Costumographic synergy: Devising the costume performance

ABSTRACT

This research report presents an emergent methodological framework for devising costume performance that offers best practice to the collaborating designer, choreographer and performer. Two distinct practical research case studies, costume performance project Elizabeth & The Three Sisters (2016) and costume research project SESSIONS #1–4, are examined to answer the question: what is an effective working methodology for designing and devising costume performance that creates a synergy between costume/materials and the moving body, and consequently design and choreography? The case study research methods include practical experimentation and devising leading to performances, and experiential findings. Research outcomes are contextualized in relation to Tim Ingold’s theories of (active) materials, Jane Bennett’s concept of assemblages, collaborative devising processes used in dance making, embodiment and somatics and intentionality and authorship in collective making. This investigation is predominantly discussed from the perspective of the experienced and experiential costume performer – choreographer: the ‘embodied subject’ who merges with the costume/materials bringing a unique analysis to the costume and performance research field that is significant to designers, performers, performance makers and scholars. The findings of this report offer practitioners a framework to develop an impactful working approach for the devising of costume performance, as well as other performance where costume is (or could be) an integral part of the work.

KEYWORDS: costume performance, embodiment, materials, choreography/devising, collaboration, framework.
INTRODUCTION

The traditional role of the choreographer is to devise the dance performance, whilst the designer creates the costume, usually to enhance the aesthetic of the piece. The costume, typically introduced in the middle or towards the end of the performance making process, is then used by the choreographer to help create mood and communicate character and/or narrative. Researching for her book *Costume in Performance: Materiality, Culture, and the Body* (2017), Donatella Barbieri found several historical examples of costume preceding and directing the process of choreographing the performance. For example, in *Lamentation* (1930), Martha Graham worked with, and against, the qualities of a stretchy tubular purple costume to express the theme of grief. This included using her limbs to expand, twist and contort the material, amalgamating (moving) body and costume in a shroud of mourning (Barbieri 2017).

Conventional approaches to choreography are challenged further by progressive experimental costume performance and the growing incorporation of costume design as a vital element in the devising of ‘total theatre’ or Gesamtkunstwerk as Wagner termed it (Fischer-Lichte 2013; Mylona 2021): a unified (performance) work, in which all elements – movement, sound, costume, lighting, etc., function together to engage the audience in the work.

Reflecting on my experience as a former dance student, professional dancer/choreographer and dance and performing arts lecturer, it is evident that there is a clear underrepresentation of costume in dance performance and education. Whether due to lack of budget or comprehension, many dance works today still centre costume choices on increased movement range, displaying the body or reflecting everyday clothing (Larsen 2016). Hence, it is no surprise that costume is still to a great extent considered a minor component in the traditional hierarchy of performance (Monks 2013; Dean 2016).

I had the privilege of working as performer and choreographer for the MA Costume Design for Performance at London College of Fashion (LCF) between 2009 and 2014. These professional experiences, and my subsequent research, allowed me to recognize the power of costume and identify the impact it can have on the moving body. My time with LCF enlightened me to the exciting possibilities of costume as creative impetus and meaning maker in performance. From a performer’s perspective, I learnt that costume design choices, such as materials, structure, layers and body fit, all create a sensorial experience that affects how the wearer feels, moves and breathes, evidencing the somatic and haptic nature of costume. This porousness between body and costume (Monks 2010) can also create an internal and external transformation in the wearer impacting their sense of identity.

The MA Costume Design for Performance course was established in 2006 by scholar and scenographer Donatella Barbieri. The course design was informed by Barbieri’s comprehensive academic and practical research into design and performance, including extensive analysis of the founding principles of physical theatre teacher Jacques Lecoq and the creative approaches of the Laboratoire D’Étude du Movement (LEM)² (Barbieri 2007). Barbieri’s course design embeds a ‘movement-based approach to the development of costume’ (Barbieri 2012: 149) and a costume-based approach to methods of devising performance (Smith 2018). Incorporating the LEM approach of ‘a rehearsal room-based design process that invites openness, curiosity, intuition and learning by doing, undoing and redoing’ (Barbieri 2007: 6), the course…
encourages designers to explore narrative, character and metaphor inspired by a text (Smith 2018). These innovative pedagogical approaches inspire the students to create costume performances with the moving body at the centre of the design process, interweaving material and physical embodiment to reveal the human condition to an audience (Smith 2018).

Working for LCF provided my first meaningful experiences of performing in and choreographing for pieces where the costume came first in the creation process. Naturally, some projects were more successful than others in ‘the intertwining of costume and choreography as visual language’ (Hammond 2019: 243). As I began to collaborate with costume designers on my own dance theatre projects, it became apparent just how challenging it can be to devise using costume as a ‘dynamic sculptural and expressive form that can stimulate and be integrated with the moving body in performance’ (Smith 2018: 194).

It is therefore essential to understand the complexity of the making of costume led performance. From an artist’s perspective, the more we understand the intricacies of the devising process, and the impact of each element and how they interact, the more effective and innovative costume performance projects can be. This comprehension must also include consideration of the multifaceted collaborative relationship between designer, costume, performer and choreographer/director, and the importance of both the costume and the live body in the creation process.

Two divergent practical research case studies, in which I was the performer–choreographer–researcher, will be analysed to explore an emergent methodology for designing and devising costume performance that creates a synergy between costume/materials and the moving body, and consequently design and choreography. The case studies will include costume performance project *Elizabeth & The Three Sisters* (2016) and costume research project *SESSIONS #1–4* (2019). Both projects involve unconventional materials. The studies will be examined through an experiential perspective and interrogated in relation to Tim Ingold’s theories of (active) materials (2007, 2010), Jane Bennett’s concept of assemblages (2010), collaborative devising processes used in dance making, embodiment and somatics and intentionality and authorship in collective making. This report will conclude with the presentation of a methodological framework that encourages best practice in the devising of costume performance.

**ACTIVE MATERIALS AND ASSEMBLAGES**

The theorizing of this report has developed from two contributions for the online conference *Critical Costume 2020: Costume Agency*: flash talk ‘The Material Directs, a reflection on the visual costume research project *SESSIONS*’ (Karstens and Smith 2020) and the article ‘Who is choreographing the costume performance? A discussion on shared agency’ (Smith 2020). Therefore, before tackling the case studies, it is useful to clarify my preference for Ingold’s theories of active materials (2007, 2010, 2011) and Bennett’s concept of human non-human assemblages (2010).

I am an artist researcher engaging practically and experimentally with materials to create costume performance, with the aim to make sense of the complexities of the creation process. Although I have previously used the term ‘shared agency’ in the articulation of my work, on reflection and echoing the assertion of Ingold, the concept of agency can be problematic…
There is a complex, rich relationship and playful dialogue between designer, materials/costume and performer—choreographer in the making of costume performance. The costume allows transformation of identity, perception of the body, movement and narrative. The performer brings the costume alive through their movement and interaction, adding their own identity, creativity and interpretation. Melissa Trimingham describes this as ‘designers and practitioners infusing costume with its agency through their kinetic empathy’ (2017: 165). Trimingham also suggests ‘materials and material form upon or, rather, with the body realize that agency’ (2017: 137). However, Bennett states ‘no one really knows what human agency is, or what humans are doing when they are said to perform as agents. In the face of every analysis, human agency remains something of a mystery’ (2010: 34), whilst Noortje Marres remarks ‘it is often hard to grasp just what the sources of agency are that make a particular event happen’ (2005: 216). I do not doubt that as artists we have intentions and agency, but I cannot easily delineate during a project when and how agency occurs, how much each collaborator contributes or if for example other non-human elements exert agency. Nor within live costume performance can I confidently state that in a specific moment I am enacting my agency on the costume/materials, or vice versa. There are also the complications of who or what counts as an ‘agent’, the potential impact of the environment/world on things and events and debates around the difference between intentionality and agency (Gell and Knappett cited in Ingold 2011). This is an extremely fascinating discussion and area of research to explore in relation to costume performance, but although agency will be mentioned, it is not a main focal point of this report.

Ingold’s theories initiate from a place of ‘working practically with materials’ (2007: 3, original emphasis) whereby materials ‘are the active constituents of a world-in-formation’ (2011: 28), and humans are part of the material world, not distinct from it. Ingold argues materials are active and alive, echoing elements of Bennett’s ‘vitality of matter’ (2010), due to their properties that ‘are not fixed attributes of matter, but are processual and relational’ (Ingold 2007: 1). For example, a material may behave differently or change form when heated, when immersed in liquid, when brought into contact with another material. This perception of the material world in relational flux is also akin to Karen Barad’s intra-actions (2007), as well as James Gibson’s Affordance Theory (cited in Ingold 2007).

The activeness of a material is due to the continual ‘dynamic interplay’ (Ingold 2011: 130) with the surfaces of other materials (Ingold 2007, 2011). For instance, fabric for a costume will be in flux with the surfaces of the table it is laid on, the blades of the cutting scissors, the hands of the designer and the air surrounding it. This notion is synonymous with the concept of porousness between costume/material and the performer’s body (Monks 2010) that allows for haptic engagement and can lead to transformations. For example, Monks likens costume to the body of a character that can be put on and taken off by the actor (2010). Therefore, the act of creating, be it a costume, a brick wall, a cake, etc., involves ‘bringing together diverse materials and combining or redirecting their flow’ (Ingold 2011: 213), and in doing so creating ‘the conditions of possibility’ (Ingold 2010: 11) for what may emerge. This interplay/flux/flow of surfaces creates an interconnecting of materials in movement that Ingold refers to as a ‘meshwork’ (2011).
Through this meshwork things can continually materialize and evolve, allowing agency to emerge (Ingold 2011).

Comparable to Ingold’s meshwork, Bennett proposes the forming of ‘human-nonhuman assemblages’ (2010: xvii), a concept that resonates with costume performance. Assemblages are groupings of vibrant materials described by Bennett as ‘living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within’ (2010: 23). Like the meshwork, the assemblage is ‘an open-ended collective’ (Bennett 2010: 24) that has no lead material or hierarchy. The materials/ parts are in a constant state of interaction and modification. Bennett also states that an assemblage ‘not only has a distinctive history of formation, but a finite life span’ (2010: 24). This reflects the creation, performance and de-costuming of the performer (the disconnection from the non-human assemblage) as part of the costume performance process. And although the term assemblage will be used in this report, I will also use the terms costume, wearable art, wearable sculpture and other variations interchangeably in relation to the case studies, as in this context they all represent Bennett’s concept. This also acknowledges that although some innovative designers working with unconventional materials prefer terms like wearable sculpture, the designs are still very much costumes.

Both Ingold’s active materials and Bennett’s assemblages are best understood through ‘sensory perception and practical engagement’ (Ingold 2011: 30). And are thus significant concepts for the contextualization of costume performance. Ingold maintains that materials ‘are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced’ (2011: 30). Therefore, my visual and experiential descriptions of the materials and costumes in the case studies can be viewed as the stories of them, myself (my body) and collaborators in dynamic interplay: flowing, mingling, modifying and transforming (Ingold 2011).

COLLABORATION IN DANCE MAKING

Creating dance performance is rarely a solitary process and typically involves collaboration between artists such as the choreographer, dancer(s), costume designer, sound artist and lighting designer. And like costume performance, dance performance relies heavily on the living, moving body (performer). Somatic dance artist and lecturer Dr Karen Barbour highlights that respect and appreciation for all artists and participants is integral to the collaborative process (2008). She cites Grant Kester who asserts that collaboration evokes ‘a form of art practice defined by openness, listening and intersubjective vulnerability’ (2008: 44), which echoes the principles of Jacque Lecoq’s LEM approach. It is therefore relevant, and particularly in the context of my own dance background, to explore the various approaches to collaboration and devising from a dance perspective before delving into the case studies.

There is a clear spectrum of dance making (Pollatsek and Wilson 2021) between the didactic (ultimate directorial control) and the democratic, through collective collaboration where,

Traditional approaches to choreography, in which the choreographer is considered expert and the dancers as instrument, are placed at one end of this continuum. At the other end lies the notion of co-ownership…
where [...] the creation of dance as art is attempted by more than one artist.

(Butterworth 2009: 178)

Unlike traditional dance forms, contemporary dance making tends to involve approaches where the dancer is very much part of the devising process, even if this shared authorship is not always acknowledged. Chris Crickmay describes the concept of devising as being synonymous with a non-hierarchical, collaborative approach to making (2015). However, Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling question whether devising approaches can be truly democratic and non-hierarchical, as it has and is very common for artistic directors and choreographers to lead the devising process, acting as the main decision-maker and controlling the final vision of the performance (Heddon and Milling 2006; Pollatsek and Wilson 2021). So how does a project team maintain true democratic and non-hierarchical principles when engaged in collaborative devising methodologies?

Tuuli Tahko asserts the importance of differentiating between ‘co-operation as a mode of working together towards a common goal that does not preclude hierarchy or leadership within the group, and collaboration as a mode of working where democracy and collective decision-making are priorities’ (2016: 181). This form of democratic non-hierarchical collaboration necessitates the ‘philosophical concept of collective intentionality’ (Tahko 2016: 255), in which all collaborators are focused on the same goals and values. This can only genuinely be achieved with joint decision making and shared responsibility (Heddon and Milling 2006).

For example, dance theatre project Thou Shalt (2011), a piece exploring the lives of Puritan women, aimed to give equal weight to all creative elements: movement, costume, sound, etc., leading to a successful performance. All project artists had conventional roles/titles, including myself as choreographer/ artistic director. However, as much as I believed that I had clearly explained and instigated a collaborative working approach, these set roles made collective intentionality and shared authorship difficult to instil in all the performers. This was particularly evident when one of the performers asked if the costumes could be made ‘prettier’ – clearly unaware of the purpose of the costume (or the piece themes) to communicate character oppression, struggle and paranoia. Whilst another performer later claimed full authorship of their solo choreography, ignoring or not fully comprehending the collaborative complexities of the devising process. Issues relating to collaboration also inadvertently became visible during the creation of Disco Babies (2014), when I, the choreographer/artistic director, had to leave rehearsals due to an emergency. During my absence, the performers seemed more comfortable taking collective responsibility of the work, evidenced by their identification and resolution of creative problems in the piece.

Seemingly roles and titles can be a barrier for cultivating an open and honest environment for collaborative devising as they tend to reinforce traditional hierarchies. This can lead to rigid perceived expectations of each collaborator’s position and contribution, by themselves or others. Circumventing these issues can be hard for performers whose training and experiences tend to reflect a much more conventional creative approach or hierarchical form of collaboration. In relation to how the performer is perceived/perceives themselves in collaboration, Royona Mitra advocates the term ‘embodied subject’ over ‘body’ to indicate the ‘lived reality that energises [devising] processes and
performance over the historically passive manifestation in which the body is seen merely as a tool of communication, devoid of agency (2015: 147). This terminological distinction, if made explicit in discussions of the collaborative process at the start of a project, could be a valuable approach to empowering performers as equal collaborators with shared authorship in the devising process.

ELIZABETH & THE THREE SISTERS

In 2016 myself, sculptor Annie O’Donnell and sound artist/visual producer Peter Heselton were awarded a Stellar Projects Nightfall commission (£1500.00). The project brief was to create a bespoke performance, installation or live art experience to be part of Nightfall, a family-friendly outdoor event to be held in Middlesbrough’s Centre Square in October 2016. Submissions could be across a range of art forms and had to respond both to the location and the theme of the event; the beauty and wonder of the night sky, from constellations to the zodiac, evening light to the science of stars.

The project objectives were to facilitate our first artistic collaboration, share artistic practices and create a costume performance that met the commission brief. I also aimed to use the project as an opportunity for research that included an exploration of costume as choreographic starting point to expand Man and Summerlin’s concept of costume as choreographer (2016) and questioning of traditional choreographic approaches in which movement creation comes first. Due to O’Donnell’s approach of using unconventional man-made materials, we also investigated non-traditional materials as wearable sculpture/costume and the resulting impact on the performing body. This included incorporating elements of Barbieri’s innovative pedagogical methods, which are informed by the LEM approach, into the devising process (Barbieri 2007, 2012). This entailed movement-based experimental play with the materials, followed by a costume led approach to devising the final performance with consideration of character, narrative and themes of the commission concept.

Our accepted commission bid proposed to create the costume performance Elizabeth & the Three Sisters (EATTS) by combining dance, wearable sculpture and sound art. We were able to merge our individual thematic ideas: my fascination with famous stargazer Elizabeth I; Heselton’s research into the alchemical symbols of Elizabeth I’s court astrologer John Dee; O’Donnell’s connection to the industrial night sky of Teesside and creation mythology, into a coherent concept to explore historical, mythical and futuristic themes relating to Elizabeth I and the Tees Valley.

The first stage of the project was to collect and play with the materials in their innate forms. As the sculptor/costume designer and knowledgeable local, O’Donnell was able to obtain a diverse stock of materials in large quantities within our small project budget. These materials included industrial and manufacturing plastics, and large quantities of Pound shop and household items, such as cable ties, shower scrunchies and frisbees. Our very first practical session took place in a large empty office space with all the materials laid out on the floor.

We engaged with the materials individually, instigated through the simple act of touching and holding the items with our hands to explore their properties: texture, weight, form and malleability. O’Donnell’s interactions progressed to more pragmatic, almost alchemical explorations, such as combining and connecting different materials together to create new forms.
Whereas I proceeded to a bodily play, exploring the flux and flow of the material surfaces against my own physical surfaces. This included wrapping my whole body in the metre-wide rolls of industrial plastic, hanging and balancing items on my limbs and shifting flat surfaces such as shoulders, straightened arms, raised thigh and flat back. This spatial play between body and material reflected Lecoq’s initial LEM exercise of the exploration of the ‘dynamism of lines and planes’ (Barbieri 2007: 5). The pliable reams of plastic encouraged swooping and whirling movements and elongated body extensions, whilst the more rigid items restricted me to pedestrian and controlled movement. Through this dynamic (inter)play, some of the materials started to emerge as potential costume items. For example, a mesh headrest became an expansive shoulder pad, a rainbow frisbee worn at the waist became a hoop structure to hang and connect other materials to, a long ream of plastic became a wig or long veil. Experiencing these non-traditional materials against my skin made me feel somewhat artificial and strangely more solid. The materials mostly extended my body into the space and disguised and reshaped my body with thick protruding forms, making me feel and move like a character from Oskar Schlemmer’s Triadic Ballet6.

This first stage of ‘collect and play’ facilitated an openness to the ‘active properties of [the] materials’ (Ingold 2011: 28) leading to haptic engagement and exploration of the properties of the material in flux with my bodily surfaces and the reactions/responses generated. Dawn Summerlin describes this somatic engagement and material investigation as participating in a ‘material language’ (2019: 110). These practical encounters involved observation and discussion of experiences and initial ideas, which costume designer Kate Lane, drawing from Jacque Lecoq’s pedagogy, refers to as a ‘mimodynamic process’ (2019: 209) of observing and creating. This process continued throughout the development of the early wearable sculpture designs. Two poignant examples of this process can be seen in decisions relating to the peach plastic strips (see Figures 1 and 3) and the rainbow frisbees (see Figures 2 and 4).

The plastic strips of material were slippery but heavy, and very enticing to work with. The material could be draped over the body, worn from the head like synthetic seaweed, tucked into the trousers like a bustle or horses’ tail, etc. However, the material (and my body) became most energized when held in the hand and whipped back and forth in the air – an action that required the forceful engagement of my whole body. This dynamic interplay made me feel powerful, as if I were slashing the sky open to reveal another realm. Both O’Donnell and Heselton verbalized their observations of my ‘abstract play’ (Lecoq 2020: n.pag.), starting with description and imagery, followed by emotional responses. These instinctive and reactive outpourings then filtered into analytical and reflective discussions regarding the visual and performative impact of the interaction between my body and the material. This wearable piece/prop developed as a representation of Elizabeth’s net, connecting her to people and places she remembers or dreams of and led to a successful crescendo of movement and emotion at the end of the performance.

The rainbow frisbees (Figures 2 and 4) were quite a tricky material to work with. As a single item, they could be hooked and hung from the body easily enough, but as a larger interconnected form they needed much more understanding of the material properties. O’Donnell spent a lot of time exploring the best way to attach the frisbees together, deciding on small carabiners as the tool of choice. We then had to work together to experiment with different points of connection to allow the frisbees to be manoeuvred into distinct…
shapes/forms, rather than forming a messy clump. This involved a lot of practical testing, observation and discussion, as well as respect of the material properties. The final design had to be placed on my body in a very specific way, and my movement had to be reduced to slow movements to stop the wearable sculpture becoming tangled, which was particularly challenging when performing outdoors in autumn. This wearable sculpture costume felt like a regal cloak and embodied a feeling and expression of royal power, strength and entitlement. These experiences led to the rainbow frisbee design becoming Elizabeth’s colourful robes and created the grand and visually colourful opening for the performance where Elizabeth symbolizes an energetic, youthful Juno.

For both myself and O’Donnell, our ability to listen, respond to and be in dialogue with the materials, instead of trying to overly control and manipulate the forms, allowed the costume design and final performance to emerge. Lane describes this type of interaction with materials and costume as ‘a sensorial and experiential approach, founded through embodied play […] [that engages] subtle haptic communication’ (2019: 227). Heselton also acted as a witness and responder to the devising process, improvising soundscapes during the development phase. His sound art responded to my interactions with the sculptural pieces, and I unconsciously responded through movement in return.

The final wearable sculpture pieces, developed over a month-long period, guided the choreography and final structure of the performance, as well as the soundscape. Breaking from a traditional choreographic approach, I would only engage in movement exploration/improvisations to develop the choreography…
when wearing the sculptural pieces in accordance with the initial research objective. In fact, I found it extremely hard to motivate myself to create without the triggered haptic connections through the porousness between costumes and my body.

As Crickmay explains, artwork emerges unpredictably through sequential acts of experiencing, observing and responding, with the form gaining refinement as the artists discern more in the detail, but that ‘at a certain stage the work transcends its ingredients and seems to become something – a coherent but shifting entity that flows […] in time and space’ (2015: 147). Crickmay refers to this process as a principle of ‘emergence’ (2015: 146). For EATTS (Figures 1–5), although there was an overarching narrative and themes, the final performance emerged through practical and sensorial engagement with the materials (material language) via a mimodynamic process to create the assemblages (wearable sculpture interweaved with the embodied subject), which were explored through improvisation to reveal a loose choreographic structure.

The emergence of the performance was able to occur through a successful collaborative process established in a working environment of respect and acknowledgement of each project member. As a collective of artists, we shared authorship of the work, agreeing on the project goals, themes and narrative. Although we mostly stuck to our own disciplines, there was no hierarchy and we democratically shared the decision making and responsibility of delivering
the commission. This included everyone attending all rehearsals, meetings and performances. There was also consistent interaction between the artists throughout the project in the form of observation of play, sharing of witnessed outcomes and ongoing dialogue about the developing meanings of the wearable sculptures, movement and choreography. It must be noted that this collaborative working approach was never explicitly agreed on but unfolded naturally. Although this is quite surprising for our first project together, it is most likely due to our individual years of experience in collaboration.

**SESSIONS #1–4**

In 2019, I re-established my collaborative relationship with Dutch costume designer Daphne Karstens, a graduate of the MA Costume Design for Performance at LCF. Karstens’ work explores the concept of body sculptures to create experimental and innovative wearable art pieces. She often works with unconventional materials, combining their individual qualities in experimentation with shape and structure to explore and redefine the boundaries and possibilities of wearable art and wearable sculpture-based performances.

My first collaboration with Karstens was as the performer for her MA final project *PING* in 2014. Five years later, I had the pleasure of performing the work again as part of *The Innovative Costume of the 21st Century Conference 2019* (Moscow). During the conference, we spent a lot of time discussing our individual current practice and research, leading to the conception of visual costume research project *SESSIONS #1–4*, completed two months later. The main research project objective was the practical exploration of the working concept ‘the material directs’, developed from Jacques Lecoq’s LEM approach, through engagement with non-traditional costume materials, leading to the creation of innovative costume pieces explored via (performative) free improvisations with no set rules or structures.

During a five-day intensive period, we experimented with various recycled everyday materials (non-fabric) on the (moving) body to create innovative costume pieces. Like *EATTS*, this project had a minimal budget that dictated the materials, which Karstens collected herself or acquired from other local artists’ collections that they wanted to dispense with. The materials included purple bottle caps, white mannequin hands, white plastic cups and small green cardboard boxes. The daily working process involved the following stages: initial hand-based engagement with the chosen material; structural repetition of the materials by connecting materials together into simple structural forms, and dynamic interplay between developing structures and the embodied subject; construction of wearable art costumes; costumed free improvisation with and without music. This final performative stage echoed the approach of the LEM ‘neutral mask’ exercise, in which I, the performer, aimed to experience the (moving) body and material environment as if for the first time (Barbieri 2007). Throughout every stage, the mimodynamic process took place via observation, touch/sensorial engagement between material surfaces, gentle material manipulation, witnessing and discussion, helping to develop a material language.

The first experiment *SESSIONS #1* (Figures 6 and 7) involved purple bottle caps. Initial handling of the plastic caps revealed they were hard, rigid, nonpliable and consistent in overall form. Through further touch-based study and play, it was apparent that the caps could be connected to create larger forms through structural repetition. This instigated a conveyor style system of...
Karstens drilling holes in the sides of the caps, whilst I connected random numbers of caps together with cable ties to create panels in a range of shapes and sizes. As more panels were formed, Karstens began to explore the cap sections on my body, gently bending them around or away from my body surfaces. A back and forth between building sections of caps and testing them out on my body continued, allowing the design to evolve. It was particularly interesting for me to observe how my choice of tightness on the cable ties impacted the flexibility of the developing formations. As the emerging wearable art was adapted on my body, I was able to get a sense of its properties.
and rigidity through muted movements, such as curving my spine and twisting my torso.

The final wearable art costume was visually impactful, appearing simultaneously futuristic and organic. The wearable art had a good weight to it that grounded me without restricting movement. The design gave enough rigour and flexibility during the free improvisation, mostly due to the expanse of space inside the form, for movement exploration. There were numerous gaps within the form allowing the piece to be shifted around my body. My haptic connection as part of the assemblage led to an embodiment of amoeba/amphibian imagery that prompted shaking, pulsing movements, like bursts of energy from a splitting cell. Further improvisation also led to moments of removing parts of the form like the shedding of skin by a reptile.

SESSIONS #1 took around a day and a half to make and was a very creative and enjoyable experience. This was very different in comparison to SESSIONS #2 (Figure 8), which involved working with mannequin hands. The mannequin hands looked like they would spark an exciting costume, but the material was extremely unyielding. From initial touch and observations, no intuitive structural repetition or ideas for connecting the hands together could be identified. It is probable that the ability to find the material language was blocked by the human imitation of the material form. Hence, we instead moved to exploring the material on my body. The hands were heavy, cold and made from hard plastic and fibreglass with no flexibility whatsoever. The material properties also meant the items would not sit or balance on my body surfaces independently. The only viable option was to tie the hands together with yellow cord, and then bind the bunches of hands directly to my body, mostly across the chest and back, and on the extremities. Unlike the caps design, the hands sculpture could not be removed as it developed, so I had to spend several hours with the design resting on and hanging from my body.

Every attempt to explore the evolving design through movement led to the hands bruising against my joints, collar bone, ribs and other bony parts. The cord also pressed and cut into my flesh. The discomfort caused by the material and its lack of workability inevitably led to a closed dialogue. I also felt very disgruntled from the unpleasantness of the process. This negative experience no doubt fed into the movement expressed during the free improvisations, which included hanging my head and torso down and jolting my body as if to try and shake myself free from the wearable art piece. This created a fantastic sound of the hard surfaces of the hands knocking together and sparked some upright sporadic popping of the chest and angular arm and torso twisting.

Thankfully working with the plastic disposable cups for SESSIONS #3 (Figures 9 and 10) was much more straightforward. The cups not only were light, smooth and very supple but also had a clear breaking point if too much pressure was applied. The initial two stages led to the discovery that the cups made visually pleasing repetitive structures when brought together in circular configurations that were very reminiscent of natural formations, such as beehives, seeding dandelion flowers, pompoms and chrysanthemums. Akin to the purple caps, a conveyor style process was set in motion wherein I would staple the side of the cups together into circular sections, and Karstens would explore how to connect the sections into larger constructions. This stage also allowed me to witness the fragility of the cups, which could easily split from the punctures of the staples, but equally the strength and durability created when the cups were brought into larger structures.
As the formations developed, Karstens would regularly experiment with the possible placement and connection of the forms on my body. The sculptural pieces were quite light yet sturdy, and when added altogether the spherical forms hid the trunk of my body. Out of all the experiments, this material created the most classically sculptural form. The structural elements greatly restricted my movement in space and made a distinct crunching noise whenever moved or compressed. I either had to remain static, take minuscule shuffling steps or gently nudge the structure forward with my toes to manoeuvre myself through the space. Due to the cumbersome size of the structures, movement had to be mostly slow, soft and controlled. The design encouraged a leaning from the hips and twisting/rippling through the upper body into held graceful positions. I felt like a precious, elegant piece of organic matter in blossom that would disintegrate by sundown.

The final experiment SESSIONS #4 (Figures 11 and 12) involved working with green cardboard medicine boxes. The material was light, rectangular and somewhat rigid but would tear if manipulated too much. Due to the original use of the material, there were already folds in the cardboard that instigated the design process. We moved quite quickly to the third stage, as the boxes were easily and quickly stapled together and moulded around my body shape. Due to this approach, Karstens began building the sculptural pieces straight onto/around my body, so I was not needed to take part in the construction itself. However, as part of the evolving costume, I did discuss and input my sensorial experiences into the design and began to find a material language through an exploration of basic movement, such as bending and straightening my limbs, and twisting my torso. The angular cubic structure reshaped and abstracted my body and immediately made me feel like a cartoonish armoured knight, making it impossible not to embody this quirky character during the free improvisations. The costume invoked repetitious movements, including marching and shuffling on the spot and across the space, exaggerated fist clenching and arm raising, wobbling, hopping, stiffening and releasing like a wooden collapsing string puppet. This costume expressed a mischievous character and was particularly entertaining to explore. It also encouraged the most energetic movement, leading to the eventual ripping of the costume (the only way to remove it) making it unusable after the final improvisation.

Often costumes are constructed by forcing materials into shapes and behaviours to recreate design drawings, meaning artists can miss the unexpected surprises from the practical sensorial engagement with materials (Karstens and Smith 2020: n.pag.). SESSIONS # 1–4 encouraged a ‘materially centred process’ (Bågander 2020: 264) that maintained an awareness of the qualities of the materials, liberating us from premeditated outcomes (predetermined characters, narratives, images, etc.) and fostered new wearable art costumes. This was advanced with the accumulation of each completed SESSION experiment, allowing us to grow confidence and trust in the process. We also set ourselves the challenge to create a piece of wearable art every day during the intensive. Working to such a tight timeframe also compelled us to make intuitive creative decisions (Karstens and Smith 2020: n.pag.), reaffirming the LEM devising ethos of openness, intuition and play.

As a development from the EATTS collaborative creation process, I was not confined to my own discipline and took part in the design construction. This engagement gave me a heightened responsiveness and empathy towards the material, creating an understanding and awareness physically and…
haptically as to what I could or could not do with the wearable art, allowing me to work with the movement and flow of the material. This collaborative approach produced ‘the conditions of possibility’ (Ingold 2010: 11) by encouraging the qualities of each material to initiate and guide the creation process. The experiments demonstrated how ‘simple’ everyday materials can be used in an abstract way to create original costumes, repurposing the material’s practical form to find its sculptural essence and expressive capacities (narrative, metaphor, etc.) when combined with the moving embodied subject.

In EATTS, there was an evident communication pattern of intuitive responses: descriptive, imagery and emotion based, followed by analytical and reflective discussions regarding the visual and performative impact of material and designs. Interestingly, a similar pattern emerged in SESSIONS # 1–4 during the free improvisations stage. However, the initial intuitive stages of engaging with and finding the structural forms of each material involved less verbal communication between Karstens and myself in comparison. This exploratory phase could therefore be perceived as the equivalent of the dynamic play between my body and the material in EATTS. To elaborate, while I was in direct contact with the material, listening and instinctually reacting to its forms and rhythms (Barbieri 2007), in SESSIONS # 1–4 Karstens was doing…
the same with her hands. And in both moments, we were being witnessed, myself by O'Donnell and Heselton, and Karstens by me. The project involved a process in which ‘the material and body [were] equally active’ (Bågander 2020: 265) through practical interactions between both designer and performer–choreographer that nurtured awareness and appreciation of each other throughout the whole project (Karstens and Smith 2020: n.pag.). This could not have been achieved without ‘mutual understanding, shared languages, common goals and the ability to negotiate across differences [and art forms] ’ (Papastergiadis 2012: 1). The fluidity of roles and disciplines also facilitated this growth in communication, interaction and understanding (Barbour 2008; Tahko 2016). Thus, the project although instigated by the materials, was arguably developed though a shared authorship between all elements and collaborators (Karstens and Smith 2020: n.pag.).

CONCLUSION: A PROPOSED METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Comparing and reflecting on the case studies described and analysed above, an emergent methodological framework for devising costume performance can be formulated, which can be used for costume performances with both an abstract or character/narrative driven outcome. The framework also offers a shared vocabulary that can transcend specific art forms, encouraging clear communication and project success.

This framework consists of two main parts: the working approach (how to work) and the devising process (what to do). An elementary diagram (Figure 13) has been included as a visual guide that can be adapted or expanded on by other practitioners. The framework is not specific to the types of materials used, or whether they are traditional or unconventional. However, it is worth noting that this framework has been developed through the analysis of two projects that did not use any form of design sketches. The incorporation of sketches into the suggested devising process is possible if the designer is open to ‘intersubjective vulnerability’ (Kester cited in Barbour 2008: 44), and does not become uncompromising to change, adaption or scrapping the designs altogether.

Ideally a collaborative working approach should be established at the start of the project. This should be democratic, non-hierarchical, respectful and trusting. Collective intentionality should be identified at the beginning. This intention could be a purely practical endeavour, such as the creation of a character driven costume performance, or for practical research purposes. This collective intention should also be used to nurture shared authorship of the project development and outcomes, facilitated through shared decision making and responsibility. The working approach can function with fixed or fluid roles. Nevertheless, there are potential benefits of co-creator roles that encourage the distribution of tasks regardless of discipline, which in turn can cultivate a sharing and developing of artistic practice. For example, taking on design construction tasks as part of SESSIONS#1–4 greatly improved my understanding, receptivity and empathy towards the materials and wearable sculptures created. Hence, ‘the designer [can be] a collaborator in, and interpreter of the movement’ (Hammond 2019: 247), and the choreographer/performer a collaborator in, and interpreter of the material, costume design and construction. It must be noted that in both case studies the designers did not experience the final costumes. Therefore, further research is needed into the potential impact of the designer engaging in free improvisations with the final designs.
As evidenced in both case studies, this collaborative approach can be implicit in parts for long standing artistic relationships or artists experienced in collaboration, such as in EATTS and SESSIONS#1–4. For new working partnerships, an explicit discussion on the approach is recommended. The collaborative working approach should be maintained throughout the whole project to facilitate a successful devising process.

The devising process stages can also be implicit or explicit in the project. In both case studies, there was a blurring between phases particularly between play and construction, with the movement and wearable art pieces developing simultaneously at times. However, the following recommended stages can help to scaffold the project:

• collect/gather active material(s)
• initial touch and handling of active material(s)
• embodied play and exploration
• development and construction of costume(s) and movement
• final improvisation/performance.

Regardless of the distinction or order of these stages, the devising process should be instigated through practical interactions with the active material (ideally by all collaborators) to activate a porousness between the surfaces of the material and embodied subject in flux. These sensorial encounters, referred to in the framework as embodied play/dynamic interplay, will facilitate an understanding of, and empathy with, the material and its properties and help to develop a material language. These interactions should be mimodynamic in nature via the use of listening, witnessing, sharing and responding, both verbally and non-verbally, allowing for haptic communication to take place. Through these practical stages, and shared authorship between all collaborators and elements, a journey of (embodied) sense-making can take place that will lead to the materialization of a final costume performance (a synergy between performer and costume/material), referred to in the framework as the assemblage/emergent form, i.e. costume performance in formation. However, Bennett’s term assemblage: the interweaving of material and embodied subject, or non-human and human (2010), can easily be replaced with other preferred terms such as costume or wearable art.

Lecoq states that ‘the LEM journey is a practical experience that cannot be replaced by written explanations’ (2020: n.pag.). Similarly, this emergent methodology embeds a focus on experiential engagement (non-verbal communication with the material/costume) supported by verbal communication between collaborators. The case studies indicate that a communication pattern of intuitive responses followed by analytical/reflective discussions, may enhance the instinctual and open nature of the process of devising costume performance.

This framework looks at costume performance from a multi-dimensional perspective, in which all artists and elements are contributing and sharing authorship. It acts as an informative guide to creating impactful costume performance for both myself and other artists. The implementation of this methodological framework can support a devising process that leads to what I have termed ‘costumographic synergy’, a symbiosis between material(s)/costume and the moving body, and the disciplines of movement-choreography and costume design. Or, as declared by Ingold a ‘synergy of practitioner, tool and material, and the coupling of perception and action’ (2011: 17). This research report has documented and reflected on two costume performance projects and resulted in a comprehensive framework that encourages…
best practice in the devising of costume performance, particularly for designers and dance artists used to more traditional devising approaches. It is imperative that as practitioners we continue to critique and articulate the creative process and outcomes in the creation of costume performance, not only within the relevant fields of research, but in education and to the audience, to better understand and evolve arts practice. Finally, it is clear through this investigation that the devising of costume performance is a beautifully unique and complex collaborative process where all elements are essential to realizing the final outcome.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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1 Examples of companies and individuals creating ‘total theatre’ work include Levantes Dance Theatre, Fully Booked Theatre, Lea Anderson, The Ballet Russes, among others.
2 A branch of experimental study within Lecoq’s École International de Théâtre.
3 Stellar Projects is a North East organization that delivers bespoke artsled projects, events and celebrations for both the public sector and local communities.
4 Peter’s soundwork focuses on the relationships between aural and visual depiction, with work often linked thematically to an investigation of the point of flux; when diverse objectives coexist simultaneously. Annie’s sculptural practice researches place and identity, examining how specific materials and objects can stand as playful tropes for myth/anecdote and people/place. Juxtaposing generic materials such as plastic with older found objects, Annie forms sculptural aggregates of time and space, changing the status of materials as carriers of evidence. The works additionally examine understandings of performative ‘collage’ practice across disciplines that stem from her previous twenty year background as a dance artist. This collage practice has recently related more specifically to sculpture that can be manipulated or worn by dancers, in an exploration of colour and line more commonly seen in painting or theatre.
5 Piece copy: Elizabeth & The Three Sisters follows Queen Elizabeth I in a stargazing journey, as she transits time, space and historical reality. In her dreams and visions, she sets off to visit the constellation of The Three Sisters (Orion’s Belt). Guided by her court astrologer Dr John Dee, she embraces Alchemical symbols and Enochian calls to move between worlds, but losing her way, Elizabeth finds herself instead in an alternative version of Middlesbrough. Where are the town’s Hercules and Vulcan? Here, the queen tries to navigate her way back through the industrial night sky to her own time and to her own reality by transforming herself into the goddesses Juno, Venus and Minerva.
6 Oskar Schlemmer, member of the Bauhaus school, created Triadisches Ballett (Triadic Ballet), an Avant Garde ballet that saw costumed actors transformed into geometrical representations of the human body (Trimingham 2017).