Fashion Bodies
Swinging between the Animate and the Inanimate
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THE INANIMATE
THE ANIMATE AND
SWINGING BETWEEN
FASHION BODIES

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Like her predecessor, the fashion model exists on the cusp of the organic and the inorganic, between the animate and the inanimate, bridging the worlds of the living and the dead. Rejections of 'nature' and associations with the artificial permeate historical accounts of fashion. In the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire praised the artificiality of beauty and wrote that fashion should be considered a "sublime deformation of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her reformation." John Carl Flügel suggested in *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930) that given fashion's "inability to find complete satisfaction with reality, [it] creates a new world 'nearer to the heart's desire,' away from the limitations and disappointments of reality." Walter Benjamin stressed fashion's deathly connotations in the *Arcades Project*, when he wrote that fashion "stands in opposition to the organic. It couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, it defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism that succumbs to the sex-appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve." And Roland Barthes, who in his 1967 semiotic study *The Fashion System* was famously interested in 'written fashion' and arguably equally uninterested in actual, worn fashion, held that fashion shows its defining characteristics most clearly when it does not have to bother with the concerns of dressing an actual person. "'Real' clothing," wrote Barthes, "is burdened with practical considerations (protection, modesty, adornment); these finalities disappear from 'represented' clothing, which no longer serves to protect, to cover, or to adorn." For Barthes, because fashion representations (in images) might still carry these practical features, it is only 'written fashion' (without any practical function) that is really and essentially fashion.

In what follows I consider two of British fashion designer Alexander McQueen's early shows, addressing specific interplays of garments and the female bodies modeling them. I ascribe to fashion itself a certain agency which I argue the two shows bring to the fore. While potentially deformational and inorganic, its inextricable ties to the human body entail that fashion always 'does' something ('agent' derives from the Latin *agere* 'to do'.)
from the Latin agere – doing): It constitutes its agency in acting and re-acting with, doing something (in relation) to the wearer’s body. Regarding this agency, what fashion scholar Karen de Perthuis calls “fashion’s imaginations” can to some extent be attributed to a designer and her way of crafting a specific material to bring out certain characteristics that will affect what a body who wears the garment can do with and in relation to it.

More generally speaking and mirroring the introductory contentions by Baudelaire, Flügel, Benjamin, and Barthes, we can see fashion as an agentive system in the sense that the ways in which fashion ‘acts’ derive from its broader relation to global capitalism and incessant renewal. This agency is not least characterized by fashion’s artificiality and brought out in intra-actions with the bodies who wear it. Intra-action is a term coined by physicist and feminist scholar Karen Barad to describe an entanglement of agencies which mutually constitute each other. In what follows, I want to explore clothes, bodies, and their respective agencies not as pre-given, but as produced through their relations with each other.

Merging fashion’s artificial, inorganic imaginations with something as blatantly realistic, as ‘worldly’, and to some minds perhaps as flawed as the human body, must seem – if anything – a restriction. And although clothes were of course always primarily made to adorn actual real-life bodies, the history of fashionable dress also suggests how reluctant fashion has been to accommodate live bodies. In fact, it could be argued that fashion has often successfully evaded (and continues to evade) actual bodies, at least in the early stages of designing a piece and disseminating that design, as well as – more recently – in digital fashion photography.

To situate my investigation of the paradoxical corporeality of fashion models, I want to complement these introductory comments on fashion’s agentive artificiality with a note on the other key term in my title. With the word ‘bodies’ I refer in the following to performative compounds of discursive and material elements. In concert, these elements mean that however far fashion models’ bodies might venture into the sphere of ‘fashion’s imaginations’, these discursive and material elements variously tie them to the everyday world. Discursive elements of bodily being are, for instance, techniques of moving, dress, and adornment, as well as manners of speaking and gesturing. All these are in more or less reiterative or antagonistic relation and contribute to a culture’s understanding and construction of gender, age, class, and so on. Further – and primarily to point to the live body’s ultimate unpredictability – my account insists on material bodies that are specific in their size, age, colour, and ability; bodies that will get hungry and tired, might get ill, and might stumble in performance. While all of these aspects can be manipulated with techniques that are again specific in their cultural form and meaning, a material body does exist that is not obviously and infinitely controllable. Even if this aspect of bodily being is not graspable in an independent, a priori way, eliminating it entirely only seems possible in the literal construction of bodies ‘from scratch’: in art and science’s attempts and imaginations.

Striking instances of such imagined ‘body constructions’ may be found in fashion plates that exaggerated and molded the fashionable body according to the aesthetic demands of the clothes. Fashion plate illustration was the most common method for disseminating fashion designs from the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth. In these and other depictions, fashion’s “apparent unwillingness to engage with ‘realistic’ portrayals of the human body can be attributed […] to an ideal that is more immediately determined by the clothes themselves”.

Such an imaginary ideal could be upheld in fashion plates and illustrations, but it was more difficult to reconcile with the medial preconditions of early photography. This meant that even after the new medium of photography was well established, it was considered less desirable than illustration for the depiction of fashion ideas until well into the second decade of the twentieth century. Vogue (founded in 1892) did not use photographs on its cover until 1932. “In the same way that photography was considered a lower art form than illustration, neither could the fashion model rival the elegance of the imagined figure.” The shift in medium that happened when modeling with real people began late in the nineteenth century is therefore significant.
Fashion Models’ Imaginary Bodies

Serving fashion’s imaginations is one thing for drawn or plastered, or (today’s) digitally altered bodies. I now want to make the case that through their skilful bodily performances even fashion models who parade on the catwalk can be subsumed into fashion’s imaginary system. A straightforward way of disclosing this paradox is through the fact that haute couture fashion is often referred to as ‘unwearable’. But at the same time it requires a body in order to be fashion. Because as soon as these sorts of garments are on display without a body inside, they run the risk of changing status, becoming something like ‘craft’. To become what it is, this fashion requires dialogue with a living body. The explicit challenge of human physicality, as we know it, appears to be a constituting feature of the fashion that I want to discuss in this article.

Looking at other contexts in which bodies are conspicuously on show, mainstream film and the performing arts in general – and everyday life for that matter – have a strong tradition of rendering an expressive body.

Regarding the photographed body, Amelia Jones draws attention to “the desire for the image to render up the body and thereby the self in its fullness and truth” as the main impetus for the development of photography. There is a drive in Euro-American culture, according to Jones, to ‘read’ both the live body and the photographed body as a sign for something else: the true self. Contrarily, high fashion often uses the body as material without any apparent interest in the connection to the human person that each body also is.

The season’s ‘Céline woman’ or ‘Dior woman’ are type-casts, at best. Art historian Isabelle Graw refers to the designer Yves Saint Laurent saying that “the mannequins were nothing but models to him, whom he did not even perceive as women”. While this seems like a glaring objectification, the emphasis appears to be on a (not unproblematic) commitment to exploring ways of staging the human figure. We might compare the approach to positions in the arts (including the performing arts): the Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer, for instance, associated terms such as marionette, automaton, and art figure with a positive potential and spoke of mankind’s liberation from his “physical bondages”, to heighten his freedom of movement.”

At a time when performing the self – variously making it visible and staging this affective labour – constitutes a considerable part of everyday life for both celebrities and ordinary people, we can wonder if such an abstracting, non-representational way of staging the human figure might not be more progressive than it at first appears. With Graw, we can ask: Is it really so liberating, having to be oneself all the time?

In what follows, I analyze specific instances in which a tension between the imaginary and the realistic, the animate and the inanimate, is staged in the work of Alexander McQueen. I exemplify the conjunction of the fashion model’s body with the imagination-driven system that is fashion in two of McQueen’s shows. This means that rather than referring to McQueen’s oeuvre – and its ample use of motifs related to the animate and the inanimate – in its entirety, I specifically consider the performed dialogue of the models’ bodies with worn objects in No. 13 and La Poupée.

No. 13
McQueen’s spring/summer 1999 show was inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement and mirrored its emphasis on traditional craftsmanship. The show featured leather bodices made by prosthetists, specially carved legs shown by the double-amputee and Paralympic sprinter Aimee Mullins, and skirts and tops made of punched wood fans, amongst other spectacular pieces.

In addition to the high heels that were part of every outfit, several garments also inhibited movement and dictated specific postures and ways of walking. For instance, transparent chiffon tops featured a deep off-the-shoulder neckline that, despite their light appearance, forced the models’ upper arms tightly against their torsos and thus functioned like a straightjacket. The leather bodices were so tight around the neck that the models could not look down at where they were stepping, which significantly affected their gait. Furthermore, these hard bodices made each woman’s torso appear to be an “autonomous object, distinct from the fleshly human body”.

Fashion Bodies

Franziska Bork Petersen
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McQueen commissioned Bob Watts, of prosthetic and orthotic centre Dorset Orthopaedic, and wood carver and gilder Paul Ferguson to produce the carved legs worn by Aimee Mullins in the show. Watts used ash wood because of its strength and suitability for intricate carving, and hand-carved the material to Mullins’ exact measurements. Ferguson subsequently created low-relief forms of vines and leaves with the detail cut directly into the wood. The sockets, which Mullins’ residual limbs fitted into exactly, allowed her to wear the legs on the runway without any additional straps.

With Karen Barad, we can refer to Mullins’ wearing of the wooden legs in No. 13 as an intra-action, an entanglement of agencies which mutually constitute each other and, in this case, produced a specific figure. The carved legs and other non-human elements constituted the model Mullins as a physically smart ‘technician of the walk’, who navigated the challenges of the runway, including rotating discs in the floor, on the wooden legs, unable to look down as her head was forced into an upright position by her corset’s rigid leather.

This made the runway walk Mullins had practised impossible to replicate when she wore the legs in No. 13. The improvised intra-action of model and wooden legs was specific to the time, space, and circumstances of the show, and performative in the sense that it gave rise to Mullins’ specific model-agency. At the same time, her wearing and walking in them constituted the agency and brought out the material properties of the wooden legs. Their lack of give in the ankle was only ‘actualized’ performatively in the specific walk they produced when intra-acting with Mullins’ specific body. While the legs make for beautiful objects in their own right, displaying them in a museum vitrine would have had an entirely different effect. This congealing of the wooden legs’ agency in relation to Mullins’ specific walking body dovetails with Barad’s insistence that matter is not a fixed substance, but an intra-active becoming: “Matter is”, according to Barad, “neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentive, not a fixed essence or property of things.”

In another example, the model’s performance helped display the garment’s agency as overwhelming. Around twelve minutes into the show, the model presented the design: “The model signifies the garment, not the other way round. The model signifies the garment as the thing, the signifier as the thing, the garment as the meaning, the model as the meaning, the garment as the object, the model as the subject, the garment as the representation, the model as the representation, the garment as the signifier, the signifier as the representation, the garment as the signifier, the signifier as the representation, the garment as the subject, the subject as the signifier, the signifier as the object.”

The model’s performance helped display the garment’s agency as overwhelming.
the show, two models stepped onto revolving discs that were installed in the floor. The models remained completely still while being rotated. This specific intra-action benefited the clothes: big balsa-wood skirts with intricate punched-out patterns which could be admired from all sides, smoothly turning without interruption by the ‘bounce’ a human walk typically entails. To push the objects’ ‘thing power’ (Bennett) to the fore, the human bodies remained motionless upon entering the intra-action. In the face of the models’ complete stillness, it is relevant to conjure animation as conventionally a characteristic of aliveness. As a consequence, it has historically been their movement that allowed automatons to be perceived as alive, and at times created an uncanny ambivalence: We know that automatons and mechanical dolls are not alive, and yet their animation makes them appear as if they were.

In our context the ‘inverse scenario’ becomes interesting: the fashion model who we know is alive, and yet her mechanical movements, her motionless freeze in posing, and her dead stare make it seem as if she might not be. In this instance, as elsewhere in No. 13, the amplified agency of the things and concomitant reduction of ‘what the human bodies could do’ was as associated with divine beauty and skill. But it was also associated with fear, as in the noted final scene of No. 13: The model Shalom Harlow appeared in a gigantically voluminous white trapeze dress, positioned herself on the same revolving discs as in the scene just described, and was subsequently ‘attacked’ with black and yellow paint by two industrial robots, who sprayed her dress from two directions.

If not exactly passive, Harlow appeared statically placed on the revolving disc and helplessly exposed to the spraying machines. In No. 13 the hard bodices, high-heeled shoes, revolving discs, and the specific cuts of many items of clothing acted on the models’ movement and shape. It is significant that in fabrication the material properties of these restricting objects – the rigidness of the leather, the stiffness of the skirts – were themselves accentuated by skilled human craftspeople (and their non-human tools and techniques). Echoing the Arts and Crafts Movement, prosthetists, wood carvers, and not least McQueen himself carefully crafted the worn pieces.
to bring out the properties of the used materials. In doing so, materials came to the fore not as 'ready to hand' – characterized by their functional use as tools – but as agentive partners in a dialogue (or: intra-action).

32 In this performed dialogue, the crafted items worked on the bodies of the models in the show, as we have seen. They inflicted their (accentuated) materiality back on human bodies. The fashion items affected both the models' movement and their shape and, overall, created figures that were often irreconcilable with what would usually be associated with human form or movement.

Fashion Model Genealogy

Live models are associated with and determined by the inorganic in other contexts, too – not only when they performatively intra-act with their agentive haute couture garments in specific fashion shows.

The second McQueen show I look at draws on the history of fashion modeling.

In the late nineteenth century, when clothes were first being modeled by real people rather than displayed on wooden mannequins, journalistic comments, novels, and caricatures immediately associated the fashion model with the doll or the mechanical. This is not all that far-fetched, because, as fashion scholar Caroline Evans points out, the first fashion models were dolls: 33 During the reign of Louis XIV, poupées – fashion dolls in miniature replicas of fashionable gowns – were dressed by the leading Parisian designers and sent to London and, later, to other European centers, to promote the French fashion ideal. The nineteenth century saw:

- the appearance of life-size 'dolls', or store mannequins, which were used to display [...], garments in the shop windows of the streets and arcades that were now a part of commercial life. The earliest forms were really nothing more than headless, limbless tailor's dummies made from wicker or cane [...]. By the 1870s the mannequins had become more lifelike and naturalistic looking. They were made from wax with wigs of real hair, had glass eyes and articulated limbs, with the most expensive versions even providing a kinetic spectacle as they rotated on a motorised or hand-operated turntable.

34 When modeling with 'real' people became common at the turn of the twentieth century, the models' status as objects was linked both to the history of dolls and wooden mannequins and to their role in commercial sales.

Fashion salons were often equipped with multiple mirrors and the models' reflections paralleled the repetitiveness of their task of indifferently modeling the same garments to different clients several times a day.

35 The model's slender body, her rhythmic step, and gliding movement were all features that, according to Evans, contributed to "her slightly unnatural, even uncanny appearance".

36 When John Powers opened the first model agency in New York in 1923 he described himself as "a broker in beauty" and fashion models as "commodities who must meet certain requirements".

37 Fashion models entered the cultural scene about a century after the Industrial Revolution had begun to let automatons emerge as central metaphors for society's dreams and nightmares. Artistic visions of people's identities and emotional lives taking on the impersonal efficiency of machines expressed a central fear. The 'woman as lifeless doll' was no uncommon theme in nineteenth-century literature (in Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's The Future Eve or E.T.A. Hoffmann's The Sandman, for instance), and Sigmund Freud drew on the uncanniness of anything that evokes uncertainty about its status as animate or inanimate 'dead matter'.

38 The fashion trade's rationalization of the body mirrored the "machine aesthetic of early modernism", argues fashion scholar Eugenie Shinkle, and Evans describes the early twentieth-century model's standardized body as "the mechanical, synchronised and occasionally robotic body of modernism, a body which was rationalised across the cultural and commercial fields of art, work and leisure, and which was encouraged to conform to geometric and functional forms."

39 Early fashion models were the "inheritors of the nineteenth-century literature of automata, dolls, doppelgängers and deathliness".

40 Today, fashion designers continue to draw on this historical context of the 'woman as doll'. She is often staged as a straightforward commodification of a woman, who indulges in her passivity and in the spectacle of her beauty.

41 Along these lines, a 2012 Lancôme mascara ad campaign encouraged customers to 'Become a doll!'.

42 In his show La Pouppé (SS 1997), McQueen took an altogether different approach...
when he conjured up images of the animate and the inanimate world by referencing dolls and marionettes – as the show’s title suggests. McQueen drew on the German artist Hans Bellmer’s work *La Poupée* from the 1930s and – like Bellmer – focused his interest in the doll on hints of an awakening sexual and mechanical play, and an uncertain ordering of the organism.

The catwalk for *La Poupée*, McQueen’s SS 1997 show, was covered in a shallow layer of water. The show featured a wide range of designs and modeling styles, many of which referred to aspects of the doll theme: The first model on the catwalk appeared to imitate a young girl with her skipping walk and energetic twirls. The semblance of an innocent girl reappeared in demure looks throughout some of the following models’ performances on the catwalk, while another ‘played’ the sexualized adult toy, squeezing her breasts and buttocks with her hands. A Barbie-like doll was referenced in pink, sparkly outfits and visible bright pink lingerie. McQueen also made reference to replication, using a doppelgänger motif as pairs of models appeared together not only in identical outfits, but also making synchronous movement patterns – while other pairs’ appearance and movements were near-identical.

The show’s makeup consisted of a decorative line of purple shades and glitter across the models’ faces, and appeared as if accurately stenciled on plastic. Neither mouth nor eyes were particularly emphasized, foregoing the conventional purpose of makeup in Western contexts.

The face became a canvas for an imagined pattern: In the context of doll-resemblances, this can be interpreted as another instance of playing down features of the biological human body, to the advantage of the artificial. The models’ frozen poses, their mechanical movement patterns, and their doll-like appearances let their bodies temporarily resemble inanimate matter.

For one of the outfits, the jeweller Shaun Leane created an inner metal frame that held the model’s arms outstretched inside her jacket. The frame worked like an entrapment, making the upper body appear as a stretched triangle, creating a very unusual silhouette. Struggling for balance as she walked down the catwalk, the model negotiated the contraption, remaining composed and avoiding looking down at the wet floor as much as possible; she also slowed down her walk, which gave it a somewhat hesitant appearance. If not unhuman, the position certainly looked uncomfortable for a human body.

While in Western culture, the doll is commonly linked to perfect femininity, McQueen followed Bellmer in referencing dolls not as beautiful, but as ‘out of whack’.

The appearance of the model with the outstretched arms brings to mind Bellmer’s (re)ordering of his doll’s body parts, which media studies scholar Peter Gendolla called a highly reflected game. Bellmer himself called it a “swinging of confusion between the animate and the inanimate”.

In performing this dialogue between human body and fashion stuff, McQueen’s creations result in unfamiliar appearances of the human figure. However, another instance in the show that challenged human physicality through the clothes’ agency and the models’ compromised agency over their movement exposed how problematic this approach to working with the human figure can also become.

While the triangular outfit emphatically inhibited the model’s walk, the obstruction was even more profound in the show’s most controversial piece: The black model Debra Shaw appeared shackled at her upper arms and thighs in a square metal frame with manacles. The frame and its placement on the model’s body created a stark contrast with the rest of the show’s outfits, emphasizing the model’s forced submission to the fashion system.
On each corner (also designed by Leane). In her walk, Shaw dealt with the relentless stiffness of the frame’s material by compensating for the relative immobility of her upper extremities with more mobile lower ones. Her lower arms and hands followed animated circular movement patterns, while the fact that only the lower leg could propel Shaw’s body forward made for a kicking gait. The sequence of the show has been identified by fashion curator Andrew Bolton as “difficult to watch” because of the clear connotation of slavery. 

McQueen reportedly denied this connotation, stating that he was only interested in how the contraption inhibited movement. Considering the sequence with regard to Barad’s entangled agencies, Shaw’s body was obviously limited in what it could do in this intra-action. Leane’s metal frame and manacles had considerable control over her movements. But the performative entanglement of this body and this object arguably also produced an image which – in meeting the spectator – evoked a specific history of denying black bodies agency. When models intra-act with specific fashion items, it may be that more than their professional agency is at stake. If agencies – according to Barad – do not precede but are mutually constituted in intra-actions, that does not mean that the intra-acting elements do not have a history (which they bring into the intra-action). Bodies – themselves consisting of and becoming in relation to multiple elements – are not only characterised by the ultimate uncontrollability of their social constitution in relation to multiple frames of reference, but also by their potential to be able to influence and shape their own histories.

**Conclusion**

“The concept of ‘the model’ […] offers an intriguing mix of things”, finds Evans; “it can be a rudimentary sketch, an ideal, a miniature, a set of instructions, a maquette or a prototype. […] But only in fashion is the model a living, breathing human being.”

Where the average contemporary woman is advised to wear something that ‘suits her’, or ‘expresses her personality’, the job of the fashion model is customarily to step back behind the dress she wears. Her movements and poses in a fashion show serve to show off the clothes in the most favorable manner. According to dance and performance scholar Gabriele Brandstetter, this means that in fashion shows models have

![Image of Debra Shaw modelling a square metal frame with manacles on each corner in McQueen's show La Poupee (Spring/Summer 1997), Shaun Leane for Alexander McQueen.](image-url)
At others, McQueen's designs emphasize the model's physicality. For example, see Bianca Westermann, *Dying To Be Born Again: Mortality, Feminism and Theory*, p. 272 ff. The high fashion environment, the models' bodies in many cases emerge as figures that are unfamiliar – certainly on the catwalk. At times they seem inanimate. We have seen that the clothing in the two shows both restricts and enables specific moves and silhouettes. In intra-acting with their appearance, but this appearance is then malleable by the body's creator. Such creations are, of course, still specific in their appearance, but this appearance doesn't mean that the models' bodies disappear from view. The effect of fashion's imaginations is dependent on the real bodies who wear them, as live catwalk presentations these performances are never staged parts.

The performance of femininity in fashion, as articulated by Caroline Evans, offers a critical perspective on the ontological status of the model.

Evans' work, "Ontology," delves into the nature of the model's body, questioning its material properties and social roles. She posits that the model's body is not merely a vessel for fashion, but rather a subject engaged in a complex interplay with cultural expectations and technological advancements.

From the perspective of Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche," the model's body is seen as a site of conflict between the human and the non-human, where aspects of the model's appearance and movement are subject to transformation.

Barthes' "The Mechanical Smile," further explores the model's role as a vessel for fashion, both in its physical form and in its ideological function. The model's body is a repository of cultural values, through which fashion is communicated and consumed.

Brandstetter's "Dancing the Animal," and "Pose – Posa – Posing. Zwischen Bild und Bewegung," investigate the tension between the human and the non-human in the fashion industry. The model's body is not only a medium for fashion, but also a subject that actively engages with the system, transforming itself in response to the demands of the fashion industry.

McLaughlin's "Bodies that Matter: On the Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswiss," and "The Illusions of Reality," explore the psychological and social implications of the model's body in fashion, highlighting the ways in which fashion both constructs and challenges human identity.

The mechanical smile, as described by Barthes, is a prime example of how fashion bodies are constructed to represent a certain ideal. However, the model's body is not static; it is a dynamic entity that reflects the changing social and cultural contexts of fashion production.

Despite the existence and influence of fashion dolls, as discussed by de Perthuis in "The Synthetic Model," the model's human body remains central to the fashion industry. The model's body is a site of potentiality, where the limits of human movement are explored and expanded.

Despite the existence and influence of Comme des Garçons' 'amalgamation' (Amalgam) fashion dolls, the model's body continues to be the primary vehicle for fashion. The model's body is not merely a tool for fashion, but also a subject that actively engages with the system, transforming itself in response to the demands of the fashion industry.