

DAVID BOWIE IS...

Curated by Geoffrey Marsh and Victoria Broackes, organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 23 March–11 August 2013. Traveling to the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 25 September – 27 November 2013, and other locations.

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Given the Victoria and Albert Museum's illustrious history of staging innovative and highly-memorable fashion exhibitions – as well as its efforts to challenge and advance the very notion of what is exhibition-worthy through increasingly interactive, popular, and democratic display platforms – it is then no surprise curators Geoffrey Marsh and Victoria Broackes would take on the considerable task of institutionalizing the life and work of David Bowie. While *David Bowie Is...* was less a fashion exhibition than a true retrospective, incorporating elements of film, works on paper, and countless other forms of minutiae, it was nonetheless a fashion-heavy exhibition wherein clothing proved to be most prominent and impacting visual signposts of Bowie's long and winding career. While the exhibition will be traveling to additional institutions worldwide, this review emerges from the version presented to unprecedented fanfare at the V&A in the summer of 2013.

Staged on the heels of his surprise Mercury Prize nomination and the release of a single that had seemingly emerged from nowhere after over a decade of virtual radio silence, this exhibition was perhaps the most perfect means through which to articulate the vast influence of the musician-cum-performance artist's life and work. In short, the world was having something of what Broackes deemed a 'Bowie moment' (quoted in Ostroff 2013) when the show opened its doors to overwhelmingly positive pre-reviews

in London. Yet, as indicated by the retrospective's ambiguous title, this task proved less than forthright because, despite his prolific output, Bowie the man has proven enduringly enigmatic.

Ambitious and record shattering, selling out online in a matter of days and garnering a degree of buzz unparalleled for museum installations, *David Bowie Is...* was, in part, an experiment in curating sound. From Bowie's early interest in jazz to the discordant cacophonies of his experimental period in Berlin, the immersive audio guide felt as if it was intended to serve as the principal thread that linked the exhibition's crowded and sprawling ground floor galleries, and which served to round out the installation's frenzied concert atmosphere.

Yet, this key component of the exhibition was one that was also the most ephemeral and glitch-prone. While ingeniously designed to change tracks as if by magic as one moved about the galleries, the audio guide proved less than intuitive and was disposed to awkward skips and transitions between tracks. At one point, however, with my ears growing weary of the aural onslaught, I thoughtlessly removed my headset and was instantly engulfed in virtual silence. Suddenly attuned to the visual spectacle around me, my reference point shifted and it was then that the sartorial elements of the exhibition came into high relief and the curators' key insight materialized: that David Bowie is a futurist whose music and artistic practice has been defined by his ability to absorb and reinvent the culture around him throughout his expansive fifty-year career and frequent self-reinventions. While his most lasting contribution to popular culture is inarguably his music, David Bowie is also an effective visual and performance artist whose body has served as his principal canvas for artistic and experimental interventions.

Thus, while sound proved central in animating the exhibition and in attuning visitors to the various phases of his life and work, Bowie's garments and his increasingly liberated relationship to fashion and costuming were central in rounding out the myth and legacy of the Bowie narrative, and which perhaps remain as the most enduring images from a curatorial effort that spanned nearly five decades and over three hundred objects that were hand-selected from Bowie's personal archive of over 75,000 items.

The exhibition's emphasis on Bowie's various personas as embodied through dress is perhaps best summarized by Camille Paglia's insistence that David Bowie, above all else, is 'body-based' in his ability to project his various selves through dress (quoted in Sulcas 2013). From his iconic Ziggy Stardust quilted suits and patent platforms to his highly-sculptural and otherworldly Kansai Yamamoto costumes from the Aladdin Sane tour, David Bowie is perhaps best understood via his various personas, which have been emblazoned in the collective cultural consciousness through a series of highly emblematic looks.

Echoing Paglia's insight, fashion theorists have situated dress as an index of culture as animated by the wearer (Entwistle 2000). Yet, when displayed absent the human body, the various meanings and histories of a garment can be compromised, attesting to what Feldman (2007) has deemed institutional fashion's 'lost body problem'. Similarly, as famously summarized by fashion historian Elizabeth Wilson, the index of the wearer remains in displays employing 'dead' mannequins to wear historical garments, rendering them haunted (1985: 1).

Conversely, contemporary fashion is a medium that is inextricably linked to consumption and commerce as well one that is highly tactile. Sponsored by the Italian fashion house Gucci, *David Bowie Is...* was part of a new wave of well-funded fashion-

centric exhibitions in which curators have employed a number of increasingly complex display techniques in an effort to differentiate them from mere shop window displays. Yet, even when artfully displayed in a museum context, clothing that borders on fashion seems to beg to be touched as in a store, owing to the frequency with which visitors eschew museum decorum in reaching out to graze a tasseled hemline or test the softness of silk.

David Bowie Is... was no exception to this rule, and it was not uncommon to see visitors reaching into displays for a furtive touch. Far from a brazen act of disrespect, however, in these moments, it was difficult not to feel as if the exhibit were actually the church of Bowie, the visitors pilgrims, and his garments fetishes that retained some vestige of the artist's aura that, with a gentle touch, might be released. Yet, despite all the curators' efforts to simulate a living, pulsating concert atmosphere, the sound stage of a music video, and a bustling music studio, the garments still fell flat – the curators unable to ultimately overcome many of the issues that continue to plague the practice of exhibiting costumes in the museum.

Case in point would be the powerful first image visitors were met with upon walking into the exhibition. Dramatically lit against a stark white wall, Bowie's arresting Kansai Yamamoto 'Tokyo Pop' black vinyl bodysuit (1973), displayed erect on a headless mannequin verged on painting – its sinuous lines and rigid two dimensionality reminiscent of a mid-century Frank Stella canvas. While iconic, the garment retained little of the energy Bowie would imbue it with on stage and in various photo shoots in which the artist was inclined to strike athletic poses that verged on the surreal and which contorted the garment's clean lines. On Bowie, the garment served as a clear extension of his body; on display, it verged on looking like a mere prop that conveyed none of Bowie's creative intervention.

As co-curator Victoria Broackes has written, 'By embracing Marshall McLuhan's notion that "the medium is the message" throughout his long career, Bowie actively participated in' designing nearly every aspect of his art and his image – his prolific output presenting 'rich opportunities for critical interpretation' (2013: 117). In many ways, *David Bowie Is...* was merely a carefully orchestrated glimpse into the vast archives of Bowie's life and work with the curators wisely refraining from exacting too heavy a curatorial hand in seeking a core message. The fact remains that we know little of David Bowie outside of his various characters that he has had a hand in creating. While so carefully handled, *David Bowie Is...* nevertheless pointed to the difficulties surrounding costume curation, even when costuming served as one element among many in the V&A's cavernous halls. However, it is here that the exhibition made its most significant contribution to the practice: that it is indeed possible to evolve costume display past mere hemline histories in employing dress as a significant signpost for articulating a cultural moment.

References

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