

Fashioning the Voice

A critical text by Mary Paterson, December 2020

Pop the collar of this trench coat, tie the belt around your waist, and admire yourself in the mirror. Are you Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*? Or Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*? Tilt your head – could you be a brooding Marlene Dietrich in *A Foreign Affair*?

Even if you've never worn a trench coat before, you can't help but bring a library of images and expectations to the encounter. Even so, *this* trench coat is a little different.

It slips on as easily as any other, brushing past your skin and reminding you of the movie star or the model or the love interest you last saw wearing one. But as your hand moves through the sleeve you hear a noise – the hiss of wind on water? The crackle of electricity through wires? And then another. This time it's your own sound that surprises you: you hear yourself gasp, or laugh. And when your other arm slips into the other sleeve, your sound comes alive again. You swing your shoulders casually left to right and release a fanfare of familiar and unfamiliar noises.

This coat is recording and amplifying the sounds you make as you move, and mixing them with some of its own. You start to dance, you start to laugh, you start to play.

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Fashioning the Voice is a creative collaboration between three different disciplines – fashion, vocal and sound art and wearable technology – to develop a work of art that is also a piece of clothing, an immersive performance and a technological experiment. It takes the form of a trench coat that is implanted with sensors that capture and manipulate the sounds and movements of the person wearing it. The experience weaves together the ways in which we intuitively manipulate our bodies – how we dress, how we speak – with the increasingly ubiquitous presence of technology that observes our most intimate, bodily behaviour. The result is both natural to use, and like nothing else you've experienced before. In the words of one of the designers, fashion stylist Jennifer Anyan, "We immerse the participant in their fashioned voice, and 'touch' them with it."

Everyone has a style (even those of us who pretend not to), just like everyone has a voice, and we tailor them to each and every situation. Indeed, these practices – what we wear and how we speak – are not luxuries utilised by the rich or the idle; they are necessities, manipulated by everyone, all of the time. And although they are rooted in our bodies, they are not simply practices of the self. The decisions you

make about how you appear in the world (or the decisions that are made for you) are integral to your relationships with other people. Every time you open your mouth or pull on a coat you are giving people clues about who you are, where you're from, and how you are going to get on with one another.

Wearable technologies tap into this innate knowledge about our bodies, and are becoming more and more integrated into our daily lives: the most surprising thing about them may be how quickly this has happened. It is unremarkable, now, that your mobile phone knows which direction you're moving in, that your Fitbit knows how many steps you've walked today, that your watch is listening to the soft rhythms of your heart. In fact, our bodies have reciprocal relationships with our technologies – they don't just monitor our behaviour, but change it, too. This is why health insurance companies offer discounts for people who regularly use a Fitbit to track their activity: technology, it seems, has the power to turn us into healthier, happier people.

This may be true, but practical applications like this make technology the slave of necessity. The fashion equivalent of a Fitbit might be a pair of sturdy shoes: it could help you walk further, but it's not what you reach for when you plan to dance till midnight. Taking these technologies in new directions, *Fashioning the Voice* uses the aesthetic focus of fashion as well as vocal and sound art to utilize in more playful, more beautiful, and ultimately more human ways.

Which brings us back to the trench coat: the trench coat is an iconic piece of fashion. Worn by men and women since at least the early twentieth century, its consistent popularity stems from its extraordinary versatility. A trench coat can be revealing or prim, dashing or responsible, sexy or dull. It is one of the few items of clothing that never goes out of vogue, worn by fashion insiders and practical shoppers at the same moment in time. Most important of all, a trench coat can be styled in countless ways: buckle the belt or tie it tight? Push up the sleeves or leave them long? Mould the material to your chest or let it waft around your body? It is, in short, a piece of clothing that can fit anyone and everyone. And here, in a rich bed of possibilities, is where *Fashioning the Voice* begins.

The first invitation to an audience member is to approach the coat and try it on in front of a mirror – after all, who can resist a bit of adult fancy dress? And as soon as you do, you are plunged into a surprising world of sensory mayhem. What are these noises? Where do they come from? Are these your sounds or somebody – something – else's?

In early showings, audiences have reacted in myriad ways: young art students tentatively twisting in front of a crowd, septuagenarian engineers starting to dance

... The most adventurous people I saw were men who are visually impaired. This audience demographic whooped and wailed, stomped and jumped, ran their fingers through every crease of the fabric. Unlike art students, shyly guarding their curated self-image, perhaps they recognised a rare, hands-on opportunity to explore their own style.

Just like the wearable technologies with which we are already familiar, the efficacy of *Fashioning the Voice* lies in how natural it feels. Using technology to reflect, amplify and distort the extraordinary expertise we already embody, *Fashioning the Voice* is intuitive and playful to use. What happens when you spin until the skirt of the coat flares up? What happens when you raise your arms above your head, or plunge your fists into your pockets, or bring the coat's crisp collar flush with your chin? What happens when you sing, or laugh, or whisper? What happens when you fashion your voice at the same time as you fashion your body, dramatically extending yourself to affect your whole environment?

This technologically enabled trench coat, then, is nothing like a pair of sturdy shoes. It is more like a technicolour dream coat, a figment of your imagination spun into real life, a rainbow of possibility that stretches from your body to the rest of the world. In short, it's the kind of thing you might wear to a party, and dance until midnight.

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The potential applications for *Fashioning the Voice* are as endless as the piece itself. It could find a home in a gallery, in a shopping centre, or a public square. It could appeal to art connoisseurs, families, or tech geeks. Amidst all of these, one of the most exciting avenues for exploration is the world of high fashion itself: the place where big ideas, beauty and luxury meet.

A group of architects have developed designs for a studio that could house the experience – a mobile dressing room that could travel between locations, or pop up in a luxury store. The idea is that participants will be able to replicate the feeling of a personal shopping experience: the luxury of being pampered while you explore different ways of being yourself in the world. But instead of shopping for clothes, the audience will be trying on new versions and extensions of themselves.

The winning design features an extendable catwalk, so that participants can display their newfound discoveries to an audience. And this larger environment could also respond to their movements and voice – imagine stepping onto the platform to be greeted by a chorus of bright, pulsating lights.

Of course high fashion, for all its extravagant creativity, is also a discipline accused of limiting self-expression, and of fetishizing unobtainable physical standards. The beauty of *Fashioning the Voice*, however, is that the styling that takes place is inescapably individual and DIY. This is not an experience aspiring to an external idea – indeed, its extravagance and its creativity all come from the people immersed, touched, moved and heard inside it.

Fashioning the Voice is about nothing less than how we live and move in the world. It pries into our most intimate relationships with our bodies, our communities and our technological prosthetics, and asks us to experiment with them all. Crucially, it is impossible to be passive when you're taking part, the experience demands you try things, you test things out, and you push your own boundaries.