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After the End of Fashion: Aitor Throup's interdisciplinary fashion practice

ABSTRACT

*Twenty years ago, Arthur Danto wrote "The End of Art," which claimed art's deviation from its previous course and its decline in traditional aesthetics: '...it became apparent that there were no stylistic or philosophical constraints. There is no special way works of art have to be. And that is the present and, I should say, the final moment in the master narrative. It is the end of the story.'*¹ *I believe fashion practice is at the end of a certain linear narrative, like Danto claimed of art, and is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary. This is related to shifting perspectives in the cultural consciousness surrounding fashion as a luxury commodity and creative cultural phenomenon. I discuss the complexities of this development through a study of the practice of designer Aitor Throup who works consistently within the fashion system while simultaneously rejecting the constraints and definitions of what this has previously meant in terms of art and commerce. How is fashion redefined through these new developments? And what does this mean for the industry going forward? I take these factors into consideration in the course of this article through the lens of Throup's interdisciplinary fashion practice.*

KEYWORDS

fashion
art
Aitor Throup
installation
performance

INTRODUCTION

Following on from a paper I presented at the *End of Fashion* conference held at Massey University Wellington in December 2016, this article will extrapolate on ideas that

resulted from consequent discussions and developments in my research, my thesis of which is focused on fashion interdisciplinarity. For that paper, I talked about the decline of the runway catwalk as a primary means of communicating fashion due to audience desire for inclusion and authenticity in order to break down hierarchies of the fashion system that are at play during a fashion show. I used fashion and product designer Aitor Throup's practice as a case study for new developments in the field, situating the analysis within the ongoing rhetoric surrounding fashion and art, the nexus of which designers like Throup sit and I will use his work as a case study today.

In the conclusion to that paper, I made a comparison between art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto's 1998 'End of Art' essay and today's so-called 'end of fashion' claiming that like art in the 1970s and 1980s fashion has hit a point of disjuncture or if we were to use Danto's vernacular a point of freedom of creation born out of a break from a master narrative. Fashion is no longer bound to strictly commercial restraints because the audience and consumer's demands have changed. Awareness of sustainability and ethics and the emphasis on a need for a return to 'slow fashion' has seen consumers demand more from designers and fashion companies.

Criticality, concept and ethical production are becoming an inherent prerequisite. It is born from an amalgam of postmodernism's cultural ambivalence and a desire for authenticity but also more simply due to developments in technology that require an interdisciplinary approach to creativity. For this article, I will use this comparison as a springboard for the concept of a new fashion practice in which designers like Throup are taking fashion beyond clothing into the domain of installation, incorporating performance, exhibition, sculpture, and film. Rather than focusing on the fashion object itself this study is an exploration into the space with which fashion is represented and how it is displayed and communicated to an audience.

DANTO'S 'END OF ART'

For context, Danto's 'end of art' claim was that art was at the end of its linear narrative and its decline in traditional aesthetics. What he meant by this was that works of art, when he was writing in the late 1990s, had become so diverse in medium, concept and presentation that outwardly they contradicted the traditional aesthetic view on what art, particularly modernism's agenda, had been, which was typically about imitation:

...it became apparent that there were no stylistic or philosophical constraints. There is no special way works of art have to be. And that is the present and, I should say, the final moment in the master narrative. It is the end of the story.²

The end of art marked a new beginning in art practice. Danto proclaimed art's new pluralism because works of art at that point in time across the board had outwardly very little in common, hence a less restricted system of creativity.³ It marked art's liberation and the end to its need to 'understand itself philosophically',⁴ or understand itself in reference to an aforementioned master narrative with a set of rules.

THE END OF FASHION

The 'end of fashion' is a notion that reflects a lot of complex issues and need for change within a highly homogenized and global industry. Trend forecaster and fashion scholar Lidewij Edelkoort claimed this most recently in her 2015 ten-point *Anti Fashion Manifesto*.⁵ She covered umbrella areas at the centre of the fashion industry such as 'Designers,' 'Marketing' and 'Consumers' that are either undergoing dramatic change or are in serious need of change due to shifts in consumer perceptions of fashion and its relation to both commerce and art. One of her points was a call for more collaboration in the industry and a fostering of altruistic relationships for which she believes contemporary society is hungry.⁶ Another was a critique of the 'perversion of marketing' and the homogenized way in which fashion is displayed and communicated, an area dominated by 'slaves to financial institutions' that 'long ago lost the autonomy to direct change.'⁷

If this is indeed the end of fashion then what does this mean for the state of fashion practice going forward? As for Danto's end of art, it means a new pluralistic beginning. I use the word 'practice' in this context as it applies to the fundamental making and literal communication of fashion. Using a word usually allocated to fine art connotes a new meaning in how we look at the creation of fashion objects and experiences.

We have entered a 'post-fashion' era where the mortality of fashion has been unveiled and new experimentation with the boundaries of fashion's borders has instigated change.⁸ Fashion designers have begun to incorporate art practice and technology, creating fashion that is grounded in concept and process and escapes the

typical or traditional modes of presentation such as the runway catwalk in favour of performances, installations and curated exhibitions both in real life and online. The 'end of fashion' and experimental post-fashion deconstructs traditional commercial and social power structures that have been based around status, gender, race, class and age. Edelkoort's manifesto is a siren call to instigate change and engage both those in the industry and outside of it in the way they produce, communicate, and consume fashion. Designers such as Aitor Throup, I argue, sit at the forefront of this change.

FASHION AND ART

As stated in *Fashion and Art* (Geczy and Karaminas), as soon as the fashion object is placed within the context and space of the museum or gallery, '...its value as a commercially driven mass-market product transitions from consumable merchandise to art installation.'⁹ Hierarchies and binaries between high and popular culture are dismantled through the medium of fashion due to its innate ability to straddle both realms. The success of fashion exhibitions at large art institutions, particularly in the past decade is testament to this. The museum and gallery space, once a site of art and artefact, has of late become occupied by fashion. The now-infamous Alexander McQueen *Savage Beauty* exhibition curated by Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton first held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York City in 2011 just a year after his suicide had one of the highest visitor rates for one exhibition in the museum's history when it moved on to the Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum in March 2015.¹⁰

In this context fashion's role as a 'fast' commodity slows down and is aligned with a 'new value system' as a commodity to be collected.¹¹ This subverts the long-held opinion that fashion is a frivolous and shallow commodity. Fashion has been dismissed by individuals under this premise within what Elizabeth Wilson states as the 'hierarchy of academic study,' going on to say that due to its relations to the body and the feminine it has been deemed as frivolous.¹²

Designers now want to validate their work at the same time as audiences and consumers want meaning and justification in the luxury items they purchase. Aitor Throup labels himself as a product designer and artist whose end product is fashion. Product, although a word tied up with commerce, evokes a sense of craft and process, which Throup champions in his personal studio work and for the denim company G Star Raw for which he was named creative director in October 2016.¹³

Interdisciplinary fashion, in the context of representing and displaying, has developed out of, amongst other things, an expansion of the fashion runway show. The 1990s saw a new breed of predominantly British fashion designers experiment with highly theatrical, phantasmagorical spectacles at the expense of the fashion houses they were hired by, which were and still are today financially backed and owned by large European business conglomerates such as LVMH (Louis Vuitton, Moët & Hennessy) and Kering. Alexander McQueen merged experimental fashion with performance often collaborating with choreographers, musicians and performance artists to create theatrical presentations such as the Spring Summer 2004 show *Deliverance*. Choreographed by professional dancer and choreographer Michael Clark, the show was inspired by Sydney Pollack's Depression era film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969), in which impoverished contestants desperately perform in a dance marathon.¹⁴ The models appeared to do the same, staggering down the runway with their partners, tripping, falling and getting carried in a performance that was exhausting to both watch and be in.¹⁵

Fashion shows such as these, injected with cross-references and presented so theatrically acted as an emulation of the fast-moving theatrical system fashion had become by the 1990s and also as a precursor to interdisciplinary fashion. These strategies from the realm of what we previously would have described as 'high culture' such as theatre, dance, and fine art practices, as well as conceptual frameworks, are mediated through the medium of fashion making hierarchies between high and popular culture break down as they become accessible to a wider scope of audience/consumer. This idea of dismantling hierarchies between 'high' culture and 'popular' culture is relevant in the context of the museum and gallery also, as is evident in the previously stated example of the 'blockbuster' fashion exhibition championed by institutions such as the MET and the V&A. Fashion gains increasing cultural gravitas while the realm of art (the exhibition/museum in this context) invites a new audience previously not necessarily engaged in this form of 'high culture'. Fashion can act as an access point in these art contexts.

Whenever discussing these two realms in tandem the question of whether fashion is art inherently bubbles to the surface. Defining fashion as art depends on a multitude of factors and the type of value system that is placed upon both objects. The undeniable statement is that they often interconnect through the practice of contemporary designers. The two realms have progressed in tandem for centuries.¹⁶

Although referencing art theory in discussing changes in contemporary fashion practice may connote a ‘fashion as art’ opinion, I am using it more as a tool to dissect and explain new developments in the fashion industry. What I am highlighting here is that designers (who do not necessarily label themselves as ‘fashion’ designers) are using interdisciplinary creative interventions that change not only the value system of fashion in regard to cultural cachet but the definitions of fashion itself, expanding it beyond what we traditionally see on a runway catwalk during fashion week or in the prolific ‘streetstyle’ imagery we see on social media sites. It is a sort of ‘democratization’ of fashion insofar as the designers are expanding their audience and the scope of people in which the work can now reach as well as the literal tools they use to create the clothing or the fashion experience.

AITOR THROUP

Aitor Throup is a product and fashion designer who works at the nexus between fashion, art and product design. Although having studied a B.A. in fashion design at Manchester Metropolitan University and then an M.A. in menswear from London’s Royal College of Art he identifies himself as a ‘product designer’ first and foremost. Throup’s total creative practice is inherently multi-disciplinary with projects and collaborations ranging from designing combat costumes for the Hollywood film *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (2014), ongoing creative collaborations with the rock band Kasabian since 2011 and multiple creative consultation and designer collaboration roles for companies such as Umbro, C.P. company, and Stone Island.

He has claimed his initial interest in fashion was through brands such as these with their appropriation of the English football hooligan subculture, one that he was surrounded by after moving to Burnley from Buenos Aires when he was twelve years old.¹⁷ His designs have been exhibited in both the Design Museum in London as well as the V&A. Alongside acting as creative director for G-Star Raw, a Dutch denim brand that is positioned in the realm of ‘streetwear’ focusing on untreated denim technologies, he has his own studio out of which he creates works that are part of a wider ongoing project called New Object Research. New Object Research acts outside of the cyclical fashion system; it does not adhere to commercial trend cycles or the hierarchy of production and communication. Commenting on this fact Throup has stated that:

I prefer creating my own systems without feeling the pressure of creativity, which is why my narratives are still relevant even six months after their conception. The amount of “newness” on a cyclical term goes against the essence of creativity – you can’t subscribe to that.¹⁸

Traditionally we would call each project a ‘collection’ however within Throup’s practice this description seems entirely incorrect and irrelevant hence his use of the words ‘object’ and ‘research’ in describing his practice. These words connote the idea that he is working to expand the fashion object, perhaps even beyond sole materiality. He has gained a reputation within the fashion industry as a conceptualist, championing the process of design with its problems and solutions over the actual end product which, it has to be said, is always meticulous.

His first independent collection for his own studio work was called *The Funeral of New Orleans, Part I* (2007). The collection was represented and displayed as both an exhibition and a film and was a reaction to Hurricane Katrina, referencing the importance of the funeral procession of musicians iconic to the city. In the film, the embodied garments morphed and peeled off from the lifeless body onto the instruments, protecting them and also breaking down the boundaries between body and object.¹⁹ They were then exhibited, the garments (both for the instruments and the human) suspended on floating forms that emulated the musicians playing their instruments.

I chose Throup’s practice as a case study because he signifies a group of young designers redefining the way in which their clothes are created, communicated and received through collaboration and ingenuity. This multi-disciplinary practice is becoming more prevalent, specifically in the way in which new graduates are working. There is more space in the industry to be taken seriously as a cross-disciplinary practitioner, particularly at the intersection between fashion, art, and experimental design. This could potentially be a product of fashion’s entrance into art academies and the nurtured collaboration that is fostered there.

There is no doubt Throup also benefits from the more ‘commercial’ side of fashion however this does not make his work any less conceptual or progressive. It could be said that these more ‘commercial’ collaborations, which connect with pop culture and streetwear brands, and his current role at G Star Raw, offer the freedom and monetary allowance to be more experimental in his individual practice. This also

highlights the progressive deconstruction of the hierarchies between high and pop culture as mentioned before.

Throup's Spring 2017 men's collection for New Object Research, subversively named *The Rite of Spring/Summer/Autumn/Winter* consisted of six individual 'looks' which were, as he told fashion journalist Tim Blanks, 'trans-seasonal prototypes'.²⁰ These 'prototypes' were dressed on life-sized marionette-like puppets, which were manipulated by four technicians down the runway at an almost excruciatingly slow pace that Blanks noted was "...clearly physically taxing for them."²¹ The performance took twenty minutes; white masks covered every face giving the presentation an uncanny aura.

The mannequin's exoskeleton-like shell draped in Throup's identifiable monochrome dystopian sportswear struggled down what we would identify as a traditional runway in what Blanks described as "...an arduous ritual – for the audience as well as the actors,"²² to a soundscape of atmospheric pendulum music. This ritualistic nature of the performance explores the boundaries between performer and viewer and by doing so Throup creates self-awareness in the audience of their own discomfort within space and time.

Throup's use of the word 'prototype' reflects his insistence that he is a product designer first and foremost:

I'm interested in product design, I geek out on the pockets or how a garment hangs. I like that the objects are static and the audience is active. You're doing the work more justice and you're paying respect to the audience; they can view it for however long they want.²³

Mixing performance and exhibition installation as a means to present his work, Throup presented in the form of a traditional runway show that at the same time completely rejected the formal commercial structure.

It caused discomfort in the crowd and challenged their experience and understanding of what a fashion presentation is and what it can be. As Blanks recalls, 'There was a walk-out or two, rolled eyes, raised brows. There was also unrestrained enthusiasm at the end, and an admiring throng clustered by the six puppets swaying in a row.'²⁴ The audience had a chance to engage and move around the garments, seeing them in as much detail as they desired as they were promptly installed statically within a

framed structure post-performance. Afterwards they were moved to the iconic London retail space established by Rei Kawakubo, Dover Street Market, a supporter of new talent and hub in which designers can exhibit and sell their work, where they were to be sold as complete looks as though a sculpture or piece of art.²⁵ These sculptural installations within a commercial retail environment further solidify the dismantling of hierarchies of a fashion show. The instant accessibility of the clothing both during the presentation and immediately after emphasizes the idea of feeding the contemporary audience's desire for authenticity and thoughtfulness in the way in which fashion is communicated and consumed.

Lifeless clothing floating in space is uncanny; the direct absence of the live body welcomes the viewer to look at the details of the garment with more attention. However, with Throup's work, although never presented or communicated on an actual live human body, we can still see the ways in which he takes every aspect of the lived body into consideration at their creation due to the attention he gives to details such as a buttonhole or an individual seam and the movement with which they constrain or invite on individual parts of the body. Geczy and Karaminas use Spinoza's theories of the body in relation to Throup's making process in which he assembles a garment piece by piece onto his signature exoskeleton mannequins.²⁶ This intricate process predetermines the body as a site of multiple surfaces and the garment is made up of a set of parts creating a whole that exists individually in space from the lived body - they are a confirmation of who the wearer is.

Anatomy is the undeniable basis of Throup's design philosophy: 'Throup explores the ways in which the human anatomy functions to produce movement and shape, his designs acting as both political intervention and cultural narrative.'²⁷ The clothes themselves are based in concept and utilitarian function. Throup is not interested in the hierarchies and seductions of the fashion system and this shows in his practice, particularly in how he represents his work. Installation is the primary means in which he does so preferring an immersive experience that the audience can wander through and engage with on multiple sensory levels rather than the passive runway show. He presents in this manner with both his collections for G Star Raw and his own studio.

You could say that his aforementioned men's Spring/Summer 2017 show was a total work of fashion. It was interdisciplinary, making use of a wide range of many creative practices to make one whole work in a unified synthesis. Soundscapes, spatial design, performance and exhibition were all utilized within a production that lasted no

more than half an hour. It was filmed however which adds a haunting element to the seemingly ephemeral nature of performance art, making it immortal. Technology and the ghostly image are spaces in themselves that designers are utilizing to represent and display their work and as a consequence they are reaching a far wider audience than previously possible.

Throup has built a career on subverting the status quo. He approaches designing a garment from the inside out, piece by piece, and to use his own words, by ‘unlearning the predetermined solutions that exist, the standardized solutions to a core problem.... To find new solutions to that problem has been what has driven my career.’²⁸ This comes back to the idea of the mediation of the human form. Throup’s ability to transcend the fashion cycle by way of his multidisciplinary practice has created the opportunity to be successful and sustainable in both his own personal studio work and his work for a big fashion business. Art, commerce and design collide in unison and this may indeed be what occurs after the end of fashion.

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