

Trying It On: The Performative Body

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'Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts. ... If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal¹.'

Ignoring the implicit notice 'no woman over 30 need enter' we re-visited Top Shop to engage with and perform the stereotype of 'mutton dressed as lamb' by trying on a range of trendy clubwear, lycra-stretched sequins, leopard-skin print and PVC. Squeezed into the frame, our bodies mirror the desire and discontent of the loss of the anyway already impossible 'perfect' body. Trying on youth in a changing room, the flesh of the body reasserts itself through the stretched fabric, it cannot be contained or forced to fit within fashions parameters. But alongside this unease, we were celebrating the carnivalesque fun and ambiguity of the images, as tendrils of hair fall upon plunging necklines and bums most definitely do look big in this. The mirrors of the changing room reflected back the performative aspects of the work and reinforced the act of looking, both of the viewer as voyeur inside the changing room and the artists as both fashion model and photographer. When we exhibited this work, we made large (60" x 40") light-boxes, montaging together series of images, to cite, challenge and create a parody of fashion and advertising photography. Chris Arnot (2000)² reviewing the show had a mixed response: materialise female desire and subjectivity as embodied, sentient knowledge.'

'A large bottom stretches tight leopard-skin to comic postcard parody. A big, bare thigh, pitted with cellulite, protrudes from a short skirt below a bare bulging midriff. The unsightly lumps are juxtaposed with lovely feminine shoulders and hints of cleavage.'

1. Butler, Judith (1990) 'Gender Trouble'. London and New York: Routledge.
2. Arnot, Chris (2000) 'Cellulite for sore eyes' in *The Guardian* 3 February p12