

'The dress must not hang on the body
but follow its lines. When a woman
smiles the dress must smile with her.'

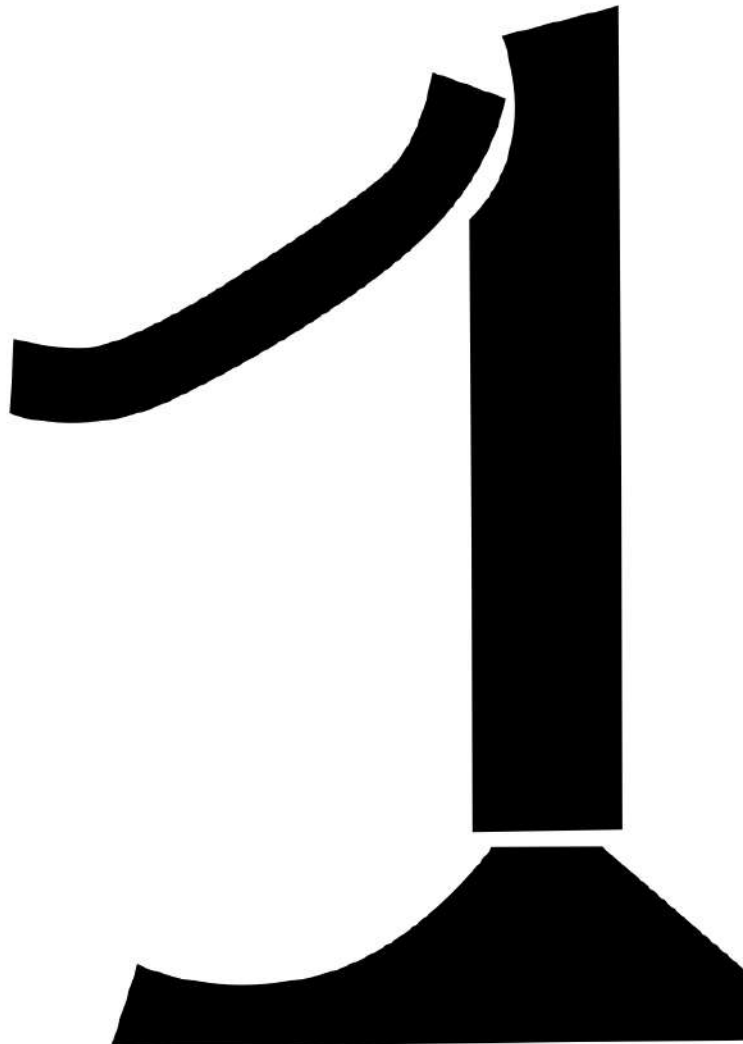
Madeleine Vionnet

SLOW COSTUMING

Creating characters
through coupe

Chris Snik





Design dialogue 2021, from research group *Body and Material Reinvented*. Edith Cassiers, Catherine Willems and Chris Snik. © Wannas Cré

p. 2-3
Rehearsing for performance for MoMu, co-making with performers Wietse Vendrig, Pieter Desmet en Jakobe Geens and Chris Snik. © Geert Goiris

p. 5
Design dialogue 2021, from research group *Body and Material Reinvented* (now *Art & Ecology*). Edith Cassiers, Catherine Willems and Chris Snik. © Wannas Cré

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Rehearsing for performance, co-making with performers Wietse Vendrig, Pieter Desmet en Jakobe Geens and Chris Snik. © Geert Goiris

1. INTRODUCTION

This book *SLOW COSTUMING* explores an integrated costume design method where all the components of the creating process of making a performance in collaboration with the whole artistic team and especially between costume designer and performer are crucial. When creating a performance, the work of the costume designer and performer melt together in fitting, making, dressing, and performing. Costume and embodiment intertwine and need each other to bring a story to life. Costumes with a good fit are not possible without coupe, which can give the right accents to body shapes and thus construct a character.

As a costume designer, I have been able to create costumes in which an intense cooperation of the creative team has resulted in powerful theatre, film, or dance performances. For example, in the production *Am Ziel* [2011], based on a play by Thomas Bernhard (translation Tom Kleijn) and directed by Judith De Rijke, the costume for the dominant mother that represents the old bourgeoisie, claims an enormous amount of space. This costume literally keeps the other characters at a distance. Only the mother can manipulate her costume in such a way that she can move around freely. The two other characters – The Daughter, representing youth and immaturity, and The Playwright, representing useless success – literally have less room in the set design (by visual artist Katleen Vinck) and must adapt to the whims and movements of The Mother. We converted the relationship between the different characters through the use of coupe in the costumes, strengthened by the materials.





Costumes by Chris Snik, *Am Zie!*, Theaterproductiehuis Zeelandia, 2011.

Unfortunately, this way of collaborating is rare. On the one hand, the importance of costumes is growing in contemporary performing arts with, for example, the increasing importance of visibility in postdramatic and devised theatre [Lehmann 1999]. On the other hand, less and less time, resources and expertise are devoted to costumes. Consequently, in an ever-shortening rehearsal process, it is often not possible to collaborate and design in an integrated manner providing time to experiment, discuss and develop all phases of the costume design process. Scholar Jessica Bugg warns that ‘funding and lack of time impact the way collaborations are developed, and subsequently how costume is approached’ [2014: 362]. Due to decreasing subsidies, there is not enough rehearsal time allowing to develop the entire creating process of a performance in an integrated manner. Consequently, there is not enough time and money for the various components of the costume design process.

The performing arts need more funding to facilitate longer rehearsing and experimenting periods, allowing all the different disciplines involved in the creative process of making a performance in optimal conditions. This would enable intense collaboration between the entire team and a more integrated costume design process. In the context of this book, I will focus on one crucial aspect in this performing arts team (that can include, but is not limited to director, set designer, light designer, performers, playwright, dramaturge, etc.), namely the costume designer. On the one hand, I will focus on the intense interaction between the unique body of a performer and the costume design and making process. And on the other, I will highlight the importance and beauty of the handcrafts that are required in this process. I want to demonstrate the importance of a thorough collaboration between designer and performer, in which the development of an idea and the making process of a costume interact dialectically. Coupe is a key concept in this vision, which is an essential component to make the construction of a costume. Costumes with a good fit hug and shape the unique body of each and every performer body and

‘shape identity and form bodies.’ [Monks 2009: 3] Coupe enables that costumes can ‘appear to disappear, so that they go with the flow of the character’s appearance’ [10]. Additionally, I will argue that all the steps needed to develop a costume are equally important and merge together in close collaboration and in co-making on and with the unique performer’s body in motion.

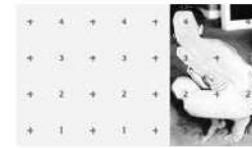
In my artistic research *Character through coupe. Towards an Integrated Costume Design Method* at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp (21/09/2021 – 23/09/2023, promotor Edith Cassiers), I want to bridge the gap between the costume designer and the performer by designing in an integrated way with attention to all phases, in the making process with a specific focus on coupe. In the first year, I concentrated on theoretical research. In the second year I focused on the dynamics of the making process, working closely with three performers with diverse performance backgrounds.

In this book, I will formulate an answer to the following research questions: ‘What do we mean by coupe?’, ‘How can coupe construct character?’, ‘What is the relationship between coupe and (de)forming the human body?’, ‘What are the different phases of the whole creating process and how are they intertwined?’ and ‘How can we extend the use of coupe to develop an integrated form of costume design?’. To answer these questions, I both consulted existing literature and performed practical research into pattern, coupe, fit, use of fabric and making techniques (handcrafts) by studying clothes from the MoMu study collection (Fashion Museum Antwerp). Additionally, this book reports my experiences ‘on stage’, namely the intense collaboration with diverse performers from the





Costumes by Chris Snik, *Am Ziel*, Theaterproductiehuis Zeelandia, 2011.



Banner: Research project.
© John Snik

Subsequently, in 'SLOW COSTUMING IN PRACTICE' I take a closer look at the *phases in Slow costuming*. In paragraph *co-making* I explain the relationship between coupe and (de)forming the human body. After that I write about my *personal experience* from my own artistic practice, which is followed by the findings from the *workshop with diverse performers* at the Royal Conservatoire Antwerp and finally I share my own 'floor' experiences from my performance. In the 'CONCLUSION', I will emphasize the importance of integrated and inclusive costume design through *Slow costuming*.

Royal Conservatoire Antwerp and the rehearsal process of the consecutive performance at the MoMu.

In the first part, titled 'SLOW COSTUMING', I explain an *integrated costume design process* and introduce the term *Slow costuming*. In the second part 'COUPE IN SLOW COSTUMING', I will give a *definition of coupe*, where I reintroduce the term coupe and focus on the importance of coupe in costumes to (de)form the character of the performer. Subsequently, I answer the question 'What is the role of coupe in costume history?' by giving a *short history of coupe*. Then I share my *research on coupe in MoMu* from the pattern-a-thon sessions with the study collection, in the Dries Van Noten Study Center at the MoMu in Antwerp¹. Finally, in the paragraph *Measuring and draping*, I explain two construction techniques to reveal the connection between the body, coupe, and costume in making techniques.

1.

More information:
www.momu.be/nl/magazine/pattern-a-thon





Anonyme, *Femme corsetée*, détail, vers 1900. Aristotype à la gélatine, 12 x 9 cm. Paris, Les Archives d'Éros

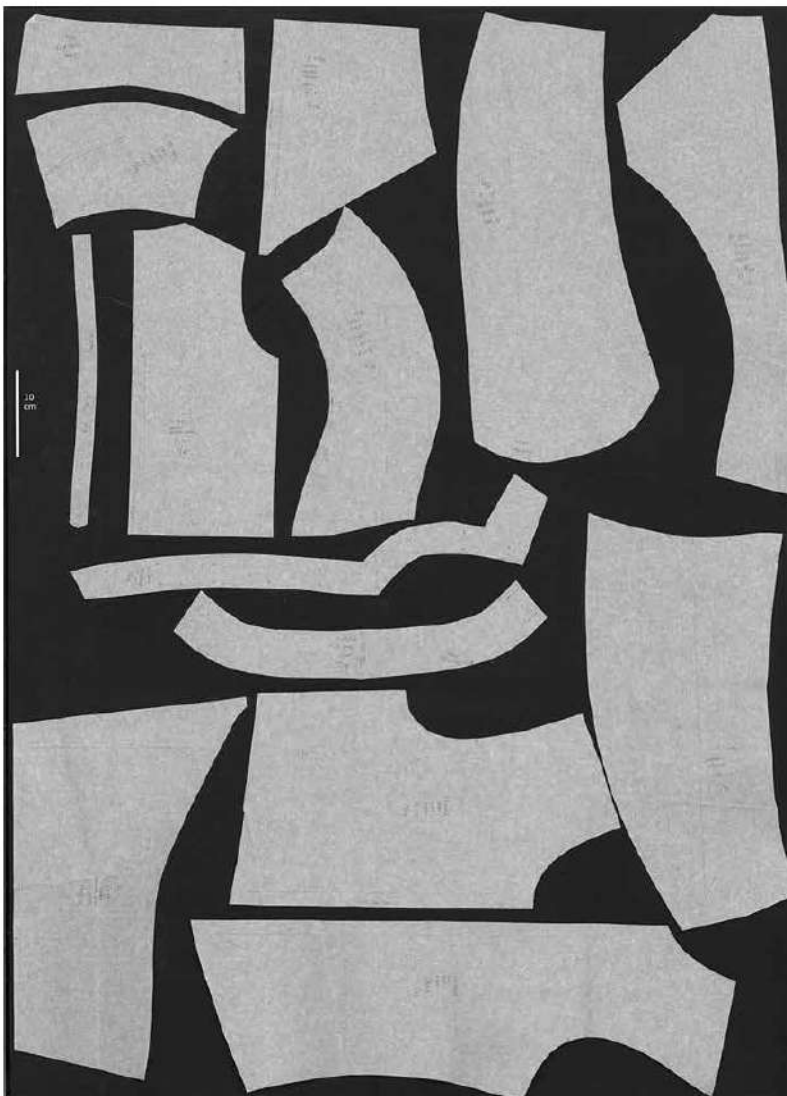
Louis Anquetin, *Portrait de femme (Mammyrto Duffny ?)*, détail, 1891. Pastel sur papier, 63 x 51 cm.

Anonyme (Femme corsetée) ca. 1900, from the book *Abécédaire de la prostitution, au XIX^e siècle*, 2015.



Studio Talbot, model wearing a corset-girdle, from the book *Abécédaire de la prostitution, au XIX^e siècle*, 2015.



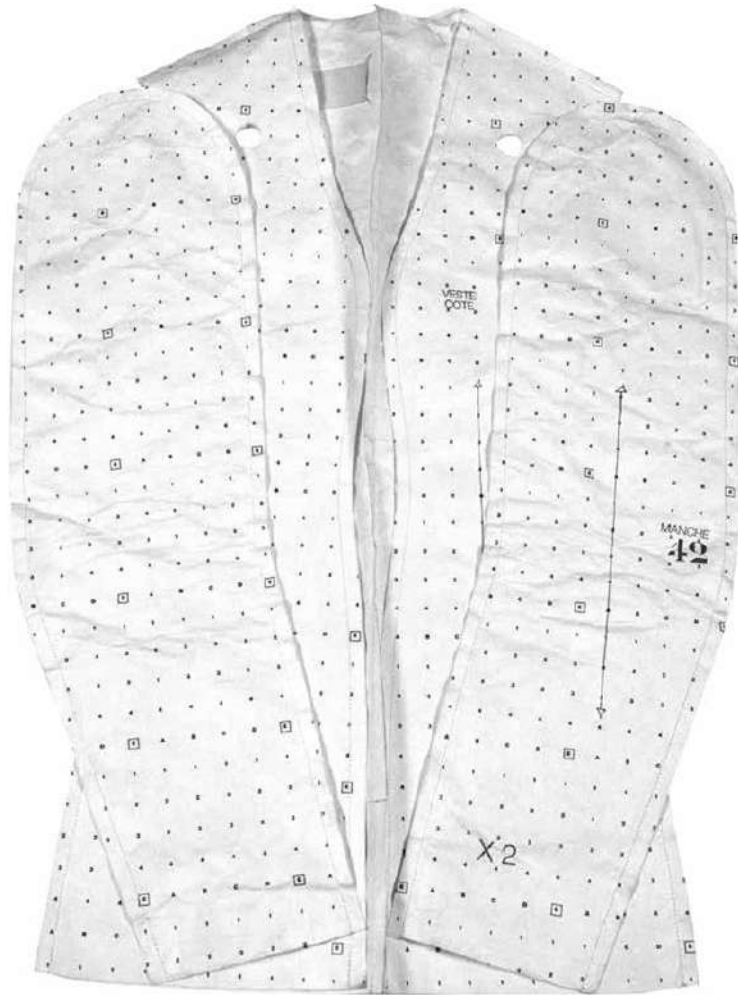


Pattern made during a pattern-a-thon session from the Dries van Noten Study Center in MoMu, 2021. © Stany Dederen



Fencing jacket from Dries van Noten Study Center in MoMu, 2021. © Stany Dederen





Jacket assembled with pattern paper, Maison Martin Margiella, Autumn/Winter 1998.



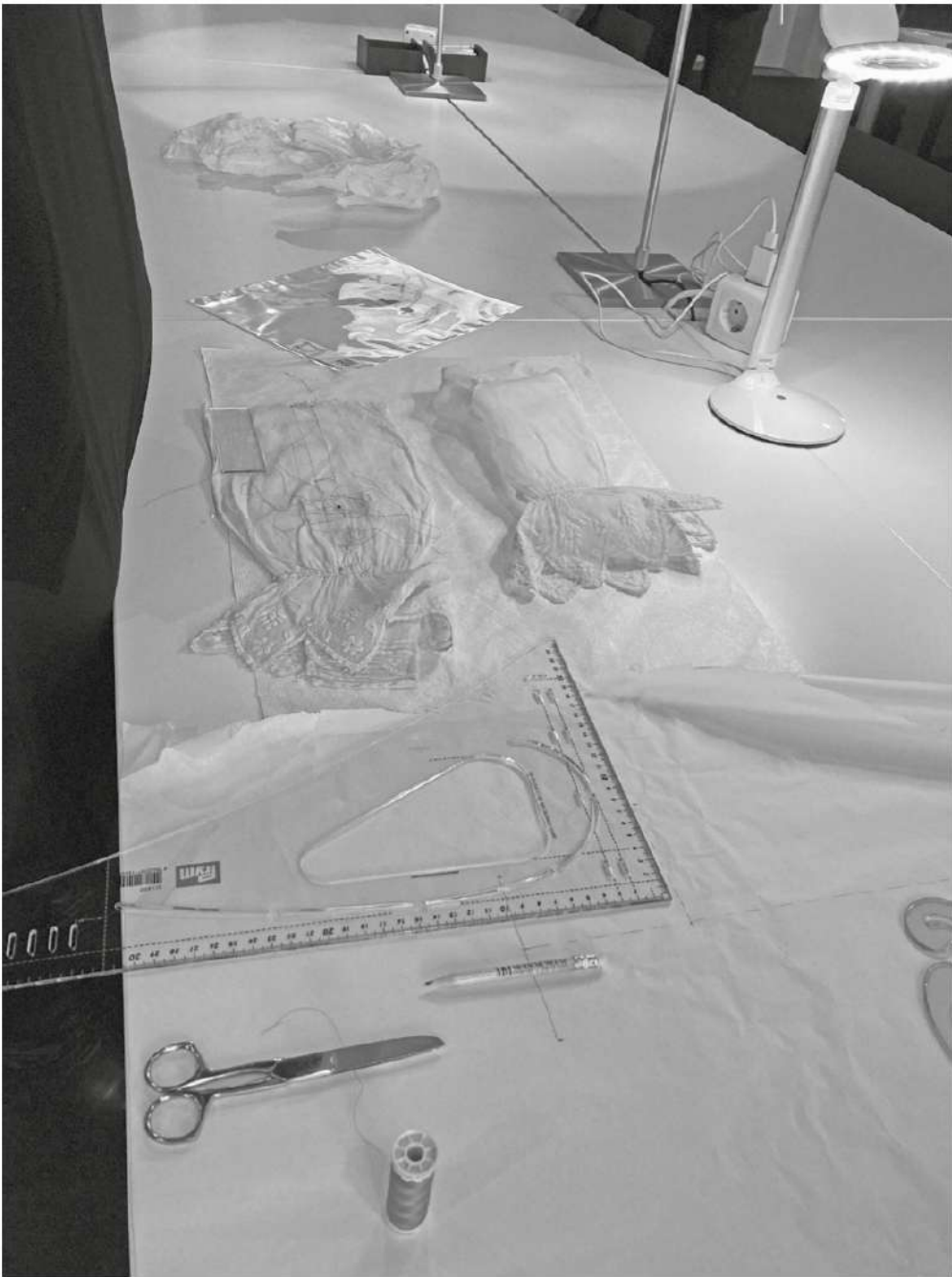
Toile for a coat by Balenciaga, from the book *Meesterlijk Zwart*, 2022. © Pierre Even



Comme des Garçons' Rei Kawakubo collaborated with Merce Cunningham for the dance *Scenario*, 1997.

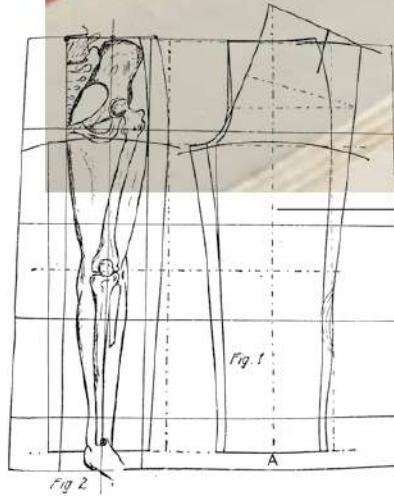
all designs. Patterns for jackets, coats, trousers etc. are usually created by patternmaking after measurements. Fashion designer Martin Margiela's visual language is known for the use of deconstruction in his fashion collections. Kaat Debot writes in her article 'Pattern and garment by Martin Margiela' [2020: 45], that he used tailoring as a means of communication in an ingenious play of 2D and 3D. In the spring/summer 1998 collection, he incorporated the two-dimensional paper pattern into a three-dimensional garment. The coupe of these garments was modified to be completely flat when not being worn. Madeleine Vionnet (1876-1975) is known for her invention of draping, which was a new pattern technique in the early 20th century. Her clothes are of refined simplicity, which is her aesthetic, while the scope of her work does not fully reveal itself at first glance. They are the product of a technical interrogation of the material properties of clothes draped on the human figure. The construction and the labor of this work remains somewhat hidden from view. The beautiful shape of the fabric on the body emerges because most of her creations are in bias cut. The craftsmanship required is enormous. She used the fabric to contour the body, wrapping it around the body and so offering a fit that appeared seamless. It was her view that the traditional placement of seams of garments did not reflect the human form. She said that 'the dress must not hang on the body but follow the lines'. Vionnet called herself *dressmaker* because she was as well a technician as a designer. Betty Kirke's research on Vionnet's work in her book *Madeleine Vionnet* [1998] is an incredibly informative object-based study:





Pattern-a-thon session in MoMu, 2021. © Chris Snik

p. 33-48
Making materials. © Geert Goirzis



p. 33-36, 38-41, 43-44
Uit De Klederindustrie.





wie leren praktijk op maatschappij
 leerlingen lesstof geven. Wilt U dan ook komen
 PRIMAAT of GARDIA (voor industriële lessen) overduidelijk
 en 'n woord. Na zijner examen Duitse. Vertelster
 alle methoden voor alle in Oostende.
 P. C. HOFFSTRAAT 33. UTRICHT

De praktische les van den leeraar N
 Vakgenooten!
 Alvorens ik verder ga over de lichamelijke afwijkingen, en hoe die in de coupe te verwerken, slechts een kort woord over het meest door ons gebruikte ingrediënt, n.l. het Garen. Wilt U niet het gevaar loopen dat Uwe Klant klaagt over innerlijke bewerking, bij de naden afscheurende zakken, of zwart garen dat spoedig grijs wordt, verwerk dan zoowel voor rijg-, hand- als machiegaren, uitsluitend

ZEBRA
 Dit bekende klasje zegt alles.

Fabrikant BIEZE STORK & Co. - HENGLO (O.).

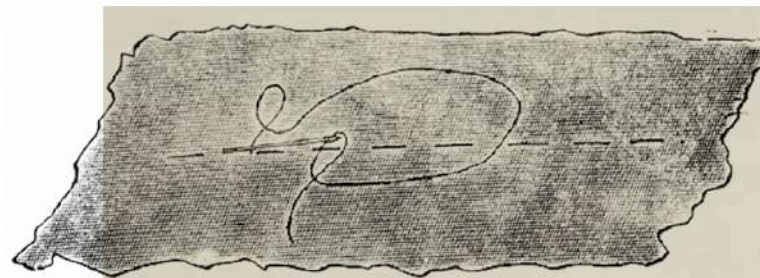


Fig 1 De rijgsteek.

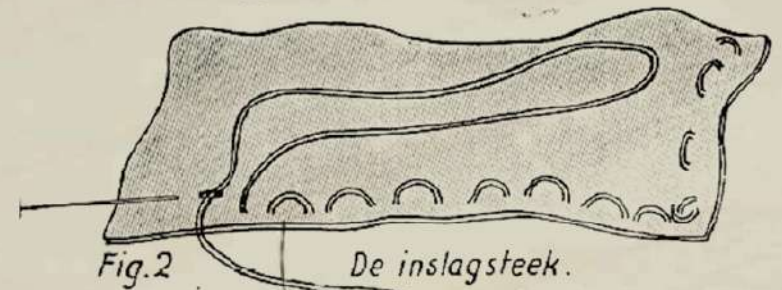
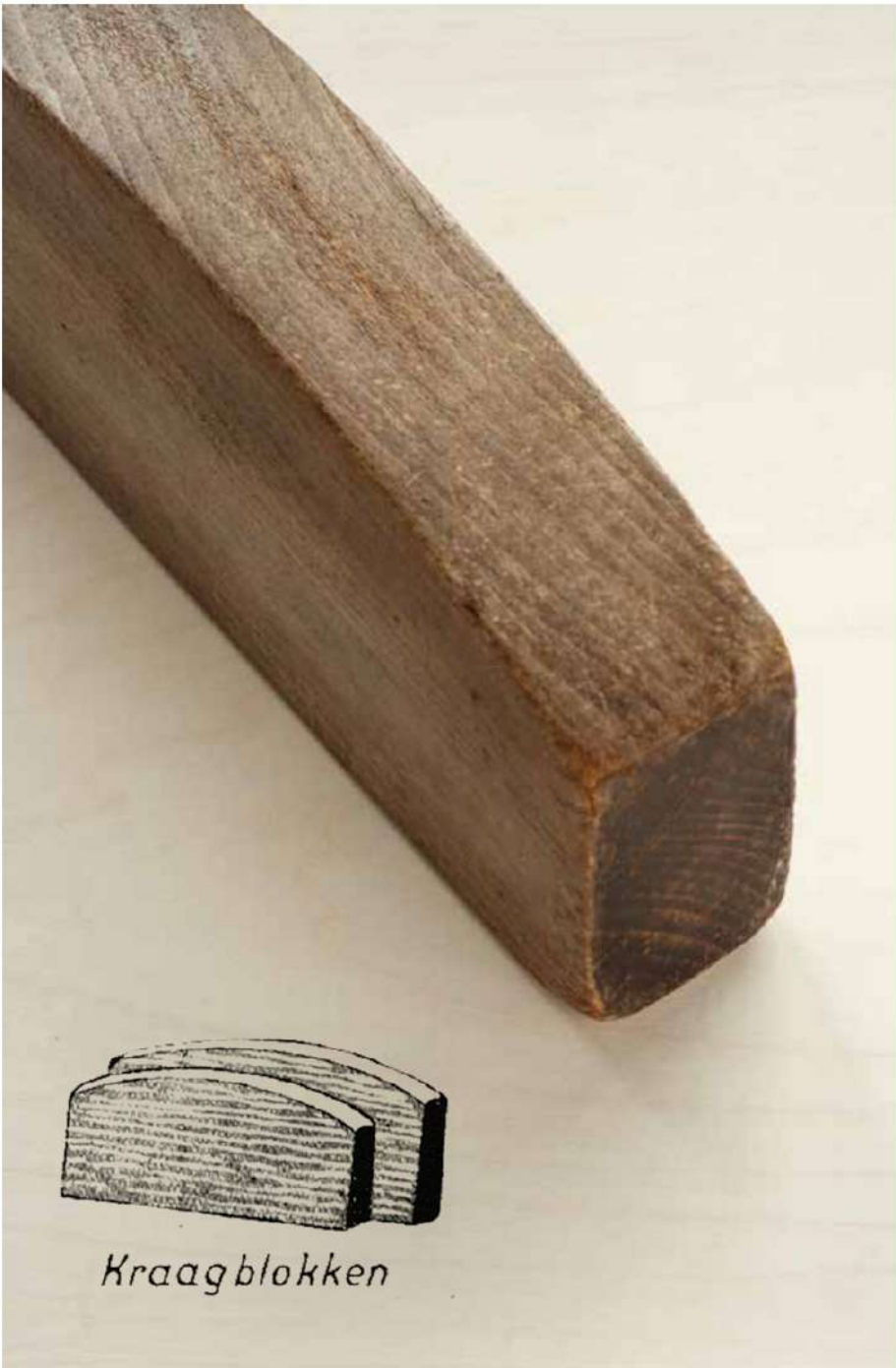


Fig.2 De inslagsteek.





Kraagblokken



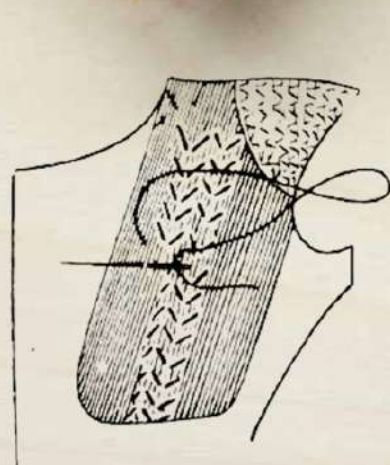


Fig.5 De pikeersteek I

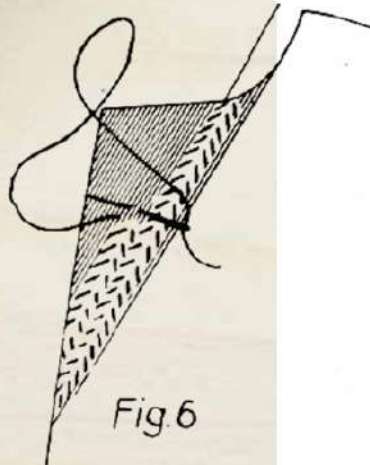
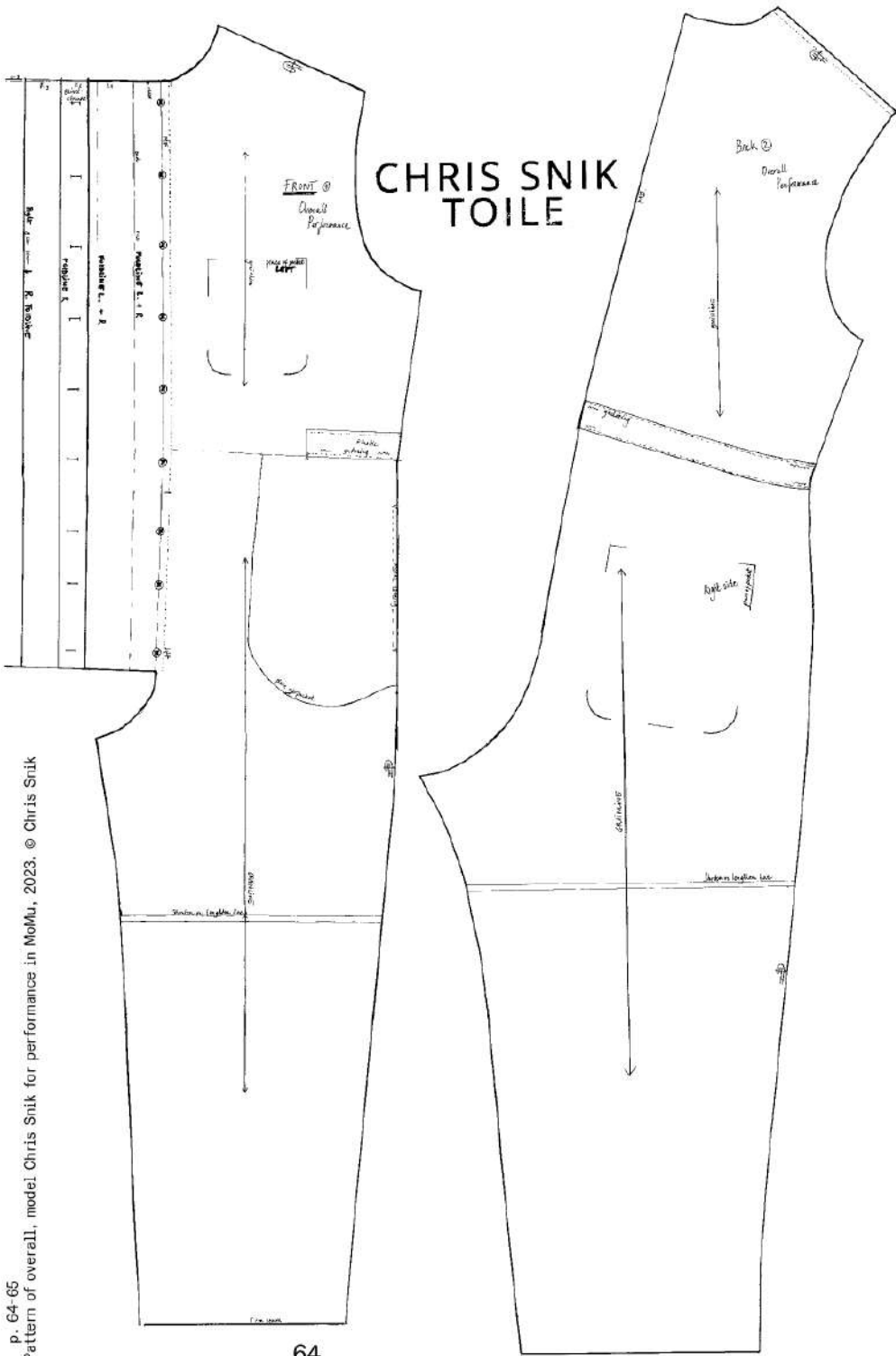


Fig.6

De pikeersteek II












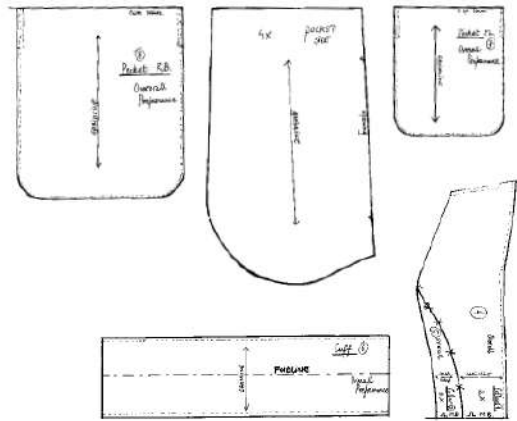
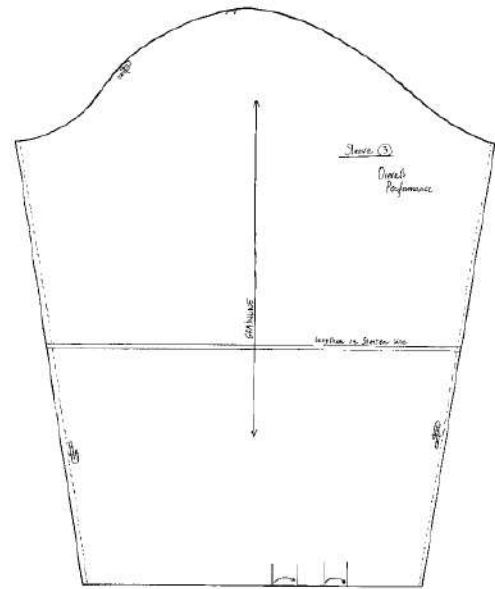




Pattern Overall Performance
 SIZE M Average
 ♀ or ♂

Symbols :

-  Stitching line
-  Fabric fold
-  Button and buttonholes
-  Fold
-  Shorten or lengthen line
-  Grainline
-  Notches
-  cutting line
- MF or CF Middle / Center Front
- CB Center back
- L Left
- R Right
- F and B Front and Back
-  French seam

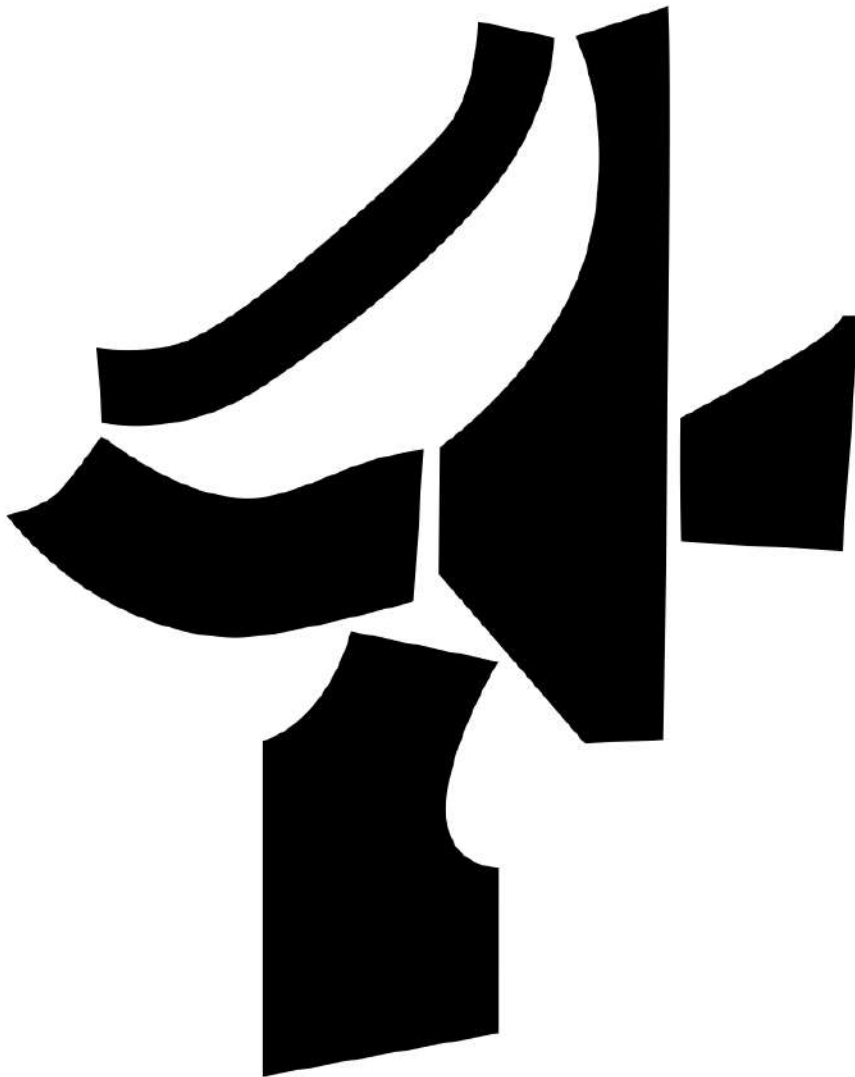


PHASES IN SLOW COSTUMING

Donatella Barbieri quotes the following in the introduction to her book *Costume in performance: materiality, culture, and the body* [2017]:

'From the material gestural and the tactile communication of the stitches and folds, (...) the journey of costume from the cutting table to the stage is reflected in the makings, wearings, and readings of it. In this, hands that make, limbs that wear, and eyes that watch implicate the body as its central shared core, as costume becomes an object in movement – from material into embodiment on stage – in the affective communication between performers and audience.' [2017: Preface XX]

To clarify the importance of couple of all the crafts involved, I will explore the different phases in a making process. From the concept evolving, into the final costume in the selected fabric including – in some cases – dressing the performer as part of the performance. The order is based on a creating process of a performance, but some phases come back repeatedly throughout the whole *Slow costuming* process. All the phases are mostly done by one person. Consequently, time must be reserved for this. I cannot mention the exact time that is required for each





Sketches by Chris Snik, 2022.

step because it depends and differs per project, but by the number steps and the repetition of the phases can be concluded that it is a time-consuming process.

- I. The development of the **CONCEPT** starts with sharing visions and ideas about the performance in collaboration with the whole (creative) team and especially with the performer(s). Important is that the concept keeps on developing throughout the whole *Slow costuming* process.



- II. **SKETCHING AND DESIGNING:** Both 2D sketches on paper and 3D sketches in fabric are tools to design throughout the design process. The latest method can be developed on a half-size or full-size mannequin or on a body double of the performer. The sketches start from ideas (concept) and continue to develop throughout the co-making process.



Atelier Chris Snik, 2022.





Co-creating and making in DE SINGEL, 2023. © Geert Goiris

CO-MAKING

Theatre historian Aoife Monks wrote one of the few academic monographs on costume and defines it as follows: 'Costume is that which is perceptually indistinct from the actor's body, and yet something that can be removed. Costume is a body that can be taken off' [2010: 11]. In my artistic practice we experienced that: performers can step into their 'role' while changing into the costume and can, of course, step out again. The character is sometimes far removed from their own personality but is created through the interaction of performer and designer based on a concept. Monks also wrote that 'We can consider the power of costuming to shape identity and form bodies' [2009: 3]. Herein is the moving body of the performer like a canvas of the co-makers. They shape through coupe (in the toile), movements, and body the character.

Here, the costume can be used to magnify, draw, conceal and interpret the body's movements in which the space between the costume and the performers

body, the so-called *ma* is of great importance. The movements of the body become visible through the costume and the costume becomes visible through the body, the movements, and the *ma*. The *ma* is shifting allowing other shapes to emerge in the silhouette. The costume sometimes touches the body and sometimes moves separately from the body under the influence of the *ma*. Eric de Kuyper wrote that the body itself can make the costume move, giving the costume a kind of autonomous movement character through the model, the fabric, and the style [1985: 9]. The coupe of the costume can direct, determine, and even disguise the movement of the performer. For example, in the case of a large rigid form, parts of the body and therefore its movement are not visible. Coupe is of enormous importance in costume design. If the coupe can shape the performative costume, the craftsmanship and thus the knowledge of co-making, experimenting, *toiling*, and performing is essential for the construction. Therefore, it implies an important participation from the performer in performing arts; it constructs the costumes and thus the character(s).

In the article 'Critical Costume' in *Scene*, researchers Rachel Hann and Sidsel Bech focus on costume practices 'that aim to reveal the processes of costuming through costuming' [2014: 4].

'They furthermore advocate in their article for 'the practice of costuming as a research method that exposes the complex relationships that occur between performing bodies and design.' The concept of 'costume' as a means of critically interrogating the body in/as performance. For costume is both an





Costumes by Chris Snik, *LOS*,
Ultima Thule, 2016.

She is wearing a blazer, a blouse, trousers, and high heels. Throughout the performance, she takes off her blazer, but the movements of her upper body are barely visible due to the design, coupe, and rigid material of her blouse. Only her arms and legs show her movements. The man with crutches, who had sworn never to set foot again in the hospital where he became the victim of a medical error, is waiting for news about his mother (played by Tom Ternest). His jacket has a sturdy inner lining (made of horsehair) and helps him into the right posture, acting as an invisible armor⁹.



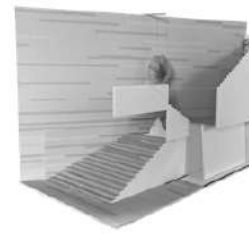
Costumes by Chris Snik, *Onzen heid*, *De Kolonie*, 2015.

Unfortunately, I was not able to make all the costumes by myself due to the (short) rehearsal time. I made a few costumes myself, some were made by a tailor, and others were bought. The tailor Atelier Martinus Johannes¹⁰ has a lot of experience in making costumes for performing arts. As a result, he understood very well how to adjust the coupe of the garment to embody the character. Guided by my feedback from the rehearsals and fittings, it was a good process and a nice result, but with more time and moreover by making the costumes myself, I could have had a more in-depth investigation to come up with better costumes. In saying so, I do not mean that clothes for a performance cannot be purchased (ready-to-wear). In a right balance, it can ensure a good contrast and add a recognizable detail that the character needs. In workshops with dance students and myself as a costume designer/teacher, I was compelled to work with existing clothes to experiment.

9.
More information:
www.nieuwstedelijk.be/project/hybris

10.
More information:
www.martinusjohannes.com





Maquette setdesign, Katleen Vinck for performance MoMu, 2023.

PERFORMANCE

I finalized my two-year research project *Character through coupe*, at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, with a performance in the atrium of the MoMu (fashion Museum Antwerp) in December 2023. During the rehearsing process with three performers, I explored on the 'floor' the close relationship between coupe and (de)forming moving bodies, handcrafts, the thread direction of the calico, character developing and design. Therefore, the theme/ concept of the performance is to reveal the processes of *Slow costuming*, coupe and co-making.

The involved performers have different backgrounds in the performing arts, namely two dancers (one in a wheelchair), a circus artist and me. The toiles and thus the coupe keep on developing every rehearsal according to our ideas and the movements developed in the *toiling* process. Simultaneously, on the rehearsal floor, new choreographies emerge, characters develop, and roles change. Consequently, the roles of the performer and costume designer intertwine. Together we embodied *Slow costuming*. For making the costumes, I use calico to highlight the concept of the performance, making sure that the intricate making techniques that are part of coupe, along with the construction marks and craftsmanship, remain visible. I performed as co-maker and change costumes in conjunction with the movements of the performers and according to the development of their character. Thus, I reappraise the art of the work that is required in a creative process and show the synergy between costume and the moving body.





Location Performance
Atrium-MoMu, 2023. © Wietse
Vendrig

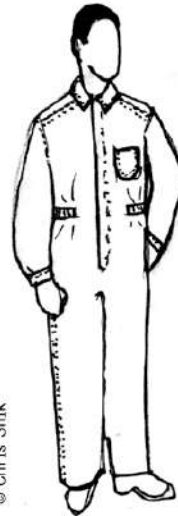
(sewing), and dressing. The order of these phases is not chronological, some phases can come back repeatedly throughout the whole *Slow costuming* process. Time and freedom to experiment with coupe, materials, shapes, and movements is essential and must be scheduled in the rehearsing period.

The handcrafts required for *Slow costuming* must be taught in the various educational programmes, especially in costume design but also in set design, directing and technical training, dance, drama, film, and performing arts. This will encourage and enable the necessary cooperation between different training units. As a result, an integrated form of costume design, namely *Slow costuming*, can be developed.

Consequently, designers, performers, and makers know all the phases necessary to achieve the final performance. This allows for an *inclusive practice* that is open to people of different sizes, abilities, skin color, etc. Moreover, the costume is developed on the unique performer's body through coupe. Body diversity can be embraced, the interaction between the designer/maker and the performer will create a costume that fits the unique body and is beautifully embodied in a silhouette in motion. We can conclude that coupe is essential for performers to transform their diverse bodies and gender expressions, identities and roles.

Slow Costuming in an integrated method. The costume designer can become a performer by dressing the performer and a performer can become a dresser. The line between making a performance and making a costume becomes thin. In my design approach, research, and artistic work I want to intertwine the creating and making process of the costume designer on the one hand and develop the character of the performer on the other. I plead for more research into and recognition of this integrated design process.

Overall for costume Chris Snik for performance in MoMu.
© Chris Snik



p. 119-125
Rehearsing and co-making performance MoMu, 2023. © Geert Goiris

