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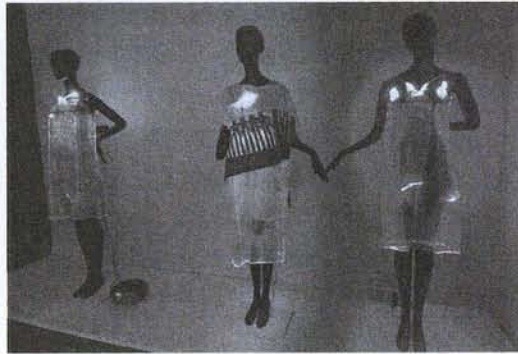
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Fashion Theory

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 **BERG**



Exhibition Review: *4 Lines* — A Fashion Exhibition + Installation — Diverse Takes on Fashion

**Reviewed by
Gillion Carrara**

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**Chicago Tourism Center, October 11–30, 2007;
Gallery talk October 13, 2007; Opening reception
October 11, 2007**

The thought-provoking *4 Lines* exhibition was realized through a partnership with the Exhibition Committee of the Chicago Cultural Center to bring apparel's visual theories and practices together with more established conventions during Fashion Focus Chicago. Nick Cave, Katrin Schnabl, Anke Loh, and Shane Gabier built platforms from which current projects invited exchange. Each designer's work emerged with four distinctive approaches that offered an opportunity to assess

their subversive notions on dress and presence. In my opinion, this powerful encounter succeeded in informing the visitor about contemporary ideals of dress.

The theme-based installations were exhibited in long narrow lines that immediately conveyed the alternate creative thinking of *4 Lines*, with quite a different energy from the fashion designs one usually sees presented in this city. Each grouping brought credible context to the oeuvre of this small yet persuasive group of avant-garde designers and deserves serious evaluation.

The designers challenge women with the genuine risk of dressing differently. Each was persistently resolute about integrating artistic development along with life in a city where conceptual dress design that confronts the *status quo* is relatively negligible by Midwest styling, and only attracts the interest of a few art critics and fashion writers.

Collaboration such as this between artists and fashion designers is not unusual. In August 2007, a *4 Lines* press release stated that the exhibition intended to explore the edge of fashion, art, and performance. Many artists have passed beyond the perimeters of form and function, choosing to develop social commentary, individual mythology, and artistic practice through dress.

Although not a dedicated art gallery, the chalk-white walls of the Tourism Center in Chicago provided parallel angles and bright-white overhead lighting, in excess, in which the four designers negotiated slim white exhibition platforms at right angles and diagonals. Fashion's avant-garde circles are quite willing to congregate in laundromats and boxcars for seasonal runway shows, so why not the city's bureaucratic center for tourism?

These four distinctive artists and designers are not necessarily pragmatic, but are in equal parts theoretical and fearlessly innovative. All are educated in theory and practice and teach in an art school, where they insist on efforts that move well past convention in the interest of

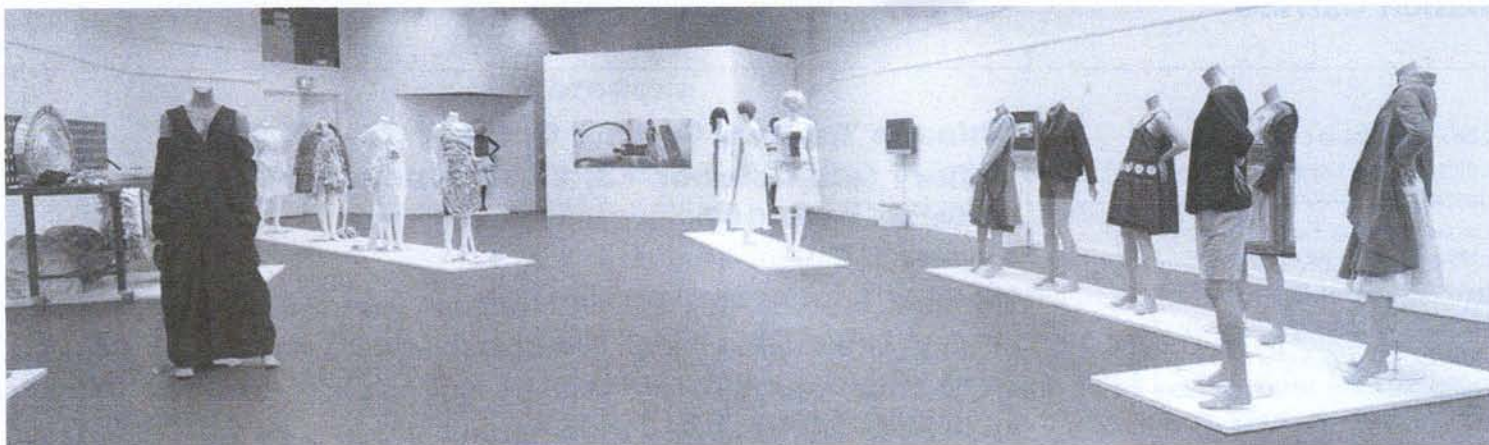


Figure 1

Overview of the *4 Lines* exhibition. Photograph: Jim Prinz. Courtesy of the Chicago Cultural Center.

genuine innovation. They integrate various processes of design and construction, as each one of them pursues the use of interdisciplinary technologies. They understand the potential and possibilities generated by their undaunted investigations in material manipulation, sculptural strategies, and the recurrence of disparate elements posing as key components to structure, color, volume, and adornment. They will muse until the ultimate execution of a concept generates an inquiry for gallery and museum space or boutique and department store representation.

Cave's one-of-a-kind, limited-edition reclamations of the classic dress shirt were featured in proximity to a fantastic moveable dress factory: an enormous stainless-steel utility table that supplied an imaginary garment worker with a profusion of precisely stacked and recycled materials. The thrift store, according to Cave, is a glorious minefield, a valuable resource for his layered multimedia projects. Five immobile mannequins displayed interpretations of the garment in response to one object of consideration: a button and its buttonhole, in multi-layered profusion. Two garments were springingly encrusted with manufacturers' labels. A commercial tag gun propelled hang-tag connectors and formerly functioning buttons out at all angles through a mesh screen jacket.

Close examination of these dissections revealed layered shirt collars twirled in stitched-down gyrations, engulfing the front of one bodice and skirt. What to do with remnants was not a dilemma as Cave wrapped

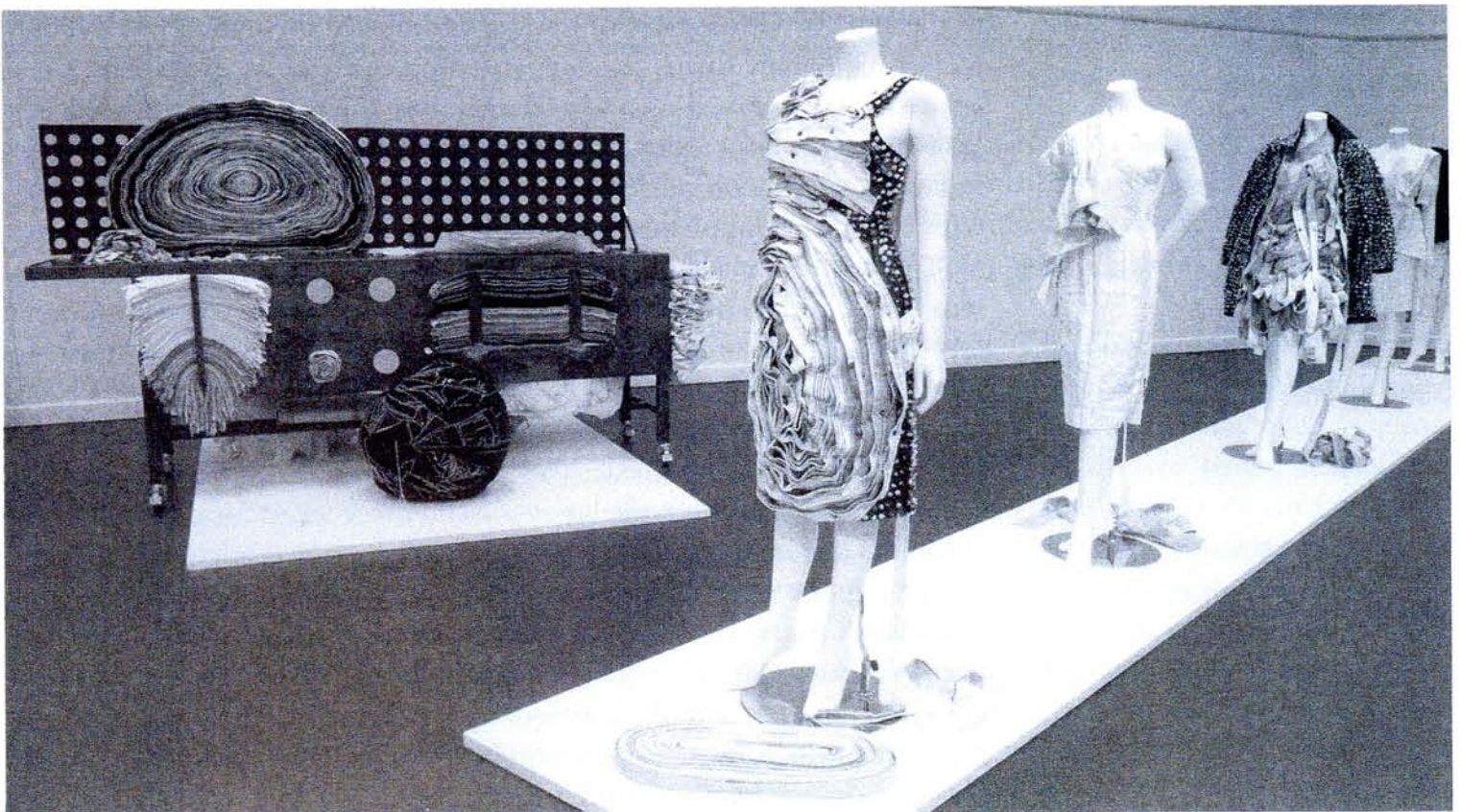




Figure 3

"L"-shaped display platform by Shane Gabier. Photograph: Jim Prinz. Courtesy of the Chicago Cultural Center.

and rewrapped scraps into weighty spheres, as if they were anchors for the abundance of inventory. With his keen eye when collecting recycled materials and once-functional elements, gadgets, and implements, Cave's selection of ornamentation has constantly expanded as it has in his non-commercial works. In this installation, he dismantled construction elements with a sense of humor, and placed them neatly at the bare feet of the female forms. Collars stood precisely in an oval form, packaged shoelaces posed as a chatelaine, and shirt plackets tumbled in a series onto the floor from the model's hand. With these options he seems to have justified craft, although generally unfit for fashion's vocabulary, with surprising supplements to fashion's avant-garde.

The focus for Shane Gabier's six garments refers to the Op-Art movement and its optical illusions, which are executed via well-ordered layering techniques in quilting. This approach is a study in deconstruction, the perception of depth and layering through arrangements based in mathematical equation. Fabric elements were reinforced to enable progressions of raised surfaces at the sides, torso, and hem of the front of one dress while the same layered elements receded on the back of the garment. Layered fragments, pleated panels, and semicircles of fabric recall Gabier's research into the relationship of colors by Joseph Albers, along with native and early American appropriation of discarded fabrics for reuse. Unexpected, and not exhibiting his distinctive fit to the figure, Gabier opened and defined such geometric shapes as the double flat circle, which he artfully sculpted into a backless jacket. Concealed batwing sleeves became unanticipated insertions in a shirt that offered both a new shape and the amusing possibility of an outstretched wing. He formed a poncho by simply elongating a circle, the result of a studio practice in which he drapes fabric over a form and "carves" the



Figure 4

"Bellows" by Katrin Schnabl. Photograph: Jim Prinz. Courtesy of the Chicago Cultural Center.

fabric into an aesthetic and functioning garment. One pair of shorts was particularly slim and a dress's midriff was exposed by a succession of cutout circles. Gabier's pieces provoked transformations of dress that one could consider as new and imaginable concepts of contemporary, feminine dress.

Accustomed to collaborations in which pools of thought give way to new ideas, Katrin Schnabl executed eight prescient concepts she labeled "Bellows" that combined fabric manipulations that included twisting, pulling, and wrapping. The eight fastidious dresses, pants, jackets, and coats in this exploration illustrate an active practice of cutting, opening, and, to an extent, stretching a pattern piece in order to facilitate new forms. What Schnabl proposes is risky. "When you cut, something releases and you have to catch that release," she posits. Implementing a constructivist's approach, Schnabl routinely collects striking tabloid fragments. She then reacts to what happens, responsible to solutions of personal and practical importance. Actual bold sequences of text extend into abstract forms, initiating her design process. Deliberations on a dress form condense and distil until a garment design actually works.

A succession of thirty photographs was positioned on panels, pitched forward, along a parallel wall to communicate with the viewer



Figure 5

"Dressing Light" by Anke Loh. Photograph: Jim Prinz. Courtesy of the Chicago Cultural Center.

about the garments in movement as alternatives to the nearby immobile figures. What Schnabl offered the inquisitive onlooker was a reassessment of philosophical proposals on permutations of form—applied to the process of design by means of mathematics. She asked how a garment can hold an idea. She asked that we consider the garment to be more than a shelter that wraps around the body entirely for protection. With one coat, she proposed that the hood do little more than materialize as a cushion for the head. One dress draped on a form discreetly defined shape with one seam, two cuts, and barely distinguishable arms restricted movement.

Anke Loh's nine garments, familiar to alternative *défilés* and installations, are the most evocative of experimentation with an amalgam of cutting-edge dimensions. Her potential projects are as liable to relate to the aesthetics of dress just as much as the technical challenges of construction and the effects of "being here" have on her. Thematic textile prints were prompted by contradictory images of beauty and the beauty of imperfections in popular culture. Devotion to artificial beauty is a curiosity that persists in her observations on American culture.

The heads of satin-white or matt-black female figures were concealed under vibrant slip-sliding polyester hair, in direct color contrast to the silk-screened textile images of hair combs. For this series, shape-based garments were substituted with basic shapes such as T-shirts, sheath dresses, and A-line skirts. Situated along a wall in a blackened alcove, optical fibers integrated in the material of two dresses radiated and reflected glowing LED (light-emitting diode) light into the surrounding area. Constantly reacting to various multiple environmental signals, colors changed between layers of Italian-produced Luminex fabric labeled Super Velo. The technology was concealed within the constructions for her project, "Dressing Light." In the hand of one mannequin, a sensor enabled the material to react to a recorded melody. Imagine a night out dressed in a garment with the ability to glow color or emit a tune! Her efforts brought an insight into her intense absorption in capturing art and technology. Open to a collaborative environment, she is investigating opportunities with like-minded scientists and engineers. Moving away from tradition, Loh is a forward-thinking designer who utilizes technological advances to reinforce uncomplicated forms of clothing.

Common hair combs, some with distorted teeth, garments on living figures, black birds in flight, and snapshots of a German community floated compatibly on a photographic wall panel, transforming the basic accessory into a powerful fusion of high and low culture. Loh is

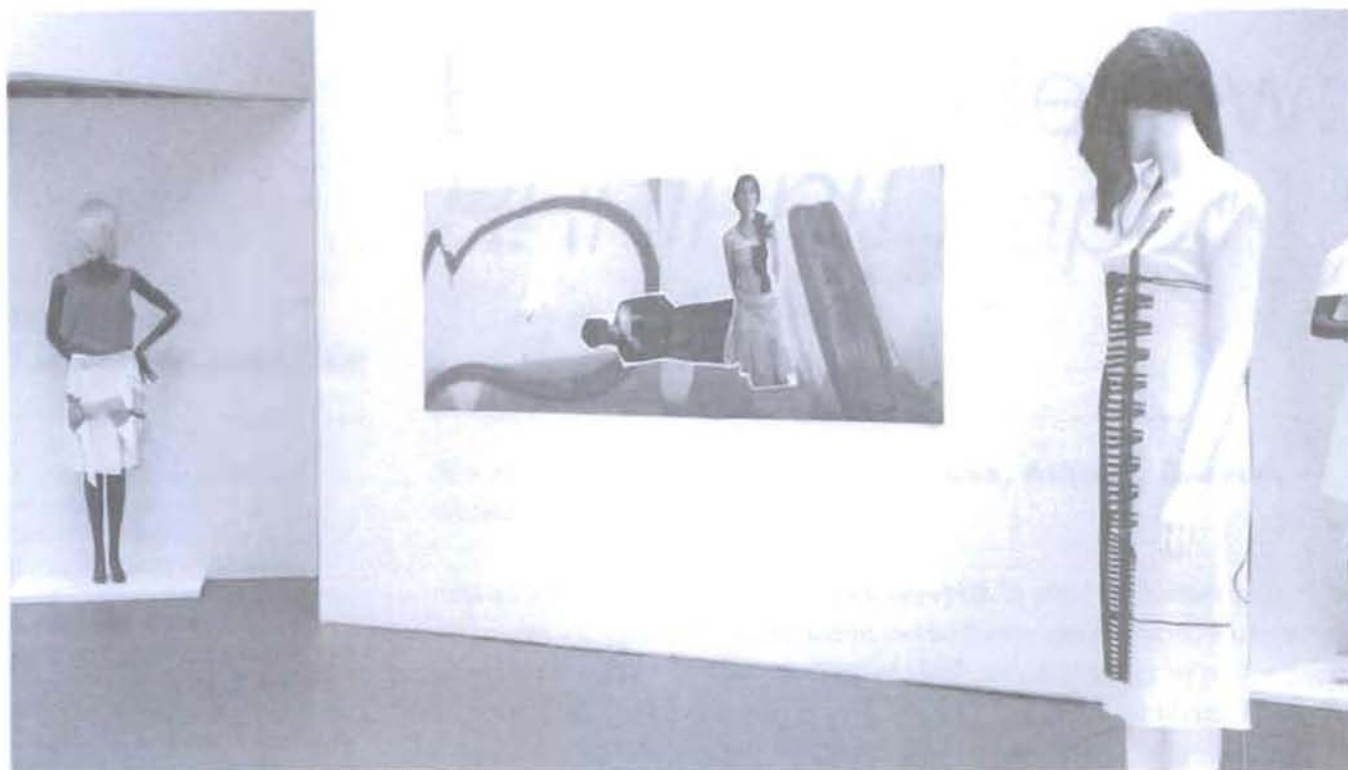


Figure 6

Wall collage by Anke Loh. Photograph: Jim Prinz. Courtesy of the Chicago Cultural Center.

determined in her examination of the differences between people and cultures, relating extraordinary irony with the seemingly mundane. The static photographic ALOFT corresponded with two flat screen transmitters of the same motionless objects passing by—playful in their suspension.

Perpetually changing rules in avant-garde dress evolve as to aesthetically pleasing and *au current* fashions. Each one of these designers and artists has attempted to dissolve traditions and examine contemporary issues, especially in consideration of the flesh, and the pleasure and discomfort of forming identity. For me, each one of them has successfully posed alternatives to those traditions while reconsidering the body and dress, creating individual and new structures, color arrangements, volumes, and textures. Through individual and highly personal experimentation each has discarded commonplace acceptance of how garments can and should be worn and from what fabrics, trimming, and finishing garments can be designed.

One can argue that art and fashion are distinctly different enterprises and that *4 Lines* is a deliberate exaggeration. This is not so. The comprehensive exchange of aesthetics forecasts the beginning of an unparalleled movement to renegotiate new boundaries for contemporary fashion that encompasses art and imagination.