

Fashion Impressario

Words Jeppe Ugelvig

With his travelling institution Centre for Style, Matthew Linde is steadily transforming the idea of fashion curation.

Few people defy the categories of cultural practice like Matthew Linde. The Australian self-proclaimed “fashion impresario” founded the ever-morphing Centre for Style in 2012, a quasi-institution that functions at once as a shop, a community center, a gallery, and an artwork for a growing generation of rising designers, artists, and performers united through fashion in the broadest sense of the word. With a punk ethos, Linde is steadily transforming the meaning of fashion curation in his staging of poetic, entertaining, and critical sartorial encounters in exhibitions, nightclubs, museums, and biennials, from Melbourne to New York via Berlin. He speaks as candidly about Margiela and Diana Vreeland as he does of his art- and fashion-designing peers as he meets DANSK in a wintry park in SoHo, New York on a Sunday afternoon. “I moved to New York, came here, and immediately thought, all I want to do is open up a store,” he enthuses.

It all began when Linde as a teenager enrolled at Melbourne’s prime fashion school RMIT, known for its broad and multidisciplinary approach to “fashion” as concept. More interested in the semiotics of clothes than their actual manufacturing, he began developing performance pieces presented to his fellow classmates in class. “I am very interested in the complex social relations that build a

fashion experience,” he explains. “Back then, I was fascinated with how Margiela approached signs and ‘the event’ within fashion. My practice was more about staging these fashion situations — it was about looking at desire.” One highlight was filming a friend touring the luxury fashion stores of downtown Melbourne, ill-fittingly masquerading as a customer in an ostentatious ball gown feather dress designed by Linde, until the pair would get kicked out — a humorous but critical interrogation of the spaces in which fashion is exhibited and interacted with.

Undiluted aesthetics

Surrounded by a community of artists upon his graduation, Linde was inspired by the DIY sensibility that infuses artist-run exhibition spaces — no overhead costs, no business-model — which allowed for a direct and unspeculative interaction with emerging creatives. “Back then, people would literally open up project spaces in their back yard,” he explains. “I was very impressed by the DIY sensibility of putting on art shows, which I didn’t feel like fashion inhibited. I was very keen on building upon that agenda in fashion.” Centre for Style was born, in a disused warehouse space in downtown Melbourne, with a guaranteed \$1-a-month rent for almost a year: A social space that would stock collections from recent fashion

school graduates from his immediate Melbourne environment as well as peers from around the world. The serious support of graduates is itself a radical gesture in a industry so heavily dominated by aggressive commercialism, the vast majority of graduates ceasing to design in their own name when they encounter the market-driven side of fashion.

“The trajectory of an artist is usually that their oeuvre gets better with time, whereas it’s kind of the opposite with the designer,” he says. “Their best work is often their graduate show, before their aesthetic gets more and more diluted. When I was reaching out to graduates from all over the world, saying ‘OMG, I’m obsessed with this collection,’ most people were really stoked, because most of these collections would never go anywhere.” As neither Linde nor his peers could afford the garments on display, CfS was always more about trying on than buying garments from the get-go — something rarely afforded when you walk into a high fashion retail context. “I guess Centre for Style is about commerce, but it’s about commerce of experience. I wanted exchange more than just capital. I wanted people to come in and play with the garments. And the more that I started thinking about the store as a playful space, it became obvious to have an events program: to have gigs, and poetry readings, exhibitions, performances, runways... And from that, it just became more and more a curatorial project, I suppose.”

Mobile host

In the same way that Centre for Style galvanized Melbourne’s booming hybrid art-fashion milieu, today the now-nomadic institution serves as a worldwide discursive platform for creatives whose works flirt with and defy the traditional art gallery as much as the fashion store format. Like the artists he backs, Linde’s quasi-institution travels around the world in a variety of renditions and contexts. His first solo show saw the complete transfer of his Melbourne store to a nearby fine art gallery, trash and breadcrumbs included — while his two-day intervention at Victoria’s Gertrude Contemporary gathered over 30 artists and designers to speculate the street as a site for fashion showcase as he hosted a 24-hour programme of talks, performances, parties, and runway shows.

His 2014 Berlin solo show *Beauvier’s Garden* staged a make-shift living-space inspired by cult film *Grey Gardens*, with freecycled furniture and garments from vanguard designers Eckhaus Latta, Nhu Dong, and Rare Candy scattered around the installation. Austrian artist Anna-Sophie Berger presented a performance on the opening night. (“You can at once have a static exhibition about fashion and perform around it,” he explains proudly.) Through Centre for Style, Linde has conducted performative road trips, staged pop-up flea-markets, hosted parties — all, in one way or another, elaborating on how fashion is experienced, displayed, and consumed. Still, curator is not a term Linde feels particularly comfortable with. “I think I’ve grown more and more distant to that term — it’s incredibly loaded, has a lot of baggage,” he explains. “The fashion curator is usually bound to an institution. I think I’ve cast myself as a director, or an impresario, rather than a curator. I situate myself as a host — adopting that as a kind of curatorial figure. Does that make sense?”

It does indeed. And of course, despite Linde’s originality, there are precursors to experimental fashion curation. Linde himself cites the staged fashion ‘interventions’ at the Cabaret Voltaire nightclub in Zürich in the 1910s as a key inspiration to his work — where avant-garde artists of the Dada tradition would experiment with fashion shows, performance, and design in an ad hoc, community-oriented manner. Rather than a dead (museum-destined) object behind a vitrine, fashion in the hands of Linde enacted, lived out, performed, with a joy and humour — a fickle term that has come to haunt his practice in the public eye. “People always say, oh, you seem to have a ‘humorous’ approach to fashion, using parody — and I’m always like, ‘not really,’” he says. “If you stray outside the very standardized image of a retail store or label, you’re instantly labeled as “parody” or “hypercritical” — and maybe these things are true, but it’s not the bread and butter of my work.” Currently pursuing a practice-led PhD on Fashion Curation, the adopted New Yorker is in fact dead serious about fashion and how we might experience it in the future. And while nothing is certain, it’s definitely something far beyond the museum, the gallery, and the store.

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Photographer Job Pišton

