

The Tête-À-Tête of Performance in Fashion and Art

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Abstract

Performance art has always been considered a treat to Modernist Art; it was theatrical in the pejorative sense Michael Fried gave to the word. When we look at his arguments we might conclude that not alone performance art or minimal art is theatrical but fashion as well. Of course Fried did not talk about fashion, neither did Greenberg, but both saw it probably as belonging to mass culture, which was a treat to the autonomy of the so called high art as well. In my presentation I want to look more closely to performance in art and performance in fashion starting in the time Fried published his «Art and Objecthood», the end of the sixties, till about three decades later. I will concentrate more in particular on the early moment and compare this with the situation of the nineties. What has changed in the development of performance art and fashion and in their relation? Performance art in the sixties and seventies tried to stay as far as possible from the theatrical sign or to use the word of the time: the sign of the spectacle. One could typify this early moment of performance art as the moment of the blank sign while fashion felt more at home in the sign of spectacle. In the nineties the situation has changed, partly due to social circumstances, partly due to a change of focus from the catwalk as instrumental for fashion to the catwalk as a autonomous event. In my presentation I will explain the opposition of a blank sign and the sign of the spectacle and give examples of first the gap and later the affinity of performance in art and performance in fashion.

In the history of modernist criticism the performance is an unreliable, treacherous sign that constantly avoids the obligation of every discipline to investigate its essence and its mission. The performance as a medium can be a live representation of a story, or a spectacle, or it can be used as a critique or negation of the spectacle and the spectacular and a staging of the Self — though the word «staging» in this case is not the right one.

In general the first is found in theatre, the second in fashion and the last two in the visual arts. Therefore as far as fashion and the visual arts are concerned, the opposition could be characterised as the opposition of the sign of the spectacle and the blank sign. Why blank? I will explain this below.

1. MODERNIST CRITICISM AND THE MEDIUM OF PERFORMANCE

Modernist criticism requires every discipline to focus on the specific nature of its medium, so that the subject of painting, for example, should be painting itself — i.e., its two dimensions, and its pictorial materials. This approach was hostile to interaction and even partly created a barrier between the disciplines, although it never completely succeeded in this.

Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' (1967) has always been a key text for this form of art criticism. He addresses himself primarily to Minimal Art, but in a footnote and in a single paragraph Fried (Fried 1998: 164) indicates that his criticism extends to early performance and installation art; he is thinking in particular of the Happenings. He dismisses Minimal Art, as well as this form of performance art, as 'theatre'. He talks about a war between theatre and Modernist painting and even between theatre and art in general, and about how art has been perverted, even corrupted, by theatre. 'Art degenerates when it comes close to the condition of theatre.' (Fried 1998: 164)

When Fried wrote this in 1967, he was still convinced that the examples of interdisciplinary collaboration all around him, such as that between John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg, for example, would not lead to a synthesis of the arts. History, however, has taught us that he was unable to turn the tide.

There is, however, another point that is important in this connection. Fried, as well as Clement Greenberg, the other well-known advocate of Modernism, clearly had a preference for works of art that were seen as commanding an intrinsic meaning independent of the time and position from which the work is perceived. Perhaps it is this verdict, essentially an aesthetic one, that neither performance art in the widest sense, nor the design product — and certainly not fashion design — can answer.

Of course one could say that fashion in the real sense is a good response to the fear of degeneration. After all, it shows good taste, and could therefore be considered as a weapon against poor clothing habits and kitsch. However, both fashion *performance* and fashion design are ephemeral, and can in fact only be understood properly in a direct historical framework — that which has been, that which plays a role in the present, or what one expects in the future.

Nevertheless, Fried's idea of art as theatre remains fascinating, especially when we consider that performance art in the 1970s, as well as the designs of a small number of fashion

designers at that time, was actually trying to be *non*-theatrical. Theatrical design went against the view that performance art was meant to be about reality itself and not a representation of reality. It was felt that the spectacle had to be avoided.

These motivations of performance art generally had little to do with Fried's critique, which penetrated a broad circle in Europe only much later. In performance arts psychological factors were more important, notably the need for self-examination and issues of personal history and identity.

2. PERFORMANCE ART IN THE 1970s

Self-examination in particular was an important issue in the performance art of the early and mid-1970s, more so than in the period before or after. I would like to refer to this as the moment of the 'blank sign', as opposed to the 'sign of the spectacle', in which fashion undoubtedly feels much more at home. Whereas the first is a sign that is meant to express as little as possible, the second wants to show off as much as possible, with clothing, accessories and make-up. [In another context Peirce used the word 'parade'.] With the former it is seldom a question of fashion but rather of 'clothing', even when it is not part of the everyday environment of the performance.

2.1. The blank sign

But can there be something like a blank sign? And how important was this period in performance art? Viewed historically, anti-theatrical European performance art certainly lasted for only a brief period.

In the Netherlands the most important representative was Ben d'Armagnac, while elsewhere there were Marina Abramovic, Gina Pane and VALIE EXPORT. Their performances were closely connected with their personal lives. They revealed their vulnerability in performances in which content, progress and outcome were usually not determined in advance, and they did not shrink from taking real risks. These performance artists had a strong influence on the art of the 1990s and later, in the first instance on the visual arts, but more indirectly also on the fashion performance of the 1990s, which will be discussed below.

Paradoxically, the visual image that springs to mind when the names of these performance artists are mentioned is certainly not that of blank signs. Whoever calls to mind Ben d'Armagnac during his performances sees a small, slight man wearing what looked like unfashionable Jaeger underwear. Jaeger underwear consisted of 50 per cent cotton and 50 per cent wool. The colour was often described as grey and the styles were very unfashionable, but in a sense the cloth suggested a sense of protection (against the cold).

Marina Abramovic brings to mind the figure of a naked woman, although she was by no means always naked in her performances. Gina Pane often wore white overalls, and the image of Valie Export is mainly determined by one performance in which she wore a black motorcycle jacket. Blank signs? In the last two cases they were certainly not really blank signs, since the white overalls expressed Pane's sexuality and the black motorcycle jacket Export's masquerade of a 'masculine' power.

Perhaps it is most accurate to speak of blank signs if we are able to overlook what sorts of clothes were worn, just *because* they were so ordinary.

After a number of performances Ben d'Armagnac realized that his clothing, which was meant to be indifferent, was quickly becoming part of his image and was thus acquiring an unwanted theatrical effect. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein may well have said that 'white glamorizes things', which is why he chose almost 'Jaeger' coloured walls for the only house he designed — for his sister Elisabeth — but as in the case of D'Armagnac we know that even 'Jaeger' can say too much.

I remember that unbleached cotton was very fashionable at that time in the fashion department of the School of Art in Arnhem. It was a type of cloth that was often used for prototypes, but fashion students were also starting to use it for their final presentations. Although the world of fashion was still far removed from the world of (performance) art, the idea of 'back to basics' was popular with both.

At the level of intention, the performance artists at that time were very aware of what their performances should *not* be, namely everything that was associated with theatre, theatricality, the spectacle and the non-real.

2.2 Travesty

During the same period, the mid-1970s, there was another phenomenon in performance art. There were a number of artists known by the name «Transformers», because most of them had taken part in the exhibition *Transformer: Aspekte der Travestie* in Lucerne in 1974.

The issue here was a phenomenon that was not limited to the visual arts, but was also conspicuous in the culture of pop music in the multiple personae of Lou Reed, Mick Jagger and David Bowie, although in their case it did not acquire such a strong psychological dimension. In a way they too were questioning the socially established boundaries of masculinity and femininity, while artists such as Luciano Castelli, Jürgen Klauke, Urs Lüthi, Luigi Ontani and Pierre Molinier were more concerned with their personal lives and identities.

Androgyny and drag performance were often staged by them as aesthetic idealised images in so-called *Selbstdarstellungen*. Performance was seen as a medium that allowed idealised and fictitious images to coincide with reality. Idealized images were created in sometimes garishly staged performances with the use of various props, outrageous clothing and, above all, make-up. At first sight these performances seem to be far removed from the much more sober performances of the artists mentioned earlier. However, in terms of content there is little difference.

Later it became clear that there is no natural relationship between external appearance and the inner self. That awareness was for example present among designers like Thierry Mugler, who had the drag artist Ru Paul appear on the catwalk for his spring/summer 1992 show in a glittering red costume consisting of a cowboy hat, cutaway trousers and arm protectors. In contrast to this, but made from the same red fabric, he wore a super-feminine body stocking that barely covered the mound of Venus/penis.

3 FASHION PERFORMANCE

In her book *Fashion at the Edge* (2003) Caroline Evans describes the fascination of a number of designers, including John Galliano, with artworks which address sexual ambiguity or a hybrid theme. Women were portrayed as *femmes fatales*, appearing in the guise of Salomé, Medusa, the showgirl, the Sadean woman or the Bataillean whore, who look both terrifying and seductive. From here it is only a small step to the catwalk, which in the case of designers like McQueen, becomes the locus of horror, where ‘death and the maiden’ is exchanged for ‘death and fashion’. This happened in most of his shows between 1993 and 1997. In the 1990s well-known designers were addressing serious and dark subjects that were generally showcased in a rather baroque and spectacular way. It is as though these designers had started to play an increasingly extreme, abject game with their public, as well as with their models. McQueen’s collection ‘The Hunger’ (spring/summer 1996), for example, included a model wearing a transparent plastic shirt under which worms were imprisoned, crawling over her skin. It is for this reason, Evans says, that McQueen seems to take a perverse pleasure in bringing sexuality, death and transgression together. Quite a few sources of McQueen’s inspiration are clear, sometimes they were found in history, and sometimes he was influenced by contemporary artists such as the Chapman brothers. In general, one often refers to the Aids crisis during that time. It undoubtedly played a major role worldwide, especially amongst gay artists and designers.

3.1 Art, fashion and perversion

In 1970s performance art the blank sign did not appear to be a blank sign at all. In the 1990s the sign of the spectacle of the traditional fashion show was not the same anymore. What was it then? In psychoanalytic terms the spectacle had become a spectacular perverse transformation of a reality of decay, loss of beauty, physical deterioration and death. Perversion can be seen as a moment in time, but it is also a dimension of the human psyche in general. We see it as a confusion and mixture of both the sexes and of generations, a denial of the ideas of a more normal sexuality. In perversion all differences are suspended, which opens the way for the creation of new realities. What we see in fashion shows is a sign of this. I want to emphasise that it comes to light in the fashion performances as such, and not in the designs we find in the shops. I use the concept of perversion here in the way it is interpreted and related to creativity by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (Chasseguet-Smirgel: 1985).

Another important concept is the concept of the abject, which has its origins in the writings of Julia Kristeva (Kristeva:1980). It was introduced in the field of art in the early 1990s when the curators of an exhibition of American art in the Whitney Museum presented their show with the title «Abject Art». Though their selection was not limited to the contemporary art of that time, the reason for this show could certainly be found in the developments of the late 1980s, when artists became fascinated with disasters, violence, traumas, death and decay. Examples which spring to mind include the work of Cindy Sherman, Andres Serrano, and others. It soon became clear that this interest was, if not worldwide, then at least a response of Western European artists, and British artists in particular. Young British Artists were interested in similar themes and abject materials — not only visual artists, but fashion designers as well. It is said (Evans 2003) that some of them — for example, McQueen — were directly

influenced by the Chapman brothers. The result was that the boundaries between the art and fashion performance became increasingly blurred at that time, precisely because the abject and the perverse were dominant in both fields.

3.2 Post-human

Although abject art became a term that was often applied to the art of the late 1980s and 1990s, the new developments were probably more often characterised as the era of the post-human. At first sight this appeared to be something completely different, but if we look at the performances, both in the visual arts and in fashion, we soon find that the abject and post-human representations had one thing in common, viz. their uncanny character, the English translation of the Freudian concept of the 'unheimlich'. The uncanny is based on a confusion about whether something is living or lifeless and the traumatic experience of being confronted with the memory of something that seems to be familiar but which has lost its familiarity because of a traumatic event. Both feature in the story about the sandman and the doll Olympia, originally a subject in the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822), but interpreted in greater psychological detail by Sigmund Freud in 'Das Unheimliche' (1919).

Fashion designers such as Hussein Chalayan, Viktor & Rolf, Walter van Beirendonck, and again, McQueen and Maison Martin Margiela, certainly use many examples of lifelike dolls and doll-like mannequins. For example, Walter van Beirendonck's 1995-96 autumn/winter 1995-6 'Wild and Lethal' show featuring masked robot-like figures resembling a group of aliens. Six months later, the catwalk was replaced by a CD-ROM with computer-generated images showing models with plastic faces moving like robots in a virtual world. We see it in Chalayan's shows, in which the models walked around like remote-controlled robots. Many designers in the 1990s exploited this sense of the uncanny by making a link between the model and the mannequin. This had been done earlier by Marcel Duchamp, who asked his artist colleagues to transform shop window dummies for the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris in 1938. Or the Polish surrealist artist Hans Bellmer, who later inspired Cindy Sherman and Alexander McQueen, and who photographed a specially made doll with a double set of legs in all sorts of positions, resulting in frightening associations with castration and rape. Maison Martin Margiela and Alexander McQueen, as well as Viktor & Rolf, worked with dolls in their shows: Margiela by making life-size wooden dolls move like marionettes, McQueen by rotating artificial, but almost lifelike models with glass heads on wooden discs, and Viktor & Rolf, who placed a dummy on a pedestal and dressed it layer upon layer like real couturiers, resulting in the model disappearing under eleven layers like a Russian matryoshka doll.

In 1992, Jeffrey Deitch curated an exhibition called *Posthuman*. A Dutch art programme made a film about this in which we see Claudia Schiffer walking across the screen in slow motion, like a goddess who transcends ordinary mortals, not only because of her aura but also because of her height. On the occasion of this exhibition, Vanessa Beecroft directed one of her first performances featuring naked, smoothly shaved women wearing identical foundation make-up. The women performed as a group, but since they looked like mannequins staring dreamily into space, there was a total lack of mutual communication, let alone any communication with the audience. It is obvious that in this case nudity is not a blank sign as in the performance art of the 1970s. In this case nudity is a form of clothing, and of course the high

heels, a well-known fetish object, are a sign of this. Through these signs nudity loses its purity and naturalness and becomes artificial and uncanny.

What are the right terms to describe this relationship between fashion and the visual arts in the 1990s? Influence is a term which was rejected in semiotics a long time ago. Zeitgeist? Kunstwollen? Intertextuality? This is, of course, the more popular term in semiotics. But it is the right term? It looks as though fashion designers absorbed and transformed their sources, these 'texts', in a spectacular, fashionable way. This leads to the questions: what are the rules of perversion and the abject in the world of fashion? Were they still different compared to those of the world of the visual arts? Certainly, their aims came closer to the artistic sources than ever before. How we know is still a question to be answered.

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