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The Invention and Artification of Fashion

Abstract: In the mid-nineteenth century, a group of talented tailors began to declare themselves artists. In doing so, they invented fashion and asserted their creative autonomy by using art as a strategy of social legitimation. The process of artification within fashion unfolds through three main stages. In the late nineteenth century, artistic intentionality emerges. In the early twentieth century, collaboration with the historical avant-gardes begins. In the late twentieth century, the radical experimentation of the new avant-gardes comes to the fore. Today, the artistic garment functions as both a 'simulacrum' of the body and a social 'megaphone', becoming a work of art capable of prompting reflection on the human condition.

Keywords: Fashion Sociology, Creative Authorship, Art Garments, Artification Strategies, Artification Phases.

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1. From Tailoring to Fashion

Unlike the fashion designer, the tailor is an artisan who, either working alone or with the assistance of helpers and apprentices, cuts and sews

garments, overseeing the entire process from taking the client's measurements to the final pressing. The tailor controls the whole productive process, with the exception of the design – that is, the idea, the creative phase.

Indeed, the tailor follows standard models that change only slowly over time and that are essentially 'given'. While the tailor may propose fabrics, colours, or lengths, the models themselves remain fixed: they are precisely those already familiar to the client, as they constitute cultural products that are widely shared within a given historical period and territorial context.

What is argued here – apparently paradoxically – is that the tailor does not deal with fashion, but with costume, understood as a form of imitation over time, that is, of ancestors, rather than imitation in space, namely of contemporaries (Tarde 2013). Costume is thus intended in the sociological sense, as a mode of producing and interpreting dress that undergoes only gradual variations across generations – variations that are comparatively far more limited than those characterising fashion.

Focusing on Europe, one can certainly observe differences between ancient tunics, medieval, Renaissance, or eighteenth-century garments,

yet these transformations unfolded very slowly and were more clearly visible in elite clothing than among the rest of society. For this very reason, it is appropriate to distinguish between the work of ‘talented tailors’ serving elite clientele and that of ordinary tailors. This distinction allows us to understand the emergence of fashion, as well as its birth and development in parallel with broader social change (Baglioni 2019).

When, then, does fashion emerge? It emerges when these ‘talented tailors’, catering to a wealthy and refined clientele, decide to introduce significant innovations into their profession (Coleman 1989). Creativity thus enters the scene, transforming costume dress into fashion dress. These tailors no longer merely follow conventional models based on clients’ requests, but begin to propose new or fundamentally renewed designs in terms of cut, combinations, materials, and colours. Moreover, in order to establish this new mode of tailoring, they adopt an innovative communicative strategy through which the artisan is transformed into an artist.

No longer a tailor, but a fashion designer: a professional capable of imposing their own style upon clients and, ultimately, upon society at large

(Volli 1988). Thanks to this crucial shift in perspective, fashion takes its first steps and becomes a sociologically modern form of dress in multiple respects – intention, production, communication, and commercialisation. It is a creative activity presented by its own makers as if it were an art.

The reference to art constitutes the strategic device through which emerging fashion emancipates itself from the artisanal sphere, highlights the stylistic talent of fashion creators, captures clientele, and secures higher profits. This communicative strategy proves functional to the social legitimisation of fashion's added value and to the professional elevation of the designer (Morini 2012). It is a brilliant manoeuvre that consecrates fashion as a phenomenon of modernity.

Much like an artist, the designer shapes garments according to their creative inspiration, signs them with a personal label, and sets their price, which no longer depends on hours of labour or material costs, but on talent and the ability to communicate it. Declaring oneself an artist, even provocatively, becomes a powerful vehicle of publicity, linking the invention of fashion to the progressive transformation of society in an acquisitive and competitive direction.

We are in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, and not only the *Ville Lumière*, but Europe as a whole is in a state of ferment. Society is captivated by revolutionary impulses and nationalist aspirations, by technological progress and economic growth, by scientific discoveries and artistic avant-gardes. Fashion situates itself precisely within this context: a mature professional field capable of intercepting the desires of the *beau monde* and the escapist yearnings that would give rise to the *Belle Époque* (Steele 1999). It engages in dialogue with art, which becomes both a source of inspiration and a promotional vehicle, as well as with artists, who are simultaneously allies and collaborators (Mackrell 2005).

These are also the years in which interest in aesthetics and functionality is amplified by the growing importance of applied arts – the forerunners of design (Vitta 2011) – which act as ambassadors of a renewed language of beauty among broader strata of the population. For this reason as well, attention to elegant dress becomes part of a shared everyday life, leading to the increasing success of fashion.

2. In Search of the Art World of Fashion

The association with art now appears as a well-established communicative strategy within fashion. Designers employ this rhetorical device to their own advantage in order to appropriate the added value traditionally attributed to art. In doing so, they capitalise on the shared belonging of both art and fashion to the broad sphere of culture. Fashion, however, constitutes an aesthetic economy (Entwistle 2002), whereas art is never conventionally associated with the economy. In aesthetic economies – such as jewellery, furniture, and the many other sectors of luxury and design – the economic dimension and the creative dimension are equally significant. In fashion, aesthetics and the market thus fully enter into the process of cultural production.

In art, by contrast, the process of cultural production is fundamentally linked to the creative dimension, while the economic dimension is regarded – rightly or wrongly – as marginal. Consequently, beyond the fact that a work of art may possess a market value (Beatrice 2025), economic considerations are not, or should not be, relevant to the cultural production process associated with art (Heinich 2001-2002). With fashion, the opposite occurs, as market value and functional utility

coexist with the aesthetic and conceptual value of garments. Fashion therefore bears a sort of 'original sin', although this is not always the case.

Fashion aspires to be recognised as art because such recognition confers prestige: it grants a kind of 'nobility licence' that legitimises its value and justifies its excesses – while, of course, also serving to increase garment prices and designers' visibility. Conversely, no form of art aspires to be considered fashion. Art is surrounded by an aura of eternity, whereas fashion is ephemeral by definition. Art is 'serious', while fashion is 'frivolous'. Art is aesthetic or conceptual content, whereas fashion is turnover and utility.

However, it is undeniable that art and fashion exhibit similarities and hybridisations, as well as differences and conflicts – both at the time of fashion's emergence and in the present day (Calò, Scudero 2009). As cultural phenomena, art and fashion have always influenced one another, to varying degrees depending on circumstances and specific cases – today even more so than in the past. In a complex and rapidly changing society such as the contemporary one, the possible connections between art and fashion are in fact far more frequent and far more diversified (Mariani 2022).

That said, it becomes analytically relevant to observe and identify episodes of artification within fashion – that is, the processes through which it is transformed from non-art into art (Shapiro, Heinrich 2012).

The production of an art garment becomes possible through the suspension of the garment's 'normality', with reference to the canons of European tailoring. To achieve this aim, specific strategies are employed that alter the vestimentary structure by intervening in materials, forms, and conventions – that is, in the constitutive elements of dress. These strategies include the unconventional use of materials, the transgression of forms, the subversion of conventions, surrealism, and pastiche (Crane 2000). By adopting these strategies, creators of art garments contribute to the emergence of the art world of fashion (Becker 1982).

The unconventional use of materials leads to the vestimentary application of experimental, unusual, recycled, deformed, or unexpected materials, not necessarily beautiful or expensive. This is exemplified by Rabanne's collection of garments made from metal and plastic discs joined by steel hooks (Kamitsis 1999), or by Margiela's use of re-

claimed materials – such as gloves, scarves, or broken plates – to create new garments and accessories (Evans 2003).

The transgression of forms results in architectural, daring, asymmetrical, disproportionate, or aberrant garments, far removed from the artisanal imperative of being crafted ‘according to the rules of the art’. Examples include Balenciaga’s abstract shapes, such as the sack dress and the baby doll silhouette (Miller 2007), or McQueen’s Armadillo shoes, which radically alter posture and the shape of the foot (Bolton 2011).

The subversion of conventions leads to the unconventional placement of garments, details, and accessories within the vestimentary order. This can be seen in Miyake’s elimination of sizes, genders, and seasons by treating the garment as an engineering module (Miyake, Fujiwara 2001), or in Michele’s application of bows, lace, and frills to menswear (Geczy, Karaminas 2018).

The use of surrealism gives rise to unexpected associations between vestimentary forms and other forms. This is evident in Viktor & Rolf’s transformation of framed paintings into wearable garments, as if they were fragmented canvases (Spindler, Baudot 2018), or in Browne’s garments made from fabrics reproducing human anatomy,

resembling a body worn over the body (Bolton 2023).

The use of pastiche leads to the combination of details and vestimentary styles from different periods and places, as well as to a shift from garment to costume – whether ethnic or theatrical, typically eccentric or performative. This is exemplified by Galliano's blending of aesthetics from different historical periods (Wilcox 2007) or by Gaultier's fusion of ethnic references with fetishism (Loriot 2011).

By boycotting stylistic normality through the innovation of vestimentary structure, creators of art garments position themselves outside the fashion mainstream. Their intrinsic difference qualifies them as experimenters or provocateurs (Crane 1997).

Experimenters are highly innovative creators who relate to fashion in the same way that avant-garde artists relate to academic art. Kawakubo employs deconstruction and abstraction to create garments that radically redefine bodily silhouette and fabric use (Butler 2024). Van Herpen uses technology to produce wearable sculptures that appear to originate from an alien world (Van Herpen, Pitiot 2023). Their approaches transform

fashion into a conceptual endeavour strongly influenced by architecture and anthropology, imagining alternative aesthetic regimes.

These are non-academic and non-conventional creators who regard themselves as artists. Their interlocutors are not consumers, but intellectuals and creatives. Rather than garments or accessories, they create objects that are meaningful in themselves – like works of art, or experiences of aesthetic or conceptual experimentation applied to fashion.

Provocateurs, by contrast, are deeply irreverent creators who play with fashions, styles, genders, and art itself, using garments as critical commentary on society and the fashion system. Westwood, rooted in punk culture, uses style to express rebellion against social prescriptions (Westwood, Kelly 2015). More recently, Gvasalia has produced garments and accessories bordering on kitsch and alluding to the ready-made, elevating replicas of everyday objects into luxurious status symbols (Sun, Kim 2022).

This provocation is not an end in itself; rather, it aims to invite the fashion public to reflect on the contemporary meanings of consumption and aesthetics. These creators are resistant to the rhetoric of authorship, genius, and high culture.

Their critique is imbued with irony and self-irony, targeting both the normality of fashion and its claims to artistic legitimacy. They are therefore anti-consumerist and anti-celebrity-driven, creating objects intended to unsettle and astonish.

3. The Phases of Artification in Fashion

Having outlined the different types of art garment creators, the focus now shifts to the progression of artification. The process of artification within fashion unfolds in three successive stages: the second half of the nineteenth century, the early twentieth century, and the second half of the twentieth century (Baglioni 2026).

The first phase coincides with the emergence of fashion itself, with the beginnings of haute couture, which was receptive to the artistic ferment of the time (Matta 2015). The first ‘talented tailors’ created autonomously and presented their own vestimentary models, thereby breaking with the tradition of commission-based tailoring and declaring themselves artists. Here, the criterion of intentionality becomes particularly evident, as in the case of designers such as Worth or Poiret (Morini 2020).

At that time, although these designers created garments according to their own taste, they

produced fashion garments rather than art garments. These were garments crafted ‘according to the rules of the art’, exquisitely tailored, but not the result of genuine artistic experimentation. This transformation remained confined to the realm of artistic craftsmanship rather than entering that of art proper, preserving both the function and the vestimentary structure of the garment. Nonetheless, it represents a crucial episode, as it invents fashion as an autonomous aesthetic and productive domain.

The second phase marks a transformation that aspires to go further, seeking entry into the realm of artisticity under the influence of the intense experimentation of the early avant-gardes (Nigro Covre 2021). Art began to involve a plurality of domains, including dress, as is clearly visible in the surrealist creations of Schiaparelli (Carron de la Carrière 2022), the purist designs of Vionnet (Golbin 2009), the futurist garments of Balla (Pautasso 2021), or the simultaneist works of Terk De-launay (Malochet, Bianchi 2006).

These are art garments in the strict sense, created by designers and artists who use dress as the object of their experimentation. While retaining vestimentary function, these garments inno-

vate vestimentary structure. The principle of craftsmanship 'according to the rules of the art' is superseded by additional aesthetic and conceptual content. Designers and artists share a common intentionality, turning the art garment into a wearable object endowed with genuinely artistic value rather than merely stylistic value.

The third phase emerges with the rise of the new avant-gardes (Poli 2003), triggering a significant transformation. Art comes to be perceived as ubiquitous, and everything appears susceptible to artification, leading to a deeper and more radical experimentation – a total experimentation that both reflects and influences the very lives of art creators (Bourriaud 1999). The garment begins to function fully as a medium for creative expression, integrating into the broad processes of signification characteristic of contemporary art.

This occurs because garment and body are closely intertwined, enabling the transmission of powerful and intelligible meanings through this specific object. Dressing is, indeed, a key element in identity construction, self-assertion, and the recognition of others, effectively communicating socially intelligible meanings (Bovone 2014). As a socially shared fact, dressing is a personal experience that does not remain confined to the private

sphere, but rather unites individuals, as it is something everyone does and understands.

If garments communicate, art garments communicate with even greater force due to their aesthetic or conceptual distinctiveness. The garment thus becomes a privileged vehicle for artistic experimentation. Vestimentary function no longer constitutes a limit to the artisticity of the garment; on the contrary, it becomes a kind of megaphone for the dissemination and comprehension of contemporary art's meanings within public discourse and public space. Being worn, or potentially wearable, enhances the cultural significance of the art garment, as if it were a second skin or even the body itself, generating emotional impact and physical involvement.

A metonymic transformation thus takes place, whereby figurative meaning replaces literal meaning: the garment stands in for the body, regardless of whether it is worn or not (Trasforini 2012). The art garment is a body – it is the body that 'inhabits' it or the body that 'is absent', with all the possible references and evocations this entails. In fashion garments, the opposite occurs: the body becomes the garment. As the ritual of the fashion show repeatedly demonstrates, the garment takes the place of the body. Fashion uses the body as a

mere mannequin, producing an inversion akin to a mirror game in which the metonymic key is applied in the opposite direction.

It is also worth emphasising the different approaches adopted by artists and designers in the creation of art garments – a difference that is reflected in the garment's function and structure, that is, in its use and appearance. Among artists, the explicit equivalence between garment and body allows for the abandonment of both vestimentary function and vestimentary structure, resulting in a double rupture. The garment is no longer, or not necessarily, an object to be worn, nor is it necessarily an object made according to specific materials, forms, and conventions. A notable example is provided by the works of Sterbak (Trasforini 2010), whose vestimentary references serve as a highly evocative support for reflection on the human condition.

By contrast, among designers – particularly those who act as experimenters or provocateurs – the art garment retains vestimentary function, in continuity with the creator's professional vocation, while abandoning vestimentary structure, thus producing a single rupture. In this way, the garment preserves its utility while becoming an op-

portunity for experimenting with alternative materials, forms, and conventions, as exemplified by Capucci's architectural and sculptural creations (Blum 2011).

In conclusion, the transformation of the garment's meaning as a site of artistic experimentation takes shape with the historical avant-gardes and deepens with the new avant-gardes. An art garment is such because it is created with an artistic purpose, thereby manifesting a precise intentionality on the part of the creator, which may be more closely aligned with the field of art or with that of fashion.

In particular, while the artist transcends both vestimentary structure and function, the designer abandons vestimentary structure while often preserving vestimentary function, continuing to conceive the garment as an object to be worn. In both cases, creative intervention is enacted upon the garment as a corporeal simulacrum, heir to the many experiences that throughout the first and second halves of the twentieth century made this kind of aesthetic and conceptual experimentation possible. Ultimately, the art garment is capable of conveying powerful and intelligible meanings because it constitutes the covering of the body and,

through an easy transposition of meaning, becomes the body itself – a symbol of the person.

What has been described, however, does not amount to an artification of fashion, but rather to an artification within fashion. These are not generalised processes, but experiences characteristic of a limited number of creators. By exploiting the added value of art, they constitute an elite within fashion: the art world of fashion.

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