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ART WORLD, RAG TRADE OR IMAGE INDUSTRY? A CULTURAL
SOCIOLOGY OF BRITISH FASHION DESIGN.

BY ANGELA MCROBBIE.

Thesis submitted to Loughborough University in partial fulfilment of Degree of
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.

I would like to thank my supervisor Graham Murdock for his excellent advice and support and also for his intellectual guidance. I would also like to thank the library staff at Central StMartins College of Art and Design for all their help. Finally I would like to thank the many people who agreed to be interviewed for this study. To honour confidentiality on questions of policy and funding I have named all heads of department who were interviewed alphabetically, and likewise on the basis of issues of income and livelihoods being discussed I have given all fashion designers pseudonyms. However I have retained the proper names of journalists and other professionals according to the agreement at the time of interview.
This thesis argues that the distinctiveness of contemporary British fashion design can be attributed to the history of education in fashion design in the art schools, while the recent prominence and visibility is the result of the expansion of the fashion media.

Fashion design had to struggle to achieve disciplinary status in the art schools. Tarnished by its associations with the gendered and low status practice of the dressmaking tradition, and then in the post war years, with the growth of mass culture and popular culture, fashion educators have emphasised the conceptual basis of fashion design. Young fashion designers graduating from art school and entering the world of work develop an occupational identity closer to that of fine artists. This is a not unrealistic strategy given the limited nature of employment opportunities in the commercial fashion sector. But as small scale cultural entrepreneurs relying on a self-employed and freelance existence, the designers are thwarted in their ability to maintain a steady income by their lack of knowledge of production, sewing and the dressmaking tradition.

The current network of urban 'micro-economies' of fashion design are also the outcome of the enterprise culture of the 1980s. Trained to think of themselves primarily as creative individuals the designers are ill-equipped to develop a strategy of collaboration and association through which their activities might become more sustainable. While the fashion media has also played a key role in promoting fashion design since the early 1980s, they are overwhelmingly concerned with circulation figures. They produce fashion images which act as luxurious environments for attracting advertising revenue. Consequently they carry little or no coverage on issues relating to employment or livelihoods in fashion. But their workforce is also creative, casualised and freelance. In each case, these young workers are the product of the shift in the UK to an emergent form of cultural capitalism comprising of low pay and the intensification of labour in exchange for the reward of personal creativity. This current sociological investigation aims to open the debate on the potential for the future socialisation of creative labour.
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CHAPTER ONE

FASHION DESIGN AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Designer Times

The seeds for this study were first sown in 1989, at the end of the so-called ‘designer decade’ when a collection of articles, many of which had appeared in the political magazine *Marxism Today*, were published in a volume titled *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, edited by Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (Hall and Jacques 1989). I was immediately interested in a short comment made by Robin Murray: ‘There are now 29,000 people working in design consultancies in the UK, which have sales of £1,600 million per annum. They are the engineers of designer capitalism’ (Murray 1989: 44). It struck me at the time that very little, if anything, was known about the working lives or careers of this kind of worker. In addition I was slightly puzzled by the immediate equation Murray made between being a designer and designing for capitalism. The designers I knew personally, including the fashion designers, rarely saw themselves in this way. The extent to which notions of art, creativity and culture intruded on and defined their practices as designers produced, at the very least, a sense of tension between themselves and the world of business. Clearly there are many different types of designer, from the art directors of the big advertising agencies, for whom designing is indeed about selling commodities, to the small scale fashion designer for whom design work often seems to be at odds with what the market wants, to people like the graphic designer, Neville Brody, whose
work could be seen throughout the 1980s in magazines like *The Face* and the left wing *New Socialist*. Figures like Brody and fashion designers like, say, Pam Hogg, seemed to me, to be more ambivalently poised in relation to working for ‘capitalism’ and it was this tension which I wanted to explore in greater depth.

There was also an underlying political motive in pursuing a study of fashion designers, as a case study of the new cultural worker. Left thinking at the time was only able to interpret this kind of work in one of two ways. The first argued that these were ‘Thatcher’s children’, prime examples of the enterprise culture who would fulfil the Tory dreams of re-building British society on highly individualist lines. These would be self-reliant young men and women, who would literally embody the virtues of going it alone and fending for yourself without the support of the ‘Nanny state’. For the left, people like these could only be seen as Tory supporters, new anti-union ‘Yuppies’, deeply intertwined and committed to the consumer culture for whom they provided the fancy wrapping paper. In contrast, the second approach suggested instead that they were simply fodder. They had been fed the jargon of enterprise and the joys of ‘being your own boss’ and then shoved into the cold and left to fend for themselves, and as a result working longer hours than even a 19th century employer could expect of his workforce. More fool them! These would be the middle-class or professional equivalent to the newly casualised and flexible workers described by Anna Pollert as being encouraged repeatedly during this period to ‘live with insecurity and learn to love it’ (Pollert 1988: 72). Neither of these characterisations seemed to me convincing or adequate as accounts of the cultural intermediaries who were entering, or rather, creating their own labour market throughout this decade.
My interest in providing a fuller account of these kinds of careers was motivated by both a sociological and a political concern. The absence of documentation in sociology or in cultural studies of this kind of work meant that political commentary was inevitably speculative. My reservations about consigning such workers to the camp of the new right, and thus ignoring them as potential allies, were based on a commitment on my part to attempting to build political bridges and draw different kinds of workers into the political processes, something that seemed all the more urgent in the face of the strong right wing government of the time, and the dwindling impact of the left (McRobbie 1996a). But the experience of teaching students who would become part of this creative workforce also led me to rather different conclusions from the mainstream left. In practice they showed few signs of embracing the language of Thatcherism (McRobbie 1996b). Although their education and social identities, did by and large, give them a more individualist outlook (not unusual for arts or media students) than their '60s or '70s counterparts who were more thoroughly 'subjectivised' by the discourses of 'the social' and by the prospect of careers in the public sector, this did not turn them into rampant Thatcherites. Many came from disadvantaged social backgrounds, some were gay or lesbian. There was also an increasing flow of young people from different ethnic groups into higher education, particularly into the new universities and the art colleges throughout the 1980s.

All the experiences we now associate with the social dislocation of Britain in the late 1970s and 1980s had also made an impact on these young people. They had grown up in different types of families, and certainly were not going to be party to the
demonisation of single mothers conducted by the Tory press during this time. Many had parents who had lost their jobs and were unlikely to work again, others were struggling with the difficulties of coming out as gay or lesbian. In every respect the old structures of support which had determined many of the patterns of people’s lives in the past had faded away. Consequently self-reliance was more of a survival strategy than a political statement. Most significant, looking back, was the sheer determination on the part of the young women I taught during this period, to make careers for themselves and to find ways of being economically independent, and not have to depend in the future on a male breadwinner. Many of the careers I chart in this thesis are the fruits of this kind of effort. They are indicative of a labour market being produced virtually out of nothing by young women designers who were part of a first generation of full-time female workers for whom a career of whatever sort, would now be for life. The great irony is that just as this process is underway, jobs for life are becoming a thing of the past. The various attempts at self-employment on the part of the designers I interviewed were therefore doubly significant insofar as they brought together these changing dynamics of both gender and employment.

Even among my own ’60s-educated generation of women, there was never at the time, the idea that working and earning a living would be an absolute necessity. (But now in the 1990s, with so many marriages ending in divorce, with dire financial consequences for women, I am regularly surprised to hear of how many of my old schoolmates are in fact full-time housewives, this now seems like such an anachronism). So, in debate with some of the old Marxist left, for whom the dreams and aspirations of their design and media studies students, to be successful and to
have rewarding careers were so much self-illusion, I wanted to introduce a gender
dimension as well as a note of political realism.

'We are just sending out cannon fodder', said one such academic, 'its like the battle
of the Somme. They leave with big ideas of being film directors, or fashion designers,
and they get mown down within a couple of years!' (Garnham 1996). This of course
smacks of the old notion of 'false consciousness'. Students are seduced by, in this
case, the ideological offensive of Thatcherism, they have no real understanding of
their position as workers, they eschew trade unionism, and they come to grief! This
kind of comment undermined the enthusiasm and the hard work of the ex-students I
knew, struggling to make a living for themselves in a way they found rewarding. And
if this was laced by glamour or fantasy, I wanted to argue with the old left that these
were hardly crimes, nor did they make these young workers automatically enemies of
the left. A good deal of the work that follows in this study, is aimed at producing a
more complex and informed account of the new creative workforce.

The New Times collection was refreshing because it suggested moving beyond old
positions. It asked how the left should respond to the enormous changes which had
taken place in British society over the previous decade and under the political
leadership of Mrs Thatcher. There was a clear sense that familiar theories needed to be
revised. The left had to shake itself up, and it had to connect, more successfully, to
what people wanted and to what it was that made Mrs Thatcher so popular. More
specifically there was a recognition that Britain had become a more fluid society. It
was as though various different social groups had become unanchored from their traditional moorings in the class structure. Class still provided an overall map of opportunities, expectations and outcomes, but the solidity of the categories of class had become weakened and to an extent re-shaped through the equally fluid positionnings of gender, ethnicity and sexuality. These shifts were most vividly charted in changes in the economy and in work and patterns of employment, and the New Times writers acknowledged how these collided with the growth of popular consumption and the rise of the service sector as a place of work.

The 1980s saw the retail revolution transform the British high street. This was symbolised, as several writers since then have noted, in the success of the Next chain, which brought fashion with a higher design input within the reach of average income consumers, both male and female (Mort 1996, Nixon 1996). The availability of more differentiated goods, with what appeared to be a more carefully designed appearance, reinforced the process of social fragmentation, as tastes proliferated, and people strove to 'be different' through the choices they made among a wider range of goods. Even low income groups, began to participate more noticeably in this leisure field, where individuals were invited or prevailed upon to 'invent themselves' in different ways, as a mark of individuality, a sign of identity. As Stuart Hall very recently noted, young black people, 'with hardly a penny in their pockets', paraded the streets, in displays of spectacular consumption (Hall 1997). Consumption, as Baudrillard argued, had achieved a new prominence, simultaneously with the way that culture and the media were now focal points in people's lives (Baudrillard 1988). Suddenly everything seemed to have become more cultural. This was as true for the single mum
who would go without herself to be able to buy some of the goods seen by her children on TV, as it was for the more affluent working classes. For young people themselves, in the poorest areas, consumption was often accomplished through illicit means. The 1980s gave rise to new forms of hidden economy, from weekend street markets, to working ‘off the cards’, to handling stolen goods, drug-dealing and, increasingly, finding work in and around the emergent club scene.

The New Times writers attributed the availability of designer goods to the growth of Post-Fordism (in response to global competition and saturated markets) and the application of new technology to the production of more differentiated goods. Flexible specialisation in production boosted flagging consumption by bringing niche marketed goods made in short runs to more discerning consumers. The people who were responsible for the higher input of quality and symbolic content in the new products were the designers, and while the traditional manufacturing workforce was slimmed down, there was a growth in this new branch of the service sector, the creative professionals. This in turn feeds directly into the new kind of society in which we now live, where we are more likely to consume images of things than the actual objects or products they refer to. The expanded market for images creates the need for a new workforce of image-makers and once again the cultural intermediaries step in to play this role. The New Times work however stops short of asking who the cultural intermediaries actually are, what precisely they do, and what are the conditions of their labour?
By taking fashion designers as a case study, this current investigation goes some way in answering these questions, but it also follows the lead set by Nixon, in two respects (Nixon 1993: 1996). In his account of the growth of the market for male products during this same period he comments on the ambivalent position occupied by the editor and founder of The Face magazine Nick Logan. He is, argues Nixon, a ‘committed entrepreneur’, not the kind of gung-ho capitalist championed by Mrs Thatcher, but rather a product of the British working-class youth cultures of the late 1960s for whom values other than simply profit and the market influenced how he came to set himself up in the magazine business (Nixon 1993). In the case of the now very successful Face magazine (still run however on a shoestring, as we will see in Chapter Ten) this meant spurning the revenue from advertising in favour of retaining editorial independence and freedom to develop a new kind of magazine. Nixon does not pursue any further the particular qualities involved in being a ‘committed entrepreneur’ though his account does suggest some social, cultural or even ethical dimension.

The socio-cultural dynamics of the particular brand of enterprise culture pursued by the fashion designers forms one strand in the current study, though it remains uncertain how exactly they are positioned in relation to labour and Capital. There is a sense in which they represent both and neither of these poles, so fluid and precarious are their careers in the enterprise culture. They share with Nick Logan a commitment to artistic or cultural integrity over the values of the marketplace, but, trained in the fine art tradition, they do not have the same entrepreneurial vision. Their enterprise comes more out of necessity and the experience of unemployment. There were few
proper jobs in fashion design in the mid and late 1980s, so the newly emerging fashion designers, created their own jobs, on the strength of dole payments, and then the Enterprise Allowance Scheme, and with the help of a sewing machine, a few stretches of fabric and access to a stall or unit at Camden Lock or one of the other city centre markets. I was interested in how these small scale cultural entrepreneurs fitted into the occupational map of the left (and indeed of contemporary sociology). How do we allocate them a class position? What does the future of work hold for them? I have already alluded to the role of youth culture and will return to it shortly, but a second feature of Nixon's work, his explorations of movements in the new economy of culture, also shapes the present inquiry (Nixon 1996). This was broached by Stuart Hall when he wrote, 'Culture has ceased ... to be a decorative addendum to the 'hard world' of production and things, the icing on the cake of material culture ... the material world of commodities and technologies is profoundly cultural' (Hall 1988: 128).

Hall's comment indicates a re-alignment of relations between the cultural and the economic. No longer can the economic be understood as existing in some pure state, untainted by the cultural and the symbolic and providing a kind of bottom line, from which all cultural phenomena develop. Nixon argues that economic decisions are in fact increasingly rendered in cultural discourse, that the cultural knowledge wielded by the creative professionals actively produces new economies. The account of these re-alignments which are quite fundamental to contemporary society, are directed in Nixon's work, ultimately towards the new products, the launching of the new man as a potential market and also as a dynamic feature of consumer culture. In my study
which follows, the emphasis is on the livelihoods of the cultural producers and the ‘micro-economies’ they bring into being. As we will see, in the field of fashion design, economic issues are continually subordinated to creative or cultural priorities, producing what Bourdieu has called a kind of ‘anti-economy’ (Bourdieu 1993b). But this does not mean the designers do not think about cash-flows and earning a living, far from it. It is rather that they rationalise their own economic fragility by seeing their market failure as a sign of artistic success or failing that, of artistic integrity.

Bourdieu argues that this display of economic disinterest is actually a strategy for longer term success as an artist which requires short term sacrifice in the name of ‘no sell out’ to commercial opportunities. But the model Bourdieu proposes depends on the ‘rarity of the producer’ (Bourdieu 1993a). What happens, I ask, when so many young people are being trained in the art schools and pursue artistic careers of some sort after graduation? The designers I interviewed all saw themselves as artists. But Bourdieu’s model of artists spurning the market and disavowing the need for earning a living, as a kind of symbolic investment, a testimony to the purity of their motives, does not quite tally with the enormous expansion of the cultural economy which is full of struggling artists who are becoming simply another part of the low pay, casualised workforce. This points to another rather different relation between culture and economy, one which I hope at least to unravel on the pages that follow.

Various other writers have either called for renewed emphasis to be paid to the complex economies of culture and to the ‘interplay between the symbolic and the economic’ (Murdock 1997a: 68) or else they have commented on the way in which
‘the connections among the political, the social and the cultural are in movement - both in society and in our heads’ (Hartwig 1993: 4). This current work provides a concrete example of some of these shifts and processes. In fact its origin pre-dates the 1989 appearance of the New Times anthology and draws extensively on what might be called the Hall tradition. By this I mean the particular convergence of themes and issues which have characterised the work of Stuart Hall and the tradition of cultural studies work which has developed around him. Inevitably there is a lot more to Hall’s work than those elements I choose to focus on here. However the general frame he provides is characterised precisely by its continuing attempt to connect sociological and cultural analysis with the political transformation of British society in the post-war years. From the Gramscian-inspired analysis of working-class youth cultures in the mid 1970s, through the account of the ideological groundwork carried out by the popular press and media in the years running up to the Tory victory of 1979, he has persistently drawn on ‘theory’ with a view to making full use of it in political analysis, as Grossberg puts it, to ‘allow you to re-describe the context that poses the political challenge’ (Hall and Jefferson (eds) 1976, Hall et al 1978, Grossberg 1997: 291).

The particular political challenge underlying this present work was posed by Britain ten years after the election of the Tories to power in 1979, when there seemed to be no end in sight to the successes of Thatcherism. Writing about the emergence of a new occupational strata, in this case the young fashion designers who had graduated from art school in the mid 1980s, it was tempting to pursue a pathway which saw these young workers as merely the product of the inexorable logic of capital, a version of
the ‘nation of shopkeepers’ which Mrs Thatcher herself was keen to promote through her commitment to enterprise culture. Where Hall’s influence can be seen I would suggest, is in the way I have argued that these ‘disciplinary regimes’ cannot completely dictate their own outcomes. The young workers who emerge from the other side of enterprise are in this study as much positioned by previous or accompanying discursive formations, such as those provided by their ‘race’, or sexuality or family background or even by their working-class identities, as they are by the apparently dominant discourse of the ‘enterprising self’. These jostle with each other, producing something other than a group of young cultural workers who could simply be described as ‘Thatcher’s children’. Yet the political challenge is that they do not fit, either in their occupational positioning as self-employed, or indeed as cultural entrepreneurs, and small employers, with existing left vocabularies. Hall’s major influence resides, I would suggest in the way he tends to stop short of fully endorsing the determinist version of history where all social and political phenomena are the outcome of the workings of the ideological apparatuses or else the products of the power of ‘subjectivising discourses’. As he puts it, the system is always more ‘leaky’ than these models permit (Hall 1996).

I have chosen to interpret this particular kind of workforce through the history and development of youth culture and popular culture in post-war Britain, not in isolation but rather as these intersect with education, in particular the art school, and with the commercial mass media, and then also more dramatically with the growth of what Schwengell has called the Kulturgesellschaft - Culture Society - (Schwengell 1991). Added to this there is also, in my focus on fashion, a more specific attention to gender
within these various intersections. The work I describe is broadly women's work and the young women who play a key role in the study, by opting for self-employment hope to find the space to work independently, often in their own time. Although very few of them had children, (none of the younger designers) there was a sense that this way of working at some point in the future, could more easily accommodate family life. In fact, as we shall see, the work involved in being a one-woman business forces many of them to postpone motherhood indefinitely.

But why does the youth culture tradition analysed at length by Hall and others in the mid 1970s offer a useful path into considering the working practices of fashion designers in Britain in the 1980s and '90s? I have already sketched out an answer to this question in two recent articles. In the first I argued that whilst the youth culture work, best exemplified in the writing of Cohen (re-printed 1997), Hall and Jefferson (1976), and Hebdige (1978) offered a rich analysis of the history and meaning of these formations and their symbolic worlds, it overlooked the fact that these phenomena also generated opportunities for young people to make a living. The clothes and other items of youth cultural style had to be purchased somewhere and I argued that many of those who provided for this market were in fact recruited from within. They found ways of making a living for themselves by servicing the youth subcultures in the form of record stalls and small shops, fashion outlets and again market stalls. Later the whole dance club scene saw an enormous rise in what at the time I called subcultural entrepreneurialism (McRobbie 1989, re-printed 1994). This self-generated, self-employment demonstrated the existence of a sprawling network of micro-economies initially inside the youth cultures, and then extending far beyond them.
It was here, in the street-markets, where new fashion ideas mingled with the second hand dresses, that a good deal of the groundwork in creating British fashion design was carried out. I also argued at the time that the subcultural field in which new styles were so rapidly displayed and then replaced with new ones, meant that the origins of these fashions could never really be attributed to any one individual. Even though Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren are recognised as having invented punk fashion, it was more the case that they provided a basic set of symbols, ideas and meanings (bin-liners, safety pins, bondage trousers). It was not so much the specific styles, more the combination of elements, the garish colours, the artificial fabrics, the aggressively do-it-yourself ethos which encouraged so many young people to create their own version. This, together with the idea of raiding the second-hand clothes shops, and pouring through old magazines for a new ‘old’ look, is once again more reflective of British fashion, than any straightforward history of the designers can demonstrate. It is also far removed from the haute couture tradition of European fashion design. Indeed it is precisely because British fashion has followed this particular pop culture course, that no history of the designers can recount the whole story accurately.

It does not make sense therefore to tell the story of British fashion by moving from people like Hardy Amies to Mary Quant to Ossie Clark, and then, a big leap, to the designers of the early 1980s, like Bodymap, because these names alone tell us very little about fashion as a participative practice, a form of popular culture. This is recognised in most accounts, including the feminist accounts of British fashion, which all make connections with popular culture, women’s magazines, shopping and
consumption and youth cultures (Wilson 1985, Evans and Thornton 1989). But if fashion design as a highly creative practice appears to take shape in the youth subcultures, and if in the UK it is inextricably connected with the growth of pop music and popular culture, if it is a popular thing, rather than an elite thing, it does not stop there; indeed I will argue here that this is in fact merely a starting point. A good deal of this work is concerned with the key role of the British art schools in shaping fashion design. As large institutions they are legitimating agencies. By the end of the 1980s, as a direct result of the expansion of this sector, and as the fashion departments in the art schools gain confidence in promoting their own products, what emerges is a relatively new phenomena, the fashion designer as auteur, as an artist in his or her own right. This is the point at which British fashion begins to be associated with a series of names, from the proclaimed genius of John Galliano, to those following in his footsteps, including Alexander McQueen and more recently Antonio Berardi. This still does not mean that British fashion is modelling itself on its European counterparts, far from it, it is more a matter of fashion finally gaining status as a kind of fine art practice in the way it has sought for so long. As long as it can be asked by the puzzled observer as a series of unlikely shapes and colours make their way down the runway, ‘but is it art and what does it mean?’ then fashion has indeed fulfilled the conditions of its own idealised existence.

I want however to hold onto and signal strongly the earlier and more nebulous beginnings of contemporary British fashion, inside the sweaty spaces of the raves and night clubs, and at home in the bedrooms of the groups of girls who design and make their own outfits for these events, and then sometimes start making them for their
friends and end up selling them on a market or to small shops. I want to stress the social context of this cultural activity because in the conclusion to this study I suggest the need for a return to a more socialised field of cultural production, the designers need to be able to collaborate and share their resources. The art ethos they have been taught to embody, is limited in its individualising focus. If art work is becoming more commonplace in the cultural economy of Britain in the late 1990s, this ethos needs to be revised and updated, especially when, as we shall see in this study, it simply does not make economic sense for designers to be working in absolute isolation from each other and from the people who do their manufacturing. They could make a better living and produce cheaper clothes if they were more able to pool their talents and abandon the ethos of working like an artist alone in his or her studio.

The second and related theme I developed out of the youth culture studies was that subcultures could conceivably be seen as informal, unofficial job creation schemes, a good deal more popular and successful than the Youth Training Schemes set up by the government at the time (McRobbie 1994). There was a degree of fluidity in the youth cultures where consumers often crossed over to be producers, and although this is more widely recognised in music, it has also been true for fashion. Being a participant in a youth culture could result in learning various skills, from poster production, to fanzine journalism, to mixing music and learning sound production, to designing and selling clothes. It is a fairly short route from these leisure activities into a BTEC (Business and Technical Education Council) or HND (Higher National Diploma) course at the local college and from there into art school. This kind of pathway was undreamed of by policy-makers and government ministers when they
expanded places in fashion design or sound production courses, at and below degree level. But my research as well as the history of British pop music shows there to be an established link between youth culture as leisure activity, art school education, and then work in cultural production. However, as I will show in the first three chapters of this study, the art school imposes its own disciplinary vocabulary on its subjects, and, perhaps not surprisingly, this involves negating or at least dislodging the importance of these informal cultural practices associated with the street.

A final question which must be raised by my locating this work within the Hall tradition, is the issue of Britishness and connected with this, the value of such a localised study as the one I pursue here. In a world of global culture, it might seem strangely old-fashioned, indeed redundant, to document a local form of cultural activity and to dwell on its apparently national characteristics. Grossberg for example has recently disputed the claims to political connectedness made by those who study the local on the grounds that it gives them some access to public representativeness, that by being local they are somehow in touch with real people in a way that those who write theoretically are not (Grossberg 1997a: 6). My justification for the kind of study that I undertake here is not that it retreats to the easily recognisable contours of nation as a way of holding at bay the more threatening forces of globalisation, but rather that the history it documents also tells us something about the formation of nation, what Anderson called the 'peculiarities of the English' (Anderson 1968). This is a story of class and gender antagonism and the struggle over culture waged inside the art school. It is also a story about how women from different social backgrounds create a labour market for themselves in the field of fashion, and about how they
modify ‘government rationalities’ as they are developed in the 1980s, to suit their own needs, in this case making use of enterprise culture to allow them to pursue their careers as creative fashion designers.

The question of the Britishness of these phenomena is more intractable. Are these various forms of cultural production (notably fashion, music and magazines) a kind of last ditch attempt at cultural imperialism, with Britfrocks following Britpop in the attempt to ‘rule the waves’, as they might put it in the tabloid press? Or am I merely avoiding the challenge posed by thinking through the role of fashion design as part of the new international division of labour, where the art work is done in the privileged post-industrial metropolitan centres, while the pre-industrial work of fashion manufacture and production is outsourced to wherever there is a regular supply of cheap female labour? It is true that I have drawn a series of boundaries around this investigation. It remains beyond the scope of this study to consider in more depth and in a way which is more deeply informed by recent queries on the nature of ‘culture’ itself by a number of authors including Stratton and Ang (1996) and Grossberg (1997b), the extent to which it can be said that the fashion design I describe here is somehow the product of British post-war cultural history. However if, as I suggest, there is a close relation between fashion and pop music then fashion might also be seen as one of those features of symbolic disruption produced by the deep, indeed seismic ruptures of class, sex and ethnicity in British society which were first felt in the late 1950s.
Pop music bears the traces more evidently of the cultural journeys made by diasporic peoples and the way these have been adopted and commercialised for use by white audiences, than does the field of fashion design, and for this reason it has been the subject of extensive analysis (Hebdige 1978, Chambers 1987, Gilroy 1987). The cleavages of class, race and sex can also be read in and through the parades of fashion and style of the post-war years, but these particular narratives remain less thoroughly documented than the story of pop. Feminist scholars have made substantial contributions in this respect (Wilson 1985, Evans and Thornton 1987) but a good deal more work remains to be done. Clearly fashion education, for example, (and fashion designers themselves) display a remarkably imperialistic attitude in their uncritical plundering and exoticisation of ‘other cultures’ in search of new fashion ideas. Geography is as rich a resource in this respect as history, and fashion photography as a genre is steeped in notions of ‘exotic locations’. But the significance of fashion orientalism requires a good deal more thought and work than a simple reference in this context can do justice to.

To those who query the value of local studies, and who dispute the claims to political relevance I would argue that, as Murdock (1997a) has recently reminded us, the case study (in this case geographically local) performs a knowledge-generating function, it allows us the opportunity to see how things actually work in practice and how more general social, and even global trends, like those described by social theorists including Giddens, Beck and Lash (1994) as well as Lash and Urry (also 1994) and also by cultural theorists like Jameson (1984) and Harvey (1989) are translated or modified when they become grounded. The local study of the sort I have carried out
here also provides the opportunity to witness how the people who are the subjects of these social changes respond to these changes in their daily practice and in this case in their working lives. There is also a sense in this current study that I am attempting to fulfil an objective which Laclau has described as honouring ‘the dignity of the specific’ (Laclau 1990). That is, it is my intention to fill out the spaces left behind by more abstract writing on, for example, processes of class realignment and the growth of identity politics which both Laclau and Mouffe have so fruitfully considered, but at an entirely theoretical level (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Laclau 1990).

Finally my defence of the Britishness of such an undertaking does not mean that studies of the same type in other locations would not be of equal value. Just as I would like to have moved out of London in this investigation, to include other cities with re-vitalised cultural sectors, so also is it important to know how new forms of work in the cultural industries are developing in different cities across the world. While there is, doubtless, a good deal that is specific to London and to Britain that has spawned this focus among some sectors of young people, in producing cultural phenomena on a seemingly do-it-yourself basis, the same might well be true of other large cities as they shift into a post-industrial mode. In addition, as we know, culture travels as Tricia Rose has demonstrated so well, hip hop music started as a localised innovation in the South Bronx (albeit with already multiple points of origin) and is now the most influential current in the global music industry (Rose 1994). On a much smaller scale, Nick Logan, who came from a working-class Mod background and who brought that experience to bear on the look of a tiny circulation and independently-funded style magazine, could not have anticipated that a few years later the magazine would be
looked at every month by art directors in advertising agencies across the world, and operates as a mobile job centre for the photographers and stylists as well as the fashion designers whose work it features. It hardly matters that Logan can still not afford to pay them!

Two other theorists - Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault - have, alongside Hall, played a major role in shaping this study. Bourdieu in particular has not only demonstrated empirically how the acquisition of cultural goods including food, fashion and other domestic commodities, plays a practical role in actively reproducing as well as confirming social inequalities, but has also turned his attention to the cultural intermediaries who create such symbolic goods. However, as will be apparent later in this study, I part company with Bourdieu in his relegation of this strata of workers to the conservative ‘rump’ of the lower middle classes, and I concur with Lash in his suggestion that Bourdieu is overwhelmingly concerned with social and cultural reproduction, rather than with the dynamics of social change (Bourdieu 1984, Lash 1993). Nonetheless Bourdieu’s work on the whole field of cultural production offers a most useful way into conceptualising the work of fashion designers. In his short essay titled ‘Haute Couture and Haute Culture’ he focuses on what is a recurrent theme in his work on cultural production, the way in which it is the job of the critics and reviewers, the journalists and specialist writers to produce the belief in the object, to create and sustain the aura and the special or even sacred status of art works (Bourdieu 1993a). Fashion journalism plays this role for the charismatic designers of French haute couture, but by extension the same could be said of the role of the fashion media in contemporary Britain, as we shall see in Chapter Ten.
However, and this is a point at which my own study departs somewhat from a Bourdieusian framework, Bourdieu suggests that a sociological analysis of a field like fashion, must inevitably act as a force of destruction upon the field. ‘If any Tom, Dick or Harriet ... can make dresses, then the specialist field is destroyed’ (Bourdieu 1993a: 138). Which raises the question, is there life or fashion after sociology?

The status of the analysis I present here, is, as I see it, less of a clearing operation. I would like this sociological account to contribute to the improvement or betterment of fashion as a place of livelihoods. I do not want fashion, under attack from sociology or cultural studies, to fade away, and anyway this is hardly a realistic scenario, as though sociology has ever had such an impact. Bourdieu implies that if it can be shown that there is really nothing special about fashion, and that more or less anybody can do it, then it ceases to occupy that special, sacred place in the public’s estimation, and thus in a sense it ceases to exist, since it is this system of belief (i.e. words) which creates the thing. My aim here is to combine the sociological labour of demystification with the work of reconstitution so that fashion is better able to attend to its own business, particularly in the area of manufacture and production. I want these elements to be brought back into the field, rather than to see the field somehow disappearing. My aim is then unequivocally reformist in that there is an attempt to connect sociological and cultural analysis with a concern for policy.

The other feature of Bourdieu’s work which also informs this study, is one briefly referred to earlier, that is his account of how a field like fashion will attempt to gain a place for itself in the cultural hierarchy by developing a strategy for gaining...
autonomy, part and parcel of which will involve a kind of disavowal or spurning of commerce and of the need to earn a living (Bourdieu 1993b). The purity or authenticity of the practice requires that producers demonstrate a commitment to values other than those of cash-flow. This repudiation of money protects young artists against feelings of failure. If they can console themselves that their work is misunderstood by the public and this is why it does not sell, which in turn accounts for their difficulties in scraping together a living, then they can at least be assured of their own artistic integrity. Bourdieu once again reveals this to be a strategy or a rule of the game, which in fact benefits only those who are in a position to 'be poor' for some period of time. The history of painting and of literature shows that living on a shoestring is usually a long term investment, on the expectation that eventually the writer or artist will gain recognition. Since only those who have access to some other financial means, a small private income, for example, can pursue such a threadbare existence, most cultural producers have to compromise their art for the sake of earning a living. In this way economic capital, hidden away somewhere in the family vaults, ensures the reproduction of cultural capital in the hands of the already privileged social classes.

Once again this account, rich as it is in explaining the disdain for money on the part of many of the designers I interviewed, requires some modification on the basis of the material context in which the designers were working. They most certainly were not from family backgrounds which could support them through years of poverty. But more significantly these young designers were no longer a tiny, privileged few. They were educated and trained in the art school system which expanded its intake quite
dramatically through the 1980s. More generally art work no longer has the exclusive identity which Bourdieu attributes to it, instead it is a very crowded field. In addition it is a field which attracts government funding in the form of publicly administered grants or unemployment schemes such as the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. These provide, at least in the early days, the financial underpinning for the creative work described in this study. So instead of describing the strategies of a privileged elite set on playing the game of cultural production, I am instead exploring the career pathways of a group of young cultural workers who are creating for themselves a series of micro-economies based on their own self-employment strategies.

The later work of Michel Foucault and more particularly that of his followers also provides a useful frame for understanding the power relations which produce creative work like fashion design, as a field of pleasure and reward. While the positionality of 'the artist' or 'the author' and the individualising and subjectivising discourses (described by Foucault in his essay 'What Is An Author?') which create these kind of practice and these sorts of person, could also be extended to the figure of the fashion designer, with the consequences this entails for how we conceive the work and for how it suddenly matters who has designed it (Foucault 1984: 101), I have concentrated instead on the significance of the growth of new kinds of creative labour as a disciplinary technique (Donzelot 1991). These current incitements to make work a source of intense personal satisfaction (independent of financial reward in this case) can be understood in Foucauldian terms as a disciplinary practice, an example of how finely tuned governmental rationality is to the construction of 'new ways for people to be at work' (Du Gay 1996: 53).
However if nowadays people are virtually forced to be free in a de-regulated, privatised economy and to seek work which promises them the satisfaction of creativity, this is not as I shall argue later, a fixed state, a kind of final destiny for the workforce of the western world. Not only is there movement and contestation within these positionings, there is also the very strong likelihood that many of these rationalities will fail. This makes the whole field of cultural work more open and less certain in its focus and direction than an application of Donzelot's model of 'pleasure in work' would allow (Donzelot 1991). There is no reason why the organisation of cultural work should not, in these circumstances, be more open to accounts which like this current one, will make a stronger case for the re-socialisation of creative labour and for new kinds of association between designers and producers in the field of fashion. This final note goes some way in answering the criticism of the theorists who dispute the apparently privileged access of local studies to political centres of gravity. What I have also taken from the work of Stuart Hall is the idea that politics cannot be put in suspension until such time as theory gets it right.

The image of the fashion design sector which has acted as a central motif for me throughout these researches, is that it is like a skimpy, silky dress, carelessly tossed between two pillars of support, but always threatening to slide down in a crumpled heap on the ground. The dress itself is the under-funded, under-rated design industry, a fragile, flimsy thing of some beauty and importance. One pillar is the world of the art school, and the other is the commercial world of women's magazines. These also provide the structural supports (or the corsetry) for the study which follows. First I look at the history of fashion in the art schools, then I consider the practices of the
fashion designers and the fate of their skimpy, silky dresses, and then finally I consider the magazine industry as the other pillar of support. I have concentrated exclusively on women's fashion and on the work of a group of young, female, British fashion designers who share more or less the same background in training and in their London location. I have defined fashion design as the application of creative thought to the conceptualisation and execution of items of clothing so that they can be said to display a formal and distinctive aesthetic coherence. This element takes precedence over function, and is recognised as such by those whose expertise allows them to categorise and evaluate work according to criteria established as part of a professional repertoire of meaning and judgement. In this sense fashion is, inevitably, a fiction, and what follows is a narrative, a sociological story about fashion design, whose value or relevance, will also be judged accordingly.

Finally there are a number of brief points I should make about this study. First it is based on an assumption that fashion, despite its trivialised status, is a subject worthy of study. As part of the industrial society, it has been a place of livelihoods for over a century. Despite great variations in wealth and poverty, with all that implies for the meaning of pleasure, nonetheless fashion has given pleasure to women, as a form of personal and practical aesthetics based on the bringing together of shape, colour and textures against the body to intersect with the body's own shapes, colours and textures. So my intent is a serious one, to give fashion the attention it deserves, in this case as a key part of the expanding culture industries. Second I want to emphasise that of course this is also a partial account. As a non-specialist entering a specialist field, carrying the baggage of a cultural studies and a sociological vocabulary, inevitably I
will have trod on some more fashionable feet in the account I present here. In particular my own academic language is both close to but very different from the fashion academics I interviewed. I could not have carried out the study without them, and for this I am especially grateful, but I hope that the different inflection I bring to an analysis of the fashion field will be seen not as a critique of their practice, but rather as an additional voice in a field of cultural importance. Thirdly it may be appropriate to point out that some might argue that the historical moment I describe is already one that has passed. This was the moment of setting up alone as a fully fledged fashion designer after just leaving college, a moment which for the sake of convenience we could take as 1987, exactly ten years before this study is concluded. Many experts will say that the recklessness of such an endeavour has been replaced by a much more carefully planned set of career strategies on the part of fashion designers graduating a decade later.¹ They have all, it is claimed, ‘learned from the mistakes of their elders’. While it is indeed most likely that a degree of realism has crept into the working practices of young designers, it remains open to debate whether or not the moment of this study has been completely eclipsed.

There is also an assumption in the account and analysis which follows that although the focus is entirely on fashion, this study has wider repercussions for the future of work in the culture industries. While it is difficult to prove this conclusively in the

¹ The Guardian Education (24/6/97) reported statistics prepared by the British Fashion Council which indicated a decline in first destination self employment among fashion graduates from 15% in 1994 to 8% in 1996. There was a corresponding rise in take up of full time jobs in the fashion industry from 45% in 1994 to 62% in 1996. However these figures include graduates in fashion marketing and journalism, as well as the whole range of fashion design graduates. This current study in contrast considers primarily those students trained in what I label ‘conceptual fashion’.
absence of a comparative analysis with another sector (e.g. graphic design, independent film production) there is some attempt to emphasise the absolute distinctiveness, indeed the sheer peculiarity of the British fashion design sector, without completely losing track of how and where it intersects with other practices. For example the section on fashion journalism shows the editors, journalists and writers to be working within similar ‘artistic’ principles as the designers themselves. As one editor put it, ‘the page is art’. While the rationale for carrying out such a study has been to suggest this as a field which is somehow exemplary and perhaps prefigurative of future work in the creative industries, there is inevitably a tension between the specific and the general.

More general questions would be concerned with the nature of work in a field like fashion. Is it seen by its practitioners as a highly creative field, like being an artist, for the simple reason that it lacks the traditional career pathways of the established professions? If so then we could see parallels between fashion and film-making, advertising, television and video production and of course the popular music industry. Is work in fashion, described in this study as highly fluid, constantly changing and requiring a multi-skilled, flexible and increasingly freelance workforce, a sign of things to come, or of things which have already come, in other similar fields, television journalism for example? Is fashion both like these other fields, but distinct from them in its gendered identity? Or, alternatively, and thinking more historically, is it fashion’s feminine status which has marked it out as different from both a fully fledged fine art tradition and also from those craft traditions which generated their own training hierarchies based first on guilds and then apprenticeships? This certainly
would begin to provide us with an account of the historical distinctiveness of fashion as a culture industry.

In the context of such uncertainty, the final assumption which underpins this investigation is that it provides a useful opportunity for developing and putting into practice a methodology for researching the new or emergent culture industries (in this case fashion design). The necessity of an individualising focus, the need to simply pursue a whole range of individuals, in isolation from each other, to find out how fashion works, tells us something about the de-socialisation of work in the cultural sector. And although it is tempting to explain this by taking seriously the image of the designers as practising artists (who have always worked in an isolated way) this favoured self-image only takes us (and the designers themselves) so far. Like it or not the designers are usually small scale employers, they need the services of pattern cutters, machinists and others. So we are confronted with the reality of a post-industrial system based on the practices of a substantial number of designers doing pretty much the same thing, dotted about the cities, rarely liaising with each other, never mind collaborating, yet experiencing the exact same problems. It is the sheer anomaly of this situation which motivates the study as a whole. My starting point however, is a historical one. It is in the British art schools that the vast majority of fashion designers are trained. But the presence of fashion on the academic syllabus in a set of elite institutions dominated by the fine arts has not been uncontested, and as we shall see the opposition to fashion design has been conducted along the lines of both class and gender. It is to these debates that we now turn.
CHAPTER TWO

GREAT DEBATES IN ART AND DESIGN EDUCATION

The moment the artisan student is taught to become an artist instead of a draughtsman, his mind becomes unsettled and aspirations arise in his bosom calculated to lead him out of the sure and solid path of commerce into the thorny and devious tract which leads to Fine Art! (Tinto quoted in MacCarthy 1972: 17).

Art and Industry

The account which follows raises questions which go well beyond the confines of the education and training of fashion designers in the British art school system. Played out in this history are issues of gender and education, the distinction between arts and crafts, social class and skill, and most of all, the romantic image of the creative artist. The development of the British art school can also be seen as part of the history of modernity and the place made available for ‘culture’ in that undertaking. The individualising project of European modernity found, in the figure of the artist, a legitimate outlet for the pursuit of experiences and emotions which were otherwise seen as impediments to the great march of rationality, reason and bureaucracy. Artistic freedom was written into the brick and mortar of these great institutions. So important was this idea, that it gave rise to endless debate and heated disagreement manifest at every level, from the painting studio to the parliamentary committee, about who could practice as an artist, who could occupy this privileged position? The history of art and design education in Britain has also been riddled with conflicts and disagreements about the most basic questions of what constitutes art? How can it be taught? How is design separate from art, what makes it different and how should students of design be
taught? The intensity of these antagonisms cannot be under-estimated. Nor do they ever get fully resolved. There are, in addition, tensions and disagreements which have particular significance for fashion design education and which have repercussions for how it is taught and practised today. Throughout these arguments we find issues of both class and gender influencing the kinds of decisions that get taken. These battles are most fiercely fought out between 1830 and 1860 and inevitably they mirror many of the concerns with class, rank and station which has characterised the history of the British education system as a whole.

From the late 18th century onwards the patricians of the Royal Academy (est. 1768) were volubly defending and protecting a particular conception of the ‘fine’ arts and insisting that only gentlemen might practice portraiture and landscape. Indeed it was ruled that the Academy would involve no teaching whatsoever and that ‘the lower branches of art’ including ‘native artists’ like William Blake should have no place within its walls (Macdonald 1970: 65). The early years of the 19th century see an endless series of bitter disputes about what kind of provision could safely be entrusted into the hands of teachers and administrators without disturbing these relations of power and privilege. When there is eventually an agreement (in the 1830s) that some provision should be made available, the debate comes to centre around what should be taught in the new Schools of Design, and to which sort of person. At this stage what happens inside the Schools depends largely on the preferences of the headmasters. The secret of their success in attracting pupils seems to lie in their willingness to offer the sort of courses which were most disapproved of by the senior officials and academicians based in Somerset House. It was the life drawing classes
which were most popular against the official recommendation that what should be
taught were the decorative arts of ornamentation (faithfully copying patterns and
decorations for a flat surface including muslins or carpets). This was what was
deemed suitable for the artisans for whom this provision was envisaged. Through the
1830s and into the 1840s Schools were shut or heads removed when inspectors
discovered that drawing rather than decoration was being taught. Overall this strategy
was destined to failure. It was as strongly opposed by teachers as it was by the pupils
themselves. The sacked teachers often set up their own small private schools and
frequently the pupils followed them.

There was therefore great public enthusiasm for art schools across the country and an
informal system of provision was already in existence by the time the Select
Committee on Arts and Manufacture elected William Ewart MP in 1836 to

inquire into the best means of extending knowledge of the Arts and of the
Principles of Design among the People (especially the manufacturing
population) of the country, and also to enquire into the Constitution of the
Royal Academy and the effects produced by it (quoted in Macdonald

The outcome was the Normal School of Design which opened in 1837. Lectures and
classes were already being provided in the Mechanics Institute as well as in the
private schools established by drawing masters in most of the towns and cities. It was
partly as a way of controlling and regulating these developments that the Normal
School and the so-called branch Schools came into being with their strict curriculum
based around 'ornamental art'.

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So concerned were the academicians and administrators with retaining control over who could practice what kind of art, that the Normal School required that its young male students sign a declaration that on completion of their training they would neither set themselves up as landscape artists nor as portraitists. Not surprisingly, given these constraints, the Normal School failed to attract the pupils it was looking for. The narrow curriculum was unattractive to the middle-class students and the fees at 4s a week were too steep for the artisans. During these years the branch Schools expanded in number as well as in their intakes as long as they could pretend to abide by these rules. As the head of a Newcastle school put it ‘I hung up the rules and broke them by my practice’ (Macdonald 1970: 107). What the academicians had underestimated was the middle-class demand for art education based round expressive rather than mechanical drawing skills. As Frith and Horne argue, ‘The Schools of Design pragmatic, slavish system was rapidly challenged by their students’ counter commitment to pure aestheticism; the schools became despite themselves Schools of Art’ (Frith and Horne 1987: 33).

Teachers and pupils alike rejected the idea of art being subordinated to industry and instead embraced the emphasis on creativity and imagination found in the Romantic movement. This ethos is clearly expressed in Ruskin’s address delivered at the opening of the Cambridge School of Art in 1858:

... all idea of reference to definite business should be abandoned in such schools as that just established ... it is certain that our immediate business, in such a school as this, will prosper more by attending to eyes than to hands (Ruskin 1858: 5—8).
Thus there was a prevailing resistance to the enforcement of a curriculum which was rigidly restricted to practising a kind of art which would make British products more competitive abroad. And while it was envisaged that artisans would learn these skills in the Schools, in practice it was the emergent middle classes who were taught by largely middle-class teachers, each equally keen to learn sketching and drawing.

It was the great Victorian reformer Henry Cole who attempted to overcome these problems. He made progress in organising the teaching of design for industry through conceding the introduction of drawing (i.e. sketching and copying from a range of models, objects and artefacts). He managed this by re-defining for his superiors the arts as useful for the advance of industry but requiring those very skills which until he took over in 1852 had been considered only for gentlemen. Cole therefore went some way towards achieving a more fruitful relation between design education and manufacture at least in the provision of design education. He had come from the Public Record Office and was an astute administrator. In his enthusiasm for the world of art and design he published his own journal in 1849, the Journal of Design and Manufacture. Three years later he was given his own department of government, the 'Department of Practical Art'. Cole's reforming zeal, or as he put it 'straight lines are a national want' (quoted in Macdonald 1970: 91), did not completely overcome the hostility of those educators who considered art as suitable only for gentlemen, but he was successful in creating a curriculum based round the whole range of drawing skills including that of the human form. He broke the academician's stranglehold over the curriculum by re-defining it for a middle-class constituency. He also developed a
teacher training programme in elementary drawing and laid the foundations for art to be taught in the primary (or elementary) schools.

Cole's achievement could be understood as comprising three elements. First as a utilitarian he argued that art should be seen as useful as well as simply beautiful and this allowed him to exercise his considerable power as an administrator transforming an uneven and conflict-ridden provision into something more efficient. Second, he allowed some of those aspects of artistic practice most notably drawing, which had previously been forbidden by his upper class predecessors, to be officially sanctioned in art education, as providing a foundation for art and design. And, possibly most significant of all, he presided over the middle-class ascendency in the field of art education. It was the middle and lower middle classes (male and female) who flocked to join the whole range of classes in the schools up and down the country and they paid fees and brought in valuable revenue. Even the evening classes were more subscribed to by the lower middle classes ('clerks, builders, engineers and young architects' Macdonald 1970: 176) than by the so-called artisans who were in effect excluded even from the scholarship system which required as a pre-requisite passes in papers set by the Schools of Art. What we see during Cole's reign is therefore the consolidation of the middle classes' aspiration to cultural as well as economic power.

What happens after Cole also had a crucial influence on the development of the art schools for almost a hundred years. The fine art tradition continues in a few elite schools while the growing arts and craft movement which defines itself in part in opposition to Cole's utilitarian principles establishes a place for itself in many of the
schools across the country, but particularly in London. Advocates of this movement express an intense dislike of factory produced goods and seek a return to the value of ‘sound workmanship’. Craft comes to be associated with truth and with the re-definition of certain trades as de facto arts.

These ‘Art-Socialists’ were greatly opposed to the public art schools being devoted to the production of drawing masters and fine artists. Working in conjunction with the London County Council and the Trade Associations, the members of the Guild began to transform the nature of art education in London (Macdonald 1970: 92).

The ‘art socialists’ argued that good design and craft not only enhanced the quality of life through the production of beautiful everyday objects, but that this then improved the quality of art in general. This approach was implemented most fully through the 1880s and ‘90s in the Central School of Art and Design (opened in 1896) and in the Glasgow School of Art. The elevation of craft skills allowed embroidery and needlework to enter the curriculum which in turn gave women a more prominent place in the world of art and design. Indeed the idea of ‘cottage craftsmanship’ celebrated by William Morris and his colleagues exerts a lasting influence on women in the art schools and in fashion design, most notably in the work in the 1970s of the UK designer Laura Ashley (Sebba 1990: 101). As we shall see in the chapters that follow, many fashion designers define their practice as combining both a fine art and a craft approach.

Later in the 20th century, particularly in the inter-war period, the arts and crafts movement was condemned on the grounds that its principles ran contrary to the interests of modernity, progress, and the importance of technology and industry. The
emphasis on single items of furniture meant the neglect of the importance of design in industrial production, once again at the cost to British competitiveness. In the 1940s the Council of Industrial Design argued overwhelmingly for more attention to be paid to design in industry. Through the concerted efforts of this body and others, design more or less supplants craft in the art school system and paves the way for a new post war provision which encourages specialism in product design, graphic design, commercial art in addition to the kinds of courses in ceramics and silversmithing still provided at the Central School of Art and elsewhere. Fashion design is noticeably absent from this concern to modernise industry with design, to the extent that in Forty’s influential history of design it barely gets a mention (Forty 1986).

By this point the reader might ask, but where do women fit into these developments and what about fashion design? In fact there are a number of reasons why at this stage fashion and dress as well as gender are omitted. First, fashion production remains dispersed and carried out largely in the workshops of private dressmakers. Second, the middle-class girls and women who attend the art schools come to learn drawing and painting not primarily to sew (though later they may do some embroidery or needlework), so the demand is not coming from the pupils. Third, fashion production also slips the net of those concerned with modernising industry and using design skills to encourage this process. As Fine and Leopold have pointed out, there is a limit to how far fashion manufacture can be transformed into a Fordist system (Fine and Leopold 1993). Fashion production technology has not developed so far beyond the sewing machines and the electric cutters introduced in the late 19th century. Unpredictable demand coupled with the use of fabrics like silk and chiffon which
require hand-finishing means that the fashion system as a whole resists an easy or efficient process of Fordisation (see also Phizacklea 1990). These factors combined with its image as a low pay, seasonal and feminised field of production mean that it has never attracted the attention of the politicians or economists in anything like the way other industrial sectors have. If product design means cars, aeroplanes or even fridges, then it is not surprising that fashion only merits a note of passing comment in the many documents produced by the Council of Industrial Design in the 1940s and '50s. The question then is how does fashion find a place for itself in the art school system?

Fashion Education For Girls: A Dual System of Provision

A dual system of provision based round differences of both class and gender comes into being from the early years of the present century. This extends and develops further the already existing class divisions in the system. One strand of provision for girls and young women emerges from the system of public education put in place through the Education Act of 1870 followed by the 1902 Act. The sewing skills taught to primary age girls from working class homes in the closing years of the century as part of the drive to improve the home-making skills of working-class and poor women extends into the continuation classes for those able to stay on past the age of 12. These in turn connect with the more specialised courses established in the trade schools which provided skills in all aspects of sewing and dressmaking for those girls whose more affluent working-class parents could afford to keep them at the school
up to the age of 16. For those whose family budget could not extend to this there were an increasing range of part-time and evening classes some based on a day-release system. Thus until after World War Two and the development of secondary school education for all until the age of 15 (introduced in 1945 but implemented 1947) working-class girls only had the chance of learning these skills either in the top-up classes attached to the elementary schools or, if they were lucky, in the growing number of evening classes in the local authority funded ‘trade schools’. This latter provision was primarily an urban phenomenon and the kinds of courses on offer reflected the nature and form of local employment opportunities. Situated just a few yards away from Selfridges department store in London (where there was a huge alteration and repair department) the Barrett Street School, now the London College of Fashion offers a good example of such a local initiative.

For middle-class girls a very different picture emerges. These ‘leisured young ladies’ flocked to part-time day classes like those held in St Martin’s School of Art in London (as reported in The Chronicle 11/11/1913, St Martin’s Archive) to learn to draw. But with the exception of the Glasgow School of Art whose progressive outlook resulted in substantial numbers of female full-time students, only a tiny percentage actually intended practising as artists. They tended to come from artistic or liberal families already familiar with the raffish or bohemian reputations of the art schools and therefore not intimidated into thinking of them as places of potential moral danger for their daughters. These girls usually chose to study fine art and it was through this route that a handful of middle-class female students came eventually to fashion (sometimes through embroidery). Fine art and then at a later date, design,
provide the institutional framework for the growth of fashion education. But the battle for fashion in the art schools was not easily won. Fashion retained a strongly feminine image in a male dominated environment. And the further lingering associations of both craft and dressmaking skills meant that its passage into the status-conscious departments of the art schools was far from smooth. Let us look then, first at this broadly middle class provision and then return to the education on offer in Barrett Street and its equivalents.

The first significant development in the mainstream of art school provision was the establishment of specialist departments in embroidery or textiles where, as was the case in Glasgow, especially motivated and talented young women were able to persuade or convince a handful of men in positions of authority that these were areas worthy of development. In Glasgow, in the years from 1880 to 1920, so successful were women like Mrs Jessie Newbery (wife of Fra Newbery the director of the new Decorative Arts studios in the Glasgow School of Art) and then Ann MacBeth that their pioneering work spread from out of the art schools into the local primary schools where needlework and embroidery for girls was introduced into the curriculum. This example shows how difficult it is to draw hard and fast rules around questions of class, gender and social control because in the case of these women (influenced by the Suffragette Movement) embroidery for girls was not for only for housework but also for personal freedom:

In becoming good craftswomen girls may become something more. Their work itself leads them to look beyond their homes ... and to make of it a new world (MacMillan 1911, quoted by Burkhauser 1988: 8).
The work of these two women encouraged others to follow them as artists and as teachers and this process in turn meant that art (in this case ‘art embroidery’) became a possible career for middle-class young women rather than simply a leisure interest. During these years the Glasgow School of Art was the exception rather than the rule. Nevertheless, the women artists who emerged as a result of this access came to hold international reputations in ‘artistic needlework’ and the results of their activity trickled down into the schools including the embroidery continuation classes where ‘clothes were made which were suitable for and useful to the class of pupils they teach’ (HMI Report 1906, quoted by Bird 1988: 27). However Roszika Parker argues that despite the equations between art and personal freedom, the function of art embroidery in the art schools and its impact in the school system was to reproduce class divisions with needlework playing a role in the preparation of working-class girls ‘for their future as wives, mothers or domestic servants’, while for middle-class girls it was ‘taught as an art, following the principles established by the women at the Glasgow School of Art’ (Parker 1984: 188).

The legacy of this progressive interest in embroidery at the Glasgow School of Art was to give women a place in the art schools as serious students and also to introduce the idea that textiles and clothing could be the object of legitimate artistic attention and imagination. Drawing partly on the vocabulary of the craft movement while extending it to items of clothing and combining this with the design ideas developed by figures like Charles Rennie Mackintosh, embroidery was seen as an applied art. In this context fashion design (which even today is not taught as such at the Glasgow School of Art) could eventually emerge as a specialism typically linked with women
artists as the result of a fruitful drawing together of these particular aesthetic interests. That then is the kind of legacy which one variation of the art and craft movement contributes to fashion education, where the emphasis is more on the decorative aspects of clothing rather than on the actual processes of designing a garment. This tradition works its way down through the art schools as a craft tradition and tends to find fullest expression in textile design courses (like those established in the Central School) rather than in fashion.

An alternative approach, still led by and provided for middle-class women and girls begins to develop in the inter-war years. It is primarily London based and it draws largely on the fine art tradition while also exploiting the expansion of schools and places available as a result of the successes of the supporters of the arts and crafts movement. This new development also brings to the art schools some of the expertise gained by those women who worked in the private dressmaking schools for young ladies which had sprung up in London like the school in Ennismore Gardens next to the Royal College of Art in Kensington. The establishment of fashion design in the curriculum is the result of the pioneering work of a handful of committed women. The upper middle class or ‘society’ tradition which embraced the path from the finishing school in dressmaking at Ennismore Gardens, into the art school to teach fashion with some interlude working at Vogue as a fashion illustrator becomes emblematic in this respect.

This is the kind of trajectory followed by two key figures; Muriel Pemberton who established fashion illustration courses in St Martin’s in the late 1930s which
eventually became the department of dress in 1957, and Janey Ironside who was responsible for developing fashion provision at the Royal College of Art. Pemberton’s career is particularly instructive. Born in 1909 she took an art course first at the Burslem School of Art in 1925 before going on to the RCA in 1928 where she was able to set up a diploma in fashion. This came about because having first established herself as a watercolourist, she then found herself being congratulated on the dresses and prints she had designed for her own use. She developed the curriculum for the diploma in fashion at the RCA after taking an additional course in dressmaking at the Katinka School of Cutting. She had told the head of department that she wanted to do fashion, and was reportedly told to come up with her own curriculum. Combining what she learnt at the Katinka with her interest in water-colours and then adding a knowledge of dress history gained from reading James Laver’s influential costume history (Laver 1937: 1983) she was appointed as a part-time lecturer in fashion drawing at St Martin’s (where she remained for over forty years) advocating an approach which was ‘open and experimental’ (Wooton 1993).

The majority of Pemberton’s students considered themselves primarily as painters, with design playing a secondary role. Throughout the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s Pemberton worked as a fashion artist (or illustrator) for magazines (including Vogue) and newspapers, as well as teaching fashion drawing at St Martin’s two days a week. She is generally acknowledged as having defined fashion design education at St Martin’s as based upon the principles of painting first and drawing second. Wooton, in his short introduction to the exhibition catalogue for Pemberton’s water-colours, says how she would ‘banish pencils from class’ relying instead on ‘oil pastel and paint mixed with
soap powder', with the aim of creating 'free and fluent lines' (Wooton 1993).

Pemberton's ideas for the curriculum can be seen in the St Martin's prospectuses over the years when her influence was at its peak. The 1938-39 prospectus announces a fashion drawing course run by Miss Pemberton, involving 'training for the production of fashion drawings such as are required for the journal or catalogue'. By 1947-8 the three year course is titled Dress Design and Fashion Drawing including 'drawing of drapery and the figure as an essential part of the training in fashion drawing proper. Instruction is given in line, wash and colour reproduction' (Prospectuses from the St Martin's Archive).

Ten years later and now with its own home in the Department of Dress headed by Muriel Pemberton with 18 part-time staff, the course includes 'creative design, history of costume, methods of production, flat pattern cutting, modelling, fitting, sketching, study of colour and texture, study of French, American and English contemporary design, visits, sketches from memory'. As Lydia Kenemy (who followed in the footsteps of Pemberton running the fashion department at what was then the St Martin's School of Art from 1977-1987) said, 'All fashion courses until then had been dressmaking courses which of course were as far from fashion as painting is from the application of paint on a surface' (interviewed September 1991). What Kenemy's comment clearly reveals is the way in which fashion design education sought to differentiate itself from the lowlier activities of dressmaking, this of course being associated with the training provided in evening classes and trade schools (later technical colleges) for working-class girls.
The courses at St Martin’s during these years would have prepared some of the students for work in the fashion industry which was gradually establishing itself in London. They would have gone to work for companies like Windsmoor or Berketex which were producing ready-made ranges for the expensive sector of the market. The young women employed here would have been expected to use their drawing and sketching skills to translate Paris fashion into something more practical for British consumers. However they would not as yet have been considered designers since there was little demand at this point for original design skills. Fashion trainees from St Martin’s would also have had some opportunities for finding work in the major department stores like Harrods and Selfridges which from the inter-war years were beginning to employ well-spoken girls to work as buyers for their fashion departments.

More likely however the girls would have chosen one of two options. Either to try, usually through contacts, to find work on the fashion magazines like Vogue or in the national press as a fashion illustrator. Once again their job would have been to provide sketches from the Paris collections and from the French fashion magazines in such a way that clothing manufacturers and pattern-making companies as well as home-dressmakers could envisage a whole new look. Otherwise these young women would make clothes for themselves and also take orders for friends. This was the middle class or ‘society’ equivalent of dressmaking. These young women would acquire a showroom or studio and depending on how successful they were and whether they wanted to expand their business beyond the scale of word of mouth, they might also advertise their services in the classified back pages of Vogue magazine. This was a
respectable and even glamorous job especially if the 'designer dressmaker' had friends from the upper classes for whom she would provide on a made-to-measure basis, ball gowns, tea (or afternoon) dresses and possibly also wedding dresses.

Typically this work would not include tailoring. For heavy outer-garments including suits and winter coats well-off women would patronise tailors or, from the 1920s onwards they could buy such items on order through the department stores. This leaves unanswered the fate of the young women who did fashion but with a strong fine art focus. It's almost impossible to tell what happened to them except that like Muriel Pemberton they probably made their own beautiful clothes with their own printed textiles, a few might have drifted back towards the art schools to teach fashion and textiles or have found work as a teacher in other sectors. Many others, like most middle-class women of their time would have abandoned their skills in favour of marriage and children.

As a fashion pioneer Janey Ironside's career is also instructive. An upper middle-class young girl living in South Africa, she remembers 'I was lent a sewing machine and began to make myself some cotton dresses from Vogue patterns' (Ironside 1973: 28). She arrived in London in her late teens and attended a private dressmaking class before enrolling on the dress course at Central School of Arts and Crafts. From there she went on to teach at the private Fashion School in Ennismore Gardens in 1949, after which she left to set up in business at home as a 'designer dressmaker' advertising her services in Vogue. With fashion editors and society girls including debutantes as her clients she was soon employing machinists, finishers and
outworkers. The Festival of Britain in 1951 provided a boost to the UK fashion industry and by 1952 Ironside had a full collection prepared for a major retailer while also specialising in made to order wedding dresses and evening wear. Four years later she was offered a job at the Royal College of Art as head of the fashion department which was slowly being established. Ironside was taking over from Madge Garland, another leading figure in the history of fashion education. Under both Garland and Ironside the course at the Royal College had less of an emphasis on fine art than the St Martin’s course under Pemberton. Garland was well aware of the obstacles she and other fashion educators faced in gaining academic respectability for fashion:

All the other Schools have behind them a body of literature, an accepted standard of criticism, a tradition which has accumulated over the years and which acts as a guide to Professors, teachers and students, but the attempt to give to designers in the fashion industry the same status as that accorded to designers in other branches of trade, such as furniture, glass, or china, is less than three years old (Garland 1957: 81).

She also argued that the fashion industry, which in the past had comprised of ‘little dressmakers’, was likely to expand as more middle-class women like herself entered the world of work, and would no longer have the time to make their own clothes. In Paris fashion was already taken seriously, but in this country it was still considered ‘frivolous’. The pressure to develop a British fashion industry would come primarily from the customer. This gave institutions like the Royal College of Art its impetus to provide a sound training in design which in turn would be of value to manufacturers.
The course at the RCA expanded quickly under Garland and then Ironside, partly because like many of the other leading fashion educators, both women were excellent publicists. Ironside forged links with Berketex, Marks and Spencer and Wallis. She also helped to establish the Fashion Advisory Committee. This in turn led to other developments in fashion education including trips to Paris for the students. Ironside describes her twelve years as professor of Fashion at the RCA (1956–1968) as being divided between teaching, administration and doing public relations for the school as a whole including liaising with industry. Ironside also provides a detailed account of the many partnerships she set up with industry. These included attracting sponsorship from Moss Bros. and contracts from BEA (British European Airways as it was then known) for air hostess uniforms. In addition she worked through what came to be known as the ‘Swinging Sixties’ with many of the key figures in the emerging world of fashion including Ossie Clark, Janice Wainwright, Zandra Rhodes and the Reldan company. She also worked with the influential fashion journalist from The Sunday Times, Ernestine Carter, and she developed a strong profile for the RCA course as having close links with industry, a reputation which continues today.

However it was precisely these connections that made those in positions of power in the art school system unwilling to take fashion seriously as an autonomous art and design practice. And this is exactly the obstacle Ironside confronted when, in 1967, as part of the transition for art and design courses from diploma to degree status, the fashion course was initially refused this status. Up until this point art and design courses had carried the title of National Diplomas and from 1949 onwards fashion and dress were recognised within the structure of this award. However there was always
the feeling within the art schools that fashion did not really count. Fashion education was largely a female field and many of the women teaching fashion at this point possessed few or no formal qualifications. They were either self-trained or they had taken courses in private dressmaking schools. This is not surprising given the tiny number of women who had access to higher education prior to the 1960s. As women in a male dominated and elitist set of institutions (many of the art schools still aspired to the model set by the academicians), at a time when middle-class women were still expected primarily to be home-makers, they were frequently dismissed as non-academics. This lasted into the late '50s and only began to change through the 'Coldstream years' of the 1960s. The ruling against fashion at the RCA reflected exactly the ambivalent status of the field. It was only reversed after strenuous campaigning and lobbying by Ironside with her influential allies from the industry. Politically it would have been unwise to deprive the fashion course of degree status precisely because of the strength of the arguments under the Labour government of the time around the future of British industry.

There is no doubt that fashion education, pioneered as it was by a handful of middle-class women, had an uphill struggle in convincing the fine art establishment of its value. As Madge Garland pointed out, this difficulty was exacerbated by the relative absence of scholarship and academic research in the field. In the end fashion educators pragmatically, and often against their own inclination, had to look to the emerging world of consumer culture and in particular to the growth of youth culture and popular culture in Britain in the 1960s, to find support for their arguments about developing provision inside the art schools. In a sense the heads of fashion needed
'Swinging London', Mary Quant and prominent fashion photographers like David Bailey to justify the expansion and the status of fashion as an academic discipline. As I will argue later, this line of support was viewed with some ambivalence by the fashion academics. They could not be wholeheartedly enthusiastic about 'pop music' or indeed popular culture being a partner to the rise of fashion, because these things represented exactly part of what fashion was trying so hard to escape from, the associations of being downmarket and popular rather than elitist, an activity associated with the world of youth culture and mass culture. These connotations could even be a danger to the existence of fashion in the art school, since at that time, the academic canon did not include the study of media, mass communications or popular culture. These were not judged suitable as academic subject matter.
Training In Fashion For Working-Class Girls

What also caused the fine art academics to wince on the question of fashion education were the strong connotations of sewing and dressmaking which marked it as a practical and domestic activity. There were the trade associations which put fashion closer to the apprenticeship systems for tailoring. Worse still, there were the rag trade associations of the ‘sweated industries’. In fact educational provision in fashion for working-class girls grew out of initiatives developed by progressive local authorities, like the London County Council, to establish trade schools to improve the skill level in the fashion industry overall and to counter the exploitative conditions of the rag trade. The history of the Barrett Street Trade School, later the Barrett Street Technical College and now the London College of Fashion is illuminating in this respect. The school opened its ‘continuation’ classes in 1915 for 14 to 16 year olds who, over a two year period, would be taught dressmaking and embroidery, ladies’ tailoring, hairdressing, trade instruction and general education. The fees were 10s a term and scholarships were available. The school was part of a plan by the London County Council to extend secondary schools by taking in pupils from across the city, charging them low fees, and providing scholarships which would cover tuition fees and an annual grant of thirty pounds for the two years. The Barrett Street School was set up as a school for dressmakers replacing an inadequate and uneven apprenticeship system. Two thirds of the curriculum was trade related and the remainder was given over to general education. In addition some art classes and sports classes were also provided.
These full-time courses were soon supplemented by part time and evening classes, and day release systems were also introduced. Throughout the '20s and '30s the school had the highest reputation for preparing girls for work in the sewing, mending and alteration departments of the big London shops, including Selfridges a few seconds away from the school, and Harrods in Knightsbridge. The model status of the school can be seen in press reports of the time. The *Times Educational Supplement* (1920--21) commented:

Looking at the results of the teaching ... the observer must feel that here at least is an attempt to form the woman whose brain will guide her hands to good work, and whose leisure will be filled by worthy occupations.

The same article continued: ‘Something beside cinema-gazing will surely fill the winter evenings ...while the habit of being satisfied only with perfect finish in work is one to carry into active life’ (undated, Ethel Cox Collection, London College of Fashion).

Although the emphasis was on dressmaking, gradually the idea of the School training ‘budding dress designers’ began to creep in through the late '20s and into the '30s. Indeed it was during the inter-war period that we first see the term ‘dress designer’ or ‘fashion designer’ appear in popular usage. While there are no official definitions available, ‘design’ appears to refer to the practice of the established designers in Paris. This means working from an original sketch or drawing or set of drawings which is then translated into a model or prototype garment. After this has been revised or re-worked on a foile (or dummy) a pattern is made which provides the basis
for the garment itself. When the patterns are sized and graded the collection is ready
to be made. What makes the work ‘fashion’ is the originality and coherence of the
formal features of the work and the way it positions itself within a recognised tradition
of fashion design, so that, for example, it might be seen to bear the influence of an
earlier designer such as Balenciaga, or else break new ground like Chanel did by
challenging earlier traditions and introducing a new ‘modern’ line. The element of
‘newness’ emerges from both this engagement with tradition and from the
representational framing of the work i.e. the seasonal or social and historical context.

In terms of education and training, the European haute couture tradition is modified in
Britain to accord with the existing class divisions in schools and art colleges. As we
have seen, in the more middle class environment of the art school, fashion finds itself
emerging out of a fine art practice, where in the Barrett Street School elements of
design gradually find themselves introduced to a tradition of making. One evening
press headline praising the work of the school ran: ‘20 guinea gowns designed and
made by 14 year olds’ (undated, Ethel Cox Collection).

The design work in the Barrett Street School was, at this time, rigorously underpinned
by training in every aspect of tailoring and dressmaking. Documents of the period
record the precise nature of the tasks the girls were expected to master. These
include: box pleating, tacking, button-holing, pockets, cuffs and sleeves. The
extensive publicity the School received through the inter-war period was very much
the result of efforts by its principal, Ethel Cox, another pioneering woman in fashion
education. This of course was also the time during which the fashion industry was
establishing itself in London and catering for the growing numbers of young female
office workers. Blouses and skirts as well as dresses, suits and coats were now available in the department stores produced especially for this sector of the market and thus less expensive than the main 'ladies' fashion companies like Jaeger, Windsmoor and Berketex. The skills learnt by the girls at the Barrett Street School would have taken them right into this end of the business allowing them to escape the sweated labour of the rag trade. Their work also attracted the attention of the society market. A 1929 edition of the Daily Sketch ran a feature titled ‘Tech School Students Make Court Dresses’.

After the war the emphasis was increasingly on producing clothes and fashion for white collar workers and this entailed specialising in tailored blouses, suits and overcoats. The Barrett Street School came to be seen as the main supplier of highly skilled mostly female labour for the respectable end of the fashion industry in London. By 1950 the School had become a technical college and thirteen years later it became the London College of Fashion. In 1985 it was incorporated into the London Institute by which time it was preparing degree courses for validation as well as offering BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) courses which were replacing the old HND (Higher National Diploma) and HNC (Higher National Certificate) qualifications. Throughout its existence, the London College of Fashion has emphasised its close links with the fashion and clothing industry and design work has played a more minor role. However its location in London has meant that students were and are unlikely to work for companies supplying the big high street fashion retailers, since almost all large scale manufacture is carried out in the north of England. London fashion and clothing production has always been intensive but
small-scale and for this reason LCF students have more often found work in the
department stores or in the smaller fashion companies and wholesalers which rely on
local production teams or units, often working as part of a sub-contractual chain. LCF
students will also find work as highly skilled pattern cutters, or else in fashion retail
and merchandising. The background of LCF students remains, today, more socially
mixed than their art school counterparts. Many are drawn from ethnic minorities and
expect to bring their skills back to either the Asian and Greek Cypriot fashion
businesses of North and East London or else to the Afro-Caribbean fashion sector in
South London. (Informal comment by LCF lecturer).

What emerges from this brief account of the growth of fashion education is a double
set of determinations at work. On the one hand the system is fairly strictly divided
along class lines. This is summed up simply in the word ‘trade’. On the other hand it
is also perceived as a feminised field and this extends across the class divide into
both middle class and working class provision. Despite the attempts of social
reformers, the art schools come to see themselves as middle-class, often elite,
institutions providing an education in art and design, although how exactly the two
relate to each other, and, as I mentioned earlier how design is actually defined and
practised, remains nebulous, with design frequently disappearing into art. This
education is aimed at a relatively narrow cross-section of the population running
from gentlemen (and ladies of leisure seeking an accomplishment) at one end, to art
school teachers (mostly male and lower middle-class) at the other. Between these
poles are architects, practising artists, sculptors, ceramicists, furniture designers and
then in the post-war period graphic designers, film-makers and photographers, and
also fashion designers. Although some element of craft remains in the activities taught in the LCC schools, especially the Central School of Arts and Crafts (silversmithing and jewellery-making), the overall emphasis in the sector is on the integration of art and design and indeed the ‘erosion of the distinction between painting and other forms’ (Pemberton 1993). Fashion has to differentiate itself from the trade associations of dress-making in order to find a secure place for itself in the art schools. The more easily it accomplishes this (e.g. through fine art embroidery courses or else through fine art-influenced textile design) the more comfortable is its existence.

In the provision made available in the trade schools and later in the technical colleges and more recently in the non-degree awarding art colleges, the more practical aspects of fashion and clothing are taught to girls from largely working-class or ethnic minority backgrounds. These girls are being trained for more highly skilled work than simply factory machinists. Depending on the geographical location of the colleges students would expect to enter the clothing industry at supervisory levels or else look for more highly paid work as pattern cutters or graders. Others would go into retailing or fashion wholesale. However with the decline of British mass production over the last twenty years and the rise of off-shore production among the bigger companies including even Marks and Spencer, skilled jobs and supervisory positions for working-class girls in fashion production are increasingly scarce. As we shall see one solution, increasingly attractive to students is to upgrade the courses to include a greater design component and to move towards degree status, or alternately, to develop BTEC and HND fashion courses providing direct routes into degree level work on completion of these two year courses. According to Inge Bates, this trend, in
combination with the increasingly prominent place occupied by fashion in the glamorous world of the mass media through the 1980s and into the 1990s, has given students like these unrealistic aspirations about being a designer and having their own studios. They are all the more likely to be disappointed, she argues, when on leaving college they find their horizons suddenly limited:

The majority believed they could ‘make it’ as fashion designers. Some were extraordinarily persistent in sticking to their ambitions, despite their tutors’ constant advice to adjust their aspirations. A few still clung to their original ambitions, even after lengthy unemployment (‘I shall be trying as long as I live’) (Bates 1993: 82).

What this shows is how pervasive the desire is to work in a creative field like fashion. Bates’ pessimistic realism must however be countered by the sociological significance of working-class girls like these now having such strong ambitions in this kind of creative field.

In conclusion, it is clear that because the art schools, drawing heavily on Romantic notions of art, define for themselves a primary commitment to creativity and imagination, and consequently encourage an image of the artist as a different kind of person from the normal, average citizen, somebody who might be expected to break the bounds of convention, and pursue an eccentric or bohemian existence, their history is one which has marginalised women and has discouraged working-class people in general from participation. Bourdieu has shown how historically, access to a private income has cushioned many artists from the harsh economics of cultural production in this field and has also limited access to those who could rely on such good fortune (Bourdieu 1993b: 68). Equally exclusionary has been the prevailing
ethos of cultural elitism which regulated and controlled the types of people deemed suitable to enjoy the privilege of this kind of education. For fashion design this has particular consequences. Despite the endeavours of reformers like Cole and then supporters of the arts and crafts movement like William Morris, a system emerged where fashion design has occupied a position of consistently low status either because it is too closely connected with the world of work and manufacture or else because it remains associated with female interests and with domesticity. A dual system of provision divided along social class lines reflects both these anxieties. Even inside the prestigious art schools where fashion is recruiting largely from the middle classes, it still finds itself pushed into a position of subordination across the institutional hierarchies. As we shall see the impact of this marginalisation continues to have some impact on the identity and on the practice of fashion design today.
CHAPTER THREE

THE FASHION GIRLS AND THE PAINTING BOYS

Inside the Art Schools

Fashion provision inside the art schools underwent significant changes in the 1960s. This was a decade of tremendous upheaval for the whole sector. The first Coldstream Report was published in 1960 and its main recommendation was that the old National Diploma be replaced by a Diploma in Art and Design which would be of degree standard, not necessarily vocational but providing instead a ‘liberal education in art’ (Coldstream 1960, quoted in Ashwin 1975: 98). This report was considered long overdue by those who had been calling for the introduction of higher academic standards including a component of art history in art education. The report specified four areas of specialism one of which was Textiles and Fashion (the others being Fine Art including painting and drawing, and sculpture and drawing; Graphic Design; and Three Dimensional Design). All four areas were to include fine art. Coldstream thus consolidated the principle that art education meant first and foremost an education in the fine arts.

Four years later however we find a shift in direction for fashion and textiles. The Summerson report stated that these areas ‘need not necessarily be related to industrial production. But the ties are ... so close that some understanding of the processes of production and of the fashion industry is a necessary part of the designer’s educational
equipment’ (Summerson 1964 quoted in Ashwin 1975: 111). The report continues ‘In this
direction we found many of the colleges deplorably backward’. Recommending visits for
staff and students to the main centres of fashion, the report adds, somewhat hopefully, ‘If
the phenomenon of fashion is to be taken seriously, it must be caught on the wing or it
will never be caught at all’ (ibid. 111). In 1970, following student disruptions in 1968 at
the Hornsey School of Art and elsewhere, a further report was published by Coldstream.
This time the main objective was to do away with the fine art bias which had underpinned
the First Coldstream Report of 1960 replacing it with a more up-to-date and relevant
programme for design education. The experimental nature of fine art was now judged to
be ‘incompatible with the inherently pragmatic nature of design disciplines’ (Ashwin
1975: 124). Fine art was therefore ‘not universally appropriate. We now would not regard
the study of fine art as necessarily central to all studies in the design field’ (Coldstream
manpower is met both in terms of quality and quantity, is obviously an important element
in the evaluation of the art and design system’ (ibid. 134).

The year 1970 marks, then, a shift in vocabulary whereby design begins to be set free
from its primary obligations to fine art, leaving the door open for a more concerted
dialogue with industry and manpower. The question is what sort of industries do the
policy-makers have in mind? And how does this thinking filter down to the education of
fashion students? In fact this new emphasis was resented by many of those working in
the art schools who saw it as marking an erosion of their autonomy and the end of the
ethos of ‘artistic freedom’. Fashion, as the weakest subject area in the sector, was forced
to bear the brunt of the industry-bias. This was also however, one of the means by which
fashion could secure stability for itself in the sector and gain recognition, if not status.
Through the 1970s design is broadly referenced as the focal point for links with industry,
but in practice it is fashion which becomes the enterprise and industry flagship for the art
schools, allowing the other areas to continue more or less unchanged. This new role for
design can be gleaned from the comments and debates which find their way into various
documents (e.g. The Gann Report 1974 quoted in Ashwin 1975: 145: 'New areas of
design employment are opening up and in our economic development within competitive
markets, design is an increasingly important factor'.) In practice, education in graphic
design, product design and the other design related areas, all hold back from this full
commitment to vocationalism arguing that the students need the time in college to learn
the basics of their discipline. The industry links are less foregrounded than those more
publicly pursued in fashion. Given the already insecure identity of fashion, also the
product of its feminised image, it is immediately vulnerable to such pressure. The fashion
students and fashion educators alike felt they had no option but to fulfill this requirement.

As one head of fashion said in interview:

We have had the pressure to make links with industry from right back in the
early '70s, if not before. Its been the only way that fashion has managed to
survive, but many of us have resented it, all the liaising and all the meetings,
its been an additional huge burden and often it takes us away from what we
are really paid to do which is teach the students (Respondent A).

It is difficult to get a clear picture of what it was like inside the art schools during this
period beyond the evidence offered by anecdotes or else in the memoir of the celebrity
artist, musician or fashion designer (see Frith and Horne 1987). However two very
different accounts both point to the same thing, namely the exclusion or marginalisation of girls from the fine art culture which still prevailed. In the autobiography of Barbara Hulanicki who went on to create the famous Biba store, first in Abingdon Street and then in Kensington High Street (Hulanicki 1983), and also in the more sociological study Art Students Observed (Madge and Weinberger 1973) there are comments which reveal the aggressively male style of teaching which prevailed in the studios. Girls are pushed into fashion as a kind of refuge. Hulanicki began in the painting department but following what seemed to be a typical experience in painting, departed to fashion:

When he (the tutor) eventually reached me he just mumbled 'Christ another fashion one' and that was the end of any guidance I got in life classes ... It was a relief to join the fashion class over the road with the Higher National Diploma students. Joanne Brogden was a visiting lecturer from London. She lectured at the Royal College of Art and later became head of its fashion department (Hulanicki 1983: 52).

Girls were seen as more suited to fashion than to fine art, indeed the extent to which they were discouraged in fine art is described clearly in Madge and Weinberger's study. Judging from the tutors' comments it's not at all surprising that the girls gravitated to what was considered a more feminine environment and subject area. For example the authors include in their account the following comments: 'Liz is a stolid puddingy student of consistent attitudes and a plodding work-style' (Madge and Weinberger 1973: 124). Or 'Pam is ... a neurotic student that adopts defensive attitudes ... I would describe her work as boring, unadventurous, mediocre painting' (ibid. 154). Or, again 'Diana is a neurotic girl ... Her work is turgid.' (ibid. 151). Or, finally 'Jackie is a nice girl, a serious girl even. Her work is diabolical' (ibid. 154). The average male student, in contrast, is
described accordingly 'Arthur is an intelligent and literate student' (ibid. 60) or, 'Brian works hard and I believe he is seriously committed to his type of work' (ibid. 160). The prevalence of attitudes like these inside the art schools throughout the 1960s makes it inevitable that female students and teachers begin to congregate in areas like fashion and textiles where they have some autonomy and where they are not subjected to this kind of judgement. With few friends to defend fashion inside the art schools and with this level of scepticism, fashion had to look outside the art school to industry and to the mass media for support.

It was the rise of pop culture in the 1960s, particularly that brand of pop culture associated with the graduates of the British art schools which gave fashion a new place in the growing consumer culture. Fashion was able to legitimate itself in this informal field through its close association with the world of pop music. 'Fashion girls' play a key role in bringing the skills of style into the world of pop. Pop music in turn becomes as Hebdige put it 'a discourse on fashion, consumption and fine art' (Hebdige 1983 quoted in Frith and Horne 1987: 107) The 'dolly birds' (as they were called in the mass media) decorating the background in the various pop films and documentaries of the time come to embody the new British fashion associated with figures like Mary Quant and Biba. Both Quant and Hulanicki were trained in the art schools but then went on to use their training in innovative and unexpected ways. Their off-the-peg fashion took many in the field by surprise. Haute couture and luxury fashion suddenly seemed old-fashioned. In this new crossover field of 'art into pop', the rigidity and elitism of the fine art world was left behind in preference for the more popular world of Pop Art. One of its most
celebrated artists Richard Hamilton described this as ‘art manufactured for a mass audience’ (Hamilton 1983 quoted in Frith and Horne 1987: 103). According to him Pop Art included the following characteristics:

- Popular (designed for a mass audience);
- Transient (short term solution);
- Expendable (easily forgotten);
- Low cost; Mass produced;
- Young (aimed at youth);
- Witty;
- Sexy;
- Gimmicky;
- Glamorous;

Each of these features informs not just the practice of Pop Art but also of the new fashion industry which came to be associated with Swinging London. Thus although fashion had to battle for status and for approval from the fine art world inside the art schools, (a struggle which continues to this day), in the more public domain ‘art’ was now bending over backwards to explore the commercial practices associated with the world of style and fashion. In this context Parisian haute couture also looked to London and the UK. As Mary Quant suggests in her autobiography:

I have always liked showing my clothes in this way and I am no longer alone in this. The description one journalist gave of the show at Courrèges this year might well have been a word picture of our first showing at Knightsbridge Bazaar. It was described as ‘a display of far-out fashions that swung down the runways to the way-in beat of progressive jazz’ (Quant 1967: 132).

Art school graduates were now looking for work in commercial culture, in advertising, retail design, graphic design, and in film and television. Artists like Richard Hamilton argued that consumer goods should ‘show the hand of the stylist’ (quoted in Frith and Horne 1987: 14) and David Hockney brought pop and fashion references directly into his paintings, in the famous early 1970s portrait, for example, of textile designer Celia
Birtwell and her then husband the influential fashion designer Ossie Clark (titled Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy). From the mid 1960s onwards fashion comes to be part of the new youth-led consumer culture. It loses its associations with both the world of European haute couture and also with the more middle market ‘ladies fashion’ sector associated with women’s magazines. It becomes both more sophisticated and more accessible. It is the product of consumer confidence, full employment, social mobility and sexual freedom. British fashion design takes off outside the art schools and in many ways it doesn’t look back. Instead it launches itself more confidently in the field of popular culture. This shift is symbolised in the space of the boutique. Shops like Mary Quant’s Bazaar in Chelsea (actually opened as early as 1955) and then Biba which opened in 1966, were a focal point for youth culture. Loud pop music, darkened, cavern-like interiors with clothes displayed in unusual ways set the pattern for what came to be distinctive about British fashion. The boutiques were as innovative in design as the clothes they stocked. They didn’t look like any other shops. The items were not priced beyond the budget of the working-class girls who spent substantial sums each week while the fast turnover of stock as well as the reputation these shops got from the publicity they attracted in the fashion magazines as well as the daily press (and in particular the Sunday newspaper colour supplements) meant that they came to represent the ultimate consumer fantasy for ordinary girls and young women up and down the country, as famously recorded by Tom Wolfe in his essay ‘The Noonday Underground’ (Wolfe 1969).

The nerve racking thing for me was that although Pierre Cardin and Norman Hartnell were showing expensive couture clothes, none of my things cost more than twelve guineas and most of them were around the five pound
mark! I had to keep reminding myself that this was the whole point of what we were doing (Quant 1967: 140).

The sudden international prominence of fashion through the launch of new magazines like Petticoat, Honey and Nova as well as the huge success of the new boutiques (with branches opening in every town and city) brought publicity to fashion courses in the art schools. Figures like Janey Ironside began to attract celebrity attention in the form of profiles and interviews and there was an increasing interest in what it meant to study or to teach fashion. So in a sense the world of popular culture validated fashion education in the art schools in a way in which the fashion educators did not expect. It did this through the Pop Art connection represented by Hockney, Hamilton and Peter Blake, and through the new celebrities of the commercial culture, figures like fashion photographers David Bailey and Terence Donovan and models including Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton. This process inevitably increased the confidence of the 'fashion girls' especially since the 'painting boys' were themselves by now also looking to the world of pop and fashion for ideas and inspiration. From the late 1960s it is the students mixing with each other across the boundaries of fine art, graphic design and fashion and exploring the whole new world of popular culture which has a greater impact on the status and reputations of the art schools than the policy-makers and the teachers could ever have imagined. (John Lennon was studying fine art at Liverpool when he met his first wife Cynthia who was doing fashion).

Fashion gains recognition in this context just prior to that moment when the art schools find themselves under increased pressure to become more accountable and to relinquish
their commitment to freedom, autonomy, experimentation and independence. By the mid 1970s these values began to fade as the art schools were absorbed under the umbrella of the polytechnic system and as a new vocabulary begins to assert itself which emphasises the importance of the market and the commercial principles of business management and accountability. Students resent this and respond by defending the values of freedom and imagination. Fashion students do the same thing and use the same vocabulary to defend the creative content of what they do in opposition to the demand to ‘go’ commercial. The fashion girls might still feel less confident than the painting boys, but they begin to overcome this by defining themselves as artists, just like the boys. In short the values of fine art are put to work against the values of enterprise culture which were just beginning to find their way into the vocabulary of politicians and policy-makers. (Callaghan 1976, Ruskin College Speech.)

Fashion Academics

The power to influence what happens inside the fashion departments and how the curriculum is taught remains however firmly in the hands of the fashion academics. They are the experts and intellectuals, they embody the tradition of fashion education which as we have already seen remains remarkably undocumented, so in a sense these women carry around this knowledge with them. They themselves have usually worked for some time as designers and know the industry inside out. They are also constantly involved in the process of negotiating policy decisions in the art school sector as a whole and implementing them in the classroom or studio. Their own situation remains vulnerable.
since the very links with industry they are expected to develop can weaken their identity and position within the politics of the art school. While every aspect of their pedagogic practice including work experience programmes for students, project-based teaching with 'live briefs' set by industry, as well as the use of visiting specialists and the sponsorship they frequently bring with them, is welcomed by senior management, it can put fashion out on a limb in the art schools where all the other disciplines are either exempt from or else vigorously attempt to opt out of 'enterprise culture'.

If they are forced to demonstrate their close links with industry then how they do this and what sections of industry they connect with is crucial for the way they define their identity as academics. This question will be explored more fully in the chapter that follows but one important way fashion academics do this is by differentiating fashion design sharply from technology, production and manufacture. There is therefore a double tension for fashion. On the one hand it is frequently thwarted in its ambition to achieve full fine art status while at the same time it must stave off all associations with the 'rag trade'. Image-making must remain quite separate from garment-making, and those who sketch must separate themselves from those who sew. Academics then find themselves in the role of dutifully guarding this boundary as a mark of their own professional status. As we shall see later this horror of sewing, as though it was a shameful activity, comes to be a key distinguishing feature and mark of identity for fashion students. Not to be able to sew is a matter of pride!
The repudiation of sewing and dressmaking forms an important part of the argument in this study. As part of the process of professionalism, fashion design distinguishes itself vigorously from production, even though, as I shall argue, this is harmful to the industry as a whole. It does not help the students that they are not actively encouraged to know about the history of production and manufacture and indeed labour relations in the industry for which they are being trained. Nor is it advantageous for the largely female workforce concentrated in production to be downgraded, and so far removed from the designers. It simply confirms their low status and makes it difficult for them to envisage moving up the fashion hierarchy in any meaningful way. It is a way of separating skills and maintaining divisions of social class and ethnicity. Fashion education finds it difficult to integrate into its professional vocabulary the skills and techniques upon which it is dependent because these are too reminiscent of the sewing and dressmaking tradition or else because they conjure up images of sweat shops or assembly lines. One way out of this dilemma is to emphasis the craft aspects of fashion design, which a few courses, usually connected with textiles do. Others expect students to know about 'execution' but not necessarily to be able to practice it themselves. And a tiny number of courses do actually integrate technology and production into fashion design. One BA course in 'Creative Fashion Technology' describes itself in its course documentation as 'nationally unconventional' for this very reason.1

These dimensions of the process of fashion production are further eclipsed by the rise to prominence from the mid 1980s onwards of the fashion designer as artist and celebrity. This re-confirms the emphasis on creativity and imagination. The rigid hierarchy of skills in fashion education means that the designer might know nothing more about production than that if a problem arises with an order then it has to be solved rapidly, if necessarily by getting a better team to take over the work. These teams frequently remain totally invisible 'hands'. Indeed the word 'sample hand' can still be found in some course documentation. The designer might be expected to oversee production, but the chain of activities which together comprise this process are not seen as active and dynamic social relations which involve significant numbers of people. The designer remains quite cut off from the people who actually make the clothes and this assumption is embedded in educational practice. According to designer Tracy Mulligan, students often never visit a design studio, never mind a factory (Mulligan interviewed by Daniels 1996: 20). In response to this claim by Mulligan, one lecturer said in passing comment: 'It would spoil the romance of fashion for the students if they were to see that side of it'. Thus (and this will be demonstrated in the sections which follow) to consolidate its place in the art schools, the subordinated field of fashion, endlessly feeling itself to be perilously close to the discredited place of manufacture, production and dressmaking, actively repudiates this connection as a means of seeking confirmation and validation as an autonomous artistic practice.

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2 As above (1986)
Fashion education constitutes itself through the bodies of knowledge which comprise the curriculum. For the British art school-trained fashion designer to exist, fashion education also needs an idea of the 'fashion subject'. The fashion subject is first and foremost a creative individual. It is through the process of rendering the subject as creative, or bringing out his or her creative potential, that the work (typically though not exclusively the collection) becomes meaningful. For the work to work it also has to fit a recognisable place within the criteria of assessment and distinction around which the courses operate. The student's identity should merge with the work in such a way as to indicate a fusion of uniqueness, originality and what is often called vision. Throughout the duration of the degree this kind of totality and integration is sought through project work and different kinds of assessment involving 'crits' when tutors individually or in groups gives their critical response to the students' work.

This process takes place across the range of fashion courses. However each department also nurtures its own brand of 'expressive individualism' as a means of distinguishing and confirming its own specific identity. This brand image is part of a whole social and pedagogic process. It is a means of inculcating into the students, a kind of departmental trademark. The differences between each different departmental ethos is also a way of encouraging diversity in the sector. One head of department said 'What I look for is portfolio and personality'(Respondent D). This breezily abbreviated account of selection criteria usefully describes the search for the student who shows potential to fit with what
Rose has called the 'subjectivising processes' of the social institutions including education (Rose 1997). As evidence of the importance of being able to demonstrate these particular qualities of selfhood, another head of department emphasised her institution's policy of personally interviewing every single person who put the institution as first choice. The time spent interviewing up to 400 candidates was a good investment, as she put it, because it was the only way of getting a feel of the 'chemistry' between the applicant and department. But this individualising technique must also be seen as a kind of disciplinary action. The notion of a fit in this way suggests the perceived need for a mutual complementarity between individual applicants and departmental ethos:

It's a very open plan world here, you use the production room together, there is nothing hidden away. If somebody bursts into tears, everybody sees it. You get hugged and kissed if you lose a boyfriend. There are no blinds in the staff office and the technical equipment is in the corner. It's a very receptive, very caring environment (Respondent B).

This is also a highly regulated space, the openness, as Foucault would quickly point out, gesturing towards non-hierarchical relations while in fact forcing both the personal and the professional lives of the students to be lived out in front of everybody else (Foucault 1977). The ideal fashion subject must therefore allow him or herself to be open to surveillance in this way. The appropriate show of emotions displayed in relation to the world of 'boyfriends' also contributes to the constitution of the fashion subject, indicating in this case a wholly feminised and heterosexual ethos. This expectation of open displays of normative emotional behaviour also becomes a way of reading 'the work', so closely merged is the self with the work. One head of department said in interview: 'We expect our students to be passionate about fashion', and another said 'Our students are very
passionate and often immature' (Respondents A and F). Passion is therefore a further distinguishing and expected quality, also a means of regulating or constraining the subjectivity of the student of fashion design, not in restrictive but in expansive terms. It is an expectation to expose the self in this particular way, as evidence of the artistic temperament. Likewise immaturity marks a subjective mode which the three years of the degree will transform into maturity if the student is to be successful. The fashion student should demonstrate both a prescribed emotional intensity and sufficient youthfulness and vitality to fulfil the requirements and expectations of the academic course. These current and future practices of the self represent an important part of the whole pedagogic process, ways of ‘shaping up’ the student so that she or he will embody the desired departmental image.

Failure to fit with this prescribed subjectivity, can mean leaving the course or being advised to transfer to another or else simply not doing well. Students also learn these informal rules and use them as their own criteria for selecting courses and sometimes for transferring mid way through a course. As Tracy Mulligan said: ‘I was completely lost there (at Kingston) ... I thought I was more commercial than I really was ... Central St Martin’s allowed me to be really eccentric’ (Mulligan interviewed by Daniels 1996: 18). These forms of knowledge and experience and these processes of shaping up the talent are what produce the final product and thus establish and confirm the reputation of the department. These are also ‘dividing practices’ (Foucault 1984) which create a spread of categories of appropriate subjectivities for different departments, reflected in comments like ‘She’s very much a Ravensbourne student, not a Central St Martin’s type at all’.
This is also a means of making fashion design intelligible to itself and to the outside world, it is the means by which ‘fashion’ is actively produced. The categories provide a grid for producing the kind of person who is a fashion designer, while also constructing the terms and the distinctions through which the design work is understood. This is also, of course, a way of setting limits and establishing norms and values. It regulates the student body and polices their behaviour while at the same time maintaining the idea that art students are expected to be more expressive and unconventional in their behaviour because the art school, as a free and unregulated environment encourages this as a pedagogic practice conducive to good work.

Since fashion is keenly aware of its subordinate status in the art school hierarchy, the question of image and identity is also fraught with anxiety. This is manifest through the ambivalent status of publicity. Publicity is the link between the department and the outside world. Fashion attracts more attention from the popular media than any other of the subjects taught in the art and design sector. The combination of models (and sometimes supermodels) wearing the work of the students in the public space of the catwalk, offers strong and highly sexualised visual images to the media and to the public. This attention is useful but also problematic for the professionals.

We’re Tesco’s window. The cream on the cake. Fashion gets more attention than any other area. But even at the RCA fashion did not get degree status to begin with. My head of school was certainly of that opinion, that fashion isn’t really degree level work. There is plenty of admiration for the funds we raise and the publicity but in academic terms its not easy to be taken seriously. It’s a sexist thing. It’s OK for graphics and for illustration but
fashion is female dominated. Industrial design is also OK but fashion design is ephemeral (Respondent G).

This statement confirms many of the themes raised in this and in the following chapter. The reference to a supermarket chain indicates the anxiety about the status of fashion in the art school structure. If fashion is too popular, too downmarket through the degree of publicity it attracts this can merely confirm its inferior status in the art school where the internal criteria for distinction is that of not being so popular, not so easily accessible by the public and not possessing such a feminised image. To have degree status must mean being difficult, abstract and theoretical, not an extension of the world of entertainment, this lessens the ‘cultural capital’ of the discipline (Bourdieu 1984). Fashion must therefore rid itself of this popular image through promoting itself as a serious academic subject. It does this by fulfilling and safeguarding all the normal academic procedures and also by developing its own distinctive professional identity and curriculum within the academy. Each department and institution must also work to produce its own image and identity. These have to be distinct and different from each other so as to defend the diversity of the system. If there are so many fashion courses there has to be several ways of teaching fashion and also of practising as a designer.

What unites the academics and underpins this system as a whole is a commitment to ‘tradition’ and to maintaining what is distinctive and unique about British fashion education and which sets it apart from the rest of the world, and in particular Europe. References to tradition are the means by which fashion legitimises itself as having a past and a history which is also part of the history of the art schools themselves. This is also a
history which evokes individuals and personalities, departments and departmental battles. It accommodates different approaches and specialisms and it also acknowledges the difference between the patrician image, for example, which continues to linger around the Royal College of Art (post-graduate teaching only and the lowest student staff ratio in the country) and the more radical image of Central St Martin’s which stems from the support it received first from the London County Council and then later from the Inner London Education Authority. Across the sector it is this great tradition which, it is claimed, has actually created British fashion. It is the rigorous art-school based training which is different from the atelier or apprenticeship system of European haute couture. As Lydia Kenemy said in interview: ‘The work is and always has been completely different in Europe and that’s because they have a different kind of training’. Fashion academics are also the subjects of the fashion system and they too are expected to embody and transmit this culture of fashion. Most heads of fashion have been trained in the British system, they have worked in industry and many have also been practising designers themselves, often well-known names. Overall the sector remains largely female, an exception in academia, and a vivid example of fashion as a gender segregated labour market.
The work that follows and also the statements quoted above draw on two main sources. These are a series of semi-structured interviews carried out with 12 heads of department (10 female, two male) over the summer and autumn of 1992. In addition I interviewed one retired head of fashion and I also talked informally with a number of lecturers in fashion and also various cultural studies lecturers in the art school sector who had special responsibility for fashion students. The other main source of data is the course documentation made available through the residual body set up to wind up the affairs of the Council for National Academic Awards. This includes validation documents and also course review documents for all fashion degree courses. The time span covered in these documents runs from 1983 through to 1993. This material allows me to begin to answer the question, what is an education in fashion design? How does it shape or influence the practice of fashion design? What is the range of fashion courses and how do they differ? How does fashion manage its relation with popular culture and the outside world? The ideal types of fashion education described below provide an account of the main approaches to fashion design education. In practice most courses combine some elements of at least two of the three models.

Professional fashion

Until recently courses falling under this type have been exclusively womenswear. They have said of themselves that they seek to achieve ‘broad range elegance’ with a focus on

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3 Access was gained to the Association of Heads of Department of Fashion and Textiles through the offices of the CNAA. I attended a number of the association’s meetings, undertook preliminary work for a review.
being ‘glitzy’ or ‘very sophisticated’. In this sense they represent what Bourdieu would describe as ‘clothes which satisfy the demand for distinction’ (Bourdieu 1984). This does not make them haute couture courses however. Their market is broader and less expensive than the fashion houses of Paris or Milan. Course documentation points to a number of examples of the sort of companies fitting with this model. These include the British designer Nicole Farhi, the Italian company Maramotti and the German label Escada. Each of these focuses on well-paid professional women as their key target market. The emphasis is on elegance rather than imagination or originality. Maramotti is a huge Italian textile and fashion corporation with a number of well-known subsidiaries and ranges.

Course documentation also stresses that this is ‘mature’ fashion design indicating that graduates from these courses might aim for jobs in large, upmarket and possibly European fashion companies. Thus while the British art school education system differentiates itself sharply from the atelier (apprenticeship) system of the European fashion houses, students trained within this professional model will be encouraged to look for work abroad and learn something of that tradition.

The students go to Milan or Paris. They will not be working for Next or C&A. I believe fashion is dictated from the top and that is the way this course develops. In the first project they have their work sheets and they look at what influences figures as diverse as Versace or Courreges. It would be 15th C Italian art or writers like Proust or novels like Lolita, and they go and research them, and suddenly they see where Versace got his colours from and they

and the interviews were carried out throughout this period.

* See note 1 as above (1986)
realise it is relatively easy to get inspiration. Ideas are all out there in art history and also in our common culture. What they have to develop are antennae. The street is very interesting and valuable but it does not create anything that is new. Even Gaultier, people say he just copies London, but he is also looking at postmodernism, and at the baroque, its the street plus his own inspiration (Respondent B).

This statement provides a rich account of the various tensions and issues at stake in fashion education in general and also for 'professional fashion' in practice. There is a double disavowal, first of the mainstream high street retailers (Next and C&A...and it is also interesting that these are placed alongside each other) and then also of the kind of fashion associated with 'the street'. The word in itself carries connotations of low culture and the common masses, even if this is now tempered by some slightly grudging recognition of 'raw talent'. More specifically it suggests the untrained, unprofessional or amateurish input in fashion from youth cultures. The respondent poses, against these influences, the more 'consecrated' references of the high arts thereby suggesting the more suitable relation between fashion education and these more elevated forms. In addition it is to the world of art and literature that the respondent looks for such validation. These are, as Bourdieu would argue, established fields of cultural legitimation. As a relative newcomer to the field of the arts, fashion positions itself in deference to these authoritative high culture traditions (Bourdieu 1993a: 132--138). The conventions of art criticism are also used to give weight to the respondent's reference to Gaultier. Not only does he look at the baroque and postmodernism, he also has 'his own inspiration'.

Another head of department described the sort of students attracted to this kind of course as follows:
They read *Vogue*, they see Jasper Conran, Rifat Ozbeck and they get very excited by the shows. They are the sort of people who have been drawing ladies in stilettos and wraparound sunglasses in their physics books for years and haven’t known what it meant (Respondent F).

Both these statements are reflected in course documentation where project work draws on themes taken either from the field of the fine arts or else from the luxury consumer culture of the upmarket glossy magazines. Sample projects include researching the ‘Belle Epoque 1890--1910’; ‘Portrait Painters’; and ‘Explore What the Work of Man Ray Brought To Fashion’.

A different but complementary slant to professional fashion is found in the following statement

We produce individuals who are creative but who are also supported by knowledge about those technical skills at the appropriate level to what they are going to be doing (Respondent G).

Here the role of ‘technical skills’ is significant since professional fashion emphasises, in contrast with the more experimental or ‘conceptual’ course, the importance of knowledge about the whole process of production. The students are being prepared for ‘creative fashion design’ in what is ‘an increasingly international industry’. Their overall professional training must therefore provide them with knowledge of the full range of skills employed in the fashion process. They must ‘be capable of working with pattern cutters and sample machinists to achieve their finished results’. They must also know the basics of ‘creative pattern cutting’ and be able to ‘reproduce as near as possible to a good

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5 As above (1988)
design sample room, with work evolving from basic projects. Most important the students must have 'high aesthetic standards'.

The students on these courses are probably more familiar than others with what is involved in fashion production. This knowledge is also considered helpful when they are looking for work in Europe or in the USA. And to further ensure this the courses also provide strong business studies components. Despite all this it is the design work which is central and it is on this that they are assessed. 'Drawing ability is crucial to a fashion designer' and second to this he or she must be able to see through to completion the 'sketchbook collection'. Submitted work therefore focuses around the sketchbook, the research and the idea, with the 'finished rough stage' including 'colour and fabric indicators' all being made to sample. Course documentation also indicates that these students are being prepared for work 'in design, consultancy, in-house design and successful self-employment'.

Producing students for 'top range' fashion has come under some criticism, for the reason that the foreign fashion houses are looking less for these full professional skills from British graduates and more for the eccentric or experimental work with which they associate British training. In addition there are a limited number of job opportunities in this sector. The students have too high expectations of costs for fabrics and overall quality to work for the middle range British companies and for these reasons are more likely to have the same aspirations for having their 'own label' as their more experimental

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6 As above (1988)
7 As above (1987)
counterparts. The fashion departments have acknowledged this problem by extending professional fashion to include menswear and also childrenswear and they have also more recently encouraged the students to consider careers in fashion management. There is however a degree of mismatch between the expectations of the big, upmarket companies and the 'professionally' qualified young designers. The foreign companies want British eccentricity, though as we shall see in the section that follows, this does not necessarily mean they are willing to pay good wages or provide good working conditions for these 'English Eccentrics' .

*English Eccentrics is also, as it happens, the name of a design label which will be considered in Chapter 7.*
Managerial Fashion

Managerial fashion represents what might be called the 'new realism' in fashion education. Business and marketing are fully integrated into these courses rather than simply added on as a supplement. Typical titles of courses which can be included in this type are 'Fashion Marketing', 'Fashion Design with Marketing', 'Fashion Communication and Promotion' and 'The Business of Fashion'. The first of these degrees was introduced in 1981 the others have emerged from the mid/late 1980s. What underpins the thinking behind this provision is that not all students of fashion design are going to be successful as designers. There is also a recognition that too many young fashion designers find themselves with no option but to be self-employed. Given the difficulties in financing such an undertaking the 'new realism' emphasises the need for flexible skills and in particular provides students with training in marketing and management. There is also a 'correspondence principle' (Bowles and Gintis 1976) between this type of course and specific fields of employment in fashion. These include Fashion Promotion and Publicity, Fashion Styling, Fashion Retail Management, Fashion Forecasting. These courses set out to solve the perceived mismatch between graduate skills and the needs of the industry. They do this through attempting to merge 'creativity with commerce' and in particular by stressing opportunities in business and management.

These courses also reflect a realism in that they prepare students for the mainstream of the fashion industry and in particular for those companies which have over the last few years
brought in a higher design content to their stock. This connects with what in the early 1980s was labelled the revolution in high street fashion where, with the emergence of companies like Next, a new kind of consumer culture was created which catered for diverse markets and which re-defined the chain retailer in fashion as being synonymous with cheap mass produced goods. With Next the whole retail environment was designed to represent a more distinctive and upmarket lifestyle. The emphasis was on small runs of goods with a fast turnover. This was made possible by the use of new computerised technology in fashion production and in particular of post-Fordist techniques including Electronic Point of Sales (EPOS) systems allowing manufacturers to produce short runs of goods responsive to sales and manufactured on a Just In Time (JIT) basis, thereby minimising loss of unsold stock and also the cost of warehousing. The new prominence of design elements in goods produced for a mass, if differentiated market also gave rise to new forms of fashion media. The popularity of fashion ‘designer culture’ spawned, for example, TV programmes like BBC’s The Clothes Show and the spin off and very successful Clothes Show Magazine.

This broadening out of the consumer culture meant more jobs in fashion-related areas for young graduates. These included styling, fashion promotion, window dressing and fashion retail management. The downturn in consumer spending from the early 1990s onwards put a brake on this rapidly expanding labour market. As we shall see in the following section of this work, the fashion business had to adjust to the end of the designer decade and the bursting of the bubble of consumer confidence which the culture of Thatcherism had promoted so aggressively. Managerial fashion adapted to this with the
same consistently new realist approach. And if designer prices even in the context of high
street lifestyle shopping could not be sustained then education followed the lead from
industry by adapting to the development of post-Fordist techniques being incorporated
into and taken over by more traditionally Fordist-run enterprises. Thus from 1992 Marks
and Spencer and other similar companies introduce and maintain specialist designer lines
alongside their more standardised and mass produced lines. They do this by employing
freelance a number of well-known designers and giving them more control over budgets
and fabrics so that they can produce distinctive, signature lines manufactured in short
runs or batches, but still carrying the St Michael label. The availability of this kind of
work allows the designers to stay in business and earn a living as a supplement to (or
instead of) their own small independent label collections. Back in the art schools
managerial fashion acknowledges this development and encourages students to consider
work in this new retail culture. Employability remains the touchstone for these courses
which also respond to the new images of the mainstream through the inclusion of these
designer niches. It is no longer a matter of, as Tracy Mulligan put it ‘making raincoats for
fashion companies’ (Mulligan interviewed by Daniels 1996: 20).

We are interested in clothes for people rather than in purely ideas fashion. And in the new educational environment, particularly for a department like ours which is part of a large inner city new university, we are doing well with this business studies approach. Its about bringing design into business and away from the old art and design model. Its contextualist. We also find it easier to get our students placements now, and they actively look forward to working for Burtons or Storehouse which in the past students would have wanted to avoid. What we give our students is a broad general fashion education. And they get jobs, even if they might not end up as the name on the door (Respondent I).
This quotation usefully demonstrates various of the themes outlined above. The fact that they might not end up as the 'name on the door' is a direct reference to that model of fashion education which is overwhelmingly devoted to producing creative individuals as names and even as stars of the fashion world, who as Bourdieu once again has shown, emulate the star system of high culture with its emphasis on the 'rarity of the producer' (Bourdieu 1993a: 137). Other courses might seek to produce designers as names, signatures and labels. 'The creator’s signature is a mark that changes not the material nature but the social nature of the object' (Bourdieu 1993a: 137), but managerial fashion courses pursue a more realist path. The reference to 'people' indicates a move away from the traditional elitism of high fashion. The high street retailers are also recognised as vitally important for the fashion industry as a whole and for employment. The statement also emphasises jobs in favour of fame, immediate recognition and the ethos of creative individualism. This whole way of thinking is then packaged within the framework of the 'inner city' and the appropriateness of real jobs for the more down-to-earth students trained in such an institution. No mention is made, however, of knowing about or gaining experience in manufacture and production. The emphasis instead is on the managerial dimension, even though it might be argued that good managers need to know about precisely these aspects of the fashion industry. The same respondent justified this by indicating that questions of manufacture and production are better dealt with in separate types of courses.

For the local women and girls, many of whom are from ethnic communities, there are other kinds of courses available. There is a lot of skill in these communities for garment production and we direct these applicants to the HND course and the City and Guilds courses offered in many of the local colleges (Respondent I).
Conceptual fashion

The third and final model of fashion education is also the most visible in popular culture and in the mass media. Often referred to as ‘ideas fashion’ the word conceptual is more accurate in conveying the strong orientation in this approach to experimentation and innovation. The emphasis here is to connect more directly with the fine arts and to defend this by arguing that this kind of work provides the lead which the rest of the fashion industry will eventually catch up with. Thus the importance of freedom to experiment without being accountable to industry or business. Only under these circumstances will creativity find its true expression. This approach resents the way in which experimentation is encouraged and expected in sculpture but scorned and even ridiculed in fashion.

We are criticised from the inside and outside for wasting the taxpayer’s money. But we allow that gamble, partly because there is a tendency not to recognise that the fashion discipline is conceptual. It is not intellectual snobbery, but we do value conceptual ideas here and we do want to challenge the status quo (Respondent A).

This is a strong defence of fine art values against those associated with the commercial market. Bourdieu argues that to assert distance from the market to the point of embracing an ‘inverted economy’ where money does not matter is in fact the clearest pathway to cultural consecration (Bourdieu 1993a: 39). This head of department recognises the subordinate place fashion still occupies in the art world, hence the gamble she takes in
arguing her ground and staking a claim for fashion to be judged in these terms. There is also a suggested inversion in her claim that this is ‘not intellectual snobbery’. What she is saying is that maybe it is intellectual snobbery (also a gamble) but this is exactly what fashion needs if it is to gain an acceptable place for itself in the art school hierarchy. This approach is then rescued from elitism by the respondent’s referring to its anti-establishment ethos. In this sense it belongs firmly to the post-war art school tradition of challenging authority.

Another head of department described her course in similar terms:

The course is conceptual and research-based. It also involves the manipulation of materials and drawing. We really push drawing and research and we see manufacture as the realisation of an idea. I want to produce very inventive students. Thinking students who are going to challenge, not do versions of things. I’d rather people loved it or hated it, they should have the courage of their own convictions (Respondent C).

This ideal type is closest to the doctrine of creative individualism. In each of the above statements there is no mention of the market or of the need to merge creativity with commerce. Indeed the latter is recognised as being potentially detrimental to the whole ethos of fashion design education:

When the courses go down the fashion marketing route the work that is produced is often disappointing. The students are being forced all the time to think commercially and the degree shows lack the energy and the spark (Respondent F).

For this reason the conceptual courses try to resist pressure to forge links with industry:
I’m not so keen on the education and industry emphasis. We want to generate people with ideas. Whether it’s Galliano or working in the mass market, people have to be allowed to take a chance. Industry expects too much from the fashion courses. We were pushed into making these links from the late 1970s but there is no way you can teach students so that they fit in with every company (Respondent C).

This comment incorporates into the umbrella of conceptual fashion the extremes of the industry from Galliano, the most successful product of Central St Martin’s in the mid 1980s, typically described by the fashion press as a ‘creative genius’, to the mass market. The creative individual is presented as having the freedom to choose the career options available in fashion, rather than being pushed in the direction of either professional or managerial jobs. Conceptual fashion allows itself both to repudiate industry and at the same time to describe itself as preparing students for every sector of the industry. Another head who might also be seen as a conceptualist described at more length the pitfalls of working to an industry brief:

Industry doesn’t know what it wants. It needs ideas, quality thinking and flexible skills, people who can also be put into management. But pattern cutters is all they think about. They expect graduates to have immediate skills. In Marks and Spencers they have them in the workroom by lunchtime churning out 25 blouses (Respondent F).

And finally another respondent explained her caution about pursuing links with industry:

Industrial liaison is all very well but it is hard to arrange and it takes time out of everybody’s timetable and syllabus. You have to explain your business and listen to him. Sometimes he makes money and sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes he doesn’t understand his own business and he is looking to the students for cheap ideas. It doesn’t always lead to a fulfilling relationship. It can be counter-productive. They think they have got me and you know you haven’t got them. Macs for Burberry, outerwear for Aquascutum. Its wrong.
We start by leading. If they haven’t got the ability to use the talent we’ve got here then the students will continue to go abroad (Respondent B).

This too indicates a certain amount of realism in the exchange between education and industry. There is some degree of criticism of industry and there is a clear recognition that both sides of the exchange do not necessarily have the same goals. There is therefore an active debate in conceptual fashion about the meaning and significance of the links with industry question. Elsewhere it is often assumed to be a good thing and the role of placements, work experience and sponsorship is accepted more or less without question. This more critical role is however in keeping with the conceptualists’ commitment to being challenging. This refuses strict adherence to the correspondence principle already seen in the other models of fashion education (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Being challenging puts the products of conceptual fashion in the league of the established arts where individuals emerge as creative talents who will work independently and who will not necessarily fit into an appropriate job with an appropriate company. The extent to which they are described in the press in these terms is a further sign of their uniqueness and their status as artists. This is the end product of the art school system which has sought to shape the ‘fashion subject’ in this way. The ‘stars’ are the students who are awarded first class degrees and who will demonstrate all the signs of the conceptualists on the catwalk while also being commended for ‘professional finish’ in their studio work. Most of the well-known names of British fashion over the last few years have fitted with this model. These include John Galliano, Hussein Chalayan, Pearce Fionda, Sonnentag and Mulligan (the only females so far) Copperwhat Blundell (a male/female duo) Flyte Ostell (likewise) and more recently Antonio Berardi. Although, as we shall see
in the section that follows, this independent and creative pathway is possibly the most fragile and the most difficult to pursue, but it is also the course which the great majority of graduates want to follow.

Despite the commitment to diversity in provision there is a sense in the sector that conceptual fashion occupies a position of dominance. It attracts the most attention, it appears to produce the greatest talent (a problematic claim as we shall also see) and it certainly speaks of its own practice with a greater degree of confidence. In a sense it is not surprising that this is the model of dominance (in, as Bourdieu would put it, a dominated field) since this approach defines its own practices narrowly, and almost exclusively within the terms of the fine arts.

It is truly creative work that we do here. We are accused by our enemies of being very self-indulgent, very theatrical. But this is a fashion course, the rest is clothing (Respondent B).

In this case the accusations against fashion are exactly the terms upon which it wishes to be judged. Clothing is repudiated as something quite other than fashion. Fashion ought to produce these strong reactions if it is to be challenging. The fashion subject who takes on and goes on to represent these attributes is envisaged then as equally singular, idiosyncratic and able to withstand criticism and even condemnation. This is consequently a more ‘aestheticised’ subject than is found in the other models of fashion education. He or she can be legitimately self-indulgent or rebellious. Course documentation supporting this type of provision emphasise the role of such individuality:
This course is intended for the dedicated, very specialist focused designer ... Innovative fashion design requires deep knowledge generating a wealth of ideas.⁹

And likewise

It is expected that graduates from such courses work as ‘creative fashion designers’ or as ‘experimental fashion textile designers’ in combination with innovative international fashion designers or design teams.¹⁰

Experimental courses like these have inevitably come under pressure from the early 1990s to introduce some element of commerce into what they do. In practice this has involved extending the field of design to more fully embrace menswear and to incorporate some element of teaching marketing to the students. This latter remains however subordinate to the students’ deep commitment to innovation and imagination. Indeed it is through this aesthetic intensity that the most fully defined fashion subject emerges. It is here that the self becomes literally synonymous with the collection, as we shall see in the section that follows. Creative individuality of this type uses the legitimating vocabulary of art and its movements – avant garde, postmodern, deconstructionist – to explain itself to the outside world. The ability to provoke outrage or condemnation as ‘wasting the taxpayer’s money’ is further evidence of fashion’s standing in the art community. This places it alongside other famous ‘outrages’ in recent art history such as the ‘pile of bricks’ at the Tate Gallery, or Rachel Whiteread’s concrete cast House in Bethnal Green and it also allows fashion the privilege of being to the ordinary viewer ‘incomprehensible’.¹¹ However while the students on these courses

⁹ As above (1986)
¹⁰ As above (1989)
¹¹ House, winner of the 1993 Turner prize, was a concrete cast of a house erected as a piece of sculpture by Rachel Whiteread in London’s East End. It attracted a good deal of publicity, much of it hostile; see N.
appear to be given a free rein to explore their imaginations and to bring their own personal experiences to bear on their work, this openness once again can be understood as a form of constraint and regulation. The more unique or idiosyncratic the creative individual is expected to be (and these traits are frequently described as flamboyance or charisma), the more emphatic are the 'technologies of the self' which the students must draw on to produce themselves in this way. Both the fashion work and the student him or herself become part of a whole performance. The star of the year is very often the (male) student who most closely fulfils the role of highly creative individual by virtue of his careful and studied deployment of the requisite attributes. These include a certain kind of brash confidence, the evident mastery of some key features of fashion technique such as bias cut and tailoring, the ability to apply in a seemingly casual way key art words to his own work, an eccentric or flamboyant personality, a sense of drama and theatricality, so that the clothes are made to perform, and last but not least, a desire to break some rules and shock the public as well as the art and fashion establishment with his work.

CHAPTER FOUR

FASHION EDUCATION, TRADE AND INDUSTRY

The Sweatshop on the Fourth Floor

Three themes now present themselves for further consideration. These are first the question of gender relations in fashion education, second the place and status of popular culture in fashion education, and third the extent to which issues of manufacture and production appear to be downgraded and removed from debates about the fashion design curriculum. The relationship between these three is I would argue the product of fashion’s battle for recognition in the art school and the dominated place it has occupied within the hierarchies of the art school establishment. Sex, class and also ethnicity have played a role in this process of subordination. Fashion has been perceived historically as a field of feminine activity and women working in fashion education have had to put up with prejudice and discrimination. As Lydia Kenemy said in interview

It never felt as if we were doing anything important. In fact we all felt we almost had to apologise for our existence (September 1991).

Fashion in the art school has been tarnished with the associations of trade and industry. As Madge Garland noted in her inaugural lecture, fashion suffered from its ‘little dressmaker’ image (Garland 1957). The connotations of low skill and low wage work in fashion extend from the local or domestic activity of dressmaking, to the immigrant
sweat-shops of the large cities to the textile factories of the north of England. Popular culture also detracts from the status which fashion wishes to secure for itself through its associations with the people, with mass commercial culture, with youth culture and once again with women. For fashion to achieve the high academic status it seeks in the world of art and design these connections have to be repudiated.

While the fight for recognition on the part of the pioneering women of fashion education has parallels in other academic fields, an additional obstacle for fashion has been the relative absence of a strong critical tradition of research and scholarship. A handful of women come to occupy positions of prominence in fashion (Ethel Cox, Muriel Pemberton, Madge Garland, Janey Ironside, Joanne Brogden, Lydia Kenemy and a few others) but their influence has been on pedagogic practice. The relative absence of theory in fashion design education has weakened its position in the academy and this together with it being seen as feminine and therefore subordinate means that fashion academics still find themselves located further down the institutional hierarchy:

"I think it's about fashion being seen as a female sphere. Certainly we don't get anything like the space which other departments insist on. They just push and push and they get it and we find ourselves cramped and feeling that we have to put up with it (Respondent E)."

Access to space and resources is therefore recognised as a question of sexual politics:

"Sculpture just stands its ground, you've got these demands from the students and there are always these big lads with their sledge hammers and their huge bits of stone or whatever and they want to do big pieces of work that take up..."
the whole place. They all say they need to be able to move around and that it would be dangerous if they didn’t have that space. Its the same in painting. But they assume we can just cram more and more students round the table and it doesn’t matter if they are working elbow to elbow. They’ll fob us off with the promise of a few new pieces of equipment (Respondent F).

Another academic agreed that fashion was seen by the art school hierarchy as a female space which would more easily bend to pressure:

I’ve had to introduce a shift system here, a kind of flexi-time not just for the equipment but for the actual working spaces for the students. They have to book in for morning or afternoons and on the knitting machines there is also an evening session. We’ve long given up the idea that the students will get the personal desk space they used to. Fashion has suffered the brunt of the cuts in this respect. They have this idea that we just need the end of the table to cut our fabrics and that as long as we have a few sewing machines we’ll be OK (Respondent D).

It was widely recognised that these issues of space and resources were influenced by gender:

When I took over this post, most of the senior posts were appointed from graphics and there was still a lot of sexism. And the visible side of the degree was the fashion show which was seen as frivolous entertainment even though it brought the institution a lot of publicity. Six frocks is what people thought we did. We were known as the ‘fashion girls’ or the ‘sweat-shop on the fourth floor’. For these reasons I did away with the show and the students did a kind of performance instead, finding the sort of people they wanted to wear their clothes and bringing them in for the day to do that. I have also tried to counter this image by doing a lot of institution wide work. Then they get a better idea of what we actually do. And the modular scheme has also opened things up. One half of our first year went into sculpture and the staff couldn’t believe what they did there. They had absolutely no preconceptions and they did this really outrageous stuff (Respondent C).

These comments reveal the way in which gender differences in the art schools operate to the disadvantage of fashion. The above quotations mesh a number of themes. First there
is the assumed privileging of painting and sculpture in the allocation of studio space. This requirement was duly borne out in all my visits to the different art schools. In every case the fine arts students had more space to walk about in, they could visit their friends on different floors each of whom seemed to have their own personal working space. There were fewer students about and they certainly were not working at each others elbow. The fashion studios in contrast were often overcrowded and visibly cramped. The atmosphere was busy and the students were jostling each other for space, equipment and materials.

Second, the above respondent also mentions the danger of the popular appeal of fashion detracting from its identity in academia as a serious subject area. We can refer this back to the comment in the previous chapter about being seen as ‘Tesco’s window’. The above respondent also attempts to challenge that idea by replacing the catwalk show with a ‘performance’ thereby bringing to fashion something of the more authoritative vocabulary of art. The third point is that fashion is re-defined as a kind of performance art. This emphasis is further reinforced through the references to the fashion student’s success in the sculpture modules, against all the expectations of the sculpture staff.

Fashion tries to be taken more seriously as a discipline by demonstrating the appropriateness of criteria for assessment of fine art models. It must relinquish any attachments to the world of popular culture to achieve this end. In fact it has to rise far above its popular image:
The glamour and the stars and the publicity are fine at one level. But the danger is that we are seen only in these terms in the institution. Professionally we cannot afford this because it just gives the engineers and the men at the top the opportunity to confirm their prejudices (Respondent G).

Another respondent connected the popular image of fashion with the relative absence of scholarship:

There is an absence of a critical voice in fashion. Instead it is celebratory or else it duplicates the voice of fashion journalism. But there is no engaged debate (Respondent C).

As Bourdieu has suggested: 'To play the (fashion) game, one has to believe in the ideology of creation and....it is not advisable to have a sociological view of the world'...

He continues 'Second received idea; that sociology ... belittles and crushes, flattens and trivialises artistic creation ... at all events fails to grasp what makes the genius of the greatest artists' (Bourdieu 1993a: 138--139).

Bourdieu is arguing that rather than seeking the reluctant legitimation from the high arts what fashion needs is the critical input of sociology. But as long as fashion seeks this elevated status the input of sociology can only be unwelcome, tainted as it is by the concerns Bourdieu describes. Sociology as a discipline is too associated itself with challenging hierarchies and elites and with defending both low culture and the masses for it too play anything other than a fleeting role. What remains is instead a recognition of the need for students to be socially aware:
Fashion students need to observe what's going on around them and this means they can't be snobbish or elitist. They have to have an interest in the outside world and the club scene is part of their research. They can also take advantage of being in a capital city (Respondent I).

The professional skills of the trainee designer require him or her to have an anthropological interest in the common culture of the street but not to embrace it:

Often they come in full of the influence of the street and one of our jobs is to get them to develop a bit of distance from this. Its very raw at this stage, very naive (Respondent A).

The street and popular culture are thus understood as an expression of the students' immaturity which will gradually fade as they progress through the course. And if we look more closely at course documentation it is quite clear that popular culture themes are noticeably absent. Most project topics and 'live briefs' are drawn instead from world of traditional aesthetic values, for example 'Re-Create Andy Warhol for the 1990s'. Either that or they represent a particular endorsement of the luxury consumer culture including 'Cruising in the tropics ... present a collection'... and ... 'Winter holidays in a remote Russian dacha ... a collection of fake furs'. These fantasy scenarios overlap exactly with the narrative fragments which accompany the fashion spreads in the glossy magazines. In both cases fashion is removed from any connection with pain or hardship. History (and geography) appear only as a series of set pieces or panoramic stages which fashion can dip into and retrieve some themes or ideas. Everything is transformed into an opportunity for creating beautiful and evocative clothes. This raises the question, if fashion is an art

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1 Course Documentation available from CNAA 1987.
then what is its relation to society? While the politics of art has been the subject of endless debate in art history as well as in sociology and cultural studies, 'fashion-as-art' has slipped this net.

We might expect this kind of question to be debated in the Cultural Studies components of fashion degree courses. It is here that the students are free to re-explore the terrain of cultural theory, popular culture, the street, working class life, ethnic subcultures as well as the more conventional topics of art history. However social or political themes engaged with in cultural studies which then re-surface in the studio work are typically translated back into the more authoritative language of the fine arts. For example at one of the degree shows I attended many students showed work which illustrated themes taken from popular culture (e.g. a 'Flintstones' collection, and a 'Peyton Place' collection and even a collection which was comprised of British Telecom phonecards stapled together) but this kind of work was presented as evidence of the influence of postmodernism:

The influence of postmodernism means that the students are stealing all sorts of references from popular culture and putting these into their clothes. They know because of what they have read that it OK to do this. But often the work itself suffers, if they have just lifted the ideas (Respondent C).

The same thing happened around 'grunge'. In the early 1990s a number of young designers in the early 1990s teamed up with photographers and stylists to produce a distinctively 'poor' look, which was both a counterpoint to the extravagant '80s and an attempt to make fashion forge a connection between itself and what the designers understood as a tide of despair and resignation among young people, best embodied in the
music of the American ‘grunge’ band, Nirvana. The look which emerged and which upset the fashion establishment by mixing old second hand clothes with new designer items and which showed models looking under-nourished and bedraggled as though in a state of drug-induced carelessness, was however given the more respectable, indeed positively Derridean title of ‘deconstruction’:

It took them all by storm, the sudden shift away from fashion being glamorous or beautiful, deconstruction hit a note, it happened just when the fashion bubble was bursting and so many of the young designers were going bust. It was another British idea but the graduates from Antwerp really developed it. They made it a lot more formal, artistically (Respondent F).

In both these cases fashion which either shows some interest in society or politics or which clearly owes its existence to trends in youth culture is re-named and re-instated as part of a recognised art movement.

The third and final theme which also informs the practice of fashion education is a marginalisation and down-grading of the practical skills of making clothes. As I have already argued this process of differentiation serves to separate fashion from earlier associations it had with the menial skills of dress-making and with manufacture and production. For fashion to gain status in the art schools it had to be able to demonstrate that it was not the rag trade. Fashion academics refer to this history from the vantage point of having successfully broken the connection.
I remember being shocked going into a college in the 1960s and there they were, using Butterick patterns to teach with. I couldn’t believe it (Informal discussion with fashion historian).

This assumes that there is absolutely no relation between teaching fashion by using paper patterns and teaching fashion design. The former never merited the label fashion, it was always dress-making. This distinction is formalised in a good deal of course documentation:

The course does not propose to train students as pattern cutters ... ²

As students are not being trained as machinists it follows that the selection of appropriate processes is more important than the skill with which it is executed.³

That is, doing fashion at art school does not necessarily mean knowing how to sew, how to cut a pattern or finish off a garment. However this is modified somewhat in the following statement:

The designer must be capable of working with pattern cutters and sample machinists to achieve their finished results. Reproduction as near as possible to a good design sample room, with work evolving from basic projects.⁴

And one head of department summarised the whole ethos in the following statement:

We are not here to educate students to be machinists. If they wish to be machinists we would advise them to leave the course and get a job in a factory. But having said that, the best way to design is to experience it

² Course Documentation as above 1987
³ Course Documentation as above 1986
⁴ Course Documentation as above 1987
through to the technical side and use it creatively. You have to be strong on the practical side. Some get to excellence in making things. Others are not quite so good. We like things to be well made but we don’t take marks off for making up (Respondent H).

This emphasises the division of labour in fashion. Creative work is far removed from manufacture, though this is immediately qualified by the recognition of technical skills. Then, and this is the key point, the speaker confirms that the quality of finish is not a criteria for assessment. To the outsider this fact is surprising, that students graduating in fashion design are not judged on finish as well as on the quality of design. It is however a key part of the professionalisation of fashion design as a discipline that production and finish are not the terms upon which design talent is evaluated. There are a few dissenting voices from this view, one of whom made the following comment:

I am surprised when I get a student who has designed a wonderful pair of trousers and when I ask them to make a pair up they say quite openly they couldn’t do it. Or that they don’t know how to put in a zip. They should all be able to recognise basic fabrics and know about textile manufacture and technology. Building on that as an introduction they would then be in a position to move into more specialist areas. The strengths of the education and training in the UK have been acknowledged countless times. Its the quirky cases and the diversity encouraged in art and design more broadly which have to be recognised again. But we also need textile technology underpinning all the courses and we also need something like a national curriculum. Of course at the top of Yves St Laurent the designer will be supported by a pattern cutter but it is not right to concentrate only on this level of work, or on change in fashion alone. Part of the whole thing is to be able to do it yourself, understand the process and do it (Respondent J).

The comment about the zip illustrates exactly the sense among many figures in the fashion industry that the emphasis on design alone leaves the students ill-equipped to deal with the transition into work where they need to know how to put orders into production.
As we shall see in the section that follows, the students lack of knowledge about every aspect of production leaves them open to exploitation by manufacturers when it comes to both quality and costing. So although their status and identity in the design field requires a careless dismissal of ‘sewing’, the reality of surviving as a designer means that they must hastily re-learn how to sew and become knowledgeable about every stage in the production process. The head of department interviewed above is one of the few figures in the field who encourages a craft approach to fashion design and is also in favour of tailoring being integrated into fashion design. He is also someone who demonstrates a keen interest in new technology and its use in design. More common however is a tendency to stake a distance between computer technology and design talent.

We have very little in the way of new technology here and we are horribly over-crowded but we still seem to be able to produce very high quality work. Its a matter of what you prioritise in the course. We realised that for us, going down the pathway of computer-aided design was probably not what our students wanted. Its much better value for us to have a few more paid machinists in the studio. Then the students can get an immediate sense of what the work is going to look like (Respondent A).

This is more typical in that it down-grades the role of new technology in favour of pure design skills based around sketch-book ideas, translated into the more conventional processes of design where a machinist is at hand to do the sewing work on the spot. This point is important since, once again contrary to the lay person’s expectations, students might even pay a machinist privately to make work up for them. This is not against course regulations. Indeed not taking into account ‘perfect finish’ as a criteria for assessment is judged to be a fairer system. It means that wealthier students who could
afford to get their sewing work done by a machinist are not advantaged against those who have to do it all themselves. And since there is no way of checking that all the finishing work is done by the students themselves, this is at least a means of ensuring that money cannot buy a higher mark.\(^5\)

In this context it is perhaps not surprising that production processes play a minimal role in fashion design education. During the research period I heard of no occasion of any students visiting a factory or production unit as part of their course. There was never any discussion of the history of fashion production, of sweat-shops, homeworking or struggles for trade union representation. What the student were provided with was a business studies package or module. They were consequently slightly more familiar with the idea of a business plan, a CV and the importance of getting a bank loan or a ‘backer’ than they were with employing people to produce their clothes to order. So in a sense right from the start there is a quite rigid division of labour.

This means that the designer will have no personal knowledge of who makes up their clothes, on what basis, for what pay and possibly even in which part of the country. Not only does this reproduce a strict social hierarchy, it also allows the designers to excuse themselves from the responsibility of exploited labour at the bottom of the hierarchy and it also permits the intervention of a whole range of middlemen who will attempt to

\(^5\) When Stella McCartney (daughter of Paul McCartney) was appointed as designer for the Chloe label in Paris (16/4/97), one press report quoted a fellow student who remarked on how, despite her enormous personal wealth, Stella McCartney would do all her own sewing.
maximise profits by keeping wages as low as possible while also safeguarding the autonomy of the field of production and manufacture to protect their own returns in relation to the costs to the designer. As we will see in the section that follows this situation means that the middlemen can also exploit the ignorance of the young designers about costing, quality and quantity. The designer will ideally delegate the task of bargaining for the costs of orders to a production manager who will then liaise with the various wholesalers and sub-contractors. But many designers work independently without the services of a business manager and in this respect they are as naive to begin with as the machinists and homeworkers are low paid. They retain this distance and distinction not only as a mark of professional status and identity but also as a style of creative individualism.

**Fashion Frames of Reference**

How do the students represent themselves? To what extent does their work demonstrate the kinds of vocabularies and models provided in education? How does the process of transmission from teacher to student take place? How successfully are the students in utilising these vocabularies? Without interviewing and talking to students at length (a task which is beyond the scale of this study) one way of gaining insight into this process is by looking at how the students present their work in language. Each final year student will typically produce a portfolio which visitors and prospective employers can leaf through. They will also submit a page of work with an attached statement for the graduating handbook or catalogue. These statements take the form of a short manifesto,
an account of how the students want their work and themselves to be seen. Often they comprise of a few short sentences, or simply a handful of words. The function is not just to promote an image or self representation (a sort of press release) but to act as a form of 'anchorage' (Barthes 1977: 40) by giving firmer meaning to a collection which, conceived of as a visual form, requires the presence of a linguistic message to convey more concretely to the viewer how the work should be understood. By considering a range of these statements it is possible to see more clearly how the fashion designer as artist is shaped and how particular meanings are given to collections which emphasise creativity and imagination. We can also gain more precise insight into the range of available discourses which the students draw on habitually and put into practice in this exercise of self promotion.

There are several clusters of meaning upon which the students rely, the most common of which are the influences of well-known artists, painters, photographers, writers and film-makers. This is the conventional canon to whom the students refer. Sometimes their statements will merely itemise names. More often this is combined with an indication of what specifically they have studied in these bodies of work. This provides both a closer association with these particular worlds and also a way of translating fashion into another frame of reference. It becomes meaningful through a process of connection, association and deferral:

The collection is inspired by the work of photographer George Hoyningen; he frequently used blocks of colour and geometric shapes.
Inspired by the erotic vulgarity of Egon Schiele ... and the photographs of Brassai and Lee Miller.

Having been inspired by a Matisse exhibition entitled 'Jazz' I aim to continue his collage technique through to appliqué details for beachwear.

A chapel by Le Corbusier inspires a study of purity and spirituality of shape.

Hiroshima Mon Amour as influence to this very simple and laid back collection.

Broadly these indicate an interest in the modernist canon in painting, architecture, film, and photography and a wish to be associated with these so that fashion is understood in the same terms applied to works of art, famous modernist buildings and the work of celebrated photographers. These are the favoured frames of reference of the aspiring fashion designer.

This process of naming offers one style of self-presentation. Another is sought through the evocation of a distinctively poetic mode. This typically comprises of words strung together or else it takes the form of the presentation of a series of impressions:

A sailor top becomes a pair of trousers, whilst huge oil painted sail shirts in paper and canvas sway with the motion of the sea.

For this collection I have gained my inspiration from the unique formation and flow of a melted candle.

Fashion as an art form. Sculptures in their own right.

The Gallic girlie of flamboyance and panache, the inspiration of Audrey at Tiffany's.

Last night I had a dream of oriental lands where images were transformed into paper.
Nature also provides a framework for fashion aesthetics:

Woman meets bird in this surreal collection where powerful birds such as eagles inspire a desire to take flight.

The Mobius curve is the basis of a range which looks at continuous lines in nature and geometry.

Pencil-thin skirts and bodices reminiscent of crickets, beetles and fish.

This work progressed towards similarities in sculpture and the intricate line spanned throughout nature.

Most frequent however are the references to film. Whilst popular Hollywood cinema attracts a lot of attention as a source of inspiration film is also understood as a fully aestheticised form.

I was inspired by the Chinese film Days of Being Wild, particularly the lines, 'She has no feet'.

La Dolce Vita lounge lizards strut their stuff with the Leisure Age.

'Wings of Desire' a womenswear collection for Winter.

A starting point of Doris Day meets Cindy Sherman results in a collection reminiscent of 1950s American suburbia.

J.L. Lewis' film The Nutty Professor provides direct inspiration for these designs.

This menswear collection takes a satirical look at 1950s film noir.

Memories, familiar and unfamiliar of 1930s stars Louise Brooks, Marlene Dietrich and Rita Hayworth.

The final collection has been strongly influenced by the costumes from 'Little Dorrit' a film by Brabourne and Goodwin.

This designer is a self confessed obsessive whose favourite films and books all star 'women with a story'.
Popular culture and street subcultures make only an occasional appearance in these statements, e.g.:

Faster armed and hard Chicano girls join Princess Leia over a metal cheeseburger.

Or

This feisty look is based on the street clothes and identity of Spanish American girls.

These short ‘manifestos’ (all of which are drawn from degree show catalogues available to the public) show the extent to which fashion is understood as an aesthetic phenomenon by association. From Joseph Beuys to Pop Art, from David Lynch to ‘very advanced looks’, from ‘hints of a liaison with the avant garde’ to ‘Californian surfers and Soho style’, this process involves a double action. First fashion gains meaning through making connections between itself and forms whose cultural legitimacy and status are already assured, and second both fashion and its diverse ‘influences’ gain further legitimation by virtue of being, in these instances, within the academy. The poetry of the statement also acts as a form of validation as does the use of terms and phrases found with great frequency in art worlds (e.g. ‘Balancing chaos and order with spontaneity’, ‘A study of dualities and split personalities’).

These are all stock signs of creativity. They each allude to a mode of work which is immediately recognisable as artistic. Here meaning can legitimately be elusive or
inconclusive. Abstraction is the surest sign of artistic intent. The creative subject (in this case, the fashion designer) can allow him or herself the liberty of being whimsical, eccentric or idiosyncratic. Alternately he or she can take a stand, and be uncompromising, ‘Burying dresses is symbolic of stories I wrote’ (Chalayan interviewed by Tuck 1995: 21). Indeed the more the young fashion designer constructs him or herself in this mode the more likely is s/he to be taken seriously as an artist. This then is part of the social construction of the self as a creative artist tutored within the institutionalised framework of the art school system.

Of course this mode of self-presentation varies from one kind of course to another. Many of the above examples are drawn from the field of ‘conceptual fashion’. In ‘professional fashion’ or ‘managerial fashion’ courses, the equivalent catalogue contributions combine art world references with those drawn from the more practical world of work experience:

My final collection is based upon the wardrobe of Sherlock Holmes, as illustrated by Sidney Paget and published in Strand magazine. This has allowed me to use the tailoring experience I gained at college alongside my interest in combining traditional and unusual fabrics.

My interest in antiques and architecture has formed the inspiration for my summer collection which has been based on the decorative patterns of the Art Deco style. These patterns being incorporated into garments forming the structure and fit of my menswear collection made of linen and suede with knit for texture and pattern.

A visit to Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood inspired the final collection. Lost memories of childhood and nostalgia. Beading and hand-smocking reflect the attention to detail shown in the children’s clothes ... I felt I would be suited to work connected with the theatrical profession.
Even in courses where the students are being trained for working in the high street, it is not unusual to express their preferences for working in a more independent and creative capacity as an ideal:

As design is my forte I feel compelled to pursue it as a career and thoughts of working as an in-house designer or creating my own label are equally inspiring.

These comments show how the graduates envisage themselves as artists and draw on a wide variety of artistic vocabularies to project a future for themselves. Fashion is seen as a practice which exists comfortably alongside art forms which occupy positions of high cultural value and which provide cultural capital to those who consume these forms. As Bourdieu has persuasively argued, the high arts, in particular 'modern art', determinedly present themselves as difficult, abstract and unfamiliar as a way of setting themselves apart from the more popular arts lower down the scale. The 'modern' arts require education, culture and 'refinement' to be fully appreciated and it is, argues Bourdieu, partly through these means that those who possess these forms of cultural capital reproduce their own power and privilege by both instituting and institutionalising such processes of differentiation and distinction. Inside the art schools fashion has tried hard to achieve distinction, but as I have argued, in many ways it has been thwarted in this goal, for the reasons of its feminine status, its associations with popular culture and its history in dressmaking. In the concluding chapter of this work I will argue that fashion does not need this elevated status. Its a false goal. Fashion could do perfectly well inside and

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6 All the quotations above are taken from a range of Degree Show catalogues which provide brief synopses of the graduating students' work with their own accompanying 'statements'.
outside the art schools by standing more firmly on its feet as a cultural practice and as part of a cultural industry. Where art and pop now sit alongside each other more comfortably, fashion ought to be able to exploit more readily and less anxiously its distinct identity and its history.
This whole section has attempted in one sense to answer the question posed by Bourdieu ‘Who creates the ‘creator’? ’ (Bourdieu 1993b: 76). By looking at the development of the British art school system and in particular at the aggravated history of fashion design education inside these institutions, I have argued that fashion has only managed to create a place for itself within the field of the dominant arts and legitimate culture as these are upheld in the academy by disavowing any traces of manufacture or labour. This process is symbolised in the proclamations of the students that they ‘can’t sew’. The three chapters have also sought to demonstrate how these antagonisms and these attempts to have high cultural status conferred on fashion date back to the 19th century and continue today. Following Bourdieu I have argued that a sociological understanding of (in this case) the fashion world inside the art school would of course reveal the political stakes which are deeply embedded in these cultural antagonisms. Sociological analysis shows the power relations which are and have been invested in maintaining and reproducing a field where women and cultural phenomena associated with women occupy a subordinate position and where activities and practices associated with manual labour are equally relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy.

The art schools occupy powerful positions in society. Their influence traverses the field of higher education and the whole world of the arts. They are in the position of being able to grant or withhold approval and commendation for cultural and creative practice. Again to draw on Bourdieu these institutions produce and reproduce ‘aesthetic dispositions’
(Bourdieu 1993b). They jealously defend artistic practice as incommensurate with concrete meaning and function. Art is ideally unaccountable to social interest. Its essence is in the distance it achieves from function and necessity and consequently the potential it has for a transhistorical existence. Despite the various critiques of and challenges to this dominant definition of art, it continues to inform working practices in art as a kind of common sense. The less cultural capital the subject area has (as in the case of fashion) the more anxious it is to be seen to embrace this model. In contrast, those fields like fine art and sculpture which are more confident of the cultural capital they possess, can loosen their defences and talk more easily about artistic production in technical terms e.g. preparing canvases, having the right tools, brushes, cleaning agents. Their own sense of cultural worth is so apparent they can openly enjoy those elements of the work which are manual, technical or mechanical. Fashion remains far too nervous to acknowledge these practices. The only exceptions emerges from (invariably male) designers of such global celebrity and renown that they too need no longer labour under the shadow of cultural illegitimacy. Thus in interview with Die Zeit, Karl Lagerfeld can insist on his dressmaking skills (Muller 1996: 56). Likewise Yohji Yamamoto, in Wim Wenders’ film Notebook on Cities and Clothes, emphasises his background in the dressmaking trade. ‘I’m not a fashion designer I’m a dressmaker’ (Notebook on Cities and Clothes 1996 video release). In a camp version of the same sensibility Isaac Mizrahi in Unzipped (dir. Douglas Reeve 1996) enjoys his mother’s admiration for his dressmaking skills. Mizrahi then provides a detailed account of the practical processes involved in producing a garment. Finally, reporting the death of Gianni Versace on July 15th 1997 one journalist wrote ‘Gianni was born in Reggio di Calabria ... the son of a dressmaker who would copy
Chanel and Dior outfits for her wealthy clients. Only last week, Versace wrote of his debt to his mother’s tailoring skills in inspiring his career’ (Spencer 1997: 3). I have not come across any women of comparable stature in the fashion industry discuss the dressmaking element in her work. Indeed if we take the three TV programmes featuring Vivienne Westwood as comparable to the Mizrahi film and the Wenders documentary, it is quite clear that the anxious aspiration to fine art status in Westwood’s case require the downgrading and disavowal of all dressmaking skills involved in the process of design (Westwood, Channel Four May 1996).

Bourdieu characterises the mystification of the work of artistic creation as one of the means of making art sacred. This conferring of value on certain works produced by certain individuals in such a way as to maintain in this case ‘the magic of the label’ is also, he argues, a strategy of power (Bourdieu 1993a: 138). For example the rhetoric of classification and differentiation in the personal statements of the graduating students is part of the ‘logic of the field’. The ‘most extreme indeterminacy’ of language allows a good deal of scope for autonomy and control (Bourdieu 1993b) and it can be deployed to befuddle the uninitiated. It is a language which refutes accountability and which instead feeds into vocabulary which defines the field and controls access to it. Bourdieu’s strategy as a sociologist is to unbefuddle the uninitiated and reveal the social processes involved in the production and reproduction of both cultural value and ‘belief’.

Bourdieu also recognises the various attempts to achieve institutional autonomy as a means of safeguarding the power to cast judgement in as incontestable a way as possible.
This is done through 'the elaboration of an artistic language'. Likewise it has been my intention here to show how the art schools produce and give credit to certain types of working practice. They also reproduce the field of artistic production through the constitution of creative subjects who demonstrably possess and display the same 'disinterested' or 'gratuitous' approach to their work. They are self-disciplining subjects for whom creative work is understood as an expressive extension of self.

Autonomy, argues Bourdieu, promises freedom and 'pure aesthetics'. If culture is already a dominated field in a world where market forces and business and economic processes are dominant then culture is forced to find a space for its own practices. It does this by reversing the logic of economics by claiming disinterest in the cash nexus. The further removed the artist is from the world of money and making ends meet the greater is the likelihood that in the longer term this investment in economic disinvestment will pay off. I have argued here that the experience of being educated in the art school system lays the foundation for this kind of outlook in the field of fashion. Academic power as such is here concerned to elevate artistic and professional values over and above the vulgarity of commercial values. Fashion must adopt this to acquire status and recognition in the art schools even though as a relatively new or emergent discipline it possesses 'low academic capital' (Bourdieu 1984). In the section that follows we will consider how these processes operate when the fashion graduates leave college and enter the world of work and employment.
CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT KIND OF INDUSTRY? FROM GETTING STARTED TO GOING BUST

Introduction

The subject of this study is that part of the British fashion industry associated with the creative work of fashion designers who have been trained in the art schools. In the introductory chapter I proposed that we envisage this sector as a gossamer-fine piece of fabric of great luxury tossed rather carelessly between two pillars of support. On the one side was the great institutional edifice of the art schools, the public sector of training and education, and on the other side, the commercial sector, in particular the magazines with their enormous readerships and lavish advertisements, a field of spectacular visual display and consumption. In the five chapters which follow I look more closely at those practices which, when considered together, can be compared to a piece of delicate fabric, a finely spun piece of silk or gossamer. This ‘fabric’ also forms the main body of ‘material’ for the study as a whole. This will focus on the employment of young designers in the British fashion industry. I ask three questions, what kind of industry is it? How do graduates in fashion design navigate a course for themselves in this volatile field? What is the labour process of fashion design?

The aim is to describe and analyse what it is like to work in fashion. There is to date no existing picture of what the industry actually comprises of, what employment or self-
employment opportunities are available, and how these come to be occupied. All there is, are a few journalistic attempts to explain the peculiarities of the UK fashion design sector, and the occasional report like that undertaken by the Kurt Salmon Group in 1991 on behalf of the British Fashion Council (Salmon 1991). This latter will be considered in detail in Chapter 9. In the first instance it is useful to address the explanations commonly found in fashion journalism since these regularly attempt to explain the perceived failings of the fashion industry. Why is there such a disparity between its international visibility and the economic returns? Why do so many of the most talented designers go bankrupt within a few years of leaving college? Why are ‘we’ not able to make more of this indigenous talent?

The most frequent answers to these questions are that young designers go abroad to work because the industry here is under-capitalised and lacking in government support. Money is invested in training innovative and talented designers who leave college only to find few UK companies interested in hiring them. They are offered jobs by foreign companies and go off to work in Paris, Milan, Tokyo or New York and the investment made in their training benefits foreign companies rather than the British economy. This is true, but as we shall see, it is by no means the whole story. Fashion journalists also claim that British fashion manufacturers have never been sufficiently interested in art school trained designers to make good use of them and that there is a wariness and suspicion on both sides. Design talent is under-used in the larger companies and company managers in turn complain that designers are too creative or unrealistic when it comes to costs. These problems are further compounded, by the dominance in British fashion of a handful of
high street retailing chains or 'multiples' who exert enormous control over consumer habits, accounting for up to 70% of fashion sales nationally.¹ This restricts the scope of independent fashion design sales and makes it more difficult for designers to survive when they can be so easily and quickly undercut in costs by the big retailers like Marks and Spencer, Next and Top Shop. This problem is made more acute by the other frequently repeated claim that British consumers spend less on fashion than their European or American counterparts.² They also want cheaper clothes even if it means lower quality goods. Together these factors create almost insurmountable problems for the designers, making it difficult for them to earn a living. Finally there is the suggestion that fashion design is best regarded as the icing on the cake. This view was put to me in interview by a member of the British Fashion Council:

What fashion does is advertise the city or the country as a whole. So fashion works in this way, its about creating an image. This is not unique to Britain, its exactly what Armani does on a much bigger scale. His image and his name are exported across the world, he is Italy (interviewed August 1993).

This implies that 'designer fashion' provides striking ideas on the catwalk which are too avant garde for the street, but which stimulate interest and gain publicity for the industry, and by extension, the country as a whole. Fashion design is a kind of spectacle, a form of entertainment which connects with the world of pop music, show business and celebrity

¹ 'The British manufacturing model is unique in the world in that a whacking 70 per cent of British retailing is dominated by multiple chain and variety stores which have exerted the controlling influence over how manufacturing has developed' (Brampton 1994: 41).

² Pagano and Thomson (1991: 12–13) writing in The Independent on Sunday report that UK fashion and clothing sales count for £265m per annum in comparison with £1.8bn in Italy, £1.4bn in France and £880m in Germany.
culture and which keeps the public interest in fashion alive, getting front page coverage in
the national press and stimulating the appetites of consumers who want to know about
fashion as a lifestyle interest, even if that means the much cheaper Kookai or Miss
Selfridge versions of the catwalk shows. Promoting British fashion culture is therefore
one of the key functions of fashion design. The image industry which fashion design
feeds into encompasses the huge field of magazines and newspapers, from young girls'
weekly magazines like Sugar to the Sunday newspaper colour supplements. Is designer
fashion, as the respondent suggests, really about spectacle and the production of images, a
kind of service sector to the high street fashion retailers and to the wider mass media? If
this is the case what does it mean for the designers?

One problem with most fashion commentary is that it places overwhelming emphasis on
the stars and celebrities of the fashion world. My intention here, as a sociologist, is to
look at the less exceptional career in fashion design. This will involve tracking the
employment experiences of a number of young people, mostly female, who left college
with a good degree, possibly attracting praise and publicity in the national newspapers for
their final degree shows, but not necessarily receiving the rapturous attention reserved for
the two or three graduates each year who are immediately labelled as stars. One element
of this analysis will query the space constructed for stardom both in the academic
institutions and in the fashion media. This is a deeply normative, and suspiciously
masculinised position. The fashion star is an identity and a role more easily aspired to and
assumed, it seems, by 'a boy'. Later on I will interrogate this subjectivity which appears
to be more easily occupied by male students than by their female counterparts. I want to signal here its status as a space, a site of expectation into which he or she who can demonstrate the requirements of ‘talent’ will slot. While an analysis of what is understood as constituting talent or indeed genius is beyond the scale of this study, the sociological emphasis here will interrogate the use of these words in professional judgement and their operation as terms of closure. The relation between the work of self-promotion entailed in the production of the self as potential star, on the one hand, and the possession of ‘talent’ on the other, is, at the very least, debatable, though as we shall also see the generalised construction of a ‘creative self’ in fashion culture is a normative requirement.

In this chapter I will deal particularly with characteristic patterns in the careers of young graduates shortly after completing their degrees. This will involve consideration of employment abroad and starting their own businesses at home. This also becomes a work of demystification. Neither the leading figures in the British fashion industry, including the journalists, nor the politicians, have very much to gain from exposing the economic underpinnings of the glamorous fashion business. Since this might well reveal as many business failures as successes, and since it might also show an industry existing under the shadow of unemployment where low pay, long hours and different forms of exploitation, including self-exploitation, are rife but apparently necessary for survival. In the face of these uncomfortable realities there is a tendency either to ignore these questions altogether or else to adopt the position of weary resignation and fatalism, as though to say the fashion industry has always been like this.
Fashion journalists and other professional figures tend to assess the state of the fashion design industry almost entirely in terms of sales and consumer spending rather than on livelihoods and employment. The fashion industry goes into recession when sales are down and recovers when there is a consumer boom. When the industry is in recovery a new crop of names dominate the headlines (e.g. the 1996 recovery has seen the ‘triumph’ of Pearce Fionda, Hussein Chalayan, Antonio Berardi and most of all Alexander McQueen, all male as it happens) but rarely do these new stars number more than half a dozen and rarely does a journalist ask what happened to the previous crop in the intervening years or indeed to all the other designers who do not merit this kind of attention.

Sociologists however have not been a good deal more helpful in this respect. They have looked only at manufacture and production and not at patterns of employment in design. Traditional labour hierarchies would also locate professional fields of work like fashion design, although largely feminised, as privileged and inherently rewarding spheres of employment in comparison to the low pay, low skill work in the sweated trades. Fashion designers might even be identified as employers and consequently in a relationship of exploitation to the poorer, unqualified women working further down the fashion chain as machinists or homeworkers. However, although many of the designers who participated in this study were influenced by and emerged out of the enterprise culture championed by Mrs Thatcher, few could be described as successful entrepreneurs, nor were many of them officially employers. In the fashion design industry as a whole, only a tiny handful
of figures fit into this category and they, like Paul Smith and Lucille Lewin of Whistles, have emerged from fashion retailing and then moved into fashion design. Although the designers I interviewed for this study were running (or had run) their own businesses, the ‘business side of things’ was experienced as a constant burden and something they would ideally offload into the hands of a business manager, if they could afford one. The work that follows explores these careers which range from running successful design companies to selling clothes in a stall or unit at London retail spaces like Hyper-Hyper in High Street Kensington or Camden Lock.

This kind of employment activity is uncharted in sociology and cultural studies. But it is an expanding field. It is also a feminised sector. There are more people working in fashion and in design-related activities than ever before, and this is not surprising given the expansion in training and in the range of qualifications now available. The last few years have seen a shift in the fashion industry as a whole, from the expensive designer ranges like Nicole Farhi, Katherine Hamnett and Jasper Conran, down through the high street middle market ranges including Next, Benetton and French Connection to the cheaper fashion ranges found in shops like Top Shop and Miss Selfridge. In many visible ways the sector has upgraded itself. A good deal more attention is paid to the design and lay-out of the shops, and this has required the services of a whole range of new professionals, from interior designers to window display artists (Nixon 1997). Sales assistants receive more training in customer services and also in stock, pricing and availability. Many of the young women working in department stores like Harvey
Nichols have degrees and hope to pursue careers in fashion retail management. Pattern cutters also are expected to have BTec qualifications and it is only lower down the scale that there remains, particularly for machinists and homeworkers, a rump of unskilled labour.

While fashion consumption has risen quite dramatically in Britain from the early 1980s onwards (between 1983-1988 spending rose by 70%) employment in manufacturing in Britain has nonetheless declined as large scale production has re-located to the Free Trade Zones of South East Asia. Overall then we can see a tilt in the general profile of the fashion industry towards retail and design. But neither the ‘new professionals’ in the design field who have become the most prominent feature of the fashion industry, nor the small scale producers have as yet warranted serious sociological attention. Instead their presence in the labour market has merely been signalled as indicative of a cultural shift in employment (Murray 1989, Lash and Urry 1994).

Overall it looks as though there has been sharp decline in UK manufacturing and its replacement by design related activities and retailing. But in fact this is not quite accurate. A good deal of the production carried out for the design sector still takes place in the UK and in the inner city small workshops and units as described in detail by

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3 Information from interviews with ex-employees of Harvey Nichols, subsequently confirmed in telephone inquiry with personnel department.
Phizacklea (1990). The British Clothing Industry Association estimates that in Britain in 1994, 380,000 people still worked in fashion and clothing of whom 90% were in manufacture. While this marks a drop from the 450,000 employed in this sector in the mid 1970s it is a less dramatic reduction than in many other industries over the same period. It should be emphasised however that the focus in this current work is on fashion and indeed on one sector of the fashion industry, the fashion design activity associated with UK art school trained designers. Most government statistics and official publications consider fashion and clothing together, with clothing referring to the manufacture of garments including underwear, outerwear, uniforms, workwear, and those childrenswear and menswear lines which remain outside the symbolic meanings of seasonal newness associated with fashion. Clothing is different from fashion precisely because it does not participate so thoroughly in the cyclical changes, and the rapid turnover and premature redundancy of past styles. It is a slower and more utilitarian mode. Official employment statistics do not differentiate between these two practices and so it is almost impossible to produce accurate figures for designer fashion production, but since the small, local units are usually producing for all three sectors (designer, high street, and the cheaper ranges) at the same time this would be a difficult task under any circumstances. Often the women themselves have no idea who the designer or company is that they are producing for. For all sectors the advantage of these local units of production is that of proximity. They can be

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4 British Clothing Association figures quoted by Yusuf as above: 17–18.

5 Phizacklea (1990) makes this point, confirmed in journalistic piece on homeworking for The Independent Weekend (Williams 1996: 5).
produce short runs of items in response to unexpected spurts of demand. They can also provide a faster service, especially when goods have got to be returned because of faults. Phizacklea (1990) and Tate (1994) have each explored the way in which these new forms of exploited labour emerge from social groups experiencing the sharp edge of economic recession. Later in this section I will connect what Piore has recently labelled as the 'return of the sweatshop' (Piore 1997) with the employment experiences of young designers. I will argue that the poles that separate the designers from the small scale producers are not as far apart as might be imagined. Indeed I will attempt to show that it is within this distinct web of relations leading from art school training into small scale production and relying on the labour of poor women typically from either the London Greek Cypriot or Asian communities that a new kind of rag trade has emerged in Britain over the last 20 years.

Finding the Designers

The graduates and young designers I interviewed for this study were trained in the tradition which I labelled in an earlier chapter 'conceptual fashion' (although as I argued, this is an ideal type which rarely appears in its pure form and will therefore contain elements from the two other approaches I outlined in Chapter 4). Starting with the names and contact addresses of two full years of students who completed their studies at a London art school in 1984 and 1985, I managed, after a good deal of correspondence and with the help of those I made contact with, to come up with a sample of 18 graduates. I supplemented this core group of respondents with a smaller group of 8 well
known and established designers and I rounded off this phase of the research by returning to the art school itself in 1994 to talk less formally with students who were preparing for their final degree show. In addition to these face-to-face interviews, I also drew on interviews and profiles published in a range of newspapers and magazines from 1989–1996. This field work and newspaper work provided the raw material of the study, though it was supplemented throughout by interviews I also carried out with experts and professionals within the industry. These included figures from the British Fashion Council, merchandising managers, a couple of chief executives from larger companies as well as the managing director of a manufacturing company.

All 18 of the graduates I interviewed were female. The average interview lasted for 90 minutes and was tape recorded. I met the graduates at their place of work and the interview was conducted over an extended lunch-hour break or else at the end of the working day. The interviews were semi-structured to allow each respondent to expand on aspects of their own experience. Since the aim of the interviews was not to come up with an accurate national profile of fashion graduate destinations but rather to build up a picture of employment experiences in a more reflective manner, this open-ended style of interviewing proved most useful.

**Going Abroad or Staying at Home?**

One of the most frequently made comments about the failing of the British fashion industry is that its young designers, having graduated from art school, are forced to look
for work abroad, in the big fashion houses in Italy, France or the USA. This, it is argued, represents a tremendous loss of talent as well as a waste of resources since so much money has already been invested in educating these young people to such a high level that their skills are eagerly sought by foreign companies. Of course it could just as well be argued that these courses succeed on the grounds that they produce very employable graduates who are able to find work in a global industry. However no attempt has been made to examine the reality of working abroad, the kinds of jobs on offer and how long they last for, and how this opportunity often, unexpectedly, serves to consolidate the distinctively non haute-couture character of the UK fashion industry.

By looking at the experiences of young designers abroad and the reasons why they frequently return home within a couple of years it is possible to begin to answer the question, ‘what kind of industry is the British fashion industry’? 17 of the 18 young women I interviewed had applied for jobs abroad at, or following, graduation. Several had made a number of applications and over half had actually been approached on the basis of their degree shows by foreign companies. These approaches, or offers, were usually made within or just following the highly competitive atmosphere of the final year degree shows. The full ‘runway’ show, with celebrity models and the press in attendance made a job offer at the end of it all the more important. Otherwise the students realised that the anti-climax could be dramatic. After months of working round the clock on their collections and knowing the amount of media coverage the shows attracted, the idea of signing on the dole within a couple of weeks after all the glamour of being in the spotlight was difficult to contemplate. For four of the group I interviewed there had been
an interim solution, they had won places and funding on MA courses and so they were able to delay the prospect of job-hunting. However the situation was not so different for them when the following year they too entered the labour market.

The interviewees were a group of designers all in their early 20s launching themselves into the fashion scene in Britain at a moment when it was seemingly at its peak. The mid 1980s marked that point at which the full impact of the ‘designer decade’ was being felt on the high street and in the pages of the press and magazines. The availability of consumer credit, the rapid translation of designer high fashion into the more design conscious retailers like Next, the public demand for higher quality goods and most of all, the encouragement of enterprise culture, all contributed to a sense of buoyancy and high expectations on the part of the graduates. Their assumption was that, come what may, they would be able to practice as designers under their ‘own label’, something that would commit them to either being self-employed or running their own business. As I will argue it is the aspiration to ‘own label’ work which both epitomises the design career and which is the most difficult pathway to sustain. The graduates knew that the fashion industry was a tough environment to survive in, they also were well aware of the anecdotes of backbiting and tremendous competition and rivalry. But they had no image or understanding of the industry as a whole. Consequently, they were not prepared for the exploitation of themselves as eager, and possibly naive trainee designers, nor for the fragility of practice within this sector as an ‘own label’ outfit.
Five of the graduates discovered the downside of the fashion industry before they even got as far as a formal interview. On the suggestion of the agents who approached them after the shows, they sent off items from their collection, and they even made additional garments to demonstrate the breadth of their talent, to companies in Tokyo, New York and San Francisco. The goods were either not returned at all or else returned in a crumpled state several months later, after expensive faxes and telephone calls. Each one of them felt forced to acknowledge the likelihood that the garments had been studied, even copied and then reluctantly returned. Even the interview stage demonstrated to them how badly they could be treated. One young woman was invited to Japan by a company who paid her hotel and air-fare. But she was left waiting for an interview over several days and by the time she was due to return she was still no clearer as to whether there was any job with the company. She returned home and never heard from them again, leaving behind several pieces of her own work. Another student who got a job in Japan had a similar dispiriting experience:

I was invited to Japan after I won a competition at college. I got some freelance work there after I did the order for the company which brought me over. But it was very frustrating because they wanted all the sketches and all the ideas but the clothes weren't being made up and I didn't know what was happening. I was producing piles of ideas for top Japanese designers who would show every year, but I never got a clear sense of what they were doing with them. I felt they were using them but there was no briefing about what they wanted and their interest began to fizzle even though they were still getting the ideas and the sketches. I came back to London on the understanding that I would work for them from home, but I was sitting around waiting to hear from them and when I didn't I had to think what to do next. I didn't want a mainstream job, so I bought myself a knitting machine made up a sweater, somebody bought it and from there it developed into real backroom stuff (Anna T).
This graduate opted for small-scale independent production at home after the experience of poor communications, unclear or insufficient contractual agreements with regard to work and the suspicion that creative material was being used without her being properly rewarded. Many of the graduates had a much worse time working for European haute couture companies, to the point that they began to associate this kind of employment with exhaustingly long hours, low pay, low reward and poor working conditions. 'They treat you like a servant' was how one young woman put it.

Another graduate reported her experience as follows:

When I finished my MA I already had an offer from Sonia Rykiel in Paris. I had worked for them as a student for £30 a day for three days a month. After the MA I went full-time. I stayed in a company flat which of course I had to pay for. It was a family run business but I could never work out how it was run. And they couldn't understand how I had been trained. Nobody in the company knew much about knitwear. I stayed with them for 3 years in extremely bad conditions. I was left in a dirty room with poor lighting. I was doing all the designs for the knitwear and was expected to work right through 5 weekends before the show for no extra pay. Sometimes that was from 10 in the morning to 9 at night. Often they would have you there, just to be there, helping to do the cards or the labels. I'd be doing everything before the show and then have to be in the next morning at 10 after the show. I'd be taking home £600 a month including all the extra hours with no thanks ever for what I was doing. It is one of the worst houses, but others are almost as bad (Melanie McF).

The young designers were also taken aback by the snobbishness and the old-fashioned employment hierarchies in these prestigious fashion houses. One girl had got a job at Dior:
I was freelance so I was working for Dior from home, it was top quality work that I was doing, a jacket at £1000 in mohair wool, and hand finishing. But it was very isolating and I had to pay all my overheads. Then Dior suddenly didn't need me any more. They never said why and I had no alternative but to go on the French dole system and apply for the equivalent there of the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. The idea was to make up my own collection and sell it round Paris. That was when I really realised how snobbish and elitist it was, if you weren't already a name. They would just turn me away at the door. At every point during my time in Paris I was treated badly, and that's why I came back here (Joanne A).

When I interviewed this young women she was waiting to become eligible for the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. The equipment she had bought while working for Dior was due to arrive back in Britain and she was spending her time making contacts in preparation for starting up on her own.

Another graduate described her experience working for Hechter in Paris:

French students are basically untrained and very sloppy. The quality of their portfolios is abysmal. And many of them are not willing to put in the long hours. This means that the British graduates get snapped up by all the big houses; Hechter, Rykiel, Kenzo etc. But they are not treated any better, despite their training and qualifications. In fact given the standard of their work they get treated worse than the French students. I stuck it out for a year at Hechters. I did a whole knitwear collection for them, from start to finish. It was good to get access to quality fabrics and yams and it was a big collection, 7 groups of garments with 6 styles in each. I had to do the sketches, the themes, the colours, and there was only one other person apart from me to handle this volume of work. Eventually I felt they were keeping their costs down by getting me to do all the work and they weren't even paying me a living wage. I got very exhausted and was worried about my health so eventually I came back to London with the aim of setting up on my own or with my sister as it turned out (Paula S).
These young designers had no notion of companies like these being capitalist organisations willing to exploit their workforce if they could get away with it. Not only were they confronted with this side of the fashion industry for the first time, they also had to fit in with the French or Italian structures which were organised around a different ‘atelier’ system. This is a form of apprenticeship which means that French trainees learn on the job rather than as full time art students. They are paid little or nothing for the duration of their training. This means that the ‘houses’ are used to a supply of young people usually from wealthy backgrounds whose parents can afford to pay all their living expenses during this time. They were likely to treat their UK recruits in a similar way, even though they would be taken on as qualified design assistants. Being treated badly while also being expected to work exhaustingly long hours undoubtedly had a profound effect on the young designers I talked to. It put them off working for a large company even one that had a reputation in the international world of fashion. The young designers became more determined to go it alone and work for themselves.

These encounters show how UK graduates are filling a gap opened up by the absence of state-funded art-school based training in fashion design in France, Italy, Germany, the USA and Japan. The uniqueness of UK provision is what gives rise to this mobile labour market. But the availability of these jobs is in itself no guarantee that there is a smooth transition from training into employment. While some fashion graduates had positive experiences to report of their time spent working for foreign companies, more often than not these were temporary posts. Not many UK graduates find themselves working
permanently abroad. Like so many other jobs in the fashion industry these tend to be a short term or temporary, and after two or three years the young designers move on.

Although there are no accurate figures collected on this phenomena it is widely recognised that the flow of UK labour to foreign design companies grew rapidly from the early 1980s when haute couture houses saw the opportunity which the thousands of enthusiastic and highly creative graduates flooding onto the international labour market afforded. They were in a strong position to cream off the best and replace this design talent on an almost annual basis. Jane Rapley Head of Fashion at Central St Martin’s in London described this process as follows in the Guardian, (21/5/94): ‘Foreign companies are generally prepared to encourage (graduates) to experiment for the first 6 months ... They also invest in young designers in the way the rest of industry does with accountants and engineers. But, she adds ‘Some students ... are bled dry on short contracts and then have to move on (Interviewed by Wilson 1994: 30).

The availability of jobs abroad has to be seen not only in the context of UK graduates filling a skills gap but of the poor job opportunities at home. As Rapley indicates this is to some extent the result of UK companies being unwilling to encourage the creative and experimental dimension in art-school trained young designers. This means that the choices are more starkly those of either trying for a job abroad or going on the dole and then setting up in business alone or with a partner. Another UK graduate put this dilemma in the following terms:
When I won the award (as Harvey Nichols European Graduate of the Year) I thought it would be easy to get a good design job in Britain. I was wrong; nothing happened. Oh, apart from Laura Ashley offering me a technical drawing job.

This prize-winning young graduate then took a job with a Dutch company where she reports being well paid and respected:

My friends who stayed behind are working for designer rip-off companies for the lower end of the market, earning £20 a week and fiddling the dole (Interviewed by Wilson 1994: 30).

Thus both during the peak years of designer culture (from the mid to late 1980s) and in the mid to late 1990s, after the sudden downturn of the fashion economy in 1989/90, the same kind of pattern emerges for these young designers. It is either a low paid form of employment in the UK or a temporary or short term job abroad. While there are doubtless some employers abroad offering good working conditions to young designers and allowing them to develop their talents, it seems as though the graduates are just as likely, if not more likely, to be confronted with the fashion industry at its most aggressively competitive and unscrupulous.

Acknowledging the trading of their own personal creativity in exchange for low pay and poor treatment abroad, many graduates return to the UK with an even stronger commitment to the idea of setting up in business alone. They have also realised that whereas in the haute couture houses they were producing design-work of a high creative standard, returning home to work for a UK company like Laura Ashley, for example,
would involve a quite dramatic drop in creative input. As young and ambitious designers, it is not surprising that they wanted to develop their talent rather than having to put it on hold. In this context ‘talent’ is inextricably connected with youthfulness, it is an asset which has to be continually nurtured and developed. Art-school training prioritises this as the basis of creative work, and not surprisingly the students do not want to see their talent squandered. Job offers from abroad were more appealing because they promised opportunities for creative talent to develop further. But this international labour market reveals itself to be as willing to exploit the talents of the students as it is to nurture them.

One graduate described this as follows:

> The first few months I sent my CV and portfolio worldwide. Dorothy Bis got back to me in January from France. I actually thought I was more suited to Milan but I thought I’d go to France anyway. In Paris they didn’t even remember that I had an interview. They eventually agreed to interview me but clearly had no intention of giving me a job. I was taken on by Hechter as a design assistant but after 4 weeks I still didn’t have a contract and after 6 weeks I was unpaid. So I left having worked for them completely unpaid and I never got the money I was owed. I had heard stories about this kind of thing in France and Italy through the graduate grapevine and I wouldn’t have taken the risk if I hadn’t been desperate. I came back to London in May and then again there was the chance of work with Valentino in Italy and I very stupidly did 6-8 weeks of work on samples to send him and then I never heard a thing, and they were only returned to me 8 months later without even an acknowledgement. So that’s what’s wrong with haute couture, they treat young designers with contempt (Tracy M).

The more informal style and culture of British fashion design stands in stark contrast to the stuffy and conservative world of haute couture. Many fashion students come from working class backgrounds and an increasing proportion are black or Asian. The success of figures like John Galliano (inevitably described in the press as ‘of Spanish origin’ and
‘son of a south London plumber’) and more recently Alexander McQueen (‘son of an east London taxi driver’) is celebrated in the UK media as the success of two working class boys made good. Even if, as in these instances, social class and ethnicity are transformed into (mythical) signs of Britain being a successful meritocracy, they are also recognised as evidence of the social mix and multiculturalism of contemporary British society. The UK graduates were astonished at how class and status conscious their European counterparts were. As part of that process which Giddens calls ‘reflexivity’ most had absorbed through school some understanding of social inequality and of the consequences of class, sex and race disadvantage (Giddens 1991). Many of them professed a kind of ‘popular feminism’ (Stuart 1990) so for them, the very traditional attitudes in the fashion houses in relation to women and to ideals of femininity were at the very least old-fashioned. They developed a particular sense of themselves as ‘British’ designers. There is more than a touch of irony in this rejection of European haute couture and American fashion since it was their ‘Britishness’ which got them the jobs in the first place and it was the British fashion industry which failed to provide them with similar opportunities.

Haute couture is snobbish and elitist. Until you are recognised they treat you like a speck of dirt. They only value wealth and what kind of family background you come from. All the trainee designers are these rich kids and that kind of attitude also feeds into the whole system. Of course you are also being trained to make clothes for very wealthy women, and somehow fashion’s not like that in England. You like to think you are making clothes that lots of people could afford ...They are basically very unfriendly. If you are looking for work they talk down to you and wont give you the time of day. Their attitude is that you are of no interest which means they don’t even need to be polite to you. I sent my CV and portfolio to the houses that I liked in Paris and I had some interviews but they were with design assistants and since it was their jobs you were after you never got very far with them, and
you never get to meet the designer. They look at your portfolio and that's it. It's all so rigid you never get a chance just to chat to people (Philippa D).

Being treated badly was the most common complaint, especially after being invited for interviews and after some interest had been expressed in their work:

I got a letter from New York from Donna Karan saying we like your work etc. etc. and would you come over? So I saved and borrowed and got the ticket myself, but when I got there the women who was told to come out and see me just said 'we're not hiring right now', and that was going to be the end of it, no explanation but I pushed and they reluctantly agreed to see me one more time but there was nothing on the table, so I just came home (Barbara S).

These experiences form one kind of backdrop against which the distinctiveness of the UK fashion design industry can be understood. The old-fashioned and rigidly hierarchical working practices of haute couture, the wealthy clients who patronised these houses and the aggressively late 20th century freelance and sub-contractual terms which left many of the young designers working without a formal contract, for employers with no social obligation whatsoever to them, had the effect of pushing the graduates back into self-employment in the UK. Helen Storey in her recent autobiography describes her experience of working in Italy in terms similar to the graduates I talked to:

At its worst Signoraism (Storey's own term for Italian female style) was, and is, a form of snobbery - a lazy attitude to life that said provided the exterior looked tanned, thin and 'hot', then the interior could remain under wraps ... Self-worth was transcribed into an Armani jacket or a Valentino dress ... I tried in vain to adopt the uniform and in the process I came to understand something of the habits of a transvestite, only in my case I was unhappy and unconvincing (Storey 1996: 37).
Some pages later Storey says that ‘Starting out on my own had been little more than a reaction to dressing women with whom I had little in common’ (Storey 1996: 67).

What all the above accounts show is the way in which fashion design graduates very rapidly learn about the industry (and also about international capitalist enterprises) often at their own expense. Their initial enthusiasm and the need for a job led many of them to tolerate conditions they soon recognised to be exploitative. Over the longer term they were not willing to put up with being treated in this way. However instead of asking why the industry was like this and how it could be improved they tended instead to interpret their experiences, individualistically and retrospectively, as part of fashion folklore with its notoriously bad employers, its tyrannical star designers and celebrities and its gossip grapevine of unscrupulous practices. The solution was to establish their ‘own label’ at home. This was seen as a way of avoiding those aspects of the industry which they perceived as exploitative.

‘We’ll Just Start Making Some Dresses’

Belief in one’s ‘own work’ supplied the graduates with a desire to pursue personal creativity without having to prioritise either the market or commercial values, and in these beliefs the young designers shared an outlook with those trained as painters, sculptors and ‘fine artists’. Creative work existed therefore as a kind of utopia set against the experiences they had had of working for the big foreign companies. ‘Enterprise
culture' came along at the right time and gave them an opportunity to pursue this goal. The Enterprise Allowance Scheme allowed graduates to 'be their own boss' as an alternative to unemployment. Most were openly sceptical that they could create a thriving business on the basis of a £40 a week benefit. However the scheme did connect directly with their ambition to work in an independent capacity.

Du Gay has suggested that the ethos underpinning initiatives like the EAS works by 'inviting us to feel as if we are our own boss, to become entrepreneurs of ourselves' (Du Gay 1991: 56). He argues that the language of enterprise which was so fiercely championed by Mrs Thatcher marked a virtual re-definition of work for those who were subjected to its rhetoric. He also shows how the idea of creativity came to play a prominent role in this new vocabulary. By encouraging the kind of close identity of self with creative work 'the government of work now passes through the psychological strivings of each and every individual for fulfilment'(Miller and Rose quoted in Du Gay 1991: 51). Creativity is consciously deployed as part of the enterprise rhetoric. This new kind of person is a self-regulating, self-disciplined and creative individual. He or she is the product of the enterprise culture's attempt to 'win' social subjects to a new conception of themselves - to turn them into 'winners', 'champions' and 'everyday heroes' (Du Gay 1996: 67). This new kind of worker can rise to and transcend the challenge of work in an economy where unemployment is high, where companies as well

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6 The Enterprise Allowance Scheme came into being in 1983 as a specific attempt to get people off the dole and into work through supporting their own enterprise by providing £40 a week which they could claim in addition to whatever earnings they made through the small businesses set up under the scheme.
as public sector organisations are continually looking for opportunities to slim down their labour costs and more people are forced into considering self-employment or consultancy roles.

The art school graduates in my study represent this ethos almost in advance of its spread into the wider world of work and corporate culture described by Du Gay. As one interviewee said ‘College expected you to leave being somebody’. But although the rhetoric of enterprise culture had an impact on the way in which the graduates launched themselves into business (with special emphasis on the business plan) it was subordinate to the creative ideal. It remained primarily a means to an end. The EAS allowed the graduates to work for themselves and it got them off the dole. The ethos of self-discipline they adhered to, which often involved their willingly working right through the night, belonged not to the idea of the ‘entrepreneur ... as ‘the new culture hero’ (Du Gay 1991: 49) but much more to the tradition of what Bourdieu describes as ‘the artist’s lifestyle’. Bourdieu emphasises this by quoting from a novel by Goncourt and Goncourt, ‘Anatole ... was attracted by the artist’s life. He dreamt of the studio’ (Goncourt and Goncourt quoted by Bourdieu 1993b: 66). The important point is that as the very idea of the artist in British society in the 1990s undergoes dramatic change, as the artist is robbed of some of his or her ‘rarity value’, by virtue of the sheer numbers of people engaged in creative work having emerged as graduates in creative disciplines, then ‘creative labour’ becomes not the exception but increasingly the norm, yet its participants still dream of the studio, and art work continues to have a special romantic aura. ‘Artistry’ provides a supremely effective vehicle for the production of a workforce for whom creative labour
is also a labour of love. Being willing to create their own labour market as well as put in long hours for low returns, and to opt for independence through freelance or consultancy work, could not be more opportune for a government wanting to get rid of 'dependency culture'. And for capital this means an unsalaried workforce!

If this image of being 'like an artist' gives the graduates the incentive to work the sort of hours that no employer could ever expect of his or her employees, then this in itself is evidence of the success of the new form of creative self-disciplining in work. These young people could be seen as 'subjects of creative enterprise', willing workers who surrender themselves to the promise of 'pleasure in work' (Donzelot 1991). This represents a new and more subtle form of self-government in tune with the requirements of a post-industrial economy. If hundreds of young graduates embark on careers as self-employed fashion designers and if they put in unimaginably long hours and accept the low financial returns on their labour, are they therefore merely conforming to a broader, and more hidden political agenda, which as Phil Cohen argues is reminiscent of the self-help ethos of the 19th century, 'What is practised for pleasure can be practised with profit!' (Cohen 1997: 297)? Both Cohen and Du Gay appear to follow Donzelot in seeing the new emphasis on creativity in work as dangling the promise of self-reward and immense gratification in work and thus producing a new kind of worker, one who enjoys the dream of creative satisfaction in work and also the 'fantasy of entrepreneurship' (Du Gay 1993). Cohen writing on the recent focus on developing personal creativity in training schemes and in the 'new vocationalism' in education suggests that 'Creative individualism has here become a recipe for social success, rather
than a symbol of Bohemian excess' (Cohen ibid. 293). Cohen thus sees enterprise culture as preying on aspects of youth culture by crudely turning personal skills and radical lifestyles into livelihoods. Young people are made into petty-capitalists with the creative work they now do for personal gain embodying a 'neutralisation of the counter-culture'. In this way, Cohen continues, 'Leisure' (is) a cottage industry for the unemployed' (Cohen ibid. 298).

What Du Gay and Cohen both point to is a new kind of subject emerging for whom work is understood in terms of individual creativity. What used to be a life of unrewarding 'slog' is now a possible site for personal fulfilment. Ideologically work is turned into a source of reward through the emphasis on creativity, no matter how irregular the earnings and regardless of how long the hours are. This ethos also encourages a new and distinctive merging of the self with work, as Du Gay suggests 'the identity of the worker has been differentially constituted in the changing practices of governing economic life' (Du Gay 1996: 55). The creative worker thus embodies the aestheticisation of labour as a strategy of government. Helen Storey puts this with poetic clarity in the introductory blurb to the recent autobiography she published which chronicles her rise to fame (she was voted most Innovative UK Designer in 1991) and her experience, four years later, of bankruptcy:

Beyond the eyes of men, and of any female state that is named --- mother, lover, worker, wife --- my creativity is my difference. I cannot resist starting again, as if in rediscovering the possibility of a creative new, I am on some level reaffirming that I exist (Storey 1996: Preface).
This process can also be understood as society offloading its responsibility to people by turning work and employment into a matter of self-love, individual will, talent and commitment. This new ethos creates an intensification of labour, not through coercion but through its opposite, through the love of one's own work, which is also a kind of self-love and a means of gaining self-value. During and after the Thatcher years, these ideas have virtually re-shaped the meaning of work, for significant numbers of people in Britain today. They also offer a useful way of looking at the careers of the graduate designers in this present study by providing a framework for understanding more broadly the new careers in the culture and media industries which depend on this fusion of entrepreneurial values with a belief in the creative self, with the latter providing a rational for the former.

The question I raise here is how does this work in practice? Du Gay acknowledges that accounts of 'top down' re-definitions of work especially those which draw on a Foucauldian framework which stress the multiple attempts to 'shape up' a new kind of worker by transforming 'the meaning and the reality of work' (Du Gay 1996: 53) do not tell the whole story. There is inevitably a dislocation (or a slip) between this regulationist grid and its implementation, these practices also raise further unanticipated issues, such as the fact that the main beneficiaries of the EAS were actually artists and writers (occupational groups historically pre-disposed to an anti-business ethic), suggesting that in terms of 'real results' 'government is a congenitally failing operation' (Rose and Miller quoted by Du Gay 1991: 58). Was the EAS cleverly utilised by the designers as a means of pursuing, not good business sense, but rather their own artistic talent? Or, is it
more the case that the odds were stacked against the young designers who faced unanticipated competition from bigger, more successful companies, so that the EAS was merely another ill fated attempt to re-vitalise the small business sector? Or, finally, did the EAS provide the designers with an opportunity to further their experience in the industry as a transitional stage in the relatively uncharted territory of a career as a fashion designer? This would understand the EAS as a training grant, the results of which were inevitably uncertain. One of the more certain effects is that, according to Dr Jane O'Brien of the Arts Council, the EAS provided a small cushion of support for practising artists during the Thatcher years which had notable effects in particular the revitalisation of the east end of London where many of these artists settled in the 1980s: 'The blue touchpaper was the introduction of the enterprise allowance in 1983, which was underwriting 10,000 artists a year before it was scrapped' (O'Brien interviewed by Harlow 1995: 3).

A good deal of the material presented here is concerned with the day to day practice of design. What happens to the young cultural entrepreneurs? Are the small businesses in the cultural sector capitalist in the traditional sense? Are these young designers entrepreneurs or are they the hapless victims of the ideology of 'enterprise culture'? I will argue that although subjects of 'enterprise culture' the graduates actually succeed in re-defining the meaning of this term, they put a 'spin' on it so that it becomes more compatible with their own goals. Out of the EAS emerges a quite unexpected and vigorous field of creative activity whose meanings are somehow at odds with that heroic vision of enterprise envisaged by Mrs Thatcher. If anything this kind of cultural practice
anticipates what, in the late 1990s, some have recently labelled ‘social entrepreneurialism’, with the ‘social’ in this case referring to the broad value of the arts to society, beyond the market or the profit motive. Where the business ethic does make an appearance, it is more a matter of it providing a route out of unemployment, without having to work for somebody else. The following comment made by a young designer interviewed in The Guardian (22/4/93) sums up the way in which the graduates used enterprise culture to create their own labour market:

> When I graduated there wasn’t a designer around who made me think, wow, I want to work for you. I was on the dole, on a Business Support Scheme course, when I realised why should I worry about somebody else’s business? I may as well worry about my own (Wilson interviewing Vicky Poole 1993: 14).

With one exception, all of the graduates I interviewed had participated at some point in the Enterprise Allowance Scheme. To qualify for the scheme they had to have been unemployed for at least 13 weeks. They also had to prepare a business plan and they had to have a bank account with £1000 deposited. The following comments provide a sense of what happened to them in their careers as young entrepreneurs:

7 The concept of ‘social entrepreneurialism’ appeared, it seems, out of the blue in 1996/7. It referred to new ways of providing a range of social services, in the light of the running down of local authority provision and privatisation of their functions. The new ‘social entrepreneurs’ tended to be either clerics, or ex-managers from business, made redundant, and looking for a challenge which would require them to combine business skills with a social conscience. So far these initiatives have tended to be based in churches or local community centres. Play groups, crèche facilities and other community services are run on a business footing. The success of the magazine for the homeless The Big Issue has also been hailed as an example of ‘social entrepreneurialism’ and, following the election of the Labour Government in 1997, a new school for ‘social entrepreneurs’ has been established by Lord Young. The idea chimes with Tony Blair’s comments about creating a more ‘decent’ society, in this case through fusing business activities, not with the individualist ethos associated with Thatcher but with some notion of the ‘social good’. It remains to be seen whether the arts and culture might be encouraged to develop within this kind of umbrella.
We had known each other at college, we met up and realised we had both had these terrible experiences trying and failing to get jobs abroad so we thought we’ll just start making some dresses ... The EAS helped solidify our ideas, draw up a business plan, and find out how much things cost, our target markets. We even stood in the street with questionnaire ... We borrowed £1,500 from each of our fathers and that was it (Tracy M).

However only four years later after an enormously successful run of shows with orders of £30,000 in spring 1994, followed by £100,000 of orders in summer and with praise and publicity and media coverage across the whole fashion press, these two designers who worked together under the Sonnetag and Mulligan label realised they could not fund the production of the next year's collection. 'By June the bank had refused automatic overdraft facility, the business manager was 'suddenly very busy' and one of the backers was getting edgy'. In October 1995, their summer '96 collection crashed. 'We got £28,000 but needed £150,000. After the show we knew we were stuffed' (Barbara S and Tracy M interviewed by Daniels 1996: 19).

Another young women described her entrepreneurial activities as follows:

After the Japan work fell through I started back on the EAS. It was all casual sportswear stuff I was doing, which I've always really loved. I was knitting away night and day. I got loads of orders after the Store Street Gallery exhibited some of my work. I found a studio in Portobello Green with a shop attached. I stayed there for three years, just doing knitwear. So in that sense the EAS worked for me. I got the kind of turnover I needed to keep going, even though I was working myself to the bone. The highlights of that period was the three designer collections I did for Harvey Nichols, Snob in New York and the Academy on the Kings Road. However soon after this things began to go wrong. I had overworked right though this period and I was ill with exhaustion. But I was a young designer and I believed in my work (Harriet P).
As we can see this young designer clearly identifies the creative aspects of her work as the most important. She draws attention to the interest in her work shown by the fine art world and it is this which legitimates her long hours ‘knitting away night and day’ in her studio. She continued:

The crunch came when I was ripped off by the real businessmen. They came into my shop and posed as customers and bought a huge quantity of stuff. They must have unpicked it to see how I had done it and then got it made up again at a fraction of the cost using much cheaper materials and yarns. They marketed my whole stock in the US at a quarter of the price. I found this out through being in New York and seeing all my designs on the rails and knowing that I hadn’t sold to that particular store. It all became clear how it had happened. I saw them there on the rails. I didn’t have the money to pursue it legally and it put me out of business since the big department stores immediately cancelled all my orders once they realised the same stock was on sale at a much cheaper price in any number of stores across the city.

Harriet P’s experience demonstrates not just the dishonest and disreputable practices common in the fashion industry but also the vulnerability of the small-scale designers. The practice of ‘ripping off’ designer styles or of copying them for the mass or middle market is a standard industry practice. The boundaries between the legal and the illegal remain foggy and for this reason few cases make it into the courts. This raises the question, not so much of what can the real designers do about it? How can they protect themselves? But rather if copying is common practice in the fashion industry, on what basis can the designers survive? Do they simply produce their catwalk collections to see them photographed and then manufactured by high street retailers like Kookai, Top Shop,
River Island and others? Is the designer label a viable business proposition in the context of the designer ‘rip off’?

Harriet P’s story, like so many others told to me, also demonstrates the difficulties of keeping up this level of labour-intensive activity over a prolonged period. Compared to many of the other young designers I interviewed, this young woman survived longer in business and achieved a remarkable degree of success. However this success has to be seen in the light of the hours put in and the stress and exhaustion which most of these young people experienced:

I started off unemployed and freelance and I approached the International Wool Secretariat and I got some work from them on the small fashion shows they put on. It was very much an if and when arrangement and that lasted for almost 2 years. But by then I was desperate. I decided to try for salaried jobs and wrote hundreds of letters but really nothing much came of it. Then I bumped into a friend from college at Kensington Market. She had got a unit through a friend and offered to share it with me. I was on the dole and applied to the EAS. I somehow managed to afford the fabric that I needed to make up a range of dresses. I also borrowed a few quid from my mum. For the next 18 months I spent three days a week sewing and three days a week selling. I watered down a lot of my designs to make them cheaper. I made enough to live on and it was better than sitting at home vegetating. My friend from college thought it was time to expand so we moved across the road to Hyper-Hyper. It cost £600 a month. Then the rent went up to £900. One week things would go brilliantly and I’d pay off the overdraft, the next week I’d be thinking I’d have to give the whole thing up. Then when the lease ran out I gave myself a week to think about it. I decided I had gone the wrong way about getting into the fashion business. I was 26 with a £20,000 overdraft. I got a copy of the Evening Standard and applied for a job as a shop manageress (Jane P).

Jane P’s experiences demonstrate with clarity the patterns of work experienced by many of the young designers who participated in this study. Even though they might deny it
‘sewing and selling’ on a small scale is a more accurate picture than the idealised image of running a studio and handing over all the sewing to a part-time machinist. Paula S was working for Jean Muir when she decided to go it alone. Frustrated by the lack of input she was able to have at Jean Muir she found out about the EAS. She was pleased to have that support for the first two years but after 5 years of working a 7 day week and with orders coming in from prestigious retailers across the country, she was still not making enough money to live on. She then had to take on freelance work for a bigger company which took up two full days each week leaving her with the task of somehow squeezing the volume of work for her own business into a five day week.

Linda B was one of the few designers who had managed to avoid accumulating large debts. She had done this by staying very small, a one-person business in effect and she was also lucky to have cheap subsidised studio and living space as a result of a local council initiative. This kept her overheads down and allowed her to function on a self-employed basis. For these reasons she was able to function over the longer term as a one-woman business, though this, as she pointed out, also meant a high degree of isolation during the working day. She was sitting in her studio sketching, doing foiles and also some sewing herself. In effect she was earning her living by doing one-off orders almost like a traditional dressmaker:

In my last year at college I was working in the Lagoon Bar and I got to know loads of people in the fashion and magazine business. From some of them I found out about setting up on my own and when I left college I already had an order book. I had started making clothes to sell before I graduated and then after college I shared a unit at Hyper-Hyper. But the costs were so great that I
had to give it up and work freelance. During this time I saved and got equipment through the Princes Trust, went on the EAS and about the same time I got the flat and workshop. It's been incredibly hard work and I sometimes feel very isolated but I've kept my head above water.

What can be seen in conclusion, is that the whole activity of setting up in business following graduation or soon afterwards, revealed to the young designers how difficult it was to survive in fashion. They experienced harsh working conditions if they were lucky enough to get a job abroad, and as often as not they were back home in the UK within a couple of years. Working in an independent capacity they experienced high levels of stress, exhaustion and were forced into patterns of self-exploitation way beyond what any employer could legitimately get away with. This was also the case right across the whole group. No single graduate student had avoided the extraordinary long hours, the low pay, or the bad employer who wouldn't issue them with a contract, or the anxiety of mounting debts and the recognition that there was a whole string of factors over which they had little or no control. It was by no means uncommon to have been left with £20,000 of debts to pay off, after working day and night, with no breaks, no holidays and no real salary to speak of.

This shows that the shift from graduation into self-employment or into establishing a small business in fashion design was hardly sustainable as a sound business proposition unless the designers opted to work as very small scale producers (Paula S, Linda B) using the services of a pattern-cutter and machinist on a temporary, freelance or part-time basis. However they all said that where creativity came into conflict with business, the former won out over the latter. They saw the Enterprise Allowance Scheme as a means of
allowing them to develop their creative talent further. It came as something of a shock to
them when they found themselves operating within a sector of the rag trade rather than in
the art world of their dreams. In the light of all the manoeuvrings they had to do, the
experience of the young designers sheds light on what it is to be part of the new flexible
and creative workforce, in particular it raises questions about surviving in the light of
fierce competition from bigger, stronger companies and it also puts on the agenda
questions of government support for the sector and the need for fresh thinking on social
insurance. As we shall see in the pages that follow the eventual course that the average
‘fashion career’ takes is to work on a freelance basis for a number of bigger companies
while holding onto some of the threads of independent work. This suggests a ‘mixed
economy of fashion design’, to which we will now turn.
CHAPTER SIX

A MIXED ECONOMY OF FASHION DESIGN

Fashion Design as a Temporary Contract

What emerges from this study is, as we shall see, something like a 'mixed economy' in fashion design. Almost all of the respondents had worked their way right through the industry, gaining experience at every level so that they were in effect multi-skilled. However it was not choice which motivated this high degree of labour mobility. Rather it was the short term viability of the business ventures which the graduates embarked upon by themselves which forced them then to try out every other possibility of work within the fashion sector. This chapter deals with the range of ways young designers try to survive, these are; On The Dole, Stallholding, Shop Assistants, Teaching, Own Label, Company Job.

ON THE DOLE

For most of the interviewees being on the dole was a taken for granted part of the experience of being a fashion designer, not unlike the periods actors spend 'resting' between jobs. For the designers these periods were in the first instance tied up with going on the business enterprise scheme which required that applicants be unemployed for a
minimum period of 13 weeks before becoming eligible. This scheme became the official route for young designers setting up in business. Its existence ameliorated the reality of 'signing on' and once they were on the scheme they suddenly moved in status from being unemployed to being 'fashion designers'. The scheme got young graduates off the dole since, as we have already seen, few received job offers of any type in the months following graduation. Over the 8 year period since they had left college many found themselves re-applying to the scheme until it was withdrawn by the government in 1994.

Originally the scheme was designed to support small businesses in their first year of operation, after which the young entrepreneur was expected to be able to manage without the supplement of £40 and later £50 a week. When it became evident that this was not long enough to create a healthy cash-flow the scheme was extended by another year. Of the young designers only one had not been on the EAS (and this was because she couldn’t raise the £1000). Five had re-applied after an interval in employment, and one designer had also been on an equivalent scheme during her time working in France. The young designers who later ended up on the brink of bankruptcy with substantial debts, or else had actually declared themselves bankrupt, had no alternative but to go back on the dole. Despite this heavy reliance on the dole as a kind of fall-back mechanism, the graduates were signing on for relatively short periods of time. For most, being unemployed was a temporary gap in their careers. None had been fully unemployed for a stretch of more than nine months, and they tended to use these periods to renew contacts in the business, and to re-think their futures in fashion. In addition, while signing on they took on some freelance work which was paid 'cash in hand' to supplement their dole. This activity in
the hidden economy was not so much a matter of criminal intent, more a means of surviving and getting back into work. Like many young people living in London they knew that dole payments were not enough to live on, never mind provide the kind of resources needed to look for a new job. Making dresses for a stall in Camden Market, or helping out as a stall assistant, or making clothes for friends in the club scene, allowed the young designers the opportunity of keeping in touch with the industry until they found a proper job. This was also a way of negating or overcoming the reality of being unemployed.

Likewise for the established, well-known designers of whom three out of eight acknowledged their experience of signing on at the Job Centres, the dole was treated in a matter-of-fact way. The stress of keeping their businesses going, knowing that they were making losses, and the exhaustion and anxiety of dealing with the banks as they headed towards bankruptcy, meant that retreating from business by going on the dole, felt like a temporary unburdening of responsibility. Helen Storey describes her experience of being on the dole as follows:

What does it feel like when the need to run has gone? ... I now deal in the small, in the detail of pennies rather than the rounding up of thousands. I am down to collecting premier points from that supermarket and Income Support of £25 a week. Its during the day that I miss the part of me I thought I knew ... there is me, and the rest of the long-term unemployed (Storey 1996: 2).

Signing on the dole has become an expected and routine aspect of life in the creative sector. The fashion designers, like so many other workers in the culture industries, know
that they will experience periods out of work. But because they have such an investment in the kind of work they do, they will adjust to this rather than confront the possible reality of failure. They neutralise being on the dole so that it comes to mean the spaces between work, almost like ‘days off’. It was assumed that ‘everybody’ had been on the dole at some point and going from the dole into the spotlight of success was as much a part of fashion mythology as it is in the music industry. The moment that the band who have eventually had a hit can celebrate being able to ‘sign off’ is paralleled in fashion with the point at which the designer can also ‘sign off’. Fashion history, like pop history, is full of stories like that of the internationally recognised Bodymap team preparing for their 1984 catwalk collection while still having to sign on, and work from the kitchen table. This kind of folklore de-stigmatises unemployment while also confirming the artistic integrity of the designer.

Despite this reliance on the dole as, at least, a fall-back mechanism, these young people could hardly be described as dependent on welfare or on benefits. Their periods of unemployment were intermittent and they sought to find ways of getting off the dole. Nor were they in any sense intentionally fraudulent in their claims. Rather they recognised that occasional freelance payments or the odd few days work here and there could hardly allow them to sign off and eat. This poses urgent questions about the sustainability of employment and ‘regular’ work in these increasingly casualised creative fields and the
consequences of shifts in unemployment benefits as dole in 1996 is being transformed into a ‘jobseeker’s allowance’ with a workfare component.¹

Dole is understood then, not simply as being without work, and therefore having to find any job, but rather as a stretch of time which would be filled with activities aimed at getting back into fashion and creative work. This is a particular, class-inflected way of managing the uncertainty and risks of working in the creative field. Dole becomes another temporary contract. However if being on the dole is bearable for short periods, this is only possible because the graduates are young and without major financial responsibilities like children, or mortgages. Theirs is a high risk strategy. The day-to-day existence which their occupational choice forces upon them means they have to suspend or put on hold major decisions in their personal lives, and it also leaves them underinsured and ill-equipped to cope with unexpected illnesses or accidents.

STALLHOLDING

Just as everybody in fashion design seemed to have spent some time on the dole, so almost everyone had been a stall-holder at some time. Indeed getting a stall was and is the standard route into setting up as a fashion designer in the UK. It is almost a rite de passage. It also offers relative ease of access. With a sewing machine, and a few other

¹ The Jobseeker’s Allowance replaced ‘dole’ in 1996. Claimants are expected to go for interviews arranged for them at the Job Centres and allowance can be withdrawn if they fail to take up job offers. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for designers to use the dole as a means of trying to re-establish a place for themselves in fashion while ‘officially’ unemployed.
pieces of equipment and enough capital to buy fabric the young designer, can enter this market. And the availability of such units in most of the large cities provides access to a market of (mostly young) consumers and also tourists. 15 of the young designers, and 6 out of 8 of the established designers had, at some point in their careers, a lease or a share in a unit or stall in one of the fashion retail markets. For many this proved a more expensive and labour intensive option than they had imagined. At the same time, with the £40 a week from the EAS it was the best way of trying to get recognised as a ‘name’ designer. Having a stall allowed the designer to produce a range of ‘own label’ stock without having to rely on other retailers placing orders and then adding a substantial mark-up onto the price. It also allowed the designers to set their own working pace. They could also adjust their output according to what was selling well at any one point in time. And without being tied to an order they could vary fabric and quality according to their cash-flow.

This kind of stall-holding arrangement frequently relied on two or three young designers working together. They would share the rent of a unit at one of the London street markets and spend one half of the week designing and making up the clothes and the rest of the week selling them. Alternately they would supply a unit with an agreed number of items each week and be paid by the stall-holder on the basis of how well the clothes sold, with only a small mark-up going to the stall-holder. While initially exciting in that it meant the graduates could immediately call themselves designers with their ‘own label’, this actually proved to be very exhausting work especially when the designer was also either doing the production work at home with the help of friends or family or else relying on
the services of a single machinist to make up the clothes on this rapid production line. Once again contrary to their own public images many of the designers were also doing the sewing.

This way of working comes closest to a cottage-industry. For a small number of the designers interviewed it was the best option for staying in business, but for others it was either the rising rent of the unit or stall or the slow volume of sales from these kinds of outlets which put them out of business (in 1994 Hyper-Hyper rents were running at £900 a month). If the stock did not sell quickly the designer was left with it, still having to fund a further range in the hope it would sell more easily. In effect the designer was carrying all the costs and all the risks. It was at this stage in their careers that two of the designers, Jane P and Anna T abandoned independent design work each with debts of over £20,000. But for those who did well with a unit (e.g. English Eccentrics, Darlajane G, Pam H) it was a transitional stage to acquiring a proper shop, and a more fully fledged business. Three of the better known designers who participated in this study had retained a stall even when they had other outlets, on the basis that the stall provided them with a more immediate response to new ideas, and also allowed them to produce slightly cheaper ranges for a younger market. Having a stall was a way of keeping in touch with the club scene and with youth culture.

The merchandising manager of the Hyper-Hyper store in London which provided rented stall space to up to 70 young designers (until 1997 when it re-located a few doors down the street and re-named itself Hype DF), described how she helped the young stall-
holders to develop a more stable and reliable turnover. She was surprised by how little they knew about marketing, promotion and production. To be offered a unit in the shop the designer had to have produced three collections already and be able to present her with a whole range including up to 25 items. Under her advice they would then ‘edit’ this down to a range which fitted both the pricing levels in the store and the outlook of the market it served. While a shared unit provided a valuable outlet for young designers, one of the main difficulties in sustaining or developing this further as a way of working in fashion lay in the high cost of renting a stall. Camden Market at £250 for the weekend was a good deal cheaper, as was Kensington Market and also Portobello Road but this also meant that the clothes were cheaper and so the returns smaller. In addition the kind of support and advice given to stall-holders at Hyper-Hyper was not available elsewhere.

Having a space at Hyper-Hyper was a more professional and less informal arrangement, the costs were higher but so were the prices of the clothes and so the possible returns to the designer through sales. And as we have seen, to be offered a unit at Hyper-Hyper the designers already had to have established some kind of reputation, so entrance to this market was not so direct as it was elsewhere. In all cases however, producing for this kind of outlet soon led to a make or break moment, since to move out of a unit and into a proper shop or else to be able to work independently as a designer for stockists or for wholesalers, required a good deal more upfront capital than the returns from having a stall provided. So at this point the young designers were forced to think and plan more

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2 According to two successful stall-holders the average volume of sales from a weekend stall (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) at Camden Market is approximately £1000.
strategically about what it would take to build on this as a business foundation. Of my sample of young designers only three, at the time of the interview, had retained a unit-style of outlet. Gaby T had a shared unit at Portobello Market which was producing a small but relatively steady income. Linda B had made a conscious decision to stay small and focus on selling from Hyper-Hyper while also producing individual items to order, and Pam H was one of the longest remaining and best-known designers based in Hyper-Hyper. All three of these designers knew who they were producing for in these outlets. Pam H had a cheaper line of clothes made specially for the club market, Linda B specialised in party dresses for stylish young professionals and Gaby T was producing slightly cheaper versions of her freelance work for ‘young, working mums in the Notting Hill area’. All three also benefited from the tourist trade which these market outlets attracted.

SHOP ASSISTANTS

At the time of the interviews out of the eighteen respondents, only two were sales assistants, and a third was a shop manageress. Jane P was pleased to get the job in an upmarket designer outlet in Chelsea after she was forced out of business with spiralling debts. Although she was not employed in a design capacity, her experience and knowledge of design were useful in her work. During the three years she had been working in this boutique she had paid off most of her outstanding debts and was beginning to be able to make more of a contribution to the flat she shared with her
partner. It was, as she put it, a relief not to have the responsibility of running her own business. She also felt she was able to learn a good deal more about the fashion business in her capacity as manageress than in the more stressful and isolated role as young designer.

Phillipa D had applied unsuccessfully for several jobs as design assistants after her attempts on the EAS failed. Eventually she got taken on by Coates and Storey but was made redundant a year later when the company was forced to lose staff. After another spell on the dole she got taken on as a sales assistant at Laura Ashley. This was a step down since obviously it provided her with no opportunities to develop her design skills, but it did pay her a regular salary and she was considering applying to their management training scheme which would mean abandoning hopes of returning to her design work in the meantime.

Finally Nana F also worked as a shop assistant even though her official title was design assistant. She was one of the few students who had no savings or parental support to fall back on following graduation and for this reason she was not able to consider looking for work abroad. Nor was she able to go on the EAS although she did spend a few months unemployed after graduating. This experience forced her to look for a job in the industry and she had spent three years with a wholesale company before finding work with a company who produced under its own label for a number of outlets across London. The promise was that Nana would work her way through the various parts of the group to the
point that she could take on responsibility for the design work. However, after 4 years this
still had not happened and when I interviewed her she was looking after the unit the
company had at Hyper-Hyper. All three graduates who worked as sales assistants or shop
manageresses felt the work they were doing was less taxing and certainly less creative
than they would have originally wished. At the same time they were less concerned to
project the strong and emphatic sense of self which the other designers did as a matter of
course. They did not share that sense of themselves as ‘stars’.

However the shift into retail and retail management for design graduates is not an
insignificant transition, even if it means giving up the dream of design celebrity. Paul
Smith, the most successful of UK independent fashion retailers, indicated (in informal
discussion) that this was a wise step for graduates, and that he himself had several design
graduates working on his own shopfloor. As a progressive employer he was committed to
training people up to be able to work at various levels in his company. This was not a
route into design but a good means of using the skills and knowledge of design
graduates in more flexible ways given the difficulty so many of them had in making a
living independently.

**TEACHING**

All of the established designers had been guest lecturers at a number of different art
colleges and at the time of interview one designer had actually moved onto a part-time
teaching contract where she taught two full days a week in the fashion design department
at one of the London colleges. Of the more recent graduates, those who had either gained
the most publicity as designers or had graduated with a 1st class degree, all found themselves doing some part-time teaching. Only Darlajane G had seriously considered moving towards a more full time career in teaching. She had come to this decision once again through the stress and exhaustion of trying to run her own business and then reconciling herself to the idea of combining a number of design related activities, one of which would be teaching.

Darlajane G occupies a kind of emblematic status in this study. Her career pattern best exemplifies the experience of the British fashion designer working through the 1980s and into the 1990s. Having gained great success and attracted a good deal of publicity as a talented young designer, she had, at the peak of her career, two outlets in London, one in Hong Kong and a substantial order book from all the main department stores in the UK and in New York. Three years later she had lost everything and had to begin all over again. Her working week at the time of interview comprised of teaching two days, working freelance another two days for Jones, one day for Pied a Terre and at the weekends she got back to her own work. In this respect Darlajane was actually following a time-honoured tradition. Many of Britain’s best known designers move from running their own business to going back to the academy. (Wendy Dagworthy who in the late ’70s and early 1980s was one of the leading figures in British fashion design, is currently head of fashion at Central St Martin’s). Teaching provides a degree of security of income for designers as it has also done historically for fine artists, film-makers and others in the creative fields. But to be offered posts like these it is, of course, necessary to have an established reputation, and for designers this means success in running their own companies with their own labels.
OWN LABEL

What designers aspire to is to be able to concentrate entirely on their own creative work. This usually means designing a range which, carrying their own name or label, they will then oversee into production and from there to the retailers and stockists who have placed the order. Having your own label also means being able to put on a show at the London collections, thus attracting the attention and publicity of the fashion press and media. All eight of the well-known designers interviewed had achieved this prominent position, though by no means all of them were able to sustain this level of success. In fact of the eight only five were still trading in the same capacity by the following year. Pam H gave up the business in 1995, to spend time developing a career in music, Coates and Storey also went out of business in 1995, and when I interviewed her Darlajane G was in the process of re-establishing herself as a freelance designer having achieved great success as an ‘own label’ but still having reached the brink of bankruptcy the previous year. Another three of the companies were reputed to have been rescued by lucrative contracts from bigger textile companies like Coates Viyella and Courtaulds or by freelance contracts with Marks and Spencer. Of course it’s a tiny sample but this pattern does correspond to the forecast provided by the Kurt Salmon study carried out for the British Fashion Council in 1991. Despite the fact that they were looking at the fashion design industry at its late 1980s peak, they predicted that of the 150 companies surveyed many would not exist in the same shape in the next couple of years. The economic analysis conducted by Salmon estimated that many of these were unsustainable, something we will return to in the final chapter of this section.
‘Own label’ work appears to be viable only when it is supported by other more profitable activities. The most successful of the companies considered here, Paul Smith and Whistles, remain, and have always been, retailers first and designers second. Paul Smith’s turnover is an enormous £141m. Smith is also remarkable for having the biggest selling menswear range in France as well as 78 shops in Japan alone. Whistles is way behind this but nonetheless has 20 stores nation-wide and has recently opened three outlets in Japan. In contrast to this, for their own label work to continue, designers like Betty Jackson, Ally Capellino and what was Coates and Storey have all been reliant on freelance work, consultancies or other forms of support or sponsorship, while English Eccentrics have undergone various slimming down operations over the last 2/3 years. The issue then is the significance and role of ‘own label’ work.

If it is ‘own label’ work which creates a fashion design industry, is this industry one which literally sparkles for a few short years for its major participants before they ‘burn out’ or retreat with financial losses while other new talent rushes in to enjoy the limelight while it lasts? Or is ‘own label’ work the only way in which the designers, working flexibly for a number of companies and also perhaps doing some teaching, can hold onto the notion of their personal creativity, even if they can only get back to it irregularly and produce for a tiny market? Is ‘own label’ the necessary fiction which fashion needs in order to exist?

All but one of the young designers had produced an own label collection, or at the very least a range bearing their own name or label, for a stall or unit like those available in
Kensington Market, Camden or Hyper-Hyper. But for most respondents this proved difficult to sustain on the longer term. At the time of the interviews only Linda B had managed to continue with this kind of work without having to take on freelance work for another company. She only managed this by keeping her overheads and her costs low and this in turn meant that she was often working to order in a dress-making capacity. Her own label was relatively unknown to those outside her small group of clients and her range was more or less restricted to evening or party wear. She had virtually made her name on the basis of one dress which was featured in an advertisement and ordered by a number of celebrities. She had made more money out of it alone than from all her other pieces put together.

FREELANCE AND CONSULTANCY WORK

Freelance and consultancy work was proving the most common way of earning a modest but relatively reliable income as a fashion designer. Of course it left the designer responsible for her own equipment and other overheads and as a self-employed person she also had to be responsible for paying into insurance plans. Being freelance meant being hired by a larger design company or retailer to work on a fee basis. If the relationship became regular the designer might find herself paid on a retainer basis. The freelance had to forego the right to use her own name or label and to produce work to go into production under the label of the company. (In some cases the clothes will carry a double credit e.g. Jasper Conran for Debenhams). This kind of arrangement has become
increasingly common since the early 1990s when so many designers went out of business. It was recognised within the industry that there was a consumer demand for clothes with a higher design content. A handful of big companies including the retailer Marks and Spencer and the textile conglomerate Coates Viyella initiated schemes which funded designers on a freelance basis to produce work which would then go out under the main company label. With Coates Viyella these schemes also included playing a role as sponsor or backer to the smaller design unit. Ally C was able to avoid going under (so it was rumoured) through the collaboration and partnership provided by this much larger company. As another designer commented: ‘They gave her the money to exploit her brand name so it must be worth something to a big company like that.’ Ally C’s personal assistant explained the relationship with Coates Viyella in rather different terms:

It gave us an advertising budget and each season it supports a catwalk show and a promotional brochure. They also give us access to their own in house public relations which means we don’t have to employ an agent or a press secretary. As a two way project it is good for them and good for us. We have a minimum five year contract and we can use their tremendous knowledge of fabrics and production. They don’t say what we have to do design-wise, its very much a matter of what we want to do. For our diffusion range we have full use of their small factory and all the technical facilities are available. Its taken us out of the recession touch wood and it also allows us hopefully to plug into much bigger international licensing deals, that’s the idea. It allows us to work more on design and not have to do everything else (Personal Assistant to Ally Capellino, interviewed June 1995).

Rather more common than this arrangement was the freelance contract or consultancy to produce a range or a collection for a bigger chain store or for a smaller high-fashion outlet like Jones in Covent Garden. What this meant in effect was a more profitable design company buying in the talent of an individual designer. Darlajane G had worked under
such an arrangement producing clothes for Jones’ ‘own label’ for the last couple of years. This had allowed her to continue to work in a creative capacity without having to shoulder the burden or running her own business.

But while this kind of practice seems like a good solution to the insurmountable problems many of the designers experienced having set up by themselves, and while it also allows a higher design input to filter into mass market clothes, the obvious question is how many designers can win contracts like these? Is it necessary to already have established a brand name in order to be offered a contract of this type? The answer to this seems to be ‘yes’. Many of the respondents referred to other designers who had been successful and become well-known but a few years later had gone out of business and were now working on this kind of basis for a range of companies. So freelance work of this type was an available option only to those who had already earned their place in the fashion scene. This suggests something of a predatory relationship on the part of the big companies. They tend not to take a risk with young design graduates who they would have to pay a salary to and then allow to experiment. Instead the companies leave it up to the graduates to make a name for themselves and then run into financial difficulties and even go out of business altogether. Once that kind of ‘groundwork’ has been established, they might consider sweeping in and rescuing them on the understanding that they both use and relinquish their ‘brand name’. Companies will only consider taking this up as an option if they can be sure it will pay off:
Named designers are simply an added bonus. Competition is extremely fierce and the differentiating factor any supplier can offer when they are competing for business at Marks and Spencers is design (Sally Smith of Coates Viyella quoted by Brampton 1994: 40--41).

This constitutes what can best be understood in sociological terms as a kind of competitive post-Fordist practice within the over-arching terms of a more conventionally Fordist enterprise. Marks and Spencer now provide for both a mass market with their standard ranges made in runs of hundreds of thousands and also for a smaller design or segmented market. They do this by bringing in direct and also through their suppliers, design talent on a freelance basis. These designers produce high quality short-runs of a handful of key items which then enhance Marks and Spencer's reputation as a store which can deliver simultaneously to the widest variety of fashion consumers. Helpful though this may be to designers who are finding it hard to stay in business, the commitment of the big companies or the key suppliers is highly selective, short term and involving relatively few risks or substantial investment. What this also shows, and this is an important feature in the overall analysis, is that the designers are themselves placed uncertainly as very small, often one person businesses within a competitive capitalist industry where the stronger, bigger companies are able to determine the conditions of work for their freelance labour force as well as their own employees.
A COMPANY JOB

Relatively few of the interviewees had worked in a design capacity as a full time employee for a major fashion company. Given that it was quite clear that the big companies prioritised their own profits first and considered creativity much lower down the agenda, and that they frequently ‘ripped off’ the designers by copying their clothes and then manufacturing them on a mass basis which meant that their economies of scale could allow them to sell them cheap, most of the young designers had strong views about how the larger companies operated. There was a high degree of distrust, they saw larger companies as only interested in profits and willing to forego quality and design input to keep costs down. They also agreed that one of the major problems working for fashion companies was having to compromise with fabrics and work with inferior materials which inevitably spoilt the overall look of the item, no matter how well-designed it was. Some of the respondents were put off working as a paid employee after spending a relatively short time in this kind of job:

My nightmare came true and I had to take an agency job with Wallis. I was an in-house designer for over two months, they paid quite well but I did not enjoy the work. There was no scope for putting in your own ideas. It was all grey suited men. Wallis is a dinosaur, you have to fit in because you cannot change it (Harriet P).

What this indicates is the scale of the investment young designers have in developing their creativity and their own ideas in their work. As it happens this same graduate having left Wallis to teach part time and to do freelance work for Fred Perry in fact ended up, at the time of the interview with a salaried job for a German fashion company. Their strong
reputation for quality in design meant that she did not feel that she had entirely compromised her design integrity. She was also able to pay off all the debts she had accumulated when working on her own label collection. Opting for a salaried job was also by this stage a realistic choice, given that she had experienced almost every one of the categories of work in fashion outlined in this chapter.

Other company jobs were viewed in fairly negative terms:

I was approached by a guy setting up a new company. He had a shop and a shop designer and he wanted me to provide the clothes. But he also wanted me to contribute £10,000 pounds on an equity share scheme and then he also wanted me to work for him on a tiny wage. In the end it seemed he just wanted a young girl with some cash upfront to sit and sketch and do the design work. I really wasn't interested (Terry G).

More attractive to the graduates was a job with a well-known British designer. Even if this paid minimal wages, this kind of work counted as good experience and brought young designers closer to the heart of the fashion industry. One of the graduates was working for Coates and Storey at the time of the interview. She was a lot more enthusiastic about being an employee and described in detail the variety of jobs she was doing:

Working with Helen and Caroline is terrific, it's completely non-hierarchical and although I've only been here a year I have been involved in almost every stage of the whole process. I'm seeing garments through from the very beginning and I've been learning a lot about the business side of things. Much more than I ever learnt at college. I've also been doing castings for the shows and I've written some press releases, and I've also had some experience in the shops (Adele B).
However, when in 1995 Helen Storey and Caroline Coates had to call in the receivers this young women’s job disappeared too. Overall the graduate designers felt disappointed by the experience of working for bigger fashion companies for the simple reason that they felt that their design skills were not being in any way developed or even used. They were not opposed to salaried work as such but the investment they had in their own talent and in their creativity as ‘young designers’ encouraged them to find work in areas where this could be further developed rather than put on hold indefinitely.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown the young graduates of fashion design to be trained to work ‘all hours’ in a flexible, freelance or self-employed capacity but are unprepared for the economic reality of this kind of work. Their willingness and motivation in this respect are apparent, but their ability to create successful small businesses on the basis of the support provided through a number of government-funded schemes (e.g. the EAS) or other schemes (the Princes Trust) is strictly limited. Moreover the time scale within which they can reach relatively high levels of success (with their names becoming well-known through press and TV coverage) only to head rapidly towards bankruptcy or the closure of the business, is remarkably short, on average 3-5 years. On the other hand this stage of setting up as a small business enterprise is important, even necessary, in establishing a name and a reputation and could be seen as a transitional stage. The graduate is caught in a no-win situation. Developing personal talent and creativity soon after graduation is a way of maintaining some kind of public visibility, and it can only be done by producing ‘own label’ work. However this runs the risk of accumulating huge debts and being forced to work at such a pace that illness and exhaustion are almost
inevitable. And as we will see in the chapters that follow the take home pay is often minimal. Their turnovers are low and frequently they only stay in business by paying themselves on a pocket money basis.

Working abroad for a well-known fashion house certainly counts as useful experience since generally there is some opportunity to do design work, but these opportunities tend to be short term and, as Lucille Lewin (founder of Whistles) pointed out (in informal discussion), the fashion capitals (Milan, Tokyo, Paris and New York) are expensive to live in 'and not terribly friendly cities for young British graduates'. This current study showed how the graduates doing this kind of work found the fashion culture in haute couture ('haute culture' as Bourdieu (1993a: 132) has aptly put it) to be elitist, hierarchical and exploitative. Such a reaction demonstrates British fashion to be something different from this haute couture tradition, a cultural phenomena suffused instead with elements of the popular: music, multi-culturalism, youth culture. We will return to this issue later. What we are left with at this stage is a micro-economy of fashion design. What we see is a sprawling network of uncoordinated even chaotic activities. It is therefore all the more surprising that these actually add up to something significant. This is creative work whose distinctive, not to say peculiar characteristics, mean that it connects with and depends on the post-modern image industries which translate the design work into visual images and then circulate them for consumption in this form, regardless of their existence as real objects for sale in the shops, and the (almost) pre-modern sewing machine (and hand-finishing) which remain the tools of the trade. At the same time it is the truly modern ethos of being a struggling, if not starving, artist which
provides the graduates with an idea of who they are and what they are doing. This combination shows fashion to be an unstable phenomena which contains not just traces of the past but is actually founded on elements which span almost two centuries. This is what I mean by a 'new kind of rag trade'. In the final chapter the sociological consequences of this distinct social and cultural practice will be considered in more depth.
In the last two chapters of this work I attempted an initial documentation of the working practices of fashion designers in Britain from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s. In addition to revealing a small scale and economically ‘wobbly’ set of activities, more or less a cottage industry, though now thoroughly urban and ‘studio’ based, this work also throws light on some of the tensions embedded in these practices. There is a great deal of fluidity as the designers flit from one employment or self-employment option to the next, there is the continuing attempt to project a public image as creative artist while having to develop expertise in business, and there is also the reality of being a one-woman enterprise and relying on some of those skills including knitting and sewing which the art school training suggested should be relegated to low skilled, paid employees. This is summed up clearly in Gillian P’s comment ‘I was knitting away night and day’.

In this chapter the focus will be on how the young graduates themselves describe what they are doing, how they envisage it, how they make sense of their own labour processes. I will argue that they rely on a double discourse of arts and crafts. These are often in tension with each other. The craft element is relegated to the more private vocabularies of the practitioners while art provides an identity in the public domain. They are nonetheless mutually dependent categories which function together as
professional ideologies for fashion design. The discourses of art perform two further and articulating roles. They connect with those relatively new patterns of meaning used in designer retailing which present fashion-as-art at the point of consumption, and they also feed directly into the broader social process which Jameson has labelled the 'aestheticisation of culture' (Jameson 1984). The idea that society is somehow becoming more and more cultural is one which is threaded right through this study. For this reason it is useful to comment more concretely on how this broad social process which Jameson argues is a defining feature of the postmodern society, connects with fashion.

As I argued at the time, in response to Jameson (McRobbie 1985, 1994), there was in his seminal article on postmodernism, a marvellously panoramic account of the world of images, with one picture, film or advertising image being flimsier and more superficial than the next, and yet there was little sense of where these came from, who produced them and what their training comprised of, what sort of educational or other institutional practice supported or grounded this production of a 'postmodern culture' and how attention to these dimensions might provide a different, indeed a more complex account from the gloomy prognosis offered by Jameson. This entire study here is in many ways an attempt to offer in the British context a more sociological and historical analysis of these processes by showing how some of the fashion 'signs on the street' are produced and circulate in particular urban economies. I have also tried to counter that tendency in the thinking of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984) and Donzelot (Donzelot 1991) as well as Jameson (Jameson 1984) which sees these practices as futile or else as merely evidence of social and economic regulation.
For Bourdieu cultural products like fashion design are the results of the activities of the lower, or sunken middle classes, who have stumbled across a relatively undesignated field in which they hope to profit. Advertising, design and marketing all offer opportunities for the ‘dream of social flying’ and thus, for Bourdieu, a strategy for upward mobility. Donzelot, in contrast, implies that the young designers are part of that group of new workers for whom some distant promise of creative reward transforms unendurably long hours into a labour of love. And for Jameson, once again, as late capital further tightens its grip on production, its goods are increasingly those which take the form of culture, not invigorating, thought invoking culture of the modernist imagination, but instead a sorry stream of tawdry second hand images, of which fashion would by typical and would also embody so many of these uninspiring currents.

However I want to suggest that we ought at least to listen to how designers themselves describe the work they do, before dismissing it as labour discipline disguised as creative freedom. The various forms of work thrown up by the de-industrialising impetus of late capital might well push these young women from pillar to post in the context of the UK fashion economy, but there is also in this activity a real determination to make work something more than dull, routine and meaningless activity. It is the idea of work being a source of self-actualisation, a means of escaping ‘alienation’ rather than experiencing it, which is a key issue for this study, particularly where the protagonists in this search are young women. The Foucault-inspired critique of Donzelot which would see these young women as the new subjects of creative work, disciplined in their artistic freedom, leaves little room for the amount of
manoeuvring and re-definition which the designers bring to bear as they encounter the
disciplinary rhetoric of ‘enterprise’. Without wishing to veer in the direction of
voluntaristic human agency as the means by which such re-designations are produced,
once we look at how the designers work and how they describe their working
practices, we can see the extent to which they make work, somehow work for them.
As Du Gay acknowledges, the conditions of dislocation which now prevail across
society, where so many parts no longer seem to fit into the kind of pattern they once
did, it becomes all the more important for government that we each are seen to be
‘governing ourselves’ in the right way, and in particular in the field of work. Yet we
cannot judge the effectivity of these ‘incitements’ without looking at how they are
operationalised, how they appear in practice.

A working resolution is thus sought in this study between the tensions of structure
against agency, by providing a concrete description of those practices which constitute
the micro-economy of fashion design. This work seeks simply to show the extent of
both the constraints and the manoeuvring around these constraints. In addition it
makes some gestures in the direction of policy. Social theory (from Foucault to
Anthony Giddens) too easily discards or refutes the possibility of small improvements
in the field of the social. But this is a limitation. Sociologists also have to be
concerned with the world we live in, and not to consider how the insights of sociology
can be used to analyse and improve a field of employment and livelihoods might also
be seen as, if not an abrogation of responsibility, then at least a refusal of the
challenge to recognise the potential role of sociology having an impact on the world.

Or to re-cast the same argument in more Foucauldian terms, the role of sociological
analysis is presumably to produce discourses which feed into and compete with the already existing accounts of how (in this case) fashion is, or how it should be organised and conducted. In the present study this policy objective is emphasised more than it is in theoretically-driven studies of changes in work and employment (for example Du Gay 1996) for the reason that in such a dis-organised field as fashion, the organising potential sociological discourse has some urgency.

'The Ghost of Matisse Gets In The Way'.

Why do the graduates rely so heavily on the language of art to explain and interpret what they do? Firstly it justifies poor turnovers by appealing to notions of artistic integrity. As Bourdieu would see it, this 'poor performance' in business confirms the legitimacy of fashion as a practice which possesses high cultural capital through its existence also as an anti-economy (Bourdieu 1993b). According to this logic it almost pays to be bankrupt in this inverted world where the rules of cultural value rely on an apparent, or initial spurning of the principles of profit. The artist, as Bourdieu puts it, has an interest in disinterest. Fashion relies on this anti-economy to align itself with fine art and against the marketplace. Secondly, the adoption of an art language also explains 'the work' to potential customers. But this is not simply a question of explication or instruction, it is also the start of the representational process more thoroughly pursued by the retailers, when the clothes are there to be seen on the rails. So in a sense art language serves both to protect the designers from the logic of the market and to mark their distinctive and differentiating presence in the market.
This is clearly expressed by Jasmine S, who was working freelance for a Covent Garden retailer at the time of the interview. She explains how the presentation of the clothes was intended to challenge the customers in the same way as a trip to an art gallery or exhibition might do:

The director of the company was trained as a fine artist and that makes all the difference. It means he knows what I’m talking about and he lets me go off and if I come back not with sketches of clothes but with some quotes and some colours and objects...and some idea of super-imposing them together...he really appreciates that. For the advertising campaign I have just done, we use no clothes or models at all, only abstract images. We chucked the ideas around...It was a kind of anti-fashion campaign but the director liked that because he is a fine artist. He understood that what I wanted to get across was the idea of fashion as constructed from debris and from obliteration...How it will be received comes down to the question of who is the Jones customer? I would want them to think about it. We shouldn’t feel we have to spoon-feed the customers all the time.

This can be seen as a way of flattering consumers by acknowledging their possession of the sophisticated codes of art and culture, thus differentiating them from the average or mass consumer. This form of segmented retailing or niche marketing would fit both with Bourdieu’s schema of class inequalities being manifest through taste cultures and also with Lash and Urry’s notion of ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ which comes into play more broadly across the society as a whole as culture, knowledge and information feature more prominently in the emergent post-industrial society (Bourdieu 1984, Lash and Urry 1994). Bourdieu also explains at length how the middle classes expect images and representations designed for their consumption to require the exercise of specific codes and competences which are the sign of a middle-class upbringing and education. Thus advertising images of the sort Jasmine describes will be abstract and ‘difficult’ for the simple reason that this corresponds to the cultural expectations of this class strata in their consumption of high culture. It
should not be easy, direct, gratifyingly emotional or sensual since these are the
expectations of a lower class of consumers (Bourdieu 1984). This differentiating
process can be seen also with clarity in the promotional material for the Helen Storey
collection at the fashion retailers Jigsaw:¹

Her own woman ... in a suit yes ... but shockingly bright; a dress
sometimes ... but gossamer light in chiffon and jersey it could slip away in
the blink of an eye ... but the ghost of Matisse gets in the way.

The literary-poetic image is further emphasised in the interior design of the Jigsaw
shops. Not only are the distinct features of the architect’s work described in the press
material accompanying the opening of a new branch (‘Noteworthy details include
Nigel Coates’ tongue armchairs in brickdust velvet’) but there is also special mention
of ‘a spectacular specially commissioned wall painting by the artist Stuart Helm’.
Fashion design is made to connect with architecture and with painting, to create an
aesthetically defined ‘experience’ of fashion shopping and to simultaneously confirm
the existence of fashion design in an art world and to legitimate the taste and status of
the Jigsaw consumers.

So far, then, it seems that Bourdieu offers us two, contradictory ways of
understanding the role of art in fashion. First it provides the necessary distance from
the vulgarity of cash and commerce and second, it acts as a strategy of taste and
distinction within the field of cash and commerce. I want to propose a slightly
different scenario. This would see the aestheticisation of fashion and consumption as
articulating both with a traditional feminine discourse of pleasure and desire, one

¹ The Jigsaw promotional material was supplied by Marysia Woroniecka PR.
which Barthes found most clearly manifest in his 1960s study of fashion magazines, and also with the more recent breaking down of the traditional boundaries of high art and low culture which has been taken as one of the distinguishing features of cultural postmodernism (Barthes 1967: Jameson 1984). This suggests that there is both something familiar in this contemporary feminine aesthetics of ‘art’ (the *Vogue* tradition) and also something new (the widening of the audience, readership and market for the fashion-as-art imagery, the *Elle* reader). This in turn indicates an opening out of ‘culture’, not so much a flattening or deadening effect as claimed by Jameson, more a feminisation and a popularisation. The consequences of this, for artists and designers still educated in the modernist tradition which venerates the charismatic status of art and the art world, are far-reaching and as yet unresolved, as art work becomes less exceptional and more ‘normal’ and as the categories of art travel further into the commercial world and into the marketplace for clothes, magazines, food, leisure and lifestyle and the whole field of consumer culture.

**Art Vocabularies in Fashion Design**

The availability of the codes of fine art operate for the fashion designers both to insulate them from the failures they might experience in the market, and at the same time to promote, or market themselves as creative practitioners. This is how they distinguish themselves as professionals. It is also a rhetoric of persuasion, this is how the fashion designers want to be recognised and because there is a risk this might not happen, they are all the more insistent. Only two of my own respondents struck a note
of discord by refusing the pretensions of their peers. For example one young woman said:

Quite honestly that stuff about walking through the woods and being inspired I think is nonsense. I work on new shapes and I know a good collection means a slim pair of trousers and a wide pair of trousers (Marcia P).

and another commented:

I'm one of the sensible girls as distinct from the gay boys. I'm not going to make big announcements every season. And I also happen to think Galliano is a load of over-rated pretentious rubbish. I want to make clothes that women enjoy wearing, whatever shape they are (Gaby T).

The closer the graduates still were to their time at art school, the more pronounced was their commitment to a fine art based identity. This is best summed up in a statement made to me by a male graduating student interviewed when I went back to college after completing the body of the fieldwork, to get a renewed feel for students graduating a full ten years after my main group of respondents. This boy said (and his comment also displays all the signs of casual flamboyance adopted by 'the boys' in the hope that their provocative style will get them noticed):

In my work I want to explore the deeper meaning of my laziness and link it with imagination. I want to hold onto and work with spontaneity. And I want to engage with eclecticism. I like the idea of a perfect finish but not the work that it involves. By far the most advanced designers are Miyake and Galliano. They are doing what they want to in spite of the need to make money. Nor is their work just about fashion. Its about imagination and projection. Like them I find two dimensional work exciting. And I like the idea of a crossover between fashion, painting and illustration (Tony A).
This is one of the best examples of the 'creative self' as a performative strategy which constitutes the graduating designer as artist through the very act of self-description. Everything he says contributes to confirming this identity. The exuberant conflation of fashion with the fine arts, serves as a kind of (over)statement of intent on the part of the student preparing for his degree show. It is also echoes the art school ethos of exploring the boundaries between different art practices. The student clearly wants to challenge the basis of what we mean by fashion and this is summed up in the disregard he shows for finish. He emphatically doesn't care about 'finish' and doesn't want to have to do the sewing and handwork to achieve this polished or professional look. He discounts money in favour of the designer doing what he or she believes in. And he positions the fashion designer firmly within the landscape of the art world. The more shocking his stance and his collection the better, since shocking or outrageous clothes are not only more likely to attract attention, they also bring the designer closer to the kind of artists who find themselves ridiculed or scorned (though hopefully admired by the significant audience) for wasting the taxpayers money. And finally, abstract or difficult 'work' on the catwalk is also testimony to the avant-gardist aspirations of the designers.

Whether or not this approach pays off, it demonstrates very clearly how so many of the designers ideally see themselves, especially in the first year or so after leaving college. The girls may be less sure of themselves and more muted in their hopes and dreams, but the imagery of the creative artist tallies exactly with what they want to
achieve. And for some like Celia M, as we shall see, this language is utilised with the
same vigour as it is by the boys.

The designers working in the UK who most clearly personify the fashion designer as
practising artist are John Galliano, Vivienne Westwood and more recently Hussein
Chalayan. Both males are graduates of Central St Martins, Galliano in 1984 and
Chalayan ten years later in 1994. Westwood’s design education came through the do-
it-yourself ethos of the punk movement in the mid 1970s and is reflective of the kind
of informal training I earlier described in the introductory chapter as not unusual
within the field of British youth subcultures. Despite these similarities the artistic
strategies they employ are quite different.

Galliano is frequently described as a ‘maverick genius’ possessing ‘outstanding talent’
(Brampton 1993: 43–46) and, as the acknowledged favourite of fashion journalists, he
has received more coverage than almost all the other well-known UK fashion
designers put together. He ‘claims never to have read a book’ but, according to Sally
Brampton in The Guardian (Brampton 1995: 21) ‘one need only look at the collection
of John Galliano or Vivienne Westwood to appreciate the mastery of fantasy-
sometimes wantonly perverse and sometimes lyrically beautifully - that this culture
can produce’.

Galliano also fulfils all the qualifying criteria as a struggling artist, sometimes
misunderstood but true to his own ideals and talent. One of the graduating students
(who has since followed the same rapid pathway to success) described his time working for Galliano as follows:

It was brilliant, I learnt so much from him. He is like a child excited by ideas. He's got no business sense at all. It's all complete naivety, the way he works. Its instinct, feeling and imagination. He would ask me out of the blue, what do you think of this? He has such vision and strong themes like his bias cut throughout all his work. He's also aware of other influential designers like Westwood and he looks closely at what she is doing (Marko B).

This comment demonstrates once again those 'technologies of the self' which can now be recognised as producing the fashion design 'subject'. Galliano is childlike, instinctual, ignores the need to make money, possesses 'vision' but has also mastered specific and recognisable techniques e.g. 'bias cut'. Journalists, friends and admirers help to make this space for the creative subject by repeating, often mantra-like its mythological elements. Galliano's various financial disasters and his time spent sleeping on friends' floors in Paris with no money to buy food never mind the fabric for his collection, have been told and retold. He has emerged consequently, as head designer for the French house of Givenchy (and more recently Dior) as a haute couturist of acclaimed genius: 'He is fantastic, beyond imagination, a grand couturier' (Joseph Ettegugui quoted by Sally Brampton 1993: 44).

Hussein Chalayan 'performs' as an artist even more uncompromisingly than many of his counterparts. He attracted the attention of the fashion press at the Central St Martin's degree show in 1994 when his collection was accompanied by a text which told the narrative of its own construction. The story of how the clothes had been buried in earth for some weeks and were then disinterred and shown on the catwalk in
this grimy state was then further explained in the context of another story, a fiction
written by Chalayan himself. This kind of ‘textual fashion’ bore all the hallmarks of
contemporary mixed-media art. It attracted a lot of attention and put Chalayan on the
fashion map almost instantly. As he said to journalist Andrew Tuck:

I just happen to symbolise my ideas with clothes. I am a fashion designer
technically because my clothes are sold in shops, but on my card it
doesn’t say Hussein Chalayan fashion designer, just ‘Hussein Chalayan’. I
think some of the clothes could be hung on a wall and because there are
pieces of writing in them perhaps that would that would remind you of
things like an ornament does (Tuck 1995: 28).

As part of his prize-winning collection Hussein had yet another piece of narrative
printed onto one of his full-length dresses which could then be read down the dress
from top to bottom. He explained:

I wrote a fictional story which related to the collection and printed it on a
dress, the clothes symbolise the story. Parts of the story are sewn into
garments, it involved you with how the garment evolved, the garment
had a history, as labels, facings, back, pocket... (ibid., 28)

Chalayan envisages himself less as a fashion designer and more an artist working with
ideas through the medium of clothes, fashion and textiles. In both the above examples
of his work he is concerned to draw attention to the material processes of garment
construction. Chalayan presents himself as an intellectual or theoretical designer:

Basically I’m very much against the mechanistic world view, this whole
idea of mechanising everything and creating formulas and models for
things we can’t really rationalise. Descartes was someone who created
this whole world view (Tuck 1995: 28).
Vivienne Westwood also embraces a strongly fine art mode. She does this by returning to the world of classical painting and incorporating elements of dress and costume and other items found in a wide range of works, drawn from over the centuries. Westwood combines these historical references with a number of more constant themes based round contemporary femininity, female sexuality and ideals of beauty. She presents herself with an air of practised eccentricity, which is of course a recognisable and accepted way of being an artist. She affects a combination of British matronliness (a 'dame') with girlish naiveté. This exonerates her from the charge of taking liberties with history. She can delight in the production details of the dresses of Marie Antoinette, for example, without any broader references to their symbolic significance as signs of unacceptable wealth and luxury in the context of the French Revolution. So, despite the radical vision of Westwood in terms of the images she creates of women which break sexual taboos and suggest female strength and power, she actually re-activates the most conservative tradition in the history of costume (which is to extrapolate items of clothing from their social context) and integrates this into her work as an innovative fashion designer. Westwood makes definitive, often disconnected statements in relation to her work... e.g. 'I work from my academic interests, like baroque theatre for example'... 'The Rococo period offers wonderful drapery' (Westwood 1993).

Despite this blindness to the political context from which she selects her historical references, fashion journalists heap praise on Britain's most famous woman fashion designer:
Vivienne Westwood uses fine art and literature as her inspiration rather than pouring over the rails of clothes on the high street (Chaudhuri 1996: 8--9).

However, like Galliano, when she talking about how she actually works, Westwood veers towards the vocabulary of craft. This corresponds with Becker’s account of how artists make use of or draw on the language of craft when discussing the technical details of their work (Becker 1982). So it is quite admissible for Westwood to say, as she did in her recent television series, ‘my work is anchored in English tailoring’. Or that creativity comes through technique, or that fashion is ‘the manipulation of materials, as it is with painting’. ... ‘Every tiny decision you make, this is technique’. ... Or, ‘You have to work in a craft way or a technical way to be creative. You have to build up the finished result’. At the same time ‘students must learn to draw, life drawing builds up judgement and aestheticism’ (Westwood 1995).

All three of these designers conform to the accepted image of the practising artist. Their interviews frequently take the form of statements or proclamations. These comprise of a ‘poetics’ of the work, a commitment to technique and a location of the work in philosophy (Chalayan’s Descartes) history (Galliano’s Les Incroyables) or period (Westwood’s Rococo). These provide titles, captions and headlines for the shows which are easily appropriated by journalists, and so once again the art dimension is qualified by the pitch for the market and for publicity. This particular ‘articulation of elements’ has set a standard for that distinctive presentation of work which is now the mark of identity of the UK fashion designer. For most of the young designers, and for the less well-known designers interviewed for this study, these
elements are less flamboyantly combined, but they still provide a crucial underpinning for the work, by providing an authoritative art-world frame of reference:

We are both strongly influenced by the fine art tradition in fashion. Our last collection started off by drawing on two colours combined in the work of Mark Rothko. A very distinctive blue and a chocolate brown. For this coming season we have been going back through Paul Klee's paintings and that feeling will come across strongly in the clothes we are planning to make (Yvette M and Lisa R).

Several of the graduates associated this crossover between art, fashion and also literature with their training.

Christine F commented:

The emphasis at college was on ideas and history. I did a whole project on the world of Vita Sackville West. I've tried to hold onto the art aspect of fashion in my current work.

This kind of approach was confirmed in an article in London Evening Standard which included a statement from the Dean of Fashion at Central St Martin's, Jane Rapley:

We deal with concepts and visual metaphors, not one shirt, two jackets, three pairs of trousers. Our students are more likely to say 'I'm really excited about the American heartland'. We've bent over backwards to keep our flexibility. It's a gamble - sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't (Rapley interviewed by Watson 1994: 12–13).

The journalist added

Certainly Central St Martin's is more serious than it was, but its still a place where you are more likely to be asked to design around a piece of music than draw up a co-ordinated collection for Principles (Watson 1994: 12–13).
Fashion design culture needs art to explain its dynamic and its creative drive both to itself and to the outside world. Art acts as a source of legitimation. For this reason the designers eagerly refer to its authority. It provides a means of explaining themselves and their work to the public. Celia M draws on the romantic tradition to describe how she works:

I am not like most fashion people who think things out in advance. It pours out of me. Its a totally emotional process. I'm a designer with passion and motivation, and I work like that. I like making clothes and dressing up. Sometimes I dream my next collection, I have millions of clothes in my head that I haven't got the time to produce them. Its like painting with the body as a canvas. Every garment in my collection has been on my body.

And it is precisely this kind of identification which leads a spokesperson for the British Fashion Council to comment:

Living on a shoestring is how most fine artists exist. How many of them make a decent living? British fashion designers see themselves in the same way. It's a distinctive mentality. They would rather do their own thing, even if it never sells. It's a complete cottage industry in the UK. (Interviewed August 1993).

**Craftsmanship and Fashion Design**

We have seen how art provides a vocabulary of value and personal confirmation for fashion designers. It also grants them legitimate access to a language which permits a degree of abstraction not to say obfuscation. In fact when they talk about how they actually work there is a noticeable shift away from an aesthetic vocabulary to a more
technical or practical one. The values of craftsmanship suddenly appear on the agenda and at the same time the more metaphoric language of art temporarily disappears:

I work with plain fabrics, never prints. It's a very small collection and very careful. I do viscose jersey, silk trousers and crepes. It's simple and understated. I go to the fabric shows twice a year and I know my clothes are pricey because I only use expensive fabrics. Tweeds are OK in Britain but nothing else. You have to buy from France or Italy. We work on a shoestring, no doubt about that. I am committed to my design work and I like to work in a totally creative environment which is what we have made the studio, with the bits of sculpture, the music and so on. The problem is finding a way of doing this kind of work and making a living. I don't know the answer to that one yet. I'm scraping a living here and fortunately I'm able to rely on my husband for the mortgage and bills (Paula S).

Paula's account of her working practice offers a clear insight into 'creative labour' as a combination of artistic endeavour and craft-like skill. Her expertise is evident in the conception of the collection and the knowledge of fabrics, while the studio decorated with its pieces of sculpture and with background music provides a 'high art' environment for inspiration and ideas. It also provides the important 'space' which confirms her creative identity.

Yvette M and Lisa R lasted only 5 years in business before being forced to declare themselves bankrupt. They were interviewed twice for this study, once just when they were heading for the media spotlight and then briefly again a few months after they went into receivership. At the time when they were attracting enthusiastic publicity they described their creative labour as follows:

We start with a colour and a piece of clothing that we like. With the last collection we began with a '70s pair of trousers and a jacket to go with it. We made them both up in calico as we couldn't afford to make up in real
fabric. Then we do the amendments and the changes. For example with this navy crepe suit we put in a lace-up front in the jacket instead of the buttons which gives them what is basically a '70s shape but with a new feel to it. We pattern cut ourselves unless it is a jacket, in which case we pay a freelance pattern cutter to do it for us (Yvette M).

Despite the emphasis on drawing as the basis for innovation and originality in design, and also as the point of connection with the world of fine art, in the interviews the graduates were all more keen to talk about working with the fabric and the idea than with the drawing and art-work stage. Overall they were less concerned with being at the drawing board and more interested in seeing the garment emerge as an object in itself. Only one designer mentioned drawing and she quickly moved from there onto talking about the next stage:

At the beginning I'm at the drawing board all day and if I end up three sketches that I like, I'm happy and I feel I've done a good days work. Then I do a sample on the knitting machine and then I go back and re-think the colours and the texture and it just keeps developing until I've got the right yarns, the right shape and the feel for the whole garment (Joanne A).

Celia M who, as we have already seen, most closely conforms to the image of the designer as visual artist, also repudiates the drawing stage, but this time from a position which re-confirms her identity as an artist/sculptor:

I work in a very unorthodox way. I cut straight into the fabric as soon as the ideas have formulated. I find that drawing beforehand stunts the natural direction. I follow any interesting mistakes, which somehow determine my whole collection. After having adjusted and re-adjusted a garment, I then make a pattern by taking the rough sample apart. It is then re-cut and passed onto my machinist to finalise the small finishing details.
Sally Brampton describes how the three women team who work under the English Eccentrics label developed a division of labour as follows:

The starting point is Helen Littman’s abstracted, lushly coloured, rich prints, mostly on silk but also on heavy cotton. The three women work on colours and themes together but the actual designing of the prints is done by Helen who is exceptionally talented in her field (Brampton 1994: 13).

In another interview for the Telegraph Magazine, Helen Littman describes how they got started ‘We would print, cut and sew and then try to sell what we made’. The journalist comments that like so many other British designers English Eccentrics ‘began by selling home-made clothes at Camden Lock market in London.’ ‘We used to carry huge rolls of fabric around on the Tube,’ Judy says; ‘We would print it ourselves on the concrete floor of this place in Wapping and then smuggle the clothes into a laundrette and bake on the dyes in the tumble dryers.’ (McHugh 1993: 37–38).

The emphasis on craftsmanship in the work of English Eccentrics has been praised throughout the fashion press:

It is the beautiful patterns which make the garments of English Eccentrics so distinctive. The clothes themselves are those simple, well cut classics - - shirts, tunics, waistcoats –which hardly deviate in line from season to season. The silks from which they are made, however, are printed with Helen Littman’s designs. These are rococo fantasies peopled with cherubs, dodos, whorls and curlicues of fantastic colours ... An outfit by English Eccentrics does not come cheap ... The fabric is cut by hand to ensure that the design is centred on the back of each garment ... The printing too is done by hand and a screen has to be made for each colour’ (McHugh 1993: 37).
Helen Littman also remembers the influence of the arts and craft tradition on the undergraduate course she did at Camberwell School of Art, and the way this influenced her own practice as a designer and her preference for producing individual hand-crafted garments in favour of long runs and higher profit margins. 'There was a craft emphasis, a William Morris feel to the course and it was very good indeed on the technical stuff' (Interviewed by Brampton 1994: 14).

Engrossed in work, the designers, like those mentioned above, switch their vocabularies to embrace the craft dimension of their practice. They emphasise their involvement right through from the start to the finish of the single garment. They rely on a machinist close at hand and they also need the services of a pattern cutter, and it is this small team-based approach which actually provides the framework for 'creative labour'. Indeed it is this craft element which provides a crucial underpinning for the art-work. Becker has described this process in the following terms:

Members of art worlds often distinguish between art and craft. They recognise that making art requires technical skills that might be seen as craft skills, but they also typically insist that artists contribute something beyond craft skill to the product, something due to their creative abilities and gifts that gives each object or performance a unique or expressive character (Becker 1983: 272).

Designers like John Galliano who have reached the heights of fame and success are more able to acknowledge this dimension than the others who still need to promote a more inspirational and purely creative image of the designer. Galliano shrugs off the label of artistic genius by claiming that 'It doesn't take into account all the hours of work that go into making something look right. Or the people I have around me who
are brilliant’ (Interviewed by Brampton 1993: 46). This also corresponds with Becker’s important argument that art is the product of collaboration: ‘art is social in being created by networks of people acting together’ (Becker 1983: 369).

Galliano’s interest in the fine details of technique - ‘we had the spots especially printed down, so when the fabrics cut on the cross, all the spots go round the body and are never interrupted by a seam’ (Interviewed by Brampton 1993: 46) - forces the journalists to acknowledge that his work is as much about craft as it is about art:

For it is his craft which most absorbs him, he is one of the greatest technicians working in fashion anywhere today (ibid., 46).

In conclusion, art codes introduce the work of the designers, typically in the form of a ‘statement’ and function also as promotional devices (in the press releases). Most importantly they provide an anchor of identity for the graduate designers. This language is strategically deployed as the most useful, and the most high status of the available discourses of self-representation available to graduates who have been through the art school system. It makes the misery of being poor, and the disappointment of not being successful something that can be turned into a legitimate mythology of being misunderstood. It is also a discourse of hope since the mythology of the struggling artist is that quite suddenly and unexpectedly he or she will find success and recognition. Finally it is appealing because it corresponds with the images (and fantasies) of creative work which in a post-industrial economy have taken on a new importance. Fashion in this respect has benefited from the new culture of creativity as the aura of art has moved beyond the fine arts to embrace cultural fields
previously seen as ‘lesser arts’. However in the day-to-day environment of the studio, a more practical and technical language evolves and this involves knowledge and expertise about fabric and cut and the way a garment will hang and it is also about trial and error and process. Skill and technique come into this as does the need for collaboration and for teamwork. But this all stops short at the point of putting a collection into production. The ‘arts and craft’ vocabulary, anxious to rid fashion of any connotations of the ‘rag trade’ conceals the equally important but menial practice of manufacture and production.

Back in the outside world, the art-language and the individual image of the designer (with his or her own distinctive design ‘signature’) is part of the process of marketing and also branding. These come together in the concept of the label. So there is a double movement around the status and meaning of art. On the one hand it represents integrity and the disavowal of the market-place, on the other hand it gives fashion the aura, status and the distinctiveness it needs to set itself apart from the high street and the rag trade, as a kind of niche market. It therefore also functions, with all its pretensions, as a commercial device. The designer-as-artist retains a value on the freelance or consultancy job market as a name with an image. But the imperative of the market is balanced by the sheer effort of the designers to see their work hung on gallery walls, featured in art magazines like Artforum and acknowledged as an object, piece or collection like an ‘installation’ or ‘performance’. Ally Capellino’s new outlet opened in July 1997 describes itself as having an ‘exhibition space’ at the far end of the store. This is where the fashion designers want to be. They also want to sell clothes and make a living. Celia M and Hussein Chalayan are ‘artists’ who
happen to be working with fashion, and as we have seen, the scissors and the fabrics are their paint and canvases. This raises the interesting question of whether fashion actually offers a more (or less) successful career as a conceptual artist, than the more conventional practices of fine art. If it does the business of fashion takes a legitimately secondary place, while the market and the publicity for this kind of 'art-fashion' is more even extensive and enthusiastic than it is for conventional art for the simple reason that the supermodels add a further element of visual interest. This scenario suggests an even more fluid mix of the categories of art and craft, high culture and low culture, practice and production.
MANUFACTURE, MONEY AND MARKETS IN FASHION DESIGN

'I Can't Sew'

Fashion design comprises of artistry, craft and manufacture, but the disregard of 'making' contributes directly to some of the difficulties the designers experience in their attempt to build up sustainable small businesses. This inattention to the fine details of manufacture also produced difficulties in the study itself. I wanted to know how the designers produced their collections, but they were reluctant to discuss their relationships with the Cut Make and Trim (CMT) men who took their orders and then farmed out the work down a long and labyrinthine chain of producers.¹ This was a sensitive issue. It seemed as though the various production deals the designers struck with the Cut Make and Trim men who offered their services either through advertisements in trade magazines, or else locally or through word of mouth, were closely guarded trade secrets. There was a degree of secrecy because good deals were hard to come by and designers were scared of losing out to competition. It was important to find a manufacturer or supplier who would guarantee that the order would be done in time and to the right specifications. Alongside this were issues of cost and payment. The designers were always worried that somebody else would slip in an order that would either be easier to make or more profitable and they would lose their place in the queue and the order would be late getting to the stockists. They knew

¹ For a clear account of all stages in the CMT process, see Phizacklea 1990.
that the CMT men played the market promising the designers that theirs was the only order they were taking on, while knowing full well that they had said the same to at least three others.

The designers needed to establish a steady relationship with one supplier but this proved difficult, not least because the orders they placed were erratic. But the volatility of the designers' orders were mirrored in the production field. CMT men also went in and out of business. The designers themselves rarely had a clear idea of the cost of runs and the precise volume of fabric needed and this meant they could quite easily be over-charged. They knew there were profits to be made through 'cabbaging' garments made to the original design from fabric left over from the run and sold by the supplier through the network of London street-markets. Despite the designers' concern to find the right fabric and despite their technical knowledge of fabric this interest was not pursued through the whole production process and this made them vulnerable to unscrupulous practice on the part of the producers.

Steven Purvis, a Scottish manufacturer who had trained at art school in textiles but had taken the unusual step of setting up his own CMT operation and then later a small factory outside Glasgow, commented on this situation:

There is a shocking ignorance on the basics of production among design graduates. Its laughable how little they know. For example they have no idea that the point at which the profit is made is at the lay-out of the fabric stage. It's all about fabric and cut. This means that pattern cutting is an art. The designers don't see that and they lose a lot through not paying attention to how the clothes are made up. There is a huge hidden economy in fabric in CMT, for instance. In fabric ripped off from the designers who can't be bothered to follow up how much is actually needed to make up the orders (Interviewed March 1994).
Instead of being involved in every stage of the costing process, the designers paid little attention to the sort of issues raised by Purvis, nor did they ask any questions about how much the women employed further down the sub-contracting chain as ‘outworkers’ or homeworkers were being paid. Perhaps it was in their interest not to ask any questions about who was actually doing the sewing, since this might have implicated them in a chain of illegal or semi-legal employment practices; people working for very low wages, ‘off the cards’, or employed on a cash in hand basis in the knowledge that they were also signing on (Phizacklea 1990). The designers tended to stick to what they considered their professional brief which focused round the quality of the final product. The rigid division of labour operating in the field of fashion separated the designers at the top from the women at the bottom end of the chain of production who did the making up. For all the reasons relating to their education and training as well as their creative identities as professional designers, they were able to relegate production to a field outside their own expertise. But they still had to have people working for them or with them in producing orders. The forms of employment the designers relied on were combinations of the following ‘modes’ of fashion design production.

STUDENTS ON WORK EXPERIENCE

When I first interviewed Yvette M and Lisa R they could not afford to pay sample machinists at all, even though they had won substantial orders following good media coverage both in the fashion magazines and also in the quality press. Instead they were
reliant on unpaid student labour. This was possible through the work experience programmes which fashion students were encouraged to take:

I can't sew. We have students from the college work for us, we can't afford to pay them but it's good experience for them and they can put it on their CVs. They do the making up and the sewing and also some of the pattern cutting and we also send them up to the west end to scout round for finishings and that's good experience for them too (Lisa R).

Lisa's comment about her own inability to sew supports what I earlier suggested was a typical fashion design graduate's repudiation of the 'dressmaking' tradition in fashion. However there seems to be a degree of 'wilful forgetting' in some of these claims. Even if what they learn about sewing remains rudimentary, most fashion design students appear to have gained some knowledge in this area. There is a degree of unlearning of these low status skills. As we have seen in the comments made by Lagerfeld and Yamamoto, it is only when designers get right to the top that they are confident enough re-discover and acknowledge the skills of sewing. They can 'come out' again as dressmakers. But for those still struggling to succeed in the fashion business, doing design means getting other people to do the sewing. Yvette M and Lisa R employed a pattern cutter and once they had raised the necessary loans from their banks and were at the stage of putting the orders into production they were able to use one of the small companies which combined some in-house manufacturing in the sort of small unit described by Phizacklea (1990) with sub-contractual work involving Asian and Turkish Cypriot women based in North East London. However having students on work experience meant that the small details of finishing or sewing work could be done by them on the premises.
All the other designers were also able to make good use of students on work placement schemes. Indeed there seemed to be something of an apprenticeship system in operation. The students did ‘finishing’ and ‘hand sewing’. In some cases they constituted more than half the production team. For example one designer described her workforce as follows, ‘I have three people help with the sewing up of garments, a woman round the corner and two students on placement’. The students do the work which the designers do not consider doing themselves and which is not the job of the sample machinist either. This was considered a vital part of the student’s training and indicates that they did have knowledge and experience of some sewing work. Rachel F explained that she always took at least a couple of BTEC students on a work experience basis and that this helped cut her costs because it meant she only had to pay a sample machinist on a one day a week basis to do the work which the students did not get through or was too difficult for them.

Several of the young designers had themselves gone through these work experience programmes where it was generally accepted that they did all the dogsbody work including the finishing of the garments and even the handing up of pins. All the design studios visited in the course of the research had students working on this basis, a few were being paid a token amount, while the others had their travel and lunch costs covered. They were also expected to do other kinds of work including writing press material, being on reception and running errands. A few designers also had students working on their stalls or units at Hyper-Hyper or Camden Lock. Work experience programmes or even informal arrangements provided the designers with valuable unpaid labour power and this included making up designs to samples, sewing and
production, as well as all the other work involved in running a studio. This whole system was summed up in a comment made by a student to her tutor on completing her placement. She said that in lieu of payment she had been given ‘two suits from Bella Freud’. The question might reasonably be asked, who does pay? Are those who work for nothing signing on at the same time which means that the dole is in effect a training agency? Do parents provide support, once again on the basis that this unpaid work will pay off in the future, or do the young designers pay their own way through unpaid work by taking evening jobs or other casual work? In fact all three of these provide a patchwork of funding, which is in itself a sign of the new piecemeal way in which jobs and livelihoods are now being constructed.

EMPLOYING A MACHINIST / PATTERN CUTTER ON A FREELANCE BASIS

As we have seen earlier in this section many of the designers had to rely on freelance services rather than actually take on full-time employees. Even the relatively well known designers found it hard to cover all the employment costs entailed in having full time employees and got round this by taking on part-time workers. The sample machinist working on this basis would typically be found locally and would be paid in the region of £5 an hour. Paula S described her employees as follows:

Everybody in the business is freelance, the pattern cutter, the machinist, and then we use a CMT firm with outworkers for the complete collections and a factory if it’s jackets, so we have no employees as such.
Celia M had an equally small team:

I have one outdoor machinist who does the bulk of the sewing and an assistant who finishes. She is employed on a part time basis and I usually have a student attached as well. There are production teams round London that, depending on their availability, can be used when necessary. But I try to rely on them as little as possible as I have experienced the horrors of late arrivals and hundreds of wrongly made garments.

Across the range of designers interviewed for this study, most could only afford to employ people in a flexible and freelance capacity. This was the only way they could have people on the books (or off the books as it happens) and stay in business. Some designers had started off with full-time employees but had been forced to re-employ them as freelancers. This suggests that flexible, part-time and freelance working practices were increasingly prevalent right across the skill range in the fashion industry, from the designers at the top, to the sample machinist at the bottom. As we shall see in the section that follows there are relatively few direct employees. These are very small businesses, a sprawling network of urban-based cottage industries, where the owner-director is, in reality, a self-employed person, and where her staff are also self-employed.

FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES.

The designers who were more established and were running relatively successful businesses would have at least one sample machinist on their full-time staff, sometimes two. These women worked closely with the designer, often in the corner of
the design studio and their talents were heavily relied upon as this (somewhat patronising) comment from Helen Storey shows:

> There should be a Sharlot in every workroom. In the best fashion houses they are bred from generation to generation - they weft to our warp as designers. When they are silent, but most often over chatter, one can glimpse their effortless skill. The years of perfection in any couture house can be seen in the rheumatoid knuckles of women ... In Sharlot's hand chiffon will obey, can follow a course of miles, never is the suffering transported to the edge. The work that flows behind has stitched in it a mother's love... (Storey 1996: 93--94).

All 8 of the well-known designers interviewed for this study had employed sample machinists and pattern cutters on a full time basis. These were core workers for the design process and reliable and highly skilled workers in these areas were highly valued even though they might not be earning wages that reflected these skills. At the time of writing the average annual pay for a skilled pattern cutter working for a London based designer was £15,000 while a skilled sample machinist could only expect in the region of £12,000. By European standards these salaries are low, a reflection of the fact that the pattern cutter in the UK is perceived of as a skilled worker despite the new educational qualifications and the various training programmes. Paul Smith saw this as symptomatic of the poor state of the UK fashion industry:

> Pattern cutters wear white coats in Italy, they are highly skilled workers and very well paid for what they do. We (at Paul Smith's) would do that here but the profile of the pattern cutter is so low. When we advertise for pattern cutters in The Guardian, Time Out, the Drapers Record, or Fashion Weekly all we ever get is 'I'm working in a pub right now but I've done a course at college.' There is a low level of enthusiasm about this kind of work yet its the most important part of the job (Paul Smith in discussion December 1995).
CUT, MAKE AND TRIM

The designers all made use of the CMT system of production as soon as they had an order which went beyond the kind of output they could possibly produce themselves. For them the most important issue was quality and, as Celia M’s comment above shows, being able to ensure that the work would not have to be returned. None of the designers enjoyed this side of the work especially when it involved having to bargain for the lowest price for an order. Many of them wanted to be rid of it altogether, either by remaining small and overseeing the production side in-house as Celia preferred, or else by delegating this work to a business manager. They were also aware of the problems in getting small batches done, since even though the local units specialised in this kind of work they still preferred bigger orders of simpler, less complex items. The CMT men know how unstable the cash-flows of the young designers were and demanded payment in cash upfront on delivery of the order. For these reasons most of the designers, if they did not have a business manager said how much they needed one. For those who worked as a couple or a husband and wife team, one partner would look after the ‘outwork’ of production, quality control and delivery leaving the other to do the design work, organise the fabric and textiles and also run the studio.

With the exception of Paul Smith, none of the designers themselves professed to having visited a factory or workshop where their designs were made up. Obviously the more established designers had their production manager or business manager liaising with the manufacturers and they would have the opportunity to make such a visit if
required, but this element never arose naturally in the course of the interviews. Even when it was clear that their orders were being produced barely a couple of miles away, there seemed very little need on the part of the designers to have any contact with the women who were doing their 'making up'. The production manager of Whistles who was in regular contact with the suppliers, put this clearly:

From a sociological point of view, you can work in a studio in the west-end and within 20 minutes you are in a factory in Hackney. Its cheap labour, the people at the top take all the glory, but behind it, its not like that...the people in the factories have no concept of what all this is about, they never come up here (Interviewed by Rana 1995).

Most of the designers interviewed had some experience with using these small and dispersed production teams. It was widely recognised that this was how fashion production was organised within the design sector. The successful companies like Whistles, Ally Capellino and Jones used these local CMT firms and they also made use of a number of factories located either in the north of England or else in Scotland. Caroline Coates of Coates and Storey described their manufacturing strategy as follows:

We do most of our manufacturing in London with the CMT companies. Coates Viyella have recently been helping us out with the manufacturing of our winter jackets. For the heavier work we need small factories with all the equipment, some are based in London but a few are located up north. We desperately need a good database with fabric suppliers and manufacturers, especially factories that will do between 20 and 200 garments, there is still a real problem finding that kind of outfit.

There is therefore a manufacturing curve where the designers move from relying on their own and also the unpaid labour of students (and friends) to the freelance employment of a machinist and pattern cutter, to the full-time employment of these workers, to the use of CMT firms who sub-contracted out the work to smaller
production units and small factories. This is largely UK, home-based production. The designers were well aware of the problems and the costs of outsourcing and relied on the local labour market of very flexible workers.

The designers omitted to mention in interview those points in their careers where they had done their own sewing. Some might have been bad sewers, others might simply have hated the tedium of sewing and been pleased to pass it on to somebody else, but there is no doubt that this activity played some significant role in the small scale production involved in setting up as a designer. They did not want to mention this because, again, it brought them too near to the image of the dressmaker and they saw this as a threat to their skills as designers. If they did one they didn’t do the other. And yet they had all been through the apprenticeship system of work experience or else they had got their own collections together by doing some of the sewing work themselves, and several of them had produced or were still producing for a stall or unit by relying on their own skills from design right through to production, so there was an element of disingenuousness here. Their training and education and their aspiration to be creative artists forced them to overlook or forget the manufacturing side of things and even the sewing they themselves had done as teenagers, as a way of keeping up with fashion and also of setting new fashion trends. In many ways it was this activity which led them to study fashion in the first place.

Frequently this disavowal backfired in that it meant the designers did not have a clear idea of what happened once the CMT man went off with the orders. This failure is as
much the outcome of a rigid, class-based and hierarchical division of labour as it is the fault of the young designers. The importance placed on this specific division of labour, is, as we have seen, a product of the history of class and gender in the art school. Adherence to this makes their failing in business almost inevitable. The designers can sew. They need to be convinced that this disavowal serves no useful function, indeed it only exacerbates the problems they face in production.

‘Nice Little Earners’

The designers could sew, but they kept quiet about it. One young women working freelance mentioned, as an aside, that she made clothes for all her family and in particular her mother and sisters back home in Northern Ireland. She would quickly run them up after she had finished work in the studio. She’d even manage to use some of the fabric left over from the orders she was doing for a big fashion company, so it didn’t cost her anything. She said she had been doing this ever since she had started at college. Nor was she alone in this respect, many of the fashion students supplemented their grants by taking orders from friends. One young women interviewed for this study said that she already had an order book by the time she left college. The young designers producing clothes for stall and units in markets were almost certainly doing most of the sewing themselves, but many of them were reluctant to admit this. The most vivid example of the fact that designers can sew comes from a newspaper article by Sally Brampton following the tragic death of John Flett, a young designer who had graduated at the same time as those interviewed.
for this study and who had been considered as talented as John Galliano. Brampton quotes Galliano remembering his friend:

At college ... he used to go out and buy a metre of fabric and run up a dress for one of the girls in his lunch hour. That gave him the money to go out that night. He made a frock a day (Brampton 1991: 9).

Similarly in a profile on the American designer Ben de Lisi (in The Independent on Sunday) the journalist describes how De Lisi was brought up by his grandmother who was a seamstress. He went on to study painting and sculpture but following graduation he turned his hand to fashion with the help of his grandmother and started supplying small collections to the big New York department stores: ‘These were nice little earners that Grandma and I did together. I would design them and we would both sew them, she taught me how to sew’ (De Lisi interviewed by Barbieri 1995: 8--9). De Lisi came to London in 1982 and began to make clothes in his partner’s restaurant after hours:

I’d put all the tables of the restaurant together and cut and then bring all the pieces upstairs and sew them together. I did it all myself (ibid.).

In a short time De Lisi had orders worth £30,000 from Liberty on the basis of this one-man production line.

How then could the UK designers work more profitably by overcoming their professional disdain for sewing? Steven Purvis made the following suggestion:

The thing is that if art students could not afford to go into design themselves they actually could go into production if they knew how to. There is a need for small scale quality production. They could do it
because it also does require design knowledge which is of course what most manufacturers don’t have. The problem is at present they come to manufacturing with the most unrealistic of expectations. They come for an interview and they have their portfolios and its all very interesting and then I ask them how much they are expecting as a salary and they say about £15,000 and I have to laugh. That’s about £5000 a year more than the average manufacturer takes home after he has paid all his overheads ... So they have no alternative but to set up for themselves, but what I’m saying is that they’re not taught to do that properly. And I’m talking as somebody who knows about fashion. There is not a major name in London that I’ve not produced for (Interviewed March 1994).

Val Baker, Merchandising Manager at Hyper-Hyper, made a similar point:

My strategy recently has been to get the designers who aren’t doing so well to take on some production work for those who are. They can do it better if they put themselves to it, and cheaper, and it gets them through a rough patch when they are not managing to sell their own stock or when things have just slowed down. This also gets round the problems of the CMT firms who wont do the very short runs. Even the ones who are doing OK, often they are not able to produce at the right kind of price. For example they need a pattern cutter or a grader and he or she charges £190 for the work. That’s far too much. They would be much better learning how to do it for themselves. What I’ve been doing is getting the designers going through a flat period to go off and do a tailoring course or a pattern cutting course at night school and then they can produce for somebody like Terry Nordel who is doing well just now but needs to be able to bring his prices down (Interviewed August 1994).

The disavowal of sewing is one dimension of fashion’s own identity crisis. It is indicative of both the low status and the low skill level of those employed in production. However the gap between the young designers and the women production workers at the bottom of the ladder is not as great as it appears. Both groups are surviving and making a living out of a culture of unemployment, they are part of the low pay labour intensive economy which has crept into British working life by stealth during and after the Thatcher years. This is an urban based workforce now finding itself working longer hours than would have been thought possible in the early
1980s. This is also a gender segregated labour market at top and bottom, and this too has consequences for how it is organised and how much it pays.

Finding A Market.

In the same way as the designers’ image as creative artist influenced the way they disavowed production, so also does it shape how they would like to disavow consumption. Just as a sculptor does not produce works with a clear market in mind, neither would the designers, if they could get away with it. Ideally they would like their clothes to be seen as ‘pieces’, small works of art for which consumers were willing to pay substantial amounts. In reality they were reconciled to thinking more objectively about the market and this tended to focus around three identifiable groups: the young fashionable and club-oriented consumers, the more mature and professional women with enough money to spend on fairly expensive clothes and the ‘celebrity’ market including pop stars, actresses, and also consumers from the fashion world itself, in particular fashion journalists and editors.

However these specific groups took second place to the fact that primarily the designers were creating clothes and collections not so much for real sales as for imagined consumption, that is for the fashion media, for the image industry. It is the national and international press as well as Vogue, Elle, Marie Claire, or Just Seventeen they have in mind when they see their clothes go down the runway. This is the first destination for the aspirant designer, and to the extent that the media makes them names, indeed household names, even though, as we have seen, they might still
be signing on and working from their kitchen tables, then it could be argued that the media-as-market adds a further twist to the peculiar economics of British fashion design. This is a market of audiences and viewers rather than consumers and this raises the possibility which we will explore in greater depth in the section that follows that the image is ‘the thing’ and that the widespread consumption of the image bears no direct relation to the often tiny trickle of sales. This is the problem for UK fashion design in a nutshell. There is a vast audience for the images of the work and a much smaller number of customers.

But before attempting to tackle the enormity of this problem, the way in which the other markets, those which involve real customers, are more concretely envisaged by a number of the designers, shows clearly the extent to which part of the labour process of ‘independent’ fashion design is to ‘shape up’ the consumer in such a way as to make them want to buy these particular kinds of clothes. (Du Gay 1996). The target market is brought into being by the meanings associated with the clothes and with the retail environment in which they are found as well as in the marketing or publicity material. The challenge is a big one, which is to create a market outside those markets sought by the powerful chain retailers and also the large fashion companies who have huge budgets at their disposal to do this kind of ‘shaping up’ work. The designers have to insert themselves within the retail world by producing distinctive meanings which are then embodied in the various items of clothing.
How is this done? Celia M’s market reflects her own identity as a fashion ‘pop artist’:

I still design for me, that’s what it’s all about. I wear them out to clubs, and I love seeing young girls in clubs and on the street wearing my clothes. They want things cheap and like me they love popular culture. My clothes have got that pop feeling. They’re very much a part of me, I suppose.

Celia’s notion of the market may be personally led and creatively driven but it is also informed by the existence and success of youth cultures and in particular the ‘club cultures’ of the late 1980s and 1990s. She draws on her own involvement in and experience of these scenes to confirm her place in the market. By concentrating on her two retail outlets, a stall at Hyper-Hyper and a small shop in Soho, she is able to keep a close eye on how quickly the stock moves and what sort of people buy her clothes.

While also producing orders for a variety of stockists both in the UK and in the US she was, at the time of the interview, producing images for an influential niche market of young ‘taste-makers’ including the editors and journalists on the style press. That is, she was giving them ‘good copy’. Her clothes made a good fashion story. The ‘pop feeling’ is also a ‘pop art’ feeling and this is reflected in the kind of coverage. Celia M gets in the style magazines where her work is seen as shocking, taboo breaking, sexually explicit and avant-garde, while also being relatively cheap. Celia M treats fashion design with the same seriousness she would a fine art, but she rids it of its elitism and draws on and quotes pop imagery (from the world of pornography, pop music history, and youth subcultures) in much the same way artists like David Hockney did in the 1960s, ‘I extended the ‘Psychedelic’ into the ‘Hippie’ collection for the winter’ she says in i-D (no 120; 1990). Celia stands firmly in the populist tradition of British fashion design, like Mary Quant in the 1960s. She rejects haute
couture, embraces pop while at the same time bringing a strongly fine art sensibility to bear on her work.

Celia M’s market comprises of young girls, clubbers and ‘trend-setters’ with a sprinkling of pop stars who not only bring in valuable revenue but can also be mentioned as customers in press material and thus serve a double function. These include Cher, Siobahn Fahey (of Bananarama and Shakespeare’s Sister) and also Debbie Harry. Clearly the purchase of a few items by celebrity figures does not create a thriving business in itself. It is more that these names bestow both an aura and an image on the designer and her clothes, so they function as much in cultural or symbolic terms as they do in economic terms. They can be used in the publicity circuits which the designer is reliant on. For the designer the press attention, the celebrity shopper and the coverage provided by a few shots in a range of fashion or style magazines and gossip columns work as a kind of symbolic capital. To have sold to a celebrity is a real mark of success which can be profitably traded on. The market is another image, in this case the image or representation of the pop celebrity who brings his or her own distinctive iconic value to the clothes further extending and accentuating their meaning and value.²

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² Celebrity fashion marks a new stage in the fashion publicity process, comprising of a series of trade offs where well known actresses, members of the Royal family, pop stars and TV celebrities ‘borrow’ an outfit from a designer for a celebrity event which will attract front page news in the press and on TV. The celebrity’s own press office will describe the dress in detail as well as crediting the designer. The best known case of this form of ‘dual promotion’ was when Liz Hurley, attending the premiere of the film Four Weddings and A Funeral (May 1993) starring her boyfriend Hugh Grant, wore a figure hugging Versace evening dress comprised of gold safety pins holding the pieces of silk and lycra fabric together at strategic points across her body. The outfit instantly made fashion history as ‘that dress’.
This exchange taps into some of the most complicated aspects of the culture of fashion design in Britain today. It demonstrates the existence of a double circuit in operation, the fashion garment as real product, bought by a real person, and the fashion garment as image (usually photographic) purchased and worn by somebody else also 'known' as an image (also photographic). Celebrity consumers play a role for most designers as part of an ideal 'image market'. Who the designers sell to becomes a mark of their success. Commenting on the work of English Eccentrics one journalist described their market success as follows:

Their customers are high profile. Mick Jagger likes their shirts, as does Prince. Paul McCartney and Pamela Stephenson wear them ... Their base now is an old warehouse in Shoreditch, from which they sell direct to prominent retailers such as Liberty, Harrods and Harvey Nichols (McHugh 1993: 37).

Anna T, one of the young designers, said that her first important sale was to 'the wife of a famous Hollywood film director who bought a jacket and a coat'. And Rachel F said:

I've sold a few things to the fashion editor of the Evening Standard. She rang me up to say how much she liked my stuff. She came to the studio to have a look round and after that she also told several of her friends about my work, on a word of mouth basis, that was very useful.

The 'added value' of celebrity customers is summed up in the final words of one of the longer interviews with Gillian P. She says, with a hint of nostalgia for the days...
when she was working as an independent designer, ‘I had the interest of the Design Council and Madonna bought one of my sweaters.’ The role of the image market and the image industries will be pursued at greater length in Chapter Ten, in the meantime their importance for the designers tells us something crucial about the practice of fashion design itself.

The more established UK designers (described by one of the younger graduates as the ‘sensible girls’) focus less on the ideal celebrity client and more on the process of shaping up the ideal women who will buy their clothes. this work is the job of the press and publicity offices. The press packs produced by Ally Capellino, Whistles, or Betty Jackson all envisage a certain type of women. ‘She’ is too busy to spend a lot of time on clothes, ‘she’ wants to be comfortable as well as stylish, ‘she’ might not even be the perfect shape typically assumed by male designers.3 Ally Capellino’s personal assistant explained:

Our market has evolved over the years. We have grown with our market and we aim to sell to women who want to look good but don’t have a great deal of time to spend on it. We want things to be easier for them and our clothes are designed to take the stress out of fashion. Our customers feel comfortable in our clothes and that’s why we have built up customer loyalty. Perhaps our biggest competition is from Betty Jackson although I don’t know how they are doing right now. Possibly about the same as us. However the home market has really picked up for us in the last couple of years. Its because we have this really strong image and its developed now into a family image. We design here for real people and we appreciate that women have different figures and so even in the Tunbridge Wells department store where we did a show last month we had very different types of women snapping the stuff up. And that’s the feedback we get from the other retail outlets we supply to, up north, in Manchester and

3 This information is culled from the press packs to accompany the new seasonal collections of Ally Capellino, Betty Jackson and also Sara Sturgeon, 1995.
Glasgow and also in Nottingham and Yorkshire. There is a home market if you search it out.

However both in house and out of house publicity is expensive. Young designers can rarely afford to employ a publicist and so they are reliant on the fashion media to pick up their work and give it exposure either within the fashion news slots or more often in the fashion pages themselves. Some of the designers actually described their market in these terms, e.g.:

I feel as though the work I'm doing here is for the Just Seventeen reader or for More! and what I'd really like to be doing is producing clothes for the Elle market or even for Marie Claire (Nana F).

In this way the market finds definition not through concrete sales but through the targeting of media space and in particular the fashion spreads in the magazines. All the designers recognised the importance of publicity. They had as many unpaid students working on the press release material for the collections as they had doing the hand-finishing. And fashion promotion now occupies a key place in the designers' business strategy, even if they have to rely on the unpaid labour of friends and students to do this work. Publicity and promotion is the means by which design reaches out to make connection with its second great pillar of support, the magazine and media industries. (The more precise nature of this relationship will be explored in the following section). If the designers have established some kind of contact with fashion editors and journalists, this 'social capital' can be used to help them find a market in retail, so that they actually have a sales outlet for their work. This was how Yvette M and Lisa R found their first stockist. They wanted to show their work during London Fashion Week but could not afford the costs of putting on a big collection, so
they decided to show the work with friends modelling it in their own studio (fortunately close to the bigger shows). However the question was how to get the buyers to attend. Invites had to be designed, produced and printed and then sent out. They were reliant on having students and friends do this kind of work for them for nothing. It wasn’t the buyers who turned up, however, but the fashion journalists and editors who came to the studio and it was they who gave the designers the break they needed:

The fashion world is very small and the way we got started was that the fashion editor at *Vogue* loved one piece that we did. Browns had already placed an order and that allowed us to send out a press release with the waistcoat to *Vogue* mentioning Browns as the stockist......However Browns cancelled the order a couple of weeks later which meant that we had no orders and no stockist. *Vogue* could only use the picture of the waistcoat if we had a stockist, so there and then on the spot Sarah (from *Vogue*) phoned up Whistles and said how lovely it was and how she wanted to use it for a picture and would Whistles consider placing an order? They said yes as long as it meant one in each size to begin with. So in fact the order meant three items of clothing. And for them of course there was the mention of Whistles in *Vogue* so they got that out of it, we got a tiny order and *Vogue* got the picture. And that in turn was what triggered off all the other interest. We were immediately approached by all the other magazines and also by the British Fashion Council asking us if we wanted to be sponsored! That’s how the whole thing works. We know that at present we are only interesting to a tiny number of media and fashion types. Somebody will buy one of our pieces for a special event, a big media do, a premiere, a dinner party, a reception.

This example is useful because it so vividly highlights the reliance on publicity and on the mass media to actually set in motion the selling of the products. Having a unit at Hyper-Hyper also worked in this way for many of the other designers. The high cost of renting a space could be offset against the general publicity which this retail unit as a whole attracted. So in this case we can see marketing work in the opposite direction from that described above. There the press brought the goods to the retailer, in this case the retailer showcases the goods and brings them to the attention of the
press. A celebrity store like Hyper-Hyper or Harvey Nichols is in itself publicity for
the clothes. If this store stocks them they must be good:

Hyper Hyper gets huge amounts of press coverage, from the Evening Standard, Elle, from i-D and The Face to Vogue and also Time Out. So we get people coming in all the time looking for something they've seen in one of the magazines. Its a tourist trade and its the girls who read the magazines (Val Baker interviewed August 1994).

This inter-relationship between the retailer and the media comprise the basis for
finding a market for the young designers, a point put clearly in a comment by leading
fashion publicist Marysia Woroniecka:

It's the fashion pages that make or break a young designer. How else can they get publicity? Most cannot afford an agent, and they certainly can't buy the kind of advertorial spaces that the big fashion houses like Maxmara, Escada or Armani can. So they are desperate to have their pieces shown, and there are a lot more opportunities now than a few years ago. But what it does mean is that so much of the designers time is taken up chasing the fashion stylists and the editors. And then some bigger companies have literally been rescued by magazines. Laura Ashley has got a lot to thank Marie Claire for.

In short the market is heavily mediated by the fashion press. It is socially constructed in that it is 'imaged' (Nixon 1996) as much as it is also 'imagined'. The idea of the consumer is created discursively through the fashion stories which are the 'centrefolds' of the glossy fashion magazines. These will be the focus of attention in the section that follows. The important point here is that whether the consumer is 'young and clubby' or more mature and working in a professional field ('real women') her existence is brought into being by these fictional devices which are the professional tools of the fashion promotion intermediaries. However these marketing images, these fictional devices, cannot guarantee sales. They might be enjoyed by readers without ever encouraging them to purchase a single item. Are we talking then,
about two quite separate circuits of consumption, that of viewing images and that of purchasing goods? If so, this has quite profound consequences for fashion as a culture industry, it means that it actually comprises of two quite separate activities, producing real clothes for real consumers and producing clothes which more or less exist to be turned into images. This then accounts for the disparity between the enthusiasm with which fashion images are consumed, and the much slower volume of actual sales of designer goods. Can the designers serve both these markets and also succeed in business?

Balancing The Books

As we have seen, the fashion market has a weak existence in the professional imagination of designers. It marks a point of doubt and uncertainty. Once again this is hardly surprising given their preferred self images as creative artists. The market indicates the presence of a commercial rather than a creative dynamic and the alarm bells start ringing. This is not how the designers want to be seen. So in interview, questions about turnover and volume of sales and capital investment and even their own salaries, were not always responded to with the same openness and enthusiasm that questions about design direction or inspiration prompted. Many of the designers appeared to live on a hand-to-mouth basis. They were either earning a ‘pittance’ or else they said they were hardly able to pay themselves a wage from the business. So there was reluctance to talk about money and any attempt to produce a clear overall account of the performances of these small companies as businesses was made more difficult by the fast rate of change and movement in and across the sector as a whole.
One minute they would be in business with a studio and a set of orders, the next they would be freelancing from home.

As we have already seen what emerged as the most stable of careers was that of the flexible freelancer working for at least two companies at the same time, combining this with some part-time teaching while also harbouring ideas of getting back to her 'own label' work. So not only is it difficult to get a clear picture of the economics of each one of the stages in the cycle of fashion employment (and self-employment) but the picture changes so quickly and the fortunes rise and fall so rapidly that anything other than a set of individual economic profiles would be unreliable. At any rate the rapid change of employment in the sector makes it difficult to present an overall account of how it functions as an economy. From the data and material which follows, the UK fashion design industry seems more like a micro-economy comprising of a strata of small scale producers whose activities are closer to a 'cottage industry' than a sector which is deemed to be in the forefront of the shift towards the new cultural economy.

The fashion and clothing industry was always volatile, wages were always low, and companies were regularly going into liquidation, so it is not as though there was a once stable and well-organised industry. The 'new kind of rag trade' which I have argued has emerged since the early 1980s is a peculiar hybrid of past, present and seemingly future features of work in an increasingly de-industrialised society. It is the cottage industry elements of the designers' practice including not just the small scale
of the economies but also the emphasis on hand finishing and on craft which make the art-school trained design sector appear deeply anachronistic and traditional, but this is then balanced by those features which make it also a product of the 1980s and 1990s. These include the whole range of changes in consumer culture, in particular the emergence of high quality differentiated goods produced in small batches to 'niche markets'. The British fashion designers can in one sense be seen as the new professionals who service the needs of this segmented market. But if only it were as easy as this. The designers find themselves in sharp competition with much more powerful sectors of the fashion industry, in particular the fashion retail chains which are in an infinitely stronger position to implement the strategies of Post-Fordist techniques of production to bring higher quality, more differentiated fashion ranges to the customers.

These companies (from Next to Kookai, from Warehouse to Jigsaw) can 'interpret' the shapes and styles from the designer ranges and through the access they have to both economies of scale and of scope they can have them on the rails at competitive prices within less than a month of the designer shows. From the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s the competition for the young designers trying to assert a place for themselves in the fashion market has increasingly come from these retailers. As we have seen a few, like Whistles, have bought collections from the young designers and displayed this work on the rails alongside their own in-house label. Otherwise the designers are dependent on sales from retailers and from department stores who are known to specialise in designer collections, such as Harvey Nichols, Liberty, Selfridges. Alternatively they have their own small outlets. But in some respects these are like
corner shops facing competition from supermarkets. Those who survive seem to do so against the odds.

The additional feature, which is also a reflection of Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, is the flexible and relatively cheap as well as local labour markets which form the manufacturing base for both the small scale designers and also for a substantial part of the bigger retailers’ output. So there is competition here too. From the point of view of the CMT men an order from Jigsaw is inevitably more appealing than one from a much smaller one-woman label. The cash flow will be more reliable, the work possibly easier and thus requiring a lower level of skill, and the fabric less delicate. In this respect too the designers find themselves at a disadvantage. These difficulties demonstrate clearly the need for a sharper and more developed analysis of the sector as a whole. So far, as we have seen, commentaries have been rather piecemeal. The designers’ experiences are reflective of those emergent features of work which are as yet uncharted and consequently more or less unknown. One of the aims of these chapters has been to describe and analyse how the designers make a living and how this creative work functions within an economy which is increasingly concerned with cultural production. The key relation appears to be the interplay between fashion as an image industry and fashion as a concrete practice which involves designing, making and selling clothes. The extraordinary vitality of the former (the visual spectacle) overshadows and conceals the difficulties of the latter (the often shoddily produced goods).
Sales and Salaries.

Celia M who, as noted earlier, at the peak of her business activity had two outlets (a shop in Soho and a unit at Hyper Hyper) and who also featured in numerous television programmes, press interviews and had features on her work appear in a range of magazines here and abroad, nonetheless rarely had a turnover of more than £200,000 per annum. With orders from big New York department stores as well as UK stockists across the country her output still remained relatively small. Most of her employees were working on a casual or part-time basis, she relied on students and on friends to ‘help out’ in the business, and otherwise depended on a single machinist and pattern cutter to help with the production. As we have already seen the small CMT firms she used for manufacture were a constant source of dis-satisfaction and anxiety. A designer like this is working virtually on a self-employed basis. She will have an accountant to look after the books, and from time to time somebody will step in as a business manager. But otherwise the business itself remains almost solely in the hands of the designer. According to Celia once her overheads had been paid her take-home salary was in the region of £15,000.

This corresponds almost exactly with another of the small-scale independent producers Paula S. Like Celia her studio was at home, her employees were all working for her on a freelance basis. She had the additional support of her sister who looked after the production side ensuring that orders were produced in time, and that the quality of the finished goods was right. However whereas for Celia the fears were of being let down by the CMT producers, for Paula S who was supplying to a range of
small, independent, high-fashion stockists across the country, the problem was in getting payment from the shops in time to maintain the cash flow she needed. She was aware of the lengths some stockists would go to avoid paying for the clothes:

Shops will often return goods with an excuse out of the blue, just before you know they are going to place another order. They have got you hooked. They know you are desperate for the order. You know that the so-called faults in the clothes they have had on their rails for three months are a way of returning them to you without having to pay for them, and so they cut their losses on things they haven't managed to sell, by suddenly inventing flaws. The small shops are terribly bad at paying, you can be left waiting months even though you know they sold the whole collection ages ago.

Problems with non-payment for orders puts tremendous strains on the designers frequently pushing them out of business altogether. Paula S had become more used to the stresses of working in such an insecure field by keeping her overheads low and by being able to rely on her husband for the mortgage payments. But given the long hours she worked and the high level of her own skills and expertise, her salary was tiny, a meagre £15,000 she estimated on a turnover of approximately £100,000.

Lisa R and Yvette M were living on next to nothing:

Almost everything goes back into the business, so it's a matter of juggling several things at once. We have to think about paying for the next season's fabric, while we are still waiting for the returns from the retailers. There are so many uncertainties and it fluctuates so much. We have to charge over £300 for a jacket to cover all the costs, but let's say right now we can just about live, though that is partly because Lisa's father owns the flat and is letting us live and work in it for nothing right now.

Two years later with a healthy order book but with debts of more than £50,000 these young designers realised that they could not find the finance to produce the orders. Lisa said 'I had had enough and wanted to pull out. We were still only on £50 a week,
and I had stopped enjoying it. There were moments of glory; I loved the collection but the production was a living nightmare’ (interviewed by Daniels 1996: 21). In October 1995 they realised they were not able to produce the summer collection for 1996 and were forced to call in the receivers.

So in this case the two designers who in many ways are emblematic of so many of the themes in this book were declared bankrupt at the same time as they were enjoying huge amounts of media attention. At no point during their short careers as celebrity designers did they have a turnover of more than £200,000 despite sales to Barneys in New York and Harvey Nichols in London. Nor did they ever have a staff as such, and it seems they were living virtually on pocket money of £50 a week from the business.

It was precisely in reaction to this kind of situation that the designers who ended up working, after a few years as independents, as freelancer designers, expressed some relief that ‘at least you get paid when you are freelance’. Once again it was difficult to get a clear or accurate picture of exactly how much the freelance designers were earning, some were on retainers to one or two companies at the same time while others were being paid for each job. It seemed that £20,000 a year was considered a reasonable and realistic income from this kind of work. For the designers still working as independents with a unit at Hyper-Hyper it was more a matter of breaking even and managing to survive on tiny incomes once the overheads had been covered. There were also a number of young designers relying on the hidden economy to allow them to attempt to move from being on the dole into working as designers in a more legitimate capacity. For them £100 a week was considered as manageable. By making
clothes for friends, or else by providing a small number of clothes for sale in a street-market or designer stall or unit, the payments for this work supplemented unemployment benefit. However they pointed out that they still had to buy the fabric to make the clothes and they also had to have the facilities (space, sewing machines, overlockers, access to a part-time sample machinist etc.) to produce for this market, so the money they got was not so much 'hidden economy' income as it was cash to cover the costs of production.

So far what we have seen gives the impression of fashion design as a kind of chaotic or 'disorganised' micro-economy comprising of a number of talented and hardworking young designers practising their trade against the odds but in the hope that eventually their talent and creativity will be rewarded. Even the most viable of these working practices, the freelance economy, requires enormous expenditure of time and labour for relatively modest returns and with the added uncertainty and insecurity of being employed on a one-off basis, and therefore of not knowing where the next order is going to come from. In this context the designers were also responsible for their own national insurance payments and as self-employed people they could not rely on maternity pay, sickness pay or pension contributions since they were not employees. Those who were married or in stable partnerships were reliant on their partners to cover these costs. Only four of the designers I interviewed for this study had children, and all of these women had husbands either working in the business alongside them or else able to support them independently of the business. A more general question raised by this kind of highly insecure work in the creative economy is the extent to which women are further disadvantaged by self-employment when it comes to
maternity and child-care. To be forced to put off the possibility of motherhood because of these difficult working conditions is in itself a great sacrifice. In these circumstances women are almost being forced to choose between a creative career and motherhood. How widespread this kind of choice will become, as the flexible economy of self-employed workers grows raises a number of important political questions. Another way of putting this is to say that the shift towards flexible, freelance work in the creative fields will almost certainly have consequences for women which might well make it more difficult (rather than less difficult, as the pro-flexibility argument has it) to combine motherhood with a career. This current study reveals such a low level of returns and such a high level of financial insecurity that the possibility of embarking on motherhood was literally unthinkable for many of the respondents. It was something they had to put off indefinitely.

Strategies For Survival.

What kind of businesses were these more successful fashion design companies? If we discount the two bigger retailer-designers (Paul Smith and Whistles) on the grounds that both companies define themselves as retailers first and designers second we are left in the current sample with Ally Capellino, Coates and Storey and English Eccentrics. If we add to them comparable companies like Betty Jackson and if we also include Vivienne Westwood (whose fortunes have also vacillated during the period covered by this study) we can develop a slightly clearer picture of how companies like these operate.
Betty Jackson and Ally Capellino have each been helped by contracts and support from larger organisations. Both designers have produced ranges for Marks and Spencer bringing them in additional funding on a freelance basis. They have also won support from Coates Viyella (Ally Capellino) and Courtaulds (Betty Jackson). They each produce for the home market and also for the overseas market, but are well aware of the fragility of the fashion market and the number of companies which have gone under in recent years. Vivienne Westwood’s work has taken a different turn in the last few years. After many years of barely making a living despite being one of Britain’s most famous designers (she continued to live in a council flat in Brixton right up until 1994) Westwood has benefited from the resurgence of international interest in ‘avant-garde’ British fashion from the early 1990s. As a result her business has moved onto a different level of success altogether with sales to Japan at £3m a year and lucrative licensing deals bringing in her company up to £10m a year.

Westwood too was forced to recognise the value of freelance contracts and she in effect bailed out her business in the late 1980s with a series of contracts for mass market catalogue companies like Littlewoods, and Freemans, while also producing ranges for the underwear company Knickerbox. This has put her at the top of the design hierarchy both for innovation and also for capital returns. However this kind of success is dependent on the highly distinctive and controversial image Westwood has fostered. Her own ranges are, as she puts it, ‘almost haute couture’. This means that alongside Galliano and Katherine Hamnett, Westwood is on the brink of relinquishing the UK in favour of the French fashion houses who are now eager to employ the stars of British fashion. Perhaps the relevant point here however is that
Westwood barely survived as a designer until she picked up the contracts from the big mass market companies. They manufactured and retailed goods bearing her name and she in return was able to fund the catwalk shows which in recent years have won her great acclaim and given rise to speculation about a move to Paris.

In contrast to this Betty Jackson and Ally Capellino have aimed at the professional female market also sought by Nicole Farhi. Their clothes are all expensive, 'classic' but with a distinctive design 'signature'. Ally Capellino specialises in linens and fine wool tweeds, Nicole Farhi produces clothes which bear the traces of current design inflections, e.g. 50's style swing coats, translating or 'editing' these into more functional outfits. Betty Jackson has won praise for her textile designs and for the use of dramatic abstract prints as the basis for her collections. Although superficially similar, these companies are not really comparable with Nicole Farhi, who with the biggest turnover and the largest number of shops and concession areas is in fact underwritten by the more middle market and younger fashion chain French Connection, with both companies managed and co-owned by Farhi's ex-husband, fashion entrepreneur, Stephen Marks. Ally Capellino as we have already seen brings in an annual turnover of approximately £3m, with sales overseas of £1.5m. This is a similar profile to Betty Jackson. Both companies have relatively small full time staff (Ally Capellino employs 17 full-time workers at the Canary Wharf studio while Betty Jackson has only twelve employees based in her Tottenham Court Road headquarters). In short these remain fairly small businesses. As several of the respondents pointed out, the key issue for designers like these was breaking in successfully and holding onto the foreign market. For Coates and Storey interviewed 18 months before they
were forced into liquidation this was the important issue. Although at their peak they were selling to 26 different countries with Belgium and the USA accounting for the greatest volume of sales, selling abroad were beset by difficulties, particularly in finding reliable agents who would manage the foreign market.

But could they raise the capital investment to make this transition into the international fashion design market? And if they couldn’t how long could they rely on the UK market to produce sufficient returns to remain competitive? What would happen if ‘they’ went out of fashion? In the UK in the late 1990s only Paul Smith, Whistles, and Vivienne Westwood have successfully made this transition. For the others the reality has been to maintain and build steadily on a turnover of between £2 and £4m per annum. To achieve this requires working on cheaper diffusion ranges and also taking on freelance contracts or consultancy for high street fashion retailers. This raises the more general and important question of how representative this small and partial account of British fashion design is? To what extent can this present analysis of primarily small scale producers many of whom are continually hovering on the borderline of big time success (on the basis of extensive media coverage) and dismal failure (on the basis of bankruptcies) be understood as typical of the British fashion industry? By considering the portrait of a cultural and creative industry provided here in comparison with a piece of funded research on small scale fashion producers commissioned by the British Fashion Council, it will be argued in the following chapter that the current study offers an accurate and realistic account.
Despite the difficulties, the present study also argues that the distinctive contours of this new kind of rag trade ought not to be dismissed as marginal and economically unviable. As part of the significant shift to a flexible, freelance and culturally-driven urban economy it is more the case that this kind of working practice in fashion is at the forefront of change and needs much better understanding and support than it has so far received. The fashion design industry requires more planning and organisation and it needs better forms of management. The UK fashion industry has sprung into being through the 1980s with high quality training and educational provision producing the designers and with the support and publicity of media industries hungry for its visual images. But between these two pillars of support is a thin, skimpy and under-funded network of activities. Social scientists ought not to wipe their hands of this apparently chaotic design sector as a further sign of the 'end of organised capitalism' and its replacement by a new even more exploitative stage, the professional equivalent to the 'return to the sweatshop' which Piore has described (Piore 1997). As a sign of things to come, this kind of creative work requires more sociological analysis and political debate. The question is not just, 'is there a space in the market for small scale independent design', (which I would argue there is) but 'can the social relations of work and employment for the designers (and also the producers) match in livelihoods, the time, energy and skills invested in the design process'?
A NEW KIND OF RAG TRADE?

The Future of Work?

Recent writing on the sociology of work has suggested that so rapid are the changes taking place in Western European societies that there is an element of opaqueness or simple uncertainty about how working life is going to develop in the coming years. Ulrich Beck for example talks about 'abnormal work' whose 'unpredictable and erratic' rhythms are becoming the norm for an increasing number of people today (Beck 1997). He has recently spoken on the idea of 'capital without jobs', and of 'work being threatened with extinction' (Beck ibid.). These useful, if rather polemical, epithets touch on issues that have been central to this current work. This study certainly charts the growth of 'jobs without capital' but emphasises not so much the extinction of work, as the determination to create work against the odds. We have seen young designers create jobs more or less out of nothing. When government promoted the idea of 'job creation' they never have this kind of cultural work in mind, and yet in this sector what we see is the creation of jobs on the strength of £1000 usually loaned by parents to have in a bank account in order to qualify for the EAS. This has provided the basis for setting up in business. By getting hold of remnants of fabric and with a minimum of equipment (sewing machine and press) most of the young designers in this sample were able to insert themselves into the fashion economy and maintain a presence in the do-it-yourself sector of the urban street markets, stalls, units, and small shops creating employment out of
unemployment, making careers out of culture and pursuing these careers with a commitment far beyond what might be expected were they simply looking for paid employment. I want to pursue at greater length in this chapter, the scale of these economies and the sustainability of this kind of creative work.

Of course, it might be argued that my sample is small and that at any rate this is a marginal field of (self) employment and that its micro-economies are unreflective of British 'designer fashion'. In fact there is only one study from which any useful comparison can be drawn. In 1991 the results of a survey commissioned by the British Fashion Council and carried out by Kurt Salmon Associates were published (Salmon 1991). The 'Survey of the UK Fashion Designer Industry' based its findings on the data provided by a questionnaire sent to 150 design companies. With a high return rate from the questionnaires the authors were confident their survey provided an accurate image of the industry. They wanted to gain information on the 'structure, employment and output' of the sector. They also sought to 'analyse output by value, volume and garment type ... to review the supply network ... to measure the size of the main markets ... and to predict future trends' (Salmon 1991: 1).

The companies they polled were similar to the small designer-led companies which have been the focus of attention here. Indeed all of the well-known designers interviewed for this current study also participated in the Salmon survey as did six of the eighteen younger designers. Since one of the criteria for inclusion in the Salmon survey was that the design companies should 'regularly participate in designer shows...
both in the UK and abroad* this would disqualify at least half of my own sample who were either unable to afford the costs of producing collections for the shows, or else were at the time of the interview no longer working in an independent design capacity. So, in this respect, the six who did take part and the full participation of the more established designers demonstrate that to a considerable extent, both studies are talking about the same kind of people.

One of the most important things that the Salmon study revealed was the volume of sales. 20% of the companies polled accounted for 80% of the annual sales, showing concentration of sales in a small sector of the field as a whole. Overall 30 of the 150 companies accounted for 4/5ths of all designer sales. The study also showed that 60% of the companies had annual sales of less than £500,000, and that 80% shared between them a measly 20% of all designer sales, an average volume of annual sales of £100,000. Overall then, the great majority of the firms had sales around the £100,000 mark with a smaller number managing to achieve a turnover of up to £500,000 per annum. Already we can see that this bears a close resemblance to the kinds of figures which the designers in this current study mentioned in relation to their turnover. Rachel F put her one-woman business turnover at £70,000 a year based round her designing and supplying between 12 and 20 items a week to the unit she shared at Hyper-Hyper and in addition taking on individual orders from customers. Several of the other young designers reported annual turnover figures within a range of between £100,000 and £200,000 annual turnover. Paula S for example stabilised at £100,000, while Celia M had managed up to the £100,000 mark. When she was doing well Jasmine S had broken through to almost one million pounds of sales.
The Salmon study does not convert its own figures into this kind of company average and therefore fails to confront the fact that a turnover of £100,000 means in practice a tiny take home pay for the designer once he or she has covered overheads, in particular the cost of renting premises like a unit at Hyper-Hyper, as well as the labour costs involved in manufacturing the clothes. In this respect the findings of the Salmon study steer clear of pinpointing the general economic fragility and precariousness of this sector and the very poor rate of returns to individual designers. Instead they add a rejoinder that the growth of the design sector between 1987 and 1989 should not be relied on as a steady trend, particularly in the light of the recession of the early 1990s. How true! It is not just that the designers can barely make a living, but that so many of them are forced out of business altogether.

However if we look in more depth at my study in comparison with the Salmon survey and consider the case of Rachel F's turnover of £70,000, we can deduce that what she is actually living on is a very small salary. She will be paying £11,000 in rent to Hyper-Hyper, in addition, although subsidised by the local authority, there will be the cost of renting her studio, adding at least another £5000 a year for premises. On top of this are the costs of fabrics, equipment and other raw materials, VAT, tax, and finally the cost of paying the part-time machinists who work for her. Its easy to see why Rachel is not in a position to employ anybody for more than a few hours a week. And as we have already seen she is heavily reliant on the unpaid labour of students on work experience. However she has stayed in business and that in itself is an achievement. The question of how long she can continue on this basis, and what the possibilities for real growth and expansion are is difficult to predict. She offers a good
example of what Giddens claims are the ‘unknowable futures’ of current forms of work and employment (Giddens 1997). But how can careers like this become more knowable? grand social theory tends to avoid asking questions of a more mundane nature, like how can we make work in the new culture industries, fluid as it is, less opaque?

Rachel F’s work is characterised by a high degree of insecurity. A few weeks illness would knock her completely off course. Holidays were out of the question. At least she was paying her national insurance contributions (unlike several of the other young designers who really were working on a hand to mouth basis) and she also had the security of a council tenancy. However the decision to have children would have placed her in a relationship of total economic dependency on a partner and the costs of paying for childcare would have wiped out her take-home pay in a stroke. A decision to expand with the aim of extending the range of her clothes and bringing in more people to help her with production, combined with taking on some freelance work would be the most likely course for her to pursue, but she would also need to develop a more active marketing strategy so that her name was better known. This also would cost her in both time and money. In short she would need to raise capital and embark on the riskier business of turning her company into more than a unit of self-employment. Her turnover of £70,000 was a ‘reasonable’ and relatively stable figure for designers working in this way but it is difficult to see how realistically she could expand without financial backing and help with the hefty rents she had to pay for her unit at Hyper-Hyper.
The Salmon survey also showed that 20% of the companies (i.e. 30 in total) accounted for £48m of annual sales. However an additional £15m could be added to this as income through licensed sales (which ran to £125m per annum). This means that 30 companies were generating £63m of sales i.e. on average just over £2m per company. This then is the second key point, that the ‘successful’ companies polled by Salmon indicate more or less the same level of average sales as 5 of the 6 ‘successful’ companies in my own study. Coates and Storey, Betty Jackson, Ally Capellino and English Eccentrics were all hovering between the £1m and £3m mark. At her peak Jasmine S had met the £1m target. Celia M despite being very well known and extremely influential in the field, had an annual sales of around £200,000. So the profile of economic performance revealed in the Salmon study parallels that of the much smaller group of companies around which this current research has been based. These are low sales for what are regarded as successful companies. Ally Capellino and Coates and Storey were, at the time of the interview, each employing approximately 17 people and had three retail outlets in Central London between them. The costs of their in-house staff would run at approximately £.5m and the rent for studio and shop space would have run to possibly another £.5m. This makes the annual sales figures look far from healthy. This again would confirm the scenario I have described of Coates and Storey going into liquidation in 1995, and Ally Capellino coming near to the brink and being more or less rescued by the Coates Viyella contract. There have also been some comments in the fashion press that the last few years have not been as stable and successful for English Eccentrics, as they
had hoped. They are reported as having to slim down the company and narrow their ranges.¹

The Salmon study estimates only 1200 people are employed nationally in manufacture for the designer sector. They acknowledge the difficulty in getting accurate figures because of the nature of the long and anonymous production chain. They rely only on the reported direct employees from the companies they polled so presumably this figure refers only to sample machinists working on the premises and a few other direct employees in production. This leaves aside the important question of how many people are employed in the long manufacturing chains. Available figures do not differentiate between people working in a CMT capacity for the low end of the market making the cheap mass fashion items, and those producing for the designer ranges. This is in any case very difficult since in many cases the women are working for both ends of the market simultaneously. Zeitlin suggests this high and low end production accounted for one third of the 480,000 employed in fashion and clothing production in 1986 (Zeitlin 1989). Taking into account the overall loss of employment in the sector of approximately 30,000 jobs and the relative growth of the local units of production revealed by Phizacklea in 1990 we could estimate that somewhere in the region of 150,000 people are working in 1996–7 in the small production units making-up both cheap and quality fashion garments.² Unfortunately this figure cannot be verified or

¹ The company themselves report re-structuring as part of an effort to develop their market in a specific, and more limited range of goods.

² This estimate is arrived at by drawing on a combination of figures from Zeitlin (1989), Phizacklea (1990) and Yusuf (1994).
broken down any further since no study has yet followed designer activity right through from conception to manufacture. Annie Phizacklea points to the substantial increase in employment particularly in home-working in the late 1980s in this sector: ‘It is estimated that at least 20,000 new jobs have been created in small clothing firms in the (West Midlands) area since 1979’ (Phizacklea 1990: 80). Once again however there is no way of knowing the ratio of high quality work to cheap standardised women’s fashionwear. Phizacklea does provide some indicators that the quality end in London at least, accounts for a more substantial proportion of the 30% attributed to both high and low end production by Zeitlin. She suggests that contrary to the usual assumption that this is mainly low skill work, many of the women workers are doing highly skilled work and seeing through items from start to finish. She also describes the relatively low take up of high-tech and CADCAM equipment in the small manufacturing units which have sprung up over the last 15 years, not just because of the cost involved but because of the primary need for individual skills including sewing and hand-finishing.

Phizacklea points to a substantial sector of production workers based in London and also the West Midlands. But this does not show up in the Salmon study for the same reason that the designers I interviewed more or less disclaimed knowledge of or involvement in this aspect of the design process. This inattention, I have already argued, is a basic feature of the ethos of ‘artistic’ design which separates creative work from production. But it also accounts to some extent for the failings or at least the weaknesses of the design sector. Both myself and Phizacklea agree that small scale designers have emerged virtually at the same time as UK manufacture has been scaled
down and replaced by the tiny production units (of less than 10 employees) positioned close enough to the designers to provide a fast service as well as a cheap one. While the Salmon study recognises that this kind of pattern is distinctive to British fashion design culture ('The UK industry is composed of smaller organisations than USA or Europe' and 'The UK industry operates more independently of big business than USA or Europe, because it contains more owners/designers/managers' (Salmon 1991: 17)) it does not follow through the connection between the growth of these relatively new production units and the designer culture itself.

Other findings by Salmon also correspond with my own smaller study. For example the volume of foreign sales shows the USA and Japan to be the single biggest foreign markets. Even here these are mostly all licensed sales which bring in only a small proportion of returns to the UK designers (Salmon suggests that £125m of licensed sales brings in only £15m). Writing now in 1997, it is quite clear that these two markets, particularly Japan, have continued to show this interest in UK designers. Paul Smith, as we have seen, now has an enormous market in Japan, Whistles also have three of their own outlets there and several of the other designers who participated in the Salmon study moved towards producing primarily for Japan in the early 1990s when the UK market went into recession (e.g. Workers For Freedom, Vivienne Westwood, Katherine Hamnett). In the Salmon study only 35% of all sales were to the home market (making the UK the single biggest market). But in my study, carried out only a few years later, the designers sold primarily to UK consumers, and they managed their foreign sales on what could only be described as a haphazard basis.
An order would be placed by a big American department store by a buyer which then had to be produced and delivered to a strict deadline. This whole transaction was conducted primarily by the designers themselves. At the peak of their success, as we have already seen, Coates and Storey had three agents working for them in different countries, but this part of the work proved by far the most difficult to co-ordinate especially keeping track of foreign sales and getting paid for them. The administration and paperwork involved as well as the initial capital required to employ agents and to actually produce orders to the high standard expected of European and American outlets meant that throughout the time that these designers were working in an independent ‘own label’ capacity the most difficult thing was to produce for the foreign market and to their requirements. Because of this they preferred to focus their attention on the home market and to liaise with the fashion editors and journalists to attract the kind of publicity they needed.

Overall the findings of Salmon lead them to conclude that the UK designer fashion industry is a cottage industry. It remains under-capitalised and consequently unable to compete successfully on the international market. While design standards are considered to be high, the perceived quality of production makes foreign retailers and wholesalers less enthusiastic. Future growth will require better international sales. At the same time UK manufacturing will continue to decline, forcing UK designers to consider sourcing abroad. Likewise the poor quality of UK textiles and fabrics already means that most designers use foreign suppliers for fabrics. Finally the authors also recognise the high turnover in firms, pointing out (euphemistically) that many of the companies surveyed might not exist in the same form over the next few years and that
many of these were in practice one-person businesses rather than fully fledged companies.

Two of these conclusions are borne out in the present study. The designer industry needs to exert itself more successfully in the foreign market (this has happened to an extent with the recent success of Paul Smith and Vivienne Westwood), and British designers do indeed rely on foreign produced textiles with the exception of Paul Smith who single-handedly has encouraged fabric manufacturers based in the UK to attempt production of more high quality textiles. Sourcing abroad for fabric puts up the price of designer items and also takes the decline of home-based textile production as a fait accompli, something which Smith himself would dispute. The overall description of this sector as a cottage industry also corresponds with my own account, if anything the returns the designers I interviewed were a good deal less than those surveyed by Kurt Salmon. They make no mention of how regularly these small businesses disappear and cease trading, though they do say that there is a high turnover of firms. The disparity between their account and my own is that through more detailed description and analysis of the situation on the ground, I have sought to show just how perilous and unstable these small companies are. Indeed casting a brief glance down the 150 companies who participated in the Salmon survey, my estimate is that over 50% no longer exist in the same form they did in 1990 when the survey was carried out. A

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3 This estimate was arrived at by consulting the business directory for London based fashion firms and through inquiries made at the trade magazine Fashion Weekly.
good proportion of these will presumably have re-formed or else the designer will be working in a freelance capacity.

It is certainly the case that there has been an enormous change in the design industry since 1991. This too corresponds with my suggestion that the most regular feature of this sector is its instability. Since the early 1990s I would suggest this has intensified and there is even greater fluidity. The companies which were contacted by Salmon in 1990 have largely been replaced by other, even smaller ones. In this context it is highly unlikely that they will compete in the foreign market with any real force, since to do so would require better quality of both textiles and ‘finish’, access to capital for investment in more up to date equipment and to computer technology and sufficient capital in reserve to tide them over during the periods between the orders being delivered and payment being received. Caroline Coates said in interview that to build up foreign sales on a properly managed basis, would have required an injection of over £1m and even this would neither guarantee survival nor allow the company to employ more than another 20 workers.

For all of these reasons my suggestion here is that the encouragement to focus primarily on the foreign market is premature, to say the least. It is much more important for the UK design industry that ways are found of keeping the designers in work and employment, and of producing and securing relatively reliable home markets. This means thinking more concretely about how to turn these ‘everyday experiments in work’ into an industry with a long term rather than an opaque future
(Giddens 1997). I hinted earlier that there are opportunities for more productive partnerships being forged between designers and the women who actually do the sewing. The design studios which are the spaces of designer activity could quite easily accommodate production facilities to allow greater integration between design and production. The expensive sub-contracting layers could be cut down, the designers would not just know who was doing the work for them, but actually work alongside the machinists and finishers. With the support of new legislation including a minimum wage and other incentives including better childcare facilities, the home-workers could be brought into the workplace rather than kept out of it.

Annie Phizacklea points to the entrapment of many Asian women in the prevailing kinds of exploited labour by virtue of their place and role in the family. In these cases the middlemen are also ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ to whom they are culturally and familially bound as well as economically dependent. However this situation need not remain quite so fixed in the future. Local authorities have in the past shown themselves capable of providing community facilities, education, training and support grants to encourage unqualified people and ethnic minorities into better paid work. On the few occasions that this kind of initiative has been pursued in relation to the fashion and clothing industry the focus has been on the small manufacturers and the producers and not at all on the designers. Although described as a ‘fashion centre’ the Hackney scheme supported by the Greater London Council, catered almost entirely for the low
quality clothing sector and did not attempt to involve designers. The involvement of designers in the sort of scheme being suggested here would be part of a broader attempt to break down the division of labour which restricts machinists and homeworkers in low skill work and which keeps the designers from knowing about and playing an active role in the production of their orders. The drive to increase exports is similarly dependent on quality goods and this too would require the presence and participation of the designers. The historic location of the fashion industry in and around London's East End and the more recent revival of local fashion industries in the West and East Midlands are good examples of where these kinds of initiatives could quite easily be developed. Subsidised studio space for designers with access to shared high technology equipment as well as reduced rate schemes for new businesses willing to employ on a direct rather than a sub-contractual basis local workers would encourage the designers to participate in such schemes.

**Conclusion**

It could be argued that the designers who participated in this study, instead of fully surrendering to the Thatcherite rhetoric of the enterprise culture of the 1980s which they grew up with, have actually re-articulated it, so that it corresponds more closely with what Schwengell labels, in the German context, Kulturgesellschaft - 'culture-society' - (Schwengell 1991). As a model for overseeing some aspects of the transition to a post-industrial economy, this is a public sector-led practice rather than private

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4 The Hackney Fashion Centre was a GLC supported initiative designed to encourage the local fashion industry. It was production-focused and did not involve designers in any significant capacity.
sector trend, as its UK equivalent has been. British enterprise culture is consequently
the more conservative version of the German interest in culture as a regenerative force
dominated by 'the public sector ... and the liberal establishment' (Schwengell 1991: 139). However as we have seen, British fashion design is in fact heavily dependent on
and uniquely supported by the state in terms of training and education, and this stands
as something of a counterpoint (as well of course as a support) to the small business
culture into which the young designers rapidly move on leaving college.

Schwengell also argues that this interest in the 'culture-society' in Germany has a
utopian element, 'but also an empirical hypothesis that, in the choices between
different sets of goods and services, culture as the permanent examination of
preferences will become a key factor' (Schwengell 1991: 137). Fashion design would
thus be understood as part of what Hartwig, also writing about the German experience
labels the 'longing for art' in this case, for producers and consumers alike (Hartwig
1993). It would rely on public sector support in the form of grants and subsidies and it
would also have the support of the art schools and the fashion academics. Schwengell
also argues that the Kulturgesellschaft marks a rejection of 'classic elitist
modernism-that cultural experimentalism can only be experienced by a minority'
(Schwengell 1991: 141). This in turn is suggestive of a greater degree of access to
culture and its democratisation, a point also made by Lash and Urry as one of the
unexpected outcomes of the shift to an image-dominated and culturally-saturated
economy (Lash and Urry 1994). Once again the usefulness of this conceptualisation in
regard to fashion is that it offers the possibility for understanding fashion design's
existence as both a cultural phenomena and a set of commercial enterprises. The
popularisation of fashion design through the 1980s is indicative of a widening interest in its aesthetics (though, as we shall see in the chapter that follows, this is not unproblematic for the designers, since it often means an interest in fashion design exclusively as a visual image, which means people know about fashion by looking at the images, without buying a single item). While fashion per se has been a traditional feminine interest, what marks the broadening out of this in the 1980s is the visibility and confidence of fashion design as key force in British cultural life. To envisage fashion as part of the 'culture society' rather than simply the 'enterprise culture' touches on its symbolic existence and on the place it has won for itself as an art practice in the postmodern context where the strict divisions of high and low culture have given way to a flood of art and art-related activities often set alongside commercial practice. The most obvious example of this is the art-fashion mix found in a number of high street department stores. Jigsaw, for example regularly 'exhibits' prize winning pieces of sculpture from the degree shows in its front windows.

But my interest here has been on the producer side of 'cultural experimentalism', and with how careers and livelihoods have been created by young and mostly female fashion graduates, from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds. This also connects with Schwengell's recognition that the culturalisation of society also emerges out of 'real change in work patterns, family, community and social habits and so on'(ibid. 142). As I have argued throughout these pages it is easy and dangerous to simply write off these urban micro-economies of culture as dismal failures, or else to say that the real talent will pull through, leaving the weaker designers by the wayside. In fact the reverse of this is the case judging by the success
of Galliano and McQueen neither of whom could survive as independents in Britain and both of whom have been rescued by French haute couture and have consequently moved to Paris. Nor is it useful to see these enterprises I have described as so small as to be insignificant. It is both the smallness and the enormous cultural visibility of these practices which is indicative of their importance. Located in what once were the historic sites of the 19th century garment industry, in the ‘lace market’ in Nottingham, in the Shoreditch area of London where so many of the designers have their studios, in the old ‘jewellery quarter’ in Birmingham (and also in the ‘fashion quarter’ in New York), these enterprises reflect all the fluidity and unpredictability and sheer inventiveness of work in a post-modern ‘Kulturgesellschaft’.

At the heart of Lash and Urry’s argument in *Economies of Signs and Spaces* is the idea that the shift to a cultural economy, brings into being, a new popular awareness of aesthetics, an aesthetic reflexivity (Lash and Urry 1994). This coincides with the stronger structures in society and the older attachments of class and age and community declining and being replaced by those of a more openly individualist nature. The weakened structures now operate by virtually forcing people to be free, to take responsibility for a whole range of aspects of their lives, including in this case the creation of the source of their livelihoods in culture. According to Lash and Urry this need not be seen as an entirely negative phenomena. They do not spell out how or why, but I would suggest, drawing on the analysis I have presented here, that the individualisation of which they and other contemporary theorists including Beck and Giddens speak, can actually encourage, on the longer term, the need for new forms of association. Recognition of the problems arising from having to ‘fend for yourself’
might well produce more active and dynamic attempts to organise working conditions along more collaborative lines. This would suggest that self-reliance can also be re-deflected to produce a more socialised version of these same principles.

While all the turmoil of a do-it-yourself labour market doubtless creates very uncertain futures, the possibility of making work a source of self-actualisation, as we have seen the fashion designers do, also marks a difference from the days when work, for the majority of people, was just a job. I would argue that the memory of this 'life of drudgery' is passed on from parents to their children and produces a 'historically-informed' discourse which fuels the expectation of a more rewarding working life on the part of the younger generation. In addition, as Du Gay has recently reminded us, debates about the decline of the 'industrial worker' have to be accompanied by a recognition that many groups of workers including women and members of ethnic minorities were typically excluded from this category (Du Gay 1996). If, as we see here, young women who do not come from privileged backgrounds, now emphasise the importance of a work identity for themselves and also one which fits with their personal aspirations, and yes, even their fantasies, can sociologists only interpret this as a further feature of social regulation? Attractive though a Foucauldian framework is, as an account of the emergence of a new kind of worker, it remains far removed from the question of policy, and with debates about how this kind of work can be better organised. Or at any rate such discussions of the production of new social selves as a strategy of government do not easily lead to thinking more concretely about how a sector like this can produce better livelihoods for its workers. After all these young people do want to work! This leads me to counter, not just the 'over-regulationist'
approach of the neo-Foucauldians as well as the speculative theorising of Giddens and Beck, inspired though it may be, it also makes me question the arguments of the more conventional Marxist-influenced writers like Inge Bates who seems to see the desire on the part of young girls for an exciting job in fashion, as a kind of ‘false consciousness’. She dismisses these ambitions to be a designer and to work in a studio as girlish fantasies and says they would be better off looking for office work (Bates 1993). But on what grounds does she base this suggestion?

I want to propose instead that individualisation and ‘selfhood’ in work, in the sense described by Rose (1997), are processes, not fixed states of being, and that they are open to contestation and change and they could prove themselves unsustainable. Put simply it might well become apparent that they do not work! And so if ‘individuation’ is an increasingly common feature of British life as the old structures of class and community weaken, and if people are forced to rely on their own resources, then this too is a dynamic and changing process. While it is difficult to imagine a revival of traditional trade unionism, it is not difficult to envisage new forms of association and even ‘combination’ emerging as part of a re-socialisation of work, albeit in very different conditions. In the preceding chapters I have shown how necessary this is for fashion.

This kind of ‘micro-politics’ is the missing dimension in current ‘grand’ sociological thinking and it is this which leads to such sociological pessimism. As we have already seen the attachment to work on the part of the designers is overwhelming. It is a
crucial and profound part of their identities, something which for women who, in general terms, no longer expect to be dependent on a male income for their livelihoods, is also a relatively new phenomenon. And these are not a tiny and highly privileged sector of the population, they are not 'artists' in the traditional and elitist sense. They are drawn from a range of different backgrounds, they are overwhelmingly female and they have aspirations to have a home, family and children and also be able to pursue a career. So in this sense they are very ordinary people. They are not 'artists in berets' starving in garrets and indulging themselves in the pub or 'salon'. Their values and desires are important for the simple reason that they are not exceptional or deviant or even simply eccentric. Indeed, their ambitions have become almost the norm for cultural and creative workers. What the fashion designer looks for in work, is not unlike what the independent television producer also wants.

So, while it is tempting to interpret the frenzied activities of the young designers as a sign that the self-disciplining model of work, embellished with the promise of creativity has brutally misled them into a spiral of self-exploitation and an intensification of their own labour well beyond any conceivable legal limit were they in conventional employment, if we want to understand this as a social phenomena we also have to at least take into account the other side of this scenario of effort. We have to listen to their own accounts of their working practices. I have already pointed to a number of important features in this respect. For example they prefer to do the kind of creative work over which they have some degree of control and where they can see the fruits of their own labour, rather than take work, if it is available, for the high street market ('seeing 1000 blouses into production at Marks and Spencer' as one
fashion academic put it). There is good sense in this decision. The culture of creativity which is what they have been trained in, requires that 'talent' is nurtured early on, it also values more highly the notion of youth, and so if the designers have any chance at all of making it, and being successful, the few years after graduation is the time to pursue this goal. After living on a grant they can perhaps risk another few years of hardship and low incomes, especially when many of their counterparts will either be on the dole or else doing 'filling in' jobs before they embark on a real career.

There is also common sense in taking the option of trying to work for yourself by supplying a unit or stall at a city market in that, in many cases, the alternative for art and design graduates is unemployment, or else taking casual work in an entirely different field. The decision to put what has been learnt into practice immediately and being willing to work long hours to make a very modest living is not just a form of self-deception. Small businesses of any sort frequently demand this input of time. There is also the question of the qualitative experience of time. The long hours worked through the night (which we academics also do ourselves) are different from being on the night shift in a factory or even working late in the office. There are interruptions of coffee, there is invariably music and even videos or TV on in the background and there is a whole studio environment, so that the 'place' of work as well as the 'time' of work are also aestheticised, as a prop to counter the often mundane or repetitive activities, or simply to get through the long hours.
The designers are taking a risk in setting up in this kind of business, but they are doing so not because they are foolishly romantic and self deluding but actually because self-employment and freelancing around is one of the ways work is going in society and as young workers, they are participating in a kind of giant experiment. Can they, and all the other ‘freelancers’ and self-employed young workers in the various cultural fields, carve out a sustainable future for themselves? Will the culture industries prove themselves sufficiently expansive to provide enough opportunities to keep so many people in some kind of gainful activity? Can British fashion design find ways of resolving the seemingly intractable problem of creating a more stable relation between producers and consumers, or is it destined to remain a dis-integrated sector, one into which eager newcomers flood each year and old-timers anxiously move around, offering a bit of this and a bit of that in a patchwork of creative employment? This study suggests that this is not quite as ragged, romantic and irrational as it appears. Instead it is a hybrid of old and new, a rag trade and an art world, a field of economic activity where the participants are inventing careers for themselves. The value of a sociological analysis of fashion design ought to be that it offers a more socialised account of a field of activity typically understood in highly individualistic terms. The challenge here is to outline the potential of new social connections which might emerge out of this individualisation and to envisage the role of government and policy in such a changed world of work.
CHAPTER TEN

FASHION AND THE IMAGE INDUSTRIES

The Fluid Field of Fashion Journalism

By providing a display window for UK fashion design, the fashion media does indeed function as a pillar of support for the industry. Had it not been for the appearance of The Face magazine in 1980 and i-D in the same year, British Elle magazine in 1985, and the British edition of Marie Claire in 1988, the boom in UK designer fashion through the 1980s and into the 1990s could hardly have happened. However the magazines did not provide this support in an unconditional, unmediated or uncomplicated way. The fashion media ‘represents’ fashion and in so doing adds its own gloss, its own frame of meaning to the fashion items which serve as its raw material. The support it offers, and the role it plays, are limited by the various traditions and conventions which have defined fashion journalism as a specialist field, shaping what can be said, and in what kind of format. And so the initial and most significant difficulty faced in exploring the relations between these two sectors is that the fashion media exists within a set of institutions and organisations whose working practices are entirely different from those of fashion design. We are entering the world of journalism as soon as we step foot inside the offices of Marie Claire magazine, or Elle, or The Guardian newspaper. It is the professional codes of journalism which dictate the way in which fashion is packaged and presented on their various pages. The fashion media is therefore as separate and as autonomous from the world of design as
the fashion departments in the art schools are from the working lives of the designers. We are talking about an entirely different institutional environment.

The work of the editors and journalists as well as the other creative practitioners including photographers and stylists are driven by a different set of logics from that of the fashion designers. These are the logics of creative and editorial reputation, circulation figures, competition from rival publications and advertising revenue. These considerations play a key role in influencing the way in which fashion appears in these different media. But one of the significant features of fashion journalism is that it is set apart from other forms of journalism. The fashion media finds itself more closely linked with the fashion industry than would be the case in other journalistic fields. The low status of fashion writing within the hierarchical field of print journalism pushes those who work in fashion closer together. The writers, the photographers, fashion assistants and contributing editors share the same ‘fashion world’ as the designers, the company directors, the press officers and publicity personnel. This is a narrow, even closed world which perceives itself to be trivialised and associated with a kind of stupidity, for example Linda Grant in *The Guardian* (15th April 1997) writes ‘the brain of a supermodel isn’t much, and so it was that Naomi Campbell came late to understanding that the fashion industry is in the business of selling and that what sells are blonde-haired blue-eyed girls’ (Grant 1997: 8). Likewise in the aftermath of the murder of Gianni Versace another journalist wrote in *The Guardian*, ‘Why all the bother, sceptics ask, over a preening victim of fashion, who belongs to the fashion press, not to Fleet Street?’ (Glancey 1997: 19).
For this simple reason fashion journalism does not have the security and confidence of other media worlds. Tunstall argues that because specialist fields in journalism associated with consumer-based activities are advertising revenue led, they inevitably have a closer relationship with the industry which manufactures and promotes the product, since this is both the source of ‘news’ and of revenue (Tunstall 1971). Fashion, because of its feminine status, is something of a special case in this respect. It has a presence in both the women’s magazine market and in the daily press. Where the readership for the women’s magazines can be assumed to be interested in fashion, there is less of an emphasis on fashion having to prove itself. But in the daily press, where the staff journalists remain overwhelmingly male, even in the context of appearing within the remit of the ‘women’s page’, fashion is more unsure of its status. This often produces an overblown language, so that the reader is reminded once too often of the creative genius of John Galliano or Vivienne Westwood, triggering a counter-reaction exactly like that in the Daily Telegraph, again in the wake of Versace’s death where a headline ran ‘Was Versace Really A Genius?’ and the journalist added, ‘Nothing wrong with being vulgar. Versace had a very good idea. It’s just that it seems odd to treat it as high art’ (Johnson 1997: 21).

The limitations of the role played by the media in supporting the fashion sector stems from the conservatism and timidity of fashion journalism and its genres. This in turn is the product of the ethos which is particularly strong in the magazines of ‘keeping the advertisers and the readers happy’. In practice references to ‘the readers’ are typically a means of gatekeeping or controlling the flow of copy so that the advertisers are indeed
kept happy in the knowledge that their product is being seen by huge numbers of the right kind of people. This knowledge of the ‘readership’ gained, according to the editors through polls and market research, is actually a useful fiction, a means by which the power of the editor is deployed. It is a crucial part of his or her professional language. It is also one of the means by which all editorial decisions are justified. ‘Our readers wouldn’t like it’, is a familiar response. But resistance to change couched in these terms produces a strangely old-fashioned and unchanging feel to the fashion writing and reporting in the magazines. The reliance on ‘tried and tested’ formulae pushes fashion out on a limb in an otherwise rapidly changing and innovative media world. The images might be designed to shock, but the text remains familiar and culturally reassuring. On these pages, fashion reporting and writing conforms to a formula where no real offence is ever spoken and no rules appear to be broken. The ‘shock of the new’ remains carefully contained within the legitimate avant-gardism of fashion photography (e.g. the ‘dirty realism’ of grunge) and, as we shall see, the fashion media regulates itself with a system of informal censorship. Of all forms of the consumer culture, fashion remains the least open to self scrutiny and political debate. This is because the editors deem that fashion must steer well clear of politics, and fashion journalists are expected to go along with this. With Vogue acting more or less as a universal benchmark of quality, fashion-as-politics is only conceivable as a catchy idea for a ‘fashion story’.

Fashion reportage is almost the same now in the 1990s as it was when Barthes in 1967 turned his attention to fashion writing and found on the pages of the French fashion magazines, a kind of rhetoric which was always anxious to reassure the young female
reader that there was nothing out there in the world that was anything other than pleasurable or at least enjoyable. Barthes wrote 'Fashion's bon ton, which forbids it to offer anything aesthetically or morally displeasing, no doubt unites here with maternal language: it is the language of a mother who 'preserves' her daughter from all contact with evil' (Barthes 1967, 1983: 261). The world existed to give these young women excuses for luxury holidays and romantic reveries ('a weekend in the country'... 'visiting his chateau'... 'a Bermuda break'). What Barthes described, still more or less prevails today, the only difference being the presence of a lightly ironic tone, a hint of postmodern gloss on such stories, apparent in the playful, joky captions which indicates that these fashion 'stories' are not to be taken too seriously.

The rules on fashion reportage, the conventions which define the field of fashion representation also set the fashion world apart from the rest of the media, by virtue of this very conservatism. It is as though the overwhelming emphasis on images, which means that the magazines are primarily 'to-be-looked-at', somehow relegates the role of text to accessory, to banal commentary, to a poetics of mood, to simple information, caption, headline, 'statement', or else to the tradition of superlatives in fashion writing, including those associated with biography which locate the designer as creative artist.¹

Even the more radical youth culture oriented magazines like The Face and i-D to an extent abide by these rules. Although they have pioneered new styles of fashion

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¹ A good example of this can be found in the following lines of an obituary for the French couturier Madame Gres, which appeared in The Guardian: 'Her range is a deliberately limited one - her piece of ivory honed to perfection - and her appeal was not to the common herd of fashion followers but the connoisseurs who understood the subtleties of the great couturier's art' (McDowell 1994: 26).
photography, which sometimes suggest that the world is not such a pleasant place, (e.g. fashion as a poverty aesthetic as promoted by *The Face* and *i-D* in the early 1990s) this remains a visual genre with an artistic signature. It is 'just' a style. And, as Dick Hebdige has forcibly argued in relation to *The Face*, where everything is on the surface, laid out as a style, there can be no place for serious discussion, there are only superficial skirmishes or 'style wars' (Hebdige 1988). An article on manufacturing for Hussein Chalayan, or on graduates working for free? Forget it. In this context sociological analysis or political debate are either simply not the 'house style' or else are 1970s-style 'retro' phenomena and thus a bit of a joke.

There are some important points of difference between this smaller, more independent press and the large circulation glossies. *i-D* retains a focus on ordinary young, black and working-class men and women as the source of most fashion 'ideas'. In interview the fashion editor Edward Enningful even suggests that fashion designers look to the magazine for their inspiration: 'Designers use the magazine as a reference. Its a question of what's up, what's going on? Its a visual thing.' By arguing that fashion ideas come from youth cultures, *i-D* provides a more open and accessible version of fashion culture, certainly a counter to the haute couture approach. But this too has its limits if we also take into account what cannot be said or shown in *i-D* and what is ruled out by its own editorial commitment to promoting fashion and style without discussing its existence or its shortcomings as a place of work and a space of livelihoods. *The Face* also offers an important forum for cultural and creative workers from a whole range of fields to have their work seen and commented on. *The Face* unproblematically sets fashion design
alongside painting, sculpture, music and cinema without subjecting it to the old high and low culture divide. This might be seen as one of the key features of its own postmodern ethos, to break down that distinction. But this and other similar magazines also draw their own boundaries, which exclude any detailed or serious discussion of the social processes or economic relations which underpin fashion as a cultural activity. Instead they construct style and fashion as insider knowledge, possessed by young, urban taste-makers whose seemingly innate sense of ‘what’s going on’ sets them apart from the masses and puts them in the lead in terms of what Thornton argues is a kind of ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton 1996). This insight and taste is then recorded, re-worked and translated into the language of the magazine form by the editors, art-directors, photographers and stylists. The problem then is that as these firm up to become standard styles of reportage, the apparent openness of this media, becomes more closed.

Why have the magazines and fashion media developed in this way? To begin to answer this question we have to know more about how this media works, including who does which job, and how key decisions are reached. This is a more difficult task than might be imagined. Just as we have seen an extraordinary amount of job mobility within the field of fashion design, with many designers doing two jobs at once, so also, when we look towards the fashion media, we are confronted with occupational fluidity which makes it difficult if not impossible to actually define and specify different jobs and the people who do them. This is partly because fashion journalism and many of its associated activities, in particular fashion publicity, has grown enormously through the 1980s. Until then there were a limited number of outlets. The quality newspapers each had a fashion
editor and a weekly slot, usually a single page, and apart from this there were only the fashion and women’s magazines. But since the 1980s the scale of coverage given to fashion has expanded into television and across all the new magazine publications as well as commanding more space on the daily newspapers. Fashion has become a subject of interest to a much wider section of the population. This can be seen most clearly on the family magazine programmes on daytime TV. Not only do they have daily fashion reports, they also have the immensely popular fashion make-overs where couples of all ages come forward to have themselves re-styled from head to foot by a team of experts.

This attention to fashion can be explained as part of the general expansion of the media and more broadly of visual culture as well as connecting with the new attention to personal image and style led by the fashion retailers through the 1980s. The availability of cheaper full colour print technology, the celebrity value of the fashion ‘supermodels’ and the sales appeal of having a glamorous model on the front page of all the newspapers has given fashion a more prominent position as a cultural phenomena. One consequence of this is that a lot more people are employed in producing these fashion images and in writing about fashion. As in other similar areas of recent expansion (pop videos for example), specific jobs often emerge in the process of somebody doing one job and seeing gaps and opportunities existing in related areas which have as yet no formal title. This indeterminacy, which Tunstall and Elliott both argue are characteristics common to media occupations in general, gives rise to both high degrees of labour mobility and also to new job titles springing up almost overnight (Tunstall 1971, Elliott 1977).
For example a fashion manageress at a key department store will be meeting with buyers, fashion agents, designers and merchandisers as well as with the fashion press on an almost daily basis. With this kind of experience and with such a wide range of contacts a shift into being a fashion agent, or doing fashion public relations and sales, or even setting up an agency for photographers, models, stylists and others is not at all an unusual step to take. These are in effect media jobs, especially when we consider how reliant journalists now are on pre-written press release material for their own copy. Two respondents in this present study followed this kind of pathway. One young woman, Naihala Lasharie, started as a sales assistant at Harvey Nichols. She moved to a well known fashion public relations company, working for nothing for a few months and was then put on the payroll. After a year she began to build up her own list of clients. Now working for herself, her clients included the Italian label, Alberta Ferretti. As she put it ‘Mrs Ferretti was a good story, I got full page coverage for her in *Vogue*, *Elle* and *The Independent*’. Naihala then moved full time to promote the shoe designer Patrick Cox (whose Wannabe loafers became an international brand) and looked after the shops, sales and public relations. At the time of the interview she had left Patrick Cox to set up once again on her own in public relations and sales with 12 clients, her own office and a small staff.

Paul Davies also began his career in the mid 1980s in sales:

After two years at Harvey Nichols as senior sales assistant where I was liaising with buyers, merchandisers, floor controllers and suppliers, and then a further two years at Jones with responsibility for visual merchandising, I set up a Press Office for the group which at that time had 5 stores on the Kings Road and at Covent Garden. After that I went out on my own with the Z
Agency for models, hair and make-up artists, stylists and photographers. I was primarily a Photographer's Agent which involved trips to Germany to introduce the photographic side to the fashion magazines in Munich, and the same thing elsewhere (Paul Davies interviewed July 1995).

A third respondent, Marysia Woronieka, was, at the time of this interview, London's best know fashion PR. She too had created her job on the basis of experience in retail and getting to know key people:

I started aged 18 working in retail. Then I moved into wholesaling 'own collections' which I presented to the fashion editors. I went to parties and got to know more of the fashion people and then went to work in an advertising agency which I hated. From there I went to Jean Bennett PR who had 10 clients and I had lots of freedom and learnt about the whole fashion business. By the age of 22 I had my own company. There were fewer fashion magazines then, and a different kind of fashion press. It was a lot more limited. One of my jobs was advising clients (i.e. the designers) which editors to contact and try and get to come to the shows, even what clothes to highlight. So I was also advising them on their collections. I knew what the media would go for. The bubble burst at the end of the 1980s. There was a different, much more demanding fashion media and the designers often couldn't come up with the quality or the finish. You could have 800 people turn up for a show, but if the quality of the product wasn't up to scratch, it could all become a complete disaster. The publicity could be top notch, but that still couldn't solve the production problems the designers at the time all seemed to have. It was costing me more to have them on my books, so I eventually had to lose them and concentrate on my two main clients, Benetton and Jigsaw (Marysia Woroniecka interviewed June 1995).

As well as indicating the limits to the kind of support given to designer clients by their press and publicity agent, while also acknowledging the weaknesses in production, both of the above comments not only tell us something about the flexibility of the career structures opened up with the expansion of fashion culture and the growth of the fashion media through the 1980s, they also describe a high degree of integration and overlap between different sectors of the industry. Individuals can move from being shop assistants to setting up their own media companies within the space of less than 3 years.
Marysia Woronieka, has now, at the time of writing, moved to New York and is working as a fashion journalist setting up web site magazines.

Harriet Quick, who at the time of the interview was fashion editor for The Guardian, described her career moves as follows:

I have worked for 5 years as a journalist, after completing the one year post-graduate course at City University. I started in design journalism first on the World of Interiors magazine for 6 months. Then I went to Fashion Weekly as menswear editor. I was there for two years. In 1992 I was freelance and won the Jackie Moore Award in the Vogue writing competition. I went back to Fashion Weekly which was superb training for the whole fashion industry, and while I was there I was also freelancing for Elle and Vogue, and also doing some designer interviews for i-D. I started doing some bits for Louise Chunn who was then fashion editor at The Guardian and then I took over from her when she left to go to Vogue (Harriet Quick interviewed July 1995).

This demonstrates both the high degree of mobility within a specialist field like fashion journalism, and it describes ways of working which Philip Elliott has argued are standard practice in media journalism, e.g. doing several jobs at once, and also doing low pay or no pay work as a means of getting and remaining known, (Harriet would have worked for nothing for i-D). Again, this is not unique to fashion but is, argues Elliott, a way for journalists to maintain a more creative profile or of having some outlet for writing pieces which would not find a home within the more commercial sector (Elliott 1979). More specifically, the degree of to-ing and fro-ing between journalism and public relations encourages a kind of professional dialogue which makes it difficult for those involved to draw hard and fast lines around where reporting finishes and advertising
begins, a task made even more difficult with the rise of lucrative, sponsored ‘advertising features’ which have come to be known as ‘advertisorials’.

It is the rise of the ‘stylist’ which is the most significant development for the way in which fashion design finds itself represented in the media. The stylist operates within the space between the design work itself and the creation of a broader environment or setting for that work. He or she does this by bringing those items into a particular and ‘styled’ relationship with other pieces of clothing. Located mid-way between assistant to the fashion editor and photographer’s assistant, styling became a recognised job as these various assistants (often with an art school training in fine art or photography) began to realise their own creative input into the fashion pages and the freelance potential of their work. They planned and then put the whole image on the page together, including the combination of clothes, usually from a range of different designers, the look of the model, including hair and make-up, the props needed for the narrative or non-narrative setting, the lighting and the overall ‘look’ of the image or series of images. Starting off as assistants who ran errands and went out scouring the second hand markets for props, the stylists were increasingly given more of a free hand by imaginative editors (like Sally Brampton at Elle) and soon a number of them began to develop a distinctive ‘style’ of ‘styling’, to the point that other editors could put a name to a page without looking at the credits.

From this a new creative occupation was born. Their services were suddenly in demand across the fashion media, but also and more lucratively they were brought in to ‘style’
individual pop stars (like Kylie Minogue for example) and to work on pop promotional videos and also advertisments. This career developed out of the smaller independent magazines like The Face and i-D which were at the forefront of what came to be known as the ‘designer decade’. Spurning the need for advertising revenue the editors allowed the stylists to experiment with fashion on the page. Elle magazine when it was launched in 1985 also relied on the work of key stylists like Melanie Ward and Debbie Mason to give its fashion a look which was quite distinctive and different from Vogue, its main competitor. However it was The Face and i-D which helped to create the stylist as a new strata of media professionals. People like Judy Blame, Venetia Scott, Melanie Ward and Anna Cockburn all worked for nothing for these magazines, but it paid off in the longer term since the readership included art directors from international companies, advertising account managers and key people from the music industry. The magazines therefore provided an ideal venue for this kind of ‘art work’ and also helped to create these new jobs in the media industries (see figs 4-12).

Anna Cockburn described in interview how she had become a stylist:

I did two years of fine art at Central St Martin’s, but I knew I wasn’t going to paint. I was much more interesting in making images, so I left and worked as an assistant to a fashion photographer, knowing nothing much about fashion. For 6 months it was a bit of a nightmare. Then I got a job at Joseph (the designer fashion retailer) and it was interesting to me because of the contact with customers. I became more conscious of clothes and the personal thing of helping the customer to choose. At that stage I didn’t know what a stylist was. But I wanted a change and heard there was some work possibly at Harpers and Queens, assistant to the fashion editor and I got the job. During this time I was also working in a pub during the evening to pay my bills. At Harpers I found myself with 6 pages and whether it was a collection I saw, a film or a dream, or a painting, it was the idea that was important. The stylist and the photographer can both be mavericks and it works. I got promoted to Junior
Fashion Editor in 1988/9 and then the recession hit and it all became more commercial, you were forced to be less creative. I went to Elle and I was on Best Buys with cheaper clothes and of course I tried to make it good with the best photographers, but there was a lot of pressure and I didn’t really settle down. I then spent a year in America on various projects, came back as contributing fashion editor at Vogue ... it was a bit disappointing because everything had to be agreed and approved from the models to the photographers it was all done at the level of ‘house style’. Since then I have been completely freelance. The agent Camilla Lowther calls me up and says there is a job here or there. At the same time right through this whole period I have worked for The Face and i-D who don’t pay but it is exposure and its advertising for people like myself and the photographers who I’ve worked with for them. I ring them up when I have an idea of something I’d like to do for them. It always costs me but its worth it for the freedom, the exposure and the space. They are also generous with the credits which are more visible and bold.

This comment is worth quoting at length for the detail it provides on this emergent occupational category of the stylist and the insight it offers on a number of themes which have direct relevance to this and the following chapter. These are first the idea of ‘making images’ as creative work, second the opportunity of movement in this field from working as a shop assistant to being a fashion editor on a glossy magazine, third, the way in which in the magazine environment creativity conflicts more directly with commerce when the industry goes into a recession and finally the extraordinary working schedule of this young women who has, throughout the entire period of paid work, also done unpaid work for the style press in order to keep her own creative profile visible. It has been suggested that this kind of pattern of working is by no means unusual in media occupations (Tunstall 1971, Elliott 1979). I would argue however that the move towards working on a permanent, freelance basis is much more marked in the 1990s than it was in the 1970s. Not only are the culture industries more crowded than before. With the growth of the service sector and the impact of privatisation and de-regulation the expansion in self-employment and in freelance working has been enormous. This is a way of capital
unburdening itself of responsibility for its workers. In a high unemployment labour market the very idea of working for no pay or 'on spec' becomes more acceptable as young people are increasingly desperate to get their foot in the door.

It is not, I think, coincidental that the final destination of the fashion designers who participated in this study was to work in an entirely freelance capacity. With the same drift in fashion journalism we can reasonably ask how sustainable are these micro-economies, these self-employed careers? How long, for example, can somebody like Anna Cockburn carry on at this level of activity? What would happen to her career and her personal livelihood if she was ill for even a short period, or if she took time off to have a child? Is she a valuable asset because of her talent or is this as crowded and as competitive as the other media occupations? The growth in this kind of work has been more than matched by the number of young people keen to work in the fashion media. It is an area of work brimming over with graduates from universities and art schools including prospective writers, photographers, graphic designers, and 'art directors' (Garnham 1987), to the extent that the Prime Minister himself, writing in The Guardian claimed there to be over 300,000 people now employed in Britain in the design sector (Blair 1997: 18). As Anna Cockburn's career indicates most of the work in this field is of a freelance character. This is highly advantageous to the employers. It also creates more competition and almost certainly results in the undercutting of set rates of pay. Even the biggest circulation magazines like Marie Claire now operate with a tiny full time staff and a whole range of different kinds of contracts for different kinds of work, e.g. contributing fashion editor, associate editor, contributing features editor and so on.
This freelance culture produces new social relations in work. A stylist commissioned to put a series of pages together needs to know that she can pull in the photographer and the models and also get hold of the clothes she needs, to a tight deadline. The informal team-working and even sub-contracting which comes into being around this new freelance economy has been barely documented in academic writing or in the media. Often it emerges from friendship groups which go back to art-school or university, or else a stylist will develop a 'feel' for working with a particular photographer and they in turn might have contacts with a couple of models and a new fashion design graduate and they will all pull their resources together and do a number of 'tests' (a fashion story) which they will then present 'on spec' or for no pay to magazines like The Face or i-D. A number of international careers have been launched on this basis (the model Kate Moss teamed up with 'model-turned-photographer' Corinne Day for Vogue in 1993 having already done a number of trial shots or 'tests' for i-D). The magazines and newspapers are inundated with these presentations of work and many have now adopted a commission-only policy. Harriet Quick of The Guardian reported receiving up to 5 portfolios a week. Recognition of the value of exposure has also given rise to new glossy publications like Dazed and Confused and Don't Tell It (again non-paying) setting up in competition with The Face and i-D. The entire copy for these magazines is in effect 'donated' in the hope that it will be seen by magazine editors and advertising companies looking to recruit new talent.

Keeping track of the economics of this kind of work is a difficult task. Only by interviewing individual participants in the field can we develop any sense of how it functions and what kind of living these people actually make. Although a thorough
documentation of the field is beyond the scale of the present study, just to be able to get some picture of the kind of division of labour which exists in fashion journalism, the only practical methodology is indeed the individual interview. People move about so quickly and there are so many short term contracts or part time jobs that it is difficult to keep abreast of these changes. It is not at all unusual, indeed it is increasingly the norm, for a fashion editor to be employed for only three days a week on a major monthly fashion magazine or even a daily newspaper to put her pages together, leaving the rest of the week 'free' to freelance elsewhere (though not on a similar title) as a way of making up a full-time wage. At the same time full-time magazine staff also freelance or 'moonlight' for other slots, particularly on TV or radio. A highly paid full time fashion editor will also be filing copy for a foreign newspaper or will be working with a new cable channel or consulting for a design company. Editors regularly move on, some, like Glenda Bailey of Marie Claire, move to take up lucrative posts in New York, while others like Sally Brampton go on to combine teaching fashion journalism with freelance writing. Nor is it uncommon for well-known fashion editors to go to work for the big fashion companies like Armani, usually to press and publicity. Crossing the boundaries in this world is also common, for example the German designer, Gil Sander employed Anna Cockburn to add her distinctive 'styling' talents to Sander's original collection. This involved designing the catwalk show (make-up, set, logo, lights, music, etc.) and then also styling the models with the clothes for a series of advertisements and an in-house brochure. This shows how in the world of the image industries, fashion design recognises the need for additional skills in the transition from three dimensional fashion to the one dimensional page, or from the art of fashion to the art-work of the page.
Fashion is not the only field to have so many ill-defined jobs and such high degrees of job mobility. This is a mark of the creative sector as a whole, although the nearest comparison is the music industry where, as Negus has argued, the creative ethos, produces occupational fluidity unheard of elsewhere (Negus 1992). Artists can move into production, and even a shift into journalism is not uncommon, while journalists are often aspirant musicians, waiting for a break. In the fashion world it is uncommon, but not altogether exceptional, for designers to move into journalism (Helen Storey has recently made such a move). And while several editors or journalists might have started out with ambitions to be a designer (Glenda Bailey, editor of British Marie Claire from 1988-1995, studied fashion design before moving into journalism) most of the journalists have simply combined an interest in fashion and style with writing and reporting. However like the music industry this is a small and close knit community where everybody seems to know everybody else. It is also a precarious world in terms of both jobs and income and this means that individuals are continually thinking and projecting into the future for contacts, new work or consultancies or similar offers. There is also, as we have seen, a high degree of mobility between press office work and journalism and together these factors produce a culture of consensus in the magazines and the fashion press. It is simply not worth upsetting those who occupy positions of power. Journalists quickly learn the rules of the game and this means knowing what kind of story not to offer.

The relatively closed world of fashion makes it all the more difficult to untangle the relationship between fashion design and the fashion media. It is not as though we can
simply place the designers in one corner and the editors and journalists in the other. There is so much mediation (through the public relations departments, press offices and agents) between the two that the very idea of looking at how the fashion media ‘represents’ fashion design is immediately more complicated than it might seem. Each separate magazine or newspaper or TV programme has its own particular ‘house style’, its own image of itself and of its audience or readership. Different media favour different kinds of fashion. We would therefore need to tackle a further set of relations between actual rather than imagined readers and consumers and their fashion preferences (fantasy or otherwise) in order to chart the connection between editorial policy and the choice of clothes featured on the pages.

‘It’s Not a Marie Claire Story’

There are hard and fast rules which govern the field of fashion journalism and magazine production which set it apart from other areas. I have already argued that these have remained in place over a longer period of time than might be expected. The conservatism which characterises fashion journalism is also the product of its marginal and feminine status. It has managed to safeguard its own tradition, one which perceives itself to be quite separate from the world of mainstream journalism. There is, for example, a reliance on a set of conventions and a generic structure for dealing with fashion which date back to the 1920s heyday of Vogue magazine and its commitment to fashion as art and as luxury consumption for upper middle-class women. This is the dominant tradition of
fashion journalism. Despite the various popularising forms of fashion media (like BBC’s The Clothes Show) the Vogue model retains a strong influence over the practitioners. The old elitist image of fashion lingers among the professionals, in particular in their respect for the litany of Vogue editors whose snobbishness and tyrannical ways of working are mythologised as part of fashion history. Figures like Diana Vreeland, one of the most influential of Vogue editors for over 30 years and currently Suzy Menkes of the International Herald Tribune, embody this fearsome, flamboyant and immensely respected image. Students are encouraged to emulate their style of writing, with its eagle eye for detail combined with sweeping judgements and dramatic proclamations, as in the famous statement by Vreeland ‘Pink is the navy blue of India’ (quoted by Billen 1996: 7). Because the editors see fashion as an extension of high culture, a branch of the fine arts which has been neglected, while at the same time also part of luxury consumer culture, their attention is unlikely to be focussed on issues like pay and working conditions in the industry. They might express concern when designers go out of business, or they might occassionally write about the economic state of the industry as a whole (although this is unusual), but these are not priorities. This is not what readers want to hear about. ‘Its not a Marie Claire story’.

Instead the editors deal in a world of fashion images and fashion fantasies. The emphasis on looking, with function and information being required simply to describe or introduce a new seasonal look, means that the editors can indulge all their own fantasies and show clothes which are well beyond the financial reach of the readership. The logic of the
fashion image on the page is not primarily to stimulate immediate consumption. The reader need not feel any obligation to buy, this is not a selling strategy, nor is it an advertisement, instead it is a journalistic strategy. For example in one issue of *The Guardian* (4th April 1997) the clothes shown on the three page spread by the designer Alberta Ferretti included a chiffon dress at £1010, a kimono coat at £1467 and a chiffon skirt at £601. This article comprised of a profile of the woman and her work and it described her success in business and her high-tech factory in northern Italy. Ferretti’s clothes are completely outside the range of even the affluent consumer, and so the point of running such a feature is to say something to the readers about Ferretti as somebody they ought to know about, and to show the work so that it evokes a certain mood, a range of meanings about beauty, wealth and ‘lifestyle’. The abstract and sexually evocative way the pictures are shot (in one picture the model is absent-mindedly touching herself as though aroused simply by the clothes she is wearing) appeal, in exactly the way Bourdieu describes, to the features of taste and distinction by which particular readers are addressed as a means of confirming their class, status and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). *Guardian* readers are expected not to be shocked precisely because these are clothes which carry an art value. They are ‘pieces’ to be admired. This determines how they are presented on the page and how they are written about. As long as the editor is confident that *Guardian* readers will not be put off by such a feature (though a few might write in to complain about the prices, as in this case one reader did ‘I mean £1,010 for a tattered up bit of net curtain-as I say, disgusting and obscene’ *The Guardian Weekend* 12th April 1997) and that they will consume the images at the level of art, fantasy and enjoyment, she can be satisfied that she has made the right choice. The fashion copy both
creates a particular kind of readership and flatters it with its good taste. Harriet Quick explained her editorial strategy at The Guardian in the following terms:

With the weekend supplement we are in the fortunate position of being able to be adventurous. There is a good deal of forward thinking, a mix of literature, art, music, culture. Newspapers are obviously different from magazines, we don't have to be cutting edge and we take fewer risks visually. We have to make fashion communicable and accessible. The writing has to balance detail with the visual side, information with the conceptual angle.

This comment locates fashion within a triple framework of the arts and culture, lifestyle and leisure interests and, as we have seen, less directly with consumer culture. With such a broader remit, it might be expected that other issues which relate more to the fashion industry as a whole, like sales, turnover, export and import, might also be covered. But this is very rarely the case. There are as fixed a set of genres of fashion writing as there are of fashion imagery. These do not include the business or economics of fashion, or its existence as a sector of employment. While newspapers like The Guardian will run the occasional story on the success of Marks and Spencer or else a profile on a key retailer like Jigsaw or Whistles there is little serious attention given generally to how clothes are produced and who exactly consumes them. Fashion journalism and fashion photography are unique in the field of mass communications. The fashion pages show clothes available for consumption and they list the stockists, or else they talk about designers and retailers and they report on the new collections, but these pages do not have to sell the clothes.

Because they are neither advertisements nor 'reviews' in the traditional sense, nor are they simply consumer information they occupy a vague and indeterminate visual space. It is precisely this that licenses the move into the field of fantasy and sexuality. The
photographers and stylists welcome the creative freedom provided on the fashion pages. For them it is a unique opportunity to show off their talent. The magazine page functions like the gallery wall. For the editors and the creative teams the art work of the page takes precedence over the clothes that are being featured. Sometimes they can barely be seen, or else they fade into the background. Edward Enningful, fashion editor of *i-D* described the fashion pages in the following terms: 'The magazine itself is art. The main thing about the work here is that it is creative. *i-D* isn't fashion, its ahead of fashion'. Sheryl Garrett, editor of *The Face* took this even further when she said that the art directors sometimes commissioned designers to create specific fashion pieces to go with the pages:

> Fashion-wise we are pushing back the barriers, its not a question of simply presenting clothes. Often we commission clothes to be designed to go with the overall art idea. Its more of an art direction approach to fashion. And because of this the best fashion photographers and stylists will for us for free. *The Face* is a career ladder, a huge opportunity for creative professionals to get attention and to show their work.

What these statements show is that the style magazines promote their own art work and their own overall look or image. They are much less concerned about showing the work of this or that designer. Fashion fits into the overall vision of the editors, photographers and the stylists but it does not define what they do. So in this sense even the style press, so committed to fashion, cannot be said to be supporting it or promoting it in any direct and unmediated way. The art-work is instead the means by which the style press ‘advertises’ its own creative talent. It offers valuable exposure for the photographers, stylists and also the models. Sheryl Garret said in interview that if one of the supermodels wants to change her image, or liven up a slightly flagging reputation, she will offer to do a
cover shot and fashion spread with her favourite creative team at The Face, again for no fee. This ensures that the public visibility of fashion is raised, but it is visual art, the art of the page, not the art of the dress or coat on the rails at Harvey Nichols that is being sold.

The style press encourage their freelance creative teams to produce images which break boundaries and attract a lot of attention. Sheryl Garrett described how this happened with a fashion spread in The Face which featured models splattered in blood: ‘Most of the magazines followed up Tarantino images with the men in suits, they played around with that. What we did was the blood issue, the fashion with blood story’. Controversial images like these also means publicity for the photographers and stylists and for the magazine itself. It is by giving the creative teams a ‘free hand’ with the fashion pages that the work ends up being shown in exhibitions and gaining the approval of the art critics. If newspapers like The Guardian provide readers with cultural capital through their fashion coverage, and thus also ‘cultivate’ the readership, the style press participates in a similar process through its embodiment and distribution of ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton 1996).

But, unlike art magazines and journals, magazines like The Face or i-D which are by no means only visual publications and do carry written text, do not however, run any serious or critical commentaries on the sort of work they promote and feature on their own pages. As Hebdige points out, there is only the snatchy title, the witty caption, or the ironic few lines of commentary. This precludes the possibility of dialogue or critique or even judgement. As Hebdige says, it simply puts everything on the surface (Hebdige 1988).
The art directors and graphic designers also relegate fashion to second place in this visual field. The photographers and stylists see this as their space and do with it as they please, they compose the page and they have no obligation to fashion designers, they merely use their work where it suits. And while it could be argued that it is, nonetheless by this means that fashion has achieved the status it has craved, (this is the point at which fashion is turned into an aesthetic image), because there is no text, no reviews, and thus no procedures or criteria for judgement (as there is in film criticism or music) fashion remains a 'spread' and its values are simply stated or asserted. There is no substantial accompanying discourse which debates questions of value or which casts judgement on the basis of agreed criteria. And so despite the flattening out of the old distinctions between high and low culture which have allowed fashion to be represented as art, it is art without analysis, critique or judgement. Fashion has in effect become image without text and a set of images almost without an object.

The fashion item need hardly exist as an object for sale in the shops, because its existence is more concrete, more assured and much more widely seen on the page. The style press and the other magazines have contributed to the visibility and popularity of fashion culture, but the truly postmodern dilemma for the fashion designers is that fashion has a more substantial and a more popular existence as an image on the page, than it has as a set of clothes on the rail. As an economy of images operating in the field of magazine and newspaper publishing, it works effectively, the pictures on the front pages sell more
copies, while the economy of fashion, the dresses themselves rather than the images of the dresses on the page, tells a different story altogether.

The fashion pages are also increasingly art or exhibition spaces. The same photographers work for the glossy, more commercial magazines as for The Face and i-D and they bring their aesthetic values to both, even if they are forced to make some compromises for Marie Claire, Elle or even Vogue (though Vogue has always championed strong art direction). Whether these are narrativised features where the pictures tell a story, and create a particular visual effect, or where the emphasis is on the image, as news or information, the aim is for an aesthetic effect. A fashion feature centres around the visual image and it is this surplus of visuality, 'spreading' out all over the pages, which has attracted the critical attention of feminist cultural theorists who have seen these spaces as also sites for fantasy and female visual pleasure (Evans and Thornton 1990, Griggers 1992, Fuss 1995). This is important, usually psychoanalytically informed work. But its exclusive focus on the fashion spectacle reinforces the wider cultural emphasis on the image. The sexual politics of the page produces a kind of sociological amnesia as though nobody was employed to produce the pages or to create the clothes.

The Power of the Editors

I have argued that fashion journalism is a peculiarly unchanging kind of practice. The forms or 'slots' for fashion coverage are narrow and restricted. Fashion stories tend to fit
with one of the following types; first, the designer or company profile or interview; second, the reports from the collections; third, the fashion spread or ‘centrefold’; fourth, the consumer-oriented feature (e.g. Marie Claire’s influential ‘100 Best Buys’); and fifth, the single item feature (the ‘new’ fitted silk shirt). These genres regulate the flow of fashion knowledge and they also create a relatively self-contained world of image where text is a subordinate feature. It is on this basis that fashion meanings are constructed. As a specialist field, it was Vogue magazine which in the early years of the century, established these rules of fashion reporting. Other magazines followed suit and also provided advertisers with the wider readership they required. The key figures in this world were the fashion editors, feared and adulated, dominating personalities who ruled over the world of fashion and were also patrons to both the designers and the photographers. The history of fashion magazines is full of such legendary characters. The spectacular figure of Diana Vreeland, contributor to and editor of American Vogue from 1940 to 1971 was the most influential of these figures and fashion editors since then have almost inevitably acknowledged the importance of her editorial style and have sought to emulate the avant-garde aspects of her style in their own practice. In particular they have inherited the Vogue rhetoric which simply asserts the overwhelming importance of fashion, as an obvious and unquestionable truth, and with this, women’s love of luxury as the embodiment of femininity. As Billen has recently put it, ‘Vogue delivers such an elevated version of an already elevated lifestyle …’ (Billen 1996: 7).

This image of the fashion editor as a powerful and influential figure, an icon of glamour and a patron of the arts continues to influence the practice of fashion journalism today.
The emphasis on status and hierarchy is important as the editors have had to fight to be taken seriously outside their own territory. Women's magazines and the glossy fashion magazines have always been quite separate from the broader field of journalism. As a place of employment this is a woman's world, in the same way that fashion education in the art schools has also been dominated by a series of strong and influential women. And for all these reasons, women's magazine journalism, including fashion journalism, occupies a much lower status than most other forms of journalism. Most male journalists consider it lightweight, trivial, entertainment, domestic and consumer-based and as a result, it is hard for journalists working in this area to move outwards into other fields, particularly news or feature writing for the press or for TV.

This induces a sense of isolation and inferiority which makes the fashion world all the more brittle and defensive, more self-contained and more concerned with its own status and importance than might otherwise be the case. It is not surprising that everybody knows everybody else and although there is a high degree of labour mobility it is very much within the same field. Lacking the broad cultural capital of the Oxbridge-educated journalist, few fashion journalists ever find themselves moving across different specialisms on a newspaper as staff journalists are still expected to do. No fashion editor ever moves to a general editorship in the press or TV, and it is rare for a beauty editor to move out of her field. While many of the journalists who write features for the new men's magazines also crossover into the wider media (Tony Parsons is a critic for The Late Review on BBC2, for example) this is primarily because what makes the men's magazine market different, they cover a wider range of material than their female
counterparts. Sports, politics, music, even literature all command more space in FHM, GQ and Arena than they do in Marie Claire, Elle or Vogue. ‘But we are fashion’ is how the editors would respond to this point. But because they are so concerned fashion images and so little with the fashion industry, it is actually qualified support that the fashion editors provide for the fashion industry. What they do is much narrower. They set the agendas for what kind of look will be promoted each season. They go to the shows and then sift through all the work shown on the catwalk and presented to them in the smaller studios and decide which designers to feature and which looks to promote. This conforms with the gatekeeping role of editors across the different forms of media, they have the power to select a story and veto other stories. In fashion the editors play a hands-on role. Glenda Bailey, also the overall editor of Marie Claire said in interview that she always had the final say on the fashion pages, because, as she put it, they were so central to the image of the magazine as a whole:

We sit round after the collections, with the team and have an ideas session, we've already done our predictions and our own forecasting. That's where the training comes in. We have this sense of what the designers are going to be doing and usually we're right. Good fashion fits with the way society is going, and that's what we also pick up on. Its my decision in the end, I have to take that responsibility and thank goodness its worked so well. We do our own research through the magazine twice a year and ask the readers to give comments on every article including all the fashion features and there is often no surprise, I find that my theories are the same as what the research shows.
Glenda Bailey also described her commitment to showing the work of British designers:

The great thing about Britain and the art schools is that they do encourage eccentricity and individuality. It's all so connected with youth culture and working-class life and the greyness of Manchester and that kind of thing. It's also because we encourage people to fight against things. In my first year at Kingston Helen Storey and John Richmond were my hero and heroine. They fought against all the rules and discipline.

These are the terms on which the editors express their support for British fashion. It's a championing role, and one which also emphasises, as Glenda Bailey does here, the 'eccentricity' of the British designers. But this merely confirms the image of the designers who must be bad at business if they are good at design. We have already seen how one editor arranged for a stockist to take a few items from the collection of Yvette M and Lisa R so that she could feature them in her magazine. If an editor really 'believes' in an up and coming designer she will often go to great lengths to help them gain a foothold in the industry. This can also tipple over to the role of 'patron'. For example it is widely recognised and endlessly acknowledged in the fashion media that the ex-editor of British Vogue Anna Wintour acted in this role on behalf of John Galliano. She took him to parties and introduced him to wealthy businessmen who might be potential 'backers', she advised him and supported and gave him space in Vogue. Inevitably this helped him gain the post he now holds as chief designer for Givenchy in Paris.

This kind of support then sets a whole set of gendered relations in motion where Galliano becomes the editors' favourite and gets, as we have already seen, more coverage than all the other UK designers put together. The form of patronage is quite unique to fashion and is very much the product of it being a self-enclosed, culturally anxious and virtually
self-regulating world, where notions of objectivity and impartiality do not have the same impact as they do elsewhere in journalism. Indeed because they adhere to traditional 'high culture' values, the editors would possibly see this role as patron of the arts as a kind of philanthropy, a way of helping the poor starving artist to achieve the success he deserves. This is another sign of how old-fashioned and conservative the fashion editors are. This role of patron is in fact far removed from how contemporary artists define their own role. Most of them would angrily reject the idea of patron as a throwback to the 18th century. Anna Wintour's patronage of John Galliano, reveals the extent to which fashion imagines itself to be following the rules of high culture while in fact it is quite out of touch with the contemporary politics of art. While this might work as a kind of camp comedy, a means by which fashion gently pokes fun at itself, this is also one of the ways by which the mostly gay 'fashion boys' find themselves the darlings of the editors and journalists. In the emotionally charged world of the catwalk shows, the passionate relations between the gay, male designers and the female journalists, finds the female designers squeezed out of this particular fashion spectacle.

Bourdieu provides an interesting account of this positioning of critics and commentators close to the artist. What he argues is that as a cultural practice develops its commentators position themselves more and more closely to the creative figures at the centre, in this case the designers. The writing and reporting is often produced more for them than it is for readers or for the public, so that they, in effect, write the designer into being, they 'create the creators' as Bourdieu puts it (Bourdieu 1993b: 78). By this means the critics also feel as though they can share something of the aura of the artist, they have
earned their place in the sun and they can bask in the warm light. In this respect 'the discourse about the work is not mere accompaniment, but a stage in the production of the work' (Bourdieu 1993b: 111). Bourdieu also says 'Words, names, schools ... are so important only because they make things' (Bourdieu 1993b: 106). This process clearly happens in the world of fashion where a few key figures can shape the career of an equally tiny number of designers and can begin a snowball effect so that within some period of time the artist, designer or whoever at the centre becomes a household name. This is exactly what has happened with John Galliano and McQueen, less so with Westwood, but still enough to make this threesome now representative of the summation of British talent. My point here is that though Bourdieu is right and this process takes place across the artistic field, the art critic does painting and fine art the service of writing seriously about it. The analysis and commentary, directed though it may be at the artist, at least performs an intellectual role in producing criticism. This is an altogether different activity from being a fashion editor and patron and simply publicising and enthusing about this or that designer.

If we take into account this individualising process, which produces the designers as simultaneously eccentric artists and also part of the celebrity world of popular culture, we can see the dangers as fashion becomes more and more reliant on media 'hype' and on whatever is new or 'up and coming', including the designers themselves. As Sally Brampton, unusually for an editor, said in interview (June 1994), 'the irresponsible thing is that the fashion press has a voracious appetite for novelty'. This means that the editors
and journalists have priorities which appear to promote UK fashion but which in fact also contribute to its problems. The instant negation of the recent past ('say goodbye to this summer's chiffon frills and move into something much sharper'), the forgetfulness about last year's successful designers, as well as the increasing pace of fashion coverage set by the global media, which means that the designers themselves have to run to keep up, are not necessarily good news for the stars of last year or the previous year, nor is it much help to the designers who cannot afford to put on a show or to pay a good public relations company. Like the music industry, a good deal of journalism is increasingly 'PR driven'. Just as the record company will jet out a planeful of journalists to Los Angeles to meet Meat Loaf and wine and dine them in the process, in the expectation of a good review, the big fashion companies have huge budgets for the launch of a new line or even just a new collection. The opening of a 'flagship' store in Sloane Street, Bond Street or another similar location will result in editors and journalists being inundated with invites and the promise of interviews. Indeed it is just this kind of promotion which will result in a feature like that described earlier on the work of Alberta Ferretti. The article coincided with the opening of a new and exclusive store on Sloane Street in London.

The smallness of the world I have just described and the feeling of being marginalised from other fields lessens the possibility of a more open and critical form of journalism. Where a new book, or film or a new record or play can be panned by the critics, it is very different in fashion. It is not unusual for editors who have published even mildly critical reports on a new collection (along the lines of 'Lacroix was disappointing') to find themselves barred from entrance and deprived of an invitation the following season. Petty
though it may seem, the shows are where the editors do their groundwork and they have to be able to see these one-off events. If filing poor copy means they won’t get invited back, this at least influences what they say. The designers can get away with it because, after all they are ‘artists’ and they can be as temperamental as they like. This reliance on keeping in with the designers mean that editors will back down from covering even a news item which might cast the designer in a poor light. I was told by the fashion editor of a daily broadsheet that it would be ‘more than my job is worth’ to cover a story which suggested that one of the leading American designers was using cheap, exploited labour to manufacture her clothes, even though this story came from reliable sources and had already surfaced in the American press. The response was similar when I suggested a story myself, on what happens when UK designers are forced out of business. The reason given on the first issue was that this editor might at some point in the future need to do an interview with the American designer and would not want to find herself refused and that on the question of designers going out of business, she didn’t want to be seen as giving poor publicity to the British fashion industry!

There are other issues which shape the nature of fashion coverage. The growth of the star system and its connections with the wider world of show business and entertainment means that the editors will focus more on international fashion and on haute couture because that is where the good stories (expensive press packs, luxury lunches, flagship opening parties) are. Their commitment to promoting British fashion needs then to be set alongside the competition from the big brand names like Calvin Klein, Donna Karan and the Italian designers all of whom can afford the kind of publicity stunts and perks which
are beyond the wildest dreams of any single British designer. As this trend begins to set the pace for fashion coverage, and as the haute couture collections begin to show at different times across the year (rather than on the traditional seasonal basis) the British designers find themselves squeezed into the London Fashion Week or into the low seasons or quiet times for the fashion press (e.g. mid-summer, mid-winter). The increasing prominence of the brand names also has the effect of isolating and marginalising the UK designers. International designer clothes might well be beyond the reach of most consumers but they also provide images which will surface on the high street soon after the shows. There is no longer the long wait for the high street versions to eventually get into the shops, as high street retailers can now make use of high-technology batch production, or simply the proximity of the local labour market, to rapidly produce cheaper copies so that what is on the catwalk one week can be in Miss Selfridge two or three weeks later. The fashion media play a role in orchestrating this connection through their high profile reports on all the shows. In-house designers at Kookai, Warehouse or French Connection only have to read the papers to see what they should be concentrating on over the next few weeks. With all the power and resources of international haute couture on the one hand and the high street on the other, the British designers begin to look less exciting. They cannot command the same kind of attention unless they themselves have moved into this international fashion circuit. The cottage industry of UK design finds itself in competition with multi-national companies and huge corporations like Donna Karan or Calvin Klein. The small scale designers fade away from the spotlight and the catwalk and the European houses (all subsidiaries of giant corporations) hand-pick one or two a year to provide a frisson of celebrity (e.g. Stella
McCartney's move to Chloe in Paris to replace Karl Lagerfeld (16/4/97); novelty (McQueen at Givenchy) or glamour and eccentricity (Westwood).

**Conclusion**

The relation between fashion design and the fashion media is one of dislocation and unevenness. The media might be a pillar of support, but this does not mean that the gossamer slips, the silky summer dresses, do not slide to a crumpled heap on the ground every so often. This is not the fault of the fashion media, it is after all an image industry, and for the editors the priority is not the designers, but their own consumers, the readers who buy the magazines. While the editors claim that their readers are the sort of people who would want to buy the clothes found on their pages, they are not really thinking about actual sales. These clothes play a symbolic role in the fantasies and aspirations of the readers. The fashion pages are fantasy spaces through which the reader is free to wander, but there is nothing there that pushes her in the direction of the shops. Instead the images and the meanings attributed to them, produce taste groups who distinguish themselves on the basis of the kind of cultural capital which accrues from these configurations of meaning. The taste groups also are produced for the benefit of the advertisers. So the fashion magazines, as Sean Nixon writing on the growth of the new men’s magazines argues, serve a double function of providing advertisers with the right kind of visual and textual environment for their products (in the case of the fashion magazines, a luxury, ‘glossy’ environment, rather like an upmarket department store) and
they also create for the advertisers a 'shaped up' group of consumers (Nixon 1996). Nixon shows how effective this has been in the promotion of a range of male products including jeans and male toiletries.

However Nixon's model does not have the same direct applicability when we look at the women's fashion media and fashion design. There is no one-to-one relationship because the fashion spreads are not advertisements and the designers cannot afford to advertise themselves. Even with a good public relations company when and where the designers clothes get featured is something of a hit and miss affair. Nor is there any guarantee that coverage will generate sales, especially if the item can barely be seen. In short this is not how women's magazines work. Fashion on the page is there to be looked at and a whole range of activities intervene before this process of looking leads to the concrete act of purchasing. There is no necessary relation between the play of pleasure, tension and anxiety in looking and the very different social relations of consumption.

The fashion magazines and the fashion press operate within an economy of looking. They also produce distinct cultural values which feed directly into the formation of taste groups for the broader consumer culture. The editors provide the advertisers with an appropriate visual environment within which they can insert their own copy. So the visual pleasures of the fashion pages are actually used indirectly to sell other products like perfume, make-up, shoes, bags, in fact all the goods whose market size allows them to pay for expensive advertising space, and once again the fashion industry, particularly the small,
independent British fashion design industry comes off worse. As far as fashion is concerned it is difficult to avoid coming to a Baudrillardian conclusion about the economy of the image replacing and even negating the economy of the actual product (Baudrillard 1988: 166). The consequences of the quite profound imbalance which now exists between the success of British fashion as part of the image industries, and fashion design as a straggling, crisis-ridden sector, can however be explained in more concretely sociological terms than those provided by Baudrillard. Quite simply there are two interlocking economic circuits in operation in this field of fashion, one belongs to the ever-expanding world of the image and of visual culture, to which vast numbers of people have relatively easy access at relatively low cost, while the other belongs to the world of making things and selling them, in a highly competitive market, where small producers (ie the designers) find it impossible, as a result of the various agents in the fashion production and distribution chain who each take their percentage, to sell their clothes cheap enough to attract a bigger slice of the market. This picture is complicated further by the role of the image industries as a de facto market for the designers, anxious to establish a name for themselves independent or prior to sales!

With the economic advantage of mass markets in the form of readers, nonetheless the fashion media remains trapped in a format which came into being when fashion was an exclusively female and ‘society’ or upper-class interest. The history of Vogue magazine reveals a lineage of ‘grande dame’ editors most of whom were unashamedly elitist in their desire to create a luxury magazine for well-to-do readers. These editors did a great deal to bring fashion design into prominence as an art. They did this partly by treating key
fashion designers as creative geniuses. They also provided the space in which fashion photography was able to establish itself, and this too was celebrated as a branch of modern art. Since then this tradition has been taken as the canon of fashion journalism. The editor of *Vogue* magazine occupies the best seat at all the shows and her power and influence are undisputed. Because fashion feels itself to occupy an inferior place in high culture and also in the world of serious journalism, and because it does not really want to be associated with mass culture, in just the same way as it does it utmost to dissociate itself from mass production, this creates an inward-looking and culturally isolated group of fashion media professionals, who seem to belong to a time when politics did not intrude in the world of fashion and when fashion people had no need to dirty their hands with what went on in the outside world. There are traces of this kind of thinking across the fashion media, in particular an insistence on the irrelevance of issues raised by feminism or in disciplines like sociology or cultural studies. This is expressed in different ways according to the different media. For example while the editor of *The Face*, Sheryl Garrett would, I am sure, recognise the importance of sexual politics in fashion and while Edward Enningful of *i-D* as a young Ghanian living in Britain, would, like Garrett, want to bring to bear to the magazines some elements of contemporary political reality, these can only be conceived of as gestures of style, they can never take the form of a social analysis. Everything in these magazines has to be translated into a kind of secret, insider knowledge about what is ‘cool’ and ‘hip’ which only they, the editors and journalists, and their readers have access to and which they can then sell to the big companies in exchange for valuable advertising revenue, by providing them with knowledge of ‘the street’ and of black youth culture and urban life.
In the women’s fashion magazines there is an even stronger reliance on tradition. Fashion writing is informative or celebratory, it is never critical, only mildly ironical. Nowhere does it touch on some of the most important dynamics in contemporary British fashion which hinge round fashion as a place of work and as a space of livelihoods. Ignoring this kind of issue keeps the editors far apart from the policy-makers and the politicians who are increasingly anxious to see the fashion industry more stable and more profitable and a better return on the investment made in education and training. The fashion media thus inadvertently secures the marginalised and trivialised image of fashion. It is as though it cannot be bothered to take itself seriously or to consider the conditions of its own existence. The excuse is invariably that this kind of material would hold little interest to readers and would put off advertisers. Yet, as women and girls become more highly educated, and as the fashion sector is increasingly recognised as an important part of the national economy, this begins to seem like an ill-considered stance. It only serves to keep fashion in the ghetto of femininity, whilst in almost every other sector of public life and in commercial culture, gender issues including those which concern work and employment are increasingly coming to occupy the political centrestage.
It has been difficult to find a single, over-arching, theoretical framework from within existing scholarship, which would comfortably contain this current study of work and livelihoods in fashion. Creative labour has been overlooked in media and cultural studies in recent years to the point that almost everything but work has been the subject of extensive attention. One exception to this is Garnham’s study of the culture industries, where he briefly considers that aspect of the culture industry labour market which has figured most prominently here, the freelance, ‘independent’ creative young workers willing to put in long hours for low pay and sometimes no pay (Garnham 1987). Deploying a conventional Marxist vocabulary, he sees this phenomena as the ultimate sign of the triumph of contemporary capitalism which is able to milk the talent of young people getting them to shoulder all the risks without even offering them a proper job or contract. ‘Often labour is not waged at all, but labour power is rented out for a royalty’... he continues ‘... the workers willingly themselves don this yoke in the name of freedom’ (Garnham 1987: 33). While Garnham is absolutely right to see this ‘no pay’ economy as a product of de-regulation and sub-contracting in the increasingly competitive culture industries, where capital manages to unburden itself of everything but a minimum responsibility to labour, my emphasis here has been to examine these kinds of working practice in more detail. With references being made to the idea of working unpaid for ‘experience’ and for ‘exposure’ at almost every
point in the fashion field, I have asked the question why does this happen? What Garnham sees as a regrettable feature of the inexorable processes of capitalism, I have considered as an integral, emergent (if also regrettable) and by now, in the late 1990s an almost predictable feature of the working practices of cultural capitalism. If Jameson has examined at length the products of such a system, the flickering images dispatched across the globe, one of the aims here has been to untangle some of the complicated features of the labour and production processes which underpin this creative economy (Jameson 1991).

When we look to contemporary sociological writing, very little attention is paid to the kind of work I have looked at here. At the same time, all the major social theorists indicate how changes in work and employment are among the most significant features of the current social transformation. I have already drawn on some of this work, from Beck's notion of 'risk work' and Giddens' account of 'uncertain futures', from Lash and Urry's 'aesthetic reflexivity' to Giddens' (again) 'reflexive modernity'. These conceptions have, in the absence of more concrete studies at least assured me that the field of activity I have been concerned with corresponds in some respects to broader social movements. However there are problems with the fact that these debates on whether or not we are in a state of late modernity, reflexive modernity, or postmodernity, are typically pitched at such a general level. As David Morley has recently argued, quoting Doreen Massey, the effect of such large scale, macro-social analysis is that it implicitly locates the local, case study or the detailed field work study as 'merely empirical' (Morley 1997: 126). This raises questions for the current study. What is its theoretical status? What does the practice of fashion design tell us
which interrupts the fluid logic of the more determinist accounts of labour market changes in the cultural sector? And what can be drawn from a small scale case study of a strata of creative workers in one particular corner of the fashion industry? Can we legitimately move from the frame of the case study to the bigger frame marking the field of cultural production? Or do the sheer peculiarities of fashion in Britain restrict such a move? Is fashion exemplary or exceptional? It depends of course on what we are comparing it with, which in turn raises the question of the relationship if any between the various component parts of the culture industries. If, as I think this study suggests, it is more exceptional than exemplary, on the basis of the particular combination of elements, including low technology production of clothes with high technology imagery and distribution of imagery, then this inevitably accounts for some of the difficulties of moving outwards to other fields for comparative purposes. But this too may be a telling feature of the new culture industries, that they are dominated by their apparent uniqueness. Can we really then compare advertising with fashion, or independent TV production? Likewise many commentators would say the exact same thing about the music industry, that it is so peculiar, so talent-driven, so fragmented and casualised, that it would be virtually impossible to compare it with other culture industries, and as a result it is typically considered, sociologically, as a separate thing (Negus 1994).

A second problem with current social and cultural theory is that the concern is with totalities, with grand social and epochal shifts. Even Foucauldian accounts, which tend to be interested in more detailed or micro-political practices, tend to focus on the broad convergence of particular discourses, and with how these add up to an accumulation of power and regulation through 'subjectivising processes'. In both
cases this 'heavy analysis' leads to a weightiness of even weak or soft structures like those in the creative field and consequently a sense of the sheer difficulty of opposing or countering such processes. Everything in the social field is the outcome of the inexorable and instrumental unfolding of power. This in turn produces a rhetoric of pessimism. Or else, with writers like Giddens, there is almost a sense of wonder and suspension of judgement at the energy and speed of the new knowledge-based and skill intensive systems of 'reflexive accumulation'. This produces a perceived need for political re-alignment which, in the context of 'uncertain futures' is appropriately 'beyond left and right' (Giddens 1995).

The aim of this current study of the British fashion industry has been, on a modest scale, to attempt to eliminate some of this uncertainty through sociological investigation by showing how working futures are currently being made in this sector. The case study format has provided the opportunity to observe just how peculiar fashion is and how far it departs from existing sociological accounts of work. This form of cultural capitalism is led by art-school trained designer-entrepreneurs, who by and large express little, if any enthusiasm for the dynamics of wealth creation and business. They work according to an entirely different set of principles which are about artistic integrity, creative success, recognition, and approval by the art establishment. It just so happens that they also have to earn a living and do this through being self-employed or by running a small business. How then are they positioned between 'labour' and 'Capital'? In the past we might have said simply that these people were artists and that the way they worked reflected the unique position of the artists in society. But as I think I have demonstrated here it is actually
more complicated than this, the more people there are working in this artistic mode, the less special does it become. In addition these designers are not producing one off pieces for a rarified art market but are instead creating ranges, to go into production for as wide a market as they can reach, so how far we can take the analogy with art work is actually questionable. Finally there is the broader question of how much cultural work of this type can society actually accommodate, is this labour market infinitely flexible or has there simply been almost unnoticed a slide into a low pay, labour intensive field of employment which is disguised by its creative image and identity?

To some extent my study follows David Harvey who, recognising the problems of assuming a wholesale shift in working practices, nonetheless argues that ‘it is equally dangerous to pretend that nothing has changed, when the facts of deindustrialisation ... of more flexible manning practices and labour markets, of automation and product innovation, stare most workers in the face’ (Harvey 1989: 191). I would add to this that for first-time entrants onto the labour market, like the designers I interviewed, we have to take into account two important factors; first that they have nothing to compare their experience in fashion design with, apart from their ‘work experience’ placements, so their taste of a working life is actually being forged along new lines; and second that this marrying of youth and flexibility in the name of ‘independence’, ‘art’ and ‘enterprise’ represents a crucial feature of the process of de-industrialisation, to a generation who will have known nothing other than this kind of work.
This could be described as a postmodern economy insofar as it combines in a seemingly haphazard manner old, pre-modern practices, including knitting and sewing, with the late 19thC idea of the modern artist who rejects industrialism in favour of romanticism, both of which are then somehow dragged into and made to connect with the late 20thC economy of the visual image. In this contemporary world there is 'a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm' so that culture 'cleaves almost too close to the skin of the economic to be stripped off' (Jameson quoted by Kumar 1995: 116). It is in the dominance of the fashion image over its object that the postmodern dimension in fashion is most apparent. While the fashion media plays a key role in shaping and articulating demand, it often seems to function independently of the field of fashion consumption. It is enough for the magazines that people consume the images and so great is the disparity between the readership of the magazines and the volume of fashion sales, that at points, as we have seen, the clothes need hardly exist in reality. They are more real as images on the page than as items in the wardrobe, as we have seen, often they are designed to order to 'go' with the page. This suggests a Baudrillardian scenario, where the economy of the images exists independently of that of their objects. Fashion is as much if not more about looking than it is about consuming and this gives rise to two separate but interlocking circuits of image and object.

In labour markets too we can see signs of the kinds of shift described by David Harvey and attributed by him to the emergence of a postmodern condition. In the world of fashion journalism as well as in design, the same casualised, short term and freelance patterns of work are dominant. The journalists and image makers as well as the designers all survive within a series of urban-based cottage industries whose character
might also be described as postmodern, precisely in the non-uniform, mixed modes of production which are distinctive in combining old sweatshop or rag trade (Grub Street for the journalists) elements, with what Harvey has described as ‘new survival strategies for the unemployed’, with the added factor that the unemployed in this case are graduates from a diversity of social backgrounds (Harvey 1989: 153). Working in fashion comprises a series of 'temporary contracts' and as this becomes the norm it gives rise to a number of social consequences including financial insecurity, under-insurance and an enormous potential for self-exploitation.

More concretely the focus in this study has been on a particular set of social and economic relationships which have achieved visibility and importance in Britain in the 1980s and into the 1990s. These are the product of the expansion in the training and education of fashion designers in the British art school system, and their subsequent entrance into a UK labour market which was itself undergoing dramatic transformations before and during this period. Of key significance was the increasing 'new right' emphasis by the Thatcher government on enterprise culture and on the virtue of self-reliance in a world where traditional 'jobs for life' were fast disappearing to be replaced by new kinds of jobs and, equally important, new social relations of work. Self-employment of the type and on the scale I have described here effects a number of transformations in one sweeping movement. It 'individuates' the experience of work, by uncoupling it from the everyday vocabulary of trade union membership or other forms of collective organisation or representation. This is replaced by the connotations of creativity which are now less exclusively attached to
the working practices of traditional fine artists and have spread more widely to include those working in a spectrum of design and related fields on a self-employed, freelance or fully employed basis. (Even hairdressers these days are keen to promote their own creative identities by holding exhibitions of contemporary art on the premises, with the work mounted alongside the wash-basins.) So the de-socialising impetus of self-employment is accompanied in this case by an additional current of change which brings ‘art work’ within the realms of possibility for more than just a tiny elite. At the same time the attractive image of marrying paid work with personal creativity can also be seen as a kind of hidden or invisible labour disciplining. By remaining freelance or self-employed the designers who might be working most of the time for some of the large fashion companies can nonetheless be assured that they have not completely sold out, they are still ‘independent’, while in practice they are part of a growing army of contracted-out workers. Art thus serves a double function, it both protects them against failure when times are hard as Bourdieu has shown, and it gives them the incentive to work all the harder, in an unambiguously commercial capacity, on the basis of that what they are doing now counts as creative work.

One way of seeing this is as part of the wider process described as the ‘aestheticisation of everyday life’ (Lash and Urry 1994). Although this general trend is widely recognised and commented on by social and cultural theorists, the extent to which it has also penetrated the world of work has been overlooked. But work too has become ‘aesthetic’ and through this it becomes an anticipated source of pleasure and self-realisation. While most sociologists have considered this aestheticising process from
the viewpoint of consumers, I have considered it here exclusively from the perspectives of the producers. The image of the romantic artist now underlies the practice of a wide range of cultural professionals, from the art directors of the advertising world juggling million pound budgets, to the independent fashion designers whose micro-economies are much closer to that of the traditional image of the 'starving artist'. Nonetheless, both of these types of cultural workers share an urban, and possibly London-based working environment, they each consider themselves highly creative and they frequently connect through the various chains of communication which find, for example a designer like Rachel F providing one of her dresses as an accessory for an expensive advertising shoot, the resulting exposure of the dress in the advertisement increasing her orders a hundredfold.

In such a seemingly disorganised creative economy, contingency and even serendipity provide unexpected windfalls and opportunities as well as subjecting its workforce to stress and anxiety through the sheer fickleness of fortunes. The young designer will help out a photographer doing a test shoot in the hope of getting more regular work, by providing a number of fashion pieces and by helping him or her organise the shoot for no numeration. It may or may not pay off in other ways. If the test series gets published the rewards are potentially high, the designer might find herself 'known' as a name or a label virtually overnight. If it is not used it is time and money invested to no effect. These kinds of associations have been described as 'transaction rich networks of firms' by writers who have looked at the post-Fordist small producers of the so-called Third Italy (quoted in Lash and Urry 1994: 114). In the specific context
of the London designers it conforms more to what Lash and Urry describe as a ‘transaction rich nexus of individuals’ (ibid. 115).

The extensiveness of this kind of work, is suggestive of a new, low pay, urban, post-industrial system. On the basis of the study conducted here, it is impossible to state with precision just how exemplary fashion is in the new economy of culture, and how extensive this new economy is more generally. However we can draw out some elements of working in fashion design which appear to have a wider currency in the culture industries as a whole. As we have seen, the freelance or self-employed status of most of these cultural workers while based on the traditional principles of artistic individualism, also give rise to new forms of team-based work. Informal relations of dependency and reciprocity emerge both within specific sectors (designers often form partnerships as ‘design duos’) or across different parts of the cultural field (stylists will often team up with photographers, models and fashion designers). Self-employment agencies of the type mentioned earlier (the Z Agency for example established by Paul Davies) are a further example of how this kind of work generates new employment opportunities as well as new ways of working. ‘Creative labour’ is not quite as isolated as it might seem, but there is as yet no theoretical or political analysis which would provide the basis for a more effective structure for co-operation and collaboration.

The most significant, and indeed I would argue the dominant features of ‘creative labour’ in fashion are; first, the frenetic level of movement; second, the ‘mixed
economy’ where the designers are actually doing two or three jobs at once; third, the peculiar mix of not just old and new, but pre-modern, modern and post-modern features of production co-existing in the same shared space and time of the urban ‘studio-workshop’; fourth, the persistent downgrading of the skills of making and sewing and fifth the relatively low returns across the sector. Just as few of the designers I originally interviewed for this study would be doing the exact same kind of work, was I to track them down today, just two or three years later, so almost all the magazine and media personnel have moved on since I interviewed them. Inquiries made on both fronts before writing this conclusion reveal an increasing shift towards freelance work for designers and journalists alike. This may mean that the small businesses which most of the designers had set up and run at some point in their brief careers were in fact transitional structures, (not unusual in the culture industries according to Lash and Urry, small TV production companies frequently only last as long as a couple of features). Far from being outright failures we might view them instead as playing a central role in establishing fashion design skills and reputations. They were largely unsustainable because it proved so difficult for the designers to raise the bank loans necessary to avoid cash flow problems. But this means that the structures of the new fashion industry, the one-woman businesses, are also temporary ‘porta-cabins’. The ‘mixed economy’ represents a second stage where by ‘freelancing around’ the designers could, ironically perhaps, achieve some degree of financial stability, which in turn allowed them to plan the re-launching of their ‘own label’. And finally, despite their protestations, in their day-to-day practice they were in fact practising the most traditional of feminine pursuits (hand-knitting and sewing), under the label of being artists, in the more contemporary context of being career-oriented
young women, not untouched by feminism, and determined to make a living for themselves in a way they found enjoyable.

Three Sites in the Circuit of Fashion

Let me re-cap. My analysis of the place of fashion design in the British art school system revealed a downgraded status as a result of a double stigma. Its associations were and have been historically with a trade or dressmaking tradition and also with a field designated as women’s work. Fashion design attempts to undo these associations through showing itself to be more than a branch of the decorative arts and more than a lesser form of sketching and drawing. Institutionally this struggle was conducted in the fashion departments of the art schools by a number of women pioneers in fashion design education who persevere in attempting to convince the rigid and male dominated hierarchies of the fine art value of their creative practice. This is achieved unevenly and uncertainly, but through these various strategies fashion design does eventually find itself established and validated as a degree level subject in almost every art school up and down the country. This achievement provides the foundation for the distinctive character of British fashion design. Unlike the haute couture tradition in Europe which is based in the commercially run but exclusively marketed ‘houses’ of Paris or Milan, where a traditional apprenticeship system remains in place, British fashion design carries all the high cultural capital of the art academy. Its graduates are educated within a system which considers itself as having elite status and which emphasises the necessary integration of fine art and design. Although in recent years this has been expanded to encompass business and marketing
components, it is the traditional image of the artist which remains the most visible sign of an art education.

However this ethos creates a lasting tension for British fashion designers. To achieve the status it required within the academy it was necessary for fashion design to separate itself not just from dress-making and from the rag trade, but also from the world of what was first known as mass culture but which later came to be referred to as popular culture. As Huyssen has argued it was part of the project of modernism in the arts to repudiate the debased and 'feminine' nature of mass culture (Huyssen 1990). This movement can be seen in the British art schools as they embraced the principles of artistic modernism and in so doing denounced the 'fashion girls'. From the fashion departments, it could be argued that the fashion girls, with nothing much to lose, did some of the groundwork of early postmodernism by going out and making links with the burgeoning pop culture of the 1960s. British fashion design as a result is more indebted to figures like Mary Quant, Biba and the late Ossie Clark than it is to the fine art professors who eventually and often reluctantly recognised its value. And yet despite this fruitful indeed historic relationship between art school-trained graduates in fashion design and the more commercial world of popular culture, fashion academics have themselves held back in acknowledging this important relationship. This is because their own status in the art schools has hinged on their adhering to and endorsing the dominant values of artistic modernism which still prevail in these institutions.
In this context postmodernism has a recognised existence not in the sense that it marks the breaking down of the ‘old divide’ between high art and mass culture but as an art movement which picks upon and references the world of popular culture by integrating it into otherwise contained contemporary works of art. In other words the outside worlds of everyday life and popular culture can only be brought into the art school as a conceptual category, a point of reference, a ‘sign of the street’. This leaves more or less intact the professional and modernist-inspired vocabularies of fashion education whose proponents still feel themselves too close to the street (a synonym here for popular culture, for femininity and of course also for trade) to be able to fully welcome this presence in any form other than a quoted reference in a self-contained work (or collection). This is understandable from the point of view of those who have had to struggle so long for fashion to be recognised as a legitimate branch of art and design, but my argument in this work has been to suggest that this now needs to be revised. Fashion in the art school could only benefit, not only from the critique of modernism, but also from the sociological defense of postmodernism as a popular, feminine, and anti-elitist practice.

Fashion design in Britain exists in a milieu largely defined by the values of popular rather than high culture. The image industries which give fashion design its main exposure might still rely on the traditionally elitist values of *Vogue* magazine in terms of emulating its focus on luxury consumption, but the magazines and the other fashion media, including the immensely successful BBC TV *The Clothes Show* programme are aimed at attracting as wide an audience as possible and they all present fashion as part of the broad span of popular culture which includes pop music,
entertainment as well as the more traditional field of female leisure interests. And so even when fashion achieves an existence within the arts, as illustrated in the London Weekend Television programme *The South Bank Show* devoted to the work of John Galliano (LWT 1996), this is not because the senior echelons of the art academy and the art establishment has fully and unequivocally pronounced fashion design as equal to and an honoured part of the fine art tradition, but rather because of the mixing and blurring of boundaries which has occurred outside these the hallowed halls, in other much less privileged and often commercial social sites and ‘spaces’ including those inhabited by young people.

The way in which society has become more cultural and more aesthetic is grounded institutionally and educationally with the growth of arts and media based disciplines and subjects now offered at a range of different levels from secondary school right up to post-graduate courses. This parallels and complements the expansion of the image industries and also intersects with the way in which the traditional arts have been forced to incorporate more popular practices and also to play a more commercial role.

All of these characteristics can be seen as part of this process by which the categories of art and culture become mixed through a combination of commercial and other factors (including strategies of taste and distinction) and as the ‘feminine’ is revalued in response to feminist pressure and as ‘women’ represent an increasingly significant market for these forms of cultural or symbolic consumption. While the young designers at the mercy of the commercial world in order to earn a living are reliant on
this popularising process, the art academics tend to hold back, as though such processes in some way threaten the field of their own expertise. In contrast to this approach I have suggested that fashion education would benefit its students by more fully addressing fashion's existence not just as an art and design practice but as a place of many peoples livelihoods, a place of sewing as well as sketching, and as a new kind of rag trade whose rhythms and dynamics rely on the expansive fields of youth culture and popular culture.

In the middle section of this study, I have described a distinct and even idiosyncratic micro-economy of fashion design. Its influence is formidable and its failure to capitalise on this influence all the more disappointing. Many of the fashion themes and currents which inform the big European haute couture collections quite blatantly borrow or 'steal' ideas first seen in the small London outlets of the British fashion designers. Many of the European designers openly admit that they send their fashion scouts out to scour the London stalls, shops and clubs for new ideas. There is little doubt that it is in the experimental 'funhouse' of the British youth culture and club culture scene, in and around the art schools, in the young graduates' studios and in the small units, shops and stall-type outlets which they supply that the creative work which influences major fashion trends emerge. Not only does this activity put Britain at the forefront of fashion design in much the same way as pop music and advertising are also recognised as world leaders in their 'design intensivity' as Lash and Urry (1994) put it, but, as I have argued elsewhere, this group activity points to a social, collective or perhaps subcultural base for what is then at a later stage attributed by the press and media to individual designers (McRobbie 1989, 1994).
A political economy of fashion design would suggest that it is within these informal micro-economies that the experimental groundwork is done at little or no cost for the bigger companies, for whom the bankruptcies and business failures of these small fish are of no concern. I have attempted in this study to both analyse the working practices of these small scale producers and to find ways of securing their place in the new cultural economy. These are, after all, forms of ‘job creation’ and while it is explicitly not my intention to reduce these to the idea of talent (‘This is where the talent is’ as the British dominance in pop music was explained to Lash and Urry), simple choice, or unconstrained agency on the part of the designers (in the ‘Just Do It’ style of Nike advertisements), but rather as the product of a strategy of government, nonetheless the process of creating jobs out of very little (‘jobs without capital’) is of some sociological significance. It is both planned through ‘enterprise culture’ and completely unplanned in its cultural outcome, the signs of which stretch across the urban landscape, bringing colour and vitality to run down, de-industrialised sites and spaces. Despite the wider political interest in ‘job creation’ it is remarkable how little attention has been paid by sociologists to what these practices comprise of in the cultural sector and how they can be made more stable, how they can find a stronger economic foundation.

Whilst I have argued that the precise contours of the market for clothes produced by British designers and sold in various national and international outlets raise a number of difficulties (as illustrated in Chapter 9) there is no suggestion that there is no
Distribution and cash flow are recurrent problems across the cultural sector and fashion is no exception. In fashion late payment or the late delivery of an order from the producers can see the designers plunge into debt beyond the point at which the banks will continue to underwrite their borrowing. They have to serve too many masters at one time and as young and relatively inexperienced graduates they are frequently not able to manage these demands. However there is little evidence to suggest that not enough customers want to buy their clothes. Customers are not the primary problem. Likewise if we look across the range of designers interviewed for this study none indicated that they were forced out of business because of poor sales. While pricing policies may have played some role in the problems faced by 

**WORD**

and **TEXT** they were nonetheless rarely left with unsold stock, instead they faced disaster with wrongly made up orders which had to be returned. It seems then that it is neither the design work itself nor the absence of customers which is the problem, consequently it cannot be claimed that the problems in the industry lies in the unrealistically creative work of the designers. Instead we have to look at the other weaknesses in the chains which connect the designers with both their suppliers and their consumers. These difficulties could be at least partly overcome by the designers working more closely with producers and employing machinists and others on a direct rather than on a subcontractual basis. With some input from government funding, designers could pool their resources and turn the informal networks which exist between them into a more fully socialised field embracing every stage from design and production to marketing, promotion and even to (relatively cheaper) sales.
In the third and final part of this study I argued that the role played by the press and the magazine industry was, on first impressions, supportive of British fashion design insofar as these publications promoted the sector by displaying the work and by subscribing to a broadly promotional vocabulary. However on closer inspection a number of more problematic features revealed themselves and these, I argued, were detrimental to the more successful development of British fashion design. Some were to do with the distinctive forms and codes of fashion journalism and its photographic conventions and also with the broader political economy of the magazines. Briefly put, these media have the space and the opportunity, given their commitment to innovation, to break some of these ‘rules’, but instead they continue to present fashion design as a cultural phenomena which is somehow trapped in its own traditions. It therefore remains framed on the page and, ironically, frozen in time. As a visual field it is as aloof and distant from the messy business of earning a living as the expressions on the faces of the models on the pages. The magazine editors could be more adventurous and include regular documentation on fashion as a place of work and employment, and more broadly on the politics of fashion and clothing, and gain recognition from the rest of the ‘quality’ media and pick up more readers in the process. But the deeper problem lies in the fashion media actually working to a mn other than that dictated by fashion sales. It is their own sales and circulation figures which really matter and this means that fashion items, indeed fashion culture, is image driven rather than garment driven. The clothes which they decide to use for the pages are virtually props or vehicles for their own creative talent and this in turn casts some doubt over the model I proposed of the media being a pillar to the industry. The designers need the fashion media, but the fashion media needs design, not designers.
They can cast their net far and wide and if the excitement goes out of British fashion design, the magazine editors simply look elsewhere.

'I Was Knitting Away Night and Day': Creative Labour and The Changing World of Work

This study, like the fashion industry it describes, bears traces of theories past, present and future, in its attempt to make sense and draw some conclusions about a place of work, which somehow stands at the very cusp of social change. I would want to defend this theoretical eclecticism as an appropriate intellectual strategy in the context of a study which has relied on interviews in order to produce what in many ways is, quite simply, a descriptive account of the working practices of fashion designers, as well as those who educate them and those who take photographs and write about their work. But the emphasis in recent cultural and social theory has gone so far in the direction of mapping global totalities and movements and charting discursive convergences in the creation of new forms of selfhood, 'self steering mechanisms' as Rose (1997) has recently described these, that it is hard to see any kind of easy fit between 'top down' theory which has envisaged a new kind of worker, no longer docile but now creative, and 'ground-up' documentation and analysis, which does not explain the latter in terms of the former. It seems the over-arching theory almost inevitably takes precedence over the description of the field. I have used the ground-up analysis to qualify the theoretical work and I have attempted to show how practice invariably interrupts at not one but many levels these processes of regulation and labour disciplining, even as is the case here, where the creative field
defines itself as explicitly unregulated and undisciplined. However I have deliberately resisted tying these practices to one single theoretical stake, for the simple reason that that too would become domiant as an explanatory frame. This seems premature in the kind of practice I am describing and for this reason, although the notion of the 'habitus' as defined by Bourdieu, might well provide a useful space for the consideration of structure and action within a given field like fashion, that kind of inquiry must wait until a later date (Bourdieu 198). Instead it is on a note of openness and uncertainty, with a glance in the direction of policy and intervention, that I want to conclude this study.

One past theory, which some might argue is now redundant, retains a haunting presence throughout this work. Inevitably perhaps the legacy of Marxism makes a necessary and valuable contribution. It will not have escaped the reader that the very idea of revealing the productive base and the 'hidden hands' which remain a vital part of the fashion process, but which the world of consumer culture is anxious to conceal, takes us right back to the very premises of historical materialism, the exploitative relation between labour and capital, hidden by the laws of the market and forgotten in the seductive presence of the commodity. But whether the commodity is a fashion object or a fashion image, many of the same labour conditions prevail for those involved in these different circuits of production. They are all casualised workers, sharing the same perilous conditions. They are under-insured against illness or accident, they are on small wages, in many cases they are just managing to keep afloat, they can hardly afford to consider having children, and it is difficult to see how they will be working in the future. It is all the more surprising then that among all the
significant contributions to post-Marxist debates on culture, none, from Baudrillard to Jameson, asks the question, who designs the objects, who makes the images? Bourdieu does, but slots his art workers into a cultural map which simply does not fit with the fluidity and cultural cross-overs of working life in contemporary Britain. He sees the 'cultural intermediaries' as members of the sunken middle classes eking out a living for themselves by discovering a kind of creative niche as yet relatively undesignated, into which they can bring their own skills which draw on both their cultural and their social capital. He comments on the flow of women into this occupational category, but gender remains subordinate to class in his account. This analysis is of limited usefulness to my own study. While the precise class position of the designers is beyond the scope of this investigation, it would be wrong to see them slotting in unproblematically into this petit bourgeois strata. At the same time they did display some of the attributes associated with the aspiring middle classes, particularly in their disavowal of the more menial (or manual) features of fashion production and manufacture. Against this I have argued here that these need to be retrieved and recognised as key features of the whole fashion process, the rag trade dimension needs to be revived and updated.

The 'memory' of Marxism is also apparent in the desire on my part to see the determination of the young women fashion designers to transform the world of work into something more than a life of drudgery and routine, as more than an index of the success of the 'subjectivising discourses' of new governmental rationalities of labour discipline. There is a history in this utopian repudiation of what used to be known as the 'factory clock', and it is not inconceivable that these discursive fragments, more
possibly those of William Morris (described by Williams as searching for ‘delight in work’) than Jacques Ranciere (‘proletarian nights’), have found their way into the field of references which construct the new space of practice for creative labour (Morris quoted in Williams 1957: 154 Ranciere 1982: 10 ). There is also that appropriation of entitlement to privileges and rewards such as pleasure in work which in the past have been the prerogative, indeed the considered right of the few. The fashion designers whose work I describe are from a range of social backgrounds, working-class and middle-class, black, white and mixed race. Their occupational identities are, yes, in part the product of the mectoccax force of post-war British education provision, which has seen, at least in recent years some movement of young people from a range of different backgrounds into the art schools (often through the BTEC route) and they are also newly arrived professionals whose work emerges from a backdrop of unemployment and is in itself is a form of ‘job creation’. So this work bears the traces of a good deal of the history of post-war British society, the history of girls’ education in the art schools, popular culture, Mrs Thatcher’s enterprise culture, punk’s do-it-yourself job creation schemes and finally the determination of young women to find work which is satisfying to them. Despite their disavowal of the production elements of fashion, their ‘dream of social flying’ as Bourdieu would put it, does not put them, for once and for all, on the other side of the fence from traditional ‘labour’. This is not the traditional, class-disloyal petit-bourgeois fraction of French society described by Bourdieu, whose conservatism plays some role in his pessimistic and over-rigid analysis. These young women actually seem far removed from the cultural intermediaries described by Bourdieu. If their mothers were denied access in the past to work of their choice, they are now pushing their way into a labour market by creating their own. As one girl said: ‘My mother has always had to take
jobs she didn’t enjoy, and she’s the one who has encouraged me. My parents extended
the loft at home so I could have it as a studio’ (Gaby T). This suggests not so much a
dream of escaping into the middle classes as a reproduction of a specific working
class family value system.

So here we have a further ‘memory of Marxism’ in my analysis, which posits that
throughout the long years of Thatcherism in Britain, her enterprising rhetoric and her
transformative programme did not exist and were not implemented uncontested and in
isolation. Nor were they as internally consistent and coherent as they might have
appeared at the time. They were unevenly implemented and possibly also subverted in
the process, they were continually ‘turned around’ by social and historical ‘subjects’
who had some capacity to re-deflect or re-designate or simply bring to bear other
elements (including those of their own families and communities) on their cultural
practice. In this respect ‘(G)overnment is a congenitally failing operation’ to quote Du
Gay drawing on Miller and Rose again (Du Gay 1991: 58). It is a mark of this ‘failure’
(or at least ambivalent outcome) that enterprise culture has produced a series of
unanticipated consequences, subjects who are not the champions of the ‘free
enterprise’ favoured by Mrs Thatcher, but as far as this study is concerned, young
women who are more likely to look to the politics of New Labour, and who will also
rely on the present government to reconsider the virtues of self-reliance so
championned by their predecessor.
Two further points need to be made, one which connects with that 'memory of Marxism', the other which breaks with it. As I argued earlier, even the 'individuation' of creative labour or 'art work' is not a fixed and unchangeable feature. The designers I interviewed were actively seeking new ways of association, the problem was that they could not see clearly how this could be achieved and they were far too busy trying to stay in business to stand back and look at the whole industry as they were experiencing it, objectively. They showed few of the signs of rampant individualism or hard competitiveness associated with Thatcher's Britain suggesting that the ethos of self-reliance was by no means written in stone. None of the designers I interviewed were big earners, even the more successful ones, they represented instead a new kind of woman worker, highly qualified and consequently 'middle-class', but subject to financial insecurity and instability in employment. The necessity of co-operation and collaboration on a whole range of issues relating to their livelihoods seems inevitable. This is precisely why I have used the term a 'new kind of rag trade'.

Where the word 'proletarianisation' falls well short of the process I am describing, and while Bourdieu's notion of the cultural intermediaries as 'proletaroid intelligentsia' is even more unwieldy (Bourdieu 1993b), nobody can dispute that this kind of livelihood will and does already mean long hours, unpredictable returns, tough competition from bigger companies and retailers. It means being multi-skilled in hand work, design work, publicity and promotions, management and business and having some idea of manufacture. These new kinds of workers are posed mid-way between labour and capital, doing the job of both at the same time. This means that, and this is the second point, the re-socialisation of creative or cultural work including fashion
design, which is not unimaginable, will not and could not, mark a return to the organisational forms of ‘old labour’ but will require instead a more imaginative leap, one which has to take as a strong point the fragility of cultural enterprises and the long term reality of self-employment. This then is the political challenge, beyond the scope of this book, which is to envisage new forms of collaboration and co-operation (and also social insurance) which reflect the creative, unstable, experimental and fluid patterns of work in fashion.


Ruskin, J. (1858) 'Mr Ruskin's Inaugural Address, Delivered at Cambridge, October 29th.' Deighton: Bell.


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