

## WHY ARE FASHION EXHIBITIONS SO ATTRACTIVE?

By **Professor José Teunissen**,  
Dean of School of Design and Technology,  
London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London

### Introduction

More and more museum – even those who don't have a costume collection - embrace fashion exhibitions. The huge interest in the fashion exhibition relates to the fact that it has become a very strong medium to bring forward underlying cultural meanings of fashion in an accessible way: it can underline how fashion – a phenomenon that we primarily experience unconsciously - functions and how it is interwoven with our cultural and social life. Even the fashion industry is embracing 'curated stores', a kind of 'exhibition' practice used as a new marketing tool to present the concepts and meaning behind a product. Something Comme des Garçons perfectly illustrates with the Dover Street Market pop-up stores.

The reason why fashion exhibitions have become so popular, I will argue in this article, has to do with the fact that the fashion system from on the 1960s underwent major changes. From a focus on a presentation of a feminine ideal and a display of status, avant-garde fashion shifted into a medium started to evoke overtly political and cultural comments on society and the fashion system (Lipovetsky 1994; Teunissen: 2009). As a result, the public has started understanding fashion in a broader perspective, as a cultural phenomenon.

Secondly, in the beginning of the 1980s (avant-garde) *fashion* designers have started to alter the essential components of classical fashion by *conceptualisation*, *story telling* and a focus on *experience design* which I will explain later.

Together these elements make the contemporary museums, and particularly the specialized fashion museum, the ideal environment for fashion as an innovative practice attracting a big audience. As such the curated (fashion) exhibition offers an understanding and a direct experience, the classical catwalk, fashion photography, the fashion magazine and the classical written studies are not able to provide.

In this essay I would like to explore why the fashion exhibition had an empowering capacity by unravelling its history and try to find arguments why it has become so popular.

### **From a chronological overview towards an entertaining and seducing experience**

Until fairly recently exhibitions consisted of a display of upper-class women's fashions, organized to show the temporal succession of styles. (Steele 2008: 10). This has been the approach for almost all pre-1970s fashion and dress museum presentations. Fashion and costume history were presented as a historic succession of styles. History was most likely brought to life through actual outfits whose fabrics, detailing and origins were key; the historic context of the garment was illustrated by reference to the wearer's background (Taylor 1998: 317).

A turning point in this type of exhibition occurred in the US in the 1970s when Diane Vreeland, an ex-editor of *Vogue*, became special consultant to the Costume Institute of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and started curating exhibitions (Steele 2008: 10, Palmer 2008: 32). Vreeland drastically changed the presentation form of the exhibition by employing stylised, lifelike mannequins, window-dressing techniques, and dramatic lighting (Palmer 2008: 32). She hoped that these theatrical techniques would bring more 'life' into the exhibition and entice a larger public. As such she tried to solve the problem that clothing on mannequins looks dead because the living body is absent, and a substitute for it must be found.

Even more remarkable, however, Vreeland collated her exhibitions from a contemporary perspective. She considered it important that the clothing on display had an up-to-date look, even if this look was not historical accurate: the result had to be attractive and recognisable as possible to the wider public. "Everything must look *Now*", she stated, and it was one to which she sacrificed historical accuracy (Dwight 2002: 210, Palmer 2008: 42). For instance, in displaying the clothing for the 1980 special exhibition *The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of China* she took her guide not from the symbolism of the clothing, but quite consciously gave the outfits the layered look and mix-and-match style that was typical of the 1980s and therefore conformed with the taste of the times (Steele 2008: 190). To underline the exotic character of the exhibition she had YSL's perfume *Opium* continuously added to the air. Vreeland was clearly doing everything she could to immerse her public in an exotic atmosphere and to give them an intoxicating experience of beauty and aesthetics. She gave her subject visual contemporaneity, as it were, by adapting them to the fashion tastes and aesthetics of the moment. In doing so, actual history – the sartorial aspect – was sometimes given short shrift.

In *Fashion Theory*'s themed issue, curators such as Alexandra Palmer and Valerie Steele (and indirectly Curator in Chief of The Costume Institute, Harold Korda, who is quoted in their articles) distance themselves in part from this approach. While they have great admiration for the 'seduction' perspective and for the visual forms of thematisation, they lament the lack of depth and accuracy. 'People need to be seduced into really seeing and identifying with fashion before they can begin to learn about it. Museum visitors are also becoming ever more visually sophisticated, and exhibition design is increasingly important,' says Steele. 'At the same time, I believe that a

significant percentage of museum visitors really want to learn something when they see an exhibition. There is no reason why exhibitions cannot be both beautiful *and* intelligent, entertaining *and* educational' (Steele 2008: 14).

### **The transition: how Fashion became an influential cultural phenomenon**

Vreeland was the first curator to introduce a new fashion exhibition concept in the 1970s where seduction and entertaining were key to attract a large audience. But as Steele concluded in the 1980s the contemporary fashion exhibition moved towards a format that was both entertaining and seductive in form, historically accurate in content, and provide insight into the phenomenon of fashion. Since the museums became established as an ideal platform for avant-garde fashion presentations based on three important tendencies. First, both fashion scholars and museums have started understanding fashion in a broader perspective from the 1980s: a further analysis of several fashion exhibitions of the last decades will underline this. In addition, scholars and more specific the studies of fashion curator Richard Martin (2009) and philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (1994) brought forward why and how the fashion system from the 1960s on underwent major changes and started to evoke overtly political and cultural comments on society and the fashion system. Finally and most important, avant-garde fashion designers have altered the fashion system from a presentation of a feminine ideal into a formal approach which underlines the design process and the construction of fashion (termed: *conceptualisation*) (Martin: 2009, Teunissen: 2009), or to express new meanings by reveal clothing with traces and emotions (*story telling*) (Vinken: 2009) and a focus on a process where the (non-visual) imagery becomes as important as the product itself (called: *experience design*) (Marchetti: 2009, Lipovetsky & Manlow: 2009). Especially these themes with a strong resemblance to the art world have made the contemporary museums, and particularly the specialized fashion museum, the ideal environment for understanding an avant-garde fashion presentation.

### **Establishing Fashion as a Cultural Phenomenon in Art Museums**

When *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* opened in London's Victoria & Albert Museum in 1994, it was one of the most significant fashion exhibitions to be based on cultural theory and the book *Subculture* by Dick Hebdige (Steele 2008: 23). The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of the book *Streetstyle* by anthropologist Ted Polhemus, who as its creator and curator interpreted the exhibition from an anthropological viewpoint. For the first time, the starting point was not a series of collected garments and artefacts but an underlying vision. The exhibition showed how since the 1950s a variety of youth cultures had been creating distinctive identities for themselves using self-selected clothing, looks and music. The identity of these young people was no longer dependent on their social origins or on the fashion dictates of Paris haute couture; on the

contrary, they used their own creativity to develop their own distinctive styles. In displaying this variety of clothing cultures and lifestyles, *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* was effectively portraying the processes of democratisation and individualisation that had marked the 1960s fashion system; it shows perfectly how the transience and fickleness of fashion trends reveal deeper, underlying societal processes – in short, it shows how fashion functions as a cultural phenomenon. Up to this point, using an exhibition to reveal concepts and societal processes had been the almost exclusive preservation of the visual arts; using dress and fashion in this way was new to the art-museum world. Right up to the 1960s, museum dress and fashion collections were usually part of the domain of the applied arts department within these museums. Most collections were composed of luxurious, exclusive pieces donated by elitist families. In the Netherlands, the *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam, the *Gemeentemuseum* in Den Haag and the *Centraal Museum* in Utrecht have extensive dress collections dating from the 18th century to the present day. For each dress object, careful research was carried out into crafting techniques and tailoring and into who had worn it and on what occasion. Dress and fashion, in short, were collected as separate historic and aesthetic artefacts, described in terms of style, form, fabric, craft, and the personal history of the wearer (Taylor 1998: 317).

### **The context of fashion: a new and thematic approach**

In the 1960s, when fashion was democratised and transformed from an exclusive luxury product for the elite into a clothes culture accessible to the masses, the museum world was also forced to adjust its perspective. After all, what would have to be collected in order to follow and display the most important developments in contemporary fashion – *haute couture*? The newest Paris *prêt-à-porter*? Street fashion? More important still, how was this contemporary fashion to be studied? It would no longer be enough to focus on the ‘clothing object’ itself; an eye would have to be developed for the societal and political context of clothing, and for the fact that fashion was now being expressed in a number of disciplines.

This interest in context from contemporary fashion and designers has been widely shared by museums, including fashion museums, in recent decades. Fashion, like media, was now seen as an interesting form of popular visual culture, which gave expression to essential aspects of our social culture (Lipovetsky 1994: 149). This new approach had also had an influence on the exhibition of historic dress; this was now given a broader, more thematic approach, and sometimes mixed historic clothing with modern fashions. For instance, in 1999 the Kyoto Costume Institute of the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto held an exhibition, *Visions of the body: Fashion or Invisible Corset*, curated by the Japanese fashion scholar Akiko Fukai, which showed historic corsets in combination with a *Stockman* (1997) bodice by the avant-garde Belgian fashion designer Martin Margiela. This wearable *Stockman* corset, made out of the same linen as the *Stockman*

mannequin, created an alternative corset; a bodice on which you could start the process of designing by adding pieces of fabric and loose drapery. It was Margiela's avant-garde answer towards the revival of *haute couture* where the British fashion designers Alexander McQueen (working for the fashion house of Givenchy) and John Galliano (working for the fashion house of Dior) re-invented and explored traditional craftsmanship in combination with a mix and match styling and experimental design methods.

In this manner Fukai's *Visions of the body: Fashion or the Invisible Corset* underlined major changes in the fashion industries of the mid nineties where *haute couture* became the most important vehicle for creativity. The *Lumps and Bumps* (1997) outfit by the Japanese fashion designer Rei Kawakubo, in which she displaced feminine curves to other parts of a woman's body was another crucial object in this exhibition, commenting how obsessed fashion remained with ideal model sizes. About the exhibition Fukai stated:

‘The exhibition is an attempt to re-evaluate the future relationship between clothes and the body, focusing on how artists interpret parts which fashion has not yet actualized clearly. What comes out is the multi-structure of fashion culture... The corset is fashion, in other words, a social framework which always exists within,’ (Fukai 1999: 193).

Fukai's exhibition was in other words focusing on understanding fashion as a cultural phenomenon. The exhibition the fashion scholar and museum director, Dr. Valerie Steele devoted to the corset at about the same time, *The Corset: Fashioning the Body (2000)* at The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, was chiefly concerned with ‘the changing *meanings* of the corset in society’ (Steele 2008: 26). In both exhibitions, dress and fashion objects were given a central role – Steele's exhibition even described down to which waist sizes a corset could be drawn – but at the same time they formed part of, and were embedded within, a broader socio-cultural historic narrative. It made the public aware not only how the shape and aesthetics of the corset had changed over time, but also the cultural values and the body-imagery going along with it.

‘It shows that it is too simply to say that it (*The Corset: Fashioning the Body (2000) JT*) is just a question of fashion versus liberation and that the corset is not to be taken simply as an instrument of the oppression of women. The corset is something the meaning of which people in different time and places have reconstructed themselves and which in fact is continuing to be part of the vocabulary of fashion and of the body-imagery.’ (Steele 2004: 77)

## **Contextualisation of fashion in museums**

In the exhibitions I curated in Utrecht's Central Museum – owning one of the largest costume and dress collections in the Netherlands – I invariably took as my starting point a current fashion theme whose underlying layers I wished to bring to the surface. In 2000 I (and Ida van Zijl) curated an exhibition on *Droog & Dutch Design* in which we showed how Dutch fashion designers such as Alexander van Slobbe and Viktor & Rolf were working within the same philosophy – Dutch modernism – as product designers like Hella Jongerius, Richard Hutten and Marcel Wanders (Teunissen, Van Zijl: 2000). For the exhibition *Woman by* (2003) nine fashion houses, including Maison Martin Margiela, Ann Demeulemeester, Dior and Viktor & Rolf were asked to design an installation which expressed their own vision of the feminine ideal in fashion and their idea of femininity (Teunissen 2004).

(IMAGE 1: *Woman by* Jose Teunissen, Centraal Museum 2004)

With this exhibition I wanted not only to show that today's fashion designers were working with very different imaginaries and ideals of women, but also to emphasise that for fashion designers like Martin Margiela and Hussein Chalayan the design concept comes first and the chosen model serves merely as a vehicle for its presentation. For example, Margiela's catwalk models are often blindfolded, so as not to distract the audience's eyes from the clothes. Hussein Chalayan developed an installation, *Kinship Journey* (2003), in which a trampoline, a confessional booth and a boat / coffin together represent the three essential phases of life. The three objects were originally made for the exhibition *Woman by*, but were removed from the exhibition for two days to serve as décor for the presentation of the collection of the same name in Paris.

IMAGE 2: *Kinship Journey* (2003) in *Woman by*, Centraal Museum Utrecht. Photo: Ernst Moritz

On the one hand, the theme of *Woman by* made it clear that contemporary fashion design has become much more conceptual and that the design concept itself has taken centre stage. On the other hand, it also showed how ideals of femininity, in today's post-feminist age, are defined in different ways by different fashion designers (Teunissen 2004: 63–77). Where Vivienne Westwood and Veronique Leroy presented classical femininity and the game of seduction as 'empowerment' of the modern woman, Ann Demeulemeester depicted a feminist emancipated woman: delicate, soft, elfin-like who comes across tough and nonchalant at the same time.

The exhibition *Global Fashion, Local Tradition* (2005) illustrated how while the internet has made fashion steadily less Western and more global, it also calls on a sense of local identity by using regional crafts (Teunissen 2005).

IMAGE 3: *Global Fashion, Local Tradition*. Jose Teunissen, Centraal Museum, Utrecht 2005. Photo: Ernst Moritz

I occupied a professorship with ArtEZ in Arnhem during both exhibitions, and was able to carry out extensive research together with Fashion Strategy MA students into both relevant context and specific designers.



All my exhibitions so far took (crucial) objects as their foundation, but the underlying concepts and narratives were visualised by means of films, installations, lighting and scenography – the most appropriate way to portray underlying layers and processes in contemporary fashion. In this way the exhibitions followed the definition of Valerie Steele (2008:14). They tried to be both entertaining and seducing in form, historically accurate in content, and provide insight into the phenomenon of fashion. In all cases the selected and presented objects and its aesthetics stayed crucial in the presentations, in that they were not merely a manifestation or illustration of an underlying idea. (Steele 2008: 25, Haxthausen 2003).

In hindsight all the above mentioned exhibitions underlined and highlighted some of the major changes the fashion system was undergoing since the 1960s. Because of their relevant topics, these exhibitions attracted many visitors and a lot of press. The successes of the new fashion exhibition as executed by for example the Kyoto Museum, Momu Antwerp, FIT New York and V&A London affected more and more museum towards the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to follow this narrative approach.

### **Fashion as popular culture: a new vision, a new approach**

It raises the question what kind of changes the fashion system actually was undergoing in the 1960s. First of all fashion became a mass-market product, something within the reach of everyone; through the upcoming youth culture with happenings, music and street fashion, it also got part of a popular visual culture in which the media played an important role. This made fashion more complex. While the object, the fashion designer and the wearer were important, of increasing importance were also the societal context in which fashion operated and other media through which fashion was made visible (Teunissen 2009: 11). Suddenly, fashion was no longer all about the presentation of a feminine ideal and the display of wealth. ‘The scenography of elegance has been replaced by a theatricality of meaning’ (Lipovetsky 2002: 8). Clothes allowed us not only to create our own identities, but to consciously propagate political ideals, as punks did in the middle of the 1970s with printed T-shirts. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fashion designer Hussein Chalayan used installations such as *Afterwords (a/w 2000)*, *Kinship Journeys (2003)*, *Readings (2008)*, and *Micro Geography (2009)* in art museums to raise political and societal issues such as migration, alienation, and the effects of globalisation on daily life. In short, I would argue, fashion could from the 1960s deliver a message beyond and aesthetic expression of style. At the same time, the fact that fashion could arise on the street meant that it was no longer a product made by a designer for a consumer; this hierarchy disappeared and was replaced by a dialogue, an exchange between fashion designer and wearer, in which the media played a crucial role (Martin 2009: 27). Precisely these changes transformed fashion into an important phenomenon of our visual culture whose social impact and manifestations became increasingly important.

‘Since the 1950s and 1960s, organizational, social and cultural transformations have thoroughly disrupted the earlier structure [of fashion, *JT*]; we can reasonably conclude that a new stage in the history of fashion has come into view,’ stated the philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (1994: 88) and continues: ‘New centres of creation have emerged, and new criteria have been imposed. The earlier hierarchical and unitary configuration has exploded. The individual and social meanings of fashion have changed along with the tastes and behaviours of women and men.’

In this way, from the 1960s onwards fashion increasingly became an expression of ideas and concepts. The fashion avant-garde had escaped the straitjacket of the functional demands traditionally made by the applied arts: fashion has become the product of a design which was ‘attached’ to the human body, but which also researched and explored its own relationship with this body, with identity, self-image, and environment. In doing so it had come to strongly resemble Pop Art and the performance art emerging in the visual arts (Teunissen 2009: 24).

‘In forming this liaison with art and in marrying Pop Art specifically, what did contemporary fashion accomplish? It became avant-garde in sensibility, it came under and drew from the thrall of popular culture, and it became the nexus of democratic social values and the clarifying aesthetic order of art. Fashion, like art since ca. 1960, has continued to fulfil the rich and elite, but it has taken this form from popular culture, celebrating that culture and not limiting itself to the supreme elements of haute couture of the most hierarchical art’ (Martin 2009: 27).

This new intertwined relation of fashion, media and visual culture implied that fashion was no longer ideally presented on a catwalk or in a store, on the contrary new fashion designs could also be launched in new and less commercial environments such as the street, the media or the art museum and became very popular in that realm.

### **Fashion studies and their influence on the fashion exhibition**

Another consequence of these new fashion developments was a raising awareness of academia and scholars to acknowledge fashion as an interesting research domain reflecting cultural changes. New forthcoming disciplines in the 1980s such as cultural studies, visual culture and women’s studies shared this very new interest in fashion as part of popular culture. They have started studying fashion much more as a cultural phenomenon than was the case in classic art history studies, in which the object itself, its history, and its place in dress history are central. Valerie Steele has posed this argument, when stating:



‘Traditional art historical practice associated with the museum emphasizes close description and connoisseurship, while the so-called “new” art history as practised in the university draws on alternative approaches and methodologies derived from cultural studies. The new art history, in turn, helped to give birth to what might be called the “new” fashion history, which also placed greater emphasis on analysing *meanings* of cultural objects and practices’ (Steele 2008: 25).

This new approach towards fashion has been met with some suspicion by traditional museum curators trained in the discipline of dress history as a sub discipline of art history, because the approach diverted attention towards the object or artefact and its aesthetics radically towards the manifestation of an underlying idea, with the clothes themselves forming no more than an illustration (Steele 2008: 25, Haxthausen 2003). In this respect the exhibition *Malign Muses (2004)* curated by Judith Clark for The Mode Museum (MoMu) in Antwerp, later also appearing with the exhibition title *Spectres. When Fashion Turns Back* in London’s Victoria & Albert Museum (2005), became heatedly debated among dress and fashion curators and researchers. IMAGE 4: *Malign Muses*, Judith Clark. MoMU Antwerp 2004

This exhibition was based on the ideas put forward in the book *Fashion at the Edge* (Caroline Evans 2003), which showed how experimental fashion designers of the 1990s chose to depict themes such as death, trauma and alienation. Clark tried to visualise these ideas using a variety of installations; the clothing she had chosen to accompany the installation served as incidental illustrations rather than central exhibits. Not all her professional colleagues appreciated the move. ‘Ideas and settings dominated the clothes,’ complained Lou Taylor (Taylor 2006: 17). Christopher Breward, on the other hand, considered the exhibition a success and saw it as an effective new form of exhibition for fashion (Breward 2008:91).

The controversial point here was that the concept of the curator and exhibition designer, Clark, overshadowed the fashion objects themselves. The clothes on display served merely as illustrations for a larger narrative while museums traditionally strived to display clothing objects within the personal context of the wearer and the period he or she was living in or explaining the design process and techniques. The critical comment has been directed towards an overly liberal interpretation and visualisation, however compelling and inviting this may be. However especially this exhibition was iconic and became illustrative for the tendency of the museums to showcase fashion more and more in the context of ideas and thoughts that reflecting the ‘Zeitgeist’ of contemporary culture and their changes.

### **Conceptual fashion: explaining the idea behind the object**

Thirdly, not only museums and scholars but also the fashion designers themselves have been altering essential components of classical fashion since the 1970s. Since their start in 1993 for the Dutch fashion designer duo, Viktor & Rolf, the environment of an art museum or gallery space has become an ideal platform for the presentation of their ideas.

‘To us, fashion represents more than just cloth and form. We turn the phenomenon of fashion into its own subject matter. We have expressed and reflected on that very position in various ways through various media, in an art context but also within the context of fashion.’ (T Magazine: 2008)

The question here is why these fashion designers have chosen the art museum as an ideal platform and how the art museum helped them to bring forward their concepts and ideas. And how do designers define the relation between the exhibited object and the context?

In the early 1980s, the Japanese designers Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons were the first - so called - *conceptual* fashion designers. Both designers played with the traditional forms and pattern parts of Western clothing, mixing them with elements of Japanese clothing styles or combining them in unorthodox ways (Fukai 2006: 291), seeking and pushing the boundaries of the classic fashion garment. Like a modernist artist, Kawakubo had chosen a formal or formalistic starting point in her designs. ‘...just as abstraction in art usually depends on an underlying knowledge of traditional drawing skills, so pattern-making at Comme des Garçons is rooted in a thorough grounding in basic principles, which are then subverted’ (Sudjic 1990: 31). The innovative thing about Rei Kawakubo was that she focused on the processes of clothing design and construction. She was one of the first designers to develop (together with architect Takao Kawasaki) shops and spaces in which she was able to showcase the philosophy and concept of her. There was a need to create an universe and context in which the product itself was given maximum attention; in a comparable way as a museum or gallery.

The exhibitions, showcasing and campaigns developed by Issey Miyake and Dai Fujiwara for the introduction of *A-POC* (2001), a technical procedure which weaved the entire garment into the fabric, were a second excellent example of how a clothing concept needed to be consistently visualised and clarified by means of ingenious presentations (including an exhibition in Vitra Berlin in 2001).

(IMAGE 5: *A-Poc presentation 2001* )

### **Fashion, storytelling and experience design**

Along with all sorts of experiments with form and concepts as mentioned above, melancholy, decay and ageing became also suddenly new and recurring themes in contemporary fashion design

from the 1980s onwards. Themes which up till then seemed to have been the preserve of the visual arts. Maison Martin Margiela was one of the first who started to focus explicitly on aging and decay by using second-hand clothes, since these have already been ‘embodied’ with life and therefore contain their own meanings. According to the fashion scholar Barbara Vinken this underlined a major cultural shift in the meaning of fashion: after the 1980s avant-garde fashion design seemed to be no longer focused on the ‘new’, but designed ‘time’, to display the signs of mortality that fashion had so stubbornly effaced in the past. In the post-modern age the awareness of transitoriness – for a long time already explored in detail in literature and the visual arts – was no longer excluded, but became an essential part of fashion. Fashion designers such as Alexander McQueen, Yohji Yamamoto and Martin Margiela regularly revealed clothes’ ‘traces and emotions’. Also here new presentation forms in galleries and museums were needed here to bring these *stories* to the surface. One of the most exemplary examples was the Martin Margiela exhibition *La maison Martin Margiela (1997)* in Boijmans Rotterdam in 1997 where with bacteria injected designs changed in colour and texture during the exhibition and finally fell apart.

A somewhat different kind of storytelling could be found in the work of Viktor & Rolf where design concepts and the imaginary world they inhabited are inextricably linked. Since the start of their label in 1993 they often used the museum and the gallery for their fashion presentations. The retrospective exhibition *The House of Viktor&Rolf (2008)* for the Barbican Art Gallery in London, curated by the fashion design duo, illustrated perfectly how their designs and imaginary world are connected. At the heart of the exhibition was a five metre high doll’s house, inside which all their collections were recreated – in miniature – on classic porcelain dolls. Viktor & Rolf had created a fairy-tale with an unsettling effect, for their designs were not displayed in miniaturised versions alone; in adjoining rooms the original designs were displayed on the same, but now life-sized dolls. For a viewing public accustomed to skinny models and equally skinny mannequins, seeing these dresses on large, chubby dolls was a shock. The macabre aesthetic – such beautiful dresses on such childish doll’s bodies – prodded the public into thinking anew about beauty ideals in fashion.

IMAGE 6: *The house of Viktor&Rolf* by Viktor & Rolf. Barbican, London 2008. Photo: Siebe Tettero.

‘(...) we always have mixed feelings when it comes to fashion exhibitions because somehow, life is taken out of the subject. But a museum show is also a more democratic way of showing fashion than a catwalk presentation. It allows us to explore perspectives and ideas beyond that format. Challenged to enliven the static form of most fashion exhibitions, we created a special installation for the Barbican and conceived the entire show around it. The installation forms the heart of the exhibition and brings together our past, present and future work, creating a new reality to showcase the clothes and installations that make up our world’ (Viktor & Rolf in T-magazine 2008)’

The Barbican exhibition illustrates clearly how the museum has become an ideal platform for fashion designers as Viktor & Rolf. When Hussein Chalayan developed *Kinships Journeys* (2003) for the Centraal Museum he stated: ‘The aura of the museum, the installations, I need these in order to render my ideas visible.’ (Teunissen 2003: 68) Summing up, for avant-garde fashion designers the museum or gallery appears to be a necessary component of their fashion brand’s strategy; the world of the brand is only complete and shown to best advantage when it appears in a museum or gallery in all its manifestations.

This encounter between museum and contemporary fashion design, I would claim, is both the result of and the reason for the new exhibition practices of fashion presently. The tangible object – a wearable dress or installation – is given space centre stage. But at the same time it is part of a broader conceptual, storytelling narrative of the designer. In form and approach these by the fashion designers sometimes (partly) self-curated presentations do not differ from an exhibition curated by a museum curator and this is why overviews of contemporary designers have become popular too: it is an ideal effective tool to explain the public the context and conceptual background of these fashion designers.

## **Conclusion**

In general, from the 1960s onwards fashion has transformed to an artistic expression of ideas and concepts. Fashion had become the product of a design which was ‘attached’ to the human body, but which also researched and explored its own relationship with this body, with identity, self-image, and the social environment. Fashion studies and new art history as well as the new fashion museums helped give birth to this “new” fashion narrative, which placed greater emphasis on fashion as a part of our media-driven and social culture and less on fashion as a tangible object.

Since good contemporary fashion exhibition should, as museums and modern curators agree on, be both entertaining and seductive in form, historically accurate in content, and provide insight into the phenomenon of fashion as part of a larger narrative. It seems no longer adequate to display only clothing objects, as the classical museum did. Right now, the fashion exhibition legitimately places clothing objects in a new and broader cultural context and is able - driven by modern media – to attract a new generation and broad audience to the museum because for the public this is essential to learn more about our contemporary fashion culture.

As such the ‘new’ fashion narrative has been very successfully for the museum. It has become a ‘new’ and very popular place for understanding the work of the avant-garde or contemporary fashion as a part of our contemporary visual culture in the same manner as they were already used to understand visual arts in the context of a museum.

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