



High Fashion as Contemporary Art

A study on intention, context, and artistic value

Halla Hannelin

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ABSTRACT

Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu
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HALLA HANNELIN
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The purpose of this thesis was to examine the relationship and parallels between fine art and high fashion, as well as to determine whether fashion could generally be considered a form of contemporary art. The study was qualitative and exploratory in nature, combining theoretical analysis with interpretive examination of selected case studies from fashion and art history. In addition to theoretical and visual analysis, the thesis included an artistic component in which conceptual fashion editorial was produced and presented within a gallery context as part of the research process.

The research indicated that intention, narrative, and context were central in determining whether fashion functioned as an artistic practice. The analysis showed that high fashion frequently employed mechanisms commonly associated with contemporary art, such as symbolism, storytelling, provocation, emotional expression, and conceptual framing. These elements were identified as key in shaping how fashion was interpreted beyond its commercial and utilitarian function.

Based on the findings, the study concluded that high fashion can be understood as a legitimate form of contemporary artistic expression when created and framed with artistic intention. The results suggested that the boundary between art and fashion was not fixed, but rather fluid and context-dependent, shaped by narrative, presentation, and interpretation. In this sense, when fashion was practiced under these parameters, it was shown to operate in close relation with art, functioning less as parallel fields and more as overlapping practices.

Keywords: contemporary art, high fashion, artistic intention, narrative, context

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1 INTRODUCTION

What is the relationship between high fashion and contemporary art? This thesis addresses a fundamental question that has gained relevance in recent years within both the art and fashion worlds, examining whether high fashion can be understood as a subcategory of contemporary art. High fashion as a concept has evolved beyond the commercial and the practical. As for decades high fashion has been merging with the thought-provoking, symbolic, and expressive qualities associated with fine art, I am not the first one to raise this question. Many designers treat their collections as conceptual projects, reflecting societal issues and personal narratives, much like contemporary artists. Through this research, I aim to unpack the artistic dimensions of high fashion, analyzing whether it fulfills the criteria that defines contemporary art or the artist. This question challenges conventional ideas about the fiber of art and commercial culture, through authenticity, intention and cultural influence.

The relationship between these sectors has intrigued me for a long time. I've found that what makes fashion fascinating isn't just the clothes themselves, but the artistry involved. For me, and for many others, including those within the fashion world, it's the creative and artistic aspects that really make the industry fascinating. Fashion isn't just about fabric and design, it's about communicating ideas, feelings, and even social commentary, much like painters, sculptors, or photographers do through their work. Just a couple of examples of designers who operate through artistry are Alexander McQueen and Rei Kawakubo. McQueen's runway shows often felt like theatrical performances, while Kawakubo's avant-garde creations rejected conventional ideas of beauty and form. These designers view their work as a way to tell cultural and personal stories, offering something deeper than just selling products.

The relationship between fashion and fine art has become especially interesting as the line between the two has blurred. Fashion, for a long time, wasn't considered part of the fine art world. In fact, even now, the idea that fashion can be art is a relatively new conversation. Many critics argue that fashion is simply too commercial, too focused on consumerism. But I think, like photography once was,

fashion is much more than that. Photography used to be seen as a mechanical process, but today, many photographers, like Cindy Sherman and Andreas Gursky for example, are celebrated fully as artists, side by side with painters and sculptors. I believe fashion is on a similar trajectory.

While calling high fashion art is still a debated topic, the growing number of exhibitions like the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute shows and the V&A's retrospectives on designers like Dior and McQueen signal a shift in the way fashion is perceived. Fashion photographers like Ellen Von Unwerth have been recognized in their own right, with shows like "Devotion! 30 Years of Photographing Women" held at Fotografiska New York in 2020. The existence of these kinds of exhibitions show a gradual change in people's attitude and thought process towards fashion. At the very least, these kinds of events are proof of recognition of fashion as a major cultural element and perhaps even something more.

The definition of art is no longer confined to traditional forms; today, it spans performance, photography, film, conceptual installations, and virtual art. I believe high fashion should be accepted into this world. Fashion has the potential to offer powerful artistic expression and societal commentary just as powerfully as other mediums of art. This thesis will explore the intersection of fine art and high fashion. Despite its commercial nature, fashion is being increasingly recognized as part of the broader conversation in contemporary art. Through examining specific theories, designers, collections, and key events, I hope to demonstrate how fashion is emerging as a serious player in the art world.



Figure 1. Installation view of *Devotion! 30 Years of Photographing Women*, Fotografiska New York, 2020. Note. Image from Artsy.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Cultural Capital and Theory of Distinction

When looking at whether high fashion can be seen as a form of contemporary art, there are some key ideas that help explain the connection between the two. These ideas show how fashion isn't just about selling clothes, it can also be a way for designers to express themselves artistically and comment on the surrounding culture and society.

Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about cultural capital and distinction are really helpful in understanding the overlap between fashion and art. He explained that things like art aren't just valued for how they look or what they are but also for the social status they give to the people who own or interact with them (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 56–60). There are countless examples of this within the artworld. Marina Abramovic's famous "Rhythm 0" (1974) is a strong one at that. The work itself wasn't for sale, in fact it had nothing commercial about it whatsoever. The piece was incredibly controversial (and still is) and by no means received only positive press. However, the controversy and discussion the work generated, later turned into infamy, and through that into real capital; reputation, exhibitions, books, collaborations. High fashion operates in a similar way. Fashion houses don't just sell clothes, but rather a lifestyle and a sense of belonging to an exclusive group, similar to how fine art works. You need to "get it", to be a part of it, and that's what makes it exclusive beyond the price.

In 2023, the brand Coperni closed a show by having famous model Bella Hadid step on to the runway in her underwear. Then a team of people sprayed specialized material called "fabrican", which sprays out as a mist and then immediately hardens into a flexible fabric-like material, directly onto her body, creating a dress live (Vogue, 2022). Once the dress had been created, Hadid walked the runway, closing the show. The dress of course had no closure, seams, or structure that would have made it possible to take it off and re-wear. Nor could it be mass produced or sold. It was purely a concept, yet it's the one piece anyone who saw the

show remembers. And while the piece itself was never intended to be sold, the press and discussion it generated were what turned into the capital for the brand.

Just as with any piece of highly regarded contemporary art, being able to afford what is essentially a symbol is inherently quite unusual and privileged. High fashion is luxury. Luxury items cost luxury prices and are bought by customers who have the means. To sell an item to a person who has everything, or at least the access to everything, the item has to be more than an item. It needs to be a badge of a specific, exclusive identity, something that speaks for its owner. These brands use designers and creative directors to produce works that generate discussion, regardless of the tone of it. Reputation is the ultimate capital. As cynical as it may seem, this is the parallel I see between these two industries. Reputation is what funds and keeps the creation and its creators in business. Fine art might take a more profound way of going about it and high fashion might be more direct in its approach, but the medium is essentially the same. Through Bourdieu's perspective, you can see how high fashion works like art, it's not just about what you wear, but what it says about your standing in society.

2.2 Concept of Aura in Fashion

Walter Benjamin's idea of *aura* is really interesting and quite applicable when thinking about high fashion as art (Benjamin, 1936, pp. 21–24). He described aura as the unique presence and authenticity that a work of art has, something special that can't be copied or mass-produced. While most fashion is mass-produced, high fashion stands out because it maintains this sense of exclusivity and individuality. This is especially true with couture pieces, which are handmade, require incredible skill, and reflect the designer's personal vision. In this way, they're a lot like art, where the value often comes from the originality and creativity of the artist. In fact, it is a big goal of these high fashion labels to create exactly what Benjamin has talked about: an aura, distance between the consumer and the piece, along with questions and mystery.

Benjamin's idea of aura is also a good way to think about high fashion runway shows. These aren't just about showing clothes; they're performances. A good example being designers like Alexander McQueen or Rei Kawakubo with shows that feel more like art installations than product showcases. The clothes them-

selves are part of a bigger story, and the focus is often on creativity and expression rather than practicality. This sense of uniqueness and artistry gives high fashion its aura, making it feel closer to art than everyday clothing. Nowadays, the shows are also received more as a form of art than something practical; what interests people is the artistry, the inspirations, and the creative process.

Amy Verner (2025) writes in an article for *Vogue Runway*, about the Jean Paul Gaultier Spring 2025 couture show: “Starting with a pale seafoam, off-the-shoulder corset laced LdSS-style and a sequin-scaled skirtlet’s call her a mermaid provocateur—the suggestive line-up spanned mythological (Cupid wearing little more than a harness of pheasant feather wings and the designer’s leather briefs, his modesty draped with blue silk); figurative (a nearly-nude bodice defined by an anchor motif attached to a delicate lace skirt); and caricature (a ghostly bride and groom in revisited period dress elaborately embellished with feathers and beading). From a thirst-trap pirate to a woman seemingly draped in sails, these couture character studies attested to de Saint Sernin’s imagination (each beginning with a hand-drawn sketch) while also justifying a wide range of otherwise unrelated ideas” (Verner 2025). The description of the show is very concept-focused, which seems to be what the consumer wants to know about a show today.

In a world dominated by mass production, high fashion collections distinguish themselves as rare and special. The craftsmanship, vision, and anticipation surrounding couture pieces contribute to the 'aura' Benjamin described—an authenticity and uniqueness that elevate these garments beyond just a physical, practical item. High fashion, through its exclusivity and distance from mass-market production and clientele, transforms into a form of art, carrying cultural and aesthetic significance.

2.3 Semiotics and Fashion as a Language

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols. Roland Barthes, in *The Fashion System*, talked about how fashion works as a visual language (Barthes, 1983). Every piece of clothing, every accessory, and even how something is styled sends a message. In high fashion, this is especially true, as designs aren’t just about the piece of clothing itself but about what they represent or symbolize.

Designer Vivienne Westwood, for example, often references punk culture and rebellion, while the house of Prada might use their designs to explore ideas like power and femininity. These aren't just clothes; they're full of meaning that can be "read," just like how an art historian might analyse the deeper symbolism in a painting or sculpture. Through semiotics, fashion becomes a way to tell stories and spark ideas, much like other forms of art.

This way of looking at fashion helps show how it's more than just a utilitarian concept. It's a way to communicate and express complex ideas, using signs and symbols that people can interpret in different ways. High fashion, in particular, uses this "language" to make bold statements, turning clothing into a medium for creativity and artistic expression.

2.4 Postmodernism and the Breakdown of High/Low Distinctions

Postmodernism in art is a movement that rejects the idea of a single, universal, "correct" way to create. It embraces irony, mixing styles, borrowing from history, pop culture, advertising and everyday life. It challenges the traditional lines between "high" and "low" art. It asks, why should certain forms of art be considered more important than others? This idea is very relevant when we talk about fashion's role in the art world. Designers like Virgil Abloh and Jeremy Scott take inspiration from streetwear, pop culture, and everyday things like logos, sportswear, and fast food, and turn them into social commentary. They do the same thing that artists like Andy Warhol did when he used common consumer products and made them into art.



Figure 2. Louis Vuitton x Yayoi Kusama Pumpkin Monogram Bag, 2023. Note. Image from Artnet.

Postmodernism also encourages collaboration and the mixing of different ideas, which is now something we see a lot in fashion. A good example of this is when Louis Vuitton collaborates with artists like Jeff Koons or Yayoi Kusama to create special collections. These collaborations are all about breaking down the boundaries between different fields like art, design, and fashion, just like postmodernism pushes us to rethink the lines that separate them. Fashion is no longer just about clothes, it has become a space where art and culture come together in new ways, allowing designers and artists to explore and express ideas from all kinds of different angles. (Jameson, 1991)

3 CASE STUDIES AND ANALYSIS:

3.1 Provocation as Strategy in Art and Fashion

Provocation as strategy in art is not exactly a new concept. The Dada movement, during and after the first World War, utilized this concept widely. As Peter Bürger argues in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Dada and Surrealism employed controversy as a means to dismantle the institution of art (Bürger, 1984, pp. 49–55). It wanted to bridge the gap between art and everyday life and belittle the notion of art having to exist within walls, mandated by specific groups. Before then, shock had mostly been an accidental byproduct, not the means to an end. This tactic of using shock and controversy as a tool to generate discussion and buzz later resurfaced in performance art and eventually in high fashion, with several designers and fashion houses making a name for themselves, relying on this tradition specifically.

An example of a controversial artwork, that wasn't created with the goal of massive controversy, could be John Singer Sargent's *Portrait of Madame X* (1884), which was one of the most famous widely controversial works. The portrait features Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau, a prominent Parisian socialite, wearing a black gown with a jeweled strap that has fallen off her shoulder. This provocative detail, along with her pale skin and confident, almost coquettish pose, led to the painting being criticized as vulgar and inappropriate when it was first exhibited at the Paris Salon. The fallen strap, in particular, was seen as suggestive, and critics questioned the morality of both the painting and its subject. (Smarthistory, n.d.).

In response to the outcry, Sargent later repainted the strap, ensuring it rested properly on her shoulder. However, the damage was done, and the portrait's scandalous reception overshadowed the artist's career for some time. Over the years, though, *Portrait of Madame X* gained recognition for its technical brilliance and daring depiction of modern beauty, eventually becoming one of Sargent's most celebrated works. It now resides in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it is recognized for its influence on both art and fashion.

Later on, in 1917, artist Marcel Duchamp created a work called "Fountain" and submitted it to the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, at the Grand Central Palace in New York. The work was a urinal, signed "R.Mutt", sloppily in black paint. Duchamp called the work (and others like it) a "readymade", an everyday manufactured object transformed into art by the artist's choice and context. Duchamp himself had helped found the Society of Independent Artists and the exhibition was advertised as having no jury and no prizes, accepting all works. However, Duchamp's "Fountain" got rejected by the board, who felt that it was not only too indecent to be shown, but also "not art". This decision violated their own rules and caused an uproar. Duchamp used the work to test the institution and expose its hypocrisy of claiming to be progressive whilst still adhering to the old ideas of "acceptable" art (Tate, n.d.)

In the decades to come many artists would format and use their work in similar ways, to test, highlight or demonstrate interesting, insightful or flawed things in organisations, institutions and communities. As fashion as a concept developed and grew in the later half of the 1900s, these principles made their way through to the industry as well. Many fashion professionals, such as designers, photographers, creative directors and even make-up artists were and are also very involved in the fine art space, often being full-fledged artists themselves or having an art degree. So, it is no surprise that principles from the art world travelled on over to the world of high fashion.

When it comes to controversy as a tool in high fashion, there are countless examples. One of the most famous examples is singer Lady Gaga's meat dress, worn to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards. Designed by Franc Fernandez, the dress was made entirely from raw beef, including a jacket, skirt, shoes, and even a handbag. It caused an immediate uproar, with reactions ranging from fascination to outrage. Some interpreted it as a bold statement about issues like the objectification of women, animal rights, and excess in celebrity culture. Animal rights groups, including PETA, criticized the dress for being wasteful and disrespectful due to its use of animal products. Others debated its environmental impact and ethical implications. Gaga, however, said the dress was a protest against those who tried to suppress her self-expression, explaining it symbolized

her fight to remain authentic and independent in the public eye. Despite the backlash, it remains one of the most talked-about fashion moments in history (Vogue UK, 2011).

One could argue that the shock value served only as a means to inflate the singer's relevancy and social standing, but regardless if that was the intention or not, the garment sparked many important discussions and created such a cultural moment, that it's still referenced 15 years later across discussions of many different topics.

3.2 Desired Division; Traditionalism Versus Future-Mindedness

Regarding early reception, in my opinion the concept of high fashion and most forms of contemporary art are almost identical. There are people who consider the work completely groundbreaking and genius and then there are people who hate it with passion, and I have noticed how often the reasons for these opposite reactions are more or less the same; it breaks the mould, it fights against tradition and the general understanding of the concept it sits under. It is just that there are people who think it is a good thing and people who think it is a bad thing. High fashion is innovative and very future focused, which is a fact that some people intensely dislike, and not only in the field of fine art, or people outside the industries, but also within the fashion market itself.

One example is Alexander McQueen's Fall/Winter 2009 collection "Horn of Plenty: Everything but the Kitchen Sink". In this collection, McQueen used ordinary household items and rubbish-like materials to create otherwise very distinctively classic haute couture -style pieces. The collection was a satirical critique of the fashion industry and its wastefulness and greediness. As quoted in Joshua Barajas 2015 PBS article, McQueen was very direct expressing his disapproval of the industry, saying; "The turnover of fashion is just so quick and so throwaway, and I think that is a big part of the problem. There is no longevity." (PBS, 2015)

The collection was met with mixed reactions. Some were impressed by the theatrics and drama of the show, whilst others found the styling choices and suggested subject matter misogynistic. Sarah Mower started her Vogue article of the show by saying "Alexander McQueen may be the last designer standing who is

brave or foolhardy enough to present a collection that is an unadulterated piece of hard and ballsy showmanship.” (Vogue, 2009)



Figure 3. Look 43 from Alexander McQueen’s Fall 2009 collection. Note. Image from Vogue Runway.

3.3 Fashion Referencing Art

In fashion, as well as art, using unspoken references as a source of inspiration and as a tool for communication is quite frequent. The references can be general ideologies, popular culture, literature, the list goes on.

Sometimes designers may reference other artworks, from different artistic fields, such as a painter or series of paintings, a classic novel or even ballet or opera.

For example, for their Spring/Summer 2016 collection, designer duo Viktor & Rolf referenced, quite directly, Picasso's "Papier Colles" and his signature way of depicting female faces. The collection was named "The Performance of Sculptures". The pieces were made of textured white fabric, perhaps recalling the idea of a blank canvas. The Pieces got progressively more sculptural as the show went on, each look featuring more embossed, 3D or sculpted elements, all from the same material, constructed in a collage –like way. (Museo Picasso Málaga)



Figure 4. A model wearing one of the Picasso-inspired looks from Viktor & Rolf Spring/Summer 2016. Note. Image from Viktor & Rolf official website.

In 2014, for their spring couture collection, designers Pier Paolo Piccoli and Maria Garcia Chiuri made 55 corresponding with 55 operas for Valentino. According to Chiuri (Vogue, 2014), each look was made to represent the essence of the protagonist of each opera. The pair was inspired by the set designers at the Rome Opera House, and the set of the fashion show was in fact painted by these artisans themselves. (Vogue, 2014)

Oftentimes runways are also made to reference the fashion house's past iconic designers or collections, as means to stay true to the brand identity and to pay homage to the founding designers and creative directors who came before, as well as the brand heritage. For example, after the death of her brother Gianni Versace in 1997, Donatella Versace became the creative director of the Versace fashion house. She honoured him during the Spring/Summer 1998 collection by featuring designs that referenced Gianni's most iconic work, including bold prints and Medusa motifs. Donatella used the collection not only to remember her brother's legacy but also to make a statement about her direction for the brand. It was a balance of keeping the Versace identity while introducing her own style to the house (Vogue UK, 2025).

Through these examples, it is evident that the world of fashion holds traditional arts in high regard. It uses art as inspiration for themes, concepts and even techniques. It seems as though, high fashion sees its proximity to art in a very real, literal way, whilst the world of fine art might have more difficulty bridging these mental gaps.

4 INTERPRETATION AND MEANING IN ART AND FASHION

4.1 Meaning is not in the object - it's in the context

What differentiates physical art from just an object? There are countless theories and opinions, but I have concluded that to me it is a matter of intention and context. Someone has either made or framed the object as art, purposefully. The object is given a story, or background that represents or symbolises a thing larger than its physical being. Art is a vessel for communication, especially for subjects that might be difficult to put into words.

The context I'm referring to can also mean the surroundings of the object. Is it placed in a gallery, or a runway, or the street, or in a shop, or in nature? The surroundings of an object hint at what the object is saying, they are a part of the story. Putting an obviously man-made object amidst nature, or a very soft natural piece in an urban environment creates contrast, which in turn creates questions. Why did it end up there, what is the story? And that question in of itself is already context that the piece needs to be art instead of just an object. It makes a person think, because someone intended it as such. Duchamp's "Fountain" for example, was a piece completely dependent on context. Not every urinal is art. But that one was, because it was taken into a different environment and intended as such. It was given a story and a space, to reach a new purpose.

I don't think art requires an explanation in order to be art. Intention can at times require some explanation, a person can't necessarily know how an object is intended, but context can stand on its own. If the validity of art was standing on it being explained, would it not then also lose its value with every person that does not understand it? And if art was only art when it was understood, there would not be very much art in the world at all. Humans perceive and experience things differently and the institution and concept of art has to be able to fit into as many molds as there are people.

4.2 Intention vs Audience Reaction

A creator does not have control over how their piece is perceived. The creator can suggest and make their symbolism more or less obvious but the final interpretation is always in the hands of the viewer. The artist creates a work with a specific, personal intention, but once they show it to another person, the original story is really just a suggestion. The person looking at the work makes it their own, with their history, way of thinking and emotional state. Once the piece is released, the meaning of it is really out of the creators hands. Many artists lean into this by purposefully not explaining very much of the piece and leaving the idea behind it vague. The lack of control over the viewers perception might sound like somewhat of a negative aspect on paper, but actually many creatives experience it as liberating. Not being able to control peoples reactions regardless of how much context you give also means that giving excessive context is not really required or necessary. This allows the artist to pour things into their work, they would not be comfortable explaining. They can charge all of it into the work and be left with the knowledge that it will only be visible to certain people, perhaps ones who have experienced similar things themselves. It is a way to create without having to expose oneself.

McQueen for example, is a polarizing character. Others think he is a creative genius, while some think his work is all gimmicks and attention seeking. I believe this split is due to exactly this; the unspoken language of art. McQueen poured so much of himself into his works, ranging from more obvious themes and references to very vulnerable, inner parts of himself and his life. Those less obvious substories were only really visible to people who resonated with them, having seen or experienced something similar in their lives. It's easy to discredit something you do not see, as not existing.

As much as controversy is a tool and can be utilized in the world of art and fashion, it is not always intentional. Sometimes communication errors happen, as with speech or writing, also in visual art. And sometimes controversy might not be the goal, but the artist may acknowledge that the work has potential to create some, yet go on to finish and publish the work regardless. And I do think that humans

disagreeing is a very natural part of life and should not be avoided at the cost of censoring oneself into not creating.

Similarly, a work might become loved or important without the creator intending it so. It might be a doodle, or a mock up, or a sketch or a practice piece, that has not been thought all the way through, or that's only purpose has been the very creation of it, as practice or meditation. But still, even when no purpose has been installed into the piece, a person can find it, if they understand the work as art. The human mind is so eager to find connections that with just visual it is possible to create a whole story, out of thin air.

4.3 Symbolism & Narrative – Why Fashion and Art Need a Story

Tate and My Modern Met define "avant-garde" as an artistic approach that prioritizes innovation, experimentation, and breaking away from traditional norms. Avant-garde movements often challenge existing artistic standards, introducing new forms, techniques, and ideas. These works are intended to provoke thought, disrupt societal conventions, and encourage new ways of perceiving the world, with the goal of pushing artistic boundaries and encouraging cultural progress (Tate, 2024; My Modern Met, 2023)

Avant-garde fashion is difficult for some people to understand, similarly how abstract art is difficult for some people to understand. It asks more than it answers, and some people do not like that. To be understood, it requires the viewer to have an open mind and want to understand it, which already is a step where many people fall off. After that the viewer must accept that they might not understand every aspect of the work, because all aspects of it might not resonate, like they would for someone else. And lastly, a viewer who understands the concept, is able to appreciate the work for what it is, even if it is not easy to understand. As Roland Barthes notes in *The Fashion System*, fashion communicates through coded visual signs, requiring the viewer to be willing to "read" and interpret its symbolic language (Barthes, 1983, pp. 23–27).

As anything and everything, fashion needs context to be considered art. Fashion without context can be beautiful and it can be an exhibition of craftsmanship and

skill, but context is what differentiates it from a utility item to art.

That is why runway shows are such productions nowadays. Everything is meticulously thought out, from the show notes (sort of like the script for the show) and styling of the models to the set- and lighting design. Everything is designed to create context for the collection. The whole show is storytelling.

Artists use religious, mythological, political and personal symbols to communicate through the work. In high fashion these symbols are also used, but even more so references. Designers and creative directors often reference the heritage of the brand, their own life experiences, identity, literature, fine art and political movements. Without a narrative fashion is just what many people see it as anyway; clothing. Capitalist and commercial, with no depth or levels of meaning. However, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues, meaning is created in the interaction between creator, context, and viewer; an “encoding/decoding” process that ensures that symbolic communication remains central to cultural expression (Hall, 1980, p.128). Fashion participates in this system: it encodes layered meanings that viewers decode according to their own experiences and perspectives.

4.4 Fashion as a Message

As Erving Goffman notes in his work on self-presentation, everyday appearance operates like a performance, where clothing plays a central role in shaping how individuals are perceived (Goffman, 1959, pp. 22–30). People use fashion to express themselves in ways they could not or would not want to in words. It is a way to show the people around you a little bit about yourself without having to say anything. You get a small illusion of control over the narrative of how you are perceived, which can feel comforting. You get to choose which parts to exaggerate and which to diminish. The ability to show up in the world as you want is an empowering feeling.

Artists use their art as a vessel to express emotion, identity, rebellion, grief... Clothing has the same power. Even if you yourself have not made the clothing, the process of picking them out, combining them and ultimately the choice to wear a specific set of clothing is a process of self-expression. The body and the way you dress it can be a powerful tool for storytelling.

The runway collections that manage to feel more like performance and narrative than commerce, focus more on expression than beauty. The story comes first, and a good story is not always just nice and easily palatable. Commerce is often very focused on igniting positive feelings, and that is where the contrast shows up. One's personal style is like a self-portrait you re-create daily. You pick the narrative through which you want to be seen and make your choices accordingly. A daily act of autonomy and self-reflection.

I find that what connects art and fashion the most, is not money nor pursuit of beauty, but rather the need for interpretation. It could be said that if that is all that it takes, virtually anything could be considered art, just by lifting it up to the arena of art and giving it a narrative. And yes, I think that is the case, but I also think that fashion is the industry actively doing it. Not every industry can nor wants to do so.

The high fashion industry is an environment that creates space for artistic expression and uses this proximity to art to its advantage. It allows for narrative, creativity and experimentation within a commercial industry. This is what separates it from other capitalistic fields. As commercial as fashion is, it places value on art and feeds it, which allows the art to feed it right back.

5 MY THESIS PROJECT: ARTWORK AND PROCESS

The artistic component of my thesis project was a sort of mock-up editorial consisting of 3 images, that was then exhibited as an installation, in 90x70cm frames, along with the clothing pieces themselves behind a large glass, reminiscent of a shop window. The idea for the work was born out of my curiosity to try and experience all the different artistic mediums that are required to make “fashion happen”, when it is made in the name of art. I challenged myself to create every aspect of the process alone and by myself, all though I know that in real life processes like these employ lots of people of different expertise. I wanted to really see and experience the range of skill the process would require, even if it meant the final work not being technically perfect in every aspect.

So, I designed and created the clothes and jewelry, designed the set and styled and used myself as the model. I photographed myself using a remote control with the camera and did the postproduction and printing of the images. Finally, I designed and installed the works in the exhibition space (though I must admit, I did have some technical help with the printing and installation processes.) I wanted to try and place myself in the position of all these professionals, and sort of test my capabilities in each. I wanted to understand what level of artistic commitment each stage entailed and to see whether it felt more technical than it did creative.

I started out by designing the clothing pieces. I created many mood boards and some sketches, but I noticed I had a hard time focusing on the clothes themselves, instead of the image of the whole work. It kept getting in the way and I could not make decisions like I could have, if I was making the pieces for just personal use or for practice. This was one of the first things where I could really feel the absence of my professionalism or experience. I decided to pivot in my strategy and let go of the mood boards and started looking at material. I found this stiff, grey fabric that I had had in my closet for a while. I had a lot of it and so I began to just make mock-ups. I used myself as a mannequin and draped the fabric around myself in different ways and sketched out the ones that felt like good ideas. I sewed maybe three different tops before I had the idea for the final one. This is where the process started to feel more intuitive and artistic, rather than technical.

That could of course be because I lacked technique. It is easy to not use ways of working that you would not know how to do anyway.

Once I had the basic idea of the main pieces, I sewed them together. I have some experience in sewing, I have done it on and off since childhood as a hobby, but I am by no means a seamstress. Therefore, the process of sewing is always a process of trial and error and achieving through unorthodox methods. I did not place much pressure on myself with the sewing, perhaps because I felt that the technical outcome of the construction of the garment was not so important, as long as it photographed well. Another moment that marks my lack of skill and expertise, in retrospect.

The photography was my favorite part of the whole process. I made the set in my one-bedroom apartment, re-arranged all the furniture to make space for my mock-studio, used a big 1mx2m painting I had made myself some years earlier as the backdrop and set up the lights. I had done a practice run for the hair and makeup earlier that week, so that part took no brain power on the day itself. I got myself ready, got dressed in my get up and set up the camera. I shot for maybe 2-3 hours, it is hard to say, I was very much in a flow state during that part of the process. The whole day, I was by myself, in my apartment, making something I had not shown or really explained to anyone. Yet somehow, I have never felt less lonely. Maybe it was the combination of using both my mind and whole body, that made it such an all-encompassing experience. The feeling was similar to when you dance to your own music in your room, by yourself. Total freedom to experiment and try and fail and be the only judge of whether what you have just made was successful or not. A rare kind of freedom, behind locked doors and closed drapes, in a 34 square meter apartment.

The post-production was like a calm, gradual comedown of that unleashed creative energy. Whilst I enjoy editing, here I had to get more technical again, for my images to read as “fashion” in the artistic space, I had to do my best to emulate real fashion editorial imagery and really focus to achieve a sufficient level of quality in the editing.

Finally, came time to set up the work in the exhibition space. This was the part that was the most nerve wrecking for me. Setting my work up to be seen and judged felt like wind on a wound. I was not even sure if I should have liked my work more than I did, I was happy with the photographs, but the installation and the concept felt risky. What if the general consensus was that “we don’t get it”? Would it rip the base off my whole thesis? and this in turn forced me to really think about the theme of my thesis more deeply. And what I found was that I really did believe in the existence of the connection between fashion and art; any arguments against it I could find or think of were not strong enough to make my mind over. After that realization, my anxiety of showing my work eased significantly. I had a work, a work I had made. I had made and set up that work in an artistic space, with intention, and I had given it narrative and context. It was there, looking at itself being looked at, and I was okay with that. I named the work “reflections”.



Figure 5. Installation view of the final artwork in the exhibition space. Note. Photograph by the author.

The process of this work made fashion feel like art. Or perhaps parts of art feel like fashion. The two got very much blurred and merged, almost creating a third middle option that has no name. The work did generate some intrigue in the exhibition, and it seemed like it was generally understood, or at least discussed. As is the case with art always, the moment the work was shown, the interpretation was not my own anymore, it was the audience's. Different people saw different things, which felt like validation for the artist in me.

To me, my work proved that every part of creating “fashion” has the capability to become an artistic process, if the person in charge of that thing feels it's where they most shine. I was able to be the most artistic, when I had the space and the time and the permission to do so. Those parts of the process really did not feel like fashion at all, even if without context that was exactly what I was making. To me, that felt like proof of the very short bridge in between the two.

6 CONCLUSION

So, should high fashion be regarded as a form of contemporary art? Is it a valid, artistic form of expression or purely commercially motivated practice? During the process of this research, I have concluded that I believe artistic work to be defined by intention and context. In this regard, yes, essentially anything can be art, but not everything is and not everything tends to be. Using this guideline, high fashion tends to be art. I would not call all of "fashion" art, but high fashion, "couture", is nowadays positioned as art more often than it is not. I feel that photography is a good comparison, as it also isn't art in all its forms, but it's still regarded as a medium of contemporary art, under the same term as its non-artistic side of practice; photography. The same principle should be applied to high fashion, in my opinion.

Having drawn this conclusion, it feels pointless to really go over more of the intersections or parallels between art and fashion, as to me it seems they both encompass each other. You would not look for parallels between sculpture and fine art; they are one thing more so than two parallels. High fashion made and framed in artistic context asks questions, makes statements, provokes, protests, advocates, evokes emotion and speaks wordlessly, just as other mediums of art do. It is a physical and emotional process that requires many different forms of artistic skill and craftsmanship to birth. At its best, it's a collaboration of artists and workers, made to one person's original vision. As an industry it has a lot of space for creatives and artists and it places great value on art, as commercial as it is. This is one of the reasons why I believe that more accepted mediums of art is a good thing. More opportunities for artists to live off their creativity and desire to influence culture, is a good thing.

I don't think just anything should be regarded or accepted as art thoughtlessly, but I also believe it's important that we as participants of the art world, flow with the culture and the times and not shut out new forms of expression, just to preserve prestige or to avoid learning more about a subject we do not deem important or worthy. Curiosity and openness has paved the way in art and life since forever and I believe that's a thought to hold on to.

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