

Walter Van Beirendonk 'Dream the World Awake' - R.M.I.T. Design Hub 2013 - Photography Ronald Stoops

Art and its double - Fashion

Gary Willis

You only have to take a stroll down the Paris end of Collins Street, Melbourne to recognise the extent to which the great fashion houses have acquired the branding rights to our streets. This phenomenon remains consistent right across the globalised world. I recently had the luxury of visiting Shanghai, the largest city in the world with a population greater than Australia. Not having been to China before, I was surprised to find the central business district like 10,000 Chadstone shopping malls running shoulder to shoulder, wherein global fashion labels had branded their claim on the imagination of the city: Chanel, Prada, Louis Vuitton, Yves Saint Laurent, Hermes, Givenchy, Valentino, Armani, Gucci, McQueen, Commes des Garçons, Jean-Paul Gautier, Tom Ford, Jimmy Choo, Dolce & Gabbana, Marc Jacobs, Paul Smith. Even the façade of our hotel sported a giant ad for Christian Dior – the Christian Dior retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai.



Since 1983, when Dianna Vreeland mounted the Yves Saint Laurent retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, attracting more than one million visitors and setting a benchmark for attendance, fashion has meant big business for the museum industry. In 1982 Germano Celant, the editor of Art Forum, published his 'Special Fashion Issue' featuring Issey Miyake's rattan paraphrase of Samurai practice armor, flagging the forthcoming alliance between 'the avant-garde and mass culture'; art and fashion.

In 1999, as Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim New York Celant staged the Giorgio Armani retrospective, which also broke attendance records for the Guggenheim, raising more than \$US15 million for the museum, while being written down as a promotional event for Armani. More recently, in 2010, the Alexander McQueen retrospective *Savage Beauty* at the MET New York, again broke all attendance records. You can understand why the museum industry is wholeheartedly embracing fashion as art.

In Australia, the Art Gallery of NSW staged the Yves Saint Laurent retrospectives in 1986, the National Gallery of Australia, the Vivienne Westwood retrospective in 2004, and the Queensland Art Gallery presented Valentino in 2008. Recently RMIT Design Hub,

staged Walter van Beirendonck's retrospective 'Dream the World Awake'. The avant-guard Beirendonck is the head of fashion at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, and has been showing his menswear collection in Paris each year. The coup for RMIT and Melbourne is that this is the first time Bierensdonck's retrospective, has been presented outside of Europe.

Clearly cultural museums have been courting the fashion industry and its precious audience for some years, but Patricia Bickers, the editor



Cover: Art Forum Magazine - 1982
Issey Miyake: Rattan Samurai Dress
Photograph; Eiichiro Sakata



of Art Monthly (UK) questions whether the art world's bond with the fashion industry isn't 'a marriage of convenience'. However, a more objective analysis would indicate a perfect match: the museum's target audience is fashion's target market.

The current exhibition at Melbourne's Immigration Museum, *Faith and Fashion Fusion* (which runs until June next year), showcasing contemporary Muslim fashion, is sign of the global reach of this trend. I didn't notice any claims for Muslim fashion as art, despite the obvious aesthetic sensibilities, but perhaps this is because Islamic fashions are fundamentally about modesty. While the Bedouin women have a rich history of accessorising the burqa, in some cultures its adornment may be in contravention of its original function – to prevent the woman from being seen.

Muslim designer/artist Hussein Chalayan, famous for his fibre-glass vacuum formed 'Remote-Control Dresses', his ready-to-wear furniture and LED light garment collections, is every bit the artist-designer. In 1998, Chalayan presented his *Between* collection, a series of six burqas. Each was cut shorter than the other until all that was left was the face-mask – what is referred to as the Omani burqa – a stiff leather mask, usually black but sometimes with a gilded metallic finish. Chalayan

Above:
Faith Fashion Fusion
Immigration Museum - Melbourne 2013
Muslim women wearing Hijab.

Below:
Muslim woman wearing full Burqa



rarely presents on the catwalk, preferring alternative spaces such as an art gallery, the theatre, a warehouse and even a go-kart track.

Regardless of culture, most fashion is concerned with nuancing the cultural norm - the business suit or that 'little black dress'. However, in contrast to those designers supporting modesty, some western designers seek to empower the women they adorn. Alexander McQueen puts the edge on the issue saying: "Rather than romanticising female vulnerability ... I want people to be afraid of the women I dress", perhaps pinpointing a fundamental difference with western fashion culture. Think Lady Gaga or Isabella Blow to engender to trope. In both fashion and art, the west seeks attention. Alexander McQueen regularly uses radical strategies to excite the imagination of his art-savvy clientele. This is exemplified by the now famous image of the young McQueen and his muse Isabella Blow in the portrait by David LaChapelle *Burning down the House* (of French fashion). The 27-year-old McQueen had just launched his first collection for Givenchy in Paris, when he and Blow staged the metaphoric torching of Europe's medieval citadel of fashion, complete with armor-clad stead rearing in the background and memento mori, a Hans Holbein-like skull slung across the foreground, to remind us of the ephemerality of life. Blow is pictured wearing an ensemble by McQueen and sporting a Philip Treacy hat.

David Bowie's hit single *Modern Love*, from his 1983 album *Let's Dance*, has inspired the Bendigo Art Gallery's current exhibition (October 26- February 4) which offers an extraordinarily rich collection of fashionistas. A short list includes Vivienne Westwood with Malcolm McLaren and Andreas Kronthaler, Alexander McQueen, John Galliano and Marc Bohan for Christian Dior, Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, Tom Ford for YSL, Jean Paul Gaultier, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons, Christian Lou-



Above:
Hussein Chalayan, 2000
'After words' Table skirt

Below:
Alexander McQueen with Isabella Blow
'Burning Down the House'
Photograph; David La Chappelle 1996
Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, London



boutin, Moschino Couture, Dolce and Gabbana, Thierry Mugler, and Gianni Versace. The gallery's collaboration with Los Angeles' Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising leads with the visual assault of the Vivienne Westwood/Malcolm McLaren 'Bondage Ensemble' from the infamous King's Road boutique, SEX, the site which spawned The Sex Pistols.

During the 1980s Westwood's inspirations shifted from the Punks and Ragamuffins to New Romantics and the appropriation of upper-class aesthetics, which Westwood presented in her Anglomania collection of 1993 with what she called her Tatler Girls. This collection was made in conjunction with Lochcarron tartans in Scotland, where Westwood had her own tartan, the 'McAndreas', designed and named in honour of her second husband.

Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than to merely keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us. – Virginia Woolf – 'Orlando'



Above:
Vivienne Westwood Circa 1977
Tartan bondage seditionary
Photograph - Nick Knight



Left:
Vivienne Westwood, 1993
One of the Tatler Girls from the
'Anglomania' Collection.



Indeed, there is a rich feast of fashion on offer in Victorian museums at the moment. The National Gallery of Victoria has long held extensive fashion collections, which date as far back as the 17th century. More recently they have begun integrating their collections into their period exhibitions. Their current Edward Steichen and Art Deco Fashion exhibition (October 18-March 2) has demure Chanel dresses and cloche hats presented side by side the Conde Nast collections of Steichen's photographs.

In 1911, photographing gowns for the French couturier Paul Poiret, Steichen became the first fashion photographer. He went onto work for Vanity Fair, Vogue and a broad spectrum of advertising agencies including J. Walter Thompson, during which time he became the highest paid photographer in the world. Steichen's output covers a number of genres, including war photography, social realism and portraiture. Like many of his ilk - Cecil Beaton, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Helmut Newton, Annie Leibovitz - much of Steichen's production was produced under commission, which in the context of American abstract painting of the mid-20th century, marked his creative output as 'not art'. In his defence, Steichen argued 'I don't know any form of art that isn't or hasn't been commercial - Michelangelo also liked to be paid well for his work'. And here falls the shadow. Steichen went onto become the director of photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

In face of the perennial question of whether fashion is art, Lisa Phillips, the director of The New Museum, New York, dismisses any distinction between fashion and art as ridiculous - 'Fashion at its highest level is an art form!'

Remember the NGV's Mix Tape 1980s: Appropriation, Subculture, Critical Style at Federation Square, earlier this year, where the work of Australian fashionistas such as Leigh Bowery, Jenny Bannister, Katie Pye,

Chris Noth with Sarah Jessica Parker wearing 'The Peacock Dress', **Alexander McQueen, 2008**
Photograph; Annie Leibovitz for Vogue Magazine

Below:
Renée and Antonio de Marco
Silver gelatin photograph;
Edward Steichen, 1935.



Martin Grant were presented side by side the collections of painting, photography, sculpture, music and design from the 1980s.

Fashion has always been understood as an expression of the culture of the period and distinctions between fashion and art are hard to define. There are many designers whose work proves just as challenging and invigorating as art's more traditional practices. The work of Leigh Bowery springs to mind. Bowery didn't care what you called what it was that he did; 'there really isn't a name for it' he declaimed. Bowery's talent was far greater than any of his nominal identities; artist, artist's model, drag queen, performer, costume designer, fashionista and enfant terrible. His work defied categorisation. Many designers and artists cite Leigh Bowery as their muse including Vivienne Westwood, Alexander McQueen and Walter Van Beirendonck.



Above:
Walter Van Beirendonck, 2010
'Take a Ride' Autumn/Winter Collection.
Photograph; Sonny Vandevelde

Left:
Leigh Bowery
'Look 38' - 1994
Photograph; Fergus Greer

Bowery was never the businessman expected by the fashion industry. He dropped out of fashion school at RMIT bored by the rigors of industrial production and tottered onto the global stage as ... an artist. Bowery's instinctive preference for the performative (over the production-run) highlights one critical distinction between art and fashion, which Adam Geczy & Vicki Karaminas, the editors of *Fashion and Art*, reiterate; 'if fashion really aspired to be art it would be ruinous' for business. Costume, theatre design, performance art, might seem to belong to a different genre, but like everything else in this postmodern world, boundaries are blurry.

Walter Van Beirendonck is regularly celebrated as an artist. Take a quick look at the costumes he designed for U2's 'POP' concert based on Action Man figures, and you will see why Bono is adamant on this point. However, the director of the Tate Modern Chris Dercon, in Australia earlier this year to launch the RMIT's Beirendonck retrospective at Design Hub, made his position on the matter clear at the forum to introduce Beirendonck's work; "fashion is not art - fashion is a mode of industrial design production", he insisted. But he then added a suspicious afterthought - "I hope that fashion is not ruining the art world".



In truth, few artists identify as fashion designers just as most designers do not claim to be artists. Rei Kawakubo refuses to be called an artist; John Galliano wants to make people dream, but recognises his duty is to sell clothes; Karl Lagerfeld demarcates a simple division, 'Fashion is Fashion: Art is Art'. Yves Saint Laurent is the first to acknowledge the fuzzy line between creative industries and art, "Fashion is not quite art but it requires an artist in order to exist".

Once, fashion was fashion and art was art, and that was that. Artists and designers operated through very different economic networks and had different social aspirations, although some artists and fashion designers arguably had much in common. Even so, most art and design shares period aesthetics. Many artists and designers appropriate each other's work. The *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* exhibition at the MET in NY earlier this year presented the work of Courbet,

Above:
Walter Van Beirendonck
 ModeMuseum, Antwerp.
 Costumes for U2, 'POPMART' tour, 1997

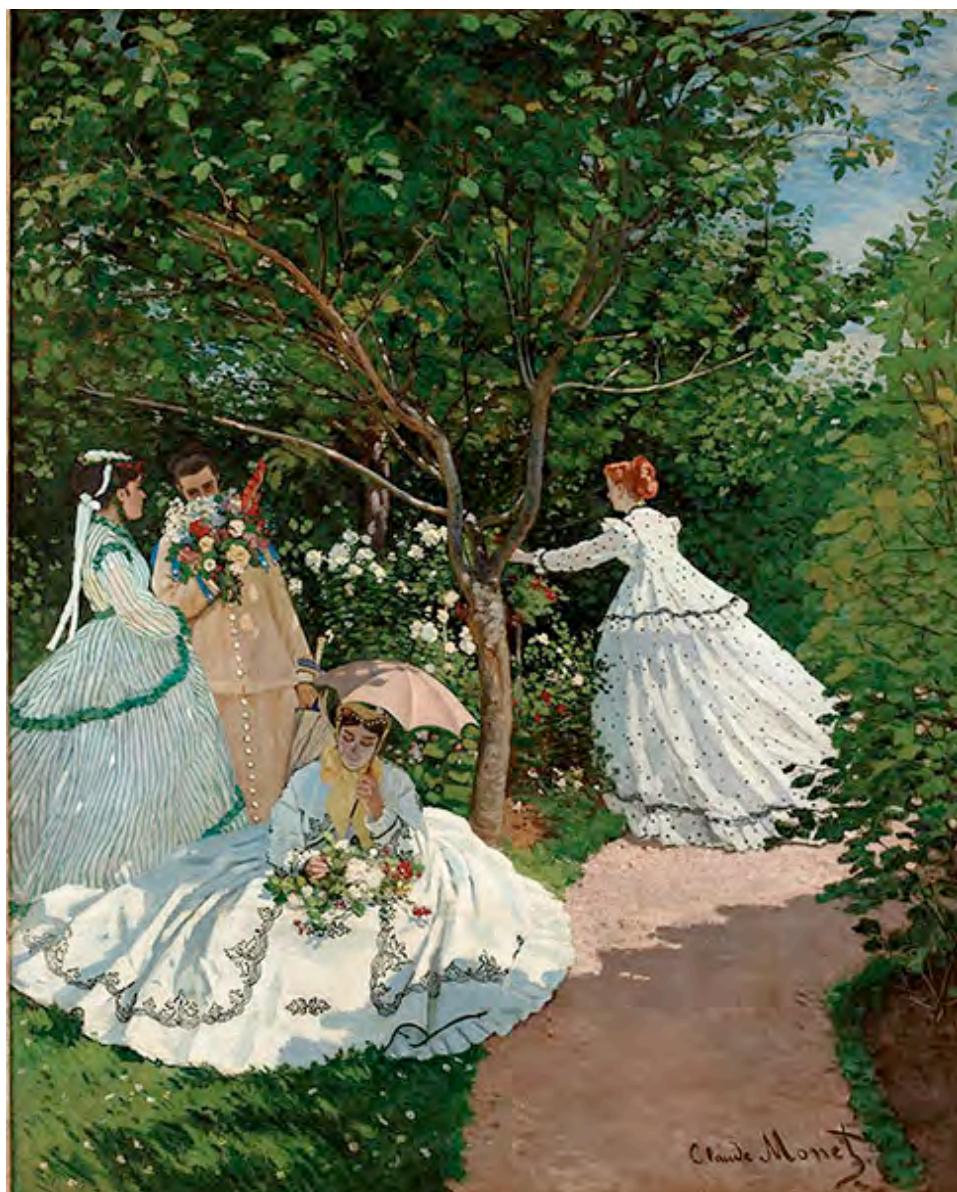
Manet, Monet, Renoir, Caillebotte and Tissot in the context of their collection of grande black silk evening gowns and diaphanous white linen day dresses of the period.

Paul Poiret was the first to acknowledge that fashion designers and artists had a much in common. Thierry Hermès built his company out of the carriage trade, making harnesses and saddles before developing a line in luggage and handbags, which he expanded into coats on the basis of the innovation he called the fermeture Hermès - the zipper. But really, how different is that from the global expansion of Claude Monet's market following the construction of his water gardens at Giverny. You could view both as businessmen taking advantage of a golden opportunity, a technological innovation. Although Poiret and Picasso may have shared a rigorous commitment to their respective ateliers, arguably they maintained similar social and financial aspirations, but the couturier and the painter chose profoundly different means. It would be hard to compare the throw-away aesthetics of Picasso's Cubo-dadist collages with the finely coutured gowns of Poiret. Picasso was not one for art as decoration, in fact he was adamant on this point; "Art is not made to decorate rooms. It is an offensive and defensive weapon (to be used) against the enemy."

Piet Mondrian would appear to have been neither socially or commercially ambitious, but clearly he was artistically driven. Just four years before he died of pneumonia, he borrowed enough money to move to New York, in 1944. Twenty years later Yves Saint Laurent painstakingly reconfigured the proportions and colours of Mondrian's De Stijl compositions, in red yellow and blue jersey for his 1965 Fall Series.



Above;
Charles Frederick Worth, 1900
Collection: Metropolitan
Museum of Art - N.Y.



Left;
Claude Monet, 1866
'Women in the Garden', Oil on Canvas
Collection: Musee D'Orsay, Paris

Nancy Troy, professor of art and art history at Stanford University, points out that Saint Laurent manufactured tens of thousands of his Mondrian-minis, at a time when a good Mondrian was worth about \$US1,800. Twenty years later, during Saint Laurent's retrospective at the NY MET, a Mondrian sold at auction for \$US42,000, possibly acquired by Saint Laurent himself. In 2011, a 1965 Saint Laurent mini (labeled and numbered 10,494) sold at auction for about \$US52,478 while the last sale of a Mondrian (that I could track) went under the hammer in the UK for about \$US30 million. No doubt Mondrian's De Stijl aesthetics played a significant role in elevating Saint Laurent's profile in the marketplace and vice versa. By the end of his life, in 2008, Saint Laurent owned five Mondrians. Some artists and designers have a long history of association.

In 1996, the Guggenheim NY curator, Germano Celant curated the inaugural Florence Biennale focusing on fashion in the arts. He presented works including Giacomo Balla, Rodchenko/Stepanova, Sonia Delaunay, Salvador Dali, Elsa Schiaparelli and Man Ray as well as



Above;
Piet Mondrian, 1942
 Studio; East 56th St. New York.
 Photograph, Arnold Newman.



Left;
Yves Saint Laurent, 1966
 De Stijl collection with Mondrian.
 Photograph, Erik Klooster.
 Courtesy;
 The Hague Gemeente Museum

pairing celebrity artists with celebrity fashion designers; Roy Lichtenstein with Gianni Versace, Jenny Holzer with Helmut Lang, Damien Hirst with Prada. Very much ahead its time, Celant's presentation of the collaborations between artists and designers was generally considered ill-fated and audiences faltered, however, given the current passion for art and fashion, I imagine that such an exhibition would be a blockbuster today.

In this context it might be interesting to pair the work and careers of two Melbourne artists Jenny Watson and Jenny Bannister. Both belong to the same generation, one a painter the other a fashion designer. Jenny Watson, the painter, famous for appropriating fashion into her painting. Jenny Bannister the fashion designer long known for her appropriation of art as fashion. Bannister articulates the artist's dilemma: creative expression versus commercial outcome. 'It hit me in the late '80s – commerciality – before then, I was an absolute purist; an artist.'

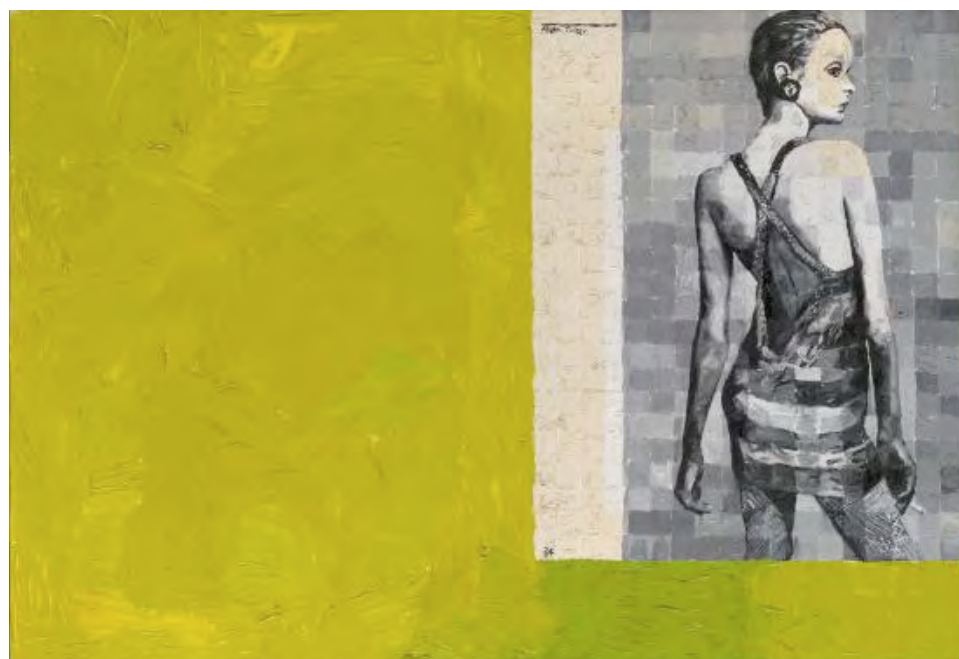
Both Jenny's were equally represented in the Mix Tape 1980s exhibition at Federation Square earlier this year. A quick search through the NGV online catalogue reveals they hold 30 works by Jenny Bannister, and 23 works by Jenny Watson, from the same period. Given fashion's current status as art, we might speculate which of the two Jennys will be first to be offered a retrospective at the NGV – perhaps they could be presented together?

But not all fashion designers aspire to the presentation of their work as art. For Marc Jacobs fashion is only valid if it is worn, "I think clothes in a museum are complete death" he explained, "I have seen the exhibitions of the clothes of Jackie Kennedy but I am not interested in her wardrobe. I am interested in the life; the woman who wore those clothes."

Of course; today there are many artists whose production is developed indirect response to their market and maintain production schedules every bit as formal as the outsourced production common to pret-a-porter. Andy Warhol might be seen as the progenitor of this phenomenon, but Warhol's production retains an ambiguous edge. In spring 2008 the Warhol Museum launched their 'Warhol Factory X Levis X Damien Hirst' line in jeans and T-shirts; some studded with Swarovski crystals. Larry Gagosian, the art dealer for both Warhol and Hirst bought most of the first edition. Interestingly, Gagosian took over as Warhol's dealer after Leo Castelli had problems representing Warhol's Dollar Sign paintings, which Gagosian explained were radical for everyone at the time – exactly because they were so vulgar. Gagosian



Above:
Jenny Bannister, 1980
'Je Suis Mod De Luxe'
 Vinyl, cotton, cassettes, & record
 Collection N.G.V.



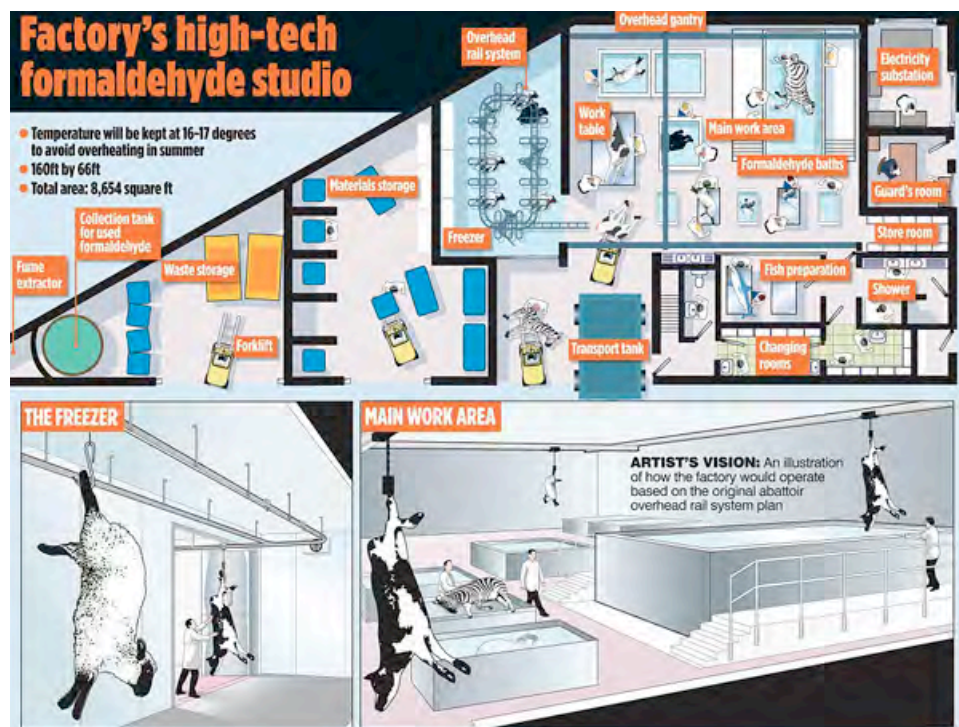
Left;
Jenny Watson, 1979
'A Painted Page - Twiggy by Richard Avedon'
 Oil on Canvas
 Collection N.G.V.

says he misses artists like Warhol, "who worked off instinct and make their own decisions". Today many artists have business managers, but Gagolian believes business managers can be a 'bad buffer' for artists.

In contrast most of the big fashion designers are run by their business managers, as became obvious when John Galliano was 'fired' as Christian Dior's chief designer, by the LVMH (Louis Vuitton, Moët, Hennessy) Corporation following Galliano's unfortunate tirade in 2011. Given the business focus of the fashion houses, design has a power that most artists can only dream about. Like art, fashion is free to capture the imagination of its audience by any means necessary, but it is fashion's business to transform its audience into market.



Left;
Andy Warhol at his first 'Factory', 1964.
 East 47th Street N.Y.
 Photograph; Ugo Mulas
 Collection: Smithsonian Institute,
 Archives of American Art



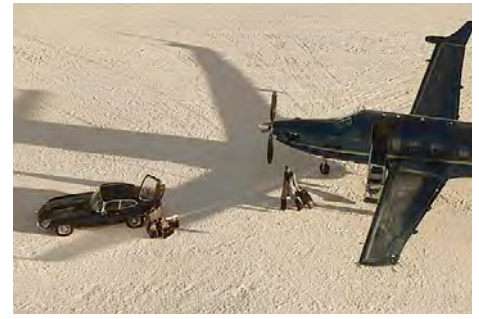
Left;
Damien Hirst's Factory 2012.
 Dudbridge, Gloucestershire
 Architects; Designscape U.K.

Although Warhol maintained the "good business is the best art", the institutional art world sometimes has other priorities. Just as the art world has dismantled the boundaries between fashion and art, it has also collapsed the boundary between politics and art. The public-funding circuits that underwrite contemporary art's public institutions have long ago shifted their funding focus in-line with politically determined preferences. After the financing their flagship institutions, a significant percentage of the arts budget is subsumed by politically determined agendas. Historically these have been indigenous issues, women's rights, sexual awareness and multiculturalism. This means the economy that contemporary art brings to its institutions will often be predominantly public-funding.

In this light, we see contemporary art as the poor cousin of contemporary fashion, although it is capable of generating patronage, contemporary art rarely excites fiscal enthusiasm. The contemporary arts' audience is largely speculative; 'hoped for' rather than guaranteed, and those that invest in art don't usually turn up until the secondary dealers and auction houses herald the historical significance of the work. This results in a profound difference between the audience for contemporary art and contemporary fashion in the public museums. Fashion is buttressed by high-end marketing, pre-established market interest and brings a significant economy in support of the spectacle of its display.

While contemporary artists struggle with diminutive budgets to mount the conceptual stunts they perform, often with little hope of recompense, fashion usually presents with the backing of its multi-national godfather, who support and prosper from its presentation.

It would be silly to imagine art's institutional interest in the fashion business as a one-sided affair; fashion clearly covets art's beat, since art has already differentiated fashion's target market. In 1999, McQueen took over the courtyard of London's highly prestigious Courtauld Institute of Art to launch his Overlook Collection, on ice; capturing the imagination of the quirky and the cultured alike. Last year, 2012 Salvatore Ferragamo sponsored a major exhibition of Leonardo Da Vinci's work at the Louvre in Paris, to remind us of their historical origins in Flor-



Above:

Louis Vuitton 2011

Apparently inspired by Louise Bourgeois, Art Deco & the 1920s & 30s
Photograph; Mark Segal

Below:

Salvatore Ferragamo 2013

Runway at the Louvre, Paris.
The Cruise Collection.
Creative director - Massimiliano Gior-



entire culture. In exchange, the Louvre offered the colonnades of the internal courtyard to launch Ferragamo's autumn collection. The Ferragamo models marched the longest catwalk that the Parisian fashion world had ever seen, marking testament to the durability of Florentine craftsmanship. This was the first time the Louvre had opened its doors to fashion, although given this fast developing relationship between the two institutions it is unlikely to be the last. Nevertheless there are already signs that fashion might be moving on.

Mitchell Oakley, the author of Thames & Hudson's *Art/Fashion in the 21st Century* speculates that fashion might not need the art world for much longer, since it is already moving onto the next big thing. Creativity is clearly not the exclusive domain of artists, and some fashion houses are well equipped to stage their own historical events. Just as many artists think outside the box, fashion designers are thinking outside the white cube. Part of the attraction of the art gallery, museum, is that they offer destination architecture that comes complete with display facilities and a captive cultural audience, but some fashion houses are capable of staging their own historical surveys and setting up their own destination architecture.

In 2006 Karl Lagerfeld commissioned Dame Zaha Mohammad Hadid, the Iraqi-British architect, to design the Chanel Mobile Art Pavilion, a mobile museum to celebrate 50 years of the Chanel quilted handbag. The 700-square-metre translucent Chanel Mobile went on the road in 2008. It was presented in Hong Kong, Tokyo, New York, London and Moscow before being permanently instated outside the Arab World Institute in Paris.

- Gary Willis 2013

Below;

Chanel Mobile Art Pavillion.

Permanently nstalled outside the
Institut du Monde Arab

Photograph - Francois Lacour

