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Art on Your Sleeve?

Is fashion art? And when the two fields collaborate, is art being cheapened? Conversations with artists, critics and curators.

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NEW YORK – On a recent gloomy afternoon in Central Park, a short line of people stretched out in front of an alien spaceship. Concocted of fiberglass and steel, the spaceship haughtily stuck its nose out at the crowd. As it turns out, the spaceship is man-made and designed by the Iraqi-born architect Zaha Hadid. It houses the Chanel Mobile Art exhibit, a collection of contemporary art commissioned by the Chanel design house and based on – or as fashion people like to say, "inspired by" – a Chanel bag. The heavy-hitting roster represented inside includes artists from around the globe, its crown jewel being John Lennon's widow, Yoko Ono.

Of particular interest to the viewer may be the Russian (or "Siberian," which sounds more chic) art collective the Blue Noses, described on the exhibition Web site as a bunch of shrewd rebels: "Under the shroud of comedy, their scenes are violent, classic critiques of the stupidity of modern society and its values." Of course, while contemplating an art exhibition based on a handbag, one cannot help but pause to think about just that, the stupidity of modern society and its values. But the exhibition raises another, perhaps less important, but no less interesting question – is fashion art?

At its best, fashion is a creative discipline. It exhibits some characteristics traditionally associated with the art world – a concern for aesthetics, regard of the creator's singular vision, even social and political commentary. It has its own avant-garde and its own kitsch. It is serious and campy, minimalist and expressionist, futurist and romantic. Fashion is displayed in galleries and museums. The art world and the fashion world are becoming increasingly intertwined. Fashion designers collaborate with artists or commission artists to interpret their work. Artists occupy front row seats at fashion shows and wear high-end fashion everywhere they go. Some fashion designers are the most avid art collectors. You get the picture. And so, the question of fashion as art persists and is hotly debated, though mostly in fashion circles. But if people in the art world are so closely intertwined with fashion, then they must have an opinion as well.

Slater Bradley is a 33-year old artist, most famous for his "Doppelganger Trilogy" series of videos that are now a part of the Guggenheim's permanent collection. He often mines the culture that influenced him as a teenager for his work, from the "Star Wars" movies to late musicians like Nirvana's Kurt Cobain and Joy Division's Ian Curtis. Tall and slim, with shoulder length hair usually gathered in a ponytail, Bradley could easily pass for a rocker himself. Once at a charity dinner that wouldn't be out of place in a Tom Wolfe novel, a socialite told Bradley, who was wearing a kangaroo leather jacket, that he was "dressed like an artist."

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Hilarious, perhaps, but there was some truth in that silly statement. The rise of creative fashion, starting in the late '70s, also coincided with the rise of art as a lucrative industry. By the late 1980s, the art market was booming to such an extent that it created a self-sufficient creative class that was rich enough to afford high fashion, but refused to wear the clothes that their wealthy but conventional patrons wore.

Bradley was born in San Francisco in 1975. There he attended the private Cathedral School for Boys. The school required their students to wear a uniform, so Bradley never had to think about how to dress. Coincidentally, it also cultivated in him a love for formal tailoring. As an art student at the University of California at Los Angeles, Bradley began thinking about using dress to express his individuality. At the same time his mother, an interior designer, began taking him on her shopping trips to San Francisco and New York where she bought clothing by Jil Sander and Helmut Lang.

When he entered the art world years later, he realized that fashion plays a huge part in it. "Everywhere I went, whether to a gallery opening or an art fair, people wanted to know what and who you were wearing. Sometimes it served simply as an ice-breaker, but often I was judged by my appearance." But, there is much more beyond this superficiality for Bradley. Fashion became a part of his bildungsroman, as he went from wearing Helmut Lang to Cloak to Carol Christian Poell. With each step of his development, fashion became more and more personal.

In 1998 he came to New York, and entered the art scene. It took a while for Bradley to become commercially successful - videos are not something that art collectors generally get excited about. "There was a period in my life where nothing was going my way, and I literally stared into the abyss. Wearing Cloak was the only thing that got me out of bed. Its military details and sharp tailoring made it my armor. I felt invincible in it." As his career slowly developed - his work is now in 16 public collections worldwide - so did his taste in fashion.

Today, Bradley prefers niche designers, whose work he views in the same way he views any work of art. "In those rare moments when I encounter somebody whose work is brilliant, I feel I am in the presence of greatness, and that I, as a creator, have nothing to add to that medium. This has never happened with art. I know I can add something to this world as an artist. I don't feel that way about fashion. When I look at a Carol Christian Poell suit or a coat, I feel that his mastery over his craft is complete and that there is nothing left to add, nothing to improve upon."

As for the alleged difference between art and fashion, Bradley does not see it. To him, art is a method of expression, and the medium does not matter, "I feel that Poell makes better art than a lot of artists these days. He is the best artist out there. He goes against everything that fashion is. You can see he tries hard to make his clothes intriguing. His product is not easy to understand, and it's not commercial. He makes me think about clothing in a way that no other designer even comes close to. The presentations he makes – the slaughterhouse, the abandoned public bathrooms – are all about the escape from modern society. It is incredibly hard to live on the edge of society today, nearly impossible, but he does this successfully. I try to do the same with my art."

Because Bradley views Poell this way, he does not flinch at spending \$5,000 on a Poell leather jacket. After all, that's a bargain price for a work of art.

Although he feels that Poell is a pinnacle of fashion, Bradley has experimented with making clothes himself, producing a limited edition T-shirt in collaboration with the iconic British artist Peter Saville. Bradley sees fashion as a more challenging medium to produce than art: "I think that demanding a collection out of a truly creative designer every six months is insane. As an artist I have much more freedom. It probably takes me about three years to take my work in a new direction. In fashion, this does not happen. There is constant commercial pressure to produce." Bradley is also not against seeing clothing in an art gallery setting, rather than a store. That way the designer sells his work outside of the retail store model, without its high seasonal turnover and constant craving for new things.

Doesn't make it inferior

Unlike Bradley, Deborah Bell, a 51-year-old Chelsea photography gallery owner, sees a clear division between fashion and art. "Fashion is not art," she says, "art has no utilitarian value – fashion does. But that does not make fashion inferior."

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Fashion's insistent claims to artistry make it seem as if the field has an inferiority complex it tries to compensate for with money, and in that sense, one cannot shake off the feeling they are watching a bad production of Moliere's "The Bourgeois Gentleman." In Bell's view, fashion's role need not be inferior. "There is so much bad art out there these days that seeing good design is refreshing. Design shouldn't hold an inferior position to art," she says. "The art world has become overblown and gluttonous in the past 10 years or so. It seemed like all of a sudden everyone wanted to be an artist, which produced a lot of bad contemporary art. There is so little of contemporary art that I would like to own; fashion is often much more interesting to me."

Bell started out as a photographer in 1978, after receiving her bachelor's degree from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. In 1983, she started working in a gallery in Soho run by the grandson of the great German photographer August Sander. She was always attracted to good clothes, but also felt that if she wore designer fashion she would be perceived as narcissistic. At a gallery opening in New York in 1986 she met the widow of Belgian photographer Marcel Broodthaers, who brought Bell to Brussels to organize her husband's archive. There, Bell read articles about the Antwerp Six, a group of rising young Belgian designers, and she was struck by the images of clothes by Ann Demeulemeester.

After returning to New York, she would frequently visit the iconic (now defunct) boutique Charivari, and Barneys. "I was too poor to afford the clothes," Bell says, "so I just went to touch and look. And then one day, about 15 years ago, I allowed myself to buy a pair of Demeulemeester's boots. They were \$987, which was a fortune for me, but I did it. And I still wear them." For Bell, coming in contact with these clothes was nothing short of transcendental. Twelve years later, she still feels the same way.

"Sometimes I just buy some of [Demeulemeester's] clothes, and it takes me a while to grow into them. I will think that I am not cool enough to wear them. People don't think of me as sophisticated looking, but every time I wear something of hers, I feel transformed. The combination of colors and fabrics, the perfect cut, the unusual and complicated construction, the craftsmanship and quality level is truly remarkable. Everything she does, down to the font of her label, is carefully considered. Her clothes have such elegance and dignity and grace. People notice it." It is this feeling of excellence in Demeulemeester's work that drives Bell to purchase her designs exclusively. "I don't need to buy anything else," she says.

Like Slater Bradley, Bell also feels that what you wear matters in the art world. "You are judged by how you look, especially in the high-level contemporary art world. It is important for 'them' to project a certain level of intimidation."

Bell is apprehensive about fashion going the way of the art world. "I think that the explosion and commodification of art in the '80s resulted from a misunderstanding of Andy Warhol's work. He made art look easy, when in reality it's not. That means a lot of bad contemporary art. And now fashion is the new thing that people think is easy to do." Her apprehension is understandable. Until recently, fashion was something of a plaything of the new aristocracy of taste, mostly driven by people from the art world, if simply because they are the ones concerned with matters of aesthetics. In the '70s, Vivienne Westwood dressed punk rockers, in the '80s, Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto dressed artists, and in the 90s, Ann Demeulemeester and Martin Margiela dressed gallery owners, while Jil Sander and Helmut Lang dressed architects. These designers catered to niche audiences that appreciated their work because it was creative.

It is imperative to understand the division between creative fashion and luxury goods. This division was very clear up until the present decade. Today, the luxury goods conglomerates (not cool) are desperately trying to become fashion companies (cool). One reason for these image makeovers is that creative designers today are no longer niche, because the aristocracy of taste has an audience of its own, and a vast one at that. All of a sudden, these critically acclaimed but financially unstable design houses look lucrative to big luxury companies. And so this decade has witnessed a buying spree. Prada bought Helmut Lang and Jil Sander. Diesel bought out Margiela. Gucci picked up Alexander McQueen and Balenciaga. Even sportswear companies are getting into the game, with Puma buying Hussein Chalayan, who is probably the most innovative designer today.

Not enough for Louis Vuitton

But this was not enough for the luxury trade (after all, buying a cool company does not make you cool), so they co-opted another practice pioneered by creative designers - collaborating with artists. Long before the current fashion-art symbiotic romp, Helmut Lang collaborated with conceptual artist Jenny Holzer and sculptor Louise Bourgeois, and Ann Demeulemeester with photographers Jim Dine and Steven Klein. These were sincere efforts by designers and artists, born out of mutual respect for each other's work and produced without any fanfare.

It was Marc Jacobs, the creative director at Louis Vuitton, who decided to take this a step (or 10) further. Motivated by Gucci's success with Tom Ford, who made a glamorous money machine out of a company that was barely getting by selling loafers to Wall Street bankers, LVMH (the luggage manufacturer's parent company) hired Jacobs to sex up its haute bourgeois image. The first two collaborations, with artists Stephen Sprouse and Julie Verhoeven, were uneventful. In 2003 Jacobs hired a Japanese artist, Takashi Murakami, to put some color in the classic monogrammed Louis Vuitton bags. Driven by an overwhelming marketing campaign and hyped by limited availability, it was an instant hit. The waiting lists were filled immediately and many of the bags promptly sold out.

Seeing success, Louis Vuitton continued to mine this partnership. In 2005, Murakami modified the bags, this time substituting cherries for the iconic monogram. He was also commissioned to decorate Louis Vuitton stores.

In 2007, the partnership culminated in a major museum exhibit of Murakami's pop art, first at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and then at the Brooklyn Museum. In return for sponsoring the show, Louis Vuitton was permitted to set up a store selling their bags smack in the middle of the exhibition. Half the store featured bags enclosed in a glass case that were not for sale. While touring the exhibit with my students, I inquired of one of the super-polished sales people dressed in a white suit, whether we should consider those bags art. "That's the idea," the salesman replied with a barely concealed chuckle, his response eliciting laughter from my students.

Unlike the salesman, Murakami himself looked a bit more serious in a New York Times video interview. When the journalist asked him whether a logoed purse can be considered a work of art, he shot her a glance and a smile that was either ironic or guilty, and said, "I think so."

The exhibit came under a lot of fire from the media for obvious reasons (okay, for crass commercialism, if you must know), not only because of the store, but also because on opening night, Louis Vuitton set up a mock fake-goods shop in the museum, where they sold the \$2,000 Murakami bags to Upper East Side socialites and the Asian nouveau riches who want to be like them. Lynn Yaeger, the venerable Vogue and Village Voice fashion journalist, wrote in her review, "Not since Marie Antoinette dressed as a shepherdess has such blatant bad taste, such revolting hauteur infected a social gathering." Perhaps shamed by the media outrage, the Brooklyn Museum Web site does not mention Louis Vuitton in its exhibition description, not even in the list of sponsors.

At the Met

And yet, displaying fashion in museums today is becoming more and more common. This is a fairly recent phenomenon, but a popular one. I decided to talk to Harold Koda, the curator in charge of the Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, about his views on fashion and art. Koda is soft-spoken and very knowledgeable, having worked on fashion exhibitions for over 20 years. His smart navy suit, brown shoes and round glasses give off an appearance of, well, a museum curator. We met in a cafe on the top floor of the Met, overlooking Central Park.

Needless to say, the Met is an important cultural institution, and the fact that a part of it is devoted to fashion is a clear sign of the changing perception toward the subject. For Koda, this is a breakthrough, and one that did not come easily. "The Met is a fine-arts museum. Unlike museums devoted to applied arts or design, it traditionally did not concern itself with fashion. The clothing collection came here first as a study resource, not as a curatorial department. The question is, of course, what constitutes fine art? We are still constrained by the traditional, primarily 19th-century, Western definitions of art, but it's not the only definition out there. For example, if you went to Japan and showed a kimono next to a Zen painting, they would have equal aesthetic validity. The entire idea of utility does not come into play there. Personally, and as a curator, I can say that some fashion can be art. At the Costume Institute, we have crafted a certain set of standards of creativity and conceptuality that separates an object from those that are really just apparel."

Koda compares his work to that of a photography curator. Everyone armed with a camera can take a photo, but not all photos are art.

Part of Koda's job is to persuade others that clothing has a place in a fine arts museum, and this task is tricky. Therefore, the exhibits are always organized in a thematic manner. Unlike its fine arts counterparts at the Met, which routinely display collected works of a single artist, the Costume Institute rarely devotes an exhibition to work of a single designer. Koda's goal is somewhat different, "Of course I am not here to convince someone that you can compare a Louis Vuitton bag to a Mona Lisa - Louis Vuitton could probably do it more successfully than I could - but to put fashion into a coherent conceptual framework and help push a certain intellectual narrative. I want to shift the general perception that, for example, the merit of a sweater that has elements of technical development, virtuosity, and expression is not invalidated by the simple fact that you can buy it in Barneys. To be sure, clothing is infused with issues of identity and of cultural and economic status, but we also want to show that fashion has a sense of the avant-garde, of moving aesthetics forward, which people also prize in art."

Koda's appetite for the conceptual has led to shows like "Bravehearts: Men in Skirts," which aimed to challenge the traditional rules of men's dress, and "AngloMania: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion," which commented on the contentious relationship between British fashion and society.

But when Koda talks about the fashion avant-garde deserving a place in the art world, who is he trying to convince? "I think the public is accepting of the idea of fashion in museums and so are the artists themselves. I don't think the art critics are ready. When [late longtime fashion writer and editor] Diana Vreeland, who was good at creating blockbusters, was appointed as the special consultant in order to energize this institution, it came at some cost to its reputation and academic standing. But it yielded a great response from the public. The public really forced the institution to be more challenging, more intellectual, more precise and caring about representation of history. And yet, the critics from the art establishment, whose training is in assessment of traditional art forms, are still unwilling to acknowledge that fashion can have the same kind of authority as art. It might simply be that it is hard for someone to judge the mastery of a medium without trying it, in however inept and rudimentary [of a] way. I once heard a specialist on Cezanne argue that some of his unfinished canvases were actually complete works. They were extraordinary images, but they were not finished, and anyone who has worked the canvas and knew about the time period when Cezanne worked would tell you that. I find the same problem with some art critics - when they look at an original Chanel from the 1920s, they see a simple black dress, and they miss the sense of social and cultural history, the transformation of the silhouette that was truly revolutionary. To them it looks like a dress that you could get

today at Banana Republic or the Gap. And that's where I have a reservation about art critics' ability to assess fashion properly."

Conceptual effort

But, are art critics really hostile to fashion? I called Rochelle Gurstein, a critic for The New Republic and a former New York University professor, to find out. "Fashion certainly has an aesthetic quality, but I don't understand the drive to call it art. Why not simply call it design? Many art critics, myself included, feel that the main distinction between fashion and art is that the artist often has a very particular idea in mind that they are trying to achieve. For example, with abstract art, many artists were trying to express a certain spiritual longing that representational art could not reflect. Other artists, like [Kazimir] Malevich, had revolutionary aspirations. A fashion designer cannot say, 'This is how I want to try to change the world'; you cannot do this through clothes. Surely, clothes can delight and charm, but not make a statement about this world. And if someone wanted to prove otherwise, they would have to present examples of fashion that would make similar claims."

So far, Gurstein says she has not encountered any, even though she is no stranger to decorative arts. For three years she taught at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, an experience that left her cold. "I found the entire program rather shallow and banal. It is one thing to delight in clothing and other decorative objects, but creating an academic subject matter out of it, granting doctoral degrees seems almost intellectually fraudulent."

However, Gurstein is careful to point out that she does not dismiss fashion wholesale. "Certainly, when you look at beautiful haute couture, it is amazing to see that someone today puts that kind of craftsmanship and delicacy into clothing. We have very few beautiful things today in our ugly, mass-produced world. Most contemporary artists today are not concerned with beauty either. Therefore, fashion can be viewed as one of the last refuges of craft and beauty that can truly delight. And yet, that does not make it an academic subject, at least not until somebody comes along and really interprets fashion into a set of ideas. This takes a lot of work, and I don't see anyone coming along and doing these historical and symbolic interpretations."

Harold Koda is acutely aware that presenting such interpretations is a central part of his job. He thinks it is the responsibility of the curator to provide an atmosphere in which the critics become receptive. What he finds a bit puzzling is that the public can be more readily convinced by an exhibition than the critics, "The general public comes in with a more generous, open mind. The critic comes in with predefined intellectual conceptions that are sometimes outmoded. Why do we not value the dresses Gustav Klimt created for Emily Floge, but we value his paintings of her wearing them?"

Could it be that art critics are antagonistic to fashion because it is too materialistic? Koda says, "To be sure, fashion is deliberately commercial, especially in a sense that it is more populous. But art is also commercial. Today, art is commerce – only it's more privileged and elitist. But I don't think popularity matters much. If you take someone like Hussein Chalayan or Azzedine Alaia – it's not the amount of reproduced pieces that counts – it's the amount of conceptual effort that went into creating a garment that makes it art. Photography can be reproduced ad infinitum, and no one questions its artistic value."

So, it seems that the goal of anyone looking for artistic merit in fashion must be to learn to separate the wheat from the chaff, something that Koda does on the curatorial level and Bradley and Bell do on a personal level. Just as not all drawing is art, not all clothes, even designer clothes, are fashion. And as far as some of fashion's impositions on the art world, like its for-hire artist collaborations and commissioned art exhibitions? Maybe Karl Lagerfeld, the Chanel designer, was right when he remarked about the alien spaceship in Central Park to a New York Times reporter: "I wish it was empty."W