

The Beast Trilogy: An Evolving Experiment in Fashion Ideation

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Abstract

Masses of leathery membranes, wild furs and etched bones.

Intangible caresses of bodily fields.

Sonic skins stretching on expanded skeletal structures.

Answers to the question: What does *The Beast* unleash? This question, when posed as a series of provocations, acts as catalyst within a setting in which practitioners as pedagogues set the conditions for beastly emergence. As a conceptual device, *The Beast* realizes unthought potential by forcing interactions with the unfamiliar. When *The Beast* is channelled through the medium of unyielding materials, an unconventionally framed body, or unidentified sound, the setting for inevitable altercations is established. *The Beast* does not submit easily. It intimidates, fights and retaliates in response to the practitioners' grappling and desire to easily know. The process enables a shift from familiar actions, thoughts and processes to states of "unknowing" and affords new, unexpected and surprising outcomes.

The asking of "what is beastly?" further coaxes *The Beast* and moves seeking beyond physical realms. Within the individual, the qualities of "beast" and "the beastly" invoke curiosity and discomfort through searching made internalized. In this circumstance unfamiliarity emerges and the hunter becomes the hunted. Framed within the context of fashion practice; centred around the "body" and "the bodily" and inherently expressed through making: how do we contend with these emergent beastly qualities? Can they be tamed or do they tame us? Investigations are led by moving, making, and through the expanded practice of listening.

As a framework for expanding possibilities of practice, *The Beast* was tested within a series of undergraduate fashion design studios. Through the outcomes emanating from the trilogy of studios, this paper examines *The Beast* as an innovative tool for fashion ideation. As an enigma defying definition, *The Beast* pushes to unpack unknown imaginings, blur disciplinary boundaries and irreversibly reshape practice.

Keywords: experimental fashion design, fashion ideation

Introduction

The notion of *The Beast* as a provocation for fashion ideation was explored across three undergraduate fashion design studios in 2011-13. The initial 2011 studio “Instinctual BEAST”, led by Tania Splawa-Neyman, focused on the beastliness of materiality, with special reference to heavy materials such as leather. In 2012, “BEASTS Too” was developed in collaboration with Danielle Wilde, to explore the interaction of the unknown beastly body with heavy beastly materials. In 2013, “Tres BEAST” added Jordan Lacey and Winnie Ha Mitford to the collaborative group, bringing explorations of environmental sound and the sonic qualities of wearables into the mix. Across the evolution of the suite of studios, *The Beast* revealed its remarkable worth as a conceptual pedagogical device, manifested both physically (through hands on, experiential engagement), and as a metaphorical pursuit (*The Beast* as a journey into the unknown).

The framework of *The Beast* extends students and pedagogues into new and unexpected unknowns. It acts as a rich catalyst for discovering unimagined territories for design exploration and evolved making practices. The studios discussed in this article demonstrate a valuable framework for fashion ideation as well as experimental design processes. This is evident in both the students’ design responses to studio provocations expressed through their project outcomes, and how *The Beast* operates as a transversal tool for us as pedagogues, enabling us to disseminate and augment our know how across disciplinary boundaries. This article focuses predominantly on our pedagogical framing and student experience.

The Beastly Frame

The Beast is an enigma. It shadows the imagination and resists definition – this is precisely its appeal. We know it has been dwelling within a trilogy of studios conceived for the undergraduate fashion program at RMIT University, hanging around as a heavy, heaving body that is lively; perpetually moving, sensing and breathing. Sometimes it seems palpable, residing within materials and bodies as a thick, languid and undeniable thingness. At other times, but also often with uncanny simultaneousness, it is somewhere away and unable to be grasped, distanced from the body or in wholly cerebral places.

To describe *The Beast*, we provide an inventory of its characteristics. Definite traits of *The Beast*, but with a sheepish disclaimer; it is a contradictory list and therefore a beastly one in itself:

- *The Beast* is within us
- *The Beast* is away from us
- *The Beast* is unknown and unfamiliar. It has never been encountered before
- *The Beast* is found within what is familiar and presumed as well known. Its existence is discovered when surfaces are scratched and things taken for granted are attentively apprehended
- *The Beast* is non-negotiable. It possesses properties that both cannot and will not change
- *The Beast* is pliable. It is able to be coaxed and reshaped through patient and creative engagement
- *The Beast* is close by
- *The Beast* is foreign and inhospitable
- *The Beast* is slippery and mercurial
- *The Beast* is sticky and inert
- *The Beast* is calm, plush, soft and friendly
- *The Beast* is fierce, mean and harsh. It wants to harm us. It is terrifying

- *The Beast* never stagnates.

This list reveals the ungraspable nature of *The Beast*, which, in essence, is the stimulus for creative practice. The question “what is beastly?” cannot unequivocally be answered, but provides an ever shifting challenge for the interrogator to find *his or her own beast*. *The Beast* is the catalyst – the stepping off point. But it is also the continual conduit through which experimentation through making, and conceptualization through thinking must pass. *The Beast*, with force and vigour, pushes the emerging practitioner into situations beyond the known.

While the authors acknowledge the theoretical scope of the beast in connection with the concepts of the bestiary, otherness, myth, nature, metamorphosis, and the complexities of humanness, animality and sovereignty, such as those discussed by Jacques Derrida in “The Beast and the Sovereign”, this paper specifically discusses the image/imaginative figuration of the beast and beastliness as conceptual catalysts for body-based imagination and design. Rather than the design thinking and making processes being led by theory, a decision was made to allow the visceral imaginings of the beast and beastliness to evoke intuitive modes of designing and making with unfamiliar materials, processes, forms and effects. Therefore, it should be noted that the purpose of *Tres Beast* is the development of a pedagogical tool via generative design processes, rather than an expression of theory.

With this in mind, the students’ initial encounter with the concept of the beast was through Saint-Exupéry’s account of the friendship between *The Little Prince* and the fox. When the little prince tames the fox he must establish ritualistic practices. These are repeated actions and attentive moments reserved especially for the fox, building reciprocity and a bond that can only be formed through compassion for a nature different from one’s own. As a series of mutual acts instigated by the little prince as practitioner, he is unavoidably acted back upon himself. Now the fox, like the little prince’s own particular rose back on his own planet, is special and one of a kind among

things that on the surface look similar. As the fox says, “what is essential is invisible to the eye” (Saint-Exupéry, 2010, p. 72).

The taming of the fox describes an inherently reflective practice; the relationship is shaped in action and we can imagine the “talking-back” of the situation being responded to through further “back-talk” (Schön, 1983, p. 79). This acts as an exemplar for the students’ own reflective processes whereby they are able to see “this situation as that one”, and so “may also do in this situation as in that one” (Schön, 1983, p. 139). Thereby the emerging practitioner’s quest can be seen as the designing of a liaison with the beastly unknown, requiring attentive interaction and receptiveness to whatever way *The Beast* might react. The result may be a prince/fox-like friendship, or conversely a vexatious clash resulting in a truce.

The interaction with *The Beast* is set over the course of a 12 week semester, split into a provocation phase led through our own disciplinary focuses of materials, body and sound, followed by the students’ responses through their beastly project.

The Beast ultimately asks: How will you react and act upon the unknown as *beast*? How will *The Beast* react and act upon you?

Provocations

As studio leaders, when we each took on the task of channelling *The Beast*, we filtered our approaches through our own expertise and know how. The use of provocations, as small and speedy exploratory exercises, is to provide starting points for encounters with *The Beast*. Aspects incorporated include familiarization with unfamiliar materials and mediums, defamiliarization through uncommon engagement with familiar materials and processes, instinctual making and design, and learning and developing construction techniques and recording processes.

In the pursuit for *The Beast*, we find many shades and traces of *The Beast*, though it never comes into focus. It intimidates, fights and retaliates against the students’ desire

to easily know, who, through grappling, are often left overwhelmed. They soon realise they must find a way to be okay with not knowing. Since there is no absolute answer to the search for their own beast, they can only move forward through internalizing the external, and are thereby directed to depths and places that they could never have imagined.

Material Beginnings

During the first instalment of *The Beast* studio, the aim was to expose students to the challenges of working with heavy materials and equip them with skills and techniques to facilitate their successful application within design propositions. Working with Tania, students explored leather, denim and non-fabrics; the latter included plastics, metals and other hard substances in the form of traditional garment trims, found objects and in sheet form. The principle was to work with the inherent properties of the material, drawing on Richard Sennett's perspective on material resistance (2009, pp. 215-222), wherein a sympathetic approach is developed through understanding what materials will and will not easily do. The problem of making with unyielding, unfamiliar materials, when seen as beastly, cast the materials as being hard to deal with, alongside their physical hardness. This challenge put forward overtly by *The Beast* positioned the students' struggle as something not so unexpected, perhaps softening its impact and readying them with clues as to its nature and ways in which they might begin to respond. A material's resistances can block attempts to work with it, but understanding its characteristics can change this resistance into an asset. Embracing and working with beastly ways might reveal the right kinds of coaxing, patience and skill that will bend the material towards taking on a valuable role in a reciprocal making experience. The metaphor of *The Beast* may also give rise to appreciations other than or beyond what is heavy, hard and menacing. Through the interplay between practitioner, material and beastliness, different scenarios may be acted out and multifaceted sides of *The Beast* revealed. The unknown beast that lurks in this material world of heaviness might be soft, light or mystical. Given enough free reign, it might even be humorous.

In the first provocation – the “heavy” video sketch – students explored ideas of heaviness through the creation of a sketch; a quick, raw creation to rapidly generate ideas using the medium of video. We asked: What is heaviness? What is heavy? What makes something heavy?

The responses can be broadly grouped as: specific experiments with heavy materials captured in motion, and interactions between heaviness and the body, often through wearing materials or garments. The students instinctively imbued their representations of heaviness with human qualities, even when focusing primarily on materials. They related the beastly quality of heaviness through interaction with themselves and to themselves, revealing ways in which they are constrained, liberated, burdened and unburdened. Related through the moving image, this was the beginning of their beastly discourse.

Through the materials-focused provocation *Leather It*, the physical properties of leather as a design catalyst were explored. The students selected a piece of leather they were instinctively drawn to, then familiarized themselves with their unique piece of skin. Strong and weak parts were identified within the material, along with evidential marks, indicating the previous life of the material. They then delved deeper to discover and imagine the abstract traits of the leather beyond appearances. What kind of character is it? What would it like to be?

The leather was then applied directly to the body by draping on to a dress form; new appreciations of the leather’s properties were obtained when it hit and caressed the curves of the human physique. Parts of the leather moulded or aligned with certain areas of the body. Sometimes the leather was draped as a whole piece, or fault lines and depressions indicated lines of cut. Working with the inherent properties of the leather, found within its composition and revealed through making, was the starting point for drawing out *The Beast*. Through this provocation, the beastly impression was materialized through making. At the same time the pragmatics of making with *The Beast* continued to evolve practice.

Bodies are Beasts Too

The students' propensity to cycle their explorations back *to*, *through* and *of* the body, led to the second iteration of the studio: *Beasts Too*, where the *Beastly Body* was placed in a range of dynamic relationships with formalized struggles with materiality. As pedagogues, our guiding question was whether doing so might extend the students' *beastly* engagement and further strengthen outcomes.

The *Beasts Too* provocations focused on: different senses (See the Beast, Feel the Beast), reductive notions of dimensionality (constraining explorations through point, line, then plane), conceptual and material interpretations of heaviness, and thinking through making. These provocations used constraint as a major force in leveraging Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization (Shklovsky, 1965, p. 16). A common technique of ethnography, design and art throughout the twentieth century, defamiliarization is epitomised in the surrealist slogan "making the ordinary extra ordinary" (Lefebvre, in Nelson & Grossberg, 1991). Its value lies in tilting assumptions off balance, to unveil unexpected responses and ways forward.

With embodied engagement as the primary focus, exercises that used commonplace materials were designed to shift focus away from materiality, and on to possibilities for the body to be something other. Embodied engagement was thereby used to unlock imaginative potential. For example, in *Point Line Plane*, students, working in groups, used cardboard poles as hand held (momentary), dynamic, linear extensions of each other's body. The resulting reframing of the body was striking, and gave immediate access to the dynamic relationships that can exist between the moving body and the surrounding architecture or space (informed by Lecoq, 2006).

In another exercise, cardboard sheets were used to block visual access to sections of the body, and thereby act as frames for the body to perform into. Such experiments rapidly brought unpredictable and evolving body forms into the immediate present, giving students alternative ways of bringing new form into being, thinking through body and material as one (ibid.).

In quite a different approach, in *Embodied thinking-through-making* exercises, students were encouraged to select a human desire from a curated list (Reiss, 2000); to rapidly pair this desire with their body, without taking time to question, consider or take into account any underlying logic; then “make” in response to this body-desire pairing, without knowing in advance what they were going to make (for more see Wilde & Andersen, 2013). The students assembled emergent body-centric garments, accessories and artefacts using commonplace materials such as cardboard, fabric, paper, wire and string. The process undermined more traditional approaches to making, where something is conceived and then realised, or placed in collision with material efforts of construction. It thereby frustrated them from working with tools and techniques that were familiar to them. It required them to suspend their disbelief and discover what they were making as the artefact or outcome emerged. It supported them to leap past the adjacent possible, the conceptually feasible (Johnson, 2010), and bring unexpected ideas to the surface.

Over the course of the semester, students were introduced to increasingly sophisticated techniques for embodied ideation and physically engaged knowledge generation drawn from Interaction Design, Theatre and Fine Art, rather than (or in complement, or even opposition to) Fashion. The techniques were delivered in intense collage-like constellations that prevented students from settling easily into a place of comfort. For example, automatic writing after an intense embodied experience while being read to from design manifestos; each of these activities and experiences competing with each other for attention. Different elements are thus experienced both as beastly and liberating. This process demands students push back in order to tame the new techniques and find a place for them in their practice.

Sounds Beastly

The third studio, *Tres BEAST*, introduced sound as a material element. Jordan used various methods for students to experience and visualize sound. One tool is the sonogram, a graphic that visualizes sound. Students used the sonogram as an imaginative tool for building a mental image of space. For example, students were

asked to imagine urban sounds as a type of immersive fog through which they drag their bodies on an everyday basis. Students were then asked to generate an image of a sonogram from a recording of their sound experiment, noisy wearables, as discussed below. This afforded explorations of sonic materials from both sound-making and sound-visualization perspectives.

Sonic qualities of clothing were also explored through “soundwalking”, a group act of concentrated listening to external sounds while walking in silence. The students were specifically asked to listen to the sounds of bodies and clothing. While the students were able to generate an impressive list of audible sounds, it was clear that the sounding body is submerged, and thus made redundant, in the quagmire of sounds produced by the city. This was a stark contrast to the diverse range of sounds they discovered in their sound experiment, noisy wearables; from this comparison the question was posed, why do we silence our bodies in space? That is, why do we demand that our bodies make no sound in space when we have the making means to create wearables with wide-ranging sonic expression?

When working with Winnie, the students addressed the beast as a metaphor for the physical (dressed) body to explore the sensual faculty of listening. Drawing on diverse references such as the noise instruments of the Futurists, SHOWstudio’s 2006 project *The Sounds of Clothes*, Viktor and Rolf’s A/W 2000 *Bells* collection, Nick Cave’s *soundsuits*, they created noisy wearables that could only be “activated” through the performing body. This exercise involved being immersed in the experience of one’s own physicality and movement, through engagements with materials upon the body. Framed in the context of synaesthesia and phenomenological engagement, they experimented with movements and gestures related to dressing and undressing using noisy and “textural” materials that coaxed physical interactions; this enabled them to gain poetic awareness of the intrinsic relations between sound, movement and material.

Using found objects and materials, including metal chains, taffeta, plastic sheets, nylon, various kinds of paper, leather samples, pieces of plywood, aluminium foil, beads,

sequins, buttons and bells, the students created wearables that could be worn and “played” on the body, to interrogate the mutually affective relationship between material, sound, and bodily movement. The process prompted students to grapple with the materials by smacking, pulling, twisting, banging, slapping, pressing, ripping and shaking. Experimenting with playful and exploratory gestures, the students interrogated the embodied performativity of dress and dressing. For the “The Sound of Silver”, three boots were made from aluminium foil, beads and bells. The performance, as an ironic take on the “dance-off”, involved stomping, stepping, shaking and kicking to destroy the boots. Another group of students reconstructed a suit jacket by lining the back with paper and the sleeves with buttons and bells. As the wearer swung her arms and stretched her back, the jacket creaked and tinkled, amplifying the subtleties of the body’s movement and the wearer’s acute bodily awareness, which prompted both wearer and listener to imagine what they were and where they had come from. The mutually affective, or “sticky”, relations between sound, material and movement drew the students into an immersive loop of listening, making, designing and performing. The emphasis was on the emergent qualities of “the beastly” and “beastliness”, focusing on the process itself rather than predetermined outcomes. Students were encouraged to delve into the chaos and confusion, to wrestle with difficult shapes and forms, to capture sounds that were previously “unheard of”, and to break down the limits of how garments could be made, worn and experienced.

The Beastly Project

After being provoked and steered away from preconceived ideas of *The Beast* and where it might be found, the students’ task is to respond through their own beastly project. They are asked: How do you define beastly? Are heavy materials and unfamiliar mediums beastly? What makes your body beastly? Drawing on the stirrings initiated by the provocation phase, they generated their own exploratory and move testing experiments (Schön, 1983, p. 147). These investigations aim to seek out and interact with unique phenomena and, through reflection, sense the results from one’s moves. This is design inquiry that demands acute self-awareness, calling upon and further heightening “knowledge-how” – experiential knowing that can only be gained through

and demonstrated by practical doing (Downton, 2003, p. 62). The students' developmental work is conducted through experimental making; giving rise to a reflexive design situation involving iterative creation, continual interrogation and reflective feedback. The evidence of these enquiries is embodied in the physical artefacts as well as the ephemera generated through their search. The students are encouraged to value these fragments as research outcomes and develop reflective moments as integral components of their journeys.

This platform of reflective experimentation discloses aspects that resonate most strongly with the emergent practice of the student. They are asked to develop their palette of materials, including gestural and sonic inspirations; this is a core sample that cuts through the weeks of provocations to reveal their own individual affiliations and a personalized toolbox of techniques and skills. These proficiencies carry them towards the ultimate goal of creating a material realization of their beast with a strong conceptual basis and physical presence. The suggested outcome is a collection of garments, alternative products or body extensions; however, provided that there is a contextual grounding in fashion or bodily relationships, the limit for their beastly expressions is boundless.

When students approached their project through a material based focus, we observed two dominant strategies. The first was to confront the unknown material as a formidable beast and temper its unruly nature by keeping a tight reign over its unpredictable qualities. Students developed strong construction techniques with a high level of control, taking on *The Beast* as a personal challenge to their making ability and a process to form relationships with the material. Henry Sun utilized an origami structure to create a complex three dimensional form. It is a composite of folds and delicate stitches, which restrains the material through the meticulous technique. Natasha Fagg employed numerous carefully trialled techniques to represent her clean-cut beast with an array of uniquely combined materials. In experiments where she trapped loose materials or replicated them in static, moulded forms, she was aiming to capture and express particular moments. Hannah McMullin found refuge in the pattern making process,

using a three dimensional technique to represent her reptilian scales; it was through sheer repetition, precision and persistence that the beastly form gradually emerged.



Figure 1. Henry Sun and Hannah McMullin's material manipulations.

In contrast, other students allowed their beastly, difficult materials to express themselves as naturally and instinctively as possible. The garment forms that emerged are expressions of the untamed and when worn, *The Beast* engulfs the body with its masses of wildly conflicting elements. Nixi Killick created her beast with uninhibited abandon using an eclectic palette of materials and techniques. She explored processes of layering in her assemblages, not only with bulky, hard materials, leather and fur, but also with mechanized fabrication techniques: vacuum forming and laser etching and cutting, offset against analogue techniques such as embroidery, leather craft and latex moulding. For her project, Mia Zielinski worked intensively with the inherent properties of crocodile skins, plastics, furs and foams. She was interested in sharp contrasts and sorted the materials into two groups with opposing beastly attributes. Two very different characters were created; a big floppy and funny bunny man and a slick reptilian woman. A theatrical narrative was woven, providing a place for these beasts to inhabit, and an imaginary trip to another world.



Figure 2. Nixi Killick's beastly assemblages.

When focusing on the beastly body, some students further developed the notion of heaviness to support, overwhelm, or force the body to be subjugated to its will. In her “heavy foot” project, Audrey Thomas-Hayes took an undesirable situation, to have heavy feet, and led her design inquiry through this constraint on the body and its movement. She worked with body scans and developed a series of shoes that interrogated physical and visual heaviness. Hannah Canham explored burdensome bodily extension as a slow incremental process, expressed through layering singularly beautiful garments. When layered, these minimalist pieces were surprising in the form they created. The wearer was forced into a space of slowness, quiet and solitude.

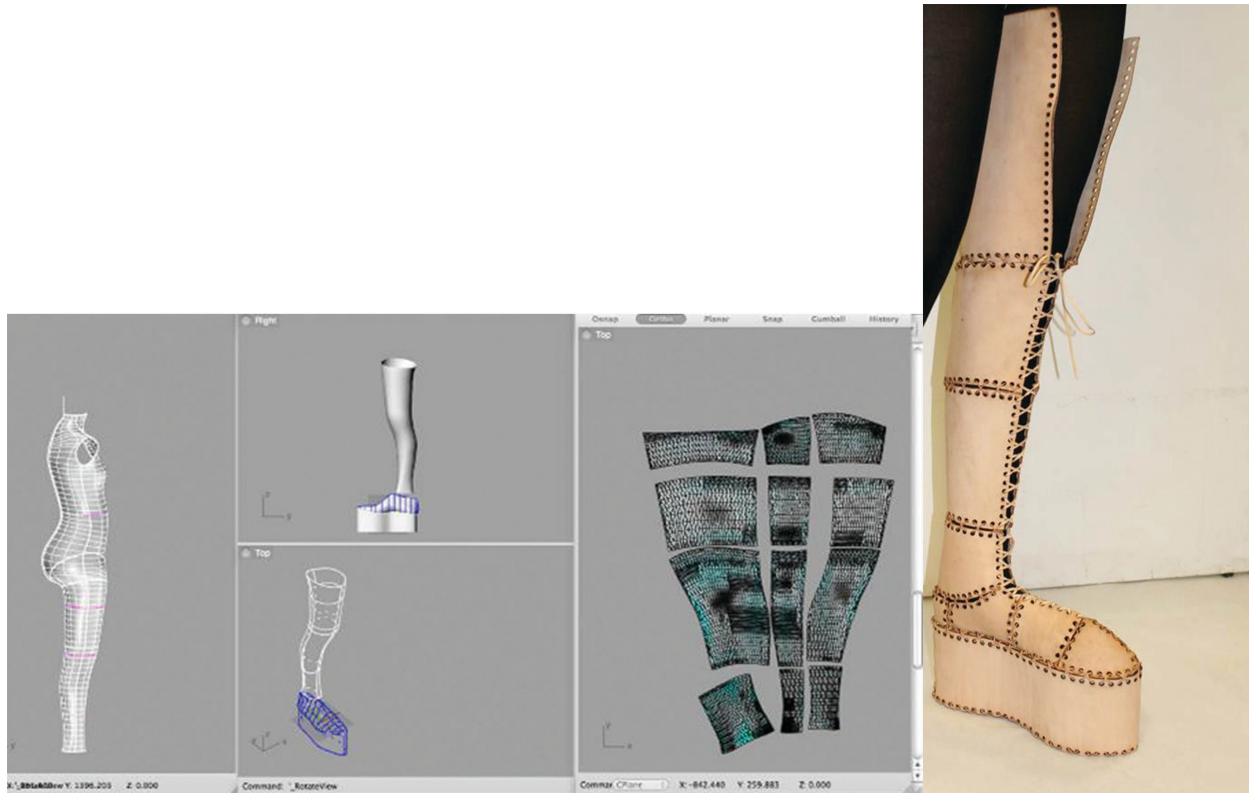


Figure 3. Audrey Thomas-Hayes' "heavy foot" project showing an in-process image and a final piece.

Other students developed garments as bodily extensions that interacted with the body in unfamiliar ways. Molly Younger used hand embroidery techniques to create garments with layers of cloth and pliable metal sheet, which became evolving sculptures. The work visually expresses the tension between body and garment, as neither can ever be at rest with mutual reactivity; the pieces are always in flux, creating an ever-changing silhouette. Laura Banfield imagined the beastly body as the internal made external, creating expanded skeletal structures encased in expanded translucent skin. The leg extensions visually refer to a beastly body form, but also made the underlying original body conform.



Figure 4. When worn, Laura Banfield's piece forced a particular stance – to stand up on tip toes.

When inspired by sonic visualization methods, the students responded in various ways. Brandon Kim created clothing inspired by the repetitive patterns and interlaying of textures within the sonograms. His garment is composed of layered transparencies of material using wave-like lines within the concentric pattern pieces, lit from underneath to show its complexity. The piece expresses his three dimensional visual representation of sound. Laura Galati engaged with an ancient form of sound visualization; cymatics. She conducted her experiments by dropping salt on to metal, which was vibrated and warped by sounds projected through adjoining loudspeakers. The resulting pattern inspired further wearables. Molly Dockray visited a zoo for inspiration to find her beast, and realized the human spectators, who scratched, poked and shouted at the animals, were the beasts instead. Extending these “beastly” actions, she ripped and stabbed the

leather garments as making techniques. The aggression of these gestures, experienced as well through their inherent and repetitive noise, was recorded and fed back into the expression of her wearables. The most poignant moment in Molly's process is the point just before the garment's irreversible destruction; the poetic instant when the garment is suspended between its completion and destruction, expressed as a contingency of material, gesture and sound.



Figure 5. Molly Dockray's poetic instant.

Last but not least, Emma Blackmore's "distant touch" project transcends the ideas put forward by us, and indicates where the beast might be found next. Expressing the ethereal phenomenon of air as the medium through which sound travels, she interrogated the potential for dress to coax instinctual responses to imaginary stimuli.

The pieces are made to “not touch” the body; instead, they hover just above and around the body, evoking an intensely visceral and yet imaginary bodily experience that is strangely familiar/unfamiliar.



Figure 6. Emma Blackmore's dress for “distant touching”.

Conclusion

The Beast is a pedagogical conceptual device that prompts imaginative thinking. Its strength lies in its indefinable yet ubiquitously felt presence; a centrifugal force of attraction and pursuit. During *The Beast* studios, students were provoked to speculate on corporeal and imaginative experiences of the body in relation to dress and dressing. They did this through designing, making and performing. The sheer physicality of *The Beast*, in terms of weight, gravity, mass and volume, coaxed physical and intellectual

engagement with previously unfamiliar or difficult materials and processes. *The Beast* called into being students' bodily involvement, and posited processes of making, designing, dress and dressing as mutually affective, embodied practices.

As a strategy for teaching, the pursuit of *The Beast* drives students beyond the familiar, and into unknown territories, through exploratory design and making processes. By pursuing the unknown, students inevitably begin to challenge their habitual design processes and question preconceived notions of their own practices: the hunter becomes the hunted. While there have been a wide range of idiosyncratic engagements with *The Beast* over the course of the three studios reported herein, *The Beast* remains the potent common theme that transverses this diversity: the coherent active force of varied approaches to student design and teaching practices.

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