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Fashioning contemporary art: a new interdisciplinary aesthetics in art-design collaborations

Nicola McCartney [a] and Jane Tynan [b]

[a]Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, London, UK; [b]Department of Art and Culture, History and Antiquity, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

A surge in creative collaboration between fine artists and fashion designers might be troubling the art world, but these mergers have prompted little debate within academic research in the visual arts. Various artists now work directly with fashion designers, and though often derided by the art press, the growth of inter-disciplinary collaboration reflects a shift in how art is perceived, especially in relation to popular culture. This discussion considers historical moments when fashion and art found common cause, but we view the distinctive qualities of recent collaborative ventures as an entrenchment of postmodernist aesthetics in both realms. Since the mid-twentieth century, art-fashion interplays have disorganised disciplinary boundaries, but they also illustrate the unsettling effects of neoliberalism on cultural production. By exploring the fashioning of contemporary art through the work of various artists and designers, including Matthew Barney, Vanessa Beecroft and Yayoi Kusama, we ask whether shared concerns in art and design around power, spectacle and the somatic might signal the emergence of a new interdisciplinary aesthetics.

KEYWORDS

Postmodernism; authorship; the body; collaboration; neoliberalism

Art and fashion

Art and fashion have had a long and, at times, troubled relationship. There is also a history of collaboration, from Elsa Schiaparelli's work with Salvador Dalí (1937) and Jackson Pollock's partnership with Cecil Beaton (1951) to the more recent coupling of Nan Goldin and *Supreme* (2018), which saw the artist's archival photographs superimposed onto the undersides of skateboards (Singer 2018). With skateboarding now a retro sport and Goldin's photographs proclaimed to be too controversial for millennials (Singer 2018) 20 years on, it might be time to reassess how art and fashion interact for a new generation of makers, who are witnessing hyper-consumerism against a backdrop of enduring hierarchies in fine art practice. If postmodern art practices blurred boundaries, disrupted hierarchies and brought the role of the author-artist-designer into question, they have also found fashion and art in ever-closer cooperation.

CONTACT Jane Tynan j.m.tynan@vu.nl; Nicola McCartney n.mccartney@csm.arts.ac.uk

If fashion and art collaborations have become less a meeting of two distinct industries and more a symbiosis, spawning a commodified art-fashion visual culture, might fashion studies be enlisted to grapple with the likely effects on a future aesthetic economy? If art theory has been reluctant to engage with fashion aesthetics, then fashion theory is equally shy about weighing in to make evaluations on art. This article explores the relationship between art and fashion, focusing on examples from the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century when this blurring of fashion and art became most conspicuous. If modernist and postmodernist art and design practices created space for dialogue between art and fashion, a focus on more contemporary art-fashion collaborations might reveal an interdisciplinary – and perhaps, relational – aesthetics emerging. Poet and playwright Oscar Wilde once claimed, 'Fashion is ephemeral. Art is eternal' (cited in Cooper 2013), while magazine editor Michael Boodro's 1990 article 'Art and Fashion' asserted that 'Art is art and fashion is an industry' (cited in Bok Kim 1998). Binary distinctions such as these place art and fashion in direct opposition to one another, but as Wilde suggested, they also highlight distinct temporalities. Art historian James Laver struggled to resolve distinctions between fashion, art and beauty; for him it was a mistake to innocently assume their interchangeability (1967, 117). While they might share a family resemblance, art and fashion speak to us in distinctive ways. Boodro is perhaps idealising art when he suggests that, unlike fashion, it is not an industry. Artists have always relied on patrons, taken commissions and the relatively rare nature of art – unique paintings or limited editions – props up the art market. In 2020 alone, global sales of art and antiques reached US$50.1 billion (McAndrew 2021), while the global fashion industry was worth US$1.5 trillion (Russon 2020). In 2018, the global luxury apparel market, a better snapshot of what fashion is worth, was valued at approximately US$66 billion with projections that this segment would reach US$84.04 billion by 2025 (Sabanoglu 2020). Considering the difficulties experienced by these industries due to COVID-19, it is striking how comparable they are in terms of their participation in the market for luxury goods. Indeed, our encounters with art – excluding independent artists that use social media as sharing platforms or stage their own shows – are only possible through the commissioning or purchasing of artworks for collections and exhibition; that is, money has been exchanged. Historically, however much artists and designers have been portrayed as cultural producers driven by distinct demands, the commerciality of art and the aesthetic nature of fashion might also give us pause for reflection. In 2017, The curators of the Museum of Modern Art in New York exhibition *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* sought to bring fashion into the realm of the arts, with an update on the 1944 show *Are Clothes Modern?* The first exhibition was also staged to recover fashion from its marginalised status in design, as the press release mused 'it is strange that dress has been generally denied the status of art,' arguing that such an intimate relation with the human body should secure its place as one of the more notable arts (Antonelli and Millar 2017, 17). The 2017 exhibition updated the question, no less urgent nearly seventy years later, to ask why art and design continues to marginalise fashion (Antonelli and Millar 2017, 19). For the 2017 exhibition, one hundred and eleven items of clothing were chosen for their impact on contemporary culture, to bring fashion, not for the first time, out of the cold and into the art museum.

Fashion and art were not always unfriendly. Artists experimented with clothing art forms that countered late-nineteenth-century commercial fashion (Stern 2004). Artistic

interpretations of fashion were often creative and utopian; they sought to recreate people's lives by transforming their bodies. Not all creatives saw fashion's radical potential, and early couturiers, such as Paul Poiret, sought to exploit the reflexivity of modern art for the purposes of self-promotion. Poiret believed that associating with artists gave him an edge in fashion business; he appropriated the 'fine arts to promote the originality, uniqueness and aesthetic quality of his designs' (Troy 2003, 46–47). Poiret understood the symbolic power of fine art and cultivated an artistic self-image to lend distinction to his designs; the story of Poiret highlights the 'unstable connection between originality and reproduction, but also the relationship between elite and popular culture' in avant-garde modernism (Troy 2003). The careful crafting of his image highlights the uncertainty he felt regarding fashion, reflected in his desire to elevate design work with the help of an artistic persona. We might also ask, to what extent did distrust of fashion in the field of art reflect a larger fear of femininity? Ilya Parkins detects ambivalence in the self-fashioning documents of Poiret that 'turns specifically on women's status in relation to history,' which she interprets as a sign that working in fashion was thought to have put the 'masculine couturier identity at risk' (Parkins 2012, 147–148), an anxiety that endures, and undermines it as a serious creative force. There are, however, examples of European male artists who saw in fashion and dress a means to project an artistic identity that increasingly relied upon corporeal display to signal 'creativity' as a key attribute (Jones 1995). Such displays were consciously performed in ways that highlight the extent to which the male artist, since the nineteenth century, has been exploiting fashion practices to mobilise versions of the self.

Despite the various interconnections between art and fashion historically, art-fashion collaborations are often met with ambivalence, distrust and defensive attempts to draw firm distinctions between these creative practices. There are, however, exceptions. In the early twentieth century, fashions were marketed as Cubist and Futurist; merchandisers used the notoriety of the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art – known as the Armoury Show – in New York to stimulate interest in European modern art in the United States, being as it was the largest exhibition of its kind to have shown on that side of the Atlantic. Various commercial interests recognised the selling power of these new art movements and got in on the act by linking their products to the art on display. Cubism and Futurism became shorthand for the European avant-garde, which had a certain cachet for affluent American consumers. What this demonstrates is that admen and merchandisers recognised similarities between modernist art and mass fashion, as 'avant-garde artists, who continually reinvented style as quickly as next year's fashion, challenged the very idea of a definable and stable artistic style' (Carlson 2014, 3). This was not a one-way street; some avant-garde artists were also keen to appropriate fashion design to blur the lines between art and life. Fashion appeared to prove the viability of Cubism, which allowed for 'movement and the workable surround of a three-dimensional human being' (Martin 1998, 16).

Futurists delighted in the idea that fashion responded to their desire for novelty and offered a spring of provocative styles that promised to fuse individual expression with mass society. Unlike others in the art world, their radicalism involved a rare recognition of fashion as a cultural force. Their love affair with fashion, though, was concerned more with issuing manifestos than making clothes. In 1914, artist Giacomo Balla wrote the 'Futurist Manifesto of Men's Clothing' and 'The Anti-Neutral Clothing: Futurist

Manifesto.' After the First World War they issued a 'Manifesto of Futurist Women's Fashion' and later the 'Manifesto to Change Men's Fashion' by Ernesto and Ruggero Michahelles; Marinetti collaborated with Enrico Prampolini and others on 'Futurist Manifesto: The Italian Hat,' and later the 'Futurist Manifesto: The Italian Tie' appeared, the work of Renato di Bosso and Ignazio Scurto. Their interventions were early and significant. Futurists were relaxed about fashion blurring the lines between art and industry, but most of all they were 'prescient in understanding clothing design as a legitimate politics of the body' (Braun 1995, 38). This is key to how we interpret the role of fashion studies in understanding artistic concerns with the body.

Cultural hierarchies

Futurists were the exception, rather than the rule, however, and most of the art world was at this stage either ambivalent or openly hostile to fashion. The sense that fashion might be a 'danger' to art was pervasive, which betrayed a fear of femininity and held to the traditional characterisation of art as a reliable representation of 'permanence, truth and authenticity' (Radford 1998, 152). Within modernism, the fear of fashion often stemmed from a critique of capitalism, clear from art historian T. J. Clarke's reaction to Cecil Beaton's 1951 photographs featuring models posing before Jackson Pollock paintings in *US Vogue*, when he declared that 'the photographs are nightmarish. They speak to the hold of capitalist culture' (cited in Söll 2009, 30). It was as if fashion sparked very real fears haunting the art world at the time. If abstract expressionism resisted figuration, placing fashion models against Pollock's paintings was undoubtedly viewed as an attempt to contaminate these great works with vulgar representations of the body. Even worse, the bodies were female and the purpose overtly consumerist. Such attempts to shield art from life – and from economic reality – were, it seems, futile. By the 1970s and 1980s, postmodernism signalled a full on 'crisis in cultural authority' (Owens 1985, 57), particularly in the arrogance of western European hegemony. This gave way to pluralism, eclecticism and melancholia, that found art 'progressively taking on certain qualities most readily associated with fashion' (Radford 1998, 152). It was this crisis that saw art incorporating fashion – along with other areas of popular culture – as a manifestation of new values that displayed scepticism with notions of truth and permanence, and thus embraced the playful, ephemeral and the popular.

Both art and fashion were seeking to embody a new pluralism, inspired by the decentred subjectivity of the postmodern subject. This had a special resonance for women, who had been systematically excluded from cultural production; the crisis not only gave rise to a wealth of artworks concerned specifically with the female body and a critique of its representations in art and popular culture, but also saw practices formerly deemed unworthy of academic study, such as fashion, finally come into view. In the 1970s, Anne Hollander boldly announced fashion as 'a form of visual art, a creation of images with the visible self as a medium' (1975, 311) and Elizabeth Wilson followed in the mid-1980s asking that fashion be taken seriously as an 'aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society' (1987, 9). This is not to suggest that fashion and art resolved their differences, but academics were starting to highlight fashion as a serious and significant cultural form. Conceptions of fashion as

'embodied subjectivity' have undoubtedly improved understanding of its significance to contemporary culture (Potvin 2009, 11). As Futurists had anticipated, the social meaning of fashion and clothing became integral to various intellectual and aesthetic investigations into the politics of the body. Questions of whether fashion constitutes an art have, according to Sung Bok Kim, surfaced with increased regularity in the 1980s in visual arts magazines and museum exhibitions, which she links with the emergence of postmodernist aesthetics in both realms (1998, 53).

Yet we still witness a rigid hierarchy that places fine art above design in the representation of fashion in art museums. When in 1983, the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York held the first ever retrospective of a living couturier's work dedicated to Yves Saint Laurent, the most vehement criticism came from art critics, as Judith Clark observed, 'Saint Laurent's commercial success and the far-reaching appeal of his designs were perceived as problematic when placed within an art museum' (2017). Here, the sense that fashion might contaminate or present a danger to art is in evidence, particularly in the 'sacred space' of the art museum, a symbol of authenticity and perhaps, even purity. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu drew attention to distinctions that maintain hierarchies between fields of culture; with Yvette Delsaut he described fashion as an intermediary, whereby members of the field of fashion 'mobilize references to high culture when discussing their work' (Rocamora 2016, 237). They note that 'references to the legitimate and noble arts, painting, sculpture, literature' are intended to place couturiers within the field of high culture through an impression of 'participation in art, or, by default, in the artistic world' (Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975, 16). When fashion designer Marc Jacobs duplicated the sun that had originally featured in artist Olafur Eliasson's 2003 installation 'The Weather Project' in his 2013 fashion show, he raised his currency 'by incorporating a sign of contemporary art into the fashion show,' which distinguished him 'as more than a fashion designer … but more crucially, as a tastemaker' (Johnson 2015, 321). The spectacle of the fashion show might distance it from the more reflexive concerns of the art exhibition, but the increasing commodification of culture makes it harder to force that distinction. Indeed, art-fashion interplays appear to be radically altering disciplinary boundaries and reshaping the status of both fields (Johnson 2015).

In 2017, Rei Kawakubo was only the second living couturier to have a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the United States. Interestingly titled, 'Art of the In-Between,' the exhibition was curated entirely without wall texts to resist directed meaning. Having majored in 'the history of aesthetics' at Keio University in Japan, Kawakubo was untrained in fashion, and tends to exercise flexibility with how she navigates the industry and identifies herself. Many fashion designers begin their studies with the more familiar disciplines of fine art or art history. Indeed, we, the authors, have taught fashion design students who continue to reference and write about art. Many of these will have studied art at school and it is this 'first language' we see permeating their design work. As cultural theorist Angela McRobbie points out, 'Fashion designers in Britain are trained in the fine art tradition' (1999, 13) so it is no surprise to find that, as a result, designers and other image makers in the fashion industry might regard their own pieces as artworks. For McRobbie, those 'working in this image industry are also products of the aestheticization of society. Their priority is to make works of art… the stylists describe their work as "image making"' (McRobbie 1999, 13).

Sometimes the fashion industry makes bold links between its practices and the business of artmaking. For example, *Grazia's* 2018 'Big Fashion Issue' features a shoot at the John Soane Museum in London, whereby the familiar cluttering of paintings acts as a backdrop for designs by Alexander McQueen, Dolce & Gabbana and Chanel. Titled 'Night at the Museum: dramatic and opulent, these clothes are works of art,' the fashion feature is reminiscent of the annual MET Gala, which exhibits fashions in the manner of works of art, the museum setting acting as an elite cultural space for international celebrities to show off their creative styles. *Grazia* is not a high fashion magazine but does follow a familiar technique within fashion media to link its products with artworks, often to claim cultural legitimacy. This is echoed by McRobbie who recognises that fashion professionals seek to benefit from the history and tradition associated with art, which betrays a lack of confidence that their work will be taken seriously but associating with 'these traditional vocabularies once again demonstrate[s] the dislocated nature of fashion design as a cultural practice' (McRobbie 1999, 13).

Kawakubo, on the other hand, does not display such cultural anxieties. Famously reclusive and refusing to be categorised does perhaps allow her work to slip between the two disciplines with more ease. For example, her 2017 retrospective featured in an editorial for *frieze* magazine, is evidence that fashion is getting more coverage in art magazines or journals (Bok Kim 1998). On the other hand, the *Prada Foundation*, which hosts art exhibitions – including Robert Gober, Louise Bourgeois and Atlas group – keeps its art endeavours distinctly separate from its fashion business (Prada Foundation 2019). Their permanent space in Milan is, in their words, dedicated to 'the ways in which mankind has transformed ideas into specific disciplines and cultural products: literature, cinema, music, philosophy, art and science' (Prada 2019). There is no mention of design here, and yet fashion is a cultural product that has historically benefitted from its proximity to fine art. The more the fashion industry reaches out to other disciplines, it seems, the better it can accrue cultural capital, which might have prompted creative duo Elmgreen and Dragset to make *Prada* the subject of one of their art installations. Famous for their commentary on the gentrification of social spaces, they created a mock *Prada* shop in 2005 in the middle of the Texan desert. Initially criticised by locals, in 2014 *Prada Marfa,* a permanently installed sculpture, once understood as art, and generating income as a tourist attraction, was reclassified as a museum. Given the luxury fashion house's reluctance to conflate its fashion design business with its art interests, there is a strange irony in seeing a *Prada* replica retail outlet forever archived as an art museum.

Appropriation and influence

If artists make commercial work and designers find themselves exhibiting in art spaces, should we continue to draw firm distinctions between the work they do? Both industries are increasingly conflated, appear to piggyback on each other's products, and freely share terminology. In 2013, as part of a lawsuit, the fashion label *Supreme* admitted to being 'influenced' by artist Barbara Kruger's work; there is a striking resemblance between their logo and Kruger's signature typography. In 2017, by return, Kruger staged an installation in a skate park, a space synonymous with the brand. And while *Prada Marfa* demonstrates how art legitimises fashion, several artists also use fashion to reach a

wider audience, which includes almost all the artists collaborating with *Louis Vuitton* who venture beyond the usual practices associated with fine art. In 1984, artist Laurie Simmons made a series of *Fake Fashion Photographs* and in 2010 Cindy Sherman was commissioned by *Balenciaga* to create artworks using their clothing, in which the artist posed as an 'IT girl.' Artist Annie Imhoff cited the aesthetics of Demna Gvasalia as inspiration for her *Faust* performance at the 2017 Venice Biennale, in which she presented fashionable millennials seemingly alienated from their surroundings. While the roles of artist and designer might be increasingly confused, there is another role of authorship at stake: the very concept of 'original' creative practice.

Despite the impact of poststructuralist critique that brought the supremacy of the creator into question (Barthes 1977), do cultural producers still defer to artists for meaning and inspiration? Perhaps this is why Kawakubo's lack of wall texts in the MET show was deemed controversial. Even though an artist-designer might have a long list of helpers, their name bears significant cultural and financial value; it is the brand under which a collection sells and the attribution that might make a difference in an auction lot sale. However, as Janet Wolff points out, creativity is a social production comprising contributions from teachers, peers, studios, technicians and so on (1981). With increasing demands to produce more and more collections each year, it seems unfair and unrealistic to expect a designer *per se* to consistently, and seemingly 'independently,' produce works of originality. Artists typifying the postmodern turn, such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, scrutinised the concept of originality by creating appropriations of other artworks and advertising media (see Levine's *After Duchamp* (1991) and Prince's *Untitled* (*Cowboy)* (1989), a take on Marlboro ads at the time). In fashion, this is still taboo and direct appropriation is not interpreted as a critique of authorship in the same way. It should be noted that this is distinct from the direct theft of other lesser-known designer's works, examples of which have been hotly debated within social media, especially on the infamous Instagram account @DietPrada. While the 'accessibility and commerciality of fashion thrives in the image saturated society that characterizes the postmodern condition' (Geczy and Karaminas 2012, 4), inspiration and appropriation have been enabled by ever-more democratic means of image searching via, for instance, digital platforms *Google* and *Pinterest*. Postmodernism's 'crisis in cultural authority' sees its perfect expression in the blurring of boundaries between art and fashion through information sharing online, and the ways in which the digital revolution has increased spaces for spectacle and eclecticism.

When in 2017 designer Raf Simons collaborated with the estate of artist Robert Mapplethorpe, by invitation, and Supreme with Goldin's archive in 2018, the approach involved repurposing old artworks, re-commodifying them and in the process creating new audiences for the work. As McRobbie points out, designers are anxious to be taken seriously, and thus are inclined to affiliate themselves with the art world, which has perhaps resulted in the artistic personality being located as the quality of the product, as she observes 'serious questions of cultural value and issues of judgement are sidestepped and replaced by euphoric assertions of greatness, genius and inspiration' (McRobbie 1999, 13). These art-design collaborations highlight questions of authorship by virtue of the asymmetry of the relationship, whereby designers are often thought to be contaminating authentic artistic creativity. This predicament has vexed the art world, which has seen over twenty years of reflection to grapple with these questions of

authorship. Regarding fashion, the debate is in its infancy and the identity and status of the maker matters greatly else they risk remaining 'mere company designers' (Kawamura 2004). Sociologist Yuniya Kawamura attempts to debunk the notion of a 'genius' designer in much the same way that art historians have offered a critique of the supremacy of the artist (Pollock 1980; Kris and Kurz 1981; McCartney 2018) probably because there is more than a danger of perceived originality at stake. As Kawamura argues, to overemphasize the individual artist as unique creator of a work 'writes out of the account numerous other people … and also draws attention away from the various socially constituting and determining processes involved' (Kawamura 2004, 69). In the same way that art historian Linda Nochlin asked, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' (1971), we might similarly be overlooking the contributions of other creatives and, significantly, women, in prioritising concepts of originality and the notion of the singular genius. In stark contrast to the popularity of biopics on fashion designers (*CoCo Before Chanel* (2009); *Yves Saint Laurent* (2014); *McQueen* (2018)), might creatives, such as Kawakubo or Martin Margiela, be forging a different kind of life beyond the demands of the fashion system? Designers do not choose to work anonymously or under different names, but we have seen this tactic adopted by artists such as the Guerrilla Girls, often to spite commercial infrastructures.

Aesthetic decadence

Kawakubo's 2017 retrospective asks the viewer to read her work in new ways and without explicit direction. As such, the audience might draw on art theory and its greater history of curatorial practice to access the meaning in the work, but what readings might arise from interpretations that draw on debates in fashion studies? Our first reflection on the postmodern conflation between art and fashion brought us to Matthew Barney's work, in particular the *Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002), a series of five feature length films. The work also involves installation, architecture, multiple venues and locations, costume, prosthetics and the body. We know that the work is positioned as fine art because it was exhibited at the Guggenheim (New York), Museum Ludwig (Cologne) and the Musée d'art Moderne (Paris); and was reviewed by notable art critics including Jerry Saltz (2003) but was also examined by film critics (Hoberman 2003) and in peer-reviewed film journals (Wagner 2008). Keith Wagner in *Film International* claimed at the time that Barney's posthuman imagery would benefit from an interpretation using film theory (2008, 39) but Barney's work might also be of interest to those who focus on questions of embodied subjectivity, through its characteristic forms, such as the body, costume, adornment, performance, masquerade and drag by appreciating that this combination of artifice and the body *is* fashion. If, as Joanne Entwistle claims, 'it is the body that fashion speaks to' (2000, 1) how then might art concerned with a politics of the body engage with fashion? Wagner's response, that Barney's work 'rejects real politics for body politics' (2008, 34), is a charge that betrays anxieties about his displays of 'aesthetic decadence' or his willingness to flirt with the sham creativity that is fashion. This critique betrays a concern that politics might be subordinated to aesthetics in an unsavoury 'stylistic spectacle' (Wagner 2008, 36–37), a view shared by many critics of the Barney retrospective at the Guggenheim who reveal 'a longing for an avant-garde safe not only from corporate branding but also from the contamination of mass

culture.' (Blyn 2013, 186). This misses the point about what an understanding of the politics of fashion might offer an interpretation of contemporary art, particularly work that engages with mass culture and consumer capitalism. Moreover, given its commercial nature, critiques of commodity fetishism are especially well-understood through the lens of fashion, which 'is situated within the framework of industrial development: it interacts with the rise of consumer capitalism and mass-media imagery' (Ewen and Ewen 1982, 116). Barney's work often features heavily stylised costumes, to signify different characters and, at times, holds obscure references supernaturally imbued with symbolic aura. In *Cremaster 3* (2002), the last of his feature-length films in the series, a chorus of tap-dancing women dressed as lambs stage a mocking tribute to the lambskin aprons awarded to freemasons. Holding to traditional hierarchies obscures the clear concerns with fashion and style in Barney's work, but also legitimises those who want to dismiss his innovative art-design interplays as mere spectacle. This scene in 'The Order' is like a 'dream sequence' (Spector 2002, 54) of the film set in The Guggenheim, where the *Cremaster Series* was first exhibited in its entirety. Do the Guggenheim's levels perhaps denote ambition within 'The Order,' a metaphor for the narrative of 'The Apprentice' and 'Architect' throughout the rest of the film? The bloodied-mouth of the 'Apprentice' character, played by Barney himself, enters another realm by donning a skin-coloured, full-length tartan kilt (Figure 1). Among other challenges, he must race through five floors against tap-dancing showgirls, artist Richard Serra – in the guise of 'The Architect' – and Aimee Mullins, as she embodies both cheetah and fashion model. All roles, human and non-human, masculine and feminine, artist and spectator, are blurred in a strange, immersive, fantasy world.

In the press image (Figure 1) Barney's body and its adornments plays a clear role in the artwork; the salmon colour of his kilt stands out in stark contrast to the pale blue Guggenheim space and sculptural props, which fade into the background, foregrounding the bloody mouth, extended – or dripping – with a protruding, symmetrically folded handkerchief and exuberant beefeater-like hat. Scottish military dress and visceral bodily extensions offer significant clues to the key themes of 'The Order' giving Barney's body a central place in the work. These body transformations are familiar to those studying fashion, but a chaotic and immersive aesthetic such as this might easily be interpreted as trickery or deception. Here, Barney's stunt reaches back into a pre-modern world of magic ritual while also flirting with the aesthetics of neoliberal capitalism. This sequence has been critiqued in relation to posthumanism and neoliberalism, but reviews curiously neglect the role of fashion. For Robin Blyn, the tensions and contradictions Barney constructs within the corporate setting of The Guggenheim are not innocent, given 'the artist's personal embrace of a liberal humanist ideology that denies the market forces that have gone into the making of Matthew Barney, genius auteur' (2013, 192). Similarly, Wagner views Barney's corporeal body as a commodity within the film and art world at large, akin to postmodern critiques of authorship, whereby 'human forms signify the art market's idea of genius and beauty, ciphered willingly as a commodity fetish to the public' (2008: 39). Barney's use of body transformations and visual trickery appear to provoke a reaction echoing earlier suspicions that fashion provoked in art world gatekeepers. Here, Barney appears to embody the ultimate enterprising self that neoliberal political rationality promotes, a cultural producer willing to place his own body at the centre of a seductive artwork that playfully merges art, design, technology and theatre.

Figure 1. Matthew Barney in Matthew Barney, *CREMASTER 3*, 2002. Production still ©2002 Matthew Barney. Photo: Chris Winget. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Aimee Mullins, herself a para-athlete, who 'teeters across the uneven terrain of the Guggenheim,' sometimes with a bare bottom, other times posing as a cheetah, is perhaps problematically a symbol of fetishism and posthumanism (Figure 2), 'a freak show with Mullins as its star performer, "The Order" would hence appear to cast into doubt the *Cremaster's* own mode of resistance to corporate domination' (Blyn 2013, 192). If Mullins *is* being exploited in the artwork, the attention drawn to her body through carefully styled prosthetics and dress only further support the claim that

Figure 2. Laura Mullins in Matthew Barney *CREMASTER 3*, 2002. Production still ©2002 Matthew Barney. Photo: Chris Winget. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

fashion is critical to the narrative. Mullins, like Barney, is cast in a similar palette; the contrasting colours of orange and blue highlight her body as the focus of the work. The characters are not always in human (or animal) form; Barney reflects that the Chrysler Building is also alive (in interview, 2004), evidence of his interest in the politics of design and materiality. The agency of 'The Apprentice' might be signified through his striking kilt's association with Celtic Games; the tap-dancing chorus line defeated by the discipline of uniformity; the band's chaotic nature represented by their lack of costume or styling; 'The Architect' in his protective and utilitarian boiler suit posing as a threat. Mullins' dual strength and vulnerability lies in her posthuman prosthetics, adorned here in the manner of high fashion accessories. Her work has encompassed both art and fashion projects, which included time spent modelling for designer Alexander McQueen.

The fact that Barney's first retrospective in Rotterdam in 1996 included a runway show suggest that his performance work might be usefully read through fashion theory. Vicki

Woods covered this show for *Vogue*, interpreting Barney's aesthetics through a formal reading – rather like an art historian – giving due detail to the artist's central language of clothing: observing the wool military jackets, 'shellacked French pleats,' 'Isaac Mizrahi houndstooth-check suits' and leather biker-jackets (1996, 161). Barney is clearly not averse to fashion but neither does he fear critiques that deride narrative themes of fetishism and decadence. If the modernist avant-garde was deeply suspicious of fashion, consistent with their critique of capitalism, perhaps Barney's work represents the return of the repressed; and yet in common with many artists of his generation he engages with the contradictions and compromises that mass culture presents. His fascination with fashion does not necessarily make him an advocate of the neoliberal order, but perhaps reflects an interest in registering its impact on our lives. As he has himself explained, working as a fashion model alerted him to how commodity culture treats the body as a tool (cited in Wagner 2008, 37).

For Nancy Spector, his artworks are 'body-centric projects' (2002, 4) but at no point in the exhibition catalogue do fashion, dress or clothing surface as more than descriptive references to costume (Spector 2002; credits for costume designers, assistants, costume rental and 'suit construction'). *Cremaster Cycle* has been explored in relation to art, film, architecture and literature with reference to posthumanism, neoliberalism and commodity fetishism. As metaphor and material, anatomy and geography are discussed at length, as well as the use of plastics (Barney in interview, Blackwood 2004) and yet costume, a significant and obvious medium, is not given attention. Barney's *Cycle* presents bodies that are in a perpetual state of transformation (Blyn 2013, 192) and he articulates this metamorphosis through dress. Pluralism, eclecticism and spectacle structure his narratives, but foregrounding body transformations and materiality has provoked reactions that Barney is more interested in commodity status than critique. The point here is not to determine the quality of Barney's work but to demonstrate that critiques of art might benefit from the wealth of thinking available within fashion studies. Contemporary art's reflexivity drives it closer to fashion as a creative practice, but when art and fashion intersect, this might prompt questions beyond registering the seductive qualities of a fashion-orientated aesthetics. Whatever the drivers, and undoubtedly both art and design are unsettled by the demands of neoliberalism, established notions about what constitutes aesthetic investigation are undergoing transformation.

'Fashioning' contemporary art

More recent examples also demonstrate that the commodification of art drives it closer to the branding tendencies of fashion and consumer culture, which raises questions about how contemporary artists are positioning themselves within the wider aesthetic economy. For example, the performance artist Vanessa Beecroft has collaborated with designers Helmut Lang, Valentino, Louis Vuitton, exhibited at Prada's gallery and more recently with Kanye West in his role as fashion designer. Beecroft's early work involved fashion models, often women, posing motionless for long durations. Figure 3 shows a triptych of Beecroft's performance *VB43*, which itself sold for $43,750 in the secondary market. Presenting at first a tableau of seemingly powerful and assertive bodies, this time-based work charts small changes in the women's demeanour, as they become tired and betray their vulnerability over the course of the artwork's duration.

Figure 3. Lot 222, Vanessa Beecroft, VB43.090.TE (Triptych I) 2000, Digital prints in three parts. 127×129.5 cm; 127×134.6 cm; 127×144.5 cm. Numbered consecutively 1, 2 and 3 on a label affixed to the reverse of the mount of each; numbered of three on a label affixed to the reverse of the mount of the left panel. This work is from an edition of three. Image © and courtesy of Phillips.

By incorporating thin, androgynous figures, and presenting the work in locations such as Beverly Hills, Beecroft might be critiquing the superficiality the fashion and beauty industries perpetuate. As art historian Clare Bishop noted in an early review (2000), critics are divided over Beecroft's work, particularly as to whether it constitutes a feminist critique of the demand for women to display their bodies for erotic effect. Is Beecroft paying homage to the classical nude? According to Clare Johnson (2006), Beecroft's works mimic the ways in which that version of femininity is perpetually out of reach and argues that her 'performances enact temporal ambiguity whilst refusing to disconnect from commercial culture' (2006, 322). The slow moving (human bodies cannot remain still for any amount of time) tableau stands in direct contrast to the fast pace of the catwalk but does embrace the same production values, leaving room for multiple readings. Knowing Beecroft's early struggles with eating disorders also adds to a reading that the work might be more critical of the fashioned body than first imagined.

Bishop decided the work was neither, citing the obvious commodification of art: '*VB43* showed Beecroft to have a thoroughly collusive relationship with the art market, the media, the fashion world, advertising and everyone's basic instinct for dumbed-down sensationalist entertainment' (2000, 31). With increasing instances of collaboration between art and fashion, might we now have more context to determine a different kind of reading? Could Beecroft's work represent an attempt to embody the image as commodity and its obsession with corporeal display, or was *VB43* simply an advertisement for the Manolo Blahnik sandals the models consistently wore? Beecroft's work unashamedly collaborates with fashion, but should this alliance alone constitute a problem, why and for whom? Bishop concludes that 'We are all mesmerised by beauty, but it's disingenuous to present this as 'art' when she's actually doing little more than perpetuating an already unholy alliance between the art and the fashion industry' (2000, 32). How we define art deserves a separate discussion. Here, we can assume that a practitioner who has exhibited at several Gagosian galleries, taken part in international art fairs and whose work is displayed in museums such as the Guggenheim, is generally regarded as an artist. Do art historians and theorists wish to preserve the imaginary sanctity of a practice that never quite existed in pure form, while the art market benefits from increasingly pluralist ventures into the wider aesthetic economy? Perhaps the quality of Beecroft's work is questionable; her work for *Louis Vuitton* at the Champs-Élysées was heavily

criticised for her BDSM-clad models of colour, which were dangerously reminiscent of slavery images. Recent press surrounding her personal life also led her to exile the art world, but the work has nonetheless been useful to mobilise conversations around the gaze, autonomy, body-politics and potentially produces what Bishop later praises in other 'delegated' works as an 'alternative form of knowledge about capitalism's commodification of the individual' (2012, 111). Should the art world engage with fashion studies, these art-fashion interplays might be read differently, rather than dismissed as isolated instances of 'selling out.' Beecroft's work certainly courts the fashion industry. Her works have been incorporated into music videos and staged for explicit fashion events. She even brands each of her works in numerical order and with her own initials, mimicking a standard practice in the fashion industry for branding collections. But as this discussion demonstrates, Beecroft is not alone, but takes her place alongside a range of artists who behave like creative directors and participate in a wider aesthetic economy.

Artists who have refused to separate art from popular culture have been enjoying more attention in a social media age, such as Yayoi Kusama, who works in various media and has throughout her career blurred various aesthetic, social and political boundaries. In the late 1960s, Kusama set up her own fashion company, producing various designs, one of which featured holes to reveal the wearer's breasts, buttocks or genitalia. Kusama has continued to design her own clothes, using motifs from her paintings on bespoke fabric and often wears brightly coloured wigs to complete the distinctive 'Kusama look.' The mirror-lined 'Infinity Mirror Room,' a large-scale installation created for an exhibition at the Castellane Gallery in New York in 1965, contained red and white polka-dotted soft blobs piled high on the floor (Figure 4). Kusama herself poses in a red bodysuit in the work, luxuriating in the colours, textures and sensations of the claustrophobic windowless room. Body and dress are integral components of the artwork; their relationship to the surrounding environment is given prominence, but infinite replication also draws attention to the permeability of boundaries of self and other, body and work. Her act of self-fashioning challenges white feminist and Eurocentric notions of identity but by refusing to limit herself to any specific aesthetic discipline she highlights these interconnections, forcing the viewer into an active positionality in relation to the work (Foster 2010).

Kusama's immersive installations and the key motifs of polka dots, mirrors and repetition, have remained distinctive aspects of her work throughout her career. As in 'Infinity Mirror Room,' she is often present in the work itself, a creative decision that reflects her insistence on the material reality of the body. She is regularly photographed with her artworks, highlighting the reality of 'stardom,' or at least the desire for it, within contemporary art, while also playfully challenging the insistence on separating body and work, which has been interpreted as a 'participatory mode of spectatorship that transcends binaristic notions of modes of viewing' (Foster 2010, 273). A similar observation regarding women artists appearing with (or inside) their artworks was made regarding artist Bridget Riley. For art historian Pamela Lee, contradictions apparent in Riley's willingness to straddle art and fashion amounted to more than just 'undialectical borrowing' (2001, 34). Op art was not debased by the appearance of Op fashion but, for Lee, was worth taking seriously 'as an acutely embodied form of its reception' (2001, 35). Such embodied forms were in the 1960s often issuing a direct challenge to patriarchal and monolithic modes of seeing. This returns the body to the centre of the debate concerning

Figure 4. Yayoi Kusama, Infinity Mirror Room – Phalli's Field, 1965. Sewn stuffed fabric, wooden panel, mirror. 250×455×455 cm. © YAYOI KUSAMA Courtesy Ota Fine Arts, Victoria Miro & David Zwirner.

the art-fashion nexus, calling to mind both the artist's body and the embodied eyes of the spectator, a particular concern in relation to the illusionist effects of Op Art on viewers. So too, Kusama's dots or blobs form a compulsive ever-moving pattern that calls to mind how elusive aesthetic forms are, and their capacity for appropriation, transformation and renewal; both Kusama and Riley made intriguing links between mass culture and contemporary art practices through practices of self-fashioning. 'Infinity Mirror Room' is an example of how the bodily dimension of the visual, in common with the postmodern experience, mobilises the blurring of boundaries between mass media and art. As discussed, the commodification of art finds it resembling the branding tendencies of fashion, positioning contemporary artists within a wider aesthetic economy.

In 2012, Kusama launched a collection with fashion house *Louis Vuitton*, who also sponsored her retrospective at Tate Modern in London in the same year. *Yayoi Kusama Louis Vuitton* was a large and ambitious artistic collaboration for a fashion house, involving ready-to-wear shoes, leather goods, watches and sunglasses. Kusama's retail window schemes were created in four hundred and sixty LV stores worldwide and the Selfridges store in London had its twenty-four windows on the

Oxford Street façade 'bathed in pointillistic, primary-coloured swirls and maxi-dots, mini-Kusama dolls' (Judah 2013) for a spectacular collaboration perfectly in keeping with the usual consumerist messages of abundance and magic that emanate from this high church of luxury consumption. The collection itself takes her signature polka dot patterning and adapts it to a range of simple separates, including a jumpsuit reminiscent of Kusama's red all-in-one worn for the original 1960s 'Infinity Mirror Room.' Her look is recreated through the bobbed hairstyle with neat fringe; the artist appears to offer the luxury brand an easily recognisable style that balances order with chaos, seriousness with fun (Figure 5). Through the collaboration Kusama's artistic motifs are given a wider audience, but her participatory mode of spectatorship also breaks down old binaries. Distrust of the art-fashion nexus lies precisely in such anxieties and could be interpreted as a stand-in for a larger fear of femininity, its insistent lack of respect for boundaries and the suspicion that the female body is dangerous and permeable. Collaborations such as these might call the status of Kusama's work into question if they are viewed as perpetuating 'unholy alliances' between the supposedly noxious fashion industry and the taken-as-given purity of the art world. They also draw attention to the transformation artists are willing to undergo to become significant market actors and highlight the relative lack of controversy that now accompanies such ventures.

Many artists are working creatively with the fashion industry, but when the art world interprets this as a form of betrayal or plain foolishness, it is often couched in language that reveals fears of contamination, claims that, in a media age, sound increasingly hollow. In 2019, the girl-group commodity turned fashion designer, Victoria Beckham, demonstrated the 'unholy alliance' between the two sectors' economies by exhibiting a series of Andy Warhol works, in conjunction with Sotheby's, at her shop during London's *frieze art fair*. Here, the art fair and auction house, already in the business of commodifying art, were taken beyond their usual parameters, in an indulgent display of art/design cross-fertilisation. Acknowledging that artists' estates are complicit in the commodification of their legacies, is a reminder that even those with a cult-following are connecting with the aesthetics of fashion. If traditional boundaries have been unsettled by neoliberal economics, then many artists have also recognised the value of fashion's symbolic circuits, authenticating the artist's signature style in ever more novel ways. By 'fashioning' contemporary art, the art market reproduces itself, and thus secures its dominance in a changing aesthetic economy.

The art-fashion nexus reveals much about the commodification of culture, a reconfiguration that has found practitioners in both realms behaving more like 'creative directors' than makers. Fashion is an aesthetic practice and art is more commercial than the art world is often prepared to admit. Historically, modern and postmodern art practices created space for dialogue between these distinct cultural practices, which led to various experiments that could, on one hand, test the viability of artworks in a commercial environment, and on the other, challenge whether fashion could fully engage in serious aesthetic investigation. There were fears, however, that fashion's dislocations, not least its consumerist attitude, made it unstable and unreliable. Various crises ushered in a new era of pluralism, and instability, which placed corporeal display at the centre of artists' engagement with questions of citizenship, politics and pleasure. This could be attributed to the gendering of contemporary art, whether a feminist

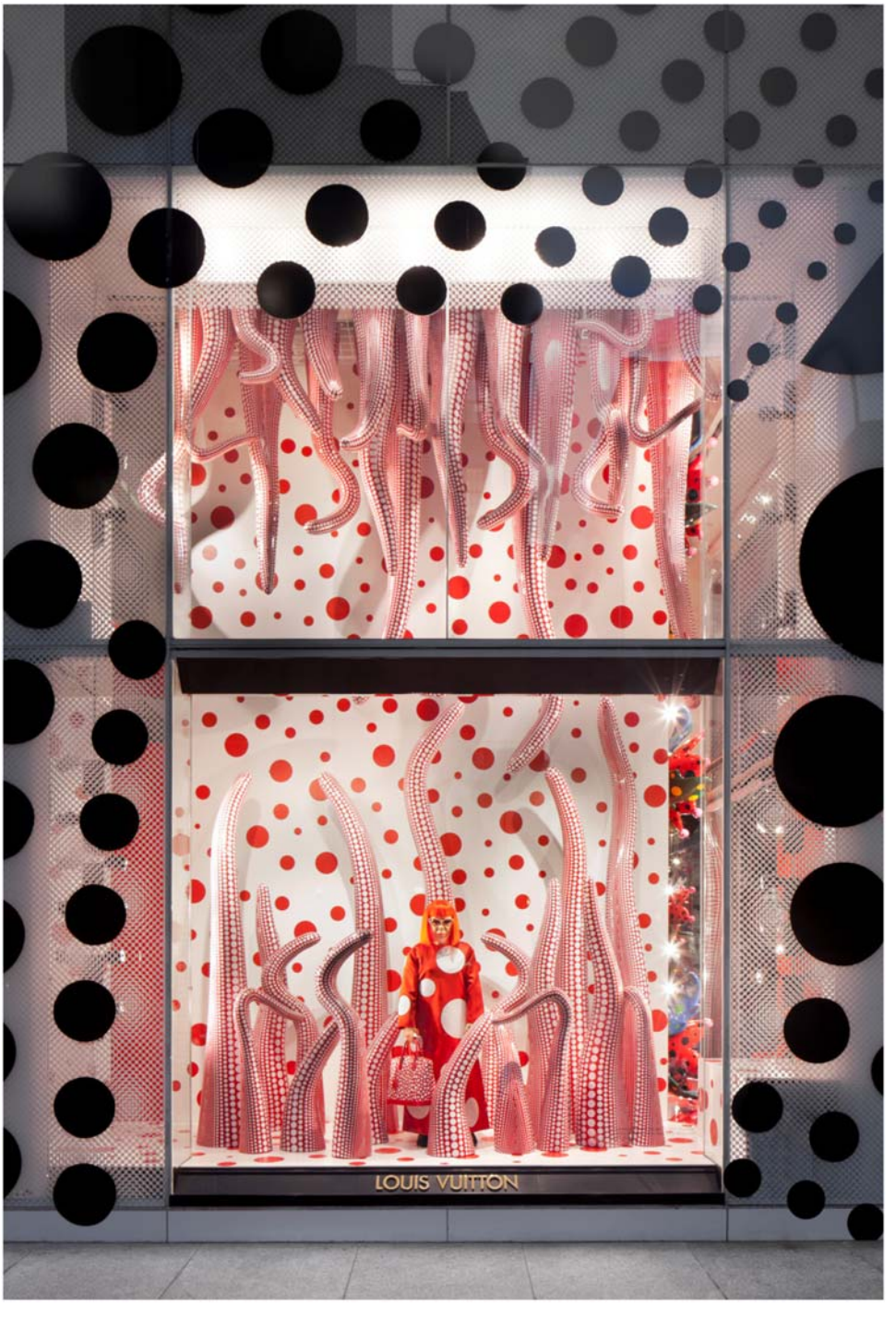

Figure 5. Vitrines Kusama: New York 5th Avenue House, United States. © LOUIS VUITTON MALLETIER / STEPHANE MURATET. Store name: 86 – LV NEW YORK 5TH AVENUE.

critique of conventional spatialisations in creative work or irreverent embodiments that engage with fleshy pleasure at the expense of art critics' anxieties. Concerns about the ever-closer relationship between art and fashion often focus on the problems of engaging in conspicuous acts that revel in styling the body for display, but such anxieties also betray an attachment to cultural hierarchies and fail to recognise the seismic cultural shift that has already taken place. If neoliberalism pivots on a complex circuit of gazes, then it is rapidly reconfiguring the aesthetic realm, altering disciplinary boundaries and reshaping the status of both art and design. To understand this transformed environment, we might do well to register the interdisciplinary role of the designer and the extra-artistic concerns of artists grappling with aesthetic investigation in a neoliberal age.

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Notes on contributors

Nicola McCartney is a Lecturer in Cultural Studies for the Fashion, Jewellery and Textiles programmes at Central Saint Martins, University of London, where she also works across Fine Art and for external institutions, such as the National Gallery. She has undertaken artistic residencies overseas and in the UK, including Yinka Shonibare MBE's studio. She was an Associate Research Fellow in the History of Art Department at Birkbeck, University of London, where she also completed her PhD. Her monograph, *Death of the Artist: art world dissidents and their alternative identities* (2018) is published with IBTauris of Bloomsbury.

Jane Tynan is Assistant Professor of Design History and Theory in the Faculty of Humanities at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) in the Netherlands. She is series co-editor of *Palgrave Studies in Fashion and the Body* and member of CLUE+ Research Institute for Culture, Cognition, History and Heritage at VU Amsterdam. Her current research concerns the politics of (self-) fashioning practices, new materialisms in social movements and various intersections of design and violence.

ORCID

Nicola Mccartney http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4438-5689
Jane Tynan http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9547-0010

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