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Bill Cunningham: Fashioning Dialogical Aesthetics

From the exhaustive fashion campaigns in printed media, to teenage bloggers and instructional YouTube videos on styling one's outfit, the dissemination of fashion has never been so rapid or far-reaching. Simultaneously, there has been an unprecedented boom of museum exhibitions devoted to the subject, from the *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* and *PUNK: Chaos to Couture* shows at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to the *Impressionism and Fashion* show at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and The Art Institute of Chicago. The prominence of these exhibitions embodies the proliferation of fashion at large, indicating a nascent shift in scholarship towards a critical and philosophical consideration of the field. With fashion coming to the forefront of critical theory, it remains important, if not imperative, to consider the discursive structures through which fashion is positioned and permitted into institutionalized conversations. This positioning helps to determine what we can learn from fashion, whom it is for, and how it informs the way we live today.

Heidegger's phenomenological approach to questions has taught us that often the vernacular language we use to talk about a subject reveals something about the structure of the

subject itself. When I began my doctoral dissertation in a program that focuses on aesthetics, philosophy, and art, I remember telling one of my colleagues that my subject was going to be contemporary fashion. On hearing this, my colleague responded, “I’m so surprised, Brooke, I thought you’d work on something more theoretical.” This small anecdote struck me—not because it was unique, but precisely because it disclosed a pervasive ideology governing the discursive relationship between art and fashion. While art is equated with the eternal and meaningful, fashion is more often associated with the superficial and ephemeral. Though we can trace a network of reasons for this ideology: from the gendering of fashion as a discourse of feminine vanity to the fraught relationship between art and craft, or the differing ideologies governing the commerce and production of art versus fashion, what I want to focus on today is the way the theorization of fashion has largely clung to a program of dominant modernism rooted in Kantian aesthetics. This program is characterized by the need to align fashion with artistic practices, in order to authenticate and warrant its philosophical discourse.

Today, my aim is to critique this ideology and articulate what literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, terms a "dialogical" methodology to rethink the relationship between art and fashion. When we ask what's at stake in these different systems of discourse, it's crucial to remember that aesthetic discourses are not simply theories that rest between pages or amongst scholars, they indeed form the socio-political realities of our age. In the later half of this talk I will demonstrate the socio-political implications of aesthetic discourse through the work of The New York Times fashion photographer, Bill Cunningham. His photos disclose a system of discourse that allows meanings to emerge from dialogues, both within and beyond the confines of genres.

Let's start by looking at Immanuel Kant's methodology, which stems from and informs

the longstanding (patriarchal) genealogy of dominant modernist aesthetics that championed what became the idea of "art for art's sake." In Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he attempts to lay out the criteria for a universal aesthetic judgment through the disinterested contemplation of form. The autonomy of form denies utility, desire, and contextually derived meaning. For example, if we were considering, say, the aesthetic form of an apple, Kant's theory would dictate that this judgment must not involve a desire to eat the apple, thoughts about the tree it came from, the table it's sitting on, our particular mood that day: only its formal elements, its redness, its shine, its shape. However, today we want to ask how this formalist genealogy problematically impacts fashion theory. It should go without saying, that stripping fashion to its formal elements is a troubling model through which to consider this rich field, as it negates its relationship to social intersections, functionality, and contextually situated meaning. In "elevating" fashion to art, by attempting to focus only on its aesthetic form, fashion is positioned above the very condition of its existence: that is, its relationship to time and place. In this essentialist view, it is only by elevating fashion to this "timeless" or "trans-historical" position, void of context, that it attains the theoretical status of artistic discourse.

This methodology has been widely critiqued, from Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of autonomous form in "The Truth in Painting" to George Smith's articulation of how Kantian aesthetics revive a discourse of aristocratic feudalism. Fashion, theorized as pure form, George Smith reminds us, attempts to transcend the "low-grotesque"¹ association with the earthliness of the human body, and to confer upon fashion that mythological, "aristocratic" condition, in

¹ Smith, "Madame Bovary." 124.

which aesthetic discourse is elevated above its conditions of production.² (SLIDE)

We see this structure in the accompanying exhibition catalogue to the previously mentioned Alexander McQueen show, *Savage Beauty*. The Met's museum director, Thomas Campbell, states:

There are any number of fashion designers with the creative distinction to warrant a presentation of their work in an art museum. But I can think of few whose careers fit as easily within the language and methodologies of art history as that of Alexander McQueen... His most compelling designs are imbued with recurring narrative, aesthetic, and technical leitmotifs. And yet, his work never devolves into predictability.³

McQueen's work gains status as a critical discourse, only in so far as it is judged and regulated according to a particular formalist "language of art history." While artists are often championed for the ways they rethink and challenge the language of art history; here fashion "warrants" consideration because of the way it "fits" within a singular or monological narrative. In other words, fashion is authenticated by the way it aligns with an outdated *a priori* understanding of art.

The differences in art and fashion scholarship are *not* caused from inherent qualities that govern each field, but rather they are products of learned attitudes and expectations from this long history of hierarchy in their accompanying discourses. Though Valerie Steel— who has helped to pioneer the field of fashion studies —writes an astute essay on the history of art and fashion, she summarizes the essay with a remark that embodies the disparate attitudes in the scholarly expectations between these fields. Steel states:

Fashion is a cannibalistic business. It assimilates everything that is visually interesting— high art, graffiti, photography, even pornography. The contemporary art world sometimes draws on fashion, but usually on aspects that the fashion world would rather not address— like pathological consumerism, labelitis, and eating disorders. Sylvie Fleury's *Agent Provocateur* (1995) of shopping bags and their contents, or Vanessa Beecroft's installation *VB43* (2000) of naked models wearing nothing but high heels, may or may not provide new, deeper ways of seeing the world, but they do speak to us in different ways than a

² Smith, "Madame Bovary." 124-125.

³ Campbell, "McQueen." 9.

simple Chanel handbag or a pair of Gucci shoes.⁴

I would argue that one of the reasons why a "Chanel handbag or a pair of Gucci shoes" "speak to us in different ways than an artwork" is demonstrated in the very language of this paragraph. For example, while fashion is a business "assimilating" high-art, art by contrast, gracefully "draws" on fashion, with no mention of its own existence as a business. Again, when a handbag is described as "simple" and an artwork as "deep," we begin to see the engendering of these discourses in the terms of their analysis. Though Steele has done some of the most interesting and extensive analysis of fashion culture, these attitudes unproductively situate fashion as a consuming cannibal and art as something that may reveal deeper truths about the world. I have no doubt that a fascinating analysis could be done, for example, on the Chanel bag, looking at genealogy of aristocratic nomenclature as it morphs from the divine right of kings into the corporate logo, and further into a pedestrian signifier. We could also ask about the relationship between quilting as a luxury textile and equestrian sportswear; the cultural significance of the chain strap as it relates to punk and violence; or the aesthetic connection between the weight of a material and its cultural/aesthetic value.

In short, my point is that one of the huge divides between art and fashion is the difference in how we are taught to value each discipline. Handbags and shoes are only simple if we ask simple questions of them.

Drawing our critique of the current fashion/art discourse to a close, I want to question Steele's assertion that "The...art world sometimes draws on fashion, but usually on aspects that the fashion world would rather not address—like pathological consumerism, labelitis, and eating disorders." If we only see artwork that literally depicts "shopping bags and their

⁴ Steele, "Fashion," 25.

contents, or...naked models wearing nothing but high heels" as fashion, we are blinded by a kind of formalist literalism that completely ignores the immense field of fashion and its massive influence on art. Though there are thousands of examples, it should be generally mentioned that fashion's colors, movements, uses, attitudes, appearances, socio-cultural meanings, ritualistic purposes, geographic scope, structuring of the body, of identity, of communities... the list goes on almost endlessly... have never ceased to inform art. In fact, we would be hard pressed to find art that *does not* draw on fashion. The issue, again, is that if we treat fashion as a cannibal and art as something which can provide deeper meanings, it is no wonder that we learn to think of fashion as an impotent discourse in need of art's justification.

Though it is not our central argument here today, the larger claim I am making is to dispel the mythology that art is anything but fashion. The problem lies in examining fashion and art as hierarchically structured entities rather than mutually inclusive and impossibly separable fields. Just like fashion, art is a production of the aesthetic discourse of our times.

I'll now go on to demonstrate how the work of New York Times' photographer, Bill Cunningham, offers—and even furthers—a dialogical methodology for rethinking art and fashion. Cunningham's work, which we can analyze through the writing of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, not only shatters the idea of an autonomous subject in fashion, but also opens the way for a new ethical/aesthetic structure, in which engaging differences become a means of knowledge, and further, socio-political agency.

In a quietly revolutionary work, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin

argues that Dostoyevsky's writing "created a fundamentally new novelistic genre"⁵ the polyphonic novel. Prior to Dostoyevsky, what Bakhtin terms the monological novel, was structured very much like our critique of the current discourse of fashion and art. The characteristics of the monological novel are a self-contained narrative, which carries out a specific ideological program through the singular quest of the hero. Just as the theorization of fashion is stripped of its agency, and corralled to fit within the predetermined narrative of art history, the aesthetics of the monological novel serve merely to carry out a predetermined *a priori* finality of the author's ideological paradigm.

Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's multi-voiced writing ruptures this monological paradigm, and the novel becomes, instead, *dialogic*: a story based on the interactions of differing voices which serve to articulate the importance of difference rather than a conclusive goal. The dialogical novel is constructed precisely through denying the possibilities of an overarching wholeness or ideology. The subject of the dialogical novel, as well as the identity of each character, is not an expression of a more fundamental essence; rather, the subject gains their ever-shifting identity within/through the dialogue created in the interstitial space of interactions.

Bill Cunningham, through the text, photos, and videos of his "On the Street" column for The New York Times, similarly deconstructs the hierarchical relationship between fashion and art. Cunningham, in a blue workman's jacket, documents the intertextual dialogue on the streets of New York. Fashion, in Cunningham's work, does not simply stay in the idealized, aristocratic and trans-historical space of the runway, editorial spread, or museum, but is rather worn and embodied by interacting subjects in the transitional space of daily life. Cunningham's narratives are formed through the way he curates his photographs *in relation* to one another. Be it on the page or in video form,

⁵ Bakhtin, "Problems," 7.

images converse and change meaning through these interactions.

Photographing images from the world *around* attire—from art exhibitions and floral bouquets, to icicles and gestures—Cunningham renders these images central *to* attire, thereby suggesting that fashion does not stop at clothing: *fashion becomes an intertextual environment*. Cunningham’s narratives propose a new aesthetic discourse in fashion: a dialogical discourse. This dialogical discourse locates the subject of fashion as a fluid dynamic network of social relationships, shifting with bodies, times of day, ethnicities, genders, or attitudes. His narratives emerge from a collage of encounters: bright balloons, against pop colored purses and peaches at the farmers market; tapestries at the Met showing nights in amour in relation to skinny jeans and contemporary bubbled jackets; last week he showed men in New York leaping over snow puddles like “ballerinas” and contrasted this with the macho roar of super bowl culture; he has traced the history of gender equality, and the democratization of information through watching it emerge in the living body of fashion—be that an autumn tree in central park or a bike messengers shorts. If Cunningham’s unfinished, or constantly becoming “subject” is now inseparable from its environment, there is no longer a discrete, monological, and autonomous subject of fashion, art, or any other aesthetic experience. In fact, we can even read Cunningham's work as a critique of Bakhtin’s aesthetics through the way he extends intertextuality beyond the interaction of human consciousnesses and into the life of the environment itself.

For Cunningham, there is no pyramid of aesthetic order. A leaf's relationship to a handbag, the gesture of jumping over a puddle, the difference in a building’s facade in Paris or New York, are all part of aesthetic conversations from which we can obtain meaning. I suggest that the plurality in contemporary art and fashion—evidenced in the impossibility of locating a

totalizing narrative, general aesthetic, and collapse of distinction between former "high" and "low" cultures—embodies and elaborates the “multiple ambiguity” to which Bakhtin refers.

In the intersections of daily life, fashion circulates through non-linear networks of interaction between multitudes of voices. Fashion and art are read, written and continuously formed through the aesthetics of others, just as words shift their meanings through the ever-changing syntax of grammar and speech. The idea of an individuated fashion or art remains just that: an ideation of monological autonomy. Fashion, like the “self,” is then a porous network of interactions, and thus always premised on a community of relationships. In other words, fashion is community.

In a culture where the contours of the body are disappearing into networks, one might ask why the adornments for that body are a critical site for investigation. Following Slavoj Žižek, I would maintain that aesthetic “poetic displacements and condensations are not just secondary illustrations of an underlying ideological struggle, but the very terrain of this struggle.”⁶ The relationship between fashion and art, here, is not an *expression* or *representation* of contemporary society. Rather, the aesthetic discourse(s) of these relationships *are* the very terms of our societies and their unfolding. A theoretical consideration of the discourses of fashion and art becomes not only a way to think about a particular cultural moment, but also a way to shape it, to create it. Through his work, Bill Cunningham, has redefined the relationship of fashion and art from an aristocratic to a dialogical discourse. If each voice, each garment, each painting and installation, passing gesture, leaf, theory, artist, designer, term—the network is infinite—informs the way we understand aesthetic discourse, this creates a new ethical responsibility, as every subject is

⁶ Žižek, “Politics,” 77.

necessarily formed by the other. This redistribution of power calls for a new pedagogical model that is less concerned with drawing boundaries between disciplines, and more active in engaging the incredible possibilities and differences in our pluralist era to chart new ways of seeing and living in the world.

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