

The Two Kingdoms. On the Relationship between Fashion and Art

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Published: December 20, 2023

Abstract

Is fashion history a branch of art history? Is the nature of the two ontologically different? Moreover, can the concept of fashion be extended to include other practices, such as more traditional forms of clothing? In our contemporary academic panorama where “including” has superseded the concept of “defining”, these questions are often only tangentially considered by fashion scholars but hardly faced directly. This essay aims to bring attention to the very definition of fashion and its differences with art. Drawing from the study of aesthetics and the theory of fashion, the paper will try to go beyond the material qualities that art and fashion sometimes share and look at the social, historical, and symbolic processes underpinning each of the two fields. The essay attempts to create an overarching theory that explains the intrinsic qualities of fashion and art from an ontological standpoint. To achieve this goal, the essay will analyse some specific cases and show how fashion and art look similar only when observed from a distance. Ultimately, it will be suggested that the difference between the two is not found in their material qualities but in how they are consumed and how they signify.

Keywords: History of Fashion; Fashion Theory; History of Art; Sociology; Ontology.

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Introduction

The cumbersome topic of the relationship between Fashion and art has been analysed by various intellectuals and publications,¹ but it is still an open debate split between those who think that Fashion is nothing but art² and those who tend to see it as something different.³ What should be noticed, is that in most cases the analysis tends to focus on a descriptive approach, namely, the consideration of formal similarities between the artefacts produced by Fashion and art. The core of the question, however, remains often untouched by these studies. What is overlooked is the different ontological nature of the two domains. The aim of this paper is to try to look at such matters directly. The claim that Fashion is a subcategory, or a branch of art carries a series of implications, some of which have critical cascading effects. For example, if art and Fashion are “of the same nature” — in other words, if Fashion is art — then this would imply that it should be inscribed within art history and evaluated, judged, or categorised using the same criteria as art. When considering the two domains, it is important to note that art history and the theory of aesthetics have a noble and ancient tradition; the field of Fashion studies, on the other hand, is just a few decades old.⁴ Moreover, Fashion is a hybrid and multifaceted field, and therefore cannot be unravelled by employing a single approach. For this reason, the following study will start with an attempt to understand how art is defined according to art historians, philosophers and sociologists who studied the subject. The second section will outline the nature of Fashion and will define how the term “Fashion” is used throughout the present study. Since Fashion does not coincide with dress or costume, it is paramount to set a specific border around its meaning. Finally, the essay will embrace a comparative approach, analysing the similarities and differences between Fashion and art and will explain the relationship between the two domains. It is important, however, to clarify one pivotal aspect of the question, which is the matter of qualitative judgment. It is undeniable that there are instances in which Fashion and art come very close to each other, but this should not be taken as a *de-facto* demonstration that the two domains overlap. Very often, the labelling of Fashion as one of the arts is done in an attempt to dignify it. In the present essay, this will be strictly avoided. It is essential to clearly state that whenever the word Fashion and art are used in my study, there is no intention of establishing any hierarchy between the two. The aim here is neither to criticise nor to undermine the importance of the Fashion industry but to understand its unique nature.

Defining Art

Philosophers who deal with aesthetics and art historians have engaged for centuries — if not millennia — with the very nature that defines art. The difficulty posed by such a question is embedded in the flexible nature of art. A sculpture by Michelangelo or a ready-made by Duchamp are equally considered art in our society, and this implicitly points out that art is a loose and open concept, however, a definition that is unable to create identifiable boundaries between domains fails to fulfill its purpose. It is for this reason that a clear theory of art has been proposed by scholars such as Emilio Garroni⁵ and Arthur Danto.⁶ The two scholars have proposed very similar explanations, albeit independently. Art, for Emilio Garroni, is always to be found beyond the art object itself, namely in what the art object implies and suggests. The very purpose of art is found in the inexhaustible universe of significations, the art object unleashes, generating an uncontainable explosion of meaning. In other words, art for Garroni is a finite object able to suggest infinity; a catalyst of meanings that cannot be found in its physical

1. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Fashion and Art* (London: Berg, 2013) and Lars Svendsen, *Fashion: A philosophy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

2. Anne Hollander, *Seeing through clothes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

3. Svendsen, *Fashion: A philosophy* and Llewellyn Negrin, “Aesthetics: Fashion and Aesthetics — a fraught relationship,” in *Fashion and Art* edited by Geczy and Karaminas (London: Berg, 2013).

4. Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned body: Fashion, dress and modern social theory* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2023).

5. Emilio Garroni, *L'arte e l'altro dall'arte. Saggi di estetica e critica* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1995).

6. Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

characteristics. Arthur Danto⁷ has a similar take. Stemming from the suggestions by Immanuel Kant, the American scholar has repeatedly tried to propose an overarching theory for the definition of art. His aim has explicitly been to formulate a theory of art that could successfully keep together Giotto and Andy Warhol. According to Arthur Danto, the two major artists who contributed most to a change of paradigm in regard to art were Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. A readymade, as conceived by Duchamp, Danto notices, was not chosen because of its aesthetic qualities; in fact, the objects were chosen with total indifference and only mattered as the mere supports of meaning. The question we are compelled to ask before a readymade, or before Warhol's Brillo Boxes, is "where are the boundaries of art if anything can be art?" A second question that comes naturally and that needs to be addressed is: "What keeps together Byzantine art, Giotto, Masaccio, Duchamp and Warhol?" According to Danto, art is somewhat an open concept; even if Greek art was mimetic, Byzantine art was hardly so. Abstraction proves that imitation does not belong to the essence of art, and kitsch objects bought in the market can be mimetic, for instance, but they are usually seen as the opposite of art. However, for Danto, claiming that art is such an open concept has been, for a long time, the easiest escape that philosophers have found to the problem of keeping such a varied range of art objects together under the same definition. Since it is impossible to find formal commonalities between Giotto's *Scrovegni Chapel* and Duchamp's *Fountain*, Danto's answer to the problem is to shift the focus from the artwork's visual properties to its non-visual characteristics. To answer the pivotal question "what is art?" Danto asks a different and yet more enlightening question: "before two identical objects, one of which is art, and one of which is not, what makes the difference? What allows one to call one object art and its twin object not art?"⁸ The solution to the riddle is meaning: art, for Danto, is an embodied concept. This applies to Giotto as much as it does to Warhol. It is not about visible but about invisible properties. It is not about beauty or mimesis, skills or materials, but about the participation of a given artwork in creating meaning. This concept can be understood through a recent example. During the 2019 Miami Art Basel, artist Maurizio Cattelan proposed a provocative artwork once again caressing and stimulating controversy. The work was a Banana attached to the wall with a stripe of tape; the price of the work was \$120,000. When the American artist David Datuna, apparently uninvited, removed the banana and ate it, the gallery announced that no legal action would be taken against Mr Datuna. The gallery claimed, that the artwork was not destroyed and the banana would be promptly replaced as it was only an "idea."⁹ To put it in Danto's words, the very act of destroying and replacing the banana has shown how it was mere support of meaning, an object made relevant by the meaning it carried in that specific context. This brings us to another discipline that has tried to define the art field: sociology. Sociology's understanding of art¹⁰ rests upon the belief that art is a process that springs into being from the gap left between the messages inscribed in the artwork by the creator and the way in which society receives it. Art for sociologists is, therefore, not a collection of objects but, following a Marxian approach is seen as a socially defined field. Similarly, Bourdieu¹¹ proposed the thesis that the work of art is created by an ensemble of elements: the artists, of course, but also the places of the exhibit, institutions of preservation, collectors, art dealers and critics, namely those figures who risk their symbolic capital — their credibility — to propose, recognise and substantiate the work of a specific artist. For the French sociologist, even the eyes that watch are created by the object that is watched since the context determines the perception. Being or not being an artist is, therefore, not a matter of value but merely a matter of context from which some are excluded and to which some others belong. Quite interestingly, Bourdieu claims that art has a quasi-magical power as it is based on faith and belief.¹² This concept is also explained by comparing art to magic as described by the anthropologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss, who, in his *Theory of Magic*,¹³ explains

7. See Danto, *What Art Is*.

8. Danto, *What Art Is*, 26.

9. Neil Vigdor, "A \$120,000 Banana Is Peeled From an Art Exhibition and Eaten," *The New York Times*, December, 07, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/07/arts/art-basel-banana-eaten.html>.

10. Anna Lisa Tota, *Sociologie dell'arte* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2008).

11. Pierre Bourdieu, *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

12. Bourdieu, 78–81.

13. Marcel Mauss, *A general theory of magic* (London: Routledge, 2005).

that to understand how magic works, he needed to shift the attention from the ritual itself to the magician, and from the magician to the popular beliefs and collective misrecognition. The magician has magic powers insofar as there is a society or a group of people ready to believe in his powers; similarly, an artist needs a group of insiders and a society ready to recognise him/her as such. It appears now clear that the sociological approaches to art are diametrically opposed to aesthetic definitions. Aesthetics has a long and consolidated tradition in trying to understand and evaluate the qualities intrinsic in the art object, whilst for sociology, the artwork itself is not even the main player in this negotiation. Despite the sometimes-harsh oppositions between philosophers/art historians and sociologists whose object of study is art, some of the sociological ideas about the art world have been absorbed and welcomed within the studies of aesthetics. Pierre Bourdieu,¹⁴ for instance, points out how even for Arthur Danto art seems to have an arbitrary nature explainable through the contexts in which it is consumed and exhibited.

Perimeters of Fashion

Any attempt to define Fashion is doomed to face the miscellaneous and contradictory corpus of theories and approaches that have tried to do so in the past and amongst which there is very little consensus. In today's academia, so sensitive to issues such as inclusivity and decolonisation, this task is even more cumbersome. Defining, in fact, calls for "exclusion" more than "inclusion," since definitions are intrinsically differential. Some Fashion theorists, however, agree on some pivotal notions: first, Fashion is related to change and imitation; it was born in Western societies during a specific historical period, Modernity, and, therefore, capitalism.¹⁵ The definition of Fashion that is proposed here is that Fashion is an organised system of production and consumption of clothes and accessories based on a constant change that came together in Paris during the 19th century and has since then evolved to embrace new geographies. This definition encompasses the Ready-to-Wear segment of Fashion as well as its highest segment, Haute Couture. The elements of change and imitation evoked here can be considered the very characteristics that tell Fashion apart from mere "dress." Sociologist Émile Durkheim¹⁶ acutely suggested that the main difference between Fashion and costume is that the first is the imitation of one's contemporaries whilst the second of one's ancestors. Along similar lines, Polhemus¹⁷ suggests that the very element that sets Fashion apart from anti-fashion is anti-fashion's impermeability to change. The reason why this essay proposes that the system of Fashion, as we know it today, came together during the 19th Century is that several social and industrial changes made it possible. Some of the evolutions that were conducive to the development of the Fashion system were: the inauguration of the Couture system in Paris in 1958, with Charles Worth; the increase in female literacy; the consumption of Fashion magazines; industrial production; and trains to bring information and commodities from Fashion centres to other cities. Equally important was the development of a porous class system, where the position of individuals within the social ladder could be defined by work and success rather than solely by a noble title and a surname. In other words, Fashion, to flourish, required the innovations and instability typical of modern capitalism.¹⁸ Just as suggested above concerning art, the definition of Fashion cannot hinge solely upon the description of the items that collectively are understood as Fashion but needs to be defined by the patterns of consumption that are intrinsic to it and the institutions that validate it. The "Fashionista" will consider "Fashionable" an item which to the eyes of the non-Fashionista might look ludicrous. It can be said, therefore, that Fashion — like art in Bourdieu's theory cited above — hinges upon belief rather than residing in a specific characteristic of the Fashion item. The creation of meaning around clothes has been

14. Bourdieu, 257.

15. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in dreams: Fashion and modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003) and Georg Simmel, "Fashion," *American journal of sociology* Vol. 62, n. 6 (1957).

16. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A study in sociology* (London: Routledge, 2005).

17. Ted Polhemus, *Fashion and anti-Fashion* (Raleigh: Lulu.com, 2011).

18. Giuppy d'Aura, "The Silence of Garments: Modernity and the conquest of elegance," *Aisthema, International Journal* Vol. 8, n. 1 (2021).

extensively analysed by Roland Barthes;¹⁹ in these studies, the French author does not directly analyse clothing but rather how garments are translated into language — and therefore acquired meaning — in Fashion magazines. Roland Barthes concludes that even when a garment is described and explained, the real “signified” of Fashion magazines is Fashion itself: clothes are the signifier, but “Fashion” remains the constant to which clothes in Fashion magazines refer. Every other meaning is either subordinated or intended to assist the main idea; circularly, Fashion for Barthes signifies itself. Even though Barthes restricts this interpretation to the Fashion magazines of his time (most of his Fashion papers and articles were published during the Sixties), one feels tempted to extend this to how Fashion creates meaning *tout-court* (using press releases, during a runway show, a Fashion campaign and so on). It might seem that sometimes Fashion targets some other meanings, yet they are all used to push a single master meaning: “Fashion is current,” “Fashion is concerned with the present,” “Fashion embraces the zeitgeist,” “it is Fashionable to be sustainable” and so on. One of the reasons why Fashion struggles to embody long-lasting meanings in the way art pursues is its degree and speed of obsolescence. For reasons that have to do with its market and with the evolutions of taste in society, Fashion changes so quickly that even the meanings it wants to convey are compelled to adapt to the ever-changing status quo. It could be suggested that to some extent, clothes offer themselves as what Claude Levi-Strauss called “free-floating signifiers,” namely signifiers in constant search of meaning and open to be filled by different meanings in different situations. Fashion, the favourite child of capitalism, as brilliantly described by Elizabeth Wilson,²⁰ has learned its most fundamental rules from capitalism itself, such as constantly evolving to adapt to the new situations of the market and incorporating its opposite instances to overcome them. It is not by chance, for instance, that a system that is compelled to produce and sell more than a new collection every six months cannot help but talk constantly about “sustainability,” and one could point out that the two needs — increasing sales and saving the environment — are intrinsically opposite.

Synthesis: How do Art and Fashion relate?

If one takes into consideration how art has been described by Garroni, Danto and Bourdieu, and compares it with the complex and polymorphous universe that goes under the definition of Fashion, the apparent resemblance between these two universes shrinks considerably. Fashion and art might seem one and the same thing only when observed from far away. Both, for instance, require creativity and, usually, both entail material artefacts; it is when approached closely that a sort of anamorphic effect takes place and what seemed to be similarities appear in all their differences. If the point of the art object is to serve as the support of concepts, as explained by Danto²¹ and Garroni,²² Fashion, on the other hand, sticks to the materiality of the object. Like art, Fashion serves the purpose of consumption, but this happens in a way that differs from the usual consumption of artworks as the two markets follow different paths, which need to be kept in mind. As said before, Fashion is inclined to work as a free-floating signifier, ready to be filled with different and contradictory meanings. This means, in other words, that Fashion often risks being reduced to a mere signifier, an object, and sometimes even a unique, innovative or beautiful one. This characteristic of Fashion is evident in its highest form, Haute Couture. Like most artworks, Couture hinges upon the uniqueness of the piece and is marked by the perfect construction of the dress; albeit this shares similarities with the uniqueness of most art pieces, it needs to be pointed out that the creation of concept is not a *conditio-sine-qua-non* of the garment. The necessary conditions that inscribe a dress into the realm of Couture, and by extension into Fashion, are its construction and materiality, degree of comfort (even when this means deliberate discomfort), and its ability to appear new. On the contrary, art at its most extreme seems to function oppositely, being the radicalisation of an idea, a signified. In some cases, the signifier that conveys the meaning can even be replaced without altering its revolutionary power, as discussed above in relation to the Banana by Maurizio Cattelan. The

19. Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (New York: Berkeley, 1967), 49; and Roland Barthes, *The language of Fashion*. (London: A&C Black, 2013).

20. Wilson, *Adorned in dreams: Fashion and modernity*.

21. Danto, *What Art Is*.

22. Garroni, *L'arte e l'altro dall'arte. Saggi di estetica e critica*.

fact that Fashion is often a bare signifier is noticeable whenever designers take inspiration from art, royalty or religion, namely fields where every signifier is designed to convey a specific and, to some extent, long-lasting meaning: John Galliano's collections for Dior were the ultimate example of this operation. The AW 2004 Couture collection by Dior had a clear inspiration: the insignias of the British Crown; even clearer was the inspiration for Couture AW 2000, where Galliano reproduced on the catwalk some outfits inspired by the Catholic Church, starting from the first look which re-interpreted quite faithfully the Pope's white robe and headpiece. In both cases, once introduced on the catwalk and removed from their original environments, these insignias became a pure signifier. Whilst the ermine robe on Queen Elizabeth II represents the power of the state and the white robe and mitre worn by the Pope represent his privileged link with God, they become empty signifiers on a runway show; the only meaning left to be signified through them is Fashion itself. This became even more obvious when the pop star Rihanna for the MET gala 2018, wore a Pope-inspired outfit (also designed by Galliano), which was white and complete with mitre. In a way, one might argue that the robe needs to die as a symbol to reincarnate as a Fashionable item, a mere signifier. It is certainly not this paper's intention to claim that a garment cannot be the carrier of meanings, or that a Fashion-show cannot have some characteristics in common with art performances or art installations; however, there are some points to be questioned and some differences to be underlined. Valerie Steele²³ investigated the relationship between Fashion and art by analysing their similarities; however, her comparisons stopped at a formal level, and even when she identified certain fundamental tenets which could contribute to clarifying their similarities, she relinquished the possibility of providing a definite answer. In her essay *Fashion*,²⁴ for instance, she mentions Arthur Danto's understanding of art as an open concept and Bourdieu's idea that Art is definable by the contexts in which it is inscribed. Steele uses these two theories to stretch the definition of art enough to accommodate Fashion. Yet, the same arguments can be used to propose the opposite theory. It is true that for Danto, art is an open concept; however, the unique characteristic of art in Danto's definition, the creation of meaning, seems not to be a requirement in the domain of Fashion. In other words, defining means differentiating "essentials" from "accidentals"; the necessary conditions from mere occurrences. Conveying a concept, for example, is "essential" in art but not Fashion; concepts for Fashion are "accidental." The essentials that define Fashion, on the contrary, are the pursuit of regular newness and — in Couture — the very specific rules that guarantee the quality and uniqueness of the garments produced. On the other hand, the material qualities of the artwork are not essential to art but a mere accidental, as demonstrated by Duchamp's Ready-mades, which consisted of ordinary objects selected by the artists provocatively with total indifference and placed in museums; this prominence of concept over the materiality of the artefact would be unthinkable in Haute Couture. Furthermore, if it is true that Art — as Bourdieu claims — is defined by the contexts and by the individuals who invest their symbolic capital in defining it (the art critics), but it needs to be specified that the contexts that define Fashion and the individuals who possess the symbolic capital for validating Fashion (Fashion critics) belong to a different context and are not mutually interchangeable. The two realms of art and Fashion are essentially validated by different symbolic systems. In her pivotal work *Fashion at the Edge*,²⁵ Caroline Evans examines the installation by Martin Margiela's *9/4/1615*, implying that the work is an example of Fashion, which is also an art installation. In it, the designer, in collaboration with a microbiologist, allowed some particular strains of microorganisms to grow over some garments, provoking their decay and colour mutation and then exhibited the garment themselves. The installation was held within an art museum, the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. There was undoubtedly thorough and refined research of meaning throughout the various stages of the installation. There is little doubt that in this case, Martin Margiela produced an artwork, the question that remains to be asked is whether the installation had anything to do with Fashion. The garments could not be sold or stored as clothes, but probably as sculptures and they were not sold within the contexts where Fashion is consumed or through a Fashion buyer, for instance. One is tempted to risk the thesis that the ascription of an artefact within the art

23. See Valerie Steele, "Is Fashion Art?," conference at Museum of Modern Art, Vienna. 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weB-SQ-XP-c>; and Valerie Steele, "Fashion," in Geczy, and Karaminas, *Fashion and Art*.

24. Steele, "Fashion."

25. Caroline Evans and Caroline Edwards, *Fashion at the edge: spectacle, modernity and deathliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

field comes at the expense of the same artefact being cast as Fashion and vice versa; a garment appears then like a servant who is forbidden to serve two masters at once. This is because the ultimate destination of the two fields, Fashion and art, tends to be mutually exclusive. It is undeniable and worthy of praise the fact that there is growing attention for costume and Fashion amongst museums. Fashion exhibitions are becoming more and more coveted, and they entail designers from the past as well as current designers, who often play an important role in sponsoring the exhibition that displays their pieces. It can be argued that the consolidation of the Fashion presence in some important museums blurs the difference between Fashion and art; however, the opposite can also be claimed. The dress and the art object are so different that even when a Fashion piece is treated as a pure artefact and fetishised in a museum exhibition, it is doomed to lose a substantial part of what it was designed to be. Elizabeth Wilson pointed out the paradox of experiencing the dress as a historicised “art object.” The scholar claimed that by glorifying it and increasing its perceived value, the dress appears ‘castrated’, diminished, unable to show its most lively and once precious functions, such as its sound, degree of comfort, movement, hardness or softness.²⁶ In other words, once behind the glass of a museum, Fashion garments are alienated from their original destination: being worn. The same cannot be said for art objects: the fountain by Duchamp, for instance, becomes a complete artwork when it stops functioning and it is exhibited in a museum, and the fact that it does not work as a urinal anymore is not perceived as a castration but rather as a requirement. Fashion and art are two parallel yet distinct systems of beliefs, each governed not only by its own set of rules but also validated by a different hierarchy and a different crowd. The Fashion critic and the art critic, the Fashion historian and the art historian, the Fashion buyer and the art are certainly not interchangeable professions and this — following Bourdieu — has a major impact on the definition of the fields since who holds the symbolic capital that can recognise and underpin an artist or an artwork cannot do the same with a Fashion designer or a Fashion collection, and vice versa. Another essential difference between the art object and the Fashion item is the different way in which obsolescence is inscribed in them. Major Fashion houses have invested an increasing amount of money in creating archives of their creations as they are starting to fully understand the power that heritage can have in the perceived value of a brand, yet this is a recent development. Fashion is meant to be consumed quickly and replaced quickly by a new collection, whilst art aims to be permanent. There are exceptions to this in both fields, and yet even when an art performance or installation comes to an end the aim is still to produce a long-lasting meaning which becomes historicised so that the concept produced can overcome the obsolescence of the happening itself. Fashion seems not to have the same concern as it would be counterproductive in relation to the functioning of its market, which requires it to evolve quickly and embody the present as much as possible. Even when Fashion brings back old styles, it does so by actualising them and, usually, when they have fallen into oblivion so that, when returning under a new actualised shape, they look contemporary. In other words, how Fashion and art perceive time and the past is utterly different because different consumption patterns govern them. Furthermore, art and Fashion tend to look at each other asymmetrically: whilst Fashion’s fascination with art is strong, and art is often a source of inspiration for designers and Fashion photographers, artists seem to be suspicious when approaching Fashion. This can be noticed if one analyses how most artists tend to approach Fashion within their artistic production: when Fashion is approached, it is usually to criticise rather than praise it. Artist Jana Sterbak, the author of many pieces that question the position of humans and especially women in society, has often approached Fashion in her works, probably for its proximity to the human body. One of her most famous works dated 1987, “Vanitas Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic,” consisted in the creation of a dress entirely made out of meat and eventually worn by the artist, and it inevitably looked for a shift in the perception of what is desirable as it turned the “ultimate object” of women desires — according to a patriarchal culture at least — into something repulsive. It is interesting to note that this effect and powerful concept disappeared completely when pop singer Lady Gaga wore a meat dress for the MTV awards in 2010. Sterbak continued her provocative works with “REMOTE CONTROL,” dated 1989. In this case, a model was asked to sit inside a crinoline-like cage. The cage prevented the model from moving freely, hence the title. It is not difficult, in this case too, to read the critical concept that the artist has inscribed in her work: the very insignia of feminine beauty in Victorian times, the crinoline, is what forbids the woman to exert her own agency.

26. Wilson, *Adorned in dreams: Fashion and modernity*; Entwistle, *The Fashioned body: Fashion, dress and modern social theory*.

Another young and yet already well-known artist, Sylvie Fleury, makes extensive use of Fashion accessories and magazines such as Vogue and Glamour, within her installations. Fleury seems to also mimic the vanity and fickleness of Fashion and her artworks are hardly disturbing at a first glance, but a more ambiguous message is revealed when analysing the work more deeply. The strength of the concept in her work is precisely the outcome of such ambiguity. It is interesting to analyse how Ropac Gallery presents her work: “She critically reflects on broader concerns with temporality and permanence, and the fleeting nature of value in contemporary society, in which items and trends quickly become obsolete.”²⁷ This claim is extremely revelatory as it tempers Fleury’s ambiguity and shows art lovers what the “real meaning” of her work is. One of the most notable examples of how parallel Fashion and art run, is the path of photographer Jurgen Teller. According to critic and curator Charlotte Cotton,²⁸ Teller was a respected Fashion photographer, but he was unable to be fully given credit within the art world until his project “Go See” in 1999. The project consisted in the photographer taking a series of shots of the young models that were sent to him by their agencies for what in the industry is known as go-sees, namely a model being sent to meet a photographer hoping for future bookings. Teller portrayed the girls not as models but as simple young girls, with no makeup or fancy lights and — Cotton claims — it was an attempt to portray their aspirations and even false hopes, the hopes that the Fashion industry was giving them. Cotton’s implication is clear: even Teller could not be taken seriously by the art world until he criticised the very system that made him an important photographer: Fashion. At this point, the asymmetry between Fashion and art that has been mentioned earlier appears with more clarity and it shows how the eternal dance between Fashion and art sees Fashion trying to catch art, but art suspiciously escapes the grip. The problem with most studies that start from the silent assumption that “Fashion is art,” is that they fully belong to the noble and growing domain of Fashion studies but often fail to consider the question from the point of view of art history, aesthetics and sociology of art. In this light, to claim that the belonging of Fashion to the art world is still debated is almost paradoxical, as one might say that the question already contains the answer. Is the very fact of being fully welcomed into the art world not what divides between what is “art” and what is not “art”? Is art not also a matter of context? How can something be called art if it is not historicised, consumed and sold as such? To conclude, an interesting remark was made by philosopher Lars Svendsen²⁹ when he claimed that if Fashion has to be seen as art it needs to accept an ancillary position, a minor art. Interestingly, a similar point was also raised by Llewellyn Negrin.³⁰ The first point made by Negrin is in rebuttal to Hollander’s idea that equates Fashion to any other visual art such as painting. Negrin points out that this reduction of Fashion to visual art “does a disservice to Fashion [...] as it neglects its intimate connection with the body”;³¹ another interesting contradiction pointed out by the scholar in the same texts is that Fashion designer’s pretence of being “artists,” rather than distancing their work from commercial pretences has the opposite effect, as it increases the commercial appeal of their creations. It is important to specify, however, that most notable designers do not aim to be considered artists; on the contrary, some seem to have quite a clear idea about the very nature of Fashion in relation to art. One of the prominent designers of our times, Miuccia Prada, is also the owner (together with her husband Patrizio Bertelli) of the most important contemporary art institution in the city of Milan, the Fondazione Prada. In fact, the separation between the Prada Group and the Fondazione is total, as the Fondazione belongs to Mr Bertelli and Mrs Prada themselves, whilst the Prada Group is a joint-stock company. This is, however, not merely a matter of business as Mrs Prada tries, very carefully, not to merge the Fashion collections with her art institution and vice versa. During an interview with Alexander Fury, Prada was asked what she thought about the relationship between Fashion and art, and she confidently replied:

Fashion is not art. It’s creative, it’s very creative. The only thing it has in common is creativity. But it is completely different because ... well, there’s all the polemic that the art world

27. Ropac Gallery, “Sylvie Fleury,” accessed 05-09-2023. <https://ropac.net/artists/43-sylvie-fleury/>.

28. Charlotte Cotton, *Photograph as Contemporary Art (World of Art)* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2020), 145.

29. Svendsen, *Fashion and Art*.

30. Llewellyn Negrin, *Aesthetics: Fashion and Aesthetics-a fraught relationship*.

31. Negrin, 48.

is more commercial! But art is working on absolute ideas, conceptual ideas in general. First of all, my work is commercial.³²

The late Karl Lagerfeld answered the same question from Luke Leitch along similar lines:

I am against museums and exhibitions in Fashion. One woman said to me — “In my world, the world of art” — so I said: “Oh, don’t you make dresses anymore?” A thin smile and then: “If you call yourself an artist, then you are second-rate.”³³

The link between art and Fashion and the pretence of designers to be welcomed amongst the artists seems to be stronger amongst the London-based designers and weaker in business-driven Fashion systems such as the Milanese or the Parisian one. This might be partly due to the fact that one of the most prestigious Fashion universities in London, the Central Saint Martins, is also home to some important art courses. On the contrary, the Fashion universities in Italy and Paris specialise only in Fashion and tend to be more linked with the business side of it.

Conclusions

This essay has tried to consider side by side two different fields and look at each of them from the perspective of the other. These two marvelous and intricate universes — art and Fashion — have hardly done so in the past. It is also my belief that considering each of the two as a separate entity and ascribing them to different traditions of Theory and History, does not impoverish Fashion — as probably feared by many — but rather the opposite. Stemming from Danto, this essay embraced the idea that art cannot be understood as an object with specific characteristics but as a meaning that uses an object to be conveyed. In this sense, I suggested, art is the exact opposite of Fashion as the latter tends to be a radicalised object, often an object with a function that escapes being caged by meaning. Showing Fashion with its specific features, with its peculiarities and unique set of creative and commercial rules, its unique calendar, and way of creating signification, its compulsory propulsion towards the near future and its ability to influence the masses, can only praise its value far more than presenting it as the stepchild of art or any other field. Ultimately, the favourite child of Modernity cannot be contained within a single box, and this seems to me its very source of strength.

32. Alexander Fury, “Miuccia Prada Likes to Disturb,” *Documentjournal*, Vol. 15 (November 2015). <https://www.documentjournal.com/2015/11/miuccia-prada-discusses-why-she-likes-to-disturb>.

33. Luke Leitch, “Karl Lagerfeld: ‘Call yourself an artist? Then you are second rate,’” Vol. 16 (May 2012). <http://Fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG9267278/Karl-Lagerfeld-Call-yourself-an-artist-Then-you-are-second-rate.html>.

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