2016, three more Critical Costume events have taken place: in 2018 at the University of Surrey, UK; in 2020 online due to Covid-19, organized by the Oslo National Academy of the Arts (KHiO), Norway in the framework of the "Costume Agency" artistic research project; and in 2022 online once again as a transcontinental partnership between the National Institute of Dramatic Arts and Queensland University of Technology in Australia, Aalto University in Finland, and Grafias da Cena Brasil Association. Each of these events included an exhibition; of these, the CC2020 exhibition is available as an independent online exhibit: https://exhibition.costumeagency.com/ (accessed on 2 March 2022).

^{16.} See also: https://www.criticalcostume.com/exhibition2015.html (accessed on 16 October 2022).

^{17.} The *Critical Costume 2015* exhibition was curated by Sofia Pantouvaki and co-designed by Sofia Pantouvaki and Jorge Sandoval.

Critical costume 2015: Exploring transmedia display practices

Early theoretical discourse on costume (Hollander, 1975/1993; Wilson, 1985/2013; Gaines, 1990) underlines the active interrelation between costume, body and character by arguing that "costume assimilates bodily signifiers into character, but body as a whole engulfs the dress" (Gaines, 1990: 193). In the 21st century, costume often addresses wider social and political issues, questions relating to identity and ethical dilemmas that go beyond mere character signification, tackling challenges in the process of representation beyond physical garments. The body remains central in contemporary terms for both the creators and the wearers of costume, as well as the audience. This confirms that questions regarding costume as expressive and performative embodied design continue to be essential in the context of exhibition display that operates without living bodies.

Costume practice is encountered today through a multitude of different media: from live theatre and film to virtual environments and mediated platforms, and often in more than one of these media combined. Mediation has become a prevalent principle of contemporary life and culture, used to express and to expose. The diverse ways in which bodily practices are "read" within and explored through such multidimensional and multimedia contexts is a key question of 21st century artistic scholarship and practice, relevant when performance costume enters the challenge of being displayed in an exhibition and not performed.

In the *Critical Costume 2015: New Costume Practices and Performances* exhibition this challenge was addressed through the curatorial choices as well as through transmedia solutions provided in the design of the space and the display options. The term "transmedia" here refers to practices that transcend one medium or format of presentation and include the participation of diverse and multidimensional physical and digital means. The exhibition was organized under six curatorial themes, each indicated by a title comprising keywords separated by a slash: "Bio / Nature"; "Body / The Other"; "Research / Methods"; "Technology / Mediation"; "Practices / Materials"; and "Interconnectivity / Encounters". Select examples are analysed in this paper as indicatory of what transmedia display practices may offer to the experience of exhibiting performance costume.

Currently, one of the most widespread mediums to present costume in motion in an exhibition environment is audio-visual documentation on video. Videos, commonly shown on screens, have been increasingly popular in costume exhibitions particularly in the past decade, as seen in the Critical Costume (2013, 2015, 2018, 2020) and World Stage Design (2013, 2017, 2022) exhibitions. When costume is viewed on a video recording of the performance, it can be observed in its original "performance" (its original usage) in a rather "documentary" manner: costume is shown when worn by the original performer in the original space/set design – but with the original lighting filtered through the camera. This presentation can be of questionable quality, particularly when the original filming of the performance was carried out only for archival purposes.¹⁸ Yet, many costume designers prefer this presentation medium

^{18.} The debate on the conditions, reasons and purposes of documenting live performance is vast and relates not only to costume, but to all the performance elements, and thus cannot be covered in the limited space of this paper.

today, as it allows a glimpse of the original production and it also offers an inexpensive and sustainable display solution.

The *Critical Costume 2015* exhibition included some costume exhibits shown on video, such as the three costume designs "Based on a Specific Material"²⁰ by Simona Rybáková and the PQ11 awarded "InHABITing Dress" by performance designer and educator Emma Ransley,

both solely presented via screens. Ranslev's work. in particular. offered the possibility of a more intimate experience to the viewer, enabled by the screen mediation. Her work was originally created as a video installation that explored "how the habitual behaviour of the performer can have a physical affect on the costume" (Ransley quoted in Pantouvaki, 2015: 41), as the performer would pull apart the fabric, revealing the body underneath. Aiming at drawing the visitors' attention away from representation, this work was displayed on a



Fig.1. "InHABITing Dress" (2011) by Emma Ransley. Photo: Eero Erkamo. ©Aalto University.

horizontal screen that showed the body inclined, inviting the visitors to concentrate on the spatio-temporal and tactile interaction between body and material, provoking a gradual transformation of the costume (fig.1).

Under the curatorial theme "Research / Methods", which introduced works resulting from diverse practice-based and practice-led research methodologies and research through costume, the project "Optical Laces 2014" by designer-researcher Jessica Bugg was also shown in a mediated way in the exhibition. This project introduces a costume entirely made from shoelaces and "designed as a tool to extend the experience, perception and physical response of the dancer" to the materiality of the garment (Bugg quoted in Pantouvaki, 2015: 31). Presented in film format, the project is communicated as a recorded lived experience that is informed and shaped through the movement of the body. The filming enhances an intimate connection to the work through camera close-ups and mini microphones that capture

^{19. &}quot;Inexpensive" here refers to costs such as transportation of the costumes and other production challenges related to the exhibition, such as the procurement of suitable mannequins (or other display means), insurance, etc.

^{20.} The costumes from these three productions are based on the use of non-traditional, non-fabric materials and their influence on the final design: foam padding material originally used for making seamless bras. Rybáková has been using this material for many years because of its easy-to-use properties that offer different options to model a character and shape a costume when compared to traditional fabrics (see also Rybáková quoted in Pantouvaki, 2015: 58).

and transmit the experience of the performing dancer on a sensory level. The video display used in the exhibition enhanced the qualities of this work by offering a chance for a sensory experience to the visitors, especially in relation to the aural qualities of the work – the sounds of the shoelace tips in the dress in movement – while also indicating through this soundscape other qualities, such as the weight of the material on the performer's body.





Fig.2. "Dance" (2014) by Ellen Sampson. (2a) The display at the Critical Costume 2015 exhibition. Photo: Eero Erkamo. (2b) Worn shoes as part of the exhibit. Photo: Tuuli Ahonen. ©Aalto University.

Interaction with the costume as object is also the method that drives artist and shoemaker Ellen Sampson's project "Dance", which explores how the ways shoes are worn and create gestures are performed powerful affective experiences for dancers - the performers who have the most "complex and ambiguous relationships" with their shoes (Sampson quoted in Pantouvaki, 2015: 35). In Sampson's work, the exhibit consisted of a screen triptych that provided a spatial dynamic display of the recorded researchbased performance (fig.2a); next to it, the real objects of her research process, the shoe forms, were also displayed for the audience to touch and observe in close distance alongside a pair of used shoes bearing traces of the performance wear (fig.2b). The visitor experience, therefore, consisted of a combined multi-sensory experience of viewing, listening – the wooden shoes' characteristic sound in movement via dedicated headphones - and feeling/touching the physical material objects available at easy reach. This

display offered one of the most holistic individual events to the visitor.

Emerging innovations in the field of costume seek to inspire creative work that integrates traditional visual and material vocabularies of the stage with digital arts aesthetics, processes, techniques and technologies. Among the diverse digital technologies available today, contemporary costume design practices engage with tools that are already established in other areas of performance – especially in spatial design and scenography – such as digital

projection. Projections propose new dramaturgical scenarios by offering costume design a wide range of options for quick-changing and layered projected materials.²¹ This medium was used in the *Critical Costume 2015: New Costume Practices and Performances* exhibition both to "complete" a costume in the physical space as well as to communicate the feeling of a performance. In the costumes for "Midsummer Night's Dream - The Poetry of Nature", emergent

Hungarian costume designer Zsófia Geresdi uses the white forms of the garments as a three-dimensional blank canvas that hosts projected layers of colour and texture to create characters. Through this simple projection becomes means, surface pattern. Geresdi's costumes do not exist without the projection: therefore, in the Critical Costume 2015 exhibition. these white costumes were displayed in a dark exhibition space complemented by continuously altering projected materials that created a threedimensional temporal visual dramaturgy on the costume forms (fig.3). The same exhibition space hosted experimental an by another emergent designer, Rosemarie Allaert. Her "Transformation 1 and 2", inspired by the Shakespearean character of Ophelia, takes an ethereal form using stage smoke as expressive material to capture the vulnerability

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Fig.3. (3a, 3b, 3c, 3d). "Midsummer Night's Dream - The Poetry of Nature" (2015). Costume Designer: Zsófia Geresdi. Shifting projections. Photos: Tuuli Ahonen. ©Aalto University.

of a character. In the original performance, smoke around the performer's moving body becomes an immaterial – yet performing and constantly transforming – costume that plays an active part in telling a story. The work was displayed on a transparent fabric – a gauze – which was turned into a projection screen that allowed the visitor to see the work from both sides while at the same time providing an ethereal quality to the projection (fig.4). This display created an immersive experience for the visitors, who could explore the "costume" from different positions in 360-degree angles in the exhibition space.

^{21.} For further examples and discussion on projections used as costume materials, see also Pantouvaki (2020).

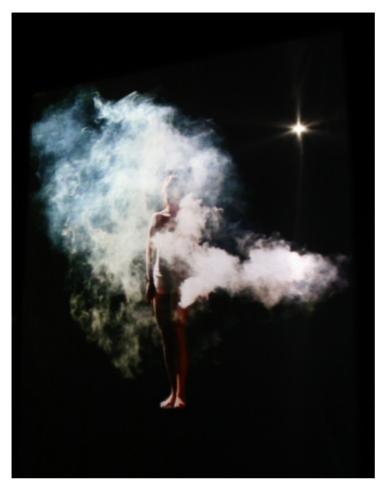


Fig.4. "Transformation 1 and 2" (2014) by Rosemarie Allaert. Photo: Eero Erkamo. ©Aalto University.

Beyond the use of video screens and projections in a costume exhibition as a display and viewing medium, this paper is interested in further exploring the potential of mediation as a tool for exhibition design in combination with other materials, formats and bodies, offering a dynamic transmedia approach.

The curatorial theme "Body / The Other" focused on works that explore the objectification of the body from a social, a political and a gender perspective, dimensions that directed the design of the display to further transmedia solutions. Costume is able to reveal bodies even when concealing them, creating an interactive interplay through garments that cover parts of the body while at the same time unsealing "unspoken taboos" (Pantouvaki, 2015: 7).²² Costuming the "Other" invites costume design

to pose questions on the performativity of the body, its social agency as well as its emancipation, multi-layered identities, ageing and dying. The work "Lop Lop: WORD or WOman biRD Homage à Max Ernst & Arthur Rimbaud" by performance artist Gabriella Daris was included in this theme. In this performance, Daris manipulates her body through body painting and makeup, gesture, posture and the use of prosthetic birds as her sole "costume" until she becomes alienated from her body like a woman-bird-puppet herself. Her performance relics – birds attached to cable ties (tie wraps) – were displayed in the exhibition space as traces of her costume, while a white frame of light was projected on the exhibition wall as a virtual performance space. A video projection of the filmed performance event, with Daris' body digitally shown on the opposite exhibition wall, served as an audio-visual connection to the original performance. This created an exhibit that demonstrated the original physical connection between the costume fragments (the birds) and her performing body, offering a shared experience that engaged the physical space of the exhibition and the digital projection as one spatial entity (fig.5). The adjacent

^{22.} See "Khotoum" or "Seals" by Nermine Said and "Revelation through Concealment" by Alyssa Choat in Pantouvaki (2015: 24-27), two other relevant works exhibited within this theme.

exhibit under the same theme presented the performance project "Wearing the 'Other'" by set and costume designer Jorge Sandoval. Sandoval's work explores the space of the "Other" through a layering of bodies, with projected image becoming "his tool to create a visual commentary of metaphorical space that exists within bodies" (Pantouvaki, 2015: 7), which collectively become sites for performance. This original work uses video and performance to explore "the body within the body" (Sandoval in Pantouvaki, 2015: 22) by presenting filmed bodies performing together with projected visual materials. In the Critical Costume 2015 exhibition, this work was presented as a projection on the wall that was enlivened by real physical performing bodies: a performer interacting with the projection created a layered "costume" that comprised the surface of the real human body and the projected image (fig.6). Therefore, this exhibit was an expanded layering of bodies in which the moving image became part of the living, performing body underscoring Sandoval's original intent to explore "the concept of the body as performative and the body as a site for performance" (ibid.). In combining these elements, the exhibition design intensified Sandoval's work on both a notional and an experiential level.

Encounters enhancing interaction between individuals was another common theme among *Critical Costume 2015* works under the curatorial theme "Interconnectivity / Encounters". Such works addressed performative situations where bodies connect and extend in the space and in relation to one another. In "ENCOUNTER#2", costume designer Joost van Wijmen explores physical contact by creating a playful set



Fig.5. "Lop Lop: WORD or WOman biRD" (2008) by Gabriella Daris. Performance relics in the exhibition. Photo: Tuuli Ahonen. ©Aalto University.



Fig.6. "Wearing the 'Other'" (2014) by Jorge Sandoval. A performer interacting with the projection. Photo: Laura Havimo. ©Aalto University.



Fig.7. "ENCOUNTER#2" (2015). Costume Designer: Joost van Wijmen. Photo: Tuuli Ahonen. ©Aalto University.

of costumes based on a simple yet inventive idea: two suits entirely made of hook-and-loop fasteners (Velcro) inviting the audience to experience an encounter - perhaps even a confrontation - through physical contact and the implications brought to this contact by the material. Van Wijmen's costumes were available to visitors of the exhibition to wear and play with; they were worn at different times and tested through the exhibition visitors' physical encounters in pairs. The costumes would enable visitors to "enter each other's personal space" without necessarily "knowing the other intimately" (van Wiimen quoted in Pantouvaki. 2015: 77). Thus, this exhibit provoked the visitor to interact with the work through the participatory act of wearing a costume, while also interconnecting and interacting with other visitors who wore the other costume (fig.7). A screen, also comprised in the exhibit, functioned as an invite for audience participation, showing previous interventions provoked by the same costumes. Altogether, this

open transmedia approach involved the physical garments, the screen and audience action, enabling the work to be understood as an experiential and immersive event.

The *Critical Costume 2015: New Costume Practices and Performances* exhibition has offered hands-on space to explore diverse ways in which costume is "read" and experienced in a multidimensional and multimedia context. The implications of research processes, new technologies and media for the study and practice of costume designing today lead to new costume practices and performances as well as to novel performative installations. The examples analysed in this paper demonstrate how transmedia display practices lead the visitor away from a rather narrow visual practice – that of "looking" at costume – to an expanded exhibition experience on both a sensory and notional level.

Digital technology has created tools that offer new exhibiting options to costume,²³ involving not only visual design, but also connections to materials, movement and bodily experience.

^{23.} Further to the remit of this paper, and following *Critical Costume 2015*, digital technology has also opened online spaces for the display of costume, as we can see in the later Critical Costume exhibitions.

Mediation is hence understood here beyond the process of viewing through a screen or a projection; it is proposed as a tool to critically reconsider the interrelations between the physical, virtual and mediated possibilities of costume. In addition, when mediation becomes a part of transmedia practice, it also carries a chance for immersion. Therefore, the opportunities that mediation offers in the context of transmedia display are also inclusive, as they provide a wide range of participation options through visual, auditory and tactile means to the visitors of future costume exhibitions.

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