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*When artists turn their attention to the fashion system, the wearability of the resulting clothes is usually the last thing on their minds, writes Paolo Gabrielli*

Since the beginning of the 20th century, when French haute couture first appropriated art in pursuit of avant-garde credentials, the crossover of art and fashion has tended to throw up more riches for designers than for artists. While the former plunder artistic movements, even individual paintings, for inspiration – the history of art as fashion's look-book – artists have been more cautious, and certainly less brazen, in embracing the visual language of the fashion world. It's partly, of course, a class issue. While the crossover has always bestowed kudos on designers, it has been considered a rather bad marriage for the artworld – an unholy union of high and low forms, of the weighty and the superficial.

Consider the landmark exhibition "Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors", mounted at New York's Jewish Museum in 1966. In an appeal to the mainstream, the show deliberately placed industrially processed work in the context of the prevalent Sixties aesthetic of cool simplicity and reduction. Harper's Bazaar proclaimed the triumph of the "minimal look", and went on to publish texts by then relatively unknown artists such as Robert Smithson. A fashion title had borrowed the authority of art to set a cultural agenda, and at the same time had conferred the glamour and publicity of the fashion world to art. It was a strategy that has persisted, reaching its natural peak with the media frenzy that surrounded "Sensation" and the YBAs. The notion that the fashion industry can only ever contaminate art has inevitably been hard to dismiss.

But just as the traditional distinctions between painting, sculpture, photography, film and installation have been eroded over the years, so too has the notion of art and fashion as distinct practices. According to Roland Barthes' analysis of what he called "the fashion system", first published in 1967, fashion is not about function, but forms a semiotic language through which cultural meanings are constructed. In other words, fashion doesn't keep you warm but, first and foremost, functions as a sign or a means of communication. And art speaks the same language. The knitted pieces by German artist Rosemarie Trockel question how social and personal identities – particularly those of women – are determined by clothing. Untitled ("Endless" Stockings) (1987) parodies the slender legs promoted by the fashion industry as the hallmark of feminine beauty. Looking at the tensions between the self and the other, Schizo-Pullover (1988) has a double neck – dressing two different people or, indeed, one person with two heads.

It's clear from looking at Yinka Shonibare's suits and dresses that this is an artist who infuses his art with an overtly political charge. For him, questions of identity, class and race are raised from works that focus on the relationship between costume, ➤➤

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Dreams fulfill a vital function towards our biological and mental balance, as do sleep, oxygen and a healthy diet.

They serve as an outlet for impulses repressed during the day; they allow problems to emerge that need to be resolved; they suggest solutions; their selective function, as with memory, releases the conscious mind.

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◀ *fashion and gender. Since the early 1990s Shonibare (who was born in London, but spent much of his childhood in Nigeria) has uncovered the layers of contemporary culture, juxtaposing those at odds with one another. Exclusive structures (and the people they exclude) often feature. In Five Under Garments and Much More (1995), Shonibare presents the viewer with garments exquisitely fashioned in African batik prints. The fabrics signify ethnic identity – ‘African-ness’ – but are in fact products of colonial origin. To confuse matters more, Shonibare tailors the costumes in the manner of sophisticated ‘designer’ items, obscuring any reading of traditional ethnic simplicity by presenting them in the context of the Western fashion world.*

*Similar tensions of the fashion system are successfully exploited by Franko B and Vanessa Beecroft, both known for their highly staged performances. Franko B’s I Miss You catwalk show and Beecroft’s entire body of work are derived from the iconography of fashion and desire: the first turns cruelty into beauty, while the second’s subliminal visions of stereotyping pose a critique of depiction itself. Beecroft’s performances are ephemeral tableaux vivants: they are not paintings of women but painted women. Carefully made-up, as if preparing for a fashion shoot, the models are orchestrated and deployed by Beecroft in the ever-narrowing space of simulation, where they are available to our gaze but remain unavailable to our understanding. It’s as if we find ourselves between the model and the photographer’s lens: the idealized woman comes alive with all her imperfections, denying us both the distance of contemplating the representation and the intimacy of the encounter.*

*Spectatorship – how we look, and what we see – is key to understanding performances of Franko B’s I Miss You (1999-2003). Along a canvas catwalk, with spectators arranged on either side and photographers gathered at one end, Franko walks back and forth ‘painting’ the fabric as his blood drips on it, throbbing out of intravenous needles. The fashion system becomes politically symbolic in his work, since it is his unprotected, naked body that is being photographed. The twist is that consumable objects do finally result from this savage parody of fashion’s catwalk shows: the very canvas used in his performance is subsequently turned into clothes and upholstery material on his behalf, by friends from art schools and the club scene.*

*Both Andrea Zittel, with her “A-Z Garment Series”, and Lucy Orta, with the complex survival suits she introduced in 1992, deal with the opposites we live with, either confronting the alienating urban condition with a renewed social engagement or avoiding it altogether. A recurring theme for Zittel is that of escapism, as she experiments with contemporary ideas of isolation, independence and personal limits. Her early Nineties Living Units also engaged with clothing: uniforms to be worn for six-month seasons, as opposed to the four-seasonal approach of the fashion industry. Exploring the socio-cultural elements that define design, her clothing merges abstraction and literalism, reducing clothing to its most fundamental elements.*

*Orta’s Refuge Wear was a response to situations of human distress and hostile social environments. Hugely influential to the ‘utilitarian’ look of the last few years, she developed what she calls “body architectures of shelter” using high-tech materials and multi-functional components. Orta’s recent Modular Architectures develops the principle of “social-links”, featuring individual body-suits which, once taken off, can be zipped together to form a sheltering tent.*

*These artists are among many who engage the idiom of fashion in a continuous, reciprocal dialogue. Costume historian Richard Martin expressed scepticism about the art-fashion connection, suggesting that if they were conjoined, it is because of the magnanimity of art. But fashion can inspire debates within contemporary art. It is up to each of us to discern the distinction between genuine crossovers and those subliminal lifestyle ads we are increasingly exposed to.*