

KDOLL'S HOUSE



DOSSIER

Named after Henrik Ibsen's titular play, *A Doll's House* explores the rituals through which femininity was constructed and embodied in Victorian England from 1890 to 1900. With recourse to an archival collection of nineteenth-century women's magazines, this intervention draws on a felt tension identified between rigid codes of femininity and the women who ostensibly adhered to them. Exploring this tension through the prism of contemporary fashion, *A Doll's House* reveals clothing as a ritual through which a mould of femininity was perpetuated and inhabited.

This assemblage has modern resonance by illuminating the extent to which femininity is not essentially tied to those assigned female at birth, but rather names the act of performing a set of social expectations that are continually (re)negotiated. Among other cultural references, the instability of such categories is indebted to Judith Butler's seminal work on gender performativity, which offers an overarching Feminist framework for appraising our archival material. In positioning these artefacts in the context of embodied ritual, this intervention destabilises normative conceptions of femininity — prompting the audience to consider their own performances and assumptions about what it means to occupy such a position.

Step into a 3-dimensional late nineteenth-century home and experience the staging of femininity represented through a curation of dresses, accessories and pious paraphernalia. *A Doll's House* invites you to critically examine these objects and their owners, particularly taking stock of the specific temporal and material conditions in which they emerge as artefacts of aristocratic gentlewomen, written amid the rising presence and groundswell of support for the women's Suffrage movement.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

.Aika Seto: My role in this project involved collecting references from library, research on archives and books, historical accuracy check for the Victorian house design and contents, support on exhibition structure planning and dossier writing

Ana Jimenez: In the early stages of the project, I focused on the idea of researching how women were enforced into certain social norms through rituals such as mourning, which led us to the idea of using rituals as a starting point for our project. I was also a part of the theory group, working alongside Ellen in the written script and working on the dossier.

Barbie Tsao: For this project, I was researching the relationship between the industrial revolution and fashion in the early stages of the project, and for website building, design and editing in the later stages, as well as assisting with other Photoshop skills.

Ellen Everett: I assisted in creating the curitorial statement and alongside the technical team, worked with them to convey this message. I worked alongside the theory team to chose and place each object in our model. I also created the voice-over script and recorded it alongside the technical team.



ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

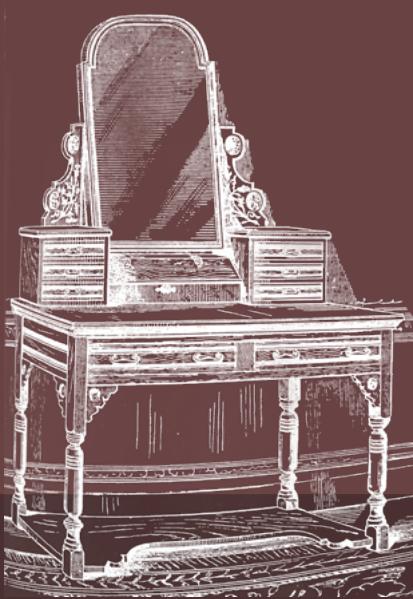
Ellie Delves: My primary role was to develop a curatorial vision/intention, statement and activist lens for this project. This involved synthesizing theory with the contributions of each group member to create a framework for think it through how to communicate our archival material.

Gabby Zong: I made a list of labelled exhibits with titles, pictures and sources and lay out of the labels. I also assisted the edition of the effect pictures.

Lix Wang: I was in charged with researching of theater dress in 1890s. I also created the 3D model design by Sketch up and worked on the video design.

Wenhan Gao: Firstly, I researched the sportswear of 19th-century women, including tennis wear and cycling wear. I also related it to the historical background and class at that time. Besides for the technical part, I am responsible for the website design. Building the exhibition website and making it like an online exhibition.

Vivi Jiang: I started with white weddings, working on 19th century wedding dresses, and on the technical part, I designed a combination of 3D and 2D, creating a rendering by photoshop.



OUR TEAM



RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Our group was fortunate enough to be granted access to the CSM archives and view their collection of 19th century women's magazines that were donated by Margaret Woodward. Woodward attended the Central School of Arts and Crafts and studied costume design under Jeanetta Cochrane and it is believed that these magazines were used as reference images for her work when designing for theatre costumes.

Our first task to begin our research was to immerse ourselves in these magazines and extract key articles, images and advertisements that were of interest to us individually. This process allowed us time to view the archives at our leisure over a period of three weeks while swapping notes, research topics and common interests that we gleaned from each article. This process was a critical juncture for our group which we will discuss later in this review.

Once we all agreed we would be researching rituals of feminine performance, each member of the group picked objects from the archives that they felt symbolised this idea. We chose rituals of dress and fashion, corsets, bloomers, modesty necklines and skating boots all were items that represented ways in which 19th century women would perform these expectations of femininity, or in fact, subvert them in ways which were quiet, but symbolic. Others in our group chose to do further research outside the archive, discovering smelling salts, a concoction of lavender and oils that were used to sedate a woman, should she swoon from arousal in public.

We discovered the symbolism in cycling, a somewhat recent freedom for women in 19th century England that allowed them access to independent transport and contemporary styles of dress that would eventually challenge Victorian-style fashion amongst women.

After deciding on our curatorial lens and topic, our group moved on to the technical development through SketchUp, a 3D modelling computer program that we would use to create a life-like exhibition to display our archive materials and position our



RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

“story” . Some members of our group were proficient in this program while others had never heard of it. We attended a workshop hosted by X but also used YouTube videos and online tutorials provided to gain a preliminary understanding of what would be possible on this platform but also what our restrictions would be.

Very quickly we realised that while SketchUp would be helpful in creating the 3D model of the Victorian-era house we wanted to create, it wouldn’t allow for enough interactive participation by the audience for things like clicking on objects, zooming in to see articles in high resolution and greater detail when it came to such important aspects such as small archive materials and dress details. We then decided to also include Photoshop to add in such important features to really showcase them through a video which we would combine with the SketchUp model in a video format.

Our group worked together in the final weeks that was a symbiotic relationship between technical and theoretical teams. After we were all in agreement on our curatorial framework and exhibition, those who were confident with SketchUp and Photoshop took on those roles and the remainder of our group were tasked with theoretical aspects including the curatorial framework, labelling and contextualisation of the objects, dossier collation and voice over transcript and recording. Although our teams worked separately while the 3D model was being created, it was imperative that we worked alongside each other the entire time to make sure each aspect of the model was contextualised within our theoretical framework, but also historically accurate. This feedback was passed along to the respective team and the changes would be made or model/-theory adjusted and the loop continued. We understood this to be the most time-efficient way to adhere to each group member’s skills and interests while also completing our project in a timely manner.

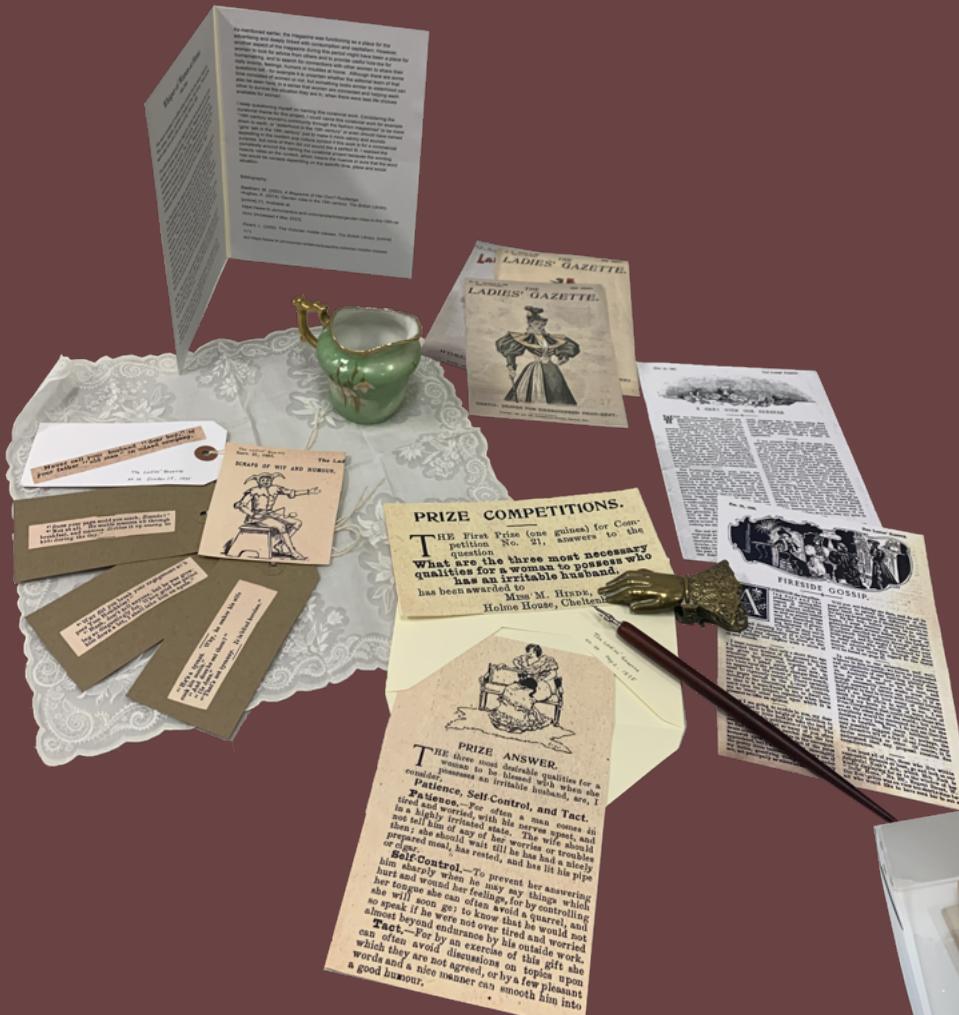
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT



OSBAND, L. (2002). VICTORIAN HOUSE STYLE : AN ARCHITECTURAL AND INTERIOR DESIGN SOURCE BOOK. NEWTON ABBOT: DAVID & CHARLES.



RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT



ACTIVIST LENS

FEMININITY AS PERFORMANCE

For the activist lens in our intervention, we applied a post-modern feminist framework in order to destabilise normative conceptions of what constitutes femininity. Shifting away from biologically essentialist notions of female-ness and womanhood, our project leverages Judith Butler's seminal work, *Gender Troubles*, in which she suggests gender is a necessarily performative, socially-constructed act. Using Butler to reappraise the archival material, our project aimed both to illuminate the restrictive trappings of this construct for women in the period (see: corsetry, high necks etc) but also, crucially, to provoke questions surrounding who is and is not afforded to participate in this performance. Here, we explored how cultural and economic factors shape and pose obstacles to embodying femininity 'proper,' which is to say the articulation of femininity in the Victorian fin de siecle.

First, this framing can function as a general critique of the eurocentrism of the archival material itself, which we had initially tried to combat through engaging cultural difference in our work. While we were unable to enact this literally in our final intervention, the notion of performance that we applied to our project disrupts the prevailing notion of femininity as 'refined' and white that many of the magazines perpetuate. Considering femininity as a performed act thus places these stereotypes in their specific cultural context and makes narrative space for other localised interpretations of what it means to embody female-ness.

Second, the notion of femininity as a gatekept Victorian ritual tied in to many of the observations we had made in the initial stages of our research, for instance in Ellen's appraisal of household budgeting and domestic economics levelled at Victorian

ACTIVIST LENS

FEMININITY AS PERFORMANCE

women. Reading detailed columns in *The Ladies' Gazette* breaking down the cost of house, social and sartorial upkeep, we were forced to reckon with the limited socioeconomic mobility (and, by extension, limited capacity to embody the rituals of femininity) for women who were not under the patronage of a wealthy family or husband. Such research opened up an important conversation surrounding the average readership of the women's magazines we were engaging with and the extent to which their readers skewed middle-upper class.

In denaturalising femininity as a stable position and exploring it critically through the lens of performance, our project aims to:

- a) Illuminate the rigidity of gender-based prescriptions in the late Victorian period
- b) Tease out the felt tensions of those (not) adhering to these prescriptions, especially in the context of imminent Suffrage and female emancipation
- c) Expand the notion of femininity: inviting our audience to engage with other disciplines, for example trans cultural theory and cultural studies, to think carefully about who has been and who still is erased from the social imaginaries surrounding femininity.



PRODUCTION PROCESS: CRITICAL JUNCTURES, IMPORTANT DECISIONS, AND MILESTONES

When we first began exploring the nineteenth-century women’s magazines, we began independently working on what we found captivating within the pages of the archive. Each member chose to engage with a different theme that resonated with them. Through these individual findings, some members within our group focused on highlighting the cultural differences between how traditional weddings were displayed within these historic UK based archives and the extensive knowledge they had on these same traditions in their home country, China. Simultaneously, others within our group focused on the manner in which women were enforced upon adhering to certain social etiquettes through a ritualistic lens. Utilising the diversity within our own group was a compelling idea that we collaboratively wanted to emphasise. We then came upon a collective merge of visualisations within the thematic proposals for our project.

Our initial intention became to create a conversation between rituals and the enforced social norms women conformed to spanning across western traditions versus eastern traditions. Rather than focusing solely on weddings, our group sought to portray the multiple rituals within the lifespan of a woman within each culture. With the mindset of highlighting the ritualistic cross-cultural comparisons in order to display womanhood within our group, we additionally came about with the idea of doing so through the use of a timeline within our exhibition. The group’s focus then turned to questioning how to critically present a woman’s life from birth to death, highlighting the ritualistic social etiquettes throughout their life within both cultures. However, our first critical juncture occurred throughout a discussion on how we could realise our proposition for the project in the allocated time.

The consideration of ethics when dealing with multicultural material was a key point to take into account from the beginning steps. However, our main concern was whether or not our group would have an adequate amount of time to handle not only gathering

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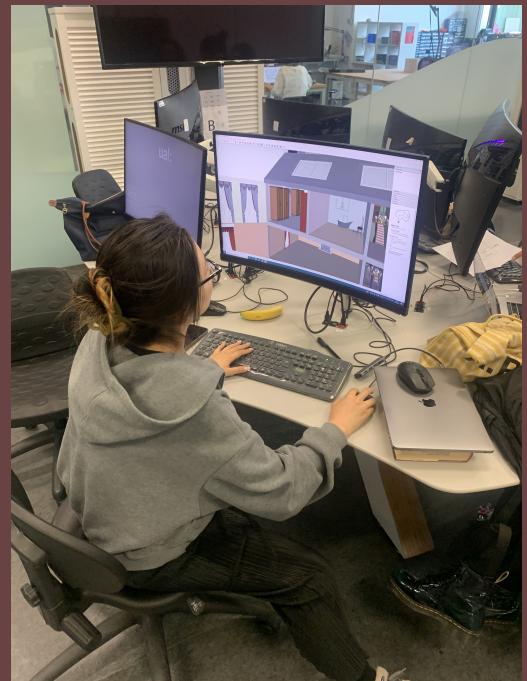
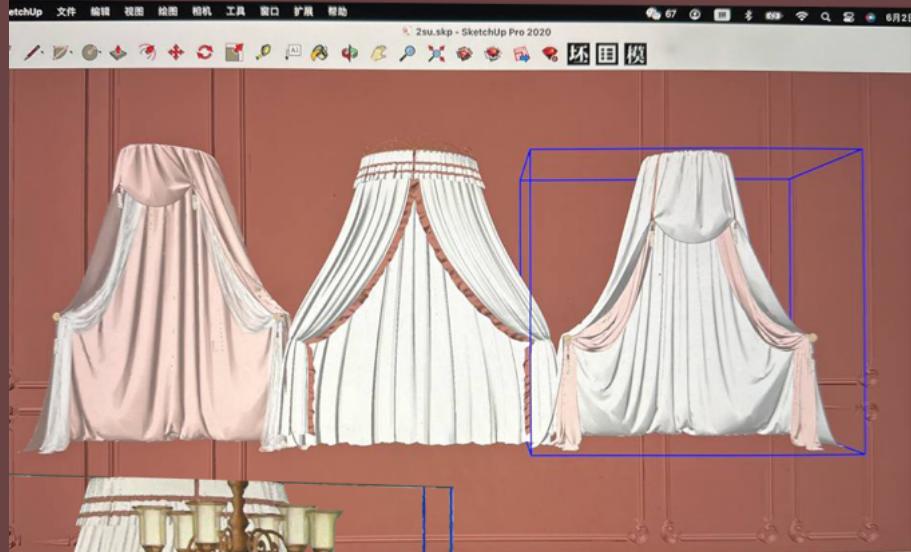
group who had the same diverse heritage we wanted to display in our exhibition were not able to appraise a form of collecting an archive that would be representative of the theme. Therefore, in order to gather an archive to use within our exhibition, we may have had to turn to online sources. This revelation also brought the members of our group to scrutinise the connotations that would bring forward. Considering search engines tend to be based on one's location, we had to take into account whether or not that would add a "western lens" on the archival matter presented to us and how that would not correspond to our initial visualisation of the project. Even the logistics of finding material online that we would be able to use legally within our exhibition in a relatively short period of time was problematic.

On account of the group's consensus, we came to the crucial resolve to shift our focus into a theme which would be appropriate for the time given. We then decided to devote our exhibition to revealing clothing as a ritual through which a mold of femininity was perpetuated and inhabited. This idea, in terms of thematic purposes, progressed smoothly. While each member was assigned a skill based role in order to carry out our project, we soon realised there had been a miscommunication barrier in terms of design. The members working on the technical and design aspects had previously thought that the doll house created would be a more realistic version of a Victorian home that had only been inspired by the magazine archive rather than a vessel created to critically display the material given to us. Returning to the original idea also brought about issues concerning the quality of the images taken from the archive. As the image collectors were not able to have access to proper lighting and had to be very delicate with the archive, our tech team was concerned about the aesthetic of each

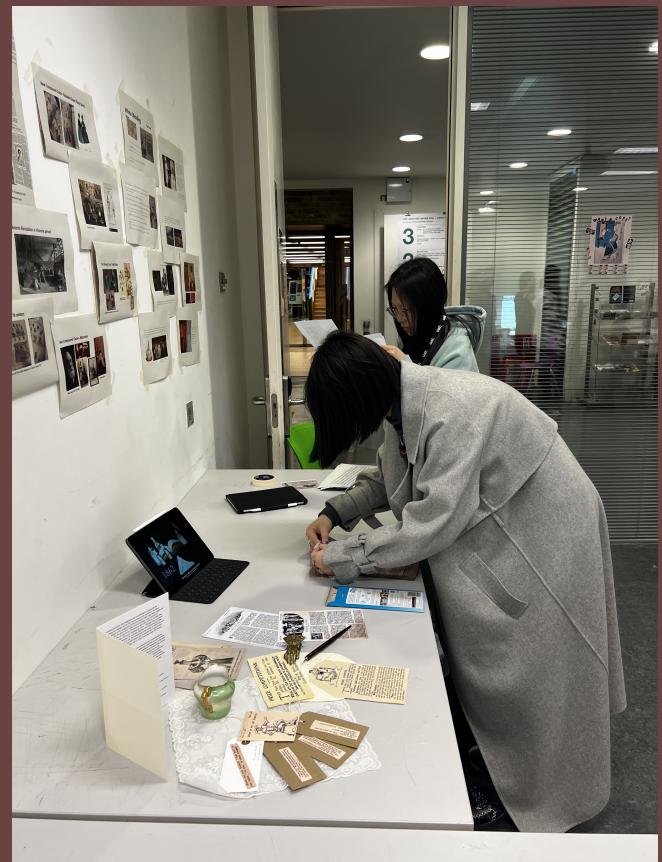
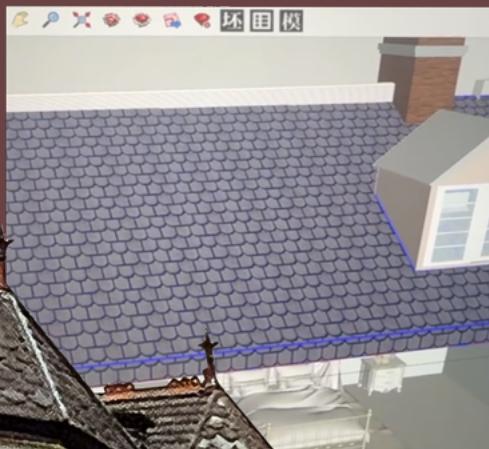
PRODUCTION PROCESS

CRITICAL JUNCTURES, IMPORTANT DECISIONS, AND MILESTONES

photograph, and place them as if they were dolls within the dollhouse. While trying to communicate how to find a common ground each member agreed upon in the final aesthetic of our design, this critical juncture provided us with an excellent outcome.



PRODUCTION PROCESS: CRITICAL JUNCTURES, IMPORTANT DECISIONS, AND MILESTONES





FINAL OUTPUT:

As the final output for our digital exhibition, we created a 3D space using sketchup and exhibited objects and articles from our collection pieces.

Here is the link to our website.

‘A Doll’s House:’ The Performance and Facade of Femininity in the Victorian Fin de Siècle

<https://www.macc19thwomensmagazine.com>

Our website was elaborately designed by Barbie and Wenhan. Visitors can access our contents including introduction, 3D online exhibition, and the tour video. We selected the brownish pink as the main colour for the website background, which was inspired by the Victorian fashion we found from the archive. The fonts for the headlines and texts were also carefully chosen to match with the typographic style of this period.

Features:

Title page with the logo

The main logo and the house-shaped icon were designed by Barbie. On the title page the logo is arranged together with image pieces from our archive material.

Introduction

This page talks about our concept, as well as our inspiration and its narrative.

Take a tour (3D exhibition tour video)

An exhibition tour video has been embedded here. Click the play button and visitors can enjoy the virtual tour of the house, and it comes with an audio guide to tell a story related to the exhibited objects. Below the video window, transcript is also available for better accessibility.



'A Doll's House:'

The Performance and Facade of Femininity in the Victorian Fin de Siècle

Named after Henrik Ibsen's titular play, A Doll's House explores the rituals through which femininity was constructed and embodied in Victorian England from 1890 to 1900. With recourse to an archival collection of nineteenth-century women's magazines, this intervention draws on a felt tension identified between rigid codes of femininity and the women who ostensibly adhered to them. Exploring this tension through the prism of contemporary fashion, A Doll's House reveals clothing as a ritual through



TRANSCRIPT

Take a step into the home of a wealthy, upper-class family in 1890 London. Explore each room of the house and discover the life of a woman living on the precipice of suffrage. How does she perform her feminine duties while quietly challenging what was expected of women at the time?

For a woman dressing herself in 1890, the corset was the first step in getting ready to start their day. Creating the look of a small waist and wider hips was imperative to achieve what was considered feminine perfection. This routine was a tedious and painful occurrence for these women.

VISUAL OUTPUT TRANSCRIPT:

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For a woman dressing herself in 1890, the corset was the first step in getting ready to start their day. Creating the look of a small waist and wider hips was imperative to achieve what was considered feminine perfection. This routine was a tedious and painful occurrence for these women.

This did stop some women from participating in sport, skating dresses were adorned with similar corsets, but were an opportunity for women to finally partake in leisure activities that were enjoyed amongst men as well.

Take a step into the living room where families would host friends after social events, including the opera or weddings or funerals. This is where a woman could enjoy the latest edition of *The Ladies' Gazette*, a rousing women's magazine that would include articles advising on legal emancipation, further education and financial counsel, while at the same time including fashion and home-making etiquette.

On the walls, images of women in this room can be seen wearing a traditional half-mourning dress, a gown that was required to be worn by women for several years after their husband had passed. This tradition was inspired by Queen Victoria on the far right, who wore her mourning dress for the remainder of her life after her husband died and popularised the custom.

Here we find ourselves in the marital bedroom, prominently featuring a woman in her wedding gown. This is where a woman could adorn her nightgown, only be seen by her spouse and participate in the proclivities of sex, for most a task that would be performed for the sake of duty. Otherwise, it was often advised that women carry smelling salts to use on hand as a way to suppress her arousal should she swoon in public.

In the dining room, meals were enjoyed in company. This was still not a casual setting, as etiquette was still upheld and enforced as a social norm that women were expected to perform. In the framed image, responses are displayed from authors of women's magazines answering women's questions regarding how to behave within separate social situations according to the etiquette at the time, even how to satisfy their husbands' often elusive schedule when it came to mealtimes.

Finally, we end our tour in the garden. Women who were wealthy enough to own bicycles were able to take them into town and even wear bloomers under their robes... how scandalous. Suddenly, women had a new found sense of freedom, playing an impactful role in the suffrage movement, becoming a statement to challenge restrictive traditional gender norms through dress.

FINAL EVALUATION:

In terms of next steps and the future of our project, we really envisioned our project as a stepping stone into a wider exhibition that may be displayed as a timeline of the suffrage movement.

We did not have archive material from the early 20th century when the suffrage movement really began to take shape which is why we did not explore it further in our actual project, but we wanted to focus on the actual archives we had access to. These archives were always at the heart of our process, research and model and we decided to remain loyal to the ways in which 19th century women were subverting and disrupting expectations of femininity, still however, within the context of a pre-suffrage England.

We imagined that our current exhibition, ‘A Doll’s House’ would exist as space within a wider exhibition consisting a number of rooms featuring perhaps prominent female suffragettes or actual archive materials from the early 19th century that documented this movement. There was also a discussion of widening the scope of our theory, research and exhibition to include various social groups who were/are also using ritual as a performance of gender and identity.

Our group was interested in trans-theory and how it relates to expectations and performance of gender and how people use rituals such as dress, accessories and fashions to subvert or confirm their own lived experiences. As no one in our group identified as trans or had enough experience to comment, we felt it was inappropriate to include this in our own project, but instead, given more time, to do the adequate research, speak to the experts and trans-community to curate an exhibition that would satisfy these themes.

Another interesting addition would be involving participants during an exhibition to contribute their own experiences with the performance of gender. How could we invite audiences to critique their own lived rituals and display these objects in an exhibition? What tensions could be felt and drawn between performances of femininity in 1890 and 2023? Our group would hypothesize, when we speak of fashion, body standards and marketing to women, not a lot has changed.