

FASHION DESIGN

AND ART

BETWEEN MUTUAL VORACITY AND DISCIPLINARY SELF-DETERMINATION

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

Abstract

Observing the 20th century, it becomes clear how much the definition of fashion as an inferior reflection of art is definitively outdated, in favour of a more complex and equitable relationship of mutualistic inference that places fashion within the ranks of the arts of modernity. Fashion has always utilised art in its rhetoric and draws on an innumerable series of expressions and idioms, contending with art for the esteem and social prominence accorded to high culture. The granted and denied relationship with time appears central in the definition of similarities and differences, essential to understanding mutual inferences and distinctive qualities in today's increasingly complex and nuanced picture. While fashion constantly seeks (otherwise risking its very existence) a vector of engagement with the real experience of the public and with time ("con-tempo-raneo"), art lives on visionary paradoxes, on a higher spiritual need, translated into form.

Keywords: Art, Fashion, Contamination, Time, Digital

Foreword: the Peer Relationship between Art and Fashion Design

Looking back to the 20th century, the era in which the relationship between art and fashion definitively flourished, it is clear how much the definition that sees fashion as an inferior and frivolous reflection of art can be definitively overcome, in favour of a more complex and equitable relationship of mutualistic inference that places fashion precisely within the ranks of the applied arts of modernity. This confrontation, equal and alternately rewarding on both fronts, has been nurtured over time and has contributed to defining that common texture of comparison, today made up of hybridisations and increasingly blurred boundaries. Since the beginning of the 20th century, fashion has several times acted as a multiplier of knowledge and played a central role in the popularisation of art. This transversal contribution, manifested in the course of a century of strong social, economic and cultural transformation, rather than leading to the debasement or trivialisation of art, has rather resulted in the dissemination of artistic motifs among social groups, which until then may have had little contact with the major arts. Yves Saint Laurent's Mondrian dress is an example of

this: if one should establish a precise moment by which Yves Saint Laurent's career took a decisive turn, this moment would certainly coincide with the presentation of the Fall/Winter collection of 1965. Inspired by the works of Dutch painter Piet Mondrian, the collection initiated a revolution in the aesthetic relationship between haute couture and the art world, laying the foundations of what would become an increasingly intrinsic union. The cocktail dresses, made of wool and jersey, concealed the complexity of the workmanship behind the lines of the composition. A difficult craftsmanship that denotes the French designer's ability to adapt a precise graphic style to the shape of the female body. The reference to Mondrian's typical palette and colour-blocking once again is not a trivialisation of art, but rather represents the emblem of a research that unites the Dutch artist and the French designer, sublimated in essentiality and geometry applied to aesthetics. There are numerous examples of the contaminations that have inspired the design of garments or entire collections such as these (in the case of the French designer, the collection was called the Mondrian collection despite the fact that only five garments out of eighty recalled the geometric traits of the Dutchman's pictorial synthesis) and still

history repeats itself years later, under other new, less literal forms, within a living metaphorical and cultural dialogue.

On 12 September 2010, pop star Lady Gaga is honoured at the MTV Video Music Awards for 'Video of the Year' and accepts the award wearing a meat dress¹. Designed by Franc Fernandez based on a design by Nicola Formichetti, and produced by Haus Of Gaga, the dress attracted attention across the globe. It was named by Time magazine as the best fashion product of 2010 and simultaneously condemned by animal rights organisations all around the world.

A dress of flesh had already been made by the Canadian artist Jana Sterbak in 1987, but in this case, it was an artistic product, which appeared and was conveyed exclusively within the perimeter of art spaces and therefore had a local audience, both in terms of the geography of users and in terms of the meanings conveyed.

Curiously, the world press that covered the event made no mention of Sterbak. It is conceivable that the pop star arrived at this result of her own free will, and that her dress, due to the weight of the number of spectators reached by the staged provocation, obscured the artistic precedent in this case. However, the episode is interesting here because it almost definitively underlines one of the founding aspects of the premise: the definitive determination of fashion as a form of artistic production. The message hidden behind the artefact fetish worn and displayed to the public by Gaga was different from the one Sterbak had translated years earlier. As part of the American protest movement against the US armed forces's Don't Ask, Don't Tell, the pop star and her entourage lined up on stage at the event four former servicemen and women expelled from the armed forces because of their sexual orientation, to declare support and stand up for the Lgbtqia+ community. Where does the original artwork fit into all this? How legitimate are such literal linguistic appropriations? These are questions to ponder, but what is certain is that the product's fascination orientation, thanks to fashion, changes from academic to popular.

¹ Karen Rosenberg of The New York Times compared the dress to a series of 1952 photographs of Francis Bacon posing with beef attached to his body, like wings.

Fashion Design: from Minor Propaganda Activity to Genuine Artistic Discipline

In the 20th century, fashion became a frequent occupation for many artists who, having understood the propagandistic power inherent in clothing, which was extraordinarily effective in creating a strong and recognisable identity for the artist, began to use clothing as a global brand of an action that manifested itself beyond the limits of the canvas or the studio, to testify the more pervasive dimension of their own production and their own philosophy. For example, Theo van Doesburg, leader of the De Stijl movement, wore a black suit and white socks and tie to represent the negative of everyday clothing. The Dadaist Jean Arp created elaborate costumes as a form of oppositional dress, while Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys ended up defining a new trend at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s: one wearing a white wig and dark glasses, the other a peach jacket and hat. Finally, "[...] the appearance was as important as the art itself". (Müller, 2000).

Sterbak herself, with her "Flesh Dress for an Albino anorexic" participates in a certain way in the production of fashion, insofar as the dress made, in an unprecedented way, is (and had to be) worn during the exhibition/performance, contrary to what was usually done, and in almost all of her previous production, with works of art and collector's fetishes. This is one example among many, because the meeting point between art and fashion is often ambiguous and elusive. Sterbak, a visual artist, used fashion and clothing as a vehicle for what she was trying to communicate about issues of the body and the feminine. Audiences and critics are confronted with conflicting definitions, asking: is clothing art or conceptual fashion? Similarly, in *Magic Shoes* (1992) by the same artist, a pair of high heels tied with chains elicits a response about women's lives and the culture of victimhood. Fashion thus begins to share a language similar to that of art, as the creation of dress and shoes exists not only within the domain of artistic production, but also within a sartorial paradigm that makes art an 'embodied' and performative practice. Fashion, writes Joanne Entwistle, "is about bodies: it is produced, promoted and worn by bodies. It is to the body that fashion speaks, and it is the body that must be dressed in almost every social encounter". (Entwistle, 2000). While Entwistle focuses on fashion, speaking about "[his] original claim that dress is a situated bodily practice that aims to

bring the totality of the dressed body into society” (Entwhistle, 2001), art in this case is “unseated” from the traditional role it occupies in high culture and begins to be permeated by new consumerist, popular, habitual, and everyday values. Like mass fashion, intimately subject to a form of iterative cyclical dependence on stylistic renewal (and unlike art, which until then had retained a condition of super-positioning indifferent to the passing of trends), Sterbak’s meat dress is perishable, subject to the organic transformations of time and with them the aesthetic obsolescence of the message².

While being aware of the mutual prejudices that still anchor the two practices to distant territories of affiliation, the academy on the one hand and industry or consumption on the other, and of how they are seamless in the different ways they refer to class, gender and consumption, as well as the much broader notion of temporality, the examples of Gaga and Sterbak testify to a mutual rapprochement, practised through a transfer of field, in which art becomes fashion and vice-versa.

When fashion is placed in the context of the museum or art gallery, its value, as a mass commercial product, changes from a consumer commodity to an art installation. This process exhausts any commercial value attached to the product, redeveloping the commodity precisely through its adherence to a new value system: a rarefied commodity to be collected. Whether a designer dress or an installation, the boundaries between high culture and popular culture are thus gradually blurred, leading to a new, much more fluid field of disciplinary promiscuity, in which promising and stimulating sui generis experiments originate. In this way “fashion seeks to bind itself to the value system of art, so art seeks to remove the stigma of such associations”. (Taylor, 2005).

A partnership is created and fashion, ceasing to be the “other” to art, it gains a new typological positioning, qualified by a new status.

A strong subtext to this dynamic is the way in which fashion, as part of the modernist project, was historically constructed to be the other of art: that is, a predominantly frivolous entity, relegated to the domain of the feminine and the body, as opposed to art, which remained masculine, placed in the sphere of the mind and psyche, even sentimental.

² Ironically, this work is now displayed in a spectral state of desiccation, poised on a headless fashion mannequin, preserving its status as art.

Faced with this scene, “philosophy (particularly feminist philosophy) has challenged the modernist notion of the superiority of the mind over the body, arguing that corporality is central to the way we experience and produce knowledge in and about the world” (Geczy & Karaminas, 2011).

The production of fashion through the media highlights how fashion thrives in different cultural and communication fields. The cover of *Artforum* in February 1982 showed an Issey Miyake dress duplicating itself “as sculpture, as painting, and as aggressive, erotic spectacle” (Townsend, 2002). This transgression marked the beginning of fashion’s transition into the gallery and exhibition space, with exhibitions held in prestigious museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Louvre, and the Musée de la Mode in Paris.

Although embraced by museums as a means of attracting crowds, corporate sponsorships and cross-branding opportunities, fashion in the museum context is nevertheless at this point still considered inferior and unworthy of such a prestigious and valuable stage as the museum was then. The accessibility and commerciality of fashion thrives in the image-saturated society that characterises the postmodern condition, while art, protected by a cult status linked to the eternal and universal dimension it derives from history, is limited in its ability to transcend mainstream popular culture and thus to adapt to the changing conditions of a rapidly transforming society. The question on whether fashion is art or not leads to an argument, or a denunciation, whose weakness lies in not addressing the systems of art and fashion themselves (Geczy & Karaminas, 2011). For over a century, debates have focused on the art object and the fashion item without considering the linguistic and consensual frameworks that allow one to be art and the other to be fashion. Claiming that one is embodied and the other is not, is only half the story, and countering that art can sometimes be worn does not solve the issue. Art and fashion dwell in undeniably different systems, defining them as respective discourses: fashion and art inhabit different modes of presentation and reception, have different uses and are subject to variable responses within monetary and desiring economies.

The history of art from Marcel Duchamp onwards has taught us that art cannot exist without the elaborate protocols that record its experience as different, indeed special. The so-called Duchampian



Fig. 01

revolution deprives the art object of an intrinsic meaning and transforms it into a cultural artefact whose status is conferred because of a delicate web of signs and agreements; hence we must even accept the relative specificity of art in relation to culture, class, and race. Without its consensus, ratification or veneration, the experience of art is diminished if not nullified. What fashion studies have taught us is that fashion is a very specific phenomenon of the West and of modernity (post-Middle Ages)³. Even when it contains notions of dress, costume and clothes, fashion is a discrete historical entity, just like the idea of art as the activity of specialised individuals or groups, producing aesthetic objects or experiences of critical difference to everyday life. Both derive from a social configuration of class, capital and communication that began in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, a period that saw the transition from the rigid restrictions of religion and government to those of self-assertion, mobility, and

the ability to exercise change.

Like money itself, fashion and art are symbolic agents, but their degrees of transaction and dependence are different. Faced with this long-established framework, we must therefore ask: beyond the different areas of exchange and consensus in which they operate (uneven and overlapping), are fashion and art really the same thing? Does fashion really want to be art? And does art really need fashion? Fashion uses art in its rhetoric; it takes its cue from an innumerable array of expressions and idioms and contends with art for the esteem and social prominence accorded to high culture: to architecture, music, theatre, and the visual arts. But this is part of its nature and rather declares a perverse and predominantly agonistic relationship with art.

The Tricky Relationship with Time

The contested and denied relationship with time appears to be central: while fashion constantly seeks (on pain of its very existence) a vector of engagement with the public's actual experience and with time (*con-tempo-raneo*), art thrives on

³ Modernity can be read here in the Hegelian sense of an aesthetic phenomenon since the Middle Ages, when human beings began to have a stronger sense of individual consciousness and agency.

visionary paradoxes, on a higher spiritual need translated into form.

Quentin Bell eloquently sums up this distinction, also highlighting what Gilles Lipovetsky has called the “highly problematic institution” (Lipovetsky, 1994) of fashion design:

“And yet ‘fashion’, because it implies change and mutability, suggests something frivolous and inconsiderable. A judgment based upon fashion is felt to be less reputable than one based upon those eternal values, those enduring truths which, as we like to suppose, we can all recognise and in the light of which we can relegate fashionable opinions to their proper and inferior place. ‘It is fashionable to maintain...’ – such a beginning allows us to anticipate that the speaker will soon refer to something more permanent than fashion. A fashionable artist is certainly one who will abide our judgment. Such assumptions may be, in fact certainly are, true; nothing is so mortal as fashion, no flower carries within it more plainly the seeds of its own destruction; the only trouble is that when we seek for eternal verities against which we can measure the shortcomings of fashion they may be rather hard to find. But if in condemning fashion we imply that it is the product of a light-weight emotion and one that can easily be disregarded then we may fall into a very grave error [our emphasis]” (Bell, 1976).

The evanescence of fashion versus the durability of art is the real sticking point.

However, fashion studies originated within three different disciplines and from three privileged observatories, from which it is possible to draw synthetic notions about its very nature: anthropology, meaning ethnography and the study of dress as a marker of class, gender, and kinship; sociology, which then branched out into the rather nebulous term of cultural studies; and art history. While this circumstance certainly relativises the importance of the aesthetic in studying the relations of disciplinary mutuality, it also makes it possible to identify other areas of proximity between art and fashion, particularly in the instrumental dimension, practiced during the 20th century, in the processes of class affirmation within Western and European societies.

Couture, which began in 1850 with Charles Frederick Worth, represents a key point for discerning the link between art and fashion. It represents the “place” where clothes begin to take on the status of substantial, sculptural objects, where for the first-time human support

acts only marginally as an activator of an already programmed potential, disengaged from practical functionality. Worth’s talent and his aggressive self-promotion were instrumental in bringing fashion to the forefront of social progress and elevating the couturier to the status of an artist in his own right. This concept, already incipient in the 18th century, now becomes Veblenian insofar as fashion is transformed into a means of social promotion. Worth gave the consumer something more than mere quality, offering a unique, non-transitive value, comparable to that of a painting trapped between the texture of a canvas or sculpture, which was thus freed from the weight of the marble mass. In this sense, for the first time, the dress takes on an expressive ability equal to that of the art product and does so under the impetus of a representation finally freed from the constraints of a limiting temporal root. From this moment on, for more than a century and a half, art and haute couture



Fig. 02

will live a condition of reflected mutuality, which will see one prevailing from time to time over the other (and vice versa) in a strong relationship of mutual voracity that approaches cannibalism. In alternating phases, through shared windows of representation, they will feed off each other, to the point of leading art operators within the systems of industrial production and, at the same time, fashion brands to exert a prolific leverage towards the art system in general.

Several times Miuccia Prada and Agnes B have been involved in sponsorship and patronage of art (just think of the Fondazione Prada's continuous curatorial and exhibition programming, which for years has flanked and matched the brand's commitment to collecting) and fashion has entered museum spaces through the front door (from designer retrospectives to thematic and conceptual exhibitions).

At the same time, the artist-photographer Cindy Sherman, in her Fashion Series, portrays herself wearing clothes designed by Jean Paul Gaultier, Issey Miyake and Jean Charles de Castelbajac. The facial expressions and generally unkempt appearance fixed on the printed paper of the series suggest a "wrong", fleeting image, caught off guard by the camera. Clothing dangle loosely over the artist's body, the scene is tense, and the image is blurred, shrouded in a troubling sense of intimacy: it is the antithesis of a fashion shoot. Sherman uses fashion to explore ideas and concepts in the construction and representation of women, and does so by displaying an unprejudiced, undermining maturity, "which testifies to a paradigm shift in the relationship between art and fashion" (Kim, 1998).

Towards the Definitive Determination of Fashion Design

This fusion process between art and fashion is sublimated again in the multidimensionality enabled by digital technologies. RO4DM3N & HoRS3S, a revisionist and contaminational history between the old and the new, curated by the artist Str4ngeThing, uses artificial intelligence as a tool of choice, to evoke new visions of contemporary culture, in which influences from Renaissance art and more current streetwear trends are skillfully blended. The resulting works refer to the idea of a black cultural Renaissance that mixes climate-oriented ideals with a fusion of high fashion and



Fig. 03

streetwear. The WRong ER4 main art collection is based on the popular conspiracy of the Mandela effect and how these logos (Nike, Louis Vuitton, Stone Island, etc.), clothing styles and even sometimes technological items, have always been part of culture over the centuries.

The traditional model of art - progeny, apogee, and decline - is no longer tenable because there is no longer a dominant concept of style. Beliefs and interests have never been so disparate. The "contemporary", as we know it in art, is a phenomenon of complex multiplicity. The same can be said of contemporary fashion: fashion continues to be branded with commercialism and the term "fashion", when used in art circles, still has a

strongly pejorative meaning. However, it is also true that the spread of art's dominance in the wake of globalisation has come to resemble more and more the ways in which the fashion always seeks to differentiate itself from what preceded it, while deriving some form of heritage and continuity from that. In this climate, what fashion has over and above art is what Adorno called the jargon of authenticity. In fashion, authenticity comes in the form of a credible link to its creator and the history of its own progression. In the case of art, authenticity has a greater weight, linked to a woman's and man's search for truth. This research should not be underestimated and in the absence of standard units of measurement, in the face of the legitimisation crises that have marked postmodernism, we are faced with a relativism in which the measure of quality is an unequal mix of consensus and conviction. The fashion system then is a production agency interested in culture. It is a huge and influential industry with many responsibilities, yet it is a reflection of the best, the worst and everything that society privileges and tolerates. We wonder what can be conveyed through this broadcasting powerhouse, whether it is possible to convey scenarios of inclusion, for fashion brands to be sustainable and successful, for the system to promote a positive and equitable society.

contemporary street fashion, move with horses and carriages in a sub-urban setting, while cars do not exist.

Image courtesy the artist.

Fig.02: Str4ngeThing, RO4DM3N & HoRS3S #19, 2023.

Image courtesy the artist.

Fig.03: Hussein Chayalan, Inertia, 2009 Spring/Summer Parade.

Photo by Chris Moore.

Image courtesy Hussein Chayalan.

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Figure Captions

Fig. 01: Str4ngeThing, RO4DM3N & HoRS3S #26, 2023. The series imagines a world in which men of the street, iconoclasts of