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Global flows, local encounters:  
Spatializing tacit aesthetic  
knowledge in high fashion



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## Abstract

High fashion knowledge depends upon global flows. Designers, stylists, photographers and models circumvent the globe regularly, along with the clothes themselves. Further, images of fashion shows are flashed around by the world's press and fashion magazines. In this way, fashion knowledge is apparently global and free flowing. However, fashion knowledge is also locally situated, depending upon closed and local networks of actors within metropolitan centres of creativity. Much knowledge distribution therefore depends on face-to-face interaction, especially at major industry trade events. In this paper, based largely on fieldwork at Selfridges department store on Oxford Street, London, I consider the particular spatial dimensions of knowledge within high fashion. Firstly by mapping and situating fashion's knowledge within the dominant literature on knowledge transfer and flows, I apply terms such as 'buzz' and 'atmosphere' to capture something of the local nature of fashion knowledge, albeit 'local' might just as easily refer to London as to the streets of SoHo in New York. Indeed, rather than assume local and global as fixed, spatially bounded entities, it is therefore more useful to see how space is actively rendered through 'scaling' by buyers in the process of positioning and connecting to wider fashion networks. Secondly, I argue that fashion depends on *tacit aesthetic knowledge* which is embodied, sensual and performative. This case study of fashion attends to the long-standing bias in social science studies of knowledge and the economy which tend to bias towards cognitive knowledge and markets in 'hard' commodities. It therefore extends our understanding of the complexity of marketplace calculations and existing definitions of economic knowledge by recognizing how sensual, aesthetic and embodied capacities are important to fashion marketplace calculations.

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## Global flows, local encounters: Spatializing tacit aesthetic knowledge in high fashion

### 1 Introduction

High fashion knowledge depends upon global flows – of people, commodities, images and styles. To be knowledgeable of high fashion one needs to understand and position a universe of designers, design houses, major stores and styles of dress, located all over the world. Further, designers, stylists, photographers and models circumvent the globe regularly, along with the clothes themselves. Further, images of fashion shows are flashed around by the world's press, while fashion magazines regularly tell readers what will be 'hot' next season. In this way, fashion knowledge is apparently global and free flowing. However, fashion knowledge is also, simultaneously, locally situated, depending upon quite closed and local networks of actors within metropolitan centres of creativity, what Breward and Gilbert (2006) refer to as 'fashion's world cities'. Much knowledge distribution therefore depends on face-to-face interaction and 'being-there' in the various cities of fashion, especially at major industry trade events like the bi-annual fashion week 'Collections'. These events are critically important in the overall temporal and spatial flow of fashion knowledge. In this paper, I consider the particular spatial dimensions of what I refer to elsewhere (Entwistle 2009) as *tacit aesthetic knowledge* within high fashion. For reasons I outline below, this tacit aesthetic knowledge is critical within the high fashion market.

Based on fieldwork at Selfridges department store on Oxford Street, London<sup>1</sup>, following the fashion buyers and building upon earlier work on fashion modelling in London and New York, this paper examines the spatial maps and flows of *high* fashion knowledge. It is important to note, from the outset, that there are different global circuits or networks within the highly differentiated markets for fashionable clothing. For example: mid-range stores are denied access to the exclusive prêt-à-porter fashion shows and there are different supply, distribution and cultural networks within mid-range and high-end fashion. Travel circuits in the mid market may involve trips to Turkey or China, while Selfridges buyers visit the exclusive salons of designers along the Rue du Faubourg-St-Honoré in Paris or warehouses dotted around Hoxton in London.

My case study of high fashion buying attends to a long-standing bias in social science studies of knowledge and the economy which tend to favour cognitive knowledge developed out of a limited range of markets in such things as basic commodities, (Garcia 1986), financial markets (Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2004; MacKenzie 2004; Tsing 2004), science-based markets (for example Law 1986a; Latour and Woolgar 1979; Latour 1987), engineering (Malecki 2000) or firms defined as 'knowledge intensive' (Swart and Kinnie 2003). However, 'there remain substantial gaps in our understanding of the mobilisation of different modalities of knowledge – their diffusion, transmission or translation across space and time' (Weller 2007: 39). In other words, within knowledge literature, 'soft' markets trading cultural and aesthetic commodities have tended to be neglected. This neglect is evident also in business and policy literature, as Rooney et. al. (2005: 1), 'policy prescriptions [...] focus on science, technology and engineering to the effective exclusion of non-technical knowledge. Knowledge embodied in culture, the arts and humanities...are not currently considered central knowledge policy concerns'.

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<sup>1</sup>/. The ESRC funded the entire cost of this fieldwork. Award reference: R000223649

However, companies trading 'cultural' or 'aesthetic' products demand attention as economically important and culturally visible markets in contemporary western (and increasingly, non-western) economies. Evidence of this significance can be found in the increasing attention paid to the 'creative industries' by Governments (Pratt 2004b) and in the emergence of small but growing collection of studies of creative businesses and markets (Grabher 2002; Negus 1992, 1999; Scott 1999, 2000; Aspers 2001; Weller 2007; Pratt 2004a, 2008). Although most of this literature is not concerned specifically with knowledge, focusing on such businesses extends our understanding of the complexity of marketplace practices. As I hope to demonstrate, fashion buying forces us to expand definitions of economic knowledge by recognising how sensual, aesthetic and embodied capacities are important in the fashion marketplace/s calculations. In examining the forms this knowledge takes and its spatial dimensions, I divide my paper into two parts.

In Part One, I situate my account of fashion knowledge within and against current literature on knowledge. One problem with this literature, derived as it is from a limited range of industries, is that it tends to privilege cognitive skills and abilities. As Allen (2002: 39) puts it, 'many insightful accounts of economic knowledge remain trapped within a formal, codified script of knowledge that, often unintentionally, marginalizes the expressive and prioritizes the cognitive.' I concur with Allen, whose reading of Cassirer provides an important critique of existing definitions of knowledge as narrowly cognitive and rational. Drawing on Cassirer, Allen produces a convincing case for an expanded definition of knowledge as expressive and sensual that is relevant to understanding knowledge in fashion.

I thus examine the specificities of fashion knowledge, revisiting the codified/global, local/tacit debate, as well as concepts like 'atmosphere', 'buzz' and 'communities of practice', which have developed out of other industries to account for knowledge location and flow. I argue that fashion's tacit aesthetic knowledge is both 'sticky', in how it adheres to particular places, but also able to 'travel' more globally. The idea of 'scaling', as different spatial registers actively imagined by actors, is particularly useful for understanding the complex spatial relations of fashion knowledge, as opposed to notions of 'local' and 'global' which tend to assume a rather static idea of space. This idea, according to Latour (2005: 184), involves looking at 'what actors achieve by *scaling*, *spacing*, and *contextualizing* each other' because 'they are the ones defining relative scale'. This, he proposes (2005: 184), is necessary to do justice to their practice as 'It's not the analyst's job to impose an absolute one [scale]' upon them.

In Part Two, I extend my discussion of knowledge beyond existing definitions to make a more significant challenge to conventional understandings. I argue that spatializing fashion knowledge requires us to consider how it is embodied. This feature is hardly acknowledged in the literature, barring one or two exceptions (see, for example, Grabher 2002; MacKenzie 2004; Mol and Law 2004). Even in literature on tacit knowledge, despite repeated references to practice and '*being there*' (Gertler 2003, emphasis added) the body is a repressed or neglected feature. In contrast, I argue that the spatialized zone of the body is one centrally important knowing location and this is especially evident – spectacularly visible – when it comes to fashion knowledge that is visibly worn on, and styled through, the body. If bodies are a location of knowledge it is evident that they are a *mobile* location as well: fashion bodies traverse established temporal and spatial routes and with it stylized fashion knowledge circulates. Here I expand discussion developed in an earlier paper on fashion week (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006) where fashion knowledge is examined in terms of performative gestures, bodily styles and spatial placements that come to constitute the international fashion show.

## 1.1 Methodological and theoretical background

This paper derives from a study of fashion buying at Selfridges department store on London's Oxford Street but draws theoretical inspiration from an earlier study of fashion modelling in London and New York (Entwistle 2002). The worlds of fashion models and fashion buyers are situated within the exclusive world of high fashion and this has implications for much of the style and nature of work here. Models, fashion buyers and other fashion workers meet in similar places and spaces according to the fashion 'calendar' or bi-annual seasonal Collections, as well as in design studios where 'fit' models display clothes to fashion buyers. Indeed, much of the look and feel of fashion work is very similar, be it inside a model agency or a high fashion store. In both, bodies are highly aestheticized – slim, attractive, mostly young, and styled in similar ways through fashionable dress. The importance of having and maintaining a particular sort of body is evident in both worlds of work, and, moreover, the body is a significant vehicle for signalling membership and for circulating and communicating fashion knowledge within the highly aestheticized world of fashion. Indeed, where bodies might be repressed features of work in other sectors, embodiment is brought to the fore in fashion work and is a feature of fashion knowledge, as I discuss.

My study of fashion buyers, conducted in 2002, was an in-depth ethnography based on observations of the women's wear department at Selfridges between late March and late September, 2002 and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). In addition to observation, I conducted interviews with buyers and merchandisers in the women's wear department, as well as the then Director of the store, Head of the women's buying office and the head of the Fashion Office responsible for general trend direction and store promotion. My research derived methodologically out of ANT in that I 'followed the actors' through their daily work, observing a whole range of activities buyers are involved in: meetings at the store, 'floor walks' around the shop floor and encounters with suppliers on 'buys' in studios. I went along on three buying trips - to New York, Milan and Paris - and these afforded me the opportunity to talk to buyers informally about their work and pick up issues from observations. Since so much of the fashion buying season is organised around 'fashion week', I also observed the Autumn/Winter collections at London Fashion Week (LFW) in February 2002 prior to field work, and followed the buyers around at the Spring/Summer Collections during September and October 2002. Indeed, my ethnography took me on the journey around one season – from planning to buying stock and its arrival on the shop floor months later. Throughout, I took extensive field notes and, wherever possible, photographs. Like all anthropological observation, these filter through my analysis but are often hard to capture in written form. Reconfiguring any fieldwork in an academic paper is difficult, although wherever possible I try to contextualise my quotes and observations with some details of the field at the time.

Similar research questions frame both the modelling and the buying projects, in particular, how aesthetic value in fashion is generated. How is the fashion model look - often described as 'edgy' or 'weird' by bookers, and thus by no means linked to conventional 'good looks' - given value by bookers and others within the market, and how they came to recognise – that is *to know* - what looks to promote? Similar questions concerning knowledge became central to the buyers project, especially the question of how buyers know what to buy given the risks inherent to selecting high fashion clothing up to six months ahead of the fashion season. However, we are not talking about some Kantian pure aesthetic but something much more profane. Fashion's aesthetic value is defined through the collective activities and practice of actors inside the market. These questions I develop elsewhere (Entwistle 2009) through sociologically informed accounts of markets, specifically, the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1993, 2005) and Michel Callon (1999, 1998a, 1998b; Callon et al. 2005). Despite obvious differences there are many points of contact between these theorists, not least their critique of classical economics and how they see the market, or more specifically, *markets*, as practised social arrangements which knit together 'cultural' and 'economic' concerns. While space prevents me from demonstrating the ways I draw these seemingly opposed theorists together (a more sustained account is in Entwistle 2009), there are a few features of both their work worth highlighting here. Firstly, both develop a critique of

economics which tends to separate and reify the 'economy' and insist upon a more anthropological analysis of markets. Second, both focus particular attention on the issues of *calculation* and *value* that are as much about the 'cultural' as they are 'economic'. This is especially pertinent to high fashion markets where the key quality calculated and valorised is something as ineffable as the 'aesthetic'.

In addition, both theorists use spatial metaphors to understand markets – 'field' for Bourdieu and 'network' for Callon - which can be applied to understand spatial arrangements within high fashion. Indeed, while these metaphors appear to be at odds, both are derived out of their respective anthropological observation/fieldwork and have anthropological validity when applied to my own fieldwork. Though admittedly Bourdieu's (1993) field becomes very abstract and theoretical, it originally developed out of his Algerian fieldwork (Bourdieu 1970), and he returns to a more empirical sense of field in his study of the French housing market, following the actors in ways that are not too far from ANT (Bourdieu 2005). As discussed below, the concepts Bourdieu develops through field - 'capital' and 'habitus' - are relevant to fashion. However, one problem with the bounded nature of field is that Bourdieu does not explain how fields relate to one another or how actors may participate in more than one field. However, as I found, fashion buying calculations are a heterogeneous assembly of different things and buyers do not just move within the reified world of high fashion, but draw on observations of consumers, markets and people they encounter outside the field of fashion. The spatially bounded nature of field does not take account of these connections between fields of cultural production.

One way out of this is through the idea of markets as networks, which Callon (1998a, 1999) proposes. According to Hughes (2004), one of the advantages of network analysis is that it refers to spatial relations between actors. Network analysis is largely a methodological approach, which, as Hughes (2004: 213) notes, 'dictates that networks are always localized, working in real places and at specific times. [...] they can only be made known by accounts of their workings on the ground, and can only be considered as globalized in terms of their physical extension across space in practice.' As one 'follows the actors' one inevitably moves with them across space that stretches outwards from the local, as I did when following buyers around London and abroad. The concept of 'network lengthening' allows one to trace the connections further and further outward, as necessary, but always by working from the local actors. Thus, on trips to London New York Paris and Milan, it is possible to map connections and relationships established by actors in the course of buying. But fashion networks are not unending either. Similarly, the 'circuits of value' (Entwistle 2002, 2009) within the fashion network are fairly predictable, linked to well-established names in the business (influential photographers, designers, for example). Thus, as Strathern (1996) argues, does the time come to 'cut the network'?

My point, however, is that there is no reason to choose between Bourdieu and Callon. Why not assemble the different elements of these approaches to produce an analysis that is heterogeneous rather than ascribed to one or other? Indeed, while ANT is often thought to be methodologically at odds with other sociological frameworks, in fact ANT is not so much a theory but a way of doing sociology, driven by empirical observation. If one stays true to early Bourdieu, and the notion of field as in *fieldwork*, (see Entwistle and Rocamora 2006 for a fuller discussion) then there is, at the very least, a similar empirical thrust, with both emphasising the need to examine markets in practice. Pragmatically, I choose appropriate elements from each theorist where they appear to explain phenomena; here I lean more heavily towards Bourdieu, drawing on concepts of capital and habitus, but in other work, I draw more extensively on Callon (see for example Entwistle 2006, 2009).

## 2 Part One: Spatialising fashion knowledge

As much literature on knowledge testifies, there are obvious spatial dimensions to knowledge in markets, firms or regions, with terms such as ‘milieu’, ‘clusters’, ‘industrial atmosphere’, suggesting some of the spatial realities of knowledge. Thus, debates about knowledge are inevitably tied to geography: where is knowledge located? how does it transfer? does it give particular companies/regions/nations competitive advantage in global economy? Within this literature, a spatial mapping of knowledge along the axis of coded/global, tacit/local has become a major debating point (see for example Allen 2000; Gertler 2003; Howells 2002, 2004; Malecki 2000). The codified/tacit dichotomy, closely associated with Michael Polanyi (1967), comes down to ‘the degree of formalization’ and ‘the requirement of presence in knowledge formation’ (Howells 2002: 872). Thus, ‘Where some knowledge (codified) is easy to transfer ... other knowledge is dependent on context, and is difficult to communicate others’. (Malecki 2000: 110) Tacit knowledge is often described as ‘sticky’, adhering to particular places and, since it is not codified, is not considered to ‘travel’ as easily as codified knowledge. Thus, ‘tacit, culture-bound, embedded forms of knowledge merge seamlessly with spatial notions of proximity, face-to-face interactions and being-there, to give the distinct impression that knowledge, as competitive asset, is a predominantly localised affair.’ (Allen 2000: 27) Some recent attempts to elaborate on the non-codified, tacit nature of productive knowledges (Maskell and Malmberg 1999; Crewe and Forrester 1993), emphasise the close associations and local relations and networks that support these knowledge flows and transfers. More recently, this mapping has been criticised (Allen 2000; Bathelt et. al. 2004, Faulconbridge 2006) as too ‘static’, failing to capture the complexities of tacit knowledge flows. Taking fashion as one previously neglected industry, further problems with current thinking on tacit knowledge are highlighted, as I now argue.

### 2.1 The importance of tacit knowledge in fashion

Tacit knowledge has long been highly valued. Discussions about the ‘ubiquity’ of codified and knowledge (Maskell and Malmberg 1999) suggest that the tacit dimension can give companies or firms a competitive advantage, enabling them to offer something different or unique from others in the marketplace. This argument is relevant to fashion. Much fashion knowledge is ubiquitous, for example, next season’s trends are circulated through such things as trend forecasting agencies like Worth Global Style Network (WGSN), fashion magazines and blogs. However, the very ubiquity of this knowledge undermines its value. This point is underscored by the main quality defining high fashion. As a child of modernity, fashionable dress is in perpetual motion, driven by an insatiable quest for newness: to be at the ‘cutting edge’ of fashion is to have grasped something of the ‘new’. Such knowledge is, by definition, not widespread; once high fashion becomes ubiquitous, its meaning as ‘cutting’ edge or ‘cool’ is lost. For this reason, tacit knowledge is highly valued within high fashion for it is assumed to be close to actual trends as they emerge and is therefore ‘on step ahead’. This is particularly true for Selfridges department store which, at the time of the fieldwork, prided itself on being ‘fashion forward’ and at the ‘cutting edge’ of retailing, and, not surprisingly, they claimed not to buy ubiquitous trend forecasting information. Hence, the Fashion Office, established by the then Chief Executive Vittorio Radice, was responsible developing in-house fashion and trend knowledge and driving the overall ‘direction’ of the store. As the Head of the Fashion Office at Selfridges put it in an interview with me,

we don’t subscribe to WGSN. We subscribed to them for a year and I felt that the time we actually spend on it, researching the information, and then out of that information, *trying be different*, because everybody will draw on that information, it just took longer than if we followed *our own instincts* right away. [emphasis added]

Following their own 'instincts', as I now argue, depends upon acquiring tacit aesthetic knowledge that is 'in the air' and is both locally situated and globally circulating.

## 2.2 Mapping tacit aesthetic knowledge in high fashion

Barring the occasional exception (Grabher 2002; Weller 2007), few studies on knowledge have drawn from cultural markets like fashion or been applied to such markets. However, some concepts from existing literature can be appropriated. For example, 'industrial atmosphere' can aptly captures how fashion ideas and creative energy are garnered. Recognised first by Marshall (1920; 1923), 'atmosphere' involves picking up something 'in the air' and has been applied widely to industry specific clusters. Although they do not use this term, Crewe and Forester's (1993) analysis of the Nottingham Lace Market demonstrates how spatial proximity plays an important part in the success of those businesses located in and around the market and it is apparent in other cities, as, for example, in Aspers (2001) study of fashion photography in Stockholm, Sweden.

The importance of sensing 'mood' and 'atmosphere' was apparent in my observations of buyers in cities abroad. Indeed, much time on buying trips is spent just looking and sensing what is going on. This is hardly surprising: cities play a major role in the emergence and dissemination of fashion knowledge and aesthetic style of aesthetic activity, enabling the clustering of aesthetic creativity and acting as spaces of display. From early dandies (Breward 1995; Wilson 2003) to post-punk youth subcultures (Maffesoli 1996; Sweetman 2004), cities are spaces of fashionable display and many emergent styles 'bubble up' (Polhemus 1994) rapidly from the street. Attempts to codify and capture these, as trend spotters and forecasts try to do, are no real substitute for 'being-there', as such street trends rapidly appear and disappear faster than attempts to codify and capture them. For these reasons, buyers not only take buying trips but may also go on purely research trips to far-flung places with no buying budget. In years previous to my fieldwork, the Selfridges' buyers had visited Japan, Brazil, India, Australia and New Zealand in a bid to keep abreast of global trends. Buying trips themselves always involve an element of 'comp' shopping. While walking the streets of SoHo in New York one day the buyer for denim-wear spoke of the need to see and sense the mood of this influential retail hub: new designers may come to light or ideas garnered for visual merchandising. However, this knowledge may not have any direct implementation but simply ensures buyers are not 'missing anything' and feeds into Selfridges' sense of itself as located on a global axis, positioned vis-à-vis major department stores across the world, such as Barneys in New York. Selfridges' competitors are, therefore, not just those located within easy reach of the flagship store on Oxford street, London (Harvey Nichols or Liberty nearby), but are identified in other fashion cities. These movements and the multiple identifications and locations keep Selfridges on the fashion network.

Thus, fashion knowledge is demonstrably 'global', with people such as fashion buyers sourcing their ideas in their travels to numerous cities across the world. They are hooked into a network of similarly global aesthetic workers - designers, models, photographers, stylists, journalists - who move between the major fashion cities for Collections, and at other industry events like Premier Vision in Paris. These are ostensibly trade events but they also help reproduce the community of fashion workers, bringing them together to circulate and 'perform' fashion knowledge (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006). However, while these trade events are tied to a 'global' distribution of people and knowledge, they are also very much *located* in 'fashion's world cities' (Breward and Gilbert 2006) and thus tied to particular, spatial-aesthetic understandings. Indeed, fashion is even more obviously local and located: *within* these cities, fashion companies cluster around particular quarters of the city, for example, Shoreditch in London, or SoHo in New York. This spatial clustering shapes the working life of fashion insiders: in the case of high fashion modelling, the major agencies, along with the major photographers' studios and designer head quarters, are clustered in particular areas of the city (Entwistle and Wis-signer 2006). In the world of fashion retailing, the head quarters, main design studios and flag ship stores of



big design houses frequented by fashion buyers are clustered into particular quarters of the city. This agglomeration can be found in other creative industries as well. For example, advertising in London is concentrated around Soho where many of the creative services (film and photography, for example) that support it are located, adding up to what Grabher (2002: 254) refers to as an 'ad village'.

Fashion knowledge is thus difficult to label as either 'local' or 'global'; it would appear to be situated and 'sticky', while simultaneously globally distributed. This complicates our understandings of knowledge location and transfer, which has been acknowledged in recent critiques of the traditional coded/global, tacit/local mapping of knowledge. Recent studies have shown how tacit knowledge may not always be dependent upon spatial proximity, but may 'travel' under particular circumstances more readily than previously acknowledged. For example, Agrawal et. al. (2006) could be describing aspects of fashion world when they argue that,

geography is likely to be less important in mediating social relationships between individuals in the same field since they have various alternative mechanisms through which to establish relationships. For example, individuals in the same community of practice ... or invisible college attend conferences and trade shows together, belong to common associations, and have other institutional settings in which to fraternize and share ideas.

'Communities of practice' (Brown and Duguid 1991; Wenger 1999) suggest how knowledge may circulate beyond particular firms and localities to other firms in similar or related areas geographically far away. Similarly, as Amin and Cohendet (2004) argue, organizational or 'relational proximity' may count as more significant than spatial proximity in terms of accounting for the flows of ideas, knowledge and people, with shared events and encounters linking different firms with similar interests. This focus has obvious application to understanding fashion markets and tacit aesthetic knowledge flows. Fashion workers constitute a 'community of practice' and share the characteristics of such a community: they enjoy 'common associations', of meanings, ideas, practices; they also share places of work and leisure and are linked via a host of trade events which bring them together in real time, exposing them to similar experiences and tastes, as discussed. Indeed, in an early sociological paper on fashion by Herbert Blumer (1969), the characteristics of fashion trend making and the surprisingly similar styles picked up and translated into fashion globally are explained by the close proximities between the major players in the industry – designers, buyers and journalists etc - most notably at fashion shows and trade events. According to Blumer, by virtue of their physical proximity, these global workers tend to see the same sorts of things, pick up on, and mediate, similar styles or what he refers to as 'incipient taste'. Physical proximity here promotes relational proximity – it reinforces the sense of community that already exists between fashion insiders.

Thus, in my travels with buyers, it was evident that fashion workers frequently move around the cities of fashion as a 'pack', staying in the same hotels, frequenting the same bars and cafes, attending the same fashion week shows, visiting the same designer studios, eating in the 'fashionable' restaurants, and meeting in the same fancy hotel foyers. On my New York and Paris trips with the buyers I was fortunate to stay in the same hotels as them and this allowed me to experience something of the environment and atmosphere of their work. Indeed, the hotels themselves are carefully selected, these choices reflecting back upon the store. One buyer mentioned in conversation in New York how it was important to stay in the 'right' fashionable hotel as it sends a message to suppliers about the high fashion status of Selfridges. For this trip the glamorous Hudson Hotel near Central Park was an ideal base for the Selfridges buyers with its stylish, darkly lit lounge and bar areas, sky terrace and electric ambient music in the lobby. The same is true of restaurants and cafes. The fashionable Balthazar restaurant on Spring Street in SoHo was suggested for lunch by the denim-wear buyer when we were 'comp' shopping in the area. This restaurant is a long-time favourite with fashion insiders, situated as it is in close proximity to many of the model agencies and flag-ship designer stores in the city, and it affords the possibility of observing the fashionable set of New York.

Within these carefully chosen settings and backdrops fashion insiders meet others; in Paris on the way to a hotel suite where one designer was showing his collection we passed the designer Stella McCartney having coffee in the lobby. These shared social spaces form the backdrop to their work and shapes their encounters – allowing them to meet significant others – that feeds into their sense of fashion. Part of doing business in such industries involves ‘hanging out’ and absorbing the ‘noise’ of the area (Grabher 2002). This ‘noise’ forms a backdrop to their practice not as direct information but ‘a concoction of rumours, impressions, recommendations, trade folklore, strategic misinformation’ (Grabher 2002: 254; see also Brown and Duguid 1996)

However, this fashion map complicates conventional understandings of ‘local’ and ‘global’: these spaces appear to be both at the same time. For Selfridges’ buyers, Paris may not be ‘local’ or ‘home’ like London, but it is somewhere they frequent regularly and know intimately. While terms like ‘buzz’ and ‘noise’ (Bathelt et. al. 2004; Bathelt 2007; Grabher 2002; Bathelt and Schuldt 2008) capture something of the vibrancy of knowledge *in situ*, local ‘buzz’ means something else in fashion: it is just as important to hang out at a café in SoHo (NYC) as it is in Soho (London), since local ‘buzz’ is not simply found in the immediate vicinity of Oxford Street. The ‘ecology’ of local ‘buzz’ (Bathelt and Schuldt 2008) in fashion thus depends upon strong geographical paths of travel that connect global fashion workers to local cultures of creativity in far flung cities. In other words, geographical distance does not limit what counts as local ‘buzz’ in fashion and, therefore, ‘local’ and ‘global’ do not refer to fixed spatial boundaries but the global circulation of local buzz/knowledge. However, rather than assume these terms ‘local’ and ‘global’ to be fixed dimensions or qualities of space it is more useful to use the analogy of the network and examine how it ‘lengthens’ according to the empirical realities of work in this industry. As the buyers move around from city to city, so their networks lengthen to include more and more spaces and actors.

Space features in the calculative work buyers do in other ways that can be captured in terms of ‘scales’ or ‘scaling’. Latour (2005) argues that ‘scaling’, rather than assuming that objective space exists, involves examining how actors envisage space. A complex scaling of ‘local’ and ‘global’ is present when examining the work of buyers and how they make sense of their own fashion retailing practices. Take the sorts of calculations factored in by buyers when encountering products on a fashion buy. Scaling is apparent in their calculations of very local conditions such as the layout on the shop floor. Buyers calculate how stock will look on the shop floor and the spatial proximity to other designers will feature in their calculations. Thus, buyers, ‘devote a large share of their resources to positioning the goods [...] in relation to others’ (Callon et. al. 2005: 29). Even on fashion buys in far-flung places, buyers derive complex maps or scales of associations to help them select, and they will imagine how commodities will sit on the shop-floor within a universe of similar or dissimilar commodities. However, buyers’ calculations may involve scaling ‘up’ as well, as when they actively imagine the store on the larger global map of designer fashion. The local geography of the flagship store on Oxford Street, and its close proximity to Liberties and Harvey Nichols and possible designer flagship stores, features heavily in buyers’ calculations of what to buy. If Liberties are stocking a new designer range, Selfridges may calculate that they want it too, or figure that there is not enough market to justify stocking it. Further, the imagined characteristics and buying habits of local consumers feature in their calculations of what to buy for the London, Manchester and Birmingham stores. New and ‘edgy’ designers will be stocked in Oxford Street to cater for a very particular London customer but may not make it to stores outside the capital. Not only is proximity to local high fashion stores important, competitors in other cities are imagined; for example, Selfridges see itself in relation to major department stores like Barney’s in New York which is also famous for retailing high fashion.

Selfridges knowledge thus depends upon a complex spatial ecology. Something of this blend of spatial scales has been acknowledged in recent accounts of knowledge. Malecki (2000: 111) notes that while some firms rely on normal local networks, ‘the stronger local environment for firms is one in which both local links are abundant and flows of knowledge to and from other places are commonplace.’ In this way, the geography of fashi-

on tacit knowledge is a blend of relational and spatial proximity. Indeed, while 'relational proximity' may be significant, as Howells (2002: 874) argues, geography will have an impact on these very routines and practices within organisations [...] therefore its underlying *indirect* importance remains.' I would concur with this: relational proximity is significant within fashion, but ultimately, the meanings of fashion, have to be translated locally by the individual firm or store. Thus, while much of the literature on knowledge takes space for granted – spatial registers of 'local' and 'global' assumed to describe different spatial scales - I suggest space is also generated or imagined. Knowledge employed to calculate fashion simultaneously creates space – rendering a position for the store *vis-a-vis* its competitors within an imagined geography of fashion space. Rather than assume local and global as fixed, spatially bounded entities, it is therefore more useful to see how space is actively rendered through 'scaling' by buyers in the process of positioning and connecting to wider fashion networks.

### 3 Part Two: fashion's tacit aesthetic knowledge as an embodied knowledge

One significant way in which fashion's tacit aesthetic knowledge is spatialized is through the body. That is to say, the body is a spatialized zone and one that moves through space (Crang 1994; McDowell 2004). This point is true of all knowledge, but, barring some exceptions, (Mol and Law 2004; Grabher 2002) other studies tend to overlook or gloss over the role the body plays in circulating knowledge. Indeed, embodiment is given little attention; it is implied but not explored in Allen's (2000, 2002) argument as part of his general critique of conventional understandings of knowledge, and is hinted at but not explored in other accounts. Swart and Kinnie (2003: 63) define tacit knowledge as 'a form of knowledge that cannot be explicated and that is *embodied through practice*.' (emphasis added). For Malecki (2000) tacit knowledge involves an inter-play between individual and shared social experiences and he refers to tacit knowledge as 'Privately-held knowledge and shared experience...Generally, tacit knowledge is *embodied* in people, rather than in written form or in objects.' (2000: 108, emphasis added). However, the embodied characteristics of tacit knowledge are not explored any further. That embodiment is repressed in much of the literature is all too evident: for example, while Howells (2002: 872) defines tacit knowledge as 'direct experience' he immediately goes on to say that 'it represents *disembodied* know-how' (2002: 872, emphasis added), which would seem strangely at odds with his definitions of knowledge as derived from 'experience' and the 'knowing self'. Further, while cognition is itself embodied, this fact tends to be repressed or sublimated as 'transcendent rationality'. Thus, despite the importance of such things as 'being there' (Gertler 2003), this simple fact - that beingness involves a sentient, physical body - is too frequently overlooked.

However, observing a market like fashion, it becomes evident that fashion knowledge is very much located on the bodies of the individual players themselves. It is *tacit* in form, in that it is uncodified and experiential knowledge garnered from being inside the field; *embodied*, in that it is worn on the body; and *aesthetic*, in that it concerns the ability to translate fashion knowledge into a suitably fashionable style and demeanour. Hence, I refer to it as tacit aesthetic knowledge. In the rest of this paper, I want to unpick features of this knowledge in more detail. Firstly, in drawing on Allen and Cassirer, I explore how this knowledge is expressive but extend Allen's arguments to describe the ways in which it is embodied. Second, I examine how the deeply inculcated knowledge of fashion might be considered using Bourdieu's notions of 'capital' and 'habitus'. Finally, I examine how 'fashion capital' is performed and performative.

### 3.1 Fashion knowledge as expressive and embodied

Much of the knowledge that comes to count in high fashion does not fit the classic account of economic knowledge as cognitive and rational, derived as it is from within economic sociology and knowledge literature. These literatures direct attention to a limited range of activities within companies, such as research and design (R&D), often, though not always, to a narrow range of firms or industries labelled 'knowledge intensive', and refers to the mental abilities of market insiders to calculate and make sense of their market. Drawing on the work of Ernst Cassirer, Allen's (2000, 2002) work represents one attempt to understand and value non-cognitive forms of knowledge required in many spheres of life. It is worth briefly revisiting the work of Cassirer (1979, 1957, 1946) to explore this further.

According to Cassirer, aesthetic experience and aesthetic ways of knowing are about sensory *forms* that are important ways of encountering and knowing the world not reducible to codified language. He describes (1979) three increasingly abstract, formal language systems we use to understand the world; expression, representation and signification. The latter two relate to the realms of language and formal abstract reasoning, which demand increasing abstraction from the world. Expressive meaning, however, 'is related directly to *sense perception* and *bodily awareness*' (Allen 2000: 21, emphasis added) which is equally valid way even if it 'cannot be readily measured by any cognitive yardstick.' (Allen 2000: 21) As Cassirer (1979: 154) himself puts it, in formal language systems '[man] (*sic*) loses his immediate experience, his concepts of experience of life fades away... what remains is a world of intellectual symbols; not a world of immediate experience.' He goes on to note that 'if this immediate, intuitive approach to reality is to be preserved and to be regained, it needs a new activity...It is not by language *but by art* that this is to be performed.' (1979: 154, emphasis added). This is not to say that the world of art is a world merely of immediate sensory experiences and emotions. What distinguishes the artist is the ability to translate common, empirical experience and imagination, emotions and dreams into 'a new sphere – the sphere of the plastic, architectural, musical forms, of shapes and designs, of melodies and rhythms.' (1979: 157). In other words, aesthetic experience and ways of knowing concern sensory *forms*: 'Art is not reproduction of impression, it is creation of forms. These forms are not abstract, but sensuous.' (1979: 186) In this way, Cassirer emphasises the formal qualities of aesthetic expression and insists that these are an important way of encountering and knowing the world, not reducible to codified language. Allen develops Cassirer's argument to suggest that how accounts of economic knowledge could include knowledge that is 'expressive'.

Allen argues for a broader definition of knowledge, beyond the narrowly cognitive and rational, that allows the inclusion of expressive realms of meaning, such as art and poetry. As he sees it, the traditional view of knowledge is rarely challenged and increasingly comes to appear 'true', thus reinforcing the idea of knowledge as cognitive. Thus, 'activities which do not fit easily into a schema of abstract symbolism are not immediately considered as part of the driving force of a knowledge-based economy.' (2000: 19) In other words, since definitions of economic knowledge arise out of a narrow range of markets and practice, the narrow definition of economic knowledge as cognitive does not get challenged. His points are largely theoretical but can be applied empirically to fashion. From the point of view of an aesthetic market like fashion, the problems with conventional ideas of knowledge become evident since buyers knowledge is both expressive and embodied in non-cognitive sense and sensibilities.

While fashion lacks the same status as art, it is an aesthetic practice even if it is less about lofty ideals of 'beauty' but fluctuating attributes bestowed on certain styles. Cassirer's point about aesthetic forms is relevant here: fashion has its own formal mechanisms of expression even while these are continually reinterpreted or fluctuating. That expressive ways of knowing in fashion are linked closely to 'sense perception and bodily awareness' is evident in the ways in which buyers encounter the clothing at a fashion show, which is often an extravagant spectacle meant to stimulate the senses and not merely 'sell' clothes. The fashion show does not

set out to sell clothes directly but weave a 'story' or concept around a Collection. Fashion shows are, quite literally, expressive and sensuous occasions. Actual buying choices are made in the studio where the sensory qualities of clothing are further examined or 'tested' (Callon et. al. 2005), as I describe elsewhere (Entwistle 2006). Here too, the expressive and sensuous qualities of clothing – the look, feel, fit and movement of garments – feature very much in buyers' calculations and are one reason buyers for claim they do not buy online or through other mediated technologies (Entwistle 2006, 2009). Let me elaborate on some of the ways in which tacit aesthetic knowledge is embodied.

### 3.2 Fashion knowledge as capital and habitus

In fashion, not surprisingly, the body is very much a space for the display of fashion knowledge. However, this knowledge is deeply inculcated and embodied and, to capture it, it is useful to refer to Bourdieu's (1984, 1993) notions of capital and habitus. Capital is, indeed, a form of knowledge, although Bourdieu does not say this explicitly. Capital can take many forms - economic, social, cultural and so on – and refers to the stock of resources that actors in a specific field can mobilize to advance their position in the field. Capital is field specific and, according to Entwistle and Rocamora (2006), 'fashion capital' refers to the social, economic and cultural resources demanded in the field of fashion. Thus, this 'fashion capital' (Rocamora 2002) combines the cultural knowledge of what designers and styles of dress are in fashion, with the ability to select and combine the appropriate clothes and wear them well; that is, it is carried through bodily demeanour and comportment. (As an academic outsider I know that I did not have it, at least not to the same degree as those I observed.) Different variations of fashion capital are at work: 'elegance' characterises the older fashion generation and materialised through the wearing of expensive designers – Chanel, Chloe or Prada – known for quality and fine tailoring, while 'edginess' is often the mark of a younger (and sometimes poorer) 'fashionista'<sup>2</sup> and involves clever and 'creative' combining of an occasional expensive item, a Prada handbag or Monolo Blahnik shoes, with high street clothes from very fashionable stores like Top Shop in London.

As noted, fashion knowledge is widely available in codified form (new trends are regularly circulated in magazines and online). However, fashion *capital* is largely tacit in nature, since knowing what is 'in' is not quite the same as being 'in the know'. Fashion insiders are usually 'one step ahead' of trends picked up by mainstream fashion press, often wearing styles a season ahead. Indeed, Selfridges' aim as a department store is to be 'fashion forward' and at the 'cutting edge', required buyers to inculcate a high fashion sensibility and capture emerging trends. It is a knowledge that is largely pre-reflexive and dependent upon developing a bodily 'ease' that only comes from immersion in the industry. One buyer described in great detail in an interview with me how her sense of style had been totally different before she arrived at Selfridges, a point she put down to her having bought for another fashion market with a largely Arab customer base. In faintly horrified tones she noted how her hair and jewellery were entirely different ('loud' and 'gold' were terms she used) and talked of how she adopted a style more appropriate to working at Selfridges once she began working there. This was some time before the push to make Selfridges a high fashion store and she, along with the other buyers, all described how their style had 'moved upmarket' and towards high fashion as Selfridges progressively moved in this direction in the late nineties. In this way, their tastes were shaped through their embodied encounters with the high fashion commodities they had to buy on behalf of the store and, as a result, their embodiment mediated the new high fashion identity of the store (see Entwistle 2006 and 2009 for a fuller discussion). Indeed, even I inculcated a greater sense of the high fashion - learning what the designers and styles highly valued – through my journey through the fieldwork, although my knowledge always lagged behind the buyers.

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<sup>2</sup>/. Fashionista is a term used widely in the UK press to describe fashion insiders

The term one might use to describe this acquired, experiential embodied ease is 'habitus', also drawn from Bourdieu's work. The value of this concept to understanding the informal enculturation of workers is acknowledged in Grabher (2002: 254) who, citing Brown and Duguid (1996) refers to the significance of acquiring this in order to become 'an insider'; that is, the importance of 'acquiring the embodied ability to behave as community members'. Habitus refers to 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1977: 72) that means one unconsciously and pre-reflexively embodies the values and style of the field one inhabits. Thus, fashion capital is literally embodied in and through the acquired fashion 'habitus'. As a deeply inculcated bodily disposition, the habitus structures ways of being and doing. It is, therefore, historical, since it derives from previously established ways of doing things, but it is also structuring or generating of practices, unconsciously, or pre-reflexively orientating how agents do things. Although Bourdieu did not talk of the habitus in terms of tacit knowledge, it is a concept that refers to tacit ways of being and doing. Buyers look, feel and embody a style recognizable within the world of high fashion and thus a style recognizable to others who have also acquired this habitus. Through this acquired bodily disposition and aesthetic style, fashion insiders signal their membership as one of the 'fashion set'.

Although habitus is unconscious and pre-reflexive, and therefore difficult to get at in an interview or observation, at a superficial level certain features of buyers' embodied style do recur in their descriptions of self at work when, in interviews, the buyers are called upon them to consciously reflect on their actions. For example, all the buyers spoke of their need to 'dress the part' and look suitably fashionable and one buyer even spoke of how the failure to dress well - that is, to be unable to understand, translate and wear high fashion clothes - would be an automatic bar to entry into this exclusive world of work. This ability to *wear the knowledge* is critical to the ease with which insiders move within the fashion network. Without it one cannot access the inner sanctums of high fashion; indeed, failure to embody this style is fatal. The same buyer told a story of how one US agent working for Selfridges in New York was 'too Westchester'<sup>3</sup> to understand the new, fashion forward Selfridges and, as a consequence, was unable to find and secure contracts with appropriate designers in the city. She was eventually fired when it was apparent that her aesthetic sense and sensibility did not enable her to source the right products for Selfridges' high fashion identity.

### 3.3 Fashion knowledge as performed and performative

Critically, fashion's tacit aesthetic knowledge is a knowledge that is performed and performative. It is performed as and when it is worn, often with great flourish, on the body and displayed at particular venues- such as high profile trade events like the bi-annual prêt-a-porter Collections. In turn, these displays are performative of the identities of those inside fashion. This argument is explicated in Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) who also suggest that the spatial arrangement of catwalk show is performative; in its configuration the show maps out and reproduces the status of participants and provides a stage, literally, in which the bodies of fashion players are ritualistically displayed. The traditional catwalk or runway forms a central stage which juts out into the audience and creates an spectacular environment for looking, not only at the models on the runway, but the audience immediately on the other side. Positions of influence are marked out through the seating arrangements, with influential players sitting in the front row and thus visible from the light that shines down from the catwalk while less influential players sit further from the runway. Thus, according to Entwistle and Rocamora, this staging of fashion space enables the enactment of fashion capital: the performances of those influential insiders are rendered visible to others thus enabling the performative reproduction of their identity within the field of fashion. What these insiders wear, and how they wear it, constitutes a large part of their performance as visible members of this community.

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<sup>3</sup>/. Westchester is a quiet suburb of New York City

This embodied tacit aesthetic knowledge is evidently 'sticky' in nature, adhering to the bodies of those fashion insiders who possess it; it also 'travels' with these insiders as well. High fashion style is a mute but globally recognised insignia of fashion workers. From my observations there were remarkable similarities in dress and bodily presentation of fashion insiders, whether on the fashion show circuit in London, New York, Milan or Paris, or in studios and in the fashion quarters of these cities. High fashion style is communicated via the body not only by clothes and accessories, but also through styles of walking, talking and being; the 'air kiss', for example, is a common gesture of affiliation to the fashion set (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006). During my field work, both with buyers and fashion models, I quickly became adept at 'spotting' fashion insiders. As I became immersed in the world of fashion, it was not hard to see who was on their way to the Chelsea barracks on the King's Road (where London Fashion Week was held in 2002) or spot models on their way to agencies.

Thus, as nebulous and difficult to pin-down as it is to pin down, high fashion style and the 'incipient taste' that insiders come to sense, is important to the work of fashion. This is not to say fashion knowledge is not formalized: merchandising statistics are used to capture historical pictures of sales and are factored into calculations of what to buy. But fashion is all about sensing and predicting the future, albeit a future which is not simply unfolding but inevitably produced through the very actions of fashion insiders imagining it. It is thus heavily dependent on informal understandings and an acquired sense and sensibility, and other such intangible qualities. Indeed, as I have argued, the store generally, and the buyers specifically, seemed to value tacit forms of knowledge and the ability they have to make sense of fashion through more nebulous and less clearly codified systems. To put it another way, fashion buyers go about *making sense* of the commodities they encounter - not merely cognitively apprehending them, but engaging other bodily senses.

That economic knowledge is embodied may not, in itself, be entirely restricted to body related aesthetic commodity markets like fashion. All markets are constituted out of embodied agents; as MacKenzie (2004), for example, has shown, stock market knowledge is enacted through such things as hand signals and even dress. However, embodiment generally only surfaces occasionally and incidentally in literature on knowledge and markets, and is, therefore, left largely implicit and unexamined. Since fashion is so evidently a market concerned *with* and orientated *towards* bodies and bodily appearance it is, perhaps, more important, and a more inevitable and a more noticeable aspect of market knowledge than that found in other commodity markets.

## 4 Conclusion

In this paper I have mapped out and defined the tacit aesthetic knowledge required within high fashion. Examining a market like fashion throws up many points of similarity and difference with other, more conventional case studies within economic sociology and knowledge literature. I have suggested that attending to aesthetic tacit knowledge complicates our understandings of economic knowledge, its characteristics, locations and flows, challenging some taken-for-granted understandings about economic knowledge as largely cognitive, and tacit knowledge as largely localised. The spatial registers for high fashion are complex and, while tacit knowledge is localised and 'sticky', it is also globally mobile and connected than the formal/codified, informal/tacit mapping would allow. Indeed, space in fashion is best considered as something actively configured than referring to fixed locations of 'the local' or 'the global'. Fashion markets also throw up a second challenge to knowledge literature, not unrelated: tacit aesthetic knowledge is embodied and the body is itself a spatialized territory of knowledge or fashion capital. As I have described it, fashion knowledge is expressive and sensual. It is also a knowledge worn on the body and travels with the body and, critically, it is performed and performative, especially at important trade events. Thus, by being worn on buyers' bodies, fashion's tacit aesthetic knowledge is simultaneously globally circulating *and* locally situated in particular cities. This inevitably returns us to conventional understandings of economic knowledge which are largely cognitive and strangely disembodied. Directing attention to aesthetic markets, therefore, one confronts the

limitations of economic knowledge defined as cognitive abilities and rational calculation. The features of knowledge described here may not be unique to fashion, although it may prove to be an exemplary case study. Further work on a wider range of markets is necessary to confirm or contradict these findings and see whether they are applicable in similar aesthetic markets and beyond.

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